

William A. Clebsch, "Each Sect the Sect to End All Sects." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (1966): 84–89.

By the same token, the quest for an authoritative religion may help us understand why revelation attracted investigators, but it does not explain (for Mormon or non-Mormon) why certain doctrines were revealed. Hopefully De Pillis's assertion that this single factor accounts for much of Joseph's teachings will not hinder researchers from looking for other relevant elements in the theological environment. Apart from the question of the source of the revelations (where the answer is settled for church members), there is the problem of why Joseph asked the questions he did. What stopped him on specific passages in the Bible and brought him to ask for illumination? Why did the statement on the resurrection of the just and the unjust provoke him to prayer? De Pillis's somewhat exaggerated claims could slow work on questions interesting to Mormons and non-Mormons alike.

Mormons will find factual and interpretative flaws in the work. There is, for example, no reason for ascribing skepticism to Oliver Cowdery on the question of authority to baptize. Both he and Joseph simply wanted to know the prerequisites for performing the ordinance. The Melchizedek Priesthood was not necessary to ordain Teachers or Deacons, and the position of High Priest as an office in the higher priesthood has been clear ever since the reception of Section 107 in the Doctrine and Covenants. But Mormons should not snap at De Pillis for relatively minor errors. If mutual understanding and trust is ever to grow between Church historians and non-members, tolerance on both sides is necessary.

In this vein, the only disappointing misconception for me was De Pillis's statement that the danger of doctrinal waywardness and the need for one true fold expressed in the Book of Mormon are "the only real theological themes of the book," which is much like saying that revulsion against sex is the central impulse of Augustine's *Confessions*. The Book of Mormon has always been difficult reading for outsiders. Little progress has been made since Mark Twain quipped that it was chloroform in print. The theological richness, the overpowering devotion to Christ and gratitude for His atonement, the narrative complexity and human interest — all these seem to elude non-Mormons. De Pillis is not to be blamed, especially when he has come so far toward understanding early Mormonism. Obviously Mormon writers have not adequately explicated the book. What authoritative work should De Pillis have read to grasp its import and beauty? Mormons must find words to reach the likes of him as well as a strictly Mormon audience. That goes for Mormon history as well, and De Pillis may have opened new ground on which a dialogue can begin.

## EACH SECT THE SECT TO END ALL SECTS

*William A. Clebsch*

It is not only refreshing in itself but also an occasion for rejoicing by all serious students of American religious history that Mario S. De Pillis is recalling our attention to the historical study of Mormonism's origins, understood as human actions in time and space and interpreted as a constitutive part of the American pilgrimage. Such a view of Mormonism is unusually instructive when carried out in considerable detail and when thoroughly documented.

For even as the young Joseph Smith in Palmyra was receiving the first

revelations which, although later amended in important ways, made him the founder of a religion, the aging Friedrich Schleiermacher in Berlin was teaching us that religions are best understood historically by studying *ad fontes* their founders. It is correct in this connection to refer to Schleiermacher's mode, not Erasmus's, of returning *ad fontes* because the former allows founders of religions to be understood as humans acting in temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts, even while the student holds under critical scrutiny his own assumptions as to the validity or invalidity of that divine authority which all historically founded religions claim as their authentication.

Therefore, it is entirely valid to wish that "non-Mormon historiography," especially where it has been "implicitly anti-Mormon," should have consulted the standard Mormon historiography of Roberts, Whitney, and J. F. Smith, even while recognizing that "such standard Mormon historians" are implicitly or explicitly pro-Mormon. It is also valid to fault writers for fastening on the dramatic and heroic career of Brigham Young as the key to understanding Mormonism as a religion — although it can hardly be denied that Young is the representative man of Mormonism's role in American social history. It is valid to deplore debates over the golden tablets, rampant (on both sides) since Alexander Campbell's cutting *Delusions* and Henry Caswall's patronizing *City of the Mormons*, for indeed the sacred scriptures of any religion are "authentic" so long as they carry divine authority for believers. To such documents the historian properly brings such questions as how they became authoritative for believers and how far they remain so in a given situation. But whether they are authentic as divine revelations rests always on merely human testimony, and it is only that testimony, not that which it attests, which falls within the historian's ken. It is not only valid but timely and necessary to plead that Mormonism's sub-canonical documents — or those of any other religion (and, with the aforementioned reservations, the canonical writings too) — be subjected to rigorous textual-historical scrutiny in the interest of historical accuracy. For all this, and it is very much indeed, the article is both valid and valuable.

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Perhaps the dialogue about "Mormonism as a religion" among other American religions, for which the article urgently pleads, has already begun more fully than is recognized. That a significant breakthrough in the study of American religions has occurred in the last generation, under the auspices of university historians in the United States, has been convincingly demonstrated by Henry F. May in a penetrating article, "The Recovery of American Religious History," *American Historical Review*, LXX (October 1964), 79-92. He concludes that "the revival" of religious history as well as religion "has brought American history back into the great dialogue between secular and religious thought. It is to this dialogue, after all, that American culture itself owes much of its vigor and complexity." Perhaps the dialogue to which Professor May refers goes beyond that proposed by De Pillis, but to commence the latter necessarily leads to the former.

That even among church historians there appeared, beginning in the 1950's, "a new, synoptic, literally synthetic, or universal interpretation" of American religion was the thesis of my article, "A New Historiography of American Religion," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*,

XXXII (September 1963), 225-257 (the quotation is from page 225). No more than Professor May's did my article shed new light on, or display new attitudes toward, Mormonism in particular. But they cited a vast literature which indeed does shed a few rays of such light and which almost without exception displays the healthy attitudes and the openness for dialogue with Mormonism as a religion for which De Pillis yearns. Yet he cites none of this literature.

Two examples of church historians may carry my point. Certainly Mormonism was taken seriously as a religion by Jerald C. Brauer in his *Protestantism in America, A Narrative History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953; a slightly updated edition appeared in 1966). On pages 163-166 he neither allows Young to overshadow Smith, nor argues about the golden plates, nor ignores early documentary data. More recently Winthrop S. Hudson has given us his masterful *Religion in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), in which four large and tightly-written pages deal with the origins, historical and doctrinal, of Mormonism; in them, Young gets four lines and Smith all the rest. Both these historians stress early doctrinal developments and religious authority in their interpretations, Hudson more generously but both with patent earnestness. That they allot only a few pages to Mormonism is surely no slight. When we consider that more than 200 denominations or sects demand some sort of explanation in general works on American religion, to devote four of 400 pages to Mormonism indicates, if anything, a quantitative two-to-one bias in its favor. With Hudson's opinion that Mrs. Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* is the "best biography of Smith" De Pillis reveals implicit agreement. (I am perplexed to find in his copious footnotes no mention of Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* [Chicago, 1957], which most of us non- but not anti-Mormon historians regard very highly precisely for its taking Mormonism seriously *as a religion*.)

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I have dwelt, perhaps too long, on the early paragraphs of De Pillis's article because I want to emphasize at once the validity of his approach as it appears to a humanistic historian of religion and because his plea for honest and serious consideration of Mormonism as a religion with its own history, properly understood by primary interest in its founder, is a plea already largely answered in an ample corpus of writings.

All American religious groups have been plagued by their own historiographers' turning apologists and catechists — try any of the denominational volumes in the "American Church History" series (itself otherwise a landmark in church historiography). If serious dialogue between Mormons and other American religionists is to take place, these demons must of course be exorcised. But not only they. Also to be laid aside in the interest of honest conversation is the sense of persecution or neglect of any given religion. That is not easy, as De Pillis's article itself demonstrates. There can be little doubt that among major religious groups in America the Mormons bear the sorest scars of persecution. But before them the Quakers were lashed, and since them the Jehovah's Witnesses. The difficulty is that any religious group claiming both uniqueness and absolute authenticity must sense neglect in the very fact of its being one sect among many, and under these circumstances neglect is hardly distinguishable affectively from a sense of persecution. Such things

happen even to tight-knit parties within denominations which are, in most respects, well assimilated into the religious pluralism (and its implicit relativism) of American society.

To the best of my knowledge nobody has written about it before, but the chronological, geographical, and religious parallels between the Mormons and the early strict Anglo-Catholics within the Protestant Episcopal Church are quite striking. In the late 1830's, writings of the English Tractarians on the independent spiritual authority of priests struck such men as William Adams, James Lloyd Breck, and John Henry Hobart, Jr. (the bishop's son) as new revelations, conveying absolute religious authority inherent in a divinely authorized priesthood and dissolving all doubts about conflicting claims of the multitudinous sects. It was in New England and New York that the Tractarian doctrine of authority was especially appealing. Those who accepted it were at first harrassed by their fellow Episcopalians and more generally suspected of crypto-Roman Catholicism. These sectarians, like the Mormons, looked to the west for their Zion, and the three persons mentioned settled into a semi-monastic community in Nashotah, Wisconsin. They were theologically in revolt against old-line true religion in the American wilderness. Some such Anglo-Catholics indeed defected to Roman Catholicism, but many remained restlessly within their denomination as a sub-sect, sensing neglect and persecution because their claim to unique religious authority failed of the universal acknowledgement which alone could justify it.

At one juncture or another, every religious group in America has undergone a similar crisis. In one crisis or another, every such group has aspired to be the sect to end all sects. In this sense, Mormonism epitomizes the experience of sectarian religion in America from William Bradford and Anne Hutchinson to Malcolm X and Father Divine.

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To belong to a family is not, of course, to lose individuality. Mormonism (here I speak not of the Reorganized Church) is, in fact, distinct. But its distinctness resides not in the fact that it is based on a special revelation, not in its authority and priesthood, not in its anti-Calvinistic doctrine, not in its having a special key to unlock the Bible, not in its attentiveness to early Christianity and to the old Israel, not even in its intimacy with the Deity. It is distinct for its capacity to transform the crisis-situation which all sects have known into an enduring program of social organization — enduring, at least, until recently. Thus it would require mountains of new data and reams of new interpretation to unseat Brigham Young from his cathedra as the representative man of Mormonism as a distinct socio-politico-economic community based on sectarian religion. Of course I merely underscore De Pillis's emphasis upon Smith's entire career after 1830 as the founder of the Mormon religion, and I also underscore the uniqueness of the Prophet's revelations not because they were revelation but as his particular revelations.

Whether such distinctness, specifically religious or more generally social, is capable of earning for Mormonism a "special status . . . as a fourth major religion" in America strikes me as a very important but entirely open question. I remain unconvinced that a Protestant-Catholic-Jew-Mormon configuration "is generally accepted in American society."

Motion-picture films used at the 1956 Democratic National Convention

and later shown on nationwide television hookups are at best evanescent indicators of basic forces at work in American society, and they are even flimsier signs of portentous tendencies in American religion. At the same time nobody would deny the significance of the fact that certain prominent Mormons have recently become men of national prominence — mostly as Republicans. But my doubts arise not so much from the evidence adduced as from the three-community conception of American religion on which Mormonism's proposed membership as a fourth community entirely relies. The sociological researches of Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, reported at length in *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), produce strong indications that the three-community conception is more a construct of interpretation than a description of the actual present realities of religion in American society. Alongside the question of Mormonism's admission as a fourth member of a religious constellation is the weightier question whether any such constellation exists outside the pages of certain well-known books.

That Mormonism has thus far deviated from the morphology of sectarian assimilation into mainstream American religion results not only from its genius at merging religious with political and economic institutions but, perhaps more prominently, from its self-imposed and geographically reinforced isolation from the mainstream of American life. But can Mormon isolation and Mormon cohesion, mutually dependent as they are, resist the erosive forces of television, population mobility, outward as well as upward education, and all the other familiar elements of rapid social change? And if Mormonism is being brought into dialogue with other American sects or religions, is the sufficient condition of the dialogue specifically religious or is it the result of a more fully shared Americanness?

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From these sociological uncertainties let us return in conclusion to Clio's domain where we belong. It is demonstrable (but not briefly so) that the three-community conception of American religion relies not so much on the cohesion of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants as American religions as it relies on the centuries-old influences of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants upon the deepest currents of Western civilization. Predictions come not from Clio but from some ventriloquist muse, and nobody can say confidently whether Mormonism's power to be exceptional will enable it to find status as a fourth American religion. It is simply a matter of record that its influence on Western civilization is, so far and understandably so, superficial.

However, it is hardly to be expected that dialogue will begin on such a fourth-religion basis. Each American sect has some time hoped to be the sect to end all sects. Only when that hope was forfeited as hopeless — call it maturity or loss of nerve — has genuine dialogue arisen between these communities. Then denomination met denomination in the interest of understanding and cooperation, not in the hope of conversion or of attaining status as an independent religion. What the various religions (denominations, sects, churches, or however called) in America have come to share is first a common Americanness and then a common religiousness.

In a very powerful sense, every religious community in the United States today is natively American. From the fourth century onwards, religion in

Europe followed the principle *cuius regio eius religio* (whose region his religion) — not only Christians but Moors and Jews and pagans. No European religion transferred to these shores has maintained the principle. Instead the rule in America has been *cuius ecclesia eius religio* (whose congregation his religion). Not Mormon Prophet nor Catholic Pope nor Anglican Priest nor Puritan Presbyterian nor Methodist Preacher has for long broken the rule, and the potpourri of American religions endures. Its very multiplicity is the condition of its harmony. Things unique — doctrine, discipline, worship, order, polity, piety, etc. — abide the *de facto* forfeiture of universality by a device that is simple and pragmatic: by turning *de jure* claims to universality into specific characteristics of uniqueness.

The Prophet's dictum holds for the Latter-day Saints: "Truth is Mormonism. God is the author of it." Just that dictum is the ticket of admission to the dialogue between religions and between the religious and the secular in America. For every participant in the dialogue representing religion says the same about his religion (with varying degrees of vehemence). The dialogue proceeds on the tacit assumption that such absolute claims are basically characteristic of religion, and that those who voice them intend them relatively.

## MORMONISM AND THE AMERICAN WAY: A RESPONSE

Mario S. De Pillis

Let me begin by congratulating the editors and founders of *Dialogue* for their intellectual daring and integrity in the handling of this journal. And I want to thank them for inviting considered commentary on my article instead of falling back on the usual device of edited letters.

My article, though it was long and detailed, needed formal commentary. In arguing for the importance of early Mormon history as the basis for defining "Mormonism" as a religion, I selected but one major religious element in the early church: authority. Much had to be omitted, a fact that is implicit in the commentaries of both Mr. Clebsch and Mr. Bushman. They have raised the larger question of the significance of the phenomenon of Mormonism in American history and life.

It is a special pleasure to respond to commentators who understood and even in a large part assented to my basic thesis. To use an accurate colloquialism, Clebsch and Bushman knew what I was talking about.

Before taking up the varied questions raised by Mr. Clebsch I would like to clarify my use of the word "authentic." In the standard usage of professional historians the word refers to the historical actuality or "historicity" of a written document or an artifact. In this sense for example, both the "Protocols of Zion" and the "Piltdown Man" have been shown to be inauthentic forgeries. Non-Mormon historians have always implicitly or explicitly stressed the inauthenticity of the golden plates and the revelations claimed by Joseph Smith. I had suggested that while that is a legitimate and relevant inquiry, it might be more fruitful to examine the actual content of the revelations for their religious significance.