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TEACHING MORMONISM IN A CATHOLIC CLASSROOM

By Mathew N. Schmalz

THE TEACHING AND STUDY OF RELIGION ARE both dominated by implicit assumptions about what constitutes normal religiosity. For instance, in many institutions that offer courses in religious studies, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism are placed under the rubric of “world religions” while Christianity, in its various mainline Protestant and Catholic forms, is often taught as “theology.” Religious traditions perceived as “other,” either because of their worldviews or because of the character or number of their adherents, are often lumped together in courses that examine “cults” or “sects.”

While the Latter-day Saint tradition has a broad temporal and geographic sweep, in many religious studies curricula, Mormonism and Mormons themselves are indeed considered to be “other.” From this perspective, Mormons are often considered to be a “peculiar people” with an unconventional charm in the claims they make about the world, but they are ultimately considered to be of scholarly interest primarily for what their history can tell us about the development of new religions or about the history of the American West. The tendency to relegate the Latter-day Saint tradition to a tangential scholarly space can be especially pronounced in institutions that themselves embrace a Christian religious identity. After all, the Latter-day Saint tradition claims to be a restoration of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a claim that many other Christian denominations, whether Catholic or Protestant, would vigorously contest as they assert their own claims to attention and authority.

The following are my reflections on teaching Mormonism in a classroom at a Catholic liberal arts college that embraces the Jesuit tradition in higher education. I will share not only

my pedagogical strategy for teaching the Latter-day Saint tradition but also how the largely Catholic students in the class engaged the diversity of Mormonism and the discourse surrounding it. I will then offer more general reflections on how Mormonism can be taught in the Catholic classroom, not as a religious tradition that is “other” or “heretical” but as one that both complements and challenges the Catholic tradition. Now, I am not an expert in Mormonism. While I have published in the area of American religiosity, my primary expertise is religions of South Asia, where I lived and worked for four years as a student and researcher. While I am Roman Catholic myself and I have received training in Catholic theology, my scholarly methodology is religio-historical and ethnographic. As such, my comments are intended to be provisional and open to amendment, correction, and challenge.

I teach in the religious studies department at the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts, some forty miles west of Boston. The archbishop of Boston established the college of the Holy Cross in 1843 and entrusted it to the Society of Jesus (or the Jesuits, as they are more commonly known). Holy Cross has changed through the years, reflecting changes in Catholic educational institutions throughout the United States. Today, Jesuit clerics and Catholic laypersons are a minority among teaching faculty while the vast majority of Holy Cross’s 2700 students identify themselves as Catholics. Although Holy Cross students are required to take one class in religious studies, this class need not concern Catholic tradition or theology. One certainly does not need to be Catholic in order to teach in the religious studies department, and no formal assent to core elements of Catholic doctrine is required of Catholic faculty members in religious studies, although this is currently a matter of some debate within Catholic higher education. And so the curriculum in religious studies and the college as a whole is in many ways very similar to that found at secular liberal arts schools, although the Jesuit mission and identity of the institution does shape the life of the college in



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powerful and unmistakable ways. Holy Cross students, for example, carry the Jesuit identity of the institution with them in numerous programs of public service. Moreover, the Catholic tradition, in its diversity, is often a touchstone or common point of reference in much campus discourse both within and beyond classroom confines. It was in this context that I offered the course, "Modern Religious Movements," in which thirty students enrolled.

I. MODERN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I taught Modern Religious Movements as a seminar, in which I foregrounded the discussion of the Latter-day Saint tradition. I began with Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*.¹ Of course, Brodie's work is very controversial: some scholars working in the field of American religiosity still consider it the classic or definitive work on Mormonism; others, and not just Latter-day Saints, find it deeply flawed. Students' collective reaction to Brodie's treatment of Joseph Smith was encapsulated well by one student who observed, "I'm glad there weren't historians and journalists who approached Jesus this way in the century following his death." I had hoped that my including Jan Shipp's insightful study *Mormonism* would counterbalance Brodie's work, especially Shipp's compelling discussion of how Hebrew Bible narratives shaped the Latter-day Saints' understanding of their exodus to Utah.² I concluded, however, that Shipp's discussion is better suited to a more advanced class, or as the culminating work in a much more in-depth discussion of the Latter-day Saint tradition. As I considered that earlier seminar in preparation for the class I was about to teach, I realized that my initial approach to the LDS tradition lacked an overall critical framework for understanding various portrayals of Mormonism. Also, I had not been able to generate a deeper engagement with Mormonism that moved beyond stereotypical understandings of Mormon distinctiveness from mainline Christianity.

Hence, when planning my second offering of Modern Religious Movements, this time as a course for a larger group of students, I choose a different tack. Instead of introducing the course through Mormonism, I saved the LDS tradition until the very end. I structured the syllabus around a critical consideration of themes within the discourse surrounding new and alternative religions: the category of "cult," brainwashing, charismatic leadership, disconfirmation of prophecy, and violence. These overall theoretical issues framed the discussion of specific modern religious movements such as Scientology, the Unification Church, the Children of God, the Watchtower, the Branch Davidians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Heaven's Gate, and the Raelians. The driving pedagogical objective was to examine contemporary discourse surrounding cults and to probe the implicit standards behind such discourse, in order to force students to reflect upon how "cult discourse" might apply to religious practices that they find quite familiar. In this effort, I also included a discussion of various Catholic groups that have been characterized as "cults." In order to bring together many of the theoretical is-

ssues elicited by the course, we then engaged the Latter-day Saint tradition as the culmination of the class.

II. ENGAGING THE LDS TRADITION

I BEGAN OUR discussion of Mormonism with the first chapter from Klaus Hansen's *Mormonism and the American Experience*, which succinctly overviews the "Birth of Mormonism."³ In describing the religious and social ferment of Joseph Smith's youth, Hansen draws particular attention to how the Book of Mormon, within the context of its time, could be perceived as something eminently rational that did not contradict the scientific knowledge of the day. Students found this argument compelling, as they did Hansen's discussion of Joseph Smith as a "genius" not unlike Mozart, Darwin, or Marx. They were less impressed by Hansen's use of the "bi-cameral brain" hypothesis to account for the psychology of Joseph Smith. The bi-cameral brain, as envisioned by the psychologist Julian James, posits that the human mind is divided into separate parts, and so it is theoretically possible for these two parts to interact in ways that a person might interpret as external voices or visions.⁴ Many students interpreted Hansen's allusion to the bi-cameral mind as a way of having one's cake and eating it too, similar to the way Catholic scholars might use psychoanalytic methodology to explain the visions of a mystic.

Unfortunately, Hansen's *Mormonism and the American Experience* is now out of print; it would have made a fine foundational text for the course. But after giving a very general introduction to the beginnings of Mormonism, I had students engage a work that is arguably more polemical than Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*: Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven: The Story of a Violent Faith*.⁵ My intent was certainly not to use Krakauer as some sort of unbiased explication of the Latter-day Saint tradition. Instead, it was to draw students into a discussion of Mormonism by having them reflect upon the implicit assumptions that shape Krakauer's discussion of what he calls "a violent faith." Krakauer focuses on a murder committed by Ron and Dan Lafferty whom he describes as Mormon "fundamentalists" because of their practice of polygamy and expansive claims of prophetic discernment. In order to unpack the specifics of the case, Krakauer draws upon key elements from what could be best described as anti-Mormon polemics: blood atonement, polygamy, and the Mountain Meadows Massacre. These canards, of course, have long been standard fare in classifying Mormonism as a "cult" or a Christian heresy.

The students in Modern Religious Movements were drawn to Krakauer's journalistic writing and the sensationalist subject matter. With specific regard to polygamy, however, some students who had taken a Comparative Religions course with me commented that polygamy is permitted in Islam and many other religious traditions and thus is perhaps not as strange or necessarily oppressive as one might think. While students had a variety of reactions to Krakauer's discussion, the most interesting discussion crystallized around his discussion of the

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Elizabeth Smart case. Most students were quite familiar with the general outlines of her case. But they were generally not aware of the identity of Elizabeth Smart's kidnapper, Brian David Mitchell, whom Krakauer portrays as spiritually akin to the polygamist Lafferty brothers, nor of his wife Wanda Barzee. But Krakauer focuses not only on Mitchell's worldview but also on Elizabeth Smart's. Specifically, Krakauer observes:

Raised to obey figures of Mormon authority unquestionably, and to believe that LDS doctrine is the law of God, she would have been particularly susceptible to the dextrous fundamentalist spin Mitchell applied to familiar Mormon scripture. The white robes Mitchell and Barzee wore, and forced Elizabeth to wear, resembled the sacred robes she had donned with her family when they entered the Mormon temple. When Mitchell bullied Elizabeth into submitting to his carnal demands, he used the words of Joseph Smith—words she had been taught were handed down by God Himself—to phrase those demands. “Being brought up as she was made her especially vulnerable,” says Debbie Palmer, who is intimately acquainted with the coercive power of fundamentalist culture from her own upbringing in Bountiful. “Mitchell would never have been able to have such power over a non-Mormon girl.”⁶

Many students were taken aback by Krakauer's analysis. Some seemed to think Krakauer's analysis of Smart's mindset followed quite well from his account of the Mormon tradition. Furthermore, Krakauer's focus on what he portrays as the sexual appetites of Joseph Smith seemed to prefigure not only the acts of Mitchell and the Lafferty brothers on Mormonism's fringes but also the contemporary state of affairs in the LDS Church. But the students who found Krakauer's argument in this instance compelling were in a distinct minority. Instead,

most students found Krakauer's claims not only inappropriately sensationalist but also a disturbing example of cult discourse.

Many students understood Krakauer's approach to be premised upon particular understandings of authority and the effects of submission to authority. Of course, Krakauer draws considerable attention to the importance of authority within the LDS worldview and the LDS Church itself. Coupled with this is an understanding of prophecy which, Krakauer seems to argue, lends itself to a grandiosity that can justify even murder, whether in Mountain Meadows or Utah County. The students understood Krakauer to be saying essentially that Elizabeth Smart, as well as many other LDS women, are in some ways “programmed” or “brainwashed” to accept male authority. The Smart case then becomes not a terrible story about how a disturbed man used power and force to rape a young woman. Instead, for Krakauer, Smart's story encapsulates the tensions and the pathologies of Mormonism as a whole.

In recognizing Krakauer's sensationalist approach to the LDS tradition, students made an interesting connection to contemporary discourse surrounding Roman Catholicism, particularly in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis. I live in Massachusetts, the epicenter of the crisis that has continued even after the resignation of Bernard Cardinal Law. I was, in fact, interviewed by the *Boston Globe* about the international ramifications of the scandal. But the *Globe*, when it talked to me, seemed to be chiefly interested in more examples of sexual transgressions by Catholic priests in India and Africa (although, to their credit, they did quote me accurately.)⁷ My students argued that Krakauer's discussion of Mormon fundamentalism is in many ways structurally similar to critiques of the Catholic Church for its handling of the sexual abuse crisis. If, for Krakauer, Mormons are in some ways preprogrammed to be subordinate to authority, so too are many Catholics “authoritarian” in disposition, at least according to many accounts

even in the mainstream media. If, for Krakauer, there are various sexual pathologies in Mormonism reflected in the persistence of polygamy, then, as conventional wisdom would have it, there are various sexual pathologies found in Catholicism, especially because of its valorization of celibacy. One of the interesting characteristics of the discourse surrounding the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is how various groups have drawn different lessons from it. For many Catholic conservatives, the Church has become too liberal and too tolerant. For Catholic liberals, the crisis has shown that the Church is too hierarchical. In either case, however, the crisis becomes not only a crucial point for generating critiques of contemporary Catholicism but also emblematic of the essential nature of the Catholic Church. Krakauer's approach to Mormonism displays a similar dynamic: the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart or the practice of polygamy among those excommunicated by the LDS Church somehow becomes emblematic of the essential nature of the LDS tradition. What happens in both cases is that the diversity of experience and practice in both traditions is set aside in the effort to develop a kind of monumental or exemplary history that serves an inherently polemical point of view.

The effect of reading Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* was to break through the common prejudices that often color perceptions of the LDS Church and Latter-day Saints themselves. By making a connection between the discourse surrounding Mormonism and Catholicism, students were able to find common ground between themselves and Mormons, who are often portrayed, as Catholics sometimes are, with broad and prejudiced brush strokes.

Our discussion of the LDS tradition next concerned Douglas J. Davies's *An Introduction to Mormonism*.⁸ A non-Mormon British academic, Davies presents a theologically sophisticated discussion of the LDS tradition that takes seriously its distinctiveness from and continuity with conventional Christianity. Davies emphasizes a variety of themes in the LDS worldview. Chief among these are the Mormon emphasis upon agency and activity and the understanding of salvation as a continuing process of joyful labor.

Most compelling for most students was Davies's argument that for Latter-day Saints, it is Jesus's experience in Gethsemane, not his crucifixion, that is essential to understanding his nature as Christ. Davies cites LDS thinkers' reflections that Jesus himself experienced a kind of cosmic battle within his psyche as he asserted his own agency to do his Father's will. For my Catholic students, this view resonated with Catholic emphasis not only upon the sufferings of Christ but also upon the mystical "dark night of the soul," in which suffering leads to "purgation" of self and surrender to God's will.

Of course, Davies also discusses the LDS tripartite understanding of the afterlife, which some students thought to be an interesting expression of the Indo-European tendency to divide everything into three parts—an aspect of Indo-European thought that scholars have identified in ancient India and Iran, as well as in Western Europe and the United States. Students also found strong parallels between Mormon understandings of

endowment rituals and Catholic sacraments. For Catholics, sacraments such as baptism, the ordination of priests, marriage, and the Eucharist or celebration of the last supper, are not just rituals with a symbolic import. Instead, sacraments effect what they symbolize through an infusion of grace. Students discerned a similar dynamic in the LDS celebration of marriage for time and eternity, in the household blessing, and in the special endowment clothing Mormons wear during their temple rituals. For both traditions, there is an emphasis not only on the ritual transmission of supernatural gifts but also upon the human being as a union of soul and body. But perhaps what struck students the most was the Mormon emphasis upon community. In addition to Davies's work, students read an article by Mario DePillis, published in *SUNSTONE*, that describes the persistence of Mormon community and the tight, almost mystical, communal bonds fostered by the LDS Church.⁹

Our discussion of the LDS tradition did not focus exclusively on secondary works, although these were certainly necessary to place Mormonism in context. Correlated with specific sections of Davies's work, students also read primary texts. From the Book of Mormon, we read the vision of the tree of life and the rod of iron from the First Book of Nephi. We read sections from Doctrine and Covenants, including Joseph Smith's prophecies concerning polygamy, the coming Civil War, and his proclamation of the Word of Wisdom. We also read President Gordon Hinckley's speech given soon after the 9/11 attacks, in which he articulates quite clearly the sense of millennial expectation that underlies the LDS worldview.¹⁰

Through engaging the specificity of primary LDS texts, students were also introduced to points of doctrinal disagreement between Mormonism and Catholicism. Issues concerning the Trinity, the status of God and his physicality, the notion of prophecy and prophethood are very real issues of difference between the LDS and Catholic traditions. These points of difference have led many to label Mormonism as a new religion, not really Christian. This, however, was not the conclusion my students drew. The focus of the class was not to engage the LDS tradition theologically nor to evaluate its claims of restoration. Instead, it was to try, in an inevitably limited and partial way, to understand how LDS tradition imbues the lives of believers with meaning. In planning the course, I had assumed that Mormonism would be considered different, other, or perhaps even bizarre from a conventional Catholic perspective. As the course progressed, it was clear that this was not the case—and not because of anything that I did as a teacher. Instead, many students in the class had grown up with Mormon friends, particularly in Belmont, Massachusetts, and surrounding towns, where there is a substantial LDS community. For these students, Mormons were not others, but friends and also fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

III. CATHOLICISM AND MORMONISM IN DIALOGUE

WHEN I PRESENTED the above reflections at the 2004 Sunstone Symposium, I greatly benefited from the response by Dr. Richard Sherlock of Utah

One of the central elements in both Catholicism and Mormonism, and one that draws deep suspicion and criticism from the surrounding culture, is the emphasis upon authority. Where one finds the difference, however, is the level to which authority extends.



State University. With a perspective gained from a tenure at Fordham University, Dr. Sherlock called attention to the contrast between Catholicism and Mormonism. For Sherlock, the LDS tradition combines the liberalism of Protestant Anabaptism with Catholicism's concern for magisterial authority. To this extent, Mormonism has a fuller understanding of the individual's agency, while Catholicism has a more deeply developed tradition reflecting upon the exercise of authority. From this perspective, Mormonism and Catholicism do not share much in terms of doctrinal content. Instead, what the Catholic and LDS traditions do share is a concern with particular religious and ecclesiastical issues. If I were to develop a course with a more robust engagement between Catholicism and Mormonism, I would structure it precisely around such issues or themes of mutual concern.

The first of these themes is authority. One of the central elements in both Catholicism and Mormonism, and one that draws deep suspicion and criticism from the surrounding culture, is the emphasis upon authority. Within Catholicism, authority is transferred through apostolic succession and holy orders, and, of course, the Pope exists as the "Vicar of Christ." Within the LDS Church, there is a generally similar emphasis upon authority and particularly the need for a central authority to adjudicate doctrinal issues. Where one finds the difference, however, is the level to which authority extends. Sherlock's response pointed to the example of a family trying to decide whether to withdraw life support from a terminally ill family member. As Sherlock characterized it, when faced by such a choice, the Mormon response would be "to pray" for guidance. Catholics, however, could consult a rich body of authoritative teaching to inform this most difficult of decisions. As a member of a Catholic family who actually had to make this decision, I know there is a strong and highly specific tradi-

tion of ethical reflection in Catholicism. But it is also true that such "authoritative" Catholic teachings are interpreted, often with different degrees of emphasis, by often fallible human beings. So if Mormonism and Catholicism have different understandings of the scope of ecclesiastical authority, nonetheless they both must deal with the human beings who exercise authority in the first place.

The issue of authority also brings with it the associated issues of adaptability and resistance. Both Mormonism and Catholicism are patriarchal—only men have full access to religiously sanctioned authority—even though both traditions have significant female presence and participation in religious life. Accordingly, within both the LDS and Catholic traditions, there is inevitably discussion of what aspects of doctrine or practice can be modified or changed in response to changing times or a fuller understanding of divine will. In discussions with my students, however, it was the LDS Church that emerged as having greater institutional and religious means of adapting to a changing world. Clearly, the Mormon understanding of prophecy as vested in the First Presidency, and which can be exercised by Mormons within the appropriate context, can become a powerful means for adaptation or a progressive understanding of God's involvement in the world. The point is evidenced by how the LDS Church has changed and developed over time, particularly regarding polygamy and what was once called "the Negro question." Nonetheless, opposing tendencies exist within both Catholicism and Mormonism that either resist change or contest the status of teachings presented as authoritative by ecclesiastical leaders.

Another crucial theme I would articulate next time is embodiment. Embodiment can mean a variety of things: the importance of the body, for example, or of understanding the

body as a crucial index of one's orientation to the world. Clearly, within the LDS tradition, the body is central: the prescriptions of the Word of Wisdom have to do with the body, as do various ritual endowments. This is all subsumed, as I understand it, within an understanding of the person as a combination of spirit and body unified by the soul. Mormonism also emphasizes a particular way of presenting the body, as one can see in the Mormon missionaries or even in the success of BYU's sports teams. By way of comparison, my home institution, the college of the Holy Cross, has as one of its claims to fame the only basketball team from New England to win the NCAA Division I basketball championship. For Catholicism, athletics became a way of articulating a Catholic religious vision of discipline and collective action. While Christianity is often characterized as dualistic, relying upon a distinction between the soul and the body, Catholicism has a much more unified understanding of the body as an index of the condition of the soul. In both Catholicism and Mormonism, embodiment in its most specific and abstract forms is central to articulating a religious vision of the Divine that is closely related to the physical or material aspects of human life.

Finally, there is the theme of meaning or, more simply, how each tradition is able to imbue the lives of adherents with meaning. What has always struck me about both Mormonism and Catholicism is the dual emphasis upon will (or agency) and surrender. For both traditions, there is an understanding of conquest that is achieved not only by a disciplined human agency but also through surrender to God and to appropriate authority.

In the end, any course that engages the breadth of human religiosity needs to be sensitive to difference, diversity, and variation. One of the crucial mistakes that commentators on both Mormonism and Catholicism have made is to consider each tradition as a monolithic, undifferentiated whole. But the power of Mormonism and Catholicism is that they work on a variety of levels and speak to people in powerful yet different ways.

NOTES

1. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
2. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1985), 58–65.
3. Klaus Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
4. *Ibid.*, 17–21.
5. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: The Story of a Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
6. *Ibid.*, 45.
7. See Michael Paulson, "U.S. View of Scandal Not Shared by Rest of World," *Boston Globe* (8 April 2002).
8. Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
9. Mario De Pillis, "The Persistence of Mormon Community into the 1990s," *SUNSTONE*, October 1991, 28–49.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Times in Which We Live," *Ensign*, November 2001, 72.



GROWING DOWN

I have visited graveyards,
found headstones,
claimed what is mine
by looking down
under the earth,
reading my heritage
from dark stones
on gray days.

I have put down roots,
planted and reaped
so that I am tied down,
tethered to meaning
by my own children's eyes.
I have gone below pain
to want, bring them,
and have found pain
in their rearing.

I am governed like a stone
rolling downward.
It is gravity that owns me now,
evidence in my eyelids,
the sagging like an old memory
heavy with meaning,
not gaining, but losing,
giving back
so that when I'm gone
I remain.

—ANITA TANNER