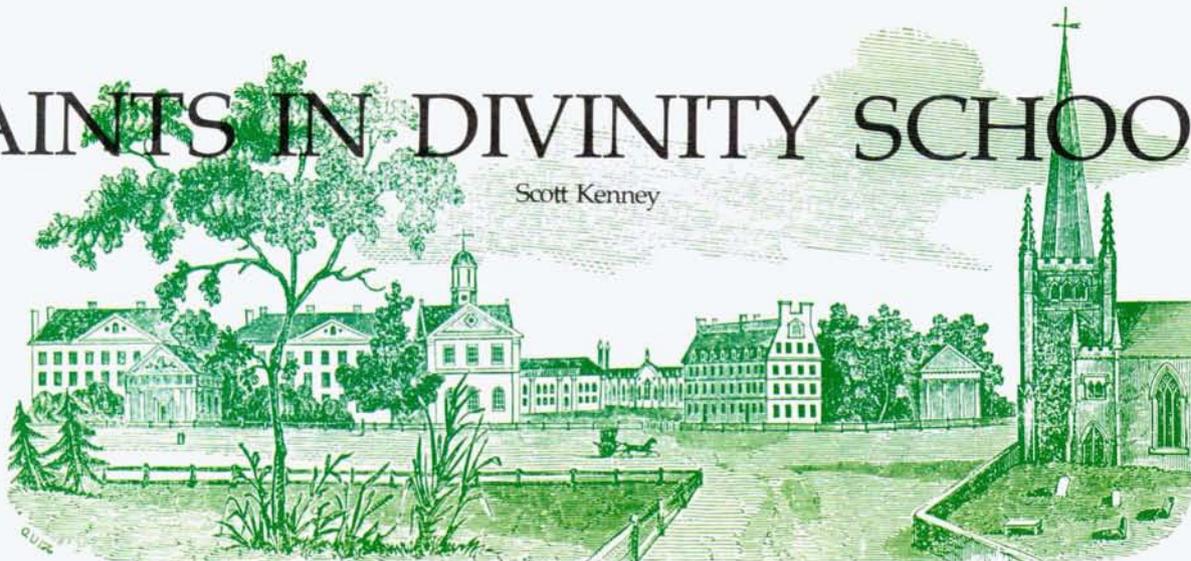


SAINTS IN DIVINITY SCHOOLS

Scott Kenney



In the past decade nearly three dozen Latter-day Saints have enrolled in the nation's leading divinity schools and schools of religion—not to become ordained ministers, but to pursue advanced academic degrees in church history, biblical studies, theology, and ancient religions. The new Mormon interest in a broad and scholarly study of religion, manifest in the increasing LDS presence in these institutions, is unparalleled in the history of the Church, with significant implications for the intellectual and spiritual development of Mormonism worldwide.

In the 1930s, with financial assistance from the Seminary and Institute system, several LDS teachers went to divinity school at the University of Chicago to study under some of the best biblical scholars and church historians of that generation. Many of those students returned to Utah and made important contributions to Church education, including Sidney Sperry, T. Edgar Lyon, and George Tanner. Then, for the next thirty years, the Mormon presence at divinity schools and theological seminaries was virtually non-existent.

In the late 1960s and early 70s interest exploded among LDS college students, and upon graduation they enrolled in record numbers at the divinity schools of Harvard, Boston University and Yale, the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley), Claremont Theological Seminary, and the schools of religion at Brown, Chicago, Michigan and Duke. These students, without the official Church sanction enjoyed by their predecessors of the 30s, are motivated for personal reasons.

A need for examination of our religious roots

Many contacted by *Sunstone* said as undergraduates they had been disappointed by the disparity between the scientific and historical methods fostered in the academic world, and the non-critical, sometimes anti-intellectual, approach often encountered in the Church. Exceptional teachers such as Hugh Nibley, Truman

Madsen and Reed Durham were cited as evidence that the Church and its teachings could withstand critical investigation and its members benefit from the scrutiny. These students experienced a need to deepen their faith through a rigorous examination of their Judaeo-Christian heritage. Many expressed a desire to enter the Church educational system upon completion of their degrees, hoping to promote a mature and informed faith among college and university students of the future.

A theological school often seems overwhelming to beginning LDS students. At the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, for instance, Ph.D. programs are offered in nine areas: biblical studies, historical studies, systematic theology, religion and education, religion and society, religion and the personality sciences, theology and the arts, history and phenomenology of religion. GTU is a consortium of nine Catholic and Protestant seminaries, and functions as the graduate school of religion for the University of California, Berkeley. Consequently, GTU students choose a full academic load of three classes per quarter from literally hundreds of offerings taught by Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Unitarians, Methodists, Jews, and even Mormons—Dr. Truman G. Madsen taught a course in Mormonism during the early 70s—not to mention the full spectrum of courses available at UC Berkeley. Most theological schools entered by LDS students reflect this ecumenical approach and connection with major universities.

LDS students are often surprised to find the theological "bias" frequently attributed to non-Mormon scholars grossly overstated. In this regard the experience of Edward Ashment is typical. Accepted as a graduate student at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, "I prepared myself for the battle which I was sure would come. There was none. In fact, the students were told during one of the first class sessions that no attacks on *any* religion would be permissible, and neither would any proselyting sermons on behalf of any religion. The professors themselves were very careful never to make any comment which might have slurred any religion—

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and mine could have been a prime target because of the recently discovered Joseph Smith papyri and the controversy which they engendered. Especially so, because Mormons from all over were writing letters to the Oriental Institute to get qualified opinions about the papyri. In fact, members of the Oriental Institute staff would often consult with me about how to answer many of those letters so that they would not offend anyone." With rare exceptions, LDS students have expressed great satisfaction with the openness of students and faculties to religious diversity.

Among the liberal faculties, however, an atmosphere is sometimes sensed which transcends denominational lines, an air of condescension or disdain for the otherworldly claims of evangelical Christianity. Keith Norman, now a Ph.D. student in early Christian history at Duke, writes of one experience while working on a Master of Theological Studies (MTS) at Harvard Divinity School. At one lecture a renowned German scholar, "was going on with the standard line of contemporary theologians about how modern man is estranged from the 'mythology' of the New Testament—that it is impossible for us today to believe in miracles or the resurrection or a literal heaven. Because Harvard Divinity School is considered ultra-liberal theologically, I assumed I was the only dissenter to this view and maintained a discreet silence. But another student was less cowardly: 'I object to this blanket characterization of modern man. I for one have no trouble believing or relating to this so-called New Testament mythology, and I know there are millions of modern Americans who believe fervently and literally in the Christian scriptures.' The class was not only stunned but inspired, and I noticed I wasn't the only one murmuring assent. I was chagrined, to say the least, over relinquishing the opportunity to assert leadership by 'bearing my testimony' in this forthright, but certainly not fanatic manner. Apparently even HDS students were open to the truth, but were being 'de-programmed' from the faith of their fathers for the lack of a clearer trumpet call."

Mormon archaeologist

Like Keith, many LDS seminarians have discovered a willingness and desire to engage in religious discussion beyond academia, in areas of personal faith and struggle. While serving in two bishoprics of the Ann Arbor ward, Ph.D. student John M. Lundquist has taught five semesters of the basic Near Eastern Religions course at Michigan. "During these years I have given out a number of Book of Mormon copies. I have answered a lot of questions about Mormonism and discussed deep spiritual questions with several students. In counselling students on marriage, religion, family and career problems, I have unabashedly given LDS answers." His approach must have had appeal, enrollment in his course increased 40 percent.

In addition to his classwork at Michigan, John participated in two archaeological digs in the Euphrates Valley of Syria, and was named editor of the excavations' report. In the fall of 1974, one of his Italian colleagues at Ebla wrote John of a sensational discovery just made—the unearthing of 15,000 cuneiform tablets. John reported to his professor, Noel Freedman, and soon hun-

From the students

There is in our society and in many religious traditions today a great ferment. Even Mormonism does not hold hard and fast positions on many questions pertaining to this field (abortion is an exception). There are great opportunities for creative work and exploration in which Mormons should be active. . . .

Aside from medical ethics, the most exciting aspect of my studies here has been learning about the critical approach to the study of religious phenomena. I have found that one can adopt a critical attitude to the study of the Bible or religious beliefs in general without giving up one's testimony. I have gained a new appreciation of the essentials in Mormonism and a renewed awareness of the relativity of the non-essentials. . . . I have learned that we do not have a monopoly on faith, testimony or righteousness.

RICHARD SHERLOCK, MTS Harvard Divinity School, 1972 in church history and theology; Ph.D. student in religious ethics; presently teaching medical ethics, Northeastern University.

I most assuredly do not recommend the experience to every student in the Church. The challenge to my testimony has been real and profound. Yet I am emerging with a conviction that is much deeper than before. I have been moved, and troubled, by the sincerity and spiritual depths of the people here. . . . When coupled with a testimony of Joseph Smith's mission, the Savior, and the Church, one hardly needs to defend the rich experiences available here.

Philip Barlow, MTS student, Harvard Divinity School in church history and comparative religions.

The major surprise of my experience here is that I am not considered an oddity. The religious composition of the faculty and student body is so diverse that the two or three Mormons just don't 'stand out.' Opportunities abound to talk about the Gospel and are limited only by my own level of willingness (and time) to become involved in the community. The associations I have developed have been based on mutual respect, and one fellow student is registering for an LDS Institute class. I have also had the opportunity to unlock a few stereotypes: two professors, were incredulous that I, a Mormon woman in theological school, have been invited to serve on the faculty of the Institute here. All in all, it has been a totally rewarding experience, one that could not have been duplicated elsewhere.

Bonnie Bobet, Ph.D. student, Graduate Theological Union, in American theology and literature.

While at HDS, I discovered that the bulk of information I heard in lectures and read in publication was not only compatible with Mormon theology, but in many cases enhanced and strengthened the Mormon position. For me, the

experience was faith-building rather than faith-testing. . . . A Mormon in divinity school serves to enlighten the future ministers of other Christian churches. The close friendships I established, the many provocative discussions, and the sharing of ideas I had with professors and other students helped not only to broaden their understanding of LDS beliefs, but also gave me greater appreciation for their beliefs.

Jolene Edmunds Rockwood, MTS Harvard Divinity School, 1977 in Old Testament and Hebrew.

My experience at Harvard Divinity School was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, largely because of the openness of my fellow students and the enthusiasm of my professors for their subjects. I found it much easier in divinity school to talk about Mormonism to non-members than I have in other places. I also found it much easier to ask serious questions about the faith of my friends. My contact with individuals from other denominations made me more conscious of what I valued most in my own faith. The concept of modern revelation became especially important in my own thinking.

Kathryn Hansen Shirts, MTS Harvard Divinity School, 1976 in church history.

Two experiences at the Graduate Theological Union stand out in my mind. First, working with professor Jane Dillenberger on "Perceptions of the Spirit in Twentieth Century American Art," the first exhibit of its kind, now completing a year-long tour of the country. Under Ms. Dillenberger's tutelage, I discovered a certain reverential feeling in different visual expressions. I experienced a similar sense of self-transcendence in the viewing of Arthur B. Davies' "Madonna of the Sun" or Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross" or Mark Rothko's Chapel in Houston as in DaVinci's "Last Supper" or Bernini's "Eccstasy of St. Teresa." The experience gave me an appreciation of modern Mormon art and its attempt to express LDS worship in new and creative ways.

Secondly, teaching an Institute class at Berkeley and Stanford forced me to synthesize my information and understanding of Christian history into a study that would be meaningful and palatable to LDS students.

I was warned at the outset of my studies in Berkeley by a friend and fellow theologian that if I came "looking," my life would never be the same. It isn't. My studies at GTU have had a profound effect on my religious perceptions. My understanding has been expanded and enriched, much more inclusive and eclectic than before. Too, I think I appreciate my own religious background and doctrines in both contrast and likeness to others. I have experienced a deeper sense of devotion and worship than before, finding increasing numbers of creative options as means of expressing the divinity in and around me.

Peggy Fletcher, Graduate Theological Union 1972-74, in religion and the arts.

dreds of articles appeared announcing the find, "a discovery which sent a shock wave around the world." (See Freedman's comments reported in "Speaking Tubes in the Household of Faith; A Report of BYU's First Religious Studies Symposium.") In January of this year, John and another LDS student left for a ten-week archaeological survey of Jordan's Yarmuq River Valley, where a new dam is to be built. "This is probably one of the most choice opportunities for students in Near Eastern archaeology and two BYU graduates are the recipients."

John is not the only LDS student to participate in historic events of contemporary religious studies. Stephen Robinson, completing his Ph.D. in New Testament at Duke this spring, is assistant to the Director of Duke's International Center for the Study of Christian Origins, and assistant to the editor of the Center's forthcoming collection of the Pseudepigrapha (Doubleday, 1980). Stephen describes the Pseudepigrapha as the "religious literature of the 'lost bicentennial' between the Old and New Testaments." The last compilation of these works (1913) contained thirteen books. The new collection will contain at least forty-seven, and Stephen has contributed three accompanying articles to the volume.

I have found nothing that ultimately conflicts with the Gospel.

Stephen writes, "I have found *nothing* that ultimately conflicts with the principles of the Gospel," and in general his conclusion is shared by all LDS seminarians we contacted. We have not learned of one who has lost his/her faith or left the Church as a result of academic challenges.

But challenges there are, and many obstacles to overcome before informed students can, their intellectual integrity intact, proclaim, "I have found *nothing* that ultimately conflicts with the principles of the Gospel." The challenges are felt more deeply in some disciplines than in others, and in some individuals than others.

Melodie Moench (MTS Harvard Divinity School in Old Testament) borrows an analogy from Judd King (MTS Harvard, 1976): "Critically analyzing the foundations of your faith is like pulling a plant out of the ground to examine its roots. It takes a lot of care to keep it alive when you put it back in the ground." Melodie adds, "My testimony will never be the same as it was before I came. I have had to adjust my understanding of some points of common Mormon belief—I hope they are non-essential—but the fundamentals are far stronger than they were before because I have had to truly understand them to make them defensible to myself and others."

It is not always easy to reconcile Church teachings with modern scholarship in our secular world. Perhaps it is not even necessary, for ultimately faith is rooted in a reality beyond the reach of historical investigation and logical consistency. Nevertheless, in working through the tensions that exist, this generation of LDS students seems to have found divinity school an enriching, deepening, and faith-promoting experience.