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Mormon Studies: A Bibliographic Essay  
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AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY, religion has been reborn in American universities. When my own discipline of history recently announced religion as the largest subspecialty for historians working in the United States, it confirmed what many of us had experienced anecdotally: religion continues to thrive in modern American life, and scholars are growing increasingly attuned to its significance in the past and present. This phenomenon has had profound implications for the study of Mormonism. As scholars have grown more and more sophisticated in their study of religion, and as it has assumed a more prominent place in many disciplines, academic interest in Mormonism has flowered correspondingly. And when the public spotlight finds its way to prominent Mormons or to the growth and institutional influence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, scholars and pundits alike crave understanding of the faith.

While the various “Mormon moments” ebb and flow on political or popular culture tides, a growing number of academic institutions have ensured that the study of Mormonism is represented on campus. Programs or endowed chairs in Mormon studies at Utah Valley University, Utah State University, Claremont Graduate University, the University of Utah, and the University of Virginia stand as telling symbols of these developments. Latter-day Saints may have a special interest in these advances,

to be sure, but the academic study of the faith communities related to Joseph Smith, in all their variety and complexity, now stands apart from any one church's purview.

The *Mormon Studies Review* proposes to track what is now a vibrant, varied, and international academic engagement with Mormon institutions, lives, ideas, texts, and stories.

A number of academic journals already address Mormonism in one way or another. Sibling periodicals relate the life of the mind to the Latter-day Saint tradition (*BYU Studies Quarterly*), express Mormon culture or place Mormonism in conversation with broader religious and secular ideas (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Sunstone*), examine the Mormon experience in terms of a single academic discipline (*Journal of Mormon History, John Whitmer Historical Association Journal, Element*), or delve deeply into Mormon texts and history in explicitly LDS terms for an LDS audience (*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Studies in the Bible and Antiquity, Mormon Historical Studies*). Furthermore, scholarship on Mormonism is increasingly found in academic journals with concerns that range well beyond the tradition.

As our unique contribution, the *Mormon Studies Review* will chronicle and assess the developing field of Mormon studies with review essays, book reviews, and roundtable discussions related to the academic study of Mormonism. In so doing, the *Review* will offer scholars and interested non-specialists a one-stop source for discussions of current scholarship on Mormonism. It will range across disciplines and gather voices from a broad cross-section of the academy, both LDS and non-LDS. The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, which publishes the *Review*, has multiple publications focused on ancient studies and LDS scripture, so

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the Review will complement those by leaning towards modern Mormon studies. Rather than publishing original research articles per se, it will allow readers to keep pace with scholarship in a variety of disciplines and fields.

Mormon studies is still developing in fits and starts. It remains haunted by pressing questions: Is it a field or merely a band of scholars who happen to share an object of study? What is its relationship to those faith communities with arguably the greatest stake in its findings? What assumptions about religion or about a particular faith could or should undergird study of it? Are there special methodological, theoretical, or epistemological considerations involved with the study of Mormonism? How might Mormon studies relate to Catholic studies or Jewish studies? While the Review will not conclusively settle these debates, it aspires to provide a forum where the shape of these conversations can be made apparent, where underlying assumptions can be assessed, and where comparative possibilities can be explored.³

Whatever Mormon studies is, it seems at least partially genealogically connected to the broader field of religious studies. As a result, Mormon studies has taken on some of that field’s theoretical problems and possibilities. In other words, Mormon studies has no corner on the problems of audience, methodology, epistemology, or identity. Religious studies scholars can barely talk politely about such things. In a memorable 2004 exchange between scholarly titans Stephen Prothero and Robert Orsi, the conflicted space that many Mormon studies practitioners inhabit was dissected by brilliant minds with no resolution.⁴ For Prothero, the working détente that reigned for the previous generation of scholars—namely, that one’s personal faith, its truth claims, and moral judgments in general should be “bracketed” out of academic writing—has cost us credibility with readers because no one knows where authors are coming from ideologically. “What is the danger,” Prothero asked, “of divulging to our

³. See the bibliographic essay in this issue for an introduction to these matters.
readers what we really think?” In Prothero’s view, to bracket belief is to condescend to readers and subjects alike. Such a state of affairs has rendered religious studies all but irrelevant in public discourse about religion, he concluded.

Robert Orsi’s rejoinder charged that modern religious studies may not have bracketed belief so much as “embedded and masked its normativities in its very practices of critical knowing,” and in such a way that the “religious experiences . . . of African Americans and women, of Catholics and Pentecostals (among many others),” have been “pathologized or marginalized.” For Orsi, religious studies “has been very much the theoretical enforcer of a normative and unchallenged liberal Protestant and Western religious modernity.”

Ann Taves’s response to the Prothero/Orsi impasse brilliantly complicated things. What of scholars who “occupy a complicated institutional middle ground between the academy and religious communities”? Her point has meaning for Mormon studies, where current and former members of the churches originating with Joseph Smith have dominated the field, though certainly not completely. Taves’s suggestion—that practitioners think more deeply about their commitments, roles, and audiences and, especially, that they better mark (or “perform,” in her words) their movement in and out of various roles and contexts—is important for Mormon studies. Her phrase “multiplex subjectivity,” borrowed from anthropology, may help Mormon studies scholars think about audience, tone, and authority. The trouble, as Taves notes, is that the boundaries within and around religion and those who study it are always contested and in flux. And even seemingly neat distinctions between this ideological commitment and that methodological goal, even when acknowledged, can belie a messier comingling of one’s intellectual and religious commitments.


The “bracketing” issue is reflective of religious studies’ larger methodology problem, which in turn also relates to Mormon studies. Viewed from one angle, both fields seem to capitalize on the messiness of the modern academy. So what if we let a common object rather than a common methodology define a field? We can readily admit that neither religious studies nor Mormon studies will ever be a single discipline. Interdisciplinarity is a contemporary academic buzzword, after all. History has long dominated intellectual approaches to Mormonism, and change might be good. (One would expect a historian to hedge on this point.) But my concern is not about methodological diversity as much as it is about the possible lack of methodology in Mormon studies. The biggest problem with such a state of affairs, in my view, is that conversations that become too insular or too self-obsessed often lack critical peers to help keep the discussion sharp or even intellectually honest.

Tracy Fessenden has voiced this concern for religious studies, whose scholars also do not share a methodology but, more critically for her, can as easily lack one altogether.7 Mormon studies scholars will have to think hard about what Fessenden calls the “and-x” problem. In religious studies, that means a field characterized by religion being endlessly linked with some other discipline: religion and literature, religion and psychology, and so forth. Problematically, the “x” part of the equation routinely emerges more neatly in religionists’ work than most in the broader fields would allow. The implication is that religious studies can actually act to insulate work, and harmfully so, from the very disciplines that ostensibly make religious studies “interdisciplinary.” What this means for Mormon studies, in my view, is that we must seek evaluative standards, readers, and theoretical cues from other disciplines if it is to be relevant in the modern academy or contribute to the broader project of the humanities.

But religious studies has something going for it despite its audience and methodological problems. What religious studies lacks in methodology it more than makes up for in a central theoretical problem. The

question “what is religion?” (or, relatedly, “what is ritual?” or “what is belief?”) has sometimes pushed religious studies to the brink of cannibalistic collapse, but it has undoubtedly given the field its theoretical energy and made its interdisciplinary coherence possible. I’m not sure what a theory of Mormonism will look like, but in lieu of methodological order, the question “what is Mormon?” seems to merit continued attention. Accordingly, the Review will take care to highlight work that compares Mormonisms or relates Mormonism to non-Mormon traditions and ideas. Mormonism will continue to help us comprehend things non-Mormon and vice versa. We’ve only begun the comparative and contextualizing projects started in the last generation, after all. Going forward, scholars will have to brave the inter- and intra-Mormon thickets and come, not unchanged, to broader intellectual shores. The Review will encourage and support that project.

And so the Mormon Studies Review charts Mormon studies at a critical early juncture. A wave of excellent scholarship and support from some forward-thinking institutions have generated considerable energy in the field. This interdisciplinary experiment shows signs of productive growth in literature, sociology, cultural studies, political science, and philosophy. The present challenge, at least as examined in the pages that follow, is to foster the current efflorescence without letting the field devolve into navel-gazing questions and answers that resonate with Latter-day Saints only.

Since the Review is published at Brigham Young University, and through an institute that bears the name of Neal A. Maxwell, we also feel compelled to ask, in a paraphrase of Loyd Ericson’s memorable query, what is Mormon about Mormon studies? While that question will not be meaningful to everyone in the field or to every institution that supports it, it is inescapable here. We’ll undoubtedly be forming answers to that question in the years to come, but we can at least set out, at this new beginning, a guiding principle for the Review: friendship. In our hope to

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meaningfully connect minds across space, time, and ideological and religious spectra, the Review aspires to a very Mormon ideal indeed. Mormonism’s founder put it this way, at least as related in a secretary’s hurried notes in July 1843:

Let me be resurrected with the saints whether to heaven or hell or any other good place—good society. What do we care if the society is good? don’t care what a character is if he’s my friend.—a friend a true friend. & I will be a friend to him[. ] friendship is the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism, to revolution[ize] [ & ] civilize the world.9

As our contribution to the “Mormon” in “Mormon studies,” the Review seeks that intellectual good society and the friendship—forged across boundaries—that defines it.

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SF: Professor Taves, you were involved in the early planning stages for what became the Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Tell me what drew you to that initiative and why you continued to support it as it developed.

AT: The formation of the Mormon Studies Council, as an advisory group to the School of Religion, and the subsequent development of the Hunter Chair were part of a broader plan to diversify the School of Religion. Although Karen Torjesen, then dean of the School of Religion, created the various councils, we were both deeply committed to creating a school that went well beyond the traditional Protestant seminary fields that provided its original structure. As the faculty person in the modern history of Christianity and American religion, I was the natural faculty representative to the Mormon Studies Council, which at that time was composed of the dean, LDS leaders from Southern California, and myself. It was an exciting experience, coming together from our various perspectives to envision what Mormon Studies might look like at CGU. We had important discussions within the council itself about how Mormon Studies could be situated within the study of religion in North America, but also how it might expand conceptions of many of the other fields, such as scriptural studies, ethics, and theology, as well.
Another outgrowth of the council structure I found fascinating (and this was totally Karen’s inspiration) was the council retreats. They brought together members of the various councils—Islamic Studies, Indic Studies, Jewish Studies, Coptic Studies, and so on, along with Mormon Studies—to discuss some theme of potential interest to everyone, such as transmission of faith across generations. These events provided council members a sense of what it is like to bring multiple traditions into conversation, something that each of the councils alone often found hard to envision.

**SF:** In a 2004 presentation at what turned out to be the first of many Claremont Mormon studies conferences, you situated Mormon studies within the broader academic study of religion. From what I can tell, in fact, your presentation may have been among the first attempts, along with Eugene England’s efforts at what is now Utah Valley University, to define an institutional space for Mormon studies in a secular setting. Figure 1 approximates a matrix of sorts that you used to frame our thinking about where Mormon studies might fit in the modern academy. Talk me through the figure and the ideas behind it.

**AT:** The matrix illustrates a range of ways in which the study of Mormonism could be positioned within various subfields within the academy and, thus, a variety of approaches and topics that could fall under the umbrella of Mormon studies. “Mormonism” doesn’t appear on the matrix because it can be studied within any of these subfields using any of these approaches. The basic ideas behind the diagram emerged from my experience as an American religious historian and historian of Christianity with a religious studies orientation who had been teaching for two decades in a Protestant theological school. While at Claremont, I taught courses in denominational history (Methodist and Unitarian-Universalist), a survey of the global history of Christianity since the Reformation, courses in American religious history, and theory and method in the study of religion. So the chart emerged naturally out of the mix of subfields and approaches with which I was familiar.

I started with Mormonism, in its denominational variants (LDS, Community of Christ, etc.), and subsumed them under the broader head-
American religious historians naturally position themselves within the broader framework of American history and American studies, so the horizontal axis under “American Religious History” spreads out laterally into various aspects of “American History” (on the left) and “Literary Studies/Cultural Studies” (on the right).

Given Mormon self-identification as Christian, I then placed it under the heading of “Christian Studies,” thinking of that not just in terms of American Christianity but also in terms of the global spread of Christianity and the various traditional Christian theological disciplines. So moving laterally at that level, we can consider the globalization of Mormonism and its interaction with various cultures (on the left) and Mormon additions to the canon in the context of “Christian Biblical Studies” (on the right). Finally, the diagram drops down to “Religious Studies,” where I highlighted a range of comparative themes that could be considered across traditions: lived religion, temples, revelation and authority, sacred texts, and so on.

**SF:** What, if anything, has changed since you originally conceptualized this? Have there been developments since 2004 that might modify your sense of the various fields?
Taves: As you know, I created that diagram on the fly as a way to summarize what we’d been discussing at the conference, so it was very much a sketch. I think I still am pretty happy with the trunk of the diagram—denominational studies, American religious history, Christian studies, and religious studies. Each of the lateral lines running through the nodes on the trunk could and should be expanded. I looked at some of the blogs from the conference on Mormon studies at Claremont in 2010, and it strikes me that, among other possible improvements to the chart, orbs could be added to represent different audiences that Mormon studies scholars might be engaging, that is, various Mormon audiences (LDS, Community of Christ, Sunstone types, etc.) and academic audiences. Different questions are going to come up depending on the audience that scholars are addressing.

SF: You hold a Catholic studies chair at UC Santa Barbara. Given your experience with Catholic studies and Jewish studies, how does Mormon studies compare with those fields?

AT: Actually, here at UCSB we not only have chairs in Catholic studies and Jewish studies, we also have chairs in Tibetan Buddhism and Sikh studies! So in thinking about all these “studies chairs,” I would start with the obvious: behind each of these endowed chairs is a community that wants to be present in the academy. How and why they want to be positioned in the academy varies somewhat. Jewish studies chairs have been around the longest and tend to be the most broadly conceived. Because Judaism can be viewed as a religion, a culture, and/or an ethnic identity, Jewish studies programs are not always situated within religious studies. As far as I am aware, the other programs generally are.

Many Catholic studies chairs have been established in Catholic universities in response to a perceived loss of “Catholic identity” in the institutions and the student bodies they serve. Catholic studies chairs and programs of that sort have religious formation as one of their aims, performing a function much like Religious Education at BYU. The Catholic studies chair I hold at UCSB, like many of the other types of chairs, was established to make sure that Catholicism had a place at the religious
studies table. Often this presence offers a tacit recognition that the traditions value. Chairs in Sikh studies differentiate Sikhism from Hinduism, chairs in Tibetan Buddhism ensure the preservation of a tradition under threat, and chairs in Mormon studies give the tradition a place alongside other Christian traditions and other religions.

SF: You mention that Catholic studies chairs often have a pastoral aim similar to Religious Education at BYU. That devotional/religious formation element has generated considerable tension within Mormon studies—a tension perhaps rooted in anxieties about academic legitimacy. What space do you see for religious education within Mormon studies? Is there something about contemporary Mormon studies that makes LDS religious formation uniquely problematic?

AT: I doubt there is anything uniquely problematic about the relationship between LDS religious formation and Mormon studies. In fact, I think we could draw pretty extensive parallels between the LDS and Catholic situations, such that we could compare BYU to the Catholic universities, the LDS institutes to Newman Centers, and the more LDS and Catholic formation-oriented centers, professional associations, and publications to one another. In general and as holder of a chair in Catholic studies at a public university, I stress our ability to shift our voice to one that is appropriate relative to a given audience or constituency. I often find myself explaining the difference between teaching Catholic studies courses at a public university and at a Catholic university. In the former, the aim of the institution is not religious formation but formation in the liberal arts, as well as the formation of educated citizens (or something like that). In private universities with a religious mission, the institution often aims to combine formation in the liberal arts with religious formation. Within any of these institutional contexts, we may want to teach students to distinguish different voices, for example, the voice of the historian who speaks in light of approaches and methods shared by historians and the voice of a religious (or nonreligious) person when speaking in light of beliefs shared with cobelievers. I wonder if this approach could be used to ease some of the tensions within Mormon studies. Would it be possible
to encourage scholars to be explicit about the voice with which they are speaking or writing in any given instance—that is, whether they are speaking as Latter-day Saints or not to a specific or a mixed audience, thus highlighting the presuppositions they are bringing to whatever they are doing?

SF: You don’t specialize in Mormonism per se, but you have presented on the tradition in Mormon-centric and non-Mormon-centric venues. What strike you as unique opportunities or challenges that come with the academic study of Mormonism?

AT: I’ll begin by restating the obvious: for anyone interested in the formation of new religious movements, Mormonism is an incredible case study. I still remember how amazed I was to read the Doctrine and Covenants and have the date and location given for each of the revelations in towns I’d heard of while growing up in upstate New York. This is not the kind of data we have for older traditions! I’m impressed, too, with the magnitude of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, which is making all that data available in critical editions. But your question, I think, alludes to the work I’ve been doing on early Mormonism and the contentious issue of the materiality of the golden plates, which is what I’ve been lecturing on in various venues. The golden plates take us straight into one of the most interesting challenges: taking the whole range of evidence and views on contentious claims into account and making our way through them as scholars in as transparent a fashion as possible. As you say in your introduction, we can never be completely transparent, but I found that being as forthright as possible about the problem I was trying to solve and the presuppositions I was bringing to it has generated a pretty positive response from both LDS and non-LDS audiences. I’m sure it helps that I am setting up the “puzzle” of the golden plates with a claim that each “side” holds dear—that is, that Joseph Smith was not a deceiver or deluded and that there were no ancient golden plates. Setting it up that way provides an intellectual challenge, but one that reflects a
religious studies approach at its best: a willingness to take the competing claims of believers and skeptics with utmost seriousness, to reveal the biases in previous scholarship (as Orsi would have us do), and to explain what we find in terms that make sense to us (as Prothero suggests).

SF: Mormon studies supports a wide range of expressions, but history continues to dominate the field. How might religious studies help the imbalance? What tools can be utilized to expand coverage from other fields like anthropology, literature, sociology, and so on?

AT: I agree: history does dominate. But I think there is a growing presence of scholars from literature and sociology. I’m thinking of the more literary approaches to the Book of Mormon and other sacred texts done by Terryl Givens, Philip Barlow, Mark Thomas, Grant Hardy, and so on, and of the sociological work of Armand Mauss and Gary and Gordon Shepherd. I’ve seen very little, though, from anthropologists apart from Tom Mould, and I think there is much more that ethnographers could contribute. With the global spread of the LDS Church, I would love to see ethnographers looking at how Mormonism is translating across cultures, not just in terms of formal procedures but in actual practice. We know quite a bit about the difficulties that Bible translators have faced in translating key terms from one cultural context (and web of associated meanings) into another. We don’t know much, as far as I’m aware, about the issues that have arisen with the many translations of the Book of Mormon. Nor do we know much about subtle differences in what it means to be LDS in various cultural contexts or for different ethnic subcultures within the United States. So all that strikes me as ripe for exploration. Religious studies scholars not only are free to embrace a range of methods, but they (ideally) are trained in more than one tradition. Scholars who lack this training, and this includes most historians, are typically not as prepared to mentally enter into the beliefs and practices of a tradition and, thus, to capture what it feels like from the inside. I think that whatever else we want to say about a tradition, conveying what it means to insiders is crucial.
SF: As Mormon studies becomes less parochial, what do you see as its next hurdles? Do concessions or adjustments need to be made on various sides, Mormon and non-Mormon?

AT: You made an observation about your experience attending an Adventist studies conference a while back that I found quite illuminating. From what you said, it sounded as if you recognized yourself and other Mormon studies types in the Adventist scholars and felt as if you were looking at yourself in a somewhat distorted mirror. I’ve had that experience too, and it always leaves me smiling at myself, wondering how I could have thought my experience was so different from the experiences of others. I think this feeling of partial recognition in the midst of differences is one that more and more of us are going to have as we move in and out of each other’s worlds. I think this experience lies at the heart of being less parochial and more cosmopolitan. I don’t think this movement requires us to abandon our home communities or basic identities, but I do think it changes us in subtle ways. I think that some people find the prospect of moving in and out of others’ communities and world-views disturbing and that those of us who value that movement need to talk more about what it is like to do that, why we value it, and how we can maintain our basic commitments while doing so.

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Beyond “Surreptitious Staring”: Migration, Missions, and the Generativity of Mormonism for the Comparative and Translocative Study of Religion

Thomas A. Tweed

In 1861, Mark Twain and his brother set out from St. Louis on a westward journey by stagecoach, and Roughing It, published in 1872, includes an account of what they found along the way, including Mormons. Twain offered a somewhat mixed assessment of the Latter-day Saints. He mounted a limited, and half-hearted, defense of Mormonism at a time when defenders were scarce, suggesting that “there was nothing vicious in its teachings.” 1 At the same time, he dismissed Brigham Young as monarchical and the Book of Mormon as somniferous: that sacred text, he claimed, “is chloroform in print.” The real “miracle,” Twain proposed, was that Smith stayed awake during the production of the book. 2 I will leave it to others to assess the leadership of Young and the soporific—or stimulating—effects of the Book of Mormon. I’m more interested in

2. Twain, Roughing It, 549, 107.
other passages in Twain’s *Roughing It*, passages that describe his encounters with Mormons on the move and Mormons who had settled. “We overtook a Mormon emigrant train of thirty-three wagons,” Twain recalled, “and tramping wearily along and driving their herd of loose cows, were dozens of coarse-clad and sad-looking men, women and children, who had walked as they were walking now, day after day for eight lingering weeks, and in that time had compassed the distance our stage had come in *eight days and three hours*—seven hundred and ninety-eight miles! They were dusty and uncombed, hatless, bonnetless and ragged, and they did look so tired!”3 Another passage records Twain’s reaction to Salt Lake City, where earlier Mormon migrants had settled:

> ... hurried on to the home of the Latter-day Saints, the stronghold of the prophets, the capital of the only absolute monarch in America—Great Salt Lake City. ... We walked about the streets ... and ... there was fascination in surreptitiously staring at every creature we took to be a Mormon. This was fairy-land to us ... —a land of enchantment, and goblins, and awful mystery. We felt a curiosity to ask every child how many mothers it had ... and we experienced a thrill every time a dwelling-house door opened and shut as we passed, disclosing a glimpse of human heads and backs and shoulders—for we so longed to have a good satisfying look at a Mormon family in all its comprehensive ampleness.4

These passages allude to some enduring representations of the Latter-day Saints: they “tramp[ed] wearilyalong,” as Twain put it, on the westward passage, heroically enduring hardships as they went. In that sense, their story seems to harmonize with other US narratives about the trans-Mississippi West, tales about hardy individualism and collective destiny. At the same time, Mormons stood apart. They had prophets when the time for prophecy had passed. They had new scripture after the canon had closed. They had theocracy after democracy had won the day. They practiced polygamy (at least until the turn of the century) when the Vic-

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3. Twain, *Roughing It*, 76.
torian Protestant god was sacralizing the monogamous home.\(^5\)

Most important for my purpose, which is to consider the implications of Mormonism for the comparative and transnational study of religion, it’s instructive to note Twain’s attitude toward both the people and the place. Twain confessed to a “curiosity” about Mormons that bordered on a perverse voyeurism as he fought the impulse to “ask every child how many mothers it had” and confessed to a “thrill” when he “surreptitiously star[ed]” at the body parts revealed “every time a dwelling-house door opened.” For Twain, the Mormons’ Salt Lake City was “a land of enchantment, and goblins, and awful mystery.” And, for many of us who don’t specialize in Mormonism, so it has remained.

But that approach won’t yield much as those of us who are nonspecialists try to consider the implications of Mormonism for the study of religion more broadly. So trying to move beyond “surreptitious staring” at the “land of enchantment’s” exotic inhabitants—and shifting the focus away from the usual representations (we get it, Mormons were polygamous)—in this brief essay I want to discuss Mormon displacement and emplacement, as Twain did, and I want to propose that consideration of these two themes, and others, shows that the Latter-day Saints offer an exceptionally generative case study for translocative history, historical accounts that trace cultural flows across geographical boundaries, and comparative analysis, the justly maligned but still useful strategy of interpreting one tradition in terms of another.

Some themes for a comparative study of Mormonism

It seems to me that Mormonism offers scholars of religion a number of interesting points of comparison. Let me mention a few. The rise of Mormonism can be usefully compared with the emergence of other new religious movements (including Christianity and Islam), and that comparison

\(^5\) I say “turn of the century” here since although the edict against polygamy came in 1890, it was not until 1905 that church members started being excommunicated for practicing polygamy. I am grateful to Philip Barlow for this insight.
can yield—and has yielded—productive proposals about why some move-
ments flourish and others don’t.6 Mormonism has a founder who has in-
vited illuminating comparisons with other founders—from Muhammad
to Mary Baker Eddy—and has provoked analysis of what happens when
those founders die.7 Those who study trance will be interested in Joseph
Smith’s visionary encounters with suprahuman beings, and scholars who
study magic and the occult will find much to hold their attention too, in-
cluding Smith’s use of seer stones and golden plates. The mature Mormon
body is clothed with sacred undergarments and marked by ritual prac-
tice, and it might be interesting to compare Mormon with Sikh, Zoroas-
trian, and Daoist bodily practices.8 Even if some have claimed that
Mormons do not have a theology but only a history, LDS beliefs and val-
ues provide interesting points of comparison with other traditions, in-
cluding views about what happens to bodies after death. Views about the
afterlife (and the premortal life too) are linked, in turn, with Mormon
beliefs about the family, which is “the unit of exaltation” for the Saints,
and those views might be fruitfully compared with, for example, the
practices of ancestor cults in West Africa and East Asia.9 To mention a
final theme that might prove useful for comparison, as Twain noted in
the passage I quoted, Mormons historically have had distinctive views
about church-state relations, and scholars interested in religion and pol-
itics in other cultural contexts and historical periods might find much of
interest in a tradition whose founder once ran for president of the United
States.

ture of New Religious Movements, ed. David G. Bromley and Phillip E. Hammond
(Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 11–29. See also a collection of essays on
the tradition: Rodney Stark, The Rise of Mormonism, ed. Reid L. Neilson (New York: Co-
lumbia University Press, 2005).

7. See Timothy Miller, When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious

8. For comparative analysis of religion and the body, see Sarah Coakley, ed., Religion

9. On the family as “the unit of exaltation,” see Jan Shipps, Mormonism: The Story of a
Crossing as a theme in Mormonism

Of all the themes that show some promise for the translocative and comparative study of religion, two others that Twain hinted at—and that emerge from my own historical, ethnographic, and theoretical work—seem especially generative: crossing and dwelling. In my theory of religion, I argued that religions are about crossing and dwelling. They are about emplacement and displacement, about finding a place and moving across space. In the remainder of this essay, I’ll focus on the first theme—crossing.

And Mormonism seems to emphasize crossings of all sorts. As I understand the term, religious crossings can be terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic: in other words, traditions prescribe and proscribe movement across the landscape, the life cycle, and the ultimate horizon of human life, however that is imagined. To focus only on two terrestrial crossings—or the ways that religions propel devotees across the natural landscape—both migration and missions seem especially important in Mormonism and especially useful for comparisons. For example, the introduction to an official LDS history, Our Heritage, includes a map that “shows the locations and routes of travel that were important in the early history of the Church.” And “the Mormon Pioneer Trail,” included on the official LDS website, offers a virtual representation and historical narrative that emphasizes the spiritual significance of the migration to Salt Lake City. This site maps the 1,300-mile trail that was followed by


11. Our History: A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), vii. The Mormon trek also was a major focus of the May 2006 annual meeting of the Mormon History Association in Casper, Wyoming.

70,000 migrants from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Great Salt Lake Valley. The webpage invites viewers to “take the journey with them. Stop along the trail and read their own accounts of what happened.” The viewer can choose to “start from the beginning” and go to the first site on the journey, as the Saints flee Missouri between 1839 and 1846 and “cross into Illinois.” After the martyrdom of their founder, and the continuing harassment of other Saints, many in Illinois decided to make the mass “exodus” to the West. And by clicking on sites along the trail, the virtual migrant can reenact the trek through Iowa, Nebraska, and Wyoming and on to Salt Lake, where Brigham Young, whom the webpage identifies as “an American Moses,” led the exodus to the promised land, the “sacred city” in the valley.13

So, as with many other peoples and traditions, migration of all kinds—voluntary, coerced, and forced—plays an important role in LDS history and identity.14 The most obvious comparisons are with ancient and modern Jews, a people in motion who have sought to settle in the land set apart for them. But migration—and other kinds of compelled and constrained crossings—has had spiritual significance for many other peoples and traditions as well, from the horrific middle passage of African slaves to the People's Temple's trek to Guyana, where they hoped to set up a religious utopia, and from the Puritan transatlantic voyage to New England to the Asian Buddhists and Latino Catholics who have come to the United States since 1965.


Mormons have been moving around for other reasons too—to bring others to the faith—and missions have been another important kind of terrestrial crossing for the Latter-day Saints. The term *missionary* has referred more narrowly to a Christian charged with spreading the faith, though by extension scholars have used it to label emissaries of other traditions as well. Not all religious traditions have dispatched representatives to convert others, and even those that have a history of such activity have not supported religious emissaries as vigorously in all times and places. Trying to follow Jesus’s scriptural injunction to “make disciples of all nations,” however, some Christians have sought converts beyond the homeland’s boundaries. Some have evangelized with little ecclesiastical or governmental support and by attempting to entice converts by appeals to reason, as with Ramón Lull (ca. 1232–1316), the Franciscan who preached to Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula and northern Africa. At other times missionaries were representatives of the state and used coercion, even violence, to win converts. Charlemagne turned to coercion to bring the Saxons to the faith, even laying out penalties that included death for those who refused baptism. Missionaries have been less prominent during most of Islamic history, yet there are some instances of systematic attempts to seek converts. For example, the Ismaili Shīʿī caliph-imams of the Fatimid Dynasty, especially al-Muʿizz (953–975), the Fatimid ruler who transformed the caliphate from a regional power to an expansive empire, drew on a network of *dāʿīs*, or “religio-political missionaries,” within and outside the boundaries of the Islamic state. Before and after al-Muʿizz’s rule, those missionaries managed to gain Ismaili converts from northern Africa to the Indian subcontinent. As with Islam and Christianity, at some moments in its history, Buddhism also has been spread by monastic- or state-sponsored representatives of the faith. Buddhists, for example, have trumpeted Aśoka’s role in the tradition’s early expansion: Aśoka (ca. 300–232 BCE) sent missionary monks to regions within and beyond his empire, including Sri Lanka.¹⁵

All this might yield illuminating comparisons with the Mormons, who began to spread the faith to other North Americans almost immediately and traveled abroad as early as 1837, when four Latter-day Saints headed for the British Isles. A strong tradition of missionary activity developed, and now many young people from eighteen to twenty-five years of age serve as missionaries for eighteen months to two years, after entering one of fifteen missionary training centers around the world. The LDS Church reports that nearly 70,000 missionaries—most of them young people—are serving at any one time. This is noteworthy, as sociologist Rodney Stark noticed, in meeting one of the conditions for a successful new religious movement: it socializes and engages the young. “Successful movements,” Stark proposed, “find important things for young people to do on behalf of their faith, that early on they provide


17. Statistics about the number of missionaries are from the official web page of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/missionary-program.
ways by which youth can exhibit and build commitment. Here,” Stark continued, “the Mormon practice of basing its primary missionary effort on teenage volunteers stands out.”

As important for the character and scope of contemporary Mormonism, however, all this foreign missionary activity has had astonishing results. As Jan Shipps noted while analyzing the recent growth—and the concomitant shift in emphasis from ethnic to religious identity—according to church estimates, the Latter-day Saints claimed one million members in 1947, most of them in North America. By 1982, membership had grown to 5 million and to 10 million by 1997. Expanding at an average rate of about 1 million new members every three years, the church estimates the current membership at more than 14 million, about one quarter of them Spanish speakers, who now make up a larger proportion of members than English speakers. Further, only about 14 percent of Saints now live in the Utah, and since 1996, more than half have lived outside the United States. Former LDS president Gordon B. Hinckley explained this growth by pointing to several factors: the church provides “an anchor in a world of shifting values,” it “gives purpose to life,” and converts “find sociability” in the organization. Whatever the reason for


20. The church membership statistics I cite here are those reported by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on their official web page: “Facts and Statistics,” http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/. As of September 2013, they reported 14,782,473 members worldwide, with 29,014 congregations using 177 languages. I realize that some scholars have raised questions about the reliability of self-reported information about religions in general and Mormons in particular. On that see Rick Phillips, “Rethinking the International Expansion of Mormonism,” Novo Religio 10/1 (August 2006): 52–68.

the growth, it is now “the most serious challenge we face,” Hinkley suggested in an interview. All this successful missionary outreach has meant the need for many new translations of the Book of Mormon (and other texts) as well as the building of many new temples. And temples have been built at an astonishing rate in recent decades, as all this crossing has led to dwelling, or in other words, this moving has led to settling (and even a noteworthy decline in movement and in the reenactment of the “pioneer” hardships, as many Saints now have to travel less distance to visit a temple). As of September 2013, there were 141 Mormon temples, and just more than half (73) of those outside the United States, including in cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Mormonism and translocative history

So like the Roman Catholic Church or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Mormonism has become a transnational organization, and that has implications not only for studies that compare themes across periods and places, but also for histories that trace the crisscrossing flows of religious practices, artifacts, and institutions across regional boundaries. In fact, it’s difficult to imagine a more interesting case for this sort of history, which I call translocative rather than transnational to signal that I want to displace the nation as the default unit of analysis, since the scale of such studies can be both smaller and larger than the nation, just as the temporal span can be both smaller and larger than the “era.” Translocative interpretations, as I have proposed, nudge us to reconsider both the spatialization and periodization of our historical narratives.

22. Our History, 141.
23. I am indebted to John-Charles Duffy for the reminder that temple building has led to a decline in movement in some ways.
Although I don’t have space to argue the point here, I think the same might be true of translocative histories of Mormonism—and histories of religion in the Americas, and elsewhere, that take the LDS tradition seriously. It’s a tradition, after all, that affirms that ancient Near Eastern peoples came to America in Old Testament times and that opens its official history by recounting the period of “spiritual darkness” following the death of Jesus’s apostles, thereby expanding the temporal and spatial boundaries of its sacred story. In recent decades this tradition has also reached across the globe, transforming and being transformed by contacts and exchanges along the way.26

So writing a history of the Latter-day Saints—or of religion in the Americas—that attends to Mormonism’s growth during the past half century, as well as to the earlier efforts of missionaries and migrants, means that we would need to recalibrate Mormon history in terms of the periodizations of other cultures. For example, to acknowledge the transculturation that occurred during the first (mostly unsuccessful) Mormon mission to Japan from 1901 to 1924, we might want to talk about Meiji and Taishō Mormonism, using the traditional labels for those decades in Japanese history, as we also might talk, in turn, about Modernist or Progressive Era Japan.27 In a similar way, translocative narratives must be multi-sited, and any history of Mormonism would need to consider the movement of people, things, and practices back and forth between Salt Lake City (and many other sites in the United States) and—noting only some Latin American cities with temples—São Paulo, Santiago, Mexico


City, Lima, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, and Caracas. But how do we tell a coherent tale about religious history with multiple beginnings and multiple locales? I’m not sure. Reflecting on the history of Mormonism might be a good place to start, however, as we respond to the challenge of writing boundary-crossing narratives.

So, as I have tried to suggest, Mormonism can serve as a generative case study for comparative religious studies, transnational American Studies, and translocative history. As nonspecialists try to move beyond the voyeuristic gaze, the “surreptitious staring” at “curiosities” behind the “dwelling-house door,” we might consider the ways that Mormonism challenges the chronologies and cartographies of religious histories, and we might ponder the illuminating cross-cultural comparisons, especially as we attend to historical actors such as missionaries and migrants and narrative themes such as dwelling and crossing.

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28. There are local and regional studies of Mormonism in Latin America, including these historical and social scientific studies of Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, and Argentina: F. LaMond Tullis, Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1987); Mark L. Grover, “The Mormon Church and German Immigrants in Southern Brazil: Religion and Language,” Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas 26 (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1989), 295–308; Henri Gooren, Rich among the Poor: Church, Firm, and Household among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala (Amsterdam: Thela Thesis, 1999); and César Ceriani Cernadas, Nuestros hermanos lamanitas: Indios y fronteras en la imaginación mormona (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2008).
The State of Mormon Folklore Studies

Tom Mould and Eric A. Eliason

In 1892 the fledgling *Journal of American Folklore* published Salt Lake City Unitarian minister Reverend David Utter’s brief observations on Mormon customs, beliefs, and angelic narratives such as three Nephite stories. Since this time, Mormons as subject matter, and later as practitioners, have become perhaps more significant in the field of folklore than in any other academic discipline with the exception of American religious history.

Following national trends in the humanities over the last few decades, the field of folklore studies has experienced a general decline in programs and academic appointments. Yet the Mormon heartland of Utah has stood out as a state particularly committed to the discipline even as it too has begun to see cutbacks. The Chase Home Museum of Utah Folk Arts, headed by Carol Edison and Craig Miller, was the only such museum in the country until its recent closure owing to budget cuts. Jan Brunvand—arguably the most famous folklorist in the country—made his career at the University of Utah drawing on numerous LDS examples in his popularization of the folklore term *urban legend.* For many years Barre Toelken led Utah State University’s well-regarded master’s program in folklore, one of few in the country. USU Press has been one of the top three or four presses for academic folklore publishing, responsible for the most popular classroom textbooks and much cutting-edge folklore scholarship. USU’s folklore archive houses the records of the American Folklore Society and the papers of leading folklorists such as Don Yoder and Elliott Oring. It took on all of the UCLA folklore archive’s materials.
when that program closed. When William A. “Bert” Wilson retired, the
swath he had cut was so large that BYU hired four folklorists to replace
him. Brunvand, Toelken, and Wilson are perhaps the most recognized
configuration of folklore’s “Three Nephites” even outside of Utah, where
Three Nephite lore is perhaps even more widely known among folklorists
than among Mormons. That this is their collective nickname speaks to
the fruitfully intertwined nature of Utah’s predominant religious culture
and the field of folklore.

It is perhaps fitting that this inaugural issue of the *Mormon Studies Re-
view* includes an examination of one of the oldest and most well-developed
academic traditions of Mormon studies. Variously understood as a cul-
turally distinct people, religion, and region, Mormondom has naturally
attracted the attention of folklorists, who define themselves in terms of
their interest in the oral narratives, customs, beliefs, and vernacular ma-
terial culture of exactly this kind of group. While our aim is primarily to
review the current state of affairs of Mormon folklore studies, this cannot
be properly done without first summarizing past surveys of the field and
reconsidering their conclusions in light of recent findings and developing
methodologies and theoretical approaches. In so doing, we hope this
essay will inform scholars of Mormonism in all disciplines about folklore
studies’ understandings of the Mormon experience.

**Review of past surveys of Mormon folklore scholarship**

The landscape of Mormon folklore studies has been explicitly surveyed
three times during the past four decades, beginning almost one hundred
years after Reverend Utter’s first published scholarship on the topic.
William Wilson was the first to cast a glance backward with the goal of
surveying previous scholarship in order to introduce a special issue of
the *Utah Historical Quarterly* devoted to the study of Mormon folklore
as well as to validate folklore studies to a Mormon audience. Working

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primarily historically, Wilson identified the first scholars to approach the subject and explained how their work, operating synergistically, spawned a fairly vibrant era of scholarship in the early years of the field. Wilson further noted that, paralleling shifts throughout the study of folklore, scholars studying Mormon folklore shifted from viewing the songs and stories they were collecting as survivals of the past to seeing them as vibrant traditions that often told much more about what is relevant and meaningful in the present than about the past they purportedly described. He also pointed to past oversights such as assuming cultural homogeneity among all Mormons, focusing on the text to the detriment of situational context and audience interpretation, ignoring the people who create and perform these folk traditions, and attending only to Utah Mormons. It is this last complaint that is particularly noteworthy since so much of the history Wilson recounted was tied to the region, where Utah and Mormon were often assumed to be synonyms—an assumption that continued long after his article.

Jill Terry (now Jill Terry Rudy) picked up where Wilson left off, attempting to capture the state of Mormon folklore studies of the 1970s and 80s. Because Rudy was writing for the Utah Folklife Newsletter, it is not surprising that her lens was trained on Utah, but a more significant explanation for this focus is that the bulk of Mormon folklore scholars were located in Utah, doing their research close to home, examining a community that remained intimately tied in many minds to the Intermountain West centered in Utah but including parts of Idaho, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Colorado. Like William Wilson, Rudy noted that past studies focused heavily on collection, preservation, and interpretation, most notably of songs, ballads, and stories; but she credited Austin and Alta Fife’s seminal book Saints of Sage and Saddle for addressing custom and belief as well. She also argued that the focus of folklore studies on Mormon belief in the

supernatural was a particularly important contribution of the field to the understanding of Mormon culture, highlighting key religious beliefs pervasive in Mormon thought and practice.

Themes addressed in early studies continued to be explored, but with new approaches or dimensions. In addition to studies of humor attending to J. Golden Kimball anecdotes\(^4\) and jokes about Scandinavian immigrants,\(^5\) studies of various joke cycles circulating among contemporary Latter-day Saints began to emerge.\(^6\) Narrative study continued to prove fruitful, echoing the focus on the Three Nephites of the past, but with additional corpuses including missionary tales, spirit children stories (now more commonly known to folklorists as PBEs, or prebirth experiences), and testimonies.\(^7\) Rudy cast past scholarship on material culture as monolithic in conveying the image of a culturally homogenous Mormon community that Wilson warned about, and therefore heralded work in vernacular architecture, particularly by Mark Leone and Thomas

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Carter, as important shifts toward the articulation of a more accurate heterogeneity. New explorations in folklore study, however, also began to emerge, including attention to folk speech, women, and new methodologies in which interview data that provided emic interpretation joined textual analysis as an increasingly meaningful way to approach folklore analysis.

A decade or so passed until, in 2004, David Stanley edited *Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources.* Because of the overlap between the regional study of folklore in the Intermountain West and the religious study of Mormon folklore, the book contained numerous histories of Mormon folklore scholarship—including biographical sketches of seminal scholars such as Hector Lee, Austin and Alta Fife, and Thomas Cheney,

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11. For example, Gilkey, “Mormon Testimony Meeting” (1979).

among others—as well as Jill Terry Rudy’s second survey of Mormon folklore scholarship. Rudy’s goal here was comprehensive: to capture the full history of Mormon folklore studies, albeit in brief. To do so, she tracked the study of Mormon folklore both historically and thematically, guided by a number of questions, including why folklorists have identified Mormons and Mormon folklore as a significant subject for study and what the study of Mormon folklore can tell us about a shared Mormon ethos. In addressing these questions, Rudy discussed how the study of Mormon folklore shifted from a regional focus to a religious one as the reach of the LDS Church expanded across the country and around the world. She echoed her own and Wilson’s previous surveys, noting that past scholarship had been heavily text-based with a particular focus on songs, stories, and the supernatural.

Material on the supernatural receives slightly different treatment now that fifteen years have passed. Instead of accolades, the focus on the supernatural has become problematic by creating too great an imbalance and a false impression that the daily lives of Latter-day Saints are consumed with supernatural encounters and experiences. While it is true that expectations for divine intercession are fundamental to Mormon thought and theology, it is also true that folklore studies have often focused on the most dramatic supernatural elements of the oral, material, and customary lore of Latter-day Saints and have provided insufficient attention to, in William Wilson’s words, stories of “the quiet lives of committed service.” Rudy joined Wilson in calling for a greater shift of attention from the supernatural to the committed service aspect of Mormon religious living.

In considering the work at the turn of the twenty-first century, Rudy suggested that the future of Mormon folklore studies would be more ethnographic and would address issues of identity and heritage politics. She noted that some of the most recent scholarship had taken a historical

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turn—namely, Margaret Brady’s biographical study of nineteenth-century folk healer and poet Mary Susannah Fowler and Eric Eliason’s work on pioneer nostalgia and J. Golden Kimball stories—but also suggested areas that she and others hoped would be explored in greater measure. These included more attention to the LDS Church in international contexts, a focus on the contemporary lives of diverse members, performance-oriented studies, and comparative work to place the Mormon experience within larger contexts. Although more oblique in her call, she also noted the need for scholars “in and out of the church” to take up the study of Mormon folklore.

Hindsight: Revising the past

These surveys provide an excellent picture of Mormon folklore studies up to the turn of the twenty-first century. Looking back at them with the advantage of hindsight, however, suggests room for revision, as does the decade of studies between the 2004 survey and today.

The concern about conflating regional with religious lore has meant that some histories of the development of Mormon folklore studies have ignored excellent work in vernacular architecture and material culture. For example, while Austin and Alta Fife are heralded for their book Saints of Sage and Saddle, Austin’s typological work on hay derricks that is regional rather than specifically Mormon is typically ignored. If we are


to truly understand daily life, then traditions shared among, if not unique to, Mormons in the Intermountain West must also be considered as part of the scholarly history. The same is true for Carol Edison’s work on cemeteries19 and regional books of folklore in the Intermountain West, such as Louie Attebery’s edited book *Idaho Folklife: Homesteads to Headstones*, a collection that includes a reprint of Fife’s hay derrick study and one of Edison’s analyses of gravestones.20 The distinction between regional and religious identity is important, but the over-corrective may be too severe, requiring us to mine these regional studies for important Mormon folk expression and suggesting future work of sussing out the parallels and differences in specific folk traditions.

Concerns that Mormon folklore studies have often ignored deeply spiritual religious traditions, focusing instead on unusual supernatural occurrences, beliefs, and legends such as those about the Three Nephites, should be tempered. While the intense focus on the Three Nephites is noteworthy, it is important not to overlook a substantial body of scholarship that has attended to religious traditions more at the center of Mormon spiritual life. This corpus begins as early as 1942 with Wallace Stegner’s *Mormon Country*, which, while not being an explicit analysis of religious tradition, nonetheless looks carefully at Mormon religious life.21 Then there are Austin and Alta Fife’s description of the life cycle of Mormon religious life,22 Carolyn Gilkey’s and David Knowlton’s analyses of testimony narratives and meetings,23 George Schoemaker’s analysis of

23. Gilkey, “Mormon Testimony Meeting” (1979); Carolyn Flatley Gilkey, “Verbal Per-
marriage confirmation narratives,24 Eric Eliason’s and Reinhold Hill’s analyses of conversion narratives,25 and the study of missionary customs and traditions by William A. Wilson, Jill Terry Rudy, and David Knowlton.26 When tallied, the balance may still tip toward the supernaturally dramatic more than everyday lived religion, but scholarship that attends to deeply held religious belief has been a consistent part of Mormon folklore study since the second half of the twentieth century and continues to grow, as with Tom Mould’s study of personal revelation narratives.27

One of the most glaring omissions of Mormon folklore studies since the 1980s, not much noted by the field’s chroniclers, has been its almost total failure, except for two short book reviews by William Wilson,28 to engage in scholarly discussion about early Mormon “folk magic” and hermeticism, most typified by Michael Quinn’s opus *Mormonism and the
Quinn’s research informed the work of major scholars of American religion, perhaps most notably John Butler’s *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* and John L. Brooke’s Bancroft Award-winning *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844*, and has profoundly shaped scholarly understanding of not just the beginnings of Mormonism but also the cultural backdrop against which emerged America’s Second Great Awakening. And while it is difficult to pinpoint a single cause of this oversight, David Allred and Eric Eliason have attempted to remedy it by bringing folkloristics to bear on the subject in several recent articles.

In looking back over the past hundred years of Mormon folklore scholarship, we might also pay more attention to the kinds of methodological and theoretical shifts that Jill Terry Rudy begins to reveal in her 2004 survey. To a large extent, the study of Mormon folklore serves as a metonym for the study of folklore in the United States more broadly. The kinds of methodological and theoretical shifts occurring in the field of folklore—more emphasis on analysis and interpretation rather than collection, a greater focus on context, the application of performance theory—have occurred in the study of Mormon folklore as well. However, there are areas where the study of Mormon folklore has developed either slightly out of step with, or in anticipation of, these larger trends. In 1976 Wilson noted that more attention needed to be paid to situational context, and he was right; but we should acknowledge that Hector Lee was beginning to ask these questions of his data on Three Nephite stories as


early as the 1940s, long before the developments in performance theory in the 1970s and 80s would begin to bring such concerns to the fore of folklore scholarship. It is also worth noting Austin Fife’s use of the historic-geographic method to develop typologies of hay derricks in ways that presaged Henry Glassie’s seminal study of folk housing in Middle Virginia.\textsuperscript{32} This approach is rare in the field today, though Jason Jackson has shown in his study of Yuchi dancing that such questions remain fruitfully examined in folklore study.\textsuperscript{33}

Jennifer Basquiat’s examination of Haitian Mormon converts’ bodies and movements as sites of, and conduits for, traditionally transmitted cultural experience\textsuperscript{34} resonates with both LDS theology’s emphasis on the divine nature and essential salvific role of human bodies and recent work on “bodylore” in the field of folklore.\textsuperscript{35} David Hufford’s experience-centered approach to religious folklore takes seriously as empirical evidence first-person accounts of encounters with spiritual and/or supernatural beings in much the same way that the field has long taken seriously people’s understanding of the medicinal properties of plants or the aesthetic criteria by which people judge their own material and verbal folk art.\textsuperscript{36} Hufford has found Mormon theology to be particularly well suited to interpret the kinds of pre-birth and post-death encounters that

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\item[35.] See, for example, a special edition on bodylore in the \textit{Journal of American Folklore} 107/423 (1994); and Katharine Young, \textit{Bodylore} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).
\end{itemize}
people of all cultures have with loved ones, as well as the kind of encounters they have with usually human-shaped malevolent or glorious beings, a topic Eric Eliason has further fleshed out in his study of angels in the Mormon experience and pre-birth experience narratives.37

Several instances of scholars in other disciplines reinventing the wheel to generate for themselves concepts akin to those central to folklore studies have occurred in recent years to the mixed delight and exasperation of folklorists long eager to promote the usefulness of their work to other disciplines. Scholars of Mormon family dynamics have followed the lead of their family studies discipline in investigating the importance of customs, traditions, and rituals to functional families.38 In religious studies, the recently popular concept of “lived religion” is markedly similar to folklorists’ venerable “folklife” approach in which scholars focus on how religious, cultural, and ethnic identities are actually lived in the day-to-day practice of regular group members, rather than treated as discrete genres of expressive culture or as the definitional claims that the group’s leaders stipulate. This approach has been a central feature of folkloristics since the 1970s. It would be tempting to believe that “lived religion” was lifted whole cloth from the field of folklore were it not for the dearth of any reference to folklorists by religious studies scholars.39

These instances of intellectual reinvention raise a larger question about scholarly identity. In some cases folklorists stand at the vanguard, in others they act as bricoleurs, and in still others, they and scholars from other fields work at the margins where folklore and related disciplines


Accordingly, we should be attentive to the work undertaken by scholars outside the field who are exploring the kinds of traditions that folklorists have come to claim as central to their field. These traditions consist of ballads, folk songs, narratives (including legends, personal experience, and histories), material culture, and vernacular architecture. Accordingly, the history of Mormon folklore studies should include the work of cultural geographers and architectural historians such as Thomas Carter, Richard Francaviglia, Richard H. Jackson, Robert Layton, Donald Meinig, Lowry Nelson, and Robert Winter; sociologists such as Armand L. Mauss and anthropologist David R. Knowlton; and religious studies scholars such as Richley H. Crapo—all of whom have attended to vernacular traditions of Mormons in the same way that Jill Terry Rudy drew archaeologist Mark Leone into her earliest survey of folklore scholarship on account of his work in Mormon architecture.40 Such a move is neither radical nor unprecedented; folklore has always been a field that has drawn loose boundaries for membership.

Somewhat more problematic, but still productively drawn into any survey of Mormon folklore studies, are the studies done by historians considering vernacular histories of the LDS Church. William Hartley’s study of the story of the miracle of the gulls and crickets provides a useful example.41 Such work is somewhat discordant with folklore studies because Hartley’s approach, like many historical approaches, undertakes as its primary objective to distinguish fact from fiction in the various accounts of a historical event, whereas folklorists are more apt to address questions such as what these different versions suggest about perceptions, beliefs, and values; the aesthetics of oral versions of these stories; and how generic norms influence form, function, and performance. But Hartley’s study remains relevant to Mormon folklore studies because it assembles multiple versions of a key Mormon folk legend for analysis.

and helps to parse those areas that are supported by historical evidence and those areas that diverge based on perspective and time. Further, in the first half century of Mormon folklore studies, it has been historians rather than folklorists who have attended to folklore about Mormons, with Austin and Alta Fife’s Saints of Sage and Saddle serving as the main exception, making clear the important contributions historians have made to the study of folklore.

More often identified in the history of Mormon folklore studies, however, is not disciplinary identity but tensions between academically trained scholars and amateur collectors. One of the most notable examples of this tension was when Kate B. Carter, president of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, was rumored to have been telling interviewees for her book series of faith-promoting stories not to talk to Hector Lee or any of his university colleagues who were engaged in similar work. Certainly part of this can be explained by commercial territorialism, but there is also the suggestion that Carter was worried that stories she viewed as spiritually powerful would be handled inappropriately by academics. Such tensions are hardly confined to Mormon folklore study and can be linked to the far broader “town-and-gown” tensions that are perceived as endemic and inherent. Yet in folklore this divide between academic-trained folklorist and amateurish collection remains, as evidenced by the many popular press collections of ghost stories and folktales, many of which have been reworked and retold by authors, rendering them of little use to academic folklorists.

In Mormon studies, there is a parallel divide between faith-promoting books written for church members and academic studies written by and for academic audiences. This divide is significant enough to make it difficult to argue for such faith-promoting works to be included in a survey of Mormon folklore scholarship, but it is worth pointing out that for those academic studies that tackle vernacular religious traditions, there is a good chance that analogues by both amateur collectors and LDS Church authorities also exist. For example, stories of personal revelation have been addressed by amateur author and church member JoAnn Hibbert Hamilton in Personal Revelation: How to Recognize Promptings of
the Spirit, emeritus General Authority Gerald N. Lund in Hearing the Voice of the Lord: Principles and Patterns of Personal Revelation, and academic folklorist Tom Mould in Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition.42

Current state of affairs

Having examined, evaluated, and revised surveys of the state of Mormon folklore scholarship up to the turn of the twenty-first century, we come to the most recent period of scholarship, from 2000 to the present. In light of specific calls from Wilson and Rudy for study in specific areas and issues, we might ask how well the field has met those calls and what trends have since emerged.

First, it should be noted that there has not been a huge increase in Mormon folklore scholarship in the past decade. With a small number of works to examine, trends are difficult to identify. When these works are placed within the larger context of Mormon folklore research, however, it is possible to identify patterns that appear to endure by either continuing into the present or taking interesting detours.

The call for greater ethnographic fieldwork not only has been heeded but also has provided the avenue for additional strides in attending to audience interpretations and the heterogeneity of Mormon perspectives, behaviors, and traditions. The growing shift toward ethnography in Mormon folklore studies is not surprising. Folklore as a discipline developed out of two academic traditions: one based on literary texts and focused on ballads, the other ethnographic with a focus on American Indian culture and mythology. Mormon folklore studies grew out of the text-based ballad branch of the discipline, and the history of Mormon folklore

scholarship has reflected this origin. But now much of the field, even for those scholars focused on narrative analysis, has shifted toward greater and more critical uses of ethnography.

In 2000 David Allred noted the fairly traditional field research practices of the Fifes that tended toward positivism, and he therefore called for the more dialogic, contested discourses that are possible through reflexive ethnography. That same year, Margaret Brady prophetically answered that call in her biography of Mary Susannah Fowler, a primarily historical work relying on archival research but including interviews with some of Fowler’s descendants in a move toward reflexive ethnography. In 2011 Tom Mould continued the synthesis of ethnography and archival research as Brady had done but reversed the balance, this time with the archival data serving to provide depth and breadth to a primarily ethnographic study that moved outside the Intermountain West to North Carolina. In between, a number of scholars have used ethnography as their primary methodology, including Eric Eliason in his study of Pioneer Day celebrations and Russian “Mormony,” Jennifer Huss Basquiat in her analysis of religious practices of Haitian Mormons, Kristi Young in her analysis of creative dating traditions, and Kent Bean is his examination of the Manti Miracle Pageant.

These ethnographic studies have opened up views into the diversity of the traditions and perspectives of Mormons past and present. This diversity appears within congregations and among members, as Brady and Allred note, as well as across regions as Basquiat’s study highlights. While the increase in regional variation has been affected by studies within the

United States, the bulk of the scholarship has been focused internationally, with Rudy’s study of foodways in Guatemala, Eliason’s study of religious identity in Russia, and Underwood’s study of religious identity among the Maori in New Zealand. Eliason and Underwood take a primarily historical approach in their articles on Russians and Maoris. Basquiat’s efforts to track shifts in practice and doctrinal interpretation among Haitians and Eliason’s study of pioneer day celebrations in other countries, however, suggest a particularly rich avenue for exploring cultural variation, particularly as it suggests a vibrant vernacular tradition in a church often characterized as highly centralized, authoritative, and hierarchical.

The same is true for the more historical studies of Jessie Embry and Jorge Iber, who have been exploring Mormonism among the nonwhite minority Latter-day Saints in the United States, including Asian American and Hispanic members. These studies, taken together but particularly those of Basquiat, Eliason, and Underwood, have examined how Mormon identity is constructed and maintained among men and women who must balance competing claims on national, regional, and additional religious identities, clearly fulfilling Rudy’s vision of a future where the politics of identity are explored in greater detail. Further, Mould’s attention to religious reputations within LDS ward units as opposed to comparatively across non-Mormon contexts attends not only to the construction of Mormon identity but also to the variation within these identities.

47. See, in particular, Jessie L. Embry, “In His Own Language”: Mormon Spanish-Speaking Congregations in the United States (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1997); Embry, Asian American Mormons: Bridging Cultures (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1999); and Jorge Iber, Hispanics in the Mormon Zion (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000).
Gender as one important piece of that identity has been addressed in past scholarship but remains understudied today. This work has been taken up primarily by female scholars outside the LDS Church. Continued ethnographic study of traditions performed within the explicitly gendered spaces of Relief Society and the implicitly gendered spaces of church and home more generally deserves greater attention, particularly in terms of how women use these traditions to respond to the patriarchy of the church.

With ethnography comes variety and variation, situated performances, and divergence in view and opinion. It also has the potential to highlight individual performers. This potential has to a large extent gone unaddressed. There are some important exceptions. For example, Margaret Brady, as previously noted, highlighted folk poet and healer Susannah Fowler as the focus of an entire book, though it is noteworthy that Fowler had been dead for eighty years by the time Brady published her work. Folk legends and heroes such as J. Golden Kimball, Porter Rockwell, and Joseph Smith have all received attention as subjects of folklore, but except for Kimball, none were viewed as folk performers. Both Thomas Cheney and Eric Eliason recognized this dual identity in Kimball (a phenomenon common in the humorous anecdotes and tall tales in which storyteller and protagonist are typically one and the same, termed a “performer-hero” by Eliason), each authoring a book of Kimball’s stories as they have continued to be shared throughout the LDS community.

The general lack of studies focusing on folk performers as “stars” (Henry Glassie’s term) is discussed at length in The Individual and Tradition: Folkloristic Perspectives and is hardly confined to Mormon folklore studies. In that book, however, Mould argues that a problem faced

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48. For example, Lawless, “I Know If I Don’t Bear My Testimony” (1984); and Brady, “Transformations of Power” (1987).
particularly in sacred and religious traditions is the expectation for humility in performance.52 Many folk traditions have no expectation for humility, and groups are hardly monolithic in this regard. Sharing personal revelation, for example, requires humility among Mormon narrators, where joke telling among the same group does not. While this may explain the lack of recognition of individual Mormon tradition bearers as “stars” in sharing personal, sacred, and spiritual experiences, it does not explain why more attention has not been paid to individual performers in traditions that do not carry the expectation for humility. Many folk genres of narrative, material culture, and foodways, for example, should be ripe for this kind of analysis that approaches individual performers as the skilled artists they are. But what anthropologist Richard Buonforte calls Mormons’ “anti-performative performance aesthetic”53 has hindered efforts (such as his own) to draw scholarly attention to performative aspects of Sunday School lessons, testimony bearing, priesthood blessings, and church talks since Mormons tend to frown on overt flair in such situations, making the best performances, ironically, the ones that seem least like performances.

At tension with the shift toward ethnographic study is the call for greater work in comparative studies. Folklorists have tended not to do comparative work, favoring the case study and the attention to cultural specificity. That said, etic and comparative analyses are nonetheless important and useful (yet unfulfilled) approaches. Take conversion narratives, for example. Eliason has provided an important case study of the form, function, and aesthetics of conversion narratives within the Mormon church.54 Additional case studies exist for other Christian faiths, as well as for non-Christian faiths around the world. It is useful to ask, then, whether there are patterns in conversion narratives that are fairly universal among Christian groups, or among world religions more generally.

53. Personal communication to author, 1992.
In doing so, the case study is strengthened by allowing us to identify those aspects of conversion narratives that are more or less unique to a particular group and therefore illustrative of a distinct religious tradition.

Finally, hinted at in Rudy’s 2004 survey but addressed explicitly in conversations among folklorists is the degree to which Mormon folklore studies includes non-Mormons as well as Mormons. From the very beginning with the Reverend David Utter’s brief note on supernatural beliefs of Mormons in 1892, the study of Mormon folklore has been addressed by scholars outside the church. The first wave of nineteenth-century scholars specializing in Mormon folklore scholars was primarily Mormon—Thomas Cheney, Austin and Alta Fife, Hector Lee, Wayland Hand, and Lester Hubbard (but not the prominent mid-century folklorist Richard Dorson). The second wave of folklorists was primarily non-Mormon—Barre Toelken, Jan Brunvand, and Steve Siporin (but William A. Wilson was LDS). The third wave went back to being mostly Mormon—Eric Eliason, Jill Terry Rudy, David Allred, Jacqueline Thursby, and Carol Edison (but not Margaret Brady or Tom Mould). Despite these shifts in the majority, the voices of insiders and outsiders have been present throughout the history of Mormon folklore studies. That said, when one considers the sustained commitment to Mormon folklore studies, the balance tips dramatically. The vast majority of the non-Mormons working in Mormon folklore have published just one or two articles; the major books and extensive number of articles that indicate leadership in the field remain authored primarily by Mormons. Folklorist Richard Dorson’s influence should not be underestimated, but is remarkable that the books by Brady and Mould have been welcomed partly for the authors’ status as outsiders. This response recognizes the implicit concern of apologetics by Mormon authors that has often been assumed of Mormon studies—primarily in the field of history, but also in the field of folklore.

The future of Mormon folklore studies

In the past decade, the field of Mormon folklore studies has shifted toward greater ethnographic work, increased emphasis on cultural variety within the church, and the construction of multiple, disparate identities within wards and across the globe. More attention has been given to areas outside the Intermountain West and to the kinds of questions that assume variation rather than homogeneity. Yet the field has not lost its roots and continues to produce work that fits comfortably within scholarly traditions of the past to great reward. Matthew Bowman’s study of Mormon conceptions of Big Foot, for example, reflects the approach that Hector Lee took in the 1940s with Three Nephite legends, serving as an example of solid scholarship that addresses enduring questions usefully asked today.56 Similarly, folklorists continue to collect folklore as concrete items for deposit in archives and for analysis as text, aided by oral historians such as Robert Freeman and Dennis Wright in their extensive research project to gather the stories of Mormons in the military—again, important work that remains intellectually compelling and productive.57

There are certainly areas in the study of Mormon folklore that are ripe for new or further analysis. For instance, Leonard Primiano has suggested the exploration of creativity within the context of an institutionalized church.58 In the study of genre, we know that expectations for what can be conveyed—as well as how, when, and where it can be conveyed—are not inherently restrictive but can actually facilitate creativity and performance. Having the structures in place with formula, norms, and patterns as building blocks can help encourage creativity by providing


58. Personal communication to author, 2012.
blueprints from which to innovate. The creative process in the context of an institutionalized, hierarchical church like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will no doubt feel restrictive for some, but it will be liberating for others. How people create within these confines, norms, and expectations deserves greater attention, particularly in terms of function and aesthetics.

The continued spread of performance theory throughout folklore will likely continue to have an impact on the study of Mormon folklore as well, encouraging both ethnographic fieldwork as well as performance-based studies. Comprehensive, event-based approaches that consider multiple genres within a single performance context hold particular promise for understanding vernacular traditions. Carol Edison, for example, has conducted studies on gravestones and obituaries. A study of the intersecting traditions surrounding death that considers the distinct but related genres of gravestones and obituaries with music, foodways, narrative, and ritual related to death and mourning as a single coherent phenomenon would be particularly rewarding. Such a move would provide a more holistic and comprehensive use of ethnography in folklore fieldwork. Another approach would be to produce more ethnographies of a single ward like Susan Taber’s in an attempt to capture the range of traditions of the community. Although such work may seem more rewarding in an international context because of the dearth of work outside the United States, a comprehensive ethnography of this nature within the country could be equally revealing by challenging the monolithic narrative that continues to shape our understanding of Mormon folklore.

Finally, with the yearly addition of student projects to the archives at Brigham Young University and Utah State University, folklore archives will no doubt continue to provide scholars with material, whether it is for comparative, historical studies showing longitudinal shifts and trends; for targeted studies of a particular theme, topic, or genre; or for mixed method studies in which archival research is used to support ethnographic

work, or vice versa. Between the rich archives and the continued ethno-
graphic work of scholars in and outside Utah, the field appears no less vi-
brant than in the past. It does, however, show clear signs of evolution that
make it clear that Mormon folklore studies is dynamic rather than stag-
nant and that there is room, lots of room, for continued exploration.

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book of Mormonism*. 
In Defense of Methodological Pluralism: Theology, Apologetics, and the Critical Study of Mormonism

Brian D. Birch

Background

In my first year of full-time teaching at Utah Valley University (1999), its Center for the Study of Ethics received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to explore how Mormon studies might function at a state institution of higher education. The project was led by Eugene England, who asked me to assist in hosting a yearlong seminar featuring both resident and guest scholars in the field. We tasked the group with exploring what it would mean to do Mormon studies in an academically rigorous manner consistent with the values of a state university. The seminar was a very fitting manifestation of Gene’s passion and creativity before his illness and eventual passing the next summer. During this period, I was left to lead the project to conclusion and determine next steps for Mormon studies at UVU. This experience served as a powerful catalyst for questions regarding my field of study and has had a profound impact on my intellectual development.

With this background in mind, I intend to explore questions in this essay related to issues and challenges in the development of Mormon

1. The institution was at this time Utah Valley State College.
studies. Throughout the NEH seminar, two primary approaches emerged. Some argued that Mormon studies should be guided primarily by concerns in cultural studies, an important objective of which is to identify and overcome injustice. As an advocate of this perspective, Gene was quoted widely as saying that Mormon studies should both “celebrate” the cultural achievements of Latter-day Saints and scrutinize beliefs and practices detrimental to social justice. This view was driven by Gene’s well-known and unyielding hope for cultural transformation. Others, such as myself, argued that this approach faced both practical and methodological difficulties. On the practical side, which features of Mormonism are to be celebrated, and which are eligible for critique? And perhaps most importantly, who decides? To say this is certainly not to imply that cultural studies could not be an important component within Mormon studies. What I attempted to argue, rather, was that cultural studies should not be the primary methodology around which other educational values revolved.

Owing to the influential work of Peter Winch, D. Z. Phillips, and David Tracy, the intersection between devotional and critical approaches to the study of religion was a crucial question from the earliest days of my graduate studies. What emerged for me was an approach that creates space wherein diverse methodologies and perspectives are allowed adequate and appropriate voice. This space would protect and facilitate both methodological and ideological diversity, which is itself a core value in higher education (and one more central, I would argue, to the aims of the academy). Thus the criterion for inclusion in Mormon studies would be the extent to which a perspective was able to critically take account of other perspectives with intellectual rigor and with an appropriate openness to revision.

2. Seminar participants and guest lecturers included Mario De Pillis, Jan Shipps, Armand Mauss, David Whittaker, Terryl Givens, Bradley Cook, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Marie Cornwall, Dean May, Thomas Alexander, Richard Dutcher, Janet Bennion, and Michael Austin.

3. Included in UVU’s catalog offerings is a course entitled “Mormon Cultural Studies,” in which issues of race, gender, class, and so on, are explored and critically examined.
The remainder of this essay will attempt to explicate this thesis and to apply it to the debates surrounding Mormon studies at this pivotal moment in its development. My arguments will be aimed in two different directions. On the one hand, I seek to argue that Mormon studies absent theological and apologetic voices is artificially exclusionary and unproductive. On the other hand, I argue that the appeal to religious authority in deflecting critical arguments can be equally inappropriate and detrimental. To accomplish this, I will utilize the arguments of Robert Neville in his 1992 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion. The short space of this essay allows for a mere sketch of the arguments. I present them in the hope that they can inform a more sustained and rich dialogue on these issues.

Methodological pluralism

As dean of Boston University’s School of Theology, Neville was concerned to address the question of the legitimacy of theology in the academic study of religion. In his essay, he tilts toward a more inclusive sensibility, arguing that a variety of disciplines and approaches “properly belong to the study of religion until they are convincingly demonstrated to be inappropriate.”

Beyond making the general point that an angle of study is innocent until proven guilty, Neville narrows his argument to assert that theological accounts fall within religious studies insofar as they “individually can contribute to the understanding of some aspect of religion.” This latter point has been an exceptionally contentious issue in the academy. There is, for example, an entire literature surrounding


what it means to understand a religion and the extent to which this understanding is serviceable to the academy.6

Donald Wiebe, for example, has spent the better part of his career arguing that “if the academic study of religion wishes to be taken seriously as a contributor to knowledge about our world, it will have to concede the boundaries set by the ideal of scientific knowledge that characterizes the university. It will have to recognize the limits of explanation and theory and be content to explain the subject-matter—and nothing more—rather than show itself a form of political or religious behavior.” The practical application of Wiebe’s arguments would result in the abandonment of both theological and phenomenological treatments of religious belief and practice in favor of purely explanatory or “scientific” methods.7 Thus, in order to defend the integrity of his inclusive approach, Neville must establish the legitimacy of theological voices while maintaining the role of critical inquiry that lies at the heart of academic discourse. He attempts to do this by requiring that theological accounts be subject to public forms of scrutiny and open to revision, and thus “make themselves vulnerable to criticism from all sides and to sustain themselves through the process of correction.”8

Applying this criterion to the situation in Mormon studies invites us to consider the extent to which Latter-day Saint apologetic discourse may

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or may not have a place at the Mormon studies table. How we approach this question is crucial to the development of this emerging field of study. One barrier to progress lies in the historical particularities of Mormon apologetics. Though the quality of this literature has been uneven (and the discourse polarizing), this does not, in my view, affect the principle at hand. Contrary to certain of my colleagues in religious studies, I believe that apologetics can (and should) have a legitimate place in the academic study of religion; and further, that it can aid in clarifying the issues that unite and divide those of diverse faith communities. That said, I believe equally as strongly that apologetics done poorly and inappropriately has the ability to do tremendous harm to the intellectual and ethical life of a religious community. The question at hand involves the extent to which Latter-day Saint apologetic literature can meet Neville’s criterion and thus be a productive part of the academic dialogue.

The role of Mormon apologetics

Coming from the Greek word *apologia*, the term *apologetics* is understood within a Christian context to mean “the defence by argument of Christian

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9. I extend Neville’s criterion from theology to apologetics cautiously yet appropriately, I believe. Neville employs the term *theological studies* in a very broad sense to mean “those disciplines within religious studies that deal with first-order normative issues in religion” (“Religious Studies and Theological Studies,” 191). According to this description, apologetic accounts would have application here (at least to the extent of my use of the arguments). Furthermore, in my judgment, the alleged “atheological” character of Mormonism does not affect the extension of Neville’s argument to Mormon apologetics. There are indeed interesting methodological issues related to Mormonism’s resistance to the theological enterprise, but they must be left for another day. See Martin Marty, forward to *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. David L. Paulsen and Donald W. Musser (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), vii–x; Louis Midgley, “No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001); James E. Faulconer, “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Element: The Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 2/2 (Fall 2006); Brian D. Birch, “Theological Method and the Question of Truth: A Postliberal Approach to Mormon Doctrine and Practice,” in *Discourses*
beliefs.” A popular Latter-day Saint approach to apologetics is to marshal evidence and rational arguments insofar as they discredit criticisms of church doctrine, history, or practice. Known in the philosophical literature as negative apologetics, it has the relatively modest goal of neutralizing criticisms rather than proving as true a particular point of doctrine. Others maintain the legitimacy of going beyond negative apologetics and employing arguments to demonstrate the superiority of Mormon belief and practice.

Arguably the most articulate and passionate defender of this position is Daniel C. Peterson, whose approach to these issues provides an example of key issues at hand in this essay. Like me, Peterson wants to argue for a more inclusive approach to Mormon studies that would incorporate apologetic voices. “I see no reason why both apologetics and Mormon studies shouldn’t be encouraged, nor even why they can’t both be pursued by the same organization, published in the same journal, cultivated by the same scholar. There is, I believe, a place for both.” Employing the arguments of the Catholic theologian Paul Griffiths, Peterson further argues that the normative voice in the academic study of Mormonism not only has a rightful place at the table, but plays a critical role in understanding this religious tradition.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether, and to what extent, Mormon apologetics can meet Neville’s criterion of intellectual “vulnerability” such that its positions are “publicly sustainable” and “objectively correctable.” Critics of apologetics worry that these conditions are not
met because proponents of these arguments often see them as invulnerable to criticism on religious grounds. One is reminded here of the famous “falsification debate” that examined how some religious beliefs cannot function as claims at all because there are no conditions under which they could be falsified through argument or evidence. Thus, according to R. M. Hare, these beliefs must be placed in an epistemological category other than “assertions,” “claims,” or “hypotheses.”12 Because openness to error and revision of one’s position is a precondition for legitimate academic discourse, apologetic claims are often set aside as serving a purpose other than intellectual understanding.

One illustration of this phenomenon is the popular metaphor of apologetic arguments as buttresses in support of religious faith rather than serving as the foundation to faith. Employing the work of theologian Brian Hebblethwaite, Peterson understands apologetics as a “vital lifeline permitting the exercise of faith” such that “studied conviction can help a believer through spiritual dry spells.”13 This takes us directly to the heart of the matter. For at this point the question becomes the extent to which these “buttressing” arguments are revisable and subject to academic scrutiny such that they meet Neville’s criterion. Peterson will almost certainly affirm that these arguments are, at least in principle, subject to revision and correction. Indeed, to the extent apologetic arguments are said

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to rely on evidential considerations, apologists will almost always affirm their contingency relative to the force of relevant evidence. Be that as it may, one may inquire regarding the practical implications of these buttressing arguments in the life of a religious community. Within Mormonism in particular, certain of these arguments have acted as valuable supports to religious belief and action.

Finally, and more practically, whose voices will be included? To what extent would a defeating argument be allowed voice in this imagined community? Perhaps more importantly, would it be recognized as such? I maintain that in order to preserve both methodological consistency and ethical charity, inclusivity must allow arguments that could potentially defeat a valued apologetic argument. This has not been readily observable in the LDS apologetic community; but if apologetic voices are to maintain academic legitimacy in the conversation, they need to be publicly accessible to criticism and potential defeat. For Neville, theological arguments “need to be public and objective in the same sense that applies to religious studies generally, and religious communities should have just as great a commitment to this as should scholars with purely intellectual motives.” Thus, an important challenge for an inclusive Mormon studies is the ability to sustain critical dialogue while avoiding both religious polemics and secular dismissiveness.

Revelation and publicity

This brings us to a related set of considerations regarding the role of revelation and religious authority. Neville observes that a challenge to the academy is the extent to which those who advocate theological or apologetic arguments “should not have to submit the revelatory or authoritative

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14. Defeasibility is an important category in the epistemology of religion. In broad terms, it refers to a belief’s vulnerability regarding its epistemic status. A defeating argument is thus one that successfully demonstrates the weakness or falsity of a belief. See, for example, part 4 of Alvin Plantinga’s Warranted Christian Belief (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 357–73.

base of their tradition’s practice to public examination.” These considerations are amplified in the case of Mormonism, which subscribes to continuing revelation through living prophets and apostles. As John Gee puts it, academic work in Mormon studies that “neglects the influence of God in the experience of the Latter-day Saints risks being reductionist in the worst sense of the word.” Though Gee is rightly critical of reductionist accounts of religion, the issue at hand for Neville involves the academic value of the appeal to revelation. “But if the task of justification is dismissed with the assertion that the authority is authoritative and that’s that, then the claim to truth is implicitly abandoned and a retreat is made to the claim that this is what I or my community believes is true.” The point here is that, in order for apologetics to be legitimized as contributing to my imagined Mormon studies community, the appeal to revelation must not serve as a “conversation stopper.” Rather, it must be subjected to scrutiny regarding its grounds, consistency, and coherence, especially in light of other parts of the tradition or other approaches to the question of revelation. From Neville’s perspective, “an authority needs to be identified and justified, and the appeal to authority itself needs to be justified.” Otherwise, the conversation risks sliding into self-contained confession without the publicity necessary for revision or correction. This situation may be acceptable or even desirable in serving religious ends; but its academic limitations must be recognized by parties on all sides. In my judgment, ample mischief has followed from the conflation of academic and confessional considerations in the study of religion.

Conclusion

To the extent I am successful in my account, the above considerations will point us toward a “third way” between strictly apologetic and skeptical methodologies. This is the balance that must be sought if apologetics is to enter at the right place in the conversation. To the extent that Neville’s arguments apply to the situation in Mormon studies, they encourage mutual respect amid a variety of voices. “Let us honor the sources of authority and revelation while engaging in critical discussion of how they are understood and justified.”20 Whatever the merits of my case above, it must be recognized that methodological questions have always been at the heart of the academic study of religion and likely will remain so for as long as the enterprise is undertaken. Rather than balkanizing the conversation, I hope the Mormon studies community can reach out to see what might be of value in the other voice and build upon it.

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Gender in Mormon Studies: Obstacles and Opportunities

Susanna Morrill

Past and present

According to thy sex thou art a mother in Israel, thy posterity shall multiply and become numerous upon the earth, thy name shall be handed down to the latest generation in remembrance of thee as an honorable mother in Zion. (Patriarchal blessing given to Sarah Burroughs Davenport by Elisha H. Groves on 23 February 1854)¹

Even in airports, gas stations, and department stores, we Mormons could spot other Mormons: married people with several children in tow; always modestly dressed . . . ; our men clean-shaven and sort of girlish because they were free of vices, and still wearing haircuts short as missionaries; never a curse word uttered, never a Coke or a coffee or cigarette in hand. (Joanna Brooks, The Book of Mormon Girl)²

Scholars of Mormonism must consider gender as a central interpretive category in order to fully understand the history and culture of this community. Gender is an essential way that LDS leaders and members structure time and space, rituals, and cultural roles. It forms the backbone of

the habitus of Mormon cultures. The LDS community is well known for fostering traditional gender and family structures and for being self-consciously patriarchal. Davenport’s 1854 patriarchal blessing given by a member of the church’s priesthood ratified the idea that motherhood was a religious role for women. These gender structures carry through in the lived religious experiences of members as demonstrated by Joanna Brooks in her recent memoir when she describes how easily she could recognize Mormon men and women. The Mormon community nurtures these traditional gender norms in order to set itself apart from mainstream American culture. From a Mormon theological perspective, men and women are born gendered in a spiritual preexistence as spirit children of Heavenly Father and a Mother in Heaven, and they remain essentially male and female into eternity. The unit of highest exaltation is a man and women sealed together for eternity by the priesthood power manifest only in the lay institutional structures of the LDS Church. Gender distinctiveness, therefore, is one of the central engines for eternal progression, even as it offers clear directions on how men and women should go about their daily lives—how they should be a mother and father walking through an airport or department store.

And yet, in Mormon studies, gender has been often neglected as an interpretive category. This stems, in part, from internal pressures on Mormon scholars who have gender as their focus. Because gender is so central to the community, and because, in Mormonism, historical interpretations have theological resonance, as is well known, in the recent past some scholars and writers who studied gender ran afoul of the church. For the most part, Mormon studies scholars have explored the lives of Mormon women from historical and theological points of view, with little consideration of how gender expectations shape the lives of men, of issues of sexuality and sexual identity, or of larger theoretical questions surrounding

gender as a category. In the late nineteenth century, the government campaign against polygamy intensified and the image of Mormon women became a symbolic weapon used by both sides. Mormon women stepped into the fray and began writing faith-based, valedictory women’s history.\(^5\) Sparked by the burgeoning feminism of the 1960s and the subsequent creation of the distinct field of women’s history in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars built on this long tradition of valedictory history and also began to study Mormon women from a more academic perspective. Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Lavina Fielding Anderson, Maxine Hanks, and Claudia Bushman, among many others, generated a tremendous body of literature on Mormon women.\(^6\) Their work gave voice and importance to the experiences of Mormon women and shaped subsequent scholarship. To cherry-pick a few examples, today John Turner incorporates the experiences of early LDS women into his biography of Brigham Young, the church has published the minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society, and Dave Hall is preparing a biography of Amy Brown Lyman that explores shifting notions of gender in the early twentieth century.\(^7\) The snowball of gender studies is gaining speed, volume, complexity, and theoretical sophistication.

Questions and obstacles remain. How much should the study of gender in Mormonism remain as a distinct subfield? How much should it disappear into the fields of history, religious studies, theology? How

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much should we give up control of the subject matter in return for greater scholarly acceptance and assimilation? Mormon scholars of Mormonism have been protective of the historical and cultural legacy of their community, a community that has faced much public derision. The people and subjects Mormon scholars write about are alive to them in ways that escape non-Mormon scholars—alive, perhaps, in the memory of a loved one, or alive in the proxy embodiment of a deceased relative during temple rituals. Thus, there will always be internal, community-focused discussions over this central issue of gender. This is inevitable and healthy in a community where historical interpretations shape present-day expectations and church policies.

Still, as scholars we need to continue to reach out to larger academic discussions. This creates scholarly synergy on all sides. Just one example of this: Mormon history and scholarship prompted historian of American religions Catherine Brekus to write a Tanner Lecture that reflects on how to find women’s agency in history, a hot topic in history and religious studies. Brekus’s essay helped generate a 2012 conference and conversations about gender within circles of Mormon studies that will, I hope in circular fashion, enrich more general discussions of women’s historical agency. The history and experiences of the LDS community are a vital part of wider cultural dialogues about gender. They illuminate larger realities in the American experiment, as the work of, for instance, Sarah Gordon and Samuel Brown demonstrate in their books on marriage morality and death practices, respectively. Mormon studies scholarship on gender can contribute much to the ultimate goal of the academic study of religion: to understand the varieties of religious experiences and, thereby, to support more civil, informed dialogue about religion and gender.

Prospects and sources

Thou shalt obtain knowledge both by dreams and by visions and be able to claim thy children, that none of them shalt fall by the hands of the destroyer. Thou art a daughter of Abraham of the loins of Joseph, a lawful heir to the blessings, privileges and power that pertain to the fullness of the Holy Priesthood. (Patriarchal blessing given to Sarah Burroughs Davenport by Elisha H. Groves on 23 February 1854)\(^9\)

In the world I grew up in, it was not okay to tell unorthodox stories. We did not hear them in church. We did not read them in scripture. But sooner or later they break through the surface in every Mormon life, in every human life, in every life of faith. (Brooks, *Book of Mormon Girl*\(^10\))

Because of the more internal focus of Mormon studies, scholarly questions around gender can get focused on the big, obvious, and controversial: polygamy, priesthood, the Mother in Heaven, same-sex marriage. This is necessary, and even as a non-Mormon, I am as guilty of it as the next person. Yet I hope—and see this is happening—that we also can move behind these big issues and delve more deeply into the multifarious, complex ways that gender has shaped and continues to shape Mormon culture, from how men and women dress and move in their bodies to how gender assumptions inform noninstitutional modes of authority. Because gender has always been so central to the social structures and theology of the church, gender has always been discussed in the community. These conversations have been loud, quiet, challenging, reinforcing, negotiating, direct, indirect, and even unknowing. Scholars are exploring the orthodox as well as the unorthodox conversations that Brooks claims always come to the surface. Just as importantly, they are looking to a rich array of sources to find these stories.

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As Davenport’s blessing indicates, seemingly strict Mormon gender roles are complicated by the prophetic nature of the community and ambiguous, conflicting statements from church officials about key doctrinal concepts such as the priesthood. Even today, after charismatic manifestations of the early church have faded, individual LDS members can tap into their own prophetic power, a prophetic power, in Davenport’s case, authorized by a church patriarch. They use this personal, prophetic authority to work out—to live within and even create—the ideal gender structures of their community.

Inspired by the founding events of the church and instructed by church leaders, women and men recorded their lives in diaries, journals, letters, and autobiographies such as Brooks’s. In addition, as they worked out how to live within and understand gender categories, men wrote theology and produced “official” publications and pronouncements of the church, such as Davenport’s blessing. Women wrote literature that was also theology. That is too dualistic and simple a formulation, but there is some truth to it. Mormon men and, especially, Mormon women have been writing stories and poems since they began converting to Mormonism in the 1830s. In the nineteenth century, there was an especially lively culture of literary Mormon women. This literary culture flourished because of the very gender roles authors struggled with: literary and poetic writing was seen as an appropriate occupation for women, allowing them to spread their much-vaunted moral influence, but at a safe distance from the rough and tumble of the public sphere. In her capacity as editor, Emmeline B. Wells encouraged women to write and then published their stories and poems in the *Woman’s Exponent*. Best-selling authors Orson Scott Card and Stephenie Meyer are descendants of these earlier authors, as are lesser-known authors and poets who contribute their work to the *Ensign*, *Sunstone*, or Mormon mommy blogs.

These literary, poetic, and personal creations are gold mines for scholars as they examine how men and women talked about and lived within the simultaneous distinctiveness of gender roles, the realities of life, the patriarchal structures of the church, and the wiggle room of prophetic opportunity. In their popular literary output, for instance, I found Mormon
women in the nineteenth century helping to create the present-day understanding of the Mother in Heaven and arguing for the centrality of femaleness through the use of uncontroversial nature imagery.\textsuperscript{11} These are men and women firm, simultaneously, in their faith in the church and in their own prophetic and commonsense abilities to negotiate the gendered structures of that faith.

As scholars mine these sources with an eye to gender as a central, organizing category, we will learn more about the way gender has shaped—and continues to shape—the history, theology, and everyday lives of Mormons. We will see the diversity of experiences in the church through time, and the increasing diversity of the LDS Church today as it becomes even more of a global community. This is an exciting time for those interested in understanding gender in Mormonism. The will, sources, and experience exist to widen, complicate, and, thus, enrich the discussion. The door is open; I hope we step through.

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The Oak and the Banyan: 
The “Glocalization” of Mormon Studies

_Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye_

MORMONISM, ANTEBELLUM AMERICA’S young and ambitious new religious movement, had not yet reached its tenth birthday when in 1837 the first Mormon missionaries booked passage on ships and took their message of restoration to Great Britain, a country across the sea. Despite the fact that a majority of Mormons now reside outside North America and that the stakes of Zion now dot the globe, the vast majority of Mormon studies focus on Mormonism in North America, usually in the United States. Yet it is also important to note that outstanding work has been done on Mormonism outside North America and that some ambitious and promising projects are under way.¹ Even so, what stands in the way of the development of truly global Mormon studies that reflect a truly global Mormonism?

Four structural issues immediately come to mind. First, Mormonism, though claiming a global presence, is still a very young religion. Compared to the great spans of time that separate scholars from the origins of major global traditions like Buddhism and Judaism, Mormonism’s historical foundations are just a cubit away. The relative freshness of the historical trail, the alluring connection between Mormon doctrinal claims and American cultural history, and the richness and abundance of sources have attracted scholars’ focus on the faith’s American roots.

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¹. See, for instance, work by Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Reid Neilson’s work on Mormons in Japan.
Second, the potential power of Mormonism’s centralized (Utah-based) institutional structure to shape its churchwide doctrines, practices, culture, and even scholarship cannot be ignored. Twice a year, the attention of Mormons all over the world is drawn to Salt Lake City to hear the pronouncements of top church leaders with authority to shape church teachings in their role as “prophets, seers, and revelators.” Twice a year, Mormons in Tahiti and Taiwan alike view, with the same familiar recognition, broadcast images of leaves rustling in the breeze as people gather at Temple Square. Not all roads lead to Salt Lake City, but for Mormons, wherever they may be scattered around the world, there is at least one road that does.

Third, Mormonism’s claims of global strength may be somewhat overstated. The official church records of Mormons across the world, measured in baptisms but unadjusted for attrition, do not accurately reflect the actual strength of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a given place. This information gap in church statistics is particularly problematic outside North America, where populations of Mormons are so tiny that they are ignored by external researchers (while in America numerous external religious surveys have included Mormons as a group). In many places where they have been established for decades, Mormon ecclesiastical units actually have very shallow generational footholds that are unable to sustain the sort of organic growth one would expect to see in a church mature enough to be a worldwide religious tradition. Scholarly projects must contend with this great and often hidden variation in the strength and distribution of Mormon units across the globe.

Fourth, while the majority of Mormon studies scholars residing in North America agree in principle on the importance of doing more research outside North America, numerous practical impediments exist. International research involves a plural marriage of time, money, language ability, and connections that make it difficult for the average Mormon studies scholar to live this “higher law.”

The good news is that this is an exciting moment when many people are working hard to expand work in the study of global Mormonism. Recent efforts and projects under way include several papers on international
Mormonism at the 2013 Mormon History Association meeting in Layton, Utah; at least one major book project and a significant component of two other book projects of which I am aware; the International Mormon Studies Book Project and Research Fund, run by students at Claremont Graduate University; and a conference on global Mormonism now in the early stages of planning.\(^2\)

I would like to suggest three ways in which we might develop new approaches to the study of Mormonism as a global religion: (1) reframing center and periphery, (2) engaging with literature on world Christianity, and (3) drawing creative inspiration from work in ethnic studies on minority groups.

**Reframing theoretical notions of “center and periphery”**

One problem with many existing histories of Mormonism outside North America is that they tend to sound like a fill-in-the-blank exercise:

In such-and-such a year, the first missionaries went from America to Country X. After ___ number of years, there were only ___ converts. In ___ the Book of Mormon was translated into ________. Through missionaries’ hard work and the inspiring dedication of a few valiant members, the church expanded, despite problems with Cross-Cultural Conflict X, Language Problem Y, and Logistical Difficulty Z. Now in the twenty-first century, there are ___ members in ___ stakes, and the closest temple is ________.

\(^2\) Joanna Brooks and Gina Colvin are coediting a book on global Mormonism; Laurie Maffly-Kipp is writing a book that addresses global Mormonism in significant respects and also a chapter on the international church for a volume on Mormonism since 1945 edited by Patrick Mason and John Turner; the International Mormon Studies Book Project is about to ship its first collections to the French Institute for Research on Mormonism at the University of Bordeaux, France, and the University of Queensland, Australia; and Brittany Chapman and Liz Heath in the LDS Church History Department are spearheading planning for a spring 2014 conference on Mormonism in Asia that will be hosted at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. For more information about the International Mormon Studies Book Project, see http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peculiarpeople/2013/05/coming-to-mha-the-international-mormon-studies-book-drive-summer-fund-raiser/.
Given Mormonism’s global diversity, why do so many of the international Mormon histories sound so strangely similar? For an answer we might turn to anthropologist Fenella Cannell, who suggests that academics studying religion should be careful to examine their own internalized assumptions. She notes, for instance, that the Western discipline of anthropology may have internalized certain Western Christian theological positions, such as the notion of the radical separation of body and spirit. Such assumptions may cause observers to classify Christian groups that blur this distinction as heterodox or unchristian when in fact these “heterodox” positions are supported in numerous places throughout the Bible.3 Were scholars to confront these assumptions about what makes a religious movement “real Christianity,” Cannell suggests, “we might instead come to see these not just as local ‘resistance,’ or as peripheral parts of ‘real Christianity,’ but as alternative Christianities deeply rooted in the highly unstable syntheses which Christian orthodoxies themselves represent.”4

What about Mormon studies? Could there also be ways in which we have unconsciously internalized certain theological, cultural, or other assumptions that shape how we organize and interpret Mormon history? In what ways do the “highly unstable syntheses that [Mormon] orthodoxies represent” manifest themselves in Mormon cultures around the world?

The uniformity in historical narratives about Mormons outside North America stems from an underlying assumption that Mormonism is to be defined in terms of its centralized administrative structure. In actuality, while unmistakably influential, the central Mormon administrative structure is neither hegemonic nor broadly representative of global Mormonism as a whole. Indeed, when it comes to the life of a local Mormon unit, as the Chinese saying goes, Heaven is high and the emperor is far away. While the administrative center of the LDS Church is unquestionably Salt Lake City, Mormonism has other centers and other peripheries.

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Where is Mormonism’s charismatic center? I suggest that this center is in fact what many are accustomed to seeing as the periphery: the Global South. In future studies, we might look for the influence of non–North American Mormonism in shaping churchwide discourse about charismatic practices. It would be interesting to know, for instance, what percentage of miracle stories (healings, visions, exorcism, etc.) in published twenty-first-century Mormon sources comes from a non–North American source. My preliminary impression based on my experience within the church as a member is that the relationship between North American Mormonism and non–North American Mormonism might be described in terms of the symbiotic, mutually dependent exchange of an economic system. From the Mormon South to the Mormon North flow “natural resources,” including convert baptisms, miracle stories, missionaries’ own faith-promoting experiences, examples of dramatic individual sacrifice in the name of religious observance, and “simple devotion” (e.g., pure, powerful piety uncluttered by the materialism of modern society). From the Mormon North to the Mormon South flow “finished goods,” including general conference, lesson manuals, editions of the scriptures, handbooks, newsroom statements, top-level leaders, organizational infrastructure, and media (e.g., iPhone and iPad apps, Greg Olsen prints, music, and websites). I wonder if charismatic resources (i.e., real-life, firsthand testimonies of healings, visions, and other miracles on par with those told about nineteenth-century Mormon pioneers in North America) from the Mormon South might be harvested and redistributed to the church at large as a sort of “welfare” for those less fortunate members in the Mormon North where modern technology, rationality, and materialism have contributed to a “charismatic” famine.

To move beyond the geographical-administrative narrative, we could also find other dimensions in which to investigate change over time, such as the development of a local Mormon community’s culture of practice. Instead of seeing subjects’ conversion to Mormonism as the beginning or

the focus of a historical project, we could locate the expansion of a Mormon community over time, along with other religious groups that form the larger religious community in a given place.6

Engaging in conversations with world Christianity

Existing literature on world Christianity provides a rich body of data and ideas that could productively inform Mormon studies. A substantial body of work already exists that defines terms and formulates new vocabulary for describing what happens when a Christian message takes root in new soil. One particularly useful concept, for instance, is the notion of “glocalization” (from globalization and localization), which posits that the spread of global organizations, culture, and modes of living is not simply a macro-level, homogenizing process; rather, globalization simultaneously generates increasing heterogeneity, including distinctive local cultural forms.7 Discussions of world Christianity, including focused studies of Christian movements in Africa and Asia, should be helpful as well.8 Literature on Christianity in China, for instance, is an

excellent reference for thinking about missions, colonial dynamics, cultural accommodation, contextual theology, transnational organizations, and the indigenization of foreign religiosity.9

Global Mormon studies scholars who are comfortably familiar with landscapes of contrasts and contradictions and who can cite examples from religious practice around the globe will have unique and important things to say in debates over rationality and apocalyptic thinking, modernity and secularization, gender and authority, and the grassroots production of religious capital.10

Borrowing helpful ideas from minority studies

Work in global Mormon studies also stands to benefit from scholarship on ethnic and religious minorities. In most places outside North America, Mormons are a tiny minority, often representing less than 1 percent of the population. In many cases, Mormon communities become shaped as much by their minority status as by their beliefs and practices. Mormonism’s minority status is further complicated by the fact that its far-reaching missionary efforts often result in subminority groups within

9. Another very interesting case study in Chinese Christianity for Mormons is the True Jesus Church, which might be termed “the Mormonism of China” because of its restorationist claims deeply rooted in Chinese political and religious culture. See, for instance, my PhD dissertation, “Miraculous Mundane: The True Jesus Church and Chinese Christianity in the Twentieth Century” (Harvard University, 2011), and forthcoming work by J. Gordon Melton and Elisa Zhai. The True Jesus Church is also interesting because it has undertaken the missionary project “in the other direction.” The True Jesus Church now claims its own global membership, with churches across North America, Europe, and Africa. Examining the relationship between this church’s universal, exclusivist claims and its Chinese linguistic and cultural influences can shed light on those wishing to understand the relationship between global expressions of Mormonism and its American organizational and theological origins.

Mormonism, such as Hmong language units in northern California and Filipina domestic worker units in Hong Kong.

With these nested minority subcategories in mind, the literature on “panethnicity” (in which individuals from hitherto distinct national, cultural, and linguistic origins are lumped together by outsiders who see them as homogenous) is helpful in understanding both how Mormons are perceived globally and how North American Mormons perceive their “global” or “ethnic” coreligionists.\footnote{See Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and David Lopez and Yen Le Espiritu, “Panethnicity in the United States: A Theoretical Framework,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13/2 (1990): 198–224.} One case in point for majority-minority “inversion” that occurs within Mormonism is the fact that the LDS Church’s Asia Area (encompassing all Asian nations except Japan, but including the world’s two most populous countries, China and India) is only one of twenty-five such church administrative units. Needless to say, lumping half the world’s people and many of the world’s oldest and most distinctive cultural traditions into 1/25th of the kingdom of God on earth is an extreme example of panethnic categorization (arising not necessarily from ignorance of the significance of ethnic distinctions, but from the relatively small number of Latter-day Saints in the Asia Area—about 170,000 actively practicing and nonpracticing members).\footnote{Rick Lee, e-mail message to author, 14 March 2013. Lee is an employee in the LDS Asia Area Office in Hong Kong.}

While “panethnic lumping” is a rather negative term implying either outsiders’ lack of understanding for ethnic distinctiveness or individual minority populations so small as to be nearly insignificant by themselves, the notion of panethnicity has also been embraced and adapted by minority groups for their own purposes. For example, diverse “Asian” ethnic groups in America have at times embraced panethnic categorization to pursue shared political and social goals. Similarly, Mormons as a global minority and “global minorities” within Mormonism may embrace their minority Mormon identity in a way that involves not only transmission of cultural or religious ideas and practices, but also the
modification, corruption, or invention of these ideas and practices. 13

Beyond the notion of panethnicity, ethnic studies showing the interaction of faith, culture, and community in minority religious communities such as ethnic immigrant churches in North America may be very useful in understanding the dynamic of Mormon units outside North America. 14

Conclusion

I believe that we are currently on the verge of a great flowering of work in international Mormon studies. Although in the past the LDS Church’s American roots have seemed like the most obvious, relevant, and accessible targets for Mormon studies research, recently scholars and the church itself have shown new commitment to the work of recognizing the cultural and religious gravity of global expressions of Mormonism. More human and financial resources are surely needed to move these global Mormon studies projects forward. 15 And yet the need is so clear as to ensure that none shall shirk. Mormon studies must grow to fully reflect Mormonism’s global realities.

I would like to suggest a pair of images that may be useful in conceiving how to approach the study of Mormonism as a global religion. Suppose we visualize Mormonism as a tree that grew from a seed. The oak tree, common in North America and Europe, might come to mind. It starts from a single seed, puts down roots, and starts to grow. As it grows,


15. Please consider becoming involved in the new initiative to promote Mormon studies outside North America, the International Mormon Studies Book Project and Research Fund (http://www.facebook.com/internationalmormonstudies).
it branches. As high up and far out as the branches may grow, they all come back to this one place where it first took root. The old standard mission-history narrative depicts international Mormonism as an oak tree: orderly, balanced, everything referring back to the one place where the seed first took hold.

But suppose that, instead of an oak, we turn to the banyan tree, common in Asia and the Pacific region. It starts from a seed lodged in a crack of a host tree. It puts down roots and starts to grow. As it grows, it branches. These branches send down slender roots, called prop roots, that plant themselves into the soil all around the main trunk. Over time, prop roots develop that can become indistinguishable from the original trunk. The future of global Mormon studies will describe a Mormon reality that is more like a banyan than an oak: a bit chaotic, growing wherever it can find a foothold, each branch with many of its own sturdy trunks and roots, yet all forming a single living organism.

The challenge of studying global expressions of Mormonism will lie in showing that Mormon communities in places such as Hungary, Guatemala, and the Democratic Republic of Congo are not just branches of an American church, but authentic parts of a vibrant religious tradition that is nourished by deep local roots—all over the world.

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“Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom”:
Some Observations on Mormon Studies

Daniel C. Peterson

The very term Mormon studies suggests its own broad definition as a “big tent.”¹ I take the adjective Mormon to refer to the subject matter, and not to the practitioners. It doesn’t require that those involved in the study of Mormonism be Latter-day Saints or believers.

Mormon studies simply involves studies of things Mormon, including the Mormon people and their history but also their scriptures and their doctrines. Nothing in the term privileges, say, research into the reception history of the scriptures over philological, archaeological, and historical approaches linked to their claimed origin or Sitz im Leben—even if, as in the case of the Book of Mormon, that origin is controversial.² Nor, by the same token, does the term in any way discriminate against reception history or attempts to explain the Book of Mormon as a product of the nineteenth century. As such, it identifies no particular methodology and says nothing whatever about whether its practitioners need to bracket Mormon truth claims.

¹. A portion of this essay is drawn from Daniel C. Peterson, “The Role of Apologetics in Mormon Studies,” Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture 2 (2012): i–xxxv. The title “Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom” comes, of course, from the late Mao Zedong but is not intended pejoratively or ironically here. It reflects my hope for a proliferation of different approaches to Mormon studies. Unlike Chairman Mao, though, I mean it sincerely.

². The term Sitz im Leben, roughly “setting in life,” originated with the German Protestant Old Testament scholar and theologian Hermann Gunkel (d. 1932).
My understanding of Mormon studies includes not only the relatively secular and nonconfessional approach characteristic of most academic religious studies but the expressly committed, even confessional, academic work in theology, liturgical theory and history, scriptural exegesis, and apologetics. I realize that many religious studies departments and faculty are housed within nondenominational private universities and tax-supported state schools and that they are, therefore, practically speaking, constrained to adopt a secular, neutral, “objective” approach not only by theoretical preferences but by institutional reality. The same holds true for the large academic societies that feature religious studies; I recognize that—in order to maintain comity and peace, among other things—sectarian conflict must be kept under control and, if possible, altogether avoided. But these are political considerations, not philosophical issues.

I am a pluralist. I don’t believe that there is a single discipline called Mormon studies any more than there is a single discipline called Islamic studies. At least, if there is, I can’t see it. I’m a practitioner of Islamic studies myself. Ultimately, I bracket Islamic truth claims, though I’m pronouncedly sympathetic toward them. My own favored approach is textual and intellectual-historical. But others under the broad tent of Islamic studies do political history, anthropology, art history, pure philosophy, economic history, military history, sociology, contemporary politics, economics, women’s history, and a host of other things. Many of them are Muslims, some fervently believing and some only nominally

3. I hope that my sympathy is apparent in such things as Daniel C. Peterson, Muhammad: Prophet of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), and my conception and founding of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. I don’t believe that such sympathy is required in students of another faith. But I think that a complete lack of sympathy, to say nothing of actual hostility, can impair one’s scholarship. I had a mentor in graduate school who, so far as I could see, was utterly color-blind, religiously speaking—which struck me as an odd quality in a historian of Islam. He simply didn’t understand specifically religious motivations, and effectively denied their existence. He was brilliant, and prodigiously learned, and he influenced me enormously, but I still think that this curious lacuna in his personality created blind spots that damaged his scholarship.
so. Many of them are non-Muslims, of various religious and secular back-
grounds. I’ve learned much from all of them, and I learn different things
from different approaches. Although I’m a serious political conservative
with libertarian leanings, for example, I’ve profited greatly from the ins-
ights of my Marxist friends. Because they see things from a different
perspective than I do, they tend to see different things than I do. Just as
my own vantage point creates blind spots, though, so do theirs. We need
each other.⁴

But the lack of a single, particular discipline of Mormon studies con-
stitutes one of the areas of legitimate concern that I believe an outsider
(or even an insider) might have with respect to religious studies in gen-
eral and Mormon studies in particular. Religious studies may, and often
do, involve history, but the use of history may not quite rise to the level
of professional historiography. A “studies” field may produce sociology
without the rigor of sociological research, anthropology without field-
work, theology without the discipline of theological/philosophical train-
ing and inquiry. Fifty survey courses, Hugh Nibley used to remark, do
not a scholar make. One might easily remain a dilettante. Or one might,
at the worst, be simply an ax-grinding ideologue, having the form of
scholarship but denying the power thereof.⁵ The same is true with regard
to women’s studies, black studies, and the like. They’re entirely legitimate
fields of research and teaching. In fact, they’ve been seriously neglected,
and they’re long overdue for attention. But none of that changes the fact
that they are not, in and of themselves, distinct disciplines. Rather, they
are areas on which various disciplines can be fruitfully brought to bear.

That is a principal reason behind my strong preference for defining
Mormon studies with reference to its subject matter (Mormon) rather
than with reference to some supposed specific method of studies. I’m

⁴ In writing an article advocating a Mormon social Trinitarian model for the journal
of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology some years back, I found myself,
much to my surprise, finding the work of Catholic feminist and liberation theologians
especially helpful. See “Mormonism and the Trinity,” Element 3/1–2 (Spring and Fall

⁵ Compare 2 Timothy 3:5 KJV and Joseph Smith—History 1:19.
methodologically a pluralist. I would much prefer to see people gain solid training in a discipline and then bring that discipline to bear upon their study of Mormon-related topics.

Permit me, at this point, to say a few words specifically about the relationship of apologetics to Mormon studies. In my view, which should already be apparent by now, apologetic and nonapologetic approaches to different topics and even to the same topic can coexist and flourish side by side. Over many years, for example, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) supported both the often apologetic *FARMS Review*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the meticulous textual studies of Royal Skousen and the coolly objective and utterly nonapologetic production of a searchable Dead Sea Scrolls database. They can even be unproblematically undertaken by the same person. Moreover, they can be mutually beneficial. Indeed, Mormon apologetics has often drawn upon completely nonapologetic scholarship, both from outside the LDS Church and from within.6 And I believe that the benefits can run the other direction, as well—though I suspect that many nonapologists will be at least somewhat reluctant to admit it. I firmly believe that the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), at certain times (notably at its annual conferences), is every bit as much a part of legitimate Mormon studies as is the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology.7

Paul J. Griffiths, an Anglican scholar who trained as a Buddhologist and who has since converted to Catholicism, published a book in 1991, entitled *An Apology for Apologetics*, in which he “defend[s] the need for

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6. Hugh Nibley, John Welch, John Sorenson—these prominent Latter-day Saint apologists relatively rarely cite fellow Mormons. Instead, they rely upon non-Mormon scholarship that seldom if ever has Mormonism in mind. To cite two personal examples, I have applied the completely nonapologetic Book of Mormon scholarship of my fellow Latter-day Saints Grant Hardy and Royal Skousen for what I judged to be legitimate apologetic purposes.

7. As it happens, perhaps my belief in both can be tangibly illustrated by the fact that, at time of writing, I’m serving on the board of FAIR and as (the distinctly ineffectual) president of SMPT.
the traditional discipline of apologetics as one important component of interreligious dialogue.” He does so in defiance of what he calls a scholarly orthodoxy that “suggests that understanding is the only legitimate goal; that judgement and criticism of religious beliefs or practices other than those of one’s own community is always inappropriate; and that an active defense of the truth of those beliefs and practices to which one’s community appears committed is always to be shunned.” In his strongly expressed opinion, “such an orthodoxy (which tends to include the view that the very idea of orthodoxy has no sense) produces a discourse that is pallid, platitudinous, and degutted. Its products are intellectual pacifiers for the immature: pleasant to suck on but not very nourishing.”

Professor Griffiths argues for what he calls the principle of the “necessity of interreligious apologetics.” This is how he formulates it:

If representative intellectuals belonging to some specific religious community come to judge at a particular time that some or all of their own doctrine-expressing sentences are incompatible with some alien religious claim(s), then they should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics vis-à-vis these alien religious claim(s) and their promulgators.

Professor Griffiths distinguishes negative apologetics from positive apologetics in precisely the same way that I myself have done, though I believe that I came to the distinction in entire innocence of his discussion on the subject. As an example of negative apologetics, which he describes

as the defense of a proposition or belief against criticism, he points out that a critic of Buddhism might argue that the two propositions *There are no enduring spiritual substances* and *Each human person is reborn multiple times* are mutually contradictory. In response, a negative Buddhist apologetic will seek to show that there is no contradiction between them.

Critics of Christianity often argue that the existence of massive natural evil in the world is incompatible with the existence of a benevolent God. A negative Christian apologetic will argue that the fact of natural evil actually can be reconciled with belief in a loving God. In a specifically Latter-day Saint context, negative apologetics will seek to rebut, to neutralize, claims such as *Oliver Cowdery denied his testimony* or *Joseph Smith’s introduction of polygamy shows him to be a man of poor character* or *Mormonism is racist*. Attacks against the claims of the restoration began even before the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the church, and Latter-day Saints have been responding to them for nearly two centuries now.

*Positive* apologetics seeks to demonstrate that a given religious or ideological community’s practices or beliefs are good, believable, true, and/or, in some cases, superior to those of some other community. While negative apologetics is defensive, positive apologetics is offensive—by which, incidentally, despite my richly deserved reputation for vicious and unethical polemics, I don’t mean to say that it necessarily gives offense.

Griffiths argues that religious communities have an epistemic or even ethical duty to engage in apologetics.14 This, he says, is because, since religious groups typically claim that their teachings are true, they are obliged to respond when, as usually happens, somebody else claims that, in fact, their teachings are wholly or partially false. We should not be indifferent to the truth or falsity of what we claim, and all the more so when our claim involves matters of ultimate importance. This means that religious communities have an ethical duty to engage in negative apologetics, to defend or justify their assertions.

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Mainstream Buddhists, for example, who espouse what has been called the doctrine of No Self, believe that the notion of a continuing substantial soul, such as most Christians affirm, creates and perpetuates suffering. If challenged by Buddhist thinkers on the question, it is the duty of the Christian community either to justify its affirmation or to withdraw it.  

Indeed, knowing of the existence of competing doctrines that contradict their own teachings, representatives of a religious community might proceed to a positive apologetics, seeking to demonstrate that one or more of their claims are, in fact, very believable, or even, perhaps, superior to rival views. There is, Griffiths says, arguably an ethical imperative to do so because religions commonly hold that adherence to their doctrines is important, and maybe even essential, to salvation. Just as a person on the shore holding a lifeline has an obligation to help a drowning man, so do those who have the saving doctrines or practices have an obligation to help their fellow mortals who might otherwise perish.

Griffiths also argues that apologetics can substantially benefit the faithful because of what he describes as

15. The entire sixth chapter of Griffiths, Apology for Apologetics, is devoted, first, to laying out a model Buddhist position on this matter, followed by a model Christian position. Thereupon, as a Christian believer, Griffiths attempts to illustrate a way in which an apologetic encounter between representative Buddhist and Christian intellectuals might proceed. See Griffiths, Apology for Apologetics, 85–108. I’m impressed by the integrity with which Griffiths seeks to represent the viewpoint of his “opponents,” and I’m reminded, in this regard, of the great Muslim theologian al-Ghazali, who, before he wrote his Tahafut al-Falasifa (now available in a dual-language edition as al-Ghazali, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, trans. Michael E. Marmura, 2nd ed. [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000]), wrote his Maqasid al-Falasifa (The aims of the philosophers) as a summary of their views. He did so in the conviction that a person should first thoroughly master the arguments and positions of an opponent before undertaking to refute them. So dispassionate was it that it was used, in medieval Latin translation, as an introduction to Islamic philosophy, and al-Ghazali, though ultimately a fierce critic of the Muslim philosophers, was thought by its European readers to be one. This is exemplary apologetic behavior.
the tendency of members of religious communities not to think in any very self-conscious way about the implications of the views into which they have been acculturated. These views are part of their blood and bone, among the presuppositions of their existence as human beings.  

Religious communities are, he says, typically forced into more nuanced understandings of their own doctrines and practices “primarily by pressures from outside or by criticisms from dissident groups within.” He cites as an example the creedal formulae generated by the ancient ecumenical councils of the Christian church. A Latter-day Saint might cite the impetus given to Mormon historians by Fawn Brodie’s assertion that Joseph Smith’s first vision was a fiction invented relatively late in the prophet’s life. Several earlier accounts of the vision were discovered as part of an effort to counter her claim. Apologetics, says Griffiths, “is a learning tool of unparalleled power. It makes possible a level of understanding of one’s own doctrine-expressing sentences and their logic, as well as those of others, which is not to be had in any other way.”

Moreover, Griffiths argues, a failure to take contradiction between competing truth claims seriously, a kind of “can’t we all just get along” indifference to resolving disputes, will have very serious consequences. “The result,” he says, “would be both relativism and fideism: religious communities would become closed, impermeable, incommensurable forms of life.”

With Paul Griffiths, I’m convinced that apologetics is an important part of scholarly discourse in religious studies and that it should be considered a kind of religious studies, and therefore, specifically, a kind of Mormon studies.

18. Griffiths, Apology for Apologetics, 36.
19. Griffiths, Apology for Apologetics, 42. “Form of life” (German Lebensform) is a term associated most specifically with Ludwig Wittgenstein, but also with some others in the analytical tradition in philosophy—particularly in the philosophy of language.
Daniel C. Peterson (PhD, UCLA) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University. Author of, among other things, *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007), he founded the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative and served as its editor in chief for over two decades. Formerly chair of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, which became the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, he also founded the FARMS Review and edited it for nearly a quarter century. He currently chairs the Interpreter Foundation, which publishes *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*. 
When asked to contribute an essay dealing with method in Mormon studies, I was reluctant to do so for a variety of reasons. My first observation is that “Mormon studies” remains undefined, and in order to provide something like a coherent contribution, I must provide a working definition. Also, my view of the future of Mormon studies is likely to provoke heated objections from some quarters. Nevertheless, I feel that the launch of the Mormon Studies Review provides a unique opportunity to offer my views, and because I do care deeply about both Mormonism as a religion and Mormonism as an object of scholarly inquiry, I have agreed to contribute.

Let me begin by offering my own view of what Mormon studies might be. I envision Mormon studies as the academic study of Mormonism in its broadest sense. Like similarly constructed fields of study such as Buddhist, Catholic, or Jewish studies, Mormon studies belongs to the academy at large and is, therefore, not primarily a devotional exercise. Mormon studies is a discipline that will require a very wide array of methodological approaches. Many scholars will bring to Mormon studies methods that work from the assumption that Mormonism can be studied academically only if we either assume that it is a human construct and cultural artifact, or if we set aside those questions of origin
and focus on other questions, leaving ultimate matters unaddressed. I happen to prefer the former approach, and I will provide an example of how this method works later in the essay. First, let me point out that a scholar who takes such a methodological tack does not necessarily believe that the religious tradition he or she studies is a human construct. But, recognizing that the rules of scholarly inquiry are different from those that govern eternal Truth, even believing scholars can apply the same method to their own faith tradition as they would to faith traditions that they do not accept as God-given. Certainly, in LDS Church-sponsored institutions, this will not be the case. Theology and scholarly apologetics must be part of Mormon studies, and they will certainly find support and expression in such institutional settings. If, however, Mormon studies is to mature into a discipline that is held in esteem by the larger academic community, we must accept the fact that secular methodologies will become increasingly prevalent. To offer hostility toward these scholars is both counterproductive and frightfully misguided. For a publication like the Mormon Studies Review, this will mean that books should not be reviewed primarily in terms of how well they foster the growth of the LDS Church or the faith of its members, but rather on how well executed the scholarship is, based on widely accepted scholarly standards. To take that step is to move well beyond where we have been.

Although institutions that support Mormon studies in a prominent capacity are important, it is my view that, ultimately, Mormon studies will find its scholarly voice primarily through scholars with an interest in some aspect of Mormonism who are working in academic departments in universities around the world. As the institutional aspect of Mormon studies broadens, so will the methodological spectrum that will be employed. Up to this point, however, the diverse scholarly methods employed by disciplines that exemplify what I imagine Mormon studies aspires to be—Catholic studies, Buddhist studies, Jewish studies, and so on—have not been much in evidence in the still-embryonic realm of Mormon studies. Most of what has been done uses some form of historical methodology. History is important, but it has rendered Mormon studies one-dimensional. We have made very small strides to move out into areas such as literary studies, the study of art and music, sociology,
anthropology, or my own discipline, religious studies. Clearly, Mormon studies needs to find voices that are trained in these fields and that can offer insights and offer questions that only they can see. I am trained in the academic study of religion, and I can write intelligently only about the various methods in that field. In this essay, I will provide one example of religious studies methodology, drawn from a wide variety of possible methods, and I will argue that even such an aggressive method as the one I am about to describe must be welcomed into the Mormon studies arena if Mormon studies is to mature into a legitimate academic discipline. If one does not desire such maturation, or if one wishes Mormon studies to remain an insular feedback loop, or if one thinks that academic discourse that does not embrace as its foundational assumption the truth claims of Mormonism is an attack on the kingdom that must be defended against, the discussion that follows may be somewhat difficult to swallow. I invite you to bear with me anyway.

One index of the maturity of Mormon studies, in my view, is the degree to which the discipline can allow a believing scholar to approach Mormonism as she would any other religious tradition. This may be more difficult than it seems. There remains within some corners of the incipient Mormon intellectual world a strong inclination to focus on the private religious inclinations of the scholar and the implications of the scholar’s work for the health of Mormonism, rather than focusing on the scholarly (as opposed to the devotional) merit of the scholarship. There exists a resistance to allow Mormonism to be examined as a cultural phenomenon and as a human construct without flinching. Like it or not, this is what the academic study of religion is about. I do not mean to sound uncharitable. No doubt much of this sensitivity stems from the fact that Mormonism has been the object of persecution and attack, both physically and rhetorically, since its inception. The key, however, is to accept the fact that there are serious scholars, even believing Mormon scholars, who do not feel the need to affirm the truth of their religious tradition in their scholarship and that this does not constitute an attack. The vast majority of scholars who study religion do not do so in order to attack that tradition, despite what practitioners of that religion may believe. Rather, it reflects professional dedication to methodological principles that must be
equally applied regardless of whether the scholar is studying his own religion or a completely alien one.

In order to be as specific as possible about what Mormon studies might look like if and when it develops into a fully accepted academic discipline, allow me to reify the abstract principles discussed above by discussing one common (although by no means universal) methodological approach. I am here invoking Bruce Lincoln’s “Theses on Method.” Lincoln, a scholar of religion who teaches at the University of Chicago, has articulated thirteen theses that govern his approach to the academic study of religion. Let me be very clear that not all scholars of religion agree with Lincoln, but his methodological inclinations are well represented among scholars of religion in the academy, and I have chosen Lincoln because his position is quite close to mine and because this type of method poses significant challenges to the way in which Mormon studies scholarship is currently created and received. I would like to take a few of his theses and discuss what their implications would be for the study of Mormonism.

Lincoln’s first thesis addresses his field of study, history of religions, by explaining that “the conjunction ‘of’ that joins the two nouns in the disciplinary ethnonym ‘History of Religions’ is not neutral filler. Rather, it announces a proprietary claim and a relation of encompassment: History is the method and Religion the object of study.” As Lincoln points out in a later thesis, to be a historian (or scholar) of religion is to assume a very clear attitude toward religion while acting as a scholar. History, and scholarship in general, uses an epistemological system that stands in sharp contrast to the epistemological and even ontological system presented by most religious traditions. As Lincoln frames it, “Religion is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal. History, in the sharpest possible contrast, is that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claim to authority on rigorous critical practice.” This relationship is

1. These theses are published widely, but the most convenient location for most readers is http://religion.ua.edu/thesesonmethod.html. All of the following quotes come from this source.
“tense” in that scholarship involves “a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself. To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the discipline’s claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.”

Please note that there is absolutely nothing in this methodological schema that precludes an individual scholar from accepting both of these epistemological models. I can engage Mormonism as a scholar and I can approach Mormonism as a devotee in different and even oppositional ways. In the classroom and in my writing, I assume exactly this position regardless of the subject matter. When I research and write on Mormonism, I do so as a scholar trained in the history of religions, and as such my agenda takes precedence over that of the religious group that I am studying and interpreting. Many Mormons, to include a fair number of Mormon scholars, find such an approach impossible to understand as anything except an attack on Mormonism and hypocrisy on the part of the scholar. If Mormon studies is to mature and find a place in the broader academic world, the community that supports it must come to terms with these types of methodological assumptions. Scholars of religion of necessity find themselves, through nothing more than active engagement with research, in conflict with a “model [that] stresses the continuity and integration of timeless groups, whose internal tensions and conflicts, turbulence and incoherence, permeability and malleability are largely erased.”

A scholar must choose how to respond to this conflict. Some give precedence to the religious interpretation; others choose to absent themselves from the conversation completely. Many others, including me, choose to remain engaged, being guided by the notion that “reverence is a religious, not a scholarly, virtue.”

Mormon studies scholars, if they seek to cultivate an academic discipline, will have to learn to ask the questions that matter to the broader academic community. As Lincoln phrases it, “The same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought be posed of religious discourse.” Here he is particularly aggressive in use
of terminology. However, the bark here is probably louder than the anticipated bite is painful. One should not understand Lincoln to mean that the scholar should seek to “destabilize” the religion itself. Rather, a rigorous scholar should recognize that the claims a religion makes for itself very often seek to stabilize discourse by offering a singular interpretation of its own past, while marginalizing other interpretations. Thus, Lincoln argues, a scholar of religion should destabilize the rhetorical control that a religion seeks to exert. Let’s pause a moment to look at a couple of examples of how this process has worked in Mormon history. The first example is the issue of post-Manifesto polygamy. For decades, the LDS Church maintained that the 1890 Manifesto ended plural marriage. This was an attempt to stabilize the discourse surrounding the practice in the service of the image of the contemporary church. When D. Michael Quinn published his seminal article on post-Manifest polygamy in 1985, he asked “irreverent” questions that destabilized the discourse and, ultimately, rewrote the narrative of that period of Mormon history.²

The second example is the work done by Ron Walker, Richard Turley, and Glen Leonard on the Mountain Meadows Massacre.² This is an interesting case because it involves a church-commissioned study that itself asked irreverent and destabilizing questions about an event in Mormon history that, for decades, had been explained away by the church as an act of a few insane white men and some Native Americans. No one would accuse the authors of that book as seeking to destabilize or harm the LDS Church. What they were doing was what Lincoln says is the responsibility of the scholar—“to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.” I fear, however, that if this work had been done by scholars not working under the direction of the church,

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their methods would have been called into question and seen as an attack by some prominent Mormon scholars. Ideally, what should matter most in both the case of the Quinn article and the Mountain Meadows book is the soundness of the scholarship rather than the orthodoxy of the authors or the “reverence” of the tone.

I am not arguing that this type of methodology ought to be dominant in Mormon studies. Obviously Mormon studies, in full flower, will be a wildly multidisciplinary space for scholarly conversation. Lincoln’s methodology, as I’ve summarized it and as I practice it, presents a challenge to the maturity of this embryonic discipline that we think of, prematurely, as Mormon studies. The tolerance of aggressive methodologies like this one, methodologies that do not pay heed to the devotional concerns of Mormonism and that subject Mormonism to the most stringent and even irreverent scholarly inquiry, requires the ability to thicken the skin a bit, to recognize that the tension between religious discourse and the academic study of religion is not necessarily destructive. It is not, ultimately, even about religion. Will the time come when Mormon studies scholars and consumers can accept the fact that legitimate scholars of religion may very well adopt the premise that Mormonism is assumed to be, just as any other religion is assumed to be, a cultural artifact—a construction that tells us something about humanity and the ingenious ways in which humans construct symbolic systems to help them confront their most deeply felt hopes, fears, dreams, nightmares, loves, pains, and joys? Will this ever be viewed, not as an attack, but as an act of tribute to the richness of the Mormon imagination? Will the work of scholars who adopt this method be welcomed alongside theology and devotional poetry, literary studies and apologetics? If Mormon studies is ever to exist as a legitimate entity in the wide academic world, the answers to these questions must be yes.

Mormons are (in)famous for building large and ornate temples that non-Mormons are forbidden to enter. Mormons also build squat, utilitarian chapels for ordinary worship—buildings in which non-Mormons would find little of architectural interest. There is a building in Salt Lake City, though, that is both open to all and quite interesting. The Tabernacle on Temple Square may also be a useful metaphor for thinking through some of the difficulties Mormon studies and its practitioners must face.

The most striking feature of the Tabernacle is its roof. The design is outrageously complicated, borrowed from the design of wooden truss bridges in New England and the Mid-Atlantic.1 Because it was impossible to import steel in those pre-transcontinental railroad days, the roof was constructed of native wood. The trusses were joined with wooden dowels instead of nails and then tightly bound with rawhide that shrank as it cured to make the connections sturdier. Mormon studies, likewise, may involve difficult and apparently inelegant adaptations of methods from other disciplines that eventually yield sturdy and enduring work. It is easy for young scholars to disdain the old, home-grown ways of their predecessors, but contemporary practitioners of Mormon studies are likely to discover some methods in their predecessors’ work that will serve them well, with some adaptation (and maybe some theoretical duct tape).

Another important feature of the Tabernacle is that it has no obvious front or back door. Its elliptical shape is punctuated on all sides by identical doorways. Besides entering through doors representing a variety of professional and academic backgrounds, practitioners of Mormon studies will enter from doorways marked by varying ideological commitments. We have long since acknowledged that the detached, objective scholar is a mythical creature. And we should perhaps go beyond acknowledging that a studious disinterest is impossible and declare that it is undesirable. It is both a methodological and ethical mistake to strive for or pretend to “objectivity,” especially in any branch of religious studies. While careful attention to theory and method is a necessary foundation for academically respectable work on Mormonism, there is no method that will rescue us from the ethical problems involved in studying religion.

Once upon a not-so-happy time, it was possible to line up studies of Mormonism on a mostly one-dimensional continuum from apologetic to anti-Mormon. There was discussion, of course, about how much room there was between the poles and what kind of work might occupy some sort of nearly neutral middle ground, but the notion that work on Mormonism necessarily demonstrated commitment to, or dissent from, the LDS Church was widely accepted, and subtext and paratext frequently overwhelmed discussions of actual texts on Mormon topics.

Now, with a few noisy exceptions, these internecine disputes are muted. Although the efficacy of “bracketing” claims about supernatural truths is not universally accepted, the possibility is often admitted at least as a conversational lubricant. And the variety of work being undertaken has expanded tremendously, as have the relationships of scholars of Mormonism to its institutional forms. This is good news and cause for celebration. However, a bit of caution is in order—having moved away from the poles marked “for” and “against” Mormonism in the bad old days, we may be tempted to think that Mormon studies can take place in a clean space where faith commitments and academic ambitions and institutional politics do not sully the quest for scholarly excellence. This seems unlikely to me. What we can do is make sure the doors are clearly
marked and be unafraid to explicitly acknowledge which door we have walked through. By this I mean we ought to be explicit about whether we enter the space of Mormon studies from a particular academic discipline, faith community, or institutional perspective and about what prior obligations and agendas we bring to the task. There are many ways to do this, and scholars of religion will be practiced at this sort of entrance, but working in the space of Mormon studies will also offer opportunities to learn from unexpected sources.

For example, we might look at an interview between Elder Dallin H. Oaks, an apostle in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Helen Whitney, a journalist and documentary film producer. While neither journalists nor church hierarchs are typical sources of methodological inspiration for academics, I think Elder Oaks here admirably performs the work of accounting for his own situation vis-à-vis Mormon studies:

> We’re emerging from a period of history writing within the Church [of] adoring history that doesn’t deal with anything that’s unfavorable, and we’re coming into a period of “warts and all” kind of history. Perhaps our writing of history is lagging behind the times, but I believe that there is purpose in all these things—there may have been a time when Church members could not have been as well prepared for that kind of historical writing as they may be now. . . . There are constraints on trying to reveal everything. You don’t want to be getting into and creating doubts that didn’t exist in the first place. And what is plenty of history for one person is inadequate for another, and we have a large church, and that’s a big problem.2

Elder Oaks acknowledges that the LDS Church’s relationship to scholarly work on Mormonism may be “lagging behind” and offers institutional reasons for why that might be so. By acknowledging that his interest in Mormon history is different from what an academic historian’s might be, he makes space for both his own interest and the scholar’s; once

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their differing epistemologies and agendas are acknowledged, both are freed from policing the boundaries of their methodological orthodoxies and can learn from each other where possible and part ways where necessary. Elder Oaks even gestures toward the possibility that other kinds of scholarship can augment the kinds of historical work his own institution is concerned with:

Another problem is there are a lot of things that the Church has written about that the members haven’t read. And the Sunday School teacher that gives “Brother Jones” his understanding of Church history may be inadequately informed and may not reveal something which the Church has published. It’s in the history written for college or Institute students, sources written for quite mature students, but not every Sunday School teacher that introduces people to a history is familiar with that. And so there is no way to avoid this criticism. The best I can say is that we’re moving with the times, we’re getting more and more forthright, but we will never satisfy every complaint along that line and probably shouldn’t.3

This frank admission is remarkable for its sympathetic appreciation of the needs of those who want to make different uses of the available historical and cultural material than those the institution prefers, and it is a useful model for people with all kinds of institutional affiliations and agendas. There is no academic credential that confers immunity from ideological blind spots and no ecclesiastical title (even with “Authority” in the job description) that carries evidentiary weight or infallible persuasive power. Mormon studies will flourish in a space where academic training, institutional affiliation, personal faith, and ideological commitments are doors to walk through, not weapons to be brandished or badges to denote rank and compel assent in the absence of sufficient evidence or persuasive argument.

If scholars come to Mormon studies by way of so many kinds of interest, training, and experience, it is likely, even inevitable, there will be

3. “Elder Oaks Interview.”
a multiplicity of voices and some difficulty in constructing a common language. Here again, perhaps, a structural feature of the Salt Lake Tabernacle offers a metaphorical way through. The acoustic of the Tabernacle is extraordinarily live. There are multiple points in the auditorium where a whisper will be amplified enough to be heard throughout the hall. We might think of this multivocal space facilitating understanding by preventing any one discourse from becoming dominant, encouraging participants from many academic disciplines and with differing theoretical and methodological frameworks to articulate particular perspectives. Retaining the possibility of particularity may help keep “interdisciplinary” from becoming synonymous with a lack of rigor or methodological vagueness.

However, working with the tools of various disciplines in a space accessible to nonspecialists necessitates taking especial care to understand others’ methods and arguments before engaging them. Talal Asad, in his essay “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” describes the work of engaging in this way as “translation.” Drawing on Walter Benjamin, he asserts that “a good translation should always precede a critique. And we can turn that around by saying that a good critique is always an internal critique—that is, one based on some shared understanding, on a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent. Such a critique—no less than the object of criticism—is a point of view a (contra) version, having only provisional and limited authority.”

This may be especially true in Mormon studies because practicing Mormons regard recording their family history, studying LDS Church history, and pursuing regular intellectual engagement with scripture as a religious duty. There are, therefore, many amateur scholars of Mormonism whose work occupies the interstices between lived Mormonism and theorized Mormonism in ways that are potentially illuminating. Of course, amateur scholars also occupy all of the space between accomplished independent scholar and crackpot, so careful scrutiny—including

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dismissing work that doesn’t meet rigorous standards of evidence and argument—is part of the way that professional scholars should deal respectfully with this work. But not all of it should be dismissed out of hand because it does not inhabit the discursive universe of the academy. Again, Asad’s metaphor of translation is useful here:

The good translator does not immediately assume that unusual difficulty in conveying the sense of an alien discourse denotes a fault in the latter, but instead critically examines the normal state of his or her own language. The relevant question therefore is not how tolerant an attitude the translator ought to display toward the original author (an abstract ethical dilemma) but how she can test the tolerance of her own language for assuming unaccustomed forms.

Religious studies, more than many academic disciplines, is about translation, creating “some shared understanding, . . . a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent.” The potential utility and even beauty of the field derives from the fact that its subjects are not inert specimens in a laboratory; they are human beings engaging questions of ultimate concern in a language that fairly drips with meaning, language rich enough for scholars to want to translate it for an audience unused to these idioms.

For non-Mormon scholars studying Mormonism, the translation involved in this project is likely to entail a fair amount of actual as well as metaphorical translation. Mormons have a highly idiosyncratic vocabulary, for which 1:1 English translations are frequently inadequate. This was somewhat humorously apparent during Mitt Romney’s campaign for the presidency as reporters tried to figure out what bishops and stake presidents could possibly be. But part of “getting” Mormonism in more than a superficial way is understanding that a bishop is really not very similar to a Protestant pastor at all, and that calling a group of adherents a “ward” instead of a “congregation” is far more than a lexical switch. The work of Mormon scholars doing critical work on their own tradition is no easier: they have to be so fully immersed in the language of the academy that they can re-create Mormon theological constructs
and cultural mores in this second language without losing the poetry of their first language.

One thing Mormons are not very good at is being quiet. Decades of sermons about reverence have done little to quell the enthusiastic babel of Mormons greeting each other in their chapels before (and occasionally during) meetings—hushed cathedrals (alas!) are not part of the Mormon aesthetic. On mornings when people gather to hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir performance that is recorded for broadcast, there is usually more than one announcement requesting quiet, and a small army of nice people patrolling the aisles shushing people in the nicest possible way.

I like thinking of Mormon studies as a gathering in the Tabernacle without the shushing—a babel perhaps, but a friendly one, a polyglot hubbub of ideas and arguments and poems and polemics, all housed under an upside-down bridge in the middle of the desert.

I hope we crank up the organ to sing hymns every once in a while.

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Terryl Givens, Fiona Givens, and the Rehabilitation of Mormon Theology

Matthew Bowman


Since his By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion (Oxford, 2002) attracted wide attention, Terryl Givens has become a Mormon scholar as much as a scholar of Mormonism. His books—all featuring a trademark mix of silken style, wide-ranging command of what scholars used to call the Western canon, and thoughtful cultural analysis—increasingly bring to mind the sort of grand statements about human purpose and meaning cloaked in an essay ostensibly about Renaissance art or early Federal shipbuilding that Walter Pater, Henry Adams, and other nineteenth-century intellectuals used to write. But while Pater mused about the nature of beauty and Adams about the slow decay of American democracy, the ur-subject lurking behind Terryl Givens’s footnotes is the Mormon worldview as he understands it. Unlike much of his earlier work, The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life (cowritten by Terryl and his wife, Fiona) is explicitly a statement of theology. It was born, quite clearly, from both
Terryl and Fiona Givens’s deep immersion in Western literature and interest in theology. But it also draws together much of Terryl Givens’s intellectual project to date. In short, the book offers a succinct and eloquent presentation of the ideas we have heretofore received only in fragments.

Givens’s first book, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (Oxford, 1997; rev. 2013), was a pioneering study of anti-Mormon literature. It cleared the path for the work of Spencer Fluhman, Megan Sanborn Jones, Patrick Mason, and other scholars interested in why other Americans found Latter-day Saints so objectionable through much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. What was unique about Givens’s argument was that while most previous commentators located hostility to Mormonism in Mormon clannishness and separatism, American scandal over the practice of polygamy, or other social and cultural factors, Givens asserted that these fears were epiphenomenal. At the root of them all lay theological disputation. For Givens, Joseph Smith was “a defiant reminder that, much as it tries to, orthodoxy cannot escape the fact of its own construction.” Hence, Mormonism produced religious anxiety among American Protestants desperate to reassure themselves that their religions offered correct and pure knowledge of God (p. 102). Givens devotes much of the rest of the book to exploring the ways that American Protestants pushed Joseph Smith to the margins of true religion, draping him in a cloak of exotic, despotic orientalism.

This is a good argument, but for our purposes, what’s more interesting is Givens’s characterization of Mormonism in *Viper on the Hearth*. Fundamentally, Givens argues that American Protestants were distraught by Mormonism’s “reconceptualizing of the sacred that is not amenable to Christian orthodoxy, its thoroughgoing demystification of the numinous, its radical historicizing of Christian origins” (p. 8). Here Givens offers a nascent version of the Mormon theology that he develops more fully in later work.

In a devotional speech at Brigham Young University in 2005, Givens compared Smith to Thomas Carlyle’s notion of the “Great Man,” dropping like lightning from heaven and setting the souls of others ablaze. He argued that Smith’s great contribution was his elevation of human capa-
bility, liberty, and genius and his unwavering conviction that these things lie at the heart of humanity’s relationship with God.¹ Viper on the Hearth is rooted chronologically in Givens’s period of academic training, the Romantic era, and it seems evident that Romantic values—those of Shelley, Keats, Whitman (and Thomas Carlyle, for that matter): a preoccupation with liberating the authentic self from institutions, great faith in human potential to understand and commune with the world, an intense devotion to emotion and the sentimental relationships that foster it—are the lens by which Givens understands the nature of the freedom that Mormonism grants. Indeed, in his essay “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude” he explicitly uses Romanticism to explain Smith’s spiritual impulses, citing the prophet’s fascination with recovery of the past, desire to privilege the pursuit of truth against formal institutions (like creeds or denominations), and conviction that human progress is a never-ending, ever-expanding effort to master the universe.²

These influences gave Givens’s developing Mormon theology two primary thrusts. The first, what Givens calls “dialogic revelation,” is enunciated nowhere so well as in his book By the Hand of Mormon. There he contends that the Book of Mormon is important to Mormons as a sign as much as a text—a sign of “revelation as a personalized, dialogic exchange,” as from prayer that “dramatically evokes an answer that is impossible to mistake as anything other than an individualized, dialogic response to a highly particularized question” (p. 217). Givens locates such interaction between human beings and God throughout the Book of Mormon and maintains that the book’s primary contribution to Latter-day Saint theology is that it presumes this relationship to be normative.

We should not stop there. The concept of dialogic revelation underlies many of the ideas that led to The God Who Weeps. It illustrates Givens’s conviction that the end of Mormonism is the elevation and perfection of

relationships, taking humanity’s relationship with God as a model. His *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford, 2007) takes for one underlying theme the intense sociality of Mormon life, observing that Mormon art of all varieties has often been the medium through which Mormons have built spiritual relationships with each other. As Givens puts it, “Like the family into which one is born, wards became the inescapable condition of a Mormon’s social and spiritual life” (p. 104). Givens has become somewhat famous for his vivid description, on the 2007 PBS documentary *The Mormons*, of Mormonism’s seemingly odd entrancement with dance, but in *People of Paradox* he places that fascination in the context of a “sociability [that] was not a distraction from a higher order of things, but a preview of higher things” (p. 133). With such a perspective, the dances that the original Nauvoo Temple occasionally hosted seem altogether fitting as religious practice. From Givens’s point of view, dialogic revelation should not be understood to exist solely between humanity and God—rather, it is a model for the sacred nature of all loving human relationships.

That sociality is given further weight by the second thrust of Terryl Givens’s theology: his intense optimism about human nature. *People of Paradox* places Mormonism’s sociality in tension with other impulses in the faith: toward radical individual freedom and toward humanity’s restless, unceasing quest for perfection. The notion of the transcendent nature of human freedom may be Givens’s most powerful vision; certainly it is the one that he (and Fiona) write most passionately about. But this idea of freedom has a certain cast. Givens’s most recent work before *The God Who Weeps* was *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford, 2010). It posits that the notion that human beings existed before their mortal birth has deep and wide roots in Western history. Givens finds this idea undergirding a number of desirable features of human nature: free will, the very concept of transcendence, the aesthetic appeal of the sublime, and the powerful bonds of human relationships (as well as some not-so-desirable side effects, the brutal randomness of human inequality chief among them). Mormonism receives only a brief treatment in the book, but many of the values that Givens
locates in the idea of preexistence emerge again in his other writings as examples of the powerful explanatory power that Mormonism offers concerning questions of human existence—particularly the libertarian, absolute version of free will that he believes preexistence postulates. “Lightning out of Heaven” and “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude” both embrace that idea; in the former essay, Givens declares, “In Joseph Smith, religion and freedom found their first perfect, seamless synthesis.”

Givens’s work has maintained the form and rigor of contemporary academic scholarship while venturing further and further across the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines and content, away from painstaking analysis of detail and toward something far more romantic and primeval. *The God Who Weeps* is in some ways an explicit statement of the Mormon way of thinking that Givens developed in his previous academic work; and like much of that work it is somewhat unclassifiable, but for different reasons. These reasons likely include the devotional intent of the book; it is written for lay audiences first and scholars second, and so its rigor of thought, while present, fades into the background. Indeed, the book better resembles a homily or exhortation than a systematic theological exposition. It reminds me of some of the best sermons from the great literary nineteenth-century masters of the form, like Henry van Dyke or Charles Parkhurst, a passionate invocation of an essentially optimistic theology, studded with as many stirring quotations from Tennyson or Sophocles as references to scripture or theologians. This lyricism is another mark of the book’s intellectual genealogy and probably reflects Fiona’s influence (as a teacher of language and a disciple of the liberal arts) as much as Terryl’s, and it is probably appropriate. That the authors rely as much (or more) on poets and novelists as they do on philosophers and theologians indicates their success at framing this thoughtful work as essentially pastoral and embracing the basically romantic (though, perhaps, not to say less Mormon) impulses behind their theology.

*The God Who Weeps* should be applauded for simply existing, and Latter-day Saints should be applauded for purchasing it (if reports are
true, these buyers are vast in number). For two generations, the Mormon faithful have been suspicious of “intellectuals” for reasons ranging from a fear of anti-Mormonism (sometimes justified) to, more often than not, an admirable commitment to the lay leadership of their religion. To some, Mormon intellectuals can be suspect usurpers of the magisterium entrusted to the church’s highest governing bodies; these intellectuals are often castigated for complicating the presumably simple tenets of the religion, or even undermining them.

Therefore, much—even, sadly, the vast majority—of what passes for Mormon devotional literature today consists of quotations from old addresses by church leaders mixed with evocative and often sentimental anecdote. That form, unfortunately, has given the category a bad name among Mormon intellectuals. Yet this book reveals precisely just how serious, rigorous, and powerful good devotional writing can be. At its best, devotional work correlates the insights of sound intellectual analysis with the practical task of Christian living. More than merely evoking sentiment, it reorients how a believer might understand scripture, God, or the nature of faith. It reveals new universes of meaning in things previously deemed mundane, draws connections out of things seemingly unrelated, and hence creates order out of perceived chaos. Good devotional literature deepens understanding and makes religious life more profound, more colorful, and more full. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*, Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, and even Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love* fall into the same category as *The God Who Weeps*.

But the best homily rests upon theology, and perhaps what is most refreshing about the book is that in addition to accomplishing the task of good devotional writing, the authors offer a clear statement of a Mormon theology. I say “a Mormon theology” because there have been multiple Mormon theologies that have attempted to systematize and regularize the torrent of vision and work produced by Joseph Smith, dating to even the first decades of Mormonism’s existence, when the brothers Parley and Orson Pratt attempted to line up Smith’s revelatory corpus and use it to cogently explain the machinery of the universe.
The romantic theology expressed in *The God Who Weeps* seems firmly planted in a strain of Mormon theology that reached its height with B. H. Roberts and John Widtsoe, two of the leading lights of Mormon theology’s golden age in the early twentieth century. Roberts and Widtsoe naturally drew on the resources that Mormonism provided them: Joseph Smith’s firm denial of human depravity, his exaltation of human potential until it reached even the boundaries of the divine, and the extrapolation of that humanistic turn into a firm and confident materiality that Brigham Young and the brothers Pratt pursued.

For Joseph Smith, human beings were of the same type that God is, and for Young and the Pratts, this meant that the universe is not governed by a mysterious and implacable divine will, but rather is a rational place that human beings possessed the ability to comprehend. But the emphases of Roberts and Widtsoe’s generation were distinct: humanity did not merely enjoy inexhaustible possibilities in the future but vast capacities today. For Roberts and Widtsoe, the achievement of human salvation is unfettered by original sin and enhanced by science. Drawing on the philosophy of a post-Darwinian world (particularly that of Herbert Spencer and John Fiske, who believed that Darwin’s theory of environmentally driven change over time could be read not simply as blind adaptation but as teleology: a way to imagine progress), Roberts and Widtsoe argued that humanity’s divine potential was best understood as the product of the development of character and capacity. Further, it was best achieved through a vaguely Darwinian process of struggle against obstacle; testing one’s strength and character against limits; and gradually, as a result, expanding one’s ability. As Roberts wrote, “I believe it consistent with right reason to say that some of the lowliest walks in life, the paths which lead into the deepest valleys of sorrow and up to the most rugged steeps of adversity, are the ones which, if a man travel in, will best accomplish the object of his existence in this world.”

Heaven, for Roberts and Widtsoe, is a determinedly humanistic affair: divine virtues could

be cultivated on this very earth; our relationship with God is not simply like but is the relationship between a parent and child; and exaltation, the end of our salvation, is different from human achievement and human sociality only in degree (though not very much), not in kind.

Aspects of this version of Mormonism remain popular today. The leaders who have most deeply shaped the character of Mormon religious culture to the present day continue to think of Christianity primarily as a religion of effort and exertion, maximizing humanity’s presumed capacities. This is distinct from the Catholic vision of Christianity as ritual observance and the Protestant understanding of Christianity as the practice of gratitude for unearned grace. As the LDS apostle Neal A. Maxwell put it in 1997, “Just as Jesus has invited, we can indeed strive to become ‘even as [He is]’ (3 Ne. 27:27). This process of developmental repentance occurs when we truly take His yoke upon us, thus finally qualifying for God’s greatest gift—eternal life.”

*The God Who Weeps* reveals that its authors’ intellectual genealogy reaches to Roberts and Widtsoe in multiple ways. For one thing, their unashamed willingness to draw from non-Mormon sources to illuminate aspects of Mormonism mirrors the approach of Roberts and Widtsoe, who eagerly sought dialogue with philosophers and theologians of the non-Mormon world. But there are theological debts as well. Terryl and Fiona Givens interpret original sin not as a spiritual incapacity, but as the result of our biological predisposition for self-preservation—and thus as an accidental, though not fundamental, feature of human existence (p. 68). They draw on Darwin to describe the constant wrestle with adversity that drives forward the cultivation of the human soul; and most of all, even in the very title of their book, they draw heaven very close to earth indeed.

All of this indicates something particular about the theology of *The God Who Weeps*, and perhaps about Mormon theology in total. The conventional definition of systematic theology (that is, comprehensive, totalizing, cosmos-explaining theology, as opposed to other versions of

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theology narrower in aim and method) demands the theologian to orient his or her effort around a core philosophical principle or set of principles, to anchor that interpretation of the cosmos with the strong tether of a fundamental premise. John Calvin famously stated his first principles in the opening lines of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “No man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.” Calvin’s fundamental principle was the absolute sovereignty of God, and his interpretation of all else in Christianity flowed from it.

The core principle of the Givenses’ theology is the authoritative nature of the human understanding, by which I mean intellectual capacity as well as desire, longing, sentiment, and impulse. It is evident to the authors, for instance, that the nature of God’s righteousness and justice might be deduced from the impulses of human conscience; that the Babylonian deities who demanded child sacrifice hold no claim on human faith because of the abhorrence of their liturgies; and that, conversely, a God who validates the repugnance of human suffering is a God who moves in harmony with human feeling and only thus is worthy of our worship (pp. 13–20). For the authors, the earthly family is an appropriate image for heavenly sociality (pp. 107–8), God is rightly described with the language of human experience and emotion (pp. 24–25), and human potential rightly understood is the very status that God now holds (pp. 2–3). Faith is the appropriate response to our impulse toward charity, our desire for intimacy, our hope that our love might transcend death. And indeed, that faith can be in, simply, our own perception of what the good ultimately is. As the authors put it, “If we find ourselves inclined to believe that a powerful deity presides over the universe, the assumption that he would be a more perfect embodiment of the morally good that we recognize and seek to emulate is not wishful thinking” (p. 18).

This confidence that human sensibilities are an accurate mirror for the primeval realities of the universe is profoundly optimistic, and profoundly romantic too. It is perfectly in line with Terryl Givens's theology as developed over his career. This should not minimize the many ways in which this project is also profoundly consonant with Mormon method and ideas. Indeed, the argument reflects some premises of the entire project of Mormon religion-making. For example, Terryl Givens and Samuel Brown have argued elsewhere that Joseph Smith found traces of his new church scattered throughout the great library of human achievement (shades of the romantics’ love for ruins à la Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and Shelley’s “Ozymandias”). And the Mormon theologian and scholar Hugh Nibley built an academic career locating parallels to Mormon thought strewn across the ancient world. The Givenses’ wide net functions similarly: While Nibley looked to architecture, archaeology, and religious practice, they construct a Mormon theology from the collective yearning of the great Western poets, finding universal human fears and sympathies and demonstrating how their Mormon theology provides answers concerning them.

The Givenses’ emphasis on human capacity, indeed, borders on the heroic. This, no doubt, contributes to the book’s popularity, but it also indicates those points at which it is wise to remember that this is a Mormon theology, and thus will hopefully open rather than foreclose further conversations. Mormons—particularly American Mormons raised on a steady diet of American individualism—will find the intense rhetorical emphasis on choice, responsibility, and “authenticity” to be empowering. For instance, “What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love” (p. 4). For the authors, heaven consists of freely entering into relationships with “authentic others,” those who through choice, failure, and renewed exertion have cultivated the divine capacity to love unfettered by any limitation.

The authors’ passion in defending this vision leads them to occasional rhetorical disbelief of the muddleheadedness of those who do not share it. Their treatment of St. Augustine, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and other Christians who subscribed to theologies that the Givenses find unappealing (like predestination or original sin) occasionally borders on the one-dimensional. For instance, early in the book they cite Edwards’s unfortunately famous (unfortunate because it poorly represented Edwards’s total project) sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” offering it as an example of the grim and arbitrary God they claim so many Christians have believed in. They then turn to Edwards’s wife, Sarah, who “was drawn to a different version of God” (p. 31). They describe Sarah’s fervent prayers and conversion experience and her delighted peace and happiness when she realized that God was a personal God who loved her and offered her salvation. It is worth pointing out that this story of Sarah’s conversion actually appeared first in Jonathan Edwards’s own 1746 work *Religious Affections;* that Sarah claimed to have sought that encounter with God at her husband’s urging; that she professed equal faith as did he in the doctrines of predestination and election; and that Jonathan included the story in his book as one example in support of his elaborate and powerful meditation on the love of God, a subject on which he wrote more powerfully and eloquently than any other Calvinist theologian.

Similarly, there are other strands of Mormon theology that press back against the intense individualism the Givenses espouse. For instance, in the mid-twentieth century, Bruce R. McConkie and Joseph Fielding Smith promulgated a version of the faith equally as convinced of humanity’s divine potential yet also, unlike the Givenses’ expansive and optimistic Mormonism, pessimistic about humanity’s propensity toward sin, unfriendly toward the intellectual world outside the church, and insistent on obedience to church leadership and reliance upon institution. Indeed, while the Givenses rely heavily on Joseph Smith’s divine anthropology, they have virtually nothing to say about his equally fervent ardor for institution building, submission to authority, and devoted sacramentalism. It is a measure of Smith’s complexity that he built a religion that, if viewed from
one angle, might be taken simply for a deeply humanistic equivalent to the vaguely sci-fi sixties-era Human Potential Movement but that, if viewed from another angle, might seem as distant from contemporary American individualism as the deeply sacramental and hierarchical world of medieval Catholicism. Both visions are beautiful, in their way—the one the rough and striving beauty of the pioneer trek west and the glory of self-creation, the other the regular and ordered beauty of cathedral bells and monastic humility. Now, it should be remembered that though the Givenses clearly prefer the former to the latter, they are not attempting to construct a systematic theology of Mormonism. Their book explains, as the subtitle puts it, “How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life” and is an exploration of Mormonism’s vision of the human condition, a particular and narrow theological question. Nonetheless, it is striking that those very things that sit so near the center of actual Mormon experience—Sunday worship, ordinances, wards—make no appearance here.

Despite my caveats, it should be emphasized that Terryl and Fiona Givens have written a meaty and impassioned study of those ideas that make Mormonism unique, and most particularly, those that make it most beautiful. The book deserves to stand alongside Sterling M. McMurrin’s *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* and B. H. Roberts’s *The Truth, The Way, The Life* as seminal statements of Mormon theology. But it also deserves to join G. K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy* and C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* in the pantheon of statements of Christian devotion. More, it has established a place for Mormon voices in that pantheon. We will be lucky indeed if others follow.

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The Reluctant Metaphysicians

Samuel M. Brown


Introduction

In the summer of 1829, Jesse Smith of Stockholm, New York, wrote an angry letter to his nephew Hyrum in response to a query about the Book of Mormon, which was being translated by Hyrum’s brother Joseph Jr. Among other complaints, Uncle Jesse described Joseph Jr.’s new scripture as “discovered by the necromancy of infidelity.”¹ These words do not

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¹ Jesse Smith (Stockholm, New York) to Hyrum Smith (Palmyra, New York), 17 June 1829; transcribed in Joseph Smith Letterbook, 1837–1843, Joseph Smith collection, 1827–1844, Correspondence, 1829–1844, 2:59–61, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Other contemporary references to Smith’s “necromancy” include Eber D. Howe,
carry the same meaning they once did, but how to translate them isn’t entirely clear. Necromancy often meant magic, but it also carried the sense of a frightful magic concerned with conjuring the dead, commonly treasure demons. Infidelity meant atheism, a broad and charged term that indicted most forms of non-Protestant belief. Whatever its precise meaning, Jesse’s phrase cast his visionary nephew in a terrible light. For almost two centuries these and similar critical scowls at Joseph Smith and the Mormonism he founded have driven the narrative and interpretive approaches to Mormonism among critics, defenders, and onlookers.

Nearly two centuries later, discussions about the intersections of magic, heresy, and religion in Mormonism mostly exemplify the French aphorism “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” (The more things change, the more they stay the same). Many contemporary discussions still repeat old debates about religious legitimacy just as they were originally framed in the nineteenth century. In the last two decades, a handful of studies have attempted to break the pattern and provide a scholarly view into the cultural tensions surrounding the religious meanings of Mormonism and magic. These books, combined with the scholarly and public context in which they occur, demonstrate a slow movement away from approaches dominated, however inadvertently, by an uncritically Protestant worldview. Though the road has been rocky, several books have done much to further the discussion. This essay engages this literature, mostly in the context of religious studies, by considering what it means, and has meant, to call early Mormonism “magic” or Joseph Smith a “magician.”

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Section 1: Magic and metaphysics

In the 1970s, the LDS Church hired Leonard Arrington, an economic historian, to lead its history department and begin to sort through its incredible archival resources. New documents came fast and furious as Arrington’s group began to process these archives, opening narratives of Mormon history that diverged at times, sometimes sharply, from prior institutional accounts. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century devotional historiography had framed church history as scripture in an extension of the supernatural rationalism of early Mormonism, while academic history generally bracketed or excluded the supernatural. The Arrington period was the first time that Mormon historians moved beyond history as scripture in any sustained way, but it remained a fact that clear partisan lines were drawn in the sand and single documents as proof texts could exert disproportionate influence. The presence of ex-Mormon and evangelical countercultists on the one side and a conservative institutional church on the other increased the stakes of any historical discussion.

Within the overall context of polemical controversy and the Arrington period (later dubbed the “New Mormon History”), Michael Quinn published his book *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* in 1987, an exhaustive and sometimes exhausting litany of “magical” items, dates, practices, and possible exposures for Joseph Smith, his family, and his followers. *Magic World View* reiterates, albeit with the scientific authority of prolix footnotes, the old polemical claim that Joseph Smith was a magician. The content and context of Quinn’s book led to harsh, even cruel,
criticism from many orthodox Latter-day Saints. Quinn, a smart historian with an encyclopedic knowledge of early Mormonism, became a sort of casualty in an internecine battle among Latter-day Saints about the meaning of their tradition. Although it drew some of its momentum from the Mark Hofmann forgeries, Quinn’s *Magic World View* relied primarily on evidence not terribly different from that discussed in Jon Butler’s more influential book *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (1990), which documented the persistence and influence of esoteric folk traditions in early America, or Alan Taylor’s work on the “supernatural economy” of late colonial America.3

Yet scholarly writing about magic was already in the process of moving on in the 1980s, leaving Quinn and his critics outmoded before publication of the revised edition of *Magic World View* in 1998. The argument over whether Joseph Smith was a magician was as old as Mormonism. Changing the terms of the discussion would require greater scholarly distance.

A scholar of nature religions and women’s studies with an emphasis on marginal or “new” religious traditions, Catherine Albanese brought considerable intellectual and textual resources to bear in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007), a survey of American “metaphysical religion.”4 Working through the overall arc of American religious history, Albanese challenges two predominant theories of the development of American Christianity. The first, represented by William McLoughlin, sees the story of recurrent evangelical revivals as the critical engine of American

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religion, in what has been termed the “evangelical thesis.”\textsuperscript{5} Jon Butler responded in 1990 by arguing that it was the transition from European establishment churches and folk traditions to post-Revolutionary denominations, rather than the evangelical impulse per se, that drove religious change in America.\textsuperscript{6} Albanese joined the broader debate by suggesting that there is another important influence in American religion: an identifiable and persistent metaphysical tradition that did not end with the close of the eighteenth century but still continues to inform and challenge America’s religious mainstremgs.

Watching for continuities with Renaissance esoteric traditions, Albanese’s \textit{Republic of Mind and Spirit} encompasses English cunning folk, Afro-Caribbean shamans, Puritan hermeticists, séance spiritualists, Indian powwows, phreno-mesmerists and magnetists, Shakers, Fourierists, Christian Scientists, Universalists, Transcendentalists, New Thought and New Age practitioners, Americanizers of Eastern philosophies (particularly Buddhism, Taoism, and yoga), Theosophists, and physiological reformers. And, of course, nineteenth-century Mormons. Albanese’s use of the terms \textit{metaphysics} and \textit{metaphysicians} will probably not gain academic or popular currency for various reasons. Still, like the more standard term \textit{Western esotericism}, Albanese’s terminology displaces polemical terms like \textit{magic} and \textit{occult} and captures something of the nature of the


philosophical and spiritual impulse behind the movements whose stories she tells.

Albanese’s specific treatment of Mormonism is largely a minor updating of Quinn, whom she cites extensively. Her distinctive claims about Mormonism are intriguing but incorrect arguments for the male-female divine dyad in Mormonism and Smith’s theological dependence on Swedenborg. (Smith was probably aware of Swedenborgianism but never a follower to any important extent.)7 Though she moves beyond Quinn’s obsolete “magic world view” framing, Albanese’s argument that Mormonism belongs in the tradition of American metaphysical religion is also not new: critics have been comparing Smith and his followers to various heretics, mystics, and practitioners of Western esotericism almost since the church was founded. Mormons were Swedenborgians, they were mesmerists, they were Camisards or the apocalyptic Anabaptists of early modern Muenster. In the nineteenth century, comparisons to similar heresies mostly represented an argument from providential history—a view of history that maintained that because Protestantism conquered America and prior heresies had faded into the past, anything that resembled those heresies was destined for demise.8

While Albanese treats her subjects sympathetically, her classification largely follows the Protestant precedent—these traditions are what Protestantism is not.9 This is-not-ness can represent merely the Other,

7. The relationship between Smith and Swedenborgianism still awaits a definitive treatment. On the possibility of a direct encounter, Albanese (Republic of Mind and Spirit, 142) and Brooke (Refiner’s Fire, 212; see n. 15 below for full citation) rely on Quinn (Magic World View, 174, 1987 ed.), who adduces a single quote from a late autobiography of an erstwhile Swedenborgian who became a prominent Mormon. Mormons did mention Swedenborgianism occasionally, generally in derisive terms. The entry in Charles Buck’s extremely popular Theological Dictionary provided a minimal overview of Swedenborgianism for American readers in the early 1800s. I personally doubt Smith knew much more about Swedenborg than is contained in that entry.

8. Matthew Bowman and I are working on a treatment of competing theologies of history in antebellum Protestantism and early Mormonism currently titled “Fragments of Mormonism: Ancient History and the Early Mormon Assault on Protestantism.”

the this-is-not-me, or it can represent what remains uncategorized after a binary classification. When the world divides into two categories, there is always a remainder, something left over. Objects in a remainder demonstrate that the classification is not as secure as one might hope. Such a remainder has various names depending on the context: triton ti, tertium quid, liminal entity. The category “magic” is such a remainder when religion and science define their polar opposition. There is substantial power and risk associated with objects that either span or exist between the poles of a binary classification. As anthropologists have observed for a century, such liminal entities can threaten, destabilize, and transform. In the case of religion and science, magic has allowed science to remake religion in significant ways. By defining specific elements of religion as “magical,” science has managed to hollow out religion’s ritual and supernatural center. (This process makes possible Stephen Gould’s “non-overlapping magisteria” concept, a culmination of the modern Protestant and Enlightenment project of disenchanting religion.)

The disenchantment of religion by naming its various elements “magical” is an interesting topic in its own right. For scholars of religion and culture, though, the important analytical problem is that the category “magic” or “metaphysical religion” is a hodgepodge, a miscellany. Studying a remainder as if it were unitary is generally poor methodology. Saying something is magic is not saying much with any rigor. The coherence of the category is an artifact of the observer rather than something true of the entity under study. Such a categorization primarily facilitates partisan manipulation. While Albanese celebrates an encyclopedically diverse and fascinating group of rebels against the Protestant mainstreams and clearly moves beyond the polemical impulse behind discussions of magic, her


project ultimately cannot free itself from the methodological and theoretical limitations of a study of conceptual remainders.

Randall Styers, in his *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*, takes a theoretical and historiographical approach to magic and modernism and carefully demonstrates the elasticity of these too-flexible concepts. Building on important theoretical work by Jonathan Z. Smith, Styers outlines how scholars have used the category of magic as part of their elaborations of religion, science, and modernism. Styers knows the key thinkers well, describes their arguments with precision and insight, and draws attention to two basic phenomena. First, scholars and others defined magic as the “bastard sister” of religion as a way to corral religion into a “rationalist” pasture. Normative Protestantism became a private, nonmaterial “devotion” in the thinnest sense of the term. Second, the elaboration of science required magic as a foil and a place to store past sins or missteps: early science that was visibly religious or supernatualist could be dismissed as nonscience. This process created a sanitized version of science with an impeccable pedigree.

In parallel with the Enlightenment mainstream, the Protestant mainstream found uses for the concept “magic” in its contests with opponents, particularly internal heretics like the subjects of Albanese’s *Republic of Mind and Spirit*. However else this concept has been used, it has helped to defame and defang critics and opponents to the mainstream. Styers provides a rigorous approach to understanding this concept and explains in some respects the methodological problems with prior efforts to analyze a remainder as if it were a unity.

Wouter Hanegraaff, the Dutch holder of one of the few endowed chairs in esotericism or hermeticism, extended Styers’s arguments within the much broader space of Western esotericism. While the discipline within which Hanegraaff wrote remains in its infancy, his *Esotericism and the Academy* furthered the debate considerably. Struggling with


nomenclature as everyone working in this space does, Hanegraaff settles on the neologism “Platonic Orientalism” to describe key traditions within Albanese’s “metaphysical religion.” Although Platonic Orientalism is a slightly opaque term, Hanegraaff is true to Styers’s insights as he follows the threads of the heavily interpreted survival of the religion and culture of the antique Mediterranean. Although he explores some tangents of more modest significance, Hanegraaff importantly focuses on a coherent what: antique Mediterranean culture—especially Egypt-derived wisdom and late Platonism—as it survives into the modern era. The most important survivals encompassed some Platonic philosophy, some syncretic henotheism, some Egyptophilia, and some theurgy. Hanegraaff sees terms like magic or occult or esoteric as words fitted for battle rather than scholarship, and he is largely correct. While at times overwrought, his sections on the evolution of these controversial terms represent a useful extension of Styers’s analysis into occultism and esotericism. While Styers is more rigorous, both authors provide methodological and conceptual tools for beginning to interpret “magic” both within Mormon history and within the academy writ large.

Section 2: Antique survivals and anti-modernism

Hanegraaff focuses on early and late modern thought, mostly European, at its intersection with the academy. He correctly identifies the impulse behind “Platonic Orientalism” and other kindred traditions commonly grouped under “Western esotericism”: a reverence for antiquity, the persistence of the cosmological worldview, and a reluctance to embrace modernism in its entirety. More immediately relevant to Mormon studies, between the first and second editions of Magic World View, John Brooke, a prominent American political historian, published an account of “hermetic” continuities between the Radical Reformation and Mormonism in The Refiner’s Fire. His Bancroft-winning book became a

14. Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 12.
flashpoint of controversy within the insular community of Mormon history, a controversy that demonstrated how separate much of that community still was from other American and religious historians. Brooke's engaging and informative book provided a plausible trail from the Radical Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe to the religious ferment of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America. While *Refiner's Fire* encountered considerable criticism, it suffered from only a few of the faults of which many Mormon readers accused it. Overall, Brooke depended too much on Dame Frances Yates's hermeticism thesis (first elaborated in her 1964 book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*), attributed too much conceptual gravity to counterfeiting, and was unable to provide secure textual evidence of direct hermetic influence on early Mormonism beyond Masonry.

But those problems should not distract from the book's significant contributions. While Brooke occasionally relies on Quinn, he contributes substantial original insight into various esoteric threads in the Atlantic world between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and correctly situated Mormonism within Atlantic culture. Further, *Refiner's Fire* was perhaps the first book by an academic outsider to take Mormon theology seriously, as a subject for careful, systematic interrogation. Until a reading community appreciates the robustness and coherence of an alternative cultural tradition, it is difficult to frame cultural rebels as anything but idiosyncratic. With Brooke's foundation, it became easier to see that Mormonism represented a principled and coherent assault on Protestantism.

Antique survivals like those described by Brooke and Hanegraaff are a key enemy to the modern project of Enlightenment, a cultural entity that is itself commonly misunderstood. In *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, Leigh Eric Schmidt clarifies the meanings and mechanisms of the American Enlightenment through the lens of the rising science of acoustics. While optics had long been a

major focus for physicists and philosophers, acoustic science was an upstart discipline. But acoustic science had an important impact not just directly in the debates over the meaning of sound, but as an exemplum that clarifies what was happening in the broader culture.

Using Enlightenment exposés of the ancient Greek oracles as elaborate ventriloquism, Schmidt fleshed out a compelling narrative about “modernity” and “Enlightenment.” Schmidt’s story is of disenchantment—the banishment of God from nature and human experience. In an extreme form, the overwrought Friedrich Nietzsche declared God dead; in a milder form, some early Americans subscribed to Deism (a nebulous term that overlaps roughly with a disenchanted theism). Modernism as disenchantment is a familiar trope in academic writing. By disenchantment scholars mean any of a number of things: the waning of the cosmological worldview, the loss of religion/theocracy as the organizing principle of society in the global West, a transition in religion from the medieval Catholic focus on church community toward the Protestant emphasis on the believer and his private conscience, or the disruption of divine immanence in the natural world. All of these are accurate depictions, in varying degrees and at various points in history, of the disenchantment associated with modernity.

Joseph Smith strongly resisted this disenchantment. This resistance placed him in many respects on the wrong side of the Enlightenment, as Schmidt perceptively observes. But Smith simultaneously welcomed other elements of the Enlightenment project. Smith’s relationship to modern ideals of Enlightenment, as that of those who followed him, is complex. Smith loved logical exegesis, enjoyed puzzling through intellectual or theological problems in pursuit of consistent solutions. He cherished common sense, albeit in a way specific to him and his followers.18 Smith stands as a reminder that the Enlightenment wasn’t ultimately about rationality per se—people had been rationally religious for

18. Jared Hickman and I explore the meanings of “common sense” philosophy and theology in Mormonism as part of our work in progress on translation and the Mormon challenge to modernity.
a very long time—it was a story about shifting contexts and authority and axioms.

Section 3: Mormon reluctance

Understanding the historiographic context facilitates comprehension of an important problem in the study of Mormonism and esotericism: Mormons generally rejected any such comparison. That they rejected the word magic is unsurprising, as that was mostly a term of simple derision. But Mormons rejected other, more sophisticated comparisons as well. What does Mormon rejection of comparisons to Western esotericism mean? An extreme version of the religious studies technique of epoche, or bracketing, would require that we take Mormons at their word. If they say they are not a Western esoteric tradition, then they are not. But that approach, which largely abandons hope for analytical comparisons, is not what I am advocating here. Asking questions, “looking under the hood,” and seeing whether people’s accounts of themselves and their cultural systems accurately describe those cultural systems are the appropriate role of the academic. I am suggesting, though, that the Mormon reluctance to accept their characterization as practitioners of Western esotericism is worth considering in its own right. The reluctance tells us a lot about both those comparing and those being compared.

Whereas many practitioners of Western esotericism are explicit about their dependence on particular esoteric traditions (such a dependence was generally the point of an esoteric tradition), Joseph Smith and the early Mormons generally rejected any explicit ties with esotericism. When confronted with Shakers, Fourierists, the French Prophets, Quakers, Swedenborgianists, or mesmerists, Smith denounced them as readily as he denounced the evangelical groups that attacked him and his movement.19 Smith was not constrained by the authority of an esoteric tradi-

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tion. Even the treasure quest, to which he brought a surprisingly rich vi-
son of matter and the resurrected earth, met with denials and rejections
on Smith’s part. While he engaged in something like the *prisca theologia*
of Patristic and Renaissance esoteric thinkers, he ranged across the
breadth of Western and ancient Mediterranean history. There was
something eclectic about Joseph Smith—he was a syncretist or a
bricoleur or, as he and his followers saw it, a prophet. Smith situated him-
self firmly within historic Christianity—or at least a reenvisioned Chris-
tian history. For someone who was continually translating, seeing to the
center of things, *magic* was the wrong word to describe what Smith was
pursuing.

In his influential essay “What a Difference a Difference Makes,”
Jonathan Z. Smith argues that communities and observers emphasize
difference when it is informative or required to differentiate conceptually
adjacent entities. Mormons strenuously rejected the comparison to
Western esoteric traditions in part because there are important similar-
ities between the traditions. But that is only a partial explanation of why
Smith and his followers have been so reluctant to allow others to classify
them as representatives of Western esoteric traditions. The important
question is not whether Smith’s apparent innovations can be classed as
metaphysical or esoteric or magical. Smith and the other metaphysicians
were all rebels against the Protestant mainstream, some similarities are
readily apparent, and “Western esotericism” is nebulous enough to allow
a comparison even without strong evidence of a direct link. The more
important question is why Smith so adamantly rejected the association.
To my mind, there are four principal reasons that Smith rejected claims
of dependence on Western esotericism.

First, comparisons to magic or esotericism were generally pejorative
partisanship. Smith was a biblical prophet building a biblical Zion, and

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20. Samuel M. Brown, “Relics, Graves, and the Treasure Quest,” chap. 3 in *In Heaven
as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford
21. Matthew Bowman and I cover these topics in our study “Fragments of Mor-
monism,” currently in preparation.
allowing for allegiances with dark arts, however much he thought he could see the meaningful reality behind some esoteric practices, prevented his more important work of recovering ancient biblical religion. The one esoteric tradition Smith explicitly embraced was Masonry, during its post-Morgan resurgence. Masonry was on its way back to cultural dominance, and Smith was building an empire on the Mississippi. He hoped Nauvoo, his Zionic city-state, would be the greatest city in America. Masonry had the potential to help in this grand effort. (Some have overstated this point in the past—Smith was not using Masonry solely for political advantage.) Denial is what people tend to do when they are placed in a blighted remainder, particularly when that classification is meant to prevent their social progress.

Second, Smith was in competition with other rebel traditions during this period of dramatic religious growth in America. Other groups—Shakers, Universalists, the followers of various charismatic prophets—represented competing paths to religious enlightenment critical of normative Protestantism. So, frankly, did radical Methodism in its beginnings. Though they inhabited a cultural space recognizable to outsiders, Mormons and these other groups competed with each other. Much as ostensibly ecumenical Protestants recognized a body of Christ but fought each other for converts, so did sectarians compete outside the evangelical establishment.

Third, Smith was attempting to build a coherent community, a church. Smith’s important 1842 editorial titled “Try the Spirits” was all about constraining supernatural power for the purpose of establishing a stable society. The editorial announced the importance of distinguishing normative (priesthood-based) supernatural encounters from those mediated by “necromancers, soothsayers, and astrologers.” Smith, implicitly following a long interpretive tradition (which Styers describes in some depth, most visibly in association with Durkheim), used magic as a marker for centrifugal, anti-communal behaviors that imperil the

23. [Joseph Smith and coauthors], “Try the Spirits,” Times and Seasons 3 (1 April 1842): 745.
integrity of a church. Smith was adamantly communalist in his vision and his theology. The “metaphysical” traditions contained anarchic tendencies as witnessed by the common centrifugalism of esotericism. The Shakers struggled during the charismatic Era of Manifestations to control the power unleashed. So did Methodists and Baptists during their early development in America. Mormons faced similar problems. American esoteric traditions were powerfully independent, whereas Smith was crafting a coherent community for the ages.

Fourth and most importantly, Smith rejected the Protestant formulation of history and ecclesial authority. Smith had a complex relationship with the Enlightenment, but whatever the specifics of that relationship, he was assiduously anti-Protestant. Allowing Protestant control of terminology (like magic or occult) to describe his rejection of Protestant norms would have meant ceding to Protestantism moral and cultural authority over Mormonism. That was intolerable for a movement so adamant that the entire edifice of Protestantism was a lie. Mormons were the only true Christian church, not a post-Protestant sect with some esoteric tendencies. And while the attitudes dismissed as magic were a potent rejection of the excesses of modernism, the opprobrium attached to the term was enough to require the rejection of the framing itself.

Few if any scholars would still be comfortable using the term magic world view to describe much of anything. But the term magic remains important to practitioners and participants. While the jargon often obfuscates more than it clarifies, for the last half century many scholars in the humanities have used the adjectives emic and etic to describe concepts that are meaningful to insiders/participants (emic) versus outsiders/observers (etic). Whatever terminology is used, the current scholarly consensus is that magic is an emic rather than an etic concept or category: participants know what the word means and use it in their interpretation of their and others’ lives and beliefs, but “magic” functions poorly as an analytic category for scholars. To call something “magic” is to engage it as an insider embroiled in partisan conflicts. It is not an act of scholarly comparison. Given that discourse about magic expresses emic rather than etic perspectives, that Mormons rejected associations with magic, and that magic is
usually a shorthand for some other conflict or point of comparison, I doubt that the term *magic* is of any real utility for scholarly understanding of Mormonism.

The title of Quinn’s *Magic World View* can serve as a thought experiment to illustrate my point. The original title is roughly synonymous with *Early Mormonism and the Crazy World View* or *Early Mormons Were Superstitious!* or *Early Mormonism and the Demonic World View*. Assuming that content follows title, a more academic approach might have been titled *Mormonism and the Fight against Modernity* or *Antebellum Folk Religion and Early Mormonism* or *Early Mormonism and the Persistence of Pre-Modern Atlantic Culture*. I am not arguing that Quinn sinned in the 1980s by titling his book or writing the way he did. I’m arguing that he was participating in insider polemics in a way many scholars (both inside and outside Mormonism) once did. From a temporal and academic distance we can see, though, that this approach is no longer terribly relevant.

Were early Mormons magicians? Was Joseph Smith the Wizard of Oz? Recent scholarship makes clear that framing the topic like this begs the question in the pedantic sense of the phrase: the question itself defines the answer. There is no real answer because it is not a question; it is an assertion. When Mormons rejected accusations of magical or occult ties, they were not dissembling. They were saying something very important and true. Framing Mormonism as magic wears a patina of science, but it invokes a troubled, methodologically flawed legacy. Contemporary analytic methods and interpretive traditions make possible investigations that can move well beyond prior efforts.

Joseph Smith and his early followers present an illuminating test case for evaluating the meaning and significance of the academic practice of categorization and classification. The Mormons remind us how often the distance required for scholarship proves shorter than hoped, like a map that crumples under pinched fingers. Particularly when it comes to societal master narratives like science, Enlightenment, magic, and metaphysics, scholars and participants must attend very carefully to their personal views and concerns. Without such methodological caution,
insights and inferences are likely to be misguided and misleading. Such has been the case with discussions about Mormonism and magic, but thanks to recent excellent scholarship, this need no longer be the case.

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On a Dawning Era for the Book of Mormon

Joseph M. Spencer


G. W. F. Hegel famously said that the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, that it is only as a historical sequence comes to a close that it becomes possible to reflect fully on its meaning and implications.\(^1\) In this sense, Terryl Givens’s 2002 By the Hand of Mormon, a full-blooded reception history of “the American scripture that launched a new world religion,” marked an important break in the history of academic study of the Book of Mormon.\(^2\) Its appearance significantly coincided with the slowdown of the most intense and productive period of investigation the Book of Mormon has witnessed in the almost two centuries of its circulation. Givens thus attempted in his book not so much to take the pulse of a flourishing movement as to eulogize what had been generally regarded as a great era for academic study of the Book of Mormon. Inaugurated by Hugh Nibley and Sidney Sperry in the 1940s, becoming dormant for a period beginning in the 1960s, and reemerging with

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peculiar force under the guidance of John Welch and John Sorenson in the 1980s, the era whose end Givens effectively announced was dominated by an unmistakable apologetic impulse and aimed at defending the plausibility of the Book of Mormon’s ancient origins.

A year after Givens’s reception history appeared, the University of Illinois published Grant Hardy’s *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition*, a reformatting of the Book of Mormon text that, more implicitly than explicitly, outlined a possible new direction for academic study of the Book of Mormon.3 By aiming to provide a readable presentation of the text of the Book of Mormon, one that aimed to give center stage to the scripture’s narrative, Hardy quietly announced his intention to help inaugurate an era of literary study of the Book of Mormon. Thus at the very moment that Givens marked the end of one era of Book of Mormon study, one focused particularly on questions of historicity, Hardy launched a project to establish the foundations of another era of Book of Mormon study, now to be focused particularly on questions of narrativity. And what Hardy outlined implicitly and announced quietly in 2003, he proclaimed unequivocally in 2010 with *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*. This clear companion to the *Reader’s Edition* is as much a manifesto as a monograph, as much an intervention as an investigation. Of course, literary treatments of the Book of Mormon have been available for a long time, some more compelling than others.4 What is unique about Hardy’s study, however, is that it explicitly presents literary work on the Book of Mormon as a way forward for students of the Book of Mormon after a rather different era of study has passed. And Hardy makes a compelling case.

What Hardy means when he speaks of a literary reading of the Book of Mormon is in important ways different from what others might mean when using such language; what he presents is not a work of theory-laden

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comparative literature but a model of what he calls “narrator-based reading.” Arguing from within the field of religious studies, Hardy marks the uniqueness of the Book of Mormon among volumes of recently produced world scripture by pointing to its narrativity. Even though more ancient volumes of world scripture bear the characteristic of narrativity, Hardy argues that the Book of Mormon’s “extended, integrated, nonmythological, history-like narrative makes it quite distinctive” (p. 12). Motivated by this heavily narrative flavor, Hardy identifies as the key feature of the Book of Mormon’s literary structure its presentation as the work of three distinguishable narrators with different personalities and divergent agendas. Thus in nine chapters, an introduction, and an afterword, Understanding the Book of Mormon focuses its efforts on discerning the characters and interests of the Book of Mormon’s three major narrators: Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. The bulk of the book is divided into three main parts, each a study of one of these figures.

On Hardy’s reading, the Book of Mormon’s major narrators—carefully and revealingly constructed within the text—are presented as drastically distinct. Nephi is a tragic figure, failing to fulfill his father’s dying request that he keep the family together and so burying himself ever deeper in the writings of arcane prophets from a tradition foreign to his own people. Mormon, in turn, is a dedicated historian with a moralizing message, struggling and often succeeding to make the recalcitrant documents of history bear witness to God’s faithfulness. Moroni, finally, is a self-conscious finisher, fretting about the myriad ways the whole project of the Book of Mormon might fail if its first readers misunderstand or dismiss it. All three figures are handlers and transmitters of texts, but each with a unique approach to the texts in his possession: Nephi focuses primarily on the texts produced by the Israelites of the Old World, relishing both their messages of doom and their messages of hope; Mormon weighs the textual remains of the thousand-year history of the Israelites

5. Rosalynde Welch has pointed out some philosophical difficulties with this approach. See Rosalynde Welch, “Grant Hardy’s Subject Problem,” Times and Seasons (blog), August 16, 2011, http://timesandseasons.org/.
of the New World, his own people; and Moroni turns his attention to a non-Israelite nation that bridged the Old and the New Worlds, a clear parallel to the Book of Mormon’s earliest nineteenth-century readers.

If Hardy has a hero, it is Mormon, whom he presents as particularly complicated and especially skilled. Where Nephi artfully but ultimately unconvincingly makes himself the uncontested hero of his writings, and where Moroni aptly but not remarkably works out his own prophetic concerns, Mormon’s deft construction of his moralizing history—especially as Hardy analyzes it—takes one’s breath away. Hardy gives whole chapters to Mormon’s use of embedded documents of various kinds, to his construction of parallel narratives to encode moral messages, and to his constant struggle with the relationship between prophecy and history. And he provides a list of other historical, literary, and moralizing strategies in Mormon’s writing that could receive as much attention (geographical notes, genealogical details, flashbacks and flash-forwards, the length of textual units, selective attention, repeated phrases, editorial insertions, typological interpretation, and so on). Whatever Nephi and Moroni have to contribute to the Book of Mormon is, on Hardy’s interpretation, ancillary to Mormon’s purpose: Nephi’s writings are primarily prefatory to Mormon’s history, and Moroni’s writings are first and foremost a kind of appendix to Mormon’s history.

Hardy’s portraits of the Book of Mormon’s chief authorial or editorial figures are very responsibly painted. They are products of sustained close reading of the text, always undertaken with an eye to large-scale questions concerning themes and motifs. Hardy thus admirably weaves together detailed readings of relatively short passages (as with, for instance, his remarkable analysis of “the record of Zeniff” in Mosiah 9–10, which reveals a profoundly sensitive voice in an often black-and-white narrative) and sweeping characterizations that make sense of whole swaths of the Book of Mormon at once (a good example is his argument that Helaman, son of Alma, is subtly presented as a poor record-keeper whose failure to produce a narrative from the records he gathered and kept left Mormon with more original sources to use in constructing his own narrative). Invariably, local,
detailed work grounds broad, global claims. There is little question
whether Hardy has read the Book of Mormon well—certainly according
to Hardy’s own definition of “reading well,” namely, “following the con-
tours and structure of the text, perceiving how the parts fit into the
whole, and evaluating fairly the emphases and tensions within the book”
(p. xiv).

In the end, however, Hardy’s good reading, compelling as it unques-
tionably is, represents only one sort of good reading, and it should be
asked both exactly how Hardy’s approach differs from what precedes it
and exactly how Hardy’s approach differs from other ways one might go
forward with the Book of Mormon. To what extent does Understanding
the Book of Mormon break with the apologetic impulse? To what extent
does it dispense with the historical (or perhaps historicist) commitments
of its predecessors? And how might it be situated among the variety of
proposals currently on offer for moving forward with academic study of
the Book of Mormon?

First, then, it should be said that Hardy’s work surely remains within
the category of apologetics, albeit not of apologetics in defense of spe-
cific religious claims. In other words, while it must be said that Hardy
expresses no interest in establishing the historical veracity of the Book
of Mormon (with all that historicity would imply about supernatural
events like the visit of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith), it cannot be
said that he expresses no interest in establishing a certain truthfulness
of the Book of Mormon. His appeals to the book’s complexity and interest,
its intrinsic worth and literary merits, its compelling construction and
occasionally forceful ideas—these are apologetic gestures, instances of a
polemic undertaken on behalf of a book few academics believe deserves
sustained attention. Simply by taking as his thesis that the Book of Mor-
mon is “better than it sounds” (p. 273), Hardy defends the book as a
source of truth—albeit neither as an unequivocal source of purely objec-
tive truth nor as an uncontestable source of divinely revealed truth. The
truth of the Book of Mormon as Hardy unveils it is something more like
the truth about which Hans-Georg Gadamer philosophizes in his work
on the aesthetic. To that extent at least, if Hardy’s approach marks an appealing way forward for academic study of the Book of Mormon, it does not definitively dispense with the apologetic impulse.

As it turns out, Hardy’s approach to the Book of Mormon does not entirely dispense with questions of history either. As he explains, his approach to the text is “not quite historical and not quite literary, because neither exactly fits the Book of Mormon” (p. xvii). It is, he says, a wrong-headed move simply to “read [the book] as a product of the nineteenth century,” since “this requires treating it as an indirect or coded source; one must start with the assumption that it is something very different from what it professes to be” (p. xvii). It is better, on Hardy’s account, to confess the “history-likeness” of the Book of Mormon. But this he takes as a spur to study the story the book sets out to tell, not as a spur to search through ancient texts or archaeological sites for corroborating (or conflicting) evidence. Hardy is more concerned to ask how the history-likeness of the Book of Mormon demands a certain sort of reading than to ask how it demands a certain set of beliefs concerning ancient history.

It should thus be said that Hardy inherits from his predecessors both a certain apologetic orientation (albeit not a traditional apologetics in defense of what are usually taken to be the Book of Mormon’s truth claims) and a certain commitment to the historical nature of the Book

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7. A good example of what Hardy seems to have in mind when he speaks of “treating [the Book of Mormon] as an indirect or coded source” is Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

of Mormon (albeit not overtly to the claim that the Book of Mormon makes ostensive reference to events, people, and places recoverable through the usual means of historical inquiry). He thus remains within the tradition of Book of Mormon studies even as he transforms the basic stakes of the gestures made by his predecessors. In each case, Hardy’s efforts undertaken in the book’s defense or in the study of the book’s history-likeness are oriented by the overarching imperative to always understand the Book of Mormon better in its own right, regardless of the relationship the text might sustain with what lies outside the text. In this sense, he definitively (if not even defiantly) reverses what Givens claims has been the dominant, almost uncontested approach to the Book of Mormon: to take it as sacred signifier (of the truth or falsity of Mormonism) rather than as sacred signified (a text deserving of sustained study). For Hardy, the Book of Mormon should be signified before and almost to the exclusion of its being signifier.

On that score, Hardy finds himself in company with many other emerging students of the Book of Mormon. Even where the focus of recent Book of Mormon scholarship is on ancient history (as in, for instance, the most recent work by John Welch or the commentary produced by Brant Gardner), the focus is on elucidating the text of the Book of Mormon much more than on establishing the historicity of the text. And among those approaching the Book of Mormon from disciplines other than those focused on ancient history (e.g., Jad Hatem, working in comparative religion, or myself, working in philosophy—not to mention Hardy himself), it is even clearer that the chief aim is to see what the Book of Mormon might have to say if it is read closely and inventively. How, though, might Hardy’s work be distinguished from


other approaches to the Book of Mormon with which it nonetheless shares a commitment first and foremost to elucidating the text?

Here it might be helpful to distinguish, as is commonly done in biblical studies, among three distinct “worlds” to which the student of the text might address her attention. First is the world behind the text, the world that produced the text. In terms of the Book of Mormon, one might in this regard look either to the ancient world (whether to the Old or to the New World) or to nineteenth-century America (the latter not necessarily in a critical vein: many believing scholars find themselves asking what role Joseph Smith’s own cultural inculcations played in the shape of the translated text of the Book of Mormon). The idea here would be to elucidate the text of scripture by looking at how its meaning is (at least in part) determined by the forces that produced it. Second is the world of the text, the world portrayed by the text, as it is portrayed by the text. In terms of the Book of Mormon, one might in this regard look at the narrative structure of the book, or perhaps attempt to establish the critical text of the book, or perhaps compare the text to other scriptural texts (the Qur’an or the Daodejing, for instance). The idea here would be to elucidate the text of scripture by giving attention uniquely to what it presents (and perhaps to how what it presents differs from what other texts that make similar claims to being scripture or history present). Third is the world before the text, the world inhabited by the readers of the text. In terms of the Book of Mormon, one might in this regard look at how the stories or ideas or structures found in the book have helped or might still help to contest contemporary thought and practice. The idea here would be to elucidate the scriptural text by showing its relevance and force, by revealing the ways in which it resists its readers.

11. One might well wonder whether comparative scripture uniquely pays attention to the world of the text. But lateral comparison, rather than moving into the world behind or before the text, establishes a differential network of how various (similar) texts work on their own terms, allowing for investigation of an individual text’s meaning in a revealing way.
All three of these approaches to scripture aim at elucidating the meaning of the text, though each takes the meaning of “meaning” to be slightly different. Where those interested in the world behind the text focus on the way that meaning is determined by the causal weave of history, those interested in the world of the text focus on the way that meaning is the product of complex structures, identifiable through comparative study of similarly structured texts. Different from both of these are those interested in the world before the text, those who focus on the way that meaning is constituted through the dynamic relationship between a text and its readers. In terms of this triple typology, Hardy’s work—and larger interests—can be said to fall within the second category, interest in the world of (rather than behind or before) the text. That Hardy has expressed deep interest in and appreciation for Royal Skousen’s critical text project and that he has stated his interest in turning his attention to comparative scripture should come as no surprise, then. Hardy’s sights are set squarely on the study of the world of the text of the Book of Mormon.

There remains, however, important work to be done on the world behind the text of the Book of Mormon. And promising young scholars have emerged in recent years to undertake that sort of work: Michael MacKay, working on the nineteenth-century context of the Book of Mormon’s emergence; David Bokovoy, working on how ancient Near Eastern history might still elucidate the text of the Book of Mormon; and Mark Wright, working on how ancient Mesoamerica might help to clarify the meaning of the text. Obviously, some of this work will have appeal primarily—if not only—to believing Latter-day Saints. It is, nonetheless, work that deserves to be pursued. But more promising in my view, if only because it has been so little pursued as yet, is work on the world before the text of the Book of Mormon.

To return to Terryl Givens, it should be said that By the Hand of Mormon does more than just identify the transition from one era of Book of Mormon study to another; it also contributes to the conversation about what a new era of Book of Mormon study might be. Givens does this in part through his construction of a reception history. Such an approach to the Book of Mormon is itself a way of taking seriously the world before
the text: a study of how the Book of Mormon has motivated believers and unbelievers alike to respond in a variety of ways.\textsuperscript{12} But what was perhaps most interesting about Givens’s book was not the history of the Book of Mormon’s reception so much as his provocative chapter on the Book of Mormon as “dialogic revelation,” as a text that has real ideas to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the nature of God.\textsuperscript{13}

There is, I think, much, much more work to do in this vein. There is, in other words, much, much more work to do on the theological productivity of the Book of Mormon—work that will more often than not be predicated on the kind of close textual analysis Hardy has modeled. And I find myself convinced that it is only as the Book of Mormon is given to speak directly and forcefully to the world before the text that it might gain the kind of universal appeal Hardy argues it should have. To put the point polemically, Hardy’s work on the Book of Mormon—its brilliance and fruitfulness notwithstanding—cannot alone accomplish its primary purpose, which is to allow the Book of Mormon to speak with a universal voice. It cannot accomplish this purpose, that is, unless it is taken up into a theological project that reveals the ways in which the Book of Mormon contests contemporary thought and practice.

I might justify this polemical claim by providing just a brief analysis of what I find to be at once the richest and yet the most disappointing moment in Hardy’s book. It comes in chapter 7, “The Day of the Lord’s Coming: Prophecy and Fulfillment” (pp. 180–213). There Hardy traces the development of Mormon “from historian to prophet” at the culmination of the Third Book of Nephi. Having developed a pattern of employing the fulfillment of prophecies through history to establish God’s faithfulness, Mormon finds himself forced by the Lord to cut his history short and to assume an unwanted prophetic mantle. In effect, Mormon


\textsuperscript{13} See Givens, \textit{By the Hand of Mormon}, 209–39.
is forced to abandon his own express design to establish the truth of his record through historically verifiable data and assume a “prophetic pedagogy . . . aimed to produce a more resilient faith, a faith capable of withstanding doubts and temptations, one that transcends the historical moment” (p. 213).

Hardy’s readerly abilities are here at their peak. The details, which must be omitted here, deserve close attention, and Hardy must be said to have discovered one of the most forceful moments in the whole Book of Mormon. Nonetheless, there is something disappointing about the way that Hardy simply leaves this pregnant transformation of the Book of Mormon’s explicit project undeveloped. He notes it as if it were little more than an interesting fact. Why no discussion of how this moment in the Book of Mormon speaks to questions of what it means to write and to read texts? Why no discussion of how the transformation Mormon is forced to undergo might speak to two centuries of debate about the relationship between the prophetic and the historical when it comes to the Book of Mormon’s origins? Why no discussion of how this remarkable text might be used as a platform for outlining an approach to the status of religious faith in a world so thoroughly dominated by the scientific outlook? Why no discussion of how Mormon might be thought of as a figure for every religious believer committed to a sacred history of one sort or another? Because he does not pursue the theological implications of his readings—because he remains focused solely on the world of the text, and not on the way that that world collides with the world before the text—Hardy misses what might well be the universal voice that speaks in the Book of Mormon, the voice that can speak as much to non-Mormons as to Mormons, as much to the curious as to the deeply interested, as much to the irreligious as to the religious.

In the end, of course, this may be a minor complaint. Even the somewhat disappointed theologian cannot complain too loudly about missed opportunities in Hardy’s work—at the very least because she can take those missed opportunities as occasions for her own theological reflection. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the theologian it is worth taking notice of the danger that what Hardy calls the literary approach to
the Book of Mormon risks being a bit too academic, a bit too abstract, to have genuinely universal appeal. Understanding the Book of Mormon announces the possibility of a new era of Book of Mormon study with great and appreciated fanfare, but the universal voice it attempts to coax out of the Book of Mormon is perhaps still only a whisper out of the dust. If the Book of Mormon is to raise its voice, it seems to me, Hardy and others like him will need as many theologically disappointed interlocutors as they have and will have appreciative readers.

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War and Peace in Our Time is the result of a 2011 conference that Patrick Mason and Richard Bushman held at Claremont Graduate University. Mason and company have two different purposes for the book. The first is analytical: they wish to begin thinking about the “historical, spiritual, and cultural resources” within Mormonism that can guide reflection about the ethics of peace and war (p. xiii). The second is engaged: believing that most American Latter-day Saints assume that war is morally permissible, they wish to publicize the work of Mormons who understand their own tradition differently (pp. xiv–xv). It is no surprise, then, that several of the contributors to the volume write for The Mormon Worker, a web-based newsletter that takes its name and orientation from the pacifist Catholic Worker Movement’s namesake publication. Mason, Pulsipher, and Bushman succeed admirably at their second goal: War and Peace in Our Time contains original and powerful readings of the pacifist teachings of Mormon scripture, illuminating short biographies of well-known Mormon pacifists (J. Reuben Clark, Hugh Nibley, and Eugene England), and the autobiographical reflections of Mormon peace activist Gordon Conrad Thomasson. The quality of the essays in the volume is not always consistent (many of the contributors are not professional
scholars), but there is no more synoptic work currently available on Mormon pacifism than this one.

Unfortunately, *War and Peace in Our Time* does not accomplish its analytic purpose quite as well. The volume debates an ethical question: given Mormon scripture, teaching, and tradition, how should Mormons approach war? If war is permissible within certain moral constraints, then Mormonism leads to some account of just war. If war is not permissible, then Mormonism leads to some version of pacifism. And yet none of the essays reflect on the terms of this debate. There is no attempt to specify what Mormonism might contribute to ethical debate about war, and correspondingly there is little analysis of the considerations that might justify or condemn war under certain circumstances. Most of the contributors ignore the rich and ongoing discussion on these questions in both religious and secular contexts.

This is in part a product of Mormon studies. As a discipline it began with the study of Mormon history rather than philosophy or theology, and it focuses (justifiably, to a degree) on the study of Mormonism rather than ethics more broadly. It is also a product of Mormon culture: whether or not Mormonism is “atheological,” as many believe, Mormons generally are not theologically educated and are somewhat predisposed to dismiss theological questions and traditions. *War and Peace in Our Time* displays the considerable limits these tendencies impose on ethical reflection about Mormonism. I share Mason’s belief that Mormonism has “historical, spiritual, and cultural resources” (p. xiii) that can contribute to the ethics of peace and war, but Mormons will not clarify those resources or effectively communicate them until they read their scripture in conversation with contemporary ethical debate and the great traditions of religious ethics. *War and Peace in Our Time* shows how much more serious intellectual work remains to be done before Mormonism’s resources can be brought to bear on questions of war and peace and other ethical issues.

Interpretatively, the two most interesting essays in the volume are by the father-son duo Ron and Joshua Madson. Both are contributors to *The Mormon Worker* and are currently coauthoring a book that develops a pacifist interpretation of Mormon scripture. If their contributions to *War
and Peace in Our Time are representative, the book will join those by Grant Hardy and Terryl Givens in considerably enriching the way that Mormons approach their sacred texts.

Ron Madson interprets a revelation to Joseph Smith, section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants, through the early Latter-day Saints’ responses to persecution in Missouri. The revelation calls the early Saints to forgive their enemies the first three times they wrong them, permitting the Saints to take action only after the fourth wrong. Even then, the Saints are merely to bring the wrong to God, who will himself take action against the Saints’ enemies. Madson interprets section 98 as a covenant between God and the early Saints. During the Jackson County persecutions in 1833, the Missouri Saints did not respond violently; they peacefully relocated to northern Missouri. In response, many Americans felt the Mormons’ neighbors had mistreated them. Five years later, however, during the controversy preceding the 1838 election, the Mormons armed themselves and took preemptive action against their neighbors. This time public opinion swung against the Mormons, and many of their non-Mormon allies from the 1833 persecutions left them. Missouri governor Lilburn Boggs issued his extermination order, drove the Mormons into Illinois, and imprisoned Joseph Smith and his companions in Liberty Jail. Madson sees these events as a direct consequence of the Saints’ failure to follow section 98. This context makes for a stirring interpretation of one of Joseph Smith’s epistolary texts, canonized in section 121, which Smith wrote while imprisoned: “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering . . .” (v. 41). Madson suggests that these verses ought to be understood as a rebuke to the Saints who responded to the threat of persecution with violence in northern Missouri. Not only is the priesthood itself insufficient to maintain power or influence, so too is the force of arms.

Joshua Madson argues that the Book of Mormon’s pacifist message comes to the fore when one considers the teachings of the story as a whole, rather than taking the actions of one individual or another within it as exemplary. He takes his approach from the biblical hermeneutics of N. T. Wright and the similar counsel of Grant Hardy to read scripture as narrative. For Madson, the narrative of the Book of Mormon is a contest
between different founding stories: first, that of the Lamanites, who see their identity as constituted by Nephi’s treachery and hate the Nephites as the descendants of a liar; and second, that of the Nephites, who base their identity on Nephi’s decision to kill Laban so that his nation could have the scriptures. They become a people who consistently return to such “ends justify the means” sacrificial violence. The interplay between these two founding stories results in the genocidal extermination of the Nephites. The message of the Book of Mormon, however, rises out of the contrasting examples of those who overcame the Lamanites’ and the Nephites’ dueling mythologies and relied instead on the power of God and his word, those whose actions and societies demonstrated the possibility of living together on the basis of mutual love and acceptance, who chose to sacrifice themselves for others rather than others for themselves (Alma the Younger, the sons of Mosiah, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, and the society described in 4 Nephi). On this basis, Madson concludes that the Book of Mormon as a whole enjoins pacifism.

As original and powerful as the Madsons’ essays are, they and the other pacifist contributions do not adequately address the deep ethical dilemmas that questions of peace and war raise. They do not adequately discuss the two central issues surrounding just war: whether and under what conditions self-defense is justified and whether and under what conditions defending an innocent third party is justified. This neglect is partly due to the absolutism of pacifism: war is wrong, period. But avoiding these questions weakens the Madsons’ position. This is because the strongest defenses of pacifism necessarily include accounts of why using violence in self-defense or to defend innocent third parties is wrong, or (somewhat more moderately) accounts of what sorts of actions people may take to intervene in such cases short of war itself and the conditions under which those actions are appropriate.

The weaknesses in the pacifist contributions in War and Peace in Our Time provide an opening for those defending just war, but they do not exploit it. In general, the just war essays are not as persuasive or informed as the pacifist essays. The volume is lopsided as a consequence. This is unfortunate since it seems clear that Mormonism has potential to contribute meaningfully to the just war tradition as well.
The most interesting just war essays are those by Eric Eliason and Mark Henshaw et al. Eliason argues that US soldiers in Afghanistan, who spend most of their time doing precisely the sort of peacemaking that many pacifists laud, have the opportunity to do so because they are prosecuting a just war against the Taliban (pp. 191–201). His essay is moving, but this is partly because he has chosen an easy example. Just war theorists generally hold that wars fought in response to aggression or to prevent serious human rights violations are just; both conditions clearly apply in the Afghanistan case. Eliason wants to preserve the possibility that war can be about defending the innocent instead of being about murder, rape, and plunder. His own experience in Afghanistan illustrates that possibility well, but Eliason ignores the ethically troubling aspects of US action in Afghanistan and Pakistan—the way that increased reliance on drone attacks has ignored the just war criterion requiring militaries to scrupulously avoid inflicting civilian casualties. Indeed, the US problematically defines all arms-bearing males in an endemically violent, anarchic part of the world as legitimate military targets.\(^1\) As a consequence, Eliason’s contribution is not as persuasive as it might be. As a personal account of his service in Afghanistan, his essay is moving, but it is not a conclusive argument that Mormonism enjoins some theory of just war.

Mark Henshaw et al.’s essay was not presented at the 2011 Claremont conference; it was originally published in *SquareTwo*\(^2\) and included after the fact in *War and Peace in Our Time*. The essay relates the considered opinions of LDS national security professionals on the relationship between their religious commitments and their participation in the US national security apparatus. As such, it is mainly an empirical investigation


of the opinions of a community of professional warriors and their support staff. Henshaw et al.’s essay is illuminating for the consistency between its opinions and many of those in War and Peace in Our Time that defend just war. Many LDS national security professionals justify US wars by reference to the war in heaven (e.g., pp. 241–42), a view that shows up in Robert Hellebrand’s and Eric Eliason’s essays as well (pp. 133–34, 195–97). And Henshaw et al. also believe that LDS theology can support either pacifism or just war, agreeing in this case with David Pulsipher (pp. 1–12), though they do not do the analysis to show why this is the case, let alone adjudicate the issues that would lead one to support one view or the other (pp. 262–63). Though Henshaw et al. demonstrate more ethical awareness than the other just war contributors, they are not engaged in an ethical project here.

What is most notable about the just war essays, however, is how consistently they make the same two mistakes. This is not because the only arguments they adduce to support just war are mistaken and these arguments are all that is available. Rather, these repeated mistakes speak to the general lack of ethical education in Mormon culture. First, the “just warriors” consistently mistake the theory of just war as a justification for some specific war. Robert Hellebrand, for example, suggests that any opposition to the Second Iraq War must rely on a “radically pacifist” position (pp. 137–38). But this is clearly not the case; the point of doing just war theory is to determine the conditions wars must meet to be just. A theory of just war distinguishes between just and unjust wars, which implies that one can consistently believe that the Second Iraq War was not just while also believing that other wars that meet the relevant criteria are just.

Second, several authors appeal to the Cold War Mormon argument that anti-Communist (and other) wars are just because they are a continuation of the “war in heaven,” a metaphorical phrase Mormons use to describe an argument in the Book of Moses between Jesus and Satan about the method by which salvation would be offered (see Hellebrand, pp. 133–34; Eliason, pp. 195–97; Henshaw et al., pp. 241–42). This view makes the same mistake as in the first case: just because under certain circumstances war may be just does not mean that some specific war (Korea, Vietnam, etc.) was just. That requires further argument. But this view adds more
severe errors as well. For one thing, appealing to the war in heaven as an argument for just war ignores the yawning gap between the metaphorical “war in heaven” and actual, violent wars in which people kill others, destroy homes, and so on. The bare theological claim that there was a “war” between Jesus and Satan does not license people to judge that one or another side in a current conflict represents either Jesus or Satan. That move inevitably escalates conflict by making it theological in addition to whatever it was otherwise about. It is a simple way to turn a war into a crusade. Moreover, even if one could confidently divide the world up between those on Jesus’s or Satan’s side in some conflict (an unlikely proposition), it does not follow that violent means are the proper way to adjudicate such conflicts. After all, the Book of Moses gives no indication that God resolved the war in heaven violently, and so there is no reason to take that story as a justification for violent war.

So the reader of War and Peace in Our Time is left in a perplexing position. The volume addresses an ethically vexing issue with the highest possible stakes: the ethics of peace and war, a question that has divided philosophers, theologians, and lay people for centuries. It aims to analyze Mormonism’s resources for thinking through this question. And yet it contains little ethical reflection on the topic. The Madsons’ essays build an interesting case for interpreting LDS scripture as requiring pacifism, but those essays do not (yet) develop an LDS pacifist ethic that can provide answers to the difficulties (about self-defense and third-party intervention) to which pacifist positions are prone. Eliason’s essay attempts to answer an ethical question but does so too quickly. The others avoid ethical reflection by appealing to the authority of LDS Church leaders (as Hellebrand does), relating the opinions of famous Mormons (the short biographies of J. Reuben Clark, Hugh Nibley, and Eugene England) without critically assessing their arguments, or empirically describing the opinions of LDS national security professionals (Henshaw et al.). Only the Madsons’ work seriously engages broader ethical thinking about these questions. Thus, War and Peace in Our Time shows its readers just how much serious intellectual work remains to be done before Mormons can bring the resources of their religious tradition to bear on ethical questions.
There are several hurdles to ethical reasoning in contemporary American Mormon culture that prevent this sort of intellectual work. Richard Sherlock has already pointed out how Mormons’ relationship to priesthood authority can forestall careful thinking about ethics: Mormons, he argues, are prone to believe that if the LDS Church as a body does not recommend or condemn a practice, then there is nothing more to say about it (see Hellebrand, p.139, for an example). This ignores the likely possibility that such silences are opportunities for Mormons to apply their religion to their own lives in new and creative ways, to discuss together and even to disagree about what Mormonism demands of them (see D&C 58:26–29). Mormons are also prone to a peculiar sort of intuitionism that sees feelings of inspiration as a substitute for careful ethical reflection. Any young woman who has dealt with a man convinced that “God” has given him a revelation that they are to be married can see the dangers in this approach.

Mark Ashurst-McGee’s essay, the most historically illuminating in the volume, suggests another hurdle. Mormonism, he explains, is foundationally shaped by Joseph Smith’s utopianism, millennialism, and evangelism. The early Mormons believed that their God-given purpose was to create a holy Zion society apart from the politics and wars of the Gentiles in preparation for Jesus’s return. They sent missionaries to the world to preach and convert others and bring them to Zion. Otherwise, they tried (and flagrantly failed, as it turned out) to avoid the world. Ashurst-McGee feels that this foundational self-understanding makes it difficult to draw a pacifist ethic out of Mormonism (pp. 83–91), but it would be more complete to claim that it makes it difficult to draw any sort of worldly ethics out of Mormonism, whether it be a pacifist or just war ethic or otherwise. If the purpose of the Mormon community is to create a pure and holy society in preparation for the apocalypse, then Mormons have no need to consider the ethics or politics of war and peace, or, indeed, any other ethical issue involving those outside their set-apart community.

That said, Mormons today are no longer so millennial in their outlook, as the essays in *Peace and War in Our Time* show. Not one contributor dismissed questions of war and peace as irrelevant because the apocalypse is imminent and “wars and rumors of wars” are simply a “sign of the times.” And Mormons today are no longer so isolated either, at least not in their professional lives. Even so, the essays in this volume (the Madsons’ excepted to a degree) show tension between the lived experience of contemporary Mormons and the way they intellectually relate that experience to their religious commitments. Although Mormons today live and work far outside the Intermountain West, if the essays in *War and Peace in Our Time* are representative, the ethical portion of Mormon intellectual life remains as restricted to the (metaphorical) mountain valleys as Mormon communities once were. I believe this intellectual isolation is the most serious hurdle to the development of Mormon ethics.

Good ethical thinking happens only when people carefully examine the categories, definitions, and assumptions they bring to the process of addressing a vexing question. Careful examination of this sort cannot occur without knowledge of the philosophical debates surrounding such questions. And this knowledge is precisely what is most lacking in the essays in *War and Peace in Our Time*. Indeed, Henshaw et al. go so far as to dismiss the entire just war tradition as unrelated to Mormon theology (pp. 236, 262). While this may be the case historically (although I suspect that even here a good intellectual historian could map out the relationships between ideas of war and peace expressed in Mormon scripture and those of Joseph Smith’s day and in the broader Western tradition), it cannot be the case ethically, because broader societal ideas about peace and war inevitably influence the way Mormons approach their own texts and tradition. Without such knowledge and the sort of broad, critical examination it enables, ethical argument inevitably devolves into self-righteous name-calling as people focus on their differences rather than examining the assumptions that lead to them.

What is most missing from *War and Peace in Our Time* are contributions that consider some ethical view (pacifism or just war), outline
the arguments and assumptions on which that view is based and the problems to which it is prone, and then start working to see what, if anything, Mormonism might add to the question. Such an approach would not only considerably improve the clarity and persuasiveness of Mormon thinking on ethical questions, it would also stand a chance at communicating to others what the Latter-day Saints’ unique theology and tradition might contribute to broader religious and ethical debates.

With this in mind, consider the Book of Mormon case with the most obvious implications for just war theory: the perplexing textual juxtaposition of the pacifistic Anti-Nephi-Lehies and their sons, the just warrior sons of Helaman. Pulsipher uses this case to argue that the Book of Mormon should be interpreted as permitting both just war and pacifism (pp. 1–12), but he does not do any of the analysis that this thesis—and the text itself—clearly calls for: how ought one determine which approach is appropriate when one is faced with a decision to go to war or adopt a strategy of peaceful resistance? Yet the Book of Mormon offers rich resources to address just this question, particularly if one approaches the text with just war theory in mind. The Book of Mormon demands that its readers ask whether there is any consistent ethical position that would allow the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to nonviolently sacrifice themselves yet also allow their children to take up arms in self-defense. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies saw their pacifism as a product of their own guilt over the violent lives they previously led—violent lives their sons mercifully did not know.

Perhaps this story offers insight into a traditional just war criterion: right intention. Just war theories hold that, in addition to being fought by legal representatives and for a just cause, just wars must be prosecuted with proper intention: to defend the innocent instead of to grab territory or get revenge. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies seemed to believe that their past violence corrupted them sufficiently that they could no longer wage war justly even when external conditions otherwise suggested they could do so. Perhaps they feared violence would stir old passions and convert their justifiable intention of self-defense into unjust aggression or revenge. This position opens the possibility that their children could justly fight in war while also suggesting the deep moral hazard continuous warfare
poses. Given this interpretation, the Book of Mormon contributes to just war theory a moving account of the importance of right intention in the waging of war, as well as right intention’s incredible fragility: too much war-making can itself corrupt that intention, making otherwise just conflict unjust.

The important conclusion from the above interpretive sketch is not that the Book of Mormon supports some conception of just war. I have not argued for that; to do so I would need to address Joshua Madson’s work and provide some argument for taking both the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and the sons of Helaman as exemplary. Mormon clearly thinks of them both as exemplary, but the text’s authors are nothing if not upfront about their own weaknesses, the ways in which they are not exemplary: the purpose of the text is, after all, to teach us to be “more wise” than they were (Moroni 9:31). Rather, the important conclusion from the above sketch is to show the richness that awareness of ethical debate gives to the reading of scripture, to show how that awareness enables Mormon texts to speak to broader questions. It was this sort of reading for which Mason and Bushman were clearly aiming in organizing their conference, but it is also this sort of reading that, with some notable exceptions, is in short supply in War and Peace in Our Time.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, War and Peace in Our Time is a significant accomplishment. Mason, Pulsipher, and Bushman deserve considerable praise for prodding Mormons to think more carefully about the implications of their religion for issues of peace and war, for creating a space in which Mormons can begin to think ethically about their religious commitments. War and Peace in Our Time is admittedly only a start, but an important start nonetheless.

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*Reviewed by W. Clark Gilpin*

In *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*, David F. Holland raises fresh and significant questions about one of the most vibrant epochs of American religious history, the three quarters of a century from the 1790s to the Civil War. As Protestant denominations proliferated and individuals exercised the freedom to change their affiliation from one to another, centrifugal religious energies not only generated diverse theological perspectives but also raised questions about the stable authority of any particular one of them. As Holland summarizes the situation, “only a fresh word from God, some claimed, could cut through the growing denominational chaos” (136–37). Thus, the religious environment of antebellum America challenged the adequacy of the inherited scriptural canon to meet the needs of a new age. The era witnessed, Holland argues, “the most lasting efforts by major American religious figures to open the canon” and make way for continuing revelation (12). Shakers, Hicksite Quakers, Transcendentalists, Mormons, Adventists, and prominent public figures ranging from the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker to the African-American prophetess Rebecca Jackson in their various ways pushed beyond the canonical borders, attentively listening for fresh communications of the divine. Parker was by no means alone in declaring “the canon of revelation not yet closed, nor God exhausted” (185).
When Holland identifies persons and movements who challenged the canon, he means those who explicitly “anticipated the future disclosure of divine truths that would add to the canon of holy writ” and “who placed so much emphasis on a new spiritual experience, a new church policy, a new natural law, a new dictate of reason, or a new principle of common sense that it became a new rule for their religious or ethical life, a continuing revelation of God’s mind, assuming a functional equivalency to a new passage of scripture.” Holland’s historical narrative places these challengers of canonical boundaries in dramatic tension with those who reacted to the challenge by viewing “the rise of new moral or religious imperatives as a sinister threat to the sanctity and unity of the closed canon” (9). Holland makes a significant contribution to scholarship by locating these nineteenth-century arguments about the “sacred borders” of the canon in a much longer historical process that goes back to the seventeenth century, especially Puritanism, and to eighteenth-century critics of Christianity, especially the deists.

As his subtitle indicates, Holland situates the concept of the open canon in relation to two other key terms, continuing revelation and canonical restraint. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the idea of scriptural canonicity assumed that there must exist a definitive textual repository of divine truth. The word canon primarily referred, therefore, to a criterion or standard of judgment, although it secondarily meant an authoritative list of books (9–10, 36). Especially in the Reformed tradition that so strongly marked early American culture, the biblical canon was the recognized rule against which other media of divine counsel—spirit, providence, ecclesial tradition, reason, and conscience—were to be tested. The canon as criterion of truth restrained the impulse toward immediate revelation that was a characteristic aspect of Puritanism and, later, of evangelicalism. The canon as definitive repository of truth countered those Enlightenment skeptics who pointed to insufficiencies in the traditional canon that had resulted from errors of transmission, internal contradictions, and an inadequate understanding of the world as it was now being described by modern science. Holland expertly narrates how, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this “closed
canon” elicited objections from deists who thought it denied God’s capacity to communicate “through the common gift of reason and the limitless book of nature” (54); from Unitarians who thought it diminished understanding of God’s “parental” care for “his human family” (181); and from Mormons who sought a prophet through whom they heard “the voice of God revealing to man as in former dispensations” (143). Indeed, Holland considers the most surprising feature of his historical study to be “the overwhelming presence of God in this discourse” about canon and continuing revelation (216).

In response to Holland’s stimulating study, I want to spell out some tacit implications of his argument and expand some important points he makes but does not adequately develop. First, as Holland’s phrase “canonical restraint” implies, he tends to stress that the canon’s principal function is to act as the guarantor of traditional order. It was not always so. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritans initially elevated the authority of scripture as a strategy of resistance against the hierarchy of the established church, justifying change by appealing to the scriptural canon’s countervailing authority. Even in the nineteenth century, Alexander Campbell and the Disciples of Christ testified to the authority of “the Bible alone” and began to refer to themselves as “the Reformation of the nineteenth century,” in order to justify their distinctive teaching and practice around baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Hence, the idea of “canonical restraint” needs to be seen as a functional category. In some social contexts the canon restrained; at other times it sanctioned resistance and innovation.

Second, when one speaks of an “open canon,” toward what does it open? Holland emphasizes that the canon is open toward “continuing revelation” from God. But his narrative clearly implies that the scriptural canon, as an authoritative collection of texts, “opens” in other directions as well. An answer commonly given in the nineteenth century was that the Christian Bible was open toward the other great masterworks of Western civilization: classical philosophical texts, the essays of Montaigne, the drama of Shakespeare, or the poetry of John Donne. As Benjamin Jowett summarized this form of openness in 1860, “Interpret the
Scriptures like any other book.” A second nineteenth-century answer was that the Bible opened toward the other sacred texts of world religions, demonstrating, so it was thought, that the religious sentiment was a universal human trait. Indeed, this was one way in which the very category religion became codified during the century. A tacit purpose of all such openings of the canon was that, by including the Bible in larger literary groupings, the interpreter created—in Benedict Anderson’s phrase—“imagined communities.” By linking the Bible to literature, scientific works, and political orations, Americans incorporated the scriptural canon into a national identity. The opening of the canon was certainly a theological and spiritual enterprise, but it was nested in a larger matrix of canonical openings.

Third, although the concepts of “continuing revelation” and “open canon” doubtless overlap, some discrimination seems necessary. The adaptive application of Christian practices, texts, and ideas to new social conditions has proceeded throughout the long and diverse history of Christianity without necessary recourse to enlargement of the canon, whether the canon is considered as a criterion of judgment or as a collection of texts. Such adaptive application occurs whenever a sermon is preached, a prayer is murmured, a dream is interpreted, or an exegetical commentary is written. The Puritans, for instance, laid down the three-fold formal structure of a sermon with precisely such new application in mind. The preacher first exegeted a specific text; he then abstracted a doctrine from the text and expounded its meaning; and he concluded by exhorting the congregation on “uses” or application to daily life: text, doctrine, uses.

Several features of the Christian Bible and its classical interpretation encouraged this sense that “continuing revelation” proceeded through the adaptive application of canonical writing. One important feature was the arrangement of the Christian canon, beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation, and therefore apparently encompassing the entire moral history of the cosmos. In some sense, the present moment of history was within the biblical narrative. Holland expertly illustrates this phenomenon in his account of the nineteenth-century Baptist William
Miller, who assiduously delved into biblical chronology in order to calculate that the latter-day glories were about to become manifest in the early 1840s. To alter the point of Holland’s definition of an open canon, William Miller anticipated “the future disclosure of divine truths” on the basis of a closed canon. Another important feature of the canonical Bible was its presentation of paradigmatic lives (Moses, David, or Paul) and archetypal narratives (the journey toward a promised land), which provided perennial models for self and society. Seventeenth-century writers in the broad Puritan tradition, preeminently John Milton and John Bunyan, imaginatively recast these canonical archetypes in masterpieces of imaginative literature, *Samson Agonistes* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Such features of the canonical text complicate the binary opposition of a closed or an open canon, and they are not adequately captured by a definition of the canon overly focused on its articulation of an authoritative rule.

What, then, caused certain applications of Christian thought and practice to challenge the canon, to announce new prophets superseding the old, to disclose revelatory texts? What factors convinced certain groups that the canonical Bible was insufficient to address the contemporary situation and that an opening of the canon was therefore required? In nineteenth-century America, at least, decisions about the “sacred borders” of a canon seem to have been thoroughly intertwined with the process of establishing the “sacred borders” of a religious community. These two sets of sacred borders interactively defined how religious authority would function within a given community, who was eligible for membership and who was not, and which rules would regulate the conduct of communal life. Some advocates of an “open canon” such as Horace Bushnell or Theodore Parker opened the scriptural canon toward contemporary literature, poetry, and philosophy because the boundaries they imagined between church and society were also quite open. Others advocates of an “open canon,” such as the Shakers or the Latter-day Saints, opened the scriptural canon toward new representations of transcendence because these reinforced the boundaries of distinction around their newly gathering communities.
Down these three avenues of scholarly reflection and numerous others, David Holland’s erudite and intriguing study of debates about canon and continuing revelation invites further research and writing on an important but frequently overlooked topic.

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**Reviewed by Kathryn Lofton**

The Book of Mormon is a book I have begun many times only to put it aside before I even reach the book of Jacob. The edition I possess was given to me by Chicago missionaries in 1997, and my incomplete reading of it haunts me. When I picked up Paul Gutjahr’s *The “Book of Mormon”: A Biography*, I thought perhaps this would be the commentary that would inspire my return to the Book of Mormon, a return that would give me another chance to see what it is about this text that makes it a scripture for so many. And also another chance for me to see if the missionaries were right: that it could be scripture for me.

Gutjahr presents a history of the Book of Mormon in which the reader is unspecified: she could be someone for whom this is a sacred text, and she could also be someone for whom it is a farce. Gutjahr chooses as his epigraph a statement from that most repossessed Mormon, Orson Pratt: “This book must be either true or false. If true, it is one of
the most important messages ever sent from God to man. . . . If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever palmed upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions who will sincerely receive it as the word of God.” This is a sharp framing for a biography of the Book of Mormon, since questioning whether Joseph Smith’s revelation supplied scripture or a humbug has been a central practice of American religious life since its antebellum appearance. John Gilbert, who set the type for its original printing in Palmyra, New York, in 1829–30, was clearly decided on the point, describing the Book of Mormon as “a very big humbug” (p. 38).

As David Walker has recently argued, *humbug* was a productive term for religious life in the nineteenth century, encapsulating “an elaborate theory of social interest and intellection, one that assumed that a public good was provided by constructing spaces of debate and consideration.” Walker explains that during the nineteenth century, to call something a “humbug” was not simply to tag it with an epithet, but to prompt a ritual investigation into the substance of the accused subject. In the second chapter of this biography (“Holy Writ or Humbug?”), Paul Gutjahr offers a wonderful description of the lines of argumentation used to explain or debunk the Book of Mormon. This chapter would be ideal to excerpt and should be inserted into courses on Mormonism, American religious history, or theories of religion, as it would establish the provocative terms for a debate among students about how to interpret claims of mystical origin.

This chapter indicates how Gutjahr’s book is a model text for the current hermeneutic epoch, one in which scholars of religion focus on the world made by and through a text, its communities, and its critics. Written with lucidity and careful research, Gutjahr’s biography evades any adjudication of humbug for the book, instead situating it within the “spiritually vibrant culture” of the early national period in which “every individual

could experience an unmediated and personal relationship with an omnipotent God” (p. 14). Gutjahr implies that the Book of Mormon was one especially intense product of a compulsively revelatory culture. He suggests, further, that even if it isn’t your kind of revelation, even if you suspect Smith of trickery, you can learn something about nineteenth-century American culture by reading the Book of Mormon. Who cares from whence it came? It exists as a document of its culture and can be read beneficially as such.

Yet the Book of Mormon’s rich cultural resonances are only ever inferred and never demonstrated in this biography. For example, Gutjahr never shows how revelation itself appears in the Book of Mormon; he just explains that the book was likely produced through revelation in a time of competing revelations. Likewise, he never interprets a passage in the Book of Mormon through the eyes of an antebellum reader to show how one might experience its particular narrative as resonant with his or her antebellum spiritual experience. In one chapter, he suggests that different Mormon sects use the Book of Mormon differently, but never says how; in a later chapter, he describes how translating the book into different languages is difficult, but never explores what specific theological or interpretive consequences this challenging work of translation might have. I cite these examples in a row not to accuse Gutjahr of failing to pursue the social relevancy of the Book of Mormon. Rather, I list them in order to indicate how carefully Gutjahr seems to avoid the content of the book altogether, quoting it fewer than twenty times in this two-hundred-page biography.

To be sure, Gutjahr’s assiduous evasion of his designated text could be in deference to the limits set by the Princeton series of which this volume is a part, Lives of Great Religious Books. The promotional text advertises that this series will offer books that “examine the historical origins of texts from the great religious traditions, and trace how their reception, interpretation, and influence have changed—often radically over time.” While it seems reasonable to track any given volume as an object formed through history, the decision by Princeton to select works from the “great religious traditions” forecloses the process of deciding
what a tradition, or what greatness, might be, other than by the fact of their appearance in this series. And without such a process of justification, Gutjahr produces a book that explains nothing about Mormonism as a religion of a particular book. This is unfortunate since a central question posed to Mormons—perhaps, as Orson Pratt suggests, the central question—has always been, and continues to be, “Why do you believe this book?”

And although Grant Hardy and Terryl Givens have supplied replies to this question (I am especially an admirer of Hardy’s work, which offers such phenomenal textual analysis), both of them remain, in this reviewer’s estimation, too close to the book to make a truly powerful case for it. In other words, both Hardy and Givens clearly begin and end their analysis with the presumption that the Book of Mormon is scripture, whereas I think this is a point that requires historical, philosophical, and anthropological argument. “That all books might be or become bibles does not mean all of them are,” writes Nancy Levene in her examination of Spinoza’s critique of the Bible. “We will and we must adapt the sacred to our mind only because the sacred, like the mind, comprehends the difference between itself and the very many profane versions into which it will fall.”

A bible worth the name is unafraid of resistant readers or heretical attack because it includes its own critique. This is how a text begets movements: through its internal enactment of interpretation. Does the Book of Mormon possess this attribute?

To be clear, Gutjahr offers many hints (borrowing on Givens’s work in particular) as to what made the book so appealing in its time. Gutjahr reminds us that the Book of Mormon finds a way to meld together an “Old Testament historical feel” with “a distinct focus on Jesus Christ” and that it offers a “complex and detailed” Christology (p. 8). But we then hear little else about that Christology, or about that melding. “The Book of Mormon is Trinitarian in nature and a strong proponent of monogamy” is one of the few moments Gutjahr describes the specific

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propositional content of the Book of Mormon (p. 66). This comment, coupled with the broader historiography of Mormonism, reminds us how much of LDS Church history was not a result of interpreting its founding scripture, but of working through the ongoing revelatory practice set by its prophet and continued by subsequent leaders. Furthermore, we’re reminded by Gutjahr that Mormons, especially the Utah Saints who came to define Mormon orthodoxy, “paid less attention to the Book of Mormon than they did to the Bible” (p. 97). So an uninformed reader of Gutjahr’s volume could walk away from it believing that even Mormons themselves care less about this book than they do about the Bible or Doctrine and Covenants. This is a conclusion that at the very least is at odds with the book’s enormous ongoing print run (with nearly 350,000 copies issuing forth from its publishing center every month) and heavy use in missionary work.

As for Gutjahr, he reveals to us a great deal more—in engaging detail—about the book’s formatting and production, its history of translation, and its visual culture than its content. In one evocative instance, Gutjahr reminds us of the significant effort painter Minerva Teichert (1888–1976) made to “bring forward the female elements of the book, carefully evoking the story’s feminine side” when she visually depicted scenes from the Book of Mormon (p. 162). Later in the same chapter, when writing about Arnold Friberg’s illustrations, Gutjahr describes his work as capturing the “gender politics of the Book of Mormon’s narrative,” a narrative that Gutjahr then describes as “profoundly masculine” (p. 170). Which is it, a book with a “feminine side” or a “profoundly masculine” text? Or, if both, how so? Through textual analysis, Gutjahr might have exhibited moments of tension in the Book of Mormon, tensions that might have given rise to multiple interpretations. Yet he suggests that there are not multiple interpretations to be culled from the book. He casts Teichert as striving in vain since the Book of Mormon is, in this account, resiliently simple in its gender story. And so at the end of Gutjahr’s biography, the Book of Mormon seems to be more of a print commodity starring superhero warriors than a series of historical or metaphysical propositions. I am sure this is far from Gutjahr’s intention, but in his
strange avoidance of the Book of Mormon, he seems to suggest it isn’t worth reading. And so the reader is left without much idea as to how the book could be scripture: that is, a book to which its readers are asked to return again and again with acts of interpretation and interrogation that define its maintenance as a sacred object.

In her blurb for Gutjahr’s biography, literary scholar and Mormon memoirist Joanna Brooks writes, “The Book of Mormon is among the most influential books in American history.” If Brooks argues that it is a book that has excited large numbers of people to migration and social commitment, then I would agree. Yet I would have to stipulate, immediately, I do not know why it did. From the rich historiography of early Mormonism, I know how early Mormons organized and why certain of its theologies tugged successfully on certain individuals, certain familial pressures, and denominational gaps. I know about connections between the Book of Mormon and prophetic tradition, about it and the history of race, about it in the context of frontier development, about it as a repository of a diversity of revelatory and hermetic traditions. But I cannot, still, see it as scripture amid all this context and connection. The Book of Mormon seems to me to be still one of the loudest unexplained books in religious history. We know to respect this book of Mormon, even as none of us have any reason to say why it is the book for Mormons (or, possibly, for anyone else). And so I continue to wait for an account of the book that tells me why it isn’t just another missionary gift gathering dust, but a profound scripture, a book that I have failed to truly see.

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**Reviewed by David Walker**

There is much talk of “the Mormon Moment” these days. (Is it here? gone? imminent? immanent?) Without wishing to belabor the theme, we do well to focus on the ways in which moments beget scholars begetting moments; that is, to pay attention to religious historians’ own constructions of Mormon Moments—now and then, for present and posterity. An occasion for reflection is Matthew Bowman’s *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*, one of several popular academic books published during Mitt Romney’s recent presidential campaign. *The Mormon People* is excellent and commendable for many reasons, not least being Bowman’s smooth prose and synthetic tack. It is also cause for pause along the rough roads of Mormon historiography, precisely for the same reasons.

I. The moments that made Bowman

This is a book about religion in history and about texts in context. It does Bowman justice, therefore, to begin with *The Mormon People’s* dust jacket and to look at the text made to envelop his own text.¹ The jacket (re) presents the stage for Bowman’s voice, even as it articulates its own expectations about the stuff and suit(ability) of religion in history. It says, for example, that “Bowman peels back the curtain on more than 180 years of Mormon history and doctrine . . . and ably sets the scene for a 2012 presidential election that has the potential to mark a major turning point in the way this ‘all-American’ faith is perceived by the wider American

¹. Please forgive the parentheses about to appear, or at least understand why they are there: I am doing my part to disrupt an easy reading of this or any text about texts about texts, and thereby to respond in one mode of scholarship—recomplexification—to the intentionally popular workings of some scholars.
public”—a population wherein “the place of Mormonism in public life continues to generate heated debate on both sides of the political divide.” We readers infer that (1) formal politics both (a) reveals popular disagreements respecting true American religions and (b) occasions perceptual and religious transformations; and that (2) exposé (“peel[ing] back the curtain”) is the rightful route to calmer, better, more balanced understandings or enactments of religion.

This is simultaneously an expansive and limiting charge for Bowman as a scholar and for religious studies as a discipline: the following, explaining, and altering of formal politics vis-à-vis religion, in this case by reconnecting “a young seer and sometime treasure hunter named Joseph Smith” to “Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney.” I say re-connecting because the assumed backdrop to Bowman’s text consists of assumptions of ongoing theocracy, sorcery, fanaticism, puppetry, and heresy. I say re-connecting because, insofar as we nuance or de-familiarize such assumptions, our task is presumptively presentist; and also because it is presumptively genealogical. We are limited by well-worn tracks of denominational history (the principle that human actions can be described by ecclesiastical affiliation, ecclesiastics by doctrine, and doctrine by pronouncement and belief) and New Humanism (the idea that religious studies might, by locating common moral or experiential centers within various social institutions, foster local and global civility), even as we are freed by the possibility of finding new meanings in—and new histories for—the disciplinary and terminological assumptions that constrain us.

To be sure, Bowman is a free man, his literary contract and book jacket notwithstanding. And The Mormon People is particularly good at navigating expectations of religion’s (or Mormonism’s) doctrinal hegemonies and experiential harmonies. Such expectations are both explicit and implicit, and Bowman addresses them through that oldest of LDS techniques: effective structure and good storytelling.
II. The moments that Bowman made

_The Mormon People_ is structured by and through the identification of moments: Mormon Moments. Among the eras and events crucial to “the making of an American Faith” (as Bowman’s subtitle has it), Bowman selects—and organizes chapters around—eight: Joseph Smith’s first visions and gatherings (to 1831), early town planning (1831–39), the life of Nauvoo (1839–46), Utahn gathering (1846–77), the announcement and denouncement of polygamy (1852–96), Progressive Era theology (1890–1945), Correlation and ecclesiastical retrenchment (1945–78), and globalization (1978–2011). Each chapter finds Bowman addressing the bugbears of religious presumption—Mormon and anti-Mormon alike—by subtle narrative counterpoint. Joseph Smith was not “wholly other,” but was rather commensurate with and intelligible to his frontier contemporaries. Commensurability, in turn, proceeded through dialogue as well as dictation. (“Mormonism was as much the construction of Joseph Smith’s followers as of Smith himself” [p. 6] is a refrain sounded especially around mergers with Sidney Rigdon’s group, economic crises at Kirtland, and post-1844 succession plans.) Mormons used the Book of Mormon as existential evidence as much as exegetical datum or proof text; and “belief” was contextualized by and through ritual performance. Saints were politically both powerful and weak; and polygamy was both fact, metaphor, and metonym. Brigham Young was patriarch and arts patron, Mormons have been theologically innovative as well as uninterested, Correlation was simultaneously stimulating and stagnating, and Mormonism manages to be a global religion without being a world religion per se.

Scholars of Mormonism are familiar with this story: Latter-day Saints are “a people of paradox.”² What Bowman contributes to the field is, to his mind, a sustained analysis of mid-twentieth-century trends. Indeed it is in chapters 6 and 7 (“Eternal Progression” and “Correlation”) especially that Bowman moves beyond “synthesis”—the announced narrative

mode of the entire book, albeit one applied with special reference to the
nineteenth century—to suggestion and trend-setting (pp. xxi, 278, 289–
90). The reader encounters there a complicated plot: James Talmage, B.
H. Roberts, and John Widtsoe advanced liberal and progressive ideals,
which were met and matched through the practical reforms of Joseph F.
Smith and Heber J. Grant, which begat David O. McKay’s and Harold B.
Lee’s program of pedagogical and ritual standardization, which was ac-
accompanied by Joseph Fielding Smith’s conservative social formations and
theologies, which counterpointed those of Talmage et al. Neither Joseph
F. nor Joseph Fielding is made to stand in relative proximity to Joseph
Smith Jr. per se; and Bowman does not argue that any particular combi-
nation of, say, Joseph Fielding Smith and James Talmage sired, say,
Stephenie Meyer or Mitt Romney.

Bowman’s affinity for “the progressives” is clear, but he is wise to es-
chew both prescription and teleology by presenting recent Mormon his-
tory precisely as a plot: a drama played among multiple heroes and
antiheroes, a complicated script from which any contemporary Saint
might take cue and to which any audience might draw connections.

III. The momentum of Bowman’s moments

What Bowman best contributes to the field of Mormon studies is, to my
mind, something more interesting—and more broadly applicable—than
his mid-twentieth-century accountings. It is a theory of cultural linguis-
tics: the notion that Mormon Moments consist in, by, and for translation.
Joseph Smith Jr. translated the Book of Mormon, others translated Smith’s
ideals into workable social policies, Brigham Young translated the exodus
experience, Wilford Woodruff translated the rationales and relations of
polygamy, and Talmage et al. “progressed” by moving new words “to the
center of the Mormon lexicon” (p. 166). Scholars of religion may take issue
with certain acts and absences of theoretical application—“experience”
remains an original, sui generis point of departure in descriptions of the
first vision and elsewhere—but the notion of translation is unimpeach-
able. Culture and cultural studies alike work through terminological shifts
and the study thereof; this is partly the Foucauldian sense of genealogy with which we are now familiar. In and into this context, Bowman says it is our job to translate, and not merely to transcribe; and it is our job to seek the roots and routes of linguistic change, whether in stump speeches, sermons, sanctuaries, schools, or homes. *The Mormon People* makes that much clear, and it consistently but subtly commands our attention.

Two observations follow from this compliment, though. The first—a challenge—concerns terms and terminological instability within Bowman’s own work. More generously put, it calls for continuation of Bowman’s inquiries and implications beyond likely bounds of trade press entertainment. The second—a critique—concerns the net directionality of Bowman’s historiographic translations.

Bowman’s narrative implies a certain Hegelianism whereby historical persons, perspectives, and terms represent inexact syntheses of theses and antitheses. More than that, Bowman’s Hegelianism is explicitly Weberian, insofar as Mormon syntheses have, he says, generally accompanied bureaucratic developments and the routinizations of charisma. Neither of these echoes are necessarily problematic, and even Bowman’s accounts of Brigham Young’s post-1844 push “not [for] charisma but institution”—tired though this analytical terrain may be—make for dynamic reading (p. 91, compare 93, 138). Dynamic, indeed, and that is irrespective of one’s personal or disciplinary attachments to Max Weber.

However, for those of us who are attached to or interested in Weber, we would do well to give freer run to a fuller slate of Weberian questions, or at least to track closely the terms in which he was most interested. Bureaucracy, for one, is a thing variously valued in *The Mormon People*. Sometimes, as during the Young years and shortly thereafter, bureaucracy provided flexibility and an outlet for growth: men and women had access to “the bureaucratic power of the councils”; and councils themselves “ground into motion”—in varying but generally westward directions—when church leaders were incarcerated or indisposed (pp. 136, 63). But other times bureaucracy was a site of fragility or a barrier to church progress, as when United Orders faltered in the face of freewheeling, railroading economics, or when Correlation’s “scientific organization”
squashed inspiration and innovative thought (pp. 119, 197). Bureaucracy seems here a contradictory thing vis-à-vis Mormon religious development: it underwrote both advancement and declension, effecting both revolution and retrenchment.

I have no problem with paradox reappearing as description for bureaucratic operation. Quite the contrary. But I do think that paradox and bureaucracy alike deserve fuller and more explicit treatment, not least because Weber himself belied any singular theory of bureaucratic development (toward scientific organization, away from religion) with implications of religion’s cultural diffusion, profligate reproduction, and corporate imbrication. In short, elsewhere if not here, we need theories and translations of bureaucratic and religious paradoxes, not simply evocations thereof. To that end we might well ask, How were mid-twentieth-century ecclesiastical bureaucracies (and the corporations they resembled) different from nineteenth-century ecclesiastical bureaucracies (and the corporations they resembled)? Was “scientific organization” more effectively achieved in the later period, as Bowman implies? If so, did such achievements entail commensurate reactions—scientific or otherwise, streamlined or not—in other sectors? Which sectors, then, have been more important for formations of (discourses of) Mormon religion? What is “the secular” advanced in and against Mormon bureaucracies, and in what ways has Mormonism itself become framed—now, immanently—in society?

I have a hard time imagining Random House publishing any book built around such questions, but it would make for important reading. It is a testament to Bowman’s work, in any case, that it lends itself easily to imaginations of argumentative furtherance and pairing.

My final point pertains to the modes of historical translation and historiographic synthesis intrinsic to, but often implicit in, The Mormon People. Despite its occasional veneer of argumentless summary, synthesis is itself an argumentative act. It is an argument to say that the nineteenth century (for instance) has been “covered,” and it is an argument to select certain historiographic trends or historical moments to “summarize.” It behooves us therefore to ask, Does this particular selection—this translation, this synthesis—give us the type of institutional groundwork
necessary for the furtherance of Mormon studies and religious studies more broadly? The answer is predictable: yes and no.

A brief story captures well my reservations—and apparently others’ too. While waiting for my own copy to arrive, I had the good fortune of skimming a copy of *The Mormon People* at a public library in Washington, DC. In it a previous patron had made three marginal notes, the longest of them objecting to Bowman’s characterization of Utahn railroad construction. Bowman asserts that “in 1869 [Brigham Young] grudgingly greeted the transcontinental railroad,” but my predecessor, circling *grudgingly*, wrote instead: “He welcomed it. Church always welcomed new tech” (p. 119). This marginalia was a gratifying find for me, a student of railroad and tourism development in the West. And the graffiti was in large part correct: Brigham Young did welcome the railroad—albeit after anticipatory arrangements—not only because railroads would ease Saintly travel to and from Utah, but also because they would bring new business, new trade, and new territory for religious encounter.

If I choose to uplift my predecessor’s act of book defacement, it is because Bowman has failed to honor the argumentative interventions of certain of his own forebears. Leonard Arrington, Dale Morgan, and others of their era were among the first in our field to contest notions of mid- to late-nineteenth-century Mormon industrial allergies, and it is to my mind the greatest shortcoming of Bowman’s work that it ignores many of the arguments of, say, Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958). To state the charge harshly: Bowman rejects, without sufficient explanation or acknowledgment, the “Mormon Moments” important to scholars situated squarely within the Moment of his own greatest concern: the mid-twentieth century. He spends little time attending to 1856 (the so-called Reformation) or 1869 (Arrington’s “Year of Decision”), for instance; and his bibliographic essay gives neither rationale nor roadmap for the general move away from “economic history”—by

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no means exhausted terrain—nor either from Arrington’s implicit arguments about religious institutionalization.4

I have no doubt that Bowman has reasons, but we too have the right to know them. Indeed more than that: we scholars of American religious history have not only the right but the obligation—the job, even—of historiographic clarity, that is, of genealogy in a subdisciplinary sense.

So what if we were to “pull an Arrington”? Arrington’s marginal notes, like those of my predecessor, might point to the importance of technology and industrial hubs for Mormon practical and discursive developments. They might point out that Heber J. Grant (b. 1856)—arguably one of the central tragic heroes of Bowman’s narrative—learned the very rudiments of trans-local Mormon incorporation during the railroad age. Or they might object that the Word of Wisdom—one among Bowman’s favorite exempla of Mormon counterculture, Progressive Era progressivism, and post-Grant wholesomeness alike—was likewise freighted with multiple bureaucratic interests, it having been reinstated shortly before 1869. (Meanwhile, the marginal notes of Reid L. Neilson and J. Spencer Fluhman, modern scholars of the nineteenth century, might point to the Mormon choruses and non-Mormon backdrops behind certain of Bowman’s scripts, highlighting thereby the importance of Tabernacle Choir tours, B. H. Roberts’s Chicagoan lobbies, informal politics, print media, and popular culture in the making of Mormon “religion.”)5 Such interventions

4. I find Bowman’s chief engagement with Arrington—in the first section of the bibliographic essay that stands in place of sustained in-text or endnoted engagement with secondary scholarship—to be somewhat evasive on this point. Bowman writes that “the most important . . . [attempt] to tell the same story as this volume” is Arrington and Davis Bitton’s The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints (New York: Knopf, 1979), and that, while “it still stands useful today,” that book “could not benefit from much of the work it inspired, and its treatment of the twentieth century is necessarily cursory” (p. 278). Bowman also refers to Arrington’s Great Basin Kingdom as “the basic work” on Great Basin settlement (p. 284), but there is no discussion of Bowman’s own narrative choices relative thereto.

may not derail Bowman’s narrative directions, but it is our business to ask whether and how they might. And in any case, we would do well to compare parallel and divergent tracks en route to better understandings of the demands and expectations for our own (political, religious, historiographic, lexicographic) Mormon Moment.


Reviewed by Stephen H. Webb

Traditionally speaking, metaphysics, at least in a form that has been useful for Christian theology, has been synonymous with the Platonic conception of a hierarchically ordered cosmos. In this view, the world is arranged in interlocking levels of reality that correspond to qualitatively different kinds of experience. Knowledge is the outcome of a journey into intangible universals that turn out to shine with more lucidity than the phenomena given to our perception. The more one penetrates the real, the less physical it becomes—and the same can be said about us. Our souls are as light as the divine, which suggests a shared substance or original unity. Reason’s labor provides a measure of how far we have fallen, just as reason’s attainment is an indication of how far we may yet rise. The virtues, which discipline our recalcitrant bodies, clear the path
back that reason must follow. Perception has its role, since desire moves the will, but only the unexpected harmonies of beauty can awaken the soul’s yearning for a peace that fulfills all understanding. On the assumption that the internal concord of the soul should reflect the unfettered splendor of the divine, great cultures have been built. The true, the good, and the beautiful are one above just as they should become united for individuals and societies alike.

For much of Western history, this metaphysical scheme was inseparable from cosmological speculations, thanks to the central role played by Plato’s *Timaeus*. Night’s darkness revealed the brilliance of the stars, and the wise ones assumed that their light was meant for us to see. However elaborately articulated, this was the common sense of the Christian worldview. The gradations of truth corresponded to a cosmic topography. Philosophy scaled a ladder that was at once physical and spiritual. True, the spiritual was immaterial, but it carried enough weight to uphold the education of our senses and the redirection of our desires.

This venture took a radically different turn in the Renaissance, when the mathematization of observation began the homogenization of ontology. Knowledge was still a matter of idealization, but the process of abstraction was completely different from the realization of universals. Abstract concepts have a formal power that belies the personally transformative demands of universal truths. Modernity thus witnessed the loss of knowledge’s metaphysical depth as facts replaced types and the goal of inquiry bent downward to immanence rather than upward toward transcendence. Morality became another object to study rather than the prerequisite for all inquiry, and beauty, severed from the question of truth, became just another word for entertainment. The more infinite the cosmos became, the more flat was the world. Stripped of its layers of meaning, nature was forced to submit to the intrusive methodologies of technical expertise, not the plaintive queries of the lovers of wisdom.

Even after the intellectual revolutions that severed wisdom from the evidence of the senses, however, Platonic metaphysics continued to prosper as it took an inward turn. If truth was no longer crowned by the beckoning shapes of perfect spheres, one could always turn within to discover
infinite intensities of spiritual depth. Only atheists denied that this world is but a shadow cast by the brightness of a greater truth.

Nonetheless, with no cosmic light to mirror, the soul proved to be too muddled to inspire endless reflection. Metaphysics floundered in these shallow waters, with some philosophers applying the practical advantages of science to old philosophical topics while others tried to refurbish bits and pieces of the Platonic project like collectibles salvaged from a long abandoned warehouse. Theology too lost direction. The disconnection of the spiritual from the material left faith appealing to the sheer fact of revelation—and it did not matter whether that authority was located in the Bible or the church—or it turned religion into an instrument of moral inspiration and social improvement.

Grace, in the old scheme, was a matter of the higher making room for the lower (and in Christianity, it was a matter of the highest making room for the lowest). But now space, whether its expansion is infinite or cyclical, is void of depth even amidst its multiplying dimensions, and thus our material world no longer gives us the coordinates for distinguishing a vertical ascent from a horizontal maze.

We are surely not done with being Platonic, but we do need a new metaphysics to respond to new cosmologies, and Adam Miller has found one. His very important book is both a splendid introduction to the thought of the French philosopher Bruno Latour and a provocative and original reflection on the possibilities for grace in an age of metaphysical materialism. I think it is right to identify Latour (and Miller) as metaphysical materialists, even though they are developing a nonstandard interpretation of matter that does away with its usual connotations as well as its philosophical lineage, but more on that below.

Miller pursues two questions. What if objects are all that we have? If so, is there room in a world of things for something as lacking in objectivity as grace? These two questions are separable, so I will first describe Miller’s interpretation of Latour’s thought and then comment on his attempt to find a place for grace in this new metaphysical terrain.

For Latour (and Miller throughout this book adopts Latour’s views as his own), classical metaphysics is, in Miller’s word, conspiratorial. It
is always on the search for a fundamental unity lurking behind the observable course of scattered events. From this perspective, all metaphysics is reductionistic, even if the reality it seeks is “higher” instead of “lower” than the available phenomena. Religion too is reductionistic—as are all attempts to prove religion illusory. Conspiracy theories are dependent on the metaphysics of invisible forces, while a metaphysics of objects—this is Miller’s wager—forces us to take things as they are.

The only solution to reductionism is to liberate all objects from every attempt to fold them into a single interpretive scheme. Latour calls this the principle or irredution. This principle does not mean that reductions are not useful. On the contrary, everything can be reduced, deduced, and aligned with everything else. Irreduction is as impossible as reduction because objects are infinitely divisible and compoundable, which is another way of saying that nothing in the world is one (united, whole, or complete). Miller explains this by saying that objects are both resistant and available. They are always available for reduction, but even when they are reduced, they leave a remainder (that is available for other groupings or constructs).

Latour’s metaphysics is experimental (which does not actually tell us much, since Latour, according to Miller, thinks “a good experiment is a bit of theater,” p. 114). Its conclusions are provisional and its method is slow and easygoing as it resists any rush to ontological judgments. It consists, nonetheless, of many axioms and gnomic statements, like the following (from Latour): “There are more of us than we thought” (p. 15). This is, perhaps, what Leibniz’s Monadology would look like had it been written by a polytheist, or written with a Husserlian turn to the things themselves without all of the fuss about states of intentional consciousness. In Miller’s words, “Rather than axiomatizing the One, he axiomatizes the many” (p. 15). The result is a decidedly flat world with no levels of being and none of the corresponding variations in intensity of experience. Miller argues that this prevents objects themselves from being flattened by the predeterminations of “deep” metaphysical systems.

Politically speaking, Latour’s leveled landscape is decidedly democratic. “To be an object,” Miller explains, “is to be a politician” (p. 20).
With no conspiracies to chart and no scapegoats to blame, everyone must engage in the small compromises and adjustments that constitute modern liberal democracies. The only thing stopping objects from acting like a mob is their sheer proliferation. Latour grants objects a certain kind of agency, but this is not an experiment in panpsychism, which is one of the major differences between Latour and Alfred North Whitehead. It almost seems as if Latour projects agency onto objects because he leaves so little room for extra-objective forces that can move objects around. Matter for Latour is not to be confused with “nature.” Nature is an organic whole that finds its meaning when contrasted with a height or depth that borders and attempts to tame its wildness. Objects are not natural any more than they are supernatural. They are also not subjected to the dualism of form and substance (although he treats form as the way in which objects are used and matter as the source of each object’s resistance to such use, which is a pragmatic updating of metaphysic’s oldest division). Since they are agents, and very weak agents at that, they give themselves a variety of forms and assume many guises without ever being a single identifiable form that can be discerned by rational understanding. This seems to me like a modern version of Scotus’s doctrine of the plurality of substantial forms. (Miller also accepts and radicalizes Scotus’s univocal treatment of language about God.)

One of the challenges in thinking about Latour is that he works so hard to overcome every traditional dualism. He is, for example, neither a realist nor a constructionist, nor is he some mixture of the two. His train of thought is conjunctive. Epistemology is ontology, the nonhuman is human, the one is multiple, and so on. Everything is something else and never just itself, even though the goal of phenomenology is to allow objects “to speak on their own behalf” (p. 125).

Latour maps his position not only by scattering unsystematic axioms but also by asserting redefinitions of ordinary words. Representation is translation, causation is fulcrum, transcendence is fermentation, and reality is defined by troublemaking and recalcitrance. The nomenclature is almost intentionally arbitrary. “That which layers and forms processions I will call *angel*,” Latour writes, “in contrast to that which aligns and maintains networks, which I call *instrument*” (p. 126). Thus does objectivism
slide into nominalism when words themselves become nothing more than objects.

The world is a mess, and so is our knowledge of it. Indeed, our lack of knowledge of things evidently corresponds to their lack of unity. Latour is a realist of the unreal. This can sound awfully banal at times. “An object’s situation,” Miller writes, “is always composed of ramifying complexities” (p. 56). Miller seems happy with the resulting relativism. “In an object-oriented metaphysics,” he admits, “the truthfulness of a statement depends solely on the number of relevant agents persuaded to line-up behind it” (p. 103). If everyone reading this review were to vote on that statement, I am confident we would invalidate it.

As for God, well, “if God exists, he is no metaphysical king” (p. 19). God too must be a politician, cajoling and compromising in order to get anything done. Absent any sovereign, intentions are advanced only through committees that have little power, just as in the modern academy! Miller follows the noted Mormon philosopher James Faulconer in resituating the verticality of transcendence on a horizontal plane. Transcendence is everywhere; there are no privileged objects, as with Martin Heidegger’s fixation with Vincent van Gogh’s painting of a pair of old, worn-out shoes. In fact, this view of objects presupposes the eternity of matter (see p. 32), and not just any old eternity of matter. Matter is not eternally chaotic but eternally formed, so that there are no original forms or a first former of all that exists; there are only eternally mutable objects that pass through the flux of this and that in ways that defy a stable rational analysis.

Where does grace fit in? Grace is the most subtle of theological terms, a word that conveys something of the ethereal and evanescent, crisscrossing between the otherworldly and the mundane. It is that aspect of God’s nature that works in us to bring about our participation in him. Force, energy, and light provide the network of images and ideas that are most naturally drawn to the experience of grace. Grace is relational, pervasive, and personal. As pure gift and thus unexpected event, it never congeals into a stable concept. Whatever it is, it is not an object. Indeed, the cardinal rule about grace in Christian theology could be this: Thou shalt not turn grace into an object. It is not something that
can be manipulated, even when, in High Church traditions, it is conveyed through tangible symbols or physical relics. When grace is objectified, it becomes its opposite, a dark desire for mastery that seeks to take the place of God. To handle it is to destroy it. At least that is the traditional, Protestant-inspired view of grace that even many Catholics have bought into today. This book—which asks the question, “What happens when we suspend our knowledge of what force is?” (p. 37)—helps us to see how very wrong everything about that view is, as well as how hard it is going to be to replace it.

I was prepared to love this book because of my sense of how Catholic Latour’s metaphysics is (confession: I am Roman Catholic). I wanted to see how Miller would rethink grace absent the fear of rendering it empirical and demonstrable. The heirs of the Protestant Reformation, albeit against the intentions of the Reformers, turned grace into a forensic event—a singular divine judgment that can be accepted by individuals at any time, as long as they plead guilty and promise to change their ways. Grace thus happens only in the cross for God and in the head for us. It is not mediated by objects, and it has no earthly weight or visible reality. It is certainly not a substance! It does not denote a change in the divine, and it actually does not change anything in us. We remain sinners, but by acknowledging our guilt, we become free of the punishment we so rightly deserve. Grace so construed always happens somewhere between us and God and never here and now.

When Miller speaks about grace, he has two voices. One is in tune with the Catholic sacramental imagination. For example, he is drawn to grace that is downsized, reduced from “large-scale forces of cosmic progress” to micro-movements of adjustments and supplementations (p. 3). That brief comment promises to take an object-oriented view of grace in new and exciting directions. Grace for Miller forces us to confront the obstinate reality of things. It brings the world closer, which is the exact opposite of science, which makes the world go away (vanishing in abstract mathematical formulas). “Science,” he writes, “corrects for our nearsightedness, religion for our farsightedness” (p. 119). Science, from this perspective, is much more miraculous and unbelievable than religion. Grace itself is a kind of object that gets in the way of our attempts
to order the objects that pass through our lives. If thought of as a force, it would be a very weak force, competing for our attention, unable to move anything on its own. “Religion aims at illuminating objects that are too near rather than too far” (p. 126). Grace is a form of attention that keeps us focused and blocks our efforts to escape from the real.

That is what Miller sounds like when he is being Catholic, and I want to hear much more. But there is another voice he assumes, and it speaks in the Protestant language of a judgment that extends infinitely beyond what is necessary and required. Updated for postmodern sensitivities, this is the language of excess—of a purely rhetorical realm that transcends the ordinary and everyday. Miller thus writes that grace is “prodigal in that it is in excess of what is deserved or expected” (p. 78). So understood, grace is “passively received rather than actively controlled” (p. 79), a statement that reiterates the Protestant claim that grace must be either freely given or laboriously earned with no in-between. When he is being Protestant, Miller says very simply that grace “is free and unconditioned” (p. 79). It is the opposite of objects because it does not need to enter into the economy of exchange and negotiation. It cannot be contracted. It begins where objects disappear.

Perhaps the problem in applying Latour to grace lies more with Latour than Miller himself. If the psychological malaise that haunts traditional metaphysics is paranoia—the sense that there is a power behind the scene controlling everything—the corresponding malady of Latour’s object-oriented system is schizophrenia—an inability to make coherent causal connections. (Latour calls the attempt to create commensurable relationships among objects “stacking,” p. 56.) There are no universals for Latour, but there are networks and associations. Latour’s objects, like people in today’s world, have no lasting loyalties or deep commitments to enduring identities. Instead, they hook up in relationships of convenience and mutual satisfaction. This is a philosophy that could only be written from and for the modern secular university, with its affirmation of disjointed areas of study, its painful inability to forge a substantive identity, and its methodological atheism. Miller talks about suffering, but that discussion is tangential at best to his theory of objects. In fact, his thoughts about suffering (as opposed to pain!) appeal to the category of depth that
he otherwise disavows. Besides, a graceful account of objects should be playful, but when Miller talks grace, he is all somber and serious.

I didn’t fall in love with this book, but it did end up making me hope that in his future books, Latour decreases and Miller increases. There was great promise in Miller’s previous work, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (2012), but this book is not the payoff. Instead, it is more promises. We need a materialistic metaphysics for a variety of reasons, even though I am not sure that Americans need to be persuaded to spend more time getting closer to objects, but I trust Miller’s promising work, more than Latour’s, to lead us there.

Stephen H. Webb, who earned his PhD from the University of Chicago, taught religion and philosophy for twenty-five years at Wabash College. His most recent book is *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford University Press, 2013), and he is working on a book, with Alonzo Gaskill, on Mormon–Roman Catholic dialogue.

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Reviewed by Adam S. Miller

“The word *matter* is, in philosophy, the name of a problem.”
—Bertrand Russell

The superstructure of practices and beliefs in which Mormons pray, serve, and live is pretty well defined. But this system, for good and bad, is free floating. Mormon beliefs have an internal coherence that gives their meaning a pragmatic stability, but the system as a whole isn’t tethered to
any similarly well-defined metaphysics. The superstructure is compatible with a range of metaphysical foundations, and it is institutionally committed to none.

Still, Joseph Smith’s revelations do point in a clear metaphysical direction. Mormonism privileges materialism: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; we cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter” (D&C 131:7–8). And it claims that matter is coeternal with God: “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). Both of these claims—that everything is material and that matter is uncreated—seem straightforward. But both suffer from the same problem: we don’t have any idea what matter is.

Scholars interested in a working (rather than historical) approach to Mormon theology will need to put this problem center stage. Any work on the speculative question of what Mormon beliefs might mean were they experimentally tethered to a particular metaphysical platform will require a serious and technical inquiry into the nature of matter itself. Mormon metaphysicians need to be, first, world-class scholars of materialism. They will have to seriously inquire into how matter has been treated throughout the history of philosophy, and they will need to know something about how matter, in the context of contemporary physics, is being investigated experimentally.

The good news is that this question, central to the future of Mormon thinking, is also critical for a broad swath of contemporary work in philosophy, theology, sociology, biology, physics, and metaphysics. We won’t be working on this alone.

Stephen H. Webb’s Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter is an excellent example of first-rate work in this vein. Jesus Christ, Eternal God models what a serious, sustained, and informed investigation into the theological stakes of “matter” in the Christian tradition looks like. And, more, it models how to then use such an investigation, not as an end in itself, but as part of a working, contemporary project to rethink a Christian commitment to matter.
Webb grounds his metaphysical inquiry into matter in a Christological claim about God’s “heavenly flesh” that is itself, then, squarely situated in a close reading of the Western metaphysical canon. Webb aims to “admit matter into the prestigious list of [God’s] perfections” (p. 24). He argues that Christ’s incarnation was not a temporary expediency necessitated by the fall but an essential and eternal feature of God’s own nature. “God did not stoop into the body of Jesus, as if putting on a disguise, costume, or cloak. If Jesus Christ is the truth of God, then he is eternally true, and the truth is his eternal divinity” (p. 292). According to a heavenly flesh Christology, Jesus Christ, from all eternity, was an embodied human being. His already-perfect materiality has always been the pattern for the rest of creation.

The body Jesus Christ had on earth is a specification of the body the Father gave to the Son before the world began. If this seems abstract, it should not be. I am seeking the most concrete way of interpreting the claim that everything that exists is what it is because it has its being in Jesus Christ. If the being of Jesus Christ is conceived as an immaterial spirit to which we are related in a mysterious and miraculous manner (a manner which does not include our bodies), then it is hard to fathom how our being originates in and from Jesus. If Jesus Christ is the prototype of all matter, the source and origin of energy, the sound that vibrates the world into being and the light that vivifies every atom, then we literally, not abstractly, have our place in him. (pp. 286–87)

Webb’s defense of this position begins with a brief of survey of contemporary physics, noting that these days “matter is not just stranger than people used to think it is. Its strangeness is what matter appears to be” (p. 8). Where matter and form were traditionally opposed and even separable, we find in contemporary physics that “when we break open one form, we find another. Like a set of ornamental Chinese boxes, matter is form all the way down” (p. 9). The strangeness is compounding. “The closer we come to matter, it seems, the more ‘it’ coyly withdraws—to the point that scientists do not even have a consensus definition of what they are looking for. Whatever the distance that separates the ancients from
us, physics and metaphysics are once again inextricably intertwined” (p. 8). It’s hard to say what it means to be a materialist (perhaps especially as a theologian) when matter itself keeps slipping away. But as Webb notes, this slippage shouldn’t be a surprise given the history of matter in Western metaphysics. Offering a master class in this history, Webb spends two hundred dense pages tracing matter’s wending way from Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Plotinus to Irenaeus, Origen, and the Nicene council, and then on up through Aquinas, Scotus, Luther, and Barth.

But Webb doesn’t stop with Barth. Instead, the penultimate chapter engages in a grateful and critical dialogue with Mormonism’s nascent materialism. Mormonism, on Webb’s account, “is like an alternate reality come to life—a counterfactual history of post-Nicene developments of pre-Nicene theology” (p. 244). For a Christian reconsideration of matter like his own, Mormonism offers the advantage of heresy. Heretics offer the kind of fresh perspective that is available only from someone who both does and does not belong to the larger tradition. “In the early church, heretics—those close enough to traditional Christianity to really get underneath the skin of its foundational beliefs—were the ones who challenged the orthodox. Today, that role should be played by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (p. 243). The Mormon counterfactual presents as a contemporary pre-Nicene theology in which God is, from all eternity, material and embodied. And, most tellingly for Webb, Mormonism advocates this view of God in order to articulate the deep connection between God and humans, a connection revealed most vividly in the person of Jesus Christ. Mormonism “departs from traditional theology most radically only when it is trying to do justice to the honor and glory of Jesus Christ” (p. 244). The result is that

Mormonism is willing to risk making God much more knowable (much more like us) than traditional theism allows while treating matter as a source of endless surprise and fantastic permutations. Matter is unpredictable and impenetrable, while God is as familiar as you or me. For Mormons, a God who is less than infinite leaves room for matter that is much more than deadweight. (p. 250)
Mormonism endows matter with a life of its own by insisting on the continuity of our lives with God’s. The result, though, is that God’s proximity is paid for by investing matter itself with the mystery that formerly belonged to God. If matter now bears some of the burden placed on a metaphysically “first term,” then matter will inevitably suffer some of the inscrutability that comes from at least partially occupying the position of the “explainer” rather than the “explained.”

Webb finds this Mormon valorization of matter and embodiment invigorating, though it still teeters on the brink of heresy. Wobbling in this way, it risks being not only incompatible with the larger tradition but even inconsistent with itself. “Studying Mormonism is like looking into a mirror that, upon closer inspection, turns into a maze. Keep exploring and the maze leads to multiple exits, each of which opens onto hauntingly familiar rooms that comprise unexpected additions to the mansion of faith” (pp. 243–44). The additional rooms are a joy, but having threaded your way through the maze in order to see them, there’s no guarantee you’ll be able to find your way back. Still, Webb thinks that Mormonism is a worthy partner in dialogue and, more, that it may be possible to describe the nature of God in such a way that, on the one hand, the larger Christian tradition gets enlarged and clarified, and, on the other hand, Mormonism may itself come to belong more properly to that tradition. To this end, Webb offers “a statement of belief that is intended to bridge the metaphysical gap between Mormons and creedal Christians” (p. 269). He recognizes that, “of course, such statements carry the risk of pleasing no one while annoying everybody” (p. 269).

My statement is based on the following Heavenly Flesh interpretation of the trinity: God the Father is material (in a way we cannot completely imagine or understand) without being fully corporeal, God the Son is anthropomorphically corporeal (and thus material in a way that is different from the Father), and God the Holy Spirit is the love they share—and it is this love that dynamically directs matter toward corporeal form. (p. 269)

Having some feel for how this statement cashes out largely depends on being familiar with the groundwork Webb has laid down in the pre-
ceeding two hundred pages, but the formulation is striking. And as a gesture of goodwill and serious consideration, it has earned a claim on our time and attention.

In closing, it’s worth noting that Webb also offers a contextualized assessment of the Mormon situation that contains both a hint of holy envy and a thoughtful warning.

Mormonism launched its own program of de-Hellenization, but it did so on the basis of a new revelation that only subsequently led to a reinterpretation of standard theology themes. Without this kind of special warrant, the attempt to write metaphysics out of Christian history can only result in a distortion of the impulse of early Christians to probe the rational depths of their most passionate beliefs. Even Mormonism’s circumvention of the established rules of metaphysics goes only so far, leaving Mormon thinkers so deeply entangled in standard theology debates that the future theological development of their church is an open question. (p. 272)

Mormon thinkers are now situated at a promising and perilous crossroads. Without any defined institutional commitment to a particular metaphysical foundation, Mormon theology enjoys an enviable philosophical freedom to start fresh on the basis of its own revelations and the “special warrant” they imply. But, too, this freedom carries with it a corresponding risk. Having circumvented the established rules of the tradition, Mormon thought risks failing to connect its superstructure to any solid foundation at all. For Mormons, the opportunity and the problem are the same: “the future theological development of their church is an open question.”

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Reviewed by David J. Howlett

Six years ago after a Mormon History Association conference session, I remarked to the random scholar sitting next to me how topics on nineteenth-century Mormonism have been revisited ad nauseam. We needed scholarship on twentieth-century Mormons, especially that of everyday people, not more tired stories about founding leaders and “great men.” My comment was that of an overly confident graduate student. What came next was memorable. “So, what are you are writing about?” I asked the scholar. “Actually, I was thinking of writing a book about Brigham Young,” he responded. I was speaking to John Turner. My face flushed red. I backpedaled and blathered some conciliatory words. Our conversation soon ended. Fortunately, John Turner did not listen to naysayers like me, and he, along with a growing host of others, has shown the value of new questions put to old topics.

In *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*, Turner offers a riveting, fair-minded, and, at times, jarring portrait of the larger-than-life nineteenth-century Mormon leader. Turner’s stated methodological end is to “avoid the parochialism and polemicism that has been endemic to Mormon history by placing Young more fully in his nineteenth-century context” (p. viii). In this light, Young proves to be a figure of great historical importance. His life, according to Turner, “brings into sharp relief” some of the era’s most contested political issues: “westward expansion, popular sovereignty, religious freedom, vigilantism, and Reconstruction” (p. 4). Within this framework, Turner argues that Young should be taken as a pioneer in more senses than one: a religious pioneer as well as a colonizer. As a religious pioneer, Young added and refined religious rituals that salved his followers’ desires for sacramental kinship connections. Young advocated and defended new, original doctrines (such as his doctrine that Adam was the God of this world). Young reformed new social practices
that Joseph Smith had only tentatively begun (the polygamous society and massive economic collectives). And Young oversaw the completion and construction of unique Mormon sacred spaces (temples, tabernacles, and wards) that decisively marked the Saints as different from other American Christians. In short, Turner’s portrait of Young the religious pioneer shows that the Mormon prophet was more than the practical implementer of Joseph Smith’s theocratic vision for human society; Young was a religious innovator in his own right.

Sifting through a mountain of primary and secondary sources (some unavailable to previous biographers), Turner organizes his book into thirteen elegantly written chapters, as well as a succinct prologue and epilogue. In his first few chapters, Turner follows the transformation of Young from a rather unremarkable journeyman craftsman into an effective Mormon missionary and fiercely loyal follower of Joseph Smith. Young, Turner notes, had never formed a close relationship with any religious leader until he met Smith and joined Smith’s church. After that, the former Methodist and craftsman, now Mormon missionary, doggedly defended Smith from all detractors, marched in the 1834 Zion’s Camp militia expedition to Missouri, and earned Smith’s confidence and a place in Smith’s original Council of Twelve Apostles. By sheer luck in 1839, Young became the leader of Smith’s apostles because of that group’s leadership ranking by age (the seniormost apostle had left Smith’s church, the next senior apostle had died of his combat wounds in the 1838 Mormon War in Missouri, and another senior apostle was thirteen days younger than Brigham). If luck placed Young at the head of the apostles, he fulfilled his duties in that role quite effectively. From 1839 to 1841, Young served as a missionary in England and earned the admiration of thousands of British converts. By 1844, Young was a trusted and respected leader in a church numbering in the tens of thousands. And Young stood in Joseph Smith’s inner circle that secretly practiced plural marriage—a practice that placed Young at odds with other leaders who opposed this controversial patriarchal restructuring of the family. Young, in fact, would become the most married man in Mormonism, and likely the most married man in America.
In the months after Smith’s June 1844 assassination, Young rallied the Saints to stand together against non-Mormon opposition in Illinois, and he outmaneuvered other successors to Smith by claiming that the apostles jointly held the authority to lead the church. Most importantly, Young claimed the power to be the Mormon people’s “chief priest,” in Turner’s words. That is, the Mormon leader presided over and expanded the rituals that Smith had believed would eventually bind humanity together in a great chain of being. These rituals included plural marriage, proxy baptism for the dead, and an elaborate promise-making ceremony that opened the way for an individual’s eternal exaltation (godhood) in the afterlife (referred to as “the endowment”). Young’s ritual power, more than anything else, secured for him a path to eventually claim to be Smith’s successor rather than simply the leader of the church’s foremost missionary group.

The chief priest who emerged from Nauvoo quickly became the Mormon chieftain, Turner explains, as Young presided over the successful mass exodus of thousands of Mormons across the plains and established a theocratic state in the Intermountain West. This singular act endeared Young to tens of thousands of his followers and won their consistent loyalty even when they had to tolerate his episodic wrath. As Turner reveals, Young was both loved and feared by the Saints. His closest associates in the church’s leadership both hungered for his approval and privately resented him. They cowered under his constant berating, and they felt unfairly blamed for Young’s mistakes, for which he rarely took responsibility. In private and in public, Brigham Young could be a harsh, crude man, prone to frequent profanity and violent hyperbole. Young believed that Joseph Smith forgave people too easily, and he lived a life that did not brook such weakness. And when Young forgave, he did not forget. He held perceived slights to himself against individuals for decades, as members of his inner circle, like the apostle Orson Pratt, knew all too well.

What accounts for such leadership practices? Young’s Missouri and Nauvoo apprenticeship—one “forged in the crucible of anti-Mormon persecution”—left deep imprints on him, claims Turner. It cultivated in Young what Turner calls a “siege mentality” and led Young “to demonize his enemies, employ violent rhetoric, and condone murders” in the
decades after his ascension to power (p. 4). Indeed, the Brigham Young of the late 1840s to the early 1860s was a fearsome, frightening leader—revealed most graphically in his “Mormon Reformation”-era sermons in 1856 and 1857 that were aimed at reforming his Saints and ferreting out apostates from Utah Territory. Most famously, Young’s sermons and subsequent policies helped create an environment that made possible the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 120 non-Mormon men, women, and children passing through southern Utah in a wagon train. Furthermore, at the apogee of the Mormon Reformation, Young defended and condoned the murder of several apostates by local Mormon leaders (the infamous Parrish-Potter murders) and the castration of a petty thief.

These violent acts that Young condoned were part of a tradition of vigilante justice, a tragically familiar form of nineteenth-century American violence, but with a Mormon twist. In each instance, Young’s doctrine of blood atonement—loving one’s neighbor by spilling his blood before he could forsake his salvation—justified the violence. Still, as Turner notes, mid-nineteenth-century Utah actually had less vigilante violence than neighboring Western territories and states. However, in Utah, “the governor and head of the territory’s quasi-established religion [Brigham Young] lent his approval . . . to shadowy acts of retribution that alarmed even some loyal Mormons” (p. 262). In this way, Utah was unique.

As Turner points out, the violence that Young sanctioned occurred within the context of a much larger conflict between the Mormons and the federal government on the eve of the American Civil War. Here Turner deftly foregrounds his discussion of Young within the shifting landscape of the mid-nineteenth-century American political parties and their many internal factions, North and South. Whereas Joseph Smith never mastered the ability to exploit political fissures, Young, with allies like the non-Mormon reformer Thomas Kane, was able to rather remarkably fend off one set of federal officials after another and set US army commanders at odds with the territorial governor who had replaced Young in 1858.

If Turner’s section on the Mormon Reformation is shocking in its descriptions of brutality, his section on the political infighting and maneuvering in Utah and Washington, DC, after 1862 is devoid of the same apocalyptic violence. While other Americans engaged in the most massive,
protracted bloodletting in US history, Young and his Saints largely stayed out of the American Civil War. Instead, Young used the war as an opportunity to maneuver to preserve his church, their plural marriage practices, and his authority. If this was ultimately a rearguard action, it was rather remarkably executed. In this section of the narrative, Turner relates how Young adopted a new leadership approach that both defended his church and muted his blustering, violent rhetoric. For instance, when several prominent LDS leaders and merchants began a protest movement against Young in 1869, he moved against them with measured restraint. Young arranged an excommunication hearing for the leaders of the “Godbeite” movement (so named for a prominent leader of the faction, a Salt Lake City merchant and spiritual seeker, William Godbe). Unlike the Mormon Reformation era, “there was no talk of cutting throats or sending men to ‘hell across lots,’” notes Turner. Instead, Young “orchestrated a hearing remarkably free of rancor” (p. 358). Godbe and others were excommunicated, but none fell victim to physical violence.

As Young aged, he “grew more cantankerous than fearsome,” argues Turner (p. 405). The reader might wonder whether Young simply grew weary of picking fights, but Turner sees Young as pursuing a deliberate strategy in the last decade of his life to adapt to new circumstances. The “Lion of the Lord,” as Young had been nicknamed, could no longer bowl over his wayward allies or political and ecclesiastical opponents. This new strategy certainly surprised Young’s opponents in Utah and Washington who, over and over again, underestimated the Mormon prophet’s abilities. Young was no one’s martyr. He was a survivor.

From the outset of his biography, Turner attempts to warn his readers against measuring Young against modern sensibilities and standards. “Young believed that God had cursed black people with inferiority and servitude, viewed American Indians as savages inclined toward idleness, and—especially until his later years—made misogynistic comments about women,” states Turner (p. 5). However, Young, cautions Turner, was much like the majority of other nineteenth-century white American men in all of these attitudes. Turner, who is a practicing Presbyterian, also attempts to defend Young against moralistic judgments of him and his church for
their bribery of federal authorities, noting that Mormons “were hardly
the only Americans with a less than saintly record when it came to po-
itical ethics” (p. 369). Historian Edward Blum, though, calls Turner to
task on this point, noting that his contextual example was a comparison
of the LDS Church with the Union Pacific Railroad. “One claimed to be
a church” while the other did not, says Blum.1

Blum’s brief criticism (one of a handful of critiques in an otherwise
glowing review of Turner) is suggestive of a belief that nineteenth-century
American critics of Young and most contemporary LDS members share
in common: churches should limit the instruments of coercion they em-
ploy for any desired end. In contrast, Brigham Young, as leader of an in-
cipient nation-state pitted against US federal power, reached for all of the
weapons that he could devise to defend his kingdom. These included lies,
bribes, occasional physical violence, and bureaucratic procedures. In
short, Young employed the very weapons that the United States used
against him. Of course, Brigham Young claimed to lead a church—but
the point is that, especially under his leadership, it was no ordinary
church. As Turner notes, Young’s LDS Church “had the real estate to back
up [its] kingdom-building rhetoric” (p. 413). No one else did. Young’s
church was a theocratic society that only reluctantly became a defanged
American denomination—and that only after Young’s death. In the end,
Young “preserved a church and created a people, but that success dam-
aged and even destroyed some lives” (p. 413). And this leads to another
factor that underlies Blum’s brief critique of Turner’s Young: the desire
that Americans, then and now, hold for revered institutions and leaders
to possess pure characters, motives, and actions.

For most Americans, religious leaders are not to be average individ-
uals; they are to be exemplary and extraordinary. LDS members venerate
their past leaders in ways that are foreign to everyone except for many
Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, and some Protestants—which is
to say that veneration of ancestors is nothing extraordinary. As religious

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1. Edward J. Blum, review of Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet, by John G. Turner, Chris-
tian Century 129/21 (October 2012).
studies scholar Robert Orsi reminds us, religions allow people “to form deep ties with saints, ancestors, demons, gods, ghosts, and other special beings, in whose company humans work on the world and on themselves.” These relationships, though, are fraught with all the same vicissitudes of human relationships—love, anger, abuse, mutuality. Consequently, disappointment with an ancestor or a divine being is nothing unusual. Beyond these disappointing religious relationships, religious people often encounter disappointment when they study their group through the same lenses that historians study all other cultures and peoples. Historian Grant Wacker warns that “for many [religious folk] the most upsetting part [of studying history] is to learn how shabby their own story—the story of their own tribe, their own sect—really is, for all too often it proves to be a tale of small-minded men and women inflicting large-minded cruelties upon anyone who got in their way.” If online reviews of Turner are any measure, many LDS readers of *Pioneer Prophet* have had this very experience. Some reviewers of Turner have even suggested that LDS individuals should not recommend *Pioneer Prophet* to average LDS members.4

While I am not LDS and have far lower stakes in this conversation, I find this last suggestion overly protective. LDS members already google information on church history to their hearts’ content and are famous for buying books about themselves. I think it would be far better for them to read a balanced portrait of Young rather than encounter a less sophisticated (even if well-documented) rendering elsewhere. Turner provides

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an unvarnished portrait of the Mormon prophet. But it is also a richly textured, three-dimensional image of Young. Apologetically minded renderings of Young, whether from the countercult or the self-anointed faithful, lack the same realism. The so-called average people that I know understand this and feel insulted if scholars treat them as children, unable to tackle complicated ideas.

Several reviews of Turner by LDS members have critiqued him for not providing ample reasons for why nineteenth-century Saints followed Young. I found this critique unconvincing. As Turner points out, over and over again, nineteenth-century Saints followed Young for a multitude of reasons. Young presided over a mission in Great Britain that converted thousands of people. Young successfully engineered the exodus from Nauvoo across the plains. Even with the spectacular disaster of the Martin and Willey handcart companies, Young showed his ability to organize and inspire people to send relief to avert a much larger disaster. As a preacher, Young gave plain-talking sermons that appealed to his listeners, and his occasional crude analogies even entertained them. Young exercised charismatic gifts, like speaking in tongues, and gave powerful prayers. And crucially, Young, as nineteenth-century Mormons believed, held the keys to conduct religious rituals that bound them to one another (plural marriage and adoption rites) and their ancestors (baptism for the dead and endowments for the dead). When reviewers have stated that Turner neglected the reasons for why nineteenth-century LDS followed Young, I suspect that they actually meant that Turner neglected laying out reasons for why they, modern Mormons, would want to follow Young. And these are two very different questions.

Still, after reading Turner’s work, I have no doubt that thoughtful, faithful LDS readers will find many ways to relate to the figure who Turner claims “dedicated himself to Joseph Smith, boldly challenged religious, political, and economic conventions, and shaped . . . the Mormon people in his self-image” (p. 413). Historians and Mormon laity alike are

5. Foster, “New Light on Old Shadows”; Smith, review of Brigham Young; and Carl, review of Brigham Young.
fortunate that such a gifted historian as Turner dedicated so much time to place Young back into the center of nineteenth-century Mormon history. If millions will know Brother Joseph once more, after Turner, they will know, even if with a melancholy sigh, Brother Brigham too.

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Reviewed by Jana Riess

In the superb introduction to *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*, Claudia Bushman points out that although written accounts of Mormon women’s lives have been encouraged for nearly two hundred years, “those from eminent women have, for the most part, been privileged” (p. xiv). The lives of female leaders, prominent pioneers, and the wives of General Authorities have assumed pride of place, while the life stories of ordinary LDS women are often not recorded. In an impressive effort to document such contemporary women’s experiences, the Claremont Oral History Project has harvested more than 2,500 single-spaced pages of such women’s interviews—and is gathering and transcribing still more. This volume of essays, coedited by Bushman and doctoral student Caroline Kline, is the first in what one hopes will be many books that mine the rich data of the Claremont project.
In addition to this collection’s significance in forever capturing ordinary women’s lives, it makes a contribution to Mormon studies by focusing on the late twentieth century, a period that has been oddly neglected in a corpus of scholarship preoccupied with the religion’s nineteenth-century origins. These twentieth- and twenty-first-century interview subjects, it turns out, are to be considered pioneers in their own right, having made their mark not by crossing the plains but by navigating the oft-confusing terrain of Mormon assimilation in contemporary culture.

In fourteen topical essays, the book unveils how the interviewees—who seem to be primarily white, North American, and middle class—feel about their own opportunities, changes in the LDS Church and in society, and women’s evolving roles. The first section of the book deals with family matters, including self-definition, fertility, singlehood, motherhood, and coping with adversity. Part 2 addresses life as a Latter-day Saint, with chapters on womanliness, callings, revelation, and missions; the final section includes chapters on women’s relationships with the institutional church via agency, patriarchy, the Relief Society, Heavenly Mother, and Proposition 8.

It’s interesting that the book is ordered in this way, with the first one hundred-plus pages devoted to roles that might be described as traditional for women. Primarily, the interviewees discuss being wives and mothers—or, in many cases, not being wives and mothers in a church that expects those roles to be fundamental and defining. As well, there is no section of the book devoted to women’s work outside of church and home. While in the early chapters women discuss their decisions to stay at home with their children or to work at a job, the work itself is strictly offstage. However, perhaps that public aspect of Mormon women’s lives was not a focal point of the interviews.

The book contains a generous range of women’s experiences, its essays showing wide diversity in how Mormon women negotiate their lives and families. While the book offers many cogent themes, three are particularly salient: agency, personal revelation, and feelings of inadequacy.
Agency

Perhaps no other idea dominates these women’s stories so much as agency, which Mormons would define as the freedom to choose to act rather than to be acted upon. Questions of authority, obedience, defiance, and autonomy come up in every chapter, whether women are deciding how many children to have or analyzing the Relief Society/priesthood manuals that have been used by the church since 1997. (These manuals appear to be generally unpopular; as one essayist surmises, “Women from the oral histories rarely point to this as a positive change.” One reason mentioned was the shift away from lessons on parenting and practical skills to doctrinal “one-size-fits-all” curriculum for both genders; see pp. 117 and 248.)

It’s interesting how few stories in the book are about women who obey church leaders despite personal misgivings. There are certainly some; one woman begged her stake president not to give her husband a demanding church calling soon after he was released from an equally demanding one, but she was resigned to being overruled. Another almost refused her own calling as Relief Society president but wound up grudgingly accepting, only to find that it was the best calling she ever had. And in the final chapter, a woman recounts how she obeyed the LDS Church’s mandate for California members to canvass for and donate to Proposition 8 even though she did not personally support the measure. “I hope to heaven our prophet is following the Lord,” she said. “I know he’s still a man and he’s not infallible. So I just have to trust that I’ll be blessed for being obedient” (p. 290).

Far more common, however, are recounts of careful evaluations of individual conscience and patriarchal authority. Two remarkable essays in the collection—Amy Hoyt’s chapter on agency and Lisa Thomas Clayton’s on revelation—draw on recent work in feminist theory to problematize a simplistic and binary approach that many feminists have used to examine female agency. The thinking has been that women’s agency is expressed in actively resisting patriarchal oppression wherever it is found. These theorists cherish the value of freedom, a freedom that is
demonstrated when women either oppose patriarchy from within their religious traditions or leave those traditions altogether (p. 152). Hoyt and Clayton argue for a more nuanced model, noting that women can also express agency by choosing to remain within patriarchal structures, upholding social norms instead of challenging them—or, as Hoyt aptly points out, doing both at the same time (pp. 198–99).

Mormon women’s agency in practice is not either-or. One story demonstrates this particularly well. A group of young married women, all friends, decided that as a Valentine’s Day present to their husbands each would create a private calendar of herself in twelve provocative poses. Although this photo shoot was decidedly not a church activity, somehow the stake president got wind of the plan and called someone in to explain it. He expressed his opposition to the idea and his concern that pornographic influences had infiltrated Mormon culture.

Many of the women were shocked when they realized that their activity was cause for concern and that the local Church leadership objected. What is interesting is that, although two women were questioned, the group decided to proceed with their original plans. Most of the women compiled their individual boudoir calendars and gave them to their husbands. (pp. 202–3)

These women were not blasé about the stake president’s concerns, but in the end they decided to privilege their own agency in policing their sexual behavior. Hoyt notes that not one of them “considered their ecclesiastical leader domineering or oppressive. . . . Rather, they simultaneously recognized his spiritual authority while maintaining that they were adequate judges of appropriate sexual behaviors within the bounds of their own marriages. This is an example of simultaneous agency, which includes a negotiation between many factors” (p. 204).

In another example of simultaneous resistance and acquiescence, this one from Hawaii in the 1970s, a local Relief Society was told that all of the money it had earned from its fundraising needed to be turned over to the bishop since the auxiliary organizations were all coming under the aegis of the priesthood. “No!” some sisters replied. “That’s our money.
We are not going to do that.” Instead of immediately obeying, they decided to spend the money before the date the account was due to be relinquished. They organized a day trip to Honolulu, a rare treat for many of the sisters, with “the best buffet” lunch they could find. They dressed up in their most “colorful muu muus, with large hibiscus flowers behind their ears, and draped with many strands of heavy shell leis. . . . They had the time of their lives” (p. 226). Essayist and volume coeditor Caroline Kline sees these sisters’ solution as a “compromise position” between male direction and their own sense of fairness. They did comply with the bishop’s request, but only after they had emptied the bank account of what they saw as their own organization’s money.

Personal revelation

If the interviews reveal many behind-the-scenes deliberations in these Mormon women’s lives, it is clear that they feel most empowered to express their agency when they have a strong personal relationship with God. Personal revelation is the wellspring of a kind of unmediated authority. For example, a direct encounter with the divine sustained a woman named Theresa during “very dark days” when she wanted to die:

A cloud of darkness seemed to close in upon me. I walked into the bedroom and threw myself on the bed. I had lost all desire to live. I wanted to die. And then I heard a small clear voice. It said, “Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians. In it he said, ‘Do not be worried and troubled. Pray and ask God for what you need, first thanking him for his good gifts. And peace will be in your heart!’” . . .

I slid from the bed to my knees. Tears flowed down my face. I thanked my Heavenly Father for these gifts and as Paul promised the Corinthians, I felt that peace. I got up from my knees, knowing full well that Heavenly Father loves us and is watching over us. (90–91)

In this story, a sister’s close discernment of the promptings of the Spirit led her to prayer and a renewed gratitude for the gift of life; she received spiritual consolation in the bleakest of circumstances. What’s
missing from the story is the presence of any intermediary. There is no priesthood holder, no authority figure, standing between her and direct access to God’s strength.

In her essay, Sherrie L. M. Gavin finds that Mormon women’s sense of spiritual empowerment comes from their own connection with God and “was not always associated with an organizational Mormon context. Although the women reported acting in callings and duties within the administrative Church establishment (and sometimes related a sense of spiritual direction in regard to the assignment), the sense of spirituality and individual spiritual direction was more often perceived to progress and develop [the] self” rather than merely help the individual better fulfill a church calling. Gavin notes that because the LDS Church lacks any kind of ecclesiastical measure of women’s spiritual progress beyond the temple endowment, “individual, personal piety—usually through the act of prayer”—is the yardstick by which women measure themselves. In this, personal revelation is paramount.

Guilt and inadequacy

In addition to the themes of agency and personal revelation that run through these oral histories, there is a shadow side as well. Many of the interviewees express anxiety about not measuring up to the high expectations placed on Mormon women by the church and its surrounding culture.

Elizabeth Mott’s essay on singlehood highlights the work of the late Chieko Okazaki, once a counselor in the Relief Society general presidency. Okazaki was committed to making all women feel valued in the LDS Church, whether married or single, mothers or childless, and she was “especially concerned about the needless shame Mormon mothers tended to carry around as if they were ‘scapegoats’ for the ills of society” (p. 64). Okazaki was “appalled at how many women were tormented by their responsibilities as mothers” and by their tendencies to blame themselves for any deviation their children might make from the Perfect Child Script.
Mott’s observations about Okazaki occur near the beginning of *Mormon Women Have Their Say*, and later in the book there is a poignant reminder that Okazaki’s concerns for Mormon women are just as pressing now as they were twenty years ago. In the chapter on missions, Elisa Eastwood Pulido notes:

Mormon women . . . hold themselves personally responsible for raising sons who will choose to go on and complete missions. Interestingly, no female narrator [interviewee in the Oral History Project] has yet attributed a son’s lack of missionary service to a weak or unsupportive father. The responsibility to raise missionaries is communicated to women through scripture, song, and the speeches of Church leaders, who emphasize the power and influence of Mormon mothers. (p. 182)

In other words, not one interviewee blamed a Mormon father for a child’s failure to serve a mission.¹ When blame was assigned, some pointed to the institutional church for alienating their children in some way (p. 185), but most held themselves responsible. One woman chastised herself for once forcing her son to attend a weekend youth conference when he didn’t want to go, saying maybe she “was the one who turned him away from the Church” based on this single perceived misstep some years before (p. 186).

So in addition to the book’s empowering stories of women’s agency

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¹. Mormon women’s total absolution of fathers when children, and particularly sons, fail to serve missions is distressing not only for the emotional burden these women carry, but because recent sociological research demonstrates they are wrong in blithely dismissing a father’s influence. While having close relationships with both parents is significant in whether a child will fulfill religious expectations and stay in the religion of childhood as an adult, the relationship with the father is actually more important. In the forthcoming Oxford University Press volume *Families and Faith*, sociologist Vern Bengtson draws on thirty-five years of longitudinal data and finds, among other things, that “for religious transmission, having a close bond with one’s father matters even more than a close relationship with the mother. Clearly the quality of the child’s relationship with his or her father is important for the internalization of the parent’s religious tradition, beliefs and practices. Emotional closeness with mothers remains important for religious inheritance, but not to the same degree as it is for fathers.”
and religious development, the collection also points to Mormon women’s fear of failure, particularly in upholding cultural ideals of motherhood. One woman, now in her sixties, wishes that LDS women would ease up on their perfectionism: “I think so many women in the Church are afraid to not be perfect,” she says. “We hear that term so much. So many women really suffer because they don’t measure up, and they are so stressed and anxious. . . . We are really, really hard on ourselves. We’ve got to have enough belief in ourselves to stand up for ourselves, to know within ourselves that we have so much ability and strength that we are the ones who make a huge, huge difference in the Church” (p. 55).

By collecting and analyzing Mormon women’s stories, Mormon Women Have Their Say points, again and again, to that ability and strength.

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Reviewed by Zina Petersen

Book of Mormon Girl is first off an engaging and entertaining read. It is by turns sweet, thoughtful, funny, self-effacing, and challenging. Joanna Brooks’s first trade book (she has scholarly works in connection with her profession as professor and chair of English at SDSU), the memoir traces her faith journey from her childhood in a secure and idyllically orthodox LDS family in Southern California, through the convergence of her own intellectual blossoming and disillusionment with conservative polemic in college to her problematic return to activity in the fold during the difficult
moment of California’s Proposition 8 campaign. Spoiler: She is still an active Latter-day Saint, happily married to her Jewish husband and raising their two daughters to celebrate both the Mormon and Jewish faith traditions.

Brooks’s book was originally self-published in 2012 but was quickly picked up by a division of Simon and Schuster. After its first release, the responses were largely from the Mormon voices of the so-called Bloggernacle (in all their varieties); after the national release, her work has received attention from such venues as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Century*, *Huffington Post*, major US networks, plus an interview with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central’s *Daily Show*. These public appearances, as much as the book, have made Joanna Brooks fully part of, and in some cases an unofficial mascot for, the “Mormon Moment” of unprecedented attention for the LDS Church. She became the “go-to” interview for many news outlets during Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign and was listed among Politico’s “50 politicos to watch” for 2011.

Predictably, this notice has bothered a few people. That an unofficial “spokesvoice” of the LDS Church should get the spotlight and the microphone is seen by some as either opportunistic of Brooks or disrespectful of the church’s official channels, or both. Others have found it refreshing and liberating that a personality not under contract to any organization could speak from inside it, deeply sympathetic while also aware of and vocal about problems she may have regarding some of its positions. And that very double-consciousness—faithful but unblinking—is what seems to be her defining niche. It is definitely a mark of the book itself.

As good coming-of-age stories should, Brooks’s memoir takes a satisfying narrative arc. Like novels, memoirs have “plot,” and plot usually involves at the very least (1) a protagonist with (2) an ordinary life that (3) is interrupted by a conflict (or several) disrupting the ordinariness, which in turn is (4) addressed, if not ultimately resolved. Unlike biographies (including autobiographies), which rely on historical veracity via primary and secondary documentation, witness accounts, and cultural placement within wider contexts, memoirs are recollections, narratives of thought and emotion remembered, so they have liberty to internalize
and interpret events and to be “microstories.” Memoir is not the same as autobiography. Memoirs are frequently written by people young enough to have very little “bio” to “graph”; often they deal with the very small: a single event, a single person, or even a single day. Brooks’s memoir is like that. It is not an account of her entire life; rather, it is what its title declares, a book about a single Mormon girl: her story of her Mormonness and her relationship with the LDS Church through her journey’s swerves, straightaways, rapids, and calms. It does not preach or defend or attack. For readers expecting one or the other of a two-sided “conflict” over Mormonism’s validity, a simple rejection/critique story or conversion/affirmation narrative, her response is Yes! Or possibly No! Because she has found things to say about both sides. There is no shortage of deep and sincere affection for the Mormon doctrines and traditions that she grew up loving and finding security in. And there is only a little holding back on the anguish of the faith crisis that led her out of the church, and on the complexity of factors that have brought her back.

Brooks’s story begins with the comfortable warm-bread narrative of a protected, testimony-guarded, sure-thing Mormon life with her bishop dad and home-canning mom, her ward with fundraising activities and youth dances and Young Women’s Camp rich with camaraderie and discovery, her efforts to follow Marie Osmond’s guide to success in practically everything, and the allure of her future RM husband, to be found at BYU, in the almost mythical utopia of Provo, Utah! (she always italicizes and exclaims it that way). The writing in this part of the book is lovely, at times gorgeously poetic; she is also wryly funny in her descriptions of eighth-grade Joanna following Marie’s beauty regimen and her friends’ girls’ camp awe at coming across their youth leader’s (enormous!) feminine hygiene products. It is a reflection of the author’s newly refound joy in her tradition, I think, that these descriptions of her simpler, naïve faith are much easier to read than the middle section of the narrative.

In college, in fact at BYU, ironically (in the sense of the word that Alanis Morissette never knew), Joanna Brooks’s faith took an enormous hit. Though she does not shy away from revealing the sources of her doubts and pain, she does not linger over the details or, as in the earlier
section, revel poetically in the description. The writing becomes more controlled, almost distant, as if the sting is still too fresh to be poked at. And who can blame her? Disillusionment is by definition painful, as she is fully aware. It is also, by definition that not many of us are happy about, necessary.

As I read about Brooks's disillusionment with the flawed cultural church and its flawed members (and saw in it the precursor to her return), I recognized patterns from other provinces of the human story. In the narrative arc of fiction, her college challenges would be the disrupted status quo; from mythology’s hero cycle they represent the crisis when the protagonist’s identity is painfully stripped away; and from a comparative religions point of view, the episode has all the earmarks of the deliberate disenchantment. In his article “Disenchantment: A Religious Abduction,” anthropologist Sam Gill discusses certain tribal traditions from various parts of the globe wherein children are deliberately disenchanted with the religion they are being raised in.1 The moment of their initiation into the mysteries and higher understanding of their faith is actually a moment of supreme disappointment. For Hopi children, the Kachina dancers, whom the children have been taught to revere as gods, take off their heads, which turn out to be masks, revealing relatives, neighbors, even parents who have duped the children. For Australian aboriginal children, the hidden noise of the voice of their god approaching is shown to be the spooky sound effects of bull-roarers, simple wooden slats tied to strings and spun through the air. For the African tribe Gill lived among, the children beat against a figure, which they are told is their god hiding behind a drapery; as they pummel it, they are led to believe that they, themselves, are responsible for “killing” the god of the tribe, and they are allowed neither to stop their battering nor to try to save him from the onslaught the initiated are forcing them to perform. In other words, in all of these tribal religions, the children who love, fear, respect, and rely on their gods must, at the moment they believe they are being initiated into mature faith, destroy the thing they believed in.

fact, this is the very act that does lead them into mature faith. Interviewing an older Hopi woman, Gill records her saying she knows now that it was what she had to go through to understand the bigger spiritual truths behind the Kachina spirits, but that at the time it was devastating and broke her young heart.

The college portion of Brooks's memoir reminded me of the words of that Hopi woman. It is enormously comforting to have the sort of faith that a child raised Mormon has, and it is beyond merely jarring to have that faith challenged—it is agonizing. Brooks's story is similar to the tribal stories also because it is a story of how the faith tradition itself is the source of both the naïve faith of “little Joanna” and the discord of disillusionment. But it is unlike them in that it is not self-consciously so. Joanna's adolescent and young-adult faith is not challenged by a deliberate act of revelation of trickery, but by an unself-conscious shift in her awareness and priority coming into clash with an unbending system.

It is her utopian dream-school of BYU that Brooks sees punishing her favorite professor, Cecilia Konchar Farr, for the very feminist views that have begun to open new possibilities for Brooks. It is the self-righteous “good kids,” the “believers” who shout at her and catcall her as she walks to her apartment in Provo, Utah! with a peace sign on her bag. It is her own family who, though they love her, find her new challenges off-putting and troubling, adding to, rather than subtracting from, a sense of betrayal, alienation, and crushing disappointment both parties feel as she goes through her faith crisis. The masks of unrealistic “Molly Mormon” perfectionistic expectation have fallen off, but college-aged Joanna is not so sure she was ever meant to see the man behind the curtain.

Gill does not leave out the Christian tradition of disenchantment in his essay. He uses as a Christian example the image of the Marys, the most devoted of Jesus's disciples, standing destitute in an empty tomb, having believed in Jesus the man and having nothing—nothing—on which to practice their faith's final act of love and respect, not even a dead body to anoint. But it is the very emptiness of the tomb, the very detail of their hope’s crushing destruction, that is the sign and signal of Jesus the Christ. The nadir of hope is the signal of hope. In being disappointed in Jesus’s
absence, the Marys’ moment of Empty Tomb is the darkness before the
dawn of resurrection and good news. It takes an angel to deliver heavenly
news; the angel has to explain the joke that has been played, the trick of
killing Death itself: you claimed you really believed him! But here you are
looking for a god in a tomb! That’s hilarious, really.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said that a person’s mind, once stretched by
a new idea, can never regain its original dimensions.2 The Christian story
can never undo the miracle of resurrection to get back to fully under-
standing the stage of hopelessness in which the Marys found themselves
in that tomb, because we know how it ends. We know that the story of
the empty tomb is not about Jesus using trickery or a mask to teach us,
though some could say his mortality masked, for a while, his divinity.
But though he would not deceive us, yet we foolish mortals would still
be deceived. We’re stupid like that. Certainly Joanna Brooks’s mind can
never return to her childlike, childish, magical-thinking kind of faith.
But we know how that ends too. And so we can rejoice with her in her
return. It is, satisfyingly if not unpredictably, love that restores her to her
former church, though not to her former innocence of ignorance. She is
not the same person she had been as a child, but is open now to the pain,
and thus open to the innocence of guiltlessness, the empathy of a grown-
up in the faith.

The last part of her memoir brings her, and us readers, back into the
fold. She has the benefit and lovely support structure of a strong and
thoughtful marriage to a strong and thoughtful man, and she has their
children. As they become more than babies, she obviously wants to teach
her children things about God and religion, but as the mother in a
mixed-faith family, she struggles with her new ambivalence about what,
and how much, to teach them. It is at the same time she is debating
whether and how much of Mormonism to share with her children that
the church was becoming involved in a cause she painfully disagrees
with, California’s Proposition 8 debate. So even though she wants to ex-
pose her children to what she remembers of the sweet parts of being LDS,

2. Oliver Wendell Holmes, The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table (1858), chap. 11.
she is more than reluctant to involve them in political activities with a cause for which she finds herself on the church’s “wrong” side. Another spoiler: she does return, and she does not abandon her stance on marriage equality.

In fact, her conclusion is a call for an inclusiveness that might not have been as reflective had the Prop 8 situation not been the context for her return. She calls for room at the table for every brand of Mormon, non-Mormon, or Other she can think of; her rallying cry is for all the familiar and all the unfamiliar, even and especially the kinds of people her childhood self with its easily defined and shadowless good/evil distinctions might have found threatening, wrong, or at least misguided. Brooks’s best good news: we’re all the misguided. And so we are all the invited, invited to the table. That’s always the surprising nature of grace and mercy, though: the Law killeth, but the Spirit giveth life, and the Spirit is a little out of control with the generosity, there, pardner. Innocent faith is made to die, to be buried in the waters of baptism and the fires of trial. Empty tombs and dark nights of the soul may seem so long as to be permanent, but then an angel comes and gives the punch line: why seek you the living among the dead? Why are you looking for a living Christ in a graveyard? You cannot find dead bodies or Death here; come and sit at the table with the Living.

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Reviewed by Hokulani K. Aikau

*Remembering Iosepa* begins and ends in the contemporary moment. The book opens on a cold November day in Salt Lake City, Utah, as Matthew Kester, author, historian, and North Shore resident, recounts making the acquaintance of the shuttle bus driver, a young Polynesian man who was born and raised in Utah but whose family members in Hawaii are close friends with Kester. This encounter, the reader learns, is not surprising because of the long history of migration that has tied Utah and Hawaii together. The closing pages of the book transport the reader to the Polynesian Cultural Center, in Laie, Hawaii, where a fire hydrant from the Hawaiian Mormon colony of Iosepa—a settlement lovingly named in honor of Joseph F. Smith—and a *wa’a kaulua* (double-hull voyaging canoe), likewise named Iosepa, remind us that migration routes carry people and things in both directions.

In beginning and ending the book this way, Kester illustrates what the late Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa describes as the world-expanding view of Oceanians. “The world of our ancestors,” Hau'ofa writes, “was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. . . . The world of Oceania may no longer include the heavens and the underworld; but it certainly encompasses the great cities in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and Canada” (quoted in Kester, *Remembering Iosepa*, p. 5). *Remembering Iosepa* is a historical account of the formation of the “world of our ancestors” as they established “routes that brought Native Hawaiians east and Mormon missionaries west to Hawai‘i and laid the foundation for communities that followed” (p. 12).

At the center of a larger tale—one including the rise of the maritime trade; the role of Hawaiians in the whaling, fur, and logging industries; the impact of the gold rush in the history of the American West and in transforming Hawaii’s political economy; and the establishment of the
Mormon culture region—is a story of how a relatively small Native Hawaiian Mormon community, established in 1889 in the desolate lands of Skull Valley, Utah, came to have such strong symbolic and cultural significance in both Hawaii and Utah. Although it is a small story relative to the larger story of the settlement of the American West (or, as Kester notes, Hawaii’s East), the significance of the Iosepa community cannot be contained or bounded by the dates of its existence (1889–1917). Rather, the lasting significance of this settlement is evidenced by Kester’s interaction with the young Polynesian men he met on his research trip to Utah—young men who call Utah home, a result of the migration of hundreds of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders that began in the early nineteenth century and continues to this day.

In tracing the historical migration patterns of nineteenth-century Pacific Islanders, Kester provides a broad context for understanding contemporary Pacific Islander migrations. What in the nineteenth century was a seemingly small trickle has today become a major political and economic wave of Pacific Islander migrations that reaches well into the interior of the North American continent. These migrations not only had an impact wherever the Pacific Islanders settled, but they also changed Oceania. As Kester explains, “I allowed the story to expand in both directions, so what I have presented here is a narrative that tries to contextualize the history of a small settlement of Pacific Islander Mormons that teetered on the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the larger story of Pacific Islanders in the American West. . . . Iosepa is part of the broader story of Pacific Islanders and their journeys east and of Mormons and their journey west” (p. 166).

Kester masterfully situates the story of nineteenth-century Native Hawaiian Mormon migration within the larger seascape of Native Hawaiian and, later, Pacific Islander migrations. In doing so, he demonstrates that “Native Hawaiians in the ‘Great Basin Kingdom’ of nineteenth-century Mormonism were not . . . a historical anomaly, but rather one of many diasporic communities of Native Hawaiians that included communities in Washington, Oregon, and California” (p. 166). As Kester makes clear, this community is distinct because of the religious motivations behind the migration. However, he does not gloss over the racial
climate within which these migrations took place: “The history of race relations in nineteenth-century Utah, however, is often obscured by the history of a white community divided along religious lines. The struggle between Mormons and non-Mormons did not so much replace the discrimination, inequality, and violence common throughout the West as it has usurped it in the historical imagination” (p. 88). For readers interested in learning more about Native Hawaiian migrations, the book *Leaving Paradise* is an instructive companion to Kester’s *Remembering Iosepa*, for both works explore why *kānaka maoli* (Native Hawaiians) migrated from Hawaii, finding work on whaling ships and with logging and fur-trading companies.¹ Both books also document the racial climate within which nineteenth-century Native Hawaiians lived and worked, and they trace the genealogies of Native Hawaiian men who cohabited with and married Native American and First Nations women, settled on indigenous national lands, and became a part of their communities.

What Kester does very well throughout the book is present the history in vivid color. The reader is drawn into the story through vignettes about individual Native Hawaiian Latter-day Saints who make a conscious decision to emigrate from their beloved homelands to participate in the gathering of Zion. These personal stories frame Native Hawaiians not as pawns of history but as active participants in the social, political, and economic worlds in which they lived. For example, Kauleinamoku of Hawaii immigrated to Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1875. He married a Hawaiian woman (who also had migrated to Utah) and served a mission to New Zealand from 1887 to 1889. Along the way, “he [had] purchased a lot and built a home in the Warm Springs district in Salt Lake City” (p. 80). Returning from his mission, he saw that the Native Hawaiian community had grown, as had racial tensions between the new immigrants and white Mormon settlers. Kauleinamoku was one of the Native Hawaiian representatives chosen to secure a site for a colony. Subsequently, he relocated his family to Iosepa, where he lived until his death in 1899. In recounting the brief details of Kauleinamoku’s life, Kester tells a compelling story of

a faithful Latter-day Saint man steadfastly dedicated to a religious ideology that called him to help build the kingdom of God on earth. Having internalized the religious narrative of the house of Israel gathering to Zion, he and his fellow Native Hawaiian coreligionists were able to withstand discrimination and ostracism in the service of their God and their church.

As a Native Hawaiian who was raised in Utah, I recognize in these stories echoes of the historical narrative I was raised with—a narrative intended to help me understand my place in the LDS Church. While the reader is given to understand how the faith and testimony of Native Hawaiian Mormons led them to accept the call to gather despite severe challenges, Kester does not allow the reader to evade the ways in which haole (white American) Latter-day Saints were the source of this ostracism and discrimination. He is critical of dominant historical narratives because they deflect attention from the racialization of Native Hawaiian Mormons as “Other.” It is this racialization that provided the rationale for Native Hawaiians’ removal to an isolated and desolate ranch some seventy-five miles southeast of Salt Lake City. In being attentive to how racial categories and ideologies operated in the LDS Church, in Utah, and in the American West, the reader is presented with a complex, contentious, and at times contradictory historical landscape that challenges popular conceptions of the American West and Hawaii. On a personal level, the way Kester crafted this story more accurately reflects my understanding of the place of Native Hawaiians in the LDS Church, the reasons we have been traveling between Utah and Hawaii for nearly 140 years, and our experiences as indigenous settlers.

*Remembering Iosepa* is beautifully written and accessible to a general and academic audience. I would recommend this book to my mother, who is an avid reader of Mormon and American history but is not academically trained. I would also recommend the book for adoption in undergraduate and graduate courses on the settlement of the American West; sociology and anthropology courses on migration, ethnicity, and race; and courses focused on comparative ethnic studies. For a course focused on Native Hawaiian migration, I recommend pairing this book with the aforementioned book *Leaving Paradise* and Rona Halualani's *In
One aspect of the story that Kester was not able to tell, yet one that does not diminish the overall significance of this book, is the impact of Mormon settlement on the indigenous nations in what is now Utah. For additional reading on this topic, I recommend Ned Blackhawk’s *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West.*

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Reviewed by David E. Campbell

In *Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport: Intellectual Journeys of a Mormon Academic,* Armand Mauss details how he has spent his lengthy career crossing the borders between Mormonism and the secular academy, suffering slings and arrows from both sides along the way. As a sociologist, perhaps his major accomplishment is a highly compelling theory to explain the dynamism found within Mormonism. With his theory, he has managed to (1) show social scientists why they should care about Mormonism and (2) demonstrate to Mormons why they should care

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what social science says about their religion and culture. Mormons generally have a strong grasp of history and appreciate its importance. As is often said, Mormons do not have theology; they have history. But why should they care about social science as applied to Mormonism? Mauss’s own life story tells us why. On the surface, he has written a memoir recounting the inside story of some significant events within Mormonism over the last fifty or so years. Yet the deeper story of Mauss’s biography is the very theory he has developed to understand the ebbs and flows of Mormons’ distinctiveness. While some readers may not be especially interested in the internal struggles of Dialogue or a blow-by-blow account of how the Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University came to be, all readers should be interested in understanding the challenges facing the LDS Church as an institution and Mormonism as a culture.

Mauss tells the tale of living through three eras of Mormonism. First, he grew up during a period of Mormon assimilation into American society. During this time, the LDS Church welcomed and even encouraged scholarly inquiry, and in some respects the boundaries between Mormons and “Gentiles” were becoming blurred. Next, the bulk of his career as a sociologist was spent during a time of what Mauss calls retrenchment, in which LDS leaders sharpened the boundaries between the Saints and “the world.” While the retrenchment took many forms, most prominently the consolidation of church programs and curriculum under the Correlation initiative, Mauss was affected most personally by a new wariness toward the academic study of the church and its people. Elder Boyd K. Packer’s words in an oft-cited talk encapsulate this boundary maintenance: “the mantle is far, far greater than the intellect.”¹ Scholars doing Mormon-related research were often met with distrust and, in some cases, faced church discipline and even excommunication. During this era, Mauss himself was even periodically called on the carpet by various stake presidents, at the behest of particular General Authorities, to confirm his

loyalty to the church. More recently, however, the church has moved into a new period of relative openness and is again renegotiating its boundaries. As part of that process, the LDS hierarchy appears to have largely made its peace with the academic study of the church.

What Mauss has done, however, is far more than chronicle a series of happenings within Mormonism. His seminal book *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* offers an explanation for why Mormonism goes through these different periods. His approach introduces two felicitous metaphors: the angel and the beehive. Periods of sharp boundaries and high tension are characterized by the angel, a symbol of what makes Mormons a “peculiar people,” while periods of blurred boundaries and low tension are symbolized by the beehive, representing Mormons’ industriousness and engagement with the world. As social scientists like Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone have argued, peculiarity feeds the vitality of a religion. Too little of it and a religion risks fading away into irrelevance. Religions win converts and retain members by standing for something—as President Gordon B. Hinckley titled one of his books. That’s the angel side of Mormonism. However, too much peculiarity and a religious group can suffer an exodus of members, or in extreme cases become completely marginalized. Historically, Mormonism has swung from periods of “angel-ness,” in which its peculiarity was emphasized (think polygamy in the nineteenth century and the prohibition on alcohol and tobacco in the twentieth), to periods of “beehive-ness,” in which common ground with others was emphasized over peculiarity.

The significance of a good social scientific theory is that it not only explains what has been but can tell us what will be. Mauss’s theory passes

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this test. Written in the midst of an angel (retrenchment) period, the logic of *The Angel and the Beehive* predicts the current swing back toward the beehive. Mauss offers a long list of evidence for the beehive-ness of today’s Mormonism that includes rapprochement with Catholics and outreach to evangelicals, Jews, and Muslims; the “muting” of some distinctive doctrines, including quotations from Joseph Smith’s King Follett sermon in church manuals; rewording the preface to the Book of Mormon so that it now says that only “some” (not “all”) American Indians are descended from the Lamanites; the rewriting of some chapter headings in the Book of Mormon to downplay their racist connotations; ending the publication of Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine*; encouraging opinion leaders to tour temples before they are dedicated; granting greater access to church archives; and a warming of relations with scholars of Mormonism (both LDS and not) (pp. 92–93). In recent years, the church has even officially clarified that Mormons in good standing can indeed drink caffeinated colas (although they are still not sold at Brigham Young University—the wheels of change turn slowly). And in yet another sign of the beehive era, the most recent excommunication of an LDS scholar has been for objecting to what he sees as the liberalizing trend within the church.

The evolving LDS position on homosexuality is an excellent illustration of the institutional church’s careful calibration between the angel and the beehive. In the wake of church members’ heavy, well-publicized, and controversial involvement in California’s Proposition 8, the LDS Church then supported a municipal ordinance in Salt Lake City to ban discrimination against homosexuals. There was also a telling change made in the published version of a general conference talk by Elder


Packer. In the spoken version, he said that God would not have created anyone with “in-born tendencies” toward homosexuality, suggesting that homosexuality is a matter of choice. The published version instead implicitly acknowledges that people are not gay by choice. More recently, the LDS Church has created a website that acknowledges “same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people” and that “individuals do not choose to have such attractions.” There is also an officially sanctioned club at BYU named “Understanding Same Gender Attraction.” The church has also given its tacit consent to the policy of the Boy Scouts of America to allow gay boys to participate in scouting (although not gay leaders). Even on the public policy issue of same-sex marriage, the church has tempered its active opposition. In September 2012, a letter read during LDS meetings in Hawaii acknowledged that church members may have differing views on whether same-sex marriage should be legalized in the state. Rather than receiving a call to overtly oppose same-sex marriage per se (as in California and elsewhere), church members were asked to advocate for legal protection on behalf of religious organizations that do not condone such marriages between people of the same gender.

The predictive ability of Mauss’s theory is impressive, but perhaps even more important is its useful insights for the future of the LDS Church. I would suggest that Latter-day Saints from church headquarters down through the ranks should take heed of Mauss’s conclusions—too much beehive-ness and Mormons cease to stand for something distinct-

tive, but too much angel-ness and the costs of membership become too high. Either one puts the church's long-term viability at risk. The key to the LDS Church's vitality has been finding the sweet spot—the equilibrium—between the angel and the beehive.

The LDS Church's position on homosexuality, and same-sex marriage in particular, again highlights this balancing act. The softening in the LDS approach to homosexuality does not mean that the church has swung away from its firm stance against same-sex marriage, although there has nonetheless been a subtle but significant shift in the scope of its opposition. Notably, in an October 2013 general conference address, Elder Dallin H. Oaks reiterated that the church opposes the legal recognition of marriages between people of the same gender: “Laws legalizing so-called ‘same-sex marriage’ do not change God’s law of marriage or His commandments and our standards concerning it.”12 However, in spite of his obvious disdain for such secular laws, Elder Oaks did not call for political action or civil disobedience to change them. Instead, he compared them to the end of legal prohibitions on adultery and fornication, both of which the church finds immoral regardless of their legality. The church appears to have adopted the view that opposition to same-sex marriage is a matter of private morality and not public activism—a position that, I would suggest, sits between the poles of angel-ness and beehive-ness.

Personally, I have long taken heed of Mauss's work because encountering it for the first time was an intellectually formative experience for me. I read The Angel and the Beehive while an undergraduate at BYU. It was the first systematic, social scientific account of Mormonism that I had ever encountered, and in my opinion it remains the best ever written. He opened my eyes to how the tools of social inquiry could be applied to understanding the church and its people; his work has influenced my thinking on Mormonism ever since. And I am merely one in a whole generation of scholars who have been shaped by Mauss's ideas.

If all Mauss had done was write the most compelling theory of Mormonism, that would have made for an impressive legacy. However, Mauss has also written the magisterial *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*, the most comprehensive book on Mormon beliefs, doctrines, attitudes, and policies regarding race. As Mauss describes in *Shifting Borders*, the book *All Abraham’s Children* gestated for a long time. Over the course of decades, it went from being solely about the fraught topic of blacks and the priesthood to a much broader discussion of Mormon attitudes toward lineage, including their beliefs regarding Jews and aboriginals. The result is a book that contextualizes the church’s history on race and helps Mormons today understand the policies of the past.

Race is the issue on which Armand Mauss has arguably done the most to build bridges, both within Mormonism and between Mormons and those outside the faith. Through the course of his career, he has long advocated that the church disavow the “folk doctrines” that were once widely repeated, including by some prominent church leaders, to justify the racial restriction on the priesthood. Mauss has argued for such repudiation since well before the 1978 policy change that enabled priesthood ordination without regard to race, the way it had been during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. It was not easy going; Mauss describes how he was “somewhat embattled from both inside and outside the kingdom” (p. 95) because he spoke out on race. Outside the kingdom he was branded a racist for his association with the church, even though his surveys of Mormons showed that, the race-based priesthood ban notwithstanding, they were no more prejudiced than other Americans (although neither were they any less so). He describes how, inside the kingdom, “many of my more conservative Mormon friends were unhappy with my public entry into this controversy” (p. 98).

Fittingly, the LDS Church’s position on its own racial history is yet another illustration of Mauss’s theory of the pendulum swings within Mormonism. While there has not been the official disavowal of the folk doctrines that Mauss has long advocated, these beliefs no longer receive any official affirmation from the church. In 2012 a BYU Religion profes-
sor was publicly rebuffed by the Church’s Public Affairs department for repeating such doctrines in the *Washington Post*,\(^\text{13}\) while the new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants acknowledges that in Joseph Smith’s lifetime some blacks were ordained to the priesthood and that “Church records offer no clear insights into the [cessation] of this practice” (Official Declaration 2, headnote). This sea change in racial attitudes has not happened only at the top, for we see it among the rank-and-file membership too. In 2012 John Green, Quin Monson, and I conducted a scientific survey of Mormons and found that a relatively small number have even heard the old folk doctrine that blacks could not hold the priesthood because they were ambivalent during the war in heaven—and a vanishingly small percentage believe it.\(^\text{14}\) While I am sure that Armand Mauss is intellectually satisfied by the real-world confirmation of his theory, I suspect that, above all, he is personally gratified to see the changes in Latter-day Saints’ beliefs regarding race.

Mauss’s life story should give hope to those Latter-day Saints who engage in the study of their church and its culture, and it should reassure those LDS leaders who might be wary of such research. As both a Latter-day Saint and a scholar, he has used his passport to move between the church and the academy, and in so doing has built bridges between them. He has shown his fellow Saints that they need not be suspicious of rigorous, scholarly inquiry; and he has shown his fellow scholars how Mormonism is an important example of a “peculiar people” who have survived, and thrived, in a religiously pluralistic society. While no one will ever fill Armand Mauss’s shoes, I hope that many others will follow in his path. Both the Saints and scholars will be better off for it.


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Mormon Studies: A Bibliographic Essay

Blair Dee Hodges

Introduction

Most overviews of the rise of Mormon studies begin with the “New Mormon History,” a title minted in 1969 to describe the increasing professionalization of historical scholarship about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But by the 1960s, academic studies of Mormonism had been under way for decades. Three years before Moses Rischin coined the label “New Mormon History,” historian Leonard J. Arrington chronicled the twentieth-century rise of “Mormon studies,” an academic legacy that was not limited to history. Arrington showed that Mormon studies was born in the context of academic professionalization in the social sciences, economics, and what is now called cultural studies. Non-Mormons and Mormons alike had produced articles, dissertations, and books at a variety of non-LDS universities prior to the establishment of Mormon-centric institutions and journals like Brigham Young University Studies (1959), the Mormon History Association (1965), Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought (1965), Exponent II (1974), and the Journal of Mormon History (1974). Arrington demonstrated that the New Mormon History was actually a latecomer to the Mormon studies party. Even so, history came to dominate mid-century approaches to Mormonism.


In 2002, a spotlight on “Latter-day Studies” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* acknowledged the centrality of history in Mormon studies while recognizing that the field included “not just specialists in American studies or religious history, but social scientists and cultural theorists as well.”

History still dominates, but Mormon studies has developed into an interdisciplinary field consisting of scholars, publications, university courses, and endowed professorships from a wider variety of academic disciplines.

Arrington’s 1966 article identified a number of considerations that are still being debated, including the problem of insider-versus-outsider perspectives, the necessity of interdisciplinary research, and the constraints placed upon research by religious institutions as well as the academy. Arrington concludes: “Perhaps eventually a Mormon Yearbook can be published that will contribute to the elevation of Mormon studies.”

Arrington believed such a publication could result in “edification and cultural advancement” by “promot[ing] research and writing which will give the Mormon heritage a fuller and more sympathetic hearing.” Arrington called for something akin to Gustav von Schmoller’s social science–focused publication *Jahrbuch*, which differs in scope from the *Mormon Studies Review* but shares the goal of evaluating, chronicling, and promoting the best academic research.

Given the diversity of academic approaches to Mormonism, perhaps the only consensus in Mormon studies is the acknowledgment that the field is without a unified vision of what it is and where it is headed. This essay calls attention to the most prominent published discussions of the “what, who, where, and how” of Mormon studies. This bibliographic assessment is not intended to be comprehensive or prescriptive; rather, it aims to highlight various questions, problems, and possibilities facing those interested in academic engagement with Mormon studies.

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Questions, problems, possibilities

Historians dominated Mormon studies during the second half of the twentieth century and periodically paused to assess the field’s direction, noting along the way the changes that have flowered in the new century. As the New Mormon History has given way to a “New, New Mormon History,” a number of scholars have evaluated past efforts with an eye to improving future scholarship. Grant Underwood’s “Re-visioning Mormon History” (1986) praised the “explosion of Mormon history” that followed Arrington’s 1966 essay, but he saw the need for historians to better adhere to “methodological trends in the broader historical profession.” Doing so would help “correct the institutional bias and refine the monolithic interpretations” that had informed the New Mormon History. For instance, Underwood prompted scholars to pay attention to regional differences and internal diversity in order to depict the “kaleidoscopic pattern of Mormonisms,” adding that special attention should be paid to the contexts in which these Mormonisms developed in order to analyze the ways that wider culture informed, and was being informed by, Mormons. Underwood’s calls have been repeated to the present, suggesting that the field has long had a sense of what is needed but has remained in some ways locked in traditional patterns.

Jan Shipps and Richard Bushman’s 2007 exchange in the *Journal of American History* also connected the New Mormon History to more recent developments in Mormon studies. Shipps reviewed Bushman’s 2005 biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, calling it “the crowning achievement of the new Mormon history,” which is both a strength and

a drawback of the book. She detailed Bushman’s strategy of presenting supernatural elements of the Mormon experience straightforwardly as the participants themselves—believers and unbelievers alike—described them.¹¹ While Shipps argued that Bushman’s biography devotes too much space to addressing problems chiefly of importance to apologists and critics, she predicted that current and future graduate students would follow Bushman’s lead by continuing to “leave the provinciality that made so much old Mormon history inward looking.”¹² Bushman had at least partially succeeded at discussing Mormonism in a way that was less polarizing for Mormons and non-Mormons, although he could not appeal to all. Bushman responded that apologists, critics, and scholars would continue to scrutinize accounts of Mormon origins. He added the proviso that such conversations should integrate the Mormon experience into the wider American experience with special attention to tone: “We will write better if we are less defensive, more open to criticism, more exploratory and venturesous, but even with our inhibitions and parochialisms, we should come to the table with our Mormonism intact.”¹³ He argued against a univocal view of Joseph Smith, called for greater inclusion of Mormon and non-Mormon voices, and invited further “inquiry from many angles.”¹⁴

While Shipps was not uncritical of Bushman’s work, her review did not offer prescriptions for an ailing patient. Rather, and in harmony with Bushman, she pointed to the vitality of Mormon studies. Their exchange sparked a roundtable discussion in the Journal of Mormon History: “What Will We Do Now That New Mormon History Is Old” (2009).¹⁵ Organizer Keith A. Erekson described the ten-member roundtable, consisting of

¹¹. This method of including the miraculous in historical accounts without either demanding readers’ acceptance or evoking their disdain is discussed further in Matthew Bowman, “Finding the Presence in Mormon History: An Interview with Susanna Morrill, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Robert Orsi,” Dialogue 44/3 (Fall 2011): 174–87.
PhD students and early-career academics, as a “polyphonic expression of a collective research agenda.” Among other topics, participants called for greater inclusion of Joseph Smith–inspired religious movements beyond the Salt Lake–based church; stressed the importance of utilizing Mormonism to inform wider American and international histories, politics, and culture; and invited scholars to push “Mormon historical scholarship in new interdisciplinary, transnational, temporal, comparative, and theoretical directions.”

Repeated calls for interdisciplinarity continued to bear fruit. In a second roundtable published in the *Journal of Mormon History*, six young scholars discussed the topic “New Ways In: Writing Interdisciplinary Mormon History” (2012). They called for more studies focused on Mormon women and children, who often play second fiddle to male hierarchical figures. They also noted that Mormon liturgy is ripe for analysis; that literary studies offer a host of insights for a massive body of Mormon fiction, history, and autobiography; and that “lived religion” (the symbolic and material dimensions of faith) offers avenues ripe for inquiry. Both roundtables—still dominated by historians—nevertheless provide a sample of rich research possibilities and hint that a generation of scholars is poised to answer the long-standing appeals for expansion and diversity.

The articles discussed thus far have focused more on the “what” and “how” more than the “who” or “where” of Mormon studies. With regard to “who,” Joanna Brooks locked on to the long-standing insider/outsider problem in her “Prolegomena to Any Future Mormon Studies” (1997). Brooks wrote explicitly from the perspective of a Mormon scholar who sensed some suspicion from the wider academy about Mormon participation. She described tensions resulting from the perception among

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some cosmopolitan circles in the academy that Mormonism entails provincialism. She discouraged Mormon scholars from watering down the Mormon side of things in order to achieve academic respectability, but she also warned against the tendency of some Mormon scholars to play the role of orthodoxy police within the faith: “Collectively and critically examining Mormon culture and staking exclusive claims to ‘Mormon-ness’ are two very different academic enterprises. From one emerges a vital school of thought in Zion, while the other marks turf in Provo [Utah, the location of Brigham Young University].”

Brooks promoted activist-oriented approaches to Mormon studies by inviting Mormon scholars to “step out of your ivory tower and put your shoulder to the wheel,” to see what critiques Mormon beliefs and practices might bring to bear on wider cultural contexts, as well as what wider cultural contexts might have to offer Mormonism in return.

She spent little time discussing what role non-Mormon scholars might play in Mormon studies, however. Non-Mormon Massimo Introvigne approaches the insider/outsider problem by critiquing the work of Terryl Givens, one of the most prolific Mormon scholars, in “LDS Apologetics from Oxford?” (2002).

Introvigne called for continued resistance against demands for scholars to adjudicate truth claims and supernatural occurrences. He argued that most scholars are more interested in questions about the “meaning, historical function, and consequences” of elements of Mormon belief than in arguing about whether golden plates really existed.

Two book-length treatments also address insider/outsider dynamics. In the first, _Sojourner in the Promised Land_ (2000), Jan Shipps combined

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her experiences as a self-described “insider-outsider” to Mormonism with an overview of Mormon history. Philip Barlow evaluated Shipps’s careful inside/outsider methodology in “Jan Shipps and the Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies” (2004). Shipps’s approach requires the researcher to engage sympathetically with Mormonism in order to analyze and describe it, but not to authenticate or debunk its revelations, or to try to change it. This method resonates with Introvigne’s suggested approach. It also bears similarity to Bushman’s, with an important difference. Bushman has also argued that Mormons should come to the table with their Mormonism intact, ready to use Mormonism to critique other perspectives in certain projects. This aspect of his approach is closer to Brooks’s prescription. The second book-length treatment on the insider/outsider problem is Armand Mauss’s Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport (2012). Mauss’s memoir covered a similar time frame as Shipps’s, which he narrates in order to explore tensions that Mormon academics like him might encounter. Mauss is more direct about problems Mormon scholars might face if their work appears to be critical of the LDS Church. Thus Mauss, Shipps, Introvigne, Bushman, and Brooks offer sympathetic engagements with Mormonism, but they differ by degrees as to the appropriate levels of criticism that Mormon claims can leverage on wider culture or that wider culture can bring to bear on Mormonism.

As the title of Barlow’s essay on Shipps suggests (“Jan Shipps and the Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies”), he devoted much of his attention to the cultural circumstances that contributed to Shipps’s popularity as


an authority on Mormonism within and beyond the academy. Thus, Barlow’s essay is useful not only in its evaluation of Shipps and the insider/outsider problem, but also in its attention to the wider cultural changes that facilitated the rise of Mormon studies.26 As the twentieth century turned to the twenty-first, Mormon studies played an increasingly prominent role in academic institutions in Utah and beyond. A number of published articles have discussed these developments. Douglas J. Davies recounted the development of Mormon studies programs and conferences during the late 1990s in “Mormon Studies in a European Setting,” bringing the “where” of Mormon studies into the discussion.27 Davies called attention to some of the practical and political issues that institutions must consider when becoming involved in Mormon studies. For example, goodwill must be fostered in the religious community as well as in the academic community in order to gain enough support to sustain the scholarship. Such considerations are perhaps most salient in Utah. Brian Birch discusses the difficulties of establishing courses in Mormon studies at a public academic institution in Utah in “Between Scylla and Charybdis: Championing Mormon Studies at Utah Valley State College.”28 He offers perspective about why Mormon studies may have been easier (but not necessarily easy) to institutionalize at a non-Utah school like Claremont Graduate University in California.

Thus, by the time the 2002 Winter Olympic Games arrived at the doorstep of the LDS Church in Utah, the “what, who, where, and how”


of Mormon studies had been addressed in various publications. Within the next several years, more university programs and endowed Mormon studies chairs would appear. It was an opportune time for Loyd Ericson, a graduate student at Claremont Graduate University, to offer one of the more systematic portraits of the state of Mormon studies in his article “Where Is the ‘Mormon’ in Mormon Studies?” (2011). Ericson painted an inclusive portrait of Mormon studies that included critics, apologists, non-Mormons, and Mormons. Claremont had established a chair in Mormon studies in 2008 and began publishing the *Claremont Mormon Studies Newsletter* in fall 2009, providing an institutional context in which Ericson could survey the field. The University of Utah’s Tanner Humanities Center began publishing its *Mormon Studies Newsletter* in fall 2011. The former includes reflective articles on Mormon studies by students and faculty alongside news and event notifications, while the latter is used to announce lectures, classes, and other Mormon studies events at the University of Utah. Both publications continue to be good resources for announcing conferences and other Mormon studies events.

The most comprehensive overview of recent institutional developments in Mormon studies through 2007 is M. Gerald Bradford’s “The Study of Mormonism: A Growing Interest in Academia.” As Bradford noted, a number of theses and dissertations dealing with Mormon topics were published in the past decade. Two in particular deal directly with Mormon studies. John-Charles Duffy’s “Faithful Scholarship: The Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies and the Politics of Insider Discourse” (2006) related a history of the rise of academic studies of Mormonism within the LDS Church. By outlining some of the fault lines between apologists and


revisionist-minded Mormons, Duffy highlighted insider/insider problems as much as insider/outsider problems. He proposed that Mormon studies be viewed as a “contact zone” in which a number of parties with competing or sometimes complementary interests can examine Mormonism from a variety of academic and religious perspectives.32

Ronald G. Helfrich Jr.’s “Idols of the Tribes: An Intellectual and Critical History of 19th and 20th Century Mormon Studies” analyzed how the professionalization of various academic fields has contributed to the present state of Mormon studies.33 He argued that scholars and intellectuals have not entirely avoided the polemical edge that has characterized apologetic defenses and critical attacks of Mormonism. To Helfrich, academic studies tend to take at least an implicit stand on the reality of Mormon claims about revelation by attributing the development of the LDS Church to demographic, psychological, economic, political, and cultural forces. He concluded that scholars should remain humble in their conclusions by recognizing the potential reductionism at the heart of any academic approach.

Finally, two Mormon studies “readers,” or anthologies of essays, have been published: Dimensions of Faith, edited by Stephen C. Taysom (2011), and New Perspectives in Mormon Studies, edited by Quincy D. Newell and Eric F. Mason (2013).34 In contrast to popular Catholic studies and Jewish studies readers,35 these Mormon studies readers devote little space to dis-

cussing the development of the field or to considering theoretical or methodological questions. Taysom and Newell describe their collections as exemplary offerings of already-in-progress Mormon studies.36 Two important essays in the final section of Newell and Mason’s collection more directly address the relationship of the Mormon faith to the academy. Eric F. Mason’s “The Saints and the Scrolls: LDS Engagement with Mainstream Dead Sea Scrolls Scholarship and Its Implications” is one of the only published pieces directly engaging the question of how ancient studies fits within Mormon studies.37 Richard Bushman’s “Commencement of Mormon Studies” concludes that while history will continue to attract significant attention in Mormon studies, a “new wave of Mormon studies” is flowing from “all the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts” in an increasing variety of publications, conferences, and institutions.38

Conclusion

Relatively few discussions about what constitutes Mormon studies have been published to date. Most scholars appear to be more interested in pursuing their academic projects than in participating in reflective discussions about the field and its methodologies. Nevertheless, the articles, reviews, roundtables, and books included in this essay provide a sense of the ongoing issues being debated and the direction of the overall field. The LDS Church has also weighed in with positive remarks about Mormon studies, including an announcement on the church’s news site of

36. The Mormon studies readers are more similar to Norman Ravvin and Richard Menkis, eds., The Canadian Jewish Studies Reader (Markham, Ontario: Red Deer Press, 2004), which presents articles about aspects of Canadian Judaism in order to call attention to research possibilities that the already-established field of Jewish studies is underutilizing.


the recently created Mormon studies chair at the University of Virginia. Matthew Bowman identified church-directed efforts like the Joseph Smith Papers Project, as well as non-Mormon John Turner’s biography of Brigham Young, both of which drew heavily on the church’s extensive archival materials as being “signs of a new openness” to academic inquiry by the LDS Church, which has helped fuel financial and academic support for Mormon studies. Additionally, over the past decade, students and scholars have taken to the blogosphere—or the “Bloggernacle” in Mormondom—to raise concerns or offer descriptions and prescriptions about the state of Mormon studies. A representative sample of online discussions is available at the Maxwell Institute Blog.

Whether in print or online, discussions about the “what, who, where, and how” of Mormon studies will undoubtedly continue to map and shape Mormon studies while highlighting the stakes involved for scholars, students, and academic and religious institutions. As evidenced by the androcentric and Eurocentric makeup of these representative discussions, more women’s and international voices are needed to contribute to the ongoing explorations of the borders and intersections of Mormon studies. Despite this relative homogeneity, the present essay also suggests that Mormon studies is not a monolithic field. At present, Mormon studies is conducted among an informal community of scholars who bring a variety of academic approaches to bear on Mormonism in order to better understand the faith, and religion more generally, by attending to the ways Mormonism informs—and is informed by—wider cultural, theological, and political contexts. The present state of Mormon studies portends a bright and vibrant future.


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