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A Response to Bahr and Forste

Jon P. Alston

The article by Howard M. Bahr and Renata Tonks Forste calls for higher standards of research on Mormonism than has been the case. Scientific findings, they rightly claim, should be objective, generalizable, replicable, and public. Few social scientists would object to these criteria, though many social science studies of Mormons and non-Mormons alike violate one or more of these standards. Such criticisms are especially valid in the study of religion, which tends to be underfunded and understaffed. The authors also level specific criticisms toward undue and uncritical acceptance of enshrined classics, exploratory works, and conclusions based on ill-defined and nonrandomly selected samples of Mormon subjects, notably Brigham Young University students and “accidental” adults living in Mormonism’s heartland.

In response to these criticisms—which place doubt on the utility of most social studies of Mormonism—Bahr and Forste present a number of research models and topics for future, scientifically reliable projects. They call for research projects which place Mormons and Mormonism in larger, more comparative contexts. The authors then present two metaphors—Mormonism as an “underdeveloped nation” and as a “boomtown”—that challenge the traditional, often superficial and unsophisticated ways former research questions have been selected and answered. These analytic guides suggest a surprising number of research questions couched within well-developed research and theoretical frameworks. They offer ambitious research challenges to social scientists.

However potentially useful, the danger of the above research metaphors is that they are too restrictive. There are other models of scholarship, if any must be used, which also offer promises of yielding insightful and objective findings. I offer one additional metaphor for future researchers investigating Mormonism: Mormonism as a religious phenomenon.

MORMONISM AS A RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

Much of the research interest in Mormonism and in its unique characteristics derives from the fact that Mormons form a religious group. It follows that a religious metaphor can be fruitfully used. We can do

Jon P. Alston is a professor of sociology at Texas A&M University.

no better than to look at Mormonism's religious past as a guide to future research. In addition, Mormonism is one religion among many and should be studied in comparison to other religious groups.

In spite of the very impressive membership growth of the LDS church in recent decades, the history of Mormonism indicates a tendency toward apostasy and schism. Steven L. Shields, in his study of Restoration-derived schisms, finds more than one hundred sects and divisions, many of which exist today.¹ Similarly, J. Gordon Melton describes almost twenty *currently* existing major groups listing Joseph Smith, Jr., as a source of revelation.² While the growth of LDS membership in recent decades suggests that Mormonism may emerge as a "new world faith," according to Rodney Stark,³ the schismatic tendency is also a fact that should not be ignored. In addition, the high rates of conversions into the LDS church are also accompanied by a dropout rate of lifelong members and former converts. Nor are conversion rates, as measured by missionary years or population, evenly distributed from one country to another or from region to region within a society. I encourage social scientists, including historians and geographers in addition to sociologists, to select research topics that deal with schism, membership growth, conversion, apostasy, leadership styles, and organization, ideally on a comparative basis.

Much of what is known about membership and conversion rates comes to us from official sources. These figures may not be completely reliable or meaningful for social scientists. Many officially designated LDS members are no doubt inactive in one degree or another, and an officially defined "member" may not define himself as such. Studies of Mormons should clearly define, apart from official sources, what is meant by membership. I do not mean to imply that Church officials inflate membership figures, though that is a possibility to be tested. Rather, membership figures can be used for different purposes which are not always compatible. A Church official may define some persons as members or not; the persons involved can disagree. Church rolls can also become dated and distorted through officially recognized disaffiliation and inactivity. Membership statistics for Roman Catholics, as well as other religious groups, are notoriously inaccurate. Social scientists should maintain a skeptical attitude when dealing with official statistics of any type.

Statistics, no matter how reliable and "true," are often meaningless when viewed in a vacuum. It is true that Mormon membership has increased by over 50 percent in the last three decades, but so have the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious groups. The research based on Mormons sometimes borders on monomania in its exclusivity. While no one criticizes research specialization, a more comparative orientation should balance the penchant to restrict one's focus to Mormonism per se.

As an aside, the spate of bibliographies on Mormon studies published in recent years suggests to me a great preoccupation with past findings. Even if this preoccupation criticizes past works, scholars should look outward more. As a non-Mormon fascinated by Mormonism, I detect a too-great concern by scholars to deal exclusively with Mormonism. This isolates those researchers from a wider community of scholars. Professional "anti-Mormons" make me nervous, but so do, though to a lesser degree, exclusively "Mormon specialists." Why these exist would make a study in itself.

Thus, again, I call for more comparative research. Even if this research is based on nonrepresentative samples, the comparative approach offers a great promise of utility. Why not, for example, draw samples of students at BYU and at Seventh-Day Adventist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist sponsored universities? One could add student samples from Bob Jones University and Oral Roberts University. How these students differ from each other and over time would be of incalculable value to the understanding of these religious groups.

At the very least, I urge future researchers to compare missionary tactics and converts among a plurality of growth-oriented, evangelical religious groups. Rodney Stark has projected a "conservative" estimate of over sixty-three million Mormons in the year 2080.⁴ But there could be, assuming similar projection techniques, almost as many Baha'is, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and even Nichiren Soka Gakkai members of various types.

ON "SENSITIZING" WORKS

The study of Mormonism is both blessed and cursed by the availability of well-respected exploratory and "sensitizing" studies. Their positive characteristics are based on the fact that such works as Thomas O'Dea's *The Mormons* alert scholars to issues which otherwise might be ignored. Unfortunately, such hallowed "classics" do not always indicate that the source of a statement is intuition rather than testable fact. Readers can fall into the trap of accepting as scientific truth what is in fact a flight of fancy and overstatement, however brilliant and intellectually appealing. Then, too, these affirmations, if accepted on trust, probably support the biases of the readers and authors, or else there would be an immediate hue and cry of disagreement and rebuttal.

One solution to this problem is to encourage graduate students to test one or another statement in these standard classics in their theses and dissertations. There is no better training for a student than to challenge a master's hunches and suggestions. To do so, the students

must become thoroughly familiar with these classics, something that most readers fail to do. Classics are more often skimmed than critically read. In addition, graduate students being what they are, they will use the latest techniques and methodologies to test statements made in these classics. This practice provides ongoing tests for “factual” claims made during previous stages in scientific and theoretical analyses.

However—and here I disagree strongly with Bahr and Forste—I call for *more* “intuitive,” imaginative, exploratory studies of Mormonism. Each generation of scholars must reinterpret its subject matter, and each generation needs its “classic.” I’ll gladly exchange studies of BYU students for one or more subjective interpretation of contemporary Mormonism. Let such a work contain flights of fancy, personal impressions (even if biased), and glib generalizations. These will be tested with more rigorous techniques and hypotheses, and their utility will be debated and determined. But we still need these pioneers, if only to test ourselves against their wisdom.

Bahr and Forste call for “no more surveying: it’s time for the shovels.” However, intuitive “surveying” can locate diamonds as well as or perhaps even better than empirical “shoveling.” The findings of much scientifically rigorous shoveling at times more closely resemble intellectual manure than paydirt. The study of Mormonism deserves better than mediocre, though empirical, research.

NOTES

¹Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 3d ed. (Bountiful, Utah: Restoration Research, 1982).

²J. Gordon Melton, “The Latter Day Saints Family,” in *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, vol. 2 (Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath Publishing Co., 1978), 1–21.

³Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26 (September 1984): 18–27.

⁴*Ibid.*, 22.