

*Are the eternal truths of Mormonism dependent on the sincerity of Joseph Smith?  
Does contemporary Mormon faith rest on the intentions of the first prophet?*

# TRACKING THE SINCERE BELIEVER

## “AUTHENTIC” RELIGION AND THE ENDURING LEGACY OF JOSEPH SMITH JR.

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**I**N 1902, WILLIAM A. LINN PUBLISHED A HISTORICAL work entitled *The Story of the Mormons*. That book became the most-often-cited treatment of the LDS Church written by a non-Mormon in the early twentieth century. Linn's exhaustive work includes more than 600 pages of text, multiple appendices, and copious citations of the works of Joseph Smith Jr., Lucy Mack Smith, and Parley P. Pratt, as well as pro- and anti-Mormon materials Linn gathered while conducting his research in the New York Public Library. In many respects, Linn's volume is a typical anti-Mormon exposé. Like other Gentiles who'd written before him, Linn sees Mormonism as a phenomenon of inviting surfaces that glosses the evils lurking beneath. The job of the historian—his job—is to unveil the deceptions, to show Mormonism for what it really is: a web of deceit spun by power-hungry leaders to ensnare the easily duped American public.

The centerpiece of Linn's debunking enterprise is his exposure of Joseph Smith as a fraud. At the very opening of his history, Linn explains that people in every time and place have been fooled by religious impostors. However, there is something particular about Joseph Smith's deceptions. Linn writes:

It is true that the effrontery which has characterized Mormonism from the start has been most daring. Its founder a lad of low birth, very limited education, and uncertain morals; its beginnings so near burlesque that they drew down upon its originators the

scoff of their neighbors,—the organization increased its membership as it was driven from one state to another, building up at last in an untried wilderness a population that has steadily augmented its wealth and numbers; doggedly defending its right to practise its peculiar beliefs and obey only the officers of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Linn's comparison of Mormonism to a theatrical production—a mocking and unoriginal imitation of religion put forward by a man who was probably immoral—reveals Linn's own beliefs more than it describes Joseph Smith's following then or now. In making this claim, Linn reveals an important assumption that deserves further exploration: He assumes that Joseph Smith's sincerity is inextricably linked to the truths of the Mormon faith. Because he judges that Smith's intentions were not honest, the religion itself is rendered a sham. Religious *truth* is thus linked to Smith's personal *sincerity*—defined as genuine, honest, and free of duplicity.

This issue still haunts discussions of Smith's legacy: Are the eternal truths of Mormonism dependent on the sincerity of Joseph Smith? And, a corollary to that question: Does contemporary Mormon faith rest on the intentions of the first prophet?

These may seem like inappropriate or even impudent questions to ask during the 200th anniversary of Joseph Smith's birth. After all, in an important sense, history is truth. Christianity is a religious tradition that makes both historical and transhistorical claims: it is grounded in a historical narrative that is itself an element of its truth claim yet is also wedded to ideals and principles that are thought to be eternal. When a Christian claims to believe, he or she is confessing to believe in both a real-life story of Jesus' death and resurrection, and also in timeless principles about the world. Mormons share these claims but add to them a testimony of the veracity of Joseph



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Smith's revelations and of belief in a Father in Heaven who has been revealed and is continuing to reveal himself to humanity. Joseph Smith has to be there, in the story, for the tradition to make sense. History must be in play.

But it bears stating, as historian Kathleen Flake and others have so ably shown us, that the historical account of the Mormon tradition can be told in numerous ways; the narrative is not self-evident or unchanging.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the history of early Mormonism doesn't have to be told in the way it usually is: by placing Smith's guilelessness and honesty front and center. There may be other options, other angles of vision that reveal elements obscured by the shadow of Joseph Smith's personal story. Even if we do linger on Smith's account, it is instructive to move away from the "sincerity box," as I want to call it, to see the Mormon prophet in other lights.

This essay attempts to do three different things. First, it explores how the notion of sincerity has been used by believers and nonbelievers alike to make claims about the truth of Mormonism. Second, it focuses on sincerity as a concept and explores why it can be a problem rather than a solution. And finally, it suggests some other possible framings for the exploration of Mormon history.

**T**HE IDEAL OF religious sincerity is so pervasive in our day and age that we may not even realize the many ways it affects what we see and feel. Many readers may be wondering, in fact: What's the problem here? Of course religious truth is about belief, about having the right internal disposition. Like the air we breathe, our dependence on it is practically automatic.

Almost everyone before and after William Linn—believers, nonbelievers, and agnostics alike—have assumed that judging Smith's intentions will take us directly to the heart of the truth of Mormonism. At the end of the day—or at least at the end of this essay—you may still decide that judging personal sincerity is the surest way to gauge true religion. But I'd like to at least temporarily pull apart this connection, to bracket the question of the ultimate truth of Smith's work and focus instead on Smith's psychology—and thereby show how people use evidence of sincerity to judge the objective validity of the Mormon tradition. For present purposes, I'm not concerned about whether God actually revealed himself to Joseph, or whether there were golden plates in



the New York hills. Instead, I want to focus on how people talk about Smith's relationship to those ancient writings. What I'm most intrigued by is the presumed clean connection between feeling and action, the importance people place on judging what Joseph thought and felt as a litmus test for the validity of Mormon origins and, by extension, for contemporary LDS faith.

So much discussion of Mormonism over the past 175 years has centered on Joseph Smith's sincerity. We might have expected that from Linn—but one hundred years later, biographies and historians continue to engage the issue. In revisiting this terrain, I am struck not only by the vast historiography, but by the patterns of argument, the well-worn channels in which it runs. The most obvious pivot point, of course, is the issue of supernatural versus natural explanations for Smith's work and authority. Was Smith a prophet of God or a charlatan? Related to character questions, almost by necessity, is the issue of how we are to understand the content and production of the Book of Mormon. Is it chloroform in print, as Mark Twain would have it?<sup>3</sup> The fantastic imaginings of a creative but thoroughly natural mind, as Fawn Brodie has proposed?<sup>4</sup> Is it Nathan Hatch's outburst of populist rant?<sup>5</sup> Or is it, as many believers would hold, the inspired word of God? Did Smith dig it out of a hillside? Did he *think* he dug it out of a hillside? Did he lie and tell people he dug it out of a hillside but for all the right reasons? Authors almost always weigh in on Smith's character. "Was Joseph Smith an honest man?" seems to me to be the underlying question for nearly every interpretation of his life.

Although this matter of Smith's sincerity may seem, on the face of it, to constitute a straightforward battle between believers and unbelievers, Saints and Gentiles, the terrain does not map that easily onto patterns of faith. Take Fawn Brodie, whose 1945 biography of Smith resulted in lambasting by prominent Mormon scholars and her excommunication from the Church. Brodie admires Smith even as she offers thoroughly mundane explanations for his power. As I read her, Brodie thinks that Smith is a really interesting man with a forceful intellect; she argues that "faithful" scholarship has, in fact, downplayed his natural talents in order to bolster the supernatural origins of his book. Harold Bloom, no believer himself, nonetheless considers Smith a religious genius.<sup>6</sup>

Faithful Latter-day Saints have focused equal attention on Smith's inner state. Notice the way that the interplay of surface appearance and interior disposition shapes Marvin Hill's review of Brodie's biography:

The Joseph Smith she depicts is a deliberate deceiver who played out his masquerade for personal advantage. The implication is that Joseph Smith was in fact skeptical as to the truths of Christianity, that he never underwent that moment of conversion which he details in his autobiography, and that he continued to enact his subterfuge until for so doing he was shot by a mob at the Carthage jail. She maintains that, to a considerable extent, his religious efforts were play-acting for the benefit of an appreciative audience.<sup>7</sup>

Hill (along with many others) was incensed by the characterization of Smith as a religious hypocrite whose inner feelings did not match his outer actions.

On the other side of the fence of faith, the less sympathetic biographer Dan Vogel acknowledges this mismatch of interior disposition and external actions but still feels a need to separate the "true" from the "false" religious experience. He theorizes insincerity as, in some cases, morally justifiable:

*I*'M INTRIGUED BY THE PRESUMED CLEAN CONNECTION BETWEEN FEELING AND ACTION, THE IMPORTANCE PEOPLE PLACE ON JUDGING WHAT JOSEPH THOUGHT AND FELT AS A LITMUS TEST FOR THE VALIDITY OF MORMON ORIGINS AND, BY EXTENSION, FOR CONTEMPORARY LDS FAITH.

Smith really believed he was called of God to preach repentance to a sinful world but . . . he felt justified in using deception to more fully accomplish his mission. Like the faith healer who uses plants or confederates in his congregation to create a faith-promoting atmosphere in which the true miracles can occur, Smith assumed the role of prophet, produced the Book of Mormon, and issued revelations to create a setting in which true conversion experiences could take place. It is the true healings and conversions that not only justify deception but also convince the pious frauds that they are perhaps after all real healers or real prophets.<sup>8</sup>

But the very vigor with which Vogel broaches the subject indicates a discomfort with it; he rationalizes Smith's insincerity. Joseph Smith, however pious, was fraudulent in his means—a fact that invalidates his ministry.

Richard Bushman's recent biography on Joseph Smith is the most exhaustive and sophisticated treatment available. He, too, stresses Smith's sincerity. Smith thought of himself as a revelator, Bushman asserts. Like the Quaker George Fox or the prophets of the Old Testament, he was guided by the voice of God, not the workings of his own mind. In order to "get inside the mind" of the prophet, explains Bushman, one must recognize this fact. Bushman feels that this gets around the thorny question of

whether or not the revelations were *really* from God—in any case, he determines, Smith *thought* they were.<sup>9</sup> For Bushman, just like the others, it is Smith's veracity that is at stake.

I don't know whether Joseph Smith thought he heard the voice of God or not. Nor is my purpose to judge any of these interpretations that focus on such questions. My purpose, rather, is to call our attention reflexively to the persistence of interest, from both Mormon and non-Mormon scholars, in Smith's sincerity. Did he mean what he said? Did he feel religious inside? Did his outer actions match his inner state? Interestingly, Brodie, Hill, and Vogel all agree that Smith *must* have come to some kind of "inner equilibrium," as Brodie puts it, which allowed for a measure of "sincerity."<sup>10</sup>

I should point out, too, that it's not just historians who are interested in this question. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself has increasingly elevated Joseph Smith's simplicity and guilelessness as chief virtues. Kathleen Flake tells us that it was only at the turn of the twentieth century, as the Church set out to prove its "Americanness" and downplay its peculiarities, that the First Vision and the tale of the young, uneducated, and innocent boy became a hallmark of the faith.<sup>11</sup> The Church has its own reasons for telling the story

this way: the naiveté of a young boy, in an important sense, stands in as a sign of the religious validity of the Church as a whole. Current LDS literature makes this bond explicit. In his April 2002 General Conference address, Elder Carlos Amado urged newcomers to "read the testimony of Joseph Smith with an open mind and real intent. You will feel his sincerity, and you will discover the establishment of the Church, restored in a miraculous way!"<sup>12</sup> Through Joseph Smith's sincerity, then, new believers will come into the Church. Increasingly, belief in Smith's veracity has become a signal feature of faithfulness.

Yet as a philosophical issue (I'll return to the historical question later), sincerity turns out to be a complicated matter: it can be misleading. The LDS Church teaches, on the one hand, that Mormons need sincerity (both theirs and Joseph's) to obtain true faith. They must enter into their exploration with the right heart. On the other hand, the Church cautions that sincerity is not enough: "At the outset of this investigation," explains Elder John Morgan in an 1881 pamphlet,

it is deemed proper and advisable to refer to another point, so that we may have a clear understanding. The point is: Sincerity of belief does not in any way establish the correctness of a principle. Only an unimpeachable testimony can do that.<sup>13</sup>

This reminder that sincerity of belief is not enough to establish something's truthfulness is an important one. But what

about the converse of this equation? Can insincere people express correct ideas and enact religious truths—sometimes despite themselves? It's an interesting question to which I now turn.

**T**HE CHURCH CLEARLY has theological investments in Smith's sincerity. But why should Smith's sincerity matter to us? Of what consequence is it to both believers and nonbelievers to evaluate and judge sincerity? How are the questions we all ask of Joseph Smith—and thus the way we tell his story and the story of the church he founded—shaped by our own cultural assumptions?

It's important, first, to place ourselves in time. Sincerity, it turns out, has not always been seen as a hallmark of religious authenticity. In fact, sincerity itself—or at least the idea that one's inner thoughts and feelings had much to do with one's salvation—has been a subject of considerable dispute in the Christian tradition for at least five hundred years. As Lionel Trilling points out in his provocative essays in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, the word "sincerity" entered the English language in the first third of the sixteenth century, just at the dawn of the Reformation. And the word was connected, morally and aesthetically, to that tumultuous religious transformation: it was derived from the Latin term meaning, literally, "clean, or sound, or pure."<sup>14</sup> Catholics before the Reformation worried much less about intentions and much more about actions, for salvation was earned principally through the rites and sacraments of the church. For Protestants, trying to separate themselves from Catholic ritualism and ceremony, having a "clean soul" became increasingly important. Sincerity provided a convenient way to distinguish "pure" doctrine, religion, or Gospel, from the impure (Catholic). Because Protestants—relying on the Apostle Paul and Augustine as their guides—believed that exterior action flowed from a right interior disposition, they were deeply disturbed by any evidence that one's actions might not accord with one's faith or feelings. Unlike Catholics, who retained the conviction that deeds themselves could motivate feelings (as well as the other way around), Protestants prized purity of heart and purpose as the hallmarks of good character. *Sola fide*. Faith alone will win you heaven. It was only in subsequent centuries that sincerity came to



connote an individual character trait—as in, the absence of feigning or pretense.

Trilling also points out that this revolution in sensibility, this transformation to seeing good character as a matter of inner disposition rather than the performance of particular activities, prompted numerous explorations of the themes of dissemblance and dissimulation in the Elizabethan Era. Think of the number of Shakespeare's plays that deal with the discrepancy between appearance and disposition: men pose as women, villains pretend to be good, and people are fooled by pretense to both comic and tragic effect. The Protestant-inspired fervor for the "pure personality" gained added force in the New World. During the religious revivals of the eighteenth century, so-called "New Light" Protestants proclaimed that one could not be a true Christian without having had a saving experience of God's grace. In turn, considerable scrutiny fell on religious leaders. Were *they* saved? If not, could they save other people? What was the relationship between salvation and inner disposition? In its most famous formulation, one New Light leader asks, "Is a dead man fit to bring others to life?"<sup>15</sup> In other words, those ministers who were not purified internally by God could not lead others to salvation. Unlike the Catholic priest who could serve as a sacramental medium of God despite his own personal failings, the Protestant minister was expected to be morally pure; the state of his soul affected his ability to save others.

The founding of the American nation and the disestablishment of religion lent a new urgency to moral suasion, since one could no longer compel religious behavior. Without a state church to structure and mandate religious action, fellow citizens had to *convince* one another about appropriate beliefs—an activity that they felt would in turn encourage moral conduct. Good behavior was thereby a sign of one's inner state of salvation. Bolstered by romantic sensibilities and the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's anthropology of natural goodness, the fascination with the self and its presentation can be found everywhere in nineteenth-century art and letters—from Ralph Waldo Emerson's assertions of the primacy of loyalty to individual belief and expression to Henry and William James, both of whom, in different spheres, explored the relationship between personal feelings and behaviors and larger moral and aesthetic categories.<sup>16</sup>

This relationship has been explored in tales of fallen religious leaders over and over again. A brief list tells the story: Arthur Dimmesdale, the cowardly minister from the *Scarlet Letter*; Theron Ware, the fallen Methodist preacher in Harold Frederic's famous novel who wanted only to impress his new Catholic friends; and Sinclair Lewis's quack preacher Elmer Gantry; and the brilliantly gullible and heavily mascaraed Tammy Faye Bakker. All of their sad stories raise the profound philosophical question: how do we know that what we see is true, is natural, is the *real* self? And this question is premised on the idea that the real self is the self *within*, a self separable from individual behavior, rather than the sum total of one's actions.

This impulse to find the real person beneath the mask or the subterfuge, and to revere people as "good" if their inner states match their outer comportment, also leads to particular obsessions with and evaluations of the past. Two connected preoccupations offer potential reinterpretations of Smith's role in early Mormonism: the American suspicion of self-creation as inauthentic; and the unexamined assumption that personal morality ought to be marked by the transparent and consistent display of one's "innermost feelings."

Americans, shaped by this Protestant spiritual ethic, can be

## MORMON SALVATION MAY BE DEPENDENT ON WHAT JOSEPH SMITH DID, BUT IS IT DEPENDENT ON WHAT HE FELT?

deeply disquieted by obvious and overt attempts at self-creation. Our culture may value the "self-made man," but that persona is a far cry from self-fashioning, the active and deliberate creation of a personal image for public effect. The latter garners deep suspicion as suspect or immoral. Think of the pop star Madonna, a contemporary example of someone willing to create herself over and over again (currently refashioned as a mother and housewife). Rather than Madonna-like flash, we tend to look for the real substance beneath the tricks and makeup. We look for sincerity.

Yet American history also offers potentially admirable models of figures who have reshaped their behavior in spite of—or even because of—a failure to feel as moral as they wanted to act. Benjamin Franklin and Dale Carnegie both offer intriguing and confounding examples of different takes on inner disposition and external behavior. Franklin, like Joseph Smith, came from humble origins. He was self-taught, an eclectic reader with deep interests in religious matters. As a youth, he engaged in "indiscrete disputations" that upset others—some of whom apparently spoke ill of him. Unhappy with being the object of scorn, Franklin determined to be seen in a different light. He chose to create a different self, much as Fawn Brodie wants to argue that Smith grew into his role as a prophet and religious leader. Indeed, in his autobiography, Franklin admits to lying and flattering in order to impress people, all to the end of having a good reputation in the world—a goal that he asserts is a deeply moral ideal.

For Franklin, a good character is formed by one's reputa-

tion, not by one's intentions. One acts not on abstract moral principles but on the pragmatic imperative to get along with others and preserve one's name. As he put it, "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do."<sup>17</sup> Franklin was devoted to the art of self-presentation: He reveals his "errata," his mistakes, to his readers in such a skillful way that one is hardly aware of the masterful control he demonstrates over his own image. He puts on the guise of such sincerity that one is taken in, convinced of the essential goodness of his inner character despite his activities. But as he might well point out, the guise is what matters in the world. He made no claims to purity of heart—in fact, quite the opposite.

The example of Dale Carnegie is also potentially instructive because Carnegie believed fervently that entrepreneurship, showmanship, and self-creation are not antithetical to religious faith or purpose: they are, in fact, deeply moral acts. Like Franklin, Carnegie—who brought us *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—urges a certain kind of theatrical play-acting on his readers:

Regard this as a working handbook on human relations: whenever you are confronted with some spe-

cific problem—such as handling a child, winning a wife to your way of thinking, or satisfying an irritated customer—hesitate about doing the natural thing, the impulsive thing. That is usually wrong.

He instructs readers instead to read his pages and follow his advice, and watch it "achieve magic for you."<sup>18</sup> I should note here that scholars have felt as equally compelled to weigh in on Carnegie as they have on Smith: was he sincere or merely a charming deceiver? Yet Carnegie claims, quite straightforwardly and much like Franklin, that the art of living morally in society is *not* about personal sincerity. Theater can provoke magic, he assures us; artifice can ensure morality.

Both Franklin and Carnegie call for a lack of transparency, the obscuring of one's sincere desires for the sake of social cohesion. Their projects of self-creation, in other words, require the use of personal artifice in the service of a greater ethical good. Contemporary philosophers take this point still further. In his 1997 book, *Hiding*, the philosopher Mark Taylor asserts that the mark of our postmodern condition is that we have moved beyond the modern illusion of depth into a world of surfaces. As he would have it, in an era of massive amounts of information and media bombardment, everything now is about appearances and spectacle. Image really has become substance. There is no *there* underneath the surface to unmask. As Taylor puts it in a provocative turn of phrase, "Depth is where the gods hide when they have been chased from the heavens."<sup>19</sup> If Taylor is right, secular scholars have chased the gods from the heavens of their scholarship, but they surrepti-



tiously worship those gods in the guise of sincerity. They love nothing more than to debunk or delegitimize by unmasking insincerity. (I include myself here because I also relished the moral spectacle of Tammy Faye Bakker getting her comeuppance, as if this nullified all religious experience connected with her.) We *do* believe there's some essence—or ought to be one—underneath, behind, or inside, guiding and shaping our exterior behavior.

Artifice and showmanship are particularly sensitive subjects when we talk about religion. But they become especially difficult in talking about Mormonism. On the one hand, Church leaders (especially of late) have emphasized the centrality of faith and belief in Joseph Smith. On the other hand, Mormonism is also a sacramental religion in which particular actions have efficacy not because of the power of the participants, but because of the power of God that is manifest through them. Sacramentalism requires an attention to ceremony and ritual that transcends individual character. It is no wonder that early observers compared Mormonism to Catholicism and to Islam, religious traditions in which ritual plays an essential part. Smith may in fact be understood as an advocate for renewed ceremonialism within American Christianity—in and of itself a marked turn toward materiality and surface appearance. Scholarly debunkers have delighted in pointing to the derivative nature of temple rituals in Masonic tradition, but these rituals might also be explored as a radical protest against the philosophical premises of Protestant revivalism in which one had to scour one's inner feelings before one could commit to Christ. Non-Mormon scholars today have been dismissive of Mormon temple decoration and aesthetics, seeing in them a world of sentimental kitsch and excessive literalism. Dismissed as impure, unnatural, mediated by materiality, things Mormon rankle nonbelievers in part because all Americans have been shaped by a deeply Protestant sensibility of the appropriate moral relationship between belief and behavior, surface and essence.

While it is interesting that outsiders and scholars have used this Protestant lens of sincerity and purity to judge Mormonism, what about the Church itself? This is what I find most intriguing of all: by focusing matters of faith so exclusively on Joseph's testimony, Mormons are capitulating to evangelical pieties in their own self-presentation. And if one believes that salvation comes, at least in



part, through sacramental observances, then why stake accounts of Mormon origins on Smith's sincerity of purpose? (I'm thinking here of the Mormon view of the necessity of receiving certain ordinances, of which LDS emphasis on vicarious temple work for the dead is a staggering example.)

Another way an insider might approach this question is: Why does it matter if Smith was a pious man, as long as God provided the Book of Mormon and restored the priesthood through him? Mormon salvation may be dependent on what Joseph Smith *did*, but is it dependent on what he *felt*? Or, on what modern-day believers claim that he felt? This equation—Smith's sincerity equals religious legitimacy—means that any personal failing of Smith calls into question the truth of Mormonism itself.

**I** PROMISED A return to history, and the relationship between the narration of Mormon origins and the legacy of Joseph Smith. As I've already mentioned, the focus on sincere intention has shaped the way the story of early Mormonism gets told. The story of Mormon faith is told as a history of Joseph Smith and his sincere striving for God—if you believe this story, if you *testify* to your belief in this story, then you are one of the faithful. Even church outsiders relate the origins story this way. Personal character and history, sincerity and truth, story and faith are all intertwined in this narrative of religious conviction. But are there other potential starting points? I briefly propose several possibilities that highlight different elements of Mormonism.

One approach might be to select a different chronological starting point. In one sense, as historian Terryl Givens has recently pointed out, Joseph Smith is simply the most recent major actor in a grand and sweeping sacred drama, the full contours of which are still to be unfolded and understood.<sup>20</sup> In this larger framework, then, the Restoration is not the beginning point at all but merely marks a *replacement*, the rightful settling of temporal affairs from the wayward course of Christian history. America is only the final stage for the unfolding of the last dispensation of a sacred drama. In this frame of reference, starting with the First Vision is sort of like beginning the story of traditional Christianity with the founding of the United Methodist Church. It's an important piece of the picture, clearly, but

it is hardly the only way to set out. Moreover, thinking of the First Vision as the narrative starting point focuses the story more on the organization of the restored church and its leaders and less on the sacred drama of which it is the final act.

A second alternative has been broached by previous scholars but still remains to be fully explored. What if the narrative of Mormon history were conceived as a story of the experiences of ordinary believers rather than the experiences of the leaders? Focusing on leadership reinforces the validity of church authority, collective unity, and the centrality of institution building. But why focus there? Why not explore how ordinary people worked out their own religious understandings? More than twenty years ago, Davis Bitton and Leonard Arrington started down this path in *Saints without Halos: The Human Side of Mormon History*, a study of the lives of ordinary believers within the Church. In their introduction, they remark:

In Latter-day Saint history there has been a tendency to ignore what happens below the top-level of administration. The lives of those who drive the engines of history are ignored, often because they leave no written records, but just as often because they are not considered important. Such an attitude is unfortunate, for the vitality and strength of any movement is

## MORMONISM AS A RELIGIOUS TRADITION WORKS OUTSIDE OF THE “SINCERITY BOX” THAT HAS BEEN BUILT TO CONTAIN IT.

expressed in the diversity of its experience as well as its unity of purpose.<sup>21</sup>

Their statement aptly captures the truth that different stories accentuate different elements of history—thus where you begin, and with whom you start—matters greatly.

What if one were to focus on *diversity* of experience rather than *unity* of purpose? Historian Jan Shippo has explored the ways that some of the earliest converts focused their attention much more on the Book of Mormon itself and less on Joseph Smith as a prophet. The saga of a New World civilization drew them in. Equally important were the manifestations of the Holy Spirit that they saw in their midst and experienced for themselves. Miracles, visions, the sighting of “wonderful lights in the air,” were all means by which early believers experienced spiritual power.<sup>22</sup>

Family history is also religious history, something which no one knew better than Lucy Mack Smith. It, too, can be seen as the experiential focus for much of Latter-day Saint history. I bring this up, in part, because I noticed in my research that a wonderful tool, the *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM*, itself divides materials into two separate categories: one is “history,” which includes Church histories and the historical memoirs of Church leaders; the other is “biography, autobiography, and family history.”<sup>23</sup> This very division makes an important statement about what counts as religious history, equating it with ecclesiastical and therefore “authoritative” narratives. The stories of “saints without halos,” in contrast, are qualified as

something “other,” something less significant.

Finally, I would offer the possibility that new *geographies* of Mormonism will yield different historical narratives. This example draws most extensively on my own current investigations into Mormon history. I began my work on early Mormonism by reading accounts of missionaries in the South Pacific. The Saints had reached Polynesia by the early 1840s, and I became fascinated by their experiences. Most intriguing for me was a particular image of a native convert. Louisa Barnes Pratt, the wife of Addison Pratt, had hung pictures of Joseph and Hyrum Smith on the wall in her bedroom in Tahiti. Startled by the popularity of those likenesses during evenings of fellowship, she observed that “all the People on the Island came to look at [them].” One evening, a visiting man left the gathered group to look at one of the pictures: “He kneeled before it in order that the painting might come in range with his eyes. . . . For a quarter of an hour he looked steadfastly upon it, I believe without turning his eyes.” Louisa did not assume that this represented an act of worship, but she concluded that “he wished undoubtedly to imprint the lineaments of the features upon his mind.”<sup>24</sup>

This brief sketch still captivates me. What could natives in Tahiti in 1843 possibly have seen in the Mormon story that

made sense to them? I had always understood Mormonism to be the most “American” of religious traditions, and much of the scholarship on the early Church explains why the Book of Mormon would have been attractive to Americans in the early national period. It was democratic, scholars argued, and it was populist. The Book of Mormon appealed to people who wanted to put the new nation at the center of the sacred landscape. But none of this helped me make sense of the Tahitian converts. They had neither met Joseph Smith nor read the Book of Mormon for themselves, and they had little chance of ever visiting a temple or gathering with the Saints in Zion. They had a picture, a material object, which mediated religious truth, transporting them to another, sacred place. I’m not discounting the talents of the missionaries or the possibility of divine inspiration, but something in the Mormon tradition resonated with the experiences and desires of native peoples in a profound way.<sup>25</sup>

With this mystery in mind, I subsequently toured the Museum of Church History in Temple Square. Meditating on the handcars and tales of transcontinental suffering and pilgrimage, I again puzzled over how my Tahitian friend would have understood these relics and this account of the faith. Where was *his* story? In what ways might he have thought about the westward trek as a sacred journey? Why would it have mattered to him? I was struck again by the extent to which the authorized history of the Church is, indeed, an American story. Mormonism truly has been presented as an



American religion, in which national borders are deeply problematic but nonetheless essential.

I might have been content to let go of my Tahitian converts, if not for the fact that they and their non-North-American brethren now make up more than half the world's Latter-day Saints. And so I persist in proposing that this geographical variety can inform accounts of the LDS Church from its beginnings. Notice that this line of inquiry doesn't discount the centrality of Joseph Smith: we still witness natives lining up to stare at his picture. But clearly that act meant something distinctive, something that has yet to be recovered fully.

HERE IS OBVIOUSLY much at stake in thinking about the founder and first prophet of the LDS Church. But I think we may see more in Joseph Smith and in Mormonism by recognizing that our focus has been relatively narrow. In responding to hecklers who continually "debunked" Mormonism by "exposing" its leader as an insincere fraud, the Church increasingly devoted itself to countering those accusations by proving Smith's honorable intentions. Historians of all stripes have followed suit. By proxy, this line of argument calls into question the sincerity of each believer at every moment. And this strikes me as a Protestant interrogation that effaces other Mormon claims—specifically, a sacramental claim to a power that works through the most flawed individuals.

In a sense, Joseph Smith Jr. is both more and less than the sum of how he has been memorialized. And Mormonism as a religious tradition works outside of the "sincerity box" that has been built to contain it. ☹



## PRIVATE AFFAIR

—high in the Dolomites, northern Italy

Was that really a minuscule church by itself in the clearing between the steep layered green peaks? Or just a leap of faith? Or strained eyes? On a perch of pasture, its microphonic spindle balances a domed thimble: that entertains the antenna which pokes God's feet, explaining both the pilgrim's and our dalliance

here. Now, eyeing the church you spied, hand in hand we descend to near it. Was the frequency complete, the builder's prayer amplified? Even the pines stand clear in worship. We turn, and retreat.

—MARILYN BUSHMAN-CARLTON

## NOTES

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