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## Essays

### Mormon Studies in the Academy: A Conversation between Ann Taves and Spencer Fluhman

*SF: Professor Taves, you were involved in the early planning stages for what became the Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Tell me what drew you to that initiative and why you continued to support it as it developed.*

*AT: The formation of the Mormon Studies Council, as an advisory group to the School of Religion, and the subsequent development of the Hunter Chair were part of a broader plan to diversify the School of Religion. Although Karen Torjesen, then dean of the School of Religion, created the various councils, we were both deeply committed to creating a school that went well beyond the traditional Protestant seminary fields that provided its original structure. As the faculty person in the modern history of Christianity and American religion, I was the natural faculty representative to the Mormon Studies Council, which at that time was composed of the dean, LDS leaders from Southern California, and myself. It was an exciting experience, coming together from our various perspectives to envision what Mormon Studies might look like at CGU. We had important discussions within the council itself about how Mormon Studies could be situated within the study of religion in North America, but also how it might expand conceptions of many of the other fields, such as scriptural studies, ethics, and theology, as well.*

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Another outgrowth of the council structure I found fascinating (and this was totally Karen's inspiration) was the council retreats. They brought together members of the various councils—Islamic Studies, Indic Studies, Jewish Studies, Coptic Studies, and so on, along with Mormon Studies—to discuss some theme of potential interest to everyone, such as transmission of faith across generations. These events provided council members a sense of what it is like to bring multiple traditions into conversation, something that each of the councils alone often found hard to envision.

*SF: In a 2004 presentation at what turned out to be the first of many Claremont Mormon studies conferences, you situated Mormon studies within the broader academic study of religion. From what I can tell, in fact, your presentation may have been among the first attempts, along with Eugene England's efforts at what is now Utah Valley University, to define an institutional space for Mormon studies in a secular setting. Figure 1 approximates a matrix of sorts that you used to frame our thinking about where Mormon studies might fit in the modern academy. Talk me through the figure and the ideas behind it.*

**AT:** The matrix illustrates a range of ways in which the study of Mormonism could be positioned within various subfields within the academy and, thus, a variety of approaches and topics that could fall under the umbrella of Mormon studies. "Mormonism" doesn't appear on the matrix because it can be studied within any of these subfields using any of these approaches. The basic ideas behind the diagram emerged from my experience as an American religious historian and historian of Christianity with a religious studies orientation who had been teaching for two decades in a Protestant theological school. While at Claremont, I taught courses in denominational history (Methodist and Unitarian-Universalist), a survey of the global history of Christianity since the Reformation, courses in American religious history, and theory and method in the study of religion. So the chart emerged naturally out of the mix of subfields and approaches with which I was familiar.

I started with Mormonism, in its denominational variants (LDS, Community of Christ, etc.), and subsumed them under the broader head-

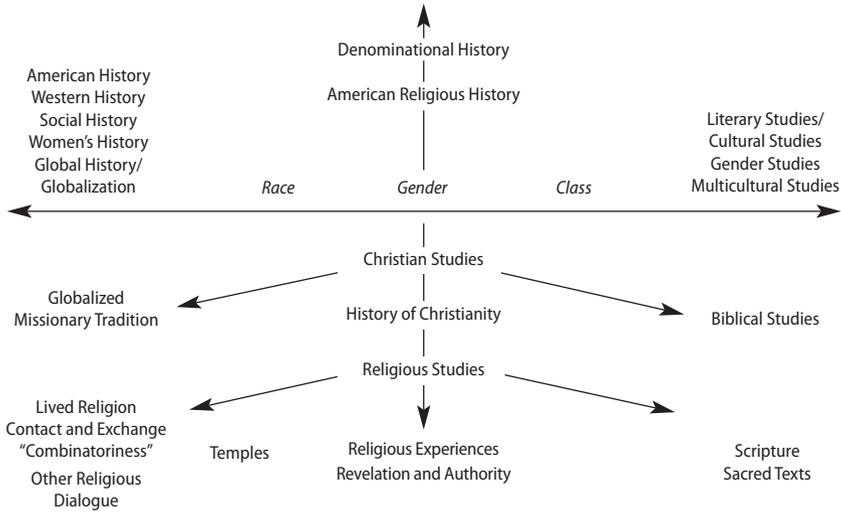


Figure 1. Chart prepared by Ann Taves for closing session of Positioning Mormon Studies Conference, Claremont Graduate University School of Religion, October 25–26, 2004

ing of “American Religious History.” American religious historians naturally position themselves within the broader framework of American history and American studies, so the horizontal axis under “American Religious History” spreads out laterally into various aspects of “American History” (on the left) and “Literary Studies/Cultural Studies” (on the right). Given Mormon self-identification as Christian, I then placed it under the heading of “Christian Studies,” thinking of that not just in terms of American Christianity but also in terms of the global spread of Christianity and the various traditional Christian theological disciplines. So moving laterally at that level, we can consider the globalization of Mormonism and its interaction with various cultures (on the left) and Mormon additions to the canon in the context of “Christian Biblical Studies” (on the right). Finally, the diagram drops down to “Religious Studies,” where I highlighted a range of comparative themes that could be considered across traditions: lived religion, temples, revelation and authority, sacred texts, and so on.

*SF: What, if anything, has changed since you originally conceptualized this? Have there been developments since 2004 that might modify your sense of the various fields?*

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**Taves:** As you know, I created that diagram on the fly as a way to summarize what we'd been discussing at the conference, so it was very much a sketch. I think I still am pretty happy with the trunk of the diagram—denominational studies, American religious history, Christian studies, and religious studies. Each of the lateral lines running through the nodes on the trunk could and should be expanded. I looked at some of the blogs from the conference on Mormon studies at Claremont in 2010, and it strikes me that, among other possible improvements to the chart, orbs could be added to represent different audiences that Mormon studies scholars might be engaging, that is, various Mormon audiences (LDS, Community of Christ, Sunstone types, etc.) and academic audiences. Different questions are going to come up depending on the audience that scholars are addressing.

*SF: You hold a Catholic studies chair at UC Santa Barbara. Given your experience with Catholic studies and Jewish studies, how does Mormon studies compare with those fields?*

**AT:** Actually, here at UCSB we not only have chairs in Catholic studies and Jewish studies, we also have chairs in Tibetan Buddhism and Sikh studies! So in thinking about all these “studies chairs,” I would start with the obvious: behind each of these endowed chairs is a community that wants to be present in the academy. How and why they want to be positioned in the academy varies somewhat. Jewish studies chairs have been around the longest and tend to be the most broadly conceived. Because Judaism can be viewed as a religion, a culture, and/or an ethnic identity, Jewish studies programs are not always situated within religious studies. As far as I am aware, the other programs generally are.

Many Catholic studies chairs have been established in Catholic universities in response to a perceived loss of “Catholic identity” in the institutions and the student bodies they serve. Catholic studies chairs and programs of that sort have religious formation as one of their aims, performing a function much like Religious Education at BYU. The Catholic studies chair I hold at UCSB, like many of the other types of chairs, was established to make sure that Catholicism had a place at the religious

studies table. Often this presence offers a tacit recognition that the traditions value. Chairs in Sikh studies differentiate Sikhism from Hinduism, chairs in Tibetan Buddhism ensure the preservation of a tradition under threat, and chairs in Mormon studies give the tradition a place alongside other Christian traditions and other religions.

*SF: You mention that Catholic studies chairs often have a pastoral aim similar to Religious Education at BYU. That devotional/religious formation element has generated considerable tension within Mormon studies—a tension perhaps rooted in anxieties about academic legitimacy. What space do you see for religious education within Mormon studies? Is there something about contemporary Mormon studies that makes LDS religious formation uniquely problematic?*

*AT: I doubt there is anything uniquely problematic about the relationship between LDS religious formation and Mormon studies. In fact, I think we could draw pretty extensive parallels between the LDS and Catholic situations, such that we could compare BYU to the Catholic universities, the LDS institutes to Newman Centers, and the more LDS and Catholic formation-oriented centers, professional associations, and publications to one another. In general and as holder of a chair in Catholic studies at a public university, I stress our ability to shift our voice to one that is appropriate relative to a given audience or constituency. I often find myself explaining the difference between teaching Catholic studies courses at a public university and at a Catholic university. In the former, the aim of the institution is not religious formation but formation in the liberal arts, as well as the formation of educated citizens (or something like that). In private universities with a religious mission, the institution often aims to combine formation in the liberal arts with religious formation. Within any of these institutional contexts, we may want to teach students to distinguish different voices, for example, the voice of the historian who speaks in light of approaches and methods shared by historians and the voice of a religious (or nonreligious) person when speaking in light of beliefs shared with cobelievers. I wonder if this approach could be used to ease some of the tensions within Mormon studies. Would it be possible*

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to encourage scholars to be explicit about the voice with which they are speaking or writing in any given instance—that is, whether they are speaking as Latter-day Saints or not to a specific or a mixed audience, thus highlighting the presuppositions they are bringing to whatever they are doing?

*SF: You don't specialize in Mormonism per se, but you have presented on the tradition in Mormon-centric and non-Mormon-centric venues. What strike you as unique opportunities or challenges that come with the academic study of Mormonism?*

*AT: I'll begin by restating the obvious: for anyone interested in the formation of new religious movements, Mormonism is an incredible case study. I still remember how amazed I was to read the Doctrine and Covenants and have the date and location given for each of the revelations in towns I'd heard of while growing up in upstate New York. This is not the kind of data we have for older traditions! I'm impressed, too, with the magnitude of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, which is making all that data available in critical editions. But your question, I think, alludes to the work I've been doing on early Mormonism and the contentious issue of the materiality of the golden plates, which is what I've been lecturing on in various venues. The golden plates take us straight into one of the most interesting challenges: taking the whole range of evidence and views on contentious claims into account and making our way through them as scholars in as transparent a fashion as possible. As you say in your introduction, we can never be completely transparent, but I found that being as forthright as possible about the problem I was trying to solve and the presuppositions I was bringing to it has generated a pretty positive response from both LDS and non-LDS audiences. I'm sure it helps that I am setting up the "puzzle" of the golden plates with a claim that each "side" holds dear—that is, that Joseph Smith was not a deceiver or deluded and that there were no ancient golden plates. Setting it up that way provides an intellectual challenge, but one that reflects a*

religious studies approach at its best: a willingness to take the competing claims of believers and skeptics with utmost seriousness, to reveal the biases in previous scholarship (as Orsi would have us do), and to explain what we find in terms that make sense to us (as Prothero suggests).

*SF: Mormon studies supports a wide range of expressions, but history continues to dominate the field. How might religious studies help the imbalance? What tools can be utilized to expand coverage from other fields like anthropology, literature, sociology, and so on?*

*AT:* I agree: history does dominate. But I think there is a growing presence of scholars from literature and sociology. I'm thinking of the more literary approaches to the Book of Mormon and other sacred texts done by Terryl Givens, Philip Barlow, Mark Thomas, Grant Hardy, and so on, and of the sociological work of Armand Mauss and Gary and Gordon Shepherd. I've seen very little, though, from anthropologists apart from Tom Mould, and I think there is much more that ethnographers could contribute. With the global spread of the LDS Church, I would love to see ethnographers looking at how Mormonism is translating across cultures, not just in terms of formal procedures but in actual practice. We know quite a bit about the difficulties that Bible translators have faced in translating key terms from one cultural context (and web of associated meanings) into another. We don't know much, as far as I'm aware, about the issues that have arisen with the many translations of the Book of Mormon. Nor do we know much about subtle differences in what it means to be LDS in various cultural contexts or for different ethnic subcultures within the United States. So all that strikes me as ripe for exploration. Religious studies scholars not only are free to embrace a range of methods, but they (ideally) are trained in more than one tradition. Scholars who lack this training, and this includes most historians, are typically not as prepared to mentally enter into the beliefs and practices of a tradition and, thus, to capture what it feels like from the inside. I think that whatever else we want to say about a tradition, conveying what it means to insiders is crucial.

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*SF: As Mormon studies becomes less parochial, what do you see as its next hurdles? Do concessions or adjustments need to be made on various sides, Mormon and non-Mormon?*

*AT: You made an observation about your experience attending an Adventist studies conference a while back that I found quite illuminating. From what you said, it sounded as if you recognized yourself and other Mormon studies types in the Adventist scholars and felt as if you were looking at yourself in a somewhat distorted mirror. I've had that experience too, and it always leaves me smiling at myself, wondering how I could have thought my experience was so different from the experiences of others. I think this feeling of partial recognition in the midst of differences is one that more and more of us are going to have as we move in and out of each other's worlds. I think this experience lies at the heart of being less parochial and more cosmopolitan. I don't think this movement requires us to abandon our home communities or basic identities, but I do think it changes us in subtle ways. I think that some people find the prospect of moving in and out of others' communities and world-views disturbing and that those of us who value that movement need to talk more about what it is like to do that, why we value it, and how we can maintain our basic commitments while doing so.*

**Ann Taves** (PhD, University of Chicago) is currently professor of religious studies and holder of the Virgil Cordano OFM Chair in Catholic Studies at UC Santa Barbara. She held faculty appointments at the Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate University prior to moving to UCSB. She is the author of *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, 1999) and *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, 2009). She is currently working on a book entitled *Revelatory Events: Unusual Experiences and New Visionary Movements*, which will include extensive discussion of early Mormonism.