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Teaching Mormon Studies at a School of Theology and a Public University

Robert A. Rees

IN THE FALL OF 2009, I CONTACTED Arthur Holder, vice president and academic dean at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, to inquire if GTU had any interest in adding Mormon studies to its rich curriculum. Dean Holder replied that GTU had wanted to include Mormonism in its academic program for years and invited me to inaugurate a program in Mormon studies, beginning in the 2010–11 academic year. Since then, at least one course on Mormonism has been offered at GTU each year, including Introduction to Mormonism, Sacred Texts of the Latter-day Saints, Mormonism: Emergence of a New World Religion, and a tutorial on Mormon ethics. In this essay I will discuss the history of Mormon studies at GTU and the challenges and rewards of a blended teaching situation at a school of theology and a public university. I will also share examples of the kinds of assignments that I find most effective and the elements of Mormon studies that my students seem to find most engaging.

GTU is an academic consortium dedicated to research, teaching, and training in the major religions of the world. It consists of nine schools of theology (Catholic, Protestant, and Unitarian) and ten academic centers, including Buddhist, Orthodox, Islamic, Eastern Orthodox, Hindu, and Black Church/Africana Studies; the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences; the School of Applied Theology; and the Center for the Arts, Religion, and Education. Sitting on “Holy Hill” just north of the University of California, Berkeley, campus, GTU is

the largest and one of the most distinguished schools of religion and theology in the world. In fact, GTU, which attracts students from many religious traditions from around the globe, has as its motto “Where religion meets the world.”

One advantage of teaching at GTU is that it and UC Berkeley have a long-standing reciprocal relationship, one that includes sharing faculty, library facilities, and academic programs. Students from Berkeley can take courses tuition-free at GTU and vice versa. This has allowed the enrollment of UC Berkeley graduate students in GTU’s courses on Mormonism and precipitated the offering of a course on Mormonism by UC Berkeley’s religious studies program. That course, *Mormonism: How an American Faith Became a World Religion*, offered fall semester 2013, attracted twenty-seven upper-division students from across the religious spectrum and was the first course on Mormonism offered on a UC campus. The UC Berkeley religious studies program plans to offer additional courses on Mormonism in the future.

Mormonism has had a periodic presence at GTU since the mid-1970s. Earlier, in 1965, John Dillenberger, GTU’s first president, invited his former Harvard student Truman Madsen (a professor at Brigham Young University at the time) to accept an appointment on the GTU faculty. Madsen declined that invitation, but several years later he agreed to teach a course at GTU entitled “Mormonism in Its American Setting” for one semester in 1974 and again in 1975, commuting weekly from Provo to Berkeley. As the GTU press release stated, “The appointment, according to Dean Claude Welch, is a milestone. ‘At GTU we strive for the broadest and most productive interchange possible and Dr. Madsen, who holds the Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding at BYU, is eminently suited to begin the dialogue with Mormons.’” In addition to Madsen, Sheila Taylor, one of the first Latter-day Saints to graduate with a PhD from GTU (2011), taught a course on Mormonism while still a student. Over the years, other Latter-day Saints, including Frances Menlove (Mormon writer), Peggy Stack (award-winning religion reporter for the *Salt Lake Tribune*), and Scott Kenney (cofounder of Signature Books), have done graduate work at GTU.

Master's and PhD students at GTU are required to take courses in at least two religious traditions outside their own. Thus, courses offered in Mormon studies at GTU have attracted Catholics (Jesuit, Franciscan, and Dominican), Protestants (including Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians), Jews, Muslims, Wiccans, Unitarians, and Latter-day Saints or former Latter-day Saints. Such a rich mixture of religious traditions provides both challenges and opportunities. The challenge, as with all courses based on a particular religious tradition, is how to teach that tradition in a way that honors it without promoting it. As Richard Bushman, one of the preeminent Mormon scholars of the past half century, observed about teaching a course on Mormonism at Columbia University, it is hard to know how to speak about a tradition when one is a practicing member of that tradition. For example, does one always qualify a statement by using such phrases as "Mormons claim . . ." or "Joseph Smith supposedly . . ."? Bushman found such an approach cumbersome and so declared at the beginning of the class that he was a believing, practicing Latter-day Saint but hoped to teach the class as he would any other subject. I have taken the same approach at GTU. This has meant trying assiduously to be open, fair, and objective and both exposing students to a variety of perspectives and points of view on Mormonism and allowing them to challenge my observations, sources, and personal perspectives.

Perhaps this is no different a challenge than that faced by nonbelieving (or even nonreligious) scholar-teachers. That is, it is difficult to teach a particular religion from either the inside or the outside. The challenge is likely greater if a particular religious tradition has doctrines or liturgical practices that are metaphysical in nature. For example, a believing Catholic and an atheist would likely differ in how each would teach transubstantiation or the assumption of Mary to a diverse student body, whether that diversity was denominational as at a school of theology or was a broader-based diversity as in a public university. Since I teach Mormon studies at both kinds of institutions, this is a tension of which I am always aware.

The blended character of Mormon studies in Berkeley also applies to the relationship between the academic program and the community of practicing Mormons. Most courses offered at GTU, including those offered in Mormon studies, are supported by councils, centers, or other groups that provide funding and other kinds of support. The Mormon Studies Program at GTU is supported by the Bay Area Mormon Studies Council, which includes civic, academic, cultural, and ecclesiastical representatives from the Bay Area's LDS community. In the future, the council hopes to expand Mormon studies to other institutions of higher learning in the greater Bay Area. Having an external council that has a vested interest in sponsoring courses in its religious tradition presents a challenge to both the teacher and GTU. The council, therefore, strives to keep a respectful distance between the religious community it represents and those responsible for offering and teaching the courses, whose responsibility is to maintain academic integrity. It is a delicate balancing act at times, but it can be successful.

In addition to special lectures at GTU (by such Mormon scholars as Terryl Givens, Adam Miller, and Fred Wood) and in the community (for example, by a group of LDS scholars attending the American Academy of Religion conference in San Francisco in 2012), the Bay Area Mormon Studies Council has sponsored or will be sponsoring various conferences relating to Mormon studies. The first international Conference on Mormons in Asia was held at GTU's Pacific School of Religion and the LDS Institute of Religion in March 2014. The council has also hosted *Exponent II*, *Sunstone*, and other gatherings and will host the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology conference in 2015 and the Mormon Theology Seminar in 2016.

Since for scheduling purposes, GTU courses on Mormonism are taught in classrooms at the Berkeley LDS Institute of Religion, adjacent to both GTU and the UC Berkeley campus, LDS students sometimes audit the courses or drop in on a more casual basis. In addition, for some class sessions, I may invite students from the institute as well as ecclesiastical leaders and members from local congregations to participate in GTU classes devoted to such topics as missionary work and

Mormon congregational practices. LDS scholars and specialists from the community are also invited to give guest lectures. For example, Todd Compton, a local specialist on Mormon polygamy, gave a lecture on nineteenth-century polygamy, and Sheila Taylor, a GTU graduate, taught a session on Mormon feminism.

My approach to teaching the introductory Mormon studies course to theology students, who include students from my own as well as a variety of other religious traditions, is to focus on the following pedagogical objectives:

- To examine the cultural and religious context in which Mormonism emerged as a unique American religion
- To introduce students to the core beliefs and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- To consider Mormon doctrine, theology, and practice within the Judeo-Christian and other traditions (this includes opportunities for comparative explorations)
- To discuss the tensions within Mormonism itself and between the church and American society
- To assess the future of Mormonism as a world religion

Through texts, videos, guest speakers, panels on various aspects of LDS ecclesiology, and field experiences, the hope is to expose students to the academic study of Mormonism as well as introduce them to the liturgical, religious, social, and spiritual practices of Latter-day Saints. Students are required to write a short critical paper, make a class presentation, or present a creative/imaginative project; conduct an informal community survey of perceptions of and attitudes toward Mormons/Mormonism; observe and discuss in class a visit to an LDS worship service; watch or listen to a session of an LDS general conference; and submit and present in class the results of a major (10–12 page) critical/research paper on some aspect of Mormon history, doctrine, culture, and so on.

Sometimes these experiences with Mormon practices open the way for unexpected but nevertheless important discussions. For example,

after watching general conference, one student observed, “I didn’t see many women up there among the leadership.” This led to a discussion of women and the priesthood and the “third wave” of Mormon feminism, with a Mormon feminist scholar as a guest lecturer. Another student made what I thought was a very perceptive comment: “I personally find Joseph Smith and Mormon theology fascinating and spiritually enlightening; I find Mormon scripture to be inspired. As an outsider watching LDS General Conference, however, I’d have to say I came away from the experience (against my better, perhaps my most hopeful, judgment) more than a little afraid. In 2 Nephi it is written, ‘It must need be, that there is an opposition in all things.’ General Conference made me wonder if there is enough opposition in Mormonism; everything seemed so seamless and somehow perfect.”

Throughout the semester the class engages in discussions of doctrine and religious practices that reflect differences between the Latter-day Saint and other Christian traditions. This includes such subjects as the premortal existence, the nature of God, the Trinity, soteriology, grace, and the postmortal existence.

The objectives for Sacred Texts of the Latter-day Saints, a course that takes a more focused, literary approach to Mormon studies, include the following:

- To consider the question of what constitutes scripture or sacred texts both within Mormonism and within the broader world of religion
- To understand the unique claims of sacred texts within the Latter-day Saint tradition and their place within the larger world of sacred literature
- To explore the historical, cultural, and spiritual contexts out of which Latter-day Saint scriptures emerged
- To consider the implications of modern revelation and an open canon
- To examine the arguments of those who do not consider Latter-day Saint scriptures either inspired or authoritative

- To apply critical tools to close critical readings of Latter-day Saint scriptural texts as a model for close readings of all sacred texts
- To explore the relation of sacred texts to beliefs, doctrines, and religious practices within the Latter-day Saint tradition

Assignments for this course include writing a critical paper on a section of the Doctrine and Covenants or a chapter from the Book of Abraham or the Book of Moses from the Pearl of Great Price, a critical paper on one of the major figures in the Book of Mormon, and a critical paper on an important symbol or image system in the Book of Mormon. Students can earn extra credit by composing a midrash on a Mormon text. Since most religious traditions represented at GTU are “People of the Book,” the course also examines LDS attitudes toward the Bible and Joseph Smith’s revision of certain biblical passages. The emphasis in this class is on developing critical skills and analytic sensitivities in reading sacred texts in any tradition.

I find that the GTU/UC Berkeley academic community is eager to hear Mormon perspectives in academic discussions and in ecumenical and interfaith activities. For example, I was invited give a lecture to GTU faculty and students on the question “Are Mormons Christian?” I was also invited to participate on a panel, “God in the White House,” sponsored by GTU just before the 2012 presidential election. The panel, consisting of a Catholic, a Jew, a Muslim, and a Mormon, provided a lively discussion of the pending election, including the implications of a Romney presidency. I have also been invited to be a guest lecturer in other GTU classes and have been invited to submit a paper for a UC Berkeley conference on Islamophobia scheduled for spring 2015.

From a pedagogical point of view, in my experience the best way to teach Mormon studies to students is to model in the classroom the same openness and spirit of reflective inquiry that I hope to inspire. To discuss Mormonism in classes composed of students from the interfaith rainbow involves learning as much as teaching. I appreciate my students teaching me things about their religious traditions that either correct my misconceptions (which can sometimes be embarrassing) or expand

my understanding. For example, in my fall 2013 course, when we were discussing excommunication, one of my Catholic students informed me that while a Catholic can be excommunicated, he or she never ceases to be Catholic. That is, in the Catholic tradition, as opposed to that of the Latter-day Saints, excommunication does not cancel the ordinance of baptism, a practice that I find preferable to that in my own tradition.

This is an example of what Krister Stendahl, former dean of religion at Harvard, called “holy envy”—teachings or practices that one admires or envies in another religion in comparison with one’s own. As a member of the GTU faculty and a member of the Board of the Marin Interfaith Council, I take opportunity to experience at least some worship services in other traditions and to engage in dialogue with other believers. This gives me an opportunity to tell my students what I admire in their traditions, and studying Mormonism gives them an opportunity to say what in Mormonism evokes their “holy envy.” One of the most consistent LDS teachings they appreciate is continuing revelation, which means the excitement as well as the challenge of having an open canon. Many, including especially my female students, are envious of the Mormon concept of a Mother in Heaven.

Having a fresh perspective from my students on my religious texts helps me to appreciate those texts even more. For example, one of my students, a Jesuit, wrote his paper on King Benjamin’s address (a Book of Mormon narrative). He concludes:

Interpreting Benjamin as a champion of equality helps to illumine the king’s character with regard to relationships among the people. . . . By establishing the measure of righteousness as located in the care the people have for one another, Benjamin heralds the future teaching of Jesus Christ concerning the greatest of the commandments. And in living within a covenantal relationship with the divine, Benjamin models morality and highlights the intergenerational nature of Mormon worship and service of God.¹

1. S. J. Glenn Butterworth, “The Character of King Benjamin,” seminar paper presented in Sacred Texts of the Latter-day Saints class, Graduate Theological Union, spring 2011.

Seeing this narrative through the eyes of a Catholic helped me see things I hadn't seen before (in spite of multiple readings). I had a similar experience last fall when one of my students, an evangelical artist who had published an article on ways in which Christ is portrayed in evangelical art, did his paper on portrayals of Christ in LDS art. In both cases, these students' deep insights were facilitated by their direct engagement with Latter-day Saint texts and culture.

In sum, teaching Mormon studies courses as a practicing Mormon at both a school of theology and California's flagship public university is an adventure, one that offers special challenges but also delightful surprises. When careful attention is given to the conditions under which academic integrity is best maintained, teaching Mormon studies in an environment in which students have opportunities to engage frequently with Mormon practices and practitioners facilitates deep insights and the formation of a learning community.

Robert A. Rees, PhD, teaches Mormon studies at Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley. Currently he is completing the second volume of *Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons* (Signature Books) as well as a book on discipleship and a collection of his own essays.