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# Friendship: An Editor's Introduction

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## Friendship: An Editor's Introduction

*J. Spencer Fluhman*

AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY, religion has been reborn in American universities. When my own discipline of history recently announced religion as the largest subspecialty for historians working in the United States, it confirmed what many of us had experienced anecdotally: religion continues to thrive in modern American life, and scholars are growing increasingly attuned to its significance in the past and present.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon has had profound implications for the study of Mormonism. As scholars have grown more and more sophisticated in their study of religion, and as it has assumed a more prominent place in many disciplines, academic interest in Mormonism has flowered correspondingly. And when the public spotlight finds its way to prominent Mormons or to the growth and institutional influence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, scholars and pundits alike crave understanding of the faith.

While the various “Mormon moments” ebb and flow on political or popular culture tides, a growing number of academic institutions have ensured that the study of Mormonism is represented on campus. Programs or endowed chairs in Mormon studies at Utah Valley University, Utah State University, Claremont Graduate University, the University of Utah, and the University of Virginia stand as telling symbols of these developments. Latter-day Saints may have a special interest in these advances,

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1. Robert B. Townsend, “A New Found Religion? The Field Surges among AHA Members,” *Perspectives on History* (December 2009), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2009/0912/0912new3.cfm>.

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to be sure, but the academic study of the faith communities related to Joseph Smith, in all their variety and complexity, now stands apart from any one church's purview.

The *Mormon Studies Review* proposes to track what is now a vibrant, varied, and international academic engagement with Mormon institutions, lives, ideas, texts, and stories.

A number of academic journals already address Mormonism in one way or another. Sibling periodicals relate the life of the mind to the Latter-day Saint tradition (*BYU Studies Quarterly*), express Mormon culture or place Mormonism in conversation with broader religious and secular ideas (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Sunstone*), examine the Mormon experience in terms of a single academic discipline (*Journal of Mormon History, John Whitmer Historical Association Journal, Element*), or delve deeply into Mormon texts and history in explicitly LDS terms for an LDS audience (*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Studies in the Bible and Antiquity, Mormon Historical Studies*). Furthermore, scholarship on Mormonism is increasingly found in academic journals with concerns that range well beyond the tradition.

As our unique contribution, the *Mormon Studies Review* will chronicle and assess the developing field of Mormon studies with review essays, book reviews, and roundtable discussions related to the academic study of Mormonism.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, the *Review* will offer scholars and interested non-specialists a one-stop source for discussions of current scholarship on Mormonism. It will range across disciplines and gather voices from a broad cross-section of the academy, both LDS and non-LDS. The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, which publishes the *Review*, has multiple publications focused on ancient studies and LDS scripture, so

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2. From 1989 to 2011, twenty-three volumes of the *Review* provided reviews of books related to the Book of Mormon and other LDS topics. The original title, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, was changed to *FARMS Review of Books* in 1996, to *FARMS Review* in 2003, and finally to *Mormon Studies Review* in 2011. Given the 2013 change in editorial staff and the broadened scope described here, the *Mormon Studies Review* will be renumbered, with this 2014 issue as volume 1. Back issues of the *Review* can be found at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/>.

the *Review* will complement those by leaning towards modern Mormon studies. Rather than publishing original research articles per se, it will allow readers to keep pace with scholarship in a variety of disciplines and fields.

Mormon studies is still developing in fits and starts. It remains haunted by pressing questions: Is it a field or merely a band of scholars who happen to share an object of study? What is its relationship to those faith communities with arguably the greatest stake in its findings? What assumptions about religion or about a particular faith could or should undergird study of it? Are there special methodological, theoretical, or epistemological considerations involved with the study of Mormonism? How might Mormon studies relate to Catholic studies or Jewish studies? While the *Review* will not conclusively settle these debates, it aspires to provide a forum where the shape of these conversations can be made apparent, where underlying assumptions can be assessed, and where comparative possibilities can be explored.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever Mormon studies is, it seems at least partially genealogically connected to the broader field of religious studies. As a result, Mormon studies has taken on some of that field's theoretical problems and possibilities. In other words, Mormon studies has no corner on the problems of audience, methodology, epistemology, or identity. Religious studies scholars can barely talk politely about such things. In a memorable 2004 exchange between scholarly titans Stephen Prothero and Robert Orsi, the conflicted space that many Mormon studies practitioners inhabit was dissected by brilliant minds with no resolution.<sup>4</sup> For Prothero, the working *détente* that reigned for the previous generation of scholars—namely, that one's personal faith, its truth claims, and moral judgments in general should be “bracketed” out of academic writing—has cost us credibility with readers because no one knows where authors are coming from ideologically. “What is the danger,” Prothero asked, “of divulging to our

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3. See the bibliographic essay in this issue for an introduction to these matters.

4. Stephen Prothero, “Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She Is Coming From,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32/2 (Winter/Spring 2004): 10–11.

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readers what we really think?” In Prothero’s view, to bracket belief is to condescend to readers and subjects alike. Such a state of affairs has rendered religious studies all but irrelevant in public discourse about religion, he concluded.

Robert Orsi’s rejoinder charged that modern religious studies may not have bracketed belief so much as “embedded and masked its normativities in its very practices of critical knowing,” and in such a way that the “religious experiences . . . of African Americans and women, of Catholics and Pentecostals (among many others),” have been “pathologized or marginalized.” For Orsi, religious studies “has been very much the theoretical enforcer of a normative and unchallenged liberal Protestant and Western religious modernity.”<sup>5</sup> Ann Taves’s response to the Prothero/Orsi impasse brilliantly complicated things. What of scholars who “occupy a complicated institutional middle ground between the academy and religious communities”? Her point has meaning for Mormon studies, where current and former members of the churches originating with Joseph Smith have dominated the field, though certainly not completely. Taves’s suggestion—that practitioners think more deeply about their commitments, roles, and audiences and, especially, that they better mark (or “perform,” in her words) their movement in and out of various roles and contexts—is important for Mormon studies. Her phrase “multiplex subjectivity,” borrowed from anthropology, may help Mormon studies scholars think about audience, tone, and authority.<sup>6</sup> The trouble, as Taves notes, is that the boundaries within and around religion and those who study it are always contested and in flux. And even seemingly neat distinctions between this ideological commitment and that methodological goal, even when acknowledged, can belie a messier comingling of one’s intellectual and religious commitments.

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5. Robert A. Orsi, “Four Responses to ‘Belief Unbracketed’: A ‘Bit of Judgment,’” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32/3 (Summer 2004): 15–16.

6. Ann Taves, “Negotiating the Boundaries in Theological and Religious Studies” (Opening Convocation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, September 22, 2005), <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/Faculty/taves/GTU-FinalLecture.pdf>.

The “bracketing” issue is reflective of religious studies’ larger methodology problem, which in turn also relates to Mormon studies. Viewed from one angle, both fields seem to capitalize on the messiness of the modern academy. So what if we let a common object rather than a common methodology define a field? We can readily admit that neither religious studies nor Mormon studies will ever be a single discipline. *Interdisciplinarity* is a contemporary academic buzzword, after all. History has long dominated intellectual approaches to Mormonism, and change might be good. (One would expect a historian to hedge on this point.) But my concern is not about methodological diversity as much as it is about the possible *lack* of methodology in Mormon studies. The biggest problem with such a state of affairs, in my view, is that conversations that become too insular or too self-obsessed often lack critical peers to help keep the discussion sharp or even intellectually honest.

Tracy Fessenden has voiced this concern for religious studies, whose scholars also do not share a methodology but, more critically for her, can as easily lack one altogether.<sup>7</sup> Mormon studies scholars will have to think hard about what Fessenden calls the “and-x” problem. In religious studies, that means a field characterized by religion being endlessly linked with some other discipline: religion and literature, religion and psychology, and so forth. Problematically, the “x” part of the equation routinely emerges more neatly in religionists’ work than most in the broader fields would allow. The implication is that religious studies can actually act to insulate work, and harmfully so, from the very disciplines that ostensibly make religious studies “interdisciplinary.” What this means for Mormon studies, in my view, is that we must seek evaluative standards, readers, and theoretical cues from other disciplines if it is to be relevant in the modern academy or contribute to the broader project of the humanities.

But religious studies has something going for it despite its audience and methodological problems. What religious studies lacks in methodology it more than makes up for in a central theoretical problem. The

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7. Tracy Fessenden, “Religion, Literature, and Method,” *Early American Literature* 45/1 (2010): 183–92.

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question “what is religion?” (or, relatedly, “what is ritual?” or “what is belief?”) has sometimes pushed religious studies to the brink of cannibalistic collapse, but it has undoubtedly given the field its theoretical energy and made its interdisciplinary coherence possible. I’m not sure what a *theory* of Mormonism will look like, but in lieu of methodological order, the question “what is Mormon?” seems to merit continued attention. Accordingly, the *Review* will take care to highlight work that compares Mormonisms or relates Mormonism to non-Mormon traditions and ideas. Mormonism will continue to help us comprehend things non-Mormon and vice versa. We’ve only begun the comparative and contextualizing projects started in the last generation, after all. Going forward, scholars will have to brave the inter- and intra-Mormon thickets and come, not unchanged, to broader intellectual shores. The *Review* will encourage and support that project.

And so the *Mormon Studies Review* charts Mormon studies at a critical early juncture. A wave of excellent scholarship and support from some forward-thinking institutions have generated considerable energy in the field. This interdisciplinary experiment shows signs of productive growth in literature, sociology, cultural studies, political science, and philosophy. The present challenge, at least as examined in the pages that follow, is to foster the current efflorescence without letting the field devolve into navel-gazing questions and answers that resonate with Latter-day Saints only.

Since the *Review* is published at Brigham Young University, and through an institute that bears the name of Neal A. Maxwell, we also feel compelled to ask, in a paraphrase of Loyd Ericson’s memorable query, what is *Mormon* about Mormon studies?<sup>8</sup> While that question will not be meaningful to everyone in the field or to every institution that supports it, it is inescapable here. We’ll undoubtedly be forming answers to that question in the years to come, but we can at least set out, at this new beginning, a guiding principle for the *Review*: friendship. In our hope to

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8. Loyd Ericson, “Where Is the ‘Mormon’ in Mormon Studies? Subject, Method, Object,” *The Claremont Journal of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (2011): 5–13.

meaningfully connect minds across space, time, and ideological and religious spectra, the *Review* aspires to a very Mormon ideal indeed. Mormonism's founder put it this way, at least as related in a secretary's hurried notes in July 1843:

Let me be resurrected with the saints whether to heaven or hell or any other good place—good society. What do we care if the society is good? dont care what a character is if he's my friend.—a friend a true friend. & I will be a friend to him[.] friendship is the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism, to revolution[ize] [&] civilize the world.<sup>9</sup>

As our contribution to the “Mormon” in “Mormon studies,” the *Review* seeks that intellectual good society and the friendship—forged across boundaries—that defines it.

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9. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 234.