The Mormon Past: Revealed or Revisited?

By Jan Shipps

In recent months a variety of persons and institutions, Mormon and non-Mormon, have focused increasingly sharp attention on the study and teaching of the Mormon past.

The institutional Church itself has promoted a number of history-related projects. The concrete walls of the new Museum of Church History and Art (scheduled to open in 1983) are slowly rising on the block west of Temple Square. The Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History, formerly the History Division of the Historical Department, has been ensconcing itself at BYU. And employees of the Church Educational System have been gearing up to teach Church history to seminary and institute students when the new year begins. Accordingly, Elder Boyd K. Packer, member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and advisor to the Historical Department, addressed these teachers at the annual CES symposium last August, expressing his concern at some recent historical writing and outlining his belief that the purpose of teaching history is to build faith. 

Louis C. Midgley, a professor of government at BYU, echoed Elder Packer's goals and sentiments to an audience at the Western History Association annual meetings in San Antonio, Texas, during October. He criticized what he termed the "New Mormon Apology," questioning the methodology as well as motivations of some Mormon historians.

Perhaps some of this concern is due to the proliferation of independent groups dealing with LDS history. Lectures chronicling certain aspects of the Mormon past have been sponsored by such varying groups as BYU (the history department, the Charles Redd Center, the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute), the Mormon History Association, the John Whitmer Historical Association (RLDS), the American Historical Association, the Utah Women's History Association, the Utah State Historical Society, and the Sunstone Foundation. Scores of books are being published in the regional press (including the soon to be released Saints Without Haloes by Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton). In addition, books on Mormonism such as Klaus Hansen's Mormonism and the American Experience (University of Chicago Press) and Larry Foster's Religion and Sexuality (Oxford University Press) have been sponsored by prestigious national publishers.

Not surprisingly, this flurry of activity has prompted a number of writers to re-examine the dead ends, contradictions, pains, and possibilities of the study of religious history in general and of Mormon history in particular.

Last spring, for example, Leonard J. Arrington addressed the topic "The Writing of Latter-day Saint History: Problems, Accomplishments, and Admonitions" for the Inaugural Lecture Series of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute (published in the Fall 1981 issue of Dialogue). A fine paper on Mormon biography was also written by Ronald W. Walker for the MHA meetings in Rexburg, Idaho. Walker read part of this paper (graciously substituting for Donna Hill, author of the nationally-published Joseph Smith: A Biography, who was ill) at a session of the 1981 Sunstone Theological Symposium entitled "Writing Religious Biography from Within." Stephen Gottschalk, a Christian Scientist scholar, and Jonathan Butler, a Seventh Day Adventist scholar, also participated on the panel. Recently D. Michael Quinn presented a paper, "On Being a Mormon Historian" to a group of students at BYU. The B. H. Roberts Society has planned a session on the study of Mormon history for February. The list could go on.

Because the questions are so important and the interest in articulating these concerns seems broad, we at SUNSTONE have decided to run a series of articles on the general topic of religious history during the next few months. We hope to include a broad spectrum of representative points of view, from both Mormons and non-Mormons. We especially encourage responses and suggestions from our readers.

The following remarks by non-Mormon scholar Jan Shipps, delivered in response to Louis Midgley's paper at the Western History Association, provide a helpful introduction, since she sketches categories and definitions which begin to bring the complex issues involved into focus.

For the sake of convenience, the historiography of Mormonism may be divided into three segments. These are better described in terms of what was (and is) occurring than in precise temporal divisions. In an initial period of beginnings, extending roughly from the late 1820s through the mid-1860s, the fundamental Mormon story came forth, was written down, added to, corrected, rewritten, and much of it published by the Church, mainly in its own periodicals and in the form of tracts. At approximately the same time, the Mormon "counter-story" likewise came forth. It, too, was written down, added to, and published to the world in the form of expose.

Gradually this initial historiographical segment gave way to a period of pure polemic which operated entirely according to what, in logic, is called the law (or principle) of the excluded middle. Mormonism is or is not true; Joseph Smith was or was not a prophet. Readers had to choose to believe either the more or less codified Mormon story or its equally patterned opposite: Saints recounted the story of LDS beginnings, subsequent persecutions (mobbing, drivings) and accomplishments despite the persecutions, while Gentiles and former Saints, with apparently endless patience, worked and reworked the Eber D. Howe and John C. Bennett material. As time passed and persons whose first-hand knowledge of early Mormonism grew frail, both the Saints and their opponents moved to buttress their positions. Church Historian Andrew Jenson and his assistants made strenuous attempts to get what Mormons remembered about early Mormonism into the permanent record; Albert B. Deming and other Gentiles...
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made no less strenuous efforts to get what non-Mormons remembered of early Mormonism written down as well. Faith promoting biographies of LDS readers were issued and apostate revelations published, all with the intent of making it absolutely clear that with regard to Mormonism no middle ground existed. Although this extreme situation was complicated by disagreement within the LDS circle itself about what happened near the end of Joseph Smith’s life, about its beginning and the beginning of the faith, serious questions did not arise; standoff which started when the prophet told the story one way and his detractors told it another continued unabated.

The modern period in the historiography of Mormonism was slowly ushered in during the 1920s and 30s when accounts which did not fit either of the “pure types” of LDS history started to appear. Usually more concerned with the Saints in Utah than with Mormon beginnings, these works were generally written by historians who were neither in the employ of the LDS Church or any competing religious organization, nor engaged in procuring—I use the word deliberately—a livelihood through the sale of anti-Mormon literature. With conspicuous exceptions such as DeVoto, Stegner, and a “little LDS housewife from Dixie,” Juanita Brooks, the authors of such works generally had graduate training; as examination of the chronological list of dissertations on Mormon history and culture in Dialogue (Volume One, Number One) reveals, that training was ever more likely to be in history as such studies were completed with accelerating frequency in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Often based on sources other than the records contained in the Church Archives—on LDS collections at Yale University, the Huntington Library, the New York Public Library, the Utah State Historical Society, the University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and even the Salt Lake City Public Library—these historical accounts were sometimes puzzling because they did not always fit securely into the traditional Mormon and anti-Mormon categories.

One of the signals that an ever-increasing number of professionals were engaging in the study of Mormon things was the formation and subsequent growth of the Mormon History Association. Another signal was a good deal of more or less corporate introspection within the community of LDS historians regarding methodology, professional standards, and the implications of doing research and writing according to acceptable canons of historical scholarship. Significant fruits of this consideration were articles by Leonard J. Arrington, Paul Edwards, Robert Flanders, Davis Bitton, and Richard Bushman.

It was Bushman’s “Faithful History” which set, I believe, the tone for what is more and more called the “golden age of Mormon history.” That period opened with the more or less simultaneous appointment of the single most outstanding professional then writing Mormon history, Leonard J. Arrington, to the position of LDS Church Historian and the professionalization of the handling of the Church’s enormous collection of source materials so that it could be used by scholars. These two related developments were obviously a part of the movement to professionalize the LDS administrative process and the Church’s central support services. Still they would not have occurred if the ecclesiastical decision-makers had not been persuaded, on the one hand, that ultimately there were no real skeletons in the Mormon closet which might require the sort of protection the Mother Church gives Christian Science source materials and, on the other, that “faithful” professional history could be written.

The recent transformation of that extraordinary history division which Arrington put together at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City into the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History, now based at Brigham Young University, should not be taken as evidence that the “Church” has lost this confidence. After all, the history division was not disbanded so much as transferred to a new—and I am convinced—more appropriate setting. But it does indicate that it has become more clear to the General Authorities than it was before that even “faithful” professional history does not merit an ecclesiastical imprimatur.

From the outside—and from the perspective of religious studies—the nature of history in religion is pointed up in bold relief, teaching us all something that might not have been absolutely clear before. According to the law of the excluded middle, the alternative to faithful history is unfaithful history. And this would seem, of course, to translate into a statement of equality so that “faithful” history equals pro-Mormon history and “unfaithful” history equals anti-Mormon history. But if the past ever demonstrates anything, it demonstrates that this statement of equality is a false one. This is an argument which directly counters some critics whose categories would, finally, call unfaithful even such outstanding examples of faithful history as Marvin Hill’s Church History critique of Fawn Brodie’s work and, possibly, even Tom Alexander’s study of “Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of
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Mormon Religious Experience."

Things will be clarified if it is recognized, instead, that there are two separate and distinct kinds of history of any religious tradition—and that Mormonism is no exception. It has a sacred history and it has an ordinary history (profane, in Mircea Eliade's nomenclature) and these are very different things.

In sacred history, the divine is an actor in the drama, a direct participant not a supernatural presence. Because the divine is a natural part of the process, sacred history inevitably takes on a mythic character which makes it "truer than true," if by truth one means that which is established and verified according to the canons of historical scholarship. Sacred history has other characteristics as well. It is stripped down—in artistic terms, stylized—so that the story is told in blacks and whites, with no grays. The persecuted and persecutors, the people of God and the people of Satan, good and evil are locked in mortal combat in which compromise is out of the question. All the ambiguity and complexity of human existence is shorn away. Moreover, the context is left ambiguous enough to keep the narrative from being either time or culture bound; it functions as scripture and is constructed so that it may be reappropriated by persons of all times and all places. Mormonism's sacred history, like all sacred history, is a part of the mythological dimension of this religion. By its very nature it can only be retold and defended; not reinvestigated; re-searched.

Ordinary history, however, does not operate in that fashion. It is marked by emphasis on context, by the inclusion of all the ambiguity and complexity of the human experience—by a recognition that there are two sides to any story. For example, to draw from the Old Testament account, the people of Jericho might have deserved some sympathy when Joshua "fit" that battle and the walls came tumbling down. As does all history, this type of Mormon history will (and must) be rewritten as Bushman said, every 30 or 40 years, because new Saints face new problems and have new concerns, which means that they seek different precedents from the past.

The appropriate categories to classify sacred history are, indeed, Mormon and anti-Mormon (and lest you think I jest, read any Utah Evangel or Modern Microfilm publication to get a taste of "sacred" anti-Mormon history). But Mormonism's ordinary history is more properly classified in "faithful" and "non-faithful" terms, depending on whether the analytic categories are drawn from within or without the Mormon experience.

To show you what I mean, let me describe an example of "unfaithful" and "faithful" history. When I was a beginning graduate student, nearly brand new to the study of Mormon history, I wrote a master's thesis on the Mormons in politics during the Nauvoo period. Examining all the evidence I could find about Joseph Smith's presidential bid, I concluded that the prophet became a candidate for president of the United States in order to avoid having to declare sides and, thus, alienate either the Whigs or the Democrats. This, from the outside, still appears to be a perfectly logical conclusion. The only problem is that it is probably wrong, as was made clear when Robert Flanders examined the very same evidence and came to a dramatically different conclusion. Instead of working within secular categories—politics, power, and so on—he drew on his knowledge of Mormonism from the inside and was able to make a convincing case that when the prophet ran for president he was not engaging in political strategy. He expected to win since he anticipated the imminent inauguration of the Kingdom of God. This was faithful history and, I am convinced, comes much closer than my "unfaithful" account to being history "as it actually was."

Some have argued that the only acceptable Mormon history is sacred history and that Mormons who "really" are Mormon will be engaged in retelling and defending the sacred story, not in writing ordinary LDS history. This is a dangerous argument. There can be no doubt about that, since sacred history lends itself to measurement mainly on an orthodoxy-heresy dimension. Should Mormon history be written only in this fashion, it could prove tragically divisive within the LDS intellectual community. More frightening, I should think, from the Mormon perspective, is the fact that even if the doors to 50 East North Temple were locked shut and all the archival collection deposited, as it were, in a safe in the office of the First Presidency, ordinary Mormon history is going to be written; it is in the public domain. If Mormons who are also professional historians—to whom sophisticated methodology and objective history are not dirty words—do not write it, it will be written by outsiders. If that happens, all the complexity, ambiguity, cowardice, bravery, devotion or lack of it, confusion, internal dissension, and efforts to build the Kingdom will be set down inside a Gentile framework. The sacred story will remain, but the glory of Mormon history will disappear.

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