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

Thomas A. Tweed

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

1. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1872; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 115. This article is a revised version of a paper I delivered at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in 2005. I want to thank Kathleen Flake for inviting me to serve on that panel and Philip Barlow, John-Charles Duffy, and Reid Neilson for commenting on an earlier draft. Blair Hodges and Virginia Garrard Burnett also helped in important ways. For my understanding of Twain and Mormonism, I am indebted to Richard H. Cracroft, "The Gentle Blasphemer: Mark Twain, Holy Scripture, and the Book of Mormon," *Brigham Young University Studies* 11/2 (Winter 1971): 119–40.

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!"³ 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 amplex.⁴

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.

4. Twain, *Roughing It*, 87–88.

torian Protestant god was sacralizing the monogamous home.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

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.

6. See Rodney Stark, “How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model,” in *The Future of New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley and Phillip E. Hammond (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 11–29. See also a collection of essays on the tradition: Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

7. See Timothy Miller, *When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

8. For comparative analysis of religion and the body, see Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

9. On the family as “the unit of exaltation,” see Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 149.

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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.¹² This site maps the 1,300-mile trail that was followed by

10. Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Jan Shipps has explored similar themes in connection with Mormonism. See Jan Shipps, *The Scattering of the Gathered and the Gathering of the Scattered: The Mormon Diaspora in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (St. George, UT: Dixie College, 1991).

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.

12. The fully interactive site, “The Mormon Pioneer Trail,” was available at <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/history> in November 2005. You can still find the map and text at https://www.lds.org/library/pio_sto/Pioneer_Trail/00_Trail_Main.html.

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.

13. For a useful geographical and historical analysis of the Mormon trek and for LDS migration and settlement more generally, see Edwin Scott Gaustad and Philip L. Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 296–307. I am grateful to Laurie Maffly-Kipp for helping me to think about “the Mormon Pioneer Trail.”

14. This distinction between voluntary, coerced, and forced migration is one that some social scientists have made. On this see William Petersen, “A General Typology of Migration,” *American Sociological Review* 23 (June 1958): 256–66. For an attempt to move toward another model of migration, see Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, eds., *Toward a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, no. 645 (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992).

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 Shi'ī caliph-imams of the Fatimid Dynasty, especially al-Mu'izz (953–975), the Fatimid ruler who transformed the caliphate from a regional power to an expansive empire, drew on a network of *dā'īs*, or "religio-political missionaries," within and outside the boundaries of the Islamic state. Before and after al-Mu'izz'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

15. See Matthew 28:19; Acts 28:31. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1986). There is some evidence that Lull's own thought was

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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

influenced by the encounter with Muslims he sought to convert. See Charles Lohr, “The Arabic Background to Ramón Lull’s *Liber Chaos* (ca. 1285),” *Traditio* 55 (2000): 159–70. However, as John Bossy points out, Lull was much more hostile toward Jews: John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 84. On Charlemagne, see Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne*, trans. David S. Bachrach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). For a translation of the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, see the passages in Dana Carleton Munro, ed., *Selections from the Laws of Charles the Great* (Philadelphia: The Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania; London: P. S. King, 1900). On the Fatimid caliphate, see Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1998), 63–119. It is Daftary who translates *dā’īs* as “religio-political missionaries” (p. 64). On Aśoka, see John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Of course, Buddhist emissaries also have transmitted practices, artifacts, and beliefs in other times and places—for example, as monks from the Paekche kingdom (18 BCE–660 CE) brought Buddhism from Korea to Japan. On the role of Korean Buddhists in East Asia, see Robert E. Buswell Jr., ed., *Currents and Countercurrents: Korean Influences on the Buddhist Traditions of East Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005). On Buddhists as active agents in the propagation of their faith since the nineteenth century, see Linda Learman, ed., *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

16. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 157.

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."¹⁸

As important for the character and scope of contemporary Mormonism, however, all this foreign missionary activity has had astonishing results. As Jan Shippo 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ Whatever the reason for

18. Stark, "How New Religions Succeed," 25. See also Rodney Stark, "Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11/2 (1996): 133–46.

19. Jan Shippo, "Getting Here from There: Mormonism at the Beginning of the 21st Century," unpublished paper, American Academy of Religion, 20 November 2005. These estimates were taken from the official website: "Church Growth" and "Where do Members of the Church Live?," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, www.lds.org.

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.

21. Frequently Asked Questions, "To what do you attribute the growth of your church?," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2005, www.lds.org.

the growth, it is now “the most serious challenge we face,” Hinkley suggested 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 crossing 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 temples, and just more than half (73) of those outside the United States, including in cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²⁴

Mormonism and translocative history

So like the Roman Catholic Church or the International Society for Krishna 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 boundaries. 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 spatialization 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. Edmunds, D. T. Suzuki, and Translocative History,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 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

dhiism: Toward 'Translocative' Analysis," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 12 (2011): 17–32.

26. *Our Heritage*, 1.

27. For studies of the Latter-day Saints in East Asia and the Pacific World, see Reid L. Neilson, "Mormonism and the Japanese: A Guide to the Sources," in *Taking the Gospel to the Japanese, 1901–2001*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Van C. Gessel (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 435–44; Reid L. Neilson, *Early Mormon Missionary Activities in Japan, 1901–1924* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2010); and Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Reid Neilson, eds., *Proclamation to the People: Nineteenth Century Mormonism and the Pacific Basin Frontier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008). See also Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

City, Lima, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, and Caracas.²⁸ 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).