How Wide the Divide? The Absence of Conversation Between Mormon Studies and Mormon Mainstream
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My title plays off the ground-breaking interfaith dialogue between Mormons and Evangelicals initiated by Professor Craig L. Blomberg of Denver Seminary and Professor Stephen E. Robinson of Brigham Young University and the book that emerged from that work. They identify history, terminology, misinformation, theological differences, and inflammatory rhetoric as some of the primary interpersonal and institutional causes of the rift between adherents of the two religious traditions. As a result of their work, many Mormon-Evangelical interfaith dialogues have been undertaken in an effort to bridge the divide between Mormons and Evangelicals.

I will argue here that a comparable divide exists between scholars engaged in the field of Mormon Studies and the Mormon mainstream. For my purposes, the phrase Mormon Studies refers to the academically grounded multi-faceted study of Mormonism—specifically, in this case, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormon mainstream refers to the body of Latter-day Saints that subscribe to the general prevailing current, direction, and activities of the Mormon Church and the associated culture found within the Mormon tradition. The divide is more complex than accounting for marketing strategies of mainstream Mormon publishing houses and their attending bookstore chains which increasingly reflect a voracious market-driven appetite for romance fiction with a Mormon twist, compilations of creative recipes, slogan-laden wall hangings, vinyl lettering, and scented candles. More significantly, the divide includes a high-profile segment of the academy that we might reasonably expect to contribute to furthering the study of Mormonism on a variety of academically responsible fronts such as research, attending conferences, presenting at conferences, encouraging institutional support, and fostering greater depth and breadth of the emerging base of literature and general scholarly milieu of Mormon Studies through writing, and publication in top-tier journals. However, most do not. Why not? In order to address these issues and questions, I, like Blomberg and Robinson, will propose a theoretical framework that will, in part, account for how the divide came to be in conjunction with the emergence of Mormon Studies as a scholarly field. In the face of this analysis, it may be easy for Mormon Studies scholars to respond to the divide with a carefree shrug since many “rifts” exist between fields of academic study and the greater lay community. However, I will argue that in this case, widening the divide through ambivalence on the part of the emerging Mormon Studies Academy may result in problematic cultural diffusion. I will argue the need for intrafaith dialogue and bilingualism between scholars of Mormon Studies and the Mormon mainstream.

How Wide is the Divide?

Consider the following examples that illustrate the existence of a significant divide between Mormon Studies and Mormon mainstream: 1) Most books authored by prominent Mormon Studies scholars including Mauss, and Shipps are not for sale at Deseret and Seagull Bookstores and are not available on their respective websites. Richard and Claudia Bushman
and Terryl and Fiona Givens are four recent and welcomed exceptions to this market pattern; 2) None of the BYU campuses maintain a Mormon Studies program with attending faculty and related coursework; 3) Even with long-standing programs at Utah Valley University, Utah State University, and Claremont Graduate School along with emerging programs at the University of Virginia and the University of Utah, much of the influence of the Mormon Studies academy remains primarily within the Mormon Studies academy.

Are we able to account for how this divide came to be in conjunction with the emergence of Mormon Studies? In this portion of my paper I will propose a three-pronged theoretical framework that will, in part, account for the divide between Mormon Studies and Mormon mainstream.

**Three-pronged Framework**

*Inclusion or Exclusion—No Middle Ground*

Randall Paul of the Foundation for Interreligious Diplomacy noted that “anger and ill will often arise when people challenge each other’s deeply held beliefs, they typically avoid fully sharing convictions that call into question the beliefs of another. This avoidance hampers the development of deep trust between people that can only come from full disclosure of beliefs and feelings. In the long run, this avoidance creates suppressed resentment.” The following example illustrates inclusion which leads to trust and exclusion resulting in resentment.

While I am an independent scholar, I teach at the LDS Institute of Religion adjacent to Utah Valley University (UVU). One of my responsibilities is to coordinate interfaith dialogue between Evangelical students visiting from other universities and Mormon students attending the institute of religion. The dialogues are held at the institute. My colleague and counterpart in the discussions with the approval of my administrators, is Pastor Greg Johnson. He was raised Mormon and converted to Evangelicalism in his mid-teens. Pastor Johnson is a prominent figure in Mormon-Evangelical circles as a dialogical partner and author. In addition to his hundreds of dialogues with Mormons elsewhere, he has participated in several interfaith events at the Orem Institute. Furthermore, each time he shares standard Evangelical positions relative to Mormonism such as “Mormons are not Christian.” Even so, Pastor Johnson is a colleague, friend, and the door to the institute is open to him. He has spoken to institute students many times in the past and I anticipate that he will do so many times in the future.

On the other hand, Dr. Brian D. Birch is a practicing member of the Mormon Church. Professionally, he is a professor of philosophy, Director of the Religious Studies Program, and academic vice-president over engaged learning at Utah Valley University. The academic study of Mormonism is a key facet of his professorial pursuits and is a prominent scholar in the field of Mormon studies. However, when I approached administrators at the institute to gain initial clearance to extend an invitation to Dr. Birch to participate on a Mormon interfaith dialogue panel with Pastor Johnson and myself the request was initially denied on the grounds that Birch, as an academic, might say things to institute students that could diminish their faith. Ironically, Birch had recently returned from Wheaton College, where he participated in the ongoing Mormon/Evangelical dialogue led by Robert Millet and Richard Mouw. However, the message was clear from institute administrators: an ex-Mormon Evangelical minister that openly portrays Latter-day Saints as a non-Christian cult is less a threat to institute students
than a Mormon returned missionary that pursues the study of Mormonism professionally from a scholarly empirical bent.

Birch need not feel singled out. I encountered the same concerns from administrators when I proposed that the institute host a reception for Terryl Givens at a Mormon Studies event at UVU. Even though Givens was a sitting Mormon bishop at the time, three different inquiries were made concerning his orthodoxy. Fortunately, Birch and Givens eventually received invitations to lecture at the institute. This did not occur, however, until the type of *intrafaith* dialogue was entered into that will be discussed at the end of this paper. Without intrafaith dialogue one way or two way exclusion will likely persist between Mormon Studies and Mormon mainstream.

**Rational and Revelation**

The Enlightenment promoted a wide-spread, long term acknowledgment of the value of rational empirical thought to investigate and obtain truth. The result was not the demise of God and religion but a shift in world view. Due to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus, and many others, reason, not God, occupied the center of the universe. For Mormons, Joseph Smith’s First Vision and subsequent flood of revelations reoriented the world view and God once again reigned supreme. But a Mormon Studies scholar would affirm that Joseph Smith’s First Vision did not negate the essential role of rational thought in coming to know God. A spackling of Latter-day commands such as: “*search* these commandments” (D&C 1:37), “*study* it out in your mind” (D&C 9:8), “*seek* learning even by *study*” (D&C 88:118) illustrate that God demands rational engagement. Identifying the precise moment in Mormon cultural history that rational thought became equated with secular thought exceeds the scope of my purposes today. Nevertheless, mainstream Mormons generally view rational approaches to religiosity as secular and devotional approaches to religiosity as spiritual. Hence, in the minds of many Mormons, secular study of religion either hedges devotion to God or may significantly debilitate the stature of God in the mind of adherents. Therefore, secular thought relative to religious study and inquiry is frequently deemed highly sinister by mainstream Mormons.

**Certainty and Ambiguity**

The Doctrine and Covenants is a sacred book of scripture in Mormonism that contains a series of revelations—the vast majority were received by Joseph Smith—that are deemed the voice of God to the world. The first revelation is known as “The Lord’s Preface” wherein God declared that the Church organized by Joseph Smith is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased” (D&C 1:30). It could be argued that aside from Joseph Smith’s claims associated with the First Vision, this pronouncement of one-hundred percent certainty may be the boldest claim the Mormon prophet made in his life. Significantly, Joseph Smith never backed down from this assertion even in the face of severe persecution and martyrdom. Neither did his followers. With this legacy in mind, it is not surprising that robust certainty is often the ground on which Mormon mainstream stands. Be not mistaken, certainty stated within the banks of reason and revelation is prized. However, a testimonial declaration like “I know the gospel is true with every fiber of my being” may be a different brand of certainty. It could be situated in a category of religious hyperbole and may retard one’s ability to grapple with legitimate ambiguities couched in secular and religious life.
For example, a Latter-day Saints’ personal testimony may be certain—yet the age-old problem of evil still exists and has provided significant ambiguity for believers over many millennia.

The general relationship then between certainty, ambiguity, and the divide between Mormon Studies and Mormon mainstream may be stated as follows: Mormon mainstream frequently celebrates certainty as the triumphal accomplishment of Joseph Smith’s restoration. Therefore, ambiguities associated with Mormonism are understandably very troubling. To be sure, certainty is a spiritual legacy of Joseph Smith’s Mormonism but more recently a cultural brand of certainty constitutes a driving current of our time. Every hair cell, every freckle, each toenail—in a phrase—every fiber of our being—must know. This quest is not problematic in Mormon thought in the ultimate sense of salvation. However, announcing one’s arrival at this destination prematurely likely will be. Scholars of Mormon Studies are no less prone to embrace certainty. However, they may be more guarded in their articulation of it due to the exploration of many ambiguities extant in the Mormon tradition. In this regard, Latter-day Saint scholars of Mormon Studies are a “people of paradox.”

**Intrafaith Dialogue and Bilingualism**

We have explored possible reasons why a Mormon Studies scholar was viewed with greater suspicion than an ex-Mormon Evangelical preacher in some Mormon circles. We have not explored what to do about the glaring reality behind the vignette. The academy of Mormon Studies has a choice: engage in dialogue with Latter-day Saints outside the academy and more carefully foster the growth of that circle; or continue to expend large quantities of time, energy, and resources to write books, articles, and deliver addresses at conferences to a small, homogenous, and seemingly unchanging group of scholars. I recommend dialogue.

Perhaps the three most prominent pioneers of Mormon Studies intrafaith dialogue are Richard Bushman, Armand Mauss, and Terryl and Fiona Givens. Each has been publishing top tier research in the emerging field of Mormon Studies for decades. However, the work of these scholars has received varying degrees of prominence among mainstream Mormons in recent years. Each has provided a forum wherein the value of academic study of Mormonism became more evident among mainstream Mormons.

For example, Bushman’s *Rough Stone Rolling* is a forthright, transparent, and scholarly biography of Joseph Smith. He makes no attempt to gloss the history of Smith or create a work of devotional historiography. Rather, Bushman provides exceptional context and then lays open the life of the prophet and his family before the reader. Historical facts, placed in context, stand on their own merit and convey the story of the rise of Mormonism. Mormons accustomed to reading only those portions of Church history that made Joseph Smith larger than life are often troubled by their initial exposure to Bushman’s biography. Bushman’s narrative possesses a certain rawness that sparks conversation and sometimes controversy in many circles. The book has evoked this response from the date of publication. It goaded conversations among general populations of Mormons that had almost never been breached before such as the nature of priesthood power—its restoration and earliest conceptions among Mormons. Similarly, Joseph Smith’s institution of plural marriage was a topic many Mormons disbelieved entirely or created explanations for his sealing to women already deceased or aged and single. Bushman’s work threw light on plural marriage in a way that generated broader conversations and more careful explanations.
Similarly, the work of Armand Mauss relative to race relations in Mormonism is definitive. His book *All Abraham’s Children* is a masterful treatise on the history, cultural tensions, and need for Mormons to genuinely reach beyond their Euro-centric and Judeo-centric roots. Mauss’s writings were brought to the fore in recent months when a Washington Post reporter interviewed a Brigham Young University professor of religion and questioned him about the Mormon Church’s priesthood ban that persisted from 1852 to 1978. Unfortunately, the professor provided justifications for the ban that were rooted in nineteenth century racism and prominent nineteenth century religious folklore that linked blacks to ancient Cain and his supposed curse. The interview shocked Mormon and non-Mormon readers alike. The writings of Armand Mauss on Mormonism, religious folklore, and acceptable race relations were immediately distributed through various electronic mediums. Within hours many mainstream Mormons were introduced to Mauss and his calculated, historically grounded, socially responsible, and religiously coherent writings. Dialogue about the ban was profuse. Eventually, leaders of the Mormon Church issued a statement indicating that no one knows why the ban was put in place and why it persisted for so many years. Ultimately, Mauss’s scholarship in Mormon Studies was exceptionally helpful to spur greater intrafaith dialogue and understanding.

Finally, Terryl and Fiona Givens’ book *The God Who Weeps* stands as a watershed publication in intrafaith dialogue between Mormon Studies Scholars and mainstream Mormons. Terryl Givens, who usually publishes through Oxford, teamed up with his wife and approached Mormon owned Deseret Book Company with a publication idea. Essentially it was this: Oxford, Illinois, North Carolina, and other university presses have shown over many years that Mormon Studies publications are viable economic undertakings. Furthermore, most of the books sold are purchased by Mormons. Therefore, why not publish a serious work of Mormon Studies through Deseret—the most prominent commercial Mormon press located in the heart of Mormonism? The offer was accepted and the Givens introduced a large body of mainstream Mormons to the language and tone of Mormon Studies. Employing secular literature, history, philosophy, and scripture the Givens’ placed Mormonism in a broader religious framework that allowed readers to expand their appreciation for the breadth and scope of Joseph Smith’s restoration. Like Bushman and Mauss, the Givens’ presented Mormonism without leaning on the tools of devotionalism. Rather, they rationally and dispassionately placed Smith’s revealed conceptions of God alongside those of Milton, Shakespeare, Plato, Augustine, and others. The comparative exercise illustrates richness in all writings compared and mainstream Mormons see their faith tradition as unique but still part of a greater whole. This was literarily and dialogically valuable.

**Conclusion**

Blomberg & Robinson write: “Unless Mormons and Evangelicals make greater efforts to investigate what the other means rather than merely exploiting what the other says, we shall remain, to paraphrase [Mark] Twain, two peoples divided by a common language.” In other words, a significant part of the “divide” between Evangelicals and Mormons is the ability to hear the dialogue but not clearly interpret the vocabulary being employed. The same is true of Mormon Studies and Mormon mainstream. Language does much to determine the width and length of the bridge that could ultimately bridge the divide. It is important that Mormons continue to become more inclusive and less exclusive within their own faith communities. Also,
if the conversation between Mormon Studies scholars and mainstream members is to continue, rational thought and exploration must continue to increase in cultural acceptability. Furthermore, while certainty holds a place in Mormon thought and disposition, it must not displace capacities to grapple with ambiguities within Mormonism. Finally, if there is not intrafaith dialogue between Mormon Studies scholars and mainstream Mormons then the future of Mormon Studies is limited to a small circle of academics. However, with intrafaith dialogue there can be dynamic growth in Mormon Studies interests due, in part, to the increased critical mass of people that speak the language and are oriented to the pursuits of the academic study of Mormonism. Bushman, Mauss, and Givens have provided a helpful paradigm for how this can occur. Ultimately, in the future I would like to present a lecture titled “Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation between Mormon Studies and Mormon Mainstream” and finally a lecture titled “Divide Bridged: Documenting the Collegial Conversation Between Mormon Studies and Mormon Mainstream.”

1 See How Wide the Divide? A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997) 12-24. The four doctrinal areas of division between Mormons and Evangelicals are identified by Blomberg and Robinson to be: 1) scripture; 2) the nature of God and the deification of believers; 3) the deity of Christ and the Trinity; and 4) salvation and the eternal state.
