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Forum: Teaching Mormon Studies

What They Learned from the Mormons

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp

NORTH CAROLINA WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST PLACE one would think of as the birthplace of Mormon studies outside Utah. But when I taught my first class on Mormonism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1999, I was hard-pressed to find any colleagues in other institutions teaching a class dedicated to the Mormon tradition who could offer templates. I was also unsure whether students there, over two-thirds of whom hail from the Tar Heel State, would be interested in such a course. In 1999 the LDS population of the region was under fifty thousand. Although the LDS Church was constructing a temple down the road in Cary, North Carolina, I knew that many students would have had little exposure to things Mormon, and perhaps would have meager interest.

So it was with few expectations and not a small measure of trepidation that I taught a seminar entitled "Mormonism and the American Experience" that spring. As would be the case in subsequent years, most of the students had been raised in moderately conservative evangelical faith communities (Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian). Many reported having learned about Mormonism at church as a cult or, at best, a seriously misguided set of theological precepts and possibly scandalous practices. Yet they were there, and I was there, ready to embark on a journey that

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would transform not only my teaching but also my research and professional life over the next fifteen years.

Never having taught such a course, I had a lot to learn as well. I had studied little about the Mormon faith during my own graduate training beyond reading Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* and the work of Jan Shippy. I daresay this was more than most scholars of US history trained in the 1980s, even those studying religion, could claim. But it was hardly enough material on which to base an entire course, especially one that needed to reach through the late twentieth century. I designed the first half of the course as a chronological survey to ground students in the basic outlines of Mormon history. In the second half, we discussed themes that I hoped would be of interest to college-aged participants: Mormon health codes, dating and lifestyle issues, women's roles, race, missionaries, and so on. To cover those themes, I made several decisions that would prove crucial: first, I brought in panels of "real live" Mormons who answered questions and talked about their own experiences; second, I sent students to a sacrament meeting to introduce them to the public face of LDS worship; third, I gave them group assignments that not only required archival research but also entailed interviews or other forms of correspondence with church members. My initial impulse was purely practical: I did not have much day-to-day experience of this faith, and I wanted to make sure that my students both understood official church teachings and were exposed to how a religion is lived.

Over the last fourteen years, I have taught this course at least half a dozen times. As it turns out, students at Carolina are fascinated by Mormonism and are eager to learn more. Moreover, local Latter-day Saints have been unstintingly gracious and eager to talk with students, to answer questions, and to welcome them into their meetinghouses and the LDS institute of religion. Mormons, too, want to know how these outside observers understand them. Several years ago I began asking my students, as part of their final essay, to write about what they had learned in the class. How, I asked them, had specific features, readings, or speakers shaped their thinking about Mormonism? What would they take away from this class?

Their answers, in short, astounded me—both for the depth of their reflections and their willingness to be frank. Their reflections are instructive in helping all of us to think more deliberately about effective methods for teaching a course on Mormonism. As a result, I offer three pieces of strategy to colleagues.

1. Use stereotypes; don't ignore them

It is tempting to sidestep the fact that people say really uninformed and insulting things about Mormons. Students inevitably have been exposed to those views. While most of my students did not have previous encounters with the (institutional) LDS Church, they did have knowledge about the tradition and its members from their own experiences. All of my students offered mental images formed from media, memes that ran the gamut from church commercials to *South Park* to famous sports figures. In North Carolina, too, evangelical church teachings that Mormonism is a dangerous “cult” also form a backdrop for them. This data is useful: often those virtual encounters have motivated students to take the class in the first place, and thus they can provide a jumping-off point for further learning. Their impressions reveal common patterns, well summarized by the following:

Mormons get married at a relatively young age. Mormons really like to dance (as evidenced by an experience at a Mormon church dance in which I was shocked to find that boys I had never met before would ask me to dance with them—this is unheard of at most high school dances!). Mormons have really big families. Mormons do not let non-Mormons in their temples, and sometimes even Mormons are not allowed in. . . . Mormons wear secret underwear. Mormons do not drink alcohol, do not drink caffeine, do not smoke or cuss, cannot have tattoos or excessive piercings, or watch rated-R movies. Mormons are republican, have a lot of commercials on TV and really like mission trips. Mormons worship a man named Joseph Smith and have an inexplicable affinity for Utah over the other 49 states.

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Missionaries provide a bountiful (and frequently very funny) source of images as well:

I thought Mormon missions were strange, without a purpose, and a way to get rid of problem children within the church.

I thought Mormon missionaries were either socially awkward guys, trouble making punks, or ultra fanatical Mormons. In my ignorance I assumed that going on a mission was something Mormon men did only in extenuating circumstances.

Voicing the stereotypes is important because otherwise they linger in the classroom as unbidden visitors, never quite materializing but not disappearing. We exorcise them early on by naming them, writing them on the board, and thereby acknowledging their shaping power (they also tend to look pretty comical when the students see them written down).

The flip side of the stereotypes is the other major source of data imported by my students: their own encounters with “ordinary Mormons.” Almost everyone in my classes has known someone—a former girlfriend, a brother’s roommate, a sports coach—who is a church member and whom the student will describe as being “really nice” (playing into another stereotype, of course). They are intrigued and confounded because they cannot reconcile their quite positive personal impressions with the negative stereotypes. It is the examination of the puzzling space between these two data sets that fuels student motivation in class.

2. Hearing internal disagreement among LDS Church members is crucial

Connected to the images previously discussed is a more generic problem, one likely magnified by the Low Church backgrounds of many students.¹ They assume Mormons do not think for themselves and

1. *Low Church* here refers to an attitude or worship style, common among Protestant evangelicals, that places considerably less emphasis on ritual, liturgy, and specialized

conclude that church members are either gullible or misinformed. As one student put it: “Coming into the class I had the idea that the Book of Mormon was such an obvious lie and anyone who believed in its accuracy to any degree would have to be uneducated.” Encounters with missionaries and with “faith-promoting” history only reinforce their sense that the church promotes a party line to which members must conform.

Picking apart this nest of assumptions is important but tricky. On the one hand, their impressions are correct inasmuch as there is a degree of orthodoxy required of church members (as is true in their own faith traditions, of course, although they might not see it as such). But we also explore the universe of issues within the Mormon faith in which the boundaries of correct thought and behavior are decidedly fuzzy and under constant negotiation. The learning comes in seeing for themselves how and why lines are drawn, how those boundaries have shifted over time, how religious leaders work to enforce them, and how some believers push back against the limits that have been set. Students read official church pronouncements, such as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” and thereby understand the ideals held up by leaders. They also, however, hear from individuals who interpret those messages and live them out in a variety of ways. Sometimes our panelists respectfully disagree with one another or voice divergent interpretations of teachings or appropriate practice.

Rather than confusing the students, or convincing them that Mormons are themselves confused, these moments of slippage between ideals and lived realities lead students to question their assumptions about the uninformed allegiance of church members. Students are willing to accept—or at least respect—a surprising variety of beliefs if they are convinced people are thinking for themselves. This is true even of some of the more controversial elements of the tradition. Indeed, airing internal dissent over the history of polygamy, racial discrimination, and

priestly roles. For this reason evangelicals tend to look with suspicion on scripted worship as an imposition of a hierarchical authority. For some pointed examples, see Richard Mammana, comp., “High Church vs. Low Church: Documentary Narrative of an Ecclesiastical Joke,” accessed October 15, 2014, <http://anglicansonline.org/special/highlow/>.

women's issues, rather than leading students to conclude that the entire faith is corrupt, actually has the opposite effect: it helps students to see that believers wrestle with difficult issues in a variety of ways. While it may seem counterintuitive, the more internal dissent students heard, and the more weighing of different opinions and interpretations they witnessed, the more they respected the ability of adherents to think independently and come to a conclusion different from their own. As one class member phrased it: "The most significant thing that I learned over the course of this class was that Mormonism is a diverse place. When one does not know much about a religion, it is easy to stereotype and cast everyone in the same category. I soon learned that, in fact, there was not such a thing as a standard Mormon."

I stress this point because it was tempting for me at first not to dwell on the disagreements and points of controversy (if only because I thought it would further stoke the fires of anti-Mormonism). And it can be uncomfortable and difficult to discuss certain topics, especially for LDS panelists in our class who are entering an unfamiliar space. I prep my visitors in advance by sending along the syllabus, explaining the variety of readings the students will be doing, and indicating what my goals are. I also talk with the students ahead of time about how it might feel to enter this space as a Mormon visitor faced with difficult questions, and we explore the various ways that a panelist might respond to such inquiry (e.g., defensiveness about the church, feeling a responsibility to provide personal testimony, worry about disagreeing with another church member in public, and so on).

The payoff, though, has been well worth the risk. Furthermore, the dangers of avoiding controversy are even greater since they only serve to perpetuate preexistent images. Responded one student: "I assumed that Mormonism was monolithic, that there was one and only one Mormon body, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I knew that the LDS Church no longer officially supported polygamy, but the stereotype of polygamist fundamentalists (which I assumed to be inside the LDS Church) abides strongly in the media and amongst the Evangelical circles where I acquired most of my mis-information about Mormonism."

Another commented on how much she learned by listening to conversations among Mormon women about the church:

If anything, my perception of women in the LDS church changed dramatically from that of meek and subordinate people who will not admit to the misgivings of their situation into smart and savvy women who have learned to negotiate the negative aspects of their culture in order to practice the faith that means so much to them. I have gained much respect for all members of the LDS Church, but especially the women and that respect is the most valuable lesson I learned in this class: tolerance and respect.

3. Focus on Mormonism as a living, breathing system with all the warts of any other human community

This suggestion extends the teachings of the previous point: my students are also in the class to learn about religious studies, broadly conceived. That task involves immersing them in the complexities of the Mormon world, its contradictions, its points of tension, and its change over time. It helps them learn to talk about religious differences—not just the differences among Mormons, but also their own attitudes and beliefs—in productive ways. “Exploring Mormonism . . . changed the way I approach difference altogether,” reflected one student.

Religiously, this is the first time that I had experienced a faith in which I began knowing absolutely nothing about the scripture. . . . This sense of vulnerability took me mentally from the position of relational commentator to a place of strictly an observational learner. I am very thankful to have had this experience in a collegiate academic setting in an environment in which everyone is in the same position as me and questions are not only accepted, but they are expected.

Students describe seeing their own beliefs and behaviors in a new light because of these exercises in observation and dialogue. This is particularly important for young people at an age (and in a society) in which authority—be it parental, administrative, or religious—is already

a fraught issue: they tend immediately to interpret constraints on personal freedom as externally imposed restrictions. But soon they begin to glimpse distinct logics and worldviews that underlie those patterns. “When I learned that Mormons, especially Mormon college students, could not have coffee, I was certain that they would be upset about this or completely ignore the command because personally I think that coffee is the best thing in the world,” wrote one student.

After learning about the commandment in class and talking to Mormons about its influence I was taken aback by the response. Many LDS students told me that they survive college just fine without drinking multiple cups of coffee a day and that the lack of coffee forces them to plan ahead and avoid all-nighters. The majority of the students I talked to also mentioned that coffee had never been a source of temptation for them. These conclusions led me to no longer think about Mormons through the lens of what they can and cannot do.

Issues of discipline and self-constraint, then, figure largely in our discussions as (potentially) positive notions that are not necessarily inimical to individual religious agency.

Recognizing that religious “others,” even others who look a lot like they do, occupy the world in very different ways is an important principle in the study of religion. Many of my students focus their own religious practices around biblical inerrancy and systematized theology; coming to recognize fundamental differences in approach to the very subject of religion is a critical step in our pedagogy. One student remarked, with some surprise, that “for Mormons, most of the things that non-Mormons obsess over simply are not a big deal.” In like manner, their visit to a sacrament meeting, jarring as it often is with the bounty of babies and small children and the decided lack of liturgy, leads us to reflect on what it means to worship and what constitutes a “sacred” moment.

This course also challenges students to think critically about the enterprise of religious studies through a process best described by a class member who quipped, “In many ways, this class both descriptively built LDS stereotypes and later shattered them.” The same could be said, of

course, for the larger enterprise of the study of religion. Here the students see this critical dynamic in action as we essentialize through our compilation of images and stereotypes the “ideal” of Mormonness (although they find out this is contested as well!) and then proceed to explore the many ways in which living Mormonism takes quite different forms. Some students then manage to stand back and view the tradition comparatively, understanding that its study has implications for their own assumptions about what religion is and how it operates. And finally, some see that those comparative categories create further intellectual problems, inasmuch as close study breaks down the classifications that religious studies has assiduously constructed: students come to see Mormonism not just as a “religion” (at least in the sense they may have previously understood that term) but as a way of life and as a community bound together in a dynamic tension of ideas, practices, and histories.

More could be said about this intellectual dynamic and about the reflections of students on this process. The pat conclusion would be that class members come away more tolerant, which they do. Their learning, in fact, has led to some terrific Thanksgiving dinner conversations with parents and grandparents about Mormons, transforming students into emissaries of religious literacy: “Because of what I have learned in this class, I feel the need to stand up for Mormons when I hear less-informed people perpetuate incorrect stereotypes. However, I do not know if Mormons will ever be completely accepted under the Christian umbrella. I do not know if people really want to be informed about them. I am glad that I am informed.” Some go on to read more in the Book of Mormon. A few have befriended local missionaries and joined in their weekly basketball games. One Muslim student found considerable common ground in studying Mormons: “I realized that we were standing on opposite ends of a connected looking glass. In many ways, both Mormonism and Islam share a cultural stigma in the United States and abroad.”

Even more interesting are the class members who admitted that they still have fundamental disagreements with Mormons based on their own beliefs. Yet the ground of their disagreement has changed. “Some aspects of the faith, I am much less apprehensive about, and

I believe these aspects have altered the way I look at all religions, especially those which differ to what I grew up with.” Another noted, “Although my ill-informed, ignorant conceptions were eradicated, my new perceptions were not all positive.” The latter student indicated that she was bothered by feminist critiques of Mormonism, especially that of Sonia Johnson, but the student was admittedly confused because the Mormon males she had met did not seem like “chauvinistic control mongerers.”

As I tell the students in the first week, my goal is not to convince them that the Mormon faith is good or bad, right or wrong. I do seek to help them become better informed about the tradition and, by extension, about their own religious beliefs (if they have any) and the dynamics of religious communities, broadly conceived. What they do with that knowledge has varied. I have taught inactive LDS students who decided after graduation to go on missions, evangelicals who continued to divinity school, atheists who read further in the Book of Mormon, and Muslims who found new conversation partners in local wards. Their journeys never fail to surprise and delight me.

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