

# DEUS MEA LUX EST: A MORMON AMONG CATHOLICS

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I am the Mormon among Catholics part of this equation. I was raised in Utah Valley—well I got taller, anyway. I got my undergraduate degree from Brigham Young University (BYU) and both of my graduate degrees from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. As an alumna of that school, and especially as a medievalist who studies the Catholic mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, I love Catholicism and the history of Catholic Christianity. I do confess, though, that my knowledge of that vast history is spotty and particular, and that the parts I love most are the wacky bits—but more on that later.

I always loved history and was attracted to the high ritual of Catholicism even as a (weird) Mormon kid, but I didn't expect to go to Catholic school, so here is how that happened. One of the ways God has always answered my prayers is through music. When my father died I spent hours listening to his favorite records of classical music to help with my grief. I have had questions resolved by overheard snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and have had little epiphanies (epiphanettes, I call them) by recalling seemingly random song lyrics—they pop into my head fortuitously, and God and I share a chuckle.

But probably the most poignant time God answered a prayer with a song was when I was a new graduate student at the University of Maryland (I didn't start out at CUA), and I was terribly homesick. Boyd and I were married about four years and had never lived outside of Utah before. We moved at the new year, which meant unpacking

our van of belongings into a tiny basement apartment during a cold snap harsher than any Maryland had experienced in years. We moved into the basement because it was all we could afford, and though it was adequate—a kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom—it also had two unforeseen aspects that did not help my loneliness and depression. The first was that the foundation of the house was severely cracked, which meant we awoke each morning to about an inch of icy water on our floor; and, second, Mrs. Cook, the landlady, who was bedridden in the final stages of aggressive and agonizing stomach cancer. She would cry out in distress and pain, and chain smoke to take some of the edge off. Our bed was about six feet below hers. Her distress, as well as the tobacco and medical waste smells would fill our tiny, splashy bedroom in all the hours she was awake, which was most of them. Dying of cancer is not for the faint of heart.

And I was in a completely inappropriate slough of self-pity as she did. My depression was fierce. I had been the darling of my graduating class at BYU, all the professors knew me and loved me, and here I was, a total stranger at an enormous state school, with professors who drank coffee and smoked cigarettes and did not care at all about the new grad student who paid out-of-state tuition and looked bewildered more often than not. They weren't unkind, particularly, but they were not *my* people, the way BYU professors had been *my* people, and where I had thought school itself could give me a purpose and a distraction from my homesickness, at the University of Maryland it merely exacerbated the longing. There was no financial aid or teaching assignment for me, so the financial sacrifice was shared out between student loans and parental help (Masterdad funding), and I felt guilty about that too.

Through the despair that winter, what I most craved was light. I had to get work as soon as possible—Boyd was on a political internship, which had a laughably small stipend attached—so I worked for a temp agency at a variety of unsavory odd jobs, all of which seem in my memory to be in very dingy and dark places. The sun was hidden

behind dull clouds for those months, our basement had no windows anyway, and my graduate school classes were night classes, since I had to work days. I never seemed to find any light. So I begged for light. One particularly gloomy evening, before Boyd called from the metro station for a ride, I broke down and begged God for some *light—any light!*

And instantly, loudly, joyfully, into my head popped a song—the hymn “The Lord is My Light.” By day and by night, His presence is near—I could use that, I was not forgotten. *I* had just forgotten Who the Light really was. Like the medieval mystics I was in school to study, I had to remember to replace my sadness with the light of His assurance. I lived by that hymn for days. The sun didn’t come out, and Mrs. Cook still shouted for release. But with that song in my head I started to climb out of my depression, and I was able to go to her, hold her hand, make useless but distracting small talk with her, without caving in to my own despair.

One day about a week after this small but crucial epiphanette, I ventured out into our new environs to get myself lost. I had learned how to drive to the essential places—grocery stores, school, work, the metro station for Boyd’s line, by driving until lost and then finding my way home, but on this day I went to get lost on public transit—I needed to learn how to find my way home even without a car. I put as much money as I could onto a metro ticket and just began riding. I changed lines, from orange, to green, to blue, to red . . . and I got out at various stops, never going through the turnstiles, just to check my surroundings. One stop on the red line was labelled Brookland/ CUA. I didn’t even know what that stood for, but I decided to get out, all the way out, at that stop. CUA stands for The Catholic University of America. I took the elevator out of the metro and emerged onto a campus with what looked for all the world to me like a castle—next to a Byzantine dome, near an English country manor house. U of Maryland has a beautiful campus, but it is quintessentially American,

all Georgian and Colonial. *This* was medieval. This was *the* Catholic University of America.

I was entranced. Even in the grim eastern winter, the campus at CUA was lovely. There were buildings with *crenellations*. There was the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception! I wandered into the bookstore. There was the university's banner, with a shield blazoned with the Cross, Mary's crescent moon in the upper left quadrant, and a book lying open in the center inscribed with the words "Deus Mea Lux Est."

And I burst into tears. God was my light, a refrain my sanity had depended on for a week, and here He had led me to a home I hadn't known existed. I visited the admissions office; I went to the English department. Within another term they had not only accepted my transfer from UM, but had also put me to work in the Writing Center and waved my tuition. Though no school experience is halcyon and perfect, I am positive Catholic University was the best place for me to get my degrees. I made friends who are still in my life, I had a brilliant dissertation director (whom I affectionately referred to as Doctor Ego, completing the trio of Doctors Id and Superego), and it launched me into a career I love.

I was already enamored of much of medieval Catholic history, but now I had reason to owe allegiance and gratitude to contemporary Catholicism as well. I hadn't had much exposure to it, growing up in Provo. My sister's best friend in her fourth grade year had been the only Catholic in our elementary school—and the teacher of that fourth grade class had told my sister, privately, not to befriend a non-Mormon. This made us all swell with indignation and loyalty, but I never learned anything about Catholics from Joan D. except not to actually swear during grace before meals. (She got in trouble for that—forgot the words and said dammit.)

My experience of being a Mormon at CUA was relatively unremarkable, academically. Though it is the pontifical flagship (the "*the*"

is a very big deal) and is the only US school to receive direct Vatican funding and require a papal imprimatur on some of its approved dissertations, it was not at all Catholic the same way BYU is Mormon. It is in many of the same categories as a religious school as BYU, but it is a lot more ecumenical, at least for graduate students.

And I will say that the religious element was a welcome relief for me. At UM, I did not know where the boundaries were with discussion that might verge into the religious—which is hard when the texts you want to study are mystical. But at CUA, almost all the faculty and students were religious and respectful of religion, even if it was a religion other than RC. The classmates I am still closest to are Evangelical Lutheran, Anglican/Episcopalian, Methodist, and NeoPagan. (The NeoPagan reads my Tarot for me at medieval studies conferences.) Our conversations about medieval Catholic texts were very, very rich.

The undergraduate students there were also religiously disciplined and understandably reverential toward conservative religious views, but many also hankered for a sense of the university experience of independence and break-away thinking. They demanded, for instance, a gay student club (which no one was willing to join) and free distribution of condoms (which few were willing to pick up during hours of high visibility). Their strident graffitied demands for these radical ideas were all done in chalk. The students wanted freedom and sexual safety and justice! *and* not to lose their scholarships. It was bold for CUA in the nineties, and would have been an expellable offense at BYU, but CUA undergrad rebels struck a cautious, hilarious balance: “Equal rights for Gays!—not that I know any of them!”

The faculty was varied. Of the four Catholics on the English faculty when I was there, one was gay himself, though of the generation to refer to himself with a twinkle as a confirmed bachelor; one was a Sister whose life’s work was the protestant Tyndale Bible; one was raised Catholic but was very proud of his Mormon heritage—as a small boy he had participated in the 1947 centennial re-enactment of the pioneer entry

into Utah—and the last was a staunchly Catholic Irishman. On learning I was Mormon he was the only one to comment: “Mormon! Oh that’s a little *baby* religion! And with a lay-priesthood, too! How adorable!”

My dissertation committee consisted of only one Catholic, from the Church History Department, a fiercely feminist Benedictine nun (Sister Mary—that would be Doctor Superego), one Unitarian Universalist (Doctor Ego, and I’d thank God for him but that’s a bit . . . anthropomorphic, for his style), and—Doctor Id—a gay alcoholic Pantheist son of a bitterly lapsed . . . Mormon. Not the same one as participated in the Days of 47 festival.

Another thing that would not have happened at BYU was the preponderance of interruptions we got for Saints’ feasts and other holy days. We graduate instructors would fight each other for Monday/Wednesday/Friday schedules, the plumb courses being the middle of the day, because school masses would always be held at the Shrine during those times. I knew I had really acclimated to Catholic education when I caught myself staring, brow-furrowed, at the word “STRAWBERRY” written out in all capitals, and wondering vaguely which one was Saint Rawberry.

By only our second year, my grad class friends and I began to refer to all of March as “Saint Patrick’s Month.” It was a wash. Spring break was only supposed to last a week, but I learned that some people can squeeze a lot more out of a liturgical calendar than you’d think. (I suspect it involves trumping up some bogus family devotional saints—possibly Rawberry.) Certain school administrators and the students’ wealthy families managed to stretch the Cancun vacation out to two weeks, and then St. Patrick’s—which they never scheduled to *coincide* with spring break—was its own week and a half celebration. To make it worse, those unlucky students who did, because of family poverty and/or cruelty, find themselves on campus in March, would drink green beer, which flowed from Kitty O’Shea’s taps at a penny a pint starting on about the tenth, to oblivion. One year when St. Patrick’s fell on a

Monday, a group in my writing class convinced one of their members, a particularly prodigious drinker, that Wednesday was really Friday, and that he had drunk and slept his way past the quizzes for that week.

I was never questioned about my religion outside of the box I checked on admissions, “NRC” instead of “RC,” except for once. And then it wasn’t so much my religion as my perceived piety. In my second year, I got pregnant and was in the first few queasy months and carrying food in my pockets to keep my stomach calm. I was taking an evening class on the York Corpus Christi plays, which are biblical re-enactments, and had, I’m sure because of my LDS upbringing and BYU education, gotten a reputation for being the go-to Bible person. During break one night, the class clown passed me in the hall as I munched my crackers and carrots, and sneered, “Actual food? I thought *you* subsisted entirely on Holy Eucharist!” I blinked at him.

“I’m pregnant, Mike. Just fighting the queasy. Plus I’m not even Catholic.” Now it was his turn to blink. “You’re not Catholic?” He broke into a wide smile: “Well, yeah because if you were Catholic and pregnant you’d be dropping out of school!” After that we were fast friends. I guess it wasn’t obnoxiously pious to know the Bible if it was the King James one.

So I didn’t have the kinds of pressure on me to join up that poor Polly Aird has had among her Mormons. Catholics are a grownup religion—not as cynically grownup as Judaism, perhaps, but not insecure and needy, either. Mormonism is a baby religion comparatively, and it is still in its puppy phase, licking people’s faces and begging for everyone to like us and play with us now. *Now!* There was only one time I felt like an outsider for not being Catholic, and it was during a homily in one of the weekday masses, when the priest made an adamant point that One Flock and One Shepherd meant *this* flock, the specific brand of RC that he was preaching, and no other. Straight was the gate and narrow was the way in his speech, and he made it clear that no one, not I nor anyone else who did not follow his lead, was on the path

nor going through the gate without his approval. It didn't feel good. I figure it doesn't feel good for Polly either.

One of the things I found myself doing during my years at CUA was forming an ongoing mental parallel between the major events of early Christian history and specific Mormon history. It's an urge born of my father's affection for syncretistic connections and parallels, but mine are usually useless. Nevertheless, I still find myself doing it—and tripping up when someone other than I has done it too—as when I heard Terryl Givens label the Pratt boys, Parley and Orson, as serving for “our” Augustine, shaping Mormonism's mystical and miraculous beginnings into a praxis and an orthodoxy.

I had wondered about that, but not so much because I had seen, for instance, the split with the Community of Christ as the schism with Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Avignon Papacy as perhaps the claims of Sidney Rigdon. David O. McKay was our Innocent III, and 1950s correlation was the fourth Lateran Council, and those early, years-long missions were a kind of monasticism.

Though we didn't have the eremitic tradition of hermits and anchors, we eventually did get our MTC cenobites, and Jesuits, when Gene England founded *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. I could go interesting places with the Spanish Inquisition, but I won't; though I will mention Brigham Young's clash with President James Buchanan in connection with the twelfth-century investiture controversy (basically, who wins in a politico-religious smack-down between a Holy Roman emperor and a pope).

There are moral failings and financial shenanigans in both histories, hagiographies of great examples and martyrs, and a pilgrimage growth-industry; rogue bishops to reign in in both traditions, uppity women, brilliant orators and philosophers—and at least the promise of some literary and artistic greatness. We haven't had an individual figure to parallel a Martin Luther that I can tell (though I think there



are many who would *love* to claim that function and label), but I do think we have had our Henry VIII, and it was Brigham Young.

Not that the complex and specific English Protestant break with Rome under Henry has exact parallels with the complex and specific reasons for the exodus and defection of the early Saints from the US, but that Brigham, like Henry, was a leader with an enormous ego, fantastic vision, strident insistence on his own near-infallibility, certain outrageous bigotries, an empire to run *his* way. And an impressive array of wives. (Though Brigham beats out Henry both in numbers married and in the moral high road of never having beheaded even one of them.)

For good or ill, England would never have become the England it is without Henry, and Mormonism, and the Jell-O Belt, would not have developed into what they are without Brother Brigham. For good or ill or both, Henry shaped a possibility for religious nationalism the world had never seen before him, and for good or ill or both, Brigham Young shaped Mormonism into a people unlike anything the world has seen either. And I would contend that both groups could use a solid twelve-step program. (In fact, I've thought frequently that the reason the Millennium is 1,000 years is that that is how long the family therapy is going to take—even with Jesus as facilitator.)

The CUA professor who called Mormonism a baby religion was more right than he knew, I think. It may be a baby with a claim to revelation and restoration, but it was neither born nor brought up in a vacuum. The “burned-over district” of nineteenth-century New England was burned over in Protestant sibling rivalry, but all of those quarrelling brother- and sister-denominations came to sweet accord in one thing: agreeing to despise and disown their Papist Roman ancestor.

Joseph Smith famously defended Catholicism when typical protestant, anti-Catholic sentiment crept into early Mormons' rhetoric. As Joan's friend when I was a kid, and as a student of CUA later, I seized on that quote, even having grown up hearing Bruce R. McConkie's identification

of Catholicism as the Great and Abominable Church. At BYU I teach Joseph Smith's repudiation of McConkie (and McConkie's apostolic apology graciously owning his fallibility after the 1978 revelation), and find my Latter-day Saint students there becoming increasingly appreciative of broader views, including Catholicism, themselves. I felt and still feel drawn to this intimidatingly well-established, grownup great-grandparent of my own faith (and especially to the mystical voices within it).

Toddlers can indeed be adorable, as my professor said, but they can also make really stupid choices, and be unpredictably cranky, throwing tantrums and embarrassing onlookers as they test boundaries and establish their own identities. To take the analogy further, children will always have both some attractive and some unattractive features and qualities of their predecessors; *as well as* having their own unique qualities and gifts, attractive or not. Even though I am thoroughly Mormon, I will always maintain a crypto-Catholic identity that comes from my alma mater; I will continue to love, study, teach, and revel in the history of Christianity, and I will always feel great affection toward my Catholic brothers and sisters—and lay folks, too!