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BY STEPHEN SMOOT

The study of Mormonism as an academic subject is finding wider acceptance in institutes of higher education, with Mormon Studies programs now housed at Utah State University, Claremont Graduate University and the University of Virginia, among others. But with this increased academic attention

trends in Mormon Studies do you think need to be corrected or improved?

Terryl Givens: The healthiest developments related to the general study of Mormonism have been those that more fully integrate the Mormon experience or perspective into broader disciplinary subjects or questions, or that try to provide a richer context for

never be adequately—or appropriately—addressed in a secular environment. But there are so many other dimensions of the Restoration that can be. For example, evidence in support of the reality of the angel Moroni is properly a matter of apologetics, not history. But American historians and scholars of religion and students of cultural studies can

insights should be as valuable to Mormons who seek self-understanding as to secular scholars trying to understand our faith.

SR: What advice would you give to a faithful Latter-day Saint wanting to embark into Mormon Studies? What advice would you give to a non-Mormon?

Givens: I'd keep two things in mind as an aspiring scholar of Mormonism, LDS or otherwise. Make sure your work is propelled by genuine questions. And acquire credible training and skills that will constitute the larger field that will frame your answers—whether that field is literature, history, languages, sociology, theology, or a dozen others you could choose.

SR: Do you think it's possible for a non-Mormon to objectively analyze the claims of Joseph Smith, particularly his claims of visions and angelic visitations? On the flip side, do you think it's possible for a Mormon to objectively analyze naturalistic explanations for Joseph Smith's claims? If so, how could this objectivity be reached?

Givens: I don't know that objectivity is possible for anyone asking meaningful questions. What is possible is honesty, integrity, and a methodology that is transparent.

SR: What role do you think Mormon Studies as a secular discipline should play at Brigham Young University?

Continued on p. 10



Mormonism and the Academy: An Interview with Terryl Givens

on Mormonism also arises questions of how both Mormons and non-Mormons can navigate what may often be the prickly subject of exposing religion to academic scrutiny. One prominent Mormon academician, Terryl Givens, who holds the James A. Bostwick Chair in English at the University of Richmond, has been involved with the burgeoning field of Mormon Studies since the late 1990s. Givens, author of such titles as *By the Hand of Mormon* and *The God Who Weeps*, was interviewed by the Student Review for his thoughts on the emergence of Mormon Studies as a secular academic discipline.

Student Review (SR): What recent trends in Mormon Studies do you find encouraging? What, if any, recent

understanding the Mormon past and Mormon thought. [Richard] Bushman's cultural biography of Joseph Smith, David Holland's work on the idea of canonicity, Samuel Brown's work looking at Mormonism against the broader backdrop of death culture—all are examples of that encouraging trend.

SR: One of the concerns articulated by some is that Mormon Studies in an academic setting could lead to secularization and reductionism, as seen in some other contemporary religious studies programs. Do you share this concern?

Givens: Some aspects of Mormonism's history and meaning, such as the role of providential influence or the reality of supernatural manifestations in the Restoration, can

certainly address the question first posed implicitly by Jan Shipps, noting that many “wonder how any intelligent person could ever accept [the Book of Mormon] as true.” That's a fair question. To answer it, we must figure out what cultural and religious work did that book perform? What religious impulses and yearnings did it respond to? Why did it resonate so powerfully in spite of (or was it in consequence of?) its supernatural claims upon its readers? To answer those types of questions it is not necessary to be an apologist or a debunker; it merely represents a quest to enhance our understanding of what this scripture meant to, and how it registered upon the minds and hearts of, nineteenth century readers. Those kinds of

Continued from p. 9

of its excellent language program. But what sets apart BYU's Arabic program specifically? "We concentrate more on speaking...more on live Arabs, and not on dead things [like grammar]," says BYU Arabic professor Dil Parkinson. "We decided a long time ago that we wouldn't try to do everything... so we don't pretend to have a good literature program, we don't pretend to have a lot of stuff, but we just have one track, and it goes on study abroad." BYU's Intensive Arabic Study Abroad in Jordan is especially successful due to its semester length, giving students enough time to be immersed in Arabic. Also, the accompaniment of a BYU Arabic faculty member such as Professor Parkinson helps keep the students focused on the 16-credit Arabic course load.

But a great Arabic program doesn't necessarily result in great job placement. "We have very high Arabic enrollments based on the job market five years ago...[the government] would hire all of our students, but now it's harder to get in." However, not all students studying

Arabic plan to work for the government. Sarah knows she wants to use her language skills in a career, but Arabic is like any other major in that is often used a pre-professional program. This is the case for BYU senior Arabic student Paul Peterson who is applying to the Marriage and Family Therapy Master's Program this fall. "I approach my undergraduate like this: I want to come out if this with skills...I want to focus on my abilities, not really my knowledge." For Paul, Arabic has taught him about good study habits, self-accountability, and simply tackling complex concepts. Combined with analytical and writing skills obtained from MESA classes, Paul has amassed skills that can help him in any field.

Even though it is difficult and perhaps not as marketable as it used to be, BYU students are happy with their decision to study Arabic. "I probably spend three or four hours a day on Arabic, but it's worth it," said Sarah. Paul agrees. "I love the subject matter, I love what I do, so naturally I do better at it." While these

students reap the benefits of learning Arabic, perhaps all of us benefit from more people studying Arabic. BuzzFeed's article deals with the woes of an Arabic student when someone asks "if you study Arabia or Muslim," "aren't all Arabs, like, dangerous?" or even "do they make you, like, wear a veil in class?" With more students becoming competent about the Arabic language and the culture and religion linked to it, we all have the opportunity to broaden our views of the often misunderstood Arab world. ●

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Continued from p. 8

Givens: As for the future of Mormon Studies at BYU, I think it needs to be an institutional decision, not informed by interlopers like myself! What I would like to see, and I believe the faculty would like to see, are clearer guidelines for how academic inquiry into

Mormon theological or historical questions will be valued (or not valued) by those judging academic performance. As at any institution, there is a legitimate expectation that professors do research in their areas of expertise and appointment; at the same time, it seems that any fears of amateurism can be

allayed by requiring peer review appropriate to the discipline. Though no one department has made Mormon Studies a prominent focus, a good deal of impressive scholarship that fits within that broad rubric has appeared across a spectrum of departments. ●

"I Feel Like Engineering is Just Sad Physics" ...and Other Kind-of-But-Probably-Not-Entirely- True College Stereotypes

BY BRITTANY TENNANT

"Ugh, freshmen. They're all so EAGER."

"The girls in the nursing school are all way hot."

"Who do the psych students even think they are?"

"I've honestly never met an El-Ed major I didn't like."

These are just a few of the endless stereotypes I've overheard by friends,

classmates, coworkers, complete strangers, etc. during my just-short-of 4 years as a student at this fantastic institute of higher learning. And let's be honest, one would be hard-pressed to find a single student on our campus that has never held a single preconceived notion about any other group they may or may not actually spend time with during their eternity in college. Given the primarily LDS population at BYU,

one might think that we've managed to avoid some of these stereotypes; however, after correcting for the reduced drug and alcohol activity among the BYU population, it turns out we're absolutely not as different (a "peculiar people," if you will) as it seems.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but I think you'll find that some of these ring true.

Continued on p. 12