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To Be Learned Is Good, If One Stays on the Rails

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Paul C. Peterson

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TO BE LEARNED IS GOOD, IF ONE STAYS ON THE RAILS

Paul C. Peterson

ABSTRACT: *This review essay looks at certain problematical issues in the recently published collection of essays honoring Latter-day Saint historian Richard Lyman Bushman. Problems emerge from the title itself, “To Be Learned is Good,” as a result of the failure to note that the Book of Mormon passage “To be learned is good” is a conditional statement. In addition, since these essays are billed as “Essays on Faith and Scholarship,” it is odd most of them do not touch on this subject at all. I examine four essays in depth, including Adam Miller’s “Christo-Fiction, Mormon Philosophy, and the Virtual Body of Christ,” which is offered as a form of clarifying Mormon philosophy but provides more confusion than clarification. Jared Hickman’s essay, “The Perverse Core of Mormonism: The Book of Mormon, Genetic Secularity, and Messianic Decoloniality,” presents Mormonism as a religion that has much in common with Marxism, Frantz Fanon, and Sean Coulhard. While not as bold as Hickman, Patrick Mason looks at Mormonism as a modern religion and suggests that premodern thinkers are largely irrelevant to Mormonism and the modern world. Mason argues that “Mormonism is a religion that could meaningfully converse with modern philosophies and ideologies from transcendentalism, liberalism, and Marxism.” I discuss the weaknesses of this view. Attention is also given to the distinction between apologetics and “Mormon Studies” that arise from essays by Grant Wacker, Armand Mauss, Terryl Givens, and Brian D. Birch, who suggests “a methodological pluralism” in approaching Mormon studies. I note that several of the essays in this volume are worthy of positive note, particularly those by Bushman himself, Mauss (who does address the presumed theme of the book), Givens, Mauro Properzi, and Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye (who also addresses the titled theme of the book in a most engaging manner).*

Review of J. Spencer Fluhman, Kathleen Flake, and Jed Woodworth, eds., *To Be Learned is Good: Essays on Faith and Scholarship in Honor of Richard Lyman Bushman* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017). 368 pp. \$24.56 (hardcover).

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship has undertaken a project that on its face should have been excellent — a collection of essays honoring Latter-day Saint historian Richard Bushman. It consists of 26 essays by scholars who have been students of Bushman or been influenced by him. It “reflects the vibrant exchanges from a memorable scholars’ colloquium in June 2016 in honor of ... Bushman” (ix). Not surprisingly, some of the most prominent figures in contemporary Mormon intellectual circles are contributors, including Bushman himself; his wife, Claudia Bushman; as well as Terryl L. Givens, Armand L. Mauss, Adam S. Miller, Philip L. Barlow, Matthew J. Grow, Laurie F. Maffley-Kipp, Patrick Q. Mason, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Grant Underwood, and Jed Woodworth (who assisted Bushman in the research and editing of Bushman’s monumental biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*).

For all its promise, this collection goes seriously off the rails in several ways. Most notably, the book presents itself as a series of essays on faith and scholarship, implying that the essays, or at least some of them, will consider the relationship between the two. But this important topic seems at best an afterthought for many if not most of the essays. There is even a problem with the volume’s title. Latter-day Saints will recognize that the phrase “to be learned is good” comes from Second Nephi in The Book of Mormon: “But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29). I may have missed it, but I saw no place in this book that recognized that the statement “to be learned is good” is a conditional statement. Hence, “To be learned is good *if* we “hearken unto the counsels of God.” That condition is the crucial key to the relationship between faith and scholarship. This makes the failure to address the absence of the qualifying condition a mystery. Why is the conditional statement left out? Why is “to be learned is good” instead presented as a nonconditional absolute?

In the Book of Mormon, the “to be learned is good” passage is preceded by some stark warnings:

Wherefore, he has given a law; and where there is no law given there is no punishment; and where there is no punishment there

is no condemnation; and where there is no condemnation the mercies of the Holy One of Israel have claim upon them, because of the atonement; for they are delivered by the power of him.

For the atonement satisfieth the demands of his justice upon all those who have not the law given to them, that they are delivered from that awful monster, death and hell, and the devil, and the lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment; and they are restored to that God who gave them breath, which is the Holy One of Israel.

But wo unto him that has the law given, yea, that has all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them, and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state! (2 Nephi 9:25-27)

And the starkest warning of all, particularly for intellectuals (either real or feigned), is the very next verse:

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. (2 Nephi 9:28)

The majority of the essays in this book ignore the question of the relationship between faith and scholarship altogether and seem unwilling to acknowledge the possibility that the presumed wisdom of the academic world can often be foolishness.

Interestingly enough, one person who does not ignore this question is Bushman himself, who has given serious thought to it for much of his academic career. In 1969, Bushman wrote the article “Faithful History,” a thoughtful and useful article for *Dialogue*.¹ For this book, Bushman has written an even better essay, “Finding the Right Words: Speaking Faith in Secular Times” (295-306). This essay, which is an elaboration on President Spencer W. Kimball’s famous 1976 “Second Century of Brigham Young University” address,² is one that any Mormon attending

1. Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Winter 1969), 11-25.

2. Spencer W. Kimball, “Second Century Address,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1976): 445-58.

or thinking of attending a university as either an undergraduate or graduate student would be well-advised to read.

Bushman discusses briefly but movingly a crisis of faith he had before going on his mission. Reflecting on that period in his life, Bushman writes, “I have come to believe that in actuality my problem was not faith but finding the words to express my faith” (299). These would have to be words that were comprehensible to those outside as well as inside the faith, almost like translating from one language to another. The words we might use in a testimony meeting are not necessarily going to be understood by someone outside the faith, as we might expect. That is not only a simple lesson but also a profound one.

Adam Miller and Philosophy of a Kind

This volume is divided into six sections. Section 3 is ominously entitled “Reenvisioning Mormonism.” Does Mormonism really need reenvisioning? If it does, none of the essays in this section or elsewhere in the book offers any clue as to why it needs reenvisioning.

Adam Miller’s essay, “Christo-Fiction, Mormon Philosophy, and the Virtual Body of Christ” (101-10), is a representative essay in this section of the book. Miller, who is probably best known for his book *Letters to a Young Mormon*,³ attempts to clarify some matters, but his essay winds up creating much more confusion than clarification. It is best to turn to Miller’s own words:

For the sake of clarity, let’s borrow some language from Manuel DeLanda’s *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. As we’ve described things, there are three elements in play when it comes to defining Mormonism: (1) the *actual*, (2) the *potential* and (3) what DeLanda, following Gilles Deleuze, refers to as the *virtual*. We can understand (1) what is actual as the *point* in space occupied by a thing in its present state, (2) what is potential as the *line* or vector that traces and projects the specific trajectory of a thing’s past development and future actualization and (3) what is virtual as the *state space* that defines a thing’s manifold of possible states and vectors — a manifold that by definition can be partially actualized only in narrow slices that, compared to that thing’s entire field of action, are exceedingly thin. (102-103)

3. Adam S. Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2013). A second edition of this book was published in January 2018.

Keep in mind that this is Miller's way of attaining clarity. He goes on to tell us that as "a philosopher, then, what I'm interested in is not just Mormonism's actual position (Mormonism as a point in space), or even Mormonism's potential (Mormonism as a specific temporal vector, historical or projected), but this deeper category that shapes them both. I want to know what Mormonism can do. I want to grasp the virtual state space that maps Mormonism's field of action" (103).

Just in case this is not yet altogether clear, we should, Miller suggests, return to DeLanda

to describe the virtual kind of state space. *State space* is a term of art adapted from the world of engineering. In mathematical models of discrete dynamical systems, state space refers to the set of possible values a given system can generate. DeLanda simply says, "state space is a space of given possibility states," or again, "State spaces may be viewed as a way of specifying possible worlds for a given physical system, or at least, each trajectory in the phase portrait representing one possible historical sequence of states for a system or process." In this sense, a state space is a static representation of an agent's dynamic range of action. (103)

Unfortunately, the essay never gets any clearer. Miller loves to remind his readers that he is a philosopher (he does so twice in the first three pages of this essay). And it is true, but he is an academic philosopher and not a Socrates.

Reading this essay reminds me of a story I used to share in many of the classes I taught. A young college freshman returned home for Christmas at the end of his first semester, a semester in which he had an introductory English course where he was taught "critical thinking," an introductory sociology course where he was taught about the social construction of reality, and an introductory philosophy class where he learned about his place in the "space state." When he arrives at home, his mother hands him a glass of water. He says (without a thank you), "This is a glass of water. Or is it a glass of water? And if it is a glass of water, why is it a glass of water?" Shocked, the mother is befuddled at what has happened to her son. But, keep in mind, it is good to be learned.

Jared Hickman and the Perverse Core of Mormonism

Another essay in this section, Jared Hickman's "The Perverse Core of Mormonism: The Book of Mormon, Genetic Secularity, and Messianic

Decoloniality” (131-45), does, indeed, offer us a fundamentally reenvisioned Mormonism. Hickman begins by telling us that his aim

is to further my previous work on the Book of Mormon toward exposing what I will call the perverse core of Mormonism. This rubric echoes the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek’s recent defense of “the Christian legacy.” In a nutshell, Žižek offers a counterintuitive Marxist response to the “Christian and other fundamentalisms” and “New Age spiritualisms” that, by his account, plague contemporary society. (131)

In Hickman’s view, “Žižek ends up arguing that Christianity harbors in its ‘perverse core’ what might seem to be its exact opposite — the atheistic materialism of Marx” (131-32). This will lead to “a human community tasked with the revolutionary transformation of its material conditions” (132). Why stop there, though? It seems that a revolutionary transformation of Christianity as a whole is not enough for Hickman, who offers a “dialectical extension of Žižek’s argument” (132). In this extension Hickman insists that

Mormonism, understood as part of the “onslaught of new spiritualisms” [Žižek] decries, contains at its perverse core that which might well seem to be its exact opposite: decolonization, including the repudiation of Christian evangelization and the valorization of non-Christian spiritual traditions. If, for Žižek, Christianity leads to Marx, then, for me, Mormonism might be said to lead to Frantz Fanon,⁴ the great black Martinican anti-colonial theorist and activist who intervened within a Hegelian-Marxist tradition that had exhibited conceptual and practical difficulty with race as a meaningful category of analysis and reality. (132)

Although even more precisely in Hickman’s view,

Mormonism ushers us to Glen Sean Coulhard, the Yellowknives Dene political philosopher who, in his recent *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, has brilliantly rewritten Fanon from an unapologetically indigenous perspective, experimentally shifting the center of radical critique from Third to Fourth World. (132)

4. Fanon was really big in college Marxist circles approximately 50 years ago. He is probably best known for his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).

Ultimately, in Hickman's reenvisioning of Mormonism, "the Book of Mormon suggests that its faithful readers will honor and sustain Native peoples without the missionary agenda or ethnocentric paternalism found within secular history. This reading, it seems to me, commits readers to the project of decolonization, an undeniable part of which is the renewal and reinvention of non-Christian Native spiritual practices" (140).

Hickman certainly gives us a reenvisioned and different Mormonism. This is not surprising, given its foundation in Marx, Fanon, and Coulhard, that it is a primarily a political and social project, a radicalized and more malevolent version of the Social Gospel Movement of the late 19th century. The only thing missing in Hickman's presentation is Liberation Theology. Perhaps this will follow in the future as a natural result of a reenvisioned Mormonism. The cost of this reenvisioned Mormonism is merely the loss of the Mormon soul.

Patrick Mason and Modern Religion

Section 5 of the book, "Scholarship in Its Purest and Best Form?" includes a number of essays that bear consideration. One such essay is Patrick Mason's "A Modern Religion" (223-36). He wisely seeks to distinguish Mormonism as a modern religion from the long-familiar view that it is an American religion, as so classified by Harold Bloom. To characterize the religion as an American religion was always far too limiting. Why? One reason is that from the very beginning, the community of Saints has seen itself as a worldwide church even when it was primarily located in North America. In the fulfillment of prophecy, the Church has now begun to become what it was envisioned at the very beginning.

Mason's distinction is a sound and useful one. However, he reaches some odd conclusions regarding Mormonism as a modern religion. After a solid discussion of Mormon theology and the role of the human soul in that theology, Mason goes on to assert the following: "With eternity as its backdrop, Mormonism is a religion ... that could meaningfully converse with modern philosophies and ideologies from transcendentalism to liberalism to Marxism" (229). (What is this fascination that some of these academics have with Marxism?) For the knowledgeable Marxist (that is, knowledgeable about his own "scientific" understanding of the world), religion, politics, philosophy, art, and literature have no independent standing. These are necessarily, in Marxist ideology, mere epiphenomena that reflect the dominant modes of production as they exist at any given moment in history.

This is one of the best-known features of Marxism. For example, Marx and Engels, in their book *The German Ideology*, explain that

in religion people make their empirical world into an entity that is only conceived, imagined, that confronts them as something foreign. This again is by no means to be explained from other concepts, from “self-consciousness” and similar nonsense, but from the entire hitherto existing mode of production and intercourse, which is just as independent of the pure concept as the invention of the self-acting mule and the use of railways are independent of Hegelian philosophy. If he wants to speak of an “essence” of religion, i.e., of a material basis of this inessentiality, then he should look for it neither in the “essence of man,” nor in the predicate of God, but in the material world which each stage of religious development finds in existence.⁵

In the Marxist view, all our intellectualizing is a waste of time and will bear no fruit. In this world, Mormonism, like all other religions, is a fraud; religion, philosophy, and self-consciousness are nonsense. For Marx and Engels, the term *nonsense* literally means there is no empirical evidence or support for the truth claims of religion, philosophy, or self-consciousness. How meaningful conversations can take place with a group (in this case, Marxists) that denies the possibility of anything that someone else says of a spiritual or philosophic nature is not clear.

In his concluding paragraph, Mason writes:

Far from being an anti-modern ideology [is Mormonism really an ideology?], Mormonism in its most robust form represents a distinctive way of being modern — theologically, socially, culturally, and existentially. It stands to reason then that Mormonism’s best conversation partners are not the pre-modern luminaries Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas — though they have much to teach us — but rather modern (and often non-American) thinkers such as Emerson, Weber, Einstein, James, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Gandhi, McIntyre, and Taylor. The next phase in Mormonism’s engagement with and place in the academy may well come not by dehistoricizing a religion that insists on history, but rather in broadening our sense of just what that historicity entails. (233)

5. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 170-71.

Mason holds the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies and is Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Claremont Graduate University. I mention this because his essay reminds me of a conversation I had 45 or so years ago with a fellow student when I was in the PhD program in government at Claremont. In a nonconfrontational way, he presented to me what he saw as the great flaw in Mormonism, namely that it is a modern religion and it did not have the long intellectual tradition that we find in Catholicism (Aquinas and Augustine), Judaism (Moses Maimonides), or Islam (Averroes, Avicenna, and Al-Farabi). These philosophers, in various ways, saw in Plato and Aristotle a rational presentation of the world and human nature which they believed matched what they saw in their sacred texts. Hence, they saw in the writings of Plato and Aristotle genuine assistance in understanding the world in which they lived.

My friend's point, of course, was that without such an intellectual tradition, Mormonism was subject to being buffeted about by fads and fashions of the moment. Plato (particularly in *The Republic*) and Aristotle remain two of the greatest teachers on the nature of the soul. These "premodern luminaries" give us a richer understanding of the soul than what we find in the often soulless modern academy, where the soul has been replaced, with dire consequences, by the self. And speaking of fads, universities and colleges are institutions that seem particularly susceptible to fads; this is most notably true in the humanities and the social sciences, with economics less likely to be so victimized. Through Plato and Aristotle we see a withering critique of the world in which we find ourselves, a world in which we do not have to succumb to its follies, as opposed to Mason's proposed embrace of what our scriptures teach is a debased and fallen world. Plato and Aristotle are of particular value *precisely* because they are not of the modern world.

We also have to keep in mind that, although Mormonism is a modern religion, its foundational text — the Book of Mormon — is a work from antiquity. We know that there are many who do not believe that the Book of Mormon is an ancient work (that it is, at best, "inspired frontier fiction"), but taking seriously the idea of the Book of Mormon as an ancient work makes forgoing "premodern luminaries" even more problematic.

On Apologetics and "Mormon Studies"

Not surprisingly, issues related to defense of the faith⁶ and the presumably broader and more rigorous field of Mormon Studies arise at several

6. *Defense of the faith* is a phrase largely synonymous with what is called in the New Testament *apologia*, a word meaning to set out reasons or evidence as one

points. Hence Grant Wacker informs his readers that he “has never been much impressed by theological apologetics. For every argument *pro* there is an argument *con*” (244). Of course, that statement is true of almost all academic endeavors. Wacker and every other academic are in the business of defending, as best they can, whatever it is they believe. This is, or at least ought to be, what takes place in every university and academic publication.

In his highly interesting intellectual autobiographical article, sociologist Armand Mauss discusses his move away from a kind of apologetics approach to his study of Mormonism but also recognizes that apologetics is “a perfectly legitimate category of theory, sometimes used with great erudition and sophistication” (260). Mauss offers Terryl Givens as an example of such erudition and sophistication (268n4).

In his own essay entitled “The Poetics of Prejudice” (21-33), Givens cites Gadamer’s warning “that there is such a thing as methodological sterility, that is, the application of a method to something not really worth knowing, to something that has not been made an object of investigation on the basis of a *genuine question*” (29, emphasis in the original). As Givens puts it,

A genuine question is a question we ask at personal risk. This is one of those intersections where pure religion and intellectual integrity powerfully align. Openness to risk may in fact prove a useful differentiator between apologetics so-called and a more religious studies-oriented scholarship. *Apologetics*, like *cult*, may be a term that has been too deformed in contemporary discourse to be a useful designation. Its semiotic value is too encumbered with pejorative connotations that overlie its distinguished history. And like *cult*, it has been wielded as a cudgel to discredit and dismiss, under the guise of applying some kind of objective rhetorical label. Since all academic activities involve formal argumentation in defense of a position, we are all apologists of a sort. So let me say instead that Gadamer’s “genuine question,” which exposes the interrogator to genuine risk, should be a hallmark of any work done in the field of religious studies, by a secularist or by a committed believer. And in its absence we may find the kind of work that deserves the label of “apologetic” in the pejorative sense. (29-30)

would in a court, and from which we have the words *apology* and *apologetics*.

In his essay “On Being Epistemologically Vulnerable: Mormonism and the Secular Study of Religion” (199-211), Brian Birch seeks to promote what he calls “a methodological pluralism” in approaching Mormon studies — the primary purpose of which [is] to identify the conditions under which apologetic scholarship may contribute in *academically* productive ways to this subfield” (204). He then explains that he “took up this issue with the aim of proposing a constructive way forward in the debates between the apologetics community and scholars advocating the development of critical methodologies in the academic study of Mormonism” (204).

I see two problems with Birch’s project. First, it presumes that heretofore apologetic scholarship has not contributed in academically productive ways. Second, so-called “critical methodologies” take many forms, but they tend to share a largely unexamined bias of reductionism of one type or another. This bias tends to prevent those who hold it from taking most apologetics seriously. For example, Birch finds it “fascinating” that the Maxwell Institute, with its change in focus, has been accused of “opening the door to a creeping secularism — that the quest for academic legitimacy⁷ has led to an unhealthy compromise of spiritual values” (205). Birch cites BYU political science professor Ralph Hancock as one who has been among the “most vociferous” in openly expressing concern that “Brigham Young University is ‘succumbing to a secular paradigm’ and thus losing the distinctiveness of its institutional mission” (205). Birch then quotes Hancock: “There comes a point where the secular framework . . . can no longer be translated into the community’s authoritative religious idiom. When this happens, faith is left speechless, defenseless, resourceless” (205).

Birch’s reply to Hancock’s concerns is his “methodological pluralism” with its underlying and unexamined assumptions, which is most likely a “solution” that is doomed to failure, due in part at least to an embrace of the sterile methodologies that Givens decries. Birch admits that “vigilance is a virtue in retaining the religious vitality and distinctiveness of Mormonism,” but he warns that “there is a considerable danger in the isolationism that comes with assuming a monolithic Mormon idiom — authoritative or otherwise” (206). So, as Birch presents it, our choice is between religious vitality and “a monolithic Mormon idiom.” While certain beliefs and practices are fundamental to Mormonism and define the Mormon identity, this is a far cry from some vague “considerable

7. This very choice of wording is symptomatic of the unexamined bias of which I speak. Embarking upon a “quest for academic legitimacy” implicitly asserts that academic legitimacy was previously lacking, else there would be no need for such a quest.

danger” that Birch calls “a monolithic Mormonism.” It is hard to walk on the campus of Brigham Young University and see a monolithic representation of Mormonism, or anything approaching it.

Rays of Light

While there is much that is problematic about some of the essays in this volume, there are also several fine essays, a few of which have already been mentioned. It is perhaps fitting that the man who has been honored, so to speak, with this collection, Richard Bushman, has produced one of the best essays in the book. The Terryl Givens essay also well warrants a careful reading, as does Armand Mauss’s look back at his scholarly career. Mauro Properzi’s essay, “Truth, Community, and Prophetic Authority” (35-46), is of interest. In addition, in her essay “Above, Beyond, and in Between: A Teacher’s Role,” Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye (69-79) takes the overall theme of the book in a uniquely productive way. In a delightful and thoughtfully engaging manner, Inouye discusses how her Mormonism influences her teaching and her relationships with students. This is one of the finest reads in the book, and those who are or who aspire to be teachers will serve themselves well if they read this essay.

What seems clear from this collection of essays is that the Maxwell Institute remains adrift. The failures of this book bring to mind numerous other anthologies that have been published over the years which have dealt more effectively with the issues raised or ignored in this volume. Of particular note is *Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars*, a nice collection of essays put together over two decades ago by historian Susan Easton Black and published by FARMS.⁸ No less than Richard Bushman himself has a fine essay in that volume.

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8. Susan Easton Black, *Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1996).

the University of California, Riverside, and in 1980 he received his PhD in government from Claremont Graduate School in California. Now retired, Peterson lives in Provo, Utah, with his wife, Pamela Jackson Peterson.

