

Mormons in our pages

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

November 1, 2012

My sister went to St. Olaf; I went to Wheaton. The differences are many--she chose Olaf after hearing both orchestras--but one that's always struck me is the fact that she was able to study world religions with tenure-track professors who actually practice them. I was not, because Wheaton requires faculty to sign a statement of faith--a model that has upsides but also pretty serious downsides.

I have no problem with people of faith who maintain, in a pluralistic world, that their particular tradition offers something crucial and unique. I am one. But when it comes to learning about another faith tradition, given the option why would you want to learn from someone who isn't personally invested in it? (I'm taking as given here that the goal is to actually learn about it, not learn how to shout it down most effectively.)

So I've been fascinated to see all the comments on religious historian [Kathleen Flake's primer on the Latter-day Saints and scripture](#), part of the *Century's* August cover package on Mormonism. One after another, readers have implied--and sometimes said outright--that they are so pleased and impressed that a non-Mormon writer could write about their faith so clearly, fairly and learnedly.

Lovely comments for a publication to receive, except for one thing: Flake *is* a Mormon. Along with being a distinguished scholar of Mormonism and other things, she's a member of the LDS church.

What fascinates me isn't that readers didn't bother to Google her before commenting. That's the Internet for you. What's striking is that their assumption was that a Christian publication would only have traditional/mainstream Christians writing for it--and that these writers would likely be ignorant of or even hostile toward all things LDS. A lot of these readers came to the article from links elsewhere and don't know the *Century* well, don't know that we've long welcomed writers from outside the mainline Protestant fold (and even some from outside the larger Christian family). Reading their comments drove home a sad point: when Mormon

readers see an article about them on a website with the word "Christian" in the title, it's not exactly paranoid for them to brace themselves for something uncharitable or even inaccurate.

One LDS commenter even said that he was "on guard for what I feared would be the inevitable 'however'" but was pleasantly surprised--the article never takes a turn toward explaining why the tradition it's just described is silly or incoherent or not as good as being a Baptist. (Or, on the other hand, why all the traditions are pretty much the same, so who cares?) The fact that he expected an inevitable "however" is sobering. We need lots more articles like Flake's, in lots of publications, on the Mormon tradition and others.