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Worldviews And The American West

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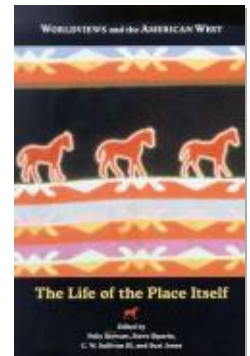
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The Concept of the West and Other Hindrances to the Study of Mormon Folklore

William A. Wilson

Although the story of Mormon folklore is considered by many scholars to be inextricably connected with the story of the American West, to read either of these stories as an inevitable part of the other is to read both of them wrong. But associating Mormons with the West is only one of the hindrances to the proper interpretation of Mormon folklore. Over the years such interpretation has been impaired by two separate emphases in folklore and historical studies—first, by a lingering adherence to Robert Redfield’s notions of the little (or folk) tradition versus the great (or urban) tradition and, second, by the persistence of the environmental-determinism theories of Frederick Jackson Turner and, especially, of Walter Prescott Webb. Both of these approaches have stopped us from adequately examining what is most important not only in the study of Mormon folklore but in the study of religious folklore in general—that is, the nature of religion itself.

Beginning in the 1930s, Redfield attempted to draw distinctions between what he called “folk” and “urban” societies by viewing folk societies as unsophisticated, homogenous, conservative, agrarian (or rural) enclaves isolated from a surrounding sophisticated, heterogeneous, dynamic, city environment (1930; 1941; 1947; 1955). It would be a mistake to tie Redfield to the nineteenth-century advocates of unilinear cultural evolution. Still, they shared points in common—especially their situating folklore among the rural and unlettered common folk isolated by these circumstances from the more progressive and educated urban world.

These ideas have strongly influenced students of religious folklore in America, particularly those who have focused on what William Clements has called “the folk church.” The folk church, says Clements, “constitutes the basic unit in American folk religion” (1983, 139; 1974; 1978). Drawing in part on Don Yoder’s well-known distinction between official and unofficial religion (1974),

a distinction bearing strong Redfieldian imprints, Clements argues that the folk church is characterized by an “orientation toward the past, scriptural literalism, consciousness of Providence, emphasis on evangelism, informality, emotionalism, moral rigorism, sectarianism, egalitarianism, and relative isolation of physical facilities.” More important for our purposes, the folk church, like a Redfieldian or especially a nineteenth-century folk community, exists “outside the main currents of American culture,” “often in direct antithesis to the establishment churches” and “mainline religion” and flourishes along this more sophisticated society’s “social, economic, political, and even physical margins” among “peripheral social groups,” “low-income economic groups,” “politically disenfranchised groups,” and “people on the wilderness frontier” (Clements 1983, 139).

Others have employed the same distinction between folk and mainline churches. In *Powerhouse for God* (1988), for example, Jeff Todd Titon, citing both Yoder and Clements, defines folk religion “as religion outside of the ‘official’ or established or normative religion.” “So long,” he continues, “as the definition of the folk church turns on the ‘folk’ as a group outside the power structure . . . I am certainly happy with that folk-cultural definition. . . . ‘Outside the power structure’ is admittedly vague, but it suggests differences in wealth, status, education, and most of all economic and political impact among insiders and outsiders” (1988, 144, 149). In their excellent *Diversities of Gifts: Field Studies in Southern Religion* (1988), Ruel W. Tyson, James L. Peacock, and Daniel W. Patterson bring together a group of essays focusing on what they call “independent Protestants,” groups very much like Clements’s folk churches. The essays, they tell us in their preface and epilogue, are “studies of Southern religious life, but not of the highly organized and self-publicizing denominations like the Southern Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, or United Methodists.” They are instead groups that “have no national bureaucracies and do not house their faiths in uptown churches” and that “choose not to conform to mainstream models.” These churches tend not to attract the wealthy and have no “large-scale hierarchical or associational organization.” Members of these churches, who “favor preaching inspired by God directly” and are “suspicious of education in seminaries . . . tend to locate on country roads, mountain ridges, or side streets rather than on the main street or in wealthy suburbs” (1988, xi, xiii, 205).

In *God’s Peculiar People: Women’s Voices and Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church* (1988a), Elaine Lawless eschews some of the above distinguishing features of folk religion but still adheres to what is central in Clements and in Tyson, Peacock, and Patterson—that is, to independent religious enclaves, Redfield’s little communities, characterized by the absence of an established hierarchy and of fixed theological and liturgical forms. “Folk religion,” Lawless insists, “must be recognized as a traditional

religion that thrives in individual, independent religious groups that owe little allegiance to hierarchical [read 'mainline'] powers" (1988a, 5).

In spite of a certain irreverence that may have crept into what I have just said, I do not object to the studies I have referred to. These are admirable treatments of southern fundamentalist and Pentecostal groups. But I do object to the part being made the standard for the whole—to the model applied to these investigations of small-scale southern religious groups becoming the pattern for other studies of American religious folklore.

The main problem with this approach is that it excludes from serious study the vibrant traditions of those uptown churches. For example, in 1984 Lawless wrote:

The Mormon religion could never be considered a "folk religion"; its standardized, hierarchical make-up prevents the emergence of the more performative modes and variation typical of folk religions. And Mormonism is not a sub-religion or sect, a fringe element of any main-line American denomination; there is no element here of little society to larger society of which Robert Redfield speaks. (1984, 79)

What do we do, then, with the religious folklore of Mormons, Catholics, Episcopalians, and other established religions, religions that are not little societies? Clements urges the study of "parallels" to folk religious traits "among mainline religious groups" (1983, 139). Others follow suit. For example, in the syllabus of his course in Folklore and Religion given at Utah State University in 1988, Steve Siporin stated: "We will explore folk religions and parts of 'major' religions that owe their continuity and dynamism more to the practices and beliefs of their members than to the writings of institutional leaders"—that is, Siporin's students would study only those parts of official religions that approximated folk religions. In the syllabus to her course in Folk Religion given the same year at the University of Missouri, Lawless was unequivocal: "This course will focus on various religions that have been identified by folklorists as 'folk religions,' that is religions that owe very little, if any, allegiance to an official, hierarchical governing body. . . . We will also be identifying 'folk' practices which survive in mainstream, official religions." Lawless then promised to study Mormons for their "'folk' religious qualities."

In recent years, some progress has been made in looking at religious traditions from a broader perspective than that of folk religion. In *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion* (1988b), Lawless still referred to folk religion and still cited Redfield, but subsequent books (1993; 1996) show no evidence of the term or the Redfield citations. Lawless still teaches a course in folk religion and introduces the course with readings from Yoder and Clements. To her credit, though, she asks students

in a midterm examination to “develop an argument that outlines the pitfalls of attempting to define a ‘folk religion’ or a ‘folk church.’” The question suggests that she and her students are taking a critical, questioning approach to these concepts. In another course, *Religious Expression and Folk Belief*, Lawless moves away from folk religions per se and explores phenomena occurring cross-culturally, such as the nature of verbal art, performance, and ritual and belief. Siporin, in his current *Folklore and Religion* class, still states that he and his students will “explore precisely those dimensions of religion that lie outside organized, formal religious systems.” But his selection of course texts like Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959) and Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) suggests that this class will also examine religious phenomena cross-culturally. To the extent that other folklore courses across the country follow these models, these are encouraging approaches. But they do not go far enough. There is nothing wrong, of course, in studying independent Protestants, folk religions, or folk churches. But we must not look at all religious traditions in formal vs. informal or institutional vs. noninstitutional terms. We must understand that the formal, hierarchical religious institution may itself be the source of much folklore.

In 1982, Jack Santino, in an intriguing essay entitled “Catholic Folklore and Folk Catholicism,” recommended an approach that could, if adopted, produce rich results in the study of organized or mainline religions. In addition to studying “folk Catholicism” (the lore of enclaved groups), Santino argued, researchers should focus on the lore in Catholic communities that results from the circumstance of being Catholic. “I am more interested,” he wrote, “in seeing [the St. Francis phenomenon] as an aspect of a larger phenomenon, that of Catholicism, which is itself a cultural force.” He continued:

In addition to popular culture and folk Catholicism, there is another aspect to this corpus of material: the shared, expressive, traditional culture of mainstream American Catholics, members not of Redfield’s little, or folk, society, but his great society, people who, although they may be members of an urban ethnic group, share with other Catholics of different backgrounds, not their ethnicity, and more than simply the name of their religion. They also share tales of parochial school education, of nuns and priest, beliefs, legends, and cosmology, perhaps even sharing world views and behaviors which are the result of processes informed by all of the above. . . .

. . . perhaps we are better served by the study of Catholic material in ethnic, regional, urban, and familial studies of folklore. It is my experience, however, that Catholics share a body of lore that transcends those categories, that is recognizably based in the experiences

of Catholicism in American and can be most profitably approached as the expression of that experience. (1982, 97, 100)

Reading these lines, one thinks of the lore of Mormon missionaries. They serve in different regions throughout the world and in each region develop a body of lore peculiar to that location, but by the circumstance of being Mormon missionaries and of participating in common experiences, they have developed a body of lore that shapes their identity and binds them together, no matter in which part of the globe they might have served (Wilson 1981).

Santino laments that the kind of lore to which he would direct our attention “has been neither delineated nor studied by folklorists” (1982, 99). I share his lament. We need to move from the narrow concept of *folk religion* to the broader concept of *religious folklore*—that is, to folklore that comes into being simply by virtue of individuals being religious, no matter where they are found. We do not, or should not, talk about folk occupations or folk regions. Rather, we focus on occupational or regional folklore—folklore arising from the circumstance of working at different occupations or of residing in different places. In like manner, we should shift our attention in religious studies to the lore that arises, not just from enclaved groups, but from the circumstances of practicing religion.

In American folklore study in general, we have been able to move from agrarian to urban worlds without neglecting the former, from peripheral to mainline society, discovering in the process that folklore does not just survive in the city but that the city itself generates folklore. It is time to make such a move in religious folklore studies, to see the institutional church, like the city, as a generator of folklore, to recognize what we know to be true in other areas of folklore research—that is, that folklore is common to the species, not just to those living on the margins of modern society. In spite of their churches’ hierarchical structures and mainline status, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, and Mormons have generated religious traditions as profoundly significant as those found among independent Protestants. If we can do nothing more than reduce the lore of these established churches to parts of the larger official religion or identify in their lore folk religious elements or parallels to so-called folk religions, then we will have taken a giant step backwards in our attempt to understand the religious behavior of our fellow beings.

In the case of Mormons, the problem of proper interpretation is made more acute by the fact that Mormons are seen not only as a religious group, but also as a regional group. Thus, the Redfieldian notion of the isolated enclave separated from mainline culture once again hinders understanding, this time, paradoxically, because Mormons are seen as belonging to the periphery.

Though Mormon folklorists had been writing about their religious culture for some years, Mormon folklore was brought to the attention of a larger American and international audience by Richard M. Dorson, who in 1959 published his popular *American Folklore* and included “Utah Mormons” in his chapter on “Regional Folk Cultures,” arguing that they were one of the five richest regional folk cultures in America (1959, 113–21). Identifying these regional enclaves as “minority cultures,” he stated:

Such nooks and byways resist the relentless forces of change and mobility in contemporary American life. In place of mass culture, they represent folk cultures, whose roots and traditions contrast oddly with the standardized glitter of American urban industrial society. In the folk region, people are wedded to the land, and the land holds memories. . . . These folk regions become important reservoirs of traditional lore. Much of their folklore will be common to other parts of the country and to other countries, but they stand out in the density and abundance of their oral tradition. (1959, 75)

In 1964, in *Buying the Wind: Regional Folklore in the United States*, Dorson reinforced this notion by including Utah Mormons among the major groups surveyed (497–535). Dorson’s view is not quite survivalist, though it comes perilously close. It defines regional, and therefore Mormon, culture as agrarian and conservative, in contrast to a dynamic urban society. As a means of understanding contemporary Mormons the statement is entirely misleading since the overwhelming majority of Mormons today live in cities.

If Dorson fell short of the mark in characterizing Mormons, John Greenway missed it completely. In 1964, the same year Dorson published *Buying the Wind*, Greenway, then editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*, added another element to the definition of this regional group—evolutionary backwardness—and thus harked back not to Redfield, but to Redfield’s nineteenth-century predecessors. “Folk to me,” he said, “means a phase in the evolution of culture from primitiveness to civilization, and a folk society is a homogeneous unsophisticated group living in but isolated from a surrounding sophisticated society by such factors as topography, economics, race, and, as in the case of the Mormons, religion” (1964, 196). Five years later, in 1969, Greenway began his *Folklore of the Great West* with a lead essay on the Mormons, in a section he called “The Good Old Days.” In the introduction to the book, Greenway defined not just Mormons but other western groups as culturally backward islands, “separated enclaves” surrounded by progressive mainline American culture. “Since advance lies with numbers in the evolution of culture,” he argued, “such dissident groups are condemned to fall backward, the faster for their coherence” (1969, 3).

Thus in the eyes of at least some leading folklorists, both Mormons and other western groups have been viewed as somewhat romantic peasant

communities that fit nineteenth-century concepts of folklore. And to a certain degree that idea persists. For example, in 1988 Hector Lee, speaking of the Mormon and western studies of Austin Fife, wrote:

Because this is a region of spectacular scenic beauty that appeals to tourists, and a milieu that fosters highly advanced educational systems in a modern environment impressively replete with the latest electronic sophistication, it is easy to overlook the fact that there has always been and still is a solid bedrock and thick underlying vein of traditional lore here, which gives a special character to the social structure of the area. (1988, xvi).

That Lee felt constrained to explain that even in an educated, modern, urban society folklore could actually exist suggests that we still have some way to go in our understanding of the nature of folklore in general and of Mormon folklore in particular.

Other sources in historical/cultural studies have also contributed to misleading interpretations of Mormon folklore. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner published his famous essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." In opposition to the older view that social institutions evolve like germ cells, without reference to environment, he claimed in this and subsequent essays that environment has significantly shaped the course of cultural development. The most important feature of the American environment, he argued, was the presence of an area of free land on the western edge of a constantly advancing frontier. As settlers poured into this free land west of the frontier, they were changed into the ruggedly independent, self-reliant, freedom-loving characters we have liked to call American (Turner 1920).

It would be tempting to see the Mormon migration to the Great Basin in these terms. Consider the following story collected in 1924 from an old pioneer woman whose family had pushed and pulled their meager possessions across the plains in a handcart because they could not afford a team and wagon:

We were six in family when we started—father, my stepmother, two brothers, a sister sixteen years of age and myself. It seems strange that there were more men and boys died than there were women and girls. My two brothers died on the way, and my father died the day after we arrived in Salt Lake. The night my oldest brother died there were nineteen deaths in camp. In the morning we would find their starved and frozen bodies right beside us, not knowing when they died until daylight revealed the ghastly sight. I remember two women that died sitting by me. My mother was cooking some cakes of bread for one of them. When mother gave her one of them she tossed it into the fire and dropped over dead. I remember distinctly when the

terrible storm came, and how dismayed the people were. My step-mother took my little brother and myself by the hand and helped us along the best she could while sister and father floundered along with the handcart. How we did struggle through that snow, tumbling over sage brush and crying with cold and hunger.

When we camped they had to scrape a place to camp on, and not much wood to make a fire with. The food rations became scarce—there were four ounces daily for an adult and two for a child, and sometimes a little piece of meat. Oh! I'll never forget it, never!

When we arrived in Salt Lake we were taken to the assembly room and the people were asked to take as many of us into their homes as they could take care of. My father and mother were taken to one place and my sister and I each to another. I did not see my father again—he died the next day. . . . I did not stand on my feet until the sixth of March. I lost the first joints of six of my toes. My step-mother then carried me twelve blocks to [a] man's home who had been a friend of father's. Mother would carry me as far as she could, then she would put me down in the snow. Then we would cry a little while and go on again. (Ricks 1924)

It would be easy to see this story as an excellent example of the American character forged by the frontier experience—the resolve to keep struggling forward in the face of desperate odds, to stop and cry for a while but then to get up and go on again, to rub one's bruises after being thrown from a spirited horse but then to get on and ride again, to mourn the loss of the Challenger astronauts but then to put another shuttle into space. And maybe it is. Mormons themselves, who are as susceptible to nationalistic propaganda as anyone, may see the story in that light today.

But for most of them it will carry other messages. It will remind them that their ancestors were on the plains suffering terribly not to fulfill some grand dream of American manifest destiny but because they had been denied their constitutional rights to worship as they pleased, because their prophet Joseph Smith had been murdered, because the Governor of Missouri had issued an order calling for the extermination of all Mormons in the state, and because they had been driven from their homes in Illinois to begin an exodus that would stretch over several decades. Hardly the stuff of patriots' dreams. What's more, the Mormon westward migration and settling of the Great Basin, far from being an exercise in rugged individualism, was one of the most successful communal and communitarian movements since Moses led the children of Israel to the Promised Land.

Turner argued that it was not a specific place but a constantly moving frontier that had shaped American character. In 1931, in *The Great Plains*,

Walter Prescott Webb modified this view by claiming that geography itself (that is, place) was an important determiner of culture. The great plains, said Webb, had three primary characteristics—they were flat, treeless, and arid. Any land west of the Mississippi possessing at least two of these features would significantly determine the life lived there. The Great Plains environment, he said, “constitutes a geographic unity whose influences have been so powerful as to put a characteristic mark upon everything that survives within its borders.” And again, “The historical truth that becomes apparent in the end is that the Great Plains have bent and molded Anglo-American life, have destroyed traditions, and have influenced institutions in a most singular manner” (1931, vi, 8). In a similar vein, Richard Dorson, who fixed Mormons in Utah, was to add in *American Folklore*: “Each regional complex contains its own genius . . . depending upon the historical and ethnic and geographical elements that have shaped its character” (1959, 75).

In 1942, eleven years after the appearance of *The Great Plains*, western novelist Wallace Stegner published his influential *Mormon Country*; the same year historian Nels Anderson published *Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah*. Both books identified Mormonism not just as a religion but as a place, a western place. Other histories followed, such as Gustive O. Larson’s *Prelude to the Kingdom: Mormon Desert Conquest*, in 1947, and Leonard J. Arrington’s monumentally important *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900*, in 1958—not the Mormon Kingdom, nor the Kingdom of God, but the Great Basin Kingdom, a western geographical kingdom.

This notion of geographic determinism sounds clearly in the titles of Austin and Alta Fife’s *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore among the Mormons* (1956), and Thomas E. Cheney’s *Mormon Songs from the Rocky Mountains* (1968). Fife especially saw himself as a regional folklorist, his Mormon studies being only part of a larger effort to understand the West. The title of Hector Lee’s *The Three Nephites: The Substance and Significance of the Legend in Folklore* (1949) is less revealing, but Lee, a friend of Stegner’s, clearly saw the legends as part of the pioneer West, useful, he said, as a means of understanding “pioneer concepts, attitudes, and impulses” (1949, 126). And he frequently used Stegner’s term, Mormon Country (1949, 9; 1988, 15).

Though all these works at times rise above their titles and tell us things about Mormons having little to do with the West, the public perception of Mormons places them squarely in the center of the West. This is clear from the dust jacket and cover illustrations on the two editions of the Fifes’ *Saints of Sage and Saddle*. The 1956 edition, published by Indiana University, shows a bearded westerner—a rifle in one hand, a tablet with mysterious inscriptions in the other—and a rural village in the background. The University of Utah’s reprinting of the book in 1980 shows a ragged family trailing a wagon train across a barren western landscape.

Without question, this landscape does play a part in contemporary Mormon lore. For example, Three Nephite stories in which one of the eternal wanderers introduced to us by the Book of Mormon comes to the aid of a family whose car has broken down miles from anywhere are understandable only if one appreciates western distances. But the main function of the landscape is to provide a resonant background. The principal focus is elsewhere, on a God who will intervene to save the lives of the faithful. Consider still one more story:

A dear L.D.S. [Mormon] lady left her small family in Phoenix to go to the temple in Mesa. While she was in the middle of a session, she got a strong feeling that she should go home—that something was terribly wrong. The feeling wouldn't go away, so she told the temple president and asked him what she should do. He said, "Have no fear. You are doing the right thing by being here. All is well at home." So she continued the session. She hurried home when she was through and found her six-year-old daughter in bed. She asked her daughter if something was wrong. She told her mother that she had left the house while the babysitter was busy with the other children and had gone out by the canal near their house. While she was playing, she slipped on some grass and fell in. She couldn't swim, and the canal is deep. Many people drown this way. But a lady all dressed in white came along just then and got her just before she would have drowned. The lady set her on the bank and made sure she was okay. The little girl asked the lady who she was because she knew that the lady didn't live near by. So, the lady told her what her name was. The lady who saved the little girl was the lady whom the mother had done work for in the temple that day. (Wright 1975)

Barre Toelken, who studies water lore and symbolism in western and Mormon lore, is interested in this story because the themes of water and irrigation make their way into sacred narrative (1991). He is right, of course, but to really comprehend this story one must probe the depths of deeply held Mormon beliefs, beliefs I haven't space to detail fully here. Briefly, Mormons believe that saving gospel ordinances must be performed in the flesh. Since their deceased ancestors have not had this opportunity, Mormons seek out the names of these ancestors through genealogical research and then vicariously perform these ordinances for them in sacred ceremonies in their temples. The session mentioned in the story would be an occasion for performing these ordinances.

To believing Mormons, this story speaks many messages. It encourages them to persist in the search for their ancestral roots; it testifies to the validity of temple ordinances; it suggests that God is a caring God who will protect them in time of need; it stresses the importance of the family and

strengthens family ties; it gives them hope that these ties will continue beyond this life. In one narrative situation after another, these messages are brought forcefully home by an artistic performance of the story designed to move listeners to action and are made all the more powerful by the narrative symmetry in which two lives are saved at the same moment—the physical life of the young girl and the eternal life of the rescuer, the mother serving as the link between the two. Surely, no one would argue that the performance of the story is any less powerful because it occurs in a church with a fixed theology and an established hierarchical structure. And one would hope that no one would demean those who tell the story by referring to it as a folk religious element surviving in an established church.

The story has little to do with the West and even less to do with untenable notions of cultural evolution or of isolated cultural enclaves. Anyone who would understand the West must, of course, pay heed to the Mormon role in settling and developing that important part of our country. But the emphasis should probably be more on the impact of the Mormons on the West than of the West on the Mormons. Especially is that true today when most Mormons do not live in the West. Of today's ten million Mormons only ten percent live in Utah, and over half of all Mormons live outside the United States and Canada (Hart 1997). Therefore, any attempt to describe the contemporary Mormon ethos as a result of western landscape will be doomed to failure.

If we are ever to understand Mormons by examining their folklore, we must turn our eyes from the past to the present, from the rural landscape to urban centers, and from the West in general to the faith and commitment that give unity and direction to Mormon life. And we must finally discover behind Mormon folklore typical human beings coming to terms through their lore with enduring life and death questions that know neither temporal nor cultural boundaries.

As folklorists, our aim should be to discover what it means to be human; as folklorists interested in religious behavior, our aim should be to discover what it means to be human and religious. Lawless argues that in our attempts to understand religious folklore we should begin with what is traditional within a particular religion (1988a, 4). I would argue that while we may end with what is traditional, with those expressive religious behaviors we call folklore, we must not start there. We must begin with the religious individual, with *homo religiosus*. Until we work our way back through the cultural overlays of the physical environment, until we discover the generative force that lies behind both highly structured liturgical ritual on the one hand and spontaneous witnessing of the spirit on the other, until we get back to religious individuals in both uptown churches and on mountain ridges, until we comprehend their need for security, their quest for meaning, their desire for the continuance of what they cherish most, until we get there,

all our efforts, to quote an old book, may be little more than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals.

And when we get there, when we have worked our way through folk churches, through established churches, through the intricate relationships between canonized dogma and resulting folk expression, through Pentecostal brothers and sisters, through saints of sage and saddle, we will discover at last, standing alone, that splendid and worthy object of our study—*homo religiosus*.