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The "Glocalization" of Mormon Studies

Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye

MORMONISM, ANTEBELLUM AMERICA'S young and ambitious new religious movement, had not yet reached its tenth birthday when in 1837 the first Mormon missionaries booked passage on ships and took their message of restoration to Great Britain, a country across the sea. Despite the fact that a majority of Mormons now reside outside North America and that the stakes of Zion now dot the globe, the vast majority of Mormon studies focus on Mormonism in North America, usually in the United States. Yet it is also important to note that outstanding work has been done on Mormonism outside North America and that some ambitious and promising projects are under way.[1] Even so, what stands in the way of the development of truly global Mormon studies that reflect a truly global Mormonism?

Four structural issues immediately come to mind. First, Mormonism, though claiming a global presence, is still a very young religion. Compared to the great spans of time that separate scholars from the origins of major global traditions like Buddhism and Judaism, Mormonism's historical foundations are just a cubit away. The relative freshness of the historical trail, the alluring connection between Mormon doctrinal claims and American cultural history, and the richness and abundance of sources have attracted scholars' focus on the faith's American roots.

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1. See, for instance, work by Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Reid Neilson's work on Mormons in Japan.

Second, the potential power of Mormonism's centralized (Utah-based) institutional structure to shape its churchwide doctrines, practices, culture, and even scholarship cannot be ignored. Twice a year, the attention of Mormons all over the world is drawn to Salt Lake City to hear the pronouncements of top church leaders with authority to shape church teachings in their role as "prophets, seers, and revelators." Twice a year, Mormons in Tahiti and Taiwan alike view, with the same familiar recognition, broadcast images of leaves rustling in the breeze as people gather at Temple Square. Not all roads lead to Salt Lake City, but for Mormons, wherever they may be scattered around the world, there is at least one road that does.

Third, Mormonism's claims of global strength may be somewhat overstated. The official church records of Mormons across the world, measured in baptisms but unadjusted for attrition, do not accurately reflect the actual strength of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a given place. This information gap in church statistics is particularly problematic outside North America, where populations of Mormons are so tiny that they are ignored by external researchers (while in America numerous external religious surveys have included Mormons as a group). In many places where they have been established for decades, Mormon ecclesiastical units actually have very shallow generational footholds that are unable to sustain the sort of organic growth one would expect to see in a church mature enough to be a worldwide religious tradition. Scholarly projects must contend with this great and often hidden variation in the strength and distribution of Mormon units across the globe.

Fourth, while the majority of Mormon studies scholars residing in North America agree in principle on the importance of doing more research outside North America, numerous practical impediments exist. International research involves a plural marriage of time, money, language ability, and connections that make it difficult for the average Mormon studies scholar to live this "higher law."

The good news is that this is an exciting moment when many people are working hard to expand work in the study of global Mormonism. Recent efforts and projects under way include several papers on international

Mormonism at the 2013 Mormon History Association meeting in Layton, Utah; at least one major book project and a significant component of two other book projects of which I am aware; the International Mormon Studies Book Project and Research Fund, run by students at Claremont Graduate University; and a conference on global Mormonism now in the early stages of planning.[2]

I would like to suggest three ways in which we might develop new approaches to the study of Mormonism as a global religion: (1) reframing center and periphery, (2) engaging with literature on world Christianity, and (3) drawing creative inspiration from work in ethnic studies on minority groups.

Reframing theoretical notions of "center and periphery"

One problem with many existing histories of Mormonism outside North America is that they tend to sound like a fill-in-the-blank exercise:

> In such-and-such a year, the first missionaries went from America to Country X. After ___ number of years, there were only ___ converts. In ___ the Book of Mormon was translated into _____. Through missionaries' hard work and the inspiring dedication of a few valiant members, the church expanded, despite problems with Cross-Cultural Conflict X, Language Problem Y, and Logistical Difficulty Z. Now in the twenty-first century, there are ___ members in ___ stakes, and the closest temple is _____.

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2. Joanna Brooks and Gina Colvin are coediting a book on global Mormonism; Laurie Maffly-Kipp is writing a book that addresses global Mormonism in significant respects and also a chapter on the international church for a volume on Mormonism since 1945 edited by Patrick Mason and John Turner; the International Mormon Studies Book Project is about to ship its first collections to the French Institute for Research on Mormonism at the University of Bordeaux, France, and the University of Queensland, Australia; and Brittany Chapman and Liz Heath in the LDS Church History Department are spearheading planning for a spring 2014 conference on Mormonism in Asia that will be hosted at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. For more information about the International Mormon Studies Book Project, see http://www.patheos.com /blogs/peculiarpeople/ 2013/05/coming-to-mha-the-international-mormon-studies-book-drive-summer-fund-raiser/.

Given Mormonism's global diversity, why do so many of the international Mormon histories sound so strangely similar? For an answer we might turn to anthropologist Fenella Cannell, who suggests that academics studying religion should be careful to examine their own internalized assumptions. She notes, for instance, that the Western discipline of anthropology may have internalized certain Western Christian theological positions, such as the notion of the radical separation of body and spirit. Such assumptions may cause observers to classify Christian groups that blur this distinction as heterodox or unchristian when in fact these "heterodox" positions are supported in numerous places throughout the Bible.[3] Were scholars to confront these assumptions about what makes a religious movement "real Christianity," Cannell suggests, "we might instead come to see these not just as local 'resistance,' or as peripheral parts of 'real Christianity,' but as alternative Christianities deeply rooted in the highly unstable syntheses which Christian orthodoxies themselves represent."[4]

What about Mormon studies? Could there also be ways in which we have unconsciously internalized certain theological, cultural, or other assumptions that shape how we organize and interpret Mormon history? In what ways do the "highly unstable syntheses that [Mormon] orthodoxies represent" manifest themselves in Mormon cultures around the world?

The uniformity in historical narratives about Mormons outside North America stems from an underlying assumption that Mormonism is to be defined in terms of its centralized administrative structure. In actuality, while unmistakably influential, the central Mormon administrative structure is neither hegemonic nor broadly representative of global Mormonism as a whole. Indeed, when it comes to the life of a local Mormon unit, as the Chinese saying goes, *Heaven is high and the emperor is far away*. While the administrative center of the LDS Church is unquestionably Salt Lake City, Mormonism has other centers and other peripheries.

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3. Fenella Cannell, introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity*, ed. Cannell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

4. Fenella Cannell, "The Christianity of Anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11/2 (2005): 352.

Where is Mormonism's charismatic center? I suggest that this center is in fact what many are accustomed to seeing as the periphery: the Global South. In future studies, we might look for the influence of non–North American Mormonism in shaping churchwide discourse about charismatic practices. It would be interesting to know, for instance, what percentage of miracle stories (healings, visions, exorcism, etc.) in published twenty-first-century Mormon sources comes from a non–North American source. My preliminary impression based on my experience within the church as a member is that the relationship between North American Mormonism and non–North American Mormonism might be described in terms of the symbiotic, mutually dependent exchange of an economic system. From the Mormon South to the Mormon North flow "natural resources," including convert baptisms, miracle stories, missionaries' own faith-promoting experiences, examples of dramatic individual sacrifice in the name of religious observance, and "simple devotion" (e.g., pure, powerful piety uncluttered by the materialism of modern society). From the Mormon North to the Mormon South flow "finished goods," including general conference, lesson manuals, editions of the scriptures, handbooks, newsroom statements, top-level leaders, organizational infrastructure, and media (e.g., iPhone and iPad apps, Greg Olsen prints, music, and websites). I wonder if charismatic resources (i.e., real-life, firsthand testimonies of healings, visions, and other miracles on par with those told about nineteenth-century Mormon pioneers in North America) from the Mormon South might be harvested and redistributed to the church at large as a sort of "welfare" for those less fortunate members in the Mormon North where modern technology, rationality, and materialism have contributed to a "charismatic" famine.

To move beyond the geographical-administrative narrative, we could also find other dimensions in which to investigate change over time, such as the development of a local Mormon community's culture of practice.[5] Instead of seeing subjects' conversion to Mormonism as the beginning or

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5. See, for instance, the work of David D. Hall on lived religion, including his edited volume *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

the focus of a historical project, we could locate the expansion of a Mormon community over time, along with other religious groups that form the larger religious community in a given place.[6]

Engaging in conversations with world Christianity

Existing literature on world Christianity provides a rich body of data and ideas that could productively inform Mormon studies. A substantial body of work already exists that defines terms and formulates new vocabulary for describing what happens when a Christian message takes root in new soil. One particularly useful concept, for instance, is the notion of "glocalization" (from *globalization* and *localization*), which posits that the spread of global organizations, culture, and modes of living is not simply a macro-level, homogenizing process; rather, globalization simultaneously generates increasing heterogeneity, including distinctive local cultural forms.[7] Discussions of world Christianity, including focused studies of Christian movements in Africa and Asia, should be helpful as well.[8] Literature on Christianity in China, for instance, is an

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6. See Thomas D. DuBois, *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

7. Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995).

8. See, for instance, Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley, eds., *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 8: World Christianities, c. 1815–c. 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). More focused studies include Eva Keller, "Scripture Study as Normal Science: Seventh-Day Adventist Practice on the East Coast of Madagascar," in *The Anthropology of Christianity*, ed. Fenella Cannell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 273–94; Todd M. Vanden Berg, "Culture, Christianity, and Witchcraft in a West African Context," in *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World*, ed. Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45–63; and Birgit Meyer, "The Power of Money: Politics, Occult Forces, and Pentecostalism in Ghana," *African Studies Review* 41/3 (December 1998): 15–37.

excellent reference for thinking about missions, colonial dynamics, cultural accommodation, contextual theology, transnational organizations, and the indigenization of foreign religiosity.[9]

Global Mormon studies scholars who are comfortably familiar with landscapes of contrasts and contradictions and who can cite examples from religious practice around the globe will have unique and important things to say in debates over rationality and apocalyptic thinking, modernity and secularization, gender and authority, and the grassroots production of religious capital.[10]

Borrowing helpful ideas from minority studies

Work in global Mormon studies also stands to benefit from scholarship on ethnic and religious minorities. In most places outside North America, Mormons are a tiny minority, often representing less than 1 percent of the population. In many cases, Mormon communities become shaped as much by their minority status as by their beliefs and practices. Mormonism's minority status is further complicated by the fact that its far-reaching missionary efforts often result in subminority groups within

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9. Another very interesting case study in Chinese Christianity for Mormons is the True Jesus Church, which might be termed "the Mormonism of China" because of its restorationist claims deeply rooted in Chinese political and religious culture. See, for instance, my PhD dissertation, "Miraculous Mundane: The True Jesus Church and Chinese Christianity in the Twentieth Century" (Harvard University, 2011), and forthcoming work by J. Gordon Melton and Elisa Zhai. The True Jesus Church is also interesting because it has undertaken the missionary project "in the other direction." The True Jesus Church now claims its own global membership, with churches across North America, Europe, and Africa. Examining the relationship between this church's universal, exclusivist claims and its Chinese linguistic and cultural influences can shed light on those wishing to understand the relationship between global expressions of Mormonism and its American organizational and theological origins.

10. See, for instance, Elizabeth E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); and Joel Robbins, "Secrecy and the Sense of an Ending: Narrative, Time, and Everyday Millenarianism in Papua New Guinea and in Christian Fundamentalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43/3 (2001): 525–51.

Mormonism, such as Hmong language units in northern California and Filipina domestic worker units in Hong Kong.

With these nested minority subcategories in mind, the literature on "panethnicity" (in which individuals from hitherto distinct national, cultural, and linguistic origins are lumped together by outsiders who see them as homogenous) is helpful in understanding both how Mormons are perceived globally and how North American Mormons perceive their "global" or "ethnic" coreligionists.[11] One case in point for majority-minority "inversion" that occurs within Mormonism is the fact that the LDS Church's Asia Area (encompassing all Asian nations except Japan, but including the world's two most populous countries, China and India) is only one of twenty-five such church administrative units. Needless to say, lumping half the world's people and many of the world's oldest and most distinctive cultural traditions into 1/25th of the kingdom of God on earth is an extreme example of panethnic categorization (arising not necessarily from ignorance of the significance of ethnic distinctions, but from the relatively small number of Latter-day Saints in the Asia Area—about 170,000 actively practicing and nonpracticing members).[12]

While "panethnic lumping" is a rather negative term implying either outsiders' lack of understanding for ethnic distinctiveness or individual minority populations so small as to be nearly insignificant by themselves, the notion of panethnicity has also been embraced and adapted by minority groups for their own purposes. For example, diverse "Asian" ethnic groups in America have at times embraced panethnic categorization to pursue shared political and social goals. Similarly, Mormons as a global minority and "global minorities" within Mormonism may embrace their minority Mormon identity in a way that involves not only transmission of cultural or religious ideas and practices, but also the

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11. See Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and David Lopez and Yen Le Espiritu, "Panethnicity in the United States: A Theoretical Framework," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13/2 (1990): 198–224.

12. Rick Lee, e-mail message to author, 14 March 2013. Lee is an employee in the LDS Asia Area Office in Hong Kong.

modification, corruption, or invention of these ideas and practices.[13]

Beyond the notion of panethnicity, ethnic studies showing the interaction of faith, culture, and community in minority religious communities such as ethnic immigrant churches in North America may be very useful in understanding the dynamic of Mormon units outside North America.[14]

Conclusion

I believe that we are currently on the verge of a great flowering of work in international Mormon studies. Although in the past the LDS Church's American roots have seemed like the most obvious, relevant, and accessible targets for Mormon studies research, recently scholars and the church itself have shown new commitment to the work of recognizing the cultural and religious gravity of global expressions of Mormonism. More human and financial resources are surely needed to move these global Mormon studies projects forward.[15] And yet the need is so clear as to ensure that none shall shirk. Mormon studies must grow to fully reflect Mormonism's global realities.

I would like to suggest a pair of images that may be useful in conceiving how to approach the study of Mormonism as a global religion. Suppose we visualize Mormonism as a tree that grew from a seed. The oak tree, common in North America and Europe, might come to mind. It starts from a single seed, puts down roots, and starts to grow. As it grows,

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13. Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 8.

14. See Pyong Gap Min, "The Structure and Social Functions of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States," *International Migration Review* 26/4 (Winter 1992): 1370–94; Yuting Wang and Fenggang Yang, "More Than Evangelical and Ethnic: The Ecological Factor in Chinese Conversion to Christianity in the United States," *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 67/2 (2006): 179–92; and Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh, "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications," *American Sociological Review* 66/2 (2001): 269–88.

15. Please consider becoming involved in the new initiative to promote Mormon studies outside North America, the International Mormon Studies Book Project and Research Fund (http://www.facebook.com/internationalmormonstudies).

it branches. As high up and far out as the branches may grow, they all come back to this one place where it first took root. The old standard mission-history narrative depicts international Mormonism as an oak tree: orderly, balanced, everything referring back to the one place where the seed first took hold.

But suppose that, instead of an oak, we turn to the banyan tree, common in Asia and the Pacific region. It starts from a seed lodged in a crack of a host tree. It puts down roots and starts to grow. As it grows, it branches. These branches send down slender roots, called prop roots, that plant themselves into the soil all around the main trunk. Over time, prop roots develop that can become indistinguishable from the original trunk. The future of global Mormon studies will describe a Mormon reality that is more like a banyan than an oak: a bit chaotic, growing wherever it can find a foothold, each branch with many of its own sturdy trunks and roots, yet all forming a single living organism.

The challenge of studying global expressions of Mormonism will lie in showing that Mormon communities in places such as Hungary, Guatemala, and the Democratic Republic of Congo are not just branches of an American church, but authentic parts of a vibrant religious tradition that is nourished by deep local roots—all over the world.

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