



LATTER-DAY SAINTS, RITUAL, PILGRIMAGE, AND
CULTURAL SYMBOLICS: NEGLECTED SOURCES
FOR UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT

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Introduction

The general academic study of Mormonism is growing rapidly, but the types of analysis have been focused in relatively few areas. Evangelical explorations of Mormonism have also been limited, as exemplified by the vast majority of popular studies that primarily address doctrine and worldview. This is understandable in that Mormons believe their faith to be a restored expression of original Christianity, and yet from a traditional Christian perspective the doctrines of Mormonism are typically considered heretical. From this perspective, the analysis and critique of Mormon doctrine serves the dual function of defining traditional Christianity while doing so in contrast and opposition to many of the unique doctrines of Mormonism. But while this situation within evangelicalism is understandable, and explorations of Mormon doctrine and worldview are of continuing importance, additional perspectives of analysis are needed which will broaden an understanding of this complex and multifaceted religion and culture.

Ritual represents an important and neglected aspect of Mormon studies that can compliment the many doctrinal studies of the religion. This aspect has not been discussed by evangelical writers and this article attempts to address this deficit. Specifically, this article will look at one aspect of ritual in the form of pilgrimage, and will apply the insights of anthropology of pilgrimage as a tool to help in the understanding of Mormons and Mormonism. I will then consider the implications of anthropology of pilgrimage for evangelicals in their engagement with Latter-day Saints.

Mormonism, Academia, And Neglected Aspects Of Study

In an extensive article from *FARMS Review*, M. Gerald Bradford notes the growing interest among scholars in the study of Mormonism as a religious tradition.¹ This is expressed in a variety of forms, from academic publications, to dissertations and theses, to the development of Mormon studies programs at various universities. But even with this increased academic interest the focus has tended to be relatively narrow involving historical, cross-cultural, scriptural, doctrinal, and social scientific studies.² In light of the narrow analytical frameworks, Bradford suggests that the religious studies agenda for Mormonism needs to be broadened to include neglected aspects of the Mormon religion:

The experiential, ritual, ethical and legal, and material dimensions of Mormonism all have one thing in common: relatively little attention has been paid to them. These elements need to be integrated with other dimensions of the faith and compared with like characteristics in other religions before the tradition's structural makeup is fully portrayed. What it means to be a Latter-day Saint is reflected in the experiential and ritual dimensions of the faith every bit as much as in what adherents believe or in the sacred writings they hold dear.³

Just a little later in his discussion Bradford goes on to specifically emphasize again the significance of ritual as a neglected aspect of Mormon studies:

í the study of the ritual or ceremonial dimension of Mormonism, in everyday life and worship is of vital importance in gaining a better appreciation of the tradition as a whole. This aspect also needs to be studied in comparison with patterned celebrations and formalities in other traditions.⁴

Bradford is not the only scholar to recognize the significance of ritual studies to an understanding of Mormonism. John Sorenson has discussed various aspects of ritual in Mormonism as an alternative or complement to formal theology as a vehicle for understanding the religion.⁵ He defines ritual as "formal patterns of behavior in which issues of ultimate significance are affirmed, reflected, or brought into thoughtful consideration."⁶ With this definition in mind, he notes there is a "range of religious ritual" that takes place in LDS life in a variety of contexts, from the personal, to the congregational, to that which surrounds LDS temples as well as drama.⁷

Scholars have noted that within Mormonism history plays the part that theology does in Protestant Christianity.⁸ History and ritual come together in LDS culture in connection with the celebration of



Mormonism's sacred history in things like community celebrations such as Pioneer Day (the most popular cultural celebration in the state of Utah) and pageants or public dramas such as the Mormon Miracle Pageant in Manti, Utah.⁹ Within Mormonism various historic sites serve as a "physical example of the ritualizing impulse," such as the Hill Cumorah in New York where Latter-day Saints believe Joseph Smith found ancient golden tables which would become the Book of Mormon, the Sacred Grove also in New York where Smith claimed to have been visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ, as well as the Kirtland Temple in Ohio and Nauvoo Temple in Illinois.¹⁰ Such sites and the ritual celebrations that go with them are significant within Mormonism. As Olson notes, "the territorial environment functions as a symbol of group identity" through which "the group's most important values are ritually and ideally expressed for the entire community."¹¹ Olsen refers to this process as an "ideology of place," a "powerful idiom through which attachment and identity are expressed."¹²

Having considered the significance of Mormon ritual in connection with idea of sacred places I now turn my attention to specific forms of Latter-day Saint ritual, that of Mormon participation in dramas at temple sites. I argue that they are as ritually significant to Latter-day Saints as a form of religious pilgrimage just as pilgrimages in other religious traditions, whether the *hajj* in Islam or life-cycle initiations (*samskaras*) in Hinduism. While it may seem strange to evangelicals to think of Mormon visits to community celebrations, pageants, and temples as religious pilgrimage akin to pilgrimage in other religious traditions, there is scholarly recognition of pilgrimage in Mormon culture.¹³ A consideration of anthropology of pilgrimage will help in understanding the similarities between various types of pilgrimages in differing religious contexts.

Anthropology of Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is a relatively new aspect of study in anthropology. It usually depends upon the theoretical model for interpretation from Victor and Edith Turner, although the details of their model are debated. Anthropology of pilgrimage seeks to understand the "cultural and social significance of human travel"¹⁴ in religious contexts. Alan Morinis defines pilgrimage as "a process undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued idea."¹⁵ It involves a number of elements which minimally include "the religiously motivated individual, the intended sacred goal or place, and the act of making spatial effort to bring about their conjunction."¹⁶ Pilgrimage then

may be understood as a sacred journey, and Morinis has developed a typology for the journeys that includes devotional, instrumental, normative, obligatory, wandering, and initiatory.¹⁷ In consideration of Mormon culture related to pilgrimage, particularly those involving temples and pageants, Mormon pilgrimage is most likely best classified as encompassing aspects of both initiatory, defined as those pilgrimages that have as their purpose the transformation of the status of the participants, or devotional, defined as those pilgrimages which have as their goal encounter with, and honoring of, the shrine divinity, personage, or symbol.¹⁸

Application to LDS Culture

Scholars are more likely to recognize pilgrimage as a facet in other religious traditions, but may question its application to Mormonism. How can pilgrimage be understood to take place in Mormon culture, particularly when, as Davies states, "Mormons themselves do not normally speak of pilgrimage?"¹⁹ Such a lack of conscious awareness on the part of the pilgrim is not the determining factor in addressing this issue. As Morinis notes, pilgrims do not necessarily engage in a process of self-conscious pilgrimage or understand the symbolism of the object of that journey.²⁰ It is the personal movement toward a sacred place on the part of the pilgrim that is the determining factor as discussed above. In Davies's consideration of this in connection with Mormonism,

If pilgrimage is grounded in the process of movement towards a sacred space for soteriological ends then it is perfectly legitimate to approach the Mormon practice of temple visiting and the idea of life as a journey to heaven as aspects of pilgrimage.²¹

In his discussion of Mormon pilgrimage, Davies discusses various expressions of it including drama and temple visits. Davies notes that LDS temples function within Mormon perceptual geography as central symbols, and in his view "Mormon spirituality cannot be interpreted without some idiom of pilgrimage."²² In LDS temples Mormon history and faith come together as "an exteriorization of Mormon spirituality," where temples serve "as the final unifying focus both of historical patterns of pilgrimage, of missionary pilgrimage, and of life itself as pilgrimage."²³

Cultural Considerations from Pilgrimage

A study of LDS ritual from the perspective of anthropology of pilgrimage provides a number of insights into Mormon culture that have profound implications for evangelical engagement with Latter-day Saints. I will first consider three cultural aspects and then their implications for evangelical and LDS encounters.



Identity and Ideology of Place

Community celebrations within Mormon culture such as Pioneer Day, and even local cemeteries in Mormon communities, function as symbols of Mormon group identity. The same is true of pageants such as The Mormon Miracle Pageant at Manti, which Bitton describes as an event which perpetuates "a romanticized, ritualized, version of the Mormon past."²⁴ Such celebrations in connection with sacred spaces of pilgrimage provide what Olsen has called an "ideology of place" where the territorial environment often serves to express fundamental aspects of a culture's ideology.²⁵

Temples as Social Symbol

LDS cultural identity is not only found in community celebrations and pageants, but as we have seen, temples also serve as important expressions of social symbols as well. As Mormon sociologist Armand Mauss has observed, a temple offers "a solid, material focus for the collective, community identity of all the Mormons in its locale, and especially for the individual Mormon identities of all who use it. One's Mormon identity is reinforced to some extent even by visiting the grounds."²⁶ In his view, "they will make an increasing contribution to the construction and maintenance of local Mormon identities."²⁷

Viewed from the perspective of anthropology of pilgrimage, a temple is a central feature of LDS culture which functions as a marker of LDS identity. Davies comments on Victor Turner's anthropological approach to symbols and states that in connection to LDS temples,

If we add to this perspective the notion that a symbol participates in that which it represents we are in a position to understand the profound part played by temples in both the historical and modern life of Saints, embracing geographical, theological, artistic and architectural aspects of Latter-day Saint culture.²⁸

Pilgrimage and Narrative Rehearsal

Whether it is a community celebration, a dramatic reenactment through pageant, or a visit to a temple, all may be understood as forms of religious pilgrimage. These acts of pilgrimage must not be understood merely as forms of participation in individual entertainment, mere personal piety, or forms of tourism, but rather, these expressions of pilgrimage serve as a social context for religious groups to engage in narrative rehearsal.²⁹ By this it is meant that participation in pilgrimage

to these locations involves a personal and corporate re-enactment of the sacred story of the Latter-day Saints, and by so doing, a sense of group identity and cohesion is reinforced. Through the pilgrimage journey Latter-day Saints are participating in their sacred story as an expression of a total way of life that solidifies both the personal sense of identity and a sense of belonging to the broader religious community as well.

Symbolic Opposition and Implications for Encounters

Important implications arise from reflection upon Mormon ritual through pilgrimage, especially in the specific case of evangelical and LDS engagement at pageants and temple sites. One popular approach among evangelicals in ministry to Mormons is to engage LDS at their cultural community celebrations, pageants (especially at the Manti Miracle Pageant), and at community open houses associated with the opening of new temples. The stated goal of these evangelical organizations is twofold, the first being the evangelization of the LDS people, and the second goal being a desire to educate the public about the differences between traditional Christianity and Mormonism. Methods at these venues run across a narrow spectrum from quiet interaction involving discussions of doctrinal differences and the distribution of literature, to more aggressive apologetic confrontation, and at times outright denunciation and ridicule. However, given the issues discussed above related to pilgrimage we might reflect upon whether these methods *at these sites at times of pilgrimage* represent potentially fruitful avenues for evangelicals to engage Latter-day Saints. I argue that these are inappropriate places for evangelism due to the cultural issues raised by anthropology of pilgrimage.

Previously I noted that Mormonism expresses its deepest sense of religious and cultural identity in events such as community celebrations and pageants as well as in its temples. For Latter-day Saints these are sacred symbols and sacred space, and through them Mormons find a sense of individual and collective identity with their religious culture. Regardless of the best motivations and desires of evangelicals, and even if outreaches at these events were more respectful rather than confrontational, the presence of evangelicals who function in opposition to the Mormon sacred narrative and symbolism at such pilgrimage venues is often perceived as an attack not only upon individual Mormons, but also upon their culture and religion. When the members of a culture feel that their culture is attacked they naturally become defensive and this hinders if not prevents effective communication.

We might also consider that Mormonism has a history of oscillating in its relationship with non-Mormon culture between what Mauss has called assimilation and retrenchment. Mormonism has tended to either move toward acceptance and assimilation in the mainstream culture or



move away from it emphasizing its unique distinctives and peculiarities or what he calls a process of retrenchment.³⁰ Mauss argues that Mormons have been involved in a process of retrenchment since the middle of the twentieth century, and that this involves a process of redefining and strengthening the boundary between Mormon and non-Mormon identity. Evangelicals might consider whether their activities at sites of sacred LDS pilgrimage will contribute toward and accelerate the retrenchment process.

Yet despite serious communication obstacles, evangelicals pursue counter-cultural educational and evangelistic methodologies in the midst of LDS pilgrimage journeys. In my view this is due to two factors. First, as referenced in my introduction, evangelical treatments of Mormonism tend toward doctrinal and worldview critiques to the neglect of other important considerations such as ritual, symbolism and pilgrimage. A greater awareness of the significance of these elements would be of great service to evangelicals as they develop a broader understanding of Mormon culture and it would also help facilitate a more positive engagement process.

Second, in addition to a lack of awareness among evangelicals of the significance of Mormon ritual and pilgrimage, I suggest that other social dynamics are at work. Kent Bean, Assistant Professor in the English department at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah, addresses the issues of identity and boundary maintenance in his doctoral dissertation that explores this process among Latter-day Saints and evangelicals during their interactions at the Mormon Miracle Pageant at Manti.³¹ His observation, research, and analysis led him to the conclusion that identity and boundary maintenance are key activities that involve both Mormons and evangelicals. In Bean's discussion of the Manti pageant he characterizes it as incorporating material aspects of public display which sends a meta-message as thousands of Mormons gather to reaffirm their faith and sense of identity. Identity reaffirmation of individuals and of a whole religious community through the act of public display takes on additional significance in light of the presence of those from other religious communities who are interpreted as an affront to the boundaries of the Mormon community. Indeed, Bean notes that the presence of members from each religious group serves as a threat to the boundaries of each group:

Pageants have become one battleground where issues of *naming* can be discussed and tussled over. Identity claims can be staked out by all those involved: "I am this; you are that." "No, I

am this; *you* are that. Boundaries are explored in the process and territory is claimed.³²

As Beam develops his thesis he discusses the issue of identity formation and the importance of having an "Other" against which one can define oneself. He quotes John R. Lewis who argues that societies need enemies, and working against a perceived enemy provides a sense of greater unity for a community. Picking up on this idea, Bean suggests that a similar dynamic plays out among evangelicals and Mormons:

í certainly some members of each group consider members of the other group to be, quite literally, enemies of righteousness. But the important point is that in the defining of someone as an enemy - indeed, in the *manufacture* of some Other as an enemy, which is arguably what is happening in instances of counter-Mormon activity and Mormon response - there is group cohesion.³³

John Saliba has noted similar issues of identity and boundary maintenance dynamics taking place in evangelical responses to the New Spirituality or New Age, and his critique is equally applicable to evangelical responses to Mormonism at places of sacred pilgrimage. Saliba notes that in confrontationally differentiating evangelical doctrines from New Age beliefs, evangelicals maintain the boundaries

that allow a community to strengthen its own sense of identity by contrasting itself with "others" who are portrayed as being the exact opposites as themselves. Such boundaries are necessary whenever conflicting religious claims challenge, or are perceived as a threat to, one's faith. They perform the function of offering intellectual and emotional security to those who are confused and troubled by the spread of different belief systems and spiritual practices.³⁴

Moving beyond Saliba's identification of a boundary maintenance and defense response to perceived threat from the "religious other," he also offers additional criticism that is relevant to evangelical evangelistic responses to Mormonism at pilgrimage sites, particularly those forms manifesting themselves at Manti, Temple Square, and new LDS temple openings:

One wonders, however, whether the kind of criticism offered has any lasting pastoral value. For in the final analysis the evangelical and fundamentalist response to the New Age Movement is nothing but a monologue or a soliloquy. At best, it is a process of self-affirmation and self-assurance, providing



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comfort and solace to confused Christiansí At its worst, it degenerates into a senseless diatribe or an emotional harangue.³⁵

It would seem then that while evangelicals engage in what is intended as a positive form of communication and outreach at pilgrimage sites within LDS culture, the likelihood is that the presence of evangelicals will be considered counter-cultural and offensive by LDS.

Conclusion

I suggest that this curious state of affairs might best be explained not only as a result of a lack of awareness of significant aspects of LDS culture such as ritual and pilgrimage, but also as a result of the subconscious desires of evangelicals to engage in a defense of their personal and theological boundaries. Such shortcomings in the understanding of Mormonism and individual Mormons might be overcome through a broader interpretive template that not only considers Mormon doctrine and worldview, but also considers the significance of ritual. Anthropology of pilgrimage in this context may then serve as an important tool and a reminder of the need for evangelicals to emphasize a hermeneutic of culture in concert with and as strongly as they practice a hermeneutic of Scripture. This dual hermeneutic will facilitate both a better understanding of Mormonism as well as more positive means of communicating with its members.



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¹ M. Gerald Bradford, "The Study of Mormonism: A Growing Interest in Academia," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 119-74,



available electronically at

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² Ibid., 142-55.

³ Ibid., 156.

⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁵ John L. Sorenson, "Ritual as Theology," *Sunstone* 27 (May/June 1981).

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2000), 11.

⁹ Davis Bitton, *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 181.

¹⁰ Ibid., 177-78.

¹¹ Steve Olsen, "Community Celebrations and Mormon Ideology of Place," *Sunstone* 5, no. 3 (May-June 1980): 40.

¹² Ibid., 42.

¹³ Douglas J. Davies, "Pilgrimage in Mormon Culture," in Makhan Jha (ed), *Social Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (New Delhi: Inter-India, 1991).

¹⁴ Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman, "Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism," in Badone and Roseman (eds), *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 1.

¹⁵ Alan Morinis, "Introduction: The Territory of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage," in Alan Morinis (ed), *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 4.

¹⁶ Surinder M. Bhardwaj, "Geography and Pilgrimage: A Review," in Robert H. Stoddard and Alan Morinis (eds), *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces: The Geography of Pilgrimage* (Dept. of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA: Geoscience Publications), 2.

¹⁷ Morinis, *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, 10-14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Davies, "Pilgrimage in Mormon Culture," 311.

²⁰ Alan Morinis, "Introduction: The Territory of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage," Alan Morinis (ed), *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 17, 21.

²¹ Davies, "Pilgrimage in Mormon Culture," 317.

²² *Ibid.*, 322.

²³ *Ibid.*, 323.

²⁴ Bitton, *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays*, 181.

²⁵ Steven L. Olsen, "Community Celebrations and Mormon Ideology of Place," *Sunstone* 5, no. 3 (May-June 1980/81): 40, 42.

²⁶ Armand L. Mauss, "Identity and boundary maintenance: International prospects for Mormonism at the dawn of the twenty-first century," in Douglas J. Davies (ed), *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London and New York: Cassell, 1996), 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 39.

²⁹ Douglas Davies, "Time, Place and Mormon Sense of Self," in Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (eds), *Religion, Identity and Change: Perspectives on Global Transformation* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 110.

³⁰ Armand Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

³¹ Kent R. Bean. "Policing the Borders of Identity at *The Mormon Miracle Pageant*," (Doctor of Philosophy diss., Graduate College of Bowling Green State University, 2005).

³² *Ibid.*, 198, emphasis in original.

³³ *Ibid.*, 201-202, emphasis in original.

³⁴ John A. Saliba, *Christian Responses to the New Age Movement: A Critical Assessment* (London and New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 77.



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³⁵ Ibid.