Sacred Envy: What I’ve Learned from Other Religions

By Jana Riess

In 2002, when I was in California visiting the mission at San Juan Capistrano, I had a brief and lovely moment of longing. My friends and I had toured the mission and the enchanting gardens and were casually wandering through the side chapels of a church. I slipped into a quiet chapel, adjusting my eyes to the darkness. The peace was soon disturbed by a low moan that was almost a wail, and my eyes sought the source of the anguish: a middle-aged Hispanic woman was standing at the small altar, arms outstretched before a statue of the saint. She was weeping. As I watched, fascinated, she unfurled her hands in supplication, edging closer to the statue, and began to caress its feet. Like the unnamed woman in the Synoptic Gospels, she anointed his—by now the statue was a living saint to me and no longer a piece of sculpture—feet with her tears, stroking them gently with her fingers. She appeared to be profoundly comforted by this act. As I tiptoed forward, I could see that the places her hands were touching had been worn smooth by generations of devotees, the marble brown and glistening with the shine of their touch. The saint’s face had the same marble brown and glistening with the shine worn smooth by generations of devotees, the places her hands were touching had been this act. As I tiptoed forward, I could see that the saint’s face had the same

He also felt very jealous.

“Do you ever have Catholic envy?” I asked my three friends at lunch. Of the three—all Protestant—two said yes and one offered a rather bewildered no. I certainly have Catholic envy—for the scholarship, the emphasis on social justice, and the glorious holidays that root the supplicant in an ancient tradition and provide an impeccable sense of rhythm for life’s days. I have Buddhist envy, for the stress on compassion, meditation, and mindfulness of the present moment. And I have Lutheran envy for the comfort food.

My day job is to study religions and keep current with new developments as religions grow and change. So I work every day with people of other faiths, hoping to understand them well enough to write about them compassionately and responsibly. I take for granted that they are as sincere in their faith as I am in my own, and that I have a great deal to learn from them. And I certainly have learned.

In terms of my Mormon practice, I’ve enjoyed several foundational experiences of other religions that have affected my outlook and strengthened my spiritual walk. I think that we would all do well to pay better and deeper attention to the religions around us. As Ibn Arabi said,

Do not attach yourself to any particular creed exclusively, so that you may disbelieve all the rest; otherwise you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent and omnipotent, is not confined to any one creed, for he says, “Wheresoe’er ye turn, there is the face of Allah.”

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Because my husband is a United Methodist, I’ve studied the teachings of John Wesley and have found Wesleyan theology helpful in keeping my spiritual reflection fresh. One particular contribution of Wesley’s has helped me achieve peace on a thorny issue for the church (by which I mean the little-c catholic, universal church encompassing all Christians): homosexuality. Wesley did not address homosexuality directly, but he left behind a theological paradigm that has been enormously valuable for me. When Wesley broke off from the Anglican Church, the Anglicans had a tripod of theological meaning: Christians could rely on the scriptures, the traditions of the Anglican communion, and their own reason in discerning God’s will. To these three, Wesley, with his interest in personal piety and holiness, added a fourth and equally important criterion: experience. In the Methodist faith, scripture, tradition, reason, and experience stand together as reliable pillars of belief and practice.

Now, with regard to homosexuality, I have listened to and agreed with many people in various Christian traditions, including Mormonism, who have stated that the Bible and the traditions of the church stand against homosexuality. And despite my reading of John Boswell and my understanding that the two-thousand-year history of Christianity has never been monolithic about this issue, I do agree that the general trend of scripture and history is on their side. However, Wesley teaches that this is only half the story, and maybe not even the most important half. My own reason—which tells me that homosexuals would not choose a life of ostracization, that sexual orientation is more inherent than learned, and that science is beginning to discover a genetic predisposition toward homosexuality—cannot be discounted. Moreover, Wesley affirms that my experience cannot be denied. And my experience tells me clearly that my homosexual friends are every bit as loved by the Lord as I am, perhaps even more so since their spirits have already been refined by the intense suffering that comes from being misunderstood.

So, I have learned an important lesson from John Wesley, and I count him as a great spiritual teacher.

My experiences working with another religious denomination have also given me a new perspective on my own religion as a changing, historical institution. For a couple
of years, I worked on an as-needed basis as a historical consultant to the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston. I was originally hired to write the introduction to a new volume of Mary Baker Eddy’s autobiographical writings, including a memoir that she drafted in 1902 but that had never been published. The publication of this document after a century of languishing in an archive was quite an event for Christian Scientists. For comparative purposes, imagine that the LDS Church was to suddenly announce that Joseph Smith had left behind an autobiographical work that was written not long before his death and that specifically answered some of the charges his many critics had laid at his door. Now add to this scenario the idea that after being carefully guarded for their entire history, the LDS Church archives would be completely opened to the public. That’s about the parallel of this situation. After decades of insularity, Christian Scientists have in the last few years instituted an unprecedented, sweeping change from the top down, with a tremendous emphasis on opening their movement to the world. They have opened the Mary Baker Eddy Library for the Betterment of Humanity, a multimillion-dollar, state-of-the-art facility in Boston, and made Science and Health available in bookstores everywhere, not just Christian Science Reading Rooms. Nowadays, any spiritual seeker can have access to Mrs. Eddy’s ideas, whether or not they join the Christian Science Church.

What have I learned from Christian Science? While I have deep respect for Scientists’ courageous decision to rely upon prayer for healing, I’m a total wimp for pain, and I still reach for the Tylenol bottle at the first sign of one of my headaches. No, beyond its emphasis on healing, I have learned from the Mother Church’s historical development, which (up to the last decade) so uncannily paralleled our own. In this story, a small, unusual sect was founded in the nineteenth century by a charismatic prophet/prophetess who was often unreasonably vilified in the press. As a result of those attacks (and in the LDS case, actual physical violence), the group turned inward, emphasizing its own unique truth claims and reverence for its founder. It remained suspicious of the outside world and adopted something of a siege mentality even while attempting to assimilate into the host culture.

In the last few years, Christian Science has done a 180-degree turn. The Board of Directors has basically leapt out in front of the membership of the church, leading them in a new direction (and one, it must be said, that not all devoted Christian Scientists are embracing). It’s a Vatican II, a sea change, a new way of viewing the world. In 2003 at the annual meeting—held in Germany, the first time that the annual meeting has ever ventured outside the Mother Church in Boston—speakers emphasized the need to embrace Mary Baker Eddy’s vision of engaging the world, instead of merely hunkering down together to withstand the world’s arrows. It was markedly different, powerful rhetoric from a church that has long felt itself under attack.

I’ve never before had the experience of looking down at a religious movement from the top. As a member of the LDS Church, I experience most things in as grassroots a manner as I can manage—I love my ward but sometimes feel removed from the institutional church hierarchy. But even my limited experience in working with the Christian Science leadership on this project, and the radio tour that followed the book’s release, taught me some valuable lessons. First, I’m far less judgmental of LDS leaders than I used to be. It’s awfully easy for members to sit back and think that our leaders are too conservative or out of touch, when in fact we may be the ones out of touch—not understanding the immense challenges of meeting the needs of a vast and growing global constituency. And for the first time in my life, I’ve wondered: has the LDS church membership ever held the prophet back from seeking or announcing revelation? In the Christian Science example, the leaders are boldly going where some of the members fear to tread. Has that ever happened in our own tradition, or will it? Spending time with the leaders of one denomination has made me more sympathetic to the leaders of my own, and far more willing to give them the benefit of the doubt when complex issues arise.

And of course, spending time with the Christian Scientists as they embrace their new direction has made me wonder about the changes I will see in my lifetime in the LDS Church. In 2003, the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the expansion of the priesthood—an event that many thought would never come—prompted many to speculate about where our own movement might be heading. What dreams may come, and what surprises are in store?

So my exchanges with members of other religions continue to challenge and sustain me in my own spiritual journey. But it’s not just a question of how my Mormonism is enriched by my interactions with people of other faiths; I think that they sometimes benefit too. For example, I believe that I first got the Christian Science job because I am a

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Mormon. In 1999, I conducted an interview with the tremendously energetic Chair of the Board of Directors of the Christian Science Church. After the interview was over, she and I fell into a conversation about Mary Baker Eddy and Joseph Smith. As we talked and shared our personal experiences of these great but complex spiritual leaders, I felt a kind of connection pass between us. We understood each other, we both knew the joy of our religious traditions and the pain of having them repeatedly misconstrued by outsiders.

This feeling was reinforced when I came to Boston for a research trip not long after starting my project on Mrs. Eddy in 2001. As I sat at a conference table with the archivists, historians, and publishers who would be working with me and helping me, we wrestled with the question of how to explain to the reading public that I was a scholar but not a Christian Scientist. One person suggested that we should mention my LDS affiliation in the author bio. I gently responded that I thought that was a bad idea, because Mormonism is so misunderstood in our culture that people would immediately assume that the author was an idiot. There was a spark of recognition when I said that. “I know exactly what you meant!” said the man across from me. This man, a nationally recognized attorney and philanthropist of tremendous intellect, has obviously had people think he is some kind of simpleton because he believes in healing through prayer.

I believe that being a Mormon has also made me better at my job, which is to evaluate religious books on their own terms. Several publishers have praised my sensitivity to minority faiths and marginalized religions. I tell them candidly that I know, at least in a small way, what it’s like to walk in their shoes. I may not be a Muslim woman who is ridiculed for wearing a headscarf, but I’ve experienced the pain of reading about outsiders who’ve abused the sacred temple garment. I may not be a Hindu who is wrongly accused of being a polytheist, but Mormons collectively have come under the same false accusation of worshipping many gods. So I understand a bit of the sting. And I draw from that experience in having compassion for those of other faiths, both professionally and in my personal interactions.

**TOWARD A MORMON STANCE OF INCLUSION**

In Mormonism, strains of exclusivism and inclusivism have always been held in tension. From Joseph Smith’s First Vision, in which God told him that other churches were corrupt, to the Church’s manuals of today, which increasingly emphasize Mormonism’s status as the only true church established by Christ, there has been a message of uniqueness and—it must be said—theological superiority. But God has also repeatedly made it clear that the truth of the restored gospel is unfinished and provisional; we acknowledge that God has yet to reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom—a kingdom which is presumably much larger than one denomination. God has also spoken through the Book of Mormon to remind readers of today of the dangers of supposing we alone possess religious truth.

7. Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea, and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath, and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?

8. Wherefore murmur ye, because that ye shall receive more of my word? Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another? Wherefore, I speak the same words unto one nation like unto another. And when the two nations shall run together the testimony of the two nations shall run together also.

9. And I do this that I may prove unto many that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever; and that I speak forth my words according to mine own pleasure. And because that I have spoken one word ye need not suppose that I cannot speak another, for my work is not yet finished, neither shall it be until the end of man, neither from that time henceforth and forever.

10. Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written.

11. For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written.

12 For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it. (2 Nephi 29:7–12)

We Latter-day Saints often assume that this passage refers only to the people in the latter days who will reject the Book of Mormon because they already have a Bible. I agree that it does mean this, but since it is the nature of scriptural prophecy to be multivalent and layered, it seems probable that this is not the only correct interpretation.

Could it not also be intended for us, the believing community, since so much of the Book of Mormon is intended for us and directed to us? Isn’t God also telling us not to so quickly discount the truths he has cultivated in other cultures, nations, and religious texts?

To me, the essence of learning from other religions lies in reading their sacred texts and being open to the truths I might find there. Joseph Campbell said that it’s extremely important that we learn from myths that are not necessarily our own. “Read other people’s myths, not those of your own religion,” he advised, “because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts—but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message.”

**NOTES**

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