

6. Ibid., 144.
7. Ibid., 62.
8. Ibid., 79.
9. See *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 20.2.1.
10. See McBaine, 72.
11. See <http://bycommonconsent.com/2014/08/28/book-review-mcbaine-women-at-church/#comment-336099>.
12. See McBaine, xvi.
13. Ibid., 129.
14. Ibid., 59–60.
15. See Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (Winter 2011): 1–85.
16. See McBaine, 135.
17. See, e.g., Numbers 27:1–11, 1 Samuel 1, and Mark 7:24–30.



E-mails with a Young Mormon about Adam Miller’s *Letters to a Young Mormon*

Adam S. Miller. *Letters to a Young Mormon*. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2014. 78 pp. Paper: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-0-8425-2856-6.

Reviewed by Russel Arben Fox and Megan Elaine Fox

Russell Arben Fox: Okay, Megan, I’ll start.

Miller prefaces his book with the statement that “Here, my work is personal. I mean only to address the real beauty and real costs of trying to live a Mormon life.” The thing is, I’m not sure I know what he intends the phrase “a Mormon life” to mean. On the basis of his chapters, it presumably involves some sense of personal agency and responsibility, a devotion to work, an awareness of sin, a desire for faith, a habit of praying, etc. Many of

his observations, comments, and critiques about those topics are challenging and fascinating. But I'm not sure how I'm supposed to see them as building upon his stated purpose, because I'm not really certain any of those suggestions and explorations couldn't apply equally well to the life of just about anyone from any other religious tradition at all, not just Mormons.

I mean, it's true that sometimes Miller will quote from the Book of Mormon or make reference to figures and statements from Mormon history. But with the exception of the chapter on temples and maybe the one on scripture, I'm not sure he ever describes the costs and beauties of a life exclusive to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He certainly never talks about "Mormon life" in the sort of specific terms which we associate with being baptized at age eight, serving a mission at eighteen, nineteen, or twenty-one, marrying young and having children, serving in callings, and so forth. So what do you think, Megan? Could you imagine any of your friends reading this book and seeing themselves (their concerns, their beliefs, their struggles) in here?

Megan Elaine Fox: I think the obvious and simplistic definition of living a "Mormon life" would be "being a Mormon and then staying alive." After you're baptized, you're Mormon. However you choose to live after that, unless you choose to have your name struck from the lists or get excommunicated, you're still Mormon. But I agree with you that this is not the sort of Mormon life that Miller is talking about; there is no real beauty or cost to saying, "Oh, I'm Mormon" and then doing whatever follows from that. The same sort of thing applies, I think, to most, if not all, religions out there. After all, from what I have learned, in a certain sense to be a Muslim all you really have to do is announce "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet" out loud and say you believe it.

In contrast to that, I think what Miller is talking about is the sort of religious life which leads to sincere self-reflection and an honest and ongoing attempt at self-betterment. This sort of religious life does have a real cost and a real beauty to it, but seems to have

less to do with ordinary praxis and more about how much work one is willing to put into it; i.e., it's less about what you are doing and more about why and how you are doing it. There is a real and significant difference between going through the motions of a religion and sincerely using a religion to become closer to God in whatever form you choose to interpret him.

RAF: What do you see that difference as consisting of?

MEF: Well, think about Islam again. There are five basic acts that are considered mandatory to living a Muslim life. They include praying five times a day, paying a tithe, and fasting during Ramadan, among others. I've fasted Ramadan, for reasons that don't matter now. It didn't bring me closer to God; it wasn't particularly helpful to my spiritual well-being, and I generally just spent a month being very hungry. This wasn't because I was performing the *Sawm* [the formal Arabic name of the Ramadan fast] wrong: to the best of my knowledge, I didn't break any of the rules of Ramadan. (I even recall pulling out a black and white thread once and checking to see if it was too late for me to eat breakfast.)

Though it is not explicit scripture, there are similarly basic things a Mormon is supposed to do to become closer to God: attend Church meetings, have personal and family prayer, take the sacrament, etc. However, I'm sure there are people who go through these motions much the same way I went through Ramadan. It's not entirely sincere.

The struggle that comes from sincerely trying to become closer to God, be it through going to sacrament meeting or going on *Hajj* [the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca], is, I think, very similar from one religion to the next. I have friends who attend Sunday meetings very different from ours for the exact same reasons we do, and get some of the exact same reactions out of it. Same with fasting or prayer. They are taking their salvation seriously, through avenues that are open to them. Anyone who is trying to sincerely live a religious life is constantly going through self-reflection and attempting to better themselves. Though the context may be different, though what we may be doing is very

different, it seems to me that why we are doing what we are doing is very similar.

RAF: So, you think that the religious life that Miller is encouraging through the topics he explores in his book is not substantively different from the kind of life which your Presbyterian or Methodist or Catholic friends who also choose to sincerely pursue a life lived “Methodistly” or “Catholically” are seeking, is that right?

MEF: Yes. Overall, I think *Letters to a Young Mormon* is less about how to live a “Mormon life,” whatever Miller may have had in mind when he wrote that, but rather how the determination to live a sincere religious life applies to the particulars of Mormon practice and rhetoric.

RAF: I like how you put that: “less about what you are doing and more about why and how you are doing it.” What that sounds like to me is “authenticity.” But whenever authenticity is brought into a discussion, there’s a potential downside: you end up, however careful you may be, enshrining at least a degree of subjectivism.

MEF: What do you mean?

RAF: Well, being a “good” Mormon is something which is at least partly determined collectively, by Church institutions and/or the Church community, while Miller’s calls to an authentic Mormon life seem to depend almost entirely, as you put it, on “sincere self-reflection and an honest and ongoing attempt at self-betterment.” Which is something we do ourselves, with our status as “good” Mormons being possibly irrelevant to that measurement. After all, as you point out, someone can go through the motions of Mormon life, as you went through the motions of Ramadan, and get no authentic transformation out of it at all—though if their primary goal is just to tell themselves they are good Mormons, reflecting back to themselves the judgment of others, then maybe that’s good enough.

So I guess what I’m saying is this: maybe Miller, as he expresses himself through this book, really *isn’t* interested in helping people

be more successful or skilled in the various duties or accomplishments or particulars of their lives as Mormons—in other words, helping them become more obedient home teachers, or more faithful tithe payers, or more generous and charitable service providers, or whatever. Rather, he wants Mormons to live their lives more “Mormonly,” more centered on a kind of inward devotion, something that could only be known subjectively.

MEF: I think that the result of someone trying to live an “authentic” Mormon life and someone simply trying to be a “good” Mormon can look very similar from an outside perspective, but really aren’t *that* similar. Like you said, whether or not one is a “good” Mormon is determined, 90 percent of the time, by what your community thinks of you, whereas being “authentically” Mormon depends a great deal more on your extremely personal attempts to be closer to God.

I’m reminded of you telling a story about a companion you had on your mission who wouldn’t ever fast. He said that fasting didn’t help him focus spiritually, it didn’t help him think about the less fortunate, made him grouchy and mean-spirited, etc. So he simply never did it. That’s one of the best examples I can think of about how trying to be authentically Mormon can differ from trying to be a good Mormon.

RAF: Of course, maybe what I took as my companion’s sincere effort to seek the spirit as it was most available to him may have just been, deep down, a totally self-interested concern with his own comfort.

MEF: Sure, and that’s why the community can’t be *entirely* left out here. There is some overlap between “authentic” Mormon religiosity and Mormon “goodness.” “Good” Mormons go to sacrament meeting; it’s something you just *do*. But I don’t think it’s something anyone who’s trying to be authentically Mormon is going to skip, either. I can see a legitimate argument being made for sitting in the hall for the entirety of the meeting, but I don’t think any “authentic” Mormon is going to entirely skip the meeting for religious reasons. Same goes for praying and

reading the scriptures. There is some merit to those standard Mormon answers.

RAF: I wonder if it would bother Miller to hear the arguments in this book put in this way. Is he really just talking in a rather philosophical and meditative way about the “standard Mormon answers,” as it were? I guess I didn’t see that, but now that I think about it I kind of suspect it’s true. Clearly he’s not talking about *all* the “standard Mormon answers”—I don’t remember anything from the book about obedience, for example, or any of the usual stuff about family and priesthood and whatnot. But to the extent the Standard Mormon Answers are “pray, read the scriptures, attend church, etc.,” I suppose you’re right that he does hit on most of them. Do you see that as a fault in the book? Is there a possibility that, for all his apparent intention to open up hard questions and think “Mormonly” in a way that goes beyond what we do at church, he actually kind of failed? (And if so, then why did you say you liked the book anyway?)

MEF: Lots of—if not all—religions have basic fundamentals that they go back to time after time. That’s not a bad thing; you can’t have any kind of “authenticity” without it. And I don’t think that he’s failed to think in a way that goes beyond the way we talk in church, because he *does* make the reader ask some of the hard questions about what it means to take on more responsibility for their thoughts and actions. That’s why I liked the book; I never thought about faith, or scripture reading, etc., the way he suggested until I read what he wrote about it. And that’s a good thing.

RAF: Let’s talk about those for a moment. What was your favorite insight from the book?

MEF: I really liked his chapter on faith. Miller claims that some people find it really easy to believe that there is a God, and some people find it almost impossible—which I think is totally true—and then goes on to say that both groups of people have certain advantages and disadvantages when it comes to faith, which for

him isn't really related to "belief" at all. For him, it connects to listening, to "attending to the difficult, disturbing, and resistant truths God sets knocking at your door . . . to care for what's right in front of you." In other words, he doesn't really think about "faith" as a thing ("I have faith in God, Jesus Christ, etc."); he thinks about "faithfulness" as a practice: when something is revealed as true to you, through your engagement with the community you're part of, don't treat it causally or idolize it. Instead, take it seriously enough to figure out what it is saying, so as to be really "true" to that revelation. Reading this chapter was the first time I really understood the often-quoted phrase "faith is an action word."

RAF: I think my favorite was how, in Miller's chapter on scripture, he essentially presents all of us a "translators," having to find for ourselves afresh the meaning (which I think is the same as the "truth" you wrote about above in conjunction with the faith chapter) of the books that claim to include the words of the prophets. He sees no other way to do this except to read them—really read them, and read lots of other things besides them, so as to deepen our ability to translate the words on the page. I think that's a powerful image, and one that fits in with a lot that I already believe about the importance of interpretation as we work our way through life.

MEF: Yes, I really liked that chapter too.

RAF: To get back on track, and to remember the title of the book: do you think that these more introspective, more "authentic" approaches to thinking "Mormonly" about the Standard Mormon Answers is actually helpful to young Mormons like yourself?

MEF: I think *Letters to a Young Mormon* is a good book—a *very* good book—but I don't think the "authenticity" that is kind of its theme is quite enough for Mormon youth like me. I have no doubt that Miller cares about the fate of the struggling and doubting young Mormons out there. There is a lot of significant and sometimes harmful baggage that comes from old phrases being thrown around

again and again in our Standard Mormon Answers, and just, at least, *not* talking about old issues in the same way can itself be a significant help. His chapter on sexual hunger really stands out here.

So, honestly, *Letters to a Young Mormon* is a great resource for reframing questions and coming to a different sort of understanding on issues that you've heard on repeat ever since you were twelve or eight or even younger. And it's a great resource, I think, for young Mormons who are beginning to learn to think about these issues for themselves, and want the sort of relationship with God and Christ that they've heard the adults in their life testify of. But for young Mormons who look at their ward, or the Church culture in general, and are hurt, or who feel alienated due to years of having been hammered with the same doctrines or general practices or anything else like that, I don't see how *Letters to a Young Mormon* is going to do much. Because, in the end, all Miller is doing is writing about the same things we hear every Sunday. And telling us to pray harder or have a little more faith isn't going to cut it—no matter that he calls it “listening” or “translating”—not when we can't feel God through the, quite frankly, often limited ways the Church wants us to interact with Him.

RAF: Is that really fair? I do think that there are at least a few places where Miller's rather subjective approach to thinking about Mormon life leads him into some new—for most Mormons, anyway!—territory. Like, what do you think about his use of “ignorance”? There is his very Zen reference to how religious people need “great faith, great doubt, and great effort”; there is the way he talks about prayer as an almost Buddhist meditative struggle to listen, which you've already mentioned; and there is the way in which he talks about “eternal life” as something which is “always for now and never for later.” I think it is possible that Miller's explorations are, at least, bringing some kind of robust concept of “unknowability” into those SMAs. In talking about prayer and the temple and faith and eternal life, he seems to be getting at the idea that there really are things that just *can't* be known. Not in the usual “wait on the mysteries of God to be unfolded” mode, or the “put it on a shelf for a while” approach to doubts, but rather in the sense of ineffable experiences that

are never reducible to propositional knowledge. I don't know Miller, but my gut tells me that in this book he is subtly working out a rather "Mormonly" way of saying something outright mystical. That truth is the illusive, immediate experience of the divine, and *not* doctrinal clarity about the historicity of the Book of Mormon or whatever.

But maybe I'm reading him wrong—maybe he really *does* think that Mormon revelations will give you definite answers to religious questions, and not just give us a mode of thinking about and experiencing how God's unknowability abides around us (which is one way of getting at "mysticism"). Any opinions there?

MEF: I'm not sure if I got an impression from the book regarding whether Miller wants his readers to think that there is definite knowledge that can be found or learned about the mysteries of God or not. It seems to me that Miller is trying to marry two beliefs. One, that revelations can give you definite answers to your questions, that prophets, seers, and revelators exist today and speak directly to and for God, and that while there are mysteries of the kingdom that we, as mortals, can't and won't understand now, we will when we're exalted. Two, that the best we can really hope for in terms of personal revelation is gaining an understanding that God "hides himself in what we would like to ignore." It's a little confusing. Still, I agree that he's done a really great job of pointing out that the Mormon rhetoric which we typically think of when we talk about SMA stuff—prayer, faith, eternal life, etc.—can be used much more broadly for much more mystical ideas. He connects this with the temple, which is another really fascinating part of *Letters to a Young Mormon*. To me, Miller is making the point in that chapter that what the temple is really there for is to show you just a small bit of the mysteries of the kingdom, only so you can get a glimpse of just how *little* we understand about God. "It will acquaint you with your own ignorance." And, to bring us back to the beginning, that's not something that's solely Mormon either. It applies to most if not all areas of study. One of my favorite quotes: "The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know" —Albert Einstein.

RAF: Are you sure that was Einstein? I think I saw on Facebook that Dumbledore said it.

MEF: “Don’t believe everything you read on the internet, Dad.”
—Benjamin Franklin.