

### 3. Shifting Perceptions of Mormons and Mormonism

Analyzing a religious community means looking at institutions, people, and practices in a specific perspective. The approach adopted for this project seeks to construct Mormonism in light of the presence of Mormons in the media. Other approaches to religious communities are, of course, also possible. The researcher constructs their subject by selecting a theoretical stance and a methodological framework. This chapter will provide an overview of diverse scholarly approaches to Mormonism, focusing on how the Mormon tradition is scrutinized, what knowledge is generated, and which aspects of Mormonism are highlighted. In addition the chapter provides the contextual frame of Mormonism for the study.

Rooted in a relatively young tradition, Mormons have been recording their history since the early days of their community. David J. Whittaker, associate professor of history at Brigham Young University, has noted that “From their beginnings, Mormons have been a record-keeping people”, and proposes that “Such a documentary record must lie at the heart of any effort in Mormon studies.”<sup>147</sup> The history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) has proved a rich seam for scholars with connections with the LDS. The library associated with the department of LDS Church history at Brigham Young University contains an impressive corpus of printed material about the Mormons, a historical archive, and handwritten sources of significant LDS leaders, including the letters of Brigham Young, the LDS Church president who succeeded the founder of the movement, Joseph Smith. Young influenced the Mormons’ settling in Utah, particular their organization, infrastructure, politics, and economy, and he introduced officially endorsed polygamy.<sup>148</sup> For Whittaker, “Mormon involvement in the western American experience was one reason their history could not be ignored by American historians,”<sup>149</sup> but he notes that the LDS Church History School, an official LDS institution, has

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147 David J. Whittaker, “Mormon Studies as an Academic Discipline,” in *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 92.

148 “Church History Library.” Accessed April 1, 2017. “The Mission of Brigham Young University | Mission & Aims,” accessed March 30, 2017, <http://aims.byu.edu/>.

149 Whittaker, “Mormon Studies as an Academic Discipline,” 96.

adopted a particular approach to Mormon history and that Mormons are often uncomfortable with methodologies used in religious studies that draw from sociology or cultural studies and run counter to the established Mormon model of the LDS Church History School.

A brief outline of the narrative of Mormon history will provide a helpful jumping-off point for the discussion in this chapter.<sup>150</sup> In 1830 Joseph Smith founded The Church of Jesus Christ in Palmyra in the state of New York. A vision is said to have guided him to golden plates, buried in the earth, on which the text of *The Book of Mormon* had been written in “reformed Egyptian” letters. Smith translated the text into English, and it became the principal scriptural foundation for the religious movement known as Mormons, which grew steadily. Persecution and discrimination forced them out of Palmyra and other locations as they searched for a safe place to settle. The migration from east to west across the North American continent continued until the “Pioneer Company” of Latter-day Saints finally arrived in Utah, and in 1849 a provisional State named Deseret was established in the Salt Lake Valley.<sup>151</sup> Joseph Smith had been killed, in 1844, in a violent raid and had been succeeded as president of the LDS by Brigham Young. The LDS Church settled permanently in Utah, and Salt Lake City became the new place of “gathering to Zion” for Mormons. 1852 the doctrine of plural marriage was announced publicly. In 1890, under pressure from Congress, LDS president Wilford Woodruff issued the “Manifesto”, which stated that the LDS Church would no longer practice polygamy. Polygamist families now lived in secret, with some leaving for Mexico or other locations. Some members split away from the LDS to found their own church, in which plural marriage was encouraged, as is still the case today. In 1896 Utah became the 45<sup>th</sup> state. Since 1978 men of all colors and races have been able to be admitted to the priesthood, the result of a revelation of president Spencer W. Kimball. According to the LDS webpage there are more than 16 million LDS members worldwide, of whom more than 9.5 million live outside the United States. More than

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150 Klaus J. Hansen, “Mormonism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 9 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6192–95; Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 151–168. Shipps’ chronology of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormonism is a very helpful overview table.

151 Shipps, *Mormonism*, 162.

65,000 missionaries currently serve.<sup>152</sup> The LDS Church is the biggest of all the Mormon churches that claim Joseph Smith as their founder. Beside *The Book of Mormon* and other Mormon texts, Mormons also refer to the Old and the New Testament as their scripture.

### 3.1. *Mormons in the media*

Since 1898, an impressive body of literature about Mormons and the media has been published. Sherry Baker and Daniel Stout, scholars of communication active in the United States, identified five stages in the academic study of Mormons and the media:<sup>153</sup> 1890–1910, the so-called the bibliographic era; 1911–1950, the era of print history; 1951–1960, the years of press relations and cultural acceptance, 1961–1990, the era of interdisciplinary studies; and 1991–2000, the age of audience analysis.<sup>154</sup> These five categories of research overlap in part with media history more generally, in that, for example, print media was the major means of communication up until the 1950s, when television became widely popular and affordable for the average American household. Unsurprisingly, then, television was central to interdisciplinary studies. The “Mormons in the Media” bibliography contains, perhaps somewhat remarkably, 51 master’s theses, mostly written at the universities of Utah and Brigham Young, with more than two-thirds (35) from the latter institution. Brigham Young University is located in Provo, in the state of Utah, and, as its name suggests, has close ties to the LDS Church, by which it was “founded, supported, and guided.”<sup>155</sup> The numerous master’s theses are indicative of the extent of LDS involvement in research in the field of Mormons and the media. Brigham Young University has been publishing the quarterly journal *BYU Studies* since 1959. On the journal’s webpage, the editors explain the publication’s purpose:

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152 “Statistics and Church Facts | Total Church Membership,” newsroom.churchof-jesuschrist.org, accessed June 16, 2019, <http://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics>.

153 Sherry Baker and Daniel Stout, “Mormons and the Media, 1898–2003: A Selected, Annotated, and Indexed Bibliography (with Suggestions for Future Research),” *All Faculty Publications*, January 1, 2003, <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1045>.

154 Sherry Baker and Daniel Stout, “Mormons and the Media, 1898–2003,” 127–129.

155 “The Mission of Brigham Young University | Mission & Aims,” accessed March 30, 2017, <http://aims.byu.edu/>.

BYU Studies is dedicated to publishing scholarly religious literature in the form of books, journals, and dissertations that is qualified, significant, and inspiring. We want to share these publications to help promote faith, continued learning, and further interest in our LDS history with those in the world who have a positive interest in this work.<sup>156</sup>

“Promoting faith [...] and further interest in our LDS history” – here are expressed core values evident in the content of the journal, which covers a broad spectrum of research into the LDS Church and its history, including the Church’s interactions with the media.

In 2007 Sherry Baker compiled a “Mormon Media History Timeline, 1827-2007”<sup>157</sup> that displays how intensively and extensively the LDS Church has included media in its mission, education, and information practices. In the abstract accompanying Baker’s timeline, she notes that while Mormon studies are now a recognized academic field, Mormon media studies have remained relatively neglected. Her timeline, accessible online,<sup>158</sup> starts in 1827, with the golden *Book of Mormon* plates that Mormons believe Joseph Smith excavated from the soil of the hills of Manchester, in New York State. Baker embraces “media” as a broad term that encompasses, for example, temple consecrations and LDS Church festivals, as well as meetings such as the annual General Conference, which can now be streamed online and is translated simultaneously into 55 languages. Such media practices help determine the LDS Church’s public presence. Further means of communication are also cited, such as the introduction of the missionary and welfare programs, the family home evening, when traditionally each Mormon family gathers at home to read *The Book of Mormon* together, and key events for the globally renowned Mormon *Tabernacle Choir*.<sup>159</sup> *Music and Spoken Word*, which features the Mormon *Tabernacle Choir*, is the longest-running continually broadcast radio program in the

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156 “Mission, Purpose, and History of BYU Studies. BYU Studies.” Accessed March 31, 2017. <https://byustudies.byu.edu/mission>.

157 Baker, Sherry, “Mormon Media History Timeline, 1827–2007 | BYU Studies.” Accessed March 31, 2017. <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mormon-media-history-timeline-1827-2007>.

158 Baker, Sherry, “Mormon Media History Timeline, 1827–2007 | BYU Studies,” accessed March 31, 2017, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mormon-media-history-timeline-1827-2007>. 3–7.

159 Baker, Sherry, “Mormon Media History Timeline, 1827–2007 | BYU Studies.” Accessed March 31, 2017. <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mormon-media-history-timeline-1827-2007>.

United States, heard since 1929. The choir has performed at the inauguration of various US presidents, mainly Republicans, since 1965.

Baker's timeline of communication technology includes innovations like the printing press, radio, telegraph, television, satellite broadcasting, and the Internet, which are combined with events and statistics from the history of the LDS Church General Conferences, political events, membership landmarks, and relevant episodes from American history, such as the US-Mexican war of 1846–1848, when a Mormon battalion was assembled to fight for the United States.<sup>160</sup> Mormon media productions are also listed, with newspapers, books, radio and television stations, specific shows, public-relations activities, films, and websites. A specific perspective on the interaction of Mormons and the media is made possible by the combination of three media sectors within the timeline: (1) the adoption of new communication technologies, (2) the introduction of LDS Church media production and (3) the creation of church-owned media companies. The focus is on the LDS as an institution and its media production, with less mention made of media and the history of communication technology. The timeline indicates a methodological approach to research into the history of the LDS Church carried out by professionals who represent the LDS Church and Mormonism, with the few individuals cited almost all LDS Church presidents.

The timeline provides a helpful guide to US-American Mormon media history in the context of the LDS Church by drawing from media history. The chronological listing has marked overlap with this project in that in both instances the history of a religious tradition is scrutinized through the lens of the media. The data provided by the timeline lacks, however, contextualization or interpretation, for the timeline is intended to provide only a historical scaffolding for investigation of Mormon engagement in the media. The approach is characteristically similar to other Mormon studies of Mormon tradition. Sherry Baker is a Mormon and her media studies approach combines, as Mormon historian Whittaker suggested, with a distinctly Mormon approach to Mormon history.<sup>161</sup>

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160 The battalion never had to fight because when they arrived in San Diego the war was already over. But the Mormons stayed and worked for the community as volunteers. A memorial "The Mormon Battalion" in the old town of San Diego mounted by the LDS Church remembers the presence of the Mormon soldiers.

161 Whittaker, "Mormon Studies as an Academic Discipline."

John Ben Haws' *The Mormon Image in American Mind, Fifty Years of Public Perception* (2013) a different but also distinctly Mormon view, too deals specifically with representations of Mormons in the media. His diachronic approach starts in 1968, when George W. Romney was the Republican candidate for the White House, and ends in 2012, when Mitt Romney ran for president of the United States as the Republican candidate. The author is assistant professor of LDS Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. Haws recognizes that people's perceptions are difficult to read, but he takes up the challenge by looking at a huge number of articles from the press and radio and television programs to analyze how Mormons and Mormonism are perceived by a broader public. Between the late 1960s and 2008 a remarkable shift from appraisal to criticism took place. Haws' evaluation of the public image of the LDS Mormons is deflating, and probably also realistic when one remembers the ambivalent perceptions of Mormon theology: "If Mormon culture and lifestyle had achieved acceptability in American society, Mormon religious beliefs, which are not so easily depicted or explained, were still clearly suspect."<sup>162</sup>

The most recent discussion of Mormons in the media is found in *Latter-day Screens. Gender, Sexuality & Mediated Mormonism*, by the gender and media scholar Brenda R. Weber, which draws on the manifold representations of Mormons to consider discourses of gender and sexuality.<sup>163</sup> Raised in an area of the United States in which Mormonism is prominent, the non-Mormon author has had numerous encounters with Mormons and Mormonism. Her exploration of Mormonism is principally concerned not with Mormons themselves but with their mediated narratives. Weber explains, "It is [...] mediated Mormonism as both an idea (meme) and a way of thinking (analytic) that beats the heart of my inquiry."<sup>164</sup> The book considers in detail the material, both (audio-)visual and literary, of mediated Mormonism. It adopts an analytical approach to gender and sexuality but also has a moral dimension, engaging issues of justice and equality. Its definition of relevant media is expansive: the material discussed includes books, RTV shows, advertisements on billboards and webpages, documentaries, fictional TV shows, musicals, and blogs.

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162 John Ben Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 234.

163 Brenda R. Weber, *Latter-Day Screens: Gender, Sexuality, and Mediated Mormonism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

164 Weber, 15.

Weber states that mediated Mormonism and the related public conversation open up “channels for progressivism, by which I mean a pluralized, diverse, and polylogic regard toward meaning and identity.”<sup>165</sup> This claim may seem surprising, but, the author explains, the church’s criticism and rejection of feminist and intellectual positions and of homosexuality have led to its suppression of a group of educated and politically active individuals who are willing to speak out and have allies in the media sphere, which has resulted in lively media productions on precisely such topics.

The six chapters that follow the prologue consider the material, both (audio-)visual and literary, of mediated Mormonism. The first chapter discusses the figure of the missionary, which functions as both meme and analytic, as a projection of whiteness, masculinity, and sex;<sup>166</sup> it also addresses the concept of spiritual neoliberalism, fostered deliberately by the media. Mediated Mormonism constantly promotes management of the self and the community through surveillance that is expressed as caring.<sup>167</sup> The idea underlying this logic is that good choices bring good things and bad choices bring bad things, with everyone thus the architect of their own fortune in the open market.

Weber introduces the term “Mormon glow” in chapter two, used to refer to a specific personal appearance with racial and gendered implications. “Mormonism as a visual spectacle,” she writes, “indicates that as a meme, it marks something extraordinary.”<sup>168</sup> The Mormon glow combines a phenotype with media spectacle, signifying a racialized habitus that refers to “spiritual purity, whiteness, boundless energy, and limitless success.”<sup>169</sup>

Chapters three and four focus on conflicting mediated versions of polygamy. The first version concerns progressive polygamy stories, as found in TV shows. The second version concerns “narratives of victimization and rescue”,<sup>170</sup> and here Weber looks, for example, at the criminal activities and excesses of the self-proclaimed prophet of the FLDS group, Warren Jeffs. Weber explores how the media provide an opportunity for suppressed women to make their traumatic stories public, but she also highlights how media representations communicate polygamy as an open

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165 Weber, 19.

166 Weber, 52.

167 Weber, 57.

168 Weber, 94.

169 Weber, 115.

170 Weber, 163.

secret and connect the story of Joseph Smith with the activities of Warren Jeffs, an association that will likely not amuse the LDS church.

Chapters five and six address Mormon feminist housewives and gay Mormons respectively. Deconstructing the term “toxic femininity,” Weber notes how the imperative of Mormon women defined by male desire and male demands is fostered by the media. Additionally, the text addresses the tensions surrounding queer practices and Mormonism as represented in the media. The F/LDS controls non-normative intimacy, which covers not just homosexual relationships but also polygamy and premarital sex. The required self-regulation in Mormonism, which is combined with the stance that Mormons can feel forbidden desire but must not act on it, feeds a media landscape full of Mormon sex stories, as the author notes.

The combination of theory, historical and social context, and media analysis drives the argument forward effectively and demonstrates convincingly how the media can be read as a meme and a way of thinking. With its informative and enriching contextualization of its sources, *Latter-day Screens. Gender, Sexuality & Mediated Mormonism* provides an effective critical reading of Mormon media sources while also functioning as an innovative approach to Mormonism.

Mormon theology remains a topic favored in the media, where it receives both critical and uncritical appraisal and has inspired both fictional and documentary productions. Approaches that engage the period from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day remain the exception within Mormon studies, where the early history of the church and its community are far more likely to be encountered, as we shall see.

### 3.2. *Telling the story of Mormonism*

Several published works have been focused on Mormons, with all of them concerned with the LDS, the largest grouping. These books might use the term “Mormon” or “Mormonism” in their title, a term that splitter groups also claim, but the focus of their discussion is usually the LDS. Yet all Mormons, be they from the dominant LDS Church, the Community of Christ (formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, RLDS), The Apostolic United Brethren (AUB), the Fundamental Latter-day Saints (FLDS), the Council of Friends, or any other Mormon splitter group, share an early history that starts with Joseph Smith’s epiphany with the angel Moroni, which showed him the golden plates in the hills of Nauvoo from which he translated *The Book of Mormon*. Their



narratives diverge only at the point when they split from what would prove to be mainstream Mormonism.<sup>171</sup>

The publications adopt various strategies in engaging Mormonism, as is evident when we compare how they represent, analyze, and describe the Mormons, their history, theology, practices, politics, culture, community, and social life. To discern the publication just by the binary categories of “written by a Mormon” or “written by a non-Mormon” seems too narrow<sup>172</sup>. Rather contextualization and evaluation of these approaches demonstrates how different pictures of a single group can be generated according to how religion is described, which sources are selected, the author’s hermeneutic horizons, the theory tested, and the methods applied. This discussion of relevant academic books about Mormonism pursues three objectives: (1) to establish how a religious tradition is reconstructed in scholarly work, (2) to expand knowledge of Mormonism that eschews a homogeneous image of its manifold histories, and (3) to flesh out definitions, concepts, and debates in Mormon studies that are crucial for this project.

### From religious movement to institutionalized Mormonism

That this discussion will start with Thomas Francis O’Dea’s (1915–1974) monograph *The Mormons* (1957) is almost a given.<sup>173</sup> O’Dea’s study is still considered authoritative and is frequently cited. Although now almost six decades old, remarkably his conclusions seem still apposite, despite the changing times. O’Dea, who was Roman Catholic, was a scholar of the sociology of religion; he received his doctorate from Harvard and taught at the University of Utah from 1959 to 1964. A number of comparisons of Catholicism and Mormonism appear in his study.

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171 One important moment in Mormon history was the end of the practice of polygamy in 1890. Many families didn’t follow the new policy and founded a new congregation. See O. Kendall White and Daryl White, “Polygamy and Mormon Identity,” *Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 2 (June 2005): 165–77; Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1986), 177–218; J. Gordon Melton, *Melton’s Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8th ed. (Detroit: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009), 646–651.

172 Hansen, “Mormonism,” 6195.

173 Thomas Francis O’Dea, *The Mormons*, 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

O'Dea was raised in Massachusetts and lived for six months in a rural Mormon village. Trained as a sociologist, in the preface to his work he places himself within the text: "Whatever astigmatism this book may reveal it cannot be attributed to a lack of first hand acquaintance, for I have tried to supplement the necessary library research with as much living experience as possible."<sup>174</sup> And he explicitly describes his interpretative approach as non-Mormon:

This book is a study of the Mormons by a non-Mormon. It is an attempt to say what Mormonism is as a religious movement and to explore what conditions and events, what kind of human decisions and efforts, have made it that. Moreover it sets forth the religious world view of the Mormons, showing what Mormons believe and how they see the world, as well as the relationship of this world view to the conditions of life under which Mormonism originated and developed. Finally, it tries to point up particular problems and dilemmas that have attended the Mormon development.<sup>175</sup>

Mormon history is crucial to his work. O'Dea discussed Mormon self-understanding in the 1950s, so contemporaneous with the work, noting how their history defined the challenges Mormons faced in adapting to social change. He looked, for example, at the Mormon experience of strong community, from the first days in New York State to settling in Utah in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. And he reflected on the consequences of statehood, and on the impact of secular modernity in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The author further interprets the LDS Church and its politics by looking at social influences and the behavior that has stemmed from the Church's worldview. The Mormons are powerfully guided by their idea of an ideal community, in which the strong support the weak and income beyond basic needs – in earlier times mostly in material form – is consigned to the church. In the context of the Mormon journey from New York State, through several intermediate stations, and then finally to Utah (as Zion), and in light of the early settlement that then took shape, a strategy of extensive communal co-operation was very successful. But after Utah became a state and was admitted to the Union, O'Dea proposed, the Mor-

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174 O'Dea, viii.

175 O'Dea, vii.

mons became more conservative in outlook, “peculiar”<sup>176</sup> instead of innovative. The building of Zion was postponed. O’Dea comments on that shift, “Accommodation and withdrawal from social experimentation were part of the general trend toward conservatism that seemed to characterize Mormon leadership.”<sup>177</sup> Co-operative endeavors in the Mormon community continued only in education and recreation. Caring for its own poor remained a concern of the LDS Church, which established its welfare plan in 1936, and poverty was reduced to a minimum.

From the beginning the LDS Church had placed great emphasis upon education.<sup>178</sup> The Church’s seminary program, described as a “worldwide, four-year religious educational program for youth ages 14 through 18,”<sup>179</sup> serves to accommodate, teach, and accompany young Mormons educated outside Utah, so not in strongly Mormon contexts. The lavish investment in such education might be later returned in tithing “although this is not, of course, the motivation of the church”, O’Dea stressed;<sup>180</sup> this strategy was designed in response to the threat of apostasy seemingly inherent in a Mormon’s encounter with secular education.

For O’Dea the LDS Church’s struggles to adapt to secular society were of central import. The chapter “Sources of Strain and Conflict”<sup>181</sup> focuses on the LDS Church’s problematic relationship with learning and independent thought. O’Dea contended that the LDS Church was failing to meet the needs of the young Mormon intellectuals who questioned theological concepts as a result of reading the scriptures and adapting them to their present, challenging standard literal readings and a doctrine based on divine revelation:

As this theology is literal and fundamentalist, the liberal can choose only between submission and personal disquietude or apostasy and

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176 J. Spencer Fluhman, *A Peculiar People: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage and Screen* (Utah State University Press, 2010). Mormons call themselves peculiar in order to mark the difference between them and the others. This demarcation line also alludes how Jews historically had been called.

177 O’Dea, *The Mormons*, 216.

178 O’Dea, 224–227.

179 “LDS Seminary is a Global, Four-Year Religious Educational Program for Youth,” [www.mormonnewsroom.org](http://www.mormonnewsroom.org), April 12, 2013, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/seminary>.

180 O’Dea, *The Mormons*, 228.

181 O’Dea, 222–257.

suffering the guilt of deserting the tradition in which he has been reared and to which he feels great attachment.<sup>182</sup>

The LDS Church leaders sought to fight apostasy by its intellectuals with fundamentalist theology; a liberal theology would destroy the theological foundations of their legitimation. O'Dea proposed that one solution to this dilemma was that beyond the essential articles of doctrine, non-literal interpretation might be permitted.<sup>183</sup>

Mormon intellectuals can find themselves in a difficult situation: the tradition to which they are connected has traditionally been led by layman, who are often authoritarian, with no traditional theological education. They lack the academic education in theology and philosophy that might help guide the LDS Church through the challenges of modern secular thought. O'Dea was clear this was a problem: "In term of theology, the LDS Church is not only governed by laymen but also by amateurs."<sup>184</sup> The principle of seniority augmented the problem, for then as today the most powerful positions within the LDS Church were usually occupied by older and more conservative men. Today too, although LDS Church leaders may well be professionals in some field, they are not trained in philosophy and theology. For example, the former LDS Church president (2008–2018), Thomas S. Monson (1927–2018), studied business management at the University of Utah and his successor Russel M. Nelson (\*1924) was a heart surgeon. Overall, this chapter in O'Dea's work provides a refreshing look at Mormonism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, noting references to history, community life, worldview, and theology made as the Mormons tackled the challenges of settling in Utah.

The concept of the ideal society has continued as a factor in Mormon self-conception, and as a motivation. O'Dea argued that Mormon history had done much to shape the contemporary economic and social attitudes of the LDS Church and its members. In its early days Mormons held to the United Order, a system of communalism founded on the Law of Consecration. Each family was to contribute the surplus of its production to the community, keeping only what it needed. Members would thus support those who had less and at the same time build up the LDS Church's own resources. The law was not enacted for later LDS communities – although it was and is still applied by some splinter groups, like the FLDS – but in

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182 O'Dea, 234.

183 O'Dea, 234.

184 O'Dea, 230.

the LDS, O'Dea suggested, it was still understood as the ideal of communal life, to be achieved eventually.<sup>185</sup> In 1841 tithing was adopted and continues to be practiced as the substitute for co-operative economic activity.

O'Dea proposed that economic achievements during settlement were founded in Mormon ideals of community. He highlighted the example of the irrigation of Utah as evidence of how a strong sense of community had made productive farming possible – mining was avoided on ideological grounds<sup>186</sup> – even in a difficult environment.<sup>187</sup> The Mormons developed co-operative techniques that allowed them to control the water supply for Salt Lake City and the villages of the Great Basin.<sup>188</sup> In the villages, groups worked together to construct and maintain the irrigation system. The use of water was restricted to those who invested in the system and was allocated according to need. The efficient irrigation of Utah led to the establishment of permanent co-operative institutions. Today these irrigation companies often continue to maintain and control the water supply in Utah. While mutual concern remained a reality in the LDS Church, this ideal of co-operative social groupings came to end, O'Dea proposed, when Utah gained statehood in 1896.

Working together, often under central direction, group loyalty, self-sufficiency and independence, aid to the needy and mutual help – these remained constant features of Mormon activities and ideals. After 1890 the tendency to experiment with social forms, familial or economic, was curtailed. In-time, co-operative institutions declined.<sup>189</sup>

The approach O'Dea adopted in his book has two principal themes: (1) the LDS Church's history, from the launching of a religious movement to its institutionalization and (2) the building of community, and that community's responses to economic, social, cultural, and political forces that shaped Mormonism up until the 1950s. He leaves his reader with an understanding of the tensions within the movement in his own time, so in the 1950s. His focus on economy, theology, and politics constructs a consistent and comprehensible narrative of the LDS Church within the

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185 O'Dea, 196.

186 The early Mormon society was based on farming, an idea of a public welfare and communality. Mining didn't fall in this category.

187 O'Dea, *The Mormons*, 198.

188 O'Dea, 201.

189 O'Dea, 215.

American context; Mormonism was not yet a global phenomenon when O'Dea was writing his book.

### Mormonism as a new religious tradition

The second book that had a huge impact on Mormon studies is Jan Shipps' *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*.<sup>190</sup> Shipps drew on historical sources to suggest that Mormonism be defined as an innovation, "the new religious tradition" of her subtitle:

Latter-day Saints of every stripe are heirs of a radical restoration. Their forebears entered into a new age in much the same way that the Saints of early Christianity entered into a new age. In so doing the Latter-day Saints started over, not to reform the institutions of Christendom but to participate in a transformation which in its totality has now made Mormonism into a distinct, discrete, internally consistent religious tradition.<sup>191</sup>

Shipps bases her claim on the radicality of Mormon religion:

It is important to note the difference between radical restoration movements, which make possible new beginnings in all the dimensions of religion – mythological, doctrinal, ritual, social, and experiential – and restoration movements, which, through processes of reformation, reinterpretation, and reintegration, revitalize religious traditions.<sup>192</sup>

Mormon scholars have tended to adopt Shipp's definition of Mormonism as a new religious tradition, but her definition of Mormonism as not Christian has attracted fierce criticism by Mormons and the leaders of the LDS church.<sup>193</sup> In contrast Mormon scholar Terryl L. Givens doesn't really understand the problem if Mormons are not perceived as Christians:

[S]ince Mormons tend to endorse the view of Jan Shipps, who has written that Mormons have the same relationship to Christianity that

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190 Shipps, *Mormonism*.

191 Shipps, 85.

192 Shipps, 91.

193 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, "Are Mormons Christian?," accessed November 12, 2017, /topics/christians; Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Deseret Book, 2010).

early Christians had to Judaism. And this without seeming to realize that, at some point, early Christians stopped being offended when they were no longer considered Jewish.<sup>194</sup>

Shippo (\*1929) introduces herself in her work as a non-Mormon and a Methodist.<sup>195</sup> She lived in Utah, an experience recounted in her second book, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons*,<sup>196</sup> a collection of essays.<sup>197</sup> She lays claims to an insider perspective that every Mormon can share:

A disadvantage of this manner of proceeding is its tendency to make my argument appear somewhat apologetic at times – an irony since I am not a Mormon – but that disadvantage is far out weighted by the effective means this stylistic strategy provided for reconstructing the picture of early Mormonism as perceived from the inside, a reconstruction that is crucial to the illumination of parallel patterns of development in early Christianity and Mormonism.<sup>198</sup>

An academic historian, Shippo is professor emeritus of history and religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Focused on historic texts, the book provides an insightful look at how Mormonism has adapted and been transformed over time. Shippo's comparative approach is less concerned with the contemporary LDS Church than with its history and historical context. The argument is not limited, however, to the history of Mormonism in America, for it includes deliberations about the theory and methods that have allowed her to define Mormonism as a religious tradition. Shippo aimed to distinguish between the text source and her act of interpretation, for which she recognizes the implications of her not being a Mormon. She states that the present study is hermeneutic as well as historic: "It is filled with historical data, but because Mormon history itself is treated as text and subjected to interpretive analysis, it is as hermeneutic as it is historical."<sup>199</sup>

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194 Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 58.

195 Shippo, *Mormonism*, xviii.

196 Jan Shippo, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

197 Shippo.

198 Shippo, *Mormonism*, xvii.

199 Shippo, x.

Mormonism, according to Shipps, has a tripartite foundation comprising prophetic figure, scripture, and experience – specifically, Joseph Smith, *The Book of Mormon*, and the corporate life of the early saints.<sup>200</sup> The transformations of Mormonism through time are typical of the experiences of religious traditions as they are established and become defined. Shipps explains her characterization of religious tradition as follows:

Because the word religion is so general that it is difficult to use in a definite or precise sense, religious tradition will here be used as the umbrella category that will cover (I) all the corporate bodies and (II) individuals unattached to corporate bodies in whose systems of belief a particular story is central.<sup>201</sup>

The comparison of Christianity and Mormonism is key to the book's argument. For Shipps "the Mormon story is merely an idiosyncratic interpretation of the Christian story."<sup>202</sup> Her central contention is that Mormons have reshaped the vision of the Old and New Testaments just as the early Christian community consolidated and reshaped Israel's history. Shipps notes differences between the Mormon scriptures and the Old and New Testaments:

As opposed to the Christian canon, which includes four narrative accounts proclaiming and interpreting the life of Jesus, plus an additional narrative covering the early years of Christianity, the only narrative description of early Latter-day Saint history is a personal account of the prophet's life in the years before the organization of the church. Smith's revelations are, in a manner of speaking, primary source materials for Mormon history, but they do not tell the Mormon story in chronological or any other systematic fashion.<sup>203</sup>

Mormon history is therefore an open canon. Shipps is well versed in Christian history and its scriptures; which enables the comparison with Mormon history and scriptures. Her analysis of how and by whom Mormon history has been researched and written, and thus how it has been defined, is instructive and illuminating. The Correlation Committee of the LDS Church scrutinizes historical material and compares it with existing authorized interpretation. Shipps comments,

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200 Shipps, xiii.

201 Shipps, 46.

202 Shipps, 47.

203 Shipps, 88.



For the most part, this body works so quietly and efficiently that the effectiveness with which the LDS Church continues to control its own history is truly surprising, given the size and energy of the scholarly body, whose members pursue the study of LDS history outside of and independent from connections with either the LDS or RLDS churches.<sup>204</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the history written by Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith's mother, is a case in point, and was particularly significant as Mack Smith's work is the only source for Smith's early life. Shipp's reconstructs the struggle over the publications of that manuscript when some leading members of the LDS Church, including Brigham Young, Joseph Smith's successor as leader, did not agree with the content. In light of invasive revisions, Shipp's deems the final published manuscript in 1853<sup>205</sup> to be "marginally authentic."<sup>206</sup> This example shows how LDS Church leaders have always wanted to be in charge of their past, a particular concern of the second LDS president Brigham Young, who was president for three decades, until his death in 1877. The LDS Church has remained involved in crafting its own history, and it also controls how Mormon history is researched, written, and published.

Further comparisons between Christianity and Mormonism are drawn in Shipp's argument. She proposes that like early Christianity, Mormonism is a *radical* restoration movement that believes there is a single truth, with which believers enter collectively into a new world. Shipp's analyses such movements by scrutinizing how the faithful transform restoration claims into objective facts and principles. She identifies the radicality of such restoration in its totality, in its encompassing, as we have seen, the mythological, doctrinal, ritual, social, and experiential. In its comprehensiveness Mormonism differs, she suggests, from other restoration movements of the 19th century. When, at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mormons as corporate body were included in the Union, new boundaries needed to be defined.<sup>207</sup> From then on, Mormons lived as "peculiar" people in a sacred time and space, distancing themselves from the rest of society. Previously, polygamy had been a way to enter into the kingdom. With

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204 Shipp's, 89.

205 The title of the manuscript was Joseph Smith, the Prophet: Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations, by Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet (Shipp's, 100).

206 Shipp's, *Mormonism*, 95.

207 Shipp's, 67–86.

that means of being present in sacred time and space now outlawed, other rituals were introduced in order to be able to enter into sacredness in the ordinary – the baptism of the dead carried out in profane time, for example.<sup>208</sup>

Shipp then looks at Mormonism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She explains, for example, the function and aim of the original General Conference,<sup>209</sup> how it changed over time as the community grew, and how electronic devices have supported its transmission. And as already mentioned, she raises the critical and delicate question of whether Mormons are Christians. This issue remains contentious, ferociously debated in particular by Mormons and evangelical Christians. Shipp recognizes that Mormons perceive themselves as Christians.<sup>210</sup> Her own decided opinion is a product of her argument that Mormonism is a radical restoration movement and therefore a new religious tradition. In the conclusion to her work, she states that because of their specific radical restoration history, Mormons cannot be deemed Christians. But, she proposes, Mormonism can be understood as a form of “corporate Christianity.”

If the key concepts of saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and the importance of temple ordinances are kept in mind as the address is considered, it becomes very clear that Mormonism is a form of corporate Christianity. While it perceives of itself as Christian, Mormonism differs from traditional Christianity in much the same fashion that traditional Christianity, in its ultimate emphasis on the individual, came to differ from Judaism.<sup>211</sup>

The term “corporate Christianity” is vaguely defined, perhaps in an attempt to bring a moderation to the discussion. According to Shipp, the difference between Mormonism and Christianity is the equivalent of the distinction between Judaism and Christianity. In four points she summa-

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208 Baptisms of the dead are conducted in the temple in the room with the font with Salomon’s twelve oxen that is found in every Mormon temple on the ground floor. LDS members baptize as proxies death members of the family to include them into the eternal family. The ritual provides a reassuring effect to the performers.

209 At the General Conference, held semi-annually (April, October) in Salt Lake City, members of the LDS Church gather to hear the president, the counsellors and other LDS Church leaders speak on faith issues and church organisation. The two-day event is broadcast on TV and radio in over 90 languages. The conference center seats 21’000 participants.

210 Shipp, *Mormonism*, 148.

211 Shipp, 148.

izes concisely why Mormonism must be considered a new religious tradition:<sup>212</sup>

1. The goal of Mormonism is eternal progression towards godhood.
2. Salvation depends on knowing Christ.
3. True knowledge is knowledge deemed legitimate by the LDS Church.
4. The unit of exaltation is the family.

Those four points also make evident why she believes Mormons cannot be considered Christians. Godhood in eternity, legitimation by the LDS institution, and the exaltation of the family unit are not part of a Christian worldview. The only intersection with Christianity is in deeming acceptance of Christ as necessary for salvation, but even there a sharp distinction is evident, for Mormons believe they will become Christ-like Gods in their eternal afterlife.

Shipps' theoretical and methodological approach is situated in the comparative history of religion, focusing on a comparison of early Christianity and early Mormonism. Her sources are mainly historical texts. Much emphasis is placed on the differences between *The Book of Mormon* and the Old and New Testament and on the historical contexts of early Mormonism and early Christianity. Shipps' aim is to claim persuasively that Mormonism cannot be deemed Christian; it is, she proposes, a new religious tradition.

### 3.3. *Mormon theology, ethics and worldview*

Comparative elements in Mormonism and Christianity often play a role in guides to Mormonism. In his *Introduction to Mormonism* (2003), Douglas James Davies (\*1947) places particular emphasis on Mormon theology, ethics, and worldview, explaining Mormon rituals in the context of doctrine.<sup>213</sup>

Davies is professor of the study of religion in the department of theology and religion at the University of Durham, with a particular interest in death studies. In the introduction, this author, too, highlights that he is a non-Mormon: "it is important for the reader to know that the author is

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212 Shipps, 149.

213 Douglas James Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

not and never has been a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or any other restoration movement.”<sup>214</sup>

Davies’ introductory work is less a historic account of Mormonism and more a systematic study highlighting and analyzing elements that are constitutive of Mormonism, with a focus on rituals and doctrine. Where Shipp’s comparison is historical, Douglas considers the characteristics of each movement’s scriptures, proposing:

If there is no division within *The Book of Mormon* analogous to the Bible’s Old and New Testaments, it is because the Bible is not a Christological document from beginning to end, even though some Christians do interpret what they call the Old Testament to make it appear so. *The Book of Mormon*, by contrast, is much more of a unity and is Christologically driven; indeed it can be read as an example of narrative theology with Christ present from beginning to end.<sup>215</sup>

Davies focuses on the LDS Church’s sacred texts, epics, and revelations as primary sources for Mormon theology, with its concept of God and humankind, but he also includes works by other authors that are widely acknowledged by Mormon leaders. He looks in particular at “the crucial temple rituals of endowments, marriage and baptism for the dead, through which human beings may achieve their divine potential.” His approach seeks, he suggests, “neither to prove nor to disprove the truthfulness of the religious claims of that faith but rather to describe them in ways that non-Mormons can understand.”<sup>216</sup>

History and practice are revealing for Davies, for, he notes, “[b]elief affects ritual and ritual affects belief.”<sup>217</sup> As he looks at the relationship between theology and history, Davies suggests that Mormonism has not (yet) developed a theology like that of many other Christian denominations, largely because Mormon theological practice is founded in past revelation and in the words of the living prophet in the present, “both of which constrain the exploratory tendencies of theologians in other churches. What Mormonism has come to possess is a relatively large group of historians who are sometimes thought to substitute for theologians, but that is only partially true.”<sup>218</sup> It may indeed be only partially the case, but any substitu-

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214 Davies, 7.

215 Davies, 59.

216 Davies, I.

217 Davies, 5.

218 Davies, 2.

tion of historians for theologians is noteworthy. A similar claim was made by Shippo when she wrote of the powerful LDS Church historians who control the Church's past.<sup>219</sup> While intersections of theology and history are to be expected, other faiths have a dependence on theology – for the exegesis of religious texts in the context of a belief system – that is absent for the Mormons. Davies sees LDS doctrine and the connected forms of ritual falling into two styles of religiosity: Protestant millenarian Mormonism and symbolic temple Mormonism.<sup>220</sup>

With a concise approach, Davies explains the Mormon religious worldview and, in particular, Mormon theology in such detail that his work is unique within the genre of introductory studies of Mormonism. His approach to Mormon beliefs as prophetic imaginations within specific social circumstances might not appeal to Mormons. He summarizes Mormon theology in light of the elements of vision, plan, and church, noting that “Through specific rites performed in temples married Saints are provided with the means of conquering death and pursuing an eternal existence in which they, themselves become Gods.”<sup>221</sup> Marrying, having children, and following strictly the Mormon commandments will result in the individual becoming a God in the afterlife, surrounded by their sacred family. The husband is the leader of the family in heaven too, and his wife becomes a Goddess. Mormon theology, Davies proposes, is a cosmology that tackles the concept of God, the relation between God and human beings, and the reason for human existence.

Davies brings a systematization to Mormon theology that other scholars have found too great a challenge. Doctrinal analysis and comparison based on texts is very enlightening and, as this study reveals, can be engaged by a non-Mormon. But how can a non-Mormon analyze ritual that they have not seen? Davies circumvents this potential obstacle elegantly by concentrating on the theological meaning of rituals. In so doing, he provides much insight into Mormon theology.

### 3.4. *Mormonism as a new world faith*

The monograph *The Rise of Mormonism* (2005) by Rodney Stark (\*1934), with an introduction by Reid L Neilson, followed close on the heels of

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219 Shippo, *Mormonism*, 89.

220 Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 6.

221 Davies, 4.

Davies' work.<sup>222</sup> Stark is a US-American sociologist of religion with a Lutheran background and hence non-Mormon. Neilson considers Stark's earlier article "The Rise of a New World Faith",<sup>223</sup> published in 1984, with its projections of LDS membership numbers. Stark had considered the whole span from 1830 to 1980, and established the rate of increase in each decade; by the 1980 that figure was somewhere in the 30 percent to 50 percent range.<sup>224</sup> In his study Stark then projected numbers up to 2100. If the growth rate is maintained, Mormons will form one of the six biggest religious communities worldwide, with a projected 601,781,268 members at the highest and 108,004,354 members as the lowest estimate (the two figures are the product of statistical probabilities).

The earlier article had concentrated on the projection itself; in the later book Stark draws on those numbers to ask why Mormons are flourishing more than other religious communities. A sociological approach allows rational choice theory to be applied and the results discussed in detail in the context of conversion.<sup>225</sup> Stark also takes a comparative approach, in particular in considering the idea of family in the religious traditions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.<sup>226</sup>

As a whole Stark's work tackles the question of why LDS Church growth is outpacing other American religions at home and abroad. Stark argues that people dispose of a religious capital, which they guard carefully, and asks about the circumstances under which they are drawn to invest that capital in Mormonism. He describes the reasons for Mormon success as follows:

Latter-day Saints often retain cultural continuity with the conventional faiths of the societies in which they seek converts; their doctrines are non empirical; they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment; they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective; they generate a highly motivated, volunteer religious labour force, including many willing to proselytize; they maintain a level of fertility sufficient to offset member mortality; they compete against weak, local, conventional religious organizations within a relatively unregulated religious economy; they sustain strong internal

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222 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid Larkin Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

223 5/18/2020 12:08:00 PM

224 Stark, 22.

225 Shipps, *Mormonism*, 57.

226 Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, 46–53.

attachments while remaining an open social network, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders; they maintain sufficient tension with their environment; they remain sufficiently strict; and they socialize their young sufficiently well as to minimize both defection and the appeal of reduced strictness. How could they not succeed?<sup>227</sup>

This discussion is taken further. Stark notes that Mormonism has more converts than cradle Mormons,<sup>228</sup> and using Mormons as a case study, he formulates 14 rational choice premises that result in conversion.<sup>229</sup> Thus, for example, if missionaries make contact with an individual on the street then the probability that the individual will convert is small; conversion is far more likely, happening in one third of cases, when the individual is engaged in a private space generated by friends or other family members.<sup>230</sup>

Stark traces the success of Mormonism to its reliance on revelation and formulates twelve theses for when revelation, broadly framed, happens.<sup>231</sup> Revelation describes the state in which individuals know what God asks from them. That experience requires a culture than holds to a communicative relationship with God, a culture that Stark suggests is found in the United States. Additionally, reception of God's message is eased by having contact with a "role-model, with someone who has had such communications."<sup>232</sup> The most fruitful place for revelatory activity is the family unit. Family has been key to Mormonism since its beginnings, with families providing a network of faith. Members' commitment is evident in the extensive tithing the LDS Church encourages – on that score Mormons are the most financially giving religious community per capita in the United States, with 48 percent of the membership contributing more than \$2000 in 2004, a figure reached by only 2 percent of Catholics, 3 percent of liberal Protestants, and 14 percent of conservative Protestants.<sup>233</sup>

For Stark the success of the LDS runs counter to the secularization thesis:

By now it must be evident to all but the most devoted ideologues that the thunderous religious activities taking place around the world are

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227 Stark, 137.

228 Stark, 136.

229 Stark, 63–70.

230 Stark, 81/82.

231 Stark, 35–56.

232 Stark, 35.

233 Stark, 92.

not dying spasms but are the lusty choruses of revival and the uproar caused by the outbreak of new faiths.<sup>234</sup>

New religious movements arise as traditional religions lose members, suggesting that the secularization thesis is not so much wrong as only partially right. Modernization has given religious groups new strategies of circulation in the market place. Stark sees religious institutions increasingly integrated such that the distinction between LDS Church and society disappears, an argument that bears comparison with the suggestion in the introduction to this study that religion as expressed through the media has become something of a lifestyle because the coherence of traditional values is missing. When the choice is between sports activities, socializing with friends, and attending LDS Church, then religion has become a leisure-time activity.<sup>235</sup> Mormons have prospered even within a modern and secularized society. Indeed for Stark, “The more *secularized* the society, the *greater the success of new religions* – of cult movements that represent an *unconventional religious tradition*.”<sup>236</sup> Stark describes Mormonism as a cult, a description that the Mormons have sought to eliminate through public-affairs initiatives, the costly image campaign *I’m a Mormon* from 2010, billboards, and many television commercials.<sup>237</sup>

In his chapter entitled “The Rise of a New World Faith”<sup>238</sup> Stark notes that religious theory has often been designed to explain why religions decline, but a case study of the Mormons requires we consider why a religious group has grown so significantly. To that end he has analyzed both quantitative data and qualitative materials from diverse sources. Stark’s sociological approach to Mormonism provides an original and insightful point of access to a religious community that is hard to pin down theologically. Having projected his statistical data to identify future trends, he addresses issues of revelation, conversion, religious capital, rational choice, and the success of a religious community. Despite the detail, the discussion still contains a degree of speculation, in particular in the case of the debate over rational choice, a debate certainly worth having, but one that provides a one-sided view of human rationality. Overall, however, this sociographic approach proves innovative and rich, and particularly rewarding when applied to an unusually successful religious community.

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234 Stark, 98.

235 See chapter 1.1, part I in the current book.

236 Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, 101.

237 See chapter 4, part II in the current book.

238 Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, 139–146.



### 3.5. *The universal but different ethnic culture of Mormonism*

In his 2007 monograph *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*, Terryl L. Givens asks: What is unique in Mormon cultural expression, and how do Mormon history and theology influence Mormon artistic production?<sup>239</sup> These questions carry two presumptions, that Mormons are associated with a unique artistic production and that this production is influenced by their history and theology. Givens (\*1957) is professor of English, literature and religion at the University of Richmond with a particular interest in literary theory, British and European romanticism, Mormon studies, and intellectual history. He is the co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*<sup>240</sup> and a practicing Mormon. The purpose of the study is described as

to plumb in tentative fashion the range of Mormonism's intellectual and artistic productions, to see if one can find there the contours of consistent themes and preoccupations, a unity between theological foundations and history, on the one hand, and cultural production, on the other.<sup>241</sup>

For Givens there are four Mormon paradoxes.<sup>242</sup> The first concerns the authority of the prophets that is in tension with the idea that each member has the right to receive revelations. The second paradox is located between secure spiritual knowledge about the deity on one side and the eternal quest for saving knowledge and the burden of an endlessly sought perfection on the other. The third paradox describes Mormon life in sacred time, and is evident “in the recurrent invasion of the banal into the realm of the holy and the infusion of the sacred into the realm of the quotidian.”<sup>243</sup> And finally the author looks at the paradox of the intertwining of exile and integration within Mormonism and a gospel viewed as both American and universal.<sup>244</sup> Givens' study is in two parts, covering the beginnings of Mormon history until 1890 in the first, and from 1890 until present in the second. The year 1890 is often seen as a tipping point in Mormon history, as the year when polygamy was abandoned and the LDS Church adopted the

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239 Givens, *People of Paradox*.

240 Terryl Givens, *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

241 Givens, *People of Paradox*, vii–viii.

242 Givens, xiv–xvi.

243 Givens, xv.

244 Givens, xv.

goal of attaining statehood for Utah. For Givens, Mormonism is an essentially American religion because American and Mormon culture and history are “imperceptibly fused.”<sup>245</sup>

A member of the LDS, Givens hopes that Mormon artists and intellectuals will facilitate the transition of Mormonism into a truly international faith.<sup>246</sup> These first three chapters are somewhat introductory in character, seeming in effect to explain essential elements of Mormonism for non-Mormons, noting, for example, that Mormons are aware of the tension that arises from being excluded from being defined as Christian and at the same time wanting to be different.

The study examines many Mormon sources of cultural production. Mormons invested in education, including languages and natural science, from their earliest days, fostering the education of women, men, and children. Givens also addresses Mormon architecture, suggesting that in the early years of Mormonism whole cities were built to represent Zion, but that once Utah had achieved statehood, Mormons started to build Zion in their homes and reduced their sacred buildings to temples rather than entire communities.<sup>247</sup> A shift is also identified in music and dance, which had been very much enjoyed until all efforts became focused on the *Tabernacle Choir*, the internationally renowned Mormon flagship. Here the author compares the Mormons to the Puritans in drawing a line between themselves and others by promoting or prohibiting practices disallowed or welcomed in other cultures.

Givens looks also at the significance of theatrical performance. Mormons, he suggests, always look for a positive message in theatre and music whereby a contented present and joyful eternity are represented and defended.<sup>248</sup> Outdoor spectacles have been and remain very popular. Popular pageants have an evangelizing potential, and “as the country’s largest and oldest outdoor drama is America’s nearest equivalent to Germany’s passion play at Oberammergau.”<sup>249</sup> The comparison with the German passion play with its first performance in 1634 highlights the success of the Mormon pageant and implicitly relates Mormon pageants to the Christian tradition. Mormonism has a specific literature. Givens stresses Mormons’ biblical lit-

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245 Givens, 61.

246 Givens, xvi.

247 Givens, 115.

248 Givens, 144–156.

249 Givens, 267. The *Hill Cumorah* pageant is one among several successful Mormon productions. Since 1937 it takes place annually in Palmyra/NY and tells the story of Joseph Smith and The Book of Mormon.

eracy, with the English of the King James translation of the Bible deemed holy language.<sup>250</sup> He also highlights that via the Relief Society and its magazine, female authors took firm root in the Mormon literary tradition. Painting was not part of the early movement, but from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormon painters turned in particular to depicting Mormon history.

Broadcast media are also a focus for Givens, whose emphasis is principally on the achievements and positive effects of Mormon media production. In the chapter “‘Cinema as Sacrament’: Theater and Film”<sup>251</sup> the content of successful Mormon movies is discussed. In producing their own films, Mormons are able to ensure that the depiction is in keeping with the moral standards upheld by the LDS Church, which may well not be the case when the same narrative is filmed by others. Independent filmmaking enables an alternative to Hollywood productions deemed too explicit in their portrayal of sex, drugs, and alcohol and in their use of crude language. Two genres are highlighted as cultural markers: comedy and missionary films. *The Best Two Years* (Scott S. Anderson, US 2003) is one such comedy, and it also has traits of missionary films such as *God’s Army* (Richard Dutcher, US 2000). Mormon comedies, Givens notes, are intended for a Mormon audience:

Like insiders to a private joke, Mormons can comfortably laugh at a genre that, by its focus on culturally distinctive eccentricities, promotes Mormon cohesion and reifies and confirms Mormon self-definition, even as it exploits a cultural grammar that is inherently exclusionary.<sup>252</sup>

The boundary-making capacities inherent in movies are also utilized in other forms of cultural production through which Mormons distinguish themselves from others. Givens refers to the LDS produced *Homefront* series, which comprises short films used as a public relations tool. *Homefront* was produced from 1972 to 2009 and received several awards.<sup>253</sup> The series upholds classical family values: thus, for example, it encourages parents to spend time with their children. Givens notes the effectiveness of the medium:

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250 Givens, 157–178.

251 Givens, 265–284.

252 Givens, 273–274.

253 The series won three Emmys and 18 Clios. Clios are the top award of the advertising industry.

As the most-lauded public service campaign in history, the series solidified the LDS church's reputation as family-centred, while revealing the power of film to present a Mormon message effectively and non-threateningly to a mass audience.<sup>254</sup>

Building on the success of *Homefront*, the LDS Church has produced many short films on social-ethical topics that are available online through their media library webpage.<sup>255</sup>

As Givens explores the specifics of the culture of Mormons, a "people of paradox" as he calls them, he shapes them as peculiar people. The argument goes: we are peculiar but our artistic and intellectual expressions are universal (beautiful), proving the universal truth of Mormonism. Or in Givens' own words, Mormonism's artistic expression inheres "perhaps salvational universalism."<sup>256</sup> He calls for the development of a Mormon aesthetic theory, noting that "Mormon belief in human preexistence provides just one possible avenue to the elaboration of a specifically Mormon theory of the beautiful, reminiscent of Platonic forms, eternal absolutes that hover at the far boundaries of recollection."<sup>257</sup> Having outlined the Mormon aesthetic, highlighting its beauty and universality, he can conclude, "Reliance upon such spiritual anthropologies nudges Mormon aesthetics in the direction of what is universally human rather than culturally particular."<sup>258</sup>

With *People of Paradox* Givens provides a revealing window on the tension between exclusivity and universality, between peculiarity and an all-embracing truth. The aesthetic theory he develops is not entirely consistent and can be read as apologetic<sup>259</sup> or overly enthusiastic. But his work is certainly a mine of information on Mormon artistic productions.

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254 Givens, *People of Paradox*, 272–273.

255 "LDS Videos - Largest Collection of Official Mormon Videos Online," accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/video?lang=eng>.

256 Givens, *People of Paradox*, 340.

257 Givens, 341.

258 Givens, 341.

259 According to Daniel L. Peterson an insider of a religious tradition has to be apologetic. He divides into positive and negative apologetics. The first defends inconsistencies and the second highlights them. "Indeed, knowing of the existence of competing doctrines that contradict their own teachings, representatives of a religious community might proceed to a positive apologetics, seeking to demonstrate that one or more of their claims are, in fact, very believable, or even, perhaps, superior to rival views." See Peterson, Daniel C. "Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom?: Some Observations on Mormon Studies." *Mormon Studies Review*, no. 1 (June 2014): 80–88.

Mormon history is American history

In *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (2012), Mormon scholar Matthew Bowman highlights the essential US-Americanness of the LDS Church. That claim is evident from the start: in the preface Bowman states: “If God indeed selected frontier America in the early nineteenth century for the restoration of his church, he could hardly have chosen better. Many scholars have called Mormonism the quintessential American faith.”<sup>260</sup>

Bowman proposes that Mormon history is American history, that Mormons are Americans. His work provides a narrative of Mormonism that begins in 1830 and reaches up to 2011, focusing on Mormons and their struggle to be fully American. Again a potential tension marks the tale the author wants to tell, as he acknowledges: “While the story of the Americanization of a radical movement, it is also the story of the preservation of a dream and the still-beating heart of Joseph Smith’s vision of Zion.”<sup>261</sup> The timing of the work is salient, associated with Mitt Romney’s efforts to take the presidency as the Republican nominee in the upcoming election; unconsciously and indirectly, however, the author may provide a partial explanation of why Romney fell short.

Bowman has a doctoral degree from Georgetown University and since 2015 has been associate professor of history at Henderson State University. His work, he makes explicit, cites only from primary sources. These sources include Mormon scriptures and historical Mormon texts. A thorough and annotated bibliography appears at the end of the book, along with appendixes that provide a useful overview of the LDS hierarchy and the four Mormon scriptures – the *Bible*, *The Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and the *Pearls of Great Price*. Appendix 3 contains a “Cast of Characters”, with short biographies of the LDS Church presidents and other notable Mormons.<sup>262</sup> “The Family. A Proclamation to the World” is also reprinted, a significant statement provided by President Gordon Hinckley at the General Relief Society Meeting held in Salt Lake City in 1995. The “Proclamation” sets out the official Mormon position on family and marriage, declaring that “marriage between man and a woman is ordained of

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260 Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), xv.

261 Bowman, 253.

262 Bowman, 263–284.

God and that the family is central to the creator's plan for the eternity of His children" and that the purpose of marriage is procreation.<sup>263</sup>

Following his chronological narrative of Mormon history, the author looks at critical topics and turning points such as polygamy, uniformity, conversion, the exclusion of African Americans from the priesthood, homosexuality, Mormon theology, and writing the history of the LDS Church. While the discussion has a certain defensiveness, tending, for example, to highlight the positive, it is undoubtedly illuminating. In discussing plural marriage, for example, Bowman describes the responsibilities that fell on husbands, and notes that there was a strong economic impetus for the practice. His analysis seeks to explain why plural marriage was important and how it fitted within the Mormon worldview.<sup>264</sup> But the tone remains apologetic in its appeal to an early 21<sup>st</sup> century readership: "Perhaps the most striking effect plural marriage had on Mormon society was the creation of powerful, strongly bound female society."<sup>265</sup> Women living in plural marriages had the economic security and emotional space to become involved in public activities, he suggests, citing the example of the Relief Society founded by women.

Bowman also seeks to justify the often criticized Mormon practice of baptism of the dead, using the abolition of polygamy as an explanation. With the loss of polygamy, he argues, another spiritual dimension needed to be added to marriage. Reconceptualization saw the introduction of the "celestial" marriage, the idea of marriage for all eternity. With this shift Mormons could uphold American family patterns as passionately as they had polygamy. The plurality of the family came from the ritual of sealing for eternity, dead (family) members included.

The LDS Church's success in the 1950s was based, Bowman suggests, on uniformity. During these years the LDS Church organization started to synchronize and standardize representations of the LDS Church and its members, introducing, for example, white shirts for the Aaronic priesthood holders, missionary training and programs, strongly centralized institutional authority termed "correlation", and Sunday school programs, publications, and teaching manuals. Bowman proposes that "Correlated materials are designed not to promote theological reflection but to produce Mormons dedicated to living the tenets of their faith."<sup>266</sup> The church-

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263 Bowman, 283.

264 Bowman, 128–131.

265 Bowman, 135.

266 Bowman, 197.

going experience became standardized across the Mormon world, and while theological innovation was met with suspicion, behavior deemed correct became increasingly normalized.<sup>267</sup> The success of the strategy of correlation was reflected in LDS Church growth, including outside the United States. The change, Bowman suggests, was to the inherent historic nature of Mormonism: “Standardization and simplification sounded the final death knell of the charismatic spirituality of nineteenth-century Mormonism.”<sup>268</sup>

Bowman pays particular attention to the exclusion of African Americans from the office of the priesthood and from temple worship. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of African Americans in Utah was low, and Bowman suggests that the law of Cain, with its one-drop rule, was more symbolic than applied.<sup>269</sup> That comment can seem apologetic: in essence a group of people were excluded because of their race. Bowman also describes the struggles of Spence W. Kimball, president from 1973 to 1985, to revoke the lineage of Cain and with it the restrictions for Mormons of African descent.

The Mormon LDS Church and its leaders continue to eschew theological writing in favor of homiletics and devotional works:

After the public disputes over evolution in the 1930s and after correlation (a preemptive strike against potential doctrinal schism) the leaders of the church have decided to leave theological dispute alone. They conceive of their task largely in terms of ministry and pastoral work, consonant with modern Mormons’ conception of their faith as a way of life and a system of ethical behavior rather than a theological argument.<sup>270</sup>

According to Bowman, it is therefore difficult to describe theologically what Mormons are. He nevertheless gives it a try: Mormons have to affirm their believe in Jesus Christ, in Joseph Smith’s mission to restore Christ’s church, and in the authority of the priesthood of the church.

Bowman also tackles Mormon history writing. He recognizes that the LDS Church has defended the idea that there can be no accurate, objective history of the LDS “without consideration of the spiritual powers that at-

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267 Bowman, 191.

268 Bowman, 197.

269 Bowman, 176.

270 Bowman, 229.

tend this work.”<sup>271</sup> For most Mormons God has guided the growth of the LDS Church, and an academic history of the LDS Church, which will fail to acknowledge the spiritual at work, is therefore inadequate. In 2009 the LDS opened a large history library in Salt Lake City, with a substantial department of LDS Church history, a museum, exhibitions, and special collections. The Internet has also been used to provide access to many historical resources. Fifteenth president of the LDS Church Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) had a pronounced media sensibility, and is identified by Bowman as the architect of a subtle (media) revolution for the LDS Church.

Bowman’s original afterword was revised for a subsequent edition to include something of an apology for failing to distance himself in his writing from the reports of Joseph Smith’s supernatural experience, and for failing to interrogate the experience with a historian’s rigor. He identifies the challenges of his narrative style: “Writing about one’s own religion is always a tricky proposition, and it becomes even more so when one’s faith happens to be Mormonism, as it is mine.”<sup>272</sup> He criticizes television productions such as *Big Love* (HBO, US 2006–11, 5 seasons) and Jon Krakauer’s non-fiction book *Under the Banner of Heaven*<sup>273</sup> for their extreme simplification of Mormonism, and regrets that for so many Americans, all their knowledge of Mormonism comes solely from such portrayals. Mormonism, he argues, has never been monolithic. The picture such sources broadcast is one-dimensional in its suggestion that Mormons are simply obedient to the instructions of a fanatical religious culture. Mormonism, he suggests,

presses norms as any prophetic religion must. From a faith with such a powerful sense of identity, such a vivid and compelling story of origin, such a profound hold on the spiritual life of its followers, anything less would be disappointing.<sup>274</sup>

In response to the often-posed question about the relationship of Mormonism and Christianity, Bowman proposes that the two faiths are complementary religions in the sense that the former is built upon the latter. He makes reference to Mitt Romney and compares the fears of Mormons with fears that have beset Jews and Christians. For Bowman the LDS is a

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271 Bowman, 243.

272 Bowman, 222.

273 Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

274 Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), xxi.



faith tradition with its own history, and his evaluation of Mormonism is generally positive, with an overlay of defensiveness. Bowman dedicated his monograph to Richard Bushman, a renowned Mormon scholar whose works on Mormonism included an impressive biography of Joseph Smith.<sup>275</sup>

### 3.6. *A sociological approach to The Mormon Quest for Glory*

Melvin Hammarberg, a social scientist who self-identifies as “not a believer”,<sup>276</sup> began his study of the LDS in the early 1970s. His book *The Mormon Quest for Glory: The Religious World of the Latter-Day Saints* is the product of over thirty years of research. The author is associate professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. The purpose of this extensive ethnographic survey based on field study is “to provide a qualitative picture of the church in the contemporary present.”<sup>277</sup> Hammarberg’s desire to understand the culture of the LDS Church has led him into “describing and analyzing aspects and features of the LDS Church’s history, rituals, social organization, kinship structures, gender roles, basis for authority, artistic traditions, use of media, recruitment of new members and other component parts that comprise this culture.”<sup>278</sup>

The author’s social scientific method draws on interviews, surveys, and observations, which are united with selective analysis of educational material, religious narratives, and historic contexts. The sources range widely to include visual material such as film and video produced by the Mormons as a vehicle for presenting their beliefs; a quantitative questionnaire distributed in the Crystal Heights neighborhood of Salt Lake City, whose resi-

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275 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Reprint (New York: Vintage, 2007). See also Claudia L. Bushman and Richard L. Bushman, *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Bushman and Bushman is not included in this discussion because the present monographs focus on the present or at least draw a bow until recent times. But of course Bushman’s work is important and a valuable source specifically according to early Mormon history.

276 Melvyn Hammarberg, *The Mormon Quest for Glory: The Religious World of the Latter-Day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

277 Hammarberg, 13. The following discussion relies on my review of Hammarberg’s monograph published in the journal *Religion*. See Marie-Therese Mäder, “The Mormon Quest for Glory: The Religious World of the Latter-Day Saints by Melvyn Hammarberg,” *Religion* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 128–31.

278 Hammarberg, *The Mormon Quest for Glory*, 2.

dents are both Mormons and non-Mormons; the LDS magazines *New Era*, *Friend*, and *Liabona*, which are all published quarterly; and *Church News*, a weekly supplement to the newspaper *Deseret News*.

Hammarberg examines the Mormon life, which the LDS Church structures and organizes in the everyday for its members. The topics are addressed descriptively and include baptism of the dead, family, sexuality, marriage, and divorce. Hammarberg also considers issues of gender and sexual orientation. The Mormon life plan is conceived such that each individual passes through a number of levels during their lifetime. Pre-earth life is succeeded by the finite life on earth, which is succeeded by an after-life, termed “the spirit world.” The Last Judgment and Resurrection that will follow characterize the hereafter.

Hammarberg systematically reconstructs the Mormon life plan, emphasizing the focus on education. Starting with early education, for children between 18 months and 4 years, he shows how personalized the lessons at this age already are. For children aged between 4 and 8 years, lessons focus on worthiness and obedience as essential conditions for the return to the “heavenly home”. For those aged between 8 and 11 the program introduces canonical texts, the Old and the New Testament, and *The Book of Mormon*. At this stage interactions in class become important, with strong connections to be established between peers. At the next stage boys and girls are separated: the young men are prepared for the Aaronic and Melchizedec priesthood and also for their leadership role as husbands; the young women are instructed in how to be mothers and wives. The pedagogy is elaborated and adapted to the needs of each age group. Thus, for example, homosexuality is discussed with teenagers. According to Hammarberg,

The church’s opposition to homosexuality causes considerable anxiety within many families and undercuts the church’s most fundamental doctrine that all human beings are sons and daughters of heavenly parents, who love and nurture them in the hope of a return to their eternal home.<sup>279</sup>

The statement makes unsparingly evident how difficult LDS policy can be for homosexual members.

Hammarberg’s academic background as an anthropologist provides a fruitful and differentiated view of Mormonism and colors the whole study. A good example for his approach is found in the description of the rituals

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279 Hammarberg, 166.

performed in the temple. He explains that the rituals have two functions: some are performed for the living, and some for the dead, with the former a rite of passage and the latter a rite of intensification. In both cases, confirmation is central. The endowment, a ritual regularly performed in the temple, is foundational to the Mormon worldview, which has salvation and, finally, exaltation constantly to the fore:

In this plan all spirits who chose mortal experience may, by their own effort and good works, and in faith and dependence upon Christ's atonement, pass through the veil of birth into a mortal life, and again at the death return through the veil to their spirit home in the kingdom of god, and there, if worthy, achieve a place in glory before heavenly Father as a god among gods.<sup>280</sup>

Hammarberg also sheds light on Mormon missionary work. His detailed description shows how closely guided and well-structured the training is. It teaches missionaries how to hold an effective and agile conversation and how to follow the detailed process that guides people through the ritual of baptism.

The author mentions two apparently oppositional extremes in relation to LDS efficiency and organizational capacity. He described the disciplinary counsels as "emotionally potent identity-defining and boundary-maintaining instruments of social control."<sup>281</sup> Their duty is to supervise the behavior of the LDS Church members, and in the process, Hammarberg proposes, generate feelings of guilt, fear, anxiety, shame, sorrow, or remorse. At the same time the LDS Church's dense network of social welfare programs provides compassionate humanitarian and educational services, reaching out to provide assistance even to non-members. *The Mormon Quest for Glory* strikes a successful balance between closeness, which enables the author to engage his subject, and distance, which allows the author to analyze the material he has gathered, always with respect for its subject.<sup>282</sup>

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280 Hammarberg, 186.

281 Hammarberg, 269.

282 Mäder, "The Mormon Quest for Glory," 131.

### 3.7. The multifaceted and scholarly reconstructed world of Mormonism

The works selected here for discussion have been chosen to show the diversity and detail that can be found in the field of Mormon studies. These summaries revealed how the author's context, analytical approach, and personal background can all shape the subject of study. Mormon Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and currently chair of the Interpreter Foundation, which publishes *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*,<sup>283</sup> provides a perceptive and useful account of the field:

Mormon studies simply involves studies of things Mormon, including the Mormon people and their history but also their scriptures and their doctrines. Nothing in the term privileges, say, research into the reception history of the scriptures over philological, archaeological, and historical approaches linked to their claimed origin or *Sitz im Leben* even if, as in the case of The Book of Mormon, that origin is controversial.<sup>284</sup>

All of the approaches highlighted here can only give a certain sense of the religious tradition of the Mormons, their theology, history, rituals, institutions, and everyday life. The works are linked by their common focus on the LDS, mainly because it is formed by the largest single grouping of Mormons. The information on that community is evidently comprehensive and enriching.

This chapter has provided insight into the different approaches that can be taken to the study of Mormon culture, and into what the aim of each perspective might be. Additionally, these introductory considerations not only leave a strong sense of the diversity of Mormon studies but also highlight particular aspects of Mormon culture, worldview, and history. This multi-perspective omnium gatherum therefore can stand as a very useful backdrop for the current study; additional literature relevant to the field of Mormonism and media is then included and discussed in the relevant subsequent chapter.

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283 "Journal," The Interpreter Foundation, accessed July 26, 2017, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/journal/>.

284 Daniel C. Peterson, "'Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom': Some Observations on Mormon Studies," *Mormon Studies Review*, no. 1 (June 2014): 80.