



FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

*Essays on Mormon History,
Theology, and Culture*

Edited by REID L. NEILSON
and MATTHEW J. GROW

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THE TANNER LECTURES ON MORMON HISTORY



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REID L. NEILSON

AND

MATTHEW J. GROW

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
From the outside looking in : essays on Mormon history, theology, and culture / edited by
Reid L. Neilson and Matthew J. Grow.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-19-024465-1 (hardback : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-19-024466-8
(pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Mormon Church—History. 2. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day
Saints—History. I. Neilson, Reid Larkin, editor. II. Grow, Matthew J., editor.

BX861L.F76 2016

289.309—dc23

2015003406

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Scala Pro

Printed on 45# Cream 400 ppi

Printed by Sheridan, Michigan, US

*For Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp (RLN) and
George M. Marsden (MJG)*

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Editors' Preface

LEONARD J. ARRINGTON, a leading scholar who would later become Church Historian of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, led the formation of the Mormon History Association (MHA) in December 1965 at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA). In 1972, MHA branched off from the AHA as an independent historical society. Two years later, its leadership team published the first issue of the *Journal of Mormon History*.¹ More than a decade into the twenty-first century, the organization continues to exert a profound influence on the field of Mormon studies through its conferences and journal. As two scholars who have benefited from our affiliation with MHA, we are grateful for the Mormon studies community it has fostered.

Nearly fifteen years after the founding of MHA, several members met to talk about how to raise the organization's professional profile and scholarly standing. Richard Bushman, Claudia Bushman, and Jan Shipps, all leading scholars in American religious history, recalled their brainstorming session and the germination of what would become the Tanner Lecture series.

It happens that three of us were part of discussions in 1979 as to what could be done to make the 1980 annual meeting, marking the 150th anniversary since the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, extraordinary. Jan Shipps was president that year. Claudia and Richard Bushman were chairs of the program committee. Other members of the program committee were Alfred Bush, Sharon Pugsley, plus Dean and Cheryl May. Sometime during our discussions, Richard proposed the idea of seeking funding for a lectureship that would invite an eminent scholar, whose work has paralleled the Mormon history but has never addressed it

directly, to expand a facet of their ongoing research to include a Mormon dimension. The president would have the privilege of choosing the lecturer, the lecture would be given each year in a plenary session of the annual meeting of the association, and the lecturer would be invited to spend as much time as possible at the meeting, getting acquainted with the members and they with him or her.

As soon as the idea was broached we all recognized its potential. Yes, it would be a mark of maturity and sophistication. We were quite willing, even eager, to give the membership an opportunity to learn from and be challenged by whatever perspectives and insights the lecturer might offer. And we welcomed the chance to raise the awareness of the lecturer, to entice eminent scholars into thinking more deeply about the Mormon past.

But who would fund such an expensive endeavor during the ensuing decades? The group of Mormon historians decided to approach Obert C. and Grace Adams Tanner, longtime Utah philanthropists, to seek a naming gift for the proposed lecture series. With the help of Mormon scholar Sterling McMurrin, a close friend of the Tanners, they secured the financial endowment. For the MHA annual meeting in 1980, the group invited two leading lights in American history, Gordon Wood and Timothy L. Smith, to present the inaugural Tanner lectures. "It was an auspicious beginning," the group reminisced.²

During the first twenty years of the Tanner lectures, the following scholars spoke at MHA's annual meetings held in various locations: Gordon S. Wood (Canandaigua, New York, 1980), Timothy L. Smith (Canandaigua, New York, 1980), John F. Wilson (Rexburg, Idaho, 1981), John G. Gager (Ogden, Utah, 1982), Martin E. Marty (Omaha, Nebraska, 1983), Edwin S. Gaustad (Provo, Utah, 1984), Langdon Gilkey (Independence, Missouri, 1985), Anne Firor Scott (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1986), John F. C. Harrison (Oxford, England, 1987), Henry Warner Bowden (Logan, Utah, 1988), R. Laurence Moore (Quincy, Illinois, 1989), Peter Lineham (Laie, Hawaii, 1990), Martin Ridge (Claremont, California, 1991), Richard T. Hughes (St. George, Utah, 1992), Nathan O. Hatch (Lamoni, Iowa, 1993), Patricia Nelson Limerick (Park City, Utah, 1994), D. W. Meinig (Kingston, Canada, 1995), Howard R. Lamar (Snowbird, Utah, 1996), Glenda Riley (Omaha, Nebraska, 1997), Rodney Stark (Washington, DC, 1998), and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp (Ogden, Utah, 1999).

After two decades of remarkable Tanner lectures, all of which were printed initially in the *Journal of Mormon History*, several Mormon historians felt that the published essays deserved to be collected and distributed to a wider audience. It was against this background that the officers of MHA invited historians Dean L. May and Reid L. Neilson to edit a volume that would make the first two decades (1980–1999) of this distinguished body of scholarship more accessible. It was subsequently published as *The Mormon History Association's Tanner Lectures: The First Twenty Years*, and it received laudatory reviews in many academic journals. In introducing that anthology, the editors wrote that the MHA lecture series had benefited both the outside scholar and the Mormon studies specialists: "The Tanner lecturers have been genuinely impressed with the vitality of the organization and of Mormon historical studies. . . . They provide stimulating and important insights, the more valuable because, in looking in on Mormon studies, they frequently bring greater breadth and offer perspectives that insiders have difficulty accessing."³

Another fifteen Tanner lecturers, leading scholars in their respective fields, have shared their perspectives on Mormonism since the beginning of the twenty-first century, for a total of more than thirty-five Tanner lectures. With Mormon studies continuing to grow as an academic field, we wanted to continue to make this distinguished body of scholarship more accessible. So we decided to collect and reprint the most recent lectures as follows: Alan Taylor (Copenhagen, Denmark, 2000), Elliott West (Cedar City, Utah, 2001), Richard H. Brodhead (Tucson, Arizona, 2002), Randall Balmer (Kirtland, Ohio, 2003), Dell Upton (Provo, Utah, 2004), Charles L. Cohen (Killington, Vermont, 2005), Stephen J. Stein (Casper, Wyoming, 2006), William Deverell (Salt Lake City, Utah, 2007), Philip Jenkins (Sacramento, California, 2008), Walter Nugent (Springfield, Illinois, 2009), Catherine A. Brekus (Independence, Missouri, 2010), George A. Miles (St. George, Utah, 2011), David B. Marshall (Calgary, Canada, 2012), Leigh Schmidt (Layton, Utah, 2013), and Jehu J. Hanciles (San Antonio, Texas, 2014).

The timing of the current volume also makes sense, as 2014 marked the renaming of the Tanner Lecture series. Initially subsidized through the generosity of the Tanner family, the donated fund has since been depleted and a new naming partner was sought to continue the tradition. In summer 2014, the MHA board announced that it had received funding from the Smith-Pettit Foundation, based in Salt Lake City, and had approved changing the name of the lecture to the Smith-Pettit

Lecture, beginning at the organization's 50th anniversary annual meeting in 2015.⁴ Thus, this volume of the most recent fifteen Tanner lectures represents the end of an era and the beginning of a future promise of excellent scholarship.

As with the first volume of Tanner lectures, it seems sensible to arrange these fifteen lectures by theme and to order them chronologically according to their content, rather than by the year of presentation. We grouped the essays according to four subjects: the American religious landscape, the creation of Mormon identities, the study of western histories, and the study of global religions. A general introduction, written by Richard Bushman, helps tie the book's thematic sections together. Moreover, we prepared brief introductory essays for each of the volume's four parts to help contextualize the essays. It has been a delight to restudy the writings of these scholars and their insights from the outside looking in on Mormon studies.

Acknowledgments

THE INDIVIDUAL TANNER lecturers deserve to be thanked first for their willingness to share their perspectives on Mormonism with the larger scholarly community. When we first pitched the idea of collecting their essays into a single volume, they all agreed with enthusiasm. Alan Taylor, Elliott West, Richard H. Brodhead, Randall Balmer, Dell Upton, Charles L. Cohen, Stephen J. Stein, William Deverell, Philip Jenkins, Walter Nugent, Catherine A. Brekus, George A. Miles, David B. Marshall, Leigh Schmidt, and Jehu J. Hanciles were all delightful to work with through the editorial process. They graciously consented to the reprinting of their copyrighted work as the intellectual property owners.

In 2015, MHA celebrated its golden anniversary. The current officers and board members of MHA have supported this publishing project, particularly president Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. We are also grateful to the leadership of the *Journal of Mormon History*, especially editor Martha Taysom and copy editor Lavina Fielding Anderson, for their early endorsement and enthusiasm. All past Tanner lectures were first printed in the *Journal*, so their editorial fingerprints are all over this volume's pages. All royalties from the first Tanner Lecture anthology were donated to the Dean L. May Scholarship Fund at the University of Utah in honor of that late coeditor. Similarly, we have directed that all royalties be gifted to MHA's Student Travel Fund to help students attend future conferences.

When May and Neilson coedited the first twenty years of the Tanner lectures, they instinctively published the collection with the University of Illinois Press, then the go-to printer of Mormon history books.⁵ "Well into the 1990s, academic and university presses published very few books related to the study of Mormonism. With the notable exception of the University of Illinois Press, which dominated the field in the 1980s and 1990s, only a handful of scholarly books about Mormonism were released each year," religious studies observer Jana Riess noted. "That's hardly the case anymore as the field of Mormon studies continues to blossom. Leading the way is Oxford University Press."⁶ Cynthia Read, executive editor of

Oxford's growing religion catalog, is largely responsible for this sea change in Mormon studies publishing. We are grateful to Cynthia and her editorial staff and production team for their professionalism and commitment to excellence in academic publishing. We also thank the anonymous reviewers of our initial proposal and manuscript.

Richard Lyman Bushman kindly wrote the insightful introduction to this volume. He has mentored an entire generation of Mormon scholars and is considered by many as the dean of the current "golden age" of Mormon studies. In fact, Reid and Matt met during summer 2001 while participating in Bushman's Archive of Restoration Culture Fellowship program, hosted by the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.⁷ The pebbles he has dropped in the waters of Mormon studies continue to send ever-expanding ripples of goodness throughout the larger academic field and the lives of its practitioners.

We are also grateful for the support of the executive leadership of the Church History Department, including Elder Steven E. Snow, Elder James J. Hamula, and Richard E. Turley Jr. Many thanks are to be given to editorial assistant Mark Melville and administrative assistant Jo Lyn Curtis, who helped compile the lectures for this volume and obtain necessary permissions.

Last, Reid dedicates this book to Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, his PhD advisor and mentor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He first became acquainted with her and her religious studies and historical scholarship by reading her 1999 Tanner Lecture on Mormonism in the Pacific. That same year, she taught the first university course in Mormon studies outside of Utah.⁸ Laurie helped make Reid's graduate school days with Shelly and Johnny some of the happiest and most interesting of his life in Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and Fearington Village.

Matt dedicates the book to George M. Marsden, his PhD advisor at the University of Notre Dame. George was an ideal mentor, giving his students an example of exacting scholarship and persuasive writing, the space to explore their own scholarly paths, and gentle guidance and insightful criticism of their work.

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Notes

1. For perspectives on the early history and maturity of MHA, see the following articles: Leonard J. Arrington, "Reflections on the Founding and Purpose of the Mormon History Association, 1965–1983," *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 91–103; Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "Entre Nous: An Intimate History of MHA," *Journal of Mormon History* 12 (1985): 43–52; and Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 58–61.
2. Dean L. May and Reid L. Neilson, eds., *The Mormon History Association's Tanner Lectures: The First Twenty Years* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), ix–x.
3. May and Neilson, *The Mormon History Association's Tanner Lectures*, x.
4. "Tanner Lecture Changed to Smith-Pettit Lecture," *Mormon History Association Newsletter* 49 (Summer 2014): 6.
5. Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 91, 166, 219.
6. Jana Riess, "Religion Update Fall 2013: Mormon Studies Grows Up," *Publishers Weekly*, October 4, 2013. See also Peggy Fletcher Stack, "LDS Books: Oxford Press Finds Profits in Prophets," *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 15, 2010.
7. J. B. Haws, "A Mentor and a Mentality: Richard Bushman and the Shaping of a Generation of Mormon Historians," presented at the 2014 Biennial Conference on Faith and History, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, September 27, 2014. Copy of paper in editors' possession.
8. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "Looking West: Mormonism and the Pacific World," *Journal of Mormon History* 26 (Spring 2000): 40–64; and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "What They Learned from the Mormons," *Mormon Studies Review* 2 (2015): 1–10.

From the Outside Looking In

General Introduction

By Richard Lyman Bushman

FOR MORE THAN thirty years now, the annual Tanner Lecture at the Mormon History Association meetings has gauged the state of Mormon studies. We can discover what the specialists in Mormonism are thinking from the conference itself, from the articles in the growing number of journals concentrating on Mormon studies, and from the stream of books on the topic pouring forth each year. The Tanner lecturers, in contrast, bring an outsider's thinking to the subject. The terms of the lecture call for someone from another field to observe Mormonism from his or her distinctive position. The lectures open a window on what a selection of eminent but detached modern scholars think about Mormonism.

After thirty-five years, the annual lectures continue to throw new light on Mormon history. In part, they reflect the fertility of modern scholarship. New topics, new approaches, new issues continue to emerge. The lecturers pick up on the great themes of modern historiography—gender, race, identity, globalization, secularization—and locate Mormonism in these ongoing investigations. Some draw on classic topics: apocalypticism, western settlement, and childhood. But whatever the starting point, the lecturers add the freshness of new eyes and new minds visiting a new country.

Taken together, this new work shows the complexity of Mormonism. It does not fit conveniently into any pigeonhole. Mormonism is so many things: a church, a society, a culture, a theology, a movement, a protest, an ethnicity, a new world religion. The essays discover one new facet after another, suggesting that Mormonism will remain ever rich, ever elusive, and never completely explored.

At one time, the significance of Mormonism could be summed up in a few sentences. In American history books, it was part of the westward movement, led by the great colonizer Brigham Young. For historians of American religion, Mormonism was another product of the religious

excitement set off by the Second Great Awakening. For literary scholars, it was an attempt to give the new American nation a founding narrative. For the fundamentalist Christian critics of the Church, it was a cult. For Latter-day Saints themselves, it was the restoration of the original gospel and church of Jesus Christ.

All of these have proved fruitful for scholars, but this collection of Tanner essays is notable for moving beyond many of the traditional inquiries. The categorization of Mormonism as a cult, a sect, or a church—once a central preoccupation of scholars and critics—is of little interest to these essayists. At one time the sociologists of religion attempted to order religions by type and then speculate on how one type evolved into another. These preoccupations originated in the theorizing of Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber, and were carried forward into the late twentieth century by Rodney Stark and his colleagues. Borrowing from the sociologists, evangelical fundamentalists seized upon the word *cult* to characterize Mormonism because it denigrated the religion in the process of categorizing it. Calling Mormonism a cult associated it with David Koresh or Jim Jones, although the word did not have that coloration in sociological thought. Together, the sociologists and the Christian critics made the term *cult* a controversial and powerful categorization. In the current set of essays by outside scholars, religious typology receives little attention. Meanwhile, the polemical use of the word *cult* is also falling into disuse.

On the other hand, the idea of a restoration church is also passed over. *Restoration* once seemed particularly useful for scholars because it overlapped with Mormon self-understanding. Mormons think of Joseph Smith as restoring the doctrines and practices of the Bible, and scholars found this conception useful for locating Mormonism in post-Reformation Christian history. Most of the reformers from Luther on thought of themselves as restorers. Alexander Campbell, Joseph Smith's contemporary, stood in this line. Campbell set out self-consciously to reframe Christianity on strictly biblical principles. Early Mormons may have borrowed the word *restoration* from Campbell via Sidney Rigdon. Although it has long been a powerful concept in Mormon thought and in the scholarly understanding of post-Reformation Christianity, it scarcely surfaces in these lectures.

Origins in general are not discussed. The beginning of the Church, the critical time when the founding revelations were received, is referred to only in passing in one essay. Perhaps the writers are being tactful, knowing

Mormons are sensitive about these events. The upshot is that the lecturers focus on what Mormonism came to be rather than how it got started.

Some of the standard questions, then, appear to be in recess for the moment. This group of scholars is more interested in the formation of identity, the place of women, and globalization. Of the traditional approaches, only the West receives much attention in this volume. Three of the essays (by William Deverell, Walter Nugent, and David Marshall) take up Jan Shipps's provocative image of Mormonism as the hole in the westward movement's doughnut, the story that has not been told. All three, however, elevate their subject above the narrative of wagon trains, wars with American Indians, and new settlements. Ultimately, they are interested in the problem of blending. How does Mormonism find a place not just in the historiography of the West, but also in American culture? How does it remain separate while becoming a part of an American whole?

This larger theme links the three western papers with the essays of Dell Upton on the Mormon landscape and Charles Cohen on Mormonism as a modern Israel. Upton sees the blending of distinctive Mormon elements with more conventional American pieces in the formation of the Mormon landscape. This seems perfectly natural, but the problem is: How are Mormons to stop from sinking out of sight in the great American sea? Will they blend right out of sight? Cohen explains how Mormons drew on the biblical theme of the nation of Israel to distinguish themselves in the American religious scene. Now in a time of assimilation, that identity is being eroded. Are Mormons on a path to extinction? Cohen thinks Mormonism will survive. As he puts it, "No matter how much Mormons may have come to resemble the 'foreign nations,' they retain their distinctive sense of peoplehood, fortified by memory, myth, and a common story." For all these essayists, this tension is central. Can Mormons remain themselves while living American lives?

Regardless of whether the authors intended it, these historical essays are an occasion for Mormons to reflect on the state of their religion now as well as in the past. Catherine Breckus's lecture on woman and agency will start men as well as women thinking about what it means to be a free agent. The formidable restrictions imposed by Mormon institutional structures must be respected, she argues. On the other hand, "if we explain that women's agency is not always oriented toward emancipation or resistance, we will treat conservative as well as radical women as serious historical actors." The decision to sustain and perpetuate can also be an exercise of agency.

Perhaps inevitably, four of these essays use one of the dominant methods of modern religious studies: comparative analysis. Mormonism is lined up with free seekers, freethinkers, millenarians, and other prophetic voices such as Ralph Emerson and Nat Turner. The aim of this work is to gain a perspective on how Americans have encountered the divine and the supernatural, using Mormonism as a salient case study. American culture is saturated with the supernatural. God and the spirits have played about us from the start: God bringing the Puritans to New England where they could worship as they pleased, Divine Providence guiding Washington at Valley Forge, the Spirit of God striking down seekers at revivalist camp meetings. Alan Taylor, Richard Brodhead, Stephen Stein, and Leigh Schmidt bring various versions of these encounters into juxtaposition with Mormonism.

What interests them are the shifting alliances Mormonism has formed throughout its history. In its early years, Taylor tells us, Mormonism partook of the diverse spiritual gifts enjoyed by seekers of all kinds. As Joseph Smith claimed more authority for himself and his church, these shared sympathies faded. Brodhead sees Joseph Smith and Ralph Emerson as kindred spirits until Smith introduced institutional authority, rituals, and doctrines—things Emerson could not abide. The Mormons were fervent students of the millennium, Stein points out, until the late twentieth century, when concerns of the moment overshadowed the apocalyptic future. The same for freethinking skeptics, Schmidt writes. In the nineteenth century, Mormons were aligned with freethinkers in their objections to the religious establishment. In the twentieth century, as belief versus unbelief became the overriding division in American culture, Mormons took their place alongside other denominations in the camp of the believers.

History has a way of reshaping and eroding religious belief, and Mormons cannot escape the winds of change. Will they hold on and be recognizable a century hence? This question lies behind many of the essays in this volume. The lectures by Randall Balmer, Elliott West, and George Miles urge us to think how the stories we tell about ourselves are one way to adapt. West sees the stories of childhood blending with the large story of the Restoration. Balmer gives us stories being told in letters to families. Miles emphasizes the constant revision of stories to explain our lives under changing conditions. This is how societies preserve themselves, he argues.

A vibrant, dynamic community inevitably generates multiple understandings of its past, present, and future, and Mormonism began to

discover and develop numerous stories about the past that helped them understand their ancestors and themselves.

But the stories will work best, he warns us, if they do not depart too far from the evidence.

The greatest challenge of the current age, we hear from Philip Jenkins and Jehu Hanciles, is the change wrought by the global expansion of Mormonism. Here the Church faces diversity and disjunctures greater than any it has ever known. The floods of converts from Latin America, Africa, and Asia introduce traditions and habits of thought far removed from any that Mormons have assimilated before. How will these global converts be made welcome without requiring them to strip away their native cultures? How much “give” is there in American Mormonism? These issues are not in the past; they are pressing questions right now.

These essays on globalization prompt Mormons to look ahead and project a global future for themselves. This does not imply we should turn our backs on the past and concentrate only on the now and the world that is coming. Mormonism’s future can be seen in its past. Adaptation to new circumstances, borrowing from other cultures while maintaining identity, forming alliances with other groups—these essays inform us that Mormonism has been doing this for nearly two centuries. The question now is whether the Church will continue to absorb and adapt, and still hold on to its core in the years to come.

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PART I

The American Religious Landscape

Introduction

BY REID L. NEILSON

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides scholars with a fruitful subject for comparative study. As the historians in this section emphasize, we can learn a great deal about various religious figures and movements in the history of the United States through creative contrasts with their Latter-day Saint counterparts. The founding Smith family may be profitably contextualized in the larger seeker culture that enveloped upstate New York after the First Great Awakening. Transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, and black revolutionaries, such as Nat Turner, can be studied in concert with Joseph Smith and other American prophets. Mormons and Shakers, with a host of other millenarians, when grouped together offer a penetrating portrait of American eschatology that is both familiar and unexpected to students of religion in North America. A comparison of Latter-day Saints and freethinkers together with an analysis of the place of women in American religious historiography rounds out the mix. These are just a few of the associations and affinities that can be teased out when scholars include the Mormon story. The American religious landscape described by the Tanner lecturers in the following essays is more complex than many observers may presuppose.

In the anthology's opening essay, Alan Taylor, an American historian at the University of Virginia, explores upstate New York's religious scene in the decades following the American Revolution. Through the lens of lived religion, he describes the spiritual lives and cultural forces that characterized free seekers, who blended and transformed old and new religious

ideas and practices in their daily lives. In so doing, he helps illuminate the spiritual longings and religious choices of the Joseph Smith family and their neighbors, who were brought to New York as part of a larger tide of economic relocation and settlement. Taylor explains how the Smiths were influenced by the rise of revivalism and a seeking culture that encouraged American Christians to break with Congregationalism and embrace the message of itinerant preachers and others who taught that the divine could be accessed through dreams and visions, as well as through the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament. Taylor describes this religious milieu as “an open-ended, fluid, porous, multivalent, and hypercompetitive discourse involving multiple Protestant denominations and many autonomous clusters of seekers.” It proved to be a fertile seedbed for the Latter-day Saints and many other religious groups.

The Smiths and many future Latter-day Saints in the region were seekers of truth like many of their fellow Americans after their country's break from Great Britain. Although this spiritual splintering made possible a variety of religious experiences and denominations, it also cultivated a shared sense of possibilities. These same individuals were free to choose in the expanding religious marketplace of ideas. Taylor describes that, in the midst of these conversations, “religion was usually lived not within any one denomination but as part of a fluid discussion that transcended the weak sectarian boundaries.” Debate and division were commonplace experiences among those living on the American frontier and those participating in the Yankee diaspora during this period of revivalism. Itinerant preachers were embraced and followed. The laity, including a growing number of women, challenged the leaders of the establishment, turning to the Bible themselves for inspiration. So it is not surprising that a young Joseph Smith found inspiration in James's admonition to ask for himself and then broke with conventional religious communities. Only later would Smith discover, when he was a prophetic figure himself with a church, that some of his followers would likewise choose to go in different directions, leaving the LDS fold and family.

On the surface, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nat Turner, and Joseph Smith seem to have little in common. Emerson was a transcendentalist who eschewed traditional religion, Turner was a black revolutionary bent on the emancipation of his fellow African Americans, and Smith was the Palmyra prophet who testified of angels and new scriptures. But, as Richard H. Brodhead, a scholar of English literature and the president of Duke

University, points out, all three men were contemporary prophets in antebellum America. Brodhead begins with the story of Turner, who began receiving revelations on his role as a redeemer of black America and ended up leading one of the most violent slave revolts in U.S. history. Brodhead suggests that Smith and Turner have not been studied together, although there are many interesting parallels between the two men. Both claimed callings through visionary experience and both felt raised up to lead revolutions against oppressive regimes. And although their methods and motives may have differed in life, in death they were both labeled as martyrs by their followers.

Of course Brodhead is not suggesting that Smith and Turner were kindred spirits, but he does argue that their stories might be read and studied in tandem. "The history of prophetism is the story of how actual men and women have asserted themselves as bearers of prophetic privilege and of the consequences of these self-assertions," he explains. "A prophet is a person singled out to enjoy special knowledge of ultimate reality and to give others mediated access to that otherwise unavailable truth." In addition to these two leaders, Brodhead discusses the lives and contributions of other prophetic figures, including William Miller, Sojourner Truth, and John Humphrey Noyes. He suggests how each of them fashioned their prophetic identity and projected their resulting authority into the lives of their followers. He concludes by comparing Smith and Emerson, who were born within two years of each other. Through his discourses, Emerson was able "to revive a prophetic conception of selfhood and rethink it in such a way that prophetic identity becomes virtually synonymous with selfhood itself," according to Brodhead. Both Emerson and Smith found emptiness in established religion, but they took radically different routes to reconceptualize the notion of modern-day revelation.

Stephen J. Stein, an emeritus historian of religion at Indiana University, offers a third comparative study of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints and their contemporary Christian counterparts. Rather than contrasting several leaders, he addresses the related topics of eschatology and apocalypticism prevalent in U.S. religious thought. Stein discusses how various American-grown religions have dealt with these end-of-times discussions. "I will address the question of the relationship between the perceived historical future and the prevailing vision of the eschatological future in the Mormon experience," he begins. "My thesis is that there has been in Mormonism and remains today a close relationship between reflections on the historical future and the conceptualization of the eschatological future." He

comes at this topic from his own related research on the Shakers and Jonathan Edwards.

Like other Christians, as well as non-Christian groups, the Latter-day Saints have always had one eye on the present and another on the prophetic future, especially the pending Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Mormons see the present as an ongoing battle between good and evil, with greater hope for the millennial future. "Eschatology has provided Latter-day Saints a way to cope with historical circumstances that often have been less than ideal," Stein writes. He then discusses the relationship between historical and eschatological futures, which are closely related in LDS thought. Since the days of Joseph Smith, the Saints have tried to determine when the second advent might be ushered in and how to prepare for the anticipated events. Stein also describes how other American religious groups have dealt with similar end-of-time questions, including Ann Lee of the Shakers, William Miller of the Millerites, and Ellen White of the Seventh-day Adventists.

The stories of women both in American religious histories in general, and within the LDS story specifically, are being told with greater inclusiveness and meaning, according to Catherine A. Brekus, a historian of American religion at Harvard University. But this has not always been the case, and there is still much progress that needs to be made to fully integrate the female religious experience into existing narratives. More specifically, she focuses on the place of agency in the lives of LDS women. She begins by showing how accounts of nineteenth-century plural marriage portrayed Utah women as historical actors without agency, doomed to the sexual desires and whims of their patriarchal husbands. Much of the writing on Mormon women in subsequent decades, at least by Latter-day Saints, was designed to debunk these damning stereotypes and elevate the place of women within the tradition. These divergent approaches resulted in observers gazing at a fractured picture of LDS women—either deluded, downtrodden slaves or fiercely independent matriarchs.

Brekus clarifies that Mormon women were not the only females in the past to be left out of—or caricatured in—published histories. She calls on scholars to rethink and reimagine how they view and write about the historical agency of all women. She argues that LDS women, like all women, made their own choices through both following and dissenting from cultural norms in avenues available to them. "Because historians have implicitly defined agency against structure, they have found it

hard to imagine women who *accepted* religious structures as agents,” she writes. Brekus also laments that Mormon women have not been more fully integrated into the larger story of American religious history and offers several suggestions for the construction of new models of women’s agency.

Leigh Eric Schmidt, a scholar of American religious history at Washington University in St. Louis, offers the concluding Tanner Lecture of this section by following Brodhead’s comparative model. He, too, places LDS figures in conversation with other contemporary Americans whose stories present interesting parallels. The Latter-day Saints and free-thinkers in post-Civil War America seem like strange bedfellows; but, as Schmidt points out, they both point to the “limits of toleration” on the American religious landscape. Although the Latter-day Saints had little to say about their secular counterparts, a number of notable free-thinkers commented on the Latter-day Saints and their place in society. “Mormons and freethinkers nonetheless have an intertwined story, especially in the late nineteenth century. They shared an outsider status of particular severity in relation to Protestant America, and that marginalization joined them, in spite of their ample differences, in the supercharged politics surrounding religious and civil liberties,” Schmidt argues in his essay.

Both the Mormons and freethinkers were minority voices crying in the nineteenth-century American religious wilderness. The Latter-day Saints and the irreligious were both targets of the Protestant Establishment during this era. But their defensive alliance was a fragile one. Drawing on his research on the lives of freethinkers like Robert Ingersoll, D. M. Bennett, and Watson Heston, Schmidt describes how these secularists viewed and commented on the LDS tradition. Although most freethinkers felt the Latter-day Saints should be able to exercise their freedoms of speech and religion, some drew the line at the practice of plural marriage, despite their own advocacy for nontraditional coupling and defiance of traditional marriage customs. Polygamy was a bridge too far, even for some freethinkers. Their own anti-Mormonism is worth revisiting because it shows the limits of cultural dissent, even for nonbelievers in America. Today, both the Latter-day Saints and the irreligious continue to be two of the most misunderstood minority groups in America.

The work of these scholars opens up new vistas on the past religious landscape and points to lands yet uncharted and unexplored for future

intrepid historians. By putting the Latter-day Saints in comparison with their fellow American prophets, freethinkers, revolutionaries, feminists, and millenarians, these observers tasked with looking into the LDS tradition from the outside have thrown light on the past and charted new directions for the next generation of Mormon studies scholars.

The Free Seekers: Religious Culture in Upstate New York, 1790–1835

By Alan Taylor

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY has traditionally focused on institution building within denominations, which emphasizes the role of leading clergy, rather than the laity. Mormon history fits this pattern, owing to an understandable preoccupation with Joseph Smith and his gathered community. Recently, however, many religious historians have shifted the focus to the study of “lived religion”—by which they mean the ways that ordinary people create their own spiritual meanings in their day-to-day lives. One such scholar, Robert Orsi, explains, “Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life.” This approach finds people eclectically reworking religious idioms that are diverse and often contested.¹

In that spirit, I will reexamine the cultural landscape of upstate New York between 1790 and 1835—the milieu from which emerged the prophetic role of Joseph Smith Jr. and the early Mormon Church. I will argue that early Mormonism emerged from the lived religion of upstate New York: an open-ended, fluid, porous, multivalent, and hypercompetitive discourse involving multiple Protestant denominations and many autonomous clusters of seekers. The movement to the New York frontier exposed people to a proliferation of religious itinerants expressing an extraordinary diversity of belief. They included Baptists (both Calvinist and Freewill), Methodists, Universalists, Quakers, Shakers, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, deists—and a great variety of distinctive local groups and defiant individuals in earnest search of their own truth. Rarely did any one group dominate a particular town.²

Although no single doctrine or denomination satisfied a majority, the diversity and fluidity of beliefs had a paradoxical effect: it produced a

common discourse. The essence of lived religion on the settlement frontier was immersion in a public and often contentious debate in which no one group enjoyed either a majority or the coercive power of the government. Of course, the preachers of every denomination denounced their rivals as snares fatal to the morals, prosperity, and salvation of the people. But despite their longing for exclusive control, every denomination had to tolerate, however grudgingly, the right of people to choose their own faith. Consequently, religion was usually lived not within any one denomination but as part of a fluid discussion that transcended the weak sectarian boundaries. In the many new towns of upstate New York, the essence of popular religion was the opportunity for people to sample and debate multiple variants of Protestant belief (and disbelief). Although I will focus on upstate New York, this culture at least characterized the entire Yankee frontier, from Maine to Ohio—and probably the entire American population of settlers, including those from the South and the mid-Atlantic states.³

Sources

The religious culture of upstate New York emerged from the accumulation of four sources: first, the centrifugal legacies of the First Great Awakening during the mid-eighteenth century; second, a selective migration that concentrated the most restless seekers in new towns; third, frontier hardships which discouraged institutional regularity; and, fourth, the creative power of dreams and visions. Of course, all four framed the social and religious experiences of Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith Sr., and their children. But although unique in their ultimate success, the Smiths had plenty of company in their early, anxious years of seeking for a unitary truth in a challenging place and time of diversity and debate.

Born in 1805 in Vermont to parents who came from Connecticut and later relocated to western New York in 1816, Joseph Smith Jr. grew up within the great Yankee emigration of the post-Revolutionary generation. Between 1780 and 1820, Yankee emigrants left southern New England to create hundreds of new settlements in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, northern Pennsylvania, the Western Reserve of Ohio, and parts of Canada. But above all they went to upstate New York—the region west of the Hudson River and north of Kingston. New York's population exploded from 340,120 in 1790 to 1,372,812 in 1820. In 1790, when the great movement was just beginning, New York ranked only fifth in population among

the states, lagging behind Virginia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and even North Carolina. By 1820 New York had become the most populous state in the nation. Because most of the upstate newcomers settled on new farms, their settlement dramatically shifted the distribution of New York's population. Out of the state's fifty-four counties in 1820, thirty-eight (70 percent) had been formed after 1780. In 1785 three-fourths of New Yorkers still lived in the Hudson Valley or along the Atlantic coast; by 1820 three-fourths of the inhabitants dwelled in the towns created after the war in the central, northern, and western quarters of the state.⁴

This Yankee diaspora came a century and a half after the great transatlantic migration of their Puritan ancestors from England to create a New England. Where the Puritan migration had manifested the cultural revolution wrought by the Reformation in England, the Yankee movement realized in the new settlements the implications of the First Great Awakening: a dramatic wave of religious revivals that gripped most of southern New England during the 1740s—with a powerful echo during the 1760s. Just as the Puritan migration disproportionately drew out of England the folk most committed to a thorough Reformation, the Yankee movement was dominated by people influenced by the radical implications of the First Great Awakening.⁵

The most radical revivalists urged the spiritually awakened to separate from churches that included the “unconverted”—those who could not testify to a new birth experience of divine grace. To promote separations, the radical evangelicals championed individual choice even in defiance of all traditional sources of authority: of official minister, county justice, and even of fathers and husbands. But the separated did not wish to remain isolated individuals. Instead, they promptly formed their own congregations, for the point of separation was to find tighter, purer communions.⁶

Although revivalism affected most of New England, only a minority fully embraced the radicalism of separating from the official Congregational Church of their local parish. Although shaken, and often reformed, by the awakening, the established churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut preserved the powerful advantage of an exclusive right to tax support. The college-educated Congregational ministry and the substantial meetinghouses of the New England Way demanded considerable payments. The governments usually refused to accept the separations and instead continued to demand tax payments from the Separates to support the local official church. If they failed to pay, Separates often suffered jail and the confiscation of some property for auctioning. From a peak of

about 100 Separate congregations in 1754, Separatism declined precipitously to just 16 churches by 1775. The Separates either returned to the Congregational establishment or found a new, congenial home among the Calvinist Baptists, who increased their Massachusetts and Connecticut congregations from thirteen in 1740 to fifty-three by 1770.⁷

After the American Revolution, the religious minorities of New England found an outlet in emigration to the many frontier districts newly opened to settlement. New York was especially appealing because the state lacked a tax-supported religious establishment. On the other hand, the majority in New England felt satisfied with orthodox Congregationalism. They were slower to emigrate into raw settlements that lacked an establishment to require—and the means to finance—a college-educated ministry and a substantial meetinghouse. Consequently, religious dissidents formed a much larger proportion in the new settlements of New York than in the old towns of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Indeed, by draining dissidence to the frontier, the migration tended to strengthen and to prolong the orthodox predominance in Massachusetts and Connecticut. And as that consolidation became conspicuous, the dissidents felt even greater pressure to move beyond the reach of the Congregational establishment.⁸

Frontier conditions compounded the initial advantage that selective migration had afforded the evangelical dissidents. New settlers could not afford to build a meetinghouse promptly and pay the ministerial salary expected by the Congregational establishment. For at least the first decade, new settlers suffered intense labor, heavy debts, and periodic deprivation and hardships as they struggled to make new farms in a dense forest. Difficult and expensive access to external markets over stump- and root-ridden roads slowed the advent of prosperity. George Peck, a New York settler's son, recalled, "The settlements were small and widely separated, the roads were terrible, and, of course, the people were poor."⁹ The frontier hardships and scant pay also discouraged the advent of college-educated ministers, who could find more secure and comfortable parishes in the older, eastern towns. And the diverse religious preferences of the scattered settlers discouraged the development of a local consensus in favor of supporting a common church and minister.¹⁰

The frontier dispersion, poverty, and divisions favored more radical evangelicals who relied on cheap, part-time, poorly educated, and itinerant preachers who earned a spare living by combining their far-flung ministry with a small farm or a trade. The evangelical itinerants also made do

without a meetinghouse, gathering instead in cabins, barns, fields, and log schoolhouses. The New England Congregationalists tried to compensate by raising funds to dispatch their ministers on summer missionary tours of the new settlements, but the missionaries found that they were too few, too brief, and too late. The settlers had already embraced the cheaper and more numerous and familiar ministry of the evangelical denominations. Rev. Henry Chapman, a Congregational missionary, lamented, “The Baptists & Methodists . . . are creeping into every corner & using every exertion to draw off people from the regular churches. They have great influence in these new settlements & that for want of other labourers in the vineyard.” Similarly, in 1806 Rev. William Graves, a Congregational missionary, complained that the Baptists and Methodists had filled the religious vacuum in the New York settlements: “By reason of their having preaching, they draw away a great number of our people, who in other circumstances would be likely to be with us.”¹¹

The Congregational missionaries feared that they had arrived too late to rescue settlers ruined by either the absence of religion or a surfeit of the wrong kind. In 1794 Rev. Aaron Kinne toured the New York frontier and reported, “Irregular & vicious habits are imbibed, rivetted, & become obstinate & incurable;—or, which is but little better, they become an object to some evangelizing Baptist, or roving Methodist. . . . There is an awakening—many are converted & baptized—dissensions arise—they are divided, disabled & ruined for all the purposes of religious society.” The settlements, he concluded, “exhibit lamentable pictures of barbarism and confusion.”¹² The legacy of the Great Awakening, selective migration, and frontier hardships all contributed to the fourth engine of religious diversity and spontaneity: the spiritual power of dreams, visions, and inner voices. As John Wigger has shown in his recent study of Methodism, the most fundamental issue dividing the evangelical from the orthodox was their clashing attitudes toward latter-day messages from the divine. For the orthodox, revelation had ceased with the apostles and rightly so. Their God could be known only through the published scriptures and only with the help of a learned expert trained by an orthodox college. By contrast, evangelicals mourned the apparent silence and absence of God from their own lives. They longed to experience His power directly, physically, visually, and emotionally. The evangelicals despised orthodox authority and learning for muting and hiding that divine power, thereby consigning souls to damnation for want of His tangible presence. By emigrating to the frontier, evangelicals left

behind the orthodox ministers who asserted their prestige against the folk longing for the daily intervention of spiritual power in this world. Moreover, frontier hardships produced intense mood swings between despair and hope, an emotional dialectic that induced more vivid dreams. Finally, the troubling competition of denominations demanded some supernatural criteria for determining their truth claims. Many seekers found religious guidance directly from God or an angel through the medium of a dream or an inner voice.¹³

Frontier Methodists and Baptists endorsed the dreams, visions, and voices as divine power working through human vessels. George Peck praised the Methodist revival that occurred in his settlement (Middlefield, New York) in 1800: "The Spirit was poured out from on high upon multitudes, and men and women, old and young, dreamed dreams, saw visions, and were filled with the spirit of prophecy." Another Methodist, Charles Giles, insisted that the circuit riders were "endowed with supernatural power, by which they spoke with tongues and performed miracles. . . . The Spirit of God attended their ministry, and signs and wonders followed them."¹⁴ Such manifestations seemed to renew the apostolic age of direct, tangible contact with the divine that people hungered for. By moving away from the Congregational establishment, seekers believed they had moved into contact with the awesome power of God.

Of course, such latter-day supernaturalism shocked the orthodox Congregationalists who visited the settlements as occasional missionaries. In 1804, Rev. Thomas Williams complained:

Many persons in this region seem to place great dependence on dreams. One woman told me that about a year ago she was greatly afraid of death for many days. It seemed to be very near and was very dreadful. One night she dreamt she saw Christ coming in the east and she thought he was coming for her. She dreamt she went out to meet him and desired him to let her stay longer and he took her into his arms and she kissed him and was in his arms a good while. The next morning she was joyful and death seemed to be at a distance. From that time she has had a hope that she was a Christian. I think that there is reason to believe that many persons in the new settlements have a hope without any more reason than she has. The Baptists and Methodists are generally very hasty in concluding that persons who have had some dreams or suggestions or bodily afflictions are Christians.¹⁵

In addition to the Congregationalists, some of the more conservative Baptists worried that dreams deceived as often as they revealed the divine purpose.¹⁶

Instead of simplifying the denominational choice, the dreams and visions compounded the diversity by delivering wildly divergent messages. Indeed, they encouraged an array of independent innovators who created their own local sects by claiming authority direct from God, unmediated and undiluted by any worldly authorities. These uneducated and self-appointed preachers toured the settlements describing their divine messages to attract their own followers. One example among many is Elisha Peck (1762–1829; no relationship to George Peck as far as I’m aware). Born and married in Connecticut, he emigrated at age thirty-seven to Otsego County, New York, where he bought a small farm (forty acres) and plied his trade as a shoemaker. After experiencing the Holy Spirit in dreams and voices, Peck broke with his Calvinist Baptist congregation in 1806. Rejecting all existing denominations, Peck simply called himself a Christian and defied the authority of scriptural learning: “I find it better to obey the spirit, than to obey the commandments and doctrine of men.” He cited the Bible’s inconsistencies as proof that scribes, priests, noblemen, and kings had corrupted the divine message, the better to deceive and exploit the common people. To decipher the divine truths embedded within a compromised Bible, people needed to seek out “the same spirit which spake by the holy prophets and Jesus Christ.” Peck concluded, “In vain do we read the scriptures over and over, unless we have this light of life to attend us.” By heeding their dreams and visions instead of human-made and -enforced creeds, the common people could reclaim the direct and daily communication with God formerly enjoyed by Jesus and the apostles.¹⁷

Of course, the various denominational clergy refused to recognize Elisha Peck’s divine authority. Rarely united in anything, the diverse clergy of Otsego County denounced Peck as an imposter. On the basis of a dream, Peck announced that his death would come on October 7, 1806, unless averted “by the fervent prayers of the faithful.” His followers prayed and Peck lived, confirming his authority to them while outraging his better-educated rival clergy. The Episcopalian Rev. Daniel Nash complained, “He is absolutely too mean to be noticed by any decent Man, being a drunken fanatic—pretends to be a Prophet sent from the Lord.”¹⁸ This rhetoric of denunciation will sound familiar to scholars of the prophetic career of Joseph Smith Jr.