“If You Could Hie to Kolob”: Mormonism and the World Religions Discourse

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Lee Wiles-Op, B.A.

Graduate Program in Comparative Studies

The Ohio State University

2010

Thesis Committee:

Hugh Urban, Advisor

Tanya Erzen

Daniel Reff
Abstract

This essay examines the ways in which the status of Mormonism within academic comparative religion discourses is quite different from that which has evolved among Latter-day Saint leaders and within the burgeoning field of Mormon studies. Whereas Mormonism is a quasi-Christian New Religious Movement in most world religions textbooks and reference works, some scholars of Mormonism have advanced the expanding Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints into the position of world religion. In doing so, they have adopted the terminology of a broader taxonomy largely without regard for maintaining its established demarcations. This classificatory tension, which will likely increase in the future, reveals some of the underlying logics, semantic confusions, and power dynamics of comparative religion discourses, ultimately problematizing the categories of Christianity, world religion, and New Religious Movement as currently constituted.
For Laura
I would like to thank a number of people whose contributions have helped strengthened this essay. First, Dr. Hugh Urban has encouraged me to pursue this project since I first mentioned it to him during my earliest weeks in graduate school. And when I was about to leave it behind, he suggested I pick it up again for another go. Second, I want to express my appreciation for the other members of my thesis committee: Dr. Tanya Erzen and Dr. Daniel Reff. Third, I thank the judges who chose a draft of this paper as the recipient of the 2009 Richard Bjornson Award. It was unexpected and had they not looked so favorably upon this work, I’m sure it would not have evolved this far. Fourth, I want to thank all my peers in the graduate program of the Department of Comparative Studies at Ohio State. We all have our own projects and our own lives, but I appreciate those times when our paths intersect. Your guidance and friendship are invaluable. Thanks for listening and sharing. Finally, I want to express my gratitude for my partner and best friend, Laura, whose patience is greater than should be expected of a mere mortal. Thank you for everything.
Vita

2002…………………………………B.A. Political Science, Cum Laude, Knox College
2002-03………………………………Post-Baccalaureate Fellowship, Knox College
2008-09………………………………University Fellowship, The Ohio State University
2009………………………………Richard Bjornson Award (Department of Comparative Studies)
2009-Present……………………….Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Comparative
                                  Studies, The Ohio State University
2010…………………………………M.A. Comparative Studies, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Comparative Studies
American Religious Movements
Mormonism
Sexualities, Families, and Religion
Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology
Religious Studies
# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication.................................................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements..................................................................................................................................... iv
Vita................................................................................................................................................................ v
List of Charts............................................................................................................................................. vii

Introduction.............................................................................................................................................. 1
The World Religions Discourse.................................................................................................................. 3
“If You Could Hie to Kolob”: Mormonism as a “World Religion?”......................................................... 6
A View from the World Religions Discourse............................................................................................... 21
Mormonism and Christianity....................................................................................................................... 23
New Religious Movements.......................................................................................................................... 32
Asia-Centrism, Monotheism, and Latter Day Saint Plurality................................................................... 33
Conclusion.................................................................................................................................................. 39
References................................................................................................................................................... 45
List of Charts

Chart 1: Dialogue Essays Identifying LDS as "World Religion"..........................18
Introduction

Since its emergence at the beginning of the twentieth century, the world religions discourse\(^1\) has held a unique position within the academy as a framework for understanding the diversity of the “religious” aspects of human life. According to Tomoko Masuzawa,

\[(i)n\] the unapologetic free market and entrepreneurial climate pervading universities and colleges in the nation, it is clear that the consistently large enrollment figure in world religions courses—as well as in derivative courses, such as courses in ‘Asian religions,’ ‘biblical traditions,’ and ‘religious diversity in America,’ to name a few—has been the single most powerful argument and justification for maintaining the steady budget line and faculty positions in the religious studies departments and programs. (2005: 9)

The material incentives to continue instructing, learning, dialoguing, reading, and writing within this mode are thus self-perpetuating, driving an industry of textbooks, reference works, and courses (see McCutcheon 1997). Since the concept of world religions and its concomitant categories—New Religious Movements (NRMs) and primal religions—are pervasive within the religious studies academy and have seeped beyond its borders to influence the frame through which governments, businesses, NGOs, teachers, and even many religious persons understand religious diversity, the question of where a particular faith fits within the discourse is a significant one. It can determine whether a religious movement is considered radical or normative, safe or threatening, legitimate or poppycock.

\(^1\) Much has been written on the category “world religion” and its effects on epistemology and pedagogy (for example, see Masuzawa 2005; Smith 2004a, 2004b, 1993; Young 1992; Fitzgerald 1990).
The world religions discourse is, in many ways, a universal concept. Within the all-encompassing discourse, each componential world religion is but an instantiation of the “religious” or the “sacred.” In *Friction*, Anna Tsing explains that “[u]niversals are effective within particular historical conjunctures that give them content and force…. Through friction, universals become practically effective. Yet they can never fulfill their promises of universality…. They are limited by the practical necessity of mobilizing adherents” (2005: 8). In the case of the world religions discourse, adherents are persons who understand or teach religious diversity through the discourse’s supposedly all-encompassing explanatory lens. Other adherents are those who want to utilize the prestige and power of the discourse in order to bolster their own careers, arguments, or religious causes.

Tsing introduces the concepts of “weeds” and “weediness” to describe those gaps in which universals fail to create the friction needed to function unproblematically in local situations. These gaps “are conceptual spaces…into which powerful demarcations do not travel well” (Tsing 2005: 175). In this essay, I will utilize Mormonism as a vehicle by which to discover some of the gaps within the structure of the world religions discourse. In other words, I will investigate how Mormonism functions as a “weed.” At the same time, I will explore the terrain—both above and below the surface—of the world

---

2 In this essay, the terms “Mormons,” “Saints,” and “Latter-day Saints” will refer to persons who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) or who continue to use the Church, its teachings, and its membership as poles around which to organize their identities and subjectivities. Unless indicated otherwise, “Mormonism” will be similarly used to denote an association with the LDS Church, though the term is also sometimes used to refer to the Latter Day Saint movement as a whole. The LDS Church is the institutional body that represents and governs the largest branch of the Latter Day Saint movement that began historically with the revelations and leadership of Joseph Smith, Jr., from the 1820s through the 1840s. The broader Latter Day Saint movement, however, has been inspiration to “at least 400 different expressions of the little church that began so humbly with a few baptisms in New York and Pennsylvania…” (Shields 2007: ix; see also Shields 2001; Jorgensen 1995; Shields 1987).
religions landscape by imagining Mormonism as a world religion. In doing so, I wish only to feel out its position within the larger world religions discourse and to discover the ways it potentially problematizes that discourse. I am not engaged in a project of asserting that Mormonism should be considered a “world religion,” though I will discuss those who do make such claims and the reasons their voices matter to Mormon studies, Mormonism, and the larger world religions discourse. Many religious movements could be employed in the way I will use Mormonism here. I am utilizing this movement because the scholarly apparatuses of Mormonism and Mormon studies have, perhaps, more influence within the academy than do similar apparatuses of other movements that are currently positioned at the margins of the world religions discourse. They, thus, have the potential to exercise more agency in determining the ways Mormonism is classified.

The World Religions Discourse

The world religions discourse is, by its very nature, expansive and unwieldy. Its internal and external boundaries can appear messy and shifting. For that reason, it is, perhaps, best explored by way of a metaphor. I will use the metaphor of a theater. Since the curtain first rose on the stage of the world religions, Western academics have been its primary playwrights. The plays they produce all have similar titles, including The

---

3 First of all, Brigham Young University consistently has the largest enrollment of any denominational campus in the United States. In recent years, multiple institutions of higher education, including the Claremont Graduate University and Utah State University, have instituted formal Mormon studies programs (Paulson 2008). There are several independent Mormon studies magazines and journals that have been in operation for decades, including Dialogue, Sunstone, and the Journal of Mormon History. Although scholars of Mormonism have long published through a number of academic presses, Oxford University Press has, within the last decade, become a major source for the field’s monographs (Stack 2010b). Finally, the LDS Church itself owns a number of academic journals, including BYU Studies, FARMS Review, and the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, that print both historical and apologetic material.
World’s Religions, Living Religions, and the eponymous World Religions. Regardless of the name, the casts are unlike those that appear on modern stages. In fact, they vaguely resemble the small ensembles of Classical Athenian tragedies. At any given time, two-to-three actors stand on stage, backed by choruses. The actors frequently alter their costumes slightly to accentuate different aspects of their respective roles. In his unity, each protagonist truly represents a vast diversity of beliefs and practices.

When two actors are on stage, one represents the East and the other is the West. One is an ancient wisdom and the other is a prophet. “[V]enerable East on the one hand and progressive West on the other…. In a word, the East preserves history, the West creates history” (Masuzawa 2005: 4). When three actors stand on stage, the East splits in two, a divide cut roughly along lines established by nineteenth-century comparative philologists. The two Easts become “South Asia” (i.e., Aryan: “Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism”) and “the Far East” (i.e., Turanian or Oriental: “Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto”). The West, for its part, becomes the “Near East” (i.e., Semitic or monotheistic: “Judaism, Christianity, Islam”) (Masuzawa 2005: 3).

Despite the theater of world religions’s attempts at inclusiveness, many “traditions” considered religious by the scholars whose work it is to demarcate and describe the facets of the characters on stage are not written into the roles of the protagonists. One of the characters who typifies these extraneous, non-historical traditions stands off stage, though s/he is given various stage names, including tribal, local, indigenous, primitive, and primal. At times, s/he is simple, sometimes multi-faceted; s/he is shamanistic and animistic, magical and natural, feminine and peaceful, savage and backward.

---

4 I use the male possessive pronoun here to imply that the world religions discourse often fails to challenge androcentric historical models of the so-called “world religions.”
Nonetheless, tribal/local/primal/primitive religions stand on the sidelines, pondering themselves, perhaps, but unaware of the greater drama unfolding before them. “In contradistinction from both East and West, the tertiary group of minor religions has been considered lacking in history, or at least lacking in written history” (Masuzawa 2005: 4; see also Smith 1993: 295).

But our heterogeneous and globally aware world has created movements that do not fit neatly into any of the roles described above. Within the theater of the world religions discourse, these movements have gradually coagulated into a nonetheless fluid and radical character whose presence on stage fills the gaps between the ancient and venerated protagonists. Collectively, these “New Religious Movements” cover a vast array of recently developed beliefs and practices. Often, they emerge from the world religions but disavow or are disavowed by their larger and elder kin.

Most religious studies scholars who are at all concerned with casting the characters in this religious drama appear to have inserted Mormonism into this last—and most recently added—role in the theater of the world religions. But can Mormonism—or, for that matter, any religious group within the category—remain a “New Religious Movement” forever? A few scholars have replied in the negative. They are, despite broader academic opinion, ready to transfer Mormonism from the role of NRM avatar to the status of world religion. Later in this essay, I will explore some of the categories that, together, constitute part of the imaginary of the world religions in order to understand where Mormonism might fit if is propelled to world religion status by its increasing size, wealth, political savvy, academic sophistication, and will to greater prestige. If that
transition does occur, it will not go smoothly. Mormonism is, by many measures, a square peg being hammered into a round hole.

First, however, a look into the history of Mormonism and Mormonism’s status among the broader field of religions will help elucidate how we arrived at this moment where this movement could, at least by some, be considered a world religion.

“If You Could Hie to Kolob”: Mormonism as a “World Religion?”

Using our imaginations, we can see a fuming Brigham H. Roberts sitting at a writing table in his Chicago hotel room on the evening of September 22nd, 1893, his brilliant and zealous mind set ablaze by real and imagined sleights directed toward him and his church by the organizers of the World’s Parliament of Religions. Roberts was still a young member of the LDS Church’s First Council of the Seventy, a tertiary branch of the Church’s universal leadership, known as the General Authorities. His tumultuous life as a church leader, imprisoned polygamist, rebuffed politician, and leading LDS historian, theologian, and apologist was still only ramping up (see Madsen 1980). Nonetheless, we might envision him on this night absorbed by the work of drafting a letter to refuse the opportunity offered him by the Parliament’s organizers to present his paper on Mormonism in the one-to-two hundred seat capacity Hall No. 3. It had come to this after a series of occasionally heated exchanges with the Reverend John Henry Barrows, the chief organizer of the Parliament. If Roberts would not be allowed to address the main hall as had “speakers representing the different world religions” (Bitton 1982: 50), he would simply go home, confident that the World’s Parliament was a sham—a deceitful

---

5 “If You Could Hie to Kolob” is a Latter-day Saint hymn that speculates on the nature of the gods and the cosmos.

6 I am relying here partly on Davis Bitton’s imaginative retelling of these events (1983).
veneer of tolerance covering the organizers’ contempt for religions as abjectified as was Mormonism in 1893, which was only three years after the LDS Church had announced its anti-polygamy Manifesto. According to Davis Bitton, a chronicler of these events and once an Assistant Church Historian, “B.H. Roberts was anxious to have it [i.e., the LDS Church] recognized as a world religion” (Bitton 1982: 51). The taxonomic label “world religion” was probably not one Roberts had in mind. In fact, it was only in 1885 that the term “world religion” had emerged into English after short periods of gestation in German and Dutch (Masuzawa 2005: 109; also see Smith 2004a: 167-68; Smith 2004b: 189-191). And though by 1897, one of John Barrows’s monographs was titled *Christianity the World-Religion* (Masuzawa 2005: 23)—stressing the unique universality of Christianity—the terms “world religion” and “world-religion” do not appear anywhere in Walter Houghton’s more than 1,000 page published report of the proceedings that Barrow oversaw at the World’s Parliament of Religions (Houghton 1893). Furthermore, I can find no record that B.H. Roberts ever used the term “world religion” to describe Mormonism. He did, however, use terminology leading in its direction, applying what appears to be a new set of labels to the LDS Church indicating Mormonism’s global aspirations.

The universality of Mormonism has long been claimed by the faithful, from both the lectern and the pen. In the early 1830s, Joseph Smith relayed a revelation that “the

---

7 Though, in Houghton’s published proceedings, ten of the religions that eventually became “world religions” in the emerging taxonomic system were labeled “chief religions of the world.” The term “religions of the world” appears throughout the proceedings, though it is usually used in the non-taxonomic sense, referring instead to all religions of the world. It is sometimes qualified by adjectives such as “chief” (33), “great” (64, 116, 568, 619, 822), “principal” (840), “accepted” (803), at which time it seems to take on meanings similar to those that would be associated with “world religions” in later decades (Houghton 1893).
gospel must be preached unto every creature” (D&C® 58: 64; also see D&C 10: 50-51, 133:37). During the roughly seven-to-eight decades that followed, the Saints were called to gather together rather than to organize where they already lived. The first call for the “gathering” of the Saints came in late 1830—the year of the LDS Church’s founding—according to which the Saints would come to dwell together in Ohio (D&C 37). The doctrine of “the gathering” soon developed, and by mid-1831, Independence, Missouri, had been designated as the place for the building of the city of Zion, a New Jerusalem in the Americas. As relations between Mormons and “Gentiles” in Missouri deteriorated throughout the 1830s, the Saints were eventually forced to move on to Illinois, where they established a new “kingdom on the Mississippi” in a city that came to be called Nauvoo (see Flanders 1965). Before his assassination in 1844, however, Joseph Smith had already begun to indicate the expansion of Zion. At that year’s General Conference of the Church, the Prophet told those assembled that the “whole of America is Zion itself from north to south” (Smith 1975: 318-19). Nonetheless, “[t]hough Joseph Smith now said that ‘any place where the Saints gather is Zion,’ in practice, Mormons responding to the divine command were still counseled to gather to the centers of church population. This meant that for the next few years they would emigrate to Nauvoo and, for the rest of the century, they would gather to Utah” (Underwood 1999: 34). Even during the days of the gathering in Utah, the boundless message of the LDS Church was asserted in public.

8 D&C is the standard abbreviation of The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1989), which is a record of important revelations believed by the Saints to have been delivered to leaders of the LDS Church.

9 Interestingly, Smith’s speech on that day coincided with public discussions of his candidacy for the US Presidency. It was followed by confirmatory speeches by Brigham Young, Hyrum Smith (Joseph’s brother), and others, with a unanimous vote cast by the assembly supporting Joseph’s candidacy (Smith 1975: 318-26).

There is debate among scholars as to the year in which Joseph Smith first began to teach that Zion includes all the Americas. He may have begun doing so as early as 1840 (Underwood 1999: 160-61 n46).
In 1864, for example, as part of the program at the free high school in Salt Lake City, a recent emigrant to Utah named Edward Tullidge spoke on “The Universality of Mormonism” (England 1985: 222). At the same time, LDS missionaries spread to several new areas of the globe beyond the Americas. By 1890, after the Church’s fund for supporting emigration to Utah was seized and disincorporated by the federal government, the leadership’s will to gather diminished along with its support for polygamy. During the following two decades, the gathering was less emphasized until finally, in 1911, members were urged by the First Presidency to build the Church where they already resided rather than move to Utah (Arrington and Bitton 1979: 137-40).

It was within this context of the shifting priorities of the LDS Church that B.H. Roberts began his bold pronouncements of Mormonism’s status. In 1907, Roberts would stand in front of a reportedly large crowd in Salt Lake City’s Tabernacle and identify the LDS, perhaps for the first time, as a “worldwide Church” (17). Arising seemingly independently of Roberts’s first usage, the term would appear again in a 1917 General Conference talk by Anthony Ivins: “[t]he definite and unchangeable purposes of God to be accomplished…The establishment of the true and world-wide Church of Christ in

---

10 The expansion of the Church was not as evenly distributed among peoples of the globe as might be anticipated by the more universalist language used by some leaders and members when discussing the potential growth of the body of the Saints. It was often guided and complicated by notions that had many similarities with racialisms developing among whites in America and northern Europe but that became bound to Mormon understandings of modern peoples’ lineages within the Lost Tribes of Israel. Such notions both influenced and were influenced by missionary efforts and rates of conversion among various groups of people (see Mauss 2003).

11 Roberts’s remarks were provoked by an apparently critical response from Salt Lake City’s ministerial association to an April 1907 public statement called “Address to the World” in which the LDS Church outlined some of its core doctrines. When Roberts declared that he was part of a “worldwide Church,” he had been commenting on the applicability of President Woodruff’s anti-polygamy Manifesto to Mormons in all countries, not just in the United States (Roberts 1907: 15-17). It is noteworthy that the report was published in the first edition of Liahona: The Elders’ Journal, a new, combined publication of the Church’s US mission. B.H. Roberts’s statement certainly reinforced the unity of an expanding Church just as it was starting to grow more deliberately outside the borders of the Intermountain West.
America” (Ivins 1917: 50). It was then heard in one General Conference talk in the 1930s (’35) and in three in the 1940s (’42, ’45, ’49) before taking a hiatus in the 1950s. It returned again in the mid-1960s, appearing multiple times in four General Conference talks. By the 1970s, the term “worldwide Church” took its place alongside “international Church” as a frequently touted label for the Saints, especially in the public speeches of General Authorities and in publications controlled by the Church or its educational organs. These sources rarely identify the Church as a world religion, though there are a number of notable exceptions, some of which will be discussed below.

In addition, at least one scholar claims that General Authorities appreciate seeing the Church described as a world religion (see Neilson 2005: 8). Nonetheless, authors of content in independent Mormon studies publications, such as Dialogue, are comparatively more likely to use the label “world religion” in accompaniment with “worldwide Church” and “international Church.”

---

12 The data in this paragraph was found in a search of available LDS Conference Reports between 1880 and 1971, after which reports of General Conferences began to appear in the Ensign. The reports were searched using the New Mormon Studies CD-ROM (Smith Research Associates 1998).

13 A search of the Ensign—the LDS Church’s official English-language adult-age magazine—for “worldwide Church” returns 125 different published pieces in which the term appeared. While all these uses may not be in reference to the LDS Church, even a cursory glance reveals that many, if not all, of them are. A similar search for the term “world religion” returned eight results, four of which apply the label to Mormonism (see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2010).

14 One particularly illustrative example can be seen in two pieces of writing co-authored by James Allen, a historian of Mormonism. In a comprehensive survey of Church history published in 1976 by the LDS-owned Deseret Book Company, Allen and Glen Leonard use the terms “worldwide church” and “international church” a number of times (e.g., x, 636) without once calling the LDS Church a “world religion.” One chapter is even called “Correlating the Worldwide Church, 1960-1973.” In a 1972 article published in Dialogue, however, Allen and Richard Cowan wrote, “The internationalization of the Church, its growth in numbers, the trend toward urbanization, the dramatic expansion of educational facilities, and the challenge of secularism all are threads of a dramatic story which is yet to be told: the emergence of Mormonism as a modern world religion” [emphasis added] (33). Furthermore, in the published proceedings of a 1976 conference at Brigham Young University on the topic of Mormonism’s global spread, the Church is not once called a “world religion,” though “worldwide Church” appears throughout (Tullis 1978).
One explanation for the LDS Church’s preference for the labels “worldwide Church” and “international Church” in its own publications is that these terms have the advantage of denoting the global scope of Mormonism without implying that it is a religion unto itself. They semantically glue Mormonism to Christianity through the use of the recognizably Christian term “Church” and are less likely to force the question of whether Mormonism is Christian, which, as we will see below, arises when the label world religion is applied to the LDS. On the other hand, the terms have the disadvantage of isolating Mormonism within the family of Christianity—as just another denomination within a religion in which it has questionable fellowship—with little prospect for transcending its status to obtain the label “world religion” within the broader discourse.

Even with the widespread use of the label “worldwide Church,” there is a mounting trend in some sectors of identifying Mormonism as a “world religion.” By 1994, the Latter-day Saint Prophet himself was using the venerated label for his Church. In June of that year, President Howard W. Hunter, who was the Prophet for just a few months, told those watching via satellite broadcast: “[t]hat which Joseph was instrumental in establishing, even The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is now a world religion, not simply because its members are now found throughout the world, but chiefly because it has a comprehensive and inclusive message based upon the acceptance of all truth, restored to meet the needs of all mankind” (1994: 73).\(^\text{15}\) The day had been a long time in the making. Three years prior—during General Conference and before he was Prophet—Hunter had said, “Mormonism, so-called, is a world religion,” with a justification very similar to that he provided in 1994 (1991: 18).

\(^{15}\) More recent LDS Church administrations were not as likely to use the label “world religion,” preferring instead to use “worldwide Church.”
But even further back in the annals of LDS history, we find B.H. Roberts again breaking new ground. On the occasion of the 1930 General Conference celebrating the centennial of the Church, Roberts was once more responding to those who denounced the Saints: “these 'absurd' and 'grotesque' miraculous [LDS] doctrines, it is argued, will constitute the limitations of Mormonism, and confine its acceptance to a few. That is to say, according to this view, Mormonism may become a tolerated, minor sect, but never will be a world movement—God's kingdom, overspreading the republic and the world.”

His rhetorical flourish continued by way of a question: “[w]hich is it to be, Latter-day Saints, a limited but tolerated sect, or a world movement?” And his answer: “[y]our history of one hundred years will be your vindication; will effectively prove your claims to the world movement character of your religion and your church. Not a sect, but the universal religion rounded upon Jesus Christ” (Roberts 1930: 45). Though the meaning of Roberts’s “world movement” transcended the narrow realm within which religion is separate from other spheres of life and knowledge, it had a distinct flavor of some of the meanings we associate with the term “world religion” today, especially those of global influence and universality.

16 Roberts’s term “world movement” seemed to denote world-historical significance and the unity of human knowledge. Truman Madsen, a biographer of Roberts’s, has noted that “[h]e loved the scope of the word ‘comprehensive.’ By it he meant coherence and majesty, ‘the unity of truth,’ of all God’s purposes with respect to man and the cosmos” (1983).

Though it remained unpublished until 1994, Roberts’s The Truth, The Way, The Life helps elucidate the term “world movement.” The book was being drafted around the time of Roberts’s 1930 speech, and in it, he described the Church as a “world movement” amidst his advocacy for integrating the knowledge of modern science with the doctrines and teachings of the Church. “To pay attention to and give reasonable credence to their [i.e., “the researcher[s] of science”] research and findings is to link the church of God with the highest increase of human thought and effort. On that side lays development, on the other lies contraction…. One leads to narrow sectarianism, the other keeps the open spirit of a world movement with which our New Dispensation began” (1994: 364).
Despite Roberts’s gestures, it appears to have been another thirty-eight years before the collective body of the Saints first emerged in print as a “world religion” proper. A 1968 essay by a BYU student in a then two-year-old independent Mormon studies journal called *Dialogue* declared that “the missions of Asia…are of special interest and present unique problems to those concerned with the development of Mormonism as a world religion” (Hicken: 134). The new designation of Mormon potential seemed to attract little notice. Between 1969 and 1981, Mormonism was only mentioned in relation to the label “world religion” twice within the pages of the journal (see Allen and Cowan 1971: 33; Michaelson 1978: 48). From 1982 through 1986, five *Dialogue* articles discussed Mormonism’s possible world religion status (Collins 1982: 50; Foster 1983: 93; Quinn 1984: 34; Foster 1984: 37; Newell 1986: 29). Not all the authors of those articles were Mormons, nor was the relationship between Mormonism and world religion status stable among their essays. In a pattern (or lack thereof) that continues to the present, the authors neither agreed on the reasons Mormonism might be considered a world religion nor on whether it was already a world religion or was only on its way to becoming one. In fact, sometimes the assertion of Mormonism’s world religion status was only implied (e.g., Collins 1982: 50) or was simply attributed to someone else (e.g., Michaelson 1978: 48). Regardless, the net affect contributes to the sense that Mormonism is, is becoming, or could become a world religion.

---

17 The *Dialogue* content data was obtained through a search of volumes 1-38 using the Dialogue Foundation’s CD-ROM (1996).

18 This lack of consistency is at least partly attributable to the semantic instability of the term “world religion” itself. Regardless, there is an advantage to the ambiguity of referring to Mormonism as a possible or emerging world religion as opposed to asserting that it has that status now in that it allows the deferral of the necessity to situate Mormonism within the world religions discourse until it actually achieves world religion status. Thus, the thorny questions that arise with the insistence that the LDS Church is a world
Whereas Mormonism did not appear again on the pages of *Dialogue* as a new, emerging, or potential world religion between 1987 and 1993, those years were hardly bereft of such claims, some of which would become quite influential. In 1984, Rodney Stark published his essay “The Rise of a New World Faith,” which was followed one year later by Jan Shipps’s monograph *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*. Stark, then a burgeoning sociologist of religion, used straight-line projections to predict that membership of the LDS Church could, at a growth rate of 50% per decade, swell to two hundred and sixty million by 2080 (1984: 23). He commented that “it has been nearly 1,400 years since a new religion [i.e., Islam] has appeared that became a major world faith.” Yet, he continued, “it is possible today to study that incredibly rare event: the rise of a new world religion” (Stark 1984: 18).

Shipps, for her part, was not so bold in her proclamations. Her contention was not that Mormonism is or necessarily will be a world religion but that Mormonism is a distinct religious tradition from Christianity. Using the theories of Mircea Eliade, she described early Mormons’ entry into sacred space and time. She explained,
when Brigham Young led the Saints across the plains, he led them not only out of the hands of their Midwestern persecutors but backward into a primordial sacred time. As the original Israelites had been, so these new Israelites were ‘once again at the beginning,’ *in illo tempore*. Repeating the passage from chaos to cosmos, the Latter-day Saints…were formed…into an ethnic body, a chosen race…. Like the children of Israel, the Saints made their way through the wilderness to claim their ‘inheritances,’ and in so doing conjoined experience and scripture to take possession of that special relationship to God which once had been the sole property of the Jews. ([1985] 1987b: 122)

Shipps’s proposition of Mormonism’s disjuncture with Christianity left a free-floating faith, tethered loosely to Christianity and Judaism but being part of neither in its essential

---

on two pages (see Brodie [1945] 1995: vii-viii)—and was originally made within a context that was in many ways different from that in which Shipps wrote—a period not yet conducive to assertions of Mormonism’s status as a world religion or a sustained argument in favor of such a classification. First of all, Brodie’s book was written to chronicle the life of Joseph Smith and the development of early Mormonism along with him, not to present a theoretical and historical case about the emergence and transformations of the Latter Day Saint movement. Second, the membership of the LDS Church was much smaller and its presence was not yet as globally felt as it was by the 1980s. Third, the academy was not yet prepared to take Mormonism very seriously. The scholarly study of what came to be known as New Religious Movements, if it could be said to have existed at all, was in an embryonic form.

Finally, Mormon studies had not yet developed to any degree resembling its form by the 1980s, when Shipps published her monograph. It was a nascent field, emerging just then from its Utah homeland to address a wider academic public with perspectives more diverse than those that had previously been available from the small field of faithful LDS scholarship. In 1950, the seed for the loose assemblage of work that came to be known as the “New Mormon History” sprouted from the pages of Juanita Brooks’s *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Confident that Mormonism could survive a sincere look at even the darker aspects of its past, she wrote in her preface to the volume, “I feel sure that nothing but the truth can be good enough for the church to which I belong” (Brooks [1950] 1991: xxvi). In the coming decades, several independent journals and magazines centering on Mormonism were founded. Leonard Arrington, the great economic historian of early Mormonism and biographer of Brigham Young, founded the Mormon History Association in 1965. Just one year later, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* printed its inaugural issue to feature scholarship on Mormonism written from a number of disciplines and standpoints. Therein, G. Wesley Johnson, one of the first two Managing Editors, wrote that “Dialogue does not seek a particular editorial viewpoint. It attempts to serve as a forum for the encounter of diverse opinions, not as a platform for the promulgation of one kind of opinion” (1966: 6). In the 1970s, *Sunstone*—a magazine whose motto is “Faith Seeking Understanding”—was founded. Finally, Signature Books, an independent publisher on Mormonism-related topics, was incorporated in 1981. Several of these new organizations even formed conference and symposia communities that continue to this day.

In addition, the publication that became the journal *Brigham Young University Studies* (i.e., *BYU Studies*) was founded in 1959, promoting the establishment of high-quality “faithful scholarship.”

All of these developments contributed to a post-1984 atmosphere in which the claims of Mormonism’s status as a new religious tradition/world religion could gain friction within a scholarly community primed to consider Mormonism’s fit within a broader religious context.
aspects.\textsuperscript{23,24} When Shipps’s theory was combined with Stark’s predictions for the religion’s future growth, Mormonism seemed, to many, bound for eventual recognition as a world religion.\textsuperscript{25} While Stark and Shipps’s treatments were more sustained than had been earlier discussions of a similar nature, they still did not encompass the range of ways in which later authors would justify classifying the LDS Church as a (emerging) world religion.

By 1990, Spencer Palmer and Roger Keller had published \textit{Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View},\textsuperscript{26} a comparative religion text that was produced for Mormon students, especially those at Brigham Young University, interested in studying religious plurality.\textsuperscript{27} Therein, the authors opined: “[n]ow that the church has expanded into all accessible national, ethnic, and religious communities worldwide, the consciousness of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a world religion instead of a sect of Christianity bound to Western history or Western culture has begun fully to serve the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[23] In Shipps’s entry on Brigham Young in the \textit{Encyclopedia of Religion} (1987a; 2005), she reiterates much of this argument, thus inserting her claims into at least one major textual component of the world religions discourse.
\item[24] Shipps has since clarified that, “even in my earliest writing about the Saints, I never said that Mormonism is not Christian” (2000a: 337). Rather, she asserted that the LDS Church “is best understood as a form of corporate Christianity that is related to traditional Christianity…in much the same way that early Christianity was related to Judaism” (Shipps 2000a: 338).
\item[25] In his introduction to a collection of Rodney Stark’s essays on Mormonism, Reid Neilson has charted some of the territory covered in this essay’s discussion of the different labels that have been applied to Mormonism in attempts to describe its global scope and its relationship with Christianity (see Neilson 2005).
\item[26] This was certainly not the first text written to provide the Saints with a Mormon-centric comparative view of religion, though it may have been the first comprehensive work to have approached the topic with an intent “to present an appreciative study of each religion at its best” while also confirming the unique truth of Mormonism (Palmer and Keller 1990: 4).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
needs of the operational church, which today is global in scope” (Palmer and Keller 1990: 9; Palmer et al 1997: 9). Furthermore, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints measures up well as a world religion” (Palmer and Keller 1990: 12; Palmer et al 1997: 12). Therefore, even Mormon students at the Church’s elite educational institution were being told within their own world religions textbook that it is advantageous for the Church to be seen as a world religion, a fact that cannot have failed to influence the way many educated Mormons see their faith, despite most LDS publications’ avoidance of the term. It was the next year that the LDS Church was declared a world religion by Howard W. Hunter during General Conference and four years later that he said the same as the Church’s Prophet and President. And by 1997, the Saints were informed that more members lived outside the United States than within it. Facts, in other words, appeared to neatly match the new classifications.

From 1994 onward, discussions of Mormonism as a new, potential, or emerging world religion began to skyrocket compared to previous periods, especially within independent scholarly and even popular publications. Justifications for the classifications were far from uniform and some authors only mentioned that a scholar, such as Stark, had identified Mormonism as a potential world religion (e.g., Eliason 2001: 13; Ostling and Ostling 1999: XVI-XVII, XXI; Givens 1997: 93, 156). On the pages of Dialogue, references to the LDS Church as a world religion increased steadily from 1994 to 2005.28

28 Given the rather nebulous nature of the discussions surrounding Mormonism’s possible status as a world religion when taken as a whole, it has been difficult to determine which articles deserve inclusion in or exclusion from the frequency chart below. I have omitted those articles that argue forcefully for denying Mormonism’s status as a world religion and those that tend to do more to problematize that classification than to confirm it. A few of these articles have appeared over the years, perhaps most notably David Knowlton’s 1996 essay in which he declares: “although people frequently say Mormonism is a ‘world religion,’ in fact it is an American religion; more than 80 percent of its membership is found in the Americas” (163). I have included reviews of books that assert Mormonism’s status as a world religion in
At least two books have described Mormonism as a world religion in their titles (see Givens 2002; Eliason 2001). Texts written by scholars to introduce Mormonism to unfamiliar audiences were especially likely to make or repeat the claim of Mormonism’s world religion status (e.g., Bushman and Bushman 2001: ix, 103; Davies 2003: 8, 142, their titles but not simple citations of such books unless they are used explicitly to buttress the argument that the LDS Church is or might become a world religion. I have also included as instances articles that indirectly assert Mormonism’s world religion status (e.g., Collins 1982: 50).

I have limited access to more recent editions of Dialogue. Therefore, I have not been able to survey them for this essay. There is little reason to believe, however, that the frequency of instances has decreased.

In Givens’s “Author’s Note,” he says simply that the The Book of Mormon has been viewed in many ways, one of which is that it is the "engine behind the growth of the next world religion" (2002). Eliason provides a more detailed—if vague and meandering—explanation for labeling Mormonism a world religion (see 2001: 2, 12, 13, 15). At one point, he concludes that “[l]aying aside all groups' claims of Christian authenticity and merely comparing religious content, Mormonism might be said to fall somewhere between being a new Christian tradition and a new world religion. It is Christian in the same way that Christianity is Jewish.... But it is a distinctly new religion based on new revelations” (2001: 9). Yet, at other points, he seems clearly to be asserting Mormonism’s world religion status: “[t]he emergence of Mormonism as a new world (New World) religion begs the question…Why did America serve as its cradle" (14).
225. 30 Even more popular sources outside the academy proper have begun claiming or repeating the claim that the LDS Church is or might become a world religion (e.g., Riess and Bigelow 2005: 9, 243-44; McLemee 2002; Ostling and Ostling 1999: XVI-XVII, XXI). 31 The discussion about whether Mormonism is a new, emerging, or potential world religion became so prevalent in the 1990s that Douglas Davies, a British scholar of anthropology and theology, created an entirely new set of criteria by which to determine whether a religious movement qualifies as a “world religion” or as a “great religion of the world” largely in order to have guidelines by which to measure Mormonism’s status (Davies 2000: 213-263). 32 In the end, he concludes that the LDS Church is probably not yet a world religion but that it might someday be (Davies 2000: 238).

30 As will be discussed in more detail below, Davies has presented the most in-depth discussion of whether Mormonism is a world religion.
31 Riess and Bigelow make a not too uncommon move in Mormonism for Dummies. In their discussion about Rodney Stark’s projections for the growth of LDS Church membership, they note that many accepted the projections and some thought they were too low—“others question the validity of Stark's projections, because Church growth seems to be slowing somewhat in the 21st century and rates of retention...are often low” (2005: 243). On the next page, however, the transition to world religion status goes suddenly from being provisional or questionable to inevitable: “[i]f Mormonism is going to be the next major world religion, it has to pass through adolescence before it reaches maturity.... Who knows what changes are in store for the next century, as Mormonism takes its place as a bona fide world religion?” (2005: 244).

In their book Mormon America, the Ostlings do something quite similar (1999: XVII, XXVI).
32 Davies urges the adoption of a monothetic definition of “world religion” using four primary criteria, which interestingly produces a list that includes Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam (2000: 214-15)—those religions that were once discussed as “universal(istic)” as opposed to the national or limited religions (see Masuzawa 2005: 110-19). While Davies attempts to place the discussion of whether Mormonism is a world religion within a broader analysis of global changes and properly criticizes those who believe that such a status is determinable based solely on measuring the LDS Church’s development (also see Davies 2003: 248-49), he ultimately accepts that world religion status can be judged by whether a religion meets his criteria. These include what I consider his internal criteria: 1) a doctrine of death conquest, 2) morality, and 3) a web of meaning connecting that morality to the conquest of death (through which merit is accrued). It must also have the characteristic of cultural expansion, which is defined as a mix of diversity and potential for adaptation to local circumstances. The fourth criterion is more clearly a feature of internal and external dynamics and can be reduced quantitatively to an increase in membership, since a failure of “cultural expansion” would severely limit the number of new adherents, assuming that the entire world will not homogenize into Utah Mormons. Success, in the end, seems still to boil down to number of adherents, which stands as evidence that a religious group can adapt and has compelling morals, soteriologies, and webs of meaning.

Nonetheless, a religious group can have all four of these characteristics and still not be a world religion if its essence is not seen as being distinct from that of the other world religions. In other words, Davies’s
Ultimately, however, we find that outside the boundaries of Mormonism and Mormon studies, there is little consideration of the LDS Church as a world religion. The only exceptions might be at the few intersections where those from within the field of Mormon studies—defined as those who have written extensively on the subject or who have been involved in its academic organizations—publish within the major circulating texts of the world religions discourse. Jacob Neusner’s widely used introductory text *World Religions in America* is actually a collection of essays written by a number of different scholars, each of whom specializes in the religion(s) about which s/he writes. Danny Jorgensen, the author of the chapter on “Latter-day Saint religion,” describes it as an “emergent world religion” (2009: 347). Jorgensen is a scholar of the Latter Day Saint movement and a past President of the John Whitmer Historical Association, which is dedicated to the study of that movement’s history. The one other point I have found at which Mormon studies and the mainstream of the world religions discourse intersect also includes an assertion of the LDS Church’s emergent world religion status. Though Klaus Hansen’s original entry on “Mormonism” in Mircea Eliade’s 1987 edition of *The Encyclopedia of Religion* did not use the term “world religion” (108-111), his revised qualitative criteria are faulty. If Mormonism had all three of Davies’s internal criteria plus "cultural integration" it would still not be a separate world religion unless its essential nature was judged to be different from that of the other world religions, most notably Christianity. It would simply be another Christian body, subsumed within that religion in the world religions discourse.

In his efforts to create a new definition for “world religion,” Davies has redefined universal religions. His definition, moreover, would exclude the majority of groups that are now considered world religions and would return to the state of late 19th century discussions of religious plurality with little or no gain in understanding of religious phenomena or their interactions with processes like nationalism, capitalism, colonialism, etc.

Though I do not know whether it is of any consequence to the inclusion of Mormonism or its depiction as a world religion in the volume, Jana Riess—the co-author of *Mormonism for Dummies* and an active Mormon—helped revise the 2009 edition (Neusner vii). It is also notable that there seems to be little consistency between the operational definitions of “world religion” employed by the volume’s various authors. For example, in the chapter on “Apocalyptic Communities,” the author implies that a religious movement qualifies for world religion status when it meets the minimal criterion of having missionaries in more than one country (see DeChant 2009: 242).
entry in the 2005 second edition does, suggesting that the “rapid expansion of Mormonism beyond its traditional culture region as it becomes a world religion brings with it some potential for conflict” (6195).34

A View from the World Religions Discourse

Except for the aforementioned exceptions, scholars who write major introductory textbooks on the world religions, anthologies of religious texts, and dictionaries of religion do not appear to agree with the assessments of some of their peers who specialize in Mormon studies, at least not within the pages of those texts. A survey of five typical world religions textbooks printed in the last twenty years reveals a far different status for Mormonism (see Esposito et al 2009; Fisher 2005; Ludwig 1996, 2006; Sharma 1995; Smith 199435).

The structures of the volumes are similar. Each begins with an introduction before it presents the world religions one-by-one. All cluster the respective chapters on the “prophetic” traditions and the “wisdom” religions together. Some acknowledge the groupings; others do not. Four devote sections to “indigenous” or “primal” religions (Esposito et al 2009; Fisher 2005; Ludwig 1996, 2006; Smith 1994). Three discuss New Religious Movements in some detail (Esposito et al 2009; Fisher 2005; Ludwig 1996, 2006, 34

34 Hansen seems already to have begun to describe Mormonism as an emerging world religion even before the revision of this encyclopedia entry (see 2004), though he did not use the term at all in his 1981 introduction to Mormonism, Mormonism and the American Experience (see 1981).

35 The edition of Smith’s book under examination here is the popular textbook The Illustrated World’s Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions, earlier versions of which were published as The Religions of Man starting in 1958 and The World’s Religions beginning in 1989. As Russell McCutcheon has noted, “Smith’s book is more useful as one instance of where the [comparative religions] discourse stood forty years ago than it is an example of where the discourse might be heading” (1997: 109). As he also notes, however, the textbook is still widely used in introductory religious studies courses today. Since it is important to keep in mind that “the introductory class is of primary importance…because the modern discourse on religion, articulated within an institutional locale, is continually reconstituted in such courses” (McCutcheon 1997: 103), the agedness of the core content and structure of Smith’s book is less significant to this essay’s discussion of the world religions discourse than is the continuing presence of the text in the syllabi of introductory religious studies courses.
Among the five books, only these latter three—Living Religions, World Religions Today, and The Sacred Paths—discuss Mormonism. All do so in their sections designated for New Religious Movements. The images of Mormonism that arise in these three books are parallel in many ways and will be discussed in further detail as this essay progresses.

Looking through the pages of four anthologies of religious texts prepared, one might imagine, largely for consumption by introductory comparative religion classes, we see remarkably similar arrangements. Again, all cluster the respective chapters on the “prophetic” traditions and the “wisdom” religions (see Fieser and Powers 2008; Van Voorst 2008; Bilhartz 2006; Woodward 2004). Three of four have sections on “indigenous” or “aboriginal” religions (Fieser and Powers 2008; Bilhartz 2006; Woodward 2004). Two include chapters on New Religious Movements (Van Voorst 2008; Woodward 2004). Two of the four have sections on Mormonism (Fieser and Powers 2008; Van Voorst 2008). The Anthology of World Scriptures places the LDS Church clearly within the New Religious Movements category (Van Voorst 2008).

Outlines of World’s Religions includes it within the Christianity chapter but under the heading “Recent Sectarian Movements” with Unitarianism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, and New Age Christianity (Fieser and Powers 2008: 405-12), even though the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal church which is younger than most of the groups listed as “sectarian,” is not under the same heading (Fieser and Powers 2008: 404).

36 One exception is in Sacred Texts of the World’s Religions in which Sikhism is included between Islam and New Religious Movements, whereas it is usually listed among the eastern “wisdom” traditions.
Dictionaries and encyclopedias of religion are often structured similarly to world religions textbooks and reinforce the framework of the discourse. One such popular dictionary—*The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith—lists eleven “feature articles” in its table of contents. The list reads very much like the cast of the drama described near the beginning of this essay, and the entry for Mormonism contains the same core elements as those that appear in *Living Religions, World Religions Today*, and *The Sacred Paths*.

What are these descriptions of Mormonism? Furthermore, how has the intellectual history of the world religions discourse influenced the positioning of Mormonism as a New Religious Movement? And how does imagining Mormonism as a world religion problematize the discourse?

**Mormonism and Christianity**

When considering how Mormonism fits within the world religions discourse, it is first vital to examine Mormonism’s complex relationship with Christianity. The near consensus within the discourse is that Mormonism emerged from Christianity and is, at least in some ways, Christian. Yet, it is also significantly distinct from Christianity. The historical conjunction of and the continuing similarities between Mormonism and Christianity, perhaps more than anything else, complicate Mormonism’s position within

---

37 Jonathan Z. Smith has written an insightful and germane essay on his work as the editor for the *Dictionary of Religion* (see Smith 2004a).
38 The feature article on “New Religions” does not comment on Mormonism. It defines “new religions” as those that “have emerged from the encounter of two or more religious traditions” (Smith 1995: 774). It is unclear whether Mormonism fits that description. In the article on Mormonism, it is called “a Christian body” (Smith 1995: 652), but to repeat, the textbook articles discussed above also describe Mormonism as Christian or Christian-ish while simultaneously categorizing it as a New Religious Movement or as a new religion.
39 I am far from alone in recognizing Mormonism’s relationship with Christianity as a key component to understanding how it is positioned within the world religions discourse (e.g., Neilson 2005: 13-14; Eliason 2001: 8-10)
the world religions discourse and serve, inversely, to problematize the coherency of Christianity and the world religions discourse as a whole.

In the *Dictionary of Religion*, Mormonism is described as “a Christian body” (Smith 1995: 652). The authors of *World Religions Today*, *Living Religions*, and *The Sacred Paths* largely agree. Three of these four texts describe Mormonism as attesting to be a restored form of pre-apostasy Christianity, thus intimating, at least, the centrality of Christian identity to members of the LDS Church. The fourth confirms that Mormonism is “Christian-based” (Ludwig 1996: 506; 2006: 504). Yet, all four also point to aspects of Mormonism that make its fit in the category of “Christianity” uncomfortable.

To begin, Fisher writes that the “chief feature of the Mormon Church…that distinguishes it from the many variations of mainstream Christianity is that Mormons believe not only in the Bible but also in another scripture, *The Book of Mormon*” (2005: 453-4; also see Ludwig 1996: 506; 2006: 504-05). In *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa found that during the mid-to-late nineteenth century,

> there seem to have developed two typical, nearly requisite, means of identifying an individual religious tradition as distinct, unique, and irreducible to any other: the naming of an extraordinary yet historically genuine person as the founder and initiator of the tradition, on the one hand, and the recognition of certain ancient texts that could be claimed to hold a canonical status, on the other.40 (2005: 132)

Every tradition that became a world religion fit one or both of the criteria in one way or another.

The standard narrative of Mormonism’s founding stresses the translation of a purportedly ancient text—*The Book of Mormon*—as a central feature of its origins. Yet, neither the text itself nor the founder/Prophet who translated it is considered legitimate

---

40 Richard King also discusses the focus on religious texts as part of the development of modern comparative religion discourses in *Orientalism and Religion* (2008).
outside the movement,\textsuperscript{41} which satisfies the two primary criteria for recognition as a separate religion according to the logic of the discourse. Regardless, Mormonism does not fit comfortably anywhere within the imaginary because Mormons themselves contest suggestions that they are not Christians.\textsuperscript{42} Since the world religions discourse requires that a religion be separate and discrete in order to attain the status of a \textit{bona fide} world religion,\textsuperscript{43} Mormonism’s relegation to the agglomerated New Religious Movements category seems unlikely to change until its relationship with Christianity can be satisfactorily resolved.

\textsuperscript{41} For an insightful and sustained treatment of the ways in which \textit{The Book of Mormon} has been viewed and utilized through the years, see Terryl Givens’s \textit{By the Hand of Mormon} (2002). Therein, he notes in a statement relevant to the discussion in this essay that “[i]t appears that the Book of Mormon is poised to become increasingly central to Mormon worship, identity, and culture. Even as their renewed emphasis on being called the Church of Jesus Christ affirms their ties to Christian origins and a larger Christian community, the obtrusive presence of Joseph Smith and his gold bible will remain an irreducible sign of difference” (245).

On a side note and in relation to Givens’s comments, the Church has more recently shown increased comfort with the labels “Mormon” and “Mormon Church” from which it had been distancing itself, especially during the last two decades, preferring instead to emphasize the brands “Church of Jesus Christ” and “Latter-day Saints” (Stack 2010a). Whether this reaffirmation of the more distinctive label “Mormon” will contribute to a willingness on the part of Church leaders to call their movement a world religion publicly is unknown.

\textsuperscript{42} Mormons have long been concerned at the charge that they are non-Christian. In their introduction to Mormonism, Richard and Claudia Bushman write that “[f]rom the beginning, Latter-day Saints have considered themselves Christian.... And yet their Christianity has been in question down to the present day” (x).

Latter-day Saint attempts to reaffirm their Christian-ness are myriad, but two recent examples will suffice here. After a visit to Salt Lake City’s Temple Square in 2009, I received a voicemail message from an older female missionary who called to thank me for visiting and to assure me that “we are Christian. Some people think we’re not.” Second, in a recent edition of his regular column in the \textit{Mormon Times}, Orson Scott Card, the well-known Mormon author, responds to “a member of another Christian church who took it amiss that he went to a Mormon sacrament meeting and hardly heard the name of Jesus spoken aloud. ‘How can you call yourselves Christian?’” he asked. Card responds that “I have the opposite problem. When I chance to watch a Christian television show…I hear them repeat the name of the Savior so often that I wince. How can they use his sacred name so casually?” (Card 2010: 1). He thus reinforces the extent to which Mormons consider Jesus sacred while simultaneously questioning whether other Christians have a true comprehension of that sacrality.

\textsuperscript{43} This logic of the discourse is not as strictly adhered to among the three Chinese traditions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Nonetheless, even though the interrelatedness and indistinguishableness of these religions within traditional Chinese life is emphasized, the faiths are often delineated separately in their own chapters, outlining the lives of their respective founders/exemplars and sacred teachings.
Apart from Mormons’ assertions that they are, in fact, Christians, the difficulty in separating Mormonism from Christianity lies partly in the reduction of the “essence” of Christianity that occurred at the confluence of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European colonialism. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad discusses this shift. He quotes Norman Sykes as writing that “Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity* popularized a new version of Christianity by reducing its doctrine to the lowest common denominator of belief in Jesus as the Messiah” (1975: 195-6). This “lowest common denominator” criterion of Christianity would, according to Asad, have been unthinkable to pre-Reformation theologians because of its emphasis on personal belief and disregard for Church authority. Furthermore, its emergence was predicated upon earlier efforts to establish the first universal definitions of “religion.” In the seventeenth century, Lord Herbert,

produced what later came to be formulated as Natural Religion—in terms of beliefs (about a supreme power), practices (its ordered worship), and ethics (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishments after this life)—said to exist in all societies. This emphasis on belief meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science. (Asad 1993: 40-1)

Thus, the ideological “lowest common denominator” framework that authorizes who and what is and is not Christian is itself interwoven with the imaginary that enabled the creation of the world religions discourse, in which each major tradition has an essential and unique core of belief.

---

44 The new universal definition of religion functioned in some ways like the later concept of “the sacred” that was in vogue amongst historians of religion in the twentieth century. Russell McCutcheon explains that “‘the sacred’ is, of course, part of a second-order, reductive language…. ‘The sacred’ reduces and thus productively homogenizes various competing local taxonomies into one grand discourse, thus allowing comparison and juxtaposition…” (2003: xv). In the discourse of “the sacred,” religions are reified as *sui generis*, unique and separate from other aspects of existence; they are distilled to one central aspect or essence that is present in all their manifestations.
Mormonism, at least on the surface, fits the “lowest common denominator” criterion of membership in Christianity that was established by Locke and is widely accepted today (see, for example, Article 3, Smith 1842). Nonetheless, the LDS Church has been considered non-Christian by a chorus of Christians since its founding in 1830. Alexander Campbell, a leader of a rival Restorationist movement in nineteenth century America, is just one example of an influential early critic who asserted the non-Christian-ness of Mormonism.45 Many commentators today echo his claim.46 Assuming those who assert

45 Though Campbell did not, to my knowledge, directly accuse Mormonism of being “non-Christian,” “un-Christian,” or “anti-Christian,” he did accuse Joseph Smith, the first Prophet of the Latter Day Saint movement, of being an “Atheist” in 1831 (96). In a book review just a few years later, Campbell referred to The Book of Mormon—and, we might infer from the following sentence, all of Mormonism—as an “atheistical affair.” Commenting on E.D. Howe’s Mormonism Unvailed, Campbell wrote,

Great labor, and care, and solicitude have been bestowed by its author upon the question of the 'Golden Bible,' and the facts involved in the history of this most impudent and atheistical affair.

No man, not already duped, who has the half of five grains of common sense, can read this narrative of Mormonism without being converted to the belief that Joseph Smith and his colleagues in the plot are a band of the most unprincipled deceivers that ever disgraced any age or nation, and that his followers are a set of superlative fanatics. (1835: 44)

It follows from Campbell’s formulations of the bedrock upon which Christian unity could be built that an atheist or an “atheistical affair” would be un-Christian by its nature. Faith in the veracity of the promises of God was a central aspect of Christianity. We see, moreover, that the essential feature of Christianity according to Campbell was none other than that identified by John Locke: “[a] Christian…is one that believes this one fact, and has submitted to one institution, and whose deportment accords with the morality and virtue of the great Prophet. The one fact is expressed in a single proposition—*that Jesus the Nazarene is the Messiah*” [emphasis added] (Campbell 1839: 127). Campbell, of course, wished to reunite Christianity under a single banner, so his exclusion of Mormonism even before the more innovative doctrines and practices like polygamy, temple ordinances, etc. developed belies his expressed interest to unite all except those who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

46 One need look no further than the 1982 film The GodMakers ([1982] 2005), Chick Publications’s full-size comic book “The Enchanter” (Jack T. Chick LLC 2007), or the street preachers and volunteers who hand out anti-Mormon materials and dispute the Christian-ness of Mormon doctrine at the open houses of new LDS temples and at LDS pageants. These are but a small sampling of the evidence that many self-professing Christians deny the Christian-ness of Mormonism and Mormons. As Jan Shipps affirms, “The God Makers was the most visible specimen of a whole genre of anti-Mormon literature that assailed Mormonism from the religious standpoint. Whether in broadsides, pamphlets, articles, books, or films, the central message was (and is) that Mormonism is not Christian but a heretical movement” (Shipps 2000b: 103).

The authors of the textbook designed to instruct Brigham Young University students about world religions write that “Latter-day Saints have frequently suffered abuse and excessive criticism at the hands of Protestant ministers, some of whose misinformation on Latter-day Saint theology has gone so far as to suggest that Latter-day Saints are not Christians” (Palmer and Keller 1990: 3), implying that it would be an extreme position to exclude Mormonism from the fellowship of Christians. Nonetheless, several
Mormonism’s non-Christian-ness have accurate knowledge of Mormon doctrine, the actual operational criteria they use for determining whether a tradition or movement is Christian must be more broad than the “lowest common denominator” criterion suggests. The description of Mormonism as both somewhat Christian and as a New Religious Movement within the core texts of the world religions discourse must partially spring from the tension between the “lowest common denominator” monothetic criterion and more complex factors at play, indicating that Mormonism is a “weed”—in Tsing’s sense—within the concept of Christianity.

The current status of Mormonism as both within Christianity yet at the margins of that category is reminiscent of a religious imaginary that prevailed in the European academy of the sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries in which the religions commonly thought of today as separate and discrete from Christianity were discussed using the terminology of “denominations” or “sects”—each only so far separated from the central Christian truth. In books of the time on broad religious subjects, there was no clear line of demarcation, for example, between a discrete brand of “heathenism” and a discrete Christianity.

mainstream and large Christian denominations have, whether directly or indirectly, denied the Christian-ness of Mormonism, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the General Council of the Assemblies of God (USA), and the Roman Catholic Church (see Presbyterian Church (U.S.A); Green 2000; The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod 2010; Spencer 2009; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2001). Furthermore, several dialogues between Mormons and non-Mormon Christians have been published, most notably How Wide the Divide?, in which discussants try to reconcile the gap between the “orthodox” doctrine of evangelical Christianity and that of the LDS Church (Blomberg and Robinson 1997). In a more recent version of this conversation, the “Christian” discussant reaches the conclusion that while individual Mormons might be saved, Mormonism is not orthodox enough to be considered Christian (Porter and McDermott 2008). Because of the discursive tension posed by Mormons’ contention that they are Christian and much of Christianity’s refusal to accept that designation, it would be difficult to make an unchallenged assertion within comparative religious texts that Mormonism is Christian without even a footnote describing the controversy. Thus, in the comparative context, at least as the world religions discourse is currently constituted, one cannot simply follow Jan Shipps in accepting as Christian any church that takes up the cross of Christ (2000a: 356) or Fenella Cannell’s guidance that “[t]o the anthropologist…a ‘real Christian’ must mean anyone who seriously so describes him- or herself” (2005: 349).
Rather, types of “heathenism” were only so many degrees separated from the truth. The truth, in each case, was dependent on the brand of Christianity individual scholars and authors subscribed to. In this discourse, beliefs that might today be associated with a system of philosophy called Theravada Buddhism, for example, would be imagined not as part of a separate religion, totally outside of a completely discrete Christianity, but rather simply as wrong in whole or in part (Masuzawa 2005: 57-8). Masuzawa asks,

[w]here is the line of demarcation between Christianity and other religions? In other words, what groups and nations are denominations within Christianity, and which ones are religions external to it? While this question seems to us today altogether elemental and obvious, none of the texts written before the nineteenth century seems to exhibit any particular inclination to address it. (Masuzawa 2005: 57)

She adds, “[i]t was only gradually over the course of the nineteenth century that the language of sect and denomination receded and became confined to the matters pertaining to the internal divisions of a single religion” (Masuzawa 2005: 58). In the twentieth century, the world religions discourse has continued the process of reifying the boundaries between supposedly discrete religions. All of these “religions” are representative of a particularly religious essence that they somehow share, but each also has at its core a unique essence that it does not have in common with the other world religions. The cores of religious truth have supposedly been transferred from the center of Christianity to a multiplicity of sites at the heart of each world religion. It is from these new centers of truth and power that the “sects” and “denominations” of each world religion came to be judged. We see, thus, that a new picture of power, truth, and authenticity emerged in the world religions discourse.
By overlaying the sixteenth through early nineteenth century European world religious discourse over the modern world religions discourse—particularly the section concerned with Christianity—it becomes possible to get a partial view of the origins of the power that is exercised within the discourse today. In the older discourse, the borders between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and heathendom—the most common meta-level categories of demarcation—were porous and seeping, not solid and exclusive. Mormonism is currently situated within the world religions discourse as, say, Taoism might have been in the world religious discourse of the early nineteenth century—as somehow a partial partaker of religious truth, yet not enough to be unproblematically Christian. Yet, the total imaginary has shifted so that a religion in that relationship to Christianity is no longer in a stable position in relation to the universal expectations of the discourse. Mormonism is, to employ Tsing, a “weed.” It cannot simply be declared untrue by the liberal world religions discourse because its authors are not partisan theologians. Unlike its predecessor, the world religions discourse ostensibly sorts not on a scale of truth-to-untruth but via a supposedly neutral taxonomy. In other words, Mormonism claims Jesus is the Messiah, so it qualifies as Christian by the monothetic definition, which also precludes it from being part of the other world religions. It contains some aspects of the “truth” of Christianity, yet not enough to be considered exclusively Christian. At the same time, it does not have whatever qualities it would need in order to have its own essence as a world religion, which would allow it to be a judge of its own “truth.” Thus, Mormonism is categorized ambiguously in the world religions discourse, apparently in an effort to maintain the discourse’s liberal integrity by
effacing the reality that truth-claims from particular positions of power—in this case, “mainstream” Christianity—have an influence on the ways its typologies are employed.

Yet, the essences of each world religion are not determined in a vacuum and are related to other discourses and structures of knowledge and power. For example, just before Mormonism is presented in the “New Religions” section of *World Religions Today*, the authors write that,

In the 1800s, Christian denominationalism began to emerge as a way of moving beyond the hostile sectarianism that had divided Christians, and by the late twentieth century there was a broad spectrum of ‘acceptable’ religious diversity in America. Nevertheless, a number of very distinctive religious movements that originated in the nineteenth century tested the limits of denominationalism. As a rule, contemporary mainline Christian denominations…regard these unique movements as having strayed beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Mormonism provides us with a good example. (Esposito et al 2009: 564)

Here is a rare explicit statement that reveals some of the power relationships that determine the position of Mormonism within the wider world religions discourse. In the creation of the liberal humanist discourse that established supposedly distinct nodes of power and truth for each of the world religions, the nodes of power within Christianity maintained a firm hold on the essence of their religion. This boundary maintenance excluded Mormonism from becoming exclusively Christian. Thus, Mormonism is described as “a Christian body” (Smith 1995: 652) and as “Christian-based” (Ludwig 1996: 506; 2006: 504), yet it is neither frequently nor extensively discussed within the chapters on “Christianity” in world religions textbooks and dictionaries nor is it categorized as exclusively Christian. It is, instead, placed within the category of “new religions” or New Religious Movements.

---

47 Note that at this time, the European world religious discourse formed discrete religions and shifted away from describing all religious movements as “sects” and “denominations” (Masuzawa 2005: 57-8).
New Religious Movements

The category of New Religious Movements is one into which the world religions discourse can place groups that are properly religious, yet do not have the approval of the dominant nodes of power within the world religions. While the terminology of “new religions” and New Religious Movements is, because it appears to take its subjects seriously, a seemingly liberal attempt to escape replicating within the academy power relationships that originate from particular religiously motivated worldviews (Smith 1995: 771), it actually continues to reify the essences of the world religions and re-enforces the power relationships within each one. It is not a category that exists simply for the convenience of having a classification for the youngest religious movements. Rather, it exists, in part, to separate those movements that are acceptable manifestations of the essences of their parent religions from those that are not. Pentecostalism (20th century) is, in most world religions texts, of the former type while Mormonism (19th century) is one among several of the latter type. The NRM category allows the recognition that some groups have the despised “cult” status while eliminating the necessity of using the label. Instead of designating certain movements as Christian or Islamic heresies, for example, those groups are lumped together as NRMs without problematizing the construction and maintenance of the orthodoxies that buttress such condemnations.

If the NRMs were imagined as Althusserian subjects (Althusser 1970), neither Mormonism, nor—I assume—any of the other NRMs, would respond to the interpellation “New Religious Movement.” Mormonism would, however, turn to the interpellation “Christian” and some Mormons, at least, would turn to the interpellation
“world religion” with the assumption that it refers to an ontological status and not a position within a discourse. In other words, neither Mormonism nor the other so-called New Religious Movements have become subjects within that category. They exist within it for the sake of convenience as objects of study and marginalization. Therefore, we might imagine that, to the extent Mormons—and some non-Mormons who study Mormonism intensively—are at all concerned with their position within the world religions discourse, they might resist the interpellation. As I have tried to demonstrate, I believe that resistance, at least from some quarters, is at hand.

**Asia-Centrism, Monotheism, and Latter Day Saint Plurality**

Mormonism’s position in the world religions discourse is complicated in other ways. Mormonism seems most closely related to the so-called prophetic, Semitic, monotheistic religions—namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet, Mormonism is neither from the region in which those religions were founded nor is it strictly monotheistic, not even in the sense of the word as accepted within Trinitarian Christianity. Actually, none of the commonly accepted world religions is from a continent other than Asia.\(^{48}\) Within the world religions discourse, all living religions that developed on the continents of the Americas, Europe, Australia, or Africa are either a) expressions of a world religion that originated in Asia, b) indigenous faiths, or c) New Religious Movements. As was outlined in the previous section, Mormonism is currently placed within both categories a) and c). In order for Mormonism to move into the category of a world religion, it would

---

\(^{48}\) I am speaking, of course, of “Asia” as currently constituted. It is irrelevant that the first practitioners of the groups that typically populate a list of world religions did not imagine a land mass called Asia with borders conterminous with those of the Asia we know today. Typically, origin stories are important components of the narratives constructed for the world religions, and those stories are all set within the boundaries of what is known today as Asia. Those religions for which a historical origin story is not told (e.g., Shintoism and Hinduism) are associated with nationalities within Asia.
have to overcome a great deal of inertia. Europe has never even been the birth place of a major tradition within the discourse, much less North America. Not only was Mormonism founded within the Americas, but it asserts that a sacred history—including ministries by Jesus himself—occurred here.\textsuperscript{49} The authors of \textit{World Religions Today} note that “Mormonism links biblical religion to the history of an indigenous population—in this case producing a distinctively American Christianity” (Esposito et al 2009: 565). While this sentence affirms Mormonism’s Christian-ness, it also emphasizes that Mormonism has, since its founding, imagined the Americas as central to sacred history. Not only did Jesus teach in the Americas to descendants of refugees from Jerusalem, but the historic location of the Garden of Eden and a place of Christ’s eventual second coming are also located in the central United States (D&C 117: 8; 133).\textsuperscript{50} In addition, the Mormons’ early years in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and the Great Basin of Utah were thought of as periods when the Saints were restoring the kingdom of God on Earth. Today, Mormonism is the only religion whose world headquarters dominates the center of an American metropolis. Thus, Mormonism not only reveals some of the invisible inertia of the world religions discourse, it also offers a potentially multi-faceted challenge to the Asia-centric paradigm.

In addition, Mormonism poses a direct contestation of its inclusion in the monotheistic cluster of religions, which ultimately problematizes the underlying historical framework of the world religions discourse itself. Though the textbook \textit{Living Religions} does not

\textsuperscript{49} See 3 Nephi of \textit{The Book of Mormon}.

\textsuperscript{50} In her foreword to a recently published annotated version of \textit{The Book of Mormon} prepared as part of a series of religious texts from around the globe, Phyllis Tickle speculates that the most "disconcerting" elements of the book for Americans is that they are “[u]naccustomed to having a sacred story occur in the Western hemisphere” (2005: viii).
stress the monotheism of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam within their respective chapters, they are essentialized as such, nonetheless, within the chapter on Zoroastrianism. There, Fisher says, “it [i.e., Zoroastrianism] introduced beliefs that are similar to those later found in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions. Supplanting polytheism, it brought an early form of monotheism, which was subsequently central to those ‘Western’ faiths” (2005: 222). Similarly, the authors of World Religions Today write that “[l]ike Jews and Muslims, Christians believe that there is but one God, the God who made all things and rules over history” (Esposito et al 2009: 149). In the second edition of The Sacred Paths, Ludwig outlines three core similarities between the Abrahamic traditions, one of which is “monotheism. There is one God, the creator of all that exists. In rejecting all forms of polytheism or plurality of gods that control this world, these three religions share a common vision both of God and of the world.” Secondly, they all agree that “God is…transcendent, beyond creation, not a part of it” (Ludwig 1996: 339). Yet, Smith’s Dictionary of Religion, Fisher’s Living Religions, and even Ludwig’s The Sacred Paths discuss the LDS Church’s teaching of “eternal progression.” In the Dictionary of Religion, the author says that “another distinctive Mormon teaching” is the belief that humans can become “like God himself” (Smith 1995: 653). Living Religions notes that “Mormons believed that the ‘Heavenly Father’ [i.e., God] was originally a man but had risen to exaltation, and that humans can likewise become gods” (Fisher 2005: 455; also see Ludwig 1996: 506; 2006: 505). Implicit in the doctrine of “eternal progression” is a belief that multiple deities exist. The “plurality of gods” is mentioned explicitly by Ludwig (1996: 506).51

51 This explicit mention seems to have been removed by the publishing of the fourth edition, though it is
Rather than being a monotheism, Mormonism is most accurately described as a henotheism or, perhaps, a monolatrism, both of which allow for the actual existence of multiple gods, though only one is worshipped. Neither term perfectly describes LDS doctrine, but both are more adequate than monotheism. If a fundamental aspect of Christianity is its monotheism, Mormonism’s henotheism or monolatrism is, obviously, another incongruity with its parent religion and with the entire class of monotheisms.

Not only does Mormonism’s polytheism/henotheism/monolatrism make it a peculiar match with the essence maintained by the central nodes of power within the Christian section of the world religions discourse, but Mormonism also represents an example of a polytheism arising from the class of monotheistic world religions. If you recall the drama at the introduction to this essay, you will remember that, when there are two actors on the world religions stage, one represents the East and the other is the West. One is an ancient wisdom and the other is a prophet. “[V]enerable East on the one hand and progressive West on the other…. In a word, the East preserves history, the West creates history” (Masuzawa 2005: 4). One fundamental difference within this dichotomy—with Islam playing an ambiguous role (Masuzawa 2005: 3)—is that the West (or the prophet and progress) is epitomized by its monotheism while the East (wisdom, stasis, and backwardness) is epitomized by its religious atheism or polytheism. Mormonism—especially if it is admitted as a world religion—thus problematizes another aspect of the invisible framework undergirding the world religions discourse by standing as an example of a polytheism that narrates its history as a progressive form of a monotheistic

still implied in the discussion of eternal progression (Ludwig 2006: 504-06).

These tenets of LDS belief are most explicitly outlined in “The King Follett Discourse” (Smith 1975: 302-317)—a speech Joseph Smith, Jr., gave at a funeral near the end of his life—and in one of the LDS Church’s scriptures: the Book of Abraham of The Pearl of Great Price (1981).
world religion that misinterpreted the nature of its deity. In other words, it is a progressive religion that, by the typology of the world religions discourse, should be static. It thus challenges the assumptions underlying the discourse’s invisible narrative.

A final sticking point for Mormonism’s entrée into the world religions category is its nearly ubiquitous presentation as a monolithic religion. Even I am guilty here of presenting Mormonism in this way. By most accounts within the world religions discourse, “Mormonism” is nearly synonymous with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.\(^52\) The broader Mormonism or Latter Day Saint movement, however, encompasses more than 400 extant and defunct branches outside the LDS Church, many with very few members, some with thousands, and one with hundreds of thousands. Of the textbooks under review in this essay, *World Religions Today* is the most explicit in its conflation of Mormonism and the LDS Church. The first line of the section in which Mormonism is introduced reads: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormonism…” (Esposito et al 2009: 564). *Living Religions* mentions that “[i]n the struggle for succession [that followed Joseph Smith’s assassination], several separate groups of Latter-Day Saints developed, the largest of which was led by Brigham Young…to Salt Lake City…” (Fisher 2005: 454). The rest of the short section on Mormonism, however, fails to distinguish between the Salt Lake City-based LDS Church and other branches of Mormonism.

The *Dictionary of Religion* makes the same conflation. If a reader searches for the entry on “Mormons,” s/he is directed to another article, titled “Latter-day Saints, Church,

---

\(^52\) The conflation of Mormonism with the LDS Church is common even among scholars who focus on the Saints.
of Jesus Christ of,” (Smith 1995: 652). While this entry provides more detail on other branches of the Latter Day Saint movement than do the textbooks, most uses of the terms “Mormon” and “Mormonism” within the entry still refer exclusively to the members, beliefs, and practices of the LDS Church. Similarly, in a section dominated by discussion of the LDS Church, The Sacred Paths briefly mentions that some “more conservative Mormons” did not go to Utah and that they resisted “new ideas like plural marriage and a plurality of gods” (Ludwig 1996: 506; see also Ludwig 2006: 505).

The world religions, however, are almost always presented as teeming with diversity and as containing multiple dynamic parts even as each religion has central tenets and exemplars—or an essence. A cursory glance through textbooks of the world religions is demonstrative of this style of presentation. In the Buddhism chapter of Huston Smith’s The Illustrated World’s Religions, he writes that “[a]fter Buddhism split into Theravada and Mahayana, Theravada continued as a fairly unified tradition whereas Mahayana divided into a number of schools” (Smith 1994: 87). Similarly, in World Religions Today, the authors write that “[t]here is, indeed, great diversity in Judaism today” (Esposito 2009: 75). By contrast, and despite its flirtation with Latter Day Saint plurality, the Dictionary of Religion says Mormons “are very much a people; the sense of community that binds them is powerful” (Smith 1995: 652). It is elsewhere described as

---

53 The textbook articles and the dictionary entry on Mormonism I describe herein each contain different erroneous facts on topics that are largely uncontroversial among scholars of Mormonism. For example, the Dictionary of Religion claims that “[t]he original [Mormon] Temple…and the famous Tabernacle stand on Temple Square in Salt Lake City” (Smith 1995: 652). While it is true that the Tabernacle is on Temple Square, the “original Temple” is not. This error and similar errors of fact provide further indication that the authors of these passages were not experts of Mormonism. The Salt Lake City Temple was the sixth temple completed and dedicated by the LDS Church. It is a staple of fact among scholars of Mormonism that the Kirtland, Ohio, temple was the first completed by the early Church of Christ/Church of the Latter Day Saints and that the LDS Church also completed three other temples in Utah before the Salt Lake City Temple was completed. To my knowledge, no branch of the Latter Day Saint movement denies that the Kirtland, Ohio, temple was the first one completed and dedicated.
having a “worldwide” membership, but that membership is largely undifferentiated in any respect (Esposito et al 2009: 565; Fisher 2005: 455).

If Mormonism were to be accepted more widely as a world religion, its diversity would, assumedly, be a more prominent aspect of its presentation within textbooks and dictionaries of religion. The LDS Church and some of its academic functionaries might not be eager to lose their designation as the sole important face of Mormonism. Furthermore, some branches of the Latter Day Saint movement that do not hold beliefs like the plurality of gods and “eternal progression” in common with the LDS Church might not wish to be divorced from Christianity in order to move into a new world religion category. Thus, another challenge to Mormonism’s potential position as a world religion might come from the LDS Church itself and the other branches of the larger Latter Day Saint movement.

**Conclusion**

Assuming Mormonism continues its projected meteoric rise numerically, financially, and politically, its incongruity with the paradigms that undergird the world religions discourse will become more apparent. In addition, the Latter Day Saint movement’s

---

54 In a 1995 essay, Danny Jorgensen provides a detailed theoretical treatment of the reasons for schism or “fissiparousness” within the early Latter Day Saint movement. A key part of his explanation is the emphasis the Latter Day Saint movement places on an exclusionary absolute truth gained through sources with legitimate authority to pronounce and maintain truth claims. He notes that Latter Day Saint “fissiparousness increases directly with the availability of means for legitimating authority…. The likelihood of schism was reduced…as charismatic authority for the movement was located exclusively in the person of Joseph Smith and gradually constrained by rational authority in an increasingly centralized, hierarchical organization” (Jorgensen 1995: 38). Following from his claim, he observes that, “[v]iewed from the standpoint of Utah Mormonism [i.e., the LDS Church], other Latter-day Saint organizations have been seen as imposters and ignored or treated as insignificant curiosities. For other Latter-day Saints it has been impossible to disregard the largest Mormon church, but they have responded to it as an abomination and aberration. Labeling one another as deviant has become a tradition, and it is an extremely useful Latter-day Saint strategy for accentuating exclusive claims to truth and moral superiority” (Jorgensen 1995: 37). Considering that these dynamics are internal to the Latter Day Saint movement and its constituent groups, it is unlikely that the LDS Church will be eager to share Mormonism’s space on the world religions stage with other groups within the movement, instead preferring to appear unified.
increasing academic sophistication and connectedness will most likely contribute to its assertion of a right to agency as a definer of its own position within the world religions discourse. As is made clear by the examples discussed above in which the label “world religion” is applied to Mormonism, the taxonomic positions assigned to religious groups by authors of mainstream world religions textbooks may gain less traction in the future as those groups’ leaders and scholars—whether practitioners or not—venture into discursive fields inside and outside of academia applying the same language and categories of the broader taxonomy but without a desire for maintaining consistency with the rest of the discourse.

Though it is the case that Mormonism has been labeled a world religion by some non-Mormon scholars, it was far from given that LDS scholars or leaders would appropriate the label themselves. That some have is an indication that, at least in their eyes, the label has begun to “serve the needs of the operational church, which today is global in scope” (Palmer and Keller 1990: 9; Palmer et al 1997: 9). Furthermore, Mormonism is not alone. Scientology and the Baha’i Faith provide two other examples of movements about which claims of world religion status have been made internally with little corroboration from the major sources of the world religions discourse.55

55 *Freedom* magazine, an official public organ of the Church of Scientology International, claims that “[t]here is no question of Scientology’s legitimate status as one of the world religions” (2009). It appears that even as far back as 1974, the Church of Scientology claimed world religion status as evidenced by the book *Scientology: A World Religion Emerges in the Space Age* (Hubbard). In 1994, the *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* published an essay called “Is the Bahá’í Faith a World Religion?” in which the question was answered in the affirmative (Fazel). The journal is published by an association that is “a cooperative effort of the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá’ís of Canada, the United States, and Alaska. It operates under the supervision of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada” and thus is far from an independent scholarly journal (Association for Bahá’í Studies 2008). And though Bahai’ism is sometimes mentioned as a world religion in textbooks, such appearances are relatively rare. Even when the Baha’i Faith is given its own chapter in world religions textbooks, it is not always regarded as a full-fledged world religion. For example, in Lewis Hopfe’s *Religions of the World*, Baha’i’ism is given a chapter, but Islam is
Thus, there is a hazard that the already imprecise categories broadly recognized within the world religions discourse will become even more vague as the overseers of the discourse are seriously challenged to move groups from one category to another—for example, from New Religious Movement to world religion—without ever having clearly defined the proper criteria for determining how to classify religious movements. In that case, the discourse’s usefulness as a coherent heuristic for understanding religions may be compromised to the extent that the power generated in and by the discourse becomes even more susceptible than is currently the case to being co-opted by marginalized religious movements for the purpose of increasing their respectability levels within the various fields in which the world religions discourse is used as a touchstone for understanding religion and religious diversity.

As those who specialize in the study of—or who are academic apologists for—specific New Religious Movements gain traction within the discipline of religious studies, it is likely that the field will be forced to reconsider its major taxonomy for introducing and discussing religions within a comparative context, whether that means a refinement of the world religions discourse or its abandonment altogether for a different arrangement. As was mentioned earlier in this essay, the academic apparatus of the LDS Church and Mormon studies may well have the strongest foundation from which to force the maintainers of the world religions discourse to reconsider Mormonism’s NRM status.

---

described as the “youngest of the world’s major religions” (1976: 265). For the most part, Bahai’ism is categorized in the same way as the LDS Church—as a New Religious Movement. In some ways, Scientology and Bahai’ism would probably have easier paths to traverse on the way to becoming world religions within the discourse, since neither protests that it is actually part of an accepted world religion. Bahai’ism, of course, emerged from Islam, but being Muslim is not part of the identity of Baha’is. In some ways, the role of Mormonism in relation to Christianity is more similar to the relationship between Ahmadiyya and Islam.
As other “new religions” become more sophisticated in their interactions with academic religious studies, however, their recognition of the power carried by the label “world religion” might mix with their desire for specific forms of legitimacy, causing them to press harder for ascension out of the NRM category.

The continued production and circulation of academic texts, materials, and courses that normativize the primacy of the world religions discourse and its categories as currently constituted will not diminish the problemitization of the discourse’s boundaries posed by NRMs. Such an approach is supported and maintained by institutional inertia, the need of departments to continue profiting from popular introductory world religions courses, the revenue academic publishing houses earn on world religions textbooks, and, perhaps, a naïve hope that an increase in the number of students trained within the discourse will reinforce its existing boundaries. Ironically, this approach will actually maintain a field of political, religious, and social capital in which it can be advantageous for religious movements and those scholars who specialize in the study of particular “new religions” to co-opt certain terms of the discourse—especially the term “world religion”—in order to advance various causes irrespective of how they affect the broader field of comparative religion or religious studies, thereby exacerbating the taxonomic confusion and imprecision already inherent in the discourse.

I do not mean to suggest that there is some objective frame of reference from which we might determine the outlines of a new and unproblematic categorization of religions that will avoid issues of power generated by pedagogical and heuristic frameworks within the academy. Rather, the so-called New Religious Movements that are bold enough to claim a more esteemed status are only striving for the legitimacy that the traditional
world religions have garnered from their classification within the discourse for years. The appropriation and re-appropriation of the term “world religion” is but an example of the double hermeneutic in which “notions coined in the meta-languages of the social sciences routinely reenter the universe of actions they were initially formulated to describe or account for. But it does not lead in a direct way to a transparent social world” (Giddens 1990: 15). Instead, these meta-terms become resources for action, bound within networks of power. So I do not mean to suggest that as NRMs claim world religion status they are somehow misunderstanding the nature of categories that are bound to ontological demarcations. Rather, such unauthorized appropriations may challenge the central nodes of power within the “world religions” to the extent that the exceptional status they once enjoyed at the top of the religious hierarchy will need to be maintained or re-established differently, thus creating a dynamic that drives change in the ways religions are categorized inside and outside the academy. The recategorizations that might result from such shifts could create, at least for a time, a clearer picture of who is actually in charge of defining the boundaries of the comparative religious world.

No group is clamoring to be recognized as a New Religious Movement. Possibly influential voices have already dismissed the label’s capacity for describing Mormonism, Scientology, and Baha’ism. If scholars continue to ascribe NRM status to these traditions, their categorizations will be politicized whether they like it or not. Such politicizations might even begin to appear in the classroom, as students who believe their traditions are world religions contest the world religions discourse’s (mis)categorizations. Many times when a label becomes subjectivized, it is imagined to have ontological value. For most whose religious homes are squarely within the established world religions, their
subjectivity within that category might not be foregrounded presently because its significance has remained invisible, but to members of those groups designated New Religious Movements, the subject-position of “world religion” might be of imminent consequence. Such a subject position denied by the world religions discourse is unlikely to stay silent for long.
References


49


