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What They Learned from the Mormons

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp

North Carolina wouldn’t be the first place one would think of as the birthplace of Mormon studies outside Utah. But when I taught my first class on Mormonism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1999, I was hard-pressed to find any colleagues in other institutions teaching a class dedicated to the Mormon tradition who could offer templates. I was also unsure whether students there, over two-thirds of whom hail from the Tar Heel State, would be interested in such a course. In 1999 the LDS population of the region was under fifty thousand. Although the LDS Church was constructing a temple down the road in Cary, North Carolina, I knew that many students would have had little exposure to things Mormon, and perhaps would have meager interest.

So it was with few expectations and not a small measure of trepidation that I taught a seminar entitled “Mormonism and the American Experience” that spring. As would be the case in subsequent years, most of the students had been raised in moderately conservative evangelical faith communities (Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian). Many reported having learned about Mormonism at church as a cult or, at best, a seriously misguided set of theological precepts and possibly scandalous practices. Yet they were there, and I was there, ready to embark on a journey that
would transform not only my teaching but also my research and professional life over the next fifteen years.

Never having taught such a course, I had a lot to learn as well. I had studied little about the Mormon faith during my own graduate training beyond reading Leonard Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom* and the work of Jan Shipps. I daresay this was more than most scholars of US history trained in the 1980s, even those studying religion, could claim. But it was hardly enough material on which to base an entire course, especially one that needed to reach through the late twentieth century. I designed the first half of the course as a chronological survey to ground students in the basic outlines of Mormon history. In the second half, we discussed themes that I hoped would be of interest to college-aged participants: Mormon health codes, dating and lifestyle issues, women’s roles, race, missionaries, and so on. To cover those themes, I made several decisions that would prove crucial: first, I brought in panels of “real live” Mormons who answered questions and talked about their own experiences; second, I sent students to a sacrament meeting to introduce them to the public face of LDS worship; third, I gave them group assignments that not only required archival research but also entailed interviews or other forms of correspondence with church members. My initial impulse was purely practical: I did not have much day-to-day experience of this faith, and I wanted to make sure that my students both understood official church teachings and were exposed to how a religion is lived.

Over the last fourteen years, I have taught this course at least half a dozen times. As it turns out, students at Carolina are fascinated by Mormonism and are eager to learn more. Moreover, local Latter-day Saints have been unstintingly gracious and eager to talk with students, to answer questions, and to welcome them into their meetinghouses and the LDS institute of religion. Mormons, too, want to know how these outside observers understand them. Several years ago I began asking my students, as part of their final essay, to write about what they had learned in the class. How, I asked them, had specific features, readings, or speakers shaped their thinking about Mormonism? What would they take away from this class?
Their answers, in short, astounded me—both for the depth of their reflections and their willingness to be frank. Their reflections are instructive in helping all of us to think more deliberately about effective methods for teaching a course on Mormonism. As a result, I offer three pieces of strategy to colleagues.

1. Use stereotypes; don’t ignore them

It is tempting to sidestep the fact that people say really uninformed and insulting things about Mormons. Students inevitably have been exposed to those views. While most of my students did not have previous encounters with the (institutional) LDS Church, they did have knowledge about the tradition and its members from their own experiences. All of my students offered mental images formed from media, memes that ran the gamut from church commercials to *South Park* to famous sports figures. In North Carolina, too, evangelical church teachings that Mormonism is a dangerous “cult” also form a backdrop for them. This data is useful: often those virtual encounters have motivated students to take the class in the first place, and thus they can provide a jumping-off point for further learning. Their impressions reveal common patterns, well summarized by the following:

Mormons get married at a relatively young age. Mormons really like to dance (as evidenced by an experience at a Mormon church dance in which I was shocked to find that boys I had never met before would ask me to dance with them—this is unheard of at most high school dances!). Mormons have really big families. Mormons do not let non-Mormons in their temples, and sometimes even Mormons are not allowed in. . . . Mormons wear secret underwear. Mormons do not drink alcohol, do not drink caffeine, do not smoke or cuss, cannot have tattoos or excessive piercings, or watch rated-R movies. Mormons are republican, have a lot of commercials on TV and really like mission trips. Mormons worship a man named Joseph Smith and have an inexplicable affinity for Utah over the other 49 states.
Missionaries provide a bountiful (and frequently very funny) source of images as well:

I thought Mormon missions were strange, without a purpose, and a way to get rid of problem children within the church.

I thought Mormon missionaries were either socially awkward guys, trouble making punks, or ultra fanatical Mormons. In my ignorance I assumed that going on a mission was something Mormon men did only in extenuating circumstances.

Voicing the stereotypes is important because otherwise they linger in the classroom as unbidden visitors, never quite materializing but not disappearing. We exorcise them early on by naming them, writing them on the board, and thereby acknowledging their shaping power (they also tend to look pretty comical when the students see them written down).

The flip side of the stereotypes is the other major source of data imported by my students: their own encounters with “ordinary Mormons.” Almost everyone in my classes has known someone—a former girlfriend, a brother’s roommate, a sports coach—who is a church member and whom the student will describe as being “really nice” (playing into another stereotype, of course). They are intrigued and confounded because they cannot reconcile their quite positive personal impressions with the negative stereotypes. It is the examination of the puzzling space between these two data sets that fuels student motivation in class.

2. Hearing internal disagreement among LDS Church members is crucial

Connected to the images previously discussed is a more generic problem, one likely magnified by the Low Church backgrounds of many students. They assume Mormons do not think for themselves and

1. *Low Church* here refers to an attitude or worship style, common among Protestant evangelicals, that places considerably less emphasis on ritual, liturgy, and specialized
conclude that church members are either gullible or misinformed. As one student put it: “Coming into the class I had the idea that the Book of Mormon was such an obvious lie and anyone who believed in its accuracy to any degree would have to be uneducated.” Encounters with missionaries and with “faith-promoting” history only reinforce their sense that the church promotes a party line to which members must conform.

Picking apart this nest of assumptions is important but tricky. On the one hand, their impressions are correct inasmuch as there is a degree of orthodoxy required of church members (as is true in their own faith traditions, of course, although they might not see it as such). But we also explore the universe of issues within the Mormon faith in which the boundaries of correct thought and behavior are decidedly fuzzy and under constant negotiation. The learning comes in seeing for themselves how and why lines are drawn, how those boundaries have shifted over time, how religious leaders work to enforce them, and how some believers push back against the limits that have been set. Students read official church pronouncements, such as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” and thereby understand the ideals held up by leaders. They also, however, hear from individuals who interpret those messages and live them out in a variety of ways. Sometimes our panelists respectfully disagree with one another or voice divergent interpretations of teachings or appropriate practice.

Rather than confusing the students, or convincing them that Mormons are themselves confused, these moments of slippage between ideals and lived realities lead students to question their assumptions about the uninformed allegiance of church members. Students are willing to accept—or at least respect—a surprising variety of beliefs if they are convinced people are thinking for themselves. This is true even of some of the more controversial elements of the tradition. Indeed, airing internal dissent over the history of polygamy, racial discrimination, and priestly roles. For this reason evangelicals tend to look with suspicion on scripted worship as an imposition of a hierarchical authority. For some pointed examples, see Richard Mammana, comp., “High Church vs. Low Church: Documentary Narrative of an Ecclesiastical Joke,” accessed October 15, 2014, http://anglicansonline.org/special/highlow/.
women’s issues, rather than leading students to conclude that the entire faith is corrupt, actually has the opposite effect: it helps students to see that believers wrestle with difficult issues in a variety of ways. While it may seem counterintuitive, the more internal dissent students heard, and the more weighing of different opinions and interpretations they witnessed, the more they respected the ability of adherents to think independently and come to a conclusion different from their own. As one class member phrased it: “The most significant thing that I learned over the course of this class was that Mormonism is a diverse place. When one does not know much about a religion, it is easy to stereotype and cast everyone in the same category. I soon learned that, in fact, there was not such a thing as a standard Mormon.”

I stress this point because it was tempting for me at first not to dwell on the disagreements and points of controversy (if only because I thought it would further stoke the fires of anti-Mormonism). And it can be uncomfortable and difficult to discuss certain topics, especially for LDS panelists in our class who are entering an unfamiliar space. I prep my visitors in advance by sending along the syllabus, explaining the variety of readings the students will be doing, and indicating what my goals are. I also talk with the students ahead of time about how it might feel to enter this space as a Mormon visitor faced with difficult questions, and we explore the various ways that a panelist might respond to such inquiry (e.g., defensiveness about the church, feeling a responsibility to provide personal testimony, worry about disagreeing with another church member in public, and so on).

The payoff, though, has been well worth the risk. Furthermore, the dangers of avoiding controversy are even greater since they only serve to perpetuate preexistent images. Responded one student: “I assumed that Mormonism was monolithic, that there was one and only one Mormon body, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I knew that the LDS Church no longer officially supported polygamy, but the stereotype of polygamist fundamentalists (which I assumed to be inside the LDS Church) abides strongly in the media and amongst the Evangelical circles where I acquired most of my mis-information about Mormonism.”
Another commented on how much she learned by listening to conversations among Mormon women about the church:

If anything, my perception of women in the LDS church changed dramatically from that of meek and subordinate people who will not admit to the misgivings of their situation into smart and savvy women who have learned to negotiate the negative aspects of their culture in order to practice the faith that means so much to them. I have gained much respect for all members of the LDS Church, but especially the women and that respect is the most valuable lesson I learned in this class: tolerance and respect.

3. Focus on Mormonism as a living, breathing system with all the warts of any other human community

This suggestion extends the teachings of the previous point: my students are also in the class to learn about religious studies, broadly conceived. That task involves immersing them in the complexities of the Mormon world, its contradictions, its points of tension, and its change over time. It helps them learn to talk about religious differences—not just the differences among Mormons, but also their own attitudes and beliefs—in productive ways. “Exploring Mormonism . . . changed the way I approach difference altogether,” reflected one student.

Religiously, this is the first time that I had experienced a faith in which I began knowing absolutely nothing about the scripture. . . . This sense of vulnerability took me mentally from the position of relational commentator to a place of strictly an observational learner. I am very thankful to have had this experience in a collegiate academic setting in an environment in which everyone is in the same position as me and questions are not only accepted, but they are expected.

Students describe seeing their own beliefs and behaviors in a new light because of these exercises in observation and dialogue. This is particularly important for young people at an age (and in a society) in which authority—be it parental, administrative, or religious—is already
a fraught issue: they tend immediately to interpret constraints on personal freedom as externally imposed restrictions. But soon they begin to glimpse distinct logics and worldviews that underlie those patterns. “When I learned that Mormons, especially Mormon college students, could not have coffee, I was certain that they would be upset about this or completely ignore the command because personally I think that coffee is the best thing in the world,” wrote one student.

After learning about the commandment in class and talking to Mormons about its influence I was taken aback by the response. Many LDS students told me that they survive college just fine without drinking multiple cups of coffee a day and that the lack of coffee forces them to plan ahead and avoid all-nighters. The majority of the students I talked to also mentioned that coffee had never been a source of temptation for them. These conclusions led me to no longer think about Mormons through the lens of what they can and cannot do.

Issues of discipline and self-constraint, then, figure largely in our discussions as (potentially) positive notions that are not necessarily inimical to individual religious agency.

Recognizing that religious “others,” even others who look a lot like they do, occupy the world in very different ways is an important principle in the study of religion. Many of my students focus their own religious practices around biblical inerrancy and systematized theology; coming to recognize fundamental differences in approach to the very subject of religion is a critical step in our pedagogy. One student remarked, with some surprise, that “for Mormons, most of the things that non-Mormons obsess over simply are not a big deal.” In like manner, their visit to a sacrament meeting, jarring as it often is with the bounty of babies and small children and the decided lack of liturgy, leads us to reflect on what it means to worship and what constitutes a “sacred” moment.

This course also challenges students to think critically about the enterprise of religious studies through a process best described by a class member who quipped, “In many ways, this class both descriptively built LDS stereotypes and later shattered them.” The same could be said, of
course, for the larger enterprise of the study of religion. Here the students see this critical dynamic in action as we essentialize through our compi-
lation of images and stereotypes the “ideal” of Mormonness (although they find out this is contested as well!) and then proceed to explore the many ways in which living Mormonism takes quite different forms. Some students then manage to stand back and view the tradition comparatively, understanding that its study has implications for their own assumptions about what religion is and how it operates. And finally, some see that those comparative categories create further intellectual problems, inasmuch as close study breaks down the classifications that religious studies has assiduously constructed: students come to see Mormonism not just as a “religion” (at least in the sense they may have previously understood that term) but as a way of life and as a community bound together in a dynamic tension of ideas, practices, and histories.

More could be said about this intellectual dynamic and about the reflections of students on this process. The pat conclusion would be that class members come away more tolerant, which they do. Their learning, in fact, has led to some terrific Thanksgiving dinner conversations with parents and grandparents about Mormons, transforming students into emissaries of religious literacy: “Because of what I have learned in this class, I feel the need to stand up for Mormons when I hear less-informed people perpetuate incorrect stereotypes. However, I do not know if Mor-
mons will ever be completely accepted under the Christian umbrella. I do not know if people really want to be informed about them. I am glad that I am informed.” Some go on to read more in the Book of Mormon. A few have befriended local missionaries and joined in their weekly basketball games. One Muslim student found considerable common ground in studying Mormons: “I realized that we were standing on opposite ends of a connected looking glass. In many ways, both Mormonism and Islam share a cultural stigma in the United States and abroad.”

Even more interesting are the class members who admitted that they still have fundamental disagreements with Mormons based on their own beliefs. Yet the ground of their disagreement has changed. “Some aspects of the faith, I am much less apprehensive about, and
I believe these aspects have altered the way I look at all religions, especially those which differ to what I grew up with.” Another noted, “Although my ill-informed, ignorant conceptions were eradicated, my new perceptions were not all positive.” The latter student indicated that she was bothered by feminist critiques of Mormonism, especially that of Sonia Johnson, but the student was admittedly confused because the Mormon males she had met did not seem like “chauvinistic control mongerers.”

As I tell the students in the first week, my goal is not to convince them that the Mormon faith is good or bad, right or wrong. I do seek to help them become better informed about the tradition and, by extension, about their own religious beliefs (if they have any) and the dynamics of religious communities, broadly conceived. What they do with that knowledge has varied. I have taught inactive LDS students who decided after graduation to go on missions, evangelicals who continued to divinity school, atheists who read further in the Book of Mormon, and Muslims who found new conversation partners in local wards. Their journeys never fail to surprise and delight me.

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The Graduate Mormon Studies Classroom

*Patrick Q. Mason*

Recently I had a conversation with a good friend of the Mormon studies program at Claremont Graduate University. He has followed the progress of the program for many years and has consistently been a great advocate for it. Though not a professional scholar, he has gotten involved in the academic study of Mormonism, not just as a consumer but as an aspiring producer as well. He is also a devout, active Latter-day Saint who has spent considerable time, talent, and treasure in service to the church. In our conversation, he wondered aloud, in as friendly and noncombative a way as possible, if the way I ran my Mormon studies seminars was a bit too secular. Was there a little too much emphasis on the historiography and not quite enough on the heavenly? For instance, in my course Approaches to Mormonism, where we survey some of the most influential or important scholarly studies of the tradition, wasn’t there something missing if we didn’t spend at least a week reading Mormon scriptures and prophetic teachings, which surely count as one of the most important approaches to understanding Mormonism?

I have now taught seven semesters’ worth of Mormon studies courses. The fact that this makes me one of the senior practitioners in the field says much about how young the field still is, especially in the classroom. In an inversion of what is true for many academic areas, even with the much-touted proliferation of Mormon studies in college classrooms across the country, I daresay there are still more Mormon studies books produced than dedicated courses taught in any given year, though that gap is narrowing. Furthermore, unlike American historians or New Testament scholars or social psychologists, most of us who teach
courses on Mormonism had little or no formal training in Mormon studies per se. I took exactly one course on Mormon history, and that as an undergraduate in the History Department at BYU. Mormonism occasionally came up during my graduate training in American history at Notre Dame, but mostly, I think, because there happened to be two Mormons in the room. (At any given lull in the conversation, I could count on one particular professor turning to me or the other Mormon and asking, “So what’s the Mormon take on that?” My genius response was typically to remind him that there is not, in fact, an official Mormon take on Puritanism or Marian apparitions.)

The conversation I had with my friend, along with the lack of established models, leaves us with more questions than answers regarding the Mormon studies classroom. To a significant degree the questions we could ask are not at all unique to Mormon studies, but rather reflect broader discussions about the nature and purpose of university education, especially in the liberal arts. How do we balance content mastery with the general development of critical thinking, reading, writing, and speaking skills? What are we training students to do or to be? Once we have determined the purposes of the classroom, then what methods are most effective for accomplishing those goals? How do we best assess learning, progress, and skill acquisition? These questions and the underlying issues are being debated on every campus of higher learning in America, and the conversation goes all the way to the White House. Here I’ll focus on a few particularities of the Mormon studies classroom as a possibly distinct species within the broader order, family, and genus of American higher education.

The answer I ultimately gave to my friend in our conversation is conditioned by my unique appointment at a graduate-only university. Although my university is part of a consortium with leading undergraduate liberal arts colleges, our own focus is almost exclusively on the training of graduate students, both at the master’s and doctoral levels. (In seven semesters at CGU, I have had only one undergraduate in a class, and she was simply auditing.) Most of my MA students want to pursue doctoral study, and most of my PhD students are pursuing
careers in higher education, usually as professors. They have specifically selected my program, department, and university as the place to get the necessary training to prepare them for their deliberately chosen careers; indeed, many of my students come to me after spending several years working in different jobs before deciding that a career in academia is what they really want. My job, therefore, is to help them acquire the knowledge, skills, and other training they need to be competitive in the academic job market in their chosen field of religious studies. It is not, primarily, to help them learn interesting things about the church of their youth, or to help them become better devotional students of scripture, or to expose them to grand questions about the universe that will make them more informed, reflective citizens. My principal task, which governs the decisions I make in and about my courses, from the construction of syllabi to the way I conduct my classes, is professionalization. I am there to help them become professionals in the field. Adopting anything else as a main goal is failure, or at least category confusion, on my part.

To be sure, along the way we have some pretty great conversations about Mormonism. Both the donors who funded the Hunter Chair and the university faculty and administrators who approved its establishment agree that the purpose of the Mormon studies program at CGU is to promote a richer understanding of Mormonism to the broader academy and the general public, and to place it in analytical comparison alongside the other religious traditions of the world. Of course, the two parties come at this goal from different perspectives, one side with the clear hope of promoting the interests of their chosen faith tradition and the other side with a recognition that, especially in the context of the contemporary United States, Mormonism matters and is worthy of serious study; the prospect of adding a faculty line and establishing a niche program to attract new students didn’t hurt the case either.

The Mormon studies classroom thus becomes a principal site for mining Mormonism in all its depth, richness, and variety for greater understanding—not just about the tradition for its own sake, but about American religious history, classic issues in religious studies such as
authority and community and identity, and the category and functions of the very term religion, to name a few. Our seminars have little to do with “church history.” Indeed, my students may be dismayed that in my classes they learn relatively little about the lives and teachings of General Authorities, the development of priesthood quorums, or chiasmus in the Book of Mormon—based on my judgment that knowledge regarding these things, however interesting and worthy of study, will not help them get jobs in the broader academic market. In fact, much of what we talk about in my classes would hold relatively little interest for the general LDS public. I occasionally allow curious members of my ward or other local Mormons to sit in on my class upon their request, and their response is almost uniformly one of benign befuddlement. That is simply because they’re not professionals in the fields of religious studies and religious history, whereas professionals in a specialized field is precisely what I’m training my students to become.

It is quickly apparent, and even confusing, to many LDS visitors to my classroom—and perhaps to some of my LDS students in the beginning of their graduate experience—that the experience is so decidedly non–faith promoting. Visitors readily acknowledge that our conversations are not denigrating to the religion either, but even after sitting and listening to the discussion for three hours, they’re just not sure what and whether the class members and I believe. They’re a bit nonplussed by the fact that I speak of Mormons in a detached third person. They hear me explore ideas and take positions that are uncomfortable to the ears of many Mormons; am I playing devil’s advocate, or do I really believe what I just said? They are wondering why I didn’t just use a General Authority quote to resolve a given question, but instead allowed the conversation to go around and around in circles, without ever actually getting anywhere. They are left adrift by the lack of resolution at the end of the three hours, with no correct answer or true principles testified of, loose ends scattered all over the floor. In short, they quickly learn that the Mormon studies graduate classroom is a foreign country where they
are surprised that they do not really speak or even fully understand the language. Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Provo anymore.¹

At the same time, I count as one of the signal successes of my courses the fact that my non-LDS students so rapidly gain not only proficiency but real fluency in Mormonism (including Mormon-speak). This is a crucial element in fulfilling the vision of increasing understanding of the tradition among future scholars regardless of their own religious (or nonreligious) backgrounds and commitments. A few semesters ago I taught an Introduction to Mormonism seminar reserved only for non-LDS students. Most of them came into the course barely knowing who Joseph Smith was, and by the end they were producing impressive and thoroughly informed research papers; one currently has the paper she wrote for that class scheduled for publication in a leading Mormon studies periodical. And yes, we even read Mormon scriptures in the classroom. Many of these non-LDS students have continued to take other Mormon studies classes with me because they quickly realize, like so many other scholars, that Mormonism is a terrific laboratory in which they can explore virtually any conceptual, thematic, or theoretical question in the study of religion.

One of my signature courses—if teaching something twice can qualify—has been Gendering Mormonism, which originated as a response to student demand, not because of any particular expertise on my part. (Strangely, neither BYU nor Notre Dame prepared me with cutting-edge gender theory.) In the class, LDS and non-LDS students have come together to ask all the tough questions and make all the appropriately damning observations while recognizing, and to some degree reveling in, some of the distinctive (if often suppressed or sublimated) possibilities opened up by Mormon theology and practice. One of the most successful aspects of the class has been the ethnographic research assignment, in which everyone had to attend a three-hour block of LDS Sunday meetings and watch either the priesthood session of general conference or the

¹. With all due respect to my colleagues at BYU who research and teach about Mormonism and similarly feel that they are speaking a different language than many of their fellow church members.
general women’s meeting. They had to record their observations through the lens of gender analysis. A similar (though less gender-specific) assignment in my Introduction to Mormonism seminar also helped imbue our discussions with a deeper sense of engagement, recognizing that we were talking about flesh-and-blood issues, not ivory tower abstractions. Observing little things, like men taking screaming children out of sacrament meeting or women running their own meeting in Relief Society, complicates notions of patriarchy and questions assumptions regarding women’s agency and oppression. (First-time attendees also consistently comment on how remarkably pedestrian the whole experience was.)

The real key to the success of the Gendering Mormonism class, however, is that everything is on the table, including a number of subjects that would make many LDS Church members and leaders squeamish. We discuss (and argue and joke and yell about) feminist theory, historic Mormon feminism, Mother in Heaven, Mormon feminist theologies, gender roles, sex and sexuality, priesthood (including women’s ordination), masculinity, patriarchy, polygamy, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage. The only mutually agreed-upon taboo is the specific language and content of LDS temple ceremonies. This ethos of the open critical forum is at the heart of any successful Mormon studies classroom. Students have to know that they can ask any question or make any comment or level any critique as long as it is in the bounds of general academic standards of civility and intellectual rigor. It is not particularly difficult for me to establish that kind of culture in my graduate classroom, since the students choose to be there and encounter similar ground rules in their readings and other courses—all of which is an important part of being socialized into the academic field of religious studies. If anything, at times it is my more “orthodox” LDS students whom I have to encourage to speak up, rather than having them passively accept the hegemony of the skeptical secular liberalism that pervades the academy. They quickly learn, however, that Sunday School answers will not suffice and that they have to engage the debate at an equally rigorous level if they want their ideas to be taken seriously by their classmates, let alone their professor. The development of a more
sophisticated Mormon discourse regarding itself and its relation to other religious traditions, academic theories, and analytical categories is one of the important secondary results of the Mormon studies classroom where Latter-day Saints are participants. Cumulatively and over time I hope it will help deepen and broaden the maturation of the field.

One of the significant questions I still struggle with is how to respect and train students in the particularities of Mormonism, and promote and extend the specific subfield of Mormon studies, without the conversation sometimes devolving into navel-gazing. My Approaches to Mormonism course effectively does this by revolving around a reading list that is constructed of books that have successfully (in my mind) resisted the centripetal forces of denominational history and speak to broader, externally constructed issues and literatures. But it is precisely this move away from the privileged purview of insiders that opens up my classroom to accusations of excessive secularity, of having moved too far from the heart and soul and experience of Mormonism as a lived religion and theology. The challenge of any scholar or teacher of religion is how to maintain an appropriate critical distance without rendering our religious subjects mute or sterile.

The fact that much of the above could be said about the Islamic studies, Catholic studies, or Buddhist studies classroom suggests that the challenges and opportunities facing the teacher of Mormon studies are particular, to be sure, but not unique. Indeed, to imply that the Mormon studies classroom is sui generis is itself an exercise in parochialization. Mormonism offers many advantages to those who would teach it: a well-developed scholarly literature; rich and accessible documentary sources, mostly in English; a living community of faith in easy reach of practically every college and university in America; and just enough mystery and controversy, past and present, to keep things interesting. The temptation of this relative embarrassment of scholarly riches is to indulge in swimming, like Scrooge McDuck, in the admittedly impressive vault of gold. But the promise, and even call, of Mormon studies is to follow the lead of Andrew Jackson's inaugural celebration and throw open the doors to the revelers, even if it means that some of
the furnishings get damaged in the process. In the end, the Mormon studies classroom will be a success only if it does things that cannot be done anywhere else and fosters dynamic conversations and learning that cannot be had anywhere else. If our focus is on “studies,” with “Mormon” as an important but mere qualifier, we will probably be on the right track.

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

Jill Peterfeso

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.

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.” Moreover, many of my Guilford students seem suspicious of prominent religious institutions. 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.5 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.

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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.

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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.¹ Based on my sense of the current scholarly consensus, students explore through my lectures and their readings the origins

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.

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 postmortem 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.

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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

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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 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.

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The Brief History and Perpetually Exciting Future of Mormon Literary Studies

Michael Austin

In the middle years of the 1970s, Mormon literary studies seemed on the verge of becoming a big deal. Since 1966, Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought had been publishing poetry, literary fiction, and literary criticism by and about Latter-day Saints. And in 1974, a bold new magazine called Sunstone began publishing similar fare for a less academic audience. The same year, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert published the first edition of A Believing People, the first anthology of Mormon literature ever, to be used as the textbook in their Mormon literature course at Brigham Young University. And in 1976, the Association for Mormon Letters (AML) held its first annual symposium in the Empire Room of the Hotel Utah, featuring papers on Mormonism and literature by such luminaries as Cracroft, Leonard Arrington, Bruce Jorgensen, and Arthur Henry King. For the next thirty-five years, the AML served as a nursemaid, shepherd, and cheerleader for the study of Mormon literature, hosting an annual symposium and giving awards for achievement in literary endeavors. In 1995 the AML board created AML-list, an e-mail forum for discussions of Mormon letters. In 2009

1. AML conferences and proceedings are archived on the Mormon Literature Database at BYU and are accessible online at http://mldb.byu.edu/amlproceedings/amlproce.htm.
the association added the popular blog site “Dawning of a Brighter Day” to bring the study of Mormon literature into the age of the Internet.

Despite its prominent start and considerable activity, the critical study of Mormon literature has not kept pace with its cousins, Mormon history and Mormon folklore, in either the quality or the quantity of its scholarly production. Unlike these other two disciplines, Mormon literary studies has had a difficult time breaking free from the largely internal audience for Mormon intellectual discourse, as represented by journals such as Dialogue and BYU Studies and by specialist and academic presses along the Wasatch Front. And even this scholarly activity is in decline. In 2014 the Association for Mormon Letters announced that it was transferring operations from its longtime home in Utah Valley to Brigham Young University–Hawaii, where it will be led by Dr. Joe Plicka of the Department of English. According to former AML president Margaret Young, the move is an attempt to revitalize an organization that has been plagued for several years by shrinking resources and declining interest in its approach to the study of Mormon literature.²

But interest in Mormon literature remains strong in other areas. Dawning of a Brighter Day is a high-traffic website with hundreds of participants, as is another popular site, A Motley Vision—a group blog devoted to Mormon literature and culture started by William Morris in 2004.³ Past AML president Gideon Burton, a professor of English at BYU, established a comprehensive, web-based Mormon literature database with bibliographic information for thousands of books and articles about Mormon literature.⁴ And the Mormon writers guild LDStory-

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² Personal communication with Margaret Young, May 13, 2014.
³ A Motley Vision, located at http://www.motleyvision.org, received the 2005 Association for Mormon Letters award for criticism. The award citation praised the bloggers for making “serious efforts to give sustained discussion to important issues, rather than simply aggregating fragments and chatter. The organization and coherence of the site, with its archives and references, has made possible the very sort of communal discussion of art and literature that AML encourages at its conferences, but does so asynchronously and electronically, allowing a greater breadth of participation across space and time.”
⁴ In 2007 the Mormon Literature Database (MLDb), maintained by Gideon Burton, incorporated the Mormon film database maintained by Randy Astle to become the
makers hosts a popular conference each year and awards the Whitney Awards in a variety of categories of adult and young adult fiction.\(^5\)

These projects, and many others, were made possible by a critical tradition in Mormon letters stretching back to the early 1960s, when a group of academically trained literary critics at Brigham Young University and elsewhere began to turn the tools of their trade towards the literature of their culture. The work of this first generation of Mormon literary scholars—including Eugene England, Richard Cracroft, Mary Lythgoe Bradford, Karl Keller, Marden Clark, Marilyn Arnold, Robert Rees, Edward Geary, and Neal Lambert—provided a solid base for future studies in Mormon literature. Because of their work, and that of the two generations of scholars that they taught and inspired, we can speak coherently of a “Mormon literary studies” today. What follows is a brief survey of their initial effort, and of the scholarship that followed it, divided into three ongoing critical projects: (1) the creation of a canon of Mormon literature, (2) the exploration of the role of Mormons and Mormonism in American literary history, and (3) the application of the tools of literary criticism to the sacred writings of the Latter-day Saints, especially the Book of Mormon.

**Defining Mormon literature**

To have Mormon literary studies, we must first have Mormon literature to study, and one of the most important projects of every generation of Mormon literary critics has been to argue that such a thing exists. A significant portion of what we might consider Mormon literary studies, therefore, consists of scholars trying to define precisely what they study.

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5. The Whitney Awards are named for the early Mormon apostle Orson F. Whitney (1855–1931), whose declaration that Mormons “will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own” has inspired generations of LDS scholars, critics, and readers. Information on the conferences and awards sponsored by LDStorymakers can be found at http://ldstorymakers.com.
A representative (and by no means exhaustive) sample of this work would include Dale Morgan’s “Mormon Story Tellers” (1942), William Muldar’s “Mormonism and Literature” (1954), Bruce W. Jorgensen’s “Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature” (1974), Eugene England’s “The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years” (1983), and, alas, my own early effort, “The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time” (1995). It also includes a fair amount of debate over boundaries, perhaps best exemplified by the dueling AML presidential addresses of 1991 and 1992. In the first, Bruce Jorgensen argued for an inclusive definition of Mormon literature—holding up Richard Cracroft’s review of Eugene England and Dennis Clark’s poetry anthology *Harvest* (1989) as an example of an uncharitable (and therefore un-Mormon) exclusion. Cracroft himself responded the next year with an address calling on Mormon literary critics “to promote a truly Mormon literature, to read and critique LDS writing with eyes of faith, with feet firm-set in Mormon metaphors.”

This definitional hand-wringing aside, two generations of critical attention have produced the outlines of a fairly coherent canon of Mormon literature. Like any literary canon—Caribbean literature, say, or women's literature—Mormon literature is imprecise, flexible, and subjective. No
two people would come up with quite the same list of works if given the opportunity to do so. But most of those working in the field acknowledge the four general period distinctions articulated by Eugene England in his 1995 essay “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects”:

1. **Foundations, 1830–1880.** An initial outpouring in the first fifty years of largely unsophisticated writing, expressive of the new converts’ dramatic symbolic as well as literal journeys to Zion and their fierce rejection of Babylon, and often intended to meet the immediate and practical needs of the church for hymns, sermons, and tracts.

2. **Home Literature, 1880–1930.** The creation, in the next fifty years, of a “home literature” in Utah, highly didactic fiction and poetry designed to defend and improve the Saints but of little lasting worth.

3. **The Lost Generation, 1930–1970.** A period of reaction, by third- and fourth-generation Mormons, usually well educated for their time, to what they saw as the loss of the heroic pioneer vision and a decline into provincial materialism, which impelled an outpouring of excellent but generally critical works, published and praised nationally but largely rejected by or unknown to Mormons.

4. **Faithful Realism, 1960–present** (overlapping somewhat with the previous period). A slow growth and then flowering from the 1960s to the present of good work in all genres, combining the best qualities and avoiding the limitations of most past work, so that it is both faithful and critical, appreciated by a growing Mormon audience and also increasingly published and honored nationally.⁹

The first two of these periods, covering the literature of the Saints until about 1930, dominates Cracroft and Lambert’s *A Believing People* (1974). All but a handful of the selections in this anthology come from the pioneer and early Utah periods of Mormon history. Cracroft and Lambert represent the Foundations period largely through excerpts from early autobiographies, journals, letters, hymns, and sermons. From the Home Literature period, the book anthologizes Orson F. Whitney’s essay that gives the period its name, along with an excerpt from Whitney’s 1904 epic poem *Elias: An Epic of the Ages*. It also includes a generous selection of poetry and hymns and two prose selections by Nephi Anderson, the perennially popular author of the novel *Added Upon* (1898).

Outside of *A Believing People*, however, literary critics have paid very little attention to these early periods of Mormon literature beyond simply acknowledging that such literature exists. Most of the texts in the first period consist of journals, letters, pamphlets, and other primary documents of the sort normally studied by historians rather than literary critics. And most of the novels and poems of the second period, as Eugene England bluntly acknowledges, aren’t very good. But the next period, the so-called Lost Generation, has generated a substantial body of critical discussion dating back to the 1960s.

The term “Lost Generation” was originally applied to the expatriate writers living in Europe between the world wars—most famously Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. It was first applied to Mormon letters in Edward Geary’s influential 1977 article “Mormondom’s Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s,” which presents and briefly analyzes works by Vardis Fisher, Virginia Sorensen, Maurine Whipple, Samuel Taylor, Paul Bailey, Richard Scowcroft, and Blanche Cannon—all nationally prominent writers with Mormon backgrounds whose this essay introduces England and Lavina Fielding Anderson’s anthology of criticism, *Tending the Garden* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), xiii–xxxiv.


fiction, to some extent, dealt with Mormon themes and characters. In what might plausibly be considered a companion piece entitled “Fictional Sisters” (1997), historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich examines a dozen Mormon-themed novels by women writers of the same period (but extending into the 1950s), including Sorensen, Whipple, and Cannon, but also introducing such lesser-known works as Jean Woodman’s *Glory Spent* (1940), Elinor Pryor’s *And Never Yield* (1942), Ardyth Knelly’s *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1949), and Amelia Bean’s *The Fancher Train* (1958). Precisely because the writers in the Lost Generation group all achieved success and acclaim outside the Mormon cultural region, Mormon literary critics have often made them the starting point in a serious canon of Mormon literature.

Vardis Fisher is by far the best known of the Lost Generation writers. During the early phases of his writing career (1928–1940), Fisher was seen as a promising writer of serious fiction and spoken of in the same sentences as the likes of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Thomas Wolfe. But Fisher’s connection to Mormonism is highly problematic. Though raised in Idaho by Mormon parents, Fisher had very little contact with the church until he was in his late teens. He was baptized as an adult but left the church soon after and never again self-identified as a Latter-day Saint. His early autobiographical fiction often refers to Mormon characters, and his most famous novel, *Children of God* (1939), deals primarily with the founding of the church and the Mormon migration to Utah. But most of his more than two dozen novels have little to do with Mormons or Mormonism. To date, most Mormon scholarship on Fisher has confined itself to examining *Children of God* and debating whether or not Fisher should be considered a Mormon writer. Several recent articles, though, have begun

to look at how the Mormon tradition might have informed his other major works.\textsuperscript{15}

Two other Mormon writers from this period have inspired significant critical discussion. Both of them—Virginia Sorensen and Maurine Whipple—self-identified as Mormons throughout their lives.\textsuperscript{16} Sorensen, most famous as the author of the best-selling, Newbery Award–winning children’s book \textit{Miracles on Maple Hill} (1957), also wrote nine novels for adults, eight of them involving primarily Mormon characters, including \textit{A Little Lower than the Angels} (1942), which is set in Nauvoo and features Joseph Smith as a prominent character. Sorensen’s Mormon characters, while challenging, are generally sympathetic, and her novels have occasioned a respectable amount of critical attention from the 1970s on.\textsuperscript{17} Maurine Whipple’s only novel, \textit{The Giant Joshua} (1941), is nearly always ranked at or near the top of lists of important works of Mormon

\textsuperscript{15} At the first conference of the Association for Mormon Letters in 1976, the distinguished historian Leonard Arrington delivered a paper, cowritten with his graduate student John Haupt, entitled “Vardis Fisher’s Mormon Heritage,” which argued that Fisher’s ties to Mormonism were stronger than previously believed. The paper was later published in \textit{BYU Studies} 18/1 (Fall 1977): 27–47. Fisher’s widow responded with an angry press release entitled “Vardis Fisher Was Not a Mormon,” which she had bound with all of Fisher’s works for which she still held the copyrights. Years later, a more balanced appraisal of Fisher’s Mormonism was given by BYU professor Stephen Tanner in “Vardis Fisher and the Mormons,” in Rediscovering Vardis Fisher: Centennial Essays, ed. Joseph M. Flora (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 2000), 97–113. See also Michael Austin, “Vardis Fisher’s Mormon Scars: Mapping the Diaspora in \textit{Testament of Man},” \textit{Dialogue} 47/3 (Fall 2014): 1–22.

\textsuperscript{16} We must footnote Sorensen’s Mormonism just a little bit because, towards the end of her life, she received baptism into the Anglican Church of her second husband, novelist Alex Waugh. However, she always acknowledged her cultural identity as a Mormon, even when it was no longer her religious identity.

literature. In addition to a handful of critical analyses, Whipple is the subject of the 2011 biography “Swell Suffering,” by Veda Tebbs Hale.  

In the years since Eugene England’s initial attempt at periodization, it has become clear that his fourth period, of Faithful Realism, can only describe that small portion of contemporary Mormon literature represented by writers who maintain a connection to the church while writing challenging Mormon-themed fiction to a largely LDS audience. The most prominent of them, Levi Peterson and Phyllis Barber, continue to attract critical attention from literary critics working with Mormon texts. Most of the other writers in this category—John Bennion, Tom Rogers, Michael Fillerup, Donald Marshall, Todd Robert Peterson, Linda Sillitoe, Margaret Blair Young, and, most recently, BYU biology professor Steven Peck—have produced, and continue to produce, well-regarded novels, plays, and short fiction with scholarly commentary on their work largely limited to reviews. Stories by many of these writers (and a number of others) have been included in three important anthologies of Mormon fiction: Eugene England’s Bright Angels and Familiars (1992), Angela Hallstrom’s Dispensation (2010), and Sue Saffle, “Eggertsen Men: Male Family Influences in Virginia Sorensen’s Kingdom Come and The Evening and the Morning,” Dialogue 35/1 (Spring 2002): 42–46.


and Robert Raleigh’s overlapping but somewhat less orthodox collection *In Our Lovely Deseret* (1998).21

Often, as England suggests, the literature in this category tries to negotiate a tenuous path between critical and faithful approaches to the LDS Church. Such literature is often set in Mormon communities among Latter-day Saints struggling to live their religion. When these writers criticize elements of LDS culture or practice, they usually situate their criticisms from within the Mormon community—with the expectation that their characters will remain Latter-day Saints after all of the conflicts in the story have been resolved. Take, for example, the dramatic final scene of Levi Peterson’s *The Backslider*, in which a cowboy version of Jesus appears to the novel’s protagonist, Frank Windham, in a urinal. Swearing occasionally and smoking a cigarette, the Cowboy Jesus rebukes Frank for his legalistic attempts to earn his salvation through ritual obedience to things like sexual continence and obedience to the Word of Wisdom. In the process, Peterson criticizes Mormon culture for its checklist approach to holiness, and Mormon theology for its unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of divine grace. But it is clear at the end of the novel that Frank Windham, like Levi Peterson himself, will remain some kind of Mormon.22

The category of Faithful Realism, however, fails to account for the two dominant strands of Mormon literature today.23 The first of these, the modern home-literature movement, consists primarily of uplifting novels, stories, and plays by faithful Latter-day Saints published by

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Deseret Book and marketed exclusively to Mormon audiences. This movement began in the 1970s with plays such as *Saturday’s Warrior* (1973) and *My Turn on Earth* (1977) and continued in the 1980s with the novels of Jack Weyland and a handful of others. Since then, Mormon home literature has become a multimillion-dollar-a-year industry with some novels—such as those in Gerald Lund’s historical *The Work and the Glory* series (1990–1998)—posting sales figures comparable to those of major national best sellers.

Despite its considerable commercial success, the modern home literature movement has attracted very little, if any, analysis by scholars of Mormon literature—just as most best-selling secular novels rarely attract the attention of mainstream literary critics. However, a second strand of contemporary Mormon literature—works by identifiably Mormon authors who write for general audiences—has fared much better. Terry Tempest Williams’s memoir *Refuge*, for example, has been widely anthologized and taught in college courses since its initial publication in 1992, and LDS literary critics have been naturally drawn to the parts of this work that deal with Williams’s Mormon faith. Other writers with some connection to Mormonism—such as Brady Udall,

24. The LDS-owned Deseret Book purchased its two largest competitors in the LDS book market, Bookcraft and Covenant, in 1999 and 2006, respectively, giving it a virtual monopoly on the home-literature market, though small independent presses and self-published books have made some inroads, as indicated by the presence of such books each year among the finalists for the Whitney Awards (see note 5).


Walter Kirn, and Judith Freeman—have dealt with Mormon issues in ways that encourage critical studies of Mormonism as part of larger conversations about their work.  

Though there will never be anything like a fixed or agreed-upon canon of Mormon literature (or any other kind of literature for that matter), the combination of works by identifiably (if not always orthodox) Mormon writers is comparable to other regional and subcultural literatures in the United States. There is, in other words, a strong-enough body of texts to justify a critical culture with centers, symposia, endowed professorships, book series at university presses, and the occasional Festschrift in honor of its major practitioners. This is exactly where Mormon literary studies seemed to be headed when the Association for Mormon Letters held its first conference in 1976, but the going has been slow, and the publication of scholarly work on Mormon literature has declined since its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. Fortunately, though, Mormons keep publishing literature, some of it very good, that can be profitably studied from multiple perspectives. Mormon literary critics have work enough to do ere the sun goes down.

Mormonism and American literary history

Since its earliest days, Mormonism has exerted a pull on the American imagination far beyond its actual representation in the population. There has, therefore, been much more consequential literature about Mormons than by them.  


28. For a bibliographical review of Mormons in popular fiction, see Michael Austin, “‘As Much as Any Novelist Could Ask’: Mormons in American Popular Fiction,” in Hunter, Mormons and Popular Culture, 2:1–22.
erary studies has been to evaluate and critique the way that works about Mormons and Mormonism have shaped the literary history of America and, to a lesser extent, England. In the nineteenth century, both countries provided a lot of grist for this mill. The first major writer to treat Mormonism was the British adventure writer Frederick Marryat, whose travel adventure *Monsieur Violet* was published in both England and America in 1843. Marryat lifted whole chapters word for word from anti-Mormon exposés such as Eber D. Howe’s *Mormonism Unvailed [sic]* (1834) and John C. Bennett’s *History of the Saints* (1842) as he mixed the story of Mormonism’s early years with the wanderings of his hero, Monsieur Violet, throughout the wild American West.

When the Saints migrated to Utah and practiced polygamy openly, they became something like an international literary sensation—the subject of works by Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, and hundreds of lesser-known writers. Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) would become the most well-known nineteenth-century work about the Mormons because, in the process of telling the story of a vengeful Mormon avenger (a story largely plagiarized from Stevenson’s book *The Dynamiter*, published two years earlier), Doyle introduced the character of Sherlock Holmes and invented the modern detective novel. Stevenson and Doyle created cohorts of vengeful, violent, sexually deviant Mormons who practiced blood atonement on their own people and sent Danite avenging angels out to kill anyone who escaped. These were the images of Mormonism that Doyle absorbed from the popular press and from the British “penny dreadful” novels that he was familiar with. When the Saints abandoned polygamy and settled into relative anonymity at the end of the nineteenth century, the sensational novels and stories continued, uninterrupted, in the form of historical fiction. Many of these novels formed part of the emerging Western genre, whose most important founding text, Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), is set almost entirely among the Mormons.29

The nineteenth century’s literary portrayals of Mormons had a comic side too. The well-known humorist Charles Farrar Browne, who used the stage and pen name Artemus Ward, traveled to Utah in 1864 and made the trip the subject of a wildly popular comic monologue that he performed all over the United States and England. Ward’s Mormons are largely good-natured, but naive, bumbling, and provincial.30 Much the same image comes through in Mark Twain’s much better known travel narrative Roughing It, which contains several chapters about the author’s visit to the Mormons of Salt Lake City. Twain gave the world such bons mots as “If Joseph Smith composed [the Book of Mormon], the act was a miracle—keeping awake as he did it” and (speaking of Mormon women) “The man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind . . . and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence.”31

Many early contributions to Mormon literary studies combined the archival work of locating and the analytical work of explaining the role of Mormons in literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of this work was done by historians, such as Leonard J. Arrington, who began in the late 1960s to publish articles with his graduate students exploring these nineteenth-century works. Their research unearthed dozens of little-known novels, stories, and exposés about violent Mormons, blood atonement, Danite avengers, and polygamous patriarchs.32 At about the same time, Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft began exploring the nineteenth-century comic portrayals of

31. Mark Twain, Roughing It (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Co., 1872), 127, 118.
Twain and Ward in a series of articles published mainly in regional journals such as the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and the *Western Humanities Review*. Their careful work has allowed subsequent generations of Mormon literary historians to situate the better-known works of Doyle, Grey, and Twain within a literary context that abounded in similar representations of Mormons and Mormonism.

Two of the most important books on Mormon literature in the past two decades pick up and significantly expand on these early articles about nineteenth-century Mormonism in American literature. Terryl Givens’s *Viper on the Hearth* (1997) explores anti-Mormon portrayals in both popular journalism and sensational fiction, advancing the argument that nineteenth-century American society attempted to constrain Mormonism’s truly radical theological ideas by constructing Mormons as Other and as the objects of fear and ridicule. In *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (2009), BYU theatre professor Megan Sanborn Jones applies Givens’s argument to a dozen or so previously unstudied plays about Mormonism that were written or performed between 1850 and 1890.

A commonplace of contemporary Mormon literary studies is the assertion that the nineteenth-century Mormon stereotypes have significantly influenced popular fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first

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centuries. Givens traces the persistent influence of these older stereotypes in the concluding chapter of *The Viper on the Hearth*, which he updated for the 2013 edition to include recent works such as *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003) and the hit Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. Literary critics have examined contemporary Danite and blood-atonement plots in dozens of mystery novels and science fiction works and in the more serious fiction of Neil LaBute, Brian Evenson, and Levi Peterson. \(^{35}\) Even in contemporary works that seem far removed from the dime-novel tradition—such as Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979) and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1991–92), which both won Pulitzer Prizes—Mormon characters and Mormonism itself are portrayed with a distinctly nineteenth-century flavor. \(^{36}\) “It has been more than a hundred years since mainstream Mormonism officially encouraged the scandalous behaviors . . . that generated the river of lurid tales that flowed from nineteenth-century presses,” writes literary critic Mark Decker. Yet “contemporary authors and auteurs tend to portray the religion in ways that invite comparisons with their pulpy forebearers.” \(^{37}\)

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Not all contemporary literary portrayals of Mormonism come from the nineteenth-century stereotypes. Some of them are considerably more complex, ranging from the satirical (but largely affectionate) image of Mormon missionaries in the hit Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* to the upstanding (if somewhat naïve) American patriots in the novels of Tom Clancy and W. E. B. Griffin. And a handful of extremely successful writers known to be Mormon—such as Orson Scott Card, Ann Perry, and Stephenie Meyer—have injected a distinctive Mormon consciousness into popular culture that has provided a platform for critics to explore the connections between Mormons and literature. For example, the prolific LDS scholar and writer Michael Collings has written widely about the Mormon subtexts of Card’s novels—including *In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization, and Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card*, the first book-length study of Card’s works, which was published by Greenwood Press in 1990 and reissued in 2014 as part of a self-published omnibus volume entitled *Orson Scott Card: Penetrating to the Gentle Heart*. And as the *Twilight* novels of Stephenie Meyer begin to attract the attention of serious critics, Meyer’s Mormonism has become an important area of scholarly inquiry into the texts.

Scholarly studies of the role of Mormonism in literary history have always been easier to place with mainstream academic publishers than studies of literature by and for Latter-day Saints. Such studies will continue to offer the best opportunities for Mormon literary critics to break

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out of the “Utah bubble” that has both nourished and confined them. Academic journals and university presses are simply more interested in manuscripts about Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, and *Angels in America* than about Nephi Anderson and *Saturday's Warrior*. And there is plenty of work left to do in this area. Mormon themes and characters run through some of the most important American and British literature of the past two centuries in ways that we are just beginning to understand. And as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints becomes more prominent internationally, the role of Mormonism in the literatures of other cultures may expand significantly, providing still more avenues for critical analysis.41

The literary study of sacred texts

In *What Hath God Wrought*, an expansive, Pulitzer Prize–winning history of America from 1815 to 1848, Daniel Walker Howe writes that the Book of Mormon is “a powerful epic written on a grand scale with a host of characters, a narrative of human struggle and conflict, of divine intervention, heroic good and atrocious evil, of prophecy, morality, and law.” After a brief presentation of its major ideas and motifs, Howe concludes that the Book of Mormon “should rank among the great achievements of American literature, but has never been accorded the status it deserves, since Mormons deny Joseph Smith’s authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the work as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than read it.”42

41. By far the most prominent literary work about Mormonism written in a language other than English is the novel *Paradísarheimt* (1960), by the Icelandic Nobel Prize laureate Halldór Laxness, published in English translation as *Paradise Reclaimed* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1962). The novel, which tells of a nineteenth-century Icelandic farmer’s conversion to Mormonism and subsequent journey to Utah, has been the subject of several studies by LDS critics, most recently by Fred E. Woods in “Halldór Laxness and the Latter-day Saints: The Story behind the Novel *Paradísarheimt*,” *BYU Studies* 49/3 (2010): 47–74.

For all of the reasons that Howe suggests, the Book of Mormon is a text that presents endless fascinations for literary critics: a complex narrative structure, multiple levels of authorship, passionate ideological conflicts, a wide diversity of genres, layers of intertextual connections to the Bible, Hebrew literary forms, nineteenth-century narrative patterns, and a vigorously contested narrative of authorship. These are precisely the sorts of questions that literary criticism was designed to address. But Howe is also correct in observing that nearly everybody with an interest in the Book of Mormon has too much of their own ideology at stake to analyze the text from the disinterested scholarly perspective that the best literary criticism requires. Thus, the vast majority of the critical books and articles written about the Book of Mormon are devoted either to proving it to be an authentic ancient record of ancient Israelites who migrated to the Western Hemisphere or dismissing it as a nineteenth-century fraud.

It is quite possible, however, to bracket the question of the Book of Mormon’s origins temporarily and examine it as a literary text. And trained literary critics, in and out of the LDS Church, have been doing so for many years. Robert K. Thomas—a BYU English professor and academic vice president who coauthored the popular *Out of the Best Books* anthologies in the 1960s—wrote his senior thesis at Reed College on the literary properties of the Book of Mormon in 1947. After receiving a PhD in English from Columbia University, he followed up with the much-cited article “A Literary Critic Looks at the Book of Mormon.” Dozens of other articles studying the Book of Mormon as


literature have been written by, among others, Douglas Wilson, Bruce Jorgensen, Stephen Sondrup, and Eugene England.45

Unlike most of the other critical projects of Mormon literary studies, the early articles bringing literary criticism to bear on the Book of Mormon have led to more detailed and sophisticated book-length publications that have now begun to penetrate into the larger world of academic literary studies. Between 1996 and 2002, literary scholars published four books on the Book of Mormon, bringing a wide spectrum of contemporary critical methodologies to the study of Mormonism’s foundational text.

The first of these books, Marilyn Arnold’s *Sweet Is the Word* (1996), approaches the Book of Mormon chronologically, functioning as a sort of study guide to encourage readers to go deeper into the text than they otherwise would. Arnold, who taught American literature at BYU and published widely on Willa Cather, makes it clear in the introduction that she will not use secondary sources or traditional scholarly methods in her analysis; rather, *Sweet Is the Word* is “very simply, my personal response to the book.”46 One year later, University of North Carolina literature professor Richard Dilworth Rust published *Feasting on the Word* (1997), which was awarded the Association for Mormon Letters


award for criticism that same year.\textsuperscript{47} In \textit{Feasting on the Word}, Rust combines chapters that explicate the various genres of the Book of Mormon (epic, poetry, sermon, autobiography) with chapters on its formal and rhetorical strategies (imagery, typology) to produce a volume that very effectively situates the Book of Mormon within the larger conversations of literary theory and criticism.

A third book, Mark D. Thomas’s \textit{Digging in Cumorah}, was published by Signature Books in 1999.\textsuperscript{48} Unlike Arnold and Rust, Thomas examines the Book of Mormon primarily as a nineteenth-century text—bracketing the question of ancient origins but examining other religious texts from the period as rhetorically comparable documents. Thomas’s critical methodology is profoundly influenced by the work of the Jewish biblical scholar Robert Alter and the Protestant literary critic Northrop Frye. Following Alter’s influential \textit{The Art of Biblical Narrative}, Thomas examines the Book of Mormon’s use of “type scenes,” or structurally similar narratives that are repeated at different points in the text with slightly different emphases, such as the “dying heretic” narratives of Sherem, Nehor, and Korihor.\textsuperscript{49} Following Frye’s work in \textit{The Great Code} and \textit{Words with Power}, Thomas also looks for the large archetypal patterns that dominate and give structure to the text, such as the movement from captivity to deliverance.\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Digging in Cumorah} was widely praised by literary critics—including Wayne C. Booth, who worked with Thomas at the University of Chicago—but aggressively dismissed by many more traditional Mormon scholars, who felt that

\textsuperscript{47} Richard Dilworth Rust, \textit{Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon} (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997).

\textsuperscript{48} Mark D. Thomas, \textit{Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives} (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).

\textsuperscript{49} Robert Alter, \textit{The Art of Biblical Narrative} (New York: Basic Books, 1982). The type scenes of the three Book of Mormon “dying heretics” occur in Jacob 7:1–21 (Sherem), Alma 1:2–16 (Nehor), and Alma 30:6–60 (Korihor). For Thomas’s analysis of this type scene, see pp. 161–70.

Thomas’s emphasis on nineteenth-century literary techniques dismissed the Book of Mormon’s claims of divine origin.51

Ultimately, Arnold, Rust, and Thomas are Mormon literary critics writing for Mormon audiences, and while their books have been much discussed and (in Thomas’s case) debated in Mormon circles, they have had very little influence outside the Mormon community. This is not true of the fourth book, Terryl Givens’s By the Hand of Mormon, which was published by Oxford University Press and reviewed in many of the most important academic publications in the country.52 In his approach to the Book of Mormon, Givens employs a sophisticated reception theory. He begins with the argument that the Book of Mormon has been received and understood by its audiences in at least four distinct ways throughout its history: (1) as a divine signal of the opening of a new dispensation and of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling; (2) as an authentic history of ancient America; (3) as a nineteenth-century fiction; and (4) as a complement to or extension of the Bible. These four large reception categories become the foundation of his analysis of the Book of Mormon’s meaning and significance.

Givens’s work demonstrated both the scholarly and the commercial potential of a literary approach to the Book of Mormon, and it has been followed up by at least two more scholarly studies of the Book of Mormon published by highly selective and prestigious academic presses. Grant Hardy’s Understanding the Book of Mormon, also published by Oxford University Press, approaches the text through character studies and rhetorical analyses of its three major narrators: Nephi, Mormon,

51. In a blurb for the back cover of Digging in Cumorah, Booth writes, “This astonishing book probes more deeply into the Book of Mormon’s literary and spiritual qualities than any other work I know. . . . The most influential American narrative of the nineteenth century has at last found the scholarly reader it deserves.” FARMS reviewer Alan Goff is much less complimentary in his review, “Scratching the Surface of Book of Mormon Narratives,” FARMS Review of Books 12/2 (2000): 51–82.

and Moroni.53 And Paul C. Gutjahr’s *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*—part of Princeton University Press’s new Lives of Great Religious Books series—describes the history of the book’s reception as a book, focusing on the ways that its audiences understood it at different times and highlighting formatting changes, translations, illustrations, and derivative works.54

Over the past ten years or so, these scholars have constructed a scholarly apparatus for studying the Book of Mormon as a literary text. Their efforts are now starting to bear fruit, as younger scholars have recently begun the painstaking work of situating the Book of Mormon in different literary contexts. Bradley J. Kramer, for example, sets the Book of Mormon in the context of ancient rabbinic literature in his new book *Beholding the Tree of Life*.55 Others, such as Jared Hickman of The Johns Hopkins University and Elizabeth Fenton of the University of Vermont, have proposed plausible and ingenious nineteenth-century American literary contexts for the Book of Mormon. This kind of contextualizing work—which has traditionally been carried out by either apologists or detractors seeking to prove that Joseph Smith was or was not a prophet—is well on its way to becoming an important concern of mainstream literary scholarship.56

By a wide margin, the Book of Mormon is the LDS scripture that has most engaged both Mormon and non-Mormon literary critics. There have been occasional literary studies of other Mormon scriptures, such as Lambert and Cracroft’s analysis of the literary form in Joseph

Smith’s narration of the first vision or Charles Swift’s recent work on the literary elements of the Doctrine and Covenants. And LDS scholars trained in literary criticism have occasionally written about biblical figures in distinctively Mormon ways. But these are largely part of internal conversations among Mormon scholars. The pioneering work of Givens, Hardy, and Gutjahr has demonstrated clearly that what Daniel Walker Howe described as one of the “great achievements of American literature” can indeed find a place at the scholarly table and that both Mormons and non-Mormons can study it productively using the tools of literary analysis.

So what now?

Reading over the last fifty years or so of work in Mormon literature studies, one cannot help but be impressed by its optimism, perhaps best encapsulated in the Association for Mormon Letters blog site, The Dawning of a Brighter Day, named for a 1982 article by Eugene England. The brightness of the day, of course, depends entirely on the metric one uses to measure it. By some measures, the state of Mormon literature and literary studies is very bright indeed—Deseret Book has created a strong market for well-written LDS-themed fiction across most popular genres, supplemented by smaller presses, independently published books, and popular conferences such as LDStorytellers and Life, the Universe, and Everything. Mormon writers like Stephenie Meyer are

60. Life, the Universe, and Everything is a long-running science fiction and fantasy symposium held in Provo, Utah, highlighting many LDS authors along with other
experiencing phenomenal success in the national market. And scholarly readings of the Book of Mormon as literature have recently been published by several of the most prestigious academic presses in the world.

Judged by other standards, however, the brightness fades. Mormonism still has not produced any Miltons or Shakespeares, but this should not surprise us at all. Very few cultures, and very few times, produce world-shaking writers like these. And even Milton and Shakespeare were not “Milton and Shakespeare” until long after their own deaths. But Mormons have not even been very good about producing, or recognizing, their own Flannery O’Connors and Cynthia Ozicks—challenging but deeply spiritual writers who draw on the power of their religious traditions (Catholic and Jewish, respectively) to produce works of significant literary merit. This is partly because of elements in Mormon culture that work against serious fiction—such as a strong tradition of using stories primarily to teach doctrine and a tendency to see literary narratives dichotomously, as either 100 percent supportive of the church or “anti-Mormon.” But it is also a failure of critical discourse. Many Mormon scholars know that Maurine Whipple’s The Giant Joshua is a complex mid-twentieth-century narrative with strong elements of feminism, ecocriticism, and anticolonialism. Very few non-Mormon scholars have ever heard of Maurine Whipple or The Giant Joshua, however, because nearly everything ever written about them has been published to an almost entirely Mormon audience.

To get to the brighter day that Eugene England foresaw, Mormon literary scholars must follow more closely along the path that Mormon historians have taken. They must make their internal conversations external, in much the same way that LDS scholars like Terryl Givens and Grant Hardy have taken their critical analyses of the Book of Mormon public. The market exists. The scholarly study of literature has traditionally been very good at making room for the literatures of important figures in the science fiction and fantasy genres. For information on the LDStorymakers conference, see note 5.

small subcultures—many of them far smaller than Mormonism. And more than a dozen prestigious academic presses now publish Mormon studies books in areas such as history, sociology, anthropology, folklore, legal studies, gender studies, and theology. The golden age of Mormon literary studies may not be right around the corner, but it is out there somewhere. The future is as bright as it has always been.

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Review Essays

What Kind of Prejudice Was Anti-Mormonism?

Chris Beneke


In the 1879 Supreme Court case of Reynolds v. United States, Chief Justice Morrison Waite rendered a decision that reverberated throughout the twentieth century. For the first time in what was then a very short history of First Amendment jurisprudence, Waite invoked Thomas Jefferson’s now-famous claim that the federal religious clauses had established a “wall of separation between church and State.” Because the term religion wasn’t defined in the Constitution, Waite indicated that he would need to investigate its original meaning. He never did. Instead, Waite went on to explain that the First Amendment prohibited congressional interference with religious belief. Religiously inspired action was another matter. Waite’s conclusion: even though polygamous marriages proceeded from a religious belief, its practitioners were still
bound by the reinforcing imperatives of social duty and civil order. In other words, when it came to plural marriage, they weren’t protected by the Constitution.

*Reynolds* was only a faint premonition, a muffled historical rumbling, of the cascade of First Amendment jurisprudence that crashed upon twentieth-century America. The case had come to the Supreme Court’s attention because the US Congress had taken the unusual step of forbidding something that resembled the free exercise of religion in an area—Utah Territory—over which it had direct jurisdiction. At least that was the constitutional justification. Underlying the *Reynolds* decision was a long-standing cultural and political animus against Mormonism, and especially Mormon polygamy, that had been mounting for half a century.

Though it has always proved hard to characterize, anti-Mormon prejudice has never been difficult to find. With the possible exception of twenty-first-century Islam, no other American religion has inspired such a riot of epithets, such a profusion of calumny, as Mormonism. This brazen faith, which struck like lightning amid the storm of Upstate New York’s evangelical revivals in the 1830s, jolted everyone with whom it came into contact. To orthodox Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, Mormonism was at once both exceedingly strange and unsettlingly familiar. Critics called its prophet (Joseph Smith) a charlatan, its revelations a ruse, its scripture a fabrication. In some ways, Mormonism fit right into its time. It was a proselytizing faith in a proselytizing age, a biblical faith in a biblical era. But that didn’t make Latter-day Saints any less inimical to their neighbors. There’s nothing that religious groups like less than to see one of their own converted to another faith, unless it’s having their scripture revised.

It didn’t help that Mormons had few nice things to say about other groups and much to say in outright opposition to them. Ecumenism is the luxury of older, staid traditions whose theological respectability has already been proven. It has little appeal or utility for the upstart faith striving to make its mark on the religious landscape. If it had only remained a speculative religion, its leaders content with soteriological musings and material prosperity, Mormonism might have escaped much
of the unfavorable attention. But this was a faith of action. It demanded communal expression and heroic feats of evangelization. Most religious groups settle into institutional and theological complacency after a couple of decades of radical innovation. Not the Mormons. The revelations and the institutional inventions continued unabated, and the Mormons themselves proved irrepressible.

The revivalist antebellum period into which Mormonism was born also saw the rise of a new wave of religious prejudice. Mormonism began its blazing ascent when Protestant bigots burned Catholic churches and convents while others vied to distinguish themselves as adversaries of religious skepticism and free thought. The year 1844 may have been the bleakest in the history of American religious relations. As Roman Catholics and Protestants battled in the streets of Philadelphia, Joseph Smith was assassinated in an Illinois jail. Within the space of a decade, the Mormons were driven from Missouri and then Illinois. Had the federal government been more powerful and more resolute, it might have driven the Mormons from their eventual homeland in Utah too. Instead, the 1857–58 “Mormon War” came to a largely bloodless and relatively amicable conclusion. By that point, the rawest forms of anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment were subsiding. Yet some of Mormonism’s greatest trials lay ahead.

The persistence and ferocity of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism presents historians with something of a puzzle. What sort of prejudice was this? Was anti-Mormonism about religion or about something else? These are actually old questions, asked many times about other American religious traditions such as Catholicism and Judaism. Historians have long debated whether anti-Catholicism was an expression of hostility toward the papacy, overbearing priests, and Roman Catholic theology—or simply an aversion to poor Irish folks. They have likewise debated whether anti-Jewish prejudice is better characterized as hostility to Jewish beliefs and practices—or to people of Semitic heritage. Despite the unoriginal character of the endeavor, there is value in raising parallel questions about anti-Mormonism. The faith’s American origins, the immediateness of its revelations, and the Anglo-Saxon background of
its converts challenge us to reconsider the factors that inspire prejudice toward minority religious groups and to weigh the sometimes competing imperatives of theology, economy, race, and culture.

It is a propitious moment for such an enterprise. A swelling tide of scholarship on the Latter-day Saints has emerged along with an expansive new literature on the significance of tolerance and intolerance in American history. Terryl L. Givens was ahead of the times when he published his elegant and combative meditation on anti-Mormonism, *The Viper on the Hearth*, in 1997. Already a classic in the religious studies field, it was recently updated with trenchant reflections on the satiric musical *The Book of Mormon* and a concluding nod to the irony of Stephen Colbert. But the 2013 iteration has retained the lyrical prose, tongue-in-cheek humor, and piercing insight that distinguished Givens’s original. “What is it about Mormonism,” he asks, “that accounts for such an enduring and tenacious fixation on this marginalized and relatively minor denomination as one of the most significant threats to presidents, Christianity, and good airlines that America has ever known?” (p. 42).

Givens’s updated edition also retains the original’s emphasis on the singularity of anti-Mormon prejudice, as well as its theological motivations. *The Viper on the Hearth* still constitutes a thundering salvo against the conventional position that anti-Mormonism can be explained by reference to economic grievances, political disagreements, or social deviance—that is, to something besides the faith itself. As Givens sees it, the conflict between Mormonism and American culture has always been fundamentally theological. As long as the faith abides, so does its irresolvable tension with the contented, uninquisitive Christianity to which the majority of Americans subscribe. Since its inception, Givens argues, Mormonism has confronted Protestants and Catholics with the alarming possibility that their own faiths might be grounded in historically contingent circumstances, while denying them the reassuring illusion that God could be kept at a safe distance.

For Givens, the underlying cause of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism wasn’t that other Americans were ignorant of what Joseph Smith was telling them; it was that they understood it too well. The
Latter-day Saints “demystified” Christianity, exposing its fragile rusting buttresses (p. 91). Most faiths rely on origin stories that are entombed in the past, sealed by the passage of time and the paucity of records kept during the era in which they arose. Mormonism isn’t like that. Whereas we know of just a handful of contemporary references to Jesus, early nineteenth-century references to Joseph Smith are still beyond reckoning. Mormons challenged antebellum America—and have challenged every era since—by “re-materializing” and “re-historicizing” Christianity (p. 92).

Givens understands the interpretive challenge before him. He acknowledges that Mormons were not the most theologically innovative sect of their day, nor the only one that endured religious violence. He is also aware that early Mormons had an annoying tendency to claim the status of a chosen people (and to refer to non-Mormons as “gentiles”), to strive for communal self-sufficiency, and to combine church authority with state power. Yet, Givens maintains, neither the comparable treatment of other radical religious groups nor the distinctiveness of Mormon social life can account for the virulent opposition that Mormonism inspired. Modern Americans are heirs to this dismal legacy. The culture remains beholden to a satisfying and highly fictionalized narrative about Mormonism, a gross caricature featuring domineering bigamists and sexually exploited women, relentlessly mustered in the service of an elaborate and long-lived theological evasion.

While paying homage to Givens, J. Spencer Fluhman offers a more nuanced and fuller taxonomy of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism. Fluhman’s “A Peculiar People” shows how the age’s most cutting deprecations were summoned against the Latter-day Saints, exhibiting a virtual panorama of contemporary anxieties about politics, society, and religion. Nineteenth-century Mormons suffered assaults from every side. Even groups with tenuous claims to Christian legitimacy (e.g., the Shakers) excoriated them. On some occasions, critics treated Mormonism as just another modern counterfeit or “imposture,” one of numberless schemes to capitalize on the cupidity and “delusions” of the masses (pp. 11, 52). On other occasions, critics identified Mormonism with violent religious upheaval, equating it with the religious “fanaticism”
of groups such as the Münster Anabaptists (p. 85). Aspersions such as these allowed anti-Mormons to ground their critique in the age’s most poignant fears, while avoiding the stigma of religious bigotry.

There are interpretive differences between Givens and Fluhman, and they are not inconsequential. What Givens explains as a theological problem Fluhman explains as a problem of conceptualization. Fluhman stresses how reluctant non-Mormons were to admit Mormonism to the family of religions, and thereby to the privileges of religious tolerance. By denying that Mormonism was a religion, non-Mormons didn’t have to concede that they were intolerant. Nor did they have to take Mormon theology seriously; there was no theology where there was no religion. This, Fluhman explains, was one of the things that made the 1879 Reynolds decision so portentous. By starting from the seemingly unremarkable premise that Mormonism was a religion, Justice Waite accorded it a degree of recognition that it hadn’t previously enjoyed. Even as the court’s decision “spelled eventual doom for polygamy” by permitting all religious belief but disallowing certain religious actions, Waite’s opinion indicated that there might be “space for Mormonism among America’s religions” (p. 105).

Fluhman traces a nineteenth-century cultural trajectory from the generally accepted notion that Mormonism was a “false religion” to the generally accepted notion that it was merely “alien” (p. 128). A watershed moment occurred with the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions—just not the sort of watershed one might expect. Parliament organizers issued three thousand invitations to the epochal conference. None went to Mormons. Given that groups as culturally and geographically remote as Hindus and Sikhs were invited (albeit in minuscule numbers), the exclusion of Mormons was notable. Yet there was to be redemption here. “Where Mormon religion had failed,” Fluhman writes, “Mormon arts and agriculture met with huge success at the exposition” (pp. 130–31). This was success of a more mundane sort, but success nonetheless. It was also an augury of Mormonism’s future as an emblematically American faith whose theology was never fully comprehended nor fully incorporated into the national polity.
As Givens looks to fiction and Fluhman to polemics for evidence of anti-Mormonism, Megan Sanborn Jones's *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* looks to the theater. Long before *The Book of Mormon* enchanted Broadway audiences, there was melodrama and a good deal of it in America. Megan Sanborn Jones has tracked down a dozen extant melodramas (approximately twice that number were performed, but only half of the scripts survive) while focusing “a critical lens on the construction of the Other and its function in the creation and use of hegemonic discourse” (p. 2). The rest of the book isn’t quite as soaked in theoretical jargon, though Jones does regularly invoke the icons of poststructuralism, especially the radical social criticism of Michel Foucault, the postcolonial cogitations of Homi Bhaba, and the feminist cultural theory of Judith Butler. Much of this is less helpful than her own perceptive observations on the relationship between nineteenth-century theater and its generating history.

Outside the theoretical interludes, Jones alternates between accounts of general historical developments and detailed descriptions of contemporary drama. Despite the heavy reliance on terms such as “hegemonic discourse,” Jones has a great number of sensible things to say (her claim that “early America interpreted freedom of worship almost exclusively to mean a freedom from international interference of Protestant Christian Worship” is not one of them [p. 12]). Among these is her sobering conclusion that “Mormons looked like Americans” (p. 8). Jones has a keen eye for recurring scripts and enduring tropes in melodrama, which she sets within the rich context of Manifest Destiny, evangelicalism, nineteenth-century gender relations, and broad patterns of American violence. In contrast to Givens’s portrayal of nineteenth-century fiction, Jones characterizes anti-Mormon theater as an effect, the residue of “hegemonic” cultural system, rather than a significant cause of anti-Mormon sentiment. With Givens and Fluhman, Jones shows how mainstream Anglo culture projected distorted pictures of itself onto marginal cultures, expiating collective sins and satisfying middle-class Protestant fantasies in the process.
Patrick Mason’s *The Mormon Menace* has little use for theory. Instead, he presents a carefully measured story about violent anti-Mormonism in the postbellum American South. The book is modest in chronological and geographical scope. It is also vital to our understanding of anti-Mormon prejudice. Mason’s volume opens with bracing scenes of religiously inspired murder, searing emblems of the rage that was vented against Mormons, as well as the reluctance or inability of non-Mormon authorities to do anything about it. Mason is careful to make the fine distinction between religious intolerance and religiously inspired criticism, and he’s aware that the nineteenth century witnessed all manner of incendiary religious controversy. But the anti-Mormon violence he documents was intolerance of a most unambiguous kind.

There was little justice for the Mormon victims of southern violence. As with the lynching of black men, local vigilantism against Mormons was abetted by the tacit approbation and shameful lassitude of public officials. Local authorities sometimes even cooperated in expelling Mormons from their jurisdictions. Mormon victims had their advocates, including new converts, sympathetic clergymen, and liberal opponents of intolerance. But these were a small minority. The hostility seemed most acute following Mormon missionary successes. Charges of sexual promiscuity and the appropriation of local women figured heavily in the justifications offered by anti-Mormons. They were akin to the charges of female seduction and abuse that inspired antebellum mob violence against Roman Catholics, particularly the infamous 1834 burning of the Charlestown convent. Emboldened by a robust tradition of extralegal violence and stirred by hyperbolic accounts of sexual exploitation and the conversion of family members into a religious community that seemed intent on drawing them irrevocably away from faith and home, white Southerners attacked.

*The Mormon Menace* demonstrates that federal anti-polygamy legislation had Southern roots and was strongly correlated with the anti-Mormon violence that occurred there. Though Mason evades a direct confrontation with Givens, their interpretations are at definite odds. There was, Mason shows, something happening in the postbellum
South that theological difference cannot explain, a surplus of violence, a remainder of invective, that cannot be accounted for by the enumeration of theological differences. The trifling fraction of Southern Protestants who actually understood Mormon theology tended to be unsympathetic. But “sexual and social” concerns triggered the fiercest opposition (p. 15). Also threatening, albeit less well known, were the Mormon principle of “theodemocracy” (p. 108) and the specter of the “Mormon theocrat” (p. 124), Mormon militia activity, and the general lack of transparency that characterized the elaborately interwoven complex of Mormon church and state activity.

Bereft of other terms to describe what they didn’t like about Mormonism, Americans reached for the one that alternately titillated and terrified: polygamy. Whether plural marriage was a defining feature of nineteenth-century Mormon faith or not, it was a defining feature of how non-Mormons perceived it. In postbellum Southern thought, Mormonism and polygamy were virtually interchangeable. Mason persuasively argues that late nineteenth-century Southern accounts of Mormons “left readers with the impression that polygamy was ‘the taproot of Mormonism,’ the sine qua non of the entire religious system” (p. 62). The same was true elsewhere, though for how long and to what degree is uncertain. The LDS Church publicly acknowledged the doctrine in 1852, and legal historian Sarah Barringer Gordon has shown that polygamy was already a major object of anti-Mormon sentiment by the 1850s. The 1856 Republican Party platform paired it with slavery and jointly designated them the nation’s “twin relics of barbarism.” “By 1860,” Gordon writes, “anti-polygamy so overwhelmed other forms of political anti-Mormonism that it subsumed them almost entirely.”¹

In the end, it’s clear (à la Givens) that anti-Mormon prejudice can’t be dismissed as the superficial residue of political and social tension. However, it’s also clear (à la Mason) that it can’t be reduced to theological prejudice either. Once polygamy was officially jettisoned in 1890,

Mormonism began an expedited journey into the American mainstream. There was, as anyone who admires Givens must appreciate, little actual theological reconciliation. More than other faiths, Mormonism simply couldn’t concede what Christian ecumenists and assimilationists demanded. Mormons had no recourse to the theological penumbra of “things indifferent” or the “Mystery of Faith” that Protestants and Catholics had called upon to evade the most penetrating and conflict-inducing questions. Moreover, racial politics, as Givens, Fluhman, and Jones all expertly explain, figured heavily in the reconciliation process. Despite overwrought nineteenth-century efforts to cast Mormons as a racial “Other” (in particular, a harem-enamored Muslim “Other”), the Latter-day Saints remained steadfastly white. That did them little good when the nation’s attention was riveted on plural marriage. But once Utah agreed to disband the practice, non-Mormon Americans began to notice that Mormons looked and acted like the sort of people they regarded as typically American. The awkward, mutual embrace between the nation and the Latter-day Saints (à la *The Book of Mormon* musical) thus commenced.

Nineteenth-century Mormons were regularly ridiculed, frequently harassed, and occasionally shot. The ridicule hasn’t ended, but the shooting and outright harassment have. And so have many other manifestations of anti-Mormon prejudice. Economically, Mormons have done about as well as mainline Protestants and slightly better than Roman Catholics. Encumbered by the Saints’ opposition to alcohol, Mormon cultural assimilation remains far from complete. Nonetheless, Mormons already occupied some of the nation’s most important leadership positions by the late 1950s, even in the White House. The question raised in harrowing form by the assassination of Joseph Smith—could a Mormon ever run a successful political campaign that was not severely handicapped by his Mormon faith?—has been answered in the affirmative. Before he stumbled over nonreligious problems, Michigan governor and devout Mormon George Romney was considered a leading candidate for the US presidency in 1968. In 2012 his son Mitt garnered

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47 percent of the popular vote. Much of that support came from conservative Catholics and Protestants.

Now that Mormon voters are comfortably settled into the country’s conservative wing, anti-Mormon prejudice tends to emanate most luminously from the secular left. For progressives, Mormonism has come to symbolize the retrograde irrationality of all Western religion. The long exclusion of African Americans from the priesthood (until 1978) and the continued exclusion of women from the same have rendered Mormonism an easy target; the historical proximity of its revelations and the practice of polygamy (though long abandoned) have rendered it all the easier. Indeed, if anti-Mormon animus has ever been the theological prejudice that Givens describes, it is so in our own day, which exudes a discernible wariness about all theology and all revelation. Yet, as controversy surrounding the recent excommunication of Mormon feminist Kate Kelly suggests, tensions with liberal democracy and mainstream culture have not wholly subsided. Mormons remain a complicated people, and anti-Mormonism a complicated prejudice.

Rough Stone Rising:  
The Joseph Smith Papers Project  

*Mark A. Mastromarino*


A job announcement for a documentary editor appeared five years ago unlike any I had seen in thirty years. Posted by the Joseph Smith Papers Project (JSPP), it reflected in its desired qualifications the professionalism required of the candidate and the maturation of modern documentary editing as a scholarly specialization. Its two final requirements, however, seemed to oppose the very professionalism being sought: Candidates needed to be a “Member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” and “worthy to hold a temple recommend.”¹ The latter requirement in particular demands true commitment, as well as sincere belief in the church’s principles and faith in the church’s local and general leadership. Realizing that revelation persists as a major principle, energizing today’s church as it had earlier powered the controversial life of its founder, Joseph Smith, I decided that it does make sense to rely on the same spiritual tool to edit the records of a self-proclaimed prophet as was used in their creation. Divine inspiration, however, is not the sole inspiration of the church’s long-term and ongoing project dedicated to publishing all of Smith’s extant papers, a massive and messy corpus of documents. The firstfruits of JSPP—5,723 pages in the nine volumes listed above—demonstrate that piety and professionalism, faith and reason, need not be in conflict. The consistent quality and utility of these game-changing publications show that talented candidates with temple recommends have been hired, trained, and molded into a productive editorial team by capable scholars and managers. This documentary edition of the papers of the founding father of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has joined, if not displaced, leading-edge projects dedicated to more secular founders, demonstrating the power of private enterprise, at least.²


². I will use as examples of documentary editions the Founding Fathers projects—the papers of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, and Hamilton—because they were instrumental in laying the foundations of the modern documentary editing endeavor and have traditionally enjoyed greater resources than most projects, enabling them to have a larger role in defining the field’s best practices.
As an LDS Church–sponsored project, JSPP is able to draw on the intellectual, publishing, personnel, (and spiritual?) resources of the church, as well as its financial reserves and administrative infrastructure. Church ownership of most of the documents and the active cooperation of the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which owns some of the important documents published by the project) have made it possible for the historical sources to be instantly accessible for study and editing. And there is a ready, if not captive, market for the sale of the resulting publications. However, since the project can actually be considered a continuation of the LDS Church’s own Histories series, serving to fulfill “Smith’s history-writing initiative that began in 1830” (Journals, 1:xli), this folding in on itself naturally gives pause. Understandably, skeptics will automatically discount the project’s validity simply out of distrust for or opposition to its sponsoring institution, but institutions can evolve. I believe, perhaps naively, that the apparent trends of the current hierarchy toward greater sophistication, openness, and liberality in its treatment of its own history seem sincere and sensible. Even if not directly related to the tragedy and controversy surrounding the Mark Hofmann affair of the 1980s, initiatives like JSPP make the study of early American Mormonism safer and more secure for all by developing a much broader base of expertise in manuscript identification and Mormon history. By giving experts the sources, resources, and apparent freedom to work, the LDS Church has contributed to an atmosphere of cooperation and trust among a true community of scholars, regardless of church membership.

Building on the work of a previous edition of Joseph Smith’s papers undertaken by Dean C. Jessee for the Church Historian’s Office and Brigham Young University’s Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History in the 1970s and 80s, the current JSPP began in

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3. I am unaware of any initiatives of other major American religions, such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church or Jehovah’s Witnesses, to publish the papers of their founders, except the online-only edition of Selections from the Mary Baker Eddy Papers, a project of the Mary Baker Eddy Library, which the Church of Christ, Scientist, opened in 2002; see http://www.marybakereddylibrary.org/ (accessed June 4, 2014).
2001 as a collaboration between BYU and the Church Archives, with Jessee as general editor, Ronald K. Esplin (director of the Smith Institute) as executive editor, and Richard Lyman Bushman as chairman of the institute’s executive committee. In 2005 the project was reorganized, and its operations were transferred to the Church History Library in Salt Lake City—the main repository of most of the original Joseph Smith documents. Project staff became employees of the Church History Department, and an enriched editorial procedure was adopted (Journals, 1:xxxix–xl).4

Even in this apparent era of good feelings, we should consider the relationship between the project and the church, particularly the extent of the former’s independence of operations, editorial freedom, and financial dependency. The general editors direct about twenty professional editors and historians supported by a shifting staff of up to thirty others. At least one of the general editors sits on an internal church editorial board (which includes two members of the First Quorum of the Seventy, Steven E. Snow and Marcus B. Nash) that reviews each volume before publication. Volumes are also reviewed by a national advisory board of recognized historians, former project administrators, religious studies scholars, and a documentary editor, which in the past has been composed of Richard Lyman Bushman, Terryl L. Givens, Dean C. Jessee, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Susan Holbrook Perdue, Stephen J. Stein, and Harry S. Stout.5

JSPP volumes bear the imprint of the Church Historian’s Press, created in 2008 to publish historical works that meet the highest standards of scholarship, and are distributed by Deseret Book, a wholly owned subsidiary of Deseret Management Corporation, the holding company for business firms owned by the LDS Church and a for-profit


corporation. In addition to profits from the sale of the print volumes, the project has been funded by Larry H. and Gail Miller, by the Larry H. and Gail Miller Family Foundation since Larry Miller's death in 2009, and, of course, by the LDS Church, first through Brigham Young University and now through the Church History Department. The project apparently receives neither state nor federal funds.⁶

In 2012 the JSPP managing historian, Matthew C. Godfrey, openly discussed, from the perspective of a former public historian, issues related to multiple and contradictory audiences and concerns over credibility. His statements "Producing volumes that appeal to scholars who profess no belief in Smith as a prophet or mouthpiece for God, to historians who disregard Smith's claims as a prophet but who believe he was an integral part of American history, and to members who anchor their religious faith on Smith's prophetic claims is a challenge," especially when among the last-mentioned group are many who have difficulty "when confronted by history that differs from the faith-promoting stories they are told in church meetings and classes," are grand understatements! Godfrey meets the challenge by always striving to produce a fair and balanced edition relying on personal integrity and internalized American Historical Association and National Council on Public History standards of professional integrity. If he and other staff regularly worship in the Salt Lake Temple as permitted by their temple recommends, then I doubt not that they also start each workday with a personal prayer for divine guidance in helping to meet their daily editorial challenges.⁷

The project’s public philosophy is Godfrey’s strategy writ large. The JSPP website asked, “Can The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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⁶. “What is The Church Historian's Press?” and “Who is paying for the Joseph Smith Papers Project?” JSP FAQ; and http://deseretbook.com/about/5110611 (both accessed May 30, 2014). A search of their websites reveals that neither the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)—the grant-making arm of the National Archives responsible for documentary editing and archives and manuscript collections—nor the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has made grants to JSPP. And general competitive grants of up to $5,000 from the Utah Humanities Council cannot be used for multiyear projects.

expect to maintain scholarly credibility while publishing its own works?” Neither acknowledging nor addressing a potential conflict between being “deeply committed to the faith Joseph Smith founded” and also committed “to presenting his documents in the best professional manner,” the response was affirmative and showed how the goal was to be accomplished: by “demonstrating high professional standards in gathering, transcribing, and annotating documents”; by relying on the editors’ expertise in historical methodology and scholarship and in documentary editing; and by consulting with outside experts as needed. This professionalism would establish credibility, and “over time the project’s scholarship will speak for itself.”

And it has. As reported in the above-referenced FAQ, “reviews of the project’s volumes published to date suggest that the project is establishing a reputation for excellent scholarship.” This reviewer, too, is favorably impressed with the quality and quantity of the project’s output. The response of JSPP’s major secondary audience, the general membership of the church, has been more mixed. Although the first published volume (Journals, Volume 1) immediately sold out the initial printing of 11,000 copies and has sold over 63,000 copies in succeeding printings (amazing figures; typical documentary editing print runs usually number about 1,000), not all purchasers were pleased. “Sandra,” in a review on Amazon.com, accused the volume of playing “right into the hands of the intellectuals who always look for the faults in religious men”; “members of the LDS church all realize that Joseph Smith was ‘human,’ but does that mean we have to read about each of his alleged faults?” She preferred the “Spirit” of B. H. Roberts’s History of the Church. Another Amazon reviewer, “D. Shurtleff,” accused JSPP of selling out to academia “in order to gain acceptance of the world, [which] is not a worthwhile goal and does a disservice to this work.”

8. “Can The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints expect to maintain scholarly credibility while publishing its own works?,” JSP FAQ.

In May 2004 its high standards earned JSPP an NHPRC endorsement, the imprimatur of the federal entity dedicated to documentary editing (similar to the seal of approval for American writers’ papers awarded by the Committee on Scholarly Editions [CSE]), which has appeared on the copyright page of every JSPP volume. JSPP’s 166-page application was subjected to the same thorough, external peer and internal commission reviews that NHPRC grant applications go through, considering the historical significance of the documents to be edited, the coherence and effectiveness of the proposed work plan—including any plans for online publication—qualifications of the project staff and level of proposed cost-sharing contributions, and plans for disseminating project products, including evidence of how these projects will benefit scholars and the public. The project made the most of its endorsement, as an emblem of its scholarly professionalism and as an opportunity to educate the general public about documentary editing and historical scholarship. As the current associate web editor, Kay Darowski, explained to a reporter at the time, “Serious historians always have to go to primary sources, and this will make (research on Joseph Smith) accessible worldwide. . . . They won’t have to go to a secondary source; they can go to the primary document to get their information. That’s invaluable to have it more accessible and to not have to go to a repository.”

If most Americans cannot differentiate between primary and secondary sources of history, then they probably have never heard of

documentary editing and do not realize that its “modern” methodology embraced by JSPP dates to the 1940s. During World War II, microfilm and photocopying advances enabled scholars to assemble bodies of photoreproduced documents. The first of the new editorial enterprises was established at Princeton University. By 1946 Julian P. Boyd and Lyman H. Butterfield had systematized their collection and cataloging of an archive of Thomas Jefferson’s scattered papers there, which enabled them to select the most authoritative version of a Jefferson document for print publication. They devised a system of typographical symbols based on those used by earlier textual scholars to reproduce in printed form such details of Jefferson’s handwriting as deletions and insertions. Footnotes described more complicated textual details, and additional footnotes and editorial annotations based on painstaking historical research provided readers with an understanding of each document within its historical context. The first volume of the Jefferson Papers, published in 1950, revitalized the NHPC (the R was added in 1975) and led to the creation of the Benjamin Franklin, Adams family, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison papers projects before the end of the decade. The NHPC could provide only guidance and research assistance until Congress authorized it in July 1964 to receive federal funding and appropriated $350,000 for grants to documentary editing projects as well as permitted it to administer a Ford Foundation grant of $2 million to ensure the continuation of the five “priority” projects. Early on, Founding Fathers projects also received large grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, New York Times, and Time-Life Corporation and have since received millions of dollars from the Packard Humanities Institute, the Founding Families Papers Inc., and numerous other foundations and individuals, in addition to the support of their host institutions.11

The JSPP has an even closer relationship with the other major pillar of documentary editing, the Association for Documentary Editing (ADE), founded in 1978 as a forum where literary and historical editors could exchange ideas and set “the highest professional standards of accuracy of transcription, editorial method, and conceptual indexing” for publishing edited texts. It has since grown to three hundred members and has assumed all the trappings of larger scholarly organizations, with annual awards, elected officers and appointed committees, advocacy efforts, publications—a newsletter, scholarly journal, website, and a free online open-access manual, now in its third edition—educational opportunities, annual meetings, and archives.12 Susan Holbrook Perdue, past president of the ADE and coauthor of its Guide, serves on JSPP’s national advisory board. At least nine of JSPP’s editors and staff are members of the ADE, and several have served on committees, including the important nominations committee. At least six project personnel have learned the principles of scholarly editing under ADE mentors at Camp Edit.13 JSPP editors have contributed pieces to ADE publications,
and ADE members have reviewed project volumes and undoubtedly served as confidential peer reviewers of JSPP’s NHPRC endorsement application. This collegial relationship was cemented when JSPP and the Church History Library served as gracious hosts to the 127 members who attended the ADE’s thirty-third annual meeting, which was held in Salt Lake City on October 20–22, 2011.\(^{14}\)

The Salt Lake City meeting demonstrated that the JSPP “had arrived,” but its nine volumes published since 2008 are what has chiefly earned it the respect of the documentary editing community. They represent the first third of a projected two dozen or so volumes of a definitive and comprehensive scholarly edition of all known and accessible Joseph Smith documents, dating from 1828 to his murder in 1844. The editors have collected around 7,000 manuscripts, many of which are various versions of a basic set of about 2,500 documents (ranging from one page to hundreds of pages), and are transcribing, verifying, and researching and annotating them. The criteria for what is considered a Smith document are authorship and ownership. Authored documents include not only manuscripts in Smith’s own hand but also those dictated by him or written by his scribes in his behalf, as well as records created under his direction or that reflect his personal instruction or involvement. Owned documents are those received by him and kept in his office, including incoming letters (Documents, 2:xxxiii).\(^{15}\)

the commission made its first three-year grant to the ADE to take over the administration of the institute and also to offer advanced seminars and workshops for midcareer editors. See “The Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents” on the NHPRC’s website at http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/partners/editing-institute.html; and the fall 2011 issue of the ADE’s e-newsletter at http://www.documentaryediting.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Fall2011.pdf (both accessed June 6, 2014).


Of the six separate but interlocking series into which the project was organized in 2005, only four have published volumes so far, and only one series has been completed (Histories). The JPP Journals series consists of journals kept by Smith and various scribes and clerks from 1832 to 1844 that were intended as primary sources for the documents in the Histories series, which consists of the entire manuscript history that Smith began composing in 1838 and that was continued by clerks after his death. The Documents series will account for half of the total number of volumes. It publishes early versions of revelations, incoming and outgoing correspondence, sermons and other addresses, selected minutes and proceedings, editorials and articles in periodicals, and official declarations and pronouncements. (This series is most similar to the majority of historical documentary editions, which focus on a subject’s incoming and outgoing correspondence.) Of most potential significance to faithful church members, the Revelations and Translations series will present the earliest manuscript texts of the Joseph Smith revelations and those published during his lifetime. These include the Book of Mormon and the printer’s manuscript from which it was produced. In contrast to the Documents series, this series will present the texts of the revelations as units—without other Smith documents interspersed—and will focus mainly on textual, not contextual, annotation. The Legal and Business-in-joseph-smiths-handwriting (both accessed May 30, 2014). In comparison, the editors of The Papers of Alexander Hamilton (who lived to be forty-seven before he, too, was shot to death) published 12,500 documents in twenty-seven volumes from 1961 to 1987. See http://rotunda. upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN.html (accessed May 30, 2014).

16. Concurrent series is a common strategy of the Founding Fathers projects with their massive documents bases and impatient funders, for it brings documents from the endpoint of a subject’s life into print much earlier and enables projects to use personnel and areas of particular expertise to best advantage. Autobiographical material is usually published first, as it provides an overview of the subject’s life and familiarizes editors with sources and potential issues. Legal materials and business records often form a series in many projects because of their specialized nature. The Papers of George Washington just initiated an online edition of his business records. Sometimes series change in the middle of a project’s lifespan, as with the Papers of Thomas Jefferson, when the Retirement Series was broken off of the ongoing Princeton project and located at Monticello in 1999 to help speed along production. See http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/editions/financial-papers-project/; and http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/series-introduction (both accessed June 16, 2014).
Records series will reproduce legal papers from the judicial proceedings in which Smith was involved and business records of Smith’s personal or family finances and those relating to his enterprises in behalf of the church, including notes and other loan documents, land records, and mercantile accounts. The Administrative Records series will publish minutes and other records pertaining to institutions that were established under Smith’s direction and that contain his personal instruction and involvement (Journals, 1:xl–xli).

The project’s first volume, published in 2008, was Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839, covering the Missouri, Ohio, and early Nauvoo periods. Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843, published in 2011 after the appearance of intervening volumes in the Revelations and Translations series, continues in Nauvoo, with entries from “The Book of the Law of the Lord” and the first two of four memorandum books in Willard Richards’s handwriting. Of the series’ projected 1,500-plus manuscript pages, only 35 or so are in Smith’s hand (conveniently bold-faced in the transcripts); another 250 pages were dictated by him. The remainder—over 80 percent—was primarily in the hands of Warren Parrish, George W. Robinson, James Mulholland, Willard Richards, and William Clayton. The value of the series lies in its reference material and its documents’ clarification of misconceptions stemming from B. H. Roberts’s six-volume History of the Church, first published in 1902, by differentiating between first-person material referring to Smith and that referring to his scribes, who often wrote with Smith as an implied first person. While the journals were used as the foundation for much of the text of the manuscript history that was published beginning in 1902, its early compilers inserted materials into the narrative and presented the entire work as a seamless first-person account by Smith. The JSPP Journals series presents the complete text of the original manuscripts without any of the other editorial insertions.

Volume 1 of the Journals series includes a preface by the general editors and essays introducing the project and the series. In addition, the front matter for volumes 1 and 2 comprises introductions to the journals that appear in each volume, a clear statement of editorial method, a timeline of
Joseph Smith’s life, and a map of his residences. Other reference material includes a chronology for the years covered by each volume; geographical and biographical directories; maps; pedigree charts; ecclesiastical, militia, and municipal organizational charts; glossaries; correlations of section numbers in editions of the Doctrine and Covenants; and chronological presentation of revelations canonized as scripture. This material is supplemented throughout by annotations in the form of source notes describing each document, its construction, and provenance; footnotes providing identifications of people, places, events, and scriptural allusions mentioned in the journals; and descriptions of textual features. Helpful editorial notes for the sake of narrative continuity explain gaps in the journals. All of this is based on thorough research in the secondary literature as well as in primary sources, as demonstrated by the essays on sources and by the lists of works cited. Both volumes are also heavily illustrated with a total of ninety-eight contextual and textual images. All of this supplementary material makes these volumes the starting point for anyone, scholar or layperson, in or out of the LDS Church, seeking a convenient entrée into Joseph Smith’s world and worldview.

My favorite volume of those under review is the second volume published by JSPP: the facsimile edition (2009) of the Manuscript Revelations Books, which is the first volume of the Revelations and Translations series. According to the statement of the general editors in its preface: “Of the thousands of items in the Joseph Smith papers, his revelations are among the most significant and contested. . . . Although the revelations have religious meaning to us as Latter-day Saints, we present

17. Volume 2 also has two appendixes with selected documents and commentary on the Missouri extradition attempt, 1842–43, and a three-page excerpt from William Clayton’s personal journal, April 1–4, 1843, which served as a source for Smith’s journal entries for those dates (Journals, 2:377–402, 403–6).

18. My only complaint about the two Journals volumes is their lack of back-of-book indexes, which limits their utility as self-contained research tools. The intention was to publish a cumulative index in the final volume of the series, with downloadable PDFs of the indexes available on the project’s website in the interim. Fortunately, however, JSPP has offered to provide free to anyone requesting them a printed and bound index to each volume.
them in these volumes without comment on their ultimate source. In the tradition of documentary editing, our aim is simply to reproduce the documents and their historical setting so far as we can reconstruct it” (p. v). This volume essentially duplicates all the material presented in volume 1 of the series, both documents and editorial apparatus. But this oversize volume includes a full-color, almost full-size, high-quality photographic facsimile of each page of the two Manuscript Revelation Books, among the most important historical documents owned by the church, with each facsimile page facing its correlated page of transcription. The layout and the photographs bring so much more to the table, and the table consequently groans under the weight of the volume’s eight pounds. The full-color printing enables the editors to peel back the layers of revision and trace the complicated textual history of the writing. They accomplish this by printing each revision in a different color ink, according to who made it, and having a marginal code box on each page reminding readers which color represents which writer (with Smith’s handwriting always in boldface black, and unidentified handwriting in red). I found very informative and interesting the accompanying seven-page “Note on Photographic Facsimiles” (xxxviii–xliii). This is an effective system but must be very expensive to produce.

The project’s transcription rules, carefully spelled out in the statement of editorial method presented in the front matter of each volume, show their value especially in the Journals, Revelations and Translations, and Histories series. The project’s approach to transcription is a generally conservative diplomatic text. It preserves substantive revisions made by journal keepers by using strikethrough for cancellations and angle brackets for insertions, employs other symbols and font treatments for illegible writing and editorial insertions, and retains original punctuation and paragraphing, with exceptions noted in the editorial method (Journals, 1:lxii). It is flexible enough to be used in the multicolor system described above. It is impossible to tell if end-of-line hyphens appear in the original document or were inserted by the modern typesetter, but concerned readers can easily check suspect hyphenation to images of the documents either in the facsimile edition or on the project’s website. To
ensure accuracy of the texts, the raison d’être of any documentary edition, project editors undertake three independent levels of text verification for each manuscript, including a final verification against the original. A different staff member uses a different method for each verification stage. The first two verifications rely on high-resolution scanned images: the first is a visual collation of the document images with the transcripts, while the second is an independent and double-blind image-to-transcript tandem proofreading. The third and final verification of the transcripts is a visual collation with the original document, with the verifier employing magnification and ultraviolet light as needed with problematic originals. Examples are given of when multispectral imaging provided a better view of obliterated text (Revelations and Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books, Facsimile Edition, xliii). Transcripts that have been through all three stages of verification meet or exceed NHPRC transcription and verification requirements (Journals, 1:lix–lx).

The next JSPP volumes to appear, in 2012 in the two-volume Histories series, also didn’t publish any newly discovered material, but provided further background documents to B. H. Roberts’s History of the Church and are valuable for tracing the history of the writing of that history. Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844 comprises eight historical pieces written, dictated, or signed by Smith or created under his direct supervision. The four documents in Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847 were begun under his official direction but did not receive his sustained supervision. The balance of the series is being published electronically on the project website, the 2,332-page manuscript in six volumes that Smith initiated in Missouri in 1838 and that church historians concluded in Salt Lake City in 1856, which was the basis of Roberts’s publication. Three of the documents in volume 1, “History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841,” are presented in parallel columns, with a fourth column reserved for annotation, which conveniently shows similarities and differences between the drafts. Of particular helpfulness in volume 1’s reference materials are charts labeled “History Creation Dates, Narrative Spans, Scribes, and Precursor Documents” and “Relationships among Histories and Precursors” (pp. xxxiii, xxxiv). As in other series’ volumes, reference
materials also include chronologies, maps (and an index to the maps), a Smith pedigree chart, biographical directories, glossaries, essays on sources, lists of works cited, and a list of corresponding section numbers in editions of the Doctrine and Covenants. I am glad to see a cumulative index in the back of volume 2.

The first two volumes of the Documents series, covering July 1828 through January 1833, were published in 2013. Their 177 total documents consist mostly of revelations (about 70 percent of the total), but also letters, agreements, notes, minutes of meetings, deeds, licenses, and the copyright for and title page of the first printing of the Book of Mormon (Documents, 1:63–65, 76–81). Only a few documents are in Smith’s hand, including letters to his wife (with images of the complete documents as well as transcripts; 2:246–57, 304–14). The documents in the series are presented in chronological order and handled individually, with some items appearing in volume 1’s appendixes.19

Each transcript is accompanied by a source note and a historical introduction, as well as annotation, as necessary. In addition, editorial apparatus includes source notes and detailed descriptions and provenances of multiple-entry documents, such as Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, 1832–1835, in the Church History Library (1:431–34). The volumes

19. One appendix consists of the 1 November 1825 agreement between Josiah Stowell and Joseph Smith and others. It does not appear in chronological order because project editors have been unable to authenticate it (the original manuscript has never been found and is known only through the text’s reprinting from a Pennsylvania paper by an anti-Mormon newspaper in the 1880s). This would have been a perfect candidate for sweeping under the rug, if the church or the project were so inclined, not only because of its dubiousness but also because it was a contract for the Smiths’ treasure-seeking and money-digging services, a sensitive topic. The editors instead present a facsimile and transcript of the newspaper article and a balanced essay on the reasons for and against its authenticity (Documents, 1:345–52). Neither the source note and annotation nor the calendar records a particularly nefarious version of the document—a transcript of the manuscript agreement produced by Mark Hofmann in 1983 to bolster the sale of a June 18, 1825, letter from Smith to Stowell, which would have been the earliest Smith holograph if it hadn’t been a forgery (Hofmann later admitted it was). The typescript of the agreement did not appear in the calendar because it did not meet the project’s criteria, but the letter, acquired by the church, is the calendar’s first entry: “[Created] Ca. 1983; Historical Department, Materials Received from Mark W. Hofmann, CHL [Church History Library]; handwriting of Mark Hofmann forging handwriting of JS. FORGERY” (1:392).
are divided into chronological parts, each of which has an introduction that sets the stage for the period. An image of each document appears on the project website, which also has images and interim transcripts of the 613 documents to date. Some may object to so much commentary. With a series introduction in volume 1, along with a volume introduction, part introductions, and a historical introduction for each document, the ratio of essay to document pages is about one to one. If footnotes, source notes, and 353 pages of reference materials in volume 1 (illustrations, appendixes, calendar, source notes for multiple-entry documents, geographical and biographical directories, maps and charts, glossary, essay on sources and list of works cited, and volume index) are added, the ratio of editorial apparatus to documents is closer to three to one. But since this is the first volume of the series, there is more groundwork needing to be laid. And the scholarly contributions are always purposeful and neither pedantic nor obtrusive.

The most useful reference feature is the calendar of documents, also placed online. It lists in chronological order all known Joseph Smith documents of the period covered by the volume. Each entry provides the creation date and a brief description of the extant, nonextant, or partially extant original document, including identification of its author, genre, and place of creation and a list of later versions of the document that contribute to the understanding of an original nonextant text or a later version that was authorized by Smith.

One cannot conclude a review of JSPP volumes without at least mentioning the project’s website (josephsmithpapers.org), which has grown in size, functions, and usefulness over the course of the project’s history. It is likely to have a much wider and longer-term impact than the print edition. The church has always been an early adapter of new technology, and the website has grown from a PR platform to a supplement to the print publications and a successful online edition in its own right, following a trend of the Founding Fathers projects,

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individually and collectively. Reference materials reprinted from the volumes, indexes for indexless volumes, and errata lists were early useful features. Soon the addition of document images with accompanying transcripts further enhanced the website, which now offered a more portable electronic facsimile edition of the Joseph Smith Papers. The intention is to upload all of the papers included in the printed volumes (as interim transcripts until they receive their third level of verification when the printed volumes are published) as well as accompanying reference materials. The website will also include material not available in the print edition, including, as part of the Histories series, the entire multivolume manuscript history of Joseph Smith; as part of the Documents series, a number of certificates and other routine documents; as part of the Legal and Business Records series, about two additional volumes’ worth of material not included in print; as part of the Revelations and Translations series, Smith’s Bible revision manuscripts; as part of the Administrative Records series, transcripts of minute books, letterbooks, and other institutional records (already uploaded are images and interim transcripts of Letterbooks 1 and 2; Minute Books 1 and


2; Record of the Twelve, February 14–August 28, 1835; Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book; and the first published hymnal [1835]). Users can sign up for e-mail announcements about the availability of new material, which is also listed on the website’s home page.

Simply stated, The Joseph Smith Papers Project is indeed a marvelous work and a wonder. Its editors are committed people of faith who are also rigorous scholars of early Mormon history and professionals trained in the best practices of the modern documentary editing tradition and who rely on the latest in modern technology and are supported and sustained by a resourceful and history-minded church. They are making widely available, electronically and in printed volumes, accurate transcripts of and research-quality images of documents created by the founding father of their church. Joseph Smith was a translator, revelator, church president, city builder, mayor, city council member, judge, militia leader, and presidential candidate, and his surviving papers reflect all those roles, though they unfortunately afford relatively rare glimpses of the husband, father, son, brother, and friend. The project also shares with scholars, the general public, and the world the results of its editors’ exhaustive and balanced research, not only providing a knowledge base that historians of the early American Republic can draw on to transform and intensify their study of the era, but also restoring confidence to practitioners in the field by serving as a clearinghouse for information on forgeries and the like. JSPP’s essential resources for the study of Joseph Smith’s life and times provide for laypeople the context, complexity, nuance, and layers that scholars have been providing each other for years.

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Religious Dialogue across Lines of Difference: Mormons, Evangelicals, and Others Agreeing to Disagree

Roy Whitaker


As a professor of American religion who studies American religious diversity, I am interested in what historian J. Spencer Fluhman calls “vibrant, varied, and international academic engagement with Mormon institutions, lives, ideas, texts, and stories.”¹ My own study of Mormonism in 2008² is a vivid example of the decade-long, sociocultural,


² In spring 2008 at Claremont Graduate University, I took a seminar (which happened to fit my schedule) with Dr. Brian Birch entitled “Mormonism and Christian Theologies.” In the same year I was invited to, and gladly participated in, two Sunstone symposiums as well. Fluhman’s comments on the relevancy of Mormon studies reflect my own academic evolution: “As scholars have grown more and more sophisticated in
paradigmatic shift⁴ and the emergent evangelical academic community’s desire to talk with Mormons and accept Mormon theological studies as a viable discipline. Moreover, Mormon scholars are also more than ever publically participating in orthodox Christian dialogue so they can move beyond superficial analysis and easy classifications of the Other in the West. Christian theologian Donald Musser and Mormon philosopher David Paulsen agree that “[significant] conversation must precede judgment, lest we misunderstand each other.”⁵ The eleven dialogues in their book Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies, Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson’s How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation, Robert Millet and Gerald McDermott’s Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate, and Richard Mouw’s Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals all provide evidence and promise for this new orientation. These four works signal the emotive sea change among academicians to include more of the voices that historically in the twenty-first century have been excluded from Christian theological discourses. Perhaps more importantly, these books embody broader conversations in the humanities and the arts that do not minimize the actual theological and philosophical differences between the varieties of religious communities around the world.

Mark Heim, Robert Wuthnow, and William Connolly are pluralism studies scholars who have expressed a clarion call for intrafaith and interfaith dialogue across real lines of difference⁵—that is, religious dialogue that resists forms of “religious relativism”⁶ (as Mouw puts it) that absorbs Otherness into sameness. In Pluralism, Connolly argues for a “critical ethos of engagement” between different groups and cultures.

their study of religion, and as it has assumed a more prominent place in many disciplines, academic interest in Mormonism has flowered correspondingly” (Fluhman, “Friendship,” 1).

6. Mouw, Talking with Mormons, 75.
He suggests that “common ground” can be discovered and negotiated without avoiding real differences. In the same vein, Wuthnow argues in *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* that “religious differences are actually quite deeply rooted. Their strength lies in their distinctive practices, rituals, and teachings. . . . Genuine pluralism will take these differences into account, respecting them and upholding them.” In both the content and the format of their debates, *Christian* evangelicals and *Christian* Mormons are as well sincere interlocutors on religious and ethical issues. They are agreeing where there is agreement, and disagreeing where there is difference. Consequently, these scholars are creating scholarly space for genuine and groundbreaking dialogue.

Hence, all the books under review are refreshingly unlike past evangelical-Mormon apologetics-polemics. Mouw’s *Talking with Mormons* defends his orthodox Christian faith, but unlike his fellow evangelical counterparts, he claims an academic should not rush to judgment. He refuses to treat Mormons and Mormon theology as the Other (pp. 8–10). He sympathetically says that he “[wants] to be sure that I understand what another person is really saying . . . [by not] jumping too quickly to the conclusion that a person is an enemy of the gospel” (pp. 22–23). The strength of Mouw’s approach is that he takes seriously the proclivities, possibilities, and problems of Mormon scholarship while recognizing that the evangelical approaches to Mormon dialogue have had their own theological and political interests and presuppositions. Unfortunately, these positions have heretofore thwarted “hopeful signs of dialogue” (p. 94). Generally speaking, because they have had more followers and a longer historical presence, evangelicals have flexed their political prowess by demarcating the conditions and parameters of Christian debates and what can be defined as original Christianity.

Writing as a pastor-scholar, Mouw wants to turn the corner on cantankerous evangelical-Mormon relations. *Talking with Mormons* is a fruitful exercise in cross-cultural bridge building. As president and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary for over two decades, he represents the

quintessential “gatekeeper” (in the best sense of the word) between the divided evangelical-Mormon communities. As a reconciler, Mouw admits:

My main concern in what I’ve been saying thus far is to invite us to nurture friendlier relations with the Mormon community. I want us to listen carefully to our Mormon neighbors, without deciding ahead of time what they “really” believe. Patience, humility, a willingness to admit our own shortcomings—all of these are necessary to move the dialogue forward. But I’m not suggesting that by forming more positive relations all of our differences will magically melt away. (p. 43, emphasis added)

The anecdotal insights (p. 96) and personal prose (p. 97) in Talking with Mormons reveal Mouw’s care and intimacy with the topic and his knowledge about its dangers and pitfalls. A good example is his carefulness not to name every person who assisted him in “dialogic evangelicalism” (pp. vi–vii). Furthermore, he does not write in a typical evangelical anti-Mormon, “stark alternative” (pp. 86–89), “spiritual warfare” (p. 88) tone. Mouw effectively argues that evangelical antipathy and formulaic countercult discourse must be contested (pp. 12–24). Consequently, what is at stake for Mouw is not simply rehearsing or even confronting evangelical ad hominem arguments on Mormonism and the Prophet Joseph Smith. Similar to the ideas of George Santayana, Paul Tillich, and Martin Buber, a key aspect of Mouw’s overall thesis appears to be the notion that theology is a “communal experience” and something deeply biographical in nature. Although he does not convey it explicitly, an underlying theme of his book is that the study of Mormonism helps evangelicals to become better evangelicals.9 Mouw’s book, then, should not be understood as just talking about Mormonism to evangelicals, but as a book for evangelicals10 that is intended to change the punitive “atmosphere in Mormon-evangelical relations” (p. 4).


10. Arguably, Mouw’s book is also an open invitation to Mormons, who may not have a grasp of key differences and similarities between themselves and evangelicals.
As is true for Søren Kierkegaard’s devotional-ideational works, Mouw seeks to construct the proper ethical, theological, and epistemological disposition in which evangelicals can better understand their own faith and other Christian faith traditions. For Kierkegaard, and I would argue for Mouw, to know the truth one has to be in proper relationship with the truth. Basically, Mouw stresses that evangelicals have misread and misrepresented the Mormon people and their tradition for far too long. It is now time for open and honest dialogue that requires more than just a critique of the Other—a self-awareness and a self-assessment that acknowledges the real lines of difference. Appropriately, the “rhetoric of inclusion,” like the concept and aims of pluralism, has its limits. Mouw does not, for example, consider Scientologists or Jehovah Witnesses as “Christian” (p. ix). He is not convinced about the biggest conviction for Mormons: Joseph Smith is the prophet and the restorer. Nor does he subscribe to other key Mormon dogmas such as continuing revelation, divine corporeality, and eternal progression. These Mormon doctrines, even after rich dialogue, are heterodox and heretical from an evangelical perspective. According to Mouw, many Mormon beliefs do not conform to the biblical witness or church creeds (pp. 52–55). For their part, Latter-day Saints themselves find traditional orthodox beliefs suspect given that early church history has been tainted by Western philosophy and theology (pp. 52–55). In all, Mouw nimbly preserves orthodox doctrinal differences between Mormons and evangelicals while positing that “trust . . . allows genuine dialogue about our deepest convictions” (p. 94). By the same token, Connolly calls for a “critical responsiveness” in discourses. “Critical responsiveness takes the form of careful listening and presumptive generosity to constituencies struggling to move from an obscure or degraded subsistence below the field of recognition, justice, obligation, rights, or legitimacy to a place on one or more of those registers.”

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and Connolly are both essentially saying that substantive debates are constitutive of a Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian *being-there* communicative model, which is to suggest that the greatest gift one can give to another is one’s presence.

In just eleven brief chapters, Mouw’s *Talking with Mormons* is the shortest and the most accessible for a novice in Mormon-evangelical studies. I do not consider its brevity a limitation as other critics have suggested, especially given Mouw’s own admission that “longer books are necessary on the subject from an evangelical perspective” (p. x). As Lewis Gordon, a humanist scholar of methodologies has argued, novel methods are always warranted whenever relevant to help deepen understanding.13

To be sure, Blomberg and Robinson’s *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* and Millet and McDermott’s *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* should be read after Mouw’s book. The other books provide greater details, additional comparative analysis, and more cogent arguments with scriptural evidence to fully frame the divergent and overlapping positions in the Mormon-evangelical debate. I have spent so much space in this review on Mouw’s text because it is an entryway to the debate. Unlike Mouw’s hope for dialogue (pp. 94–96) and commentary on Othering (pp. 21–22), *How Wide the Divide?* and *Claiming Christ* cover more substantive and broader theological terrain of the issues that divide Mormons and evangelicals—namely, the doctrines of Christology, the Trinity, deification, and soteriology.14 These two books are, frankly, companion pieces. Although *Claiming Christ* focuses on Christological issues, it and *How Wide the Divide?* have similar structures. Like the approach taken in *Mormonism in Dialogue*, Blomberg or Robinson will first present a position, then the other responds to it by presenting it from his tradition, and then a final rebuttal—or a “joint conclusion”—is offered. Thus, the methodology of these books supports the argument that *authentic* dialogue is *organic* dialogue, and it ought to

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be (re)produced in how scholars do their work. Like Mouw, the authors of *How Wide the Divide?* and *Claiming Christ* contend that new scholarship and novel methodologies are needed that appreciate ostracized institutions, traditions, and identities in Western culture on their own terms. “Successful interfaith dialogue involves much more than winning an argument,” Millet and McDermott contend. “It also entails building and enhancing a friendship” (p. 12). In other words, the medium is part of the message.

Of the four books considered here, *Mormonism in Dialogue* is the most expansive work—not only in terms of length of pages and breadth of topics, but also because of the vast cadre and caliber of leading scholars participating in Mormon dialogue. For instance, Rosemary Radford Ruether has published in feminist theology for well over three decades now. Dwight Hopkins is just as respected in black theological studies. David Tracey in hermeneutics and theological method and David Griffin in process theology and postmodern theory also figure in the stellar list of scholars—all of whom have not formally written in a sustained way about Mormon studies in the past.

Unlike in *Claiming Christ* and *How Wide the Divide?*, the non-Mormon authors in Musser and Paulsen’s anthology are not overtly evangelical and fundamentalist in their respective theological orientations. Yet they clearly remain committed to their unique theo-ethical positions and philosophical frameworks. In interreligious and intercultural dialogue, there is “no view from nowhere.” Going well beyond Mormon and evangelical debates about whose Jesus and which Christianity, the scholars whom Musser and Paulsen recruited for the volume are willing to discuss rare topics such as Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich, as well as contemporary movements such as liberation theology, myth theology, and openness theology. The scholars take these topics

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and show how they relate to Mormon thought. In this light, Musser and Paulsen’s primer signals the larger academic turn toward more multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to the study of religion and theology. The book gives the reader a wider and different lens to accurately discern just how wide the divide is between the two faith traditions. In this respect, Mormonism in Dialogue is more dialogical and dialectical than the other two books. It affords the audience a richer theological mosaic and a less parochial lens with which to compare and contrast Mormon-evangelical theology. As a result, their book can appeal to a larger market and more mature readers in religious studies. While it may be a bit too advanced for lower-division or first-year religious studies students, I believe that graduate schools, seminaries, and religious studies programs would serve their faculty, students, and communities well by having a copy as a library resource.

Therefore, Musser and Paulsen’s collaboration stands as an audaciously ambitious magnum opus in the field of Mormon-Christian studies. To ignore Mormonism in Dialogue would be analogous to ignoring Richard Bushman’s Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling when examining LDS life and thought in American religious history. The book’s existence dispels trite cultural prejudices that say Mormon thinking is oxymoronic, and also stale theological misnomers that conclude that Mormon theologizing is not possible (p. vii). As is true for the other Mormon-evangelical books under review, I concur with Martin Marty’s observation of the anthology: “Here readers are likely to agree that the scholars are forthright in stating their differences, open to listening to the other, and courteous about the way they handle both the self-assurance and the self-criticism of the other” (p. x, emphasis added). Mouw, Wuthnow, and Paulsen call for more empathetic dialogue and a “[careful] speaking and attentive listening on both sides” (p. 17, emphasis added). Simply put, Paulsen’s point and an underlying message of the entire anthology is that honest and healthy dialogue is possible between Mormons and evangelicals.

At the outset, Paulsen admits that the anthology (as Mouw suggests of his own book, p. x) “pleads for a volume two” (p. 13). Paulsen is correct. Speaking about space where open debate is readily encouraged, Mouw fleshes out my point: “As a longtime subscriber to Sunstone, I could have
recommended some of Sunstone’s other writers to add yet more diversity to the mix: Jungian Mormons, Deconstructionist Mormons, Process Theology Mormons” (p. 59). Possibly a section entitled “A Dialogue on Mormonism and Atheism” or “A Dialogue on Mormonism and Secularism” and another section entitled “A Dialogue on Mormonism, Pop Culture, and Media Studies”16 would be welcome additions to Musser and Paulsen’s next volume. Examining salient contemporary theoretical and ethical issues under a Mormon horizon would keep with the spirit of their vision of creating “mutual understanding and building bridges” (p. xi).

Although the topics and themes are still relevant, Mormonism in Dialogue was published in 2007. In today’s media-driven, Facebook-Instagram, Twitter-word world, seven years is a long time. Since the book’s publication, we have seen for the first time the real possibility of a US president who happened to be Mormon. We have a grassroots surge by LDS women laity and scholars—as evident in Joanna Brooks’s The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith—who are advocating for women’s rights and shared governance in church affairs. There is also an American cultural sea change over the past decade in the acceptance—though not fully—of LGBTQIA persons, identities, and institutions in society. Mormon theologians need to be more engaged and more nuanced about these critical issues. If not a volume 2 for Mormonism in Dialogue, the equivalent of a Cambridge Companion to Mormonism is now needed to continue to nurture and challenge Mormon scholarship.17

While scholars of Mormon and evangelical literature have good reason to applaud the four publications under review as invaluable contributions to the Mormon-evangelical debate, some scholars may be disgruntled with certain elements. For one, there is a lack of gender and racial diversity among the principal authors and main editors of the books. All of the authors and editors are white and male. Why is this? What does this say about the Mormon-evangelical divide? Is this

16. For example, the ongoing success of the Broadway musical The Book of Mormon suggests that critical analysis about the relationship between Mormon identity, aesthetics, and American popular consciousness is continually needed.
17. On this point, an Oxford Handbook of Mormonism is due in 2015.
reflective of the larger evangelical and Mormon authoritarian culture? In the long run, a uniform and dominant-white-male, straight gaze hinders new avenues of self-discovery as Mormonism studies comes of age in a multicultural, multiethnic, gendered, and queer America. For example, the dialogue in *Mormonism in Dialogue* between Dwight Hopkins and Eugene England on black theology (pp. 341–84), as well as the chapter on womanist theology (pp. 303–39), is a substantive dialogue about race and religion. But racial discourse, as critical race theorists argue, is always a subtext, or is sublimated within the dominant, normative “white” discourse. That is to say, the concept of race, along with class and gender, implicitly frames not only Hopkins-England conversation but also feminist, myth, process, and the other dialogues in the text. My point is that the volume would be more inclusive by naming this for the reader and exposing its own methodological limitations, since the book is the beginning of a new frontier. That is, Musser and Paulsen are socially constructing the field for future scholars.

Another observation is that Musser and Paulsen’s thematic approach (e.g., a chapter on myth theology, a chapter on openness theology, and a chapter on feminist theology) is undeniably thoroughly analyzed by the foremost scholars. But in addition to the helpful foreword, acknowledgments, preface, and introduction that provide the context and rationale for the project, a concluding chapter like that in Blomberg and Robinson’s book would have provided the reader with an understanding of how the various areas fit together and the possibilities of future dialogue.

Last but not least, there needs to be more debate about what exactly constitutes “Mormonism.” Who gets to be a Mormon and a viable speaker in the evangelical-Mormon discourse? By this I mean it appears that the four books under review seem to have settled on the contours of the LDS tradition, when in fact there are several other sects and strands of Mormonism that deserve some attention and a voice.18

Given all these points, evangelicals and Mormons have not always seen each other as legitimate actors having proper authority in Christian

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18. An example of a group that has often been neglected in Mormon studies and marginalized in LDS culture is Fundamentalist Mormons.
matters. Despite this, the new chorus of Mormon-evangelical books portends the nascent age of the “Mormon Ecumenical Moment,” in which we as teacher-scholars are privileged to investigate. Taken as a whole, Latter-day Saints and their brand of Christian theology can no longer be considered a footnote or a whitewashed form of modern American religious thought. Without a doubt, Mormon thinkers are, as Paulsen rightly urges, players on today’s Christian theological stage (p. 18). What is significant is that it is not only Mormons saying it. Mouw is proof that evangelicals are now saying it as well (p. 14). He writes, “Brigham Young University is world class. . . . Some devout Mormons are well-known scholars at major secular schools” (p. 30). While it is true that Mormons and evangelicals do differ on core issues of tradition, scripture, and experience, it does not mean that respect cannot be the undergirding heuristic principle in how they relate to each other. In essence, the four books help to demystify Mormon theology and to remove the stigma existing in the popular imagination about being Mormon. With works like Mormonism in Dialogue, How Wide the Divide?, Claiming Christ, and Talking with Mormons, the future looks bright for greater understanding of religious dialogue across lines of difference.

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Reviewed by Jeanne Halgren Kilde

While the term *enigmatic* is too strong a descriptor, the Kirtland Temple is definitely something of a puzzle for scholars of religion and religious architecture. Erected in Kirtland, Ohio, between 1833 and 1836 under the direction of LDS Church founder Joseph Smith, the temple is both similar to and quite unlike Christian churches of the period or region. Its blend of Classical and Gothic architectural vocabularies was not uncommon, yet its white bottle-glass (or pebble-dash) stucco seems to have been unique for the region. Its lower level worship room filled with box pews would have felt familiar to Christians of the period, but the two banks of tiered pulpits rising like stair steps facing each other from opposite ends of the room were unprecedented in Christian churches, as were the great curtains (or “sails”) that hung from the ceiling to segment the large room into smaller ones. Moreover, the function of the temple in Mormon history, particularly with regard to the LDS-RLDS schism, while not exactly shrouded in mystery, has been the subject of more speculation than serious historical inquiry. Lastly, this building, erected by the founder of Mormonism, has not been owned by the LDS Church for generations, yet it remains an important historical stop for LDS pilgrims following the path of the early church.

David J. Howlett’s work goes far in solving some of these puzzles; indeed, it goes well beyond them. *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space* offers a well-researched and
information-packed history of the building in question along with a groundbreaking analysis of the complex and changing relationship between the LDS and the RLDS churches, as well as a valuable commentary on the nature of the complicated category of “sacred space.” The author accomplishes all this by using the Kirtland Temple itself as a lens—or prism—to disentangle several themes related to the meanings, practices, and events associated with this unique building. His analysis is made richer through the deployment of several theoretical concepts borrowed from such authors as Pierre Bordieu and Jonathan Z. Smith, and by the coinage of a new concept derived from the research and analysis: “parallel pilgrimage.” The result is a work that not only advances Mormon history but also provides an illuminating case study that contributes to our general understanding of religious space, the development and function of religious identity, and the relationships among religious groups.

Howlett’s use of the building as a tool to raise questions places this work on a divergent path from much of religious history, which has often focused on the intellectualist aspects of theologies, creeds, or moral codes rather than on religious practices or cultus. *Kirtland Temple* is a model for overturning this paradigm. The focus on the building necessitates investigating practices (what people do in it) as well as ideas (what they think about it). Through the rituals and performances associated with the temple, both LDS and the RLDS members have constructed a host of understandings of the building that have, in fact, changed over time. These understandings of the building, Howlett demonstrates, have both reflected and contributed to how each group has understood its own identity, Mormonism, and each other. Indeed, what emerges from this study is a complex story of LDS and RLDS identity formation and transformation grounded in dialogue, contestation, and, occasionally, cooperation. The building itself unites the two groups in a complicated material relationship that Howlett helpfully terms “parallel pilgrimage.” While both groups see the temple as religiously significant, the reasons for its importance are quite different for each group. Moreover, those reasons have shifted over time. For decades LDS and RLDS members
have been visiting the same site—that is, pilgrimaging to it—but they have been understanding it in very different, parallel ways.

The central theme linking the Kirtland site, which eventually included not only the temple but also a number of other nearby historic buildings and two visitors’ centers, to practices and to ideologies is that of “contestation.” Howlett deploys the work of several scholars to illuminate how disputes over certain spaces function to sacralize them. As two or more groups dispute their claims over the control and meaning of such spaces, the stakes rise and the sites are perceived as increasingly vulnerable and holy. In the case of the Kirtland Temple, Howlett explores how RLDS adherents used the building in the late nineteenth century to legitimize their new denomination, citing it as the only temple designed by the Prophet Joseph Smith at the command of God himself and thereby ascribing a kind of “hypersacrality” to the building (p. 110). In contrast, the LDS people developed a counternarrative of decline, arguing that although the building once was holy, it had become fallen space, desanctified by the occupation of the theologically erroneous RLDS people, a narrative that was intensified in the late twentieth century by rhetoric describing the building as cursed. Such divergent meanings have been at the heart of, and at the same time have augmented, disputes over the ownership of the building that continue to this day.

Processes of alterity, then, or defining one’s position, here theological, in relation to a perceived other, constitute a reigning theme throughout this book. To investigate those processes, Howlett turns to a variety of practices and performances associated with the buildings, including the work and activities of both RLDS and LDS religious leaders and everyday practitioners, the narratives of tour guides who are charged with articulating Mormon history at the site, the experiences of RLDS and LDS pilgrims who visit this central site of early Mormonism, the horrific actions of one shockingly aberrant zealot, and the activities of the general public. Howlett makes good use of nontraditional source material in these investigations. Discussion of two plays produced, respectively, by RLDS and LDS members serves as a means of comparing the two groups’ outlooks, the former strongly influenced by liberal Protestantism while
the latter is focused on in-group creed and missionizing. Additional
discussion of the performative and ideological aspects of the guided
tours allows exploration of how these were transformed between 1959
and 2012. As a former tour guide for the RLDS Church, Howlett aug-
ments this discussion with his firsthand observations of how pilgrims
and tourists navigate the temple and historical sites and interact with the
guides and with the religious messages of the two groups.

Central among the tensions that Howlett perceives within these
practices and between RLDS and LDS pilgrims and leaders are com-
peting claims to Mormon identity, authenticity, and orthodoxy. His
analysis carefully illuminates a number of specific points of contention
that, owing to the need to share this space, are continually being negoti-
tiated. Raised in the RLDS Church, Howlett is well aware of the fact
that his positionality could easily compromise his presenting a balanced
interpretation and may draw suspicion from some LDS readers. His
treatment of LDS perspective, however, is generally balanced and even
empathetic at points. He is particularly compelling, for instance, in his
treatment of how LDS members have at various times interpreted, rhe-
torically and theologically, the central paradox of why Joseph Smith's
original temple is not controlled by the LDS Church. He also addresses
RLDS problems, developing, for instance, critical analyses of the ideo-
logical schism within the RLDS Church in the 1980s and the subsequent
tragic shooting of a family by a fundamentalist RLDS leader in 1989.
While the fundamentalist movement remains, the RLDS leadership
shifted distinctively toward liberal Protestantism and ecumenism in
the 1990s, with the group adopting a new name, Community of Christ,
along with a distinctive peace and justice theology. LDS leaders, Howlett
shows, while viewing these moves as taking the RLDS Church further
from "true Mormonism," have also found some common ground upon
which to work with RLDS leaders, particularly regarding the historic
sites. Yet, he concludes, such cooperation, while admirable, is delicate,
and the balance is easily tipped back toward conflict.

Highly informative with regard to religious practice, contestation,
and identity, Howlett's treatment of the materiality of the building is less
comprehensive in comparison. For instance, Smith’s opposing banks of pulpits is closely examined for their ideological and theological functions and practical use by the priesthood, but their use for religious services after the LDS people departed Kirtland, and particularly by contemporary RLDS members, is not discussed in detail. Neither are other physical aspects of the space—lighting, acoustics, seating, heating, cooling, or remodeling—examined. No floor plans are provided (although architectural elevations depicting the interior from two directions are), and only one interior photo, taken during a hymn service in 2008, is included in the book.

Nevertheless, *Kirtland Temple* provides an enlightening case study of the processes of contestation and negotiation in the development of sacred space and religious identity. Readers interested in these processes or in Mormonism itself will derive great benefit from this well-written and engaging book.


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*Reviewed by Anne Hyde*

TODD COMPTON’S EXPANSIVE NEW BOOK, *A Frontier Life: Jacob Hamblin, Explorer and Indian Missionary*, covers a period and subjects I care about: the early and mid-nineteenth century and Native people, Mormons, and Western exploration. Jacob Hamblin and his entire family were amazing
people—talented, resourceful, and faithful. Hamblin, one of those astonishing characters that appear everywhere in early Mormon History, was one of Brigham Young’s most trusted and valued town builders and missionaries. Hamblin had his eyes on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, was involved in the efforts to clean it up, and took some responsibility for the children orphaned by the episode. His entire family helped spread Mormonism south and west. Hamblin, in particular, took on the politically and religiously challenging task of evangelizing local Utah Indians and the tribes farther south, including the Hopi and Navajo. Later in his life, because his proselytizing and town-building work took him through so much of what is now southern Utah and northern Arizona, Hamblin accompanied John Wesley Powell on his trip down the Colorado as a guide. Such an astonishing life deserves a big biography.

Compton’s big text is carefully written from a range of materials including diaries, journals, and family letters. It also makes use of the enormous wealth of LDS bureaucratic record keeping. The book focuses on Hamblin’s adult life in Utah and on his career as town builder, missionary, and LDS insider in the early years of the LDS Church. He came to Utah in 1850, and like many Mormons, he and his family had suffered hunger and cold waiting to embark on that journey for nearly two years. His first wife left him, unwilling to undertake the move to unknown Salt Lake City. His second wife, Rachel, picked up the pieces and helped Jacob move their large combined family to Salt Lake. Almost immediately after their arrival, Brigham Young sent Jacob Hamblin to begin the project of converting the Indians.

We get a detailed, almost kaleidoscopic view of Mormon life in raw and isolated southern Utah in the 1850s and 1860s. We see where Hamblin went, who went with him, what they did, ate, and said. Compton provides a wealth of evidence for the details of Hamblin’s daily life and the astonishing range of places he went. After reading the book, I had new respect for the difficulty of daily life and the kind of confident faith and personal bravery it took to leave the edges of the Mormon world and travel into Indian country. Exploring and establishing new communities like Lee’s Ferry and Callville, places filled with Native groups who
didn’t particularly want Anglo or Mormon communities near them, was challenging work. Hamblin did it the old-fashioned way; he built relationships with local Indians and learned to speak to them. His goal, however, was not neighborliness, but conversion and access to Indian water sources and land.

By Compton’s account, Hamblin never questioned the value or morality of what he was doing. Bringing Indian people into the Mormon fold was the right thing to do. It didn’t matter whether his own family suffered terribly while he was gone or if he lied to or threatened Indian guides and allies. Some of these trading and missionary expeditions went badly, leading to waves of raiding from the Paiutes and Navajos. Hamblin didn’t take children, grab horses and supplies, or insult Indians because he was a slave to Brigham Young or Mormon authority; he did them because he had a series of visions that instructed his actions.

I don’t blame Hamblin for being a man of his time or someone with missionary surety. Here’s where I want Compton to be more than a reporter providing a welter of detail that can obscure other aspects of this important story. His objective style works well to let us understand Hamblin in his own context, but Compton doesn’t provide us with enough context to understand the big picture of Indian relations in the region and Mormon and Native roles in creating these relations. For example, when we accompany Hamblin on various missionary expeditions, we see, from his perspective, Indians who are naked and hungry and godless—the very definition of wretched. They did look this way to Hamblin, and he very much wanted to clothe them and preach to them. But were they wretched? What is the context for this? The historian’s task is to provide the context required to understand what is being described. What kinds of lives did Goshutes or Hopis or Paiutes lead? How would their material and religious values differ from or speak to nineteenth-century Mormon ones? In the same way, I think we need to understand more about Hamblin’s own religious views and how similar and different they were from those of other Mormons and other Americans.

Hamblin often gets credit for being a great peacemaker in a violent period of Western American history. Compton does a good job of
complicating that story by demonstrating the varied motives that drove Hamblin and his LDS superiors and by pointing out that most of these missionary efforts failed by nearly any measure. Once the Indians realized the Mormons would not help them in their wars with other Indians and that the Mormons wanted and would take their water, relationships ended. The results, Compton says, were inevitable. In the end, he concludes that “all an Indian missionary could do would be to help both Indians and white settlers adjust to the process in a human and non-violent way.” Again, I wanted Compton to step out from the safe position of using his sources to report—that is, providing his readers with more analysis of why things happened the way they did. In this way, readers can better understand how this very interesting character that Compton carefully details for us might have mattered in the past and into the present, a useful goal for all historians.


Reviewed by Colleen McDannell

Will we ever get enough of polygamy? Just as the textual Book of Mormon is now eternally tied to the Broadway musical The Book of Mormon, so the television show Big Love, fundamentalist Mormons, and the controversies over gay marriage lead us back to nineteenth-century polygamy. Keeping attention on alternative family patterns means Latter-day Saint history will always be a part of the cultural discussion. Christine Talbot’s A Foreign Kingdom is a masterful addition to that conversation.
Mormon polygamy has been approached in a variety of ways—from the historical surveys of B. Carmon Hardy and Richard S. Van Wagoner to the legal studies of Sarah Barringer Gordon to the careful explorations of everyday life by Jesse L. Embry and Kathryn M. Daynes. Talbot builds on this literature by asking her readers to step back from the lived worlds of polygamists and into the constructed worlds of those nineteenth-century Americans who thought about polygamy. The goal of *A Foreign Kingdom* is not to tell us about polygamists but rather to use polygamists to tell us about citizenship. In this way Talbot’s study fits well with J. Spencer Fluhman’s “*A Peculiar People,*” which uses anti-Mormonism to understand the construction of categories of religion in the nineteenth century. Both studies use the history of a small group of Americans—Mormons—to better understand wider concepts held by many Americans.

Talbot clearly lays out her argument in the introduction: Polygamy destabilized the public/private divide in ways that restricted Mormon access to American citizenship. Only with the proper relationship established between the public and private could people qualify for “membership in the American body politic” (p. 3). From the anti-Mormon perspective, Mormons could not be citizens because their homes were so entangled in theocratic politics that they had no space to develop an individual, independent conscience. Talbot illustrates how Mormonism and representations of Mormonism “denaturalized” family and citizenship (p. 161). This blurring of the “natural” divide between public and private, male and female, and church and individual by Mormons provoked others to reaffirm and reassert the distinction between social realms. The bulk of the book is taken up in carefully laying out the evidence that supports this argument.

After a quick summary of LDS history and thought, Talbot starts by describing the Mormon rejection of an inward-looking, romance-driven nuclear family and its preference for an extended kinship system modeled after the Old Testament. For Mormons, polygamy provided the multiple kin connections and the personal sacrifice that enabled religious progression to occur. Female suffrage, which Utah women

gained in 1870, also worked to diminish the difference between what men did and what women did. Talbot points out that the reality of an anti-romantic family life was not easily practiced and that in their private writings many polygamist wives articulated the strain that this nonconventional family life caused them. It is here, when the ideal takes a backseat to the real, that one wonders if the erasure of the private in Mormon households actually did take place in ways different from that of non-Mormons. It is easy to accept Talbot’s argument when we assume that Mormonism (and Victorianism) worked the way that it was supposed to work.

_A Foreign Kingdom_ is strongest when it is analyzing representations, especially anti-Mormon fiction. Through fiction, anti-Mormons imagined a Mormon family devoid of romantic love, sentimentality, and attachment to domesticity. The family was the foundation of the nation, and the polygamist family was a disordered, chaotic, disharmonious mess. How could citizens be raised in such a household? From the perspective of mainstream Americans, it was clear that a public, national culture could not be created without private attachments. Talbot uses architecture and now-familiar anti-Mormon cartoons to drive home her point that Protestants believed that civic virtue required domestic unity, which could not be achieved by Latter-day Saints because outside influences (religion, politics) had polluted the home circle.

Although Talbot briefly mentions a parallel in anti-Catholicism (pp. 86–87), this connection could have been made stronger. It not only was the celibate priest and nun who threatened the notion of a natural family structure, it was the immigrant family whose multiple children acted like adults: working, cussing, and staying out of school. In the later nineteenth century, Progressive Era reforms were directed at many subcultures—from Native Americans to Italians—that espoused alternative family structures.

In her chapter “Consent, Contract, and Citizenship,” Talbot reflects on another “defect” that Mormons shared with Catholics, that of misplaced authority. Here, in a highly original argument, she illustrates how the marital contract prepared individuals for the social contract, which in turn made them citizens. Polygamy and theocracy blended into one
another because both deprived individuals of their right to independent consent—women because they were not free to regulate their marriages and men because their church stopped them from freely giving political consent. For anti-Mormons, it was impossible to imagine that anyone would ever freely consent to either the Latter-day Saint religion or to its social practices. In general, this is an observation that could be applied to the full history of American religions—how could any thinking person be a Catholic, a Jehovah’s Witness, a Hare Krishna? Obviously, weak individuals are either hypnotized (Mormons) or brainwashed (Hare Krishnas). Talbot’s demonstration of how this works with Mormons helps us see how the anti-cult movement also used this strategy when its advocates argued that totalitarian “cults” rendered (often through violence) adults into children who could no longer be thought of as consenting citizens. Mormonism established female servitude, making women variously prostitutes or slaves. While other scholars have also made this observation, Talbot’s unique contribution is to stress its connection to disenfranchised citizenship.

The construction, however, was not simply about Mormons. What also was going on was a sleight-of-hand to present Protestant women as freely consenting adults, when they were not. The slave/prostitute Mormon woman meant that the Protestant woman—by definition—had rights and freedoms through her revered domestic position. It was her position in an ordered home, not simply her existence as an adult, by which she gained citizenship. And therefore the exercise of that citizenship would better be expressed through the head of the home, the male. This logic made even more sense after Latter-day Saint women began voting. As the Mormon patriarch was thought to be a despotic ruler, so the non-Mormon husband was a loving, companionate husband. If the “oneness” (p. 125) of Mormonism—the collapsing of the private and public, church and state, individual and leader—was fundamentally the problem, then separation must be the goal. While Talbot sticks to describing the Mormon side of the binary, it is easy to see how anti-Mormonism props up a shaky Victorian Protestantism threatened by increased immigration, calls for women’s rights, and the enfranchisement of male African Americans.
Talbot’s chapter “Race, Class, and Contagion” tackles the problem of how and why Mormons, almost all from Western European stock, came to be thought of as an evolutionary-regressive subrace. Not surprisingly, Mormons are represented as Muslims not simply because they are polygamists but because they lack liberty of conscience, exist in an imperial despotic state, and were racially “black.” Talbot does not dwell on the racial construction but rather uses it as evidence for understanding how Yankee Mormons became essentially a foreign theocracy (p. 141) and thus a “contagion” to the healthy American body politic (p. 142). Here the problem is not miscegenation but rather the monstrous pollution that will inevitably “eat away at the very moorings of the Republic” (p. 145).

With such a complete attack on Mormonism—where “real” Mormonism and “imagined” Mormonism were indistinguishable—it almost seems that the anti-Mormon legislation of the late nineteenth century was superfluous. However, once it was established through cultural means that Mormons were not citizens, it would be simple to rid them of political, economic, and religious rights through legislation. In each chapter, Talbot presents Latter-day Saint rebuttals, but in the penultimate chapter she more fully describes Mormon resistance. Latter-day Saints recognized that legislation was an attack not simply on individuals but on their “church as a body” (p. 153). They called upon the Constitution to defend their religious rights and to limit the role of federal officials. They designed strategies to fight in the court. They even turned the rhetoric used against them, of their being “un-American” and “anti-Republican,” towards their tormentors. And, of course, the Saints willingly went to prison, perjured themselves, and struggled “on the underground” to defend their right to live as they wanted. Nothing, however, worked. In the end, Latter-day Saint leaders exchanged their nontraditional marital practices for access to citizenship and statehood (p. 159). The theological, economic, and social accommodation that would be made in the twentieth century is the story for another book.

In her conclusion, Talbot safely sticks to repeating her argument and summarizing her chapters. Only in the last few paragraphs does she indulge in a few thoughts about the contemporary world. “Ironically,” she writes, “the LDS church has become one of the staunchest
defenders of normative, monogamous marriage between a man and a woman” (p. 164). But is it ironic? Talbot has provided a compelling case of how citizenship is given only to those who worship in a certain way, have families in a certain way, and structure their economies in certain ways. But to what extent does contemporary America actually allow for deviation from certain social norms, such as those pertaining to family structure? Americans’ growing support of gay marriage does not necessarily spring from contemporary acceptance of fundamental social difference, but is at least partly due to same-sex marriage advocates’ effort spent pointing out that their families are just like “our” families. Like other marginalized communities, Mormons understand in an intimate and real way the pain of being outside the norm. Given the history that Christine Talbot so forcefully portrays, it is perhaps no irony that Latter-day Saint leaders convey a vision for family life that aligns squarely with what a large share of Americans imagine as normal.

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*Reviewed by Randall Balmer*

The formula sounds beguilingly simple, yet it is so difficult to execute. Take an unusually detailed and heartrending seventeenth-century diary about a religious convert and juxtapose it with a twenty-first-century conversion narrative that also entails the discovery of sexual identity. Add to that the sure hand of a narrator who understands both historical context and the dynamics of conversion, and you have a truly extraordinary book.
To combine all of these ingredients, however, *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America*, also required a scholar willing to take risks. Craig Harline, a historian at Brigham Young University, did just that.

Harline, who studies the Reformation, came across the diary of Jacob Rolandus in a Belgian archive. The diary recounts the travails of a son and grandson of Reformed ministers in the Netherlands. In 1654 Jacob, an only son, decides that despite all of his study of language and theology at the feet of his father, he cannot resist the allure of the “true” church, Roman Catholicism. Jacob, twenty-one years old and still legally a minor, plans his escape, under cover of darkness, from his parents’ home in Boxtel, Brabant, to Antwerp, where he can practice his faith freely.

Harline renders Jacob’s furtive escape from the clutches of Reformed Protestantism with the skill of a novelist—the skulking out of the house, the waiting horse, the near detection, confusion over his route. When Jacob finally arrives in Antwerp, he is greeted cautiously by the Catholics there, but impressed with his piety and sincerity, they eventually take him in. Timothy Rolandus, the distraught father and Reformed minister, mounts several sorties to find and repatriate his errant son, but Jacob manages to elude capture.

In addition to the account of Jacob’s escape, Harline also finds correspondence between the young papist and his family, especially his sister, who plays on guilt in her efforts to persuade Jacob to abjure his conversion and return home. These anguished letters tell the story of a family utterly rent apart by a divergence of religious belief, which each party reiterates with passion. Jacob urges his sister to escape to Antwerp as he did and thereby choose the true church; Maria beckons her brother to return to the true faith. “But most moving of all,” Harline writes, “were the tears they shed as they pondered the awful eternal state that awaited the other if the other did not repent” (p. 155).

With the rich material, embroidered with pathos, in these seventeenth-century sources, Harline might have taken the easy course and written a fetching book about the travails of a Reformation-era family rent by theological differences. But Harline opted for the road not taken,
interleaving the Rolanduses with a twenty-first-century family and, to some extent, with his own family history.

Taking a cue from method acting, Harline elects, in his own words, “to search out the specific memories that were causing the Rolanduses to resonate so strongly within me, in the hope that this might help me to understand both the Rolanduses and those memories more profoundly than otherwise” (p. 21). Harline recounts his ancestors’ conversion to Mormonism and the anguish felt by their families, especially when Carl and Mathilda Petersson left their native Sweden for the New World.

The book finds its narrative stride when Harline interjects Michael Sunbloom (an alias) into the story. Sunbloom broke his parents’ hearts when he announced his conversion to Mormonism, thereby forsaking their evangelicalism, which was also the faith of his childhood. Like Jacob Rolandus, Michael Sunbloom did nothing halfheartedly; he converted formally (as young Rolandus had) and threw himself into Mormonism, translating his considerable skills as a schoolteacher to the task of heading the church’s local young adult program.

Although they are centuries apart, Rolandus and Sunbloom are soul mates, and Harline underscores the parallels by alternating chapters between them. Sunbloom tries to explain his decision to his parents, but they resist. When Timothy Rolandus finally brokers a meeting with his son, both men weep, which Timothy misinterprets as Jacob’s remorse and his imminent return to the Reformed fold. Each expected the other’s contrition, so neither was placated and both were crestfallen. “Jacob was speechless,” Harline writes, “as if, like many a grown son, he was paralyzed by the conflicting emotions of wanting both to respect and to separate from his father” (p. 105). It would be the last time father and son would see each other.

Michael Sunbloom’s dawning awareness of his sexual identity, coupled with Mormonism’s conservative sexual ethic, prompted his move away from the Latter-day Saints and caused yet another rift with his parents. Only after many years and the avowed determination on the part of his father that, despite his own confusion over the matter, he
wanted to retain a relationship with his son was Michael reconciled with his parents.

What do we learn from the juxtaposition of these remarkable stories? Although Harline doesn’t call attention to it, readers will find it difficult to miss what we might call the “certitude gap” between the two eras. Jacob Rolandus and Maria, his sister, were both absolutely certain that their understanding of truth was the correct one. Jacob, secure in the notion that Roman Catholicism was the only way to salvation, referred to the Reformed church as the “Deformed” church and allowed that “I’d rather die a thousand times than, as Holy Scripture says, return like a dog to its vomit and a swine to its slop” (p. 172). Not to be outdone, Maria dismissed her brother’s “primped-up and angry words,” which provided “no proof on which the false papist religion could possibly remain standing” (p. 174).

The contestation between Michael and his parents, on the other hand, was no less intense or painful. But neither side, in the end, succumbed to dogmatism. Michael himself was tormented by doubts at every step of his journey, and his parents finally relented in their condemnation. Why the difference? There are perils, of course, in trying to universalize either story for its respective eras, but it does seem that citizens of the twenty-first century might be a bit more inclined to compromise than their counterparts of the seventeenth century. Why? Harline doesn’t speculate, but I wonder if it has something to do with cultural diversity or the Enlightenment or the postmodern validation of an infinite variety of experiences.

Harline does account for social location. “Jacob’s and Maria’s particular social station, familial context, gender, experiences, personalities, ways of feeling and thinking, and more, shaped the lens—even decided the lens—through which each perceived truth” (p. 178). Tragically, each chose to reject the other’s lens.

For the Sunblooms, on the other hand, emerging scientific evidence about homosexuality, together with new understandings about the textual and historical context of biblical passages that appeared to condemn same-sex relations, eventually altered the dynamic between
parents and son. “During their months of uncertainty and thought, the Bible’s passages about love came to matter more to them than all its words about homosexuality, or about hating father and mother and son and daughter, or about Jesus’s message dividing people like a sword,” Harline writes of Michael’s parents (p. 238). “They didn’t have to choose between their faith and their love for their son, because the best version of their faith was to love their son, and everyone else, and to make everything else secondary—even the things they didn’t get” (pp. 239–40). Indeed, Michael’s parents never abandoned their conservative evangelical beliefs or affiliations, but adhering to the New Testament teaching that love trumps law, they opted for a more capacious embrace of their faith. They did so not from the premise of dogma but from the mandate of love.

Therein lies the gospel, the “good news.”

Harline makes the point through all of this that toleration is different from acceptance. Mere toleration suggests reluctance, even coercion (not to mention condescension), whereas acceptance signals a willing embrace of the Other: “what struck me most in general was this: those who rejected or tolerated could not see other-believers as quite like themselves, while those who accepted could” (p. 246). Those who merely tolerate tend to portray others as “dangerously different, so that whatever slurs-of-the-moment they might have suffered individually (heretics, sodomites, lepers, Christ-killers), they in truth had only one name: Other” (p. 246).

Conversions provides ample corroboration for the bromide that families are dangerous places. But the two stories have dramatically different endings. Maria’s final words to her brother, who became a Jesuit and who served out his life as a missionary, included intelligence on their parents, who were “reasonably healthy, but your absence, plus your conversion to that abominable popedom, are perpetual wounds” (p. 206). Michael and his partner, by contrast, enjoyed close ties with Michael’s parents, even choosing to relocate to their community, Michael’s hometown, when the gay couple retired.
As Harline writes, “In the end, conversion may be as inscrutable as love, or God” (p. 93). Inscrutable perhaps, but Harline’s remarkable book sheds a great deal of light on both the dynamics and the consequences.

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Reviewed by Peter J. Thuesen

On November 12, 1911, a photograph buried on page 31 of the Indianapolis Star showed six smiling women with the caption “Pretty Mormon Girls with Tabernacle Choir of Salt Lake City.” In this manner the Star announced the first-ever concert of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in the Hoosier capital on the following Saturday at the Murat Temple, a Moorish revival theater. Subsequent previews in the Star were a mixture of amusement and disdain. The “sight of the average Mormon missionary is enough to make people take to the woods,” quipped the paper’s editorial board, while elsewhere an article noted that the choir members were “traveling ‘de luxe’ in palatial [rail] cars, vastly different from the ox team conveyances with which their ancestors crossed the prairies.”1

The choir’s gig in Indianapolis was part of a twenty-three-city public relations tour undertaken just a few years after the nationwide controversy over the seating of LDS apostle Reed Smoot in the US Senate. Receptions along the tour varied widely. In New York, where the group performed at the opening of the American Land and Irrigation Exposition, the singers had to compete with such curiosities as a bust

1. Indianapolis Star, November 14 and 15, 1911, pp. 6 and 3, respectively.
of President William Howard Taft carved in butter. A performance for the real Taft at the White House was a high point, but elsewhere the choir encountered occasional hostility. In Richmond, Virginia, protests erupted and the local newspaper opined that the choir’s tour was a plot to “propitiate favor for Mormonism with the uninformed and thoughtless.” Though the pair of performances in Indianapolis received a favorable review in the *Star*, the paper’s critic admitted that the choir was “an organization rather unfamiliar in this part of the country.”

What a difference a century makes. When the Tabernacle Choir next appeared in Indianapolis on June 14, 2013, the venue was Bankers Life Fieldhouse, the cavernous home of the Indiana Pacers. Mitt Romney’s presidential bid had made it all but obligatory for future politicians to pay attention to the Mormon vote, so Indiana governor Mike Pence attended the performance as the guest of honor and even conducted the last number. Most striking of all, the choir’s concert came less than a year after the groundbreaking for the LDS Indianapolis Temple, which sealed Mormonism’s rise in Indiana from the status of tiny minority to serious denominational contender.

The choir’s experience in Indianapolis illustrates the public relations success story of the LDS Church in recent years, but as Reid L. Neilson shows in his important new book, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, that story goes back more than a century and is fraught with complexities. Though choir tours have become the most familiar component of the LDS public relations strategy, the church’s (and choir’s) first significant effort to influence public opinion occurred in conjunction with a famous late-nineteenth-century event, the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, which Neilson argues was a turning point in the LDS Church’s engagement with the non-Mormon world. Over seven thousand Latter-day Saints attended the event, some to help run the Utah exhibit, others to participate in associated congresses such as the World’s Parliament of

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Religions, and the Tabernacle Choir to sing in its first major competition outside Salt Lake City. While one might legitimately worry that the narrative of these events could be as tedious as the proceedings of a church convention, Neilson's briskly written account surprises with its level of intrigue and controversy. His amply documented research, moreover, conclusively demonstrates that the Columbian Exposition (as the 1893 World's Fair was known) became the testing ground for the church's future public relations. Recent PR gambits such as the 2013 tour that took the Tabernacle Choir back to Indianapolis, and even the “I'm a Mormon” advertisement campaign (which placed billboards and television spots in Indianapolis and other key markets), reflect in some ways the mainstreaming strategy first developed in 1893. Though Neilson does not take up the Indianapolis case in his book, his study provides an indispensable context for understanding the evolution of the LDS public image in this and other major markets across the country.

Neilson begins with an overview, valuable in its own right, of how Mormons represented themselves to the public prior to 1893, in the founding (1830–1846) and pioneer (1847–1890) periods of the church's history. He concludes that in both eras the church's primary outreach was through “aggressive use of the printed word” (p. 46), much of it heavily apologetic in character. He identifies four main areas of publishing activity: (1) a widening canon of scriptures (Doctrine and Covenants, 1835; Pearl of Great Price, 1851), (2) church-sponsored periodicals, (3) doctrinal treatises, and (4) historical works. His accounts of (2) and (3) are particularly helpful, showing how editors such as Erastus Snow, George Q. Cannon, and John Taylor took the publishing of periodicals to cities outside the Great Basin—St. Louis, San Francisco, and New York, respectively. As one Mormon writer hailed them: “May the Snow storm blow, the Cannon roar, and the Taylor cut until the gainsayers of Zion are silenced” (p. 39). Similarly, multiple editions (and foreign translations) of doctrinal treatises such as Parley Pratt's A Voice of Warning (1837), Lorenzo Snow's The Only Way to Be Saved (1841), and Parley Pratt's Key to the Science of Theology (1855) attempted to silence the gainsayers by showing how Mormonism trumped all
previous theological systems through its restoration of ancient doctrines. The problem with this flood of publications, Neilson argues, is that it “yielded considerable converts but very few friends” (p. 46). That is, it failed as a public relations strategy because it emphasized doctrinal peculiarity rather than the Latter-day Saints’ contributions to mainstream American culture. (Had Neilson’s narrative focused on the twentieth century, it would have been interesting for him to engage Kathleen Flake’s argument that in the wake of the Smoot controversy, the LDS Church actually reembraced a form of doctrinal peculiarity in elevating the importance of Joseph Smith’s first vision as a “safer” substitute for the more inflammatory doctrine of plural marriage.)

What pushed the church toward a new concern for public relations in the early 1890s? A key factor was the quest for Utah statehood, made possible by Wilford Woodruff’s “Manifesto” of 1890 disavowing plural marriage. The 1893 Chicago World’s Fair presented a unique opportunity to showcase Utah’s contributions to the nation. Since the Utah Territory’s population was then 98 percent Latter-day Saint, involvement in the Exposition also became a way for the church to demystify Mormonism by exposing the public to living, breathing Mormons. Neilson points out that because there were still relatively few Mormon missionaries at this time, most Americans had never encountered a Latter-day Saint. He quotes a Chicago Tribune reporter who wrote that local residents had an “overwhelming curiosity to know what manner of creature a real live flesh and blood Mormon is.” After seeing the Tabernacle Choir perform, the reporter confirmed for Tribune readers that Mormons were just like other folks: “They have no eccentricities of manners or costume. The men are manly; the women are sweet, womanly, [and] real pretty many of them” (p. 131).

As a measure of how seriously the church took the choir’s participation, all three members of the First Presidency (Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith) accompanied the singers on

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the journey to Chicago, which included performance stops en route in Denver, Kansas City, Independence (Missouri), and St. Louis. In Chicago, in what Neilson calls the church’s “preeminent ‘Cinderella’ moment of the nineteenth century” (p. 138), the choir was chosen to provide the dedicatory music during the placing of the Liberty Bell at the Exposition. The choir also took the silver medal in the Exposition's Welsh Eisteddfod (performance festival), coming in second only to a Welsh choir that was the odds-on favorite. President Woodruff proudly recorded in his journal that the choir came in second place “Contesting against the world” and that he and his fellow members of the First Presidency were “Received with open Arms” by the “Leading Men of the world” (p. 139).

The welcome was less than open-armed, however, when the church sought a place at the World’s Parliament of Religions, which met as part of the Exposition. John Henry Barrows, the chair of the organizing committee and pastor of Chicago’s First Presbyterian Church, was an outspoken opponent of Mormonism. When the LDS Church failed to receive an invitation to appear alongside the other major religious traditions represented, B. H. Roberts, a member of the First Council of the Seventy and a well-known apologist for the church, took up the cause. Eventually, Roberts won over another Parliament organizer, Merwin-Marie Snell, a Catholic scholar and writer, who publicly accused his colleagues of not dealing fairly with the Mormons. The controversy spilled over into the local press, and Neilson does a good job of capturing the clash of personalities.

In the end, it was Mormon women who had the most success at winning acceptance by their non-Mormon peers. Two years before the Exposition, the LDS Relief Society had gained membership in the National Council of Women. This paved the way for full LDS participation in the World’s Congress of Representative Women, which convened in conjunction with the Exposition. As a result, members of the Relief Society had the opportunity at the Exposition to win over prominent non-Mormon activists, including Isabella Beecher Hooker and the onetime anti-Mormon reporter Rosetta “Etta” Luce Gilchrist. Neilson
concludes that by 1893 “Mormon women had woven themselves into the fabric of domestic and international feminism” (p. 102).

Yet, as Neilson’s account suggests, the members of the Relief Society achieved inclusion first and foremost as women and only secondarily as Mormons. This is indicative of what Neilson identifies as the larger paradox of the LDS assimilation strategy in the decades following 1893, when the church would go on to participate in a number of world’s fairs. Mormonism, he writes, was “mainstreamed into American culture as a religion because of its nonreligious achievements” (p. 178). In other words, while world’s fairs have often celebrated the exotic and even the peculiar, these classic American spectacles became a way for Mormons to portray themselves as a less peculiar people.

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Reviewed by Tom Simpson

In her 1977 essay “The Image-World,” Susan Sontag wrote about the revolutions in culture and consciousness precipitated by a new photographic realism—a new way of seeing, remembering, and constructing our world—whose origins lay in the technological advances of the mid-nineteenth century. Employing her academic training in the study of religion, she noted that “image-making at its origins . . . was a practical,
magical activity, a means of appropriating or gaining power over something.” The camera shared and expanded these powers “in order to reanimate what is usually available only in a remote and shadowy form.” In the eyes of Sontag, it was precisely the photograph’s material basis, its chemical and physical connection to that which it represented, that gave it such power to shape our identities and worldviews. She concluded that whereas “the primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that images possess the qualities of real things . . . our inclination [now] is to attribute to real things the qualities of an image.”¹

It seems no accident, then, that from the nineteenth century to the present, image-obsessed Americans have turned their eyes and hearts to Christ, fashioning an extraordinary and dizzying array of images that reflect the complex histories and trajectories of American power and desire. In its simplest and perhaps most powerful form, the desire has been to reanimate the sacred past, to resurrect, as it were, the embodied Christ, whose physicality is essential to faith but whose physical features have been shrouded by the passage of time. In a 1913 article for the Juvenile Instructor, for instance, Mormon artist J. Leo Fairbanks noted with pleasure the power that modern renderings of Christ have to shape the devotions of youth. He wrote: “Art causes us to feel that Christ was a man, that He lived a physical existence, that he was mortal, sympathized with sinners, moved among beggars, helped the infirm, ate with publicans and counseled with human beings for their immediate as well as their future spiritual welfare. It is to art that we turn for help in seeing the reality of the facts of the religious teachings of this divine human” (Color of Christ, pp. 147–48).

Of course, in a more tragic and sinister way, all the new image-making, on balance, led to a radical re-formation of Christ as white, as the fair-skinned, blue-eyed One too often idolized as “a totem of white supremacy” (p. 169). It is this thesis—that the nineteenth century was the historical and cultural crucible for the racialization and whitewashing of images of Christ—that lies at the heart of Edward J. Blum and Paul

Harvey’s outstanding book, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. Pitched to an undergraduate and lay audience, the authors’ collaboration has produced a paradox in the literature of US religious history: a Christocentric, yet brilliantly inclusive and synthetic, chronological survey spanning the colonial period to the present.

Some of the book’s essence is familiar. We know, for instance, that Warner Sallman’s iconic *Head of Christ* (1941), now so thoroughly omnipresent in the United States and beyond, is a figment of the American racial imagination. More surprising and profoundly valuable is Blum and Harvey's careful, textured reconstruction of the complex and contingent historical processes that brought us this far. Before the nineteenth century, they argue, images of Christ were few—Protestant iconoclastic sensibilities carried the day—and tended to portray Christ in a far less racialized manner, as bathed in light and blood, not clothed in white skin. As late as the early nineteenth century, moreover, most Americans “had never viewed paintings or etchings of Christ. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had probably never seen a visual representation of God’s son. If they had, it was at most a small and crucified figure with few details. . . . The connections between whiteness, Christ, and power had yet to be made, mass-produced, and mass-marketed” (p. 74). In other words, the American iconography of a white Christ did not simply or inevitably accompany colonial invasion and settlement; it took centuries to emerge, and it was conceived, in many ways, in distinctively American sin.

Playing a central role in the distortions were the historical fictions of the “Publius Lentulus letter,” a medieval text purporting to offer a Judean governor’s detailed, eyewitness account of Jesus’s hair and facial features. Here is Jesus, with “a slightly ruddy complexion,” a full beard, and hair “the color of the ripe hazel nut,” parted in two. “Puritans knew it was a fraud,” Blum and Harvey write, “and so did Americans for much of the nineteenth century. But over the course of that century, as slavery expanded and whiteness became a symbol of civic status, the reputation of the letter ascended” (pp. 20–21). In the context of Reconstruction and the reshaping of American understandings of citizenship, race, identity,
and power, cultural productions as divergent as Henry Ward Beecher's *The Life of Jesus, the Christ* (1871) and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) soon cemented the image of a white Christ in the American popular imagination. Decades later, Warner Sallman's art would do the most to export this racialized image abroad, in the baggage of American evangelism and empire; the painted version of his *Head of Christ* “exploded into national and world consciousness like no other piece of American art” (p. 208).

In this particular narrative of religion in American history and culture, which uses race as its primary hermeneutical lens and principle of selection, Mormonism takes on real, enduring significance. Joseph Smith makes his first appearance at a crucial moment for the book's thesis: the very beginning of the third chapter, “From Light to White in the Early Republic.” Blum and Harvey concede that “Smith was in many ways an outsider” who did little in his lifetime to shape mass perceptions and visualizations of Christ. Nevertheless, “in his rendering of Jesus . . . he and his church were part of a broad and sweeping transformation. They were present at and participated in the birth of the white American Christ, an advent that paralleled the birth and rise of the white male citizen as the embodied figure of civic inclusion in the United States. All throughout the United States of the early nineteenth century, being a white man was becoming a marker for political status, power, and opportunity” (p. 77).

At the end of the book as well, Mormons are central to the narrative and thesis. After offering a brief account of the origins and power of the *Christus* statue in Mormon culture, as well as how, “by the 1990s, Jesus art was a vital part of Mormon culture and everyday experience,” Blum and Harvey turn down the home stretch of the book's argument. “So much had changed since the age of the Puritans,” they conclude, before modern media and iconography had shaped our consciousness of Christ irreversibly (p. 255). By implication, Mormonism typifies the ambiguities, tensions, and ironies associated with modern representations and rematerializations of Christ in America. Ultimately, according to the authors, no group in America today is better than the Mormons
at pulling off the peculiar sleight of hand that allows white Christians to affirm rhetorically that Jesus is not white, while maintaining a powerful culture and machinery of iconography that keeps the white Jesus—a Jesus who is “white without words”—emblazoned on the individual consciousness (p. 253).

Accordingly, for Latter-day Saints engaged in critical reflection on issues of race and racism in the church’s past (and present), *The Color of Christ* is essential reading. As many other commentators have noted, one of the great challenges for the twenty-first-century church will be to foster in its members a soul-searching honesty about the church’s—and America’s—intimacy with white supremacy. *The Color of Christ* offers little cause for Mormon celebration, but it does provide something arguably more important: an occasion for ethical, intellectual, and spiritual courage in coming to grips with the past and charting a global future in solidarity with those who suffer.

In the broadest terms, *The Color of Christ* makes a tremendous contribution to the field of US religious history by documenting the ascension and omnipresence of the white Christ in American culture. Equally valuable is its consistent presentation of powerful and prophetic counterclaims by Christians who have historically undermined and destabilized attempts to affix whiteness permanently to Jesus. We have William Apess, a Pequot born to a slave mother, launching a devastating criticism of “the whiteness of Christ and its links to American racism” in his 1833 “Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” (p. 105). Later in the century, amid efforts to stimulate pan-Indian renewal, we find the Paiute prophet Wovoka, a.k.a. Jack Wilson, in whom some saw the long-awaited Messiah appearing before them as “an Indian . . . [who] stood in judgment of whites.” In the age of segregation and struggles for civil rights, we find James Baldwin, after the bombing of Birmingham’s Sixteenth Baptist Church, hoping that the damage done to the church’s white, stained-glass Jesus would finally spell the demise of the slavemasters’ and segregationists’ “alabaster Christ,” while from the dust and ashes of that horrific tragedy we hear the voice of the grieving and enraged Mississippian Anne Moody, who told God, “I know you must
be white. And if I ever find out you are white, then I’m through with you. And if I find out you are black, I’ll try my best to kill you when I get to heaven” (p. 3).

Blum and Harvey’s dramatic story of Christ in the American imagination culminates with a jarring concluding chapter, “Jesus Jokes,” which analyzes contemporary popular culture’s wide-ranging and often bewildering appropriations and portrayals of Jesus. Often weary of the cartoonish racism of the past and a more recent, countercultural “chaos of liberation theologies” (p. 238), audiences now confront Jesus “in a variety of forms, but few Americans can explain where they came from, how they got there, what they mean, or why most of them are white” (p. 276). A reader can be forgiven a certain intellectual nostalgia, or a peculiar twenty-first-century nausea, when a book that begins with the distilled, anguished eloquence of Baldwin and Baez ends with the ironic, adolescent self-indulgence of South Park. In the end, however, my overwhelming feeling toward The Color of Christ was one of gratitude for a brilliant, original retelling of the story of religion and race in America. Courses in US religious history, the history of Christianity, religion and race, Native American religions, and religion and popular culture should make strategic use of The Color of Christ, along with its companion website, http://colorofchrist.com/, which includes additional materials for classroom use. Wider lay audiences interested in the intersections of religion and race would be wise to read the book as well, because it makes such a timely and essential contribution to the understanding of our complicated and volatile past.

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*Reviewed by Richard Buonforte*

I have long hoped for an authentic ethnography of the Latter-day Saint experience, for an interpretive description centered on and grounded in the culturally significant social doings of interacting individuals. I have wondered when a competent and experienced ethnographer would step forth and explore aspects of Latter-day Saint culture and society along the lines laid out in Keith Basso’s exemplary work on the Western Apache. But if *The Mormon Quest for Glory* is what Oxford University Press is willing to publish in this area, then I will continue to wait for a knowledgeable anthropological field-worker to make this major and much-needed contribution to Mormon studies. While the author’s aim is appropriate and admirable—“to explain the religious world of the Latter-day Saints through the lens of their own spiritual understanding” (jacket cover)—*Quest* unfortunately falls well short of actually achieving this worthwhile goal.

Largely devoid of adequate theoretical direction and littered with dated citations, erroneous information, ill-chosen terminology, awkward analysis, and lapses in logic, *Quest* reads as though it was rushed to publication before the author had time to revise successive drafts into a finished work that merits attention. A purportedly comprehensive hodgepodge of topics spread over nearly four hundred pages, *Quest* calls to mind the kind of cultural descriptions common in anthropology half a century ago. A would-be ethnography that includes everything from soup to nuts, this big book lacks both theoretical depth and ethnographic substance. It consists, rather, of a thin, artificial concoction, certainly nothing approaching what contemporary anthropologists call a thick description, an accurate and insightful interpretive account—duly informed by relevant theory—that represents the experiences and perspectives of the people from the actor’s or native’s point of view.
Authored by an associate professor emeritus whose formal research agenda at the University of Pennsylvania focused mainly on “post-traumatic stress disorder among Vietnam combat veterans” (p. 10), *Quest* begins badly. Combined with ill-chosen cover art, the subtly sensationalist title—foreign to Latter-day Saint language and thought and almost anti-Mormon in tone—makes an unfortunate first impression, a sour note sounded more loudly in several subsequent chapters. *Quest* also ends poorly, with a bibliography missing many of the references cited in the body of the text. In between, hundreds of disorganized pages of stiff, awkward, repetitive, and unedited prose make this a long row for the reader to hoe, like chopping weeds in a previously unplowed field.

According to the author, “the audience for this book is the educated lay public, as well as scholars and other students of the LDS, [including] anthropologists, religious studies specialists, Americanists, psychologists, sociologists, historians, and students within other disciplines and interdisciplinary fields” (p. 13). Hammarberg initially intends to take “an ethnographic approach” (p. 2): “In this study I write as a social scientist with the aim of seeking to understand the LDS on their own terms” (p. 3). More specifically, he plans to rely on participant observation and especially on interviews with ordinary members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But *Quest* often wanders away from this proposed path, constantly lost in random topical tangents, in published and online sources, or eventually in irrelevant and even arguably anti-Mormon materials.

Rather than “seek an emic or insider’s view” (p. 2), *Quest* actually analyzes the everyday lives and ordinary experiences of Latter-day Saints from an alien, outside angle from the get-go. The author immediately imposes his own ethnocentric perspective, the antithesis of an anthropological ethnography, repeatedly employing the phrase “I call,” as in “I call this effort by the members of the church to build the kingdom of God on earth their ‘quest for glory’” (p. 1). Evoking the title of this ill-fated work, this key phrase is encased in double quote marks in the original text, intended, however, to signal scare quotes, not to represent a quotation from an interview with a Latter-day Saint, or from the
author’s own observations or recordings of Latter-day Saint language, or even from an official church publication. Contrast this problematic practice with Keith Basso’s multiple award-winning ethnography *Wisdom Sits in Places*, where the title is taken from a meaningful native phrase that embodies and expresses the Apache cultural concepts the author seeks to understand and represent.¹

Unfortunately, Hammarberg’s entire *Quest* is couched in his own alien terms, his analysis of Latter-day Saint culture organized according to a so-called lifecycle that is not just vague, general, and at times inaccurate, but not especially salient for making sense of the inner lives of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “I call this combination of lifecycles and lifeways a cultural model or ‘life plan’” (p. ix), the last phrase again encased in double quote marks in the original text—to signal a scare quote, not a native term. “The central stages of the life plan,” he continues, “consist of birth, infancy, early and later childhood, . . . followed by young adulthood, . . . adulthood, . . . [and] full adulthood” (pp. ix–x).

This so-called cultural model fails to take into account that “more Latter-day Saints acquire their LDS identity by conversion than by birth and coming of age” (p. 225), a fundamental fact finally admitted more than two hundred pages later in a chapter entitled “Becoming a Convert,” an admission that leaves the reader unsure about the relevance of the material presented up to that point. This chapter contains one of *Quest*’s many bizarre inaccuracies. According to the author, Latter-day Saints think and speak of potential converts as moving through a series of steps in which they transition from “strangers” to “seekers” to “investigators” on their way to becoming full-fledged “converts” (p. 225), the key terms quoted as native categories, as part of how “LDS members view the conversion process” (p. 226). I joined the church as a young adult more than forty years ago, I served a full-time mission and spent nearly a decade as a ward missionary, and I have lived among Latter-day Saints in New York, South Carolina, California, Connecticut, Arizona, and Utah—and

I have never heard anyone in any context refer to a potential convert as a “seeker,” not once. The author is also apparently unfamiliar with how modern members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refer to themselves. He repeatedly employs the odd and alien phrase “the LDS,” an annoying neologism reminiscent of an outdated anthropology that once identified native peoples in a similar and somewhat ethnocentric fashion (“the Apache,” “the Comanche,” etc.).

As already noted, Quest does include data collected in formal interviews, thereby allowing the reader more direct access to the native’s point of view, although without much help in terms of interpretations thoroughly informed by contemporary social theory. Many quotations even include the researcher’s questions, and that happily makes the work more open to evaluation. But in too many cases, the interview methods range from less than fully effective to potentially unethical, the outcome too often a body of unreliable or undigested data. A sympathetic reader would prefer to attribute this to inadequate training or to an unfortunate lack of skill, but in certain significant instances a baffled reader must also begin to wonder. Is it simply that the author doesn’t know how to avoid asking leading questions or how to refrain from suggesting answers—or might he also have an ulterior motive beyond the aims of academic anthropology?

In the chapter “Preach My Gospel” (pp. 197–224), for instance, a middle-aged and highly educated Hammarberg manipulates an interview with an unsophisticated nineteen-to-twenty-one-year-old missionary, baits him, and then informs the missionary that his testimony is based on what Hammarberg believes is a logical fallacy (pp. 218–19). This is not an effective way to conduct an interview if a field-worker wants to understand how participants in another culture know what they know about the way the world works and how they therefore see themselves. Nor is this a good way to show proper respect for the experiences of other people, a hallmark of authentic ethnography and an essential quality for field-workers who want to remain welcome in the communities where they ply their trade. It also ultimately flies in the face of the restrictions imposed on social science researchers by the Institutional Review Boards
(IRB) that govern their activities and disallow research that might bring social or psychological harm to the subjects of a study, harms familiar to the author, I assume, given his “interests in psychology” and his earlier research on post-traumatic stress syndrome (p. 10).

Even more perplexing from a methodological and moral perspective is *Quest’s* cavalier treatment of sacred ceremonies in “Endowed from on High” (pp. 171–96), a real puzzler in light of a now decades-long discussion about the poetics, politics, and ethics of anthropological research and writing. The author acknowledges that Latter-day Saints refrain from talking about certain aspects of temple ritual as a significant expression of their sense of the sacred, and that they are therefore unwilling to discuss specific details during interviews. But then instead of asking church members to describe the many other aspects of the temple experience that could have been part of an informative conversation, he imposes his own narrow take on precisely what should not be exposed in public and proceeds to publish a muddled account of the endowment ceremony based partly on arguably anti-Mormon sources. Unfortunately, he draws heavily on an outdated online blog produced by a nonscholarly, nonacademic, and anonymous writer who openly admits his hostility toward Mormons in particular and toward Christianity in general. Ironically, *Quest’s* take on the temple experience is significantly less insightful than what is widely available in the official publications and websites of the LDS Church. Alas, this is likewise the case for far too much of the content of *Quest.*

This all stands in stark contrast to the way award-winning ethnographer Keith Basso (1940–2013) went about his business. When he wrote his doctoral dissertation in 1967, he took his proposed publication to the Western Apache tribal council for approval and complied when asked to remove material they judged outsiders would be better off not knowing. Nearly thirty years later, the preface to his ethnography on Apache places explains how he “traveled with Apache consultants . . . to hundreds of named localities [over a period of] almost eighteen months, spread over five years (1979–1984), and this book is one of the results”—and then observes that “it contains none of the maps we made (Chairman Lupe
has determined that publishing these would be unwise).”¹ After acknowledging his debt to his Apache “teachers and friends,” Basso makes this unequivocal statement: “How deeply they loved their country. And how pleased they were that some of their knowledge of it would be preserved and made public, subject to a set of clearly defined restrictions which have not—and shall never be—violated.”²

When I first heard about The Mormon Quest for Glory: The Religious World of the Latter-day Saints, I sincerely wanted to have high hopes; sadly, I end my encounter with this unhappy book deeply disappointed and unable to recommend it to other readers.

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Reviewed by Amy Easton-Flake

Women of Faith in the Latter Days, edited by Richard Turley and Brittany Chapman, fittingly stems from an impetus similar to that which motivated the Woman’s Exponent, a bimonthly newspaper founded and run by women of the LDS Church from 1872 to 1914. As editor Louisa

¹. Basso, Wisdom Sits in Places, xv.
Lula Greene explained in the inaugural issue, the *Exponent*’s purpose was to encourage women to “help each other by the diffusion of knowledge and information” and to give women a space to “represent [them] selves” because “who are so well able to speak for the women of Utah as the women of Utah themselves?” Similarly, Turley and Chapman have brought together a wide variety of Mormon authors to recount the stories of women from LDS Church history in order to, as they state in the introduction, “enhance awareness of these women through inspirational accounts written for a general readership” so that their lives may “be an inspiration to readers” (1:xiii–xiv).

The primary audience is clearly the general membership of the church in North America; however, since the editors hope their work will lead “to better scholarly and popular works” on the subject (1:xiv), they also see these volumes as part of the growing field of Mormon women’s studies and serving a more specialized audience. Thus Turley and Chapman seek to produce a work that engages a general audience while attaining a certain level of academic rigor in terms of sources, tone, and historical accuracy that will make it useful to scholars and researchers.

*Women of Faith* joins the often-overlooked genre of collective biographies of Mormon women that began in the 1870s and 1880s with such works as *The Women of Mormondom*, *Representative Women of Deseret*, and *Heroines of Mormondom* and that has swelled to more than fifty in number since the 1990s. What sets *Women of Faith* apart and makes it a valuable addition to the genre is both its commitment to historical accuracy (it is better researched than most of its predecessors) and its breadth and ideological commitment to representing, as far as it is able, “a diverse group of women, both those well known to readers and those who lived lives of faith in comparative anonymity” (1:xiv). As a seven-volume series, *Women of Faith* has an advantage of space over its predecessors. Each volume features women born within a twenty-five-year period, except for volume 1, which covers women born between 1775 and 1820. The number of women featured has decreased in subsequent

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volumes—thirty-five, thirty, and twenty-three, respectively—but the commitment to diversity in terms of authors and subjects remains.

Besides well-established scholars such as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Jill Mulvay Derr, and Carol Cornwall Madsen, many of the contributors are newer scholars to Mormon women’s studies or are novice writers often recounting the stories of their ancestors. Only a handful of the biographies will be well known to readers, with many others being vaguely familiar and most others being unheard of. This mix in terms of subjects is a definite strength because it captures a wider array of women’s voices than that of previous collective biographies; however, the authors’ various backgrounds seem to result in their having slightly different objectives or audiences in mind. For instance, some choose to moralize a story, taking a more popular approach, while others keep a neutral tone, adopting a more academic approach. In this way the volume reflects the uneven mix that currently exists in Mormon women’s studies as both amateur researchers and highly trained academics seek to contribute to the field. Like *Women of Faith*, contributors to Mormon women’s studies are often trying to speak to a dual audience of interested individuals and scholars. While the dual audience and mixed contributors serve to broaden the base of those who engage in Mormon women’s studies, they also keep the field from advancing as fast as women’s studies has within other disciplines.

Each entry in the first two volumes is organized into two sections: “Biographical Sketch” and “Life Experiences.” The biographical sketches generally follow a basic format: date of birth, place of origin, joining the church, travel to Utah (volume 2 adds experience settling the West as well), family life, talents, and contributions to the church. The “Life Experiences” section varies from one woman to the next. While some authors fully develop the biographical sketch, others share highlights exploring important aspects of the subject’s life and character, and still others focus on only one life event in great detail. Some authors employ long journal entries with no commentary, others intersperse their own summary and analysis with quotations of the person and of people who knew her, and some relate the stories in their own prose.
The contributors’ freedom in choosing what to include in this section sometimes leads to unevenness between the chapters and to dissatisfaction over what is featured. Readers will at times wish for context and analysis where long block quotes dominate and for quotations when none are offered.

Finding the right balance between letting women’s words speak for themselves and providing analysis and context to make their words more pertinent and understandable is a difficult negotiation, but as the chapters by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich illustrate, this blend is what makes great history—for both popular and academic audiences. Those of either group will appreciate the deeper understanding that comes when a trained historian weaves together sources, context, and analysis. Ulrich shows how even a line or two of context may do much to locate readers in the past. For instance, she explains that Phebe Whittemore Carter Woodruff did “an amazing thing” when she left her home in Maine and traveled one thousand miles to Kirtland by herself, because “except for the handful of girls who moved to nearby factory villages to seek work, New England women did not migrate alone” (1:451). Thus in just two lines, Ulrich helps readers understand much better Woodruff and her actions. Likewise, in her sketch on Esther Romania Bunnell Pratt Penrose, the first Mormon woman from Utah to become a doctor after studying in the eastern United States, Ulrich explains how medicine was perceived in the early Latter-day Saint community, thereby adding an appreciated depth to *Women of Faith*.

The strength of the series is in the particulars of the women and their dynamic lives. While readers may expect rather monolithic backgrounds, they will find instead women originating from the northern, southern, and midwestern United States as well as from England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, Canada, and Mexico. Some came from wealth, others from poverty; some were relatively young when they joined the church, while others had already lived full lives as teachers, seamstresses, wives and mothers, and, in one case, even as a coal miner. Volumes 1 and 2 also offer many cogent themes, three of which are particularly striking: faith amid trials, death and loss, and agency.
Faith amid trials

Although the biographies in the first two volumes generally recount the standard narrative of the trials and persecutions early Latter-day Saints faced as they were driven from one state to the next, what makes these narratives engaging is the details they reveal about how individual women experienced and dealt with these difficult times. For example, Drusilla Dorris Hendricks suffered mob violence on a very severe and personal level when her husband was paralyzed from the neck down after being shot at the Battle of Crooked River and she spent the rest of her life caring for him. The journal of Hannah Last Cornaby recounts how quickly “friends became enemies” when she and her husband joined the church in Suffolk, England, and how they were “persecuted” and “sometimes stoned” (2:36). The recollections of the Martin Handcart Company by Janetta Ann McBride and her brothers bring needed life to this historical moment as we learn of sixteen-year-old Janetta wading through the icy Platte River multiple times to help her family across, pulling the family handcart through the snow while barefoot because her father had died and her mother was ill, and then giving her blanket to other family members to use at night while she lay freezing and crying. As these first two volumes unmistakably illustrate, joining the church and committing to spend one’s life as a Latter-day Saint was never an easy path—persecution, ostracism from friends and family, mob violence, death, illness, and laborious labor were the standard. Yet each sketch, as the title Women of Faith anticipates, shows each woman’s underlying faith that helped her engage with and overcome these afflictions. What Sherilyn Farnes wrote of Emily Dow Partridge Young could be said of all: “Much of her ability to see the hand of the Lord came through her willingness to work hard and choose faith amidst her trials” (2:440).

Death and loss

A universal trial for these women was the loss of family members, most often the death of infants and young children. Given the high infant
mortality rate of the early and mid-nineteenth century, the fact that so many of these women lost children is not surprising; but the recounting of one instance after another makes the pervasiveness of death all too clear. The pathos is palpable in journal entries and autobiographies such as that of Mary Minerva Dart Judd, who described the loss of her sixteen-month-old son in these terms: “Death came and we had no power it seamed but I could not give him up and did not untill he was buried and then it seamed as tho I buried my heart with him. . . . I have felt as tho I would never feel joyfull any more” (2:181). Later, after losing the seventh of her fourteen children to “the monster death,” she recorded, “What is earth but A phase to mourn” (2:181). From Jane Elizabeth Manning James, one of the first converts of African descent, who saw “all of [her] children but two, Laid away in the silent tomb” (2:132), to Emma Hale Smith, the wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who lost six of her children in infancy, the loss of children was a significant and devastating trial faced by many early members of the church. That these women found comfort in their faith is also plainly evident. For example, Judd declared, “The Lord alone knows how deep the sorrow has been in my heart,” and then hoped that these trials “would only give us power to be as Abraham of old to [be] saints in deed then we mit rejoice in all our sorrow and death in this life” (2:181). Throughout these sketches, these women are shown to choose faith over despair.

Agency

It quickly becomes clear that early Latter-day Saint women were active agents rather than submissive subjects. Cyrena Dustin Merrill and Belinda Marden Pratt left all their family behind to join the church and gather with the Saints. Maria Jackson Normington Parker and Desideria Quintanar de Yañez were instrumental in bringing their families into the church. Numerous women, such as Louisa Barnes Pratt, Lydia Goldthwaite Knight, and Sarah Sturtevant Leavitt, led their children across the plains to Utah without the aid of husbands and filled the role of provider. Many women were also active in civic and religious affairs. Mary Isabella Hales
Horne, for instance, was a ward and stake Relief Society president for over thirty years, instituted a nursing training program, served on the Deseret Hospital board of directors, played a major part in the women’s suffrage movement of Utah, and was president of the Women’s Cooperative Mercantile and Manufacturing Institution from 1890 to 1905. Aurelia Read Spencer Rogers contributed significantly to the church by introducing the idea of a children’s Primary organization. Readers will come away with a transformed view of early LDS women as they read of the unexpected roles many of them performed. This is particularly true as readers turn to volume 3 and see a noticeable shift in women’s lives as the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century brought greater opportunities to women in North America.

The third volume of *Women of Faith* makes some welcome structural and thematic shifts that will benefit the series as it moves forward. By replacing the “Biographical Sketch” and “Life Experiences” sections with one unified sketch, most authors more adeptly present a satisfactory overview of their subject while highlighting the moments that made their subject unique. In the first two volumes, authors depicted women’s lives as primarily family centered, but the third volume focuses more on women’s engagement outside the home and how they helped provide (or in many cases solely provided) for their families. Consequently, while the dominant theme of women’s agency and their decision to choose faith amid trials remains constant in the third volume, three new themes—polygamy, professions, and civic and religious responsibilities—move to the forefront and provide much needed insight into the lives of early Latter-day Saint women.

**Polygamy**

Although many of the women featured in the first two volumes lived in polygamous relationships, it is in the third volume that polygamy becomes central rather than peripheral to the stories presented. Through women’s direct words, readers receive fresh insights into how Mormon women actually experienced and functioned within plural marriages.
For instance, the thoughts Lorena Eugenia Washburn Larsen shares after learning of the 1890 Manifesto that ended polygamy encompass both the difficulty and refining nature of polygamous living. She wrote, “As I thought about it, it seemed impossible that the Lord would go back on a principal which had caused so much sacrifice, heartache, and trial before one could conquer one’s carnal self, and live on that higher plane, and love one’s neighbor as one’s self” (3:90–91). In another account, Mary Elizabeth Woolley Chamberlain’s reflections upon being proposed to by a man who already had several wives provide a window into how ingrained the polygamous lifestyle was to many of the second-generation Latter-day Saint women: “The fact that he was a married man did not deter me in the least, as I had always been taught that plural marriage was a divine principle of our religion and I had been raised in it, so it was almost second nature to me” (3:35). Despite many of these women’s openness to and recognition of the refining influence and promised blessings of polygamy, the sketches make it clear that polygamy was not an easy lifestyle for anyone, particularly as anti-polygamy legislation caused many to endure poverty, live in exile away from their families, and become the primary providers for their children.

Professions

Whether out of necessity or opportunity, the institution of polygamy catapulted many women into the role of provider. Between 1893 and 1930, Ellen Johanna Larson Smith lived apart from her husband for twenty-one years while he was seeking employment elsewhere, serving a mission, or living with his other wife in Utah. Consequently, Smith was responsible for supporting her children and did so by beekeeping, taking in boarders, cleaning the Snowflake Stake Academy, running a notions shop, and becoming a photographer. Another woman, Ellis Reynolds Shipp, worked within the structure of polygamy to leave her three young children in the care of a sister wife while she attended medical school in the East. What many readers may find surprising is how many of these turn-of-the-century women melded work and family life. One example is Sarah Ann Taylor Howard, who worked
with her husband in starting and running the Bountiful Dairy Company, the Bountiful Livestock Company, and a brickyard. For Martha Maria Hughes Cannon—a physician, trained lecturer, suffragist, state senator, and polygamous wife—the combination of motherhood and professional advancement was central to her ideological makeup. As she wrote in a letter, motherhood “if properly managed should [not] interfere with [a woman’s] true advancement in whatever sphere she might cast her talents” (3:17). Readers will be intrigued as they read about the first female state senator in America, the first woman mayor of an all-woman town council, the housekeeper for the mission home in Japan, an actress and a drama teacher at the University of Utah, and physicians, teachers, and a host of other compelling women.

Civic and religious responsibilities

What makes many of these women notable are the causes they championed outside the home and their responsibilities within the church. Featured in volume 3 are many women who improved women’s lives and made valuable contributions to the church through their positions as Relief Society or Young Women general presidents. Many others served in a variety of other ways, including as missionaries in foreign countries. Some of the wealthier women also had time to devote to championing political and civic causes, most commonly suffrage. Emily Sophia Tanner Richards remained devoted to the cause of suffrage even after women in Utah gained the right to vote, speaking at national suffrage events and serving as a delegate to the National and International Councils of Women. Richards, along with Elizabeth Ann Claridge McCune, Susa Amelia Young Dunford Gates, and others, promoted a number of other progressive and social causes, such as the kindergarten movement in Utah, the Utah Art Institute, the Orphans’ Home of Salt Lake City, and the American Red Cross.

In Women of Faith, Turley and Chapman make a meaningful contribution to the field of Mormon women’s studies by providing brief overviews and insights into a wide variety of lives, and those who read the first three volumes will certainly look forward to the remaining four.
To improve these future volumes, the contributing authors would do well to include more context to situate readers within the time these women lived, for readers will wonder if these biographies are representative of Mormon women or are also typical of other North American women at the time. Providing a stronger historical context will help readers to better appreciate these women and their contributions to society. Though readers will at times be left with questions about the more complex aspects of these women’s lives, the volume editors hope that any such concerns will serve to stimulate further contributions to this fertile area of study (1:xiv). *Women of Faith* amply illustrates that early Latter-day Saint women’s lives are worthy of continued study and that, in fact, much work remains to be done. Readers of the first three volumes will certainly walk away with a new appreciation for and awareness of the diversity of women's experiences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and researchers will continue to discover additional personalities and sources that may be profitably mined.

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**Reviewed by James E. Faulconer**

Much of this book reads like an extended love letter, not one from the lover to his beloved, but from the lover to his family explaining what he loves about her and responding to the family’s objections. Stephen
Webb is a lover of Mormons, and we should be pleased that he is. The first thing he says in his acknowledgments is “Studying Mormonism has made me a better Christian.” Perhaps Mormons who read what he has to say about them will be able to respond, “Studying Webb has made us better Mormons.”

Webb recognizes the strengths of the LDS Church and its members that people often talk about: their interest in family, their work ethic, their strong communities. His book begins with that recognition, and it comes up throughout. Webb is also interested in Mormon history, and he discusses some aspect of it in each chapter. But in the end he is more interested in Mormon metaphysics—beliefs about ultimate reality and how they are related to one another—than in relationships and practices: “I think that Mormon metaphysics provides the best gateway into the whole range of Mormon religious beliefs and practices” (p. 9).

Though that is a questionable assumption, as I will argue later, the approach is nevertheless reasonable and helpful. By far most criticisms of Mormonism by those of other faiths concern history or theology rather than practices. There have been several books in which an LDS scholar engages with non-LDS scholars to discuss Mormon beliefs, but this is perhaps the first to look at Mormon metaphysics in a more or less systematic way and to compare it favorably with other Christian beliefs. It is surely the first book to do so for a general audience. But Webb does more than defend LDS belief against criticism—he argues that the religious beliefs originating in the prophecies of Joseph Smith have something to say not only to Latter-day Saints but to all Christians. I know of nothing comparable.

Specifically, Webb focuses on the LDS belief that even spirits are material, what is often called “Mormon materialism.” That belief is made explicit in the Doctrine and Covenants: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter” (D&C 131:7). Webb says, “By arguing that only the physical is real and that the divine is physical in ways that we can only glimpse in this world, Mormon metaphysics actually has some advantages over traditional metaphysical schemes that emphasize the immateriality of the divine” (p. 9). The heart of his argument comes in
chapter 3, “What’s Up with Mormons and Matter?” There Webb outlines the approach that philosophers and theologians have traditionally taken: for many people, there are material things and immaterial things, like souls; for others there is only the material. So there are two ways of seeing the world, the immaterialist way and its contradiction, materialism. The latter view appears to be the dominant view today, though it is contested strongly by religious people who take the former view. But “Mormon metaphysics,” he says, “opens the possibility of a third way between these stark alternatives” (p. 82), an alternative in which “the sacred exists in continuity with the physical world” (p. 33) rather than as something wholly other than the human world and beyond human experience, as much of traditional Christian theology understands the realm of God.

Mormon materialism, Webb says, is a powerful tool for thinking about religious belief. For example, it can help solve the traditional problem of how to account for visions of God, which seem impossible if he is utterly immaterial and beyond human understanding (p. 86). It makes all human relationships with God more understandable (p. 108). And if, with Orson Pratt, we understand materiality to be resistance or the ability to affect and be affected (which is, I believe, the most charitable way of understanding Pratt’s definition of materiality as solidity), we end up with “a more robust understanding of the individuality of each member of the Trinity” (p. 99). Webb argues that adopting Joseph Smith’s teaching that everything is material would be useful to Christian theology in general and not only to LDS belief.

In the previous book where Webb discussed Mormon theology, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh Theology and the Metaphysics of Matter*, there was an ongoing though underlying engagement with the Orthodox Christian theologian David B. Hart. There is a similar underlying engagement in this book with Richard Mouw, and through him with contemporary Calvinist theology. Those engagements are a subtle demonstration of Webb’s thesis that Mormon theology can be used in wider theological debates.

Although the book takes on such figures as Hart and Mouw, its audience is educated people with little or no training in philosophy or theology.
Webb succeeds in writing for that audience. He is a readable writer, quite capable of explaining technical philosophical ideas in nonphilosophical terms. In the process of making his argument, Webb successfully gives brief but accurate and accessible accounts of the thought of Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and others. One need not be a specialist to read this book nor have a dictionary at one's elbow while doing so.

Two chapters are not obviously part of that discussion of Mormon materialism: chapter 2, “The Magic of Being Mormon,” and chapter 5, “Mormon Overreach? Brigham Young and Parley Pratt.” The first is a defense of Joseph Smith’s early treasure seeking and his use of so-called magical means for doing so. The second looks at the lives and teachings of Brigham Young and Parley Pratt and suggests that perhaps they went too far, Brigham Young in his theologizing about Adam and his desire for a theocracy and Parley Pratt in his practice of polygamy.

It is not that Webb has no appreciation for these early LDS leaders. Referring to a quotation from Young, Webb says:

Young had such a vivid understanding of Christ’s presence in the world that he dared to imagine that Jesus instructs every human being, whether they know it or not, in the way of holiness and righteousness. Restoration, then, has nothing to do with the search for lost moral purity and everything to do with establishing the cosmic truth of Christianity. (p. 165)

The chapters in question are part of the love letter, recognizing criticisms that are often leveled against Mormonism and dealing with them honestly but sympathetically. Webb gives a sympathetic and reasonable explanation of Smith’s magical practices. He connects Young’s work to build the kingdom of God on earth with the LDS Church’s contemporary engagement in businesses such as City Creek Mall, and he argues that contemporary LDS emphases on self-reliance and industriousness are outgrowths of Young’s kingdom building. Though he is critical of Pratt’s marriage to Eleanor McLean, Pratt’s twelfth and final wife, he recognizes the unparalleled importance of Pratt’s missionary work to the LDS Church.
Three appendixes appear at the end of the book. They are somewhat more technical than the chapters that form the book’s body. Two of them further show how Webb thinks that non-Mormons can benefit from Mormon theological insights. The third raises interesting questions that anyone doing Mormon systematic theology must consider. These appendixes are, of course, not essential to the book, but readers with a deeper interest in theological questions are likely to enjoy and profit from them.

I have only two relatively minor criticisms of Webb’s book and one stronger one, though they are really friendly disagreements rather than criticisms. First, I believe he gives too much authority to nineteenth-century LDS theologizing. Joseph Smith gave us a tremendous amount to think about, but reflecting on his teachings didn’t end in the nineteenth century, though Latter-day Saints also sometimes seem to think it did. In particular, Webb relies too heavily on the thought of Orson Pratt. Pratt was a brilliant contributor to nineteenth-century Mormon theological speculation. It would be a mistake to ignore what he did. But it is equally a mistake to assume that he defines Mormon belief. Webb too often says “Mormons believe . . .” when “Many Mormons have believed . . .” would be more accurate. Most of the beliefs he discusses are not established LDS doctrine, but “Mormons believe” suggests they are.

In addition, Latter-day Saints often hold different beliefs than those he attributes to them. For example, Webb says, “Mormons believe that Jesus was begotten by an immortal (but not immaterial) heavenly father” (p. 188), but many Mormons are agnostic about how Christ was conceived. He says as well, “The Saints also believe that God the Father progressed into his bodily form, as did Jesus Christ in his premortal state” (p. 123). There is no question that this is a common LDS belief. But it is not doctrinal—the King Follett discourse has not been canonized—and there are faithful, reflective Saints who do not believe this. Though Webb points out that LDS beliefs are “elastic” (pp. 21–22), the way he goes on to discuss them may give the impression that they are not.

Webb regularly connects his theological understanding with contemporary quantum mechanics, also a concern. In the nineteenth century many LDS thinkers made the mistake of thinking that Newtonian
mechanics, even if it needed refinement, was the final word in physics. As such, they thought it was useful as a theological tool, helping to show the believability of their speculations. But with the relative fall of Newtonian mechanics came also the fall of theological explanations too closely tied to it. A similar fate may await any theology that ties itself too closely to contemporary physical theories. Metaphysics and physics need not be correlated.

But my strongest disagreement has to do with Webb’s belief that Mormonism has and needs a stable metaphysical foundation. I am one of those to whom he refers when he says:

These anti-foundationalist scholars [those who do not believe that a systematic Mormon metaphysics is necessary] celebrate Mormonism as a uniquely fluid and flexible Christian tradition that is unconstrained by doctrinal principles and philosophical commitments. I think that they are wrong, but the reader should know that I am offering an interpretation of Mormonism that emphasizes its philosophical consistency and logical coherence, while some Mormon scholars would argue that Mormonism does not have (and should not have) methodical and metaphysical ambitions. (p. 25)

Webb is up-front about the different ways of seeing the relationship between theology and Mormonism, and he is honest about there being Mormons who disagree with him.

I doubt that anyone doing work in LDS theology would go so far as to say that Mormonism is unconstrained by doctrinal principles. That is too strong. I would say that, though individual Mormons may well engage in thinking about Mormonism philosophically and logically, and though there are certainly people who may benefit spiritually from reading or engaging in such thought, the LDS Church itself does not need it. Theologizing can be useful to the church and its members, but it is not essential to its or their identity.

Two quick explanations of that claim, the first historical: Judaism has survived for thousands of years without relying on theology. (The same can be said of a number of other religions.) Judaism has had its
theologians, but unlike most of the Christian tradition, its theology is not what defines it. What does define Judaism may be difficult to decide, but it isn’t theology. Mormons are more like Jews in that regard than they are like other Christians.

The second explanation is a rejoinder to a possible objection. The objection is that without a theology it is difficult to stop the complete evisceration of religious belief. The presumption is that the result of a lack of theology is likely to be the slide from religion to mere culture: practices not tied to theologized beliefs may end up being informed by no beliefs at all. But those (like me) who don’t share Webb’s belief in the importance of theology think that living prophets and continuing revelation provide the safeguard against that slide. As they see it, in Mormonism continuing revelation takes the structural place of theology.

In spite of these friendly disagreements, I strongly recommend Webb’s book, not just to the non-Mormons at whom it is aimed but also to Mormons. Latter-day Saints will learn a great deal about Catholicism by reading it. Webb’s belief that “Mormonism has a deeply Catholic sensibility” (p. 15) is news that Mormons need to hear. Mormons tend to think that they are more like Protestants than Catholics, resulting sometimes in an anti-Catholicism inherited from nineteenth-century Protestantism. It is usually mild, even under the surface, but it is often there. Webb’s book offers non-Mormons a love letter explaining why he loves Mormons and giving them reasons why they might also. He does a good job of that. At the same time, in doing so he offers Mormons a love letter that may help them learn to love and appreciate their Catholic brothers and sisters more.

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articles and book chapters on philosophy. Among his Maxwell Institute publications are The Life of Holiness: Notes and Reflections on Romans 1, 5–8; Faith, Philosophy, Scripture; and the “Made Harder” series covering the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. He writes a weekly online column on LDS beliefs for Patheos.


Reviewed by Megan Goodwin

Janet Bennion compellingly conveys the “variability in experience” among contemporary Mormon fundamentalists in her latest monograph (p. xiv). Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism encompasses two decades of ethnographic fieldwork in the North American Intermountain West, as well as an analysis of seventy to ninety hours of popular media consumption. Bennion explores the variegated and troubled histories of polygynous sects and contemporary American mainstream investment in religio-sexual difference repackaged as popular entertainment. Polygamy in Primetime demonstrates the multiplicity and complexity of Mormon fundamentalist belief and practice, both complicating fundamentalist identity beyond plural marriage and arguing strenuously for the decriminalization of the practice.

Bennion is professor of sociology and anthropology at Lyndon State College. Polygamy in Primetime is her fourth monograph. Her previous books addressed gender hierarchy among minority religious communities in northern Mexico’s Chihuahua Valley and women’s networks within and among polygynous families. She has contributed articles to several edited scholarly volumes critiquing the 2008 raid on the FLDS Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado, Texas. As a vocal advocate for the
decriminalization of polygamy, she has argued that spouses of plural marriages should be afforded full rights and protections from abuse under the law (p. xvi).

In pursuing this argument, Bennion explores popular culture depictions of Mormon fundamentalist polygyny in scripted television programs such as HBO's *Big Love* and unscripted programs like TLC’s *Sister Wives*, in news reports and talk shows, and in Internet articles and “polygamy websites” (p. xv). The author’s stated primary concern is analyzing the impact of such popular culture portrayals of plural marriage on women and children in polygynous families, on mainstream American culture, and ultimately on the legal regulation of sexual and marital difference (p. xvi).

The project’s approach is ambitious and often compelling, if a bit sprawling in its scope and organization (though in its rhizomatic structure, *Polygamy in Primetime* is perhaps not unlike the religious communities the book profiles). Bennion attempts to encompass “media influence, legislative history, gender dynamics, the politics of kingdom building, polygamous sexuality, and the cultural context of crimes related to plural marriage under one cover” (p. xvii). In the introduction, which argues for the ongoing relevance of engaging polygyny in the study of gender and American culture, Bennion revisits her previous work demonstrating the challenges and benefits of plural marriage for Mormon fundamentalist women. Part 1, “A Mormon Polygamy Primer,” surveys the history, ethnography, and ideology of the four major fundamentalist groups—the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Apostolic United Brethren, the Latter-day Church of Christ, and the Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness of Times—practicing plural marriage today.

In this section, Bennion painstakingly chronicles the breadth and byzantine structure of Mormon fundamentalist theologies and provides vivid illustrations of lived religious communalism. Her accounts of conflict resolution, kingdom building, Adam-God theology, and consecration are detailed and comprehensive, which makes her primer both invaluable and at times overwhelming to the novice researcher. Bennion's
analysis of gendered and sexual dynamics among Mormon fundamentalist communities is particularly cogent, detailed, and insightful. Her “Gender Dynamics and Sexuality” chapter revisits her previous work on the appeal of plural marriage to conservative religious women but also considers the largely unexplored issues of divorce and queerness within Mormon fundamentalist communities.

Part 2, “How Do We Deal with Polygamy?,” considers the impact of mainstream media, legislation and enforcement, and public opinion on the theology and lived practice of fundamentalist polygyny both within and beyond Mormon fundamentalist communities. Bennion’s intention is to demonstrate a shifting popular narrative regarding plural marriage, one that strengthens the author’s argument for decriminalizing the practice. Part 2 is less focused and more polemical than the previous section; Bennion is perhaps a stronger ethnographer than she is a media or legal analyst. Though the persistence of American public interest in plural marriage is beyond contestation (as evidenced by the ongoing success of shows like Sister Wives), the direct impact of popular media on public opinion is notoriously hard to prove. Bennion is right to address the scholarly lacuna of work on popular culture and Mormon fundamentalism; her survey of television programs, news broadcasts, and Internet discussions does convincingly demonstrate a discursive shift with regard to sexual difference. However, her line of reasoning—that more, and more nuanced, popular depictions of lived polygyny will necessarily accrue popular acceptance and thus lead to decriminalization of the practice, which will further legitimize the practice and protect practitioners from abuse—is ultimately limited.

Bennion’s work is particularly noteworthy for her frank and nuanced discussion of the abuses prevalent among some Mormon fundamentalist communities. As John-Charles Duffy notes in his review of Saints under Siege: The Texas State Raid on the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, many scholars of Mormon fundamentalisms occlude or ignore the abuses within the FLDS community in Eldorado in their eagerness to indict
the overreaches of Texas state legislators, law enforcement, and social workers. Similarly, Bennion notes that her 1998 work on the Apostolic United Brethren in Pinesdale, Montana, “romanticized” Mormon fundamentalist polygyny (p. 260). But after her work with the LeBaron community in Mexico, Bennion insists that some forms of polygamy—particularly those in which the spouses are isolated, impoverished, and afraid—are more prone to facilitating abuses.

While Bennion frankly acknowledges the persistence of welfare fraud, underage marriage, and sexual coercion among some minority religious communities, she insists the institution of polygyny is not in and of itself abusive (p. xvi). Rather, illegality, isolation and circumscription, unequal access to authority within the relationship, male domination, economic deprivation, and the absence of a female network may exacerbate abusive tendencies (p. 261). The author rejects a causal link between the practice of plural marriage and the physical and sexual abuse of women and children and complicates the category of “abuse” to include economic deprivation, substance abuse, and neglect in addition to domestic violence and sexual assault (p. 261). In these ways, Bennion’s work meaningfully disrupts the dominant narrative that elides polygyny with child sexual abuse and coercive marriage practices. At the same time, she corrects her earlier work to insist that “some forms of polygamy are more conducive to the abuse of women and children” (p. 262).

While Polygamy in Primetime is a successful and useful complication of Mormon fundamentalism beyond issues of marital nonmonogamy, Bennion’s prescriptive and singular focus on the efficacy of decriminalization in combating abuse limits the scholarly utility of her work. While the author is undoubtedly correct in her assertion that “wives and children in families that are living in hiding are at risk of abuse, economic hardship, and circumscription,” Bennion fails to address the prevalence of domestic abuse within mainstream families, religious or secular (p. 262). With the exception of illegality, none of the

factors she identifies as contributors to abuse are unique to polygyny. Decriminalization would absolutely grant plural wives access to greater legal rights and privileges, including spousal insurance, hospital visiting rights, and inheritance (p. 262). But given the pervasiveness of domestic violence and sexual assault in contemporary American households, Bennion’s insistence that decriminalization would significantly decrease abuse within polygynous families is ultimately unconvincing.2

So too her assertion that legalizing plural marriage would cause polygyny to “eventually be viewed as yet another potentially viable alternative family type that should not be treated as immoral” (p. 262). She provides no clear path from decriminalization to widespread public acceptance of sexual difference, which is perhaps the primary limitation of her argument. Bennion places undue faith in the influence of the American legal system upon American public opinion. Though she clearly elucidates the theological and cultural motivations for plural marriage within Mormon fundamentalist communities, Bennion offers no consideration of the religious grounds upon which much of the American public rejects the practice. Neither does she account for the demonstrable conservative Protestant bias that governs most legal decisions within the American juridical system, particularly with regard to sexual difference.3

Nevertheless, this work is at its core a nuanced and careful consideration of a significant and contentious subject. Bennion successfully complicates lived sexual difference beyond novelty and decenters


sexuality as primary identity marker in Mormon fundamentalist families.\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Polygamy in Primetime} offers a rich and careful history and ethnography of marginalized, frequently misunderstood religious minority communities, and as such will be of interest to scholars of gender and sexuality, American religions, American cultural studies, minority religions, new religious movements, and Mormonism.\textsuperscript{5}

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\textit{Reviewed by Peter McMurray}

In reflecting on the autobiography of Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida writes: “The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the autos of my autobiography. When, much later, the other will have perceived with a keen-enough ear what I will have addressed or destined to him or her, then my signature will have taken place.”\textsuperscript{1} Our stories of self are bound


\textsuperscript{5} The positioning of Mormonism relative to the study of new religious movements is, of course, a larger issue and one worth exploring at greater length.

\textsuperscript{1} Jacques Derrida, \textit{The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation}, trans. Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 51.
up in the way they are heard by other ears, a challenge for any creator of music or musicology. In his 2011 book, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*, Jeremy Grimshaw embraces this challenge, crafting a richly contoured narrative of the musical life—or lives—of Young, a major figure in American experimental music of the past half century. Famously enigmatic, Young and Marian Zazeela, his artistic partner and wife, granted Grimshaw unprecedented access to them but eventually withdrew their support for the project as it neared publication, among other reasons because of its characterizations of Young’s relationship to Mormonism. The resulting book thus becomes multifaceted (a metaphor Young uses for divine experience), shedding light not only on experimental music but also on questions of Mormon culture, hippie-era fixations with the East, and the ethics of listening to and writing the lives of others who are simultaneously creating their own (sometimes contradictory) narratives. Given the existence of other reviews of this book, I focus my remarks here on the significant implications this book holds for a nascent Mormon studies.2

While the span and complexity of La Monte Young’s career and persona might daunt most musicologists, Grimshaw seems to relish his task, handling a multitude of musics and methodologies with grace and nuance. Young seriously engaged with jazz, twelve-tone serialism, minimalism, experimental improvisation, and Hindustani classical music. But in telling the story of his own life, Young highlights humbler roots: sounds he grew up with as a small child in Bern, Idaho, like wind, crickets, and the electrical hum of a transformer near his grandfather’s gas station (pp. 8, 21). He would then shuttle back and forth between Los Angeles and American Fork, Utah, all before he entered high school.

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I first heard of Young because he had beat out legendary saxophonist/multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy in a jazz audition; Grimshaw confirms this story, placing Young in bands and sessions with a veritable Who’s Who in (more experimental) jazz in the years to follow: Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, and Billy Higgins (p. 23). (Sandy McCroskey suggests that an important impetus for Young’s abandonment of Mormonism was the racist reaction by his grandparents/caretakers to the company he was keeping.) Young’s life path would lead to similar encounters with the leading figures in European high modernism (including a Darmstadt summer course with Karlheinz Stockhausen), ultimately landing him in New York, where his work brought him into close contact with composer John Cage, pianist David Tudor, and many visual artists of equal stature (Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, and Marian Zazeela, whom he would marry).

Grimshaw works mostly chronologically, drawing on an eclectic mix of archival documents, personal interviews, recordings, and scores to produce an equally eclectic text that moves from biography to cultural history to musical analysis. If his methods are somewhat heterogeneous—though perhaps not enough to warrant a term like “gonzo musicology,” as Grimshaw describes his methodology—they allow him the flexibility to pivot quickly to draw unexpected conclusions. For example, Grimshaw finds in jazz and in serial music significant precursors to the kinds of preoccupations of Young’s later, more static compositions. By focusing, in most chapters, on a single “work”—though Young’s compositions typically defy such fixed terminology—Grimshaw is able to give some substantive analysis while also anchoring Young’s musical trajectories. The prose is lucid throughout, even in some of the more technical descriptions of tuning systems, and Grimshaw has forged an ethnographic historiography that allows his vivid descriptions (e.g., of learning the protocols for monitoring Young’s sound/light installation known as “Dream House,” pp. 122–24) to do maximal work.

And what of Mormonism? Here the book becomes simultaneously more ambitious and perhaps less clear. Grimshaw identifies himself as a Utah native and practicing Mormon (now a faculty member at Brigham Young University, p. 12) and makes explicit from the outset his aim to...
offer a “‘Mormon reading’ of Young’s life and work” (p. 12). He fine-tunes this position in his extended chapter on Mormon cosmology and Young’s composition *The Well-Tuned Piano*, highlighting how he hopes to undercut the fairly simplistic, exoticist reading of Young’s connection to Eastern music: “Although the spiritual and transcendent qualities attributed to Young’s music are frequently described (by the composer and others) using exotic terminology, the beginning of Young’s heavenly quest far predates and dovetails with his exposure to Eastern religious ideas and ’60s counterculture” (p. 146). He elaborates further that “one can read Young’s works and his (frequently Eastern-oriented) rhetoric as tropes on Mormon theology and cosmology” (p. 152). This Mormonization of Young’s decades-long, intensive study of Hindustani music with Pandit Pran Nath troubles a prevailing narrative of Young and many of his contemporaries. On the one hand, it mitigates charges of exoticizing appropriation, which seems to be the author’s aim: Unlike so many artists of the period (e.g., John Cage or Terry Riley) for whom the Orient seems to be a vast, timeless unknown, Young was simply finding resonances with his own Mormon cosmology. On the other hand, as Young and Riley have charged since the publication of the book, it also minimizes the impact of Nath’s role in Young’s music, a role that continues to shape much of Young and Zazeela’s creative life today (pp. 108–10).

Readers familiar with Mormonism and Mormon studies, however, may find a slightly different objection: What kind of Mormonism is Grimshaw speaking of? Chapter 5, “Space Exploration, Part 2,” leads off with a remarkable epigraph in which John Cage recounts a conversation with Hugh Nibley about life on other planets (p. 142). Shortly thereafter, Grimshaw suggests that he is speaking of a “Mormon culture” that “differs in many important ways from what one might associate with the faith today,” focusing instead on “certain aspects of Mormon cosmology that once enjoyed more conspicuous circulation than they do today” (p. 143). He constructs his Mormon cosmology primarily from the Book of Abraham with nods to Joseph Smith’s first vision, Orson Pratt, LDS hymns, and a smattering of contemporary authors on Mormonism.
(e.g., Erich Robert Paul and James Faulconer). This sampling of Mormon theology accomplishes considerable work in minimal space but would have benefited from some more limited historical parameters. For example, he gives little evidence to show the details of how Young would have encountered these doctrines—of premortal existence, Kolob, or a universal astronomical first cause. Following Grimshaw’s generous reading of Kyle Gann’s East-West dichotomy (pp. 165–66), I am inclined to say that Grimshaw, too, knows he is playing fast and loose with Mormonism and does so for “expository efficiency” (pp. 165–66). Again, such efficiency allows him to discuss culture, musical analysis, and Young’s persona and also to confine the bulk of his comments on Mormonism to a single chapter. But at times it also leads him to some tenuous conclusions. For example, he reflects on Young’s understanding of the first vision as follows: “Young, in an act of grand misprision, sees himself just as he had been taught as a child to see Joseph Smith: as a prophet chosen by God to restore eternal truths that had been hidden during a long period of apostasy—truths with the potential to transform the mortal into the divine” (p. 154). Such a strong reading is fascinating and provocative but also seems to misconstrue Young’s own thinking. Indeed, Grimshaw regularly refers to Young as a prophet—usually self-appointed—but he never cites Young making this claim himself.

I am hardly the first to notice the emphatic use of prophet here. Writing to Grimshaw before the book’s release, Young’s student Jung Hee Choi makes a similar argument, highlighting two points—language and power: “I believe the term prophet has been used loosely here where it could be interchangeable with mystic, visionary, yogi or even creative thinker. . . . In addition, your use of the word prophet, strikes us with an excess of religious baggage that is highly reflective of power and politics.”3 As regards the latter point on prophets and power, ironically enough, Young does have something of a reputation for asserting control in a way that might well align with a more authoritarian (i.e., “power and politics”) view of a prophet, as seen in accounts of the dispute over

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recordings made with other musicians in the group formed by Young called the Theatre of Eternal Music (p. 98ff.). But Grimshaw goes out of his way to deemphasize this more authoritarian side of his prophet; he is clearly preoccupied with the more visionary, oracular roles of a prophet.

Choi’s first point about terminology highlights yet another complexity in pinning down Young: if not “prophet,” then what? Like any scholar’s diction, Grimshaw’s is influenced by his own background, occasionally to a fault, as when he describes shishya-guru relations as “a musical priesthood” (pp. 112–13). No metaphor seems necessary here to highlight the ritual chain of transmission; calling it “priesthood” (or “a mantle” with “a lineage of ancient authority”) veers toward a dog-whistle version of Mormon studies where insiders will recognize a coded cultural language that goes largely unnoticed by outsiders. Other instances might include the Cage-Nibley encounter, which surely means much more for Mormons than for Cage acolytes (p. 142); terms like synergy (pp. 115, 178) or phrases like the anthropomorphic definite plural “the scriptures say” (p. 115); and even interpretations like seeing in a figure eight a symbol of traditional family relations (p. 124).

And yet Choi’s list of possible substitutes for prophet seems unsatisfying in its own right. Indeed, the term mystic is used extensively, calling attention again to the kind of “cultivated exoticist attitudes” (p. 103) that pervaded American arts in this period. (Grimshaw also falls into this trap on occasion, as when he writes of “the atemporal imagination of a guru,” p. 115.) The strength of Grimshaw’s narrative, as so often happens, is also its weakness: some kind of mysticism does seem to bring these various threads of Young’s life together, yet it is not entirely clear what Grimshaw (or Choi, on behalf of Young) means by “mysticism.” As described above, this problem runs rampant in certain Euro-American discourses about the East. But what exactly constitutes Mormon mysticism? These terms warrant further exploration by Grimshaw. But in an academic context where other authors have already addressed large swaths of musical analysis and cultural critique of Young’s Indian influences, Grimshaw’s approach seems not only plausible but much needed for corrective context.
More broadly, I wonder whether this book is really a “Mormon reading” of La Monte Young’s life and music or simply a reading of the entirety of La Monte Young’s life and music (or as close as one could actually come). Both Grimshaw’s assertion that the book is a “Mormon reading” and the response from Young and his colleagues seem misplaced. Mormonism plays an important role, but it is always complementary—to jazz and serialism, to drones and Indian music, and even in Grimshaw’s humorous descriptions of the “lapsed-Mormon-microtonalist phenomenon” (p. 161). Maybe certain tuning systems do resonate and redirect “certain latent Mormon cultural tendencies” (p. 161). But if anything is essentially Mormon here, it would seem to be Grimshaw’s attempt to generate an “all-encompassing model” (p. 146) out of the metaphors and methods of Young’s creative practice. (Such omnivorous consuming and repurposing of its environment plays a decisive role in Mormonism from its founding revelations to the cultural politics of the Mountain West today.) Grimshaw repeatedly notes that in Young’s work these metaphors go beyond simply “evoking,” materializing instead as embodiments of real phenomena (e.g., sound and place, pp. 158–59). I wonder how Grimshaw thinks of his analytical models as evoking or embodying Young’s work: has he made literal ideas that were never intended to be, or has he simply realized that these metaphors were hardly metaphorical at all? Returning to Derrida, we have probably not heard La Monte Young’s autobiography in Jeremy Grimshaw’s book. But listening alongside Grimshaw, with or without Young’s blessing, we can hear his music and understand the context it comes from much more clearly.

As a final and related note, the question of Mormon studies lurks as well: how (if at all) does the book fit into this nascent field? That this review is being published in a Mormon studies review rather than in a musicological one suggests some kind of interface. Again, the answer is not simple: Grimshaw’s own account meanders in and out of Mormonism, perhaps more so than Young’s own life. And as a quick online search will confirm, Mormons love to lay claim to their celebrities, despite (or perhaps precisely because of) the distance between their
celebrity life and officially sanctioned Mormonism: think of Brandon Flowers, lead singer of the rock band The Killers, or pop singer/Tabernacle Choir member Alex Boyé, or, from a generation earlier, the Jets and the Osmonds. As recent controversies over proxy baptisms for Holocaust victims and others have shown, the act of pronouncing another person to be Mormon—whether avant-garde composer, celebrity musician, or a deceased stranger—entails a certain exercise of power over that individual that may not always be welcome. Although never stated outright as such, this question of the power to narrate one's own life seems to lie at the heart of Young’s concerns with Grimshaw’s account. But beyond this question of authorized narratives, the book offers an intriguing model for a kind of orthogonal Mormon studies, one steeped in a particular discipline (musicology) with a subject like Young, whose life history certainly entails meaningful encounters with Mormonism but whose work demands a certain disciplinary toolkit to understand. In this regard, Grimshaw’s book suggests a fruitful direction for interrogating precisely these kinds of liminal spaces within and just beyond Mormonism.

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Over the past forty years, writers of literary Mormon fiction have focused on telling realistic stories that provide unconventional views of Mormon life to contrast with the cheery images provided by the LDS Church Correlation Committee. Rife with depictions of Mormon cultural foibles and moral failures, these stories seek not to embarrass Mormons or condemn them unfairly, but to emphasize humanity’s desperate need for Christ’s atonement and grace. For instance, in Levi S. Peterson’s *The Backslider*, the most critically and aesthetically successful Mormon novel from this era, protagonist Frank Windham overcomes his self-destructive drive to purge himself of sin when Jesus appears to him in the form of a cigarette-smoking cowboy, chastises him for not accepting His redeeming blood, and encourages him to enjoy a good Christian life. Atypical and—for many—blasphemous, Peterson’s Cowboy Jesus preaches a gospel that offers an alternative standard of righteousness from the one Frank gleaned from the more dogmatic members of his southern Utah community—particularly his mother, whose narrow views on keeping the commandments would make even the most orthodox Mormon squirm. This alternative standard, however, while jarring to many Mormon readers, is crucial to the cultural work of the novel. Rather than mocking that which is sacred to demean it, it seeks actually to improve it by redefining our understanding of what it means to be a faithful Mormon.

Works like *The Backslider* continue to appear on bookshelves to offer Mormon readers similar alternatives, often with the subtly didactic intent of encouraging readers to replace hard-line, dogmatic approaches to Mormon living with greater attention to faith instead of works, compassion instead of judgment, and grace instead of condemnation. Lately, however, several works of Mormon fiction have stepped away from this approach, distancing themselves from drawing pat conclusions on
questions of ethics and morality to explore other avenues of meaning—and meaning-making—in the Mormon world. Indeed, rather than reconfiguring the way Mormons understand devotion to God, church, and community, these works have embraced an approach that perceives the whole of the Mormon cosmology as a kind of playground where one can tell offbeat and fanciful stories that revel in the chaotic now of an information-age Mormonism. While these novels do not wholly forgo the Mormon literary tradition of “artistic preaching,” they do so in a manner that often raises more questions than they answer.

Among recent contributions to this new direction in Mormon literature have been Steven L. Peck’s *The Scholar of Moab* (2011), a novel, and *A Short Stay in Hell* (2012), a novella. Both works are set in landscapes on the fringes of orthodox American Mormon life and belief. In *The Scholar of Moab*, set in the 1970s, protagonist Hyrum Thayne wrestles with his listless life as a “miserly laborer” for the US Geological Survey in Moab, Utah, desiring instead to “stroll among the high & mighty” as a scientist-scholar (pp. 6–7). He also lives a kind of double life as a Mormon “in outward experience” and so, “like many scientists,” remains an “unbeliever” in his heart (p. 9). On the other hand, Soren Johansson, the protagonist of *A Short Stay in Hell*, is an active, believing Latter-day Saint who dies and finds himself not in the spirit world but in an afterlife where Zoroastrianism is the true religion and hell is modeled after the setting of Jorge Luis Borges’s 1941 short story “The Library of Babel.” Interestingly, though, despite Soren’s devotion to his faith, Mormonism plays a much smaller role in *A Short Stay in Hell* than it does in *The Scholar of Moab*, functioning more as a starting point for Soren’s existential journey than as an elemental part of the work’s setting and themes. Still, as Soren’s stay in hell progresses, perceptive readers will identify ways Mormonism flavors the entirety of the text, even after Soren abandons his old beliefs in the face of his new Zoroastrian reality. The novella’s attention to themes of free will, accountability, and eternal relationships, for instance, give *A Short Stay in Hell* the feel of a Mormon meditation on the logic of the plan of salvation.
Aside from their innovative uses of Mormon elements, both works benefit from strong main characters. *The Scholar of Moab* introduces readers to Hyrum Thayne first as a vandalized statue, a broken tribute “reverently erected” to honor Hyrum as “The Lord’s Chosen Servant and Defender of Moab.” The reason for this monument, at least initially, remains a mystery for the novel to unfold; however, the image of a “once grand idol” obscured by “verdant fescue ringing the red-rock base out of which two hollow, broken brass shins protrude boldly” immediately associates Hyrum not only with “some perverted twist on an Arthurian legend,” as the text suggests, but also with the “vast and trunkless legs of stone” of the broken and forgotten statue of Ozymandias, which once memorialized, according to Shelley’s famous poem, a powerful pharaoh and the city he built. Like these legends, Hyrum is a forgotten hero whose glory days have become nothing more than a half-remembered curiosity, a scattered narrative for amateur historians to puzzle over and piece together. Indeed, Hyrum is more antihero than hero. Naive, poorly educated, and morally inconsistent, Hyrum deceives his way through the novel, conjuring ludicrous stories about Communist plots and Gadianton robbers in order to obscure his failings as a husband and Mormon. Yet there is something heroic about Hyrum Thayne’s desire to transcend his “Dickensian life” and become a scholar. If he is a hero, he is a tragic hero—a man whose longing to transcend his environment is hampered by his penchant for “get[ting] caught up in things in ways that make no sense” (p. 204). As Hyrum’s fabrications snowball and increasingly excite Moab’s superstitious Mormon community, his awareness of this tragic flaw becomes more pronounced, causing occasional, poignant moments of reflection in his personal journal:

I would have been much happier talking about bumblebees & their Faith. Or talking about Evolution... But even though that is what I wanted to do that is not what I did do. Instead I dig a deeper & deeper Hole about these Gadianton Robbers. The very thing I want to be done with. The very thing I want to fix I Break even more. Why I do this I do not know. I seem my worst Enemy mostly. A real Enemy could not do worse I think. (p. 204)
Hyrum is right about his character. *The Scholar of Moab* has no obvious villain to oppose its protagonist except that within him that keeps redemption at bay. Mormon literary critic Marden Clark once opined that “Mormonism has a high potential for tragedy,”¹ and *The Scholar of Moab* might be that claim’s best evidence. In Hyrum the aspiring scholar we see great heroic potential, particularly in his capacity to dream and inspire others, yet his inability to apply that potential in positively transformative ways—either for himself or for others—causes unnecessary suffering in those who love and trust him. In this respect, he is a kind of fallen prophet or false savior, a sad example of a Mormon whose inability to “[put] off the natural man,” as King Benjamin terms it, stymies efforts toward meaningful goodness (see Mosiah 3:19).

If Hyrum Thayne is a tragic antihero, then Soren Johansson is a Mormon everyman whose stay in hell evokes the experiences of Mormons who, upon finding their foundation of faith shaky, begin new searches for truth. Indeed, Soren’s journey through hell involves a process of reconciling his mortal certainty about the truthfulness of Mormonism with the disillusionment he feels when the reality of his afterlife undermines that certainty. In hell, for instance, Soren discovers that “all contracts, bonds, commitments, covenants, pledges, and promises entered into prior to . . . entering Hell are null and void,” thus rendering his deeply held beliefs about the eternal nature of his relationships to his wife and children suddenly inconsequential. Similarly, when Soren is offered coffee, the once-simple choice of whether or not to refuse it becomes an existential crisis:

> Being a Mormon, I had never even tasted coffee, let alone drunk a whole cupful. How could that matter now? Zoroastrianism had been shown true, and I was in a Hell that had no prohibitions against it. Still, it was hard. Lifelong habits are not easily broken. Keeping the Word of Wisdom, as we Mormons called our health code, had always been taken as a sign of my righteousness, my

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worthiness to attend the holy temple, and to participate fully in the church. Even here in Hell, after a lifetime of keeping the Word of Wisdom, I was having an ugly time deciding whether to try a cup. (pp. 39–40)

Although worried that his new “Hell was really all a ruse concocted by God” to try his faith, Soren drinks the coffee, but not without feeling as if he “had betrayed something deep within [him]” (p. 40). Like that of Hyrum Thayne, Soren’s character is shaped by his increasingly complicated relationship to Mormonism. As his ties to the community lessen, so do his moral certainties about the laws and rules that are supposed to order the universe:

All my life I had lived with a strong sense of morality. How do you give it up? How do you do things you thought you’d never do? Where do all the things you believed go, when all the supporting structure is found to be a myth? How do you know how or on what to take a mortal stand, how do you behave when it turns out there are no cosmic rules, no categorical imperatives? It was difficult. So tricky to untangle. I still remember the deep sense of loss. The pain almost killed me. (pp. 51–52)

In a sense, then, A Short Stay in Hell functions as a kind of thought experiment that asks readers to imagine how they would react, if placed in a similar situation, to the collapse of the assumptions that govern their lives and worldviews. For this reason, A Short Stay in Hell has relevance for readers beyond Mormon circles, especially if they read Soren’s Mormonism as a type for any system or ideology—religious or otherwise—that shapes human experiences in significant ways. For readers, that is, Soren is a vehicle through which they can better reflect upon and assess how they choose to order their lives.

Of the two works, A Short Stay in Hell is the most conventional in form and style. Written from a first-person perspective, the novella provides an essentially chronological account of Soren’s stay, with a weary, hell-worn Soren relating his journey from the vantage point of several billions of years in the future. Indeed, as if to make up for its rather conventional
narrative approach, the novella expands (and boggles!) its readers’ minds with the way it stretches and collapses their sense of time, condensing eons into barely one hundred pages in a way that seems neither gimmicky nor awkward. Soren’s narrative voice is such that glossing over the events of a million years as if they were the events of a minute seems natural and believable. It is a voice that is intimately acquainted with the concept of eternity in ways known perhaps only to the gods.

The Scholar of Moab, on the other hand, is a fragmented narrative that disorients readers with nonlinear chronology, multiple (and often unreliable) narrators, and blurry generic lines. Set largely in the 1970s and comprised of documentary fragments recovered from the cluttered trailer of “a bitter old man,” the novel is a cacophony of voices, formats, and styles loosely bound together by their interest in Hyrum Thayne’s rise and fall. Aside from Hyrum’s pathetic journal, readers become acquainted with the horrid doggerel of Sandra Thayne, Hyrum’s devout Mormon wife; the whimsical, overwrought prose of New Age poet Dora Tanner, Hyrum’s mistress; and the philosophical reflections of Oxford-educated Edward and William (Eddy and Billy) Babcock, conjoined twins who befriend Hyrum and work as cowboys in Moab. Each of these texts contributes something to our understanding of Hyrum’s story, yet what ties them all together is the welcome voice of “The Redactor,” the modern-day compiler and sometime interpreter of the found documentary record. He is to The Scholar of Moab what Mormon is to the Book of Mormon, although he lacks a Moroni to tie up the loose ends of the story’s chaos. Indeed, like A Short Stay in Hell, the novel ends without the convenience and satisfaction of a traditional ending, thus forcing readers to draw their own conclusions from The Redactor’s work.

Of course, neither The Scholar of Moab nor A Short Stay in Hell is interested in delivering traditional endings. Both works have much to say about Mormons and to Mormons, but like a number of other new works of Mormon fiction, they are not interested in concluding their narratives with the tidiness of a rote Sunday School lesson—or even the relatively tidy heresies of something like The Backslider. Rather, they are focused on—or at least moderately preoccupied with—foregrounding
and exploring important issues and themes that touch at the core of human experience. In other words, Hyrum Thayne and Soren Johansson allow readers to negotiate their own grappling with the everyday chaos of uncertainty and doubt that make finding a place in the world—and enduring to the end—so difficult. If these works seem inconclusive, it is only because Peck wants to give us practice in needling out the meanings that can be so elusive in reality.

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