

# MORMON SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

Vol. 23, No. 2

Fall 2002

Mary Lou McNamara, Editor

Perry Cunningham, Designer

---

### In This Issue

President's Message .....	1
Book Review: The Mormon Culture of Salvation .....	1
Overview of Upcoming Mormon Sessions and Papers at SSSR/RRA .....	5
What's New in Salt Lake .....	6
Announcements .....	7

### President's Message

Here we are! Approaching SSSR/RRA meetings under the best of circumstances, especially as far as our association is concerned. As revealed in the preliminary program (<http://www.sssrweb.org>), there is an abundance of papers about Mormonism. In addition to MSSA's two sessions and the session submitted by David Knowlton, there were enough individual paper proposals submitted to the program chair to warrant more sessions. There are also several theme tours of the sites in the Valley for conference visitors to enjoy. The opportunity to meet in the heart of Zion will probably not repeat itself for some time. Savor it!

I hope everyone will encourage colleagues and students who otherwise don't participate in these meetings to attend—and to join MSSA. This should be a great opportunity for the association to recruit membership. Tell people about the MSSA; encourage them to join with us.

Please remember that everyone is invited to our business meeting, and that in addition to planning sessions for next year's meetings in Norfolk, Virginia, we will also need to nominate candidates for several positions, including a new editor for the MSSA Newsletter. And in this regard, I want to thank Mary Lou

McNamara—personally as well as on behalf of the entire association—for all of the work she has put into producing the newsletter. During McNamara's editorship the newsletter has effectively served our collective need for useful information, quality book reviews, and news items. Mary Lou! Thank you for your good-hearted help, your hard work, and gracious sense of humor!

Daryl White

**Book Review: *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, by Douglas J. Davies** (2000, Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 293pp.)

John P. Hoffman

Bronislaw Malinowski, in his famous essay *Magic, Science and Religion*, postulates that religion rescues people from death, the ultimate threat to group cohesion and solidarity. This occurs not only through funeral rites, but also through various sacralizing traditions that remind group members that the conquest of death is possible. Recent studies of Mormonism have taken the link between religion and the conquest of death in an attempt to understand the founding of Mormonism and its subsequent cultural qualities. Perhaps the most impressive—and thought provoking—attempt has been produced by Douglas J. Davies. Davies, a Professor of Contemporary Theology at the University of Durham, extends his earlier research on Mormon identities and related interests to produce an intriguing book about Mormon culture. Although the title focuses on a *culture of salvation*, the book contains an impressively nuanced account of a sweeping number of themes that shape and define Mormonism. The book might have been titled (admittedly with much less impact, but perhaps greater precision) *The Semiotics of*

*Mormonism*, for Davies offers a broad discussion of the symbolic richness of Mormonism while also providing a contrast with the way similar symbols are used in other religious traditions.

The general goals of the book are described early in the introductory chapter. Davies sees a quest for the highest reaches of salvation as a motivating force engendering Mormon spiritual matters, and attempts to interpret this phenomenon through a scrupulous overview of the many ingredients of Mormon culture. Drawing upon his earlier more general research, he sees concerns about salvation as stemming from the “degree of durable plausibility achieved in rational and emotional dimensions of life such that no alternative was sought” (p.17). Moreover, Davies takes some risks by postulating that death played, and continues to play, a crucial role in the development of Mormon culture and practice, especially as they relate to salvation seeking. Arriving on the heels of William Morain’s psychohistorical book *The Sword of Laban* (American Psychiatric Press, 1998), a risk is that Morain’s notions that the trauma of death experienced by Joseph Smith motivated the founding of Mormonism will be linked to Davies’ much more balanced accounting of the variety of places where death affects themes in Mormon culture. Nonetheless, Davies’ attention to death is careful and highly contextualized. He follows the tradition of Malinowski by addressing concerns about death as cultural, group-centered concerns. Most importantly, he recognizes that attention to only one issue, even one as salient to the development of religious movements as is death, constitutes reductionism. His more general approach is to see death as a crucial motivating factor in generating the symbols and manifestations of salvation seeking, but also to recognize other aspects of salvation ideology in LDS life, from family life to temple ritual. A tendency that is not overcome by Morain or Davies, however, is the tacit interpretation of death experiences through contemporary lenses. It is likely that death was experienced much differently by early 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans than by our contemporaries, especially since infant mortality and young

adults deaths were much more common in years past (cf. Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*, Yale University Press, 1996).

The introductory chapter provides important background material that is elaborated in the remaining chapters. Davies argues that salvation may take several forms even within particular groups and that these forms are *dynamic* representations. Analyzing a *culture* of salvation is important because the former is both active and passive. Active culture is found in new experiences and expectations; passive culture is seen in temporal structures and organizational forms that define a “life of faith” (p.6). As a simplifying scheme for understanding these cultural forms, Davies introduces the categories of domestic, ward, and temple Mormonism, with home life distinguishable from more formalized rituals. Yet death-conquest transcends these three categories. Furthermore, drawing upon Clifford Geertz’ well-worn definition of culture, Davies emphasizes the way that moods and motivations are directed within Mormonism into family and temple life. The chapter also argues that a key facet of Mormonism that distinguishes it from many other forms of Christianity is its emphasis on developing a testimony rather than being converted. Testimonies are narratives that reinforce official principles of the church and enactments of sacred events. Although the realization that testimonies are processual is unremarkable to LDS members, Davies uses the distinction with conversion to contend that it influenced the development of certain organizational demands and was consistent with the ostensible need for a *true* church to rise above the many presumed false ones. Analyzing some set of testimonies, perhaps gleaned through journals, historical records, or observational research, would have added validity to this argument. It seems to ring true, but available evidence would have provided a more nuanced interpretation.

Chapter 2 attempts to distinguish the way that salvation is approached from a more traditional Christian perspective and a Mormon perspective. The chapter discusses how salvation-seeking shifts as it is articulated

through rituals, beliefs, and practices. Following a discussion of holiness and how it becomes, in contrast to Rudolph Otto's discussions, a group phenomenon rather than an individual realization, Davies suggests a shift from Jan Shipp's tripod metaphor of Mormonism (prophet, scriptures, and corporate) to twin pillars with a linking arch. The pillars are the Book of Mormon and temple work, with a connecting arch of prophetic leadership. These attributes ground the truth that is found among the believers of Mormonism; a truth that is as much about personal experience as it is about divine laws. These personal experiences take on added significance through rituals that are linked to a concern with death. For example, temple ritual emphasizes individual responsibility for words, actions, and covenants faithful members must perform in the conquest of death.

The chapter also emphasizes the symbolic differences between Mormonism and mainstream Christianity that take shape in the use of the cross. The cross normally represents a verbal, gestural, or visual depiction of salvation through a sacrificial Christ. Yet in Mormonism, much more emphasis is placed on the atonement of Christ. There is no death in the atonement images. Depictions of a dying Christ prevalent in mainstream Christianity "give way to scenes of life" (p.54) in Mormon culture. The net result for Latter-day Saints is a process of salvation-seeking that concerns achievements in this life that foster achievements in an afterlife. Response to death, or perhaps more precisely the consequences of death, involves action and conquest, not resignation.

Chapter 3 focuses on what Davies terms temple Mormonism. As suggested in earlier chapters, domestic, ward, and temple Mormonism provide three overlapping realms of Mormon life and help structure its approach to salvation. There is a clear emphasis on how temple work is the key to achieving human potential, for the practitioner and, indirectly, for ancestors. The temple represents the *domus dei*, or the house of God. This is in contrast to *domus ecclesiae*, which is simply the house of assembled people. A key difference between

temple and ward Mormonism is identified by these terms. In fact, Davies sees little distinction between LDS wards and Protestant churches, in either form or function. In terms of overcoming death and achieving salvation, the temple stands at the forefront—it "mediates between time and eternity, between the pre-existence, earthly existence, and the post-mortem realm" (p.74).

It is also in Chapter 3 that we find Davies' key thesis about the role of death in the life of Joseph Smith. Davies contends that the death of Smith's older brother Alvin served to unite a number of themes in developing Mormon doctrines of death. He points out that Alvin's death is revisited in several documents, including Section 137 of the Doctrines and Covenants. The profound death event and the subsequent revelation found in this section is linked by Davies to baptism for the dead and other vicarious temple work, especially since it represents the ability of the unbaptized to receive various degrees of salvation. Baptism for the dead is a particular ritual that is corporate and non-individualist, and thus reinforces a cohesive infrastructure that transcends death. Importantly, though, Davies continues to stress that the death event was only one piece of a much more elaborate mosaic.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role of the body in Mormonism and how understanding it affects a practical pursuit of salvation that is set in place by domestic behavior, community relations, and church organization. Davies uses the terms *habitus* and *gestus* to link notions of the body with death. *Habitus* allows social groups to share various aspects of life through the use of symbols, gestures and so forth; whereas *gestus* concerns an entire way of thinking and behaving that is part of group membership. Nevertheless, Davies sees a large overlap between these two terms, especially as he discusses gestures, moods, behaviors, and bodily control in LDS culture. As the LDS church evolved, the Mormon body became a focal point for rituals that had eternal importance. Temples and bodies fused to produce eternal families, a sacredness of place, and, ultimately, a conquest of death.

Moreover, Mormon *habitus* finds its essence in testimonies; those narratives that frame visual and verbal representations of faith as members “take the stand” and use phrases such as “grateful for the opportunity” of doing something (p.129). Emotions often run high and personal faith and tradition coalesce into group cohesion. Unfortunately, there is little sense that these personal-communal experiences vary across LDS communities, wards, or meetings, if at all.

Chapter 5 is titled Domestic, Ward and Temple Mormonism, although its main focus is on the domestic sphere. Davies emphasizes the role of merit and how it affects values and behaviors. Merit attaches as group members closely follow group prescriptions and attain important roles within the church hierarchy. Yet it differs from status in its dynamism and, at least in Mormonism, in its ascription through bureaucratic means (e.g., temple worthiness interviews with leaders). Control of body is an important component of merit. Marriage as an institution that active Mormons strive for, sexual control in the domestic sphere, and understanding that the spirit life is other-focused and relational are all ways to demonstrate merit. In short, obedience predates merit and serves to define Mormonism as a religion that seeks to overcome evil through divine knowledge (as opposed to other means such as transforming an evil nature through a discrete conversion experience). The knowledge gained through Mormon scripture and a prophetic leadership allows a triumph over death made possible because of obedience to some “true” set of prescriptions.

Chapter 6 is designed to use the concepts of obedience and merit in conjunction with folk experiences and bureaucracy to determine how the Mormon culture of salvation emerged.

Chapter 6 provides further ingredients that add to the mix of a culture of salvation. In particular, Davies discusses overcoming the tension of a highly spiritual—and personalized—set of needs with the need to maintain bureaucratic control. Establishing particular offices designed to carry out disparate functions helps resolve this tension.

For example, authority as a charismatic element is enshrined in the patriarchal blessing (and thus stems from a patriarch), but is complemented by a bureaucratic-rational process of record keeping. Similarly, juristic and spiritual powers are administered through established, institutional authorities (e.g., bishop and patriarch). The identity Mormons derive from mystical powers and the charisma that it may represent are expressed in controlled testimonies or in other systematized interactions. Mormon charismatic and bureaucratic statuses thus emerge as complementary.

The final two chapters reflect upon what has been built to understand (Chapter 7) and speculate (Chapter 8) about Mormonism as a world religion. Davies explores what it is about Mormon culture and practice that may make it (potentially) a world religion. First, its ethical vitality as represented in strict behavioral rules is a source of strength for a growing church. Davies’s discussion is reminiscent of prevalent hypotheses about strict churches that have become common in the sociology of religion. Strictness provides additional vitality and meaning to a religious tradition. Second, the LDS church was highly selective about which aspects it borrowed from traditional Christianity and which aspects it abandoned. The Bible was not abandoned; rather scripture was expanded. Baptism was retained, but baptism for the dead was added. The temple as a special place in which secret rites are conducted replaces the Eucharist as a central practice of the Christian tradition. Third, conquest of death is based on achievements in this life at the individual and family levels. These characteristics coalesce to produce a potentially powerful world religion. It is worth quoting at length to establish Davies’s view of Mormonism as such:

Without any doubt Mormonism is a prime example of a religion that *involves a distinctive process of the conquest of death, rooted in ritual practice and related to explanatory doctrine and to an ethical pattern of life involving generation of merit employed for soteriological ends* (p.237; emphasis in original).

Whether these characteristics will result in a major world religion remains to be seen, as the LDS church struggles to find a foothold in the diversity of world cultures it must engage. Davies argues that the church has some of the important characteristics shared by world religions, but, he adds, whether it can emphasize them sufficiently to become one remains to be seen.

Chapter 8 elaborates some of the more important characteristics of Mormonism that will affect its ability to become a world religion. Although Davies sees many aspects of Mormonism that should appeal to the world's populace (e.g., particular modes of death conquest; a dual system of temple rites and local church organization; emphasis on certain traditional family practices), there is also the danger that death conquest will lose its importance, as seems to be happening in the western world. Hence, Mormonism's distinctive appeal as a culture that has unique methods (or at least a more elaborate scheme) of death conquest may lose force in the modern world.

An overall evaluation of Davies' book is difficult because it suffers from almost an embarrassment of riches. There are observational gems found in each chapter, but there is also a lack of coherence to the narrative that many readers may find distracting. From a sociological perspective, there is too little attention to variability within LDS culture and tradition. There is also a lack of conceptual and theoretical continuity in the arguments. There is a rush to pack perhaps too much information in each section and chapter. Although readers familiar with Mormonism may nod their heads in agreement as Davies discusses particular Mormon approaches to the conquest of death or the unique contributions of temples as distinct spaces and as the container of rites, many may also find it difficult to determine the all-important dynamism of culture that Davies alludes to in the introductory chapter. It does not appear simply to be historical context that is missing, but also the way that LDS culture may (or may not) have adapted to shifts in the culture of the surrounding environment. If

culture is dynamic and adaptive, as Davies suggests early on, then a culture of salvation should also have temporal and spatial shifts. But it is difficult to identify this dynamism in the text. Nevertheless, Davies has produced an intriguing piece of scholarship that should gain the attention of those interested in Mormonism as an organization, structure, and culture.

John P. Hoffmann is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Brigham Young University. His research interests include the impact of religious affiliation and practice on attitudes and behavior, adolescent health, and applied statistics.

### **Overview of Upcoming Mormon Sessions and Papers at SSR/RRA**

The The 2002 annual meeting of SSSR/RRA will be November 1-3 at the Hilton Salt Lake City Center (with board and council meetings and a kick-off reception on October 31). The sessions and papers given below were recently listed at SSSRweb.org. They may change.

- Friday, 10:15-11:45, "Diversity in the Mormon Homeland: Minority Religion in Utah," organized by David Clark Knowlton, with Janet Bennion, Bonnie Lynn Mitchell-Green, Bonnie Glass-Coffin, and Richley H. Crapo as participants.
- Friday, 12:00-1:00, Mormon Social Science Association Business Meeting.
- Saturday, 10:15-11:45, "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Potpourri I," organized by Armand L. Mauss. Papers include "Keeping the Faith: Expressions of Religiosity and Religious Identification Among Non-Mormon Immigrants to Utah" by Robert Reynolds; "Creedal Homogeneity among Latter-day Saints: Report of a Cross-Cultural Study" by Marcus H. Martins; and "Personal Grooming as a Measure of Faithfulness in the LDS Church," by Michael Nielson and Daryl White.

Friday, 3:00-4:30, Glenn M. Vernon  
Lecture organized by Daryl White,  
"Gender and Religion in Comparative  
Perspective: In search of a paradigm"  
by Marie Cornwall.

Saturday, 1:15-2:45, "Contributions of  
Armand L. Mauss to Mormon and Other  
Religious Studies" organized by O.  
Kendall White, Jr., with Charles Y.  
Glock, Gary Shepherd, Thomas Murphy  
as participants, and Armand L. Mauss  
as respondent.

Saturday, 1:15-2:45, "Women and  
Religion" organized by Georgie Ann  
Weatherby, to include a paper, "LDS  
Family Cohesion: The Role of Women's  
Paid and Unpaid Labor" by Daphne  
Pedersen.

Sunday, 9:45-11:15, "Church of Jesus  
Christ of Latter Day Saints: Alternative  
Lifestyles" organized by Ryan Cragun,  
with "Are Mormons Culture Warriors?  
Mormon Participation in Local Political  
Debate over Gay Marriage" by  
Benjamin Jensen and Laura Olson,  
"Attitudes of 21st Century Members of  
the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day  
Saints toward Polygynous Practices: An  
Application of Cognitive Dissonance  
Theory" by Jenifer Kunz; and  
"Institutional Responses of LDS and  
RLDS Churches to Gay and Lesbian  
Challenges" by O. Kendall White and  
Daryl White.

Sunday, 11:30-1:00, "Church of Jesus  
Christ of Latter Day Saints: Potpourri II"  
organized by Marie Cornwall, with  
"Start the Revolution Without Me: An  
Update on the Mormon Church's  
Response to Societal Change in  
Women's Roles" by Carrie Miles;  
"Religion, Job Readiness, and  
Employment Outcomes: The Case of  
LDS Employment Resource Services"  
by John P. Bartkowski; and "Recent  
Developments in Mormon Political  
Theology: Parallels in the History of

Traditional Christianity" by Jeremiah  
John.

### **What's New in Salt Lake**

A major new attraction is the Gateway Mall,  
which has about a hundred stores and  
restaurants plus a 12-theater megaplex. A  
highlight of this outdoor mall is a  
choreographed water fountain show set to  
music which activates every half hour. The  
Gateway has dramatically transformed and  
revitalized the warehouse district west of  
Temple Square.

Another new feature is last year's east-west  
addition to TRAXX. TRAXX opened in late  
1999 as a light rail commuter system  
connecting Salt Lake City's downtown with the  
city of Sandy to the south. The new east-west  
addition connects downtown with the University  
of Utah. A free-fare zone from the Delta Center  
to Temple Square to 600 South makes TRAXX  
(plus UTA buses) attractive to anyone in the  
downtown area.

A complete renovation of the major interstate  
freeway, I-15, was finished in May 2001. That  
makes the trip to Thanksgiving Point near Lehi  
much more pleasant. The Museum of Ancient  
Life, the world's largest dinosaur museum,  
opened at Thanksgiving Point in June 2001.

Temple Square has had a new look since it  
finished the Main Street mall, a landscaped  
area between the Salt Lake Temple and the  
Church Office Building. Also, the Conference  
Center was completed in 2001 and may be  
toured any day of the week from 8 a.m. to 9  
p.m.

### **Announcements**

- The MSSA website is available at  
<http://www2.gasou.edu/psychology/mssa/>. Mike Nielsen is maintaining it.
- Are you teaching Mormon studies-  
related classes? Send a copy of your  
syllabus to Mike Nielsen for inclusion on  
the MSSA website. Send it to him by

email, [mnielsen@gasou.edu](mailto:mnielsen@gasou.edu), or by regular mail, Dept. of Psychology, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460-8041

In "Oh Gods," in The Atlantic Monthly, [www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/02/lester.htm](http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/02/lester.htm), Toby Lester bubbles with enthusiasm over the ever-changing world of religion today. This is a good overview for lay people, with Mormons mentioned a couple of times.

The Group of European Psychologists of Religion and the International Association for the Psychology of Religion is calling for papers for their annual conference in Glasgow to be held August 28-31, 2003. The organization pursues psychological research on empirical religious phenomena. Proposals for papers (150-200 words) should be submitted by email (MS Word or RTF) by May 1st, 2003 to Dr. Dirk Hutsebaut, University of Leuven, [Dirk.Hutsebaut@psy.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:Dirk.Hutsebaut@psy.kuleuven.ac.be). Conference languages will be German, English and French. Pre-registration and inquiries may be directed Dr. Geoffrey Scobie of Glasgow, [G.Scobie@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:G.Scobie@educ.gla.ac.uk).

CARA at Georgetown University, a social science research center focusing on projects related to the Catholic Church, seeks a research associate. This is a Ph.D. level appointment typically made as a Georgetown research professor. The position entails conducting and analyzing surveys, focus groups, and/or demographic research. Send a writing sample to Dr. Bryan Froehle, [CARA@georgetown.edu](mailto:CARA@georgetown.edu).

William James Awards, from the Council on Spiritual Practices, provide funding for masters' theses and doctoral dissertations (up to \$500 and \$1500 respectively) on studies of religious/spiritual experiences and their

effects. For more information, see the CSP website.

Annual MSSA dues are \$5. The year through which your dues are paid is indicated on the mailing label. If your mailing label is printed with 2001 or earlier, you are not current. You can become current by sending a check to MSSA to Cardell Jacobson, MSSA Secretary/Treasurer, Department of Sociology, 800 SWKT, BYU, Provo, UT 84602. If you do not wish to be a member of MSSA, please send that notification. Additional donations are always welcome, particularly those given in support of the Vernon lecture.