

# Mormon Studies in a European Setting

*Douglas J. Davies*

I AM PARTICULARLY GRATEFUL FOR THE INVITATION to edit this special edition of *Dialogue*, largely because it allows me to address readers in a relatively informal and conversational way on certain academic issues which often remain implicit or ignored. While these topics are important for what can be called "Mormon Studies," they apply equally as well to others. In this introductory paper, I mention first my own involvement in LDS studies, then consider the role of conferences, and finally, discuss the papers comprising this volume.

## LDS STUDIES

My own engagement with LDS material was accidental, stemming from a postgraduate studentship from the British Social Science Research Council, held at the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford. This was in 1969, following my undergraduate studies in anthropology at Durham University. An insightful meeting with the anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt resulted in the rapid conclusion that I should work more in the sociology of religion rather than become an Africanist. Accordingly, I was taken on by Dr. Bryan Wilson, whose research seminar at All Souls College was a creative center for the study of numerous religious movements. Here I engaged with Mormonism, a religion practically unstudied in the U.K., and of which I had no previous experience or knowledge. Through initial, friendly contacts with Latter-day Saints in Wales, I began a life-long interest, interspersed—as academic life demands—with work on many other topics, including Sikhism, Anglicanism, and the themes of death, cremation, and burial.

The mid 1980s provided opportunity for me to revisit much of my earlier research material, particularly the extensive work I had conducted on the Bodleian Library's holding of the *Millennial Star*, a gem of a find for a young postgraduate at a time when academic studies of Mormonism

were not particularly extensive. This resulted in the volume *Mormon Spirituality: Latter-day Saints in Wales and Zion*.<sup>1</sup> I then helped create a Center for Mormon Studies at Nottingham University, where we were able to develop a small library as well as host postgraduate students who came to work with me on a variety of their own projects. Numbers were small in terms of the U.K., but this was a significant move, with doctorates completed on a variety of topics: Craig Marshall on higher education and Mormon student identity, Tyler Moulton (from Brigham Young University) on the notion of salvation, and Warrick Kear—who appears in this edition—on music in Mormonism. These students were all active Latter-day Saints, mostly employed in the LDS Church Education System (CES), as was Julian Jones, whose M.A. considered members' attitudes to LDS bishops. Barry Fox, who was then head of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Britain, completed his doctoral work on the history of that movement in the U.K. Much of this research was conducted without the enormous archival reserve available in U.S. centers, and the survey aspects in particular generated their own databases. Even this small focus of LDS study resulted in numerous inquiries from and contacts with interested parties in the media, other churches, and various LDS members potentially interested in research.

One significant aspect of LDS research in the U.K., which we were able to foster, took the form of two academic conferences devoted to Mormon Studies, and I will return to a brief description of these after discussing the topic of academic conferences in general. I must add that I enjoyed general support from LDS church officials and members in the U.K., including Jeffrey R. Holland before his appointment as one of the Twelve Apostles.

After moving to the University of Durham, I had to leave behind whatever resources had been garnered at Nottingham and begin afresh. One valuable contribution was made by Prof. Armand Mauss, who was able to spend a short period as a visiting research fellow at Durham. His personal and scholarly support were invaluable, both in his advice associated with my book *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*,<sup>2</sup> and also with much help in preparing this particular edition of Dialogue for publication. Additionally, a variety of visits and lectures, including one in December 2001 by Prof. Roger Keller as holder of the Richard L. Evans Chair at Brigham Young University, have stimulated undergraduate interest in LDS religion at Durham. Prof. Keller's predecessor in that chair, Dr. David Paulsen, has also contributed much to my reflection upon LDS spirituality, not least through his friendship.

<sup>1</sup>Douglas J. Davies, *Mormon Spirituality: Latter-Day Saints in Wales and Zion* (Nottingham: Nottingham Series in Theology, 1987; distributed in the U.S. by Utah State University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation: Force, Grace and Glory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

Such scholarly interaction, stimulus, and support are of particular importance for a subject like Mormonism when taught in an institutional and cultural context where it is certainly of minority interest. It is to the credit of both Nottingham and Durham University Departments of Theology that they were happy to host this academic venture. Similarly, I have gained a great deal from participating in a variety of LDS events in the U.K. and in Utah, including as a visiting professor at Brigham Young University. In the final analysis, much scholarly work is initiated and fostered through personal exchange, whether through our original mentors or through subsequent contacts, a point which appropriately brings me to the subject of conferences.

### CONFERENCES

Conferences are, in and of themselves, an interesting phenomenon. The academic profession would hardly be what it is without them, since they furnish a prime arena for people to meet and gain some personal sense of each other. Just how we judge scholars is a complex issue that has, as yet, remained beyond formal academic scrutiny. Usually we must make do with reading what others write, but there is a quality of criticism—or perhaps it would be better to say of appreciation—which comes only from listening to a scholar speak. Better still, our opinions take even greater form when we are able to talk with each other in truer reflection of the collegial nature of scholarship.

In practice, many conferences have become so large that, unless participants have long attended, they can easily be lost or find themselves marginalised amid crowds who all seem to know each other. However, conferences also provide a basis for academic politics in forging or enhancing individual or corporate status, not to mention their role in fostering networking, and the whole issue of job-searching. As with academic journals, conferences have both the privilege and responsibility of helping to forge and maintain aspects of the boundaries of disciplines, and here both privilege and responsibility need to be framed by an ethical attitude as far as freedom and constraint are concerned. Even in the broad world of mainstream academic theology, one sometimes hears colleagues speak negatively of the way “the academy” polices its discipline. Whether acting as a conference organizer, journal editor, or, for example, as an anonymous referee for major grant-awarding bodies, the issue of personal integrity must be explicit, at least to oneself. To what extent are personal prejudices allowed to color our judgement? What degree of freedom do we give to new ideas or interpretations?

*Nottingham 1995*

These are crucial questions, and with some of them in mind, I undertook in 1995 to organize an academic conference on Mormon Studies at the University of Nottingham, based at Derby Hall of which I was then warden. Some thirty or so individuals attended, many from the U.S. Over several days the delegates heard a great variety of papers, twenty-four of which were subsequently published.<sup>3</sup> This conference was particularly significant in bringing a wide variety of people together who otherwise might not have met.

*Durham 1999*

Subsequent communication with delegates encouraged me to organize a second conference in April 1999, by which time I had moved to Durham University. Although slightly fewer in number, the delegates said how much they appreciated the collegiality of this event. A major feature of this conference lay in the fact that three of the most senior of all British scholars in the study of religion agreed to give papers on the main topic of the conference, which was that of Mormonism as a potential world religion. Professor Ninian Smart, whose relatively recent death has removed a major figure in comparative religion from both the British and world scene, genially reflected on religious attitudes, and spent time talking with many of us there. Professor John Hinnells, a key scholar in Zoroastrian studies and, at the time of the conference, the chairman of the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies in the U.K., considered aspects of the definition of religion. Dr. Bryan Wilson, Emeritus Fellow of All Souls College at Oxford University and a Fellow of the British Academy, addressed the subject of "Toleration and Religious Pluralism." Numerous delegates appreciated meeting these colleagues in the informal atmosphere engendered by the conference.

Alongside challenging themes were also international elements furnished by, for example, Massimo Introvigne from Italy, with his timely theoretical discussion of "Mormonism and Postmodernity," Mark Grover on "Coming to Zion Brazilian Style: The Changing Mormon Concept of the Gathering," and Grant Underwood's typically engaging account of "Mormonism, the Maori, and Cultural Authenticity." It was also particularly good to welcome several younger scholars, whose contributions were notable for their scholarly rigour: Henri Gooren's anthropological method was well deployed in his account of Mormon membership in Guatemala, a paper offered in this issue of *Dialogue*. Another which is not here but was equally telling was that of Staffan Arner on

---

<sup>3</sup>Douglas J. Davies, ed., *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London: Cassell, 1996).

"Mormon-Jewish Relations Yesterday and Today." He brought to the conference that sense of the history of religions for which his University of Uppsala (Sweden) is renowned, and he fully did it credit through his knowledge of Swedish LDS history coupled with practical experience of the LDS presence in Jerusalem. His paper was much appreciated and promises a future publication of some considerable merit.

From the U.S., Eric Eliason in a polished presentation set about "Mapping the New World Religion" through "The Cultural Geography of Temples and Pioneer Day Celebrations." Notes of a more British kind were sounded by the steady historical craft of Malcolm Thorp on "Popular Millennialism in Britain 1837-1865" and David Whittaker's enviable competence in covering "Mormon Publishing in the British Empire 1836-1860."

Returning to the world-religion front, Michael Homer considered the "Historical Foundations of Mormonism as a World Religion," with Malise Ruthven reflecting on "Islam and Mormonism: Common Gnostic roots," and Roger Keller considering "Non-attachment in Buddhism and Mormonism." I took up the theme of "Death Transcendence and World-Religion Status." Other British contributions came from Roy Whitehead, who dwelt on some negative aspects of his Mormon experience in Scotland, while—in directly anthropological terms—Hildi Mitchell analyzed the idea of embodiment in relation to Mormon identity. Shortly afterwards she completed her doctoral work in the anthropology of Mormonism in Britain while based at Queens University Belfast. Other significant topics covered by papers included those of gender pursued by Lynn Matthews Anderson, LDS youth delinquency by Bruce Chadwick, and the philosophical aspects of LDS doctrinal cultural origins by David Paulsen.

Not everyone present was expert in LDS topics. For example, among the non-LDS attendees was the Revd. Lionel Atherton, an Anglican priest from Chorley in Lancashire, in whose parish the second British LDS temple had recently opened. Seeking some understanding of Mormonism as part of his ecclesiastical pastoral work, he had been in touch with me and appropriately, I felt, attended the conference. He subsequently did some postgraduate work with me, including a study period in New Zealand, where he worked on aspects of LDS life. His appreciation of meeting with academics, many of whom were also LDS, was positively voiced both at the close of the conference and thereafter. This was one example of the importance of maintaining open boundaries in academic ventures on religious topics, allowing for the fact that individuals always possess their personal agendas.

One final aspect of the Durham conference needs to be mentioned, which was not in any sense part of the academic program but reflected upon some LDS themes in the musical rather than the sentential mode. I had invited the two organists of the College of St. Hild and St. Bede

(the venue of the conference)—Joseph Ramadan, an undergraduate, and Julian Cooper, a postgraduate—to present a short recital. Cooper's framework of Bach, Boyce, Vierne, and Dupré contained three composition-improvisations by Ramadan on "Come, Come Ye Saints," "The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning," and "How Great the Wisdom and the Love," three hymns which typify, at least to me as a non-LDS, something essential that suffuses Latter-day Saint spirituality. This was doubtless a first as far as the 1891 Harrison and Harrison organ of Bede Chapel was concerned. The music was, I think, much appreciated by the numerous delegates who sat in the shadowed stillness of that fine building.

#### DIVERSITY OF INTEREST

If the ability to share in music together was one minor aspect of this conference, a major feature lay in its interdisciplinarity, a characteristic also shared by the 1995 gathering. This factor is of considerable importance for any field wishing to designate itself by the term "studies." Mormon Studies, for example, cannot simply depend upon historical method any more than upon the sociological view of life. The established base of both Mormon historical and social scientific study groups already reflects those perspectives in highly developed ways, but much remains to be gained from interdisciplinary encounter, especially at conferences where numbers are small enough for people actually to engage with each other. One potential hazard of modern and large conferences emerges from the plethora of different topic areas attracting specialists in streamed presentation of topics. Given the small numbers present at both these British conferences, everyone could listen to everything.

In Mormon Studies, as in some fields related to other religious traditions, the issue of scholarship is for a significant number of people intimately bound with their own religious convictions, sometimes with consequences for their status and acceptance within their own church organization. This can cause problems regarding what people want to say and are prepared to hear. Certainly, the first of the two conferences I organized witnessed both more and less religiously conservative delegates together. Such circumstances necessitate a degree of learning on all sides, and raise the issue of judgement over the papers delivered. There is no easy resolution to the difficulties and sensitivities of both institutional and personal agendas involved in such decision making. Sometimes there are moments of discomfort. What is important is that as high a degree of intellectual integrity as possible is maintained within an overall academic dynamic of responsibility and a sense of humanity.

## PAPERS

To return to the issue of interdisciplinarity, I would like now to focus on the papers included in this collection. I do not wish to gloss their contents, because they are perfectly competent to speak for themselves, but I must note that the variety of material they present is one example, albeit relatively brief, of how I conceive of the notion of "Mormon Studies."

The subject matter of Latter-day Saint life obviously provides the key focus, with a degree of historical contextualizing inevitable. Yet we can also see the distinctive influences of literary theory in Givens, whose wider publications are establishing him as a significant scholar in the literary-cultural appreciation of Mormonism within its American cultural setting. In Kunin, we also have a form of textual analysis, but one derived from structuralist anthropology, albeit a derivation involving much personal formation by the author. I was concerned to include this piece, precisely because structuralism of most sorts has become radically unfashionable. However, having been raised academically when structuralism was in its anthropological prime, and having worked in it a little myself decades ago, I still think it possesses the capacity to provoke thought and engender insight. Scholars who dislike the approach, or general readers who find it overly complex, should take the suggestions it offers and see how they relate to their own preferred ways of interpreting material. Whatever the result, I think it is wise to ponder the thought of someone with an expertise both in the literal and cultural interpretation of Hebrew texts and in an anthropological understanding of what groups do with their sacred writings.

On the more strictly anthropological analysis of social events, Henri Gooren offers results from his extensive fieldwork material from Guatemala. His wider comparative study of LDS and Pentecostal forms of religious organization have made a significant contribution to the detailed knowledge of social change and religious conversion in South America.

Warrick Kear brings to his paper not only a personal knowledge of LDS congregational and church organizational life in Britain, but also a deeply rooted academic background in music. His earlier doctoral studies responded to that need in Mormon Studies for a scholar to see how his own knowledge could be enhanced by the acquisition of new skills, both in social scientific and historical dimensions. His paper shows how significant insights may emerge, not least as an opportunity for others, whether historian, sociologist, or musicologist, to pursue them in even more detailed ways. Armand Mauss needs no introduction as a sociologist of Mormonism, but his paper in this collection also reflects the impact of a more historical and literary interest.

There are relatively few strict sociologists of religion in Britain, especially among the older and more senior colleagues, who have taken more

than a passing interest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but Christie Davies is one of them. His support for the two conferences was very welcomed, especially since he has some experience of LDS institutions beyond the U.K. His paper is of the more general and speculative kind, rather than a detailed empirical or sociological enterprise, but I include it because it reflects the importance of comparative method within sociological study. If Mormon Studies is ever to flourish as an identifiable field, then the comparative aspect is vitally important.

My own paper on "Gethsemane and Calvary in LDS Soteriology" should not, perhaps, have been included in this collection, because it was given at the Mormon History Association Conference in Denmark in the summer of 2000, where my book, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, also received its publication launch. I include it here, although numerous of its themes are treated in much greater detail in that book, because it was the outcome of a particular insight which dawned in a moment, but only on the back of several decades familiarity with Mormon ideas and prompted by the comparative perspective of wider Christian theology and iconography. The academic value given to art and iconography as their own distinctive forms of expression of faith and belief has had a fairly recent impact upon more established theological disciplines in mainstream Christianity, but it is an important one. As a comparative venture, it also shows how one tradition may foster responses in another. For example, I happened to be invited by Dr. Rowan Williams to write his Archbishop of Wales' Lent Book for 2001 at the very time the fact of Gethsemane, so differently valued by LDS and other Christians, was on my mind. (Lent Books are an Anglican tradition and are used either individually or by study groups throughout the period of Lent, leading up to Easter. They offer a means of considering the Christian life in relation to the sufferings and obedience—the passion—in the life of Christ, as told in the New Testament.) My Gethsemane reflections, published as *Private Passions* (Canterbury Press, 2001), were an extended analysis and meditation on what I came to see as an idiom of betrayal underlying early Christianity. *Private Passions* would never have taken the form it did had I never pondered the LDS commitment to Gethsemane; thus, comparative studies can have effects in numerous directions.

All such effects depend, of course, on the prior interests, commitments, and knowledge of individuals. Of the contributors to this edition, some are LDS, but the majority are not, and—as the contributors' list shows—numerous academic backgrounds are represented, all of which contribute to the diversity of this collection. These papers will illustrate the possibilities for Mormon Studies by scholars of various nationalities and religious backgrounds. One hopes this collection will beckon many others to join us in the same enterprise.