Abstract: The proliferation of Mormon Studies is surprising, considering that many of the basic questions about the field have never been answered. This paper looks at a number of basic questions about Mormon Studies that are of either academic concern or concern for members of the Church of Jesus Christ. They include such questions as whether Mormon Studies is a discipline, whether those who do Mormon Studies necessarily know what is going on in the Church, or if they interpret their findings correctly, whether there is any core knowledge that those who do Mormon Studies can or should have, what sort of topics Mormon Studies covers or should cover and whether those topics really have anything to do with what Mormons actually do or think about, whether Mormon Studies has ulterior political or religious motives, and whether it helps or hurts the Kingdom. Is Mormon Studies a waste of students’ time and donors’ money? Though the paper does not come up with definitive answers to any of those questions, it sketches ways of looking at them from a perspective within the restored Gospel and suggests that these issues ought to be more carefully considered before Latter-day Saints dive headlong into Mormon Studies in general.

In my lifetime, Mormonism has gone from mostly under the radar of Religious Studies to the point where there are now academic programs in Mormon Studies. Whether this is a good development can at least be debated. As the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship has suspended the Mormon [Page 94]Studies Review (but has now announced that it will be relaunched, perhaps toward the end of 2013), it is worth looking at some lingering questions in the field of Mormon Studies. These are some questions about the field that have not been satisfactorily answered—nor are they necessarily answered here—but they need to be considered lest Mormon Studies become seen by Latter-day Saints as simply another dash of the Gadarene swine. ((I would like to thank William Hamblin, Kristian Heal, Paul Hoskisson, Louis Midgley, and Gregory Smith for fruitful discussions and comments about this topic. This article was originally accepted by the Mormon Studies Review and was to have been included in the first issue, Mormon Studies Review 23/1, but did not appear. The article has been adjusted slightly to reflect recent events.)) As a partial foil for my discussion, I would like to use an unappreciated pioneer in Mormon Studies, the late British Shakespearean scholar Arthur Henry King, who was widely read and widely traveled and already had a distinguished academic career before he encountered The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the very end of his academic career he produced a thoughtful work of Mormon Studies that was part analysis and part critique. ((Arthur Henry King, The Abundance of the Heart (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986). This was reissued with slight revisions as Arthur Henry King, Arm the Children: Faith’s Response to a Violent World (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1998).)) The critique was aimed at members of the Church who substituted their own naïve presuppositions, culture, politics, or ethnicity for the Gospel and did not consider their actions in the light of what the scriptures taught.

Is There any Discipline in Mormon Studies?

When Arthur Henry King taught Shakespeare, he would begin his upper division classes by announcing that he was not going to require the class to write an essay on Shakespeare since none of them was competent to do so. Instead he would teach them a method that, if pursued for twenty years, might equip them with such competence. The English majors were instantly offended at his suggestion that they did not know enough to write an essay on Shakespeare, but he was absolutely right. His disciplined method required the scansion of every line and the analysis of every word in the context of the play, in the context of Shakespeare’s usage, and in other usage in Shakespeare’s day. It involved asking moral questions of the material, such as: Is there any love in this play? Who is posturing in this play and why? This is an admired speech, but is it a good one? Is the sentiment expressed by this character moral? If this character were to give a Christian response here, what would it be? What does this character need to repent of? Does he or she repent? His method required a reflexive critique on whether interpretations were (1) actually preferable, (2) just
probable, (3) merely possible, or (4) simply impossible. King was as demanding of himself as he was of his students. He would stand up and walk out of a play if the director carelessly omitted Marcellus’s speech in the first scene of *Hamlet* (which he thought was the highlight of the play), ((William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* i.i.158–164.)) or butchered *The Tempest* by substituting Prospero’s nihilistic speech ((William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* IV.i.146–158.)) (which he must repent of) ((William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* IV.i.158–163.)) for his repentance at the end. ((William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* epilogue 1–20.)) Students who entered King’s office would find his packed bookshelves filled with little else than three-inch-thick binders filled with his notes on every Shakespearean play. Observant students could tell that he had practiced his own method for many years and was teaching from personal experience and personal discipline. His method described a discipline for studying Shakespeare that can be profitably applied to other fields. (I have used it with some profit in Egyptology. Among the Egyptological essays I have produced reflecting the method King taught are: John Gee, “Notes on Egyptian Marriage: P. BM 10416 Reconsidered,” *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 15 (2001): 17–25; “Trial Marriage in Ancient Egypt? P. Louvre E 7846 Reconsidered,” in *Res severa verum gaudium*, ed. Friedrich Hoffmann and Günther Vittmann (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 223–31; “On the Practice of Sealing in the Book of the Dead and the Coffin Texts,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 35 (2008): 105–22; “A New Look at the Conception of the Human Being in Ancient Egypt,” in *Being in Ancient Egypt: Thoughts on Agency, Materiality and Cognition*, ed. Rune Nord, Annette Kjølby (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2009), 1–14; “A New Look at the ‘nḥ pꜣ by Formula,” in *Actes du IXe Congrès international des études démotiques*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer et Didier Devauchelle (Cairo: Institut Français Archéologie Orientale, 2009), 133–44.))

Many areas of study require the mastery of language(s), or mathematics, or some other demanding base, without which one cannot even begin to work competently in the field. A physicist cannot begin to probe the mysteries of quantum mechanics without the calculus, even though mathematics is not his area of interest. A student of the Old Testament requires not just Hebrew but also German in order to interact with the technical literature of his field, though his interest is hardly focused on modern European languages. While it is clear that many who write on Mormon Studies are not competent to do so, the cause of this problem has been often overlooked. Tellingly, Mormon Studies seems to lack the disciplinary “prerequisites” which other fields demand—the original documents are mostly in English and easily read by any literate layperson, which means that the would-be author faces few bars to entry. If the ability to read English and talk to a few Mormons are the only requirements, why pretend that the quality of most work in Mormon Studies reflects the standards of an academic discipline, such as peer review, graduate school apprenticeship, and a necessary command of the relevant literature? To produce work worthy of serious interest, Mormon Studies may need a discipline that after twenty years of experience might produce something worthy of consideration.

Discipline requires “a certain amount of grind and insistence on detail and accuracy.” ((King, *Abundance of the Heart*, 240.)) Without discipline we end up with what King called “higher illiteracy,” which he said comes “partly because during the years of our schooling we have not been submitted to any unremitting disciplinary training in the use of language.” ((King, *Abundance of the Heart*, 240.)) It is that lack of discipline—and the rigorous training that might supply it—that often leads individuals to use such sloppy and ill-thought-out categories as “mysticism,” “theology,” and “objectivity” when talking about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

King was blunt and forthright in academic matters; he was not interested in “Mormon nice.” *Nice*, after all, comes from the Latin *nescius* “ignorant” and originally meant “foolish, stupid, senseless.” ((*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. nice.)) “Nice” is how one treats people when one does not know any
better. While it is often a good thing for Latter-day Saints to ignore the learning of the world (such can afford to be nice), Latter-day Saints who wish to engage in Mormon Studies cannot afford to be nice if this means ignoring sloppy work, immature thinking, or a lack of grounding in the relevant fundamentals. Christ’s command was not merely to be as harmless as doves but to be wise as serpents.

Most of those who have excelled at Mormon Studies come from other disciplines and have excelled because they apply their discipline to their Mormon subject. They are careful thinkers. They also love their subject and are excited about it—not because they think that it is somehow strange but because they think that it is wonderful. Good entomologists, for example, do not think that insects are weird or strange or some academic curiosity. They are passionate advocates of their subject; they are not trying to kill off the species they study. It is precisely their passion for their subject that compels them to bring their best to their study. They do not affect disinterest. Disinterested people are incapable of research, since research requires an interest in the topic of research. Disinterested people write trite drivel. Disinterested speakers are boring. Students hate disinterested professors; they prefer enthusiastic ones. (And we should remember that enthusiasm comes from a Greek term meaning “to be inspired or possessed by a god.”) We do not want disinterested observers of Latter-day Saints because disinterested people do not care. Why would anyone want to affect or feign disinterestedness in her topic?

From the point of view of the Saints, Mormon Studies should not pretend to learning for learning’s sake. As King wrote,

> For us, all learning is for God’s sake, not for its own sake. As soon as we speak of learning for its own sake, we set up learning as an idol independent of God. The Mormon tradition is supremely one of work, work for the Lord and others—service. Work is the second great virtue. Caring or love is the first; and work should spring from caring. The object of a Mormon university must be to build the kingdom of God, to serve in the Church in the full sense of what that implies. Because we believe in the Church, because we believe it to be the most important organization on this earth, because we believe it to be the instrument of God’s will, because we believe Christ is its head, we must therefore believe that any organization that the Church sets up must finally and ultimately serve the Church. ((King, Abundance of the Heart, 263–64.))

**Does a Specialist in Mormon Studies Necessarily Know What is Going on in the Church?**

We cannot presume that someone professing to do Mormon Studies is necessarily a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but we have the right to expect him or her to know something about the Church. ((While splinter groups may be a legitimate object of study, they are statistically insignificant and may well meet the definition of fringe groups. Only two splinter groups (the Bickertonites, and the Community of Christ) have sufficient numbers to be mentioned in the Association of Religion Data Archives. Mormon Studies is principally about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and this is how I will use the term here.)) That is, after all, supposedly his or her area of expertise. In reality, though, that area of expertise can be overstated. A scholar of Mormon Studies might have broad interests in the Church and some knowledge about the Church, but expertise will generally be in a more narrow range, such as Church history in the Nauvoo Period, or Mormons in the southeastern United States in the late nineteenth century, for example. A potential problem then appears when outside observers, such as the media, turn to a scholar focused
on some narrow aspect of Mormon Studies, and mistakenly conclude that the scholar is some sort of authority on the Church in all its dimensions. A biochemist specializing in DNA would not be consulted about transition-metal chemistry simply because he is a “chemist,” but scholars of Mormonism are often asked to comment on matters equally far from their area of expertise. More troubling, neither they nor their audience seem to realize they are doing so.

Jan Shipps was a well-known example of this phenomenon. Shipps was constantly consulted by the media for her opinions about what was going on in the Church, though some of the Saints could be forgiven for wondering from her statements excerpted in the media how informed she was. Shipps recalls that her first exposure to the Church was when she moved to Logan, Utah, for a year. ((Jan Shipps, Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xii.)) Most of the people that she associated with “did not fit into the ‘active Mormon’ category” and most of what she learned about Latter-day Saints was over alcohol. ((Shipps, Sojourner in the Promised Land, 372.)) She recalls that “we never attended a sacrament meeting.” ((Shipps, Sojourner in the Promised Land, 372.)) She then moved to Colorado, where she did graduate work on Mormonism all while trying “to avoid being pulled one way or the other.” ((Shipps, Sojourner in the Promised Land, 373.)) In the early seventies she finally entered what she considered the “real Mormon community,” which was “the community of Mormon intellectuals then gathering around Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought.” ((Shipps, Sojourner in the Promised Land, 374.)) She herself admits that “this loosely organized community stood in sharp contrast to the ever more rigidly organized and strictly regulated religious body to which the great majority of LDS intellectuals belonged and in which many were active participants.” ((Shipps, Sojourner in the Promised Land, 374.)) In other words, she has only had limited contact with what goes on in the Church and her principal informants have been those on the fringes. While outsiders can, and sometimes do, have important insights into the Latter-day Saint experience, insiders know that outsiders’ understanding is incomplete, and they often fail to grasp basic, fundamental, even obvious facets from their outside position. This dynamic can make them unreliable sources of information for those who actually want to understand the church better.

Why does this problem arise? In the first place, most scholars of Mormonism are in a very poor position to understand what is going on in the Church simply because of its sheer size and extent. In 2009, the Church had 2,865 stakes with 28,424 wards and branches in over 150 countries. ((Brook P. Hales, “Statistical Report, 2009,” Ensign 40/5 (May 2010): 28.)) Assume for the moment that a scholar of Mormonism has twenty friends in different stakes around the Church reporting to her what is going on in their wards and stakes (an overly optimistic estimate), perhaps a couple of times a year. A stake president will have, on average, about ten units reporting to him. Additionally, most Sundays he will be visiting one or two of those wards in person. Every month he will be interviewing the bishops. At least three or four times a month (sometimes three or four times a week) he will be interviewing various members of the stake to issue callings, to issue temple recommends, to counsel those with problems, and to deal with the wayward. Additionally, nearly every week a stake president (or a bishop, for that matter) will receive a packet in the mail from Church headquarters informing him about minor policy changes and upcoming things of which he should be aware. A stake president, therefore, is better informed about what is going on in the Church than a typical scholar of Mormonism, albeit often for a more restricted geographical area.

This is not to say that the media ought to go to a stake president for information. (The stake president would likely send a reporter to the local public affairs representative.) But a stake president is more likely to be informed about what is going on in the Church than someone whose primary source of information consists of those Latter-day Saints who frequent cocktail parties. If one wants to understand what is going on in the current Church, however, one needs to have a larger picture than even a stake president can provide.
A member of the Quorum of the Seventy in an Area Presidency will have responsibility for an average of about 90–100 stakes, consisting of 900–1000 wards. An apostle will have an average of 686 stakes and 6869 wards reporting to him. The apostles as a group also receive reports from each of the Area Presidencies at least a couple of times a year. Furthermore, these brethren will spend about forty weeks a year on assignment visiting Latter-day Saints worldwide, which the scholar will not.

This is not to say that either the media or scholars of Mormon Studies should waste the time of the General Authorities with routine media queries. Church Public Affairs is established to interact with the media. So while someone who does Mormon Studies may be an expert in his or her particular niche, he or she will be in less of a position to say what is generally happening Church-wide than a typical General Authority.

What Will a Student Learn in a Mormon Studies Program?

Most “studies” programs are interdisciplinary, with a number of different faculty in different departments specializing in where the subject of the “studies” program intersects with the discipline: for example, history, theology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, languages, political science, literature, and so forth. Outside of Brigham Young University, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, and Brigham Young University–Idaho, no university has more than a single chair in Mormon Studies. This lack of a broad interdisciplinary approach means that other universities cannot really have an effective program and students who study in such places are unlikely to get a well-rounded education in the topic. Instead, in the classroom they will be instructed in the eccentricities of their particular professor.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a worldwide church with more members living outside the United States than inside the United States, yet Mormon Studies has generally been focused on the United States. Will Mormon Studies programs based exclusively in the United States deal well with the worldwide Church or will they only focus on the Church in the United States? Can one specialist really be expected to cover more than a fraction of the territory?

Students in a Mormon Studies program will learn mostly from and be greatly influenced by their professor. What then will their students be learning from them? “Generally, course and faculty/student interface are needed for the development of skills, the inculcation of method, the application of principle, the acquiring of attitude—to show how learning is organized, how it can stimulate and lead to discussion—not for information that students should be getting by reading.” (King, Abundance of the Heart, 240.) The character of the professor assumes a crucial role here.

What Core Areas of Knowledge Should a Specialist in Mormon Studies Have?

While someone in Mormon Studies may have a specialist niche, there should be some standard core knowledge that a specialist in Mormon Studies ought to be expected to have. An analogy from another discipline might be appropriate here. While Egyptology covers thousands of years and every facet of that civilization and Egyptologists necessarily specialize, there is a core of knowledge that comes as part of their training that they can all be expected to have. There are texts that all are expected to have read, and minimal competencies that all are expected to have achieved before proceeding to their specialties. Likewise, those involved in Mormon Studies should share a standard core of texts and a standard core of basic knowledge.

While there will be some debate regarding all the texts and knowledge that a scholar of Mormon Studies should have, I will here suggest a bare minimum. A scholar of Mormon Studies worthy of the
title should at a bare minimum have carefully read all of the standard works of the Church: the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Some reasons for this are obvious. As the canon of the Church, these are the core texts throughout the Church that all members are encouraged to study. It is only to be expected that members and scholars should be familiar with them. Latter-day Saint writing and talks are peppered with quotations from, and allusions to, these books of scripture (over 100,000 of them in the last sixty or so years of General Conference alone). ((See http://scriptures.byu.edu/.) One cannot presume to write intelligently about Latter-day Saints without an intimate grasp of this core intellectual background.

It should likewise be expected that anyone who wishes to write knowledgeably about Latter-day Saints should know the basics of Latter-day Saint belief. This base would include the Gospel (i.e., faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end). Those basics can be found in the lessons taught to investigators and new members. That is what the Church expects its members to believe and commit to. Thus, those who do not belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but wish to participate intelligently in Mormon Studies, would do well to familiarize themselves with the third chapter of Preach My Gospel, the Church’s guide for missionary work. ((Preach My Gospel (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 29–88.) This chapter covers the basics of Latter-day Saint beliefs and tenets. The guide is available in forty-three languages, all of which are available for free on the internet, so there is no excuse for not knowing the material. ((At https://churchofjesuschrist.org/library/display/0,4945,-8057144241,00.html.))

One would also expect that those doing Mormon Studies would have some idea of what a Church meeting was like; one would think that they should have at least attended a Sacrament Meeting, a Fast and Testimony Meeting, and a session of General Conference. (I deliberately exclude familiarity with temple ordinances because not all Latter-day Saints have yet experienced the temple.)

Beyond these recommendations, one would expect a knowledge of the general outlines of LDS Church history, if for no other reason than to help them navigate more specialist discussions.

Doubtless, there is more that should be included. The exact core competencies can be debated, but I have a hard time imagining how someone could even claim the sort of competence in Mormon Studies necessary to publish without this bare minimum.

Will Students of a Specialist in Mormon Studies Necessarily Know Even the Basics about the Church?

One of the most disappointing things about reading accounts of the Latter-day Saints by outsiders is the persistent failure to get even basic information correct.

In 2009 the Church had 51,736 missionaries who baptized 280,106 converts for an average of over 10 ¾ converts per missionary companionship. This does not include all the investigators who did not end up being baptized, but is limited to those people who were taught well enough that the individual could pass a baptismal recommend interview, which means that the person understood the basics of the Church. Is it plausible that any professor of Mormon Studies is going to get ten of his students a year able to answer all those questions satisfactorily? Students in a Mormon Studies program should not be required to convert, but they should be familiar with the basics, which is what the missionaries teach. A Mormon Studies instructor who fails to help his students understand the basics has failed his students. This is not to say that missionaries are particularly gifted teachers; their training in teaching is rather minimal. For all its brevity, however, it is more
extensive than the amount of pedagogical training necessary to receive a PhD.

So a Mormon Studies graduate is likely to be no better informed about the Church in general than a stake president and no better a teacher than a missionary. A scholar can be an expert in particular without being an authority in general. A scholar might, for example, be an expert in a comparatively specialized subject, and might be the most knowledgeable person in the Church in that particular area. This specialized expertise has to be the strength of those involved in Mormon Studies.

What is the Purpose of Mormon Studies?

For years we have had individuals with specialist knowledge without programs and positions in Mormon Studies. Their existence does not require or even argue for a need for such programs. Since the purpose of Mormon Studies is the key question, and one which I will not presume to answer at this time, I suggest that the answer might depend on the position of the individual to whom the question is put. The purpose of Mormon Studies may mean one thing to the professor of Mormon Studies, another to the student, something else to the donor who has put up the money for the professor’s position, something different to the member of the Church, and yet something different to a leader of the Church.

As in the rest of academia, a potential problem for the professor of Mormon Studies is simply the inevitable pressure to publish, perhaps before the professor has anything to say. Like Jan Shipps, Arthur Henry King encountered the Church in the 1960s, but, unlike Shipps, King did not pretend or presume to be neutral, but rather joined the Church. Already an academic by training and sometime professor at Cambridge, King joined the faculty at Brigham Young University as a professor of English and taught English, particularly Shakespeare. He published very little. After some twenty years among the Latter-day Saints, however, he produced a book which he began by admitting, “I am new to the Church; and I wondered, therefore, what I could say from inside it that could interest you, or indeed, be knowledgeable. I have come in late, but I am addressing people here who have always been in the Church, or perhaps came to it early.” ((King, Abundance of the Heart, 9.)) Yet, his relative newness to the church notwithstanding, he wrote a work which remains one of the most original and insightful books in Mormon Studies because of his careful and thoughtful engagement with the subject. ((King, Abundance of the Heart.)) I doubt that he would have produced anything so profound had he rushed into print to satisfy the timetable of a tenure committee. If a professor has perhaps not matured enough to produce something profound, it is even more unlikely that a graduate student who is not a member of the Church would have anything useful to say. Would a graduate student who has spent 45 hours in a semester-long class on Mormonism really have the hubris to think that he would have anything worthwhile to tell the typical Church member who spends at least 150 hours a year in Church meetings alone (to say nothing of the countless hours outside the Sunday block)? These are people who have covenanted with God and given their lives to him through his Church. They are citizens and inhabitants of the kingdom of God, not tourists. They may not be specialists and they do not know everything, but they know from personal experience and devoted time how the Church works and what LDS life is like.

A professor, furthermore, might take a different attitude toward his subject. Some, caught in the publish or perish trap, might decide to pump forth whatever bilge they think they need to placate a tenure committee, probably staffed by secular Religious Studies scholars. For others, their professorship might serve as an opportunity to demonstrate their erudition or cleverness. While Latter-day Saints may put up the money to fund chairs in Mormon Studies, Religious Studies scholars are the ones who will determine the rank advancement of those who hold university chairs in Mormon Studies and who will determine who will be hired. Thus the interests of Mormon Studies
chairs will not necessarily align with the desires of Latter-day Saints. This has been less of a concern in the past when those hired for Mormon Studies chairs were established scholars, such as Richard Bushman, who had already established track records for competence. Any younger, non-tenured scholar will have to make his or her work in Mormon Studies please the senior scholars in Religious Studies who [Page 108]hold the key to his or her rank advancement and tenure. Will work in Mormon Studies conform to the expectations of the Religious Studies departments? Will it serve the academy, and not the Kingdom? There are times when it might serve both, but there might also be times when one simply cannot serve two masters and thus must choose whom one will serve. “It is the tradition of the academic that he should be a self-regarder, a self-lover, an exhibitionist, a narcissist, one who postures and clowns for educational purposes.” ((King, Abundance of the Heart, 262.)) Arthur Henry King noted, “I have been a member of several universities, and I have visited some two hundred. And I can assure you that the outstanding feature of the faculty of universities is an extraordinary immaturity which springs from self-regard, the praise given by others, arrogance, the belief in one’s own powers—any of these things will bring it about. It is more difficult to grow up when one is clever.” ((King, Abundance of the Heart, 263.))

There is, however, a more excellent way. As Arthur Henry King taught, “When we have laid down at Christ’s feet all our scholarship, all our learning, all the tools of our trades, we discover that we may pick them all up again, clean them, adjust them, and use them for the Church in the name of Christ and in the light of his countenance. We do not need to discard them. All we need do is to use them from the faith which now possesses us. And we find that we can.” ((King, Abundance of the Heart, 30.)) Otherwise, as Hugh Nibley warned, for those who do not defend the kingdom of God, their “whole career will become one long face-saving operation—at the expense of the Church.” ((Hugh Nibley, “Nobody to Blame,” in Hugh Nibley, Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2008), 136.))

Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions of the tree of life are relevant here. Lehi describes “a great and spacious building . . . filled [Page 109]with people, both old and young, both male and female, . . . in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:26–27). An angel explains to Nephi that the building represents “the world and the wisdom thereof” (1 Nephi 11:35). Nephi somberly explains that “as many as heeded them, had fallen away” (1 Nephi 8:34).

For Latter-day Saints, who generally already know their faith much better than outsiders ever will, one important purpose for Mormon Studies is to provide believers with insight. Arthur Henry King liked to quote from T.S. Eliot: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” ((T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” V, from The Four Quartets, in T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 145.)) A good work in Mormon Studies will make the Latter-day Saint who already knows the subject feel as though he or she is encountering the subject for the first time. It will add fresh insight and be edifying.

Are Scholars of Mormon Studies Necessarily the Best at Interpreting What is Going on in the Church?

If the purpose of Mormon Studies is to be insightful and edifying, we might wonder how insightful scholars of Mormon Studies actually are. I was struck by the perspicacity of one member of the Church with whom I attended the October 1999 Priesthood Session of General Conference. After the meeting, he announced that the Church was going to sell ZCMI, which the Church did a month and a half later. He had correctly read between the lines when the following passage was delivered over the pulpit:
Now, the next question: “Why is the Church in business?”

We have a few business interests. Not many. Most of these were begun in very early days when the Church was the only organization that could provide the capital that was needed to start certain business interests designed to serve the people in this remote area. We have divested ourselves long since of some of these where it was felt there was no longer a need. Included in these divestitures, for instance, was the old Consolidated Wagon and Machine Company, which did well in the days of wagons and horse-drawn farm machinery. The company outlived its usefulness.

The Church sold the banks which it once held. As good banking services developed in the community, there was no longer any need for Church-owned banks. ((Gordon B. Hinckley, “Why We Do Some of the Things We Do,” Ensign 29 (1999): 52.))

Granted that the man who drew the conclusion was, and is, more astute than most, the correct conclusion drawn at the time is not necessarily straightforward even in retrospect. Are those who do Mormon Studies so astute? They may not necessarily be. Looking back at various interpretations made by certain intellectuals doing Mormon Studies regarding events and trends happening in the Church, one gets the distinct impression that they misunderstood them. This is not to say that all intellectuals, or even all Mormon intellectuals, are clueless. Most of the time those in Mormon Studies have the good sense not to claim to be prophets, but they have, on occasion, presumed as much. ((Nibley, “Nobody to Blame,” 127.)) If Latter-day Saints are going to find something insightful and edifying in Mormon Studies, some facets of the field are going to need to change.

What Sort of Topics Should be Covered by Mormon Studies?

For some, Mormon Studies is synonymous with Mormon History. While history is an important component of Mormon Studies, the field itself cannot be reduced to history. By its designation, Mormon Studies models itself on the broader discipline of Religious Studies. The chairs in Mormon Studies have, so far, been in Religious Studies departments, not history departments. Church members excited over the prospect of Mormon Studies may not be as excited over the topics that Religious Studies as a larger discipline prefers to address.

One could consider the list of the Mormon Studies topics presented over the last few years at the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion, perhaps the premiere outlet for Religious Studies in the United States. ((The list of has been assembled over several years from the American Academy of Religion’s website, with excerpts of the author’s abstracts when available. The length of the list has forced it into an appendix.)) It is indicative of the type of topics that one can expect to emerge out of a Mormon Studies program. Latter-day Saints will find among the topics the innocuous to the noxious. If anything, it shows the type of work that is promoted under the rubric of Mormon Studies. As might be expected in Religious Studies, there is a tremendous interest in interreligious dialogues, and comparisons across different religions. Because Religious Studies, like many “Studies” fields, tends to use a post-modern lens, which sees religion as a means to seize or maintain power (religion as politics by other means), there is a concentrated focus on politics. (The danger of such a position is that one might come to view the Church as a merely human institution that can or should be politically manipulated. It seems to me that those who take this position have grossly misunderstood the Church.) Like most “Studies” fields, Religious Studies is also fixated on issues of race and gender, particularly on sexual orientation and, from certain perspectives, deviant sexual behavior. It is unsurprising, then, that some think Mormon Studies should be no
exception. Those involved in Mormon Studies have also been interested in Latter-day Saint arts. Pilgrimage seems to be another popular topic. There are other topics, but their rarity makes them almost appear as though they were aberrations. Treatments of Latter-day Saint scriptures do appear, but are fairly rare and usually deal with what someone said about a text rather than the text itself.

This is not to say that all of these topics are illegitimate, or non-academic, or uninteresting, although some of them might be some of those things. However, the vast majority of these studies are far removed from the issues that most Latter-day Saints deal with on a daily basis. Too many of them qualify as higher illiteracy. They are not things that Latter-day Saints will find insightful or edifying. They are an imposition of the interests of outsiders on the Latter-day Saints. They generally deal with isolated instances or marginal phenomena. None of them deal with the gospel. None of them deal with the central issues of the kingdom of God. Few of them appear to help the kingdom—at best, they are neutral toward its progress, and at worst, they are sometimes overtly hostile. They are distractions from what we are supposed to be doing as a Church and as a people. "Our task is not to accept agnostic literature." ((King, Abundance of the Heart, 268.)) That is, for Latter-day Saints, the danger in Mormon Studies. We can expect that as younger scholars in Mormon Studies try to produce work respected by the academy at large, more of the sort of drivel that is at best of marginal interest to the Saints will be produced in the name of satisfying whatever prevailing fad possesses the academy. King writes,

We do not need to catch up with the world, the flesh, and the devil. If we are the Lord’s, we are not of this world. If we fulfill prophecy, it will not be by imitating other universities, but by taking note of what they do and, in the light or darkness of that, working out our own path. That path should ultimately be traced for us by inspiration and revelation, but it will not be traced for us at all unless we use ourselves to the maximum in the magnificent possibilities that are given us here. We are obligated, each of us, to make the best of ourselves in order that we may do the best for Christ, and this is as true of our intellectual work as of all other kinds of work we have to do. ((King, Abundance of the Heart, 271.))

Not all of the presentations at the American Academy of Religion meetings were by members of the Church. Some were by disaffected Latter-day Saints, some by those who have left the Church, some by anti-Mormons who have never been members, some simply by professors who think they know more about the Church than they actually do. We can expect more of these in the future. After all, "to attack religion is the one safe course for the ambitious intellectual. . . . this marks him as a great thinker and above all saves him from being called to account, for if he is too closely questioned or criticized, he can always play the martyred liberal." ((Nibley, “Nobody to Blame,” 137–38.)) It is even likely that a graduate student will train to become a secular, academic species of professional anti-Mormon. Indeed, I know of at least four who are. Ironically, he or she may do so in a Mormon Studies program funded by members of the Church who could conceive of nothing ill coming out of it.

We should expect more of things like the program, “What the Study of Mormonism Brings to Religious Studies: A Special AAR Session Organized on the Occasion of the Bicentennial of Joseph Smith’s Birth” which was presented at the 2005 American Academy of Religion meetings in Philadelphia. At that session, one scholar announced that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had no interest in being perceived as Christian until the year 2000. The Latter-day Saints in the audience, who made up probably between one and two thirds of the assembled, may have been wondering where this person had been, since the subject has made periodic appearances
in General Conference from as early as 1962. ((Hugh B. Brown, “Are the Latter-day Saints . . . Christian?” Improvement Era 65/6 (June 1962): 408–10.)) One after the other speakers prefaced their prepared remarks with the comment, “I do not really know anything about the Mormons, but . . . .” The pièce de résistance of the entire meeting was the observation by a distinguished Old Testament scholar, based on an examination of three pages literally at random from the Book of Mormon, that the Book of Mormon made no use of the Old Testament. With such truly incredible conclusions one wonders how much more he could have embarrassed himself in front of such an audience, at least a third of whom recognized that the emperor had no clothes. One also wonders what sort of lack of study of Mormonism continues to occur in Religious Studies. Not all presentations on Latter-day Saints in such programs are so blithely ignorant of the object of their study, but too many are. This is not a situation which would occur—much less be tolerated—in virtually any other discipline.

**Is Mormon Studies Reductionist?**

The session devoted to “What the Study of Mormonism Brings to Religious Studies” was notable for another omission. There was no mention of one of the especially distinctive features of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When Joseph Smith went to Washington, D.C. in December 1839 to petition redress for the robbery, vandalism, and deprivation of rights associated with the Missouri persecutions, the President of the United States, Martin Van Buren, asked him “wherein we differed in our religion from the other religions of the day. Brother Joseph said we differed in mode of baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. We considered that all other considerations were contained in the gift of the Holy Ghost.” ((History of the Church, 4:42.)) The presence, influence, and inspiration of the Holy Ghost is still seen as a driving force among the Latter-day Saints. One Sunday a month, the bulk of the time in the principal worship service is devoted to members, as prompted by the Holy Spirit, telling of the influence that the Spirit has had in their lives and of the mighty acts of God they have witnessed. A section of the Church’s official magazine for adults is devoted to the same thing. Much of what has been done in the name of Mormon Studies omits this distinctive characteristic. For some topics and discussion, it may not be necessary or appropriate, and some who do Mormon Studies may not believe a word of it, but to wholly omit it from consideration is to falsify the account of the experience of Latter-day Saints. It cannot be a true account. It reduces the faith of the Saints to something much less. It is as though one were to stage Shakespeare’s Tempest without Prospero or Ariel.

As has happened in other Religious Studies sub-disciplines, Mormon Studies might try to describe something and the Latter-day Saints might find their faith “not only well described, but also explained, i.e., explained away into political, historical or literary factors.” ((Herman te Velde, “The History of the Study of Ancient Egyptian Religion and its Future,” in Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century, ed. Zahi Hawass and Lyla Pinch Brock (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 2:43.)) 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. Latter-day Saints who engage in such work might wonder how their work fits in with Doctrine and Covenants 59:21. Those who are not Latter-day Saints or who are merely “cultural Mormons” should realize that their reductionist work will be viewed by the Saints as flawed: at best as not fully accurate and at worst as fundamentally fallacious, if not intentionally misleading.

Those who take a reductionist approach, Nibley noted, do not take kindly to those who suggest there is something more, or who try to correct their errors. They “promptly sound the alarm and attack them as fanatics and troublemakers.” ((Nibley, “Nobody to Blame,” 136.)) The current straw man term of opprobrium is apologist, ironically employed by individuals vigorously and vociferously defending their own position, i.e., acting as apologists themselves. The entire scholarly enterprise is
scarcely anything but apologetics—the defense or advocacy of a position through reason, evidence, and the marshaling of argument.

Is There a Political Program to Mormon Studies?

Many academic fields that end in “studies” are viewed by some as less a discipline than a political program, as less interested in doing research than in indoctrinating students into a particular ideology. One wonders whether some engaging in Mormon Studies have such an ideological program. Looking at the trendy topics covered in presentations on Mormon Studies at past academic conferences, one may perhaps be forgiven for asking such an impolitic question. If the faith of the Saints is going to be reduced to something, to what will it be reduced? If there is a political program, Latter-day Saints will want to know to what extent the ideological agenda coincides with sustaining the kingdom of God. Most political agendas simply do not coincide with the kingdom of God. If a book or article of Mormon Studies is reductionist, it will largely reduce the faith of the Saints to something with a political agenda, and that political agenda, having removed God from the kingdom of God, will be something largely alien to the community of believers.

What is the Student of a Program in Mormon Studies Supposed to Do with His or Her Education?

Whenever I have run into Latter-day Saints enrolled in a divinity program, I have asked them what they intend to do with their degree. After all, the purpose of a divinity school is to prepare ministers of various other denominations for the ministry. Since a Latter-day Saint cannot be a minister in those denominations, what would one do with a divinity degree? Fortunately, all of those I have talked to were getting a Master’s degree and have intended to use it as a stepping stone into a doctoral program, so it made some sense on the path of education. Currently there are no Mormon Studies degrees (the degrees are in Religious Studies), but Mormon Studies could be an academic ticket to nowhere. As the chair of one Religious Studies department put it: “In the academic world, specialization in Mormon Studies can wreck a promising career.” (Peter A. Huff, “A Gentile Recommends the Book of Mormon,” Dialogue 43/2 (2010): 208.) In the past, those who did Mormon Studies got their training in other fields and pursued Mormon Studies, initially, on the side. This is true of most of the bigger names in Mormon Studies such as Richard Bushman (American history), Terryl Givens (comparative literature), Arthur Henry King (Shakespeare), Leonard Arrington (economics), John Sorenson (anthropology), Hugh Nibley (history), Dan Peterson (Arabic), Lou Midgley (political philosophy), Noel Reynolds (political philosophy), and Jack Welch (law). At one time most of these, such as Nibley, Sorenson, Bushman, Givens, Peterson, Reynolds, Welch, and Midgley, were associated with the Neal A. Maxwell Institute but the Institute’s current management has decided to go in a different direction. (Bushman and Givens are still associated with the Institute on the new Mormon Studies Review advisory editorial board announced in late March, 2013.)

If Mormon Studies programs house and promote students who are in Mormon Studies to promote their own anti-Mormon agenda, they will destroy their program’s reputation with places that might be inclined to hire their graduates. While one might think that graduate programs would, in their own interest, not want to make their students toxic, most do not seem to care. So long as they are well-paid, some academics seem not to care about the fate of their students; and thus we see that academia will not support its children at the last day. Will this cause students who recognize that something is wrong with the program to avoid it? Might the long-term result be the elimination of such an academic program? This might well be the case with Mormon Studies programs.
Are the Funds for Mormon Studies Chairs Wasted?

So far three chairs have been endowed in Mormon Studies (Utah State University, Claremont Graduate University, and the University of Virginia). Endowed chairs do not come cheap. What sort of return do the investors expect from their investment? Are the publications and the type of research done by those chairs in line with the expectations of their Latter-day Saint funders? Obviously the donors are the ones who can best answer those questions, but the Latter-day Saint community has an interest in the answer to the questions. In the end, Mormon Studies is not about some small clique of intellectuals but about the Latter-day Saints who are the subject of the study and who may feel that the study rightfully belongs to them.

Conclusion

Above all, the relatively new field of Mormon Studies needs humility in its practitioners. Like it or not, the real experts on Mormon Studies are the General Authorities. As good as some of us may be in our particular niches, we need to keep in mind the many things that we do not know, and may never know. Mormon intellectuals are not particularly well positioned to get a very broad view of a worldwide Church. The interests and incentives of those who engage in Mormon Studies are not necessarily, and for the most part are not at all, the interests of the Kingdom. While typical Latter-day Saints might naïvely think that Mormon Studies is a good idea, they will not be happy with most of the material that passes for Mormon Studies if it follows the trend of Religious Studies in general, or the early output of those currently engaged in formal Mormon Studies programs. Scholars who want Mormon Studies to conform to the Religious Studies model should not be surprised, then, if Latter-day Saints have little regard for the work that they do. For most Latter-day Saints, the question is not whether serving God with all one’s mind can include Mormon Studies, but whether Mormon Studies is actually serving God.

Appendix

Sorted by Topic (author’s names removed to protect the guilty)

Comparative Religion

“I am a Mormon’ and ‘I am a Scientologist’: Recent Marketing Efforts in Mormonism and Scientology” (2011). “This presentation offers a comparative analysis and critique of recent marketing efforts by both churches to introduce the public to ordinary Mormons and Scientologists as a means of introducing the Mormon Church and the Church of Scientology: the “I am a Mormon” and “I am a Scientologist” campaigns. Why are these churches marketing themselves in these ways? What do they reveal about the socio-religious dialectic and tension between new religious movements and mainstream American society? This presentation draws on video evidence, fieldwork, and interviews conducted with church leaders to elucidate the origin and aim of the campaigns from the perspective of Mormons and Scientologists themselves.”

“The Personal and the Impersonal Divine in Mormonism and Bohemianism” (2011). The author sees similarities between Joseph Smith and Jacob Boehme. “In their Promethean equation of the divine and human Mormons were more radical than Boehme for though he eliminates the ontological distinction between God and humanity Boehme still makes important distinctions between the relative eternal status of God and humanity. Joseph Smith eliminates this distinction in the King Follet Discourse declaring that God is a glorified human being.”
“The Enoch Figure: Pre- and Post-Joseph Smith” (2011). The paper claims to rely on “snippets of Enoch’s appearances throughout history, showing how Enoch is almost always used in associated with secret knowledge (mysteries) and powerful (often magical) language. Special consideration will be given to Joseph Smith and his complex connections with the many Enoch texts, traditions, and ideas.”

“Not the End of the Story: Theological Reflections on the Mormon Afterlife” (2011). The paper examines “the more fundamental differences between a Mormon afterlife and the one taught by traditional Christianity” through the lens of “dualism and embodiment.”


“‘And the Word Was Made Flesh’: The Meaning of the Incarnation in LDS Christology” (2010).


“Mormonism and the Christological Spectrum” (2010).

“Evangelicals, Catholics, and Mormons in Dialogue: Pluralism and the American Religious Right” (2009). The purpose of this paper is so that those “committed to more liberal pluralisms may find that this cautious yet contested conservative pluralism open up new possibilities for elaborating counter-discourses to religious conservatism and for extending pluralist values in United States’ society.”

“The Significance of Recent Mormon-Evangelical Dialogues” (2009). Claiming that a “Mormon-Evangelical dialogue” has been occurring over many years, this paper "examines the issues engaged, the strategies employed, the challenges faced, and the consequences observed within the respective faith communities.”

“Lifting the Scourge’: The LDS Resanctification of the Community of Christ’s Kirtland Temple, 1965–2008” (2009). This paper claims that it “interrogates why and how a place can be transformed from defiled space to sacred space in less than a generation.”

“Nineteenth-Century North American Brethren in Latin America: A Brief Comparison of Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses” (2007). This paper purports to address issues because “North American nineteenth century new religious movements such as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are expanding largely under the radar of social science heretofore preoccupied with the growth of evangelicos.”

“Teaching Mormon Studies: Theory, Topics, and Texts” (2007). This panel discussion was supposed to address “how will it [Mormon Studies] be impacted by the particular theoretical issues that influence these sub-disciplines as well as by recent theorizing in the study and teaching of religion generally? How might Mormonism best be studied from an interdisciplinary perspective or from the vantage point of comparative religion?”


“'A PO Box and a Desire to Witness for Jesus’: Calling and Mission in the Ex-Mormons for Jesus” (2006).

“Opening the Bible: Open Canon and Openness Theology” (2006).


“What’s in a Church’s Name?: Mormonism, Christianity, and the Limits of Self-Identification” (2001).

**Politics**


“Anti-Mormonism and the Romney Campaign; or, Did Evangelical Hostility Sink Mitt’s Ship?” (2008).


“Media and the Mormon Candidate: One Reporter’s View” (2008).


**Race**

“Jane Manning James: Reenacting and Reclaiming the ‘Black’ and ‘Mormon’ Past” (2011). The paper argues that “the LDS worked to preserve Utah as a (white) Mormon homeland by discouraging blacks from moving to Utah and joining the Church. Yet the presence of well-known black Mormons, especially Jane Manning James, hindered the realization of such a project.” It claims that “a century later, through reenactments of James’s spiritual autobiography, contemporary black Mormons aim to create a space in the Church, and in Utah, in which a saint can be both black and Mormon.”

“‘Not Only to the Gentile but Also to the African’: African American Mormons and Mormon Identity in the Nineteenth Century” (2008).


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“Reorienting Mormonism: Race, Ethnicity, and the Possibilities for Paradigm Shifts in the LDS Church” (2008).


“Seeing Jane: Jane Elizabeth Manning James’ Posthumous Career as an LDS Symbol” (2006). The author states “I argue that Saints have selectively appropriated, and often simplified, [Page 124]the stories James told about her own life in order to create a usable past and imagine a brighter future for the LDS Church and the world.” The author, on the other hand, would rather see her as one who “repeatedly petitioned LDS Church officials for her endowments and sealings, rituals that would enable her to reach the highest levels of glory after her death. Because of her race, officials consistently denied James’ requests.”

“Mormons, Natives, and the Category “Religion” in the Colonization of the American West” (2007). This paper purports to use history to explain “the influence of theological agendas in the emergence of religious studies in American universities”


Gender

“The Mommy Wars, Mormonism, and the ‘Choices’ of American Motherhood” (2011). Starting with the supposition “that choices among American women regarding childbirth and infant feeding necessarily result in regret and insecurity that are then projected onto other women” the paper intends to show that “religiously motivated ‘choices’ [among LDS women] undermine this thesis.”

“Western Pioneer Mythos in the Negotiation of Mormon Feminism and Faith” (2011). The paper idolizes the “Mormon women who supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)” because they “faced persecution and excommunication from the church.” It argues that “despite the possible cost, they continued to support the bill bolstered by a western pioneer mythos.”

“Scripting, Performing, Testifying: Giving Faithful ‘Seximony’ through the Mormon Vagina Monologues” (2011). Examining a presentation entitled “the Mormon Vagina Monologues” at the 2001 Sunstone conference that “critiqued the Mormon Church patriarchy, but also used essential elements [Page 125]of Mormon faith – those of testimony, scripture, and personal revelation – to envision a Church more accepting of sexual differences. Using methodological approaches from Mormon studies, feminist studies of religion, and performance studies . . . a number of monologues are examined, including pieces dealing with sacred undergarments, female masturbation, eternal marriage and the celestial kingdom, and the personal and theological struggles of male-to-female transsexual Latter-day Saints.”

“‘Further Light and Knowledge’: Ways of Knowing in Mormonism and the New Spirituality” (2011). A look at “how particular LDS women have synthesized, supplemented or replaced Mormonism with esoteric elements of twenty-first century New Spirituality . . . such as astrology, reincarnation, channeling, and divination” to lead them “towards a progressive, more humanistic spirituality.”

“Female Priestly Subjectivity and Dynasty in Early Mormonism” (2011). “This paper takes up the question of female subjectivity raised by the equation of priestly power and marriage. . . . In sum, I will consider the manner in which these women inhabited or performed patriarchal norms and, in
the process, achieved a recognizably culture-specific subjectivity or self-conscious identity and agency in public and private, ecclesiastical and familial domains.”


“The Interpretation of Tradition within Mormon Women’s Literature” (2003).

Sex

“Captive Bodies, Queer Religions: Scripting North American Religious Difference” (2011). The author argues that “queering the study of North American religions requires more than simply recovering the voices of American LGBT people of faith—that we must rather mobilize critical theories of sexualities to think about religious difference in North America. Next, I consider three examples of the North American captivity narrative genre—Mormon, Neopagan, and Muslim—as articulations of American Protestant anxieties about the perceived challenges marginal religions pose to heteronormativity.”

“Giving Them a Way Out: What American Muslim Women Can Do About Polygyny” (2011). The paper argues that fundamentalist Mormons have allowed American Muslims to be more open about polygyny. “This paper will outline the history of polygyny as practiced in the U.S., particularly among African American Muslims, and consider the ways in which the jurisprudence of Islam and the U.S. may offer Muslim women the legitimate ‘way out’ they seek.”

“I am a Daughter of My Heavenly Father’: Transsexual Mormons and Performed Gender Essentialism” (2011). “Using monologues featured in the Mormon Vagina Monologues (MVM) and scripted by male-to-female transsexual Latter-day Saints, this paper offers a case study of sexual identity construction within a rigid religious system.” “In transitioning, Mormon transsexuals disobey the Church but obey God, thereby becoming ‘who the Lord Jesus wants me to be.’ As this paper shows, the MVM’s transsexual contributors reclaim sexual subjectivity by performing testimonies—not of the Church’s truthfulness, but of gender identity and theological commitment.”

“That They Might Have Joy': Towards a Postheteronormative, Gay Mormon Hermeneutic” (2011). The paper strives to find “a viable gay Mormon hermeneutic.” The author argues that the Church will change its position on this issue although “a healthy dose of their own ‘civil disobedience’ may be necessary for LGBTQ Mormons, their families and sympathizers, who are willing to stick with the Church, and seek for change from within it.”

[Page 127]“Joseph Smith, Polygamy, and the Problem of the Levirate Widow” (2011). The paper argues that “Polygamy was part of a wide-ranging attempt to solve the problem of death. In an under-appreciated exegesis of the Sadducean thought experiment of a serially bereaved levirate widow in Luke 20, Smith found support for a tie between widowhood and polygamy, a close association between marriage and resurrection, a demotion of angels, and a view of marriage as a sacrament. This paper explores Smith’s exegesis and its relevance to practical problems like the afterlife shape of families when widow(er)s remarried. This paper also emphasizes the close relationship between early Mormon polygamy and afterlife beliefs.”


“Why Same-Sex Civil Marriage Belongs in the Kingdom of the World: Extending the Teachings of Martin Luther” (2009). This paper claims that a state-based approach to marriage “frees religious communities to accept same-sex civil marriage while simultaneously allowing for particular religious communities to define marriage rites narrowly according to their own sources of authority.”
“Queer Families, Mormon Polygamy, and Big Love” (2008).


“Concealing the Body, Concealing the Sacred: The Decline of Ritual Nudity in Mormon Temples” (2005).


LDS Arts

“‘For Death was That — and This — is Thee’: Stephanie Meyers, Theosis, and the Twenty-first Century Vampire Romance” (2011). “This paper examines Stephanie Meyers’s Twilight novels within the framework of the Mormon doctrine of exaltation, the elevation of the pious to godhood after death.”

“Mormon Literature: Where Are We Going? Where Have We Been?” (2010).


“New York Doll” (2010). A showing of the film by the same name, “a 2005 Sundance Film Festival award winner that treats the formation, demise, and 2004 reunion performance of the New York Dolls, an influential ‘glam-rock,’ ‘proto-punk’ band who performed in the early 1970s. . . . The film centers on bassist Arthur ‘Killer’ Kane, intersecting his role in the band, his conversion to religion (Mormonism), his poverty and loneliness, and his reunion performance with the band, all preceding his death from leukemia.”

“Coming Face to Face with the ‘Mormon Jesus’ through Paintings by Del Parson, Greg Olsen, and Paul Grass” (2010).

“The Mormons” (2007). A showing of Helen Whitney’s PBS documentary which it praises for “the breadth and depth of its coverage.”

“The Interpretation of Tradition within Mormon Women’s Literature” (2003).

Pilgrimage

“‘When You’re Here, We’re Here’: Encounters between the Living and the Dead at Latter-day Saint Pilgrimage Sites” (2011). “This paper examines encounters between the living and the dead in pilgrimage using Latter-day Saint (Mormon) pilgrimage as an illustrative case study. . . .
Latter-day Saint pilgrimages are uniquely structured around interaction between the living and the dead, making the Latter-day Saint case particularly productive for exploring these issues.

“This Is the (Right) Place: Memorializing Sacred Space and Time in Salt Lake Valley” (2010).

“‘Over the Winding Trail Forward We Go’: Children and Pilgrimage in the Latter-day Saint Tradition” (2010).


Miscellaneous

“The Cultural Logic of LDS Death-ritualization: Puzzles and Possibilities” (2011). Why didn’t Mormons develop funerary rites as components of the esoteric temple ritual that emerged in the 1840s? Historical precedents in LDS ritual allow us to imagine temple-based funerary rites that might have been but weren’t, in turn providing foils for a Geertzian reading of the cultural logic of how Mormons do and don’t ritualize death.

“‘An Influence Among Humanity’: Internal Religious Debate over Narrative Paradigms” (2010). The author is interested in the 1911 evolution controversy at Brigham Young University, although she cannot get even the name of the Church correct. She argues that “ultimately, the controversy represents a missed opportunity for the church to be viewed as relevant in secular discourse and opens up a discussion about the potential of religious organization in general to better engage in secular discourse.”

“Joseph Smith and the Rhetoric of Economics and Prophecy” (2006) “this paper will examine Smith’s discourse on economics in an attempt to state clearly his theory of political economy, and to expand understanding” of “prophetic rhetoric” which “can best be characterized as poetic, if not frenzied.”

LDS Scripture

“Discussion of Grant Hardy’s Understanding the Book of Mormon (Oxford University Press, 2010)” (2010).