

# Joseph Smith Jr.

*Reappraisals after Two Centuries*

EDITED BY

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# I

## Introduction

*Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens*

“Joe Smith,” as he is commonly called, will soon find that America is not another Arabia, nor he another Mohammed; and his hope of founding a vast empire in the Western hemisphere must soon vanish away.

—Robert Baird, 1843

The Prophet, Joseph Smith Jr., is unquestionably the most important reformer and innovator in American religious history.

—Robert V. Remini, 2002

In August 2005, we sat among a group of academics and scattered spectators, listening to a series of papers at a scholarly conference at the National Taiwan University in Taipei. Arun Joshi, a respected Hindu journalist from India, was speaking on the relevance of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith’s 1820 First Vision to the conflicts in Kashmir and the Middle East. The confluence of setting, speaker, and subject was more improbable than Joshi’s conclusion: “The message of Joseph Smith is more relevant . . . today than ever before.”<sup>1</sup>

The occasion in this instance was commemorative. Joseph Smith’s bicentennial observance, during 2005 and 2006, and a series of conferences around the world attended by scholars both from within and outside the LDS tradition (i.e., the traditions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), explored Smith’s life and legacy. At sites ranging from Claremont, California, and Washington,

D.C., to Sydney, Australia, and Taipei, Taiwan, presenters weighed in on the impact of this controversial religious figure. Two hundred years should be ample time to assess the accuracy of Josiah Quincy Jr.'s famed prediction: "It is by no means improbable that some future text-book, for the use of generations yet unborn, will contain a question something like this: What historical American of the 19th century has exerted the most powerful influence upon the destinies of his countrymen? And it is by no means impossible that the answer to the interrogatory may thus be written: Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet."<sup>2</sup>

Who was Joseph Smith? He burst into the American spotlight as a twenty-four-year-old youth in 1830 with the publication of a book claiming, all in one, to be new scripture, ancient history, and evidence of his call from God. He aroused only local notice at first, as just another one of New York's countless "humbugs of religion," although in his case, he quickly developed a Mormon print culture to spread his message and invite examination of his claims. Angels, gold plates, and mysterious "interpreters" sometimes overshadowed in the public mind the particulars of the message his Book of Mormon and of the revelations he conveyed, just as the size of the cohesive communities he inaugurated in late 1830 alarmed people not attuned to the purported spiritual significance of these latter-day gatherings of what they claimed to be remnants of a scattered Israel. Many people were converted, and many were outraged, but even from the beginning a few dispassionate observers wonderingly pondered the undeniable charisma of this prophet in pantaloons, who was as adept, noted one editor, at "prophecy[ing] [and] preaching" as he was at "building . . . temple[s], and regulating his empire."<sup>3</sup>

Smith's religion was a curious mix of old and new. He claimed to be recuperating a gospel and ordinances as old as Adam, with temples that invited comparison with Solomon's. Even plural marriage, rumors of which circulated as early as the 1830s, was but a restoration of a practice of the Patriarchs, he insisted. But from the perspective of orthodox Christianity, new scripture—half again the size of the entire Christian Bible—was sufficient departure from *sola scriptura* to warrant condemnation. Republican ideals, as well, were violated in Smith's apparent merging of church and state, and he flouted the public perception of the prophetic vocation in everything—from his name to his earthy deportment to his political aspirations. He was murdered before the last and most daring of his theological pronouncements—those involving an evolved God, human theosis, and marriage for the eternities—ever made it into the court of religious opinion.

But how has the story of Joseph Smith and the religious movement he founded been told since his assassination in 1844? The historical approach has traditionally governed the study of religion in America, although, religious

studies scholar Catherine L. Albanese argues, this has changed in recent decades as sociologists, anthropologists, literary scholars, philosophers, and theologians have joined the field. Moreover, three major methodologies—the *consensus*, *conflict*, and *contact* models—have shaped the guild of American religious history.<sup>4</sup> As a result, past historians have written about Joseph Smith and Mormonism in predictable ways when making general surveys of the American religious landscape.<sup>5</sup> But that is beginning to change.

Speaking of the consensus approach, Albanese explains, “Consensus historiography writes the Anglo-Protestant past at the center of U.S. religious history. It sees processes of religious and ethnic blending—the proverbial ‘melting pot’—strongly at work in the nation’s history, and it minimizes any narrative of religious pluralism. . . . Likewise, it minimizes the impact of social, cultural, and religious change over time and stresses a religious culture of continuity with Anglo-Protestantism.” The consensus model began when Robert Baird published *Religion in America* in 1843.<sup>6</sup> Because Mormonism challenged the Protestant establishment (the very thing Baird was trying to glorify), Baird was not at all sympathetic to Joseph Smith and his followers. “The annals of modern times furnish few more remarkable examples of cunning in the leaders, and delusion in their dupes, than is presented by what is called Mormonism,” Baird wrote. “‘Joe Smith,’ as he is commonly called [“an ignorant but ambitious person” as Baird characterizes elsewhere], will soon find that America is not another Arabia, nor he another Mohammed; and his hope of founding a vast empire in the Western hemisphere must soon vanish away.”<sup>7</sup>

A decade later, in 1855, Philip Schaff’s *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character* was translated from German and made available in America. Like Baird, this German historian was antagonistic toward those groups, particularly the Mormons, who seemed to be thwarting or challenging the continued hegemony of European Protestantism in America.<sup>8</sup> “I confess, I would fain pass over this sect in silence. It really lies out of the pale of Christianity and the church,” Schaff writes. “Nor has it exerted the slightest influence on the general character and religious life of the American people, but has rather been repelled by it, even by force, as an element altogether foreign and infernal.” He dismissed Joseph Smith as “an uneducated but cunning Yankee” to his readers back in Germany, yet despaired over what the growth of Mormonism says about the United States: “I must only beg, in the name of my adopted fatherland, that you will not judge America in any way by this irregular growth.”<sup>9</sup>

Two other authors of major surveys of religion in America followed in the same consensus footsteps.<sup>10</sup> Daniel Dorchester suggested that “Mormonism grew out of popular superstitions for a time quite prevalent among the more

ignorant classes, about one hundred years ago,” in *Christianity in the United States* (1888). He spent the next five pages of his book pillorying Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and all things Mormon.<sup>11</sup> In *A History of American Christianity* (1897), Leonard Bacon likewise described Mormonism as “a system of gross, palpable imposture contrived by a disreputable adventurer, Joe Smith.” Bacon continued:

It is a shame to human nature that the silly lies put forth by this precious gang should have found believers. But the solemn pretensions to divine revelation, mixed with elements borrowed from the prevalent revivalism, and from the immediate adventism which so easily captivates excitable imaginations, drew a number of honest dupes into the train of knavish leaders, and made possible the pitiable history which followed.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Baird, Schaff, Dorchester, and Bacon were not professional historians of religion. William Sweet, holder of the inaugural chair in American church history at the University of Chicago, helped professionalize the discipline through his historical publications during the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> He offered a more sympathetic treatment of Joseph Smith and Mormonism in his well-known text *The Story of Religion in America* (1930).<sup>14</sup> One of Sweet’s protégés, Sidney E. Mead, in *The Lively Experiment* (1963), put Joseph Smith in the company of antebellum religious leaders like Peter Cartwright, Charles G. Finney, and Henry Ward Beecher, who supplanted more traditional religious figures such as Timothy Dwight, John Witherspoon, and William White.<sup>15</sup> The closing bookend to the consensus historiography was Sydney E. Ahlstrom’s tome, *A Religious History of the American People* (1972). The late dean of American religious history makes it clear “that the entire saga of Joseph Smith and Mormonism is a vital episode in American history,” yet he struggles to articulate Smith’s significance and legacy.<sup>16</sup>

During the past three decades, two avant-garde methods have challenged and, in many cases, supplanted the traditional consensus approach: the conflict and contact models. “By the time Ahlstrom’s work appeared, . . . especially among younger scholars influenced by postmodernism, postcolonialism, and general critical-studies concerns, there was a general suspicion of grand narratives,” Albanese explains. The conflict model “emphasizes contentiousness and contests for recognition, status, and a fair share of the benefits accorded to the various religious traditions and groups in the United States. . . . By definition, conflict historiography does not produce comprehensive narratives.” The more recent contact model “seeks to encompass the conflict model but also to include more. Its argument is that conflict has been only one of a series of

exchanges between religious peoples and religious goods when they have met in the United States and that, therefore, any comprehensive narrative of religion in America must examine and explore all of these exchanges.”<sup>17</sup>

These recent historiographical evolutions have freed up space in scholarship for the Mormons and have leveled the rhetorical playing field. As scholars of the American religious past and present continue to move away from the consensus model, in which the upstart Latter-day Saint tradition had no real fit, and embrace conflict, contact, and other methodologies, Joseph Smith is beginning to get a new hearing in scholarly surveys, monographs, textbooks, and articles.

The rationale behind this collection is that the day has come when the founder of Mormonism and his prominent role in American history and religious thought cannot be denied. The attention paid to Smith’s teachings, charismatic ministry, and religion-making imagination now comes from scholars in American history, religious studies, sociology, biblical studies, Christian philosophy, literature, and the humanities—all of whose areas of concentration are represented in this collection. It is our intent to reflect in these pages the wide-ranging interest in Joseph Smith that the commemorative conferences only suggested.

One challenge in assessing the historical importance and relevance of Joseph Smith’s thought has been related to the difficulty of moving beyond the question that arrests all conversation—the question that asks whether Smith was a prophet or fraud. These essays are rich evidence that a variety of interpretive strategies can bypass this question in order to explore Smith’s influence, historical impact, parallels with literary figures, and situatedness in new religious contexts. In addition, at least three of the essays directly address the challenge of transcending the insider/outsider schism in Joseph Smith studies (Maffly-Kipp, Mouw, and Hudson); their authors propose their own solutions.

Together, we have selected fourteen essays for this publication, the majority being previously unpublished papers, which we have organized into three sections: “American Prophet,” “Sacred Encounters,” and “Prophetic Legacy.”<sup>18</sup> In part I, “American Prophet,” five scholars situate Joseph Smith within an American setting in particular. In the opening essay, “Prophets in America circa 1830: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nat Turner, Joseph Smith,” literary scholar Richard H. Brodhead finds that by contextualizing Smith’s history as “prophetic autobiography” alongside Nat Turner’s, “uncannily similar” aspects emerge. As a result, what Brodhead calls a history of prophetism takes shape that delineates some of the forms and tragic consequences of prophetic self-assertion. The implications may be translatable across a spectrum of times and cultures.<sup>19</sup>



Historian Klaus J. Hansen, in “Joseph Smith, American Culture, and the Origins of Mormonism,” argues why the Mormon prophet’s contributions must be seen as the intersecting of American culture with Smith’s own particular religious imagination. Comparing Smith to Samuel Johnson and Abraham Lincoln, Hansen uses the question of Smith’s relationship to his father as a suggestive illustration of how personal loss becomes religious restoration, and a private experience taps universal appeal.

In “‘I Love All Men Who Dive’: Herman Melville and Joseph Smith,” literary scholar Richard Dilworth Rust illuminates Smith’s religion-making imagination by juxtaposing him with America’s greatest myth-making novelist of the nineteenth century, Herman Melville. Melville revealed a recurrent interest in things Mormon, and the most telling preoccupation that unites him with Smith, Rust finds, is not so much the heights they both achieved as successful creators of epic systems, but the depths they plumb as “thought-divers,” exploring the “darkest abysses” of human experience and of the tragic universe.<sup>20</sup>

Next, religious studies scholar Catherine L. Albanese examines “The Metaphysical Joseph Smith.” Noting that American religious history has too often limited itself to mainstream denominationalism and evangelicalism, Albanese has worked to limn the contours of metaphysical religion. This tradition emphasizes the world and human beings as ontologically parallel to, and deriving a stream of spiritual energy from, a higher reality. The consequent worldview “as above, so below” is characteristic of hermeticism and modern mystics like Emanuel Swedenborg. Exploiting Richard Bushman’s suggestion that Smith is a protean figure amenable to any number of religious agendas, Albanese finds he fits the bill perfectly as a proto-metaphysician. Extending the arguments of Harold Bloom and John L. Brooke, Albanese argues that in addition to exploring occult antecedents and their influence on Joseph Smith, it is time for American historians “to take account of the debt” that metaphysical religion owes to Joseph Smith.<sup>21</sup>

Historian James B. Allen begins his essay, “Joseph Smith vs. John C. Calhoun: The States’ Rights Dilemma and Early Mormon History,” with a discussion of the 1832 secession crisis involving South Carolina, reminding us that the popular violence enacted against the Mormons occurred in the immediate context of national debates and crisis over the states’ rights question. Constitutional interpretation unfolded against—and under the influence of—this backdrop. The same prevailing views favoring state autonomy over federalism that facilitated eventual civil war also facilitated Mormon oppression. Allen thus offers a rare political and constitutional context for understanding the Mormons’ difficulties, the development of Joseph Smith’s political views, and Smith’s own involvement in the national presidential campaign of 1844.<sup>22</sup>

Part II, “Sacred Encounters,” addresses more directly the religion-making imagination of Joseph Smith. In “Joseph Smith and Creation of the Sacred,” historian Richard Lyman Bushman proposes a simple fundamental in his accounting for Joseph Smith’s religious appeal: Smith “met a human need for the sacred.” So, of course, do all religions, but Smith was different, Bushman argues, in constructing the LDS faith around two potent loci: new sacred words, and new sacred places. His additions to scripture blend audacity and a self-effacing quality. The sacred words summarily annihilate the principle of *sola scriptura*, even as the personality delivering this coup de grâce, for Mormons, is subsumed in the voice of God. As for place, Smith literalized the concept of Zion and introduced into Christian worship the concept—and physical reality—of the temple. In the process, he became the first American religious figure to exploit the power of sacred space.<sup>23</sup>

Literary scholar Terryl L. Givens, in “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude,” connects Joseph Smith’s religion making, in both its scope and its method, to the intellectual revolution called Romanticism. Like all intellectual revolutionaries of that era, from Thomas Malthus to Karl Marx to Charles Darwin, Joseph Smith rearticulated the fundamental vision of his field of influence in terms of contestation, struggle, and dynamism. His collapsing of sacred distance, his rupturing of the canon, his doctrines of preexistence and theosis, and his gestures toward a comprehensive, scriptural Urtext—all betoken an emphasis on process over product and a precarious tension between the searching and certainty that characterized both his personality and the faith he founded.<sup>24</sup>

Applying the analytical insights of Paul Tillich and William Whyte to the revelatory production of Joseph Smith is sociologist Douglas J. Davies in “Visions, Revelations, and Courage in Joseph Smith.” His choices are intended to further the project of an interdisciplinary, rather than a provincial or academically ghettoized, approach to Mormon studies. Specifically, Davies considers the traumas of the young Smith, the psychodrama of his First Vision, and echoes of both in the Gethsemane theology Smith developed. The courage that is revealed in these contexts is embodied by Joseph Smith, personally, and institutionally in such forms as vicarious baptism and countercultural practices like plural marriage. Finally, Davies explores the paradox of the LDS emphasis on both courageous individualism and membership in a church that makes corporate belonging and corporate rites salvifically indispensable.<sup>25</sup>

Biblical scholar Margaret Barker, in “Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition,” comes to Mormonism as something only tangentially related to her own work in radically reformulating our understanding of ancient Jewish religion. She has elsewhere assessed the Book

of Mormon in the context of preexilic Israelite religion. For this collection, she extends that interest by considering the temple worldview of early Israel before the reforms of King Josiah. Noting the primacy of this same temple-dominated vision in the prophetic career of Joseph Smith, she writes the first of a two-part essay on that subject, leaving to Kevin Christensen the job of more fully elaborating the specifics of Smith's visionary production. Specifically, Christensen applies to the Mormon case Barker's claim that "the rise of Christianity can only be understood if we recognize that Jesus' own visions drew upon and exemplified the First Temple tradition." From his translation of the Book of Mormon through the corpus of his own visions, Joseph Smith similarly established continuity with the Bible as text and Jerusalem as sacred space. Equally important is Smith's pattern of both chronicling sacred theophanies and urging their possibility in contemporary religious practice. That is why Christensen can argue that "Joseph Smith's restoration converges on the key time, place, institutions, and issues involved in Barker's reconstruction."

Part III, "Prophetic Legacy," our final section, expands the discussion to a consideration of Joseph Smith in a global context. Religious studies scholar Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, in "Tracking the Sincere Believer: 'Authentic' Religion and the Enduring Legacy of Joseph Smith Jr.," furthers the project of an intellectually rich account of Mormonism by offering a critique of the centrality of sympathy in the polemics that have engulfed Mormon historical studies from their inception, and proposing an alternative. Her critique is situated in a largely postmodern, antiessentialist conception of identity as a malleable and fluid concept. At the same time, she sees, in Smith's own turn to ritual, a validation of appearances over essence, of doing over being. A focus on the epic of Mormonism's narrative rather than its characters, on popular rather than elite Mormon history, and on the geographical varieties of Mormonism, with their correspondingly different accounts—all are presented here as powerful antidotes to the snares of an approach that links, and therefore reduces, Joseph Smith and the religion he founded to an irresolvable debate over human motives.<sup>26</sup>

"The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probing" is Christian philosopher Richard J. Mouw's contribution. The interest of evangelical scholars in Mormonism has tended to be in the context of apologetics rather than scholarly inquiry. Mouw breaks new ground in this regard by responding to Richard Bushman's probing question "Is Joseph Smith *possible* for you?" Like Maffly-Kipp, Mouw stakes out an alternative to the facile either/or approaches that refuse to relinquish the burden of judgment. Turning the study of Joseph Smith in the direction of reception theory enables both a richer dialogue and the possibility of real insight into the religious yearnings and preoccupations

of religious communities. As a tentative gesture in this direction, rather than a full examination of the subject, Mouw's essay makes history in a modest way.<sup>27</sup>

It would be hard to imagine a solution more different in tone from Mouw's than the argument advanced by humanities scholar Wayne Hudson in "The Prophethood of Joseph Smith." His premise, flatly stated, is that Joseph Smith is "a genuine prophet of world historical importance." In a bold reversal (for a non-Mormon), he takes such status for Smith as a historical given and as a starting point that can enrich our study of various prophethoods, rather than as a laurel to be disputed in religiously provincial and self-serving ways. Hudson takes a position based largely on the enduring consequences of Smith's prophetic output, and then turns to analyze the constituent elements of Smith's prophetic vocation: intelligibility, sincerity, charismatic force, cognitive complexity, and effectiveness. Hudson's main contribution in this regard is to probe the possibilities of taking prophecy seriously as an aspect of religious experience and of cultural import, an aspect both "objective and culturally mediated," but to do so without lapsing into "irrationalism."<sup>28</sup>

In "Joseph Smith and Nineteenth-century Mormon Mappings of Asian Religions," historian Reid L. Neilson turns to the subject of what Joseph Smith himself had to say about Mormonism's relationship to other religions, and ways of accommodating religious pluralism. Neilson traces the trajectories of Mormon thought on Eastern religious traditions, following the death of Smith, during the balance of the nineteenth century. Rather than fitting neatly into conventional religious studies paradigms, Neilson argues that the Latter-day Saints warrant their own categorization as "restoration inclusivists."<sup>29</sup>

Lastly, archivist David J. Whittaker provides an invaluable bicentennial bibliographical essay of the Mormon founder in "Studying Joseph Smith Jr.: A Guide to the Sources." Thankfully, he divides the voluminous manuscript sources on Smith into the various categories of journals, sermons and discourses, revelations, correspondence, personal history, administrative records, legal documents and judicial history, early Mormon publications, the papers of Smith's associates, and accounts of Smith's contemporaries. Whittaker also separates the hundreds of published sources on Smith into sections on bibliographical guides and sources, diaries and personal writings, sermons and discourses and writings, personal history, revelations, and biographical studies.<sup>30</sup>

It is our hope to provide between these two covers an assemblage of statements on the place of Joseph Smith in American history and religious thought that is more wide-ranging than any collection previously available. The most important consequence of this effort is simply a retrospective assessment of his legacy, but the cumulative weight of the evidence here presented suggests that

greater attention to his contributions will enrich those fields and disciplines that are beginning to write him into their respective histories.

We appreciate our editor, Cynthia Read, and the board of Oxford University Press for sensing that there is more to Joseph Smith than the stories that have been told. We also thank Gwen Colvin of Oxford University Press for guiding the book through production.

# 3

## Joseph Smith, American Culture, and the Origins of Mormonism

*Klaus J. Hansen*

In *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (a sequel to her celebrated *A History of God*), Karen Armstrong describes and analyzes the evolution of major world religions in an era known as the Axial Age, a term first used by German philosopher Karl Jaspers in 1948. —The Axial Age roughly encompasses the centuries from 900 B.C.E. to 200 B.C.E., which saw the birth of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Both Jaspers and Armstrong argue that Axial Age religions were born in a cauldron of violence, disruption, and intolerance that characterized these societies—though I should emphasize that Armstrong, especially, does not see the rise of these religions in a mechanical, reductionist way, as a response to social problems, as is so common in much modern sociohistorical literature. (The influence of Max Weber, especially, comes to mind—with the concession that his followers have been more guilty here than the master himself.<sup>2</sup>) In the case of Joseph Smith, I tend to agree with Harold Bloom’s argument that “the Prophet Joseph has proved . . . that economic and social forces do not determine human destiny. Religious history, like literary or any cultural history, is made by genius, by the mystery of rare human personalities,” and like Bloom, “I am not persuaded by sociological and anthropological studies of Mormon history.”<sup>3</sup>

My qualification is that as a historian I find it difficult to believe that ideas are born *ex nihilo*. For example, Albert Einstein did not arrive at the Special Theory of Relativity in 1905 (the *annus mirabilis*

in which he published five monumental contributions to modern physics) in a vacuum.<sup>4</sup> He had to address several major questions—for example, James Clerk Maxwell’s counterintuitive observation that the speed of light must be a constant (confirmed by the Special Theory), the all but axiomatic belief that the transmission of electromagnetic forces required the medium of an “aether” (disconfirmed), and numerous related issues that had been floating around for some time and that were occupying many of the brightest minds in physics. Yet the world had to wait for the young employee of the Swiss patent office to resolve some of the most challenging scientific questions of the time in a solution of sheer brilliance that has defied attempts at explanation by psychologists or sociologists.

Although an analogy between physics and religion may at first appear far-fetched, a comparison of the so-called genius of Einstein with that of Joseph Smith may be valid, if genius is viewed as a generic quality rather than a quality associated with a specific discipline and talent. One encounters not infrequent references attributing the quality of religious genius to Joseph Smith, whereas Einstein is seen as a genius in physics. Einstein was also a person with deep religious insights, however, as well as a remarkably talented violinist. Perhaps he should be called a universal genius, a term historically applied to Leonardo da Vinci. My point is that there is a tendency to use the term *genius* too loosely. Rather than calling Smith a religious genius, I would prefer to call him simply a genius who applied his gift to the creation of a new religion. Both Smith and Einstein (as well as others in history who are referred to as geniuses) processed enormous amounts of information, insights, and inspiration into new and coherent forms, systems, works of art, and so on. Jan Shipps made an analogy between Joseph Smith and Mozart.<sup>5</sup> I went so far as to compare him with Darwin and Marx: “Like them, Smith cast a vast body of knowledge and belief into a new mold.”<sup>6</sup> Harold Bloom “can think of not another American, except for Emerson and Whitman, who so moves and alters my own imagination” (as Joseph Smith does).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most apropos in the case of Joseph Smith is the poetic imagination of Thomas Carlyle: “The Great Man was always lightning out of Heaven; the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame.”<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after the publication of the Book of Mormon, Alexander Campbell attacked the work by claiming that it was a hodgepodge addressing all the major theological questions of the times: “infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of freemasonry, republican government, and the rights

of man.”<sup>9</sup> Joseph Smith biographer Fawn Brodie used such charges in support of her own environmental interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Yet in the case of both Einstein and Smith, the necessary antecedents do not add up to a sufficient explanation of their genius. Nevertheless, even though their innermost thoughts and inspirations may not be determined solely by their environment, the historical context helps us understand more about the unique contribution of great individuals. Literary scholar Terryl Givens put it well by saying that “there is a dimension to ‘the Great Man’ and his influence that is to be understood historically. And there is a dimension that transcends history in its evocation of that which is universal. Both elements are present in Joseph Smith’s case.”<sup>11</sup> I, however, as a historian, rather than attempting to explain what is considered genius, must be content with the more humble task of chronicling “the Joseph of history.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, in the case of Joseph Smith, it is his human weaknesses rather than his genius that has been a major source of controversy. In fact, so the argument goes, it was his brilliance that motivated him to commit religious fraud because lack of education and social standing prevented him from advancing in the normal channels open to members of the rising middle class. Crude and simplistic accusations common in nineteenth-century anti-Mormon literature were replaced by more sophisticated secular explanations, such as Fawn Brodie’s in modern scholarship—though even Brodie was caught in the “truth or fraud” paradigm that was part of her Mormon upbringing. This mold was not broken until Jan Shipps introduced her religious studies approach into the Mormon scholarly community, bypassing the truth question in favour of a nonjudgmental investigation into just what made Joseph Smith tick.<sup>13</sup>

Returning now to Karen Armstrong, I pick up her argument that the two great world religions following the Axial Age chronologically—Christianity and Islam—likewise arose in periods of intense conflict and instability. If, as has been argued, Mormonism is an emerging world religion, it should not be surprising that its rise also occurred at a period of major change—especially in the United States, but also in the larger transatlantic region of which it was an integral part. The Smith family—Joseph Sr., his wife, Lucy, and their nine children (including young Joseph Jr.)—was part of a migration that helped transform western New York from sporadic clearings in the wilderness into a booming society urbanizing along the Erie Canal. That canal was completed in 1825, five years after Joseph’s “First Vision” and five years before the official founding of Joseph’s “Church of Christ” in 1830. During those same years, Rochester, New York, was transformed from a mere village into America’s newest city, with a population of 10,000 that was providing prosperity, or at least optimistic visions of a better future, for many of the new arrivals in the region; it also led to disappointment and despair for some, including the Smith family.



The specific, unique nature of Joseph Smith's visions and the founding of a new religion may not have been caused by social and economic factors, but the questions he raised grew out of Joseph's environment. At the risk of simplifying a complex issue—having to paint in bold strokes in a short essay such as this one—I take my cue from the magisterial study of Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism*, which makes a persuasive case that Joseph Smith's response to the rapid social, political, and economic changes of the period was driven by a search for alternatives to a world driven by individualism, competition, and pluralism.<sup>14</sup> Methodologically, I am also guided by the example of Jay Fliegelman, whose explorations into American thought and culture recognize that “the relationship between idea and event is intractably complex,” and that seemingly unrelated “events and texts reflect the same overarching preoccupations of their culture.”<sup>15</sup>

The changes in the social, economic, political, and religious views and institutions of the age of Jackson had their origins in the colonial period, where perhaps their most dramatic impact was on the American Revolution. Richard Bushman's pioneering case study—*From Puritan to Yankee*—of the transformation of character and the social order in Connecticut, from 1690 through 1765, became a model for studies that link changes in society and culture across broad boundaries.<sup>16</sup> My own attempt to chart the complex interactions between religion and culture in *Mormonism and the American Experience* is greatly indebted to the insights of Bushman and those he inspired. In his conclusion to *Puritan and Yankee*, he states that the transformation of Connecticut life was for the most part positive: “In the century after the Revolution Yankee society produced a flowering of individualism, a magnificent display of economic and artistic virtuosity.” Yet he acknowledges a negative side as well: “Yankees also learned the sorrows of rootlessness—fear, guilt, and loneliness. The light and the dark both were fruits of the liberty wrested in the eighteenth century from the Puritan social order.”<sup>17</sup> I am reminded of a famous quotation from Alexis de Tocqueville:

The woof of time is every instant broken, and the track of generations effaced. Those who went before are soon forgotten; of those who will come after, no one has any idea. . . . Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him to the solitude of his own heart.<sup>18</sup>

As I see it, someone like Joseph Smith and those who became his followers had a vision of democracy and of the promise of American life that was different

from the vision of the movers and shakers of what was to become mainstream America.

The latter, seeing opportunities in political and social change, welcomed the transformation, even dissolution, of traditional institutions. While the Revolution had already destroyed the traditional political order, by the early nineteenth century the privatization of the economy, the disestablishment of the churches, and major changes in family relations were well along their way. The Federalists had clung to patrician notions of government and society for the better part of a generation, but the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 signalled both a substantive and symbolic passing of the torch to a new generation, greatly extending male franchise, loosening economic strings, and increasing social mobility. Although it is true that government continued to play an important role in the economy, the Jacksonian ideology proclaimed the arrival of the modern, negative state. Traditional, paternalistic conceptions of government regulation were rapidly making way for the principle of *laissez-faire*, exchanging the visible hand of government for the invisible hand of Adam Smith. The natural world of equality of opportunity, in the minds of most Jacksonians, was self-regulating, in distinction from the old and rapidly declining world of special privilege, deference, and monopolies. The Federalists had enjoyed a status based on inheritance and ascription; the Jacksonians had persuaded themselves that they had risen through their own efforts. By the 1830s institutional restraints in America had loosened dramatically.<sup>19</sup>

In the opinion of some scholars, this transformation led to major changes in public and private attitudes toward individualistic behaviour and competition. Richard Bushman has already identified such attitudes in the eighteenth century, describing them as a shift in the locus of authority in government, in religion, and in the family. While “stern fathers” had presided over individuals and families in colonial or Puritan society, both physically and symbolically, exercising externally sanctioned authority, Yankees and their nineteenth-century descendants were self-directed, having internalized the ethical and social demands imposed upon them. In the opinion of some historians, this shift in authority, both institutional and psychological, was an essential element in the creation of the new capitalist, urban, competitive order.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps no institution played a more formative role in this transformation than religion. Richard Bushman sees its central role revealed in the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century (1725–65). Strengthening as it did the relationship between the individual and God, it had the unintended consequence of loosening ties to traditional authorities of the state, the church, and the patriarchal family. Jay Fliegelman has followed the currents of these developments into the second half of the eighteenth century, seeing the American Revolution

“as the most important expression” of a broader cultural revolution that separated a younger generation from its ancestors. Having broken with their literal fathers, the rebels were psychologically prepared to break with their king.<sup>21</sup>

Historian William McLoughlin has followed the logic of these events into the nineteenth century, arguing that the Revolution was but the first stage in a long and arduous process through which Americans established their national identity. The First Great Awakening had resulted in the external separation of the colonies from their mother country. A second awakening was required to “provide the internal ideology which every new nation needs but which America’s founding fathers purposely omitted from the Constitution.” Therefore, according to McLoughlin, the Second Great Awakening, which convulsed the American nation in several waves between the 1790s and 1860, was “the most central, the most pivotal event in the formation of the American national character or culture.”<sup>22</sup>

Believing in the power of analogy to help explain such a drastic transformation, McLoughlin introduces the work of anthropologist Kenelm Burridge, whose influential study *New Heaven, New Earth* reports on a number of prophetic, millennial movements of the third world. In spite of profound specific differences among these various cults he has discovered remarkably similar patterns of social and cultural transformation. As the prophetic movement gains momentum, the old rules of society are jettisoned, followed by a period of “no rules”—a time of intense, even frenzied experimentations with new social forms and rituals. By its very nature, the intensity of this stage soon leads to exhaustion. It does not take long before the participants consolidate and stabilize the rules of the “new heaven and the new earth.” At this point, the society has adopted “new rules,” which in time may well become regarded as the old rules of yet another prophetic movement.<sup>23</sup>

The waning Federalist era may be identified as a period of old rules; the age of revivalism—of “freedom’s ferment,” as Alice Felt Tyler called it—can be seen as a period of no rules; and the era of the consolidation of corporate capitalism as an age of new rules (John Higham wrote of a transformation “from boundlessness to consolidation”).<sup>24</sup> Another scholar attracted by the explanatory power of analogy is Lawrence Foster, who likewise sees revivalism as the central cultural expression of an age of transition, one in which individuals were suspended between two worlds, “between an old order that is dying and a new order that is yet to be born.” Foster shares the opinion of several scholars who see this period in American history as a time when, to some creative individuals, “all things are possible.”<sup>25</sup>

Joseph Smith was one of these. I agree with Harold Bloom that, like most geniuses, Joseph lacked the herd instinct that made other so-called leaders

follow the temper of his times. I also believe that sociologists and anthropologists, and even historians, may be helpful in identifying necessary causes of genius, even if the sufficient causes explaining genius elude them. I am particularly impressed by Gordon Wood's brilliant inaugural Tanner Lecture at the Mormon History Association's sesquicentennial commemoration of the founding of the Mormon Church, at Canandaigua, New York, in April 1980—a veritable tour de force that recapped the culture of the New Republic. Wood concluded with the bold assertion that [Mormonism] “was born at a peculiar moment in the history of the United States, and it bears the marks of that birth. Only the culture of early-nineteenth-century evangelical America could have produced it. And through it we can begin to understand the complicated nature of that culture.”<sup>26</sup> Wood's reading of Mormonism's relationship with the evangelical world was based on a sophisticated and deep reading of the relevant literature. To quote his summation:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for all its uniqueness, was very much a product of its time, but not in any simple or obvious way. Mormonism was undeniably the most original and persecuted religion of this period or of any period in American history. It defied as no other religion did both the orthodox culture and evangelical counterculture. Yet at the same time it drew heavily on both these cultures. It combined within itself different tendencies of thought. From the outset it was a religion in tension, poised like a steel spring by the contradictory forces pulling within it.<sup>27</sup>

This internal tension also led to external conflict.

Perhaps the greatest source of tension, both internal and external, was that generated by Joseph's most audacious and radical, even revolutionary, innovation—plural marriage, or celestial marriage as its author called it. I am particularly indebted to Lawrence Foster for my understanding of this complicated story. Foster attempts to explain Joseph's radical reordering of family relationships in the larger context of what he calls “the crisis of the family” in antebellum America. On the margins of response to this crisis were the Shakers, advocating celibacy; John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Perfectionists, practicing religiously-sanctioned and -controlled multiple liaisons; and the Mormons, whose principle of plural marriage was seen as the most controversial of all social experiments in the nineteenth century. To all but devout Mormons, on one end of the cultural spectrum, and antipolygamy crusaders on the other end, plural marriage presented a perplexing and intriguing historical problem. The Saints, of course, simply accepted it as a commandment of God, justified for the reasons Joseph provided by revelation. The anti-Mormons had an

equally simple explanation: a lecherous Joseph Smith and some of his lecherous associates had to devise a system that would provide religious sanction for their sexual appetites. Perhaps the most notorious version out of this so-called lecher school is Fawn Brodie's charge, which argues that, although Joseph had deep affection and love for his wife Emma, "monogamy seemed to him an intolerably circumscribed way of life." At the same time, "there was too much of the Puritan in him" to allow him to be content with clandestine affairs. To calm his own conscience "he could not rest until he had redefined the nature of sin and erected a stupendous theological edifice to support his new theories on marriage."<sup>28</sup>

Rejecting Brodie's simplistic interpretation, Foster sees plural marriage "as part of a larger effort to re-establish social cohesion and kinship ties in a socially and intellectually disordered environment,"<sup>29</sup> even as American society was moving rapidly toward the privatization of the economy, of the family, of religion, and even of politics, all accompanied by new rules ensuring stability. When Joseph Smith began to have his visions and revelations, this transformation was by no means complete. To him, the churches were speaking in a Babel-like babble of competing voices. In the 1820s and 1830s many Americans still lacked those internal gyroscopes that eventually—compliments of movements like evangelical religion—would stabilize Americans on their course toward progress and success. The perception of social disorder was still widespread in American society. For example, modern research has confirmed that the breakdown of external authority in the wake of the Revolution resulted in a dramatic rise of premarital pregnancies and drunkenness. Marital conflict led to an increasing number of wives leaving their husbands. Both slavery and the presence of free blacks in the northern cities were seen by many whites as causes of disorder and social unrest. The paternalistic reform movements of the early nineteenth century were virtually powerless to deal with these problems. The lower classes no longer listened to the exhortations of such reformists for sobriety, while colonization of emancipated slaves was seen as, at best, a feeble effort beyond the powers of paternalistic initiatives. Reforms toward both temperance and antislavery became successful only after they appealed to the individual directly, as evangelical religion did, without intermediaries, in keeping with Ralph Waldo Emerson's dictum that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man."<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, a statement like Emerson's cuts both ways—as an expression of the trend toward modernizing values of antebellum America, and as a motto of those leaders, such as Joseph Smith, who were resisting this trend, suggesting that, even in our post-Derrida world, the reading of texts can be a complicated business. In his recent biography, Richard Bushman argues that Joseph's

reconstruction of the family “did not grow out of a diagnosis of social ills.” If he is right (and he is certainly consistent in decoupling Joseph’s prophetic genius from social context), it is also true that Joseph’s “new and everlasting covenant” was not born in a vacuum. Many of the kind of people who became Mormons or Shakers or Oneida Perfectionists found themselves at sea in a rapidly changing society. Joseph convinced his followers that the old rules no longer applied in this time, when the new rules of the dominant culture had not yet been clearly defined and many new rules were not to the liking of the kind of people attracted to new movements. Change was a real possibility for many. In the words of Lawrence Foster, “Smith was attempting to demolish an old way of life and to build a new social order from the ground up.” The message of the “new and everlasting covenant” illustrates this point forcefully: “All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise . . . are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead.”<sup>31</sup>

In the opinions of William McLoughlin and Perry Miller, the Second Great Awakening was like a tidal wave—a tsunami that swept away the last vestiges of an old order and made possible the creation of the modern capitalist American empire founded on the bedrock of religious, political, and economic pluralism. According to Gordon Wood, “there was nothing like it on this popular scale since the religious turbulence of seventeenth-century England or perhaps the Reformation.”<sup>32</sup> Those who regard these works as too speculative may turn to a number of case studies corroborating the importance of evangelical religion in the formation of the cultural values of modern America. In an influential study of Rochester, New York, from 1815 to 1837, Paul E. Johnson, not without some ingenuity, has extrapolated evidence from a wide range of data supporting his argument that Charles Finney’s revivals in Rochester were an essential linchpin in the legitimation of the ideology of free labor among the entrepreneurs in that city and, by extension, in other industrializing communities affected by revivals.<sup>33</sup> Anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace’s ambitious and detailed study *Rockdale* carefully and convincingly traces the formative role of evangelical religion in the establishment of the capitalist order in the cotton mill communities along the Delaware River in southern Pennsylvania.<sup>34</sup> In their examination of precisely how the modern order was born, showing the contingency of the process, these scholars have corrected the impression of historical inevitability implicit in the works of Miller and McLoughlin, by injecting a dialectical dimension into their narratives that shows precisely how the new order was born out of a conflict whose outcomes were not at all apparent to the participants

at the time. Not surprisingly, the evangelical entrepreneurs and employers seen in these studies encountered strong resistance from traditionally oriented workers, who attempted to shape a separate identity and consciousness out of their own experiences of class and culture. The fact that, in the long run, even the most strong-willed or recalcitrant were forced to capitulate before the overwhelming force of the evangelical-capitalist ethos does not negate the intensity and historical significance of a struggle in which many workers ended up on the losing side.

There were, of course, many such losers other than these workers. It is only to be expected that in a country as large and diverse as the United States significant ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities would fail to share this evangelical fervor and its values, which did not necessarily reflect, and in some cases were in opposition to, these minorities' values. Some attempted to establish revitalization movements of their own. The old Calvinist Federalist establishment did not give in to the emerging democratic, pluralist middle-class society without a fight. For different reasons, various outsiders who had not shared in the power of the old order also opposed the atomistic individualism of a society that seemed to thrive on competition and conflict. Catholicism, separated into various ethnic components, is a major example. And other groups of Americans who stood outside the evangelical pale were those who founded or joined a collection of dissenting movements that attracted many who were physically or psychologically uprooted by the emerging new order. Many of these individuals found homes among Mother Ann Lee's Shakers, John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Perfectionists, and Joseph Smith's Mormons.

Of all these movements, Mormonism came to be seen as the most serious threat to the hegemony of the evangelicals. Catholics were, of course, numerous and came in for their share of persecution.<sup>35</sup> But on a percentage basis, the persecution of the Mormons exceeded that of any other group of white Americans (though paling in comparison to the slaughter of Indians and the lynchings and race riots inflicted on African Americans). In the case of Catholicism, there could be cultural differences with Protestants that were absent vis-à-vis early Mormon converts, most of whom had Protestant New England or Mid-Atlantic roots. Moreover, Joseph Smith had always insisted on the peculiarly American nature of the origin and the doctrines of Mormonism. To Joseph, Mormonism was American to its very core, making it potentially subversive to those who saw such language as rhetoric that only masked a deep cultural divide. Mormonism presented itself not merely as another variant of American Protestant pluralism, but as an articulate and sophisticated counterideology that attempted to establish a "new heaven and a new earth" intended as an alternative to the Protestant evangelical millennium.

Although the relatively open, evangelically enthusiastic period of American history provided fertile soil for the rise of Mormonism, the new religion was largely untouched by the fires of the revivals. For the most part, the kind of people attracted to Mormonism were either confused by revivals, as was Joseph Smith himself, or were left cold by enthusiastic religion, like Brigham Young. The intensity of anti-Mormon persecution was, in its way, a backhanded compliment to a movement that became one of the most articulate, and the best-organized, in its rejection of the values and practices of the evangelicals. Even more than Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists, Mormons actively attempted to change the world through their all-encompassing vision of a kingdom of God that presented a challenge not only to the evangelical religious values but also to the closely related political, economic, and social values of antebellum America. When Mormonism was labelled the Islam of America by its opponents, the most obvious reason was plural marriage, but a more profound explanation must be sought in the fact that Joseph Smith, in the words of Harold Bloom, “intended a religious reform as total as the birth of Islam,” one that would obviate distinctions between the secular and the religious, between church and state, between heaven and earth, and create a seamless web encompassing the entirety of existence, past, present, and future.<sup>36</sup> Even if Joseph’s opponents may have perceived this grandest of visions only dimly, they knew enough to realize that Mormonism could be included in a pluralistic society only with great difficulty—an observation Alexis de Tocqueville underscored in his comparison between American Christianity and Islam, writing that “religions ought to keep themselves discreetly within the bounds that are proper to them and not seek to leave them, for in wishing to extend their power further than religious matters, they risk no longer being believed in any matter. They ought therefore to trace carefully the sphere within which they claim to fix the human mind, and beyond that to leave it entirely free to be abandoned to itself.” Of course, had Joseph been familiar with Tocqueville’s observations he would have rejected them.<sup>37</sup>

If, to repeat McLoughlin, it was the Second Great Awakening that provided the internal ideology that consolidated the American national character and culture, and the Awakening was thus “the most pivotal” movement in antebellum American history, then it stands to reason that a movement such as Mormonism, which attempted to follow a different drummer in the formation of American values, must be resisted. When it is further understood that the Mormon challenge occurred at a time when American values were still very much in the process of being formed, at a time when the national identity was far from secure—at a time, in fact, when the evangelical crusade, in the opinion of scholars such as McLoughlin and Miller, was the manifestation of a national



identity crisis—then, perhaps, what is surprising about the anti-Mormon crusade is not that it happened, but that the tales of mob violence, arson, pillage, and murder do not fill an even larger volume.

Yet if McLoughlin is correct in his assertion that the Founding Fathers had purposely omitted the internal ideology of the American Republic from the Constitution and that this ideology was, in fact, in the process of being formed at the very time that Mormonism attempted its own definition of the meaning of America, then the label un-American, so freely attached to the Mormons in the nineteenth century, has merely propaganda value. In the light of this discussion, then, the extensive debate among historians on the question of whether or not nineteenth-century Mormons were “American” turns out to be a nonquestion. It is only by looking in the rearview mirror—after evangelical, pluralistic, and capitalist values were victorious in helping define an American identity—that certain historians have felt confident in settling the question with any degree of finality. Because the Mormons (along with other antievang- elical dissenters) appeared to be on the losing side (at least until around the time of World War I), the propaganda of the victors seemed to have prevailed. Clearly, this is an American version of what Herbert Butterfield has called the Whig interpretation of history—from hindsight.<sup>38</sup>

An ideal alternative, of course, would be to write the history of the birth of Mormonism through the eyes of the participants—Richard Bushman’s biography of Joseph might serve as a model.<sup>39</sup> Instead, I will attempt to illustrate in a brief postscript how I see “culture” and the religious imagination intersecting in the life of Joseph and his family. Plagued by economic hard times in Connecticut and Vermont that led to the loss of their farm, the Smiths moved their family seven times in fourteen years. Having Puritan origins on both sides, the family had internalized many of the values and habits of Yankees. Father Joseph’s investment in a risky ginseng venture was a gamble he lost—according to Tocqueville a rather typical activity of many Americans in this period, driven by rising expectations of the early market revolution<sup>40</sup>—expectations that were dashed once again after the Smith family’s move to western New York. Any hopes of providing for their children’s future and their own old age evaporated for good after Joseph’s parents, now both in their fifties, lost another farm. Such misfortunes appear to have left Joseph Sr. a broken man, and after the death of the eldest son, Alvin, the family leadership devolved on Joseph Jr.—a drama leading me to translate the abstract language of academia, such as the “shift in the locus of authority” into the vernacular of lived reality that, in the case of Joseph, was touched by the divine. The crisis might have become a tragedy but it found a religious resolution—though it was not inevitable, as the following two stories will illustrate.

The father of Samuel Johnson was a bookseller who had fallen on hard times, a broken man—physically and emotionally. One day, when Samuel was a young man of twenty-two, he refused to attend his father’s bookstall, perhaps ashamed of the old man. “My pride prevented me,” he wrote. “I gave my father a refusal.” Fifty years later, on a rainy day, Samuel wrote that he took “a postchaise to Uttoxeter, and going into the market at the time of high business, uncovered my head, and stood with it bare an hour before the stall which my father had formerly used, exposed to the sneers of the standersby and the inclemency of the weather.”<sup>41</sup> By that time Samuel had become “Doctor” Johnson of dictionary fame.

Closer to home is the story of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was three years younger than Joseph Smith Jr. Both boys grew up in families battered by economic hardships. In their struggles for economic security, both fathers moved their families westward—the Smiths to western New York, the Lincolns to the Indiana frontier (incidentally, in the same year—1816). Both boys had strong mothers (after Nancy’s premature death, Lincoln had a supportive stepmother). Both had somewhat troubled relationships with their fathers (Lincoln more than Joseph). But whereas Joseph “reinvented” his father as a revered patriarch, Lincoln forged a successful life without his father, Thomas. In fact, it could be argued that it was only because of breaking with his father that Abraham Lincoln saw himself as being able to succeed in the competitive, individualistic world of the market revolution. Lincoln’s illiterate father resented his son’s attachment to books, which the young boy seems to have recognized as the means of escaping to a better world. The father saw no alternative to physical labour—which, to young Abe, perhaps, seemed a form of slavery. (Without saying Lincoln’s deep ethical convictions, historians have suggested that the man instrumental in the abolition of slavery also saw the “peculiar institution” as a major impediment to free-market economics).<sup>42</sup> When Thomas Lincoln died, his son refused to attend the funeral of his father. If the son felt any remorse, the record is silent. According to biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin, “such conflict between father and son was played out in thousands of homes as the ‘self-made men’ of Lincoln’s generation sought to pursue ambitions beyond the cramped lives of their fathers.”<sup>43</sup>

These two stories project into bolder relief the relationship Joseph had with his father. As Richard Bushman tells it, the leadership of the Smith family devolved on Joseph because Joseph Sr. was seen as “not fully adequate. He was a gentle, disappointed man with an inclination to compensate for his failures with magic and drink. . . . Joseph Jr. eventually restored his father’s dignity by giving him an honoured place in the church. If there was any childhood dynamic at work in Joseph Jr.’s life, it was the desire to redeem his flawed,

loving father.” Bushman then questions rhetorically, “But was this enough to make him a prophet?”<sup>44</sup> Probably not! But early in Joseph’s prophetic career the Angel Moroni revealed to him Malachi’s prediction that the prophet Elijah would “plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to their fathers, and the returning of the hearts of the children to their fathers.” Joseph was then in his eighteenth year, about the same time that he seemingly had usurped his father’s role as “patriarch” of the family. This was in 1823. After the restoration of the priesthood predicted by Moroni, and after the founding of the Mormon Church, Joseph ordained his father as patriarch (it is unclear whether in 1833 or 1834). Joseph Jr. predicted that his father, like Adam, would assemble his children. “His seed shall rise up and call him blessed. . . . his name shall be had in remembrance to the end.”<sup>45</sup> Brought down by the ravages of the market revolution, the father had been redeemed by his son—a story that might have had several different outcomes: Oedipus killed his father and married his mother—a story that became iconic in the symbolic drama of a modern secular religion. Samuel Johnson could only do penance. Lincoln, seemingly without regret, refused to attend the funeral of his father.

In the case of Joseph, religion and culture did intersect. If, in the shift in the locus of authority, it is the loss of the father that is central, then the restoration of the father is likewise central. For Joseph, that restoration was religious. And it intersects with virtually all the other principles of the Mormon Restoration: priesthood, the temple, marriage, life before birth and after death, salvation and exaltation, cosmology. . . . So in the end, perhaps, the answer to Richard Bushman’s question is—No! Joseph’s desire to redeem his father wasn’t enough to make him a prophet. To put it into the context of this essay, “culture” wasn’t enough. But without that desire, what kind of a prophet would Joseph have become? Would Mormonism be alive today? And if so, how different would it be from the Mormonism we know—rooted as it is in Malachi’s admonition and promise? As missionaries are spreading the message of Joseph Smith across the world, it becomes apparent that the appeal of the message in no small part derives from the bond Joseph established—not only with his father, but with many other fathers and their children—a theme that (though finding expression in a particular culture at a particular time) is universal.

Of course, it is not the only universal theme. For Joseph Smith, “the eternal feminine” was a necessary corollary. In the “new and everlasting covenant,” exaltation could be achieved only by the eternal union of a man and a woman—not necessarily in a polygamous relationship (redefined after the “manifesto” of 1890). As Richard Bushman put it, “Before the marriage revelation, women were in the shadows in Joseph’s theology, implied but rarely recognized. Now they moved to the center.”<sup>46</sup> (In regard to this, some Mormon feminists argue

that Bushman's is an insight that has been slow in coming, with the benefit of hindsight). Making a stronger case for Joseph's "feminism" is Clyde Forsberg, who argues that by the 1840s the Mormon prophet's views had already evolved into a theological middle ground between Masonic patriarchy (which excluded women from the lodge) and evangelical feminism, which many patriarchs saw as a threat to their manhood. Joseph's granting of equality to women in the temple, then, can be seen as a radical step that offended camps on both sides.<sup>47</sup> Feminists, who have been less than successful in mobilizing Mormon women, tend not to be impressed by the explanation that, in the eternal scheme of things, Mormon women see themselves as having achieved a degree of equality with their spouses that puts them ahead of most males outside the Church. It is true, however, that at the present time such promises (marriages, sealing promises, covenants) are "solemnized" in more than a hundred temples throughout the world.

Arguably, a future Karen Armstrong may well include Mormonism as a subject for another book on world religions, perhaps even linking its origins to a modern counterpart of the Axial Age.

Finally, for what I see as my personal conundrum vis-à-vis the Joseph of culture and the one who is God's mouthpiece, I take refuge in William Butler Yeats: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"<sup>48</sup>

# 5

## The Metaphysical Joseph Smith

*Catherine L. Albanese*

One of the central interpretive questions surrounding Joseph Smith has been the character and connections of his own religiosity. Was he a latter-day Puritan reexpressing the impulses of the older English reform movement that had succeeded so spectacularly in early America? Or was he an evangelical Christian, essentially, who built on the sectarian Christian choices available in the famed Burnt-over District of upstate New York to reproduce it in new guise? Still again, should he be read, instead, as the founder of a new religious movement? And one more time, might we find some combination of these choices in his religious makeup and persona? These are all interpretive moves that are arguable and make considerable religious sense as we explore the cases that scholars have advanced in support of them. My own way of making religious sense of Joseph Smith, though, moves in a direction that certainly overlaps these views at different intersections but also inserts the Latter-day founder in yet another frame. Taking my cue from Richard Bushman, who once suggested that we should devise a “usable Joseph Smith” as a “protean figure” who could function “for our own purposes,” I propose here another way of exploring what Smith means as a religious figure.<sup>1</sup>

In Joseph Smith, I am convinced, we can find an early and clearly identifiable case of the meeting in one person—and a major leader, at that—of the combined strands of belief and practice that came together later as mature metaphysical religion. In short, the

Joseph Smith that has excited me as a historian is a culture broker for American metaphysical religion and, as such, himself a proto-metaphysician.

Here I need to be clear on what constitutes metaphysical religion in an American context. It is easy to cite mid-nineteenth-century and later séance spiritualism, post-Civil War Theosophy, New Thought, and Christian Science, and, by the later twentieth century, the New Age movement and the “new spirituality” of the present. The components of American metaphysical religion, however, may be tracked from a time far earlier—beginning in the European Renaissance with the high culture rediscovery of Hermes Trismegistus and the growth, on the Continent and in England, of esotericism. It can also be tracked in European traditions of folk and country magic and in American colonial versions of the same, but with Native American and African American materials added to the synthesis. By the nineteenth century, an augmented ingredient list would include cultural manifestations as different as Freemasonry, Universalism (the denomination and the theology), and New England Transcendentalism. In this vernacular mix of actors and acts (of thought, of practice), the commonalities that were shared across culture—from elites to everybody’s people—were more important than the differences.

Still more, in the midst of the combinativeness, a series of identity markers could be found. Metaphysical forms of religion have privileged the mind in forms that include reason but move beyond it to intuition, clairvoyance, and relatives such as revelation and higher guidance. These mind forms of religion operate on the conviction that there is a correspondence between our present world (let us call it simply the “microcosm”) and a larger reality that it replicates (the “macrocosm”). In this vision of “as above, so below,” metaphysicians find a stream of energy flowing from above to below—an influx so powerful and constitutive of their reality that they discover themselves to be, in some sense, made of the same “stuff.” If there are differences in this energy, they are of degree and not of kind. The influx of energy (let us now call it “divine”) that enlivens their world is a healing salve for the world’s ills and—in the strongest statement of their view—renders them divine and limitless. Metaphysical practice is premised on these beliefs about correspondence, resemblance, and connection. Action on one microcosmic site or piece of the world affects the larger reality. Ritual, thus, involves enacted metaphors. To say this another way, metaphysical practice is about magic. If the magic is material magic, it involves symbolic behavior using artifacts and ritual accoutrements—what is called ritual, or ceremonial, magic. If the magic is mental, it signals active use of the imagination and the powers of mind, as in forms of “mind cure.”<sup>2</sup>

In this context, Joseph Smith and the early Mormonism that he promoted show us—more clearly than any other movement I am aware of at the time—a

sample repertoire out of which American metaphysical religion was constituted. In the mind and cultural practice of Smith, we have a dazzling display of the ingredients and the selective combinativeness that would, in fact, be preeminent features of a mature American metaphysical religion. From this perspective, literary and cultural critic Harold Bloom was decidedly close to target when he pointed to the Mormonism of Smith's early production as a prototype for an American religion with "Gnostic, Enthusiast, and Orphic" qualities. For Bloom, what held its principles together was the "American persuasion, however muted or obscured, that we are mortal gods, destined to find ourselves again in worlds as yet undiscovered."<sup>3</sup> He could have added, destined to find ourselves by combining the pieces of many cultural products in a new and distinctly American synthesis.

What were the pieces as they coalesced in the life and practice of Smith and in the emerging religious formation that he shaped? In his remarkable combination, Smith brought together a series of spiritual movements and cultural worlds. From his youth he was fascinated by Freemasonry, and he joined a lodge himself in 1842. He was, thus, clearly familiar with the Masonic elaboration of biblical themes and so with the story of Enoch's hidden plates of gold and their found-and-lost-again history in the age of the Old Testament's Solomon. He likewise knew something of the mystical revelations of the then-celebrated Swedish author and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who, in Smith's nineteenth-century upstate New York environment, had become something of a Hermetic household magus. But Smith was also a cunning man in the English country magic tradition and, in a new-country counterpart, a lover of Indian lore. In the midst of all of this, too, he anguished as a religious seeker struggling with the discordant messages of Christian evangelical preachers around the era's revival fires.

Smith's exposure to Freemasonry had begun with his family's familiarity with it from the 1790s in Vermont, where his parents then lived. Later, in New York, Joseph Smith Sr. may have joined a lodge, and his second son, Hyrum, surely joined one in Palmyra, where the family lived, in the 1820s. There is evidence, as well, that the family was familiar with Masonic symbols, and—in the time and place in which they lived—Freemasonic writings were readily available. Moreover, although Smith early condemned secret societies and the Book of Mormon has occasioned commentary for its anti-Masonic themes, he was also clearly fascinated by religious secrecy, Masonic or otherwise. When he "rose to the sublime degree" (his words) at the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge that Mormons had begun, he gained access to the secret initiations that, in part, helped him to shape Mormon temple ceremonies in the tradition of what was known as Royal Arch Masonry. John Brooke, in our time, has noticed and

detailed the connections, but Brooke had plenty of earlier-twentieth-century company for the associations that he made—from S. H. Goodwin in 1924 to the tell-all Tanners (Jerald and Sandra) by at least 1964.<sup>4</sup>

To connect the dots between Smith and Freemasonry is well enough. But the task of historical recovery involves a deeper archaeology. In the vaults of Smith's memory and attachment were links that, as Brooke has argued, identify the Mormon founder with a broad Hermeticism that he and many who joined him inherited vernacularly. So far as the historical record can reconstruct, no early-nineteenth-century schoolmaster ever handed Smith a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. But as Brooke summarized, "Smith arrived at an approximation of many of its fundamental points by a process of reassembling scattered doctrines available in dissenting and hermetic sources."<sup>5</sup> He fused them and extended them, even as the print culture of upstate New York helped to advance his reassembly and fusion. There, text disclosures of Freemasonic secrets fanned out into a world of other and further disclosures. Read from a metaphysical perspective, perhaps none were so significant for the Hermetic underlay of early Mormon theology as the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg. With his doctrines of divine influx, of God as the "Divine Human" with its hints of the Father Mother God of Hermeticism, of heaven as a material place with elaborate mansions and well-appointed tables and flower gardens, and of the "conjugal love" between heavenly soulmates with their etherealized sex, the mysticizing Swede was known to many Americans. Swedenborg's notions of spirit calling and angelic communication and of heaven as a progressive place were also part of his good news, along with a gradation of three heavenly realms and reports of cryptic heavenly writing. Accounts of Swedenborg appeared in public newspapers, as at Canandaigua, New York, in 1808, and were also available in Palmyra's public library. It is not too surprising, then, that Swedenborg's theology—with the nuanced inflections and adjustments that Smith would make—was echoed in some of the major tenets of Mormon theology.

Swedenborg's anti-Trinitarianism was replaced by a tritheism in which the Father, Son, and Spirit were, and are, distinct and separate. His cryptic heavenly writing—with its echoes of hieroglyphics, secrets, Kabbalism, and Hermetic lore—found its transformation in the "reformed Egyptian" text that Smith's golden plates announced. Swedenborg's careful correspondences were refracted in a new light in which heaven was, indeed, an earthlike place and earth itself shone with the borrowed light of the heavenly world. Spirit was a form of matter in Joseph Smith's world, and the heavenly realm was inhabited by a God similar to Swedenborg's Divine Human and to the Hermetic vision in general. God, for Smith—as late as 1844—was a "man" like Mormon believers. Smith's revelation of the eternity of marriage (echoing Swedenborg's



“conjugal love”) affirmed a future state of glory in which those bonded for all eternity would be “Gods” with “all power” and angels “subject unto them.” Meanwhile, the Mormon cosmos in which the departed found themselves existed as three worlds with differing degrees of glory. Smith’s “telestial,” “terrestrial,” and “celestial” heavens to a certain extent recalled the Swedish seer’s earlier “natural,” “spiritual,” and “celestial” versions.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Smith had grown up in a family with a long tradition of magical belief and practice. Vermont was what D. Michael Quinn has called a “treasure-digging mecca” when Joseph Smith Sr. lived there. In the western New York to which he eventually relocated, he found a congenial environment for magical practice, as Palmyra’s local newspaper in the 1820s revealed. Even some clergy apparently carried dowsing rods, and Christianity blended seamlessly into the magic of the folk. Seer stones, astrological charts, talismans, magical daggers—all were part of the cultural milieu and used in the context of securing protection and conjuring spirits. Against this backdrop, there were, indeed, sophisticated magical artifacts in the Smith family, and it was clear that the family practiced ritual magic.<sup>7</sup> Joseph Smith Jr. himself was, by any standard, a cunning man, but what was new was the rapidly urbanizing and industrializing environment in which he found himself, with the Erie Canal running through one end of Palmyra. As the economy of exchange boomed in commercial venues, so it did in goods of the spirit. Given the readily available books, newspapers, and people with metaphysical knowledge, a would-be magus in Palmyra could quickly absorb a varied portfolio in the magical trade.

By the time the Book of Mormon appeared, Smith had already acquired a reputation as a local money digger and treasure hunter, employing the familiar divinatory techniques of English country magic. He used a stone to “see” what needed revealing in order to accomplish his work, and he was sought out for his seer’s skill. At one time, in fact, he was part of a company of money diggers who traveled around to various places in New York and Pennsylvania seeking old Spanish and Indian treasure. When he got into trouble with the law and was tried in 1826 as a “disorderly person,” he walked away as a first-time offender. But what is especially interesting about his case is how much it reveals about his magical practice, its connection with old lore about the simultaneous obstinacy and slipperiness of buried treasure, and its level and degree of magical sophistication. Michael Quinn’s argument for the “apparent magical context” for Smith’s earlier First Vision in 1820 suggests that the heavenly pronouncement regarding all of the sects being wrong may be construed as an endorsement for magical practice as a replacement. This line of inquiry points in a way, too, to the spiritual territory that Jan Shipps trod in her well-known reconstruction of the discovery and translation of the Book of Mormon.<sup>8</sup> The

puzzle of the prophet could be solved with convincing ease if one followed Smith in an elision of material and spiritual treasure. One should dig for gold, yes, but—as a New World alchemist of the spirit—one should dig for gold as the philosopher’s stone of a new religiosity. Here folk magic could blend with a vernacularized Hermeticism in a new and combinative version that moved beyond itself even as it was being created, laying a path for the infusion of Hebraic and Christian strands and also much more.

The Book of Mormon, which Smith testified he had unearthed and translated (with the help of biblically inflected seer stones, the Urim and Thummim), claimed to reveal the true beginnings and history of the Indian peoples who first dwelled on this and the South American continents. Three times in 1823, a “spirit” had come to Smith with the message that a record of ancient Indian history was contained in the golden plates. Such an announcement was congruent with what Dan Vogel has called the “persistent legend of a lost Indian book” abroad in the region during the early national period. When Smith was digging for Indian treasure, Indian mounds were often the sites of his labor. Nor did he and his friends have a hard time finding locations. Both the New England that Smith’s father left and the New York State in which Smith himself lived during this period of his life possessed landscapes dotted with mounds and memorials of Indian provenance.<sup>9</sup> Americans of Smith’s time and earlier had speculated, as well, on Indian origins. Were the indigenous inhabitants pre-Adamites and thereby outside a biblical framework? Were they, instead, among the descendants of Noah? More explicitly, were the American native peoples of Hebrew descent and perhaps from the lost tribes of Israel? Alternatively, were the mound builders really Indians, or did their massive and marvelous constructions suggest (in an unconscious racism) that they were of a race different from the natives encountered by Europeans in the Americas of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Questions such as these about the Indians spilled over into print in vernacular media like popular books and newspapers, and descriptions of the mounds were readily available to readers in various places, including the area in which Smith was raised.

Thus, Smith and the Book of Mormon were preoccupied with the memories encrypted into the land—in its earthworks and unearthed arrowheads, in its unanswered questions and untold histories. In fact, the very title page of the Book of Mormon announced its intention “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord had done for their fathers.” But there was more. The Book of Mormon had been delivered on golden plates, and its content connected the mounds to the use of metal, so that, as Vogel wrote, the “Book of Mormon’s righteous Jaredites and Nephites” were presented as “advanced metallurgists.” From whence did this high metallurgical ascription

come? If we look to the historical and archaeological record, metallurgy was not the particular forte of mound builders.<sup>10</sup> And so, we must come full circle: In the received esotericism of Europe, things were different. Freemasonry's biblical Enoch had found a triangular plate of gold, and the Hermetic tradition had produced its hieroglyphics, even as the (biblical) Urim and Thummim and the ubiquitous peep stones of the cunning men and women would enable the cunning to read them.

Beyond its sheer combinativeness and prodigious religious creativity, what was so interesting about the metaphysical synthesis that Smith achieved was its corporate quality. Perhaps taking a cue from the Freemasonic lodges and brotherhoods and certainly from the models of Christian community and organization at the time, Smith's religion, which had begun as a family affair and had speedily become a family-and-friends affair, grew into a distinctly communal production. In fact, the formidable communalism of early Mormons played into the fear and hatred they generated wherever they settled. More important here, as the institutional cement for communalism was developed by Smith in his elaborate organization building, it became clear that Mormon metaphysics was not something that one did alone. The mysticism of Hermetic solitudes had given way to a larger context of corporate ritual practice in secret temple ceremonies. Mormons did metaphysical religion in community. Their production, thus, pointed toward a series of metaphysical groups, societies, and denominations that would emerge as the nineteenth century progressed. From this perspective, the usable Joseph Smith was a religious leader of extraordinary ability who charted an early path of spiritual combinativeness, embedded it in cultural practice with a seamless fusion of its theological components and practical acts, and situated it in community. Later metaphysical religion owes a mostly unacknowledged debt to Joseph Smith, and it is time for historians to take account of the debt. The acknowledgment is especially important because a full account of the major forms of religion that have characterized the American experience cannot stop at mainstream denominationalism and evangelicalism but must also include the metaphysical forms of spirituality that have pervaded our national life into the present. In that context, Joseph Smith becomes a spiritual harbinger of a distinctively American future.