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Making the Unfamiliar Familiar: Mormon Studies for Non-Mormon Students

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In my role as an assistant professor of Christianity and contemporary religious thought, I consider it my primary task to challenge students by making the familiar unfamiliar.¹ Unlike the classrooms of colleagues who teach Buddhism or Islam, my classes (like Jesus in Film and Pop Culture or History of Christianity) fill with students who have some knowledge—however incomplete or biased—about the subject matter. In some cases, students arrive already deeply invested in the learning outcomes—and deeply suspicious of any deviation from their existing understandings. In these courses, my duty, as I see it, is one of destabilization: I bank upon students’ (often complacent) familiarity to gain purchase of the course material, and once we begin our semester’s journey in earnest, I complicate the terrain and disrupt their assumptions. Thereby what is familiar to them becomes unfamiliar, and critical engagement begins.

Teaching Mormonism demands an altogether different objective: now I must make the unfamiliar familiar. My students know little about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and what they know comes from news articles or pop culture references or election-year sound bites, ¹

¹ Much of how I approach and teach Mormonism stems from the good example of Laurie Maffly-Kipp, who was my doctoral adviser as well as the professor who introduced me to Mormonism. I am also indebted to the students in my Mormonism classes, especially Tali Raphael and Pamela Rhyne. Finally, I am fortunate to know many brilliant LDS scholars of Mormon studies who have helped me with this material in myriad ways over the years. I thank them all, and especially John-Charles Duffy.

all of which obscure more than reveal. It is no wonder, then, that the early days and weeks of my Mormonism course find students a bit glassy-eyed and tentative, trying to enter into this foreign world with honest doses of curiosity and respect. While they have their preconceived notions, most feel too unsettled (and maybe also too “politically correct”) to speak from those presuppositions. Here, immediately, my professorial role feels different: my job becomes that of a friendly and trustworthy guide—perhaps like a missionary sister at Temple Square—charting the course and leading the way. It is the topic itself that provides destabilization.

I empathize with my students’ disorientation. In the past nine years, I have gone from a novice student of Mormonism to a researcher who publishes on Mormonism to a professor who teaches Mormonism. I am not Mormon. Studying Mormonism has become, for me, an ongoing process: by now, the unfamiliarity of Mormonism has become familiar, but there will always be more to learn. This is, after all, a tradition open to ongoing and personal revelation. So when I step into the classroom to teach Mormonism, I am inviting my students to join me in discovery.

With this article, I offer observations and recommendations for other instructors who teach or want to teach Mormon studies. I acknowledge my junior status and my limited data pool: I have always taught at schools in central North Carolina, first as a graduate student at UNC-Chapel Hill and currently as an assistant professor at Guilford College, a small, liberal-arts, Quaker school in Greensboro. Mormonism students I have worked with tend to be junior- and senior-level religious studies majors and minors equipped with sophisticated questions. Yet I trust that my experiences can resonate with others whose backgrounds and student populations differ widely from my own.

What follow are specifically my reflections about a semester-long Mormon studies course. I do introduce Mormonism in my lower-level Religion in the U.S. course, inserting it into narratives about the Second Great Awakening and new religious movements and paralleling it with nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism and anti-Catholicism. In these abbreviated treatments, Mormonism transfixes and puzzles students: questions pour forth for which there is scarcely time to answer
sufficiently. As a professor of American religious history, I cannot leave out the LDS example, and I know our days focused on Mormonism will be some of the semester’s liveliest. Yet I always fear I have somehow done a disservice to Mormon studies, leaving the story, the people, and the significance insufficiently explained. Though it feels tremendously unsatisfactory, I make a point of telling these lower-level religious studies students that they should take my Mormonism course if they want to understand Mormonism.

What do my students gain from a course dedicated explicitly to Mormonism?

Especially for religious studies majors and minors who have practice encountering and situating religious diversity, the Mormon example reminds them that there is still more to discover. In a Mormonism seminar, students are called to draw upon the tools they have been honing in other courses: tools for reading scripture, for understanding conflict between religious groups and the governing nation, for analyzing demographic trends. Situated within familiar religious studies motifs, Mormonism ceases to look strange. Jan Shipps’s analogy that the Book of Mormon is to the Christian Bible what the New Testament is to the Hebrew scriptures helps students see continuity in religious processes of innovation.\(^2\) Nineteenth-century legal and political disputes (like Reynolds v. United States or the Reed Smoot hearings) locate Mormons within the struggle for self-identity and determination, and they demonstrate how religions have long chafed the permeable line between church and state. Tracing Mormonism's assimilation into the American mainstream shows students that powerful, millionaire, Mitt Romney types are a particular and modern manifestation of American Mormonism—and not the norm.

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Students have found tremendous satisfaction in coming to understand so intimately a tradition that once seemed so alien. As one student put it, “I now know more about Mormonism than 99% of the non-Mormon population,” making him the expert-in-the-room whenever Mormon matters surface in conversation or in class. Another student explained that her newfound knowledge of Mormonism has helped her forge relationships, professional and personal. Now when she meets self-identified Saints, she responds with warm enthusiasm; this positivity often surprises and disarms her conversation partners, who seem unaccustomed to meeting non-LDS people who appreciate and understand the Mormon tradition.

Students also recognize Mormonism as an invaluable case study for understanding (1) the emergence of a new religious movement and (2) the uniqueness of the American religious context. What happens in the early years of a religion’s self-definition, and how does context (historical, political, and economic) inform an emerging church’s decision making? How do American motifs of individualism, innovation, patriotism, and the frontier manifest in the LDS story? Quite simply, as a world religion founded in the United States and infused with American values, Mormonism affords us scholarly opportunities that other Western or Eastern traditions simply cannot.

A word on LDS students: although I can count on one hand the number of LDS students I have encountered in my classes, these students know there is much they do not know—and they seem almost desperate to understand their tradition differently from what they have grown up learning at home and in church. I am so grateful for their presence in my class, and not simply because they can help me differentiate the myriad characters and plotlines in the Book of Mormon. Even more beneficial, they can affirm and explain for their classmates the existence and relevance of those LDS practices that seem particularly unusual to non-LDS people (emergency preparedness comes to mind). They can also share their own confusion on some doctrinal points (e.g., the King Follett discourse) and thus reveal that the tradition has its contentious and controversial elements, just like other religions. Finally, since LDS students are on an inverse journey in a Mormon studies course, from the familiar to unfamiliar, their learning processes are all the more fascinating.
to observe. As they uncover resonances in the readings and discussions, their personal histories begin to make sense again, and they find affirmation and expression unlike anything they have encountered before. This seems particularly true of LDS students who have left the church or are struggling with the faith. Here, the lumps and bumps of Mormonism do not drive them away, but draw them near.

What does a successful Mormon studies class include?

Let me reiterate the need to teach the “lumps and bumps”—the good, the bad, and the ugly. The vast majority of US college students today support gay marriage, and increasingly large percentages identify as “spiritual but not religious.”3 Moreover, many of my Guilford students seem suspicious of prominent religious institutions.4 How, then, to teach a religion that is institutional and socially conservative? I contend that it is imperative to show students the ideological diversity within Mormonism, and I do this particularly with readings and ethnographic methods. We read several articles from Sunstone magazine and blogs like Exponent and Feminist Mormon Housewives; these are not LDS Church–sanctioned publications, but their authors—some faithful Saints, some former—love the church and grapple with its inherent tensions. I have found that students care more about Mormons and Mormonism when they invest in these difficult conversations and come to understand what’s at stake for all sides.


4. I have found that this student suspicion of religion is more prominent at Guilford than at UNC–Chapel Hill, certainly because over 80 percent of the latter’s student body comes from within the state, meaning that many Carolina students have been raised in evangelical traditions. Of course, students’ background and social and religious location greatly influence how they will perceive religious diversity like Mormonism.
Ethnographic approaches help immensely, and I have my students talk to as many Latter-day Saints as possible. They attend services at the local ward. They hear panel discussions throughout the semester: a panel of missionaries, a panel of men (all holding positions in the local ward), and a panel of women. Many students interview Saints (either in person or online) for their final research projects. I find that students love the panels, and I love watching students find common ground with our Mormon visitors. When I taught Mormonism in fall 2012, by mid-semester I would arrive to class and be greeted with updates on our missionary guests’ latest activities: “I saw Elders Smith and Jones riding their bikes!” “The elders are visiting my neighbors later this week!” “I talked to Elder Miller and Elder Williams the other night for, like, an hour, and the Moroni story makes much more sense now!” Indeed, one of my unofficial learning objectives is that my students will forever be kind toward Mormon missionaries.

I also do a semester-long pop culture project in which one student each day is to find and analyze a media depiction of Mormonism. Students have chosen varied examples, including Sister Wives clips, New York Times articles, scenes from the musical Book of Mormon and the television miniseries Angels in America, and ads for the “I’m a Mormon” campaign. This helps students recognize differences between how Mormons describe themselves and how they are constructed by others. As the semester moves forward, students find that they can better understand or deconstruct the cultural stereotypes that they would otherwise gloss over uncritically.

In sum, I advocate having Mormons of all stripes speak for themselves as frequently as possible. Accompanying this must be conversations with students about listening and discovering nuance. Finally, students need to be able to see where and how cultural biases—either about Mormons or from Mormons—complicate understanding.

5. A fellow faculty member whose family attends the local ward proved invaluable in helping me find people to invite for the panel discussion. I also contacted the local ward and the LDS student group at nearby (and much larger) UNC–Greensboro. Nearly everyone I contacted was helpful and welcoming.
Why do I study and teach Mormonism?

While I cannot imagine not studying and teaching Mormonism, I realize that some Latter-day Saints might wonder what appeal their tradition holds. For me, the answers are both scholarly and personal. When first learning about Mormonism in 2005, I was immediately drawn to topics around gender and sexuality. I eventually realized that the questions I wanted to ask of the LDS Church were the same questions I longed—but did not dare—to ask of my own tradition, Roman Catholicism. The safe distance between myself and Mormonism allowed me to discover themes that I suspect I could not have recognized in a Catholicism course, wherein I would be too enmeshed and personally invested. In the end, Mormon studies has allowed me to see Catholicism and Catholic studies far more clearly.

This clarity does not extend neatly to the classroom, however. I am struck by the differences in student attitudes between my Mormonism class and my Catholicism class. Whereas I felt my Mormonism students approached the material with cautious curiosity that blossomed into enthusiastic engagement, my Catholicism students seemed deeply critical throughout the semester, and this often manifested in snide jokes or clench-jawed resistance. I do not know the origins of such striking contrasts—and I have several theories—but I must assess my own attitudinal differences in the classroom. Is it possible that I am unwittingly

6. Of course, I will have to teach these classes several more times before I can draw any viable conclusions, and my musings here are merely speculative. But here are some thoughts. I think some students (especially in the South) come to class with a profound distrust of Catholicism, owing to the tradition’s size and visibility. Moreover, the church has reaped years of bad publicity on the heels of the sex-abuse crisis. While the LDS Church shares conservative Catholic positions on topics like abortion and same-sex marriage, the Mormon position is less well known, and progressive students deem Catholicism far more problematic on that front. In a different vein, Mormons do an incredibly good job selling themselves: they are courteous, appealing, and likeable. I also believe this discrepancy has something to do with the familiar/unfamiliar motif I have traced throughout this essay: Mormons are admittedly unfamiliar, whereas Catholics seem and/or should be familiar. When students discover that Catholics are, in fact, unfamiliar as well, they are more apt to give the newly discovered information a cynical, negative gloss.
sensitive to anti-Catholic biases? Or have I somehow given my students permission to be cynical toward Catholicism because it is a tradition I feel more comfortable critiquing openly, whereas I tread more carefully with Mormonism because it is not “mine”? Or simply, have many students already formed strong opinions of Catholicism, but they can still meet Mormonism with fresh eyes? Whatever the exact reason, these challenges and questions should resonate with any professors, those who teach their own tradition and those who teach someone else’s.

To conclude, this interplay between familiarity and unfamiliarity can and should impact instructors and students alike. While I will continue to grow as a scholar thanks to the field of Mormon studies, so too do I get to see my students grow as thinkers and relational beings. Mormonism is an invaluable part of my teaching repertoire, and students claim it is likewise invaluable for them. Methodologically, students value the ethnographic approach and learn to seek on-the-ground experiences and interviews in their other work. Historically, students get an in-depth exploration of one religion’s change over time and see intimately how culture, context, and contention shape religious identities. Interpersonally, students lose some distrust of difference as they connect with and even befriend real live Mormons. And pedagogically, for me as the professor, I am called on to model the academic moves I make in my own scholarship.

Jill Peterfeso holds a PhD in religious studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She received an Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza New Scholar Award for her 2011 article “From Testimony to Seximony, From Script to Scripture: Revealing Mormon Women’s Sexuality through the Mormon Vagina Monologues,” published in the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion. She is currently writing about the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement and is an assistant professor of religious studies at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina.