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"I'll pet a cat from time to time . . . and I'm a Mormon": Teaching Mormonism in the American Midwest

Sara M. Patterson

IT WAS THE 2011 “*and I’m a Mormon*” ads that cinched it. Watching short clips of the Internet and television ads that attempted to normalize Mormonism made things click with my students. The ads sought to make what was strange familiar in a culture that had responded to advertising agencies’ surveys about perceptions of Mormonism with adjectives like “secretive,” “cultish,” “sexist,” “controlling,” “pushy,” and “anti-gay.”¹ Who would have guessed that hearing things like “I’m a soldier. I love being married to my wife, Mandy. I’m a father. I’ll pet a cat from time to time. Pizza on a Friday is a good thing. My name is Eric Lund and I’m a Mormon” would do the trick. But perhaps the ads tapped into some underlying emotion that many eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-olds know well—the desire to fit in, to be seen as normal, to be an insider. Whatever the case, the students in my Religion in America class finally got it. They *got* that religious identity in America requires a careful navigation of insider and outsider status.

The students’ new understanding came, of course, toward the end of our exploration of Mormonism. We had worked our way through the nineteenth century, comparing Mormons to other utopian communities such as the Shakers and the Oneida community. I had learned long ago

1. Laurie Goodstein, “Mormons’ Ad Campaign May Play Out in the ’12 Campaign Trail,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2011.

in my teaching career that if I wanted to include Mormonism in a course, I couldn't just discuss the sexual practices and theopolitical visions of the nineteenth-century group. To do so would ensure that Mormons remained an exoticized Other for my students, whether they were LDS or non-LDS. Much, much more had to be said about the Saints for students to imagine how the world looked to Mormons in the nineteenth century. So polygamy and theocracy were considered in the context of the appeal of new and continuous revelations that suggested that America was also a promised land. We explored what happened as the main body of the LDS Church gave up the practice of polygamy and set itself on a trajectory of claiming insider status in American culture while attempting to maintain a sense of distinctiveness. We knew R. Laurence Moore's thesis from *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*. However, it was a few short commercials that brought the entire section together. After that point of insight, I found that the students were more open to exploring Muslim and Buddhist experiences, attuned to the intricate ways that religious groups attempt to claim their status as insiders while clearly marking distinctiveness. It was a small teaching victory.

Perhaps it is because I teach in the American Midwest, where the LDS population is small and not very visible, or perhaps it is because I tend to prefer to teach classes that look across traditions and denominations to address big-picture themes and questions, or perhaps it is a combination of circumstance and desire, but I have never taught a course that focused solely on Mormonism. And that seems right to me. What may be borne out of circumstance has become a significant issue in my contemplation of the pedagogy of Mormonism. Though courses that focus solely on Mormons certainly have their place, I think the incorporation of Mormonism into other courses should be a commitment for those of us who understand the significance of Mormon studies in academia and who want to see it become part of the study of religion, not ever and always standing alone. In this essay, I address the possibilities and pitfalls of incorporating Mormonism into classes that explore broader issues. My experience teaching Mormonism comes from its inclusion in classes titled "History of Christianity," "Exodus in

America," "Religion in America," and "Gender, Sex, and Family in Judeo-Christian Traditions." In these courses, Mormonism may get two or three weeks of the class's full attention and then be revisited as it is compared to other religious groups.

Before moving on, I want to make an observation about time limitations, the bane of any teacher's existence. Timing restrictions can make it hard to cover the changes that the Mormon tradition has undergone. One could cover those changes quickly, but to ensure that students understand the changes *from the perspective of religious insiders*, time is necessary. Non-LDS students will often jump to the conclusion that change over time implies falsity in a faith. Working them through how to interpret changes in any religious tradition is an important lesson and takes class time and careful study (and an emphasis on the fact that *all* traditions change over time). Even though having the time to do this carefully is a potential pitfall of incorporating Mormonism into classes with larger themes and questions, I believe that the promises outweigh the problems.

What strikes me is that thinking about how religious groups operate as both insiders and outsiders begins at the level of course construction as well. The largest benefit of a course that focuses solely on Mormonism is obvious: the amount of time that a class can explore the tradition. And this is no small factor. A lot more can be addressed in thirteen weeks than can be addressed in three. The issue of time is an especially important concern in exploring Mormonism precisely because the faith is often described as controlling. Because of this perception, students need to know that there is diversity among Latter-day Saints—diversity of social identities, political perspectives, and theological stances—and that those diversities change over time. At the same time, I would argue that it is equally important to communicate to students that Mormonism is one faith tradition worthy of study among other faith traditions—that it is an important case in the history of religion in America, that it is an interesting branch of Christianity in the study of the history of Christianity, and that it has lessons for us about the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religion (in the nineteenth *and* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). There is something important to be gained

by including Mormonism in many of our courses, and that something, too, has to do with insider- and outsider-hood. Who is worthy of our study? Why do we choose the groups that we choose to study? How do we best communicate to students that Mormons are both distinct from but similar to other Christian groups? How do we encourage students to think of Mormons as both insiders and outsiders? And how do we support students as they imagine themselves as both Mormon insiders and outsiders in fruitful ways?

One of the exercises I've used to embolden students to imagine history from different perspectives also asks them to use their creative faculties to do so:

Each student must create and present a project in which she or he examines life in the United States from the perspective of a member of a religious minority group. You should create a profile for yourself (e.g., eighteen-year-old, female, Vietnamese Buddhist refugee immediately after arriving in Illinois in 1973). Imagine yourself as this person and create a project that expresses some of his/her experiences using a creative or artistic approach. Among the various possibilities for creative projects are plays, videos, poetry, drawing, painting, sculpture, photo journals, and music. In addition to presenting the project to the class, each student must submit a written summary of the project and what she or he intended to accomplish by means of the project. These projects are graded on the basis of the following criteria: (1) the way the project demonstrates a thorough awareness of the content of the course, (2) the amount of work the student has invested in the project, (3) the creativity of the project, and (4) the in-class presentation.

The project asks students to be creative, to employ their historical knowledge in a new way, and to engage their ability to empathize. The project is an obvious opening to talk about how we can never fully understand another person's experiences nor feel the way that person does, yet it also allows us to talk about the ways that human experiences can connect us to one another across culture and time. Some of the best projects have come from students who imagined themselves as Latter-day

Saints. These students went further in their exploration of Mormon history, imagining themselves as particular believers during a particular time, imagining themselves as Mormon insiders.

This theme of insider and outsider status also comes up in one of my favorite sections of my course *Gender, Sex, and Family in Judeo-Christian Traditions*. The section addresses the early twentieth-century shift from polygamy to monogamy within the main body of Utah Mormonism. The section comes toward the end of the course after we've explored how creation stories set up gender roles and sexual expectations. We've investigated the ways that gender and sexuality are hard to disentangle, because what a religious group imagines it means to be a man or a woman is often very much tied to ideas about sexuality and family structure. The Mormon example highlights several themes in the course: how sexuality can be read as religious practice, how gender and sexual expectations can be understood by a group to mark its members as different from outsiders, and how outsiders can use sexual and familial practices to mark an "other" religious group as deviant. This last one is key. The Mormon example emphasizes how much outsider expectations and norms can profoundly shape insiders' understandings of self. It also points to the power of gender and sexual norms within a culture, the power to mark a group as deviant. That intricate dance between insiders and outsiders in the early twentieth century, as Mormons changed their practices to be more in line with the larger Protestant culture's expectations while maintaining a sense of distinctiveness, teaches students how inextricable gender, sexual, and religious identities are. This background/context sets us up for discussions about Mormon views (note the plural) on monogamous marriage and homosexuality in more recent years. By this point students can unpack the ways that theological claims undergird sexual and gender expectations. In addition, they can spot when groups are attempting to use claims about gender and sexuality to assert their status as insiders in the larger culture. Mormonism serves as an important example precisely because change over time, as well as change in interactions with outsiders, highlights several significant themes in the class.

All told, the inclusion of Mormonism in several of my courses has yielded great rewards, both in terms of students learning more about Mormon history and experience *and* learning more about larger themes in the study of religion. I would again repeat my claim that it is important for us as educators to incorporate the study of Mormonism into our study of religions generally. In fact, I think it is imperative that we do so precisely because it communicates to students a message about Latter-day Saints—that they are both insiders and outsiders, as are we all. The 2011 “*and I’m a Mormon*” ads remind us that we all have the same impulses as eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-olds, the impulse to fit in and to be different.

Sara M. Patterson is associate professor of theological studies at Hanover College. Her work *Middle of Nowhere: Religion, Art, and Popular Culture at Salvation Mountain* will appear soon from the University of New Mexico Press. She is currently writing about the intersections of place and historical memory along the Mormon Trail.