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## "Light and Truth" in the Public University Classroom

*John G. Turner*

TEACHING ABOUT A SIZEABLE CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT is rewarding and challenging. Rewarding in part because students find such subjects accessible and—because they typically have met people affiliated with the religious movements in question—in some way relevant. Challenging because the subjects are sometimes fraught with controversy and discomfort.

I have taught courses dedicated to the exploration of Mormonism two times, both to classrooms devoid of any members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The courses were in Mobile, Alabama, and Heidelberg, Germany, locales with relatively few LDS Church members. More frequently, I have integrated material on Mormonism into other courses—a lecture about early Utah in the context of westward American expansion and units about Mormonism in courses about the history of religion in the United States. In those courses (offered in both history and religious studies departments), I have had a handful of Latter-day Saints in my classrooms. For the most part, however, I have been teaching about Mormonism to people who know nearly nothing about it.

Nearly all of the time, I use—or at least attempt to use—the same approach to Mormonism as I use when teaching about any other religious movement.<sup>1</sup> Based on my sense of the current scholarly consensus, students explore through my lectures and their readings the origins

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1. For the purposes of this essay, I am bracketing the entire question of defining religion.

and development of a movement's scriptures, rituals, and other key elements. At the same time, I try to preserve a sense of openness and wonder about the supernatural claims of movements and the experiences of their practitioners. As far as is possible, I want students to grasp how the adherents of the religions we study understand themselves.

I love teaching about Mormonism for several reasons. First, I know a great deal more about it than I do about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and a host of other topics I am required to teach. The fact that I have developed and pursued an interest in the history of Mormonism allows me to approach the subject with markedly greater enthusiasm and self-confidence. Second, the wealth of readily available primary and secondary sources allows students to engage in their own research. I regularly direct students to the Joseph Smith Papers website and to many other excellent digital resources. Finally, even my students who know next to nothing about the subject have at least some preconceptions about the church regarding Mitt Romney, *South Park*, the Broadway musical, LDS missionaries, and so on. They often have a vague sense that Mormonism matters, at least on a cultural or political level. It is easy to use Mitt Romney, controversies over same-sex marriage, or popular culture as a hook to capture students' attention. The difficult task is to persuade students to wade more deeply into Mormon history and into the sacred (for some) waters of gathering, scripture, revelation, and ritual.

Especially in semester-long courses dedicated to Mormonism, I want students to come away with an understanding of how the Latter-day Saints fit into the larger framework of religion in America (and, increasingly, the world), as well as some sense of particular Mormon scriptures, beliefs, and practices. Students cannot understand Mormonism, either in the 1830s or today, without understanding its points of contact and clashes with evangelical Protestantism, for instance. Likewise, in order to gain some sense of the LDS Church as a worldwide religious movement, students need to understand why Mormonism has grown rapidly in the South Pacific and in certain parts of Latin America while failing to do so in, say, Belgium.

At this point, I now have a log of classroom strategies that seemed to work well, failed attempts, and ongoing challenges. I have found

several effective ways to introduce students unfamiliar with the subject: Eliza R. Snow's poem "My Father in Heaven" (now the hymn "O My Father"), the 1832 and 1838/1839 versions of Joseph Smith's history, and either the *South Park* "All About Mormons" episode or a song from the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. In the latter examples, we sometimes discuss whether students would feel as comfortable with satire about, say, the Prophet Muhammad.

Often I have had time for more involved units. For example, I have had students write papers comparing and assessing *Blood of the Prophets* and *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*. Will Bagley, Ronald Walker, and Richard Turley (and authors of other books) have all generously joined my students via Skype to discuss their works. In terms of monographs, I have found Kathleen Flake's *The Politics of American Religious Identity* ideal in its length, clear thesis, and narrative. Especially in connection with introducing students to contemporary Mormonism, I have had students attend Sunday services and have invited missionaries, local church members, and others into the classroom. Sadly, thus far I have lacked funding for extensive field trips to Utah and historical sites across the country.

Particularly when teaching courses in a department of religious studies, I have attempted to more fully introduce students to Latter-day Saint scripture and ritual. These attempts have proven less successful. I have assigned excerpts of the Book of Mormon (oftentimes 1 Nephi 1, 2 Nephi 2, sections of 3 Nephi, Ether 3, and Moroni 10) and sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, but my students have largely found the material inaccessible, alternately boring or confusing. In a larger sense, I find that people need to work rather hard to appreciate scriptures that are not already their own. I face similar challenges when asking other students to engage the Qur'an, the Bible, and other scriptures.

Still, both on the subject of scripture and more broadly, Mormonism does present particular challenges. I will discuss two. First is the issue of the Book of Mormon's authenticity. When it comes to the New Testament, one might debate whether the Gospel of John dates to the late first century or to the early second century, but no one questions that it is indeed an ancient text. With the Book of Mormon (and the

books of Moses and Abraham), one debates millennia, not decades. I ask my students to consider the book's narrators and themes. For instance, we observe the distinctive teachings about the fall of Adam and the embodiment of Jesus Christ found in 2 Nephi and Ether, respectively, and we discuss the use of the Book of Mormon by both nineteenth-century and contemporary Latter-day Saints. Still, the fact that the vast majority of my students do not accept the Book of Mormon as an ancient text makes many reluctant to invest themselves in such analysis.

Related to the question of the Book of Mormon's authenticity is the larger question of Joseph Smith's character as a prophet. Unlike in the cases of Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad, my students are quite eager to discuss whether or not Joseph Smith found golden plates, published ancient scriptures, and received revelations from God. For most of my students, the fact that Mormonism's founding prophet married many women definitively resolves the prophet/fraud question. Some have a similar reaction to the details of Muhammad's polygamy, though for the most part students do not raise questions of truth or authenticity when it comes to more ancient religious movements. When it comes to Joseph Smith, however, many students are eager to debunk his claims. I imagine that if I had more Latter-day Saints in my classes, some would be similarly eager to defend them.

Many instructors in both history and religious studies encourage students to bracket questions of "truth." While I never focus on such questions in my own lectures or in assigned readings, I normally do not steer students away from them. For starters, explicitly professorial bracketing eliminates questions both interesting and important. As Joseph Smith asked, "Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?" (Joseph Smith—History 1:10). As Moroni encourages his readers, "Ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true" (Moroni 10:4). Many students are asking such questions, if usually not about the Book of Mormon or the LDS Church. Indeed, they *should* be asking such questions because they matter a great deal to many human beings and have major ramifications for how we live our lives. As someone who approaches Mormonism from outside the church, I

have my own answers to such questions, which I will briefly share with students if asked. No, I will say if pressed, I do not accept the Book of Mormon as an ancient record, nor do I believe that God chose Joseph Smith Jr. to restore Christ's one true church. Moreover, I find Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage and Brigham Young's endorsements of violence less than commendable. At the same time, I also share my appreciation for many aspects of Mormonism: 2 Nephi 2, the fact that Latter-day Saints need not defend the classical Christian formulations of the Trinity, the beauty of Mormon hymnody and artwork, and that Latter-day Saints apparently do not resent helping their neighbors move in and out of their homes. What is important, I remind my students, is to understand why others have arrived at very different answers to their questions, which brings us back to our scholarly study of Mormonism's history, scripture, and rituals.

A second particular challenge with Mormonism pertains to those rituals or ordinances, a central aspect of the study of religion. In the classroom, I explain baptism for the dead, the endowment, and sealing, but student understanding remains rather opaque. A major reason for this is that Latter-day Saints regard temple ordinances as too sacred to be discussed in any detail outside the temple. The church asks both members and outsiders to respect its understanding of that secrecy. At the same time, temple work is absolutely central to contemporary Mormonism. I discuss the endowment in broad strokes, describing how its sacred drama encapsulates the Latter-day Saint plan of salvation, and I show photographs of various temple rooms published by the church. I hope I strike the right balance when it comes to this subject.

How might one mitigate these challenges? In the future, I intend to proceed on a more explicitly comparative basis. My hope is that a more comparative examination of scripture and ritual might reduce students' initial suspicions about Mormon secrecy and impressions of Mormon oddity. One might, for example, note that Christians in late antiquity similarly faced suspicions because of their clannishness, exclusivity, and new rituals (such as the Eucharist). Or one might examine Native Americans groups that restrict access to their sacred rituals.

For the most part, I have been pleased with the classroom atmosphere when I have taught courses or units on Mormonism. I have told my students that classrooms are not an appropriate forum for proselytizing, whether the goal is converting others to or from a religion. In one semester, I had a Latter-day Saint student publicly chastise the class for making what she took to be snide remarks about her faith. The class collectively discussed her concerns, one student apologized, and we proceeded on a better footing. While I attempt to foster civility in the classroom, one cannot entirely avoid topics that make individuals uncomfortable or prevent students from making remarks that offend. For the most part, my students tread lightly when discussing anything pertaining to religion, especially if the topic is Islam. They have learned that they are expected to be tolerant. It is often a struggle to get students to candidly share their impressions. At the very least, I have found that prophets, persecution, and polygamy are splendid antidotes for student apathy.

The last time I taught a semester-long course on Mormonism, I subsequently learned that one of my students was meeting the local missionaries for weekly conversations. It occurred to me that my lectures must have been unusually inspiring this time around. Then I began worrying about phone calls from concerned parents. Perhaps I should add some sort of disclaimer to the syllabus. At the same time, I rather like the idea of my students searching for “light and truth” (D&C 93:36), even if they do not find it within the confines of my own church.

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