

unbeliever, interested in his tale. He now sees that by occupying the middle ground, he lost readers on both sides: non-Mormons who refuse to be interested in a person who could be a prophet, as well as Mormons who find the Joseph Smith in the biography just a bit too rough still.

His diary concludes with this comment: "At times I thought there was no middle ground for my version of the Mormon Prophet. I came to envy historians who write about slavery or patriarchy; no one doubts their basic beliefs. But on second thought, I realized that my book was better for being written for a divided audience. I cannot say that *Rough Stone Rolling* achieves a perfect balance, but it does offer an empathetic and, so I hope, a candid view of an extraordinary life" (83).

Notes

1. For a quick introduction to Brodie, and references to reviews and other biographical information, see the entries at en.wikipedia.org for Fawn McKay Brodie and *No Man Knows My History*. For Brodie's excommunication, see Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 58–59.

2. For the quotation from Kirn, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/books/review/15kirn.html> (accessed March 2007).

Editor's Addendum

The second edition of the Bushman road diary alluded to above is now available in bookstores or at the publisher's website, www.KoffordBooks.com. Richard Lyman Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith: Author's Diary* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 141 pp., paper: \$14.95.

Analyzing Spiritual Things from a Sociological Perspective

Rodney Stark and Reid Neilson. *The Rise of Mormonism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005., 192 pp., \$39.50.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Needle, book review editor for the Association for Mormon Letters; student of and commentator on the American religious tradition with an emphasis on Mormonism

The name Rodney Stark is very familiar to LDS readers. His interest in Mormonism began with his long-time friendship with fellow sociologist

Armand Mauss, also a familiar name and a member of the Church. Stark penned some astounding predictions several years ago, projecting what seemed to some an amazing growth rate for the American-born church and viewing Mormonism as the first new “world religion” since the advent of Islam.

The current volume, a collection of loosely connected analyses, is the outgrowth of requests made by colleagues and friends to gather some of his foundational writings containing his observations on Mormon growth and its impact on the world. Neilson, who has authored and/or edited several books on Mormonism, provides an extensive introduction, bringing to light both Stark’s views and the various reactions to those views. It’s an excellent summary and a must-read for anyone wanting to understand the direction of Stark’s research.

Stark introduces readers to the idea of “religious capital”—what believers have invested in their faith, noting that “the greater their store of religious capital (the more they have invested in a faith), the more costly it is for people to change faiths” (25). We can see this dynamic at work every day. Converts to Mormonism risk offending friends and family; those who leave Mormonism often leave a comforting and nurturing community. Such adjustments come at a cost. And Stark is correct; the costs are higher when the convert has been “invested” in his or her former faith.

Stark believes that revelation has played a large part in the formation of four of the great religions. In a fascinating study of four prophets (Joseph Smith, Jesus, Mohammed, and Moses), Stark compares and contrasts both the methods and content of the revelations. He examines the commonalities of their experiences—their environments, social situations, etc.—and then introduces the idea of the “holy families” of Mormonism, Christianity and Judaism, focusing on the immediate family members of the prophets.

But immediate family is just the first layer of interaction for the prophets. Each developed a social network through which he advocated and taught his unique gospel. In true sociological style, Stark studies the mechanics of evangelization and analyzes the phenomenon of conversion under the heading “Choice and Capital” (“capital,” as previously noted, being the investment each person has in his or her religion and how it sets the cost of conversion). The idea of networking is further discussed, not just in the context of conversion, but also as a tool of retention.

All of this may seem a bit mechanical. When analyzing spiritual things from a sociological perspective, such an outcome is hardly unex-

pected. Social scientists enjoy quantifying and explaining behaviors. In this spirit, Stark, in considering the costs of membership, presents Mormonism as a “costly” religion (85), one which demands much sacrifice from its members. But isn’t the choice of a costly religion a basically irrational choice? No, he would insist. Stark finds that religious choice, like other decisions, “is generally based on cost-benefit calculations and is therefore rational behavior in precisely the same sense that other human behavior is rational” (94). That is, people will make their choices based not solely on the demands made on them but also on the benefits they perceive as accruing from meeting those demands.

It is the burden of the Church, therefore, to represent the benefits of membership to outweigh the costs. Intrinsic to this process, Stark insists, is the ongoing effort to modernize mainstream religion. He draws an interesting conclusion: “My model proposes that modernization causes the secularization of conventional faiths and that this in turn leads not to a secular society but to the rise of new religious institutions better adapted to the new social and cultural institutions” (102). I suspect many traditionalists will disagree with this conclusion; but it raises an interesting question: Can we account for the rise of Mormonism, at least in part, by the liberalization and secularization of the mainstream religions in the early nineteenth century? This is an interesting hypothesis.

I took great interest in Stark’s observation that “new religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that their doctrines are nonempirical. Religions are less vulnerable to the extent that their doctrines are focused on a nonempirical reality and are not subject to empirical tests” (119). Indeed, such is the nature of “testimony”—an unprovable but firm belief in that which cannot be proven factually. If one can be led to believe without having sound evidence for that belief, then maybe contrary evidence will leave the follower unshaken.

All of these factors are part of the context for Stark’s larger model, consisting of ten elements, identifying why religious movements succeed:

The Latter-day Saints often retain cultural continuity with the conventional faiths of the societies in which they seek converts; their doctrines are nonempirical; they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment; they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective; they generate a highly motivated, volunteer religious labor force, including many willing to proselytize; they maintain a level of fertility sufficient to offset member mortality; they compete against weak, local, conventional religious organizations within a relatively unregulated

religious economy; they sustain strong internal attachments while remaining an open social network, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders; they maintain sufficient tension with their environment—they remain sufficiently strict; and they socialize their young sufficiently well as to minimize both defection and the appeal of reduced strictness. (137)

This formulation goes a long way in explaining, from a nonspiritual perspective, the success of Mormonism as a new religious movement. But is this what the true believer really wants to hear? Belief in the revelatory basis of one's religion surely negates the need for sociological analysis and scientific study. But Mormonism has become a large, worldwide movement, poised to become the next great world religion; and as such, it will always be the focus of study of pundits and scholars.

The Rise of Mormonism is a thoughtful and insightful look at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, not so much as a movement born of revelation and restoration, but rather as a unique religious institution bearing the optimal characteristics for maximum growth and sustenance. Stark's analysis will not sit well with some who see the success of the Church as a divine reward rather than the result of various sociological factors. But Stark's conclusions merit examination and evaluation, and will surely provoke discussion in many quarters.