New Paradigms for Understanding Mormonism and Mormon History

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WITHIN HISTORICALLY-ORIENTED RELIGIOUS FAITHS, such as those deriving from Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, any effort to develop new paradigms for understanding their historical development, especially in their formative stages, is inextricably intertwined with efforts to develop new ways of understanding the nature and significance of the faiths themselves. This is true because religious movements that base important elements of their *raison d'être* on claims that certain events actually happened—and happened in certain ways—open themselves up to criticism or to the necessity of changing their faith significantly if the historical assertions they make about those formative experiences prove either to have been false or to have occurred in substantially different ways than have been represented in the standard origin stories of their faith.

Thus it matters to committed Jews that the events described in the Exodus story really happened and were not just a powerful symbolic way of expressing the group's faith in its status as a chosen people of God. Likewise, for orthodox Christians it is important to believe that Jesus actually rose bodily from the dead and not that the story merely illustrates the profound truth that Christ symbolically lives in and animates the hearts of his followers today. And for Muslims, who so closely link what they view as God's ultimate and final revelation to humanity in the Quran with the role of what they see as God's last and greatest prophet Muhammad, any evidence that Muhammad might have been less than exemplary in his personal behavior or his teachings creates intense discomfort and anger, as can be witnessed by the Muslim reaction to Salmon Rusdie's brutally satirical (and viciously unfair) novel *The Satanic Verses* (1989). Latter-day Saints can have some sympathy with this Muslim anger by recalling their own intense reactions to Fawn Brodie's

pointed but far more balanced treatment of the prophet Joseph Smith in *No Man Knows My History* (1945).

This inextricable linkage between the nature of a religious faith and how its history is presented results in deep tension for historians like myself who, on the one hand, profoundly respect the religious movements they study, while, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with reconstructing, insofar as it is possible, what actually happened in the early development of those movements. In particular, what should historians do when, after close and thoughtful consideration, they conclude that certain events, felt by believers to be critically important to their faith, world view, and entire way of life, probably happened substantially differently than is represented in orthodox accounts? As a non-Mormon who has devoted nearly twenty-five years to the intensive study of early Mormon history, let me share briefly how my thinking in this area has developed and raise some of the difficult and unsettling questions with which I have not been able to come to closure in my own life and thinking.

The larger and perhaps ultimately intractable issue is one that is faced, I believe, by thoughtful individuals of all religious faiths who are committed to linking both the spiritual and historical aspects of their heritage into a coherent whole. Briefly stated, the question might be as follows: Is it more desirable to hold intense religious commitments which may be poorly founded historically but which motivate cooperative effort, self-sacrifice, and social unity or to hold to more historically well-grounded religious beliefs which tend to produce individualism and self-interest separate from the larger good? If coming to a historically realistic understanding of one's religious faith tends to produce socially undesirable results for a majority of individuals, would it be better to try to discourage such inquiry? Is it possible that only some sort of absolutistic religious commitment to a higher power whose influence is seen as fully pervading everyday life is sufficient to establish real community and overcome deeply ingrained human tendencies toward selfishness?

One individual who struggled with these issues without fully resolving them throughout his unusually active 97-year life was Arthur E. Morgan, the man who revitalized Antioch College with the work-study plan in the 1920s and went on to be the first head of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Morgan's ongoing tension over religion was related to the influence of his devout Baptist mother and his freethinking agnostic father. In later life he articulated the problem he had in determining whether to side with the highly committed, pious, warm-hearted fundamentalism of his mother or the intensely curious, free-thinking pursuit of truth wherever it might lead of his father. He noted his frustration that all too often people with intense, unquestioning religious commitment seemed more likely to show genuine, unselfish concern for others and a real sense of

community (which he deeply valued socially), while the freethinkers (with whom he most identified intellectually) often seemed deficient in the area of social responsibility and willingness to consider the needs of the larger community rather than just their personal self-interest.

Morgan never intellectually resolved this tension. In practice, he combined both elements by following the cooperative, self-sacrificing behavior of the religious true believer, while intellectually continuing to identify with the free-thinking pursuit of truth. As he put in a powerful diary entry in his late teens:

> I wish people had more sympathy and forbearance with other people's individuality. No two persons are alike, and we must either all get into a certain style of conventional living and suppress ourselves, or else we must have forbearance with one another. I get tired of having good orthodox people tell me I am going to perdition. The horror of having a doubt is so great to them that they do not see the horror of having a faith so small and shaky that they are afraid to doubt for fear it would make the whole structure tumble.[1]

One might counterpose to Morgan's reflections, however, the cautionary remarks of liberal religious leader Harry Emerson Fosdick, in his autobiography *The Living of These Days*, when he observed: "One can be so open-minded that he is like a summerhouse, through which all ideas are free to pass but where no ideas settle down and live. Gilbert Chesterton once remarked that the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."[2]

What, if anything, does all this have to do with the development of new paradigms for understanding Mormonism and Mormon history? Mormonism, like any vital religious faith, has always struggled to maintain a creative tension between opposing tendencies within the movement. Some of these "sources of strain and conflict" were ably delineated nearly forty years ago by Thomas F. O'Dea in his classic study *The Mormons* (1957). Most recently, Armand L. Mauss, in *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (1994), has compellingly argued that a great deal of Mormon success, especially in the twentieth century, has been due to its ability to maintain an optimum and fluctuating tension between distinctive religious claims (which also have been a focus of hostility and opprobrium), on the one hand, and a quest for acceptance and respectability (which can blur distinctiveness and assimilation with the larger society), on the other hand. Mauss argues that

1. Quoted in Lucy Griscomb Morgan, *Finding His World: The Story of Arthur Morgan* (Yellow Springs, OH: Kahoe, 1928), 611.

2. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1956), 260.

whereas Mormonism during the first half of the twentieth century moved substantially toward respectability and assimilation with the larger society, in the latter half of the twentieth century, in order to retain its distinctive character, it has, once again, increasingly asserted its opposition to, and distinctiveness from, the larger society.

It is striking to note that in this respect, as in many others, the development of Mormonism in the twentieth century is similar to, and even paradigmatic of, the development of other major religious traditions. Even before the horrors of World War I and World War II showed the depths of Western industrial civilization's capacity for evil, many of the most sensitive European cultural critics such as those described in Gerhard Masur's *Prophets of Yesterday* (1961) were acutely sensitive to the inadequacies of simplistic liberal optimism about prospects for the future. Most remarkably, during the past two decades since the mid-1970s, a profound shift has been taking place, as significant elements in all the major religious traditions of the world have recoiled sharply against the widespread secular assumption that humanity is the measure of all things and that God is essentially irrelevant or "dead." Brilliantly reconstructing a portion of this shift in his book *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (1994), Gilles Kepel notes how, in the three great monotheistic traditions, various forms of "fundamentalism" have arisen and achieved varying degrees of success in challenging the secular assumptions that have pervaded much of the twentieth century. Where such fundamentalisms are headed, in Mormonism and other traditions as well, and whether they will constructively engage or merely exacerbate the profound shortcomings of our current civilization by contributing to religious and ethnic holy wars or other disruptions remains to be seen.

In Mormonism, as in the other great exclusivistic religious traditions deriving from Jewish, Christian, or Muslim roots, the whole issue of new paradigms has always been problematic. In the first place, each of the great monotheistic traditions and its major offshoots represents, or attempts to represent, itself as a new and all-inclusive paradigm for understanding Truth. Judaism sharply separated itself as a monotheistic faith representing a specially chosen people of the one true God and rejecting what it saw as the barbarous polytheism all around it. Christianity, as it eventually developed, represented itself as a "new covenant," replacing and superseding the earlier Jewish covenant(s) through its understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the sole means by which salvation could be achieved. Islam, claiming to include but also to supersede Judaism and Christianity, argued that the revelations of God presented in the Quran to Muhammad represented the final perfect manifestation of God's will for humanity. And Mormonism, beginning like

other Protestant groups with the argument that Roman Catholicism had corrupted true Christianity and that it was trying to return to and "restore" the purity of that initial faith, also argued that it was preparing the way for the dispensation of the fullness of time in which all previously valid human truth would be combined in a new synthesis for the Millennium.

Since each of these faiths claimed to have or be in the process of creating a paradigm for understanding ultimate truth, any effort to apply external models to understanding their faith is understandably viewed with suspicion by strongly committed members. They feel that their faith is the measure of all things and that use of other models for analyzing their faith—whether those models be religious or secular—is inherently subversive.

To some extent, this perception has validity. Take the case of mainstream Christianity over the past two centuries. Two major approaches developed from contact with the outside society have weakened the exclusivistic tendencies of traditional Christianity. On the one hand, increasing contact with other rich faith communities around the world has led many thoughtful individuals to question the possibility that Christianity is the *only* means human beings can effectively use to achieve salvation. On the other hand, academic historical and scriptural analysis has pointed out complexities and ambiguities in conventional faith claims, leading many individuals towards a more secular understanding of the development and significance of Christianity itself.

Mormonism has also been affected by such tendencies during the twentieth century, especially during the fifty years since World War II, as it has expanded its membership nine-fold and increasingly moved out of its Zion in the Intermountain West to engage the rest of the United States and the world. In this process, comparative perspectives from other disciplines and comparisons with other religious movements increasingly have been used in understanding Mormonism itself. At the same time, critical historical, sociological, and literary approaches have been used more and more frequently by Mormons trained in major centers of higher education as they try to better understand their Mormon heritage.

These developments have been viewed, even by their most enthusiastic supporters, with a certain caution. Can the distinctive boundaries and sense of mission of the faith be sustained in the face of such intellectual and social tendencies tending toward individualism and reassessment of the faith? Is there a danger that we may be throwing out the baby with the bath water and be left ultimately (in Archibald MacLeish's words in his poem "The End of the World") with "nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all"?

For Mormons, probably no issue in early Mormon history and reli-

gious belief has been more difficult and controversial in this regard than the nature and significance of the Book of Mormon, especially the question of whether it represents a literal history of the ancient inhabitants of the New World. Traditionally, there have been only two major approaches to this issue. One is, in essence, that the book is precisely what it purports to be—an ancient, divinely inspired record of the inhabitants of the New World, written on golden plates, recovered by the young Joseph Smith with the help of an angel, translated "by the gift and power of God," and representing another testimony to Jesus Christ in the New World. The other position, baldly stated, is that the book was a conscious, deliberate fraud, that it was either dictated by Joseph Smith out of his own mind or reworked from somebody else's manuscript, and reflects the concerns and preoccupations of nineteenth-century America rather than an ancient civilization. Until very recently, few efforts have been made to articulate any sort of alternative approach or paradigm for understanding the Book of Mormon. During the past decade—and to the surprise and consternation of observers both inside and outside the Mormon movement—some believing Mormons have attempted to articulate a new approach for understanding the Book of Mormon that uses elements from both of the two earlier approaches in new ways.

In the comments that follow, I will briefly give my own perspective on some of those developments and then discuss how this particular issue highlights the problem of developing and applying new paradigms for understanding major religious movements. It is only with considerable reluctance that I approach this issue directly here. Just as I have always had intense personal religious convictions but have been hesitant to discuss them, I have also felt that it was inappropriate for me, as a non-Mormon, to intrude my views directly about matters that could be seen as impinging on the "sacred space" of Latter-day Saints. Unlike many more secular historians, I genuinely care about the truth claims of the various religious groups I study professionally and I do not in my own mind simply sidestep such issues by using verbiage about the symbolic meaning that such claims have for individuals in the group. At the same time, my unshakable personal conviction both that absolute truth exists and that it can never fully be comprehended by humans because of our limitations in perception in this dimension of being has left me unafraid to go to the heart of questions that others might sidestep. My conviction has been that if I can be absolutely direct and honest in trying to understand the most difficult and intractable questions about a particular group, then all the less difficult issues will fall into place as well.

Let me also emphasize that what follows is only the briefest outline of a much larger possible argument and that I do not necessarily claim that my approach is "true" or "correct." I would stress that even if I may

feel, as I do, that the approach I shall be outlining so briefly here is more historically plausible than either the standard Mormon or anti-Mormon approaches, I do not think it is in any way likely or even desirable for Latter-day Saints to move toward such an approach, since it probably would be counter-productive for the health and expansion of the movement. In fact, during nearly twenty-five years of intensive study of the Latter-day Saint movement, the closest I have come to articulating in print the basis for such an alternative approach is a lengthy end note in my first book *Religion and Sexuality* (1981), pages 294-97, which I reluctantly inserted at the urging of my Oxford University Press editor. She was utterly baffled and frustrated because she could plainly see that I did not believe the Book of Mormon was either a literal history or a fraud, but she could not tell what I did think it was.

Within less than a year of beginning my intensive study of early Mormon history and family patterns in the early 1970s, I arrived at the basic conclusion that neither the Mormon nor anti-Mormon approaches to the Book of Mormon were adequate to understand it historically. Perhaps the turning point in my thinking came when I read the testimony of Joseph's wife Emma, recorded shortly before her death, about how the Book of Mormon was produced. She stated, in part:

> In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the [seer] stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us. . . . The plates lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. . . . My belief is that the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt about it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscript unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him.[3]

The first thing that struck me in reading this testimony is that if Joseph Smith was not even looking at the Book of Mormon plates during much of his dictation, the end product could not possibly be a "translation" in any normal sense in which the term is used. A translation presupposes something tangible that one is translating. Unless one hypothesizes clairvoyance on a staggering scale that even the most devout might have difficulty accepting, the process described by Emma would seem more plausibly characterized as a remarkable example of either human creativity or of divine revelatory inspiration, depending on one's point of view.

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3. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26 (1 Oct. 1879): 289-90.

At the same time, Emma's statement also convinced me that the counter argument that the Book of Mormon was a fraud was equally inadequate to explain such a compelling and uplifting creation. So how could the book properly be viewed? My own hypothesis, based on reading literally hundreds of ancient and modern transcriptions of trance communications and related examples of automatic writing, was that the Book of Mormon might best be viewed as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, examples of a trance-related document ever produced in the history of religion. Almost invariably, such documents, even some of the greatest such as the Quran, are almost purely filled with moral exhortation. But the Book of Mormon contained *both* a plausible story line and an unusually sophisticated moral message that even some of its harshest critics such as Alexander Campbell were astonished by. I thus argued that the most interesting questions raised by the Book of Mormon relate to its *content* not to its *origins*, whatever they may be. In my opinion, the book could best be viewed, like the Doctrine and Covenants, as a work of "inspiration" or "revelation" rather than as a literal translation or an actual history. From a sophisticated Mormon perspective, the book could still be described as "divinely inspired" and "a marvelous work and a wonder"; from a balanced non-Mormon perspective, it could be seen as an unusually sophisticated product of unconscious and little-known mental processes like those associated with automatic writing.

Some Mormon studies over the past decade have developed this line of argument, most notably Scott C. Dunn's article "Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon" in the June 1985 issue of *Sunstone*, and Anthony Hutchinson's extraordinary first chapter in the recent volume *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (1993), edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe, in which he asserts: "Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas" (1).

It is fairly clear that whatever the merits or demerits of this argument, it is a non-starter for both Mormons and non-Mormons in terms of its social appeal and usefulness. If non-Mormons were to begin to look seriously at the Book of Mormon as a significant religious document rather than maintaining their distance by dismissing those who revere the document as benighted people without full possession of their mental faculties, they could become vulnerable to a more profound appreciation of Mormonism as a compelling new religious movement. This they generally do not wish to do.

For Mormons, on the other hand, drawing a line in the sand and standing firm on arguments that the Book of Mormon is a literal history (whatever else it may also be) is similarly far more compelling as a

boundary maintenance mechanism and way to inspire the awesome commitment that continues to pulse through this powerful expanding religious movement. To jettison such a compelling argument in favor of the shifting sands of scholarly interpretation would not, I think, make sense organizationally.

In this respect, it may be useful to consider the argument put forward by Elaine Pagels in her fascinating study *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979). She argues that, irrespective of the merits or demerits of gnostic arguments in their own right, they were far less compelling organizationally than the orthodox Christian beliefs that eventually triumphed, with their strong stress on order and hierarchy. In the final analysis, the social implications of a specific set of beliefs are more important than abstract debate that may contribute to individualistic splintering in a movement.

To conclude, what does all this suggest for the use of new paradigms in Mormonism and Mormon history? Clearly the years since World War II have seen not only the remarkable numerical growth of the Mormon movement in the United States and worldwide but also a remarkable flowering of scholarship about Mormonism and Mormon history. In my opinion, that scholarship as a whole has contributed to the broadening and deepening of our understanding of the character and significance of this dynamic movement, both in the past and the present. Overall, the most acceptable use of new models has been in analyzing the profound social accomplishments of the Latter-day Saints. Attempting to apply external models to understanding the religious development of Mormonism, however, has been more controversial and is likely to remain so in the future.