

INTRODUCTION

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A single volume cannot accurately measure the influence of a beloved colleague, but this one nevertheless stands as modest evidence of Robert L. Millet's prodigious impact over a career that spanned nearly four decades. His retirement in 2014 provided an opportunity to gather some of us who count him as a mentor, colleague, and friend. We offer the collection of essays that follows as a monument to his remarkable career as an administrator, teacher, and writer. That these pieces range across topics, disciplines, and even religious traditions seems especially appropriate given Millet's own broad reach. His students number in the thousands, his readers number perhaps ten times that, and his friends in academia, the Church Educational System (CES) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and around the globe in many faiths would be difficult to number indeed. Both in terms of his staggering literary production and in his broad collection of colleagues, it is not an overstatement to place Bob, as he's affectionately known to us, among the most influential Latter-day Saint voices of the past quarter century.¹

Millet's path as an educator and a writer was somewhat circuitous, but several aspects of his Southern upbringing predicted a life of influence. Born December 30, 1947, to Lou and Bobbi Millet, Bob's early years in

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Louisiana exposed him to good cooking and religious variety. His father was raised a Latter-day Saint and his mother a Methodist. Early on, the family drifted in and out of Church attendance at their local Latter-day Saint ward. That periodic activity notwithstanding, Bob grew into a spiritually sensitive youngster with a passion for religious learning. “I was one of those birds that was sort of drawn to church. I loved the Church,” he recalls. Bob had a voracious appetite for Bible stories and Church manuals. His interest in religious topics was piqued in school, too. As one of the few Latter-day Saints in a veritable sea of Baptists and Roman Catholics, he gained both an appreciation for friends of other faiths and sensitivity to the fact that he stood somewhat apart. The interfaith nature of his young adulthood exposed him to the broad outlines of traditional Christianity and to a Latter-day Saint minority struggling to define itself over and against that majority. In one telling reminiscence, Bob remembers asking a family member about grace, only to be told, “That’s what the Baptists believe.” In some ways, his subsequent career seems to be an outgrowth of that early search for Latter-day Saint meaning in a broader Christian world.

After a stint at Louisiana State, Bob transferred to Brigham Young University. Though initially unsure what to study, he knew he loved people and wanted to help those who were struggling. Psychology seemed a good fit and, after realizing a bachelor’s degree would not secure a career, he stayed at BYU for a master’s degree in the same field. He started a doctoral program, too, but he impressed a supervisor in what was then called LDS Social Services and was hired at a Social Services office in Idaho, where he worked from 1973 to 1975. He was not long into that position when it became clear that his interests lay primarily with the *preventative* side of Church social work—and with teaching in particular.

Fortuitously, Millet had crossed paths as an undergraduate with a future mentor who would dramatically shape his academic future. Bob had innocently wandered into the old Joseph Smith Building one night as a homesick undergraduate, only to find himself at the feet of a lecturer named Robert J. Matthews. Matthews would win wide acclaim for pathbreaking work on the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of the Bible, but Millet had no idea who Matthews was when he sat down in the auditorium. Matthews was among the first Latter-day Saints to gain access to the Reorganized

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' (now "Community of Christ") JST manuscripts and helped disarm longstanding Latter-day Saint mistrust of Joseph Smith's "Inspired Version," as it was known in RLDS circles. Bob was electrified by what he heard. The two eventually struck up an acquaintance and periodic correspondence after Millet embarked on his own careful study of the JST. Matthews, clearly impressed with his young protégé, kept an eye on Millet's progress and advised him about Church education once his zeal for social work fizzled.

Millet taught seminary for a couple of years in the mid-1970s and then accepted a transfer to direct the Church's Institute of Religion adjacent to Florida State University. The assignment not only took him back to his Southern roots, it exposed him to the joys and strains of both the institute classroom and the expansive world of secular religious studies. He learned quickly that an institute director recruits as much as teaches. And driven by the chance to enhance his academic training and by possible employment at BYU, he enrolled in a doctoral program at Florida State. As an institute director, a full-time student, a young bishop in his local Latter-day Saint ward, and a committed husband and father, Millet remembers the stint in Tallahassee as both dizzyingly busy and blissful. "I don't know how we lived through it," he said, looking back. "It was a blur."

At Florida State, he worked under Leo Sandon, a scholar of American religious history. The training at FSU stoked his fascination with the nation's Christian diversity, but it also fueled his theological streak. Bob had appreciated popular evangelical preachers on the radio as a young man, but his time at FSU brought enhanced exposure to Christianity's great thinkers. He relished the academic experience he gained with Christianity, but, with his advisor's encouragement, Millet centered his own research on the Latter-day Saints. Even so, he was exhausted after his coursework and qualifying exams and felt uninspired with the prospect of completing the doctoral dissertation. With his FSU coursework done, he had also accepted a new role in CES as a "Teaching Support Consultant" for the Southern States Area. Bob and Shauna moved to Athens, Georgia, and Bob traveled across a sizable portion of the South training other CES teachers. But when his area director moved to the College of Religious Instruction at BYU (later called Religious Education) and asked if Bob would be interested in coming to Provo,

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Bob—with Robert Matthews’ ongoing encouragement—quicken his research and writing pace to become a viable candidate. Sandon had known something of Mormonism and urged Bob to study the concept of “Zion” in Latter-day Saint history. Partaking as it did of both doctrinal and historical development, it suited Bob’s interests, and he crafted a dissertation that he describes as “not very well written” but nevertheless generative of some of his later academic fascination with Joseph Smith and the Restoration.

With Millet’s completion of the PhD at Florida State and move to BYU in 1983, his passion for teaching and writing found greater resources and opportunities. Initially, he taught courses in the Bible and the Joseph Smith Translation. His leadership potential was not lost on his administrative superiors, however, and he quickly became a fixture in the leadership of both BYU’s Department of Ancient Scripture and in Religious Education, an academic unit roughly equivalent to a college in the university’s administrative structure. After a stint as chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture from 1988 to 1991, Millet was selected to replace Robert Matthews, his beloved mentor and friend, as dean of Religious Education in 1991, a position he held until 2000.²

As dean for nearly a decade, Millet led Religious Education into somewhat new territory. Long the center of religious instruction on campus, Religious Education had swung between periods of pedagogical and devotional emphasis that tilted the quasi-college towards being an institute of religion and moments of academic orientation that tended towards the model of a typical academic department, complete with publishing requirements and full academic standards. He inherited that ongoing identity crisis as dean. Was Religious Education’s mission to effectively convey the gospel to the rising generation or to produce original scholarship on religious topics—or some combination of the two? If a combination, what would serve as the preferred training for faculty—experience teaching Latter-day Saint young people the faith or formal scholarly training in biblical studies and history? Suspended somewhere between the two models, Millet nevertheless pushed towards enhanced academic rigor while simultaneously safeguarding the teaching excellence that had become Religious Education’s hallmark. To support teaching in Religious Education and in CES generally, he reinstated graduate training specifically calibrated for Church educators and established a periodical to explore pedagogy and to provide in-depth content

for Latter-day Saint readers, the *Religious Educator*. To spur academic rigor, he concentrated on faculty hiring and generally elevated the scholarly profile of both departments—Ancient Scripture and Church History and Doctrine.³

He found two additional areas needing immediate attention. First, he realized that Religious Education's place within the university was fairly isolated. Sensing that relationships with the university administration had been somewhat strained in the past, he worked to integrate Religious Education within the university community and have its mission better articulated and understood. Second, he moved towards détente with faculty and administrators in the sciences. Relations between Religious Education and the sciences had been at times rocky, stretching back to the early twentieth century when broader cultural clashes over Darwinian evolution and scriptural accounts of creation had erupted in Provo. To aid a broader rapprochement, Millet dispatched an associate dean, Larry Dahl, to establish a dialogue with science faculty. The conversations were productive; relations improved and collaboration between the two campus entities spurred the development of a packet of official Church statements related to science for student use in religion classes. Millet counts the improved relationships between Religious Education and the broader BYU community among the most significant legacies from his dean years. Millet's gifts as a bridge builder made success in both cases possible, and his penchant for bringing people together and spanning ideological divides was to be further elaborated and tested in his religious outreach efforts.

That story developed over many years. His passion for interreligious dialogue no doubt developed organically from his own upbringing, but it also sprang from a memorable exchange with a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The search process for Religious Education's dean brought Millet into close association with several members of the Quorum of the Twelve (although their expanding administrative duties would make such a thing unlikely now). Multiple informal interviews with members of the Twelve not only preceded his formal appointment, but several Apostles traveled to Provo to announce his appointment to the faculty. One of those preliminary interviews proved to be profoundly influential for Millet's work as dean and subsequent involvement in religious outreach.

During that brief interview, Elder Neal A. Maxwell asked Millet to keep him informed about how things progressed and, particularly, to call on him

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if he needed help during the overwhelming early months. During a particularly difficult early stretch, Millet contemplated accepting Elder Maxwell's invitation. He hesitated, but with the weight of his new responsibilities bearing down, he summoned the courage to call Elder Maxwell's secretary on a Monday afternoon, when the Twelve are often out of the office, hoping to secure a few minutes in the Apostle's schedule for a phone conversation. To his surprise, Elder Maxwell himself answered the phone. After Millet's brief explanation and request for advice, Elder Maxwell responded characteristically, "Oh absolutely! I can be there in about forty-five minutes. Would that work for you?" Embarrassed, Bob reassured him that he would come to Salt Lake City. Finding time a few days later to meet, Bob went to Elder Maxwell's office hoping for direction on the thorny issues he faced as a new dean. Bob recalls the memorable conclusion to their visit:

We had a wonderful conversation. He gave some encouraging counsel. Then he came around and put his hands on my head and said, "By the power of the Holy Apostleship"—that got my attention. . . . He said a lot of things that I still can't remember. I remember how inspired I felt by his blessing. But then [came] words that he repeated three different times through the course of what he was saying. "Brother Robert, you've got to find ways to reach out to those of other faiths more." "Now Brother Bob, you need to build some bridges between us and those of other faiths." And then he said [it] again just before he closed. And it just weighed on me. I didn't know what to do with it.

Bob left the interview impressed and inspired but unsure how to proceed. Initially, he broadened his reading load. He had taken up the habit of listening to prominent evangelical preachers on his drive to and from work as department chair, but after that 1991 interview with Elder Maxwell, he began reading contemporary Christian theological and devotional works to better understand the conservative Protestant world. He also took associate deans and visited the campuses of other religiously affiliated universities—such as Notre Dame, Baylor, and Wheaton—and made some valuable connections as a result.⁴

Grateful for what they learned from those campus visits, Millet still wondered about how to build more meaningful bridges with people of

other faiths. After his stint as dean, and in recognition of his experience and contributions to interreligious understanding, he was appointed to BYU's Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding from 2001 to 2005 (see the essay in this volume by J. B. Haws). That endowed professorship provided a new platform from which to pursue Elder Maxwell's mandate. An unlikely opportunity grew out of Bob's friendship with a local Baptist pastor, Greg Johnson. Johnson had been raised Mormon but ultimately became an evangelical Christian as a teenager. After attending evangelical institutions Westmont College (Santa Barbara, California) and Denver Seminary, Johnson felt the call to ministry and to Utah, in particular, where he hoped to improve relations between the Latter-day Saint and evangelical communities. Uninspired by evangelical "countercult" approaches to Mormonism, rooted as they were in sharp-edged polemics that left most Mormons insulted, he sought a more relational approach to interfaith work, one grounded in mutual understanding and respect. One of his Denver Seminary mentors, Craig L. Blomberg, had coauthored a landmark volume of interreligious dialogue with one of Millet's colleagues in Religious Education, Stephen E. Robinson. (Johnson had introduced the two.) Their 1997 *How Wide the Divide?* modeled a new kind of conversation, one that was both respectful and engaging, and helped clarify respective positions and thaw some of the longstanding iciness between the two scholarly communities.⁵ Critics charged that they downplayed some of Mormonism's more distinctive elements, or that each had been too soft towards the other side, or that they had even attempted to find common ground, but Johnson was inspired and so was Millet. Their own friendship, which began in 1997, would pave the way for a dramatic new stage in Latter-day Saint/evangelical relations.⁶

Millet and Johnson's extensive personal conversations opened them both to new understandings of the other's faith and, to a certain extent, new understandings of their own. They eventually opted for a two-pronged approach to share what they had learned. First, they offered to evangelical and Mormon groups something of a public dialogue, where they would engage each other with the kinds of questions and answers that had characterized their private conversations, followed by audience Q&A. Over the years, some seventy audiences across the United States, Canada, and England experienced the Millet/Johnson dialogue. Secondly, the pair established a formal Latter-day

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Saint/evangelical dialogue group, comprising scholars from both traditions. The group ultimately opted for semiannual meetings—alternating in the spring between Mormon and evangelical locales and coinciding in the fall with the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society for Biblical Literature. The dialogue group lasted for fifteen remarkable years.⁷

After some tentative first steps, the dialogue became a productive engine for goodwill, understanding, and insight. Millet and Richard Mouw, then president of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, became the de facto leaders of their respective sides and early on determined to keep the group relatively small, private, and focused on doctrinal matters. Bonds of friendship and love between dialogue members eventually replaced palpable early tension. Questions that participants guessed would be major stumbling blocks (grace versus works, for instance) seemed less daunting after careful consideration. Other matters (such as ontology and anthropology) proved far less conducive to common ground. Neither side had any interest in “watering down” their own perspectives or in doctrinal compromise. Neither side featured a unified systematic theology either, though, so theological diversity became a prominent feature of their shared experience. In the end, members of the group spoke publicly to clarify the others’ positions and to correct misperceptions. Group members also quoted from each other’s work, visited each other’s institutions and classrooms, and eventually collaborated on several publishing projects. Millet himself led the way, authoring several titles directly related to the dialogue. Two volumes put the dialogue’s process on display for a broad audience, each with a different evangelical conversation partner: *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation between a Mormon and an Evangelical*, with Gregory Johnson, and *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate*, with Gerald R. McDermott. And, in a first of its kind, Millet also authored an examination of Latter-day Saint teachings about Jesus Christ for an evangelical audience in a prominent evangelical venue: *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*.⁸ In 2015, a collaborative volume from its participants summed up the dialogue, marked its conclusion, and hinted at possibilities for future discussion: *Talking Doctrine: Mormons and Evangelicals in Conversation*.⁹

The tone and content of Millet’s interfaith outreach efforts were not universally understood or appreciated, however. Some among Bob’s own BYU colleagues worried that emphasizing the Christ-centered aspects of Mormon

theology or the Book of Mormon so prominently effectively downplayed the more unique elements of Mormon thought and practice. Others doubted the sincerity of the evangelical counterparts. Once the effort broadened to include evangelical student visits to the BYU campus, some worried that Latter-day Saint students might get caught unawares in “stealth” evangelism. And, while some Church leaders lauded the efforts for the goodwill and understanding they generated, others worried that scholars might be perceived as speaking for the Church or that unique Church teachings might somehow get short shrift in the conversations. His outreach efforts cost him more than one friendship in Religious Education, Millet reported with regret. Even so, he felt inspired to take some risks given that 1991 apostolic mandate and the observable good accomplished during each step of the outreach process.

In the end, it seems warranted to place Millet in company with a circle of Latter-day Saints (from leaders such as David O. McKay to academics like Truman Madsen) who have influenced the tenor of Religious Education’s, BYU’s, and the Church’s approach to interreligious endeavors. Simply put, Millet had a hand in many of the notable recent headlines related to interfaith cooperation or understanding: the two visits of renowned evangelist Ravi Zacharias to speak at the Tabernacle on Temple Square (in 2004 and 2014); the meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals governing board in Salt Lake City in March 2011 and an address of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles to that body;¹⁰ the visits of national evangelical leaders to Church headquarters in Salt Lake City or BYU, including Ravi Zacharias, Assemblies of God USA general superintendent George O. Wood, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president R. Albert Mohler Jr., and Southern Evangelical Seminary president Richard D. Land; and the creation in 2014 of an Office of Religious Outreach connected to the BYU Religious Studies Center, which provides funding, support, and coordination to interreligious activities in Religious Education and across campus. Millet’s unique blend of courage, sensitivity, conviction, and openhearted curiosity fit him well for this extraordinary chapter in Latter-day Saint history. Future histories will simply have to account for his influence when considering the twenty-first-century Church’s engagement with other faiths.

His interfaith work punctuated a career of astounding literary output. Author, coauthor, or editor of over 70 books and 180 articles and book chapters, he has become one of the more recognizable and popular voices in Mormon

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publishing. By and large, he has calibrated his work for a broad Latter-day Saint audience. He remains a voracious reader of contemporary scholarship across a wide range of topics, but his own work tends to translate that world of sophisticated ideas for nonacademics. That approach resulted from a conscious decision early on in his career. Some of his more academically minded colleagues pushed him to write for scholarly audiences because of his training at Florida State. But while he appreciates the more scholarly work of others, he decided to set his focus at a wide angle. “Somebody’s got to talk to the Saints,” he explained. His writing is at once devotional, apologetic, scholarly, and pastoral. His interests vary widely, but the three sections of this Festschrift reflect his leading concerns as a writer: doctrine, scripture, and comparative Christianity. While one senses some significant shifts in his style and tone over time—especially a growing awareness of his non-Mormon conversation partners and readers—some steady themes are perceptible in his work.

First and foremost, Millet’s work is “Christocentric” in its approach to Mormon theology. That is, despite his respect for Joseph Smith and Church history, the person and mission of Jesus Christ is in the forefront for Millet (and especially so in his later work). For him, topics range out from that center, but the Center is never far afield. Seen in context, Millet’s work seems both reflective of, and undoubtedly contributive to, a broad shift in Mormon culture during the last half of the twentieth century. The 1990s reformatting of the Church’s official logo, with “Jesus Christ” in noticeably larger type, nicely encapsulates that shift. Millet’s writing is certainly part of that larger story. If twentieth-century Latter-day Saints are more conversant in their tradition’s redemptive themes, more articulate concerning the role of grace in salvation, and more aware of the commitments they share with traditional Christians—and there is strong evidence that each is true—Millet likely deserves some of the credit (or blame, depending on one’s perspective).

Secondly, the Millet corpus is rooted in a literalistic appreciation of scripture, especially the Book of Mormon and New Testament. This fact no doubt correlates with his pronounced Christocentrism, but it’s worth noting how consistently Millet returns to the authority of scripture, and with an informed yet commonsensical reading of it, as an organizing principle.¹¹ Again, context matters. Millet came of age as a young professor just as Church President Ezra Taft Benson called Latter-day Saints to task for longstanding neglect of

the Book of Mormon. While President Benson emphasized what he regarded as the Book of Mormon's lessons for American destiny, the millennial crescendo he sensed in world history, and the sin of pride, Millet and some of his like-minded Religious Education colleagues answered the call by focusing on another of the Church President's themes: the book's potential for increased personal spirituality. As they mined its pages, they rediscovered themes from the Church's earliest revelations: a strong emphasis on grace, Christ's Atonement, and salvation through his "merits." What has sometimes been taken as a "Protestant turn" in Millet's writings is likely often more the result of a fresh reckoning with early Restoration scripture. That his writing in the 1990s fit him well for détente with evangelicals is clear enough, but perhaps only in retrospect. When he started dialoguing with evangelicals in the early 2000s in earnest, in other words, he came with "Amazing Grace" already on his mind. Again, in this Millet both reflected and propelled a broader turn in Mormon culture. He has worked to harmonize Christ-centeredness and the more radical possibilities in the Mormon theological inventory, but by this point, if he were forced to choose, no one could question where he stands.

Much to his credit, the authors gathered here may or may not agree with Millet on any given topic. Certainly, it reveals a great deal that he invited several Mormon historians and philosophers into the Latter-day Saint/evangelical dialogue who spent as much time contesting his points as did the evangelicals! He has long been confident that Mormonism can more than hold its own under intense scrutiny, and he's keen to set a big table for the discussion. Simply put, he has personally mentored a large number of Mormon educators and has won the trust and respect of a significant contingent of Protestant fellow travelers. We who count ourselves grateful recipients of his generous influence hope this volume's collective thinking, faith, and lively conversation form a worthy "thank you" to our cherished colleague and friend.

NOTES

1. Biographical information and quoted material without a citation is taken from author's interview with Robert L. Millet, January 16, 2015 (transcript in author's possession), and from "Engaging Intellect and Feeding Faith: A Conversation with

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- Robert L. Millet” (interview by Lloyd D. Newell), *Religious Educator* 15, no. 2 (2014): 132–45.
2. Donald Q. Cannon served briefly as “interim dean” between Matthews and Millet. Cannon thereafter served as one of Millet’s associate deans.
 3. See “Engaging Intellect,” 138–39.
 4. See “Engaging Intellect,” 137.
 5. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997).
 6. See Craig L. Blomberg, “The Years Ahead: My Dreams for the Mormon–Evangelical Dialogue,” *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 8–11.
 7. For a brief history of the dialogue, see Derek J. Bowen, “Mormon–Evangelical Scholarly Dialogue: Context and History,” *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 19–21.
 8. Robert L. Millet and Gregory C. V. Johnson, *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Publishers, 2007); Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon–Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007); Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). See also Robert L. Millet, “The Mormon–Evangelical Dialogue: Reflections after 12 Years,” *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 4–7; Richard J. Mouw, *Talking With Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).
 9. Richard J. Mouw and Robert L. Millet, eds., *Talking Doctrine: Mormons and Evangelicals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).
 10. The address was published in the Church’s official organ: Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “Standing Together for the Cause of Christ,” *Ensign*, August 2012, lds.org/ensign/2012/08/standing-together-for-the-cause-of-christ?lang=eng.
 11. While I discern a preponderance of references to the Book of Mormon and New Testament in my admittedly incomplete survey of his writings, it should be noted that Millet has written on every book of Latter-day Saint scripture. Indeed, he reflects an important reality in modern Mormon practice: as formalized in the 1981 editions of the Latter-day Saint canon with their extensive cross-referencing system, Millet reads those scriptures *together*. That is, while some of his Religious Education colleagues specialized in a particular book of scripture with its respective linguistic, historical, or textual particularities, Millet represents a more holistic approach—almost theological and yet not formally or systematically so. See “Engaging Intellect,” 134–35.