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The Religious World of the Latter-day Saints*

Reviewed by Richard Buonforte

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Melvyn Hammarberg. *The Mormon Quest for Glory: The Religious World of the Latter-day Saints*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Richard Buonforte

I HAVE LONG HOPED FOR AN AUTHENTIC ETHNOGRAPHY of the Latter-day Saint experience, for an interpretive description centered on and grounded in the culturally significant social doings of interacting individuals. I have wondered when a competent and experienced ethnographer would step forth and explore aspects of Latter-day Saint culture and society along the lines laid out in Keith Basso's exemplary work on the Western Apache. But if *The Mormon Quest for Glory* is what Oxford University Press is willing to publish in this area, then I will continue to wait for a knowledgeable anthropological field-worker to make this major and much-needed contribution to Mormon studies. While the author's aim is appropriate and admirable—"to explain the religious world of the Latter-day Saints through the lens of their own spiritual understanding" (jacket cover)—*Quest* unfortunately falls well short of actually achieving this worthwhile goal.

Largely devoid of adequate theoretical direction and littered with dated citations, erroneous information, ill-chosen terminology, awkward analysis, and lapses in logic, *Quest* reads as though it was rushed to publication before the author had time to revise successive drafts into a finished work that merits attention. A purportedly comprehensive hodgepodge of topics spread over nearly four hundred pages, *Quest* calls to mind the kind of cultural descriptions common in anthropology half a century ago. A would-be ethnography that includes everything from soup to nuts, this big book lacks both theoretical depth and ethnographic substance. It consists, rather, of a thin, artificial concoction, certainly nothing approaching what contemporary anthropologists call a thick description, an accurate and insightful interpretive account—duly informed by relevant theory—that represents the experiences and perspectives of the people from the actor's or native's point of view.

Authored by an associate professor emeritus whose formal research agenda at the University of Pennsylvania focused mainly on “post-traumatic stress disorder among Vietnam combat veterans” (p. 10), *Quest* begins badly. Combined with ill-chosen cover art, the subtly sensationalist title—foreign to Latter-day Saint language and thought and almost anti-Mormon in tone—makes an unfortunate first impression, a sour note sounded more loudly in several subsequent chapters. *Quest* also ends poorly, with a bibliography missing many of the references cited in the body of the text. In between, hundreds of disorganized pages of stiff, awkward, repetitive, and unedited prose make this a long row for the reader to hoe, like chopping weeds in a previously unplowed field.

According to the author, “the audience for this book is the educated lay public, as well as scholars and other students of the LDS, [including] anthropologists, religious studies specialists, Americanists, psychologists, sociologists, historians, and students within other disciplines and interdisciplinary fields” (p. 13). Hammarberg initially intends to take “an ethnographic approach” (p. 2): “In this study I write as a social scientist with the aim of seeking to understand the LDS on their own terms” (p. 3). More specifically, he plans to rely on participant observation and especially on interviews with ordinary members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But *Quest* often wanders away from this proposed path, constantly lost in random topical tangents, in published and online sources, or eventually in irrelevant and even arguably anti-Mormon materials.

Rather than “seek an emic or insider’s view” (p. 2), *Quest* actually analyzes the everyday lives and ordinary experiences of Latter-day Saints from an alien, outside angle from the get-go. The author immediately imposes his own ethnocentric perspective, the antithesis of an anthropological ethnography, repeatedly employing the phrase “I call,” as in “I call this effort by the members of the church to build the kingdom of God on earth their ‘quest for glory’” (p. 1). Evoking the title of this ill-fated work, this key phrase is encased in double quote marks in the original text, intended, however, to signal scare quotes, not to represent a quotation from an interview with a Latter-day Saint, or from the

author's own observations or recordings of Latter-day Saint language, or even from an official church publication. Contrast this problematic practice with Keith Basso's multiple award-winning ethnography *Wisdom Sits in Places*, where the title is taken from a meaningful native phrase that embodies and expresses the Apache cultural concepts the author seeks to understand and represent.¹

Unfortunately, Hammarberg's entire *Quest* is couched in his own alien terms, his analysis of Latter-day Saint culture organized according to a so-called lifecycle that is not just vague, general, and at times inaccurate, but not especially salient for making sense of the inner lives of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "I call this combination of lifecycles and lifeways a cultural model or 'life plan'" (p. ix), the last phrase again encased in double quote marks in the original text—to signal a scare quote, not a native term. "The central stages of the life plan," he continues, "consist of birth, infancy, early and later childhood, . . . followed by young adulthood, . . . adulthood, . . . [and] full adulthood" (pp. ix–x).

This so-called cultural model fails to take into account that "more Latter-day Saints acquire their LDS identity by conversion than by birth and coming of age" (p. 225), a fundamental fact finally admitted more than two hundred pages later in a chapter entitled "Becoming a Convert," an admission that leaves the reader unsure about the relevance of the material presented up to that point. This chapter contains one of *Quest*'s many bizarre inaccuracies. According to the author, Latter-day Saints think and speak of potential converts as moving through a series of steps in which they transition from "strangers" to "seekers" to "investigators" on their way to becoming full-fledged "converts" (p. 225), the key terms quoted as native categories, as part of how "LDS members view the conversion process" (p. 226). I joined the church as a young adult more than forty years ago, I served a full-time mission and spent nearly a decade as a ward missionary, and I have lived among Latter-day Saints in New York, South Carolina, California, Connecticut, Arizona, and Utah—and

1. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

I have never heard anyone in any context refer to a potential convert as a “seeker,” not once. The author is also apparently unfamiliar with how modern members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refer to themselves. He repeatedly employs the odd and alien phrase “the LDS,” an annoying neologism reminiscent of an outdated anthropology that once identified native peoples in a similar and somewhat ethnocentric fashion (“the Apache,” “the Comanche,” etc.).

As already noted, *Quest* does include data collected in formal interviews, thereby allowing the reader more direct access to the native’s point of view, although without much help in terms of interpretations thoroughly informed by contemporary social theory. Many quotations even include the researcher’s questions, and that happily makes the work more open to evaluation. But in too many cases, the interview methods range from less than fully effective to potentially unethical, the outcome too often a body of unreliable or undigested data. A sympathetic reader would prefer to attribute this to inadequate training or to an unfortunate lack of skill, but in certain significant instances a baffled reader must also begin to wonder. Is it simply that the author doesn’t know how to avoid asking leading questions or how to refrain from suggesting answers—or might he also have an ulterior motive beyond the aims of academic anthropology?

In the chapter “Preach My Gospel” (pp. 197–224), for instance, a middle-aged and highly educated Hammarberg manipulates an interview with an unsophisticated nineteen-to-twenty-one-year-old missionary, baits him, and then informs the missionary that his testimony is based on what Hammarberg believes is a logical fallacy (pp. 218–19). This is not an effective way to conduct an interview if a field-worker wants to understand how participants in another culture know what they know about the way the world works and how they therefore see themselves. Nor is this a good way to show proper respect for the experiences of other people, a hallmark of authentic ethnography and an essential quality for field-workers who want to remain welcome in the communities where they ply their trade. It also ultimately flies in the face of the restrictions imposed on social science researchers by the Institutional Review Boards

(IRB) that govern their activities and disallow research that might bring social or psychological harm to the subjects of a study, harms familiar to the author, I assume, given his “interests in psychology” and his earlier research on post-traumatic stress syndrome (p. 10).

Even more perplexing from a methodological and moral perspective is *Quest’s* cavalier treatment of sacred ceremonies in “Endowed from on High” (pp. 171–96), a real puzzler in light of a now decades-long discussion about the poetics, politics, and ethics of anthropological research and writing. The author acknowledges that Latter-day Saints refrain from talking about certain aspects of temple ritual as a significant expression of their sense of the sacred, and that they are therefore unwilling to discuss specific details during interviews. But then instead of asking church members to describe the many other aspects of the temple experience that could have been part of an informative conversation, he imposes his own narrow take on precisely what should not be exposed in public and proceeds to publish a muddled account of the endowment ceremony based partly on arguably anti-Mormon sources. Unfortunately, he draws heavily on an outdated online blog produced by a nonscholarly, nonacademic, and anonymous writer who openly admits his hostility toward Mormons in particular and toward Christianity in general. Ironically, *Quest’s* take on the temple experience is significantly less insightful than what is widely available in the official publications and websites of the LDS Church. Alas, this is likewise the case for far too much of the content of *Quest*.

This all stands in stark contrast to the way award-winning ethnographer Keith Basso (1940–2013) went about his business. When he wrote his doctoral dissertation in 1967, he took his proposed publication to the Western Apache tribal council for approval and complied when asked to remove material they judged outsiders would be better off not knowing. Nearly thirty years later, the preface to his ethnography on Apache places explains how he “traveled with Apache consultants . . . to hundreds of named localities [over a period of] almost eighteen months, spread over five years (1979–1984), and this book is one of the results”—and then observes that “it contains none of the maps we made (Chairman Lupe

has determined that publishing these would be unwise).”¹ After acknowledging his debt to his Apache “teachers and friends,” Basso makes this unequivocal statement: “How deeply they loved their country. And how pleased they were that some of their knowledge of it would be preserved and made public, subject to a set of clearly defined restrictions which have not—and shall never be—violated.”²

When I first heard about *The Mormon Quest for Glory: The Religious World of the Latter-day Saints*, I sincerely wanted to have high hopes; sadly, I end my encounter with this unhappy book deeply disappointed and unable to recommend it to other readers.

Richard Buonforte teaches anthropology at Brigham Young University. He holds two advanced degrees from Yale, one in linguistics, the other in anthropology, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on Latter-day Saint testimony discourse. His interests include ethnographic methods and writing, contemporary anthropological theory, and American and Mormon culture. He is currently writing an introductory text on social-cultural anthropology, which he hopes to title *Human Being—An Anthropological Perspective*.

Richard E. Turley Jr. and Brittany A. Chapman, eds. *Women of Faith in the Latter Days*. 3 vols. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011–14.

Reviewed by Amy Easton-Flake

WOMEN OF FAITH IN THE LATTER DAYS, edited by Richard Turley and Brittany Chapman, fittingly stems from an impetus similar to that which motivated the *Woman’s Exponent*, a bimonthly newspaper founded and run by women of the LDS Church from 1872 to 1914. As editor Louisa

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1. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, xv.
 2. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, xvii.