Beyond “Surreptitious Staring”: Migration, Missions, and the Generativity of Mormonism for the Comparative and Translocative Study of Religion

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In 1861, Mark Twain and his brother set out from St. Louis on a westward journey by stagecoach, and _Roughing It_, published in 1872, includes an account of what they found along the way, including Mormons. Twain offered a somewhat mixed assessment of the Latter-day Saints. He mounted a limited, and half-hearted, defense of Mormonism at a time when defenders were scarce, suggesting that “there was nothing vicious in its teachings.”¹ At the same time, he dismissed Brigham Young as monarchical and the Book of Mormon as somniferous: that sacred text, he claimed, “is chloroform in print.” The real “miracle,” Twain proposed, was that Smith stayed awake during the production of the book.² I will leave it to others to assess the leadership of Young and the soporific—or stimulating—effects of the Book of Mormon. I’m more interested in

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². Twain, _Roughing It_, 549, 107.
other passages in Twain’s *Roughing It*, passages that describe his encounters with Mormons on the move and Mormons who had settled. “We overtook a Mormon emigrant train of thirty-three wagons,” Twain recalled, “and tramping wearily along and driving their herd of loose cows, were dozens of coarse-clad and sad-looking men, women and children, who had walked as they were walking now, day after day for eight lingering weeks, and in that time had compassed the distance our stage had come in *eight days and three hours*—seven hundred and ninety-eight miles! They were dusty and uncombed, hatless, bonnetless and ragged, and they did look so tired!” Another passage records Twain’s reaction to Salt Lake City, where earlier Mormon migrants had settled:

> We . . . hurried on to the home of the Latter-day Saints, the stronghold of the prophets, the capital of the only absolute monarch in America—Great Salt Lake City. . . . We walked about the streets . . . and . . . there was fascination in surreptitiously staring at every creature we took to be a Mormon. This was fairy-land to us . . . —a land of enchantment, and goblins, and awful mystery. We felt a curiosity to ask every child how many mothers it had . . . and we experienced a thrill every time a dwelling-house door opened and shut as we passed, disclosing a glimpse of human heads and backs and shoulders—for we so longed to have a good satisfying look at a Mormon family in all its comprehensive ampleness.

These passages allude to some enduring representations of the Latter-day Saints: they “tramp[ed] wearily along,” as Twain put it, on the westward passage, heroically enduring hardships as they went. In that sense, their story seems to harmonize with other US narratives about the trans-Mississippi West, tales about hardy individualism and collective destiny. At the same time, Mormons stood apart. They had prophets when the time for prophecy had passed. They had new scripture after the canon had closed. They had theocracy after democracy had won the day. They practiced polygamy (at least until the turn of the century) when the Vic-

3. Twain, *Roughing It*, 76.
torian Protestant god was sacralizing the monogamous home.\textsuperscript{5}

Most important for my purpose, which is to consider the implications of Mormonism for the comparative and transnational study of religion, it’s instructive to note Twain’s attitude toward both the people and the place. Twain confessed to a “curiosity” about Mormons that bordered on a perverse voyeurism as he fought the impulse to “ask every child how many mothers it had” and confessed to a “thrill” when he “surreptitiously star[ed]” at the body parts revealed “every time a dwelling-house door opened.” For Twain, the Mormons’ Salt Lake City was “a land of enchantment, and goblins, and awful mystery.” And, for many of us who don’t specialize in Mormonism, so it has remained.

But that approach won’t yield much as those of us who are nonspecialists try to consider the implications of Mormonism for the study of religion more broadly. So trying to move beyond “surreptitious staring” at the “land of enchantment’s” exotic inhabitants—and shifting the focus away from the usual representations (we get it, Mormons were polygamous)—in this brief essay I want to discuss Mormon displacement and emplacement, as Twain did, and I want to propose that consideration of these two themes, and others, shows that the Latter-day Saints offer an exceptionally generative case study for translocative history, historical accounts that trace cultural flows across geographical boundaries, and comparative analysis, the justly maligned but still useful strategy of interpreting one tradition in terms of another.

Some themes for a comparative study of Mormonism

It seems to me that Mormonism offers scholars of religion a number of interesting points of comparison. Let me mention a few. The rise of Mormonism can be usefully compared with the emergence of other new religious movements (including Christianity and Islam), and that comparison

\textsuperscript{5} I say “turn of the century” here since although the edict against polygamy came in 1890, it was not until 1905 that church members started being excommunicated for practicing polygamy. I am grateful to Philip Barlow for this insight.
can yield—and has yielded—productive proposals about why some movements flourish and others don’t. Mormonism has a founder who has invited illuminating comparisons with other founders—from Muhammad to Mary Baker Eddy—and has provoked analysis of what happens when those founders die. Those who study trance will be interested in Joseph Smith’s visionary encounters with suprahuman beings, and scholars who study magic and the occult will find much to hold their attention too, including Smith’s use of seer stones and golden plates. The mature Mormon body is clothed with sacred undergarments and marked by ritual practice, and it might be interesting to compare Mormon with Sikh, Zoroastrian, and Daoist bodily practices. Even if some have claimed that Mormons do not have a theology but only a history, LDS beliefs and values provide interesting points of comparison with other traditions, including views about what happens to bodies after death. Views about the afterlife (and the premortal life too) are linked, in turn, with Mormon beliefs about the family, which is “the unit of exaltation” for the Saints, and those views might be fruitfully compared with, for example, the practices of ancestor cults in West Africa and East Asia. To mention a final theme that might prove useful for comparison, as Twain noted in the passage I quoted, Mormons historically have had distinctive views about church-state relations, and scholars interested in religion and politics in other cultural contexts and historical periods might find much of interest in a tradition whose founder once ran for president of the United States.


Crossing as a theme in Mormonism

Of all the themes that show some promise for the translocative and comparative study of religion, two others that Twain hinted at—and that emerge from my own historical, ethnographic, and theoretical work—seem especially generative: crossing and dwelling. In my theory of religion, I argued that religions are about crossing and dwelling. They are about emplacement and displacement, about finding a place and moving across space. In the remainder of this essay, I’ll focus on the first theme—crossing.

And Mormonism seems to emphasize crossings of all sorts. As I understand the term, religious crossings can be terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic: in other words, traditions prescribe and proscribe movement across the landscape, the life cycle, and the ultimate horizon of human life, however that is imagined. To focus only on two terrestrial crossings—or the ways that religions propel devotees across the natural landscape—both migration and missions seem especially important in Mormonism and especially useful for comparisons. For example, the introduction to an official LDS history, Our Heritage, includes a map that “shows the locations and routes of travel that were important in the early history of the Church.” And “the Mormon Pioneer Trail,” included on the official LDS website, offers a virtual representation and historical narrative that emphasizes the spiritual significance of the migration to Salt Lake City. This site maps the 1,300-mile trail that was followed by


11. Our History: A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), vii. The Mormon trek also was a major focus of the May 2006 annual meeting of the Mormon History Association in Casper, Wyoming.

70,000 migrants from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Great Salt Lake Valley. The webpage invites viewers to “take the journey with them. Stop along the trail and read their own accounts of what happened.” The viewer can choose to “start from the beginning” and go to the first site on the journey, as the Saints flee Missouri between 1839 and 1846 and “cross into Illinois.” After the martyrdom of their founder, and the continuing harassment of other Saints, many in Illinois decided to make the mass “exodus” to the West. And by clicking on sites along the trail, the virtual migrant can reenact the trek through Iowa, Nebraska, and Wyoming and on to Salt Lake, where Brigham Young, whom the webpage identifies as “an American Moses,” led the exodus to the promised land, the “sacred city” in the valley.\(^{13}\)

So, as with many other peoples and traditions, migration of all kinds—voluntary, coerced, and forced—plays an important role in LDS history and identity.\(^{14}\) The most obvious comparisons are with ancient and modern Jews, a people in motion who have sought to settle in the land set apart for them. But migration—and other kinds of compelled and constrained crossings—has had spiritual significance for many other peoples and traditions as well, from the horrific middle passage of African slaves to the People’s Temple’s trek to Guyana, where they hoped to set up a religious utopia, and from the Puritan transatlantic voyage to New England to the Asian Buddhists and Latino Catholics who have come to the United States since 1965.


Mormons have been moving around for other reasons too—to bring others to the faith—and missions have been another important kind of terrestrial crossing for the Latter-day Saints. The term *missionary* has referred more narrowly to a Christian charged with spreading the faith, though by extension scholars have used it to label emissaries of other traditions as well. Not all religious traditions have dispatched representatives to convert others, and even those that have a history of such activity have not supported religious emissaries as vigorously in all times and places. Trying to follow Jesus’s scriptural injunction to “make disciples of all nations,” however, some Christians have sought converts beyond the homeland’s boundaries. Some have evangelized with little ecclesiastical or governmental support and by attempting to entice converts by appeals to reason, as with Ramón Lull (ca. 1232–1316), the Franciscan who preached to Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula and northern Africa. At other times missionaries were representatives of the state and used coercion, even violence, to win converts. Charlemagne turned to coercion to bring the Saxons to the faith, even laying out penalties that included death for those who refused baptism. Missionaries have been less prominent during most of Islamic history, yet there are some instances of systematic attempts to seek converts. For example, the Ismaili Shiʿi caliph-imams of the Fatimid Dynasty, especially al-Muʿizz (953–975), the Fatimid ruler who transformed the caliphate from a regional power to an expansive empire, drew on a network of dāʿīs, or “religio-political missionaries,” within and outside the boundaries of the Islamic state. Before and after al-Muʿizz’s rule, those missionaries managed to gain Ismaili converts from northern Africa to the Indian subcontinent. As with Islam and Christianity, at some moments in its history, Buddhism also has been spread by monastic- or state-sponsored representatives of the faith. Buddhists, for example, have trumpeted Aśoka’s role in the tradition’s early expansion: Aśoka (ca. 300–232 BCE) sent missionary monks to regions within and beyond his empire, including Sri Lanka.15

All this might yield illuminating comparisons with the Mormons, who began to spread the faith to other North Americans almost immediately and traveled abroad as early as 1837, when four Latter-day Saints headed for the British Isles. A strong tradition of missionary activity developed, and now many young people from eighteen to twenty-five years of age serve as missionaries for eighteen months to two years, after entering one of fifteen missionary training centers around the world. The LDS Church reports that nearly 70,000 missionaries—most of them young people—are serving at any one time. This is noteworthy, as sociologist Rodney Stark noticed, in meeting one of the conditions for a successful new religious movement: it socializes and engages the young. “Successful movements,” Stark proposed, “find important things for young people to do on behalf of their faith, that early on they provide


17. Statistics about the number of missionaries are from the official web page of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/missionary-program.
ways by which youth can exhibit and build commitment. Here,” Stark continued, “the Mormon practice of basing its primary missionary effort on teenage volunteers stands out.”

As important for the character and scope of contemporary Mormonism, however, all this foreign missionary activity has had astonishing results. As Jan Shipps noted while analyzing the recent growth—and the concomitant shift in emphasis from ethnic to religious identity—according to church estimates, the Latter-day Saints claimed one million members in 1947, most of them in North America. By 1982, membership had grown to 5 million and to 10 million by 1997. Expanding at an average rate of about 1 million new members every three years, the church estimates the current membership at more than 14 million, about one quarter of them Spanish speakers, who now make up a larger proportion of members than English speakers. Further, only about 14 percent of Saints now live in the Utah, and since 1996, more than half have lived outside the United States. Former LDS president Gordon B. Hinckley explained this growth by pointing to several factors: the church provides “an anchor in a world of shifting values,” it “gives purpose to life,” and converts “find sociability” in the organization.


20. The church membership statistics I cite here are those reported by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on their official web page: “Facts and Statistics,” http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/. As of September 2013, they reported 14,782,473 members worldwide, with 29,014 congregations using 177 languages. I realize that some scholars have raised questions about the reliability of self-reported information about religions in general and Mormons in particular. On that see Rick Phillips, “Rethinking the International Expansion of Mormonism,” Novo Religio 10/1 (August 2006): 52–68.

the growth, it is now “the most serious challenge we face,” Hinkley sug-
gested in an interview.22 All this successful missionary outreach has meant
the need for many new translations of the Book of Mormon (and other
texts) as well as the building of many new temples. And temples
have been built at an astonishing rate in recent decades, as all this cross-
ing has led to dwelling, or in other words, this moving has led to settling
(and even a noteworthy decline in movement and in the reenactment of
the “pioneer” hardships, as many Saints now have to travel less distance
to visit a temple).23 As of September 2013, there were 141 Mormon tem-
iples, and just more than half (73) of those outside the United States, in-
cluding in cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.24

Mormonism and translocative history

So like the Roman Catholic Church or the International Society for Krish-
na Consciousness, Mormonism has become a transnational organization,
and that has implications not only for studies that compare themes across
periods and places, but also for histories that trace the crisscrossing flows
of religious practices, artifacts, and institutions across regional bound-
aries. In fact, it’s difficult to imagine a more interesting case for this sort
of history, which I call translocative rather than transnational to signal that
I want to displace the nation as the default unit of analysis, since the scale
of such studies can be both smaller and larger than the nation, just as the
temporal span can be both smaller and larger than the “era.” Translocative
interpretations, as I have proposed, nudge us to reconsider both the spa-
tialization and periodization of our historical narratives.25

22. Our History, 141.
23. I am indebted to John-Charles Duffy for the reminder that temple building has led
to a decline in movement in some ways.
24. The information about the temples is taken from the official website: “Temples of
the World: Chronological List,” the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,
http://www.ldschurchtemples.com/chronological/.
25. Thomas A. Tweed, “American Occultism and Japanese Buddhism: Albert J. Ed-
32/2 (November 2005): 249–81; and Tweed, “Theory and Method in the Study of Bud-
Although I don’t have space to argue the point here, I think the same might be true of translocative histories of Mormonism—and histories of religion in the Americas, and elsewhere, that take the LDS tradition seriously. It’s a tradition, after all, that affirms that ancient Near Eastern peoples came to America in Old Testament times and that opens its official history by recounting the period of “spiritual darkness” following the death of Jesus’s apostles, thereby expanding the temporal and spatial boundaries of its sacred story. In recent decades this tradition has also reached across the globe, transforming and being transformed by contacts and exchanges along the way.26

So writing a history of the Latter-day Saints—or of religion in the Americas—that attends to Mormonism’s growth during the past half century, as well as to the earlier efforts of missionaries and migrants, means that we would need to recalibrate Mormon history in terms of the periodizations of other cultures. For example, to acknowledge the transculturation that occurred during the first (mostly unsuccessful) Mormon mission to Japan from 1901 to 1924, we might want to talk about Meiji and Taishō Mormonism, using the traditional labels for those decades in Japanese history, as we also might talk, in turn, about Modernist or Progressive Era Japan.27 In a similar way, translocative narratives must be multi-sited, and any history of Mormonism would need to consider the movement of people, things, and practices back and forth between Salt Lake City (and many other sites in the United States) and—noting only some Latin American cities with temples—São Paulo, Santiago, Mexico


City, Lima, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, and Caracas. But how do we tell a coherent tale about religious history with multiple beginnings and multiple locales? I’m not sure. Reflecting on the history of Mormonism might be a good place to start, however, as we respond to the challenge of writing boundary-crossing narratives.

So, as I have tried to suggest, Mormonism can serve as a generative case study for comparative religious studies, transnational American Studies, and translocative history. As nonspecialists try to move beyond the voyeuristic gaze, the “surreptitious staring” at “curiosities” behind the “dwelling-house door,” we might consider the ways that Mormonism challenges the chronologies and cartographies of religious histories, and we might ponder the illuminating cross-cultural comparisons, especially as we attend to historical actors such as missionaries and migrants and narrative themes such as dwelling and crossing.

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28. There are local and regional studies of Mormonism in Latin America, including these historical and social scientific studies of Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, and Argentina: F. LaMond Tullis, Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1987); Mark L. Grover, “The Mormon Church and German Immigrants in Southern Brazil: Religion and Language,” Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas 26 (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1989), 295–308; Henri Gooren, Rich among the Poor: Church, Firm, and Household among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala (Amsterdam: Thela Thesis, 1999); and César Ceriani Cernadas, Nuestros hermanos lamanitas: Indios y fronteras en la imaginación mormona (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2008).