

Mormonism as a Social Movement

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When I was invited by the director of Religious Studies to offer the first ever course on Mormonism at a major university for academic credit, I was honored, but a bit concerned. While faith-promoting LDS religion courses have long been offered at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah and its affiliated smaller colleges in Idaho and Hawaii, there had never been an invitation like this for a Mormon scholar to teach students seeking academic credit.

I consulted with several church leaders, including two apostles, who each told me they were thrilled at this invitation as a first in church history. Both advised me to make it a rigorous, academic course since it was to focus on history and analysis. One of them, Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley instructed me to make it scholarly like other religion courses at Michigan and other top schools across the country. The other, Elder David B. Haight, instructed me to not seek to convert anyone, but to teach so others may understand Mormonism's perspective.

So I determined to design and teach a course that would be honest, rigorous, and not a missionary effort. Rather, it would be historical and informative. I decided upon discussing the matter with Ann Arbor friends not of my church, as well as several LDS doctoral students I knew well, to approach the task by making it an overview of Mormon culture, history, warts and all. It would also be open to all questions.

So I determined it should be titled thus: "Mormonism as a Social Movement." It would include a range of readings on church origins and founding, leadership of founder Joseph Smith, a range of doctrines and cultural values, etc. We would read scholarly studies on the church's rise, forced evacuations from NY, PA, Ohio, Missouri, Illinois and eventually across the Great Plains establishing it as the so-called Great Basin Kingdom in what was Mexican Territory at the time, after which it became the Utah Territory and eventually a state by the same name.

Topics for our weekly classes in LSA will include

1. Mormonism's Founding
2. Core Beliefs
3. Visions and New Scripture (Book of Mormon, D&C, Pearl of Great Price)
4. Joseph Smith as a Person and Prophet

5. The Revolutionary Nature of Mormonism as a Social Movement
6. Brigham Young and Western Expansion
7. LDS Trials and Tribulations
8. Dissent from Within and Oppression from Without: 25 Years of Struggle
9. The Revolutionary Nature of Mormonism Politically, Culturally, and Sociologically
10. Core Values of the "American Religion," as Tolstoy called it
11. Mormon Church Evolution Through U.S. Expansion, etc.
12. Global Growth and Mormonism Today

Course sources will include first and foremost:

Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900 by Leonard Arrington, 1958, Harvard University Press

The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail by Wallace Stegner, 1964, McGraw-Hill Pub.

Additional articles, LDS scriptures, critiques of Mormonism, etc. will be drawn upon throughout the semester, as well as church scriptures.