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Roundtable: The State of Mormon Studies

In Defense of Methodological Pluralism: Theology, Apologetics, and the Critical Study of Mormonism

Brian D. Birch

Background

IN MY FIRST YEAR OF FULL-TIME TEACHING AT Utah Valley University (1999), its Center for the Study of Ethics received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to explore how Mormon studies might function at a state institution of higher education.¹ The project was led by Eugene England, who asked me to assist in hosting a yearlong seminar featuring both resident and guest scholars in the field. We tasked the group with exploring what it would mean to do Mormon studies in an academically rigorous manner consistent with the values of a state university. The seminar was a very fitting manifestation of Gene's passion and creativity before his illness and eventual passing the next summer. During this period, I was left to lead the project to conclusion and determine next steps for Mormon studies at UVU. This experience served as a powerful catalyst for questions regarding my field of study and has had a profound impact on my intellectual development.

With this background in mind, I intend to explore questions in this essay related to issues and challenges in the development of Mormon

1. The institution was at this time Utah Valley State College.

studies. Throughout the NEH seminar, two primary approaches emerged.² Some argued that Mormon studies should be guided primarily by concerns in cultural studies, an important objective of which is to identify and overcome injustice. As an advocate of this perspective, Gene was quoted widely as saying that Mormon studies should both “celebrate” the cultural achievements of Latter-day Saints and scrutinize beliefs and practices detrimental to social justice. This view was driven by Gene’s well-known and unyielding hope for cultural transformation. Others, such as myself, argued that this approach faced both practical and methodological difficulties. On the practical side, which features of Mormonism are to be celebrated, and which are eligible for critique? And perhaps most importantly, who decides? To say this is certainly not to imply that cultural studies could not be an important *component* within Mormon studies.³ What I attempted to argue, rather, was that cultural studies should not be the *primary methodology* around which other educational values revolved.

Owing to the influential work of Peter Winch, D. Z. Phillips, and David Tracy, the intersection between devotional and critical approaches to the study of religion was a crucial question from the earliest days of my graduate studies. What emerged for me was an approach that creates space wherein diverse methodologies and perspectives are allowed adequate and appropriate voice. This space would protect and facilitate both methodological and ideological diversity, which is itself a core value in higher education (and one more central, I would argue, to the aims of the academy). Thus the criterion for inclusion in Mormon studies would be the extent to which a perspective was able to critically take account of other perspectives with intellectual rigor and with an appropriate openness to revision.

2. Seminar participants and guest lecturers included Mario De Pillis, Jan Shipps, Armand Mauss, David Whittaker, Terry Givens, Bradley Cook, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Marie Cornwall, Dean May, Thomas Alexander, Richard Dutcher, Janet Bennion, and Michael Austin.

3. Included in UVU’s catalog offerings is a course entitled “Mormon Cultural Studies,” in which issues of race, gender, class, and so on, are explored and critically examined.

The remainder of this essay will attempt to explicate this thesis and to apply it to the debates surrounding Mormon studies at this pivotal moment in its development. My arguments will be aimed in two different directions. On the one hand, I seek to argue that Mormon studies absent theological and apologetic voices is artificially exclusionary and unproductive. On the other hand, I argue that the appeal to religious authority in deflecting critical arguments can be equally inappropriate and detrimental. To accomplish this, I will utilize the arguments of Robert Neville in his 1992 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion. The short space of this essay allows for a mere sketch of the arguments. I present them in the hope that they can inform a more sustained and rich dialogue on these issues.

Methodological pluralism

As dean of Boston University's School of Theology, Neville was concerned to address the question of the legitimacy of theology in the academic study of religion. In his essay, he tilts toward a more inclusive sensibility, arguing that a variety of disciplines and approaches "properly belong to the study of religion until they are convincingly demonstrated to be inappropriate."⁴ Beyond making the general point that an angle of study is innocent until proven guilty, Neville narrows his argument to assert that theological accounts fall within religious studies insofar as they "individually can contribute to the understanding of some aspect of religion."⁵ This latter point has been an exceptionally contentious issue in the academy. There is, for example, an entire literature surrounding

4. Robert Cummings Neville, "Religious Studies and Theological Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61/2 (Summer 1993): 187. See also Neville, "The Role of Religious Studies in Theological Education," *Occasional Paper No. 8* (School of Theology at Claremont) 2/4 (December 1992), 1–8; and Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

5. Neville, "Religious Studies and Theological Studies," 186.

what it means to *understand* a religion and the extent to which this understanding is serviceable to the academy.⁶

Donald Wiebe, for example, has spent the better part of his career arguing that “if the academic study of religion wishes to be taken seriously as a contributor to knowledge about our world, it will have to concede the boundaries set by the ideal of scientific knowledge that characterizes the university. It will have to recognize the limits of explanation and theory and be content to *explain* the subject-matter—and nothing more—rather than show itself a form of political or religious behavior.” The practical application of Wiebe’s arguments would result in the abandonment of both theological and phenomenological treatments of religious belief and practice in favor of purely explanatory or “scientific” methods.⁷ Thus, in order to defend the integrity of his inclusive approach, Neville must establish the legitimacy of theological voices while maintaining the role of critical inquiry that lies at the heart of academic discourse. He attempts to do this by requiring that theological accounts be subject to public forms of scrutiny and open to revision, and thus “make themselves vulnerable to criticism from all sides and to sustain themselves through the process of correction.”⁸

Applying this criterion to the situation in Mormon studies invites us to consider the extent to which Latter-day Saint apologetic discourse may

6. See, for example, Alasdair McIntyre, “Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?,” in *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick (London: MacMillan, 1964); Peter Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1/4 (October 1964), 307–24; D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997); and J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

7. Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), xiii, emphasis added. Wiebe shares in the main lines of criticism that are directed toward the “Chicago school” founded by Mircea Eliade and that influenced Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Ninian Smart, Jonathan Z. Smith, and other notables in religious studies. See James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences, and Subsequent Debates* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

8. Neville, “Religious Studies and Theological Studies,” 191.

or may not have a place at the Mormon studies table.⁹ How we approach this question is crucial to the development of this emerging field of study. One barrier to progress lies in the historical particularities of Mormon apologetics. Though the quality of this literature has been uneven (and the discourse polarizing), this does not, in my view, affect the principle at hand. Contrary to certain of my colleagues in religious studies, I believe that apologetics can (and should) have a legitimate place in the academic study of religion; and further, that it can aid in clarifying the issues that unite and divide those of diverse faith communities. That said, I believe equally as strongly that apologetics done poorly and inappropriately has the ability to do tremendous harm to the intellectual and ethical life of a religious community. The question at hand involves the extent to which Latter-day Saint apologetic literature can meet Neville's criterion and thus be a productive part of the academic dialogue.

The role of Mormon apologetics

Coming from the Greek word *apologia*, the term *apologetics* is understood within a Christian context to mean “the defence by argument of Christian

9. I extend Neville's criterion from theology to apologetics cautiously yet appropriately, I believe. Neville employs the term *theological studies* in a very broad sense to mean “those disciplines within religious studies that deal with first-order normative issues in religion” (“Religious Studies and Theological Studies,” 191). According to this description, apologetic accounts would have application here (at least to the extent of my use of the arguments). Furthermore, in my judgment, the alleged “atheological” character of Mormonism does not affect the extension of Neville's argument to Mormon apologetics. There are indeed interesting methodological issues related to Mormonism's resistance to the theological enterprise, but they must be left for another day. See Martin Marty, forward to *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. David L. Paulsen and Donald W. Musser (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), vii–x; Louis Midgley, “No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001); James E. Faulconer, “Why a Mormon Won't Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Element: The Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 2/2 (Fall 2006); Brian D. Birch, “Theological Method and the Question of Truth: A Postliberal Approach to Mormon Doctrine and Practice,” in *Discourses*

belief.”¹⁰ A popular Latter-day Saint approach to apologetics is to marshal evidence and rational arguments insofar as they discredit criticisms of church doctrine, history, or practice. Known in the philosophical literature as *negative apologetics*, it has the relatively modest goal of neutralizing criticisms rather than proving as true a particular point of doctrine. Others maintain the legitimacy of going beyond negative apologetics and employing arguments to demonstrate the superiority of Mormon belief and practice.

Arguably the most articulate and passionate defender of this position is Daniel C. Peterson, whose approach to these issues provides an example of key issues at hand in this essay. Like me, Peterson wants to argue for a more inclusive approach to Mormon studies that would incorporate apologetic voices. “I see no reason why both apologetics and Mormon studies shouldn’t be encouraged, nor even why they can’t both be pursued by the same organization, published in the same journal, cultivated by the same scholar. There is, I believe, a place for both.”¹¹ Employing the arguments of the Catholic theologian Paul Griffiths, Peterson further argues that the normative voice in the academic study of Mormonism not only has a rightful place at the table, but plays a critical role in understanding this religious tradition.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether, and to what extent, Mormon apologetics can meet Neville’s criterion of intellectual “vulnerability” such that its positions are “publicly sustainable” and “objectively correctable.” Critics of apologetics worry that these conditions are not

in Mormon Philosophy: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 103–32; and Birch, “‘Faith Seeking Understanding’: Mormon Atheology and the Challenge of Fideism,” in *Mormonism at the Crossroads of Contemporary Philosophy and Theology: Essays in Honor of David L. Paulsen* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 47–68.

10. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. E. A. Livingstone, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31.

11. Daniel C. Peterson, “The Role of Apologetics in Mormon Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): xii, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-role-of-apologetics-in-mormon-studies/>. See also Peterson, “The Witchcraft Paradigm on

met because proponents of these arguments often see them as invulnerable to criticism *on religious grounds*. One is reminded here of the famous “falsification debate” that examined how some religious beliefs cannot function as claims at all because there are no conditions under which they could be falsified through argument or evidence. Thus, according to R. M. Hare, these beliefs must be placed in an epistemological category other than “assertions,” “claims,” or “hypotheses.”¹² Because openness to error and revision of one’s position is a precondition for legitimate academic discourse, apologetic claims are often set aside as serving a purpose other than intellectual understanding.

One illustration of this phenomenon is the popular metaphor of apologetic arguments as *buttresses* in support of religious faith rather than serving as the *foundation* to faith. Employing the work of theologian Brian Hebblethwaite, Peterson understands apologetics as a “vital lifeline permitting the exercise of faith” such that “studied conviction can help a believer through spiritual dry spells.”¹³ This takes us directly to the heart of the matter. For at this point the question becomes the extent to which these “buttressing” arguments are revisable and subject to academic scrutiny such that they meet Neville’s criterion. Peterson will almost certainly affirm that these arguments are, at least in principle, subject to revision and correction. Indeed, to the extent apologetic arguments are said

Claim to Second Sight by People Who Say It Doesn’t Exist,” *FARMS Review* 18/2 (2006): ix–lxiv; and Peterson, “An Unapologetic Apology for Apologetics,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): ix–xlviii.

12. See Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell, “Theology and Falsification,” in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13–22. Since this debate, the philosophical community has produced a vast literature devoted to the question of the epistemological status of religious belief. See, for example, Peter Winch, “Meaning and Religious Language,” in *Trying to Make Sense* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 107–31; Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 16–93; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000); and D. Z. Phillips, *Faith after Foundationalism: Critiques and Alternatives* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1995).

13. Peterson, “Unapologetic Apology for Apologetics,” xix. See Brian Hebblethwaite, *In Defence of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

to rely on evidential considerations, apologists will almost always affirm their contingency relative to the force of relevant evidence. Be that as it may, one may inquire regarding the practical implications of these buttressing arguments in the life of a religious community. Within Mormonism in particular, certain of these arguments have acted as valuable supports to religious belief and action.

Finally, and more practically, whose voices will be included? To what extent would a defeating argument be allowed voice in this imagined community?¹⁴ Perhaps more importantly, would it be recognized as such? I maintain that in order to preserve both methodological consistency and ethical charity, inclusivity must allow arguments that could potentially defeat a valued apologetic argument. This has not been readily observable in the LDS apologetic community; but if apologetic voices are to maintain academic legitimacy in the conversation, they need to be publicly accessible to criticism and *potential* defeat. For Neville, theological arguments “need to be public and objective in the same sense that applies to religious studies generally, and religious communities should have just as great a commitment to this as should scholars with purely intellectual motives.”¹⁵ Thus, an important challenge for an inclusive Mormon studies is the ability to sustain critical dialogue while avoiding both religious polemics and secular dismissiveness.

Revelation and publicity

This brings us to a related set of considerations regarding the role of revelation and religious authority. Neville observes that a challenge to the academy is the extent to which those who advocate theological or apologetic arguments “should not have to submit the revelatory or authoritative

14. Defeasibility is an important category in the epistemology of religion. In broad terms, it refers to a belief’s vulnerability regarding its epistemic status. A defeating argument is thus one that successfully demonstrates the weakness or falsity of a belief. See, for example, part 4 of Alvin Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 357–73.

15. Neville, “Religious Studies and Theological Studies,” 196.

base of their tradition's practice to public examination."¹⁶ These considerations are amplified in the case of Mormonism, which subscribes to *continuing revelation* through living prophets and apostles. As John Gee puts it, academic work in Mormon studies that "neglects the influence of God in the experience of the Latter-day Saints risks being reductionist in the worst sense of the word."¹⁷ Though Gee is rightly critical of reductionist accounts of religion, the issue at hand for Neville involves the *academic* value of the appeal to revelation. "But if the task of justification is dismissed with the assertion that the authority is authoritative and that's that, then the claim to truth is implicitly abandoned and a retreat is made to the claim that this is what I or my community believes is true."¹⁸ The point here is that, in order for apologetics to be legitimized as contributing to my imagined Mormon studies community, the appeal to revelation must not serve as a "conversation stopper." Rather, it must be subjected to scrutiny regarding its grounds, consistency, and coherence, especially in light of other parts of the tradition or other approaches to the question of revelation. From Neville's perspective, "an authority needs to be identified and justified, and the appeal to authority itself needs to be justified."¹⁹ Otherwise, the conversation risks sliding into self-contained confession without the publicity necessary for revision or correction. This situation may be acceptable or even desirable in serving *religious* ends; but its *academic* limitations must be recognized by parties on all sides. In my judgment, ample mischief has followed from the conflation of academic and confessional considerations in the study of religion.

16. Neville, "Religious Studies and Theological Studies," 194.

17. John Gee, "Whither Mormon Studies?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 115, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/whither-mormon-studies/>. See also *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001).

18. Neville, "Religious Studies and Theological Studies," 196.

19. Neville, "Religious Studies and Theological Studies," 196.

Conclusion

To the extent I am successful in my account, the above considerations will point us toward a “third way” between strictly apologetic and skeptical methodologies. This is the balance that must be sought if apologetics is to enter at the right place in the conversation. To the extent that Neville’s arguments apply to the situation in Mormon studies, they encourage mutual respect amid a variety of voices. “Let us honor the sources of authority and revelation while engaging in critical discussion of how they are understood and justified.”²⁰ Whatever the merits of my case above, it must be recognized that methodological questions have always been at the heart of the academic study of religion and likely will remain so for as long as the enterprise is undertaken. Rather than balkanizing the conversation, I hope the Mormon studies community can reach out to see what might be of value in the other voice and build upon it.

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20. Neville, “Religious Studies and Theological Studies,” 199.