

**RELS/HIST 4795: Biography, Autobiography, and Joseph Smith  
Spring 2010**

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Office hours: Tuesday, Thursday 3-4 p.m. (or by appointment)

**Course Description & Goals:** Like the new religion he founded, Joseph Smith has an uncommonly rich, complex, controversial, and fascinating history. Scrutiny of this history offers unusual opportunities for thinking not only about Smith, but about “prophets” more generally, about the rise of new religious movements, and about the nature and art of biography.

In lecture, discussion, and the study of text, image, and film, this course will attempt to 1) come to provisional terms with aspects of the life of Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith; 2) gain an introduction to the most influential analytic treatments of Smith and the historiographical issues behind them; and 3) explore the psychology, philosophy, methods, limitations, and meaning intrinsic to the writing of biography and autobiography.

**Required Texts:**

Richard Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism’s Founder (Vintage Books, 2007). ISBN: 978-1-4000-7753-3

Richard Bushman, On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author’s Diary (Greg Kofford Books, 2007). ISBN: 978-1-58958-102-9

A course pack has been prepared for the course, and is available for purchase at the bookstore.

**Calendar:** We will be responsive to the give and take of our discussions, allowing more or less time for individual topics as our discussions dictate. Schedules for reading will be handed out in class for several weeks in advance. Due dates for papers are in the “Graded Elements” section below.

**Graded Elements of the Course:**

**Paper #1:** perform a succinct “exegesis” of Joseph Smith’s “first vision.” Using the historical sources made available, succinctly identify and analyze what you take to be the key historical issues in Smith’s account(s) of the episode and its role in the Mormon movement. Explain what and why you conclude about each of them. End your essay by drawing on these conclusions to recast the story as you would tell it if you were the Mormon prophet’s biographer. Approximately 5-7 pp. **Due Tues. 2/5/08. 100 points possible.**

**Paper #2:** Identify, explore, and put in relation to one another the historical/philosophical methods and presuppositions you see at work in Brodie, Bushman, and at least one other biographer of Joseph Smith. Some of these the authors will articulate; others you will need to discern as you study them. 5-7 pp. **Due Thurs. 3/6/08. 100 points possible.**

**Paper #3:** Write your own “religious” [or surrogate—see below] autobiography: 10--15 pp. **Due** approx. end of March. I will be looking for quality of writing and for how you have thought about the process of spiritual autobiography in relation to the course. I do not presume that you necessarily embrace a formal religion; if you do not, construe the terms “spiritual” and “religious” to entail your core values and worldview; how did these come to be formed? **Due Tues. 3/25/08.** I will not assign a grade to the paper. It is worth **100 points** when turned in with acceptable quality.

**Paper #4:** This research paper will center on a topic of your choice, negotiated with me before Spring Break, on an aspect of Joseph Smith’s life and/or thought. Talk to me before or after class, email me, or make an appointment to discuss and have your topic approved; once approved, email me your understanding of the agreement. Approx. 10 pp. **Due Tues. 4/15/08. 100 points possible.**

**Short papers:** I may assign several 1-paragraph or 1-page response papers, either in class or out; some may be unannounced. These may be on questions I pose to you in advance

or, for in-class responses, to the day's reading. **Points depending on number of papers assigned.**

**In-class oral work:** How does your effort elevate the quality of our thinking? **50 points**  
**[Graduate students will meet with me independently to determine an additional project.]**

**Class rules:** 1) Note that this is not a religious course, but rather an academic course about religion. We are not here to determine spiritual truth or falsity. You can do well in the course whether you personally are inside or outside the religious tradition that Smith launched.

As he predicted, the Mormon prophet became a controversial figure, offending and inspiring different audiences. As we try to come to terms with his life based on the historical record, we will necessarily encounter material that may seem sensitive or surprising. Our methods are those of scholarship and of critical thought, using tools developed in the academy. These tools are valuable, evolving, and bequeathed by smart folks who came before us; they can help us see, think, and live better. But these tools are not equipped to determine the ultimate metaphysical truth or spuriousness of such questions as "Is there a God?" or "Did Joseph Smith really encounter an angel?" You are of course encouraged to come to critical judgment on various matters, as in any course, but our classroom is not the place for spiritual "testimony" attacking or defending Joseph Smith—or, of course, classmates. If you are unable or unwilling to study religion from different points of view by the rules of academic discourse, please reconsider taking this course. Do feel encouraged to ask any question that occurs to you, but I will be the arbiter of its appropriateness in our setting.

2) I construe that we share responsibility for the quality of our academic experience this term. I will offer lectures at key points, but often we'll shed more light through probing conversation. Come to class having prepared questions or insights from your reading and reflection. Our time is limited as we grapple with complex matters; during class time, banish cell phone sounds, tardiness, or anything that would distract the rest of us from our task.

3) As in your future or current workplace, unexcused absences will affect your experience, performance, and grade.

**Grading:** For each paper, the points equate to the following:

<b>A</b> 93-100	<b>C+</b> 77-79
<b>A-</b> 90-92	<b>C</b> 73-76
<b>B+</b> 87-89	<b>C-</b> 70-73
<b>B</b> 83-86	<b>D</b> 60-69
<b>B-</b> 80-82	<b>F</b> 59 and below

For in-class oral work, the scale is cut in half.

Graduate students are expected to perform at a higher level.

Criteria: Learning cogent expression is central to what you should take from the University. Good writing matters. What I am looking for in particular is your knowledge and understanding of the cumulative material in the lectures, discussion, and reading; evidence of active, imaginative, and critical reflection on the issues at hand; persuasiveness and insightfulness of your argument; clarity, organization, and good form in your expressions; and use of evidence, documentation, and reason, rather than mere proclamation or sentiment, supporting your thesis.

Late papers will be penalized 5 percent per day (including weekends) beginning immediately after the due time. No paper will be accepted after more than ten late days.

Incompletes are given only in special cases with extenuating circumstances (not for poor performance).

Final grades cannot be posted, emailed, or given out over the phone. If you want your final exam and grade conveyed directly, please provide me with a legal size self-addressed stamped envelope when you turn in your final paper.

I reserve the right to deduct points for breaking class rules.

Suggestion: Consider finding partners or forming study groups to discuss class material outside of class and to critique your papers in style and content before handing them in. It will rarely strike you as convenient to do so, but it is likely to save you time in the long run and is apt to

elevate the level of your understanding and the quality of questions and insights you bring to each class meeting. Some of you may want to make use of the College's Writing Center to critique your papers or to help you organize and think about them.

**Special Needs:** If you have special needs in relation to the course, please immediately inform me and contact the Disability Resource Center, located in the University Inn, Room 101: (435) 797-2444 and (435) 797-0740, Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

**Academic Integrity:**

Trust is a precious commodity. Cheating will trigger an automatic grade of "F" in the course and a report to the Dean. Especially important as you master the world of academic inquiry is the issue of plagiarism: Thou shalt not claim another person's ideas as if they originated with you. Thou shalt not copy, paraphrase, or borrow an idea from another work without citing the source. Thou shalt not cite a work and then paraphrase too closely or copy directly without quotation marks. Please see the USU General Catalog for explicit descriptions of and procedures for Academic Dishonesty: [http://studentlife.tsc.usu.edu/stuserv/pdf/student\\_code.pdf](http://studentlife.tsc.usu.edu/stuserv/pdf/student_code.pdf); <http://www.usu.edu/policies/PDF/Acad-Integrity.pdf>.