

Finding the Presence in Mormon History: An Interview with Susanna Morrill, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Robert Orsi

Introduction by Matthew Bowman

Robert Orsi holds the Grace Craddock Nagle Chair in Catholic Studies at Northwestern University. He is a historian of Catholicism in America and, more broadly, a student of religious experience. His highly acclaimed work includes *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotions to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), and, recently, the essay "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity," which appeared in *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 2 (September/October 2008), 12–16.

Mormons should be interested in Orsi's work. His essay is a challenge to traditional scholarly method: It asks what categories of interpretation there are for supernatural events—for what Orsi calls supernatural "presences" or "abundant events"—that influence human behavior and with which humans construct relationships. Though Orsi's area of study is American Catholicism, and though he wrestles with apparitions of Mary and the presence of the saints, his questions speak directly to the heart of struggles within Mormon historiography. Many students of Mormon history continue the wars over Joseph Smith's trustworthiness; many seek to account for his feats through appeals to environmental influence or his psychology while many others refute such appeals. More recently, a younger generation of scholars have often cast

such questions aside, concluding that the tools of history cannot explain Joseph and that such attempts are therefore a dead end. Orsi's work should invite all of these camps to consider new ways of thinking about how we might discuss what happened to Joseph Smith.

Recently, *Dialogue* asked Susanna Morrill, associate professor of religious studies at Lewis and Clark College, to moderate a discussion between Robert Orsi and Richard Lyman Bushman, then chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University. The three discussed the relevance of Orsi's work to Mormon historiography, his impressions of Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), and how scholars of religion might strive to deal with religious experience in more satisfying ways.

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Susanna Morrill: I'd like to start the conversation by asking four framing questions relating to the issue of religious experience: First, are "abundant events" proper subjects of study for historians of religion? Second, how do historians of religions go about studying such experiences within the methodological expectations of the academy? Third, what are the responsibilities of scholars to the believers whom they write about? And fourth, to what extent will, and should, the faith of scholars appear in their work? Richard, could you start the discussion with the ideas Robert offers in his article?

Richard Bushman: Your essay "Abundant History" suggests a helpful way to conceptualize the experiences of visionaries such as Joseph Smith. The essay offers a new vocabulary for describing such events, which is, in my opinion, much closer to the reality than the words we have used before. You call encounters with divinity "abundant events" and then note various phenomena surrounding such events—the density of personal relations in which the visionary is involved, for example. But you go beyond the divine encounter itself to what follows. In the aftermath of Marian apparitions, the people who approach the shrines exhibit an unusual intimacy. The worshippers drop the walls around themselves as they share their pain and hope. These observations suggest a re-

search agenda for historians looking at other abundant events such as Joseph Smith's visions.

Robert Orsi: Yes.

Richard: You also speak of the routes of influence radiating from such events. That's a nice way of putting it; the word "routes" suggests an approach to what happens in consequence. Where do the abundant events lead? But it occurs to me that some of the responses of the Marian groups, which taken together could be thought of as a morphology of an abundant event, take a different form in the case of Joseph Smith. Rather than the abundant event dissolving the boundaries of subjectivity and establishing intimacies, in Joseph Smith's case it leads to structure and organization. The people who are converted take on priesthood offices and go on missions; they have council meetings. As the influence radiates still further, you get minutes of the meetings and letters and all the paraphernalia of organization. I thought it would be interesting to talk about how events that are so similar at the core lead in different directions in the aftermath.

Robert: I appreciate the difference. I was thinking about that concept as I read the very powerful final chapter of *Rough Stone Rolling*, in which the people left behind in Nauvoo after Joseph's murder continued to work on building the temple, though they knew they weren't going to be using it after it was done because they would be leaving Nauvoo. It seemed to me that we needed some word to get at what happens between Max Weber's idea of initial charismatic leadership of a new religion and its eventual institutionalization. It seems as if something else is going on there, almost as if the stones themselves were charismatic—the stones of this sacred building that would otherwise signify the routinization of Mormonism. So I take your point. It does lead in different directions, which might have to do with the specific peculiarities of modern Catholicism and modern Mormonism. I was struck by—as you want to put it—the radiation outwards of Joseph's spirit and his vision through the organization.

Richard: I agree that the Weberian term doesn't work. The way I've put it, to preserve a little of Weber, is that charisma is immediately routinized with Joseph Smith. That is, he invests this organi-

zation and all these offices with this divine power, so that everybody in it thinks they are receiving revelation.

Robert: Right, right.

Richard: And there's no right word for describing that.

Robert: No, there isn't. I don't think there's a right word to describe what happens in Nauvoo after he dies and his followers continue building. One of the moments that especially interested me was the anointing with oil in 1836 in Kirtland, also in a temple-related setting. I was surprised to learn how many of Joseph's visions were communal, how many were shared, with Sidney Rigdon and others. Again and again his visions are actually occurring in a context of other people having visions alongside him. Is that right?

Richard: That's absolutely right. He hoped he could bring all of his people to come before God the way he had. His real precedent is Moses trying to bring the children of Israel to Sinai to confront God, and they shrink back before they can do it (Ex. 19:16–10). He had this democratic sense that his own experiences should be diffused through the church.

Robert: Again here's an example where the language fails us. What is happening at these meetings in 1836 where there is an abundance of visions that are shared by lots of people—where people are speaking in tongues and seeing the heavens open? Modern historiography just stops at this point; it cannot deal with such experiences historically or phenomenologically. And as you say early on in the book, it appears that the only two options in modern historiography are either debunking such moments, claiming that the person at the center of it all is a charlatan and everyone else are dupes, or else translating the events into the language of the social: that it's a matter of poverty, of people being on the margins of society, etcetera. But that leaves the central experiences unexamined and thus absent from history.

Richard: I agree with you entirely. You don't have to dismiss all those other things; but if you were to talk about them to the people themselves, they might nod but would think we missed the point. One trouble is we get caught up in our readers' struggles. If we had absolutely neutral readers, we might be able to do it. You

suggest at the end that, to write understanding history, the historians must have a certain sensibility, but so do readers. They have to be willing to go with the flow, and that's sometimes hard for them to do.

Robert: I think you certainly invited readers to do that in *Rough Stone Rolling*. I had read Fawn Brodie earlier, of course (*No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945]), and so I had my head filled with the usual things about Joseph Smith. But you really do invite readers into a very different experience of him, and I found it quite powerful. I might be a particularly sympathetic reader; nonetheless, I thought the way the book was structured was fabulous. And what you say in the opening chapters—that what's interesting is that so many people so quickly believed Joseph enough to uproot their lives and follow him—I do think that's extraordinary. Why historians feel the need to explain away such appeal or how they think it was accomplished by deception or charlatanry I don't understand. What kept getting me is why historians can't simply marvel at this extraordinary act of imagination, however you want to see it, that takes place in upstate New York, and begin the work of interpretation with being so astounded that they find themselves at the limits of their inherited explanatory tools and need to find new ones.

Richard: In some ways I think we're moving in a direction where a larger number can, or want to. But so many people are extricating themselves from religion of some sort and therefore are uneasy about dealing with divine connections—

Robert: Yes.

Richard: They want to keep a distance between themselves and divine experiences. For example, some readers of books on Joseph Smith say that, whenever you talk about Joseph Smith's visions, you always have to say "alleged visions."

Robert: Right. That I don't understand. The visions were not alleged to *him*. They were not alleged to the people around him. It's the same with the women I wrote about with St. Jude. St. Jude was not *allegedly* present to them. I had to begin with the fact that they

understood St. Jude to be present and efficacious in their lives, and to begin anywhere else would have distorted the history.

Richard: You would not be valuing their experience, and you have to begin with that. You may want afterward to translate that experience into your own language but you have to start with what they experienced.

Robert: I've said some place that the halls of religious studies departments are filled with ex-ministers and ex-priests and so forth, all of whom have very powerful and very deep and perhaps legitimate concerns about religion and long and complicated histories with religious traditions. I agree that such personal background does play a role in the scholarship, and I think it's critically important for people to be very clear about what anxieties and commitments they bring before they set out to do this work.

Richard: Let me ask you about some of the words you proposed. You used the terms "abundant events" and "presences." These might be thought of as stand-ins, some might say, for "God" or "angels."

Robert: Yes, I wanted to find a language open enough so that angels, God, and other special beings could find a place in this critical terminology.

Richard: That was the genius in the choice of those words. They encompass so much. Since I'm right in the middle of Mormonism, I must find a way to distinguish what I'm doing from confessional history, written for and by believers. It seems to me that your words establish a ground where the differences between confessional and scholarly history are put aside for the moment. Tell me what you thought about when you devised those words.

Robert: I was trying to name a particular kind of human experience that I believed historians had not been taking sufficient account of—namely, the experience of a presence that is outside the self, other than the self, an otherness that has consequences. Joseph had to attend to his own revelations, as you say, which is a perfect example of what I was after. The people who pray to St. Jude experience the saint as other than themselves. They experience him as having his own needs, his own desires, and his own ideas about them and what they need; and they have to contend

with all of those issues as they would in any other relationship. In that sense, I was trying to get to a place where we could actually argue that figures like St. Jude are themselves agents in history.

Richard: What kind of response have you gotten from this article? Ruth Harris's book, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin, 1999), an account of the origins of the shrine and the current practices of patrons, was so useful because it did win over a lot of people. Harris was so empathetic and yet kept a grip on her Jewish secularism; she was kind of a neutral witness. I wonder how far that kind of history will go.

Robert: I want to see more of it. I'm trying to think of recent examples. While I was reading *Rough Stone Rolling*, I was also reading a book by Michael Lambek, an anthropologist I met last summer in Central Asia. He's a professor of anthropology and the Canada Research Chair at the University of Toronto, Scarborough. The book is *Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Mayotte is an island off the coast of Madagascar. Lambek's language is unabashedly that of presence. The book is about spirit possession, spirits interacting with him, talking back to the spirits—he appears to have no problems with any of those activities.

While such an approach may not be the norm, anthropology departments seem to offer more space for such conceptualizations. It occurred to me as I was reading Michael's book and thinking about this conversation we were going to be having that this difference has to do with the history of our respective disciplines. Anthropology has the privilege of approaching these realities in the ways we're talking about here without apology, in part because anthropologists traditionally are dealing with populations that have been framed as radically other, although anthropologists go on to trouble such distinctions as familiar or unfamiliar.

But what makes it so dangerous when we talk about abundant presence is that we're referring to populations that are part of modern Western civilization, and then the stakes change. But again, Lambek says, in essence, "I spoke to the spirits, and the spirits spoke to me." Spirits interact with people, so they interact with the anthropologist. This interaction is a dimension of the fieldwork. There is not a hint of squeamishness here.

But you had asked me about how I approached my essay. When I gave the lecture at a university for the first time, some people were angry with me. One young scholar accused me of betraying modern critical religious scholarship, saying that I had crossed over to the other side and become a confessional historian. Which is, as you know, not what I aspire to. Other people felt that I was trying to explain away the sacred, which they saw as the most aggrandizing and arrogant position of modern historiography—that I could somehow explain the sacred. I don't think I'm doing that either. I'm actually trying to find a path between these alternatives, but it's proven difficult.

Richard: Russell McCutcheon stakes out the position for the true Enlightenment scholar who is under an obligation to undercut the reports of divinity in his *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001)]. But I think that, in the long run, what's going to work are books like your *St. Jude* and *Madonna*—books that have explanatory power and bring into focus phenomena that are otherwise omitted. In the long run, that's what's really going to help.

Robert: I agree—because it's truer to history. If you're really an empiricist, a radical empiricist, this is where you have to go. How could you empirically treat the early history of Mormonism without saying the things that you say in the book?

Richard: I get into a difficult position because I have to explain the translation of the Book of Mormon. Marian apparitions are easy compared to golden plates.

Robert: I appreciated this dilemma with new force as I was reading you this time. As I understand it, the two options are composition and transcription.

Richard: Yes.

Robert: I take it people want you to say something there?

Richard: Yes. I felt pressure from the same group that you're talking about to reduce Joseph Smith to an expert at assimilating his culture and generating this text. I'm not saying that it's impossible; but if you look at the record of the people who saw him translating, there are few signs of an author composing a text. Everything we know from first-hand accounts about what went on

seems to indicate that he was reading out of a stone, that he was inspired by it, and that the words just came forth. And if you look at his life, his background, his training, his previous experience of writing, it's very hard to see him generating this huge history of a civilization. The best I can do is to say: Here are two views of it; but if you really follow the documentary evidence, you come to a different result than that he just made it up out of his own head.

Robert: Do you think the problem there is a question of belief or a question of language? Do we simply lack the conceptual tools to talk about a moment like that—a moment that can avoid either composition or transcription? Do we just not have a rich enough language to approach the human imagination in religious history and culture?

Richard: I think language could make a huge difference, because Joseph Smith's is not the only text that seems like a miraculous production from an untutored person. The spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis produced that kind of text, and people marveled about it in the same way. Automatic writing doesn't do it; you need to retain a religious impulse behind it—the sense of encounters beyond the self.

Robert: I feel that an earlier generation of scholars of religion was willing to consider these questions. The answers may not always have been satisfying—but I think of William James here, or even the early theorists of crowd behavior. There were scholars interested in talking about how we think about these sorts of human events, but I don't see it anymore.

Richard: James is the perfect example of it—

Robert: But in the end he's too individualistic for me!

Richard: Very Protestant, maybe?

Robert: Yes. [Laughs] Another topic that occurred to me while I was reading your book was the whole issue of prayer, of what prayer is as a historical, cultural phenomenon. If we historians think of prayer only from a human perspective, we miss the kind of speaking that prayer is, empirically, because prayer is not simply a monologue. If practitioners understand a dialogue to be taking place, that dialogue has to be taken into account by scholars. Prayer is a particular sort of human practice. I was interested in

the amount of praying that takes place among early Mormons, how often they're actually on their knees together.

Richard: Yes, that's true, in private councils and wherever. I guess that's true of all religious groups, but Mormons integrated it into all of their activities. Whenever they make a decision about the Church, they pray about it. Also the use of the words "Holy Spirit," which can be dismissed so easily, but the important part is their sense that something flows, that they are transformed, that something is coming from the outside in response to those prayers. That sense gets lost. I don't think I did a good job of capturing that experience, but it's there in the record.

Robert: My wife, Christine Helmer, who is also a scholar of religion—one of her topics of interest is religion and sports, or theology and sports. She often talks about the psychological concept of flow, which, as a former athlete she knows from experience as well as from her reading about the world of sport. It occurs to me, as she talks about it, that here is another useful word in thinking about these experiences; there is a sort of an embodied flow between people. I'm very interested in the connections among people in these moments; that's what I was thinking about as I read your book. The density of Joseph's surround—his interpersonal surround—was really amazing. What language can we find to talk about the ways people together can share visions or experiences like this?

Richard: That's what you were referring to when you spoke of mob theory—an effort to spiritize, a sort of ether that connects people.

Robert: Right, yes. I'll take ether. I'll take anything that helps us to think in new ways (or in old/new ways) about such human events. There's no problem in kinesiology or sports psychology with talking about athletic flow, about a team suddenly coming together in an extraordinary way, when a play suddenly seems to belong to no individual player but to all of them at once and to be outside them in some way, as if they were being played by the game rather than the other way round. A kid in the NCAA tournament just said that he didn't know how the game he was in ended; he just did what he did and he doesn't know how he did it. I think we could maybe borrow some language from this domain.

Richard: The rowers call it swing, being perfectly in sync, when the boat just seems to slide. Those are strange moments.

Robert: I take it that, despite such moments, there is sometimes dissent within the Mormon community as well in regard to your work.

Richard: Well, the dissent takes two forms. Of course, there are people who've defected from Mormonism and who are eager to deflate its claims and who think I am altogether too easy on Joseph Smith. But then there is a larger group of people who have sort of idealized him as a person and have idealized the whole process as a sort of pristine flow from God to him, unsullied by anything human. When I introduce magic or Joseph's temper or any of a number of things that seem to detract from his immediate connection with heaven, they get uneasy. I've had people tell me they read fifty pages and couldn't stand it. They had to put the book down. And to me that's the beauty and the force of it—that here is this poor guy, struggling along and yet feeling that God is with him and angels are his companions.

Robert: Right. It's funny to me that you should mention that people read fifty pages and then stop. According to my notes, which I'm looking at here on my desk, it's on pages 49 and 50 that you talk about the culture of magic. So it might be there where they jump ship. I have to say that I wish we had a word other than "magic" for the world of Smith's childhood, because "magic" carries with it such a long and nasty history. I was thinking, "What other words are there?" At the end of "Abundant History," I quote the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, who talks about "hypnomantic societies" in *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990). Anything other than words that bring with them dismissal and disdain—words that don't help us approach empirical realities.

Richard: Mormons have fallen heir to Protestant concerns about superstition; they put all magic into that category and believe that it's in contradistinction to a pure, true religion. If Joseph Smith got his ideas from the Bible, that's fine; but if he was stimulated to look for God through something they think of as magic or superstition, then that detracts from what he's doing. I don't know

what a better word would be, but there are a lot of Mormons who struggle with magic.

Robert: Speaking for myself, I think that's one place scholars can stand. I'm willing to use this language I'm talking about and this perspective we've been discussing to think about Vodou spirits or Catholic saints or the spirits in Mayotte. I don't have the squeamishness that people in areligious traditions might have about seeing other people's abundant presences as real. I think that's something a scholar of religion can contribute to human society: inviting people to be patient with and attentive to other people's spirits.

Richard: I think that kind of alliance is getting easier and easier. It certainly is within Mormonism. I think the battlefield—because it *is* a battlefield to many Mormon minds—is changing its configuration. It's no longer denomination against denomination but believers against unbelievers. It's easier to reach out and say hurrah for the Catholics. And Mormons really like Jews who have some teeth in their religion, particularly Orthodox Jews. It's getting easier.

Robert: I know that revelations have continued in Mormonism, and I've read a little about popular Mormonism, or whatever one wants to call it—everyday Mormonism. Is there still a culture of spirit presences?

Richard: There's a lot of lore. I guess it's common to a lot of Christian religions; a husband dies and he appears at his wife's bed three days after the funeral, that sort of thing. What would really interest me would be for you to observe a Mormon testimony meeting—do you know what testimony meetings are?

Robert: I do, yes.

Richard: People getting up and trying to describe moments when they feel they've been touched by the divine, even in the ordinary: "I was helped to find an apartment or get a job." Sometimes they go deeper than that. I think they come closest to capturing Mormon private religion, which then becomes communal because you're urged to tell people about it. There's a wonderful juncture there—people seeing the presence here and there in their lives and relating it to their brothers and sisters.

Robert: Yes, and then they struggle to find language to speak of it.

Richard: Right, and they don't have any good general words; they would never use the word "presence." They would probably say "Holy Spirit" or words like "inspiration." But usually it has to be reduced to some incident—"here God helped me, or someone came to my aid."

Robert: Clifford Geertz said someplace that the anthropologist stands alongside his or her sources as they're struggling to make sense of their worlds, and he or she joins them in the work of thinking through the meanings of their world. I prefer this as a model to the stark "we explain what happened to them."

Richard: That's lovely, a very human conception of the scholarly mission—to be useful to the people. I love Ruth Harris getting in and helping a poor soul get up to the right spot. It's a beautiful scene.

Susanna: This has been a fascinating conversation. To wrap it up, do either of you have any final questions or parting shots about how abundant history might change how we understand Mormon or Catholic history?

Robert: Well, actually, I have one question of fact that I want to ask. It wasn't clear to me. Richard, the anointing with oil, was that on the head? The face? Where was the anointing with oil?

Richard: It was over the whole body.

Robert: It was? What kind of oil was it?

Richard: I don't think they described it in those early days, but it would be some simple olive oil or something of that sort. They did try to imitate the anointing of the Levitical priests in Exodus. They tried to imitate the washing fluids—it calls for cinnamon and myrrh, and they couldn't get any myrrh but they did use cinnamon. But I don't think they had any kind of special oil.

Robert: I spent some time last summer in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, which is going through a religious revival right now of Orthodoxy, and saint shrines are becoming very important again. What happens at saint shrines very often in contemporary Georgia is anointing with corn oil. People will sometimes pour corn oil into the earth of the saint's grave as a way of establishing a

connection, or they'll drink some of it after the bottle has been touched to the saint's grave. Again, it's this desire to be in touch with the real in a particularly intimate way. I tell my students that if it doesn't offer you the opportunity to taste something, lick something, kiss something, or put something into your mouth, it's not a religion.

Richard: There's a lot of body in Mormonism.

Robert: There *is* a lot of body in Mormonism, I have learned that. This is obviously a conversation that can continue, and I look forward to continuing it in other venues.

Richard: Your essay is of immense importance. I'm grateful to have had access to it. It's something I can use in courses I teach. You may have seen the talk I gave at Harvard Law School where I cited Charles Taylor.

Robert: Yes.

Richard: It's very useful for Mormons to situate what they're saying about their own religious experiences in some larger framework. I don't know whether it legitimizes it or enlarges it, but somehow it adds seriousness to say we're part of a larger configuration of contact with the divine. I think your work is going to be very important for Mormons.