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## "Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom": Some Observations on Mormon Studies

*Daniel C. Peterson*

THE VERY TERM *MORMON STUDIES* suggests its own broad definition as a "big tent."<sup>1</sup> I take the adjective *Mormon* to refer to the subject matter, and not to the practitioners. It doesn't require that those involved in the study of Mormonism be Latter-day Saints or believers.

Mormon studies simply involves studies of things Mormon, including the Mormon people and their history but also their scriptures and their doctrines. Nothing in the term privileges, say, research into the reception history of the scriptures over philological, archaeological, and historical approaches linked to their claimed origin or *Sitz im Leben*—even if, as in the case of the Book of Mormon, that origin is controversial.<sup>2</sup> Nor, by the same token, does the term in any way discriminate *against* reception history or attempts to explain the Book of Mormon as a product of the nineteenth century. As such, it identifies no particular methodology and says nothing whatever about whether its practitioners need to bracket Mormon truth claims.

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1. A portion of this essay is drawn from Daniel C. Peterson, "The Role of Apologetics in Mormon Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): i–xxxv. The title "Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom" comes, of course, from the late Mao Zedong but is not intended pejoratively or ironically here. It reflects my hope for a proliferation of different approaches to Mormon studies. Unlike Chairman Mao, though, I mean it sincerely.

2. The term *Sitz im Leben*, roughly "setting in life," originated with the German Protestant Old Testament scholar and theologian Hermann Gunkel (d. 1932).

My understanding of Mormon studies includes not only the relatively secular and nonconfessional approach characteristic of most academic religious studies but the expressly committed, even confessional, academic work in theology, liturgical theory and history, scriptural exegesis, and apologetics. I realize that many religious studies departments and faculty are housed within nondenominational private universities and tax-supported state schools and that they are, therefore, practically speaking, constrained to adopt a secular, neutral, "objective" approach not only by theoretical preferences but by institutional reality. The same holds true for the large academic societies that feature religious studies; I recognize that—in order to maintain comity and peace, among other things—sectarian conflict must be kept under control and, if possible, altogether avoided. But these are political considerations, not philosophical issues.

I am a pluralist. I don't believe that there is a single discipline called Mormon studies any more than there is a single discipline called Islamic studies. At least, if there is, I can't see it. I'm a practitioner of Islamic studies myself. Ultimately, I bracket Islamic truth claims, though I'm pronouncedly sympathetic toward them.<sup>3</sup> My own favored approach is textual and intellectual-historical. But others under the broad tent of Islamic studies do political history, anthropology, art history, pure philosophy, economic history, military history, sociology, contemporary politics, economics, women's history, and a host of other things. Many of them are Muslims, some fervently believing and some only nominally

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3. I hope that my sympathy is apparent in such things as Daniel C. Peterson, *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), and my conception and founding of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. I don't believe that such sympathy is required in students of another faith. But I think that a complete lack of sympathy, to say nothing of actual hostility, can impair one's scholarship. I had a mentor in graduate school who, so far as I could see, was utterly color-blind, religiously speaking—which struck me as an odd quality in a historian of Islam. He simply didn't understand specifically religious motivations, and effectively denied their existence. He was brilliant, and prodigiously learned, and he influenced me enormously, but I still think that this curious lacuna in his personality created blind spots that damaged his scholarship.

so. Many of them are non-Muslims, of various religious and secular backgrounds. I've learned much from all of them, and I learn different things from different approaches. Although I'm a serious political conservative with libertarian leanings, for example, I've profited greatly from the insights of my Marxist friends. Because they see things from a different perspective than I do, they tend to see different things than I do. Just as my own vantage point creates blind spots, though, so do theirs. We need each other.<sup>4</sup>

But the lack of a single, particular discipline of Mormon studies constitutes one of the areas of legitimate concern that I believe an outsider (or even an insider) might have with respect to religious studies in general and Mormon studies in particular. Religious studies may, and often do, involve history, but the use of history may not quite rise to the level of professional historiography. A "studies" field may produce sociology without the rigor of sociological research, anthropology without fieldwork, theology without the discipline of theological/philosophical training and inquiry. Fifty survey courses, Hugh Nibley used to remark, do not a scholar make. One might easily remain a dilettante. Or one might, at the worst, be simply an ax-grinding ideologue, having the form of scholarship but denying the power thereof.<sup>5</sup> The same is true with regard to women's studies, black studies, and the like. They're entirely legitimate fields of research and teaching. In fact, they've been seriously neglected, and they're long overdue for attention. But none of that changes the fact that they are not, in and of themselves, distinct disciplines. Rather, they are areas on which various disciplines can be fruitfully brought to bear.

That is a principal reason behind my strong preference for defining Mormon studies with reference to its subject matter (Mormon) rather than with reference to some supposed specific method of studies. I'm

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4. In writing an article advocating a Mormon social Trinitarian model for the journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology some years back, I found myself, much to my surprise, finding the work of Catholic feminist and liberation theologians especially helpful. See "Mormonism and the Trinity," *Element* 3/1–2 (Spring and Fall 2007): 1–43.

5. Compare 2 Timothy 3:5 KJV and Joseph Smith—History 1:19.

methodologically a pluralist. I would much prefer to see people gain solid training in a discipline and then bring that discipline to bear upon their study of Mormon-related topics.

Permit me, at this point, to say a few words specifically about the relationship of apologetics to Mormon studies. In my view, which should already be apparent by now, apologetic and nonapologetic approaches to different topics and even to the same topic can coexist and flourish side by side. Over many years, for example, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) supported both the often apologetic *FARMS Review*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the meticulous textual studies of Royal Skousen and the coolly objective and utterly nonapologetic production of a searchable Dead Sea Scrolls database. They can even be unproblematically undertaken by the same person. Moreover, they can be mutually beneficial. Indeed, Mormon apologetics has often drawn upon completely nonapologetic scholarship, both from outside the LDS Church and from within.<sup>6</sup> And I believe that the benefits can run the other direction, as well—though I suspect that many nonapologists will be at least somewhat reluctant to admit it. I firmly believe that the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), at certain times (notably at its annual conferences), is every bit as much a part of legitimate Mormon studies as is the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology.<sup>7</sup>

Paul J. Griffiths, an Anglican scholar who trained as a Buddhologist and who has since converted to Catholicism, published a book in 1991, entitled *An Apology for Apologetics*, in which he “defend[s] the need for

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6. Hugh Nibley, John Welch, John Sorenson—these prominent Latter-day Saint apologists relatively rarely cite fellow Mormons. Instead, they rely upon non-Mormon scholarship that seldom if ever has Mormonism in mind. To cite two personal examples, I have applied the completely nonapologetic Book of Mormon scholarship of my fellow Latter-day Saints Grant Hardy and Royal Skousen for what I judged to be legitimate apologetic purposes.

7. As it happens, perhaps my belief in both can be tangibly illustrated by the fact that, at time of writing, I’m serving on the board of FAIR and as (the distinctly ineffectual) president of SMPT.

the traditional discipline of apologetics as one important component of interreligious dialogue.”<sup>8</sup> He does so in defiance of what he calls a scholarly orthodoxy that “suggests that understanding is the only legitimate goal; that judgement and criticism of religious beliefs or practices other than those of one’s own community is always inappropriate; and that an active defense of the truth of those beliefs and practices to which one’s community appears committed is always to be shunned.”<sup>9</sup> In his strongly expressed opinion, “such an orthodoxy (which tends to include the view that the very idea of orthodoxy has no sense) produces a discourse that is pallid, platitudinous, and deguttled. Its products are intellectual pacifiers for the immature: pleasant to suck on but not very nourishing.”<sup>10</sup>

Professor Griffiths argues for what he calls the principle of the “necessity of interreligious apologetics.”<sup>11</sup> This is how he formulates it:

If representative intellectuals belonging to some specific religious community come to judge at a particular time that some or all of their own doctrine-expressing sentences are incompatible with some alien religious claim(s), then they should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics vis-à-vis these alien religious claim(s) and their promulgators.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Griffiths distinguishes negative apologetics from positive apologetics in precisely the same way that I myself have done, though I believe that I came to the distinction in entire innocence of his discussion on the subject.<sup>13</sup> As an example of negative apologetics, which he describes

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8. Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), xi.

9. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, xi.

10. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, xi–xii.

11. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 1.

12. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 3.

13. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: An Unapologetic Apology for Apologetics,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): ix–xlvi. I had actually not read Paul Griffiths’s book when I wrote the introduction in 2010; I had only seen (and, not surprisingly, been struck by) its title.

as the defense of a proposition or belief against criticism, he points out that a critic of Buddhism might argue that the two propositions *There are no enduring spiritual substances* and *Each human person is reborn multiple times* are mutually contradictory. In response, a negative Buddhist apologetic will seek to show that there is no contradiction between them.

Critics of Christianity often argue that the existence of massive natural evil in the world is incompatible with the existence of a benevolent God. A negative Christian apologetic will argue that the fact of natural evil actually can be reconciled with belief in a loving God. In a specifically Latter-day Saint context, negative apologetics will seek to rebut, to neutralize, claims such as *Oliver Cowdery denied his testimony* or *Joseph Smith's introduction of polygamy shows him to be a man of poor character* or *Mormonism is racist*. Attacks against the claims of the restoration began even before the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the church, and Latter-day Saints have been responding to them for nearly two centuries now.

*Positive* apologetics seeks to demonstrate that a given religious or ideological community's practices or beliefs are good, believable, true, and/or, in some cases, superior to those of some other community. While negative apologetics is defensive, positive apologetics is offensive—by which, incidentally, despite my richly deserved reputation for vicious and unethical polemics, I don't mean to say that it necessarily gives offense.

Griffiths argues that religious communities have an epistemic or even ethical duty to engage in apologetics.<sup>14</sup> This, he says, is because, since religious groups typically claim that their teachings are true, they are obliged to respond when, as usually happens, somebody else claims that, in fact, their teachings are wholly or partially false. We should not be indifferent to the truth or falsity of what we claim, and all the more so when our claim involves matters of ultimate importance. This means that religious communities have an ethical duty to engage in negative apologetics, to defend or justify their assertions.

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14. The next few paragraphs rely largely upon Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 15–17.

Mainstream Buddhists, for example, who espouse what has been called the doctrine of No Self, believe that the notion of a continuing substantial soul, such as most Christians affirm, creates and perpetuates suffering. If challenged by Buddhist thinkers on the question, it is the duty of the Christian community either to justify its affirmation or to withdraw it.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, knowing of the existence of competing doctrines that contradict their own teachings, representatives of a religious community might proceed to a positive apologetics, seeking to demonstrate that one or more of their claims are, in fact, very believable, or even, perhaps, superior to rival views. There is, Griffiths says, arguably an ethical imperative to do so because religions commonly hold that adherence to their doctrines is important, and maybe even essential, to salvation. Just as a person on the shore holding a lifeline has an obligation to help a drowning man, so do those who have the saving doctrines or practices have an obligation to help their fellow mortals who might otherwise perish.

Griffiths also argues that apologetics can substantially benefit the faithful because of what he describes as

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15. The entire sixth chapter of Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, is devoted, first, to laying out a model Buddhist position on this matter, followed by a model Christian position. Thereupon, as a Christian believer, Griffiths attempts to illustrate a way in which an apologetic encounter between representative Buddhist and Christian intellectuals might proceed. See Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 85–108. I'm impressed by the integrity with which Griffiths seeks to represent the viewpoint of his "opponents," and I'm reminded, in this regard, of the great Muslim theologian al-Ghazali, who, before he wrote his *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (now available in a dual-language edition as al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura, 2nd ed. [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000]), wrote his *Maqasid al-Falasifa* (The aims of the philosophers) as a summary of their views. He did so in the conviction that a person should first thoroughly master the arguments and positions of an opponent before undertaking to refute them. So dispassionate was it that it was used, in medieval Latin translation, as an introduction to Islamic philosophy, and al-Ghazali, though ultimately a fierce critic of the Muslim philosophers, was thought by its European readers to be one. This is exemplary apologetic behavior.

the tendency of members of religious communities not to think in any very self-conscious way about the implications of the views into which they have been acculturated. These views are part of their blood and bone, among the presuppositions of their existence as human beings.<sup>16</sup>

Religious communities are, he says, typically forced into more nuanced understandings of their own doctrines and practices “primarily by pressures from outside or by criticisms from dissident groups within.” He cites as an example the creedal formulae generated by the ancient ecumenical councils of the Christian church.<sup>17</sup> A Latter-day Saint might cite the impetus given to Mormon historians by Fawn Brodie’s assertion that Joseph Smith’s first vision was a fiction invented relatively late in the prophet’s life. Several earlier accounts of the vision were discovered as part of an effort to counter her claim. Apologetics, says Griffiths, “is a learning tool of unparalleled power. It makes possible a level of understanding of one’s own doctrine-expressing sentences and their logic, as well as those of others, which is not to be had in any other way.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Griffiths argues, a failure to take contradiction between competing truth claims seriously, a kind of “can’t we all just get along” indifference to resolving disputes, will have very serious consequences. “The result,” he says, “would be both relativism and fideism: religious communities would become closed, impermeable, incommensurable forms of life.”<sup>19</sup>

With Paul Griffiths, I’m convinced that apologetics is an important part of scholarly discourse in religious studies and that it should be considered a kind of religious studies, and therefore, specifically, a kind of *Mormon* studies.

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16. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 25–26.

17. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 26.

18. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 36.

19. Griffiths, *Apology for Apologetics*, 42. “Form of life” (German *Lebensform*) is a term associated most specifically with Ludwig Wittgenstein, but also with some others in the analytical tradition in philosophy—particularly in the philosophy of language.

**Daniel C. Peterson** (PhD, UCLA) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University. Author of, among other things, *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007), he founded the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative and served as its editor in chief for over two decades. Formerly chair of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, which became the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, he also founded the *FARMS Review* and edited it for nearly a quarter century. He currently chairs the Interpreter Foundation, which publishes *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*.