

Mormon Studies, without the Rose-colored glasses

The latest fad in the LDS blogosphere is the praise of “Mormon studies.” Many have extolled Mormon studies as the wave of the future, that will bring a new golden age which will somehow at last spread enlightenment about Mormonism both within the Church and throughout the nation. In my opinion, these hopes are grossly overly optimistic. Here’s why.

First, a little background. I need to point out that I do religious studies professionally, though not Mormon studies. I regularly attend academic conferences on religious studies. Most recently I gave a presentation on “The Temple in the Qur’ān” in Dublin in May 2012. My most recent book is on religious studies, *Solomon’s Temple: Myth and History*. I own, for example, over three hundred books on India and Hinduism which I’ve purchased purely for personal interest, since I don’t publish in that field. I have nothing against religious studies; quite the contrary, I enjoy reading, researching, and publishing on religion. However, I do recognize a number of serious problems with the discipline. Religious studies does a number of things very well, and a number of things rather poorly. But more on this in a moment.

Another thing to note is that, despite numerous claims to the contrary, apologetics is not what’s wrong with Mormon studies. There has never been anything preventing anyone from doing any type of Mormon studies in any way they want. The fact that some Mormon scholars happen to think apologetics is an important and legitimate field of scholarship in no way prevents other scholars from doing non-apologetic Mormon studies. There seems to be a delusion among some that, since Dan Peterson’s oppressive influence has at last been removed from the Maxwell Institute, Mormon studies can now finally flourish in the way that it always should have but has been prevented by Dan’s ominous specter. This is sheer nonsense. Apologetics has never prevented Mormon studies from flourishing. If Mormon studies has not flourished it is more likely because few people cared, and few did it well. In this regard it perplexes me why some people object to scholars who do apologetics. If they don’t like apologetics, they don’t have to do it. They don’t even have to read it. They can, in fact, completely ignore it. I, for example,

consistently ignore the latest insights in pediatric medicine. But it would be absurd for me to argue that we must stop pediatric medical research in order to allow brain surgery to flourish. I say, let a thousand flowers bloom! If some want to do Mormon studies, let them. If others prefer apologetics, so be it.

We also must note that, despite the fond wishes of many critics, LDS apologetics is not going away. The fact that the director of the Maxwell Institute has decided to no longer allow the Institute or its employees to publish LDS apologetics will, in the long run, not even put a small dent in the effort. At most it may briefly delay the appearance of a few studies. Anyone who thinks LDS apologetics is finished, is, to put it nicely--and I really, really want to be nice--grossly deluded. Mormon apologetics has existed since the founding of the Church, and it will continue to flourish even after Dan Peterson is dead--may that day be far from us! So, don't expect your friendly neighborhood apologist to be silenced by inept bureaucratic decree any time soon.

Now, to my views on Mormon studies as a subset of religious studies, for what they're worth. First, we need to note the strong, even overwhelming secular bias in religious studies. There are a wide range of reasons for this, which are too complicated to discuss here, but it is widely recognized in the field. Fundamentally, religious studies examines religion as a human phenomena, with the (often unspoken) assumption that religious belief and practice is entirely explainable without positing the existence of God or his intervention in human history and life. This is a self-imposed limitation on the discipline, in which it is mimicking, rather poorly, the empiricism and materialism of the natural sciences. This assumption makes some sense in some ways, since religion is indeed an integral part of of all human societies and cultures, and can be studied by examining its human context and its impact on human cultures, societies, and individuals.

However, this secularist assumption also presents a drastic, even fatal limitation to the study of religion. Imagine a scholar of Beethoven, who studies his life, German society of his age, the

physics of the instruments of the period, the qualities of the ink and paper on which he wrote his scores, but never bothers to actually listen to Beethoven's music. Or an art historian who studies every detail of the tools Michelangelo used to sculpt and paint, but never actually looks at his art. Or a scholar who knows everything about the relationship of Dante and the medieval Florence, but has never read the *Divine Comedy*. It would be obvious to everyone that there is a fundamental failure in that method which would tarnish its results. We study the historical and cultural contexts of the great musicians, artists and poets in order to better understand their music, art and poetry. If we never listen to their music, or gaze upon their art, or read their poetry, we have missed the essential core of their achievements, however much we have learned about the peripheries. And this, I believe, is the fundamental flaw in religious studies. It examines everything about religion but its essence--the encounter between God and mankind. From the perspective of secular religious studies, religion is "spilled poetry"--to use the striking words of Harold Bloom--when in reality it should be described as "spilled divinity." This problem means that secular religious studies will always fail to grasp the essence of religion. For if God really does exist, and really does intervene in history, and really is the ultimate cause of religion, then removing God from the discussion means that everything religious studies has to say about religion is at best warped and twisted, and at worst, fundamentally misguided and wrong. On the other hand, if God does not exist and religion is entirely of human origin, then the secular assumptions of religious studies is merited and necessary. However, the so-called "bracketing" of questions about God and the truth-claims of a religion does not in fact create a neutral environment which facilitates the objective study of religion. Rather it inherently biases study of religion in favor of secular presuppositions. And, when dealing with religion, the ultimate questions ignored by secular religious studies are the truly important ones. Otherwise, the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith are mere rantings in a madhouse.

Another serious problem with religious studies is that it tends to privilege etic (outsider) vs. emic (insider) discourse--a methodological problem long recognized by scholars. That is, religious studies tend to create explanatory models that make sense to non-believers (religious studies scholars) rather than believers. This, I fear, is an inevitable consequence of the nature and

methods of religious studies. Personally, I find it much more interesting to read a book by a believing Hindu than to read a book by a secular scholar about Hinduism. On the other hand, there is certainly a place for both approaches. The goal of a religious studies scholar should be to describe a religion in a way that believers who read his book will truthfully respond, "That's exactly right. That's what I believe." Unfortunately, religious studies scholars in general, and Mormon studies specifically, regularly fail to do this. Their works too often leave the believer puzzled, wondering how there could be another religion called Mormonism which is so fundamentally different from the religion the believer knows and practices and loves. While non-Mormons can certainly study Mormonism and offer whatever insights they may have, we as Mormons would be very unwise to allow ourselves to be defined by the assumptions and dictates of Mormon studies. While it may be useful to look at yourself in a mirror to see yourself as others see you, it is insanity to believe that you really are the reflection in the mirror.

This problem is related to the pretense of objectivity that we sometimes still hear bandied about. Non-Mormon religious studies scholars are objective--so the argument goes--while Mormon scholars are biased. Therefore, only non-Mormon scholars can really explain Mormonism. Only when Mormon scholars ape the assumptions and conclusions of non-Mormons can they be considered scholarly. If they fail to submit, they are cast off into the dustbin of "apologetics." This issue has been argued to death, and I don't want to repeat it here. The reality is that both non-Mormons and Mormons are biased in their study of Mormonism in their own way. The proper path forward is for everyone to recognize and admit their biases. In my opinion, if anyone tells you that he is objective about your religion while you are not, he either doesn't understand the ontological and epistemological nature of the question of objectivity, or he is engaged in deceitful posturing in an attempt to privilege his discourse and silence yours. As a general rule you shouldn't trust someone who feels she needs to tell you how objective she is, any more than you should trust a used car salesman who feels compelled to tell you how honest she is. *Caveat emptor.*

Another scandal also afflicts religious studies. People who are not professional religious studies scholars would undoubtedly be shocked to find the magnitude of sheer nincompoopery that passes itself off as serious academic scholarship at the annual national meeting of the American Academy of Religion. It's really breathtaking to watch political correctness run amok in the academy. (My favorite example was a session on "Eco-feminism, food and pets." I'm not making this up.) That's not to say that there aren't many splendid, insightful, and brilliant papers given at academic conferences on religion. The reality is, however, that academics practicing religious studies have proven unable to govern their discipline and establish sufficient methodological rigor to weed out the nonsense. Having failed to govern their own house, it would seem unwise to make them the sole arbiters of what is or is not rigorous scholarship about Mormonism. The claims, methods and assumptions of religious studies should not be above criticism. A related problem is that religious studies is an arcane and complicated discipline that requires a great deal of background knowledge to understand. Its appeal will inherently be limited to academics talking to themselves. Academic discourse is, of course, important. I do it all the time. But it is not the purpose of religion.

Be that as it may, the real problem with Mormon studies is that there is no such thing. There are no programs or degrees in Mormon studies--not even at BYU. There is no professional *Journal of Mormon Studies* (No, *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* don't count. And while there are excellent journals of Mormon history, the study of Mormon religion is related, but still distinct.) There are few classes taught in major universities on the subject. Mormonism is generally taught, if it is taught at all, by a non-specialist as a small portion of classes on "American Religion" or "New Religious Movements." As far as I am aware, no class on the Book of Mormon has ever been taught anywhere in the world outside of LDS universities. (I may be wrong; if someone knows of any please let me know.) This can be compared to almost every major university in the country offering classes on the Bible, the Qur'an, etc. Unlike biblical studies, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, early Christian studies, Catholic studies, Hinduism, etc., *no one in the world can actually major or do graduate work in Mormon studies*. It simply doesn't exist. How can you possibly envision Mormon studies as an academic field if there are no classes taught anywhere

other than BYU on the Book of Mormon? Ask yourself this: what is the best study on the Book of Mormon written by a non-Mormon? Are there any at all?

The closest approximation to a Mormon studies program is at Claremont. But a university cannot have a serious Mormon studies program with only one professor of Mormonism, which is all we find in the Claremont School of Religion (<http://www.cgu.edu/pages/1036.asp>). A real Mormon studies program would require at least a dozen faculty who specialize in Mormonism, paralleling Brandeis' Jewish Studies program, which has twenty-four faculty in Bible, Hebrew, and Jewish Studies. Where can we find a Mormon studies program like Brandeis' Jewish Studies program? Nowhere.

I also doubt that any serious university support for Mormon studies will be forthcoming anytime in the near future. This is in part due to the recession, and in part do to the rising costs of universities, which are greatly outpacing inflation. Universities simply don't have the funding or the will to create such new specialized programs. The national trend in academia is in fact to shut down such specialized programs and shift their resources towards high enrollment general education and major classes, not to create new expensive special programs with limited appeal.

Furthermore, for the most part, only Mormons--or their marginalized and ex-Mormons counterparts--actually do Mormon studies. Mormon studies is not something you can pick up in a few months or even a few years of cursory reading. Mormon studies now requires full-time specialization. The fact of the matter is that, up until now, there simply have not been enough interested non-Mormons willing to devote the time and study necessary to master the field. Ask yourself: who are the top ten non-Mormon scholars on Mormon religion? What are the top ten journals of Mormon religion? Where are the top ten schools one would attend to study Mormon religion? What are the top ten graduate programs on Mormon religion? When somebody can fill this list, then we can start talking about Mormon studies in a serious way. Until then, I remain neither optimistic nor enthusiastic about the immediate future of Mormon studies. I am willing to be convinced otherwise, but right now I am highly skeptical.