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Kristine Haglund

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We'll Find the Place: Situating Mormon Studies

Kristine Haglund

MORMONS ARE (IN)FAMOUS FOR BUILDING LARGE and ornate temples that non-Mormons are forbidden to enter. Mormons also build squat, utilitarian chapels for ordinary worship—buildings in which non-Mormons would find little of architectural interest. There is a building in Salt Lake City, though, that is both open to all and quite interesting. The Tabernacle on Temple Square may also be a useful metaphor for thinking through some of the difficulties Mormon studies and its practitioners must face.

The most striking feature of the Tabernacle is its roof. The design is outrageously complicated, borrowed from the design of wooden truss bridges in New England and the Mid-Atlantic.¹ Because it was impossible to import steel in those pre-transcontinental railroad days, the roof was constructed of native wood. The trusses were joined with wooden dowels instead of nails and then tightly bound with rawhide that shrank as it cured to make the connections sturdier. Mormon studies, likewise, may involve difficult and apparently inelegant adaptations of methods from other disciplines that eventually yield sturdy and enduring work. It is easy for young scholars to disdain the old, home-grown ways of their predecessors, but contemporary practitioners of Mormon studies are likely to discover some methods in their predecessors' work that will serve them well, with some adaptation (and maybe some theoretical duct tape).

1. "History of the Tabernacle," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/additional-resource/history-of-the-tabernacle>.

Another important feature of the Tabernacle is that it has no obvious front or back door. Its elliptical shape is punctuated on all sides by identical doorways. Besides entering through doors representing a variety of professional and academic backgrounds, practitioners of Mormon studies will enter from doorways marked by varying ideological commitments. We have long since acknowledged that the detached, objective scholar is a mythical creature. And we should perhaps go beyond acknowledging that a studious disinterest is impossible and declare that it is undesirable. It is both a methodological and ethical mistake to strive for or pretend to “objectivity,” especially in any branch of religious studies. While careful attention to theory and method is a necessary foundation for academically respectable work on Mormonism, there is no method that will rescue us from the ethical problems involved in studying religion.

Once upon a not-so-happy time, it was possible to line up studies of Mormonism on a mostly one-dimensional continuum from apologetic to anti-Mormon. There was discussion, of course, about how much room there was between the poles and what kind of work might occupy some sort of nearly neutral middle ground, but the notion that work on Mormonism necessarily demonstrated commitment to, or dissent from, the LDS Church was widely accepted, and subtext and paratext frequently overwhelmed discussions of actual texts on Mormon topics.

Now, with a few noisy exceptions, these internecine disputes are muted. Although the efficacy of “bracketing” claims about supernatural truths is not universally accepted, the possibility is often admitted at least as a conversational lubricant. And the variety of work being undertaken has expanded tremendously, as have the relationships of scholars of Mormonism to its institutional forms. This is good news and cause for celebration. However, a bit of caution is in order—having moved away from the poles marked “for” and “against” Mormonism in the bad old days, we may be tempted to think that Mormon studies can take place in a clean space where faith commitments and academic ambitions and institutional politics do not sully the quest for scholarly excellence. This seems unlikely to me. What we can do is make sure the doors are clearly

marked and be unafraid to explicitly acknowledge which door we have walked through. By this I mean we ought to be explicit about whether we enter the space of Mormon studies from a particular academic discipline, faith community, or institutional perspective and about what prior obligations and agendas we bring to the task. There are many ways to do this, and scholars of religion will be practiced at this sort of entrance, but working in the space of Mormon studies will also offer opportunities to learn from unexpected sources.

For example, we might look at an interview between Elder Dallin H. Oaks, an apostle in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Helen Whitney, a journalist and documentary film producer. While neither journalists nor church hierarchs are typical sources of methodological inspiration for academics, I think Elder Oaks here admirably performs the work of accounting for his own situation vis-à-vis Mormon studies:

We're emerging from a period of history writing within the Church [of] adoring history that doesn't deal with anything that's unfavorable, and we're coming into a period of "warts and all" kind of history. Perhaps our writing of history is lagging behind the times, but I believe that there is purpose in all these things—there may have been a time when Church members could not have been as well prepared for that kind of historical writing as they may be now. . . . There are constraints on trying to reveal everything. You don't want to be getting into and creating doubts that didn't exist in the first place. And what is plenty of history for one person is inadequate for another, and we have a large church, and that's a big problem.²

Elder Oaks acknowledges that the LDS Church's relationship to scholarly work on Mormonism may be "lagging behind" and offers institutional reasons for why that might be so. By acknowledging that his interest in Mormon history is different from what an academic historian's might be, he makes space for both his own interest and the scholar's; once

2. "Elder Oaks Interview Transcript from PBS Documentary," 20 July 2007, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/elder-oaks-interview-transcript-from-pbs-documentary>.

their differing epistemologies and agendas are acknowledged, both are freed from policing the boundaries of their methodological orthodoxies and can learn from each other where possible and part ways where necessary. Elder Oaks even gestures toward the possibility that other kinds of scholarship can augment the kinds of historical work his own institution is concerned with:

Another problem is there are a lot of things that the Church has written about that the members haven't read. And the Sunday School teacher that gives "Brother Jones" his understanding of Church history may be inadequately informed and may not reveal something which the Church has published. It's in the history written for college or Institute students, sources written for quite mature students, but not every Sunday School teacher that introduces people to a history is familiar with that. And so there is no way to avoid this criticism. The best I can say is that we're moving with the times, we're getting more and more forthright, but we will never satisfy every complaint along that line and probably shouldn't.³

This frank admission is remarkable for its sympathetic appreciation of the needs of those who want to make different uses of the available historical and cultural material than those the institution prefers, and it is a useful model for people with all kinds of institutional affiliations and agendas. There is no academic credential that confers immunity from ideological blind spots and no ecclesiastical title (even with "Authority" in the job description) that carries evidentiary weight or infallible persuasive power. Mormon studies will flourish in a space where academic training, institutional affiliation, personal faith, and ideological commitments are doors to walk through, not weapons to be brandished or badges to denote rank and compel assent in the absence of sufficient evidence or persuasive argument.

If scholars come to Mormon studies by way of so many kinds of interest, training, and experience, it is likely, even inevitable, there will be

3. "Elder Oaks Interview."

a multiplicity of voices and some difficulty in constructing a common language. Here again, perhaps, a structural feature of the Salt Lake Tabernacle offers a metaphorical way through. The acoustics of the Tabernacle is extraordinarily live. There are multiple points in the auditorium where a whisper will be amplified enough to be heard throughout the hall. We might think of this multivocal space facilitating understanding by preventing any one discourse from becoming dominant, encouraging participants from many academic disciplines and with differing theoretical and methodological frameworks to articulate particular perspectives. Retaining the possibility of particularity may help keep “interdisciplinary” from becoming synonymous with a lack of rigor or methodological vagueness.

However, working with the tools of various disciplines in a space accessible to nonspecialists necessitates taking especial care to understand others’ methods and arguments before engaging them. Talal Asad, in his essay “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” describes the work of engaging in this way as “translation.” Drawing on Walter Benjamin, he asserts that “a good translation should always precede a critique. And we can turn that around by saying that a good critique is always an internal critique—that is, one based on some shared understanding, on a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent. Such a critique—no less than the object of criticism—is a point of view a (contra) *version*, having only provisional and limited authority.”⁴

This may be especially true in Mormon studies because practicing Mormons regard recording their family history, studying LDS Church history, and pursuing regular intellectual engagement with scripture as a religious duty. There are, therefore, many amateur scholars of Mormonism whose work occupies the interstices between lived Mormonism and theorized Mormonism in ways that are potentially illuminating. Of course, amateur scholars also occupy all of the space between accomplished independent scholar and crackpot, so careful scrutiny—including

4. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 189.

dismissing work that doesn't meet rigorous standards of evidence and argument—is part of the way that professional scholars should deal respectfully with this work. But not all of it should be dismissed out of hand because it does not inhabit the discursive universe of the academy. Again, Asad's metaphor of translation is useful here:

The good translator does not immediately assume that unusual difficulty in conveying the sense of an alien discourse denotes a fault in the latter, but instead critically examines the normal state of his or her own language. The relevant question therefore is not how tolerant an attitude the translator ought to display toward the original author (an abstract ethical dilemma) but how she can test the tolerance of her own language for assuming unaccustomed forms.

Religious studies, more than many academic disciplines, is *about* translation, creating “some shared understanding, . . . a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent.” The potential utility and even beauty of the field derives from the fact that its subjects are not inert specimens in a laboratory; they are human beings engaging questions of ultimate concern in a language that fairly drips with meaning, language rich enough for scholars to want to translate it for an audience unused to these idioms.

For non-Mormon scholars studying Mormonism, the translation involved in this project is likely to entail a fair amount of actual as well as metaphorical translation. Mormons have a highly idiosyncratic vocabulary, for which 1:1 English translations are frequently inadequate. This was somewhat humorously apparent during Mitt Romney's campaign for the presidency as reporters tried to figure out what bishops and stake presidents could possibly be. But part of “getting” Mormonism in more than a superficial way is understanding that a bishop is really not very similar to a Protestant pastor at all, and that calling a group of adherents a “ward” instead of a “congregation” is far more than a lexical switch. The work of Mormon scholars doing critical work on their own tradition is no easier: they have to be so fully immersed in the language of the academy that they can re-create Mormon theological constructs

and cultural mores in this second language without losing the poetry of their first language.

One thing Mormons are not very good at is being quiet. Decades of sermons about reverence have done little to quell the enthusiastic babel of Mormons greeting each other in their chapels before (and occasionally during) meetings—hushed cathedrals (alas!) are not part of the Mormon aesthetic. On mornings when people gather to hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir performance that is recorded for broadcast, there is usually more than one announcement requesting quiet, and a small army of nice people patrolling the aisles shushing people in the nicest possible way. I like thinking of Mormon studies as a gathering in the Tabernacle without the shushing—a babel perhaps, but a friendly one, a polyglot hubbub of ideas and arguments and poems and polemics, all housed under an upside-down bridge in the middle of the desert.

I hope we crank up the organ to sing hymns every once in a while.

Kristine Haglund (MA, German Literature, University of Michigan) is editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and a blogger at *By Common Consent*. Her research interests include LDS women's and children's history and the intersections of religion and social media.