
Becoming the American Religion: The Place of Mormonism in the Development of American Religious Historiography

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The title of this article refers not to some sociological or theological state of contemporary Mormonism but to the current state of American religious historiography. Indeed, in the post-Protestant era of American religious historiography that has emerged since the '60s, Tolstoy's insistence on Mormonism being the American religion has begun to ring true in American academia. That is, Mormonism fits the paradigms of the New Religious History (the interpretive structure that emerged in the post-Protestant era) of being interpreted as an outsider to mainstream Protestantism, a manifestation of folk-intellectual undercurrents, a popular social impulse, and a new American religion, to the point that much of these vital aspects of American religion are understood through Mormonism. This factor, coupled with Mormonism's imminent replacement of Puritanism as America's most-studied religion, points to Mormonism filling the position of orienting epicenter in American religious history—the position formerly held by the Puritans.¹

I do not mean to overstate this point; Catholicism or Methodism, among others, certainly rival Mormonism in this position (not to mention that New Religious historians would demur calling any religion the American one in any sense). Nevertheless, Mormonism's prominent place in current American religious historiography in both volume and interpretation is undeniable. What is more, Mormonism's current status in American religious historiography is remarkable, given the religion's former position. At the turn of the last century, Mormonism found itself on the fringe of

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American academia, a pariah, even the definition of un-American that historians treated either out of disdainful necessity or out of a curiosity for the exotic. Mormonism found it difficult to shake marginalization as one limiting interpretive structure replaced another. Nevertheless, academia's understanding of Mormonism improved in each successive phase. In fact, the more historians have sought to understand Mormonism (as opposed to dismissing or debunking it), the more important the religion has become in the story of American religion. And conversely, the more important Mormonism has become, the more American religious historians have sought to understand the religion. Tracing Mormonism's historiographical development in the context of American religious historiography demonstrates this dialectic as well as the pivotal position in which Mormon historiography currently finds itself.²

Nineteenth Century Denominational History: Two Great Traditions

Nineteenth-century religious history was dominated by the Protestant infrastructure—universities, divinity schools, and scholarship. From this domination came what is known as “The Great Tradition of American Religious History.” This tradition held that providence had a special role for America in preserving and promoting Protestantism. Through this lens, church historians saw America's heritage as originating with the Puritans who instilled the nation with the divine, Protestant mission. Thus, American religious history, centered on what was considered the Protestant mainstream, marginalized those outside the category. Although “others” were clearly part of the American religious scene, the major writers of America's religious history felt optimistic that these “others” would die out and that all Americans would soon embrace Protestant ecumenical bliss. Catholicism's prominence in nineteenth-century America posed a glaring problem for these historians; however, the authors reconciled this problem with the hope that in America, Catholicism would lose steam and take on a Protestant flavor. Likewise, these writers hoped to give lip service to the great American principle of religious tolerance, a tolerance that failed to apply to Shakers, Universalists, and especially Mormons. Indeed, the principal writers of American religious history in the nineteenth century held Mormonism in disdain. For instance, Robert Baird, essentially the founding American church historian, called Mormonism “the grossest of all the delusions that Satanic malignity or human ambition ever sought to propagate.”³ Philip Schaff, the eminent international church historian, called Mormonism “the worst product of America” and begged his German audience not to “judge America in any way by this irregular growth” because he

felt that many other aspects of American religion were far better.⁴

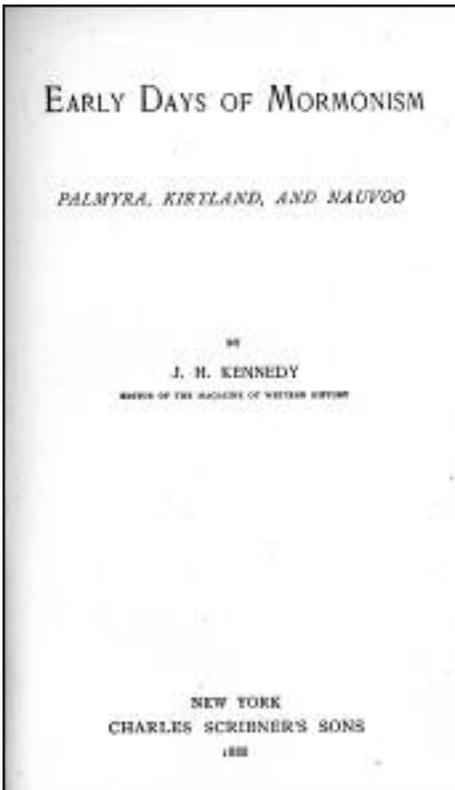
Thus, the major writers of American religious history had little tolerance for Mormonism's place in their story and wished more than anything that it would go away; the fact that Mormonism not only persisted but also flourished acted as proverbial salt in the wound.⁵ These historians made little attempt to understand the movement, as their interpretive structure declared it illegitimate; in the words of Leonard Woolsey Bacon, "It is only incidentally that the strange story of the Mormons . . . is connected with the history of American Christianity."⁶ These assumptions caused problems when historians actually took a closer look. For example, Philip Schaff, though no fan of Mormonism, took pause when he confronted the faith's failure to conform to its stereotypes, admitting that among the Mormons, "peace, harmony, and happiness generally prevail." Schaff concluded his commentary on Mormonism with this confession: "I readily grant, that Mormonism is, to me, still one of the unsolved riddles of the modern history of religion; and I therefore venture no final judgement upon it."⁷ Under the assumptions of the Great Tradition, attempting to understand Mormonism led only to confusion. Unfortunately, Schaff made no attempt to solve this mystery, as this enigmatic view of Mormonism, in contrast to harsh and simplistic reductions, continued long into the twentieth century.

"Owing to the many reports . . . designed by the authors therefor to militate against its character as a Church," Joseph Smith and his followers undertook their own denominational history. Because the Protestant infrastructure dominated American religious history, Mormonism created its own institutional history by forming its own colleges and official historians. Indeed, Mormons soon began to form their own "great tradition"—a quasi-scriptural interpretation of their past, which narrated God's dealings with His new chosen people, or Latter-day Saints. The Mormons made an impressive effort at their history, particularly in the form of document collection. Led by B. H. Roberts, Mormon historians also undertook several monographs and other historical works, further establishing the Mormons' "great tradition"—a tradition largely embodied in Joseph Fielding Smith's *Essentials in Church History*. Thus, though Roberts did much in this direction, a clinical understanding of the movement lay somewhere in the chasm between the two great traditions.⁸

The Rise of "Scientific" History

Emerging "scientific" historians at the end of the nineteenth century found the sectarian rancor and the blatantly interested interpretations of the religious historians particularly disdainful. In fact, the scientific historians

generally downplayed religion, considering its ephemeral nature difficult to treat under their positivistic assumptions. Though religious historians at that time made some attempts to be more “scientific,” most dragged their feet. As religious historians saw it, religious history was separate from secular history, and the scientific historians seemed only to be taking God out of history, undermining religious history’s supposed purpose. Bacon’s polemical treatment of Mormonism in *A History of American Christianity* in 1897, as well as Smith’s *Essentials* in 1922, demonstrates this resistance. Nevertheless, some attempts to treat Mormonism “scientifically” emerged at the end of the nine-



Title page from *Early Days of Mormonism*.
 Courtesy Church Archives, Church of Jesus
 Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

teenth century. Among these was James Kennedy’s *Early Days of Mormonism* (1888), which, “in deference to the modern conclusion that even theological history should not be controversial,” attempted to write an “unbiased history” with “no tinge of personal interest . . . and no theory . . . to be advanced or defended,” but he generally concluded against the Mormons. Further “objective” treatments of this sort continued into the beginning of the twentieth century, with the work of B. H. Roberts on the one hand and William A. Linn’s *The Story of the Mormons* (1902)—the standard Mormon history in American academia in the early twentieth century—on the other.⁹

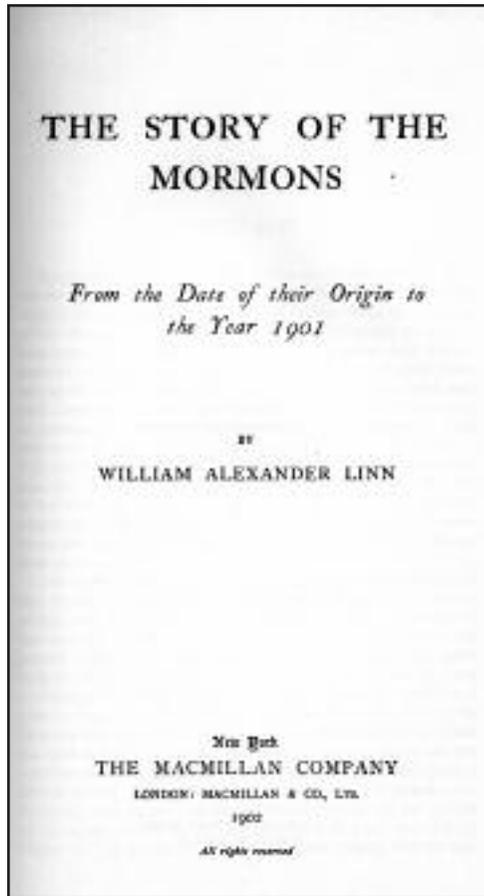
As was the tendency of the scientific historians, the social sciences were applied to Mormon history in the hope of achieving greater objectivity.

This was the goal of the first doctoral dissertation on Mormonism (later published): I. Woodbridge Riley’s “The Founder of Mormonism; A Psychological Examination of Joseph Smith” (1903). Although extremely reductionist, *The Founder of Mormonism* was a step forward without the rancor, as Riley staunchly held to his position

of avoiding moral judgment of Smith (and was largely successful). Nevertheless, typical of the scientific historians of the day, Riley did not take religious experience seriously, determining that the Prophet was an epileptic.¹⁰ Thus, in being “objective,” scientific historians tended to remove religion from the equation.

Many others began to apply social science paradigms to Mormonism, and, typical of the turn of the century, the frontier thesis was popular among many of these historians. With the Turner thesis, Brigham Young became somewhat of a hero—the tamer of the Great Basin—while Joseph Smith remained problematic.¹¹ Essentially, the frontier thesis, along with the other applications of the social sciences, represented how historians at the time, and for years to come, were more comfortable in viewing Mormonism as a social movement than a religious one. Thus, Mormonism often fit better in the history of the American West than it did in American religious history.¹²

Hence, though “scientific” history had managed to be more objective than nineteenth-century denominational history, it too was severely limited in its ability to treat Mormonism, or any religion, for that matter. Pioneering social historian J. Franklin Jameson decried the neglect of religion by the scientific historians in his “The American Acta Sacntorum” (1908), where he argued that “of all means of estimating American character from American history, the pursuit of religious history is the most complete.” Amid his often-critical suggestions, Jameson noted,



*Title page from The Story of the Mormons.
Courtesy Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saints.*

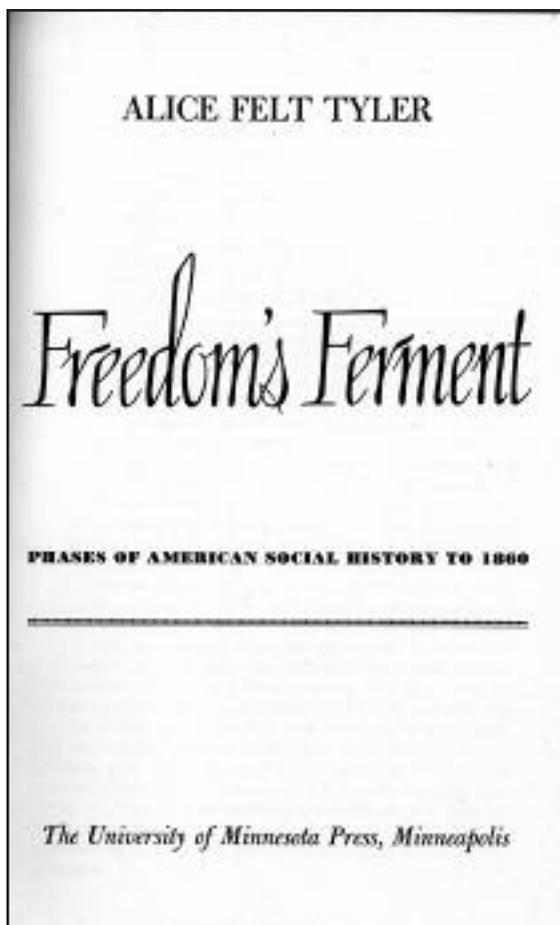
“Equally limited is the mind which can not find in the early story of Mormonism a prime source of illumination upon the actual mentality of the obscure villagers of 1830.”¹³ Thus, in his broader framework of how religion could be used to understand the national character, Jameson pointed to the role Mormonism could play in the endeavor. Thus, instead of using Mormonism’s background to explain the religion—the dominant trend then and for years after—Jameson suggested that the religion could explain its background. In essence, Jameson invited historians to take a closer look at what Mormonism said about America, thus signifying Mormonism’s important role in American religious historiography (a theme that the New Religious History embraced more than half a century later).

Yet, according to the prevailing opinion of the time, all Mormonism said about America was that America contained a class of credulous dupes. Although Mormonism’s abandonment of polygamy at the end of the nineteenth century had reduced the religion’s pariah status, scholars were generally disdainful of religion as a whole in the early twentieth century. The 1920s perhaps marked the nadir of religion’s esteem in academia with the Scopes Trial and caricatures by H. L. Menckin and Sinclair Lewis—Mormonism had its own satirist in Bernard De Voto. Thus, religion continued to take a back seat to issues of economics and politics in American history. Nevertheless, William Warren Sweet and Perry Miller soon began to “recover” American religious history, taking a page from the scientific historians through objectivity and in-depth source analysis. At the same time, this recovery essentially reestablished the Great Tradition. Indeed, though Sweet avoided polemics in his treatment of Mormonism and, like those who had previously applied the frontier thesis to Mormonism, saw Brigham Young as the ultimate frontier theocrat, he did not place Mormonism in his big stream of American religion—treating the religion in sort of an appendix. Likewise, Perry Miller’s recovery of the Puritan mind, which created a type of New England centrism in American intellectual, cultural, and especially religious history, drew attention away from the early republic, Mormonism included. In the end, Miller said almost nothing about Mormonism. Thus, as religion was recovered in American academia, the Great Tradition continued to dominate, and Mormonism continued to be marginalized.¹⁴

Despite the attempts of Miller and Sweet, the disdain for religion among American intellectuals continued into the ’40s. Alice Felt Tyler in her *Freedom’s Ferment* (1944) attempted to bridge the gap between intellectual disdain for perceived religious excesses and the importance of religion in American history. Tyler saw evangelicalism and democracy as the driving

forces in various ante-bellum movements, from utopianism to social reform. Though Tyler was generally pleased with the various phenomena, she showed a definite disdain for the blatant supernaturalism of Millerism, spiritualism, and especially Mormonism. Tyler simply dismissed Mormonism as credulous fanaticism and made no attempt to link Mormonism to the optimistic impulse that evangelicalism and democracy bred in other movements. For example, Tyler derided Joseph Smith's presidential platform as "full of panaceas," glibly ridiculing the Prophet's thoughts on prison reform, abolition, and territorial expansion—impulses that she praised among other

movements in later chapters. Thus, Mormonism represented the excesses of a free and open society—democracy and evangelicalism gone awry.¹⁵ Into this environment came Fawn Brodie's monumental biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History* (1945). Borrowing many of the scientific reductions of previous commentaries on the Prophet with added research, a literary flair, and the aura of an insider exposé, *No Man Knows My History* came to represent the ultimate rebuttal to the Mormon great tradition. Thus, the '40s saw the residual effects of the skepticism of the '20s.¹⁶



*Title page from Freedom's Ferment.
Courtesy Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saints.*

Consensus History, the New Left, and the Beginning of the New Mormon History

In the post-World War II era that saw the rise of consensus history, religion emerged as an essential part of the national identity and a key element to the hostility toward communism. Typical of consensus history, arguments for Mormonism's Americanness were common during this period. Individual works also linked Mormonism more closely to broader American phenomena, including Whitney Cross's *The Burned-Over District* (1950). Cross placed Mormonism in the context of what he argued was antebellum America's social/intellectual epicenter—spawning and fostering movements such as abolition, anti-masonry, and, most particularly, a wide variety of religious expression. Though Cross was highly sympathetic to the Mormon movement (the Smiths in particular), his use of such terms as ultraism, excessive, and insane to describe much of what went on in the burned-over district indicated that Mormonism was still a bizarre byproduct of pure Americana.¹⁷ Likewise, *The Burned-Over District* often caused Mormonism's confinement to the book's namesake in historical analysis: in broader syntheses, Mormonism was viewed as a byproduct of the burned-over district, not a legitimate part of American society. In a similar vein, David Biron Davis's "The New England Origins of Mormonism" (1953) linked Mormonism to the quintessentially American Puritan fathers. Yet, despite the many similarities Davis saw between the two religions, Mormonism's similarities to John of Leyden's Muenster Anabaptists underlay Davis's interpretation—feeling that Mormonism's "peculiarities can be interpreted as what happens when all classes of ignorant and superstitious people have freedom to draw their own conclusions from scripture." Though Mormonism was American, it was still an embarrassing stepchild.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Mormonism's fuller incorporation in academia was gaining ground. In this environment, the New Mormon History was born. Leonard Arrington, the "dean of Mormon history," fostered this movement at Utah State University, where he began the formation of a fraternity of Mormon scholars and also taught and inspired a new generation of Mormon historians. This movement of mostly Mormon scholars (although certain non-Mormons made key contributions) sought to explore the history of Mormonism through new and scholarly methods, in the hope of bridging the gap between the Mormon great tradition and American academia. With the publication of Arrington's dissertation, *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958), and the explanation of *The Mormons* (1957) by the prominent religious sociologist Thomas O'Dea, the New Mormon history was underway. Thus, Mormon historiography benefited from consensus history's friendlier attitude toward

religion.¹⁹

Despite these developments in Mormon historiography, Mormonism was still marginalized, owing to the Great Tradition's continuing dominance in American religious historiography. As mentioned, Perry Miller said essentially nothing about Mormonism, and neither did the eminent American religious historian Sidney Mead. Winthrop Hudson's *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* left Mormonism out as well. Likewise, the major syntheses of American religion into the '60s continued the trend of placing Mormonism only in the contexts of burned-over-district peculiarism and western regionalism, neglecting any new interpretation or incorporation.²⁰

Nevertheless, new developments began to emerge in American religious history as the Great Tradition came under the New Left's iconoclasm. This massive revision led Sydney Ahlstrom to conclude in 1970 that "the pluralistic character of the nation is a fact. The Protestant establishment in its historic form is no more." Nevertheless, Ahlstrom still grounded his magisterial *A Religious History of the American People* (1972) in the Puritan tradition. Though progressive in many ways, Ahlstrom's treatment of Mormonism demonstrated the problems of the continuance of the Puritan-centered approach. Ahlstrom, like other historians, placed Mormonism in his section on early nineteenth-century communitarian movements. However, he seemed a bit uncomfortable with the minor presence he gave Mormonism in his book, saying, "Almost no one denies that the entire saga of Joseph Smith and Mormonism is a vital episode in American history." Yet Ahlstrom seemed at a loss of how to fit this "vital episode" into his remnant of the Great Tradition, conceding that "the exact significance of this great story persistently escapes definition" because Mormonism's development rendered "almost useless the usual categories of explanation."²¹

Thus, from Philip Schaff to Sydney Ahlstrom, the Great Tradition in any form was unable to make Mormonism fit; therefore, more than a hundred years after Philip Schaff concluded that Mormonism was "still one of the unsolved riddles of the modern history of religion," Mormonism remained enigmatic in American academia. To define "this great story," a new historiographical structure was needed—a new structure that was provided as the New Social History began to replace grand narratives like the Great Tradition.

The New Social History and the Blossoming of the New Mormon History

Not coincidentally, as the Great Tradition fell, the New Mormon History blossomed. The fraternity of scholars that Leonard Arrington fostered developed into the Mormon History Association (MHA) in 1965, the

same year the journal *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* was founded, and the University of Illinois Press began its commitment to publish monographs on Mormon history. Thus, in the context of American historiography's fragmentation resulting from the New Social History's emphasis on treatment of minority groups (largely neglected by previous grand narratives, like the Great Tradition), Mormonism was developing into its own subfield in American history. In this environment, the New Mormon History became the structure by which Mormonism was interpreted in American academia. This trend continued throughout the '70s as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself began directing Mormon scholarship through the formation of the Church Historical Department in 1972 (with Leonard Arrington at the head), and the MHA started its own journal, *Journal of Mormon History*, in 1973. These developments fostered an abundance of Mormon historical scholarship throughout that decade and into the next. Typical of the diversification of American historical scholarship at this time, Mormon academic "insiders" were enabled to present Mormon history in a more thorough, less reductive, and generally more sympathetic way.²²

Despite the successes of the New Mormon History, its status as its own subfield continued Mormon history's marginalization in the broader field. Though the University of Illinois Press and various Mormon historical journals greatly facilitated the writing of scholarly Mormon works, they still pigeonholed Mormonism by effectively assigning the religion to a particular academic venue. Moreover, as Mormon history developed into its own field in this era, historians in the New Mormon History essentially became Mormon historians. Much of the New Mormon History was inward focused, with the purpose of illuminating Mormon history to the Mormon community. At the same time, just as there was orthodox resistance to the scientific history of the first half of the century, many within Mormonism felt that the New Mormon History effectively took God out of the Mormon story by replacing all divine explanations with naturalistic ones. Mark Hofmann's forgeries of early Mormon documents in the mid-'80s also did not help matters. An extensive debate ensued within Mormonism over the nature of history and, in particular, the proper way to do Mormon history—a debate that Martin Marty called "The Crisis in Mormon Historiography" (1983). In essence, the persistent question of the Church's validity led to a focus on minutia and insider theses that had very little potential for meaning outside the narrow field. Typical of the fragmentation of the New Social History, Mormon historiography had its own dynamic without a broader historiographic context.²³

Nevertheless, the boom of scholarship of the New Mormon History, coupled with the dramatic increase in Mormon membership during these decades, made Mormonism more accessible to the writers of the New Religious History's major syntheses. Moreover, as the New Religious History was highly influenced by the New Social History's bottom-up, decentralized, outsider-focused paradigms, Mormonism found its way to the center of the scholarship. In essence, within the paradigms of the New Religious History, Mormonism now looked like a fully legitimate American religion. Pointing the way was Gordon Wood's "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism" (1980), which placed Mormonism in the context of the religious culture of the early republic. Rather than simply designating Mormonism as a manifestation of bizarre religiosity of the burned-over district, Wood more fully located Mormonism as a legitimate part of the broader evangelical culture of the period. In a manner similar to J. Franklin Jameson, Wood called the Book of Mormon "one of the greatest documents in American cultural history." Essentially reintroducing Jameson's often-ignored, understand-America-through-Mormonism paradigm, Wood claimed that through Mormonism, historians could "begin to understand the complicated nature" of early-nineteenth-century evangelical America.²⁴ This suggestion, coupled with scholars' increased attention on the early republic, set the stage for Mormonism's academic importance throughout the decade.

Thus, the New Religious History's major interpretations used Mormonism as a major piece of explorations of vital aspects of American religious history. R. Laurence Moore used Mormonism as his prototypical outsider, whose "otherness," like many other nonmainline religions, made Mormons quintessentially American. Nathan Hatch saw early Mormonism as an expression of the *Democratization of American Christianity* that occurred in the new republic, seeing Joseph Smith as the ultimate popular theocrat. Calling the Book of Mormon "a document of profound social protest," Hatch saw the whole Mormon movement as "intensely populist," like many of the other "thundering legions" of the early republic. Finally, based on Joseph Smith's link to the occult, Jon Butler used Mormonism as a prime example of how folk belief and traditional Christianity were wedded in his "antebellum spiritual hothouse." With the paradigms of the New Religious History demarcated, Mormonism found itself at center stage. Further, Lawrence Foster's look at nineteenth-century experimentation with sexual mores and Richard Hughes and Leonard Allen's discussion of American forms of Christian primitivism both used Mormonism as a significant part of their analyses. Although many of these writers still tended to treat Mormonism more as a social movement than a religion, Mormonism was

achieving remarkable prominence in American religious history.²⁵

Religious Studies and Recent Developments

Concurrent to the development of the New Religious History was the progression of the field of Religious Studies in American academia. This interdisciplinary means of studying religion in nonconfessional and nonreductive ways began gaining headway in America in the '60s. It blossomed further in the atmosphere of the New Religious History. In fact, the New Religious History overlapped with religious studies in many ways—rejecting the legitimate/illegitimate approach of the Great Tradition and seeking the inclusion of outsiders in their syntheses. However, Religious Studies' refusal to treat religious movements as epiphenomenon was at odds with the New Social History's influence on the New Religious History, which tended to do so. Nevertheless, the field of American religious history further overlapped with Religious Studies in the '90s with an abundance of theses rejecting socioeconomic causation in favor of religiously based intellectual/cultural causation and explanation. That is, in the '90s, many theses in American religious history explicitly opposed treating religious developments as socioeconomic epiphenomena, arguing that such movements were religiously driven. Thus, this new intellectual history, with its elements of causation and mentalités, differed from the intellectual-elite focus typical of the old intellectual history.²⁶

These developments fostered changes in Mormon historiography as well, beginning with Jan Shipps's application of religious studies to Mormonism. Mormonism's status as a new nineteenth-century religion placed it within an important subfield of religious studies. The work of Shipps, along with syntheses by Mary Farrell Bednarowski and Catherine Albanese, explored Mormonism from this perspective. When new syntheses of American religion were constructed along the described intellectual/theological lines, Mormonism continued to be central. In *The American Religion* (1992), Harold Bloom used Mormonism as a prime example of democratic Gnosticism—the American religion, according to Bloom. Likewise, Paul Conkin granted Mormonism its own form of American Christianity (Mormon Christianity) in his discussion of *Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (1997).²⁷

Likewise, a branch of Mormon insider historians embraced this type of intellectual history. Philip Barlow's *Mormons and the Bible* (1991) discussed the place of the Latter-day Saints in American religion according to Mormons' use of the Bible. Grant Underwood's *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (1994) placed Mormonism in the context of antebellum

millenarianism and was therefore an important work on both Mormonism and millenarianism. In fact, the adoption of the new intellectual history by a group of Mormon historians facilitated a greater syncretism of Mormon scholarship with the broader field of American religious history.²⁸ Works by Steven Epperson, Marianne Perciaccante, Steven C. Harper, and Eric Eliason in this same decade also demonstrate this tendency.²⁹ Thus, this branch of Mormon history moved beyond the insularity of the New Mormon History with theses that had greater meaning outside of Mormon historiography. With the barriers further removed between Mormon and American religious history, historians have more effectively been using the Jameson/Wood paradigm to understand America through Mormonism.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of using Mormonism to understand American history was John Brooke's *The Refiners Fire* (1994), which won the Bancroft Prize by synthesizing many of the New Religious History's paradigms in the study of Mormonism by itself. Brooke built on Butler's thesis of Mormonism as an ultimate expression of below-the-surface occult mentalities that wholly bypassed orthodox New England Puritanism. Brooke placed Mormon theology in the broader context of Renaissance hermeticism, which he attempted to trace from the English civil war to Joseph Smith Jr. Thus, Brooke's application of the new intellectual history made Mormonism the embodiment of a counter-Puritan American culture, a culture rivaling Puritanism as central to the American experience.³⁰ Terryl Givens's *Viper on the Hearth* (1997) also explored the paradigms of the New Religious History by focusing solely on Mormonism. By examining popular anti-Mormon literature of the nineteenth century, Givens argued that Mormon theology was so offensive to evangelical Protestantism that the evangelicals felt to recast Mormonism in a demonic light that they could oppose on moral grounds instead of just theological ones. Indeed, Mormonism became so vile to many Americans that it became the definition of the "other," or what was anti-American; thus, Mormonism helped to define what was American. By means of the new intellectual history, Givens and Brooke further presented Mormonism as the New Religious History's ultimate American religion.³¹

Perhaps the ultimate demonstration of Mormonism's prominent place in American religious historiography currently is Terryl Givens's recent work *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (2002). This multifaceted work of Mormon apologetics is partially the result of both the importance Mormonism has achieved and the evolution of American religious historiography to the point where such a book could be published in the preeminent academic press.³² One can expect even greater developments with Richard Bushman's forthcoming biography of Joseph Smith, along with the publication of the complete papers of the

Prophet. Further developments in Mormon historiography will have the maximum potency to create greater understanding and importance if Mormonism is located within the field of American religious history. Likewise, because Mormonism is essentially religious in nature, drawing on structures that are used to examine other religions has a tremendous potential for further understanding Mormonism. Thus, tracing the development of Mormonism within American religious historiography demonstrates the pivotal place of Mormonism within that field and the best way in which to embrace the opportunity.³³

Notes

1. Thomas J. Yates, "Count Tolstoy and 'The American Religion,'" *Improvement Era* 42 (1939): 94. Mormonism's central place in the New Religious History is discussed later in the paper. For predictions of Mormonism surpassing the Puritans in academia, see Nathan O. Hatch, "Mormon and Methodist: Popular Religion in the Crucible of the Free Market," *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no. 1 (spring 1994): 34; and Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 223.

2. This essay, therefore, is not a comprehensive summation of Mormon historiography but rather a discussion of Mormon historiography within American religious historiography. Therefore, major works on Mormon history are mentioned in that context. For a comprehensive historiography, see Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). The reference to understanding refers to an academic one rather than a theological one, with the belief that academics have the potential to illuminate theology.

3. Robert Baird, *Religion in America; Or an Account of the Origin, Progress, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States, with Notices of the Unevangelical Denominations*, ed. Henry Warner Bowden (1856; New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 273–74.

4. Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of its Political, Social, and Religious Character*, ed. Perry Miller (1856; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961). The other major works on American religion in that century are Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States from the First Settlement down to the Present Time* (New York: Philips and Hunt, 1888); and Leonard Woolsey Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: Christian Literature, 1897). Excellent discussions of the Great Tradition include Eldon Ernst, "Winthrop Hudson and the Great Tradition of American Religious Historiography," *Foundations* 23, no. 2 (1980): 104–26; and R. Laurence Moore, "Protestant Unity and the American Mission—The Historiography of a Desire," in his *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3–21.

5. Baird's only solace was that "we have reason to hope that the evil has reached its apogee, and that the destruction of the community will, before very many years pass away, be affected by moral influences." Baird, *Religion in America*, 274. By 1888, Daniel Dorchester was less hopeful of Mormonism's disappearance because it "has become an ecclesiastical despotism of immense strength," yet Dorchester still clung to a sense of opti-

mism about the future of American Christianity because to him, Mormonism “is, after all, only a local ulcer,” and that it “can have no sure lease on the future.” Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States*, 646, 780. By 1897, however, Leonard Woolsey Bacon was worried about Mormonism to the point that he declared Mormonism “formidable to the Republic, not by their number . . . but by the solidity with which they are compacted.” Bacon, *History of American Christianity*, 335.

6. Bacon, *History of American Christianity*, 335. Despite this statement, Bacon throws in this odd statement about Mormon origins: “In its origin Mormonism is distinctly American—a system of gross, palpable imposture contrived by a disreputable adventurer, Joe Smith.” Bacon, *History of American Christianity*, 335. Similarly, Schaff argued that Mormonism “really lies outside of the pale of Christianity and the church.” Schaff, *America*, 203.

7. Schaff, *America*, 198, 203. Schaff admitted that he could “say nothing at all satisfactory about this phenomenon, owing to the want of accurate knowledge from the proper sources on our own part, and to the general immaturity of the movement.” Schaff said he included Mormons in his book only because “concerning nothing have I been more frequently asked in Germany, than concerning the primeval forests and the Mormons . . . as if it had nothing of greater interest and importance than these,” and he therefore treated Mormonism so as not to “disappoint expectations.” Schaff, *America*, 203.

8. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:1. The title of the work is misleading as Roberts compiled the bulk of the work long after Smith’s death, and the words often are not the Prophet’s. Roberts wrote his own interpretive history, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Century One*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965), as well as several monographs. See also, Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1922). *Essentials* went through dozens of reprints and editions. On the importance of history in Mormonism, see *Doctrine and Covenants* 21:1; 47:1–3; 69:3–8; Jan Shipp, “Getting the Story Straight,” in *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 87–108; and Martin E. Marty, “Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 3–19.

9. See Henry Warner Bowden, *Church History in the Age of Science: Historiographical Patterns in the United States, 1876–1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); and James H. Kennedy, *Early Days of Mormonism* (New York: Scribner’s, 1888), v, vi. See also William A. Linn, *The Story of the Mormons: From the Date of Their Origins to the Year 1901* (New York: Macmillan, 1902). I do not mean to equate Roberts and Linn, but both hovered between the apologetic/objective paradigm.

10. I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism; A Psychological Examination of Joseph Smith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1903).

11. The application of the Turner thesis to Mormonism began with Andrew Love Neff’s dissertation, “The Mormon Migration to Utah, 1830–1847” (Ph.D. dissertation, Berkeley: University of California, 1918). On other applications of these themes, see Leonard J. Arrington, “Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no.1 (1966): 15–32. Representative of the Young-over-Smith theme was M. R. Werner’s biography, *Brigham Young* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925). Werner treated the early stages of Mormonism because “one cannot write about Brigham Young without explaining Joseph Smith,” yet he felt “that with-

out Brigham Young the Mormons would never have been important . . . but without the Mormons Brigham Young might have been a great man." Werner, *Brigham Young*, v. Thus, while Werner was taken with Young, he was less impressed with Joseph Smith and called the Book of Mormon "one of the dullest books in world literature." Werner, *Brigham Young*, 48.

12. On Mormons in the West, Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 623–27 and Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-speaking Peoples The Great Democracies* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1956–1958), 4:118, mention Mormonism only as part of the westward expansion (with brief references to its origins).

13. J. Franklin Jameson, "The American Acta Sanctorum," *American Historical Review* 13, no. 2 (1908): 298, 300.

14. For De Voto's caricatures, see particularly "The Centennial of Mormonism," *The American Mercury* 19 (January 1930): 1–13; and *Year of Decision, 1846* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943). De Voto later admitted regretting some of his more biting remarks toward Mormonism in "A Reevaluation," *Rocky Mountain Review* 10 (autumn 1945): 7–11. See also Henry F. May, "The Recovery of American Religious History," *American Historical Review* 70 (October 1964): 79–92. May focused on the intellectual aspects of the recovery and therefore gave most of the credit to Miller.

15. Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944), 104–5.

16. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945). See Newell G. Bringhurst, ed., *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996). Fawn Brodie was a niece of LDS Church President David O. McKay.

17. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950), 143. On the issue of the Smiths' New York reputation, Cross said, with regard to the Smiths' being lazy, "Every circumstance seems to invalidate the obviously prejudiced testimonials of unsympathetic neighbors." Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 141–42. With regard to judgment on the Prophet's motivations, Cross said, "In order to explain why Joseph developed into this role one must either utilize faith, traffic in psychoanalysis which at such a distance from the event becomes highly imaginative, or descend to coincidence. Historical analysis profits little by any of these alternatives." Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 143.

18. David Brion Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," *New England Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1953): 157. On Mormonism's Americanness, see William Mulder, "The Mormons in American History," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (January 1959): 59–88.

19. On Arrington's career, see Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); and David J. Whittaker, comp., "Leonard James Arrington (1917–1999): A Bibliography," *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 2 (1999): 11–45. Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957). Many also point to Juanita Brooks, *Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1950) as a major book in the beginning of the New Mormon History.

20. See Winthrop S. Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New

York: Harper and Row, 1953). Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1960), Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), and Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (New York, Harper and Row, 1966).

21. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Problem of the History of Religion in America," *Church History* 39, no. 2 (1970): 234; and Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 508. Ahlstrom concludes his section on Mormonism by saying, "One cannot even be sure if the object of our consideration is a sect, a mystery cult, a new religion, a church, a people, a nation, or an American subculture; indeed, at different times and places it is all of these." Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 508.

22. Ahlstrom's Puritan-centered approach was rejected soon after its publication. New developments emerged in the work of Robert Handy, who was willing to accept many more faiths as legitimate, saw pluralism in American religion from beginning to end, and later incorporated Canada into his syntheses. See especially Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), ed., *Religion in the American Experience: The Pluralistic Style* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), and *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

Dialogue was founded by a group of Mormon graduate students at Stanford for the purpose of taking multidisciplinary looks at Mormonism. Illinois Press's commitment began with Robert Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 1965) and continued on the initiative of its editor, Elizabeth Dulany, who saw the need for a university press to facilitate Mormon historical writing.

Here I have summarized an extensive and diverse group of writers. However, many "insider" Mormon historians felt motivated (in part) to present Mormon scholarship more sympathetically than previous accounts. Works of this nature included the award-winning Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), and Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985). Disaffected "insiders," such as Klaus J. Hansen and D. Michael Quinn, engaged in extensive research and analysis that also gave a fuller view of Mormonism. Likewise, "outsider" Jan Shippy, through extensive research, interaction, and religious-studies methods, became what she called an "inside-outsider," enabling her to give a fuller and more sympathetic treatment of Mormonism as well.

23. Concerns over Mormon historiography effectually led to the dissolution of the Church Historical Department (1982) as LDS Church leadership decided not to manage historical scholarship directly, determining to fund Mormon history through its university (BYU) instead. See Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). On Hofmann, see Richard E. Tuley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992). For a summation of the historiographical debate, see Thomas G. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 3 (1986): 25–49; and Martin E. Marty, "Two Integritys: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," 3–19. On the true/false paradigm in the Mormon historiography, see Roger D. Launius, "From Old to New Mormon History: Fawn Brodie and the Legacy of Scholarly Analysis of Mormonism," in Newell G. Bringhurst, ed., *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect* (Logan, Utah:

University of Utah Press: 1996), 195–221.

24. Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61, no. 4 (1980): 381, 386. See also Klaus Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), part of Martin Marty’s Chicago History of American Religion series. In the introduction to Hansen’s book, Marty explains that Mormonism was the only denomination that received book-length treatment because of Mormonism’s Americanness. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, xiii.

25. See R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 115, 120; and “Toward an Antebellum Spiritual Hothouse,” in Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 225–56. The issue of the Smiths’ occult activities revived in the 1980s with Mark Hofmann’s forgeries, two of which were on Smith and the occult. See D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (1987; Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998). Lawrence Foster discusses Mormon sexual experimentation in *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Finally, Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1988); Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); and Kenneth L. Winn, *Exiles in the Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) similarly placed Mormonism within the broader context of antebellum society.

26. “Religious Studies” is a somewhat ambiguous term, often meaning a broad range of approaches to and philosophies of religion. For a thorough explanation, see Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). A useful definition is provided in Frank E. Reynolds, “History of Religions: Condition and Prospects,” *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion* 13, no. 5 (1982): 129. The late ’70s and early ’80s saw a resurgence of Whitney Cross’s attempt to explain intellectual history through socioeconomic means, most typical of which was Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979). Major religiously based intellectual/cultural interpretations of the 1990s include Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Paul K. Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

27. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of A New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (1981; 3d ed. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1999); Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989); Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); and Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

28. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Grant Underwood, *The*

Millenarian World of Early Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). A sort of intellectual-history manifesto with regard to Mormonism is found in Richard T. Hughes's "Two Restoration Traditions, Mormons and the Churches of Christ in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Mormon History* 19, no. 1 (spring 1993): 34–51; see particularly pages 35–38.

29. Works by Epperson include *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); and "The Grand Fundamental Principle: Joseph Smith and the Virtue of Friendship," *Journal of Mormon History* 23, no. 2 (fall 1997): 77–105; by Perciaccante, "Backlash Against Formalism: Early Mormonism's Appeal in Jefferson County," *Journal of Mormon History* 19, no. 2 (fall 1993): 35–63; by Harper, "Missionaries in the American Religious Marketplace: Mormon Proselyting in the 1830s," *Journal of Mormon History* 24, no. 2 (fall 1998): 1–29; and "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," *Religion and American Culture* 10, no. 1 (2000): 99–118; and by Eliason "Curious Gentiles and Representational Authority in the City of Saints," *Religion and American Culture* 11, no. 2 (2001): 155–90; and "The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church," *Journal of Mormon History*, 28, no. 2 (fall 2002): 139–73. Marvin S. Hill's *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); and Kenneth Winn's *Exiles in the Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) also placed Mormonism within broader nineteenth-century movements (antipluralism and republicanism) but were sociopolitically based more than religiously so.

30. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Much of *Refiner's Fire* was considered controversial by Mormon experts. See Jan Shipp's "Thoughts about the Academic Community's Response to John Brooke's *Refiner's Fire*," in her *Sojourner in the Promised Land* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 204–18.

31. Terryl Givens, *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

32. Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

33. On methods to be borrowed from the study of other religions, the hermeneutical works on Methodism in the '90s provide models for application to Mormonism; see Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991); and A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993)—not to mention the fact that comparisons to the America's largest religion at the time of Mormonism's founding (Methodism) are shockingly few. Likewise, the works of religious studies, particularly that which places Mormonism in the broader context of Christian history, also hold great potential. See Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3d ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1999). This interpretation (along with Brooke's) indicates that the Mormonism-as-the-American-religion paradigm is limiting in itself. Indeed, though there is no lack of scholarship on this subject of British converts, Mormonism's success throughout the Anglo world in the nineteenth century suggests that this is the broader culture that Mormonism should illuminate. Indeed, as comparative studies of evangelicalism have gone not only transatlantic but throughout the British Empire, Mormon studies need to follow suit. See Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790–1865*

(Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1978); and Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). With Mormonism's current movement toward world-religion status (there are currently more members outside the United States than inside), Wood's claim that through Mormonism historians can "begin to understand the complicated nature of that culture" is now taking on a global significance.