

Comment on “Conversion in 19th Century Mormonism: Identities and Associations in the Atlantic World”

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I don't intend praise or to criticize these three engaging papers—they certainly are all clear and compelling—but to pay them the highest compliment, which is to comment on the thoughts they provoke. They compel us, as they were meant to do, to think more deeply about conversion. What does it consist of? What readies a person for conversion to Mormonism? What does Mormonism mean to converts?

In a way, conversion is a branch of intellectual history, where the basic question is how do ideas spread? How does one country invent the postage stamp and then other countries pick it up? After the idea was adopted in one location, what readied other nations to adopt a postal system based on stamps? By analogy, what led people to adopt the Book of Mormon once the idea had been invented in Manchester, New York? Or Zion or the Priesthood? Why did the idea spread?

But the analogy to intellectual history does not quite do justice to conversion. Conversion is not just to a set of ideas, it is a life decision like marriage or choosing a career. It requires a more full-bodied acceptance. It has to touch you, to resonate, to enlighten, or redeem; it is something like falling in love.

For that reason we have to look at life conditions to explain conversion. What broad circumstances readied a person to make this commitment? And that is what these papers do. They speak

more broadly of the social world in which the converts dwelt. They bring in the social as well as the intellectual to fill out the picture of conversion.

Chris Jones,¹ for example, helps us to understand how open and mobile, even turbulent American society was in the early nineteenth-century. These people had trouble settling on a career. Ezra Booth was first a preacher and then a farmer. James Covell was a doctor and a preacher who traveled from Maine, to upstate New York, to New York City. So many people in these years had connections but not deep roots.

They moved religiously too. Think of all the varieties of Methodism available to the three men Chris discusses. Ezra Booth was a Methodist, then a Mormon, then a Millerite. Covell faced a smorgasbord of Methodist varieties from which to choose: the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Society of New York, then Congregational Methodists, Independent Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists, and Reformed Methodists. As Chris depicts the process, each of these religious dilettantes could select from a variety of religious forms to find one that precisely suited his taste.

But the word “dilettante” does not do these men justice. They practiced a kind of scriptural rigor too. They wanted to find the truth and believed they would know it when they saw it. One reason Covell could not abide the Mormons was their insistence on baptism by immersion. He knew they were wrong. Ezra Booth traveled with the Johnsons to the next county to listen to the Mormons because they were confident they would know the truth when they saw it. All of these people enjoyed a kind of self-sufficiency in their religious choices. They did not have to consult someone or turn to an authority. They had the confidence they could recognize the truth themselves. They believed in their own reason and knew that the Bible was an infallible guide.

The Methodist world was in turmoil partly because so many devoutly religious people were searching for the true religion and believed they could decide for themselves where it could be found. They were on the move, perhaps you could even say on the prowl, for a faith they could embrace with conviction. This frame of mind explains why a few people could take to Mormonism with its strong truth claims, but also why they often left soon after.

They could decide for themselves to be sure, but they also could be easily dislodged. If something went awry, they would be on their way again in search of a better truth. They were self-anointed amateur religious connoisseurs.

A similar kind of juxtaposition runs through Amanda's paper on Mary Fielding. Over against a set of social concerns, devoted religious people in her narrative were also seeking biblical truth, confident they would know it when it came along. Belief in a rigorous biblical standard and social strain were, perhaps, in dynamic tension, as so many scholars have suggested. People could bear social turbulence because their lives were anchored in biblical truth, or perhaps the other way around. They insisted on religious exactitude because so much else was uncertain for them socially.

Amanda's paper, however, deals more with social class than social disruption. She deftly traces the precarious position of the Mary Fielding's family in England. They were East Anglian farmers, an honorable position if not an exalted one in English society. Amanda suggests their standing was a little precarious, rising above the lower classes, yet not firmly situated in the middle classes. Mary's mother, Rachel, strove as best she could for respectability, and Mary's brother James achieved eminence as a preacher. Her sister Ann married a clergyman. No one was a gentleman or a gentlewoman but they were respectable. On the other hand, Mary's father, John Fielding, preached for the Primitive Methodists tying them to the lower middling classes.

For these people balancing on the edge of social propriety, conversion to Mormonism, associated as it was with lower class delusion, was to give up all pretensions to religious respectability. Conversion meant a drop in social position that was painful for the English Fieldings to behold. It was a grave disappointment for them to learn of their Canadian siblings' decision to become Mormons.

Why did the Canadian Fieldings agree to this drastic descent? Because Joseph Fielding, Mary's other brother, thought the Mormon missionaries explained the biblical prophecies better than anyone. Biblical rigor trumped social respectability. By the same token, James's rejection of his brother's Mormon message turned once again on Methodist objections to immersion. While the fam-

ily was concerned about markers of class and about family loyalty, they were more concerned about the conception of truth. Biblical conviction weighed more with them than social standing.

Ben Park's paper on Edward Tullidge reverses the order of the other two papers. Chris and Amanda reflect on the social influences on Mormon conversion. Ben Park discusses how a convert, Edward Tullidge, thought Mormonism could affect society. Tullidge seems to have thought of Mormonism as a tool for reforming the world. His greatest commitment in Ben's telling was to the social redemption of mankind. Mormonism provided a means for achieving that goal.

He was not the only one to sense some kind of primal force in Mormonism that could be diverted and reshaped. John C. Bennett seemed to have entertained thoughts of using Mormon manpower and zeal to build a great kingdom in the West. James Arlington Bennett, the Long Island intellectual who was baptized but never gathered to Nauvoo, though disgusted by the other Bennett, nonetheless referred briefly to similar ambitions. To further confuse the Bennett picture, the newspaper editor James Gordon Bennett wrote of Mormonism as a body with immense potential that might someday raise up a mighty kingdom. "The Mormons under the guidance of their great prophet and seer, the famous Joseph Smith," Bennett wrote in *The New York Herald*, "are organizing a religious empire in the far west that will astonish the world in these latter days." Smith "combined religion, political, moral, and social institutions in one mass of legislation and empire." Tullidge picked up on that same Mormon dynamism and sought to direct it toward the spread of a beneficent civilization through the world.

Tullidge's ambitions came from the missionary force that he first encountered in England. It was easy to imagine that all that zeal and that compelling message of a millennial Zion harnessed to reform society at its core. Tullidge's Mormonism seems to have waxed and waned according to his hopes that the Church could help him fulfill his liberal dream of a new world order. He dabbled with the Godbeites and came and went but ultimately returned to the fold. He could find nothing that quite matched the Utah church for energy and organization.

These papers together blend the study of Mormonism with the study of society. Rather than a story of doctrine or faith, they emphasize the social order within which Mormons formed their lives. Surely this is the way that scholarship in the future must go. It is not enough to see conversion as a matter of understanding doctrine combined with humbly seeking God. These elements of the story certainly deserve their place; the converts themselves thought that way. But we cannot isolate the spiritual from the social or the cultural. Religion was lived in society. For the actors themselves the conditions of life were an ever present reality. Our histories, if they are to recover the past, must reconstruct the social worlds the converts inhabited.

Note

¹Jones's paper could not be included, but will be published at a later date.