

Abundant Events or Narrative Abundance: Robert Orsi and the Academic Study of Mormonism

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Introduction

This essay is an experiment of sorts. For some time, Mormon Studies has attempted to move beyond the narrow confines of its past, with its focus on institutional histories and biographies of important people (mostly white men), toward a more methodologically nuanced and interpretive multi-disciplinary approach. Part of that growth requires that the data of Mormon Studies be scrutinized through the theoretical approaches coming out of disciplines such as religious studies. This essay does two things. First, it describes Orsi's method and situates it within the context of religious studies methodology. Second, it scrutinizes the historical narratives associated with Joseph Smith's "golden plates" through the lenses provided by Robert Orsi's theory of "abundant events" in order to test the suitability of Orsi's method to the data of Mormon Studies. The source material will be familiar, perhaps even banal, to students of Mormon history. Much of it is drawn from widely available collections of primary sources that have been known and used for many decades. This is intentional, and a very important element of the experiment. It is the only way that we can test how a new theoretical model might allow scholars to view common things in new and uncommon ways.

The utility of Orsi's category of abundant events is mixed but it presents encouraging possibilities. It does, on one hand, have a

certain appeal because it seems to lend a richness of thought to the study of the more difficult problems of the supernatural faced by scholars of religion in general and of Mormonism in particular. On the other hand, as we shall see, there are significant questions that this study raises about Orsi's category. Most significant is how one should understand the role of narrative in the culture-changing power of the abundant events, something that must be addressed if his category is to reach its promise as a tool of significant scholarly utility.

Religious Studies and the Problems of Definition

To be a scholar of religious studies is to find oneself in a fierce debate about the nature of the object of that study. Stated simply, scholars cannot agree on what "religion" is. Is it, as William James believed, the sum total of the feelings, thoughts, and acts that bind a human being to the divine?¹ Or was Paul Tillich right when he described religion as the act of being grasped by "ultimate concern"?² Clifford Geertz suggested that it was a complex cultural symbolic system, while Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge held that religions are "systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions."³ Jonathan Z. Smith famously concluded that "religion" is not an organic phenomenon at all, but rather a taxonomic device, "solely the creation of the scholar's study."⁴

Right out of the gate, then, scholars of religion face a complex definitional problem. This problem has two basic components. First, "religion" as a categorical notion emerged out of the European experience in which Roman Catholicism was taken as normative, and early attempts to define the category of religion were conflated with the specific facets of that particular kind of religion. As scholars in the West began to collect more and more data that they thought looked in some way "religious," they found that the definitions that they had developed were insufficiently flexible to accommodate the vast variety of material that they found.⁵ That problem persists and has never been adequately addressed. The result is dynamic and multi-faceted dialogue over what represents the most authentic elements of a religion: is authenticity to be found in what religions share, or in the divergences? Huston Smith and Karen Armstrong would hold that the common ele-

ments are truly authentic, while Stephen Prothero dismisses that approach as soft-headed sentimentalism.⁶ How one answers that question naturally shapes the comparative frame into which particular religions are slipped.

The second part of the difficulty in defining religion, and related closely to the first, is that the objects, beliefs, and practices that most people, especially in the West, consider “religious” often relate in some way to unprovable “supernatural” claims. Indeed, as one historian of the Enlightenment observed, “the basic error Enlightenment ideologues tried to remove from Christian [and, by extension, Western] culture was . . . its long-standing weakness for imagining the presence of spiritual realities in nature.”⁷ When faced with claims that violate the rules of rationality, scholars are faced with a difficult methodological choice: either accept the emic description of events or reject the emic point of view and provide a second-order analysis of the event using tools from a discipline such as anthropology, sociology, history, literary theory or psychology. As one would expect, scholarly opinion on this falls along a continuum. Clustered at either end of the spectrum are relatively small groups of scholars. At one end, there is a school of thought best represented by Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, who believed “that no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers.”⁸ Smith thus gives absolute primacy to first-order definitions and explanations and severely limits the interpretive role of the scholarly observer.

At the other pole, Russell McCutcheon and a handful of like-minded scholars militate against what they view as the craven subservience to religious authority demonstrated by Smith and others. McCutcheon, in particular, has written extensively of the need for scholars of religion to act as “critics not caretakers” of religious traditions.⁹ McCutcheon states quite emphatically that “to study religion as something fundamentally religious—something studied only in terms of the religious person’s own expectations and criteria—is, therefore, to fail to study its actual causes, these assorted hopes and fears of historically embedded human beings.”¹⁰ Bruce Lincoln expressed this point of view more succinctly when he wrote that “when one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood . . .

one has ceased to function as historian or scholar.”¹¹ For scholars in this group, religious claims receive no special treatment and there is no academically sound reason to view the beliefs of religious practitioners as anything but data to be analyzed. “Religious” data are, therefore, not *sui generis*, but are open to the same criticisms as any other data.

Most scholars of religion find themselves somewhere between the two ends of the continuum, trying constantly, and often in vain, to strike some sort of balance that allows scholarly analysis of “religious” experience while simultaneously avoiding “reductionism” that would render the experience unintelligible to those who experienced it in the first place. All of these factors make for a contentious discipline, to be sure, but they also capacitate a vibrant, healthy, and continuous reevaluation of the theories and methods to be used to study religion. Out of this jungle of contention grows a vast theoretical literature that frequently presents possible new approaches to the academic study of religion. One of the great joys of studying religion is to periodically examine one’s own field of expertise through the lens of a new methodology or category.

Robert Orsi and Abundant Events

Robert Orsi is an influential and distinguished scholar of American Catholic history. For the past few years, in a variety of publications and conference addresses, he has presented and developed his theory of “abundant events.” In the fall of 2011, Orsi participated in a published discussion with distinguished historian of Mormonism Richard L. Bushman, in which they speculated about the usefulness of Orsi’s theory to the study of Mormonism. During that exchange, Orsi called the origins of Mormonism an “extraordinary act of imagination” and argued that events such as the discovery of the gold plates bring scholars to “the limits of [scholars’] inherited explanatory tools and [they] need to find new ones.”¹² Orsi and Bushman are thus optimistic that the theory of abundant events will prove useful to the study of Mormonism.

Orsi’s theory is both a statement of a problem and a proposed solution.¹³ The problem that Orsi presents is a complex one: how do scholars of religion account for experiences that are simulta-

neously irrational and real? Orsi has argued that events with “supernatural” characteristics are often mistreated, reduced, and misrepresented by scholars who have only the linguistic tools of modernity at their disposal.¹⁴ Orsi is not the first scholar to make such an argument. He is among a school of religious studies scholars who want to avoid the problem of “reductionism,” in which interpreters of religion explain supernatural experiences in psychological, anthropological, or sociological terms, and thus “reduce” them to something other than what they really are. Orsi therefore falls toward the Wilfred Cantwell Smith end of the spectrum discussed above. As Orsi phrases it, “One challenge of writing about religion, is to figure out how to include figures of special power as agents in history and actors of consequence in historical persons’ lives and experiences.”¹⁵ It is the word “special” that signifies the real thrust of Orsi’s efforts. And it is this element in Orsi’s argument that raises the hackles of some other religious studies scholars. As the statement from Lincoln that I quoted above makes clear, one of the most trenchant criticisms of any kind of approach that appears to privilege religious experiences is that there is a kind of occult apologetics at work. By creating a special category for religious experience, the criticism goes, one insulates religion itself from criticism. I agree that this has been a problem with phenomenological approaches to the study of religion at least since the time of Rudolf Otto. But what makes Orsi’s category potentially appealing, even to a scholar who leans as far toward the McCutcheon side of the debate as I do, is that Orsi is attempting to create categories that bring religious experience into the “real” world rather than attempting to fence them off. He is not entirely successful in this attempt, but he has advanced the debate farther than anyone else since Mircea Eliade’s field-shifting work produced in the 1950s.

Orsi’s writing on the category of abundant events is scattered across a number of books and articles, so I offer a summary here based on those disparate sources. “One of the first things to say about an abundant event,” Orsi writes, “is that it serves as a focusing lens for the intricacies of relationships in a particular area at a particular time, [and provides] meaning for all the hopes, desires, and fears circulating among a group of people as these were taking

shape at a certain place and at a certain time.”¹⁶ Among other functions, then, abundant events illuminate the contours of culture and are in this way anchored in reality, and act upon that reality the same way that any other event is. Orsi suggests that scholars ought to spend some time trying to figure out how an abundant event, as irrational as it might seem, “finds presence, existence, and power in space and time, how it becomes as real as guns and stones and bread, and then how the real in turn acts as an agent for itself in history.”¹⁷ I take issue with Orsi on this only to the extent that I think he is vague about the relationship between the narratives into which these abundant events are inscribed, and the events *qua* events. I am left wondering which of the two allows us to see the cultural landscape. Or is the narrative part of the event? That issue does not have to be decided or agreed upon, however, in order to make the case that something connected with abundant events sheds light on ordinarily dark and unspoken elements of a culture, which in turn helps scholars understand and map how these options speak to the fears and dreams of that culture. The strength of Orsi’s category is in his argument about the potential of abundant events to reveal otherwise hidden aspects of a culture.

In addition to describing in general terms what abundant events do, Orsi generated a set of criteria that defines more exactly the characteristics of an abundant event.

First, such events present themselves as *sui generis*: people experience them as singular, even if they are recognizable within cultural convention—for instance, even if a culture prepares us for an encounter with witches, when the encounter happens, it is considered out of the ordinary. Second, abundant events are real to those who experience them, who absolutely know them not to be dreams, hallucinations, delusions, or other kinds of sensory error, even though others around them may and often do contest this. Third, they arise and exist among people. They are intersubjective (although this intersubjectivity may include the dead, for instance, or saints). They arise at the intersection of past/present/future (as these really are or as they are dreaded or feared or hoped for). At the moment of such an event we have a new experience of the past while at the same time the horizon of the future is fundamentally altered.¹⁸

Orsi takes as his starting point the problem of understanding religious phenomena that became entrenched during the Enlight-

enment. It was during this era that the idea of “religion” as a discrete category of beliefs and behaviors emerged and was cast in the language of liberal Protestant thought. Thus, according to Orsi, the very language that established “religion” as a category also severely circumscribed the type of experiences that could be included: the kinds of experience that pertained to “domesticated modern civic Protestantism” defined the category.¹⁹ This language is not sufficiently dimensioned to address what Orsi refers to as “abundant events.” Speaking on behalf of “many (not all) scholars of religion,” Orsi laments the limits of “social and psychological” analyses of religion which “fall short of the realness of the phenomena they purport to describe and explain in people’s experience.” The chief problem, as Orsi sees it, is that social-scientific methods “pretend to be exhaustive” and therefore are “empirically insufficient.”²⁰

Because many scholars of religion attempt to eliminate the ontological questions that always clamor for answers when it comes to supernatural claims, Orsi feels that the discipline has missed a very important opportunity to understand how numinous events or claims end up coming to life and animating the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors not only of the persons who experienced them, but also the lives of those who contend against them. These abundant events, according to Orsi, “are characterized by aspects of the human imagination that cannot be completely accounted for by social and cultural codes, that go beyond authorized limits.”²¹ Likewise, Orsi laments in the strongest language the inability of religious studies scholars “to make one’s own self-conceptions vulnerable to the radically destabilizing possibilities of a genuine encounter with an unfamiliar way of life.”²² Orsi’s interest in the idea of the “abundant event” is driven by his belief that the academic study of religion, by its very nature, distorts its subject and precludes itself from studying religion *qua* religion, something that as a Catholic studying Catholics he finds severely limiting. Orsi argues that modern religious studies engages in a strange game of category bait and switch: scholars claim to study religion but we study everything but religion. We render the religious in the language of psychology, sociology, economic, critical theory, anthropology, political science, cognitive science, and so

forth. This language is not sufficient to address “abundant events.” Even scholars who approach religion from the McCutcheon side of the continuum, according to Orsi, should recognize that these events, ultimately real or not, produce real-world consequences and should therefore command the respect of scholars.

I cannot get over the feeling that Orsi might be using a straw man here. His location of the reality of abundant events in the power they have to motivate real action in the world is diminished by the fact that no one really disputes that point. If Joseph Smith had never claimed to have found and translated golden plates, there would have been no Book of Mormon. Not a single scholar of religion could honestly disagree with that. The disagreement comes when Orsi insists that the actions produced by the claim of an individual to have experienced an abundant event somehow provide evidence that such an event is as real as “stones.” It is at this point that Orsi’s case is the least convincing, because he seems to be engaging in little more than the old phenomenological method of Otto and his acolytes, in which the scholar assumes *a priori* the existence of some supernatural power and then treats descriptions given by believers of supposed interactions with this “numinous” force as manifestations of this power. Orsi further damages his argument by his hostile use of language. Orsi’s use of terms like “authorized limits” is unfortunate. Furthermore, when he suggests that scholars should find a way to embrace “radically destabilizing possibilities” through their reading of primary sources, he sounds to me more like an evangelist than a scholar, offering an implicit call to repentance for those of us who have, thus far, failed to be sufficiently destabilized by the religious narratives of others. Such language suggests dissatisfaction with the academic study of religion that borders on moral opprobrium, and it is provocative enough that it may make critics of potential friends. It may also represent an allusion to the general project of deconstructionism, which may indeed represent a productive way of approaching the issues that Orsi presents. The problem is that, if he does indeed wish to invoke deconstructionist thought, then he ought to be more explicit about how it informs his method.

Apart from his suggestion that more naturalistic scholars of religion are imposing autocratic limits on what may or may not be

appropriate explanatory models, and his possible deployment of a rhetorical straw man, there is a more serious problem with Orsi's proposal of a special category for "abundant events." Simply stated, he appears to conflate the power of the "event" with the power of the narratives about that event. At the very least, he fails to address the relationship between event and narrative. For decades, historians have developed sophisticated theories about the nature and role of narrative in the making of history. The historical event lacks meaning and is not communicable without the creation of the narrative. As historical sociologist Larry Griffin phrased it, "narratives are made up of the raw materials of sequences of social action but are, from beginning to end, defined and orchestrated by the narrator to include a particular series of actions in a particular temporal order for a particular purpose."²³

It is this created quality that poses a problem for Orsi. Abundant events, as Orsi defines and imagines them, seem to exist and act independent of mundane historical agents—such as human beings. In most of the cases that Orsi discusses in his work, and certainly in the case of the supernatural events described in Mormonism, very few individuals claimed to have experienced the supernatural event in any unmediated way. And even for those who did have such experiences, they had to communicate them to others in some way, or there is nothing in the experience but rank solipsism. Because these events have made their way into the historical record, we know that they made it out of the individual's mind and into the mind of someone else. The vast majority of individuals who come to believe the event is genuine come to that position because of the narratives that the original event generated. In other words, none of these abundant events that Orsi describes, either in particular or as hypotheticals, can exert influence on the real world without being inscribed within narratives; and narratives as such do not seem to fit Orsi's description of abundant events.

A careful reading of Orsi's work on "abundant event" theory suggests that Orsi is possibly attempting to reconfigure, along the lines of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work, what agency means and the degree to which non-human objects (Cohen chooses stones, for example) may in fact be agents whose actions occur on a plane

that is difficult for humans to comprehend.²⁴ The “abundant events” would then include the narrative that conveys them and so makes them historical actors. If that is the case, and I am by no means certain that it is, then Orsi has solved one problem while creating another one. Jones and scholars engaged in projects similar to his are concerned with natural inanimate objects as historical agents, not supernatural events. Whatever the solution to that problem may be, it is certain that Orsi’s ongoing project to define and understand “abundant events” would benefit from explicit engagement with Jones and scholars working in this general vein.

I can conclude that Orsi’s theory of abundant events is useful to the study of religion in general, and Mormonism in particular, only to the extent that it recognizes, accepts, or explains, in an explicit and clear manner, the role of narrative in the process of making the events “real.” His argument that abundant events, because of their unusual nature, tend to reveal things about a cultural moment that otherwise would remain hidden, would be greatly strengthened, if he could flesh out what I see as the unstated premise that it is the narratives that are created that are the agents of cultural revelation, rather than the events themselves. Linking them explicitly could open up wide vistas of scholarly conversation not only within religious studies but among religious studies, literary theory, history, philosophy, folklore, and anthropology.

Abundant Events and Mormonism

The first question we have to answer before we can proceed is whether or not the gold plates—their discovery, possession, translation, disappearance, etc.—constitute an “abundant event” according to the criteria Orsi sets forth. Are the gold plates “*sui generis*”? Are they extra-categorical? It seems clear that Joseph Smith’s experience with the plates was recognized as out of the ordinary by both believers and unbelievers. People knew about ancient writing on metal plates and people knew about angels. But nobody knew about ancient angels delivering metal plates. Critics of Smith never argued that the experience was banal or derivative, except inasmuch as they attempted to tie the discovery of the plates to money digging culture (more on that later), and Smith and his supporters never attempted to lend credibility to

their claims by arguing that angels delivered plates to people all the time except inasmuch as they nested the recovery of the plates in narratives of other miraculous—and equally out of the ordinary—events in Jewish and Christian history. It is arguable that the plates, and the narratives that they spawned, have few parallels in American religious history.

What about Orsi's next criterion? Are the plates real to those who experience them? Here, Orsi is trying to exclude those events that are frankly fraudulent and known to be such by the individual claiming to have witnessed them. This is difficult to prove in all cases, and the case of the plates is no exception. Historian Dan Vogel believes that Smith may have fabricated plates out of tin.²⁵ If this is true, then Smith was obviously not convinced of the reality of the event and the plates would not be an abundant event *for him*. But, even if the plates never existed and Smith was making up the entire story, the stories themselves are, without doubt, creating events perceived to be real in the minds of many of those who hear or read them. In that case, the abundant event is located not in the experience of Smith with the plates, but in the story of the plates, or the hoax perpetrated on the witnesses if one follows Vogel's reading of the sources—something they apparently believed to be real. In any case, it is undeniable that, for some individuals, the plates were as real as anything else they experienced. This presents a problem for Orsi's category because, again, the power comes not from the event but from the stories told about the event, stories that do not even require the original event to have occurred at all.

This discussion leads us to another of Orsi's criteria for abundant events: "they arise and exist among people. They are intersubjective." Orsi's language is a bit obscure here, but he is arguing that abundant events have real world results. They motivate behavior and create community. They change the world through actions of people who are motivated by them. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at a seminar on the Brigham Young University campus in August 2011. The presence of persons at that conference was evidence enough that the plates fit this criterion. Every person present woke up, traveled to the campus, and sat listening to the papers because of the gold plates—whether they be-

lieved in them or not. And, of course, disbelief in the plates has never kept them from motivating people to action. For example, a man who lived near the Hill Cumorah remembered that soon after Smith claimed to have found the plates in the hill, “there was great excitement through the whole country” that led to expeditions to the hill.²⁶ Consider the case of Lorenzo Saunders, a disbelieving neighbor of the Smiths’. On either the twenty-third or thirtieth of September 1827, Saunders found himself on the Hill Cumorah with “five or six others and we hunted the hill by course and could not find no place where the ground had been broke. There was a large hole where the money diggers had dug a year or two before, but no fresh dirt. There never was such a hole; there never was any plates taken out of that hill . . . It is a lie.”²⁷ How does one account for Saunders’s presence on that hill? If we adhere to the theory of abundant events, then we must concede that Saunders is on the hill because the abundant event itself intruded into the world and re-ordered reality to lead him there. But that is not the only possible reason. The event need not be “abundant” or even real. Even if the plates were found, it was the story about the plates that led Saunders to the hill and motivated his exploration, not the event itself. Saunders’s expedition is not evidence of “abundance,” it is evidence of the power of story-telling.

Finally, Orsi argues that abundant events “arise at the intersection of past/present/future (as these really are or as they are dreaded or feared or hoped for).” At the moment of such an event we have a new experience of the past while at the same time the horizon of the future is fundamentally altered. “Abundant events are saturated by memory, desire, need, fear, terror, hope or denial, or some inchoate combination of these.”²⁸ This is the most important of all of Orsi’s criteria and the one which lends itself best to the case of the gold plates. As such, it merits a fuller exploration than the other criteria. In order to fully examine the proposition that the gold plates represent an abundant event, we have to look closely at the way narrative accounts about the plates, as they are put forth by both supporters of Smith and his detractors, reveal the worldviews of their authors.

It may be helpful at this point to explore possible nuances of Orsi’s thought by introducing ideas that are consonant with his the-

orizing, but which broaden its scope. By creating another category, and briefly looking at the work of two other theorists, it is possible to demonstrate that Orsi's category of abundant events is not as novel, or as helpful, as it might appear to be. It may be productive to imagine and describe abundant events as "Frontier Events." The "plates" emerge in a world of frontiers. We often speak of Joseph Smith as having lived on the "frontier." This is taken to mean a geographical frontier, with all of the rough and tumble that such a life brings with it. There is no question that Joseph did live on such a frontier. But, he also lived on other frontiers. A frontier might be understood as a liminal space where the range of what philosopher William James called "live options" is radically expanded.²⁹ James argued that one's belief in the reality (the real-ness) of anything depended upon how "alive" the option was to the individual thinker. In order to be "live" an idea or an option for behavior must appeal, at least to some minute degree, to what James calls a "tendency to act." An option is "live" not because of any inherent quality of the option itself, but rather it comes to life and dies because of the particular cultural conditions in which it is embedded. Nobody worships Osiris anymore, but Osiris has not changed. That is a dead option because the world changed around Osiris. The stories about Osiris and his daily trip around the solar circuit motivated real behavior among the ancient Egyptians. But it no longer does so. This suggests to me that scholars might find it useful to explore the question of how abundant events die. By grappling with the implications of the loss that occurs when something that Orsi identifies as an abundant event no longer motivates behavior in the real world, scholars might be able to extend the scope and subtlety of Orsi's theory.

Returning to the idea of "live options," philosopher Bruno Latour has described ideas or objects that perform this function as "actants." Actants, like abundant events, are contested because they carry with them the possibility of irrevocable cultural shifts. Latour writes that

as a result of the actants' work, certain things do not return to their original state. A shape is set, like a crease. It can be called a trap, a ratchet, an irreversibility, a Maxwell's demon, a reification. The exact word does not matter so long as it designates an asymmetry.

Then you cannot act as you wish. There are winners and losers, there are directions, and some are made stronger than others.³⁰

So if the plates represent an abundant event and a new live option, then it is crucial to understand the frontier world into which they “intruded.” It was a world of political frontiers. When Smith was born there had only been five presidential elections and three presidents. He lived in a new nation with a new constitution that carried within it the promise of a radical re-visioning of the relationship between government and the governed. The plates emerged in a world of economic frontiers. The failure of two national banks in Smith’s lifetime, accompanied by a high level of national debt stemming from the War of 1812, combined with privately issued back currency to produce an unstable world of inflation and speculation.³¹ Perhaps most significantly, the plates emerged in a world of religious frontiers—the Second Great Awakening. But it was much more than that. It was a constellation of religious revolutions driven by theological innovation and sectarian invention that forever shifted not only the denominational landscape, but the entire cultural shape of religion in America. It multiplied, exponentially, the number of “live” options available to Americans in the arena of religious choice.³² Mormonism, of course, emerged as part of this frontier. Even before the church was founded, however, the stories about Joseph Smith and his “golden bible” electrified the cultural frontiers of America. Abundant events are frontier events inasmuch as they suggest new live options for a culture. In other words, abundant events do not simply illuminate culture—they change it. Here I think Orsi’s category is very useful. Events that challenge, or even insult, the cultural sensibilities of a particular place and time tend to elicit responses from cultural actors that reveal all sorts of cultural structures. Such events do not have to be supernatural, of course, but supernatural claims seem to perform this function with particular efficiency. Certainly this is the case with the gold plates.

Stories about the plates are dropped into a nineteenth-century American cultural matrix that was already destabilized and frontier-like in almost every way imaginable. As we would expect given what we know from Orsi, Latour, James, and others, the historical record suggests that worlds of discourse immediately catalyzed

around the “plates,” all of which claim that the “plates” signified some fundamental truth about the state of reality on local, national, and cosmic levels. “Plates”—not just the object but the stories about the object—violate and reveal structures of expectation even in a world in which the number of live options has dramatically increased. The worlds of discourse that emerge are founded on shared assumptions about how reality is supposed to work, and the “plates” could not easily fit in to any of them. This is what gives them their power as an idea, it is what makes them abundant. To really grasp the scope of this abundance—the degree to which the plates reveal worldviews and shape culture, we must look closely at the narratives generated by the plates. These narratives that center on the plates tell us much more about the worldview of the authors than those authors would have guessed. Unsurprisingly, most, but not all, narratives generated by the plates come in the form of either pro- or anti-Mormon propaganda. Each body of narratives contains an implicit construction of the self and an explicit construction of the other.

First, let’s consider the pro-Mormon narratives. This narrative world takes as its mission solving the problem of chaos through the bundle of implications signified by the plates, including divine authority, chosenness, and knowing the will of God. This community believed that it was opposed by a world characterized by “evil disposed and designing persons” from a variety of backgrounds and dominated by sinister cultural conditions. It was a world struggling in “darkness and confusion.” Religious chaos and contention stemmed from the “sophistry” and “reason” employed by the newly dominant forms of American evangelical Christianity. In this world, the “seemingly good feelings of both priests and converts were more pretended than real.”³³ In other words, this was a world of chaos and pretense. This was a world in which the disparate elements were bound together through hate, which was then reified in the form of persecution. Smith wrote that, despite all of the diversity of religious opinion and the contention that such diversity engendered, “all [of the parties] united to persecute *me*.”³⁴ Smith’s claim to possess the plates rendered him vulnerable to physical and even psychic attack in the form of competing scryers who vandalized the Smith property in an at-

tempt to locate the plates.³⁵ This was a dangerous world, and the plates seemed to make it more dangerous—at least temporarily. It was a world in which the devil seemed to hold great sway. The devil, too, targeted Smith and his followers and motivated those who opposed him. Unsurprisingly, Smith’s accounts of Satanic attacks and attempts to separate him from the plates illuminate the then-recent development of a muscular diabolology among evangelical Protestants.³⁶

What is interesting about this discourse community, however, is that it rejected all of the extant modes of thought and action that might preclude a solution to the chaos. Embedded in the invention of a new religious tradition founded on the idea of supernatural intrusions into banal reality was an effort to stabilize rather than revolutionize the world. Joseph Smith’s plates stood for these people as a concrete symbol of authority, of the voice of God who proclaimed a narrow road to heaven. This discourse community was looking to shut down live options, rather than to encourage them. Crucial to this project was the need to establish the plates as an instantiation of all the ideas and concepts that would save the world from pretense and chaos. It involved a recasting of the past as well as the future, especially the American past and future. In an 1835 account of the early history of the Church, Joseph Smith said that Moroni told him the “Indians were the literal descendants of Abraham.” Orson Hyde made a similar statement in 1842, but his words reveal how the plates had implications for America’s future as well as its past: Moroni told Smith that

the American Indians were remnants of the House of Israel and they were an enlightened people when they left Jerusalem to emigrate to America, possessing the knowledge of the true God and enjoying his blessing and special favor. In the course of time, this nation fell into ungodliness and the greater part of them were exterminated; but . . . their records were deposited for protection into the earth’s bowels, in order to preserve them from the hands of the godless who sought to destroy them. . . . He was told that these records contained many sacred revelations pertaining . . . to the events of the last days.³⁷

Many of the people who joined Joseph’s community felt that religious “authority” had been lost and they looked for its return. Although most Latter-day Saints are aware of these motifs, it is

worth noting that they are based on a cultural assumption: namely that there is one right way of getting to heaven and anyone offering other options is effectively leading people to hell. This is not a community that is going to favor a plenitude of live options. It is not a community that is going to wish to perpetuate the frontier that gave birth to it. Consider the testimony of Martin Harris. Harris recalled that, in 1818, he “was inspired of the Lord & tought of the spirit that I should not join any church although I was anxiously sought for by meny of the sectarians. I was taught I could not walk together unless agreed.” Harris goes on to tell how he demanded both uniformity and rationality from the “sectarians” in their theological enterprise: if a principle was not in the Bible, then Harris rejected it. He notes especially that he found the doctrine of a disembodied, Trinitarian god repulsive and non-Biblical. Harris finally concluded that “there was no authority for the Spirit told me that I might just as well plunge myself into the Water as to have any one of the sects baptize me.”³⁸ Harris’s views are largely representative of many early converts to Mormonism. This was a world that had at its heart a paradox: chaos in the form of religious competition was a major threat that could only be neutralized by authority which, in turn, could only emerge in a world with an unusually high number of live options. But, as the Harris testimony makes clear, this was also a world in which coherence was important and “proof” mattered. Any claim to absolute authority in such an environment would naturally have to be solidly anchored to a reality that could be tested, even if the tests were rudimentary. It is no surprise, then, that for Harris and hundreds like him, it is the story of the plates that becomes the most persuasive live option. The plates become, in effect, the live option to end all live options for those who inhabit the discourse community established by Smith.

We need to turn now to a consideration of the other community of discourse, also focused on the plates, but which saw them as a dangerous hoax. Just as with documents that function as pro-Mormon propaganda, when viewed at the right angle, these texts provide a window into the worldview of their creators. This was a community that claimed to value order, thrift, hard work, and honesty, and associated these traits with a middle-class sensi-

bility. They generally adhered to evangelical Christian ideas, which were assumed to be rational, non-ritualized, private, and based on the Bible. Other religious expressions were marginalized through the use of a discourse of “superstition” and irrationality. They understood the progress of America to be linked with progress of Protestant Christianity to create and maintain cultural and religious order. They feared disorder, “superstition,” and “infidelity,” not only in religion but also in terms of economics and politics. They prized “authenticity” and despised “pretension.” The documents produced by this community in response to the stories of the plates portray Joseph Smith and his followers as living inversions of their cultural values. Symbolized by Smith, Mormons were viewed as ignorant, “superstitious,” lazy, and disordered. They kept their land in a “slovenly, half-way, profitless manner”³⁹ and spent time “idly lounging” around stores in the village.⁴⁰ They were, in sum, an “illiterate, whiskey-drinking, shiftless, irreligious race of people.”⁴¹ Furthermore, the Mormons were thought to be motivated by fear and greed and an effort to rise to a “higher sphere in the scale of human existence”⁴² to become, in other words, counterfeit human beings. Joseph Smith “evidenced the rapid development of a thinking, plodding, evil-brewing mental composition—largely given to inventions of low cunning, schemes of mischief and deception, and false and mysterious *pretensions*.”⁴³ Mormons were religiously perverse and spiritually shallow. Pomeroy Tucker argued that Smith quit attending Methodist classes because “his assumed convictions were insufficiently grounded or abiding to carry him along to the saving point of conversion.”⁴⁴

Mormonism also threatened to drag civilization back to a dark age that the new American epoch was supposed to have eradicated forever. A famous letter to the *Palmyra Reflector* from an anonymous correspondent noted: “I observe by the public prints that this most clumsy of all impositions, known among us as Jo Smith’s ‘Gold Bible,’ is beginning to excite curiosity from the novelty of its appearance.” This was a “singular business because it was hardly to be expected, that a mummerly like the one in question, should have been gotten up at so late a period, and among a people, professing to be enlightened.” The author then

argues that the entire episode can be explained by the “money digging mania . . . which eventuated in the discovery of Jo Smith’s ‘Golden Treasure.’”⁴⁵ Another article in the *Palmyra Reflector* attempted to link Smith with other “impostors” from the past, especially those from what was believed to be the dangerous and foreign world of the East. “Jo Smith . . . can bear no comparison to the author of the Koran, and it is only in their ignorance and impudence that a parallel can be found.”⁴⁶

In this discursive world, Joseph Smith, and by implication the entire Mormon enterprise, was viewed as a fraud. The language of pretension and imposture courses through the anti-Mormon documents of the period in an almost obsessive pattern. Consider the following sample of descriptions that employ the motifs of fraud and fakery. Joseph Smith’s delusions “persevered in and improved upon from time to time, culminated in 1827 by the great imposture of the pretended finding of ‘ancient metallic plates resembling gold,’ afterward translated into the ‘Golden Bible’ or Book of Mormon.”⁴⁷ Notice the juxtaposition in this account of perseverance, a known and celebrated virtue, with pretense and fraud, deeply disdained vices. That Joseph is not only a fraud, but one who will stain the good name of perseverance, seems to intensify the critique. In another account, we learn that Joseph Smith, Sr. “would go to Turkey Shoots and get drunk; [he would] pretend to enchant their guns so that they could not kill the Turkey.”⁴⁸ In this case, too, we have a mixed act. Genuine enchantment was a real concern for some in the early Republic, and fraudulent enchantment was no less a threat, but for a different reason. Smith senior appeared to lack respect for the power of enchantment and violated the ethics of authenticity through his pretense. But the Smiths did not only contaminate the virtues of hard work and the fear of enchantment through their fakery. They also contaminated the innocence of beautiful womanhood. “Joseph’s wife [Emma] was a pretty woman; as pretty as I ever saw. When she came to the Smiths she was disappointed and used to come to our house and sit down and cry. She said she was deceived and got into a hard place.”⁴⁹

Imposture, fakery, and fraud, symbolized by the gold plates, were all tied to the contamination and defilement of virtue in a

wide variety of forms. The tone of these documents is uniformly serious, even occasionally grave. There is little mockery of Joseph Smith as a benign idiot or an obvious fakir. Rather, the authors responding to Smith seem to see him as dangerous and threatening because of his willingness to deceive. Consider the following few examples. “It is well known that Jo Smith never *pretended* to have any communion with angels, until a long period after the *pretended* finding of his book, and that the juggling of himself or father, went no further than the *pretended* faculty of seeing wonders in a ‘peep stone,’ and the occasional interview with the spirit, *supposed* to have the custody of hidden treasures; and it is equally well known, that a vagabond fortune-teller by the name of Walters . . . was the constant companion and bosom friend of these money digging *impostors*.”⁵⁰ Six “leading citizens of Canandaigua, New York” (Nathaniel W. Howell, Walter Hubbell, Ansel D. Eddy, Henry Chapin, Jared Willson, and Lewis Jenkins), wrote to Reverend Ancil Beach (a young Methodist minister in Indiana) in January 1832 that: “Joseph Smith has lived in and about Manchester for several years an idle and worthless fellow; previous to the Mormon project he had been engaged for some time in company with several others of the same character [Smith fails at money digging]—Joseph then *pretended* to have found a box, in digging in the woods, containing some gold plates with characters upon them which none but himself could decypher.”⁵¹ Jesse Townsend wrote to Phineas Stiles on December 24, 1833, claiming that

To avoid the sneers of those who had been deceived by Smith [in the money digging failures], he pretended that he had found, when digging alone, a wonderful curiosity, which he kept closely secreted. After telling different stories about it, and applying to it different names, he at length called it the golden plates of the Book of Mormon. As he was questioned on the subject from time to time, his story assumed a more uniform statement, the term finally given to the marvellous treasure being the ‘Golden Bible.’ In the meantime, Joseph visited a visionary fanatic by the name of Martin Harris, and told him that he had received some gold plates of ancient records from the Lord, with a ‘revelation’ to call on him for fifty dollars to enable him to go to Pennsylvania and translate the contents of the plates.

Later in the letter, Townsend writes that Cowdery transcribed the Book of Mormon “as a pretended translation of the golden plates

which he [Smith] affirmed he had been directed by the Spirit of the Lord to dig from the earth.”⁵²

In these narratives, written in response to the story of the gold plates, the themes of fraud and fakery abound, indicating a deep-seated fear shared by Mormons and non-Mormons alike. For each group, the plates represented the focal point of the hopes and fears, the cause of problems and the solution to problems. We have, in the plates, a phenomenon that acts on the world in precisely the ways that Orsi says an abundant event should act. The difficulty is trying to tell where the power of the action is located: in the plates themselves, or in the narratives about the plates.

Conclusion

Orsi implies that abundant events occur at the point where language breaks down and they become difficult to describe. But in the case of the gold plates, we have an abundant event that is described endlessly and in stunning detail by both believers and non-believers. The plates elicit voluminous cultural narratives that serve to expose the cultural assumptions shared by early Mormons and early anti-Mormons—assumptions that include the fear of a culture overwhelmed by its own fecundity and constantly in danger of being duped by the peculiarly potent fakeries that accompany frontier life. The plates, to revisit a quote from Latour, “crease” reality so profoundly that it never assumes its old shape. And this is Orsi’s point about abundant events—scholars, in what is sometimes an ironic attempt to reify them, to make them intelligible, or more real, marginalize them or impose upon them an unnatural ideological structure or order and in so doing miss the point entirely.

The gold plates are real precisely because they spill out of the narrative intended for them and move through history in unpredictable ways. I disagree with Orsi’s implicit insistence that abundant events are real in some transcendent and ultimate sense. It is true that they produce unintended consequences; they provoke reactions that reveal the keys to understanding culture. But, again, we return to the problem of narrative. As we have seen from this brief sampling of documents, the plates intruded into American culture only through the vehicle of narrativity, and it

might be the obviously man-made narrativity that gives them such power. The most influential theorist of historical narrative, Hayden White, wrote that

In historical discourse, the narrative serves to transform a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle into a story. In order to effect this transformation, the events, agents, and agencies represented in the chronicle must be encoded as 'story-elements,' that is to say, characterized as the kinds of events, agents, and agencies that can be apprehended as elements of specific "story-types." On this level of encodation, the historical discourse directs the reader's attention to a secondary referent, different in kind from the events that make up the primary referent, namely, the "plot-structures" of the various story-types cultivated in a given culture.⁵³

If White is correct, then scholars of religion must make a great deal more effort to locate any potential abundant event within its own narrative context. Orsi provides scholars with an inadequate explanation for the role of narrative, and this is deeply problematic because it is the narrative of the events, rather than the events themselves, that motivates action. Orsi seems to take this as an incidental point, as a given. As a result, he never addresses the fact that the events that he describes are only abundant through the work of narrative, nor does he acknowledge that the narratives can exist independent of the reality of the event. It is true that Orsi tries to avoid this problem by asserting that only events believed to be real can qualify as abundant events, but in solving that problem he introduces another, namely the notion that mythology cannot behave within cultures in the same way that abundant events do. That is demonstrably false. For Orsi's work to be more than the statement of a problem, he must grapple with the implications and meaning of the link between event and narrative. Does the event make the narrative? Does the narrative make the event? Can narrative be considered an extension of the abundant event? If so, how? If there is a way for scholars to solve this problem of narrative and event, and I have suggested in this essay that there may be, then Orsi's category of abundant events may bear fruit. There is no doubt that the notion of abundant events is and will continue to be particularly attractive for those scholars and readers who, for whatever reason, feel that the academic study of

religion does violence to the objects that come under its scrutiny. I am optimistic that further scholarly attention to Orsi's "abundant events" idea, scholarship that applies his theory to an ever-widening group of historical data sets, may refine his theory into one of the most important to emerge in the field of religious studies in decades.

Notes

1. James details his definition of religion in his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Originally published in 1902, the complete work is now available in convenient online editions, such as the following: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/621/pg621.html>.

2. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 1.

3. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90; Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 39.

4. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

5. For a detailed discussion of this early period in the study of religion, see Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

6. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1991); Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

7. Wouter J. Hanegraff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 163.

8. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion—Wither and Why," in *The History of Religions: Essays on Methodology*, edited by Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 42.

9. See Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

10. Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in The Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999), 67.

11. Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Volume 8 (1996): 225.

12. "Finding the Presence in Mormon History: An Interview with Susanna Morrill, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Robert Orsi," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 178.

13. I am indebted to my colleague Matthew Bowman for the insight that Orsi's theory of "abundant events" is as much a statement of a problem as it is a theory for interpreting data.

14. It is worth noting that the concept of the "supernatural" is itself an invention of the modern West. See Dale Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From Hippocrates to the Christians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13.

15. Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

16. Robert A. Orsi, "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity," *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society* September/October 2008, 14–15.

17. Robert Orsi, "2+2 = 5, Can We Begin to Think about Unexplained Religious Experiences in Ways That Acknowledge Their Existence?" *The American Scholar*, Spring 2007, available online at <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/when-2-2-5/>.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 186.

20. Robert A. Orsi, "The Problem of the Holy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, edited by Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 84.

21. Orsi, "2+2 = 5."

22. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 198.

23. Larry J. Griffin, "Narrative, Event-Structure Analysis and Causal Interpretation in Historical Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 98: 5 (March 1993): 1097.

24. See, for example, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Time Out of Memory," in *The Post-Historical Middle Ages*, edited by Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 37–62. I am indebted to one of the anonymous referees of this article for bringing this source to my attention.

25. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 2004), 98.

26. Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of the Prophet Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Edward Stevenson, 1893), reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (hereafter *EMD*) 3:387.

27. Lorenzo Saunders to T. H. Gregg, January 28, 1885, reproduced in Charles Augustus Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 1914), 135.

28. Orsi, "2+2=5."

29. James discusses the subject of live options throughout his pam-

phlet, "The Will to Believe" which was originally published in 1896, and which is now available online: <http://educ.jmu.edu/~omearawm/ph101willtobelieve.html>.

30. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 160.

31. For background on the political and economic culture of the antebellum period, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a discussion of how these events impacted Joseph Smith and his family, see Bushman, *Jospeh Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

32. Among the best treatments of the religious developments of this period are Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

33. "Joseph Smith History, 1838–1856, A–1," <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838%E2%80%931856-volume-a-1>.

34. *Ibid.*, 4. Emphasis added.

35. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 61.

36. On the emerging evangelical diabolology, see W. Scott Poole, *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 33–64, *passim*.

37. "Orson Hyde Account, 1842"; reproduced in Vogel, EMD 1:164.

38. "Martin Harris Testimony, 1870,"; reproduced in Vogel, EMD 2:332.

39. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867), 13.

40. Tucker, *Origin*, 14.

41. *Ibid.*, 16.

42. *Ibid.*, 29.

43. *Ibid.*, 16.

44. *Ibid.*, 18.

45. Letter to the Editor, *Palmyra Reflector*, January 6, 1831; reproduced in Vogel, EMD 2:239–240.

46. Abner Cole, "Gold Bible," No. 2, *Palmyra Reflector*, January 18, 1831; reproduced in Vogel, EMD 2:241.

47. Tucker, *Origin*, 289.

48. Lorenzo Saunders Interview, reproduced in Vogel, EMD 2:127.

49. *Ibid.*, reproduced in Vogel, EMD 2:132.

50. *Palmyra Reflector*, January 6, 1831; reproduced in Vogel, EMD 2:256.

51. "Nathaniel W. Howe and Others to Ancil Beach," reproduced in Vogel, *EMD* 3:15.

52. Jessee Townsend to Phineas Stiles, December 24, 1833; reproduced in Vogel, *EMD* 3:22.

53. Hayden V. White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23:1 (February 1984): 20.