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The Graduate Mormon Studies Classroom

Patrick Q. Mason

RECENTLY I HAD A CONVERSATION with a good friend of the Mormon studies program at Claremont Graduate University. He has followed the progress of the program for many years and has consistently been a great advocate for it. Though not a professional scholar, he has gotten involved in the academic study of Mormonism, not just as a consumer but as an aspiring producer as well. He is also a devout, active Latter-day Saint who has spent considerable time, talent, and treasure in service to the church. In our conversation, he wondered aloud, in as friendly and noncombative a way as possible, if the way I ran my Mormon studies seminars was a bit too secular. Was there a little too much emphasis on the historiography and not quite enough on the heavenly? For instance, in my course Approaches to Mormonism, where we survey some of the most influential or important scholarly studies of the tradition, wasn't there something missing if we didn't spend at least a week reading Mormon scriptures and prophetic teachings, which surely count as one of the most important approaches to understanding Mormonism?

I have now taught seven semesters' worth of Mormon studies courses. The fact that this makes me one of the senior practitioners in the field says much about how young the field still is, especially in the classroom. In an inversion of what is true for many academic areas, even with the much-touted proliferation of Mormon studies in college classrooms across the country, I daresay there are still more Mormon studies books produced than dedicated courses taught in any given year, though that gap is narrowing. Furthermore, unlike American historians or New Testament scholars or social psychologists, most of us who teach

courses on Mormonism had little or no formal training in Mormon studies per se. I took exactly one course on Mormon history, and that as an undergraduate in the History Department at BYU. Mormonism occasionally came up during my graduate training in American history at Notre Dame, but mostly, I think, because there happened to be two Mormons in the room. (At any given lull in the conversation, I could count on one particular professor turning to me or the other Mormon and asking, “So what’s the Mormon take on that?” My genius response was typically to remind him that there is not, in fact, an official Mormon take on Puritanism or Marian apparitions.)

The conversation I had with my friend, along with the lack of established models, leaves us with more questions than answers regarding the Mormon studies classroom. To a significant degree the questions we could ask are not at all unique to Mormon studies, but rather reflect broader discussions about the nature and purpose of university education, especially in the liberal arts. How do we balance content mastery with the general development of critical thinking, reading, writing, and speaking skills? What are we training students to do or to be? Once we have determined the purposes of the classroom, then what methods are most effective for accomplishing those goals? How do we best assess learning, progress, and skill acquisition? These questions and the underlying issues are being debated on every campus of higher learning in America, and the conversation goes all the way to the White House. Here I’ll focus on a few particularities of the Mormon studies classroom as a possibly distinct species within the broader order, family, and genus of American higher education.

The answer I ultimately gave to my friend in our conversation is conditioned by my unique appointment at a graduate-only university. Although my university is part of a consortium with leading undergraduate liberal arts colleges, our own focus is almost exclusively on the training of graduate students, both at the master’s and doctoral levels. (In seven semesters at CGU, I have had only one undergraduate in a class, and she was simply auditing.) Most of my MA students want to pursue doctoral study, and most of my PhD students are pursuing

careers in higher education, usually as professors. They have specifically selected my program, department, and university as the place to get the necessary training to prepare them for their deliberately chosen careers; indeed, many of my students come to me after spending several years working in different jobs before deciding that a career in academia is what they really want. My job, therefore, is to help them acquire the knowledge, skills, and other training they need to be competitive in the academic job market in their chosen field of religious studies. It is not, primarily, to help them learn interesting things about the church of their youth, or to help them become better devotional students of scripture, or to expose them to grand questions about the universe that will make them more informed, reflective citizens. My principal task, which governs the decisions I make in and about my courses, from the construction of syllabi to the way I conduct my classes, is professionalization. I am there to help them become professionals in the field. Adopting anything else as a main goal is failure, or at least category confusion, on my part.

To be sure, along the way we have some pretty great conversations about Mormonism. Both the donors who funded the Hunter Chair and the university faculty and administrators who approved its establishment agree that the purpose of the Mormon studies program at CGU is to promote a richer understanding of Mormonism to the broader academy and the general public, and to place it in analytical comparison alongside the other religious traditions of the world. Of course, the two parties come at this goal from different perspectives, one side with the clear hope of promoting the interests of their chosen faith tradition and the other side with a recognition that, especially in the context of the contemporary United States, Mormonism matters and is worthy of serious study; the prospect of adding a faculty line and establishing a niche program to attract new students didn't hurt the case either.

The Mormon studies classroom thus becomes a principal site for mining Mormonism in all its depth, richness, and variety for greater understanding—not just about the tradition for its own sake, but about American religious history, classic issues in religious studies such as

authority and community and identity, and the category and functions of the very term *religion*, to name a few. Our seminars have little to do with “church history.” Indeed, my students may be dismayed that in my classes they learn relatively little about the lives and teachings of General Authorities, the development of priesthood quorums, or chiasmus in the Book of Mormon—based on my judgment that knowledge regarding these things, however interesting and worthy of study, will not help them get jobs in the broader academic market. In fact, much of what we talk about in my classes would hold relatively little interest for the general LDS public. I occasionally allow curious members of my ward or other local Mormons to sit in on my class upon their request, and their response is almost uniformly one of benign befuddlement. That is simply because they’re not professionals in the fields of religious studies and religious history, whereas professionals in a specialized field is precisely what I’m training my students to become.

It is quickly apparent, and even confusing, to many LDS visitors to my classroom—and perhaps to some of my LDS students in the beginning of their graduate experience—that the experience is so decidedly non-faith promoting. Visitors readily acknowledge that our conversations are not denigrating to the religion either, but even after sitting and listening to the discussion for three hours, they’re just not sure what and whether the class members and I *believe*. They’re a bit nonplussed by the fact that I speak of Mormons in a detached third person. They hear me explore ideas and take positions that are uncomfortable to the ears of many Mormons; am I playing devil’s advocate, or do I really believe what I just said? They are wondering why I didn’t just use a General Authority quote to resolve a given question, but instead allowed the conversation to go around and around in circles, without ever actually getting anywhere. They are left adrift by the lack of resolution at the end of the three hours, with no correct answer or true principles testified of, loose ends scattered all over the floor. In short, they quickly learn that the Mormon studies graduate classroom is a foreign country where they

are surprised that they do not really speak or even fully understand the language. *Toto*, I've a feeling we're not in Provo anymore.¹

At the same time, I count as one of the signal successes of my courses the fact that my non-LDS students so rapidly gain not only proficiency but real fluency in Mormonism (including Mormon-speak). This is a crucial element in fulfilling the vision of increasing understanding of the tradition among future scholars regardless of their own religious (or nonreligious) backgrounds and commitments. A few semesters ago I taught an Introduction to Mormonism seminar reserved only for non-LDS students. Most of them came into the course barely knowing who Joseph Smith was, and by the end they were producing impressive and thoroughly informed research papers; one currently has the paper she wrote for that class scheduled for publication in a leading Mormon studies periodical. And yes, we even read Mormon scriptures in the classroom. Many of these non-LDS students have continued to take other Mormon studies classes with me because they quickly realize, like so many other scholars, that Mormonism is a terrific laboratory in which they can explore virtually any conceptual, thematic, or theoretical question in the study of religion.

One of my signature courses—if teaching something twice can qualify—has been *Gendering Mormonism*, which originated as a response to student demand, not because of any particular expertise on my part. (Strangely, neither BYU nor Notre Dame prepared me with cutting-edge gender theory.) In the class, LDS and non-LDS students have come together to ask all the tough questions and make all the appropriately damning observations while recognizing, and to some degree reveling in, some of the distinctive (if often suppressed or sublimated) possibilities opened up by Mormon theology and practice. One of the most successful aspects of the class has been the ethnographic research assignment, in which everyone had to attend a three-hour block of LDS Sunday meetings and watch either the priesthood session of general conference or the

1. With all due respect to my colleagues at BYU who research and teach about Mormonism and similarly feel that they are speaking a different language than many of their fellow church members.

general women's meeting. They had to record their observations through the lens of gender analysis. A similar (though less gender-specific) assignment in my Introduction to Mormonism seminar also helped imbue our discussions with a deeper sense of engagement, recognizing that we were talking about flesh-and-blood issues, not ivory tower abstractions. Observing little things, like men taking screaming children out of sacrament meeting or women running their own meeting in Relief Society, complicates notions of patriarchy and questions assumptions regarding women's agency and oppression. (First-time attendees also consistently comment on how remarkably pedestrian the whole experience was.)

The real key to the success of the Gendering Mormonism class, however, is that everything is on the table, including a number of subjects that would make many LDS Church members and leaders squeamish. We discuss (and argue and joke and yell about) feminist theory, historic Mormon feminism, Mother in Heaven, Mormon feminist theologies, gender roles, sex and sexuality, priesthood (including women's ordination), masculinity, patriarchy, polygamy, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage. The only mutually agreed-upon taboo is the specific language and content of LDS temple ceremonies. This ethos of the open critical forum is at the heart of any successful Mormon studies classroom. Students have to know that they can ask any question or make any comment or level any critique as long as it is in the bounds of general academic standards of civility and intellectual rigor. It is not particularly difficult for me to establish that kind of culture in my graduate classroom, since the students choose to be there and encounter similar ground rules in their readings and other courses—all of which is an important part of being socialized into the academic field of religious studies. If anything, at times it is my more "orthodox" LDS students whom I have to encourage to speak up, rather than having them passively accept the hegemony of the skeptical secular liberalism that pervades the academy. They quickly learn, however, that Sunday School answers will not suffice and that they have to engage the debate at an equally rigorous level if they want their ideas to be taken seriously by their classmates, let alone their professor. The development of a more

sophisticated Mormon discourse regarding itself and its relation to other religious traditions, academic theories, and analytical categories is one of the important secondary results of the Mormon studies classroom where Latter-day Saints are participants. Cumulatively and over time I hope it will help deepen and broaden the maturation of the field.

One of the significant questions I still struggle with is how to respect and train students in the particularities of Mormonism, and promote and extend the specific subfield of Mormon studies, without the conversation sometimes devolving into navel-gazing. My Approaches to Mormonism course effectively does this by revolving around a reading list that is constructed of books that have successfully (in my mind) resisted the centripetal forces of denominational history and speak to broader, externally constructed issues and literatures. But it is precisely this move away from the privileged purview of insiders that opens up my classroom to accusations of excessive secularity, of having moved too far from the heart and soul and experience of Mormonism as a lived religion and theology. The challenge of any scholar or teacher of religion is how to maintain an appropriate critical distance without rendering our religious subjects mute or sterile.

The fact that much of the above could be said about the Islamic studies, Catholic studies, or Buddhist studies classroom suggests that the challenges and opportunities facing the teacher of Mormon studies are particular, to be sure, but not unique. Indeed, to imply that the Mormon studies classroom is *sui generis* is itself an exercise in parochialization. Mormonism offers many advantages to those who would teach it: a well-developed scholarly literature; rich and accessible documentary sources, mostly in English; a living community of faith in easy reach of practically every college and university in America; and just enough mystery and controversy, past and present, to keep things interesting. The temptation of this relative embarrassment of scholarly riches is to indulge in swimming, like Scrooge McDuck, in the admittedly impressive vault of gold. But the promise, and even call, of Mormon studies is to follow the lead of Andrew Jackson's inaugural celebration and throw open the doors to the revelers, even if it means that some of

the furnishings get damaged in the process. In the end, the Mormon studies classroom will be a success only if it does things that cannot be done anywhere else and fosters dynamic conversations and learning that cannot be had anywhere else. If our focus is on “studies,” with “Mormon” as an important but mere qualifier, we will probably be on the right track.

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