The following is a modified version of a paper presented at the Parliament of World Religions held in Salt Lake City in October of 2015. The panel topic was on how to engage in comparative religion to further develop a Mormon ethic of peace.

I would like to start by sharing some personal experiences that have informed my view on the study of other faiths and how we might think about it in the context of interfaith dialogue and developing a Mormon ethic of peace. Around 15 years ago, as an undergraduate at a large University, I decided to take a World Religions course out of personal interest. At the time I had already spent years studying various languages as part of my degree in literature and religion. My reasoning for signing up for this class was that it would give me a broad introduction to various religious traditions that could inform my own work in comparative studies and satisfy my curiosity.

In retrospect, I must confess that my experience with the course was less than positive, not because I didn’t like the class but because of how the course influenced my thinking about religion. I am sad to say that by the end of the semester, I had an extremely negative view of several religions—predominantly Buddhism, Hinduism and other Asian traditions. It was not until many years later that I began to realize my perception of these religions arose from an erroneous notion of comparison that was based on out of date information with a particular apologetic agenda that tended to misrepresent the tradition of study. This led to a misconception of the reality of the “other” because the “other” was never fully allowed to speak for itself. My initial reaction as a young student was to consider Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism as so radically exotic and so foreign that there was no relevance to the comparison. I saw no value in continuing to explore them; indeed I was actually told by several professors that it would be a waste of time to study something like Buddhism because it was irrelevant to understanding my own tradition.

Four Guidelines for Engaging in Comparative Religion: Revising our assumptions on teaching and learning about religion in the classroom and other public spaces

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When we engage in interfaith dialogue with the attitude that we are the ultimate truth and final answer to all religious concerns, it makes it extremely difficult to engage in any sort of meaningful dialogue that doesn’t devolve into pedantic condescension or banal truisms.

This perception began to change when I had the opportunity to study for a short time at a university in Beijing. During my time there, I traveled with a friend to visit his family in Tibet. While there, I visited several Buddhist monasteries and spent time with the monks and laymen—this provided me a different perspective and enabled me to learn more about Buddhism as it is lived and practiced in a real context by ordinary people.

Shortly after this experience in China, I began my graduate studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School in Religion and Literature and was privileged with the opportunity to work with the late Anthony Yu. Professor Yu commented that if I wanted to understand Chinese literature, then I needed to learn something about Buddhism. At this same time I had already started my studies in Sanskrit as a means to engage Sanskrit Literature. I vividly remember sitting in my professor’s office and having him take down a copy of the Buddhacarita—the Works of the Buddha—and offering it to me to begin studying the relationship between religion and literature within the South Asian context.

With these two experiences, my path began to change. Throughout my master’s program I had resisted the study of Buddhism, convinced from my previous experience that I had no interest and that it held no value for me. Here I was, about to earn a graduate degree in religious studies with specialization in Sanskrit and Chinese literature (two of the most important languages for the study of Asian religions), and I wasn’t willing to consider studies in Buddhism—the most widespread of all Asian religions. And it was all because of a perception about the religion that I had developed in consequence of the way in which an undergraduate course on world religions was taught.

I was finally convinced to reconsider my position and luckily had the opportunity to complete my doctoral degree at Cornell University in Asian religions and literature with an emphasis in Buddhist studies. I feel blessed for that opportunity because I now consider some of my greatest friends to be those that I have worked with over the years engaging in a comparative study of religion. I’ve spent time enjoying the hospitality of Sufis in India and worked side by side with Buddhist monks translating the recently discovered Sanskrit manuscript of the Vimalakirtinirdeśasutra. My work and research has taken me to Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, Muslim, and Daoist temples and sacred sites all over Asia and North America, and has given me opportunities to engage with and discuss religion in a variety of contexts. These experiences have reshaped my entire outlook on life and the role that religion and interfaith dialogue can have in bringing peace to our modern world.

This brief background helps to set the context for the questions and tentative insights I would like to briefly explore. Why did my initial experience in engaging with comparative religion produced such a negative reaction, and how might we resolve these problems? My experience teaching religion as an academic discipline at multiple Universities has convinced me that I’m not alone in that reaction. Indeed, my sense is that, at least in North America, it is in the educational setting of a university classroom that most students first come in contact with other religions in any real depth. Let me be clear. In no sense am I trying to find fault with the professor that taught that particular course I attended as an undergraduate or with the authors of the textbooks we used—I am certain of their sincere intent. My intent is to
seek a better way. How can we improve, and why is it so important that we do? While my suggestions are directed primarily to the University and formal education setting, I believe that these recommendations are also pertinent to informal learning and interfaith dialogue within the public sphere.

1. Proper comparison: We must guard against any faulty form of comparison that misrepresents the other faith without a proper historical context. We must also be careful not to formulate the object of study into the “other” that we want it to be in order to control the elements of comparison. We must acknowledge and engage with the tradition on its own terms. This requires a considerable amount of intellectual effort. It also presents a greater challenge to our own faith that requires us to critically examine how we understand our own tradition, and it is through that challenge that true understanding, not just of the other but of our own tradition, arises.

This is more than just comparing our ‘best with their best’ or speaking directly with the tradition rather than the tradition’s enemies, as Krister Stendahl so rightly advises us to do. Bruce Lincoln argues that “meaning is constructed through contrast. All knowledge, indeed all intelligibility, thus derives from consideration of data whose differences become instructive and revealing when set against the similarities that render them comparable.” And this is, in my estimation, the true value that arises through the comparative project that is so essential to the interfaith enterprise; meaning and intelligibility arises through comparison, and such comparison tells us just as much about ourselves as it does about the other. Without that intelligibility—seeing as we are seen—arising out of a proper method of comparison, there cannot be the true cooperation that is so necessary for peace.

In saying this I do not mean to denigrate the efforts of previous scholars, authors, and educators who have engaged in comparative religion; indeed I am deeply grateful for their efforts because this is an ongoing process of trial and error, learning from mistakes and standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before. However, my own experience in formulating biases and misjudgments towards other religions, particularly Buddhism, grew directly from participating in a classroom which suffered from this lack of proper comparison. And this, I believe, is directly linked to a lack of formal education and training in the academic discipline of religious studies.
2. Training in the discipline: We should use caution when asking non-specialists to engage in comparative religion. I say this for both the academic setting of a world religions course at a university (particularly those associated with a specific faith) as well as those who engage in interfaith relations in a less specialized setting. This isn’t a call for elitism, nor is it an attempt to protect “academic turf.” It is a plea to realize the complexity of not just each tradition but of the very notion of religion as an object of study and discourse that requires critical thinking, a clear methodology, and specific training—all of which takes time and effort to develop.

This is a call for more effort on the part of academically trained specialists to help engage in interfaith dialogue, not just in a class setting but within their communities and among their colleagues of other departments. In light of alarming responses towards certain religious traditions in our public and political rhetoric, we need to make sure this is not just an “academic” concern but a public issue that is addressed in the public square—particularly in the way the media engages with religious discourse and conflict. Serious consequences can arise out of an improper approach to the comparative enterprise that can lead to critical misunderstandings that actually damage the interfaith movement rather than aid it. Just as we should not allow non-specialists to teach physics and chemistry we shouldn’t allow those without the educational background to teach comparative religion and religious studies. Rather, trained specialists must engage in educating the public and developing a proper methodology for comparative dialogue.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks comments that we should have “the good sense to understand that a person cannot be educated without understanding religious traditions and conflict.” He also highlights the importance of implementing an educational curriculum based upon an academic approach to the study of religion within a pluralistic society. While Elder Oaks is here speaking specifically of public school education, I believe that many of the suggestions he discusses could be, and should be, tweaked to fit the unique context of both public and religiously affiliated universities. Navigating the complexities of engaging in the academic study of religion within higher education is fraught with challenges.

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Those challenges are only heightened within the context of a religiously affiliated university and thus require training in the discipline that can help us carefully navigate the pitfalls of such a comparative study and how we approach this discussion. This leads to my third point.

3. Avoiding relativism, skepticism, and nondenominationalism: Most modernized, Western societies hold the ideal of freedom of religion as a core value. Many of us live in a pluralistic society. And religious pluralism requires that interfaith dialogue doesn’t devolve into relativism, global skepticism, or trite nondenominationalism. There are real differences between religious traditions just as there are real similarities. But if we do not correctly and adequately deal with the differences we will not have really approached a form of dialogue. When we try to brush aside differences to highlight similarities, and vice versa, we are not engaging in a true interfaith dialogue. The only results that can come out of such an interaction are simplistic sentiments and fundamental misunderstandings that do not produce real change—and provide grounds for conflict. If we can avoid these three pitfalls and instead work toward clearly delineating specific differences, building trust, and engaging in frank dialogue, this creates a space for understanding those we are trying to engage with on their terms and within their context, inasmuch as that is even possible. This becomes more plausible if we approach this dialogue with a sense of humility.

4. Humility: In engaging in the interfaith enterprise, there is a great need for humility. As Lenn Goodman writes, “Humility seems more fitting, and wiser, than pyrrhonian skepsis or protagorean relativism. Humility,
lightly worn, projects no aura of invincible ignorance, but rather a sense of fellow feeling . . . Humility renounces literalism, which like dogmatism, is less a sign of innocence than a response to conflict, cognitive dissonance, and doubt.” When we engage in interfaith dialogue with the attitude that we are the ultimate truth and final answer to all religious concerns, it makes it extremely difficult to engage in any sort of meaningful dialogue that doesn’t devolve into pedantic condescension or banal truisms. It is a lack of humility that projects a sense of exceptionalism and more accurately indicates insecurities than confidence. And those insecurities are often based in a lack of surety and understanding of our own faith and our place within it—and can result in conflict to cover doubt. Humility indicates confidence, confidence that you can engage in a real and legitimate comparative dialogue without producing a crisis of faith because you already have sure footing in your own faith and are looking for understanding rather than justification.

One value of wrestling with another religious tradition is that it requires us to get strong footing in our own tradition and helps us see our faith in ways that we might never have considered before. Time does not permit me to illustrate how this has worked in my own studies, but the opportunities to engage in this interfaith dialogue are legion. Let me close by observing that my own experience in engaging in this type of reciprocal illumination has proved to be invaluable to my own personal development and the peaceful relationships I have developed with others. We create a peaceful community when we provide the opportunity for honest inquiry and interaction, where my faith is strengthened by interacting with others of great faith and my mind is enlightened by engaging with other enlightening ideas.

1 In a 1985 press conference given in Stockholm Sweden, Krister Stendahl, a Harvard professor and Bishop for the Church of Sweden, outlined three rules for religious understanding: when trying to understand a religion ask its adherents and not its enemies, don’t compare your best to their worst, and leave room for “holy envy.”
2 Bruce Lincoln, Gods and Demons, Priests and Priestesses, 122.
4 Lenn E. Goodman, Religious Pluralism and Values in the Public Sphere, 18.