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Mormon Studies and Method: The Rigors of the Academic Study of Religion and the Maturity of Mormon Studies

Stephen C. Taysom

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."¹ 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/theseasonmethod.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.³ 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,

2. D. Michael Quinn, “LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Spring 1985): 9–105.

3. Ronald Walker, Richard Turley, and Glen Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). This book is a masterpiece of historical contextualization.

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.

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