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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 25 | 2005

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Library of Congress Hosts Academic Conference on Joseph Smith, Part 2

This report covers the proceedings of the second day of “The Worlds of Joseph Smith,” an academic conference held on 6–7 May 2005 at the Library of Congress, in Washington DC, in recognition of the bicentennial of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s birth. For a report of the first day of proceedings, see the article in *Insights* 25/3 (2005).

Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World

Moderating the fourth session was Andrew Skinner, dean of Religious Education at BYU and the new executive director of ISPART, who remarked that this particular session was “a wonderful opportunity to consider the doctrines taught by Joseph Smith compared to those of other Christian denominations that surrounded Joseph as well as his successors.” The featured presenter of the session was David L. Paulsen, a professor of philosophy at BYU who delivered a paper titled “Joseph Smith Challenges the Christian Theological World.”

Paulsen said that theology was unnecessary before the death of the early apostles and that Joseph Smith posed many challenges to the “diverse and ambivalent world that we call Christian theology”—namely, God’s resumption of direct revelation in modern times; restoration of divine authority to speak and act in God’s name; a greatly enlarged and still open scriptural canon; deeper understanding of Jesus Christ as God and Savior; reaffirmation of the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as opposed to the God of the philosophers and theologians; an ennobling theomorphic understanding of humanity; and a comprehensive and inspiring soteriology (theology dealing with salvation) that, among other things, explains the fate of the unevangelized.

Of those challenges to the theological world, none is more fundamental than the belief in direct

revelation from God, a concept that challenges “every variety of Christian thought,” Paulsen said. He said that Smith’s greatest argument for extrabiblical revelation was his first vision, which informs a Christology that is similar to the apostle Paul’s and that at points agrees with, adds to, and repudiates contemporary Christologies. “The God who revealed himself to Joseph Smith is radically unlike the God of the

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New Research Pushes Christian Apostasy Earlier in Time

A much-anticipated book exploring the root causes of the early Christian apostasy is now off the press: *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds and published by FARMS and BYU Press.

This book is the culmination of several years’ work by BYU scholars who used manuscripts from the first few centuries of Christianity (some not discovered until the last century) to reevaluate the formative research on the apostasy by James E. Talmage, Joseph Fielding Smith, and B. H. Roberts.

Following them, most Latter-day Saint scholars and leaders previously understood the Christian apostasy through the findings of 19th-century Protestant historians and the claims of 18th-century anticlerical writings. Both sources provided a seemingly endless array of evidences of apostasy in Christian history. This reliance on Protestant writers produced in LDS accounts of the apostasy a heavy emphasis on the late-medieval corruption of the Catholic Church, typically described as having occurred during a time of severe spiritual darkness and intellectual backwardness.

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3,000 people came through the exhibit in Stuttgart, a tribute to the very diligent work of the local church leaders. A richly illustrated lecture was also given in Salzburg, in all cases in German. Included among the guests in both locations were town and county government officials.

Another FARMS scholar, Stephen D. Ricks, a BYU professor of Hebrew and cognate learning, gave a lecture on the exhibit's opening night in Zollikofen, Switzerland. He spoke on the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls and says that the many community leaders in attendance were favorably impressed with the quality of the exhibit. Ricks also spoke to the Latter-day Saint community in the area on the following evening. A specialist on the scrolls, Ricks imparted to his audiences much information and insight, though he modestly maintains, "I received so much more in return."

Beautiful leather facsimiles of several scrolls, including the 24-foot-long Isaiah scroll, highlight

the display. Also included are a model of the community at Qumran, genuine Qumran coins and clay oil lamps, a sword forged around the time that Qumran was destroyed (about AD 70), and photographs and maps. The tour has benefited from such guest lecturers as Donald Parry, Florentino García Martínez (a world-renowned scrolls scholar), and Valérie Triplet-Hitoto (a Nibley Fellow pursuing a PhD at the University of Paris, Sorbonne).

"The biblical scrolls serve as a focal point due to the fact that the Bible is a religious text shared by a number of religions and faiths," said Parry. "This is one reason the scrolls represent such a vital archaeological find. They are ancient relics that bring together people of various faiths who share this common scriptural heritage."

The exhibit continues its tour in central Europe, with visits that began in Frankfurt and will end in Copenhagen. Please check farms.byu.edu for further information. 

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philosophers," who is relegated to an "unblinking cosmic stare," Paulsen said. He identified several key differences between those conceptions of God, including his "tender possibility" made clear in Latter-day Saint scripture.

The first respondent was Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary and a professor of philosophy and ethics. Noting that the question of Joseph Smith's claim to divine authority can be bracketed while considering his contributions to theology, Mouw proceeded to discuss Catholic and Protestant views on what constitutes legitimate additions to scripture. For Catholics, the authoritative extension of the church's teaching office (*magisterium*) allows the development of extrabiblical dogma viewed as "the Spirit's continuing, normative guidance to the church" (e.g., immaculate conception, the holy Trinity, and papal authority). Protestants see such additions as "an adulteration of the original deposit," Mouw said, and accept explications that follow the "clear sense" of scripture. Joseph Smith, on the other hand,

claimed to receive "new information directly from the Godhead," and as a result "the real authority for Mormons resides not in books [of scripture] but in living prophets," he said.

Mouw suggested that the appeal of Smith's theology was not only that it brought doctrinal certainty amid religious confusion but also that it shrank the metaphysical gap between God and humankind. The latter is "deeply offensive" to Jews and Christians, who view it as a kind of idolatry, Mouw said. "But it's one thing to make that point (and I certainly want to make it), and it's another for Christians to ask themselves whether the early-to-mid-19th-century movements that reduced this gap of being between God and human beings can in any significant way be seen as a corrective to weaknesses in our own theology and our own practice."

Randall H. Balmer, a professor of religion at Columbia University and editor-at-large for *Christianity Today*, was the next respondent. Regarding the question of authority in the early Christian church, he remarked that he saw possible irony or

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even humor in Matthew 16:18–19, where leadership of the church falls to Peter, who in Balmer’s view (and contrary to Latter-day Saint views) was “anything but rock solid”—an indication that the church was entrusted to “fallible man,” Peter being a kind of “Everyman” and “the apotheosis of infallibility.”

Latter-day Saint belief in modern prophets “surely complicates the question of epistemology—how do we know what is and what is not scripture, God’s special revelation to humanity?” Balmer said. “Here we encounter the perils of circularity. We know because Smith tells us, because the Book of Mormon tells us. . . . [This] casts doubt on the validity of such argumentation and the enterprise of apologetics itself” since it is based on Enlightenment rationalism and thus is concerned with linear thought and empirical evidence. He explained that the postmodern approach of the late 20th and early 21st centuries views faith from an entirely different angle, “seek[ing] to vindicate the faith by invoking experience rather than argument.” He mentioned a few pitfalls of apologetics and concluded by saying that he found the presentation of the Mormon faith by the “docents at Temple Square”—tour guides who punctuate their remarks with personal testimony—“more compelling than the ratiocination that I’ve heard over the last couple days.”

Robert L. Millet, a professor of ancient scripture and former dean of Religious Education at BYU, was the final respondent. Speaking on how the church has changed through the years, he emphasized that while the doctrine does not change, the emphasis given to certain doctrines does change. Examples include seeing Christ’s atonement as beginning in Gethsemane and culminating on the cross (not as limited to Gethsemane) and giving more emphasis to the Book of Mormon and to Christ and his saving grace.

The church’s move from Illinois to the Great Basin was as much ideological as it was geographical, Millet said, for the church began to focus on its “distinctives,” a trend that has continued. “It may appear to some that the Latter-day Saints are changing when in fact we just may be coming of age, unveiling what has been there in the

literature all along, offering distinctive insights to a world that may in time come to appreciate them.” He concluded that such refinement and retrenchment is not a crisis, as the author of the 1987 book *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* claimed, but “a movement toward a more thoroughly redemptive base to our theology, . . . a movement that is in harmony with the teachings of the Bible and the Book of Mormon.”

Joseph Smith and the Making of a Global Religion

The final session considered “the global reach of Joseph Smith’s ideas and influence,” noted moderator Jill Mulvay Derr, an associate professor of church history and doctrine at BYU, in opening remarks. The presenter at this session was Douglas J. Davies, a religion professor at the University of Durham (England) who has pioneered a Mormon studies program at that university. Speaking on “World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints,” Davies, who is not a Latter-day Saint, said that assessing the church’s status as a world religion required a “thick” analysis (complex, multidimensional) rather than a “thin” analysis (superficial, considering a single strand of data) and that Rodney Stark’s 20-year-old prediction that the church would soon be a world religion is oversimplified and overlooks possible impediments to that growth.

Davies proceeded to distinguish between the terms *world religion* and *global religion*, assigning Mormonism to the latter and noting that a world religion is not simply a religion with a very large number of adherents. He ventured his own definition, which includes “a distinctive process of the conquest of death” (a requirement that Mormonism satisfies since it “furnishes a more extensive, eternal soteriology than any other church”) and, crucially, development from its original cultural source by “engaging creatively with the cultures into which it expands and . . . by generat[ing] diversifying textual, symbolic, and historical traditions.” Regarding the latter requirement, Mormonism is an “expanded denominational subculture rather than . . . a world religion” since it remains to be seen if it can become enculturated in many differing societies. “Still, I may be quite wrong,” as varieties of Mormonism may emerge in areas like

Africa and Brazil and yet be “in full accord with a centralized value system,” Davies said.

Respondent Gerald R. McDermott, a professor of religion and philosophy at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia, evaluated Stark’s thesis—that “Mormonism [would] soon become the first new world religion since the rise of Islam”—along three lines: (1) whether it is truly a new religion, (2) whether it is in fact the first new world religion since Islam, and (3) its prospects for future growth. Although some scholars say Mormonism is not new because of its continuities with traditional Christianity, McDermott, who is not a Latter-day Saint, concluded that its newness “cannot be denied” since, among other things, the faith has an enlarged scriptural canon, accepts new revelation, denies ontological difference between creature and Creator, and rejects creation *ex nihilo*.

He pointed out that a number of religions since the rise of Islam in the seventh century are comparable to or larger than Mormonism (based on information in the 2001 *World Christian Encyclopedia*). For example, as of 2000, Sufism numbered 237 million, the Japanese Soka Gakkai religion 18 million, the Baha’i religion 17 million, Pure Land Buddhism 14 million, and Jehovah’s Witnesses 13 million (the latter in 219 countries, compared to Mormonism’s 11 million in 116 countries). While Stark says that only Mormonism has what it takes to become a world religion, Jehovah’s Witnesses “fare well when judged by the same [10] criteria”—a “rough parity that seems evidenced in similar worldwide growth,” McDermott said. He noted that since Jehovah’s Witnesses are “not as associated with America in this increasingly anti-American world,” their prospects for growth might be a little better than that of the Latter-day Saints. Thus “Mormonism takes its place not among the great world religions, all of which dwarf it in size, but among the fair number that may someday reach that status.” He went on to say that a lot depends on Mormonism’s “translatability” into other cultures, that is, “whether it has the ability to transcend its American provenance and theological character.”

The next respondent, Jan Shipps, a noted historian and professor emeritus of history and religious studies at Indiana University–Purdue University

at Indianapolis, proposed that the church did not begin to take on a true global presence until the administration of President David O. McKay. His attention to a restructured missionary program, an extraordinary building effort, and a churchwide correlation program, along with his circumnavigation of the globe, “were all essential elements in beginning the transformation of Mormonism from provincial tradition to global religious force,” said Shipps, who is not a Latter-day Saint. She added that President Spencer W. Kimball’s 1978 revelation that extended the priesthood to all worthy males helped considerably in universalizing the Mormon message and that “practically the entire ecclesiastical administration of Gordon B. Hinckley has been devoted to completing [that] conversion.”


Shipps noted that her 1985 argument that Mormonism was a new *religious tradition* has been misunderstood as a restatement of Stark’s 1984 prediction that the faith will be the next *world religion*. The two categories are not the same. Mormonism qualifies as a new religious tradition according to Shipps’s six criteria (mythological, doctrinal, ritual, social/institutional, ethical, and experiential dimensions), “an indication that Mormonism is more than a cult, sect, denomination, or church—it is a religious tradition, one that was new when it came into being.” The point is that “you need to become a religious tradition before you can become a global religion.” Without Joseph Smith’s opening the heavens, Shipps said, Mormonism would likely have been just one more “idiosyncratic Protestant denomination” on the American religious landscape. She concluded that Mormonism is “something between a world religion and a great religion that is not a world religion. It is something like Judaism, [which] is fully realized as a religious tradition but one not able to be fully encultured in some parts of the world, and a proto-world religion, one that will lengthen its stride enough to attain world religion status. [It] still remains to be seen whether that occurs.”

Roger R. Keller, a BYU professor of church history and doctrine specializing in world religions and Christian denominations, was the final respondent. The essence of gospel fullness lies in priesthood authority, he said, and “affects how

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Latter-day Saints understand the first principles of the gospel, the organization of the church, and what it will mean for Mormonism to be a world religion.” His remarks centered on these three themes. Keller clarified that Mormonism is an achievement-based religion in the sense that good works are a natural product of discipleship. “Discipleship *is* works; it is the outgrowth of our encounter with the Savior, and anyone who claims differently stands outside the biblical tradition.”

Regarding Davies’s suggestion that the nature of church organization may prevent the church from becoming a world religion, Keller said that this view overlooks the role of priesthood authority, which connects the entire church membership to its leaders. “Just as the world is [effectively] shrinking, so is the church on a worldwide basis.” He pointed out that the “unifying force” determining how the church engages with foreign cultures is priesthood authority and that certain cultural accommodations “will not be at the expense of central authority.” The church “will maintain structure, order, and unity in doctrine and organization, while at the same time permitting regional and cultural diversity when that diversity does not violate the principles of the revealed order of things. Those will be the parameters of the growing world religion, and I’m perfectly happy to leave it to God to see what the end result will be.” 

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