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Converting the Saints: A Study of Religious Rivalry in America

By Charles Randall Paul

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018

Reviewed by Ronald E. Bartholomew

Charles Randall Paul, the founder and president of the Foundation of Religious Diplomacy, has established himself in the academy as an expert in religion and philosophy on engaging differences. Paul's book *Converting the Saints* looks at religious conflict by analyzing encounters between early-twentieth-century Protestants and Latter-day Saints. During this time, Protestants served several missions to Utah in an attempt to convert Latter-day Saints back to mainstream Christianity. Paul looks at the conflicts that inevitably arose between the two religious traditions and through his analysis proposes a new theory of conflict engagement that turns destructive conflict into constructive, peaceful engagement. In a well-written introduction, he clearly outlines this purpose: to propose a new conflict engagement theory "that reflects the basic human desire for comparative supremacy . . . based on disharmony, disagreement, and unresolvable, continual contestation over that which we value most: our unique values, passions, and purposes" (xx). He calls this proposed theory "collaborative contestationalism" (xxi).

Collaborative Contestationalism

It is evident from the beginning that the scope of this book is universal—though the book features a focused case study, Paul intends to effect change on a global stage, where conflict resolution is often first misunderstood and second mishandled. What is more, he opines that contemporary conflict resolution theory is based on a false premise: "both secular and religious thinkers have incorrectly presumed that resolution of religious conflict is both desired by the parties and a key to achieve social stability" (xv). He further points out that "billions of people, religious rivals, [have] no legitimate place for engaging [in]

contests”; “world-changing terrorist strategies proliferate in the absence of an honorable venue”; and “without a legitimate and honorable place for religious and ideological persuasive contestation, frustrated advocates for change will find other means to contest seemingly unresolvable matters—including turning to inter-tribal or international wars or disruptive violence against civilian order” (xvii).

Pointedly, Paul argues that at least one purpose of this book is to change the world from a place of chaos, where adherents to opposing religious claims often “resolve” their contests by asserting supremacy in a way that results in violence or, at minimum, civil disorder, to an environment where, if carefully and expertly handled, those same adherents would be able to maintain disagreement and continuous contestation without resorting to violence or civil disobedience. Although this does not mirror the utopian concept of Zion (in which all share a unified belief) sought by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Paul’s proposal could potentially save lives and possibly maintain civil order in what still remains, at least theologically, a “fallen world.”

Therefore, he proposes a venue for rivals to “contest without coercion” (xv), where “certain ethical methods of inter- and intra-religious contestation” are “employed with skill, patience, and true care for the well-being of the rival” parties (xix). To facilitate this, we must “disenthrall ourselves from the desire to end conflict: rather, it is beneficial to cultivate the desire to sustain continual persuasive contestations. . . . Particular forms of persuasive religious contestations can be healthy for both religions and societies. . . . We thus need a conflict engagement theory based on disharmony, disagreement, and unresolvable, continual contestation” (xix–xx). In other words, Paul’s proposal for engaging in conflict allows people to maintain their disparate religious beliefs and disagree with one another in ways that are peaceful and constructive. Paul asserts that this is the only theoretical model that will bring peace to “a pluralizing world [which] depends on normalizing engaged contestation and collaboration between trustworthy religious or ideological rivals” (xix–xx).

Per Paul’s theoretical proposal, ideally in the United States, such contestations would “check each other by critical scrutiny and public antagonism” (14). In reality, however, these contestations have led to the Supreme Court, over time, developing a set of precedents “to help determine when the government is justified in using force to curtail religious practices that threaten national unity by challenging broadly held cultural norms and mores.” As a result, “what has emerged today

is the general feeling that for the government to act for or against religion, the justification must rest on some compelling state interest that supersedes any particular religious interest” (14–15). And in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Antebellum Southerners, Latter-day Saints, and Native Americans found themselves on the wrong side of this religious equation.

Three American Wars of Religion

Citing as examples the Civil War and the U.S. government’s “wars” against Latter-day Saints and Native Americans, Paul argues that at times various groups have been perceived to be either anti-Christian or counterfeit Christian, incorporating teachings or practices that threaten broadly accepted cultural mores. When the federal government perceived that these groups were growing in influence like an uncontrolled cancer, it waged a war of violence against the groups to protect itself and force them into conformity. These wars were “justified as a defense of Christian righteousness that was under attack or being diluted” by these minority religious groups, which, incidentally, had all “sought [to] escape from the expanding American Empire” to no avail (22). In the end, Paul asserts, all three wars, with their several battles, “were each fought because neither side could convert [the other],” thus placing a “national unity of belief” out of reach (20).

Protestant Missions to Utah in Historical Context

After carefully examining American Protestantism from 1890 to 1930, including Protestant missionary efforts, Paul situates Protestant missions to the Latter-day Saints in Utah in the context of eroding Protestant religious, social, and cultural hegemony. As Protestantism failed to create a unified denomination, its early-twentieth-century crusade against Latter-day Saints occurred on the brink of impending schisms: “In a last grasp for solidarity, if not hegemony—Protestants . . . answered the exclusive question, ‘Who, really, is Christian?’ with the unifying answer: ‘Well, certainly not the Mormons’” (57).

As Protestants encroached on Utah, attempting to convert the Latter-day Saints back to Christianity, conflicts between the two groups inevitably arose. Paul posits: “I believe the primary reason behind the early-twentieth-century Protestant-Mormon conflicts was both groups’ desires for religious supremacy and hegemony; and their belief that they were called to lead the nation—and even the world” (75). Within

that framework, Protestant missionary efforts in Utah “were, in large part, a defensive containment plan to protect the Christian flocks in the east from Mormon sheep stealing” (61), while Latter-day Saints sought to establish their “triumphal theodemocracy in America and the rest of the world” (75). According to Paul, “Protestants believed they were the foreordained stewards” of the “blessed continent and ached to assert their moral authority,” while the Latter-day Saints, in contrast, “made a direct theological and missionary attack on them that was galling and embarrassing when successful” (79) to Protestants who were thoroughly convinced Mormonism was a sham based on false premises.

In chapter five, which forms a sort of interlude between his unique theoretical framework and the actual history he attempts to analyze, Paul provides what he claims to be a contrast comparison between the opposing faith communities’ narratives, doctrines, symbols and rites, and styles of religiosity, asserting that his analysis will “provide a keener understanding of why their socio-political-religious contestation has endured almost two centuries” (81). He then devotes the next forty pages (81–120) to what amounts to, in my opinion, a subjective summary of the purported orthodoxy and orthopraxy (that is, beliefs and practices) of these two faith traditions.

In my estimation, the book up to this point is a significant contribution to the corpus of literature regarding contestation theory as it applies to United States and Latter-day Saint religious history, but here it suddenly takes an unnecessary nosedive. First, according to his own admission, there is no centralized, authoritative, or even generally accepted Protestant orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Second, his subjective perceptions are a distraction to the intelligent reader who is familiar with both the diversity of Protestant beliefs and practices as well as the evolving orthodoxy and orthopraxy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹ In short, what was orthopraxy and orthodoxy at the

1. For an excellent historical survey of the nature of changing orthodoxy and orthopraxy, see chapter 2, “Mormonism and Theology,” in Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). He notes, for instance, that “the church’s steadfast reliance on the principle of ‘continuing revelation’ [has] resulted in a tradition of church teachings that is highly fluid and generally hard to pin down” (7); “thousands of conference sermons are rife with mutually incompatible views, and teachings are constantly evolving” (17); and “Mormonism, like Catholicism and some varieties of Protestantism,

turn of the twentieth century in either faith tradition has grown, evolved, and changed since that time, and, unfortunately, he seems to provide his contemporary understanding of only the current positions loosely held by both faith traditions. Hence, although helpful, his analysis falls short of the assertion that it would “provide a keener understanding” of a two-century-old contestation.

Perhaps the most brilliant aspect of this text is his comparative historical analysis of three Protestant missionaries who served their religious traditions faithfully from the last few years of the nineteenth century through the first five decades of the twentieth century. Although their terms of service varied in length, they served concurrently for nine years. His historical treatment of each of these men’s service is of the highest quality: thorough, engaging, and based on primary source documents. The extensive notes and bibliography alone are worth the purchase price of the book. What is more, his comparative analysis of their differing methods and successes is not only based on missiological reflections but also psychological, sociological, and theological factors as well. As a missiologist, I found his insights thought-provoking. Not only is this text a welcome addition to the corpus of the literature pertaining to conflict resolution theory, but it is also an important contribution to mission studies in general and to the growing body of Latter-day Saint mission studies in particular.

Ronald E. Bartholomew is faculty at Utah Valley Institute of Religion, where he teaches Christian history and Latter-day Saint Church history. He has published scholarly articles in academic journals in the United States and Europe and has written several chapters in various published volumes. His research interests include nineteenth-century missionary work in Victorian England. He is an active missiologist who is engaged in the national and international mission studies academy.

claims that doctrine not only can but must evolve as a living tradition and that its spiritually inspired stewards respond to changing needs, capacities, and conditions” (20).