

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MORMON STUDIES

Volume 2

Spring 2009

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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The *International Journal of Mormon Studies* is a European based internationally focused, peer-reviewed online and printed scholarly journal, which is committed to the promotion of interdisciplinary scholarship by publishing articles and reviews of current work in the field of Mormon studies. With high quality international contributors, the journal explores Mormon studies and its related subjects. In addition, *IJMS* provides those who submit manuscripts for publication with useful, timely feedback by making the review process constructive. To submit a manuscript or review, including book reviews please email them for consideration in the first instance to submissions@ijmsonline.org.

International Journal of Mormon Studies (Print) ISSN 1757-5532

International Journal of Mormon Studies (Online) ISSN 1757-5540

Published in the United Kingdom.

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<http://www.ijmsonline.org>

THE EXPERIENCE OF MORMON CHILDREN IN ENGLISH SCHOOL-BASED RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND COLLECTIVE WORSHIP*

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All state schools in Britain are required to offer pupils—subject to a seldom utilised parental withdrawal clause—some form of curricular religious education as well as a daily act of collective worship, also known as “assembly.” Standards and content vary, but the statutory requirements are clear. Before 1944, religious education and observance were common features of both denominational and board schools in England and Wales; the 1944 Education Act made them legal requirements of educational provision (Copley 2000, 57–69). The 1988 Education Reform Act, despite the backdrop of a vastly more secular and pluralist Britain, reaffirmed the government's commitment to a daily, compulsory act of collective worship and religious education (RE) classes in maintained schools.

The act of collective worship is supposed to be explicitly religious (i.e. not just “spiritual”) and “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character” (1988, section 7.1). Some buffers were introduced in the 1988 Act (and later in 1993) between this statutory act of Christian worship and the multi-faith (and none) identity of modern Britain: a local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) can lift the requirement for a mainly Christian act of worship; the act of worship was deemed to be “collective,” rather than “corporate” (as one would find among a corporate body of believers); and parents were given the right of withdrawal.¹

* This article represents a brief preliminary investigation into British Mormon attitudes towards school religion and the place of New Religious Movements in its curriculum. Readers are invited to email ronan@jhu.edu for future updates.

¹ DfE Circular 1/94, a document with no legal power, offered further guidance on the provision of collective worship. None of 1/94 offered new legislation but attempted to make clear what the 1988 Act intended. It noted

For its part, curricular religious education currently falls outside of the government-set National Curriculum, but is regulated by a non-statutory framework. The 1988 Act required Local Education Authorities to convene SACRE's with the responsibility to report to the government quango known as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Locally-designed syllabuses were intended to complement the National Curriculum. Teaching world religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism) became a legal requirement, but syllabuses also needed to take account of the predominately Christian tradition of the UK. State-funded ("maintained") faith schools are allowed greater freedom to design religious education classes and worship assemblies that reflect their own particular traditions. Pupils have the option to take examinations in Religious Education and the RE GCSE exam (typically taken at 16) is a popular choice.

Both RE and collective worship are not uncontroversial elements of British schooling. The school-inspecting body, OFSTED, consistently finds collective worship to fall short of its statutory requirements, owing, perhaps, to the discomfort it arouses in many schools: in a modern, liberal, secular democracy, this compulsory act of religion can be seen as "intrinsically self-congratulatory, potentially invasive of individual pupil's conscience and entirely inappropriate in an institution funded for educational purposes and from public taxation" (Gates 2007, 204). RE fares better, mostly because its curriculum is consciously broad and tends to scrupulously avoid any whiff of indoctrination. In most cases, RE is religious *studies* rather than religious education. (The battle over RE does, however, continue, if not to rage, but certainly to sputter, as discussed skilfully by Copley 2005.)

Given the concern for "inclusion" in education in general, and in school-based religion in particular, what is the experience of religious

"deep concern" (1/94:9, 5) that collective worship was not being accorded its proper status as an "opportunity for pupils to worship God" (1/94:20, 50) and gave advice that proved controversial: "worship" meant "religious worship" and not simply "assembly" and should elicit a "response from pupils" (1/94:21, 59); non-Christian elements could be included but as a whole, collective worship must "accord a special status to Jesus Christ" (1/94:21, 63).

minorities in collective worship and religious education? Certainly, concern for an inclusive curriculum, one that reflects Britain's minority communities is demonstrable: why else would white schoolchildren in Worcestershire be required to learn about Sikhism, a religion which they will seldom otherwise encounter and one which is relatively small in numbers? Stripping RE of its non-Christian elements would be unthinkable today. However, concern for the inclusion of other religious minorities—and I speak here of members of New Religious Movements—is less forthcoming. This article will discuss the experience of Mormon school children in the RE classroom and worship assembly and any possible implications of this research.

The baseline for this research is Kay and Francis's 2001 study of the attitudes of over 25,000 schoolchildren regarding RE and collective worship. They find that religiously-affiliated pupils are more likely than their secular peers to feel positively about school-based religion. This is perhaps unsurprising, but they also discovered that religious minorities had the most favourable attitudes: "non-Christians are more favourable than Christians; sectarian Christians are more favourable than non-sectarian Christians" (2001, 117). I have compared these findings with a survey I conducted of 43 Mormon Seminary students in a provincial Mormon Stake in England, around twenty of whom I then led in a group discussion of their views. The sample is admittedly small and it is hoped that it can be widened in the future, but gaining access to large numbers of Mormon children for the purposes of conducting an academic survey is not an easy undertaking.

Research undertaken among American Mormons has showed that Mormons tend to have an above-average level of both education and religiosity. The English group I surveyed represent the most active of Mormon youth. They were all between the ages of 14–18 and enrolled in the church "Seminary" programme which requires them to study the Mormon scriptures and meet regularly in classes (sometimes early in the morning). They were participating in their bi-monthly "Stake" (diocesan) meeting and demonstrated by their presence a high level of commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

These were not cloistered cultists, however. Most of them were bright and articulate and as interested in flirting and joking with each other as they were learning about the Old Testament. All of them attended state schools in the area. I asked them to respond to a series of questions on a five-point Likert scale (agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, or disagree strongly). The scale was scored in the direction of favourability, “agree strongly” scoring 5. The questions were as follows (the first two modelled on Kay and Francis):

Religious Education should be taught in school.

Schools should hold a religious assembly every day.

I feel comfortable participating in RE in my school.

I feel comfortable participating in religious assemblies in my school.

I also asked a fifth question: “is the Mormon church ever mentioned in class or assemblies? Please give details.”

Mean results were as follows (with comparisons to Kay and Francis):

Religious Education should be taught in school

Non-religious	2.71
Religious	3.21
Christian	3.21
Non-Christian	3.53
Non-sectarian Christian	3.15
Sectarian Christian	3.59
Regular (“nearly every week”) religious attendees	3.68
<u>Mormons</u>	<u>3.67</u>

Schools should hold a religious assembly every day

Non-religious	1.83
Religious	2.18
Christian	2.19
Non-Christian	2.44

Non-sectarian Christian	2.13
Sectarian Christian	2.48
Regular (“nearly every week”) religious attendees	2.61
<u>Mormons</u>	<u>1.95</u>

I feel comfortable participating in RE in my school	
<u>Mormons</u>	<u>3.79</u>

I feel comfortable participating in religious assemblies in my school	
<u>Mormons</u>	<u>3.00</u>

As Kay and Francis point out, overall “support for religious education and religious assembly is weak. It rarely rises above the mid-point of uncertainty” (2001, 125). RE garners more support (although it is not sensational) than collective worship. Support for both activities is greater among the religious compared with the non-religious, non-Christians compared with Christians, and sectarians compared with non-sectarians. (Kay and Francis define sectarian as Baptist, Evangelical, Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Community Church, and House Church.) The more a child attends a place of worship, the more likely she is to favour both RE and assembly. With regard to RE, Mormons score highly with a mean total of 3.67, higher than all other categories and practically equal with those who attend places of worship nearly every week. They also do not seem to be discomforted by RE: a majority (77%) agreed that they were comfortable with RE, a mean score of 3.79. Collective worship does not fare as well, however, scoring only 1.95 among Mormons, lower than all other scores in the Kay/Francis survey. Mormon students’ “comfort” in participating in assemblies is a perfect mid-point of 3.00.

The low Christian regard for RE and assembly might, according to Kay and Francis (2001, 126) be skewed by the secularism of many children who otherwise identify as Christian. The fact that non-Christians respond relatively positively might be due to the affirmation they receive when hearing their religions discussed in a respectful manner—the major non-Christian religions must be taught in RE. This

cannot explain, however, why Mormon children score highly. Only 33% of my respondents noted that Mormonism was discussed at school and even then, it was not always done in ways that reflected the children's own religious experiences. One student responded that the church was mentioned "briefly, talking about polygamy"; another responded that "yes [the church was mentioned] once or twice because we are a bigotry (sic) religion apparently"; another said, "in history, we learnt about Mormons and they were given a negative view and some facts given which are untrue." Mormons tend to feel positively about RE despite the non-status of Mormonism within it.

Kay and Francis believe that sectarian children's support for school religion is due to their higher than average religiosity and familiarity with religious topics and devotion. Still, this does not entirely answer why such pupils would feel positive about an RE curriculum that often deals with religions other than their own, and, in the case of NRM-adherents (Mormons) either ignores their religion altogether or discusses it in problematic ways. Mormon acceptance of RE requires further explanation: certainly, the antipathy-cum-hostility to religion that RE sometimes faces is less likely to emanate from Mormons than from other children. How can we explain their support? Even though faithful Mormons believe that theirs is the one true church, the value of learning about world religions has received tentative support in the church, and quotes affirming the value of religions other than Mormonism can be found throughout devotional discourse, from Joseph Smith to the present. It may also be the case that armed with a relatively high degree of religious literacy, Mormon children simply do well in their RE classes. One respondent noted that RE was "easy" because she "already knew most of the stuff." The value of "learning about other people's ideas" was also affirmed, as was a certain intra-faith fellowship: "in RE class the religious kids could talk about their beliefs in a way that was uncool outside of class." One child suggested that such discussions offered a "missionary opportunity," an important boon for young Mormons taught to see proselytising as a positive opportunity. We should also consider the possibility that Mormon children are not a

distinct subset; note how their opinion of RE almost exactly matches other very religiously active children.

With all this in mind, the extreme dislike (1.95) of collective worship among Mormons, especially compared with other religionists, is interesting. One is tempted to suggest that whilst Mormons can tolerate and sometimes embrace a classroom discussion of religion, their participation in an act of worship not their own, especially given Mormon concern for orthopraxis, is harder to embrace. As one child put it, “making us join in made me uncomfortable.” However, given their “comfort” score (3.00), this cannot tell the whole story. At the very least it further demonstrates pupils' general dislike of collective worship, whatever their faith.

Gill (2004, 193-4) discusses the implications of strong overall pupil negativity to collective worship and the strategies that need to arise to address it. She offers an interesting example: there is a major disconnect between the literalism of worship in primary schools, where pupils are offered religious narrative and teaching with little or no room for discussion as to its truthfulness, and the marked scepticism of older pupils. Having perhaps naively accepted Bible stories as young children, teenagers find themselves rebelling against the same as they get older. Gill recommends that room “for the exploration of problematic issues” be found. Doubt seems to surface instinctively for many secondary pupils; admitting its existence is important and would help pupils participate with greater “integrity.” However, given the very literal religious education provided on Sundays and in Seminary, this cannot be an explanation for the Mormon hostility towards assemblies. Perhaps it is the very weakness of collective worship that bothers Mormon youth: luke-warm biblical exhortations coupled with the cynical reactions of their peers to the same may be jarring to children used to a very earnest form of worship. They may not mind participating, but compared to Mormon worship, it probably feels like a waste of time. One needs to further ascertain whether it is the *daily* act of worship or the worship itself which is problematic.

Such dislike for secondary school worship, even among the religious (Mormons are an extreme example, but even religious pupils in general only score 2.18), ought to serve as a signal to education policy-makers that something is amiss, perhaps not with regard to policy *per se*, but certainly in its delivery. Classroom-based RE is perhaps an easier topic to address as it deals with a curriculum in which teachers and schools are generally well-trained and well-suited to deliver. (One problem with the mechanics of school worship is that there may not be enough teachers willing to lead it. Plus, secondary school facilities and timetables are not always conducive to conducting regular, large-scale assemblies.)

What can the Mormon example regarding RE teach us? Kay and Francis (2001, 126) note that “policies that are designed to appeal to the majority are really more appealing to the minority...Educational policy, and particularly educational policy referring to religion, must continue to take account of the needs of minorities, presumably by the continued use of sensitive democratic mechanisms.” The secular majority seem unimpressed by the RE curriculum whatever the content on offer whereas religious minorities seem more willing to engage in RE even if their own theologies are largely ignored (e.g. sectarian Christians, Mormons) or worse, misrepresented (e.g. Mormons). Would pupils' engagement with RE improve if it better reflected their own religious or life stances? If so, a case can be made, as Kay and Francis suggest, for a “much wider range of choices within religious education, some of which reflect the secular orientation of the majority and others that reflect the particular commitments of minorities” (2001, 126–7). To achieve this, the RE curriculum should devolve to an even more local level. Currently the national framework is interpreted by county bodies to provide a curriculum for all its schools. Whilst this has the advantage of ensuring that a wide range of influential and relevant religions are covered, it means, for example, that an ethnic school in east Oxford has to follow the same curriculum as a mainly white school in rural Oxfordshire. Operating within a basic wider framework, RE teachers at the school level should seek to ascertain and engage with the

values of their own pupils. In a school with Adventists or Mormons, there is no reason why Ellen White or Joseph Smith should not be discussed alongside Guru Nanak and Mother Theresa.

Exactly how schools could go about teaching NRM's—and the further value of doing so—must be the subject of another article.²

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² Some work on this question has already been done by James Holt (2002).