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Marrow of Human Experience, The

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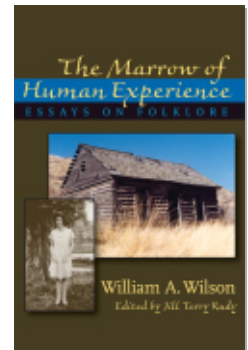
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“TEACH ME ALL THAT I MUST DO”

The Practice of Mormon Religion

I first discovered “Teach Me All That I Must Do” not at the 1998 AFS meeting in Portland where it was initially presented, but rather sitting in Bert Wilson’s home office.¹ As a folklore graduate student at Brigham Young University, I was writing my thesis on reflexivity and the insider voice in Mormon folklore scholarship. Although Bert was retired and had no obligation to participate in yet another MA thesis, he generously agreed to help me with a chapter on his contribution to the field and shared with me several of his unpublished works, including this article.

After reading “Teach Me All That I Must Do,” I immediately associated it with several of Bert’s other articles from the late 1990s that evaluate the trajectory of Mormon folklore scholarship. In fact, his article “Folklore, a Mirror for What? Reflections of a Mormon Folklorist” (1995), is almost a prologue to “Teach Me.” In that article, he points out a serious weakness in the field of Mormon folklore: “The problem is that I, and others like me, who know what Mormons really do talk about, have played too willingly to the expectations of outsiders and have thus reinforced their own misconceptions” (1995, 19). His point resonates with both my research on and participation in Mormon culture. Despite the fact that well-known Mormon folklore like J. Golden Kimball narratives and Three Nephite legends beg for cross-cultural comparison with trickster heroes and vanishing hitchhikers, they are often not the heart of Mormon vernacular and expressive communication. Thus, in this article Bert focuses on the “seldom . . . collected and less often studied” stories of service that form a core of Mormon experience.

“Teach Me All That I Must Do” is also significant in the way it reflects and contributes to the reflexive trend in American folkloristics. Recent years have seen extensive questioning of the goals of folklore research and the ethics of representation. In this article, Bert participates in this academic conversation, and I see in his argument similar self-reflection and concern with the ethical and fair depictions of the life experiences of others. Furthermore, he acknowledges the value of the insider voice, not

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just because in matters of folk expression the insider has the right to be heard, but more importantly because the insider can shed light on what is really happening. It is ironic that Bert would critique his own work as not reflecting enough of an insider perspective since the corpus of his research, which has made him the preeminent Mormon folklore scholar, has been more concerned with the insider's perspective than previous research on Mormon folklore (for example, the work of Austin and Alta Fife or Hector Lee). Thus, even though Bert seeks in "Teach Me" to refocus his work, this article is also an extension of his legacy as a scholar of Mormonism: his presentation of an emic, or insider, understanding of Mormon folklore.

As an act of reflexivity this article does more than some reflexive studies by moving past paralyzing self-inspection to present new ways of approaching Mormon folklore. One new direction for which Bert lays a foundation (even if he does not specifically address it) is a greater reliance on the tools of performance analysis in examining "the practice of belief." In the conclusion, he suggests the ethnographic value of looking "not just at a body of abstracted beliefs but at actual behaviors, at the process of believing, at *how* religious people, Latter-day Saints and others, enact their convictions in daily life." Because of arguments like this, ultimately I read "Teach Me All That I Must Do" as a call to more fully observe and analyze the performance of Mormon folklore. Even though Bert's article does not attempt such a performance-oriented analysis, it engages the theoretical justification of such studies, and thus, in the end, this should be an article that influences another generation of Mormon folklore scholarship.

—David A. Allred

STUDENTS OF RELIGION SOMETIMES DIVORCE THE BELIEFS OF THE GROUPS they study from the practices in which these beliefs are embodied (from participating in sacred ritual to carrying on the routine of daily life), leaving in their place only empty abstractions that yield little understanding of what religious people really take seriously and of what moves them to action in pursuit of their religious ideals.¹ Certainly, this holds true for the study of Mormon beliefs.

In a recent article in the *Journal of American Folklore*, entitled "The Practice of Belief," Marilyn Motz writes: "Examining believing as a practice rather than belief as an entity—using the form of a verb rather than a noun—is a crucial distinction. The usefulness of folklore scholarship lies not in its ability to collect and categorize beliefs but in its ability to explore how people believe" (1998, 349). Some years ago, in a course at Indiana University, Professor David Bidney told class members, "If you want to know what people really believe, look at what they do" (1962). In this paper, I will, as Motz suggests, look at belief as a "process"—believing—and will focus on *how* members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons, believe by looking, as Bidney suggests, at what they *do*.

This approach may be particularly helpful in the study of Mormon folklore because the Latter-day Saint church, perhaps more than most religious

denominations, strongly emphasizes the doing of religion. According to the Book of Mormon, which Latter-day Saints accept as scripture, “it is by grace that we are saved, after all that we can do” (2 Nephi 25: 23). The phrase “after all we can do” is important; it suggests that works are not a consequence of grace but rather precede grace—that we must be doing, not just believing. Thus the semiofficial *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states: “God has made provision through the atonement of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the human family. Those things that God does for mankind are called ‘grace.’ Those things that people have to do for themselves are called ‘works.’ Both are necessary” (Ludlow 1992, 4: 1587). In other words, in terms of necessary and sufficient causes, while both works and grace are necessary, neither without the other is sufficient. Thus Mormons are prone at times to skip over Paul, as they read the New Testament, and quote James’s statements that we should be “doers of the word and not hearers only,” that “by works a man is justified, and not by faith only,” and that “faith without works is dead” (James 1: 22, 2: 24, 2: 20).

The importance of work, of doing, is inculcated in Mormons from their youth on. They grow up hearing proverbial expressions urging them “to work out their salvation” and “to pray as though everything depended on the Lord and to work as though everything depended on them.” From their hymnal they sing songs with titles like the following: “Do What is Right,” “Carry On,” “Choose the Right,” “I Have Work Enough To Do,” “Keep the Commandments,” “Let Us All Press on in the Work of the Lord,” and “Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel”—this last hymn urges its singers to “push every worthy work along” (1985 *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, nos. 237, 255, 239, 224, 303, 243, 252). And they are reminded that Spencer W. Kimball, president of the LDS church from 1973 to 1985, had a placard on his desk that stated simply: “Do It!” Spencer W. Kimball was the nephew of J. Golden Kimball, the crusty Mormon divine noted for sprinkling his sermons with “hells” and “damns.” Considering the strong emphasis placed on following the advice of church leaders, it was probably inevitable that a riddle-joke would develop asking, “What do you get when you cross Spencer W. Kimball with J. Golden Kimball?” Answer: “Do it—damn it!”

Converts to the Mormon church are sometimes startled when they discover that they have adopted not just a new theological system but a new social system as well, a social system which, in Mormon parlance, keeps them “anxiously engaged” in church activities and eats up huge hunks of their time. All who serve in the Mormon church, except those at the very top of the hierarchy, are lay workers, volunteers who, while holding down regular jobs outside the church, serve in the church, without pay, in various positions for designated periods of time. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states:

In practice, the building up of the kingdom of God on earth is accomplished by individuals serving in numerous lay assignments, or callings. They speak in Church meetings and serve as athletic

directors, teachers, family history specialists, financial secretaries, children's music directors, and women's and men's organizations presidents. . . . Millions of people serve in the Church, and that service represents a significant time commitment. (Thompson 1992, 2: 814)

A Mormon myself, I could add a number of tasks to those listed here. The following parody comes perilously close to the truth: "Mary had a little lamb; / She also had some sheep; / But then she joined the Mormon church; / And died from lack of sleep" (Gault 1972).

What I have described above, intense service willingly given by church members, is seldom reflected in most of the folklore made available to the non-Mormon world through past scholarly studies, including, I must confess, many of my own. There are two reasons for this: first, the focus already mentioned on belief rather than practice; second, a focus in these studies on dramatic tales of the supernatural rather than on less dramatic stories of losing oneself in service, stories that really go to the heart of what it means to be Mormon. Most of the supernatural narratives recount stirring instances in which God or his angels intervene in the lives of church members to save them from spiritual or physical distress—suggesting, almost, that all one need do to get out of a tight situation is pray for help and an angel will pop up from behind some cloud to solve all his or her problems. Abstracted from the culture that produces them, these supernatural narratives, which certainly do exist, can easily give one the impression that Mormonism is an entirely *me*-centered religion whose members are concerned most with what God can do for them. While it is true that Mormons seek God's help in personal matters, their religion itself is primarily an *other*-centered religion whose members are encouraged to sacrifice their own interests and devote themselves to the service of others.

Though this service can take many forms, I will mention just three: missionary service, in which church members take their gospel message to the world; sacred temple service, in which members vicariously perform ordinances such as baptism for deceased ancestors who died without benefit of gospel law; and humanitarian service, in which members reach out to members and nonmembers alike to help them in times of spiritual, physical, or financial distress.

At the moment, some 59,000 Mormon missionaries serve throughout the world at their own expense. To those of you who have had a couple of these missionaries appear at your doors, smiling broadly, eager to convert you, their efforts may seem more a nuisance than a service. From their perspective, however, they are fulfilling the Lord's injunction to take the gospel of salvation, as they understand it, to all the world. They know they will not be welcomed at most doors. Behind those broad smiles, we will often find quivering, frightened young men or women, terrified by the hostility they might encounter. But they knock anyway, convinced that it is their duty. Mormon lore is replete with stories of dedicated missionaries sticking to their tasks in spite of the abuses

they must endure. A Mormon missionary was recently attacked and murdered in Russia, an all too common occurrence, and his companion was severely wounded. Interviewed on TV, his family, though mourning his loss, also reaffirmed their commitment to the church's missionary efforts and expressed no regrets at sending their son and brother to serve. That story, I am sure, will circulate broadly, as will and have other stories recounting the great personal and financial sacrifices some families make in order to keep their young men and women, sometimes two or three at a time, in the field. I recall many stories of widowed mothers working fingers to the bone to support a missionary. Such stories have seldom been collected and less often studied.

Just as Mormons are convinced that they must take the gospel to the living, they are equally convinced that they must make its saving ordinances available to their “kindred dead” who died without knowledge of these ordinances. Thus, through intense genealogical research, they seek out the names of their deceased ancestors and then, in their holy temples, vicariously perform these ordinances on their behalf. Achieving these goals requires tremendous effort, almost all of it carried out by volunteers. At the present, there are well over one hundred Mormon temples operating throughout the world. Many of these temples are open from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. (a few stay open around the clock). In addition to those who come to the temples to perform vicarious ordinances for the dead, hundreds of others must serve in the temples as officiators in these ordinances. Whereas most missionaries are young people (though in recent years significant numbers of senior couples have also entered the field), most who work in the temples are older—the average age is about seventy. Once again, stories of the dedication and sacrifice of these temple workers abound but have seldom been collected or studied—stories of people leaving their homes to serve in temples in foreign lands, stories of people hampered by crippling disease who still show up at the temples regularly to carry on the work, stories of people who sacrifice their retirement years and lives of ease to advance the cause.

Once one understands the behavioral emphases lying behind the practices described above, then other stories, those dramatic tales of divine intervention, take on an entirely different character. They can be seen not simply as accounts of how God has helped individuals with their personal problems but as behavioral models urging individuals to help others as God has helped them. Two examples will have to suffice:

Two missionaries were on a Navajo reservation and were driving their car. It was snowing up a storm when their car went into a drainage ditch. They pulled themselves loose and started walking down the road. They were super cold and didn't think they'd make it. They prayed that someone would come. Just then a truck came outta nowhere and [the driver] asked them if they needed a ride. The guy told them that he was on his way to work at the trading

post. He dropped them off at their place and the next day they went to the trading post to thank him, and the lady said only she and her husband worked there and no one else. (Watt 1993)

I heard a story about a lady who was very much interested in genealogy, and of course she belonged to the church. She had gathered quite a few names but she couldn't find her grandmother's name, when she was born, or when she died. This lady lived in Norway and she had prayed a lot about getting the information about her grandmother.

One day it was snowing outside and it was in the morning and she was sitting eating her breakfast and somebody knocked at the door. And an elderly, well-dressed man came in and asked if he could have a little something to eat, and at first she thought it was kind of funny because she could always see people go by the kitchen window but she hadn't seen this man go by, but she invited him in and gave him breakfast. She had a funny feeling all the time they were eating and talking at the table, and when he was through eating he thanked her and left. Again she thought it was funny that she couldn't see him go by the window, and she looked outside and there was no trace of footsteps on the snow.

She thought that was kind of funny, but as she gathered the dishes she took his plate, and under his plate was a piece of paper and on that piece of paper was her grandmother's full name, and her birthdate and when she died, and when she even married! (Browne 1968)

It would be easy enough to catalogue Mormon beliefs embedded in these two narratives. Both reflect a belief in the existence of heavenly beings who can appear to and assist people in distress. Both engender in teller and listener a sense of obligation to commit themselves to missionary, genealogical, and temple work. If the Lord's messenger really saved the missionaries from the storm, if the mysterious stranger left under his plate the genealogical information the Norwegian woman had been seeking—if these events really happened, then missionary, genealogical, and temple work must be true principles; and if they are true principles, then we should diligently pursue them; and if we pursue them, then the Lord will help us serve as instruments in saving others. He will help us practice what we profess. These are the stories' most important messages.

The third practice around which stories circulate is humanitarian service. These stories are perhaps the most abundant but least collected and studied of all Mormon narratives. The Book of Mormon states that "when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2: 17), echoing Christ's statement: "Inasmuch as ye have done [it] unto one of

the least of these my brethren, ye have done [it] unto me” (Matthew 25: 40). The first verse of a popular Mormon hymn relates directly to these scriptures. It begins with a series of questions followed by a comment followed by still more questions: “Have I done any good in the world today?” asks the hymn. “Have I helped anyone in need? / Have I cheered up the sad, and made someone feel glad? / If not, I have failed indeed. / Has anyone’s burden been lighter today / Because I was willing to share? / Have the sick and the weary been helped on their way? / When they needed my help was I there?” The refrain then exhorts those who have failed in their duty to mend their ways: “Then wake up and do something more / Than dream of your mansion above. / Doing good is a pleasure, a joy beyond measure, / A blessing of duty and love” (1985 *Hymns*, no. 223).

Simply doing good, then, is one of the central emphases of the church. The church itself has in recent years expanded its humanitarian efforts, especially in former eastern-block and third-world countries, sending out senior couples not to proselytize but to provide educational, medical, agricultural, and other services. Most stories, however, speak of ordinary members who during the routine of daily life take time out to help others. The following three examples are typical:

When we moved here our neighbor, Hyrum Babcock, was in the late stages of multiple sclerosis. Our priesthood quorum organized itself to care for him. Each day one of us would read to him for a few hours, and each night one of us would help him bathe. A member had built a motorized sling to lift him from his wheelchair into the tub, which a single person could operate with a little training, and that is what we used so he could have a full body bath each day, which helped immensely in avoiding bedsores. This went on for about five years until he died. (England 1998)

A Mormon woman in England, hearing constantly on TV of the plight of Bosnians during that war, organized a food convoy, including getting the trucks donated, collecting food, clothing and medicine, and with fellow Mormons driving the convoy to Bosnia and delivering the supplies. She did it again the next year. (England 1998)

My father [the reference is to my own father] was a section foreman on the Union Pacific Railroad when the great depression began. He was cut back to regular section hand but, fortunately, had enough seniority to keep his job. He voluntarily took a half-time work schedule so that someone else could also work half time and thereby keep his family fed. He sold Watkins products door to door in his free time in an effort to make up the lost wages.

Other stories tell of Relief Society women in a local congregation taking turns sitting with the ill or dying; of a graduate student at the University of Chicago, who spent his Saturdays tutoring children from disadvantaged homes on Chicago's south side; of a soldier during the Korean War who donated his entire mustering out pay to a Korean orphanage; of a scoutmaster who held an incapacitated scout on his shoulders throughout a very long and very hot pioneer days parade; of a financially strapped church member in Finland who rode his bicycle across town early in the morning to clear a frail widow's walkway after each snow storm; of a church member who, upon finding a drunk man lying in his own vomit, picked him up, cleaned him up, took him to a hotel, and arranged his night's lodging.

The acts of service described in these stories are certainly not peculiar to Mormons. They are the kinds of actions one hopes each decent human being might undertake when encountering fellow human beings in need. For Mormons striving to practice their religion, however, they are centrally important, as they attempt to wake up, in the words of the song, and do something more than dream of their mansion above. Though more pedestrian in character than dramatic supernatural tales, these stories take us much closer to the core of Mormon moral and humane values than the supernatural stories ever will. In studying Mormon folklore, we neglect them at our peril.

A popular Mormon children's song, composed in 1957 by Naomi Ward Randall and performed again and again by most Mormon children as they grow toward maturity, ends with the line, "Teach me all that I must do / To live with him someday." In the original version of the song, the line read: "Teach me all that I must know. . ."; but during his presidency, Spencer W. Kimball, who had the "Do it!" placard on his desk, changed "know" to "do"—teach me all that I must do—recognizing perhaps that as children are enculturated into Mormon social worlds, doing, or practicing religion, may be more important than knowing it (*Children's Songbook* 1989, 2). Few Mormon children will have any kind of sophisticated knowledge of the theological beliefs underpinning their religion, but most of them will have internalized the behaviors expected of them—missionary service, temple service, humanitarian service—as they face the realities of everyday living. Students of religious folklore could take a lesson here. If we will look not just at a body of abstracted beliefs but at actual behaviors, at the process of believing, at how religious people, Latter-day Saints and others, enact their convictions in daily life, we may discover what we have been after all along—a better understanding and appreciation of what these people feel and believe most deeply. So let's do it—damn it!

NOTE

1. A number of the examples used in this paper are drawn from narratives I have heard all my life growing up and living in Mormon society. It is impossible to document these with any exactness. Examples not drawn from my own experiences are documented in the traditional manner.