

Unveiling Mormonism:

Speaking of that new religious phenomenon known as Mormonism, Charles Dickens gave his opinion in 1851 that “What the Mormons do seems to be excellent; what they say is mostly nonsense.” With those two lines, Dickens managed to succinctly capture the contemporary perception of Mormonism—but he also provided a cogent key to understanding the public’s engagement with this religion that continues to the present day. I want to illustrate the ways in which his observation has proven relevant through three fairly distinct phases of public perception that Mormonism has passed through, which we could roughly demarcate as Fraud, Philandery, and Football. I will then conclude my remarks by considering how Mormonism might conceivably break free of the stage it has been stuck in for one hundred years, and forge a new relationship to the public eye.

1. Fraud (E. B. Howe/Spaulding Theory) 1830-1850s
2. Coercion (white slavery/brainwashing) 1850s-1890s
3. Triumph of Culture 1890s

I.

In 1834 Eber D. Howe published Mormonism Unveiled: A Faithful Account of that Singular Imposition and Delusion. It was the first—and one of the most widely circulated and influential of all 19th c books published on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This was the book that laid out two related theories that would dominate discourse about Mormonism for the

first few decades: Joseph was a Fraud, and the Book of Mormon was a theft from Solomon Spaulding. His book chronicles “the fooleries, and forgeries, and lies of Jo Smith,” in order to “expose in a becoming manner, the falsehoods which have been interwoven for the purposes of fraud and deception” (93, 54).

An entire line of books and pamphlets followed suit. Several stories circulated in confirmation of Smith’s fraudulence. Warren Foote recorded in 1835 that a Methodist preacher in Greenwood, New York, related the following story: “On a certain occasion, J. Smith proclaimed that he would perform a miracle the next Sabbath, by walking on the water. Accordingly, he went to work and fixed some planks on some posts, just under the water of a pond. After all things were arranged, some fellows went in the night, and sawed his planks nearly in two. When Sunday came a multitude came to gather to witness the miracle. When the hour appointed arrived, “Joe Smith” walked boldly into the water, and on reaching the middle of his last plank, down he went, and came nearly being drowned, before he could be got out.”

Both the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune later reprinted the story.

Another fable circulated by Henry Caswell had it that Smith, upon being shown a Greek Psalter, pronounced it to be a dictionary of Egyptian hieroglyphics before being told the real nature of the book. So Smith was a fake and the victims of Mormonism were gullible and credulous. By means of such representations, the content of Smith’s message was effectively rendered

unworthy of serious consideration. The labels invalidated the message without a hearing.

Even otherwise good historians long bought into the scenario of Mormonism as largely appealing to bumpkins and the uneducated. In actual fact, recent scholarship has show that is not an accurate characterization. For instance, of the first 80 converts to the fledgling faith identified by profession, eleven were schoolteachers and fifteen were doctors or lawyers.ⁱ

To counter this pervasive image, Latter-day Saints initially did very little by way of published response. This was in large measure because an 1831 revelation had declared, “Wherefore, confound your enemies; call upon them to meet you both in public and in private; and inasmuch as ye are faithful their shame shall be made manifest.” (71:7). So Mormons did a lot of public debating, with mixed results.

In Parley Pratt’s 1832 mission with William McLellin, for example, he boasts of demolishing in debate a Baptist minister by the name of Dotson, who opposed his work in Greene County, Illinois. Dotson, apparently finding himself out of his league as a debater, appealed to the Baptist missionary extraordinaire, John Mason Peck for support against Mormon inroads. As Pratt admitted in the aftermath of the debate, “we baptized only a few of the people.”ⁱⁱ

In 1840 on the Isle of Man, John Taylor was challenged to debate by one Reverend Thomas Hamilton, who had accused the Mormon of dishonesty and blasphemy. Taylor accepted the invitation and the Market Hall where the

debate was held was filled to capacity. According to the *Manx Liberal*, a local newspaper, as soon as the Reverend Hamilton proceeded, “it soon became apparent that he was a mere braggadocia, possessing no qualifications save ignorance and presumption. ... He ... made not even the most distant allusion in reference to the gross and unfounded charges he had pledged himself to prove.” [8](#)

But the Mormons didn’t always come off victorious. Jump back to 1838, and Pratt’s New York mission. He had arrived in the city the previous summer, in the aftermath of the Kirtland implosion. Six months of labor, and precious few converts to show for his work. He wrote, “From July to January we preached, advertised, printed, published, testified, visited, talked, prayed, and wept in vain. To all appearance there was no interest or impression on the minds of the people in regard to the fulness of the gospel. . . . We had hired chapels and advertised, but the people would not hear, and the few who came went away without being interested.”ⁱⁱⁱ There may have been some connection between his lack of success, and a well attended public encounter Pratt had in these months with the redoubtable Origen Bachelor. Usual adversaries of Mormon missionaries were local, relatively untrained and ordinary clergymen. Bachelor was a pro, having, for example, debated religion in ten letters with Robert Dale Owen, the freethinking son of Robert Owen, in 1831. More recently he had been writing articles for Alexander Campbell’s *Millennial Harbinger*.^{iv} Bachelor was soon to be known, in fact, as “the great Goliath and champion of

the Cross,”^v and was invested enough in debunking Mormonism to publish a book on the subject in 1838.^{vi}

Pratt did not record the results—most likely because he did not come off very well. But the Detroit Tribune did. They reported that in this “celebrated discussion . . . Mr. Bachelor proved” two contentions. First, that Solomon Spaulding was the true author of the Book of Mormon, having written a work that Sidney Rigdon plagiarized and attributed to Joseph Smith. Second, that Professor Charles Anthon of Columbia College had discredited the Book of Mormon plates as “having been so arranged and engraved for the purpose of deception and confusion. To these various facts and charges,” the journalist declared, “poor Parley P. Pratt made a feeble reply, and utterly failed to controvert the proofs produced by Mr. Bachelor.”^{vii} Bachelor himself gave more details in his subsequent exposé of Mormonism. Alarmed at the “degree of public attention” Pratt’s preaching had excited, he challenged the elder to “a public discussion” which turned into a marathon debate. Pratt withstood Bachelor’s attacks for three consecutive days, but on the fourth he tried to withdraw, protesting that his adversary was ridiculing the Book of Mormon. Under pressure from the audience, Pratt agreed to continue, but objected again on the sixth evening when Bachelor impugned the character of Smith, Rigdon, and others. They sparred a while longer, but “in the very heat of the battle,” Pratt “beat a retreat and left poor old *Mormon* to take care of himself!” Not wanting to lose the momentum he had gained, Bachelor continued to regale the crowd for two more evenings.

Pratt had neither the experience nor the popularity of an Origen Bachelier, and found himself outmatched.

This incident is illuminating because it so perfectly illustrates this first phase of Mormonism's public image. Pratt realized that he couldn't win against ridicule and defamation. He, too, succumbed to the tried and proven technique of mocking the man and evading the message. Time and again this was a winning strategy for the anti-Mormons. The lesson would not be lost on Pratt, as we will see later, but one might say that it was on his fellow Mormons.

II.

A second phase of the public relations battles opened up in the 1850s, with the advent of publicly acknowledged polygamy. Polygamy, like the charge of fraud, was a tremendously powerful distraction. Like Smith's alleged con-gimmicks, plural marriage was good for ribald humor. Cartoons continued the tradition of reducing Mormonism to a simple joke. From Brother Brigham in bed with a dozen Mrs. Youngs, to an eager polygamist who saves himself arduous courtships by making a collective proposal to the collective "Widow Gloverson," Mormonism was not to be taken too seriously. The image of the Mormon polygamist, like the image of the prophet-fraud, allowed a facile dismissal of the religion in toto.

But there was another, more malevolent side to popular depictions of polygamy, that took two forms.

First, once the laughter of initial depictions faded, a stream of literature linked plural marriage to various forms of coercion. The evil eye, mesmerism, hypnotism, the administration of drugs, and blatant violence, all became the modus operandi of fictive polygamists. The psychology was fairly transparent. Mormons could achieve conversion—like plural marriages-- only by circumventing the will. To put it in other terms, popular portrayals assured American readers that Mormonism had no power to persuade them. It could only take its victims by coercion—physical or mental. Thus the American public preserved a comforting sense of moral distance from this Viper on the Hearth, as a *Cosmopolitan* article denominated the religion. Once again, the end result was a lack of serious engagement with Mormon theology, with Mormon scripture, or with Mormon practices that extended beyond the marital system. Mormon resort to coercion was proof that they too recognized their message was not really worthy of thoughtful consideration by the public.

A second pattern was to further insulate the public from the fear of this “viper on the hearth” by depicting Mormons in ways that created a false sense of radical difference. They dressed different (like caped cavaliers or klansmen), they talked different (like Elizabethan gentlemen) and they looked different – usually like orientals. The illusion of their radical otherness created the comforting fiction that Mormons were different enough to be easily recognized and safely avoided. That they would never get close enough to the American hearth to contaminate or seduce.

Even science joined in the attempt to construct Mormons as distinctively, even racially, different.

Ironically, what strikes a modern audience as transparent and ridiculous attempts to create a new ethnicity-- WORKED. The Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups identifies Mormons as a distinct ethnicity.

One surprising fact about these early phases of Mormon representation is that Mormons have been complicit with their public portrayal. In the first and second phases, they largely played defense. Missionaries fanned out to counter what they perceived as misrepresentations of Joseph Smith. The Book of Mormon was not read on its own terms, or for its doctrinal content; instead it was largely subordinated to the task of serving as visible emblem of Joseph's prophetic calling. Little effort was made to plumb—or communicate—the content of the scripture itself. And in 1852, Brigham Young dispatched the foremost intellect of mid-century Mormonism, Orson Pratt, to defend and debate the practice of plural marriage. It was hard to move on to other topics, when the Mormons agreed to focus their intellectual energies on the topic of greatest prurient interest to other Americans.

But there were, ironically, two principal advantages which Mormons derived from all the negative publicity. First, the depiction of the Mormons into an alien people, with distinctive cultural mores and practices, played into Mormon aspirations to forge a community with a powerful sense of its own identity, a covenant nation, a people apart. Second, the narrative of perpetual

persecution has always served as an index of God's special favor. Victimhood and blessedness have always been close companions.

Phase III.

The decisive turning point in Mormonism's contemporary image occurred with such suddenness that we can trace it to the very week and year. It came about toward the end of 1893. In that year, the Mormons were persuaded to participate in the Great Columbian Exposition at the Chicago World's Fair. The result of the LDS church's participation was to set in stone a dual public consciousness regarding Mormonism.

The World's Fair was unprecedented in scope; it covered 600 acres, involved hundreds of specially constructed buildings and exhibition halls, and was attended by over 27 million people. A major incentive for Mormon participation was a much heralded choral competition organized by the Welsh: called an Eisteddfod. The Tabernacle choir was relatively young and unpracticed in choral competitions, but their director Evan Stephens was eventually persuaded that they had a real chance at a medal. They obtained First Presidency approval, raised funds, and made the trip to Chicago. It was a historic return to the East. For the first time in 50 years, a Mormon delegation—accompanied by their Mormon prophet-- walked among fellow Americans east of the Rockies. The Mormons were transitioning out of their

polygamous phase, but still a few years away from securing statehood. Public sentiment was still generally adverse to Mormons.

In Chicago, on Friday September 8, in front of packed crowds, the Tabernacle Choir dazzled the audience and the judges alike, to win the silver medal in the grand choral competition. The general consensus of Mormon and gentile was that they had actually earned the Gold. Overnight, they were the recipients of rapturous acclaim. Suddenly they became America's sweetheart. They were invited to provide the patriotic music for the placement of the Liberty Bell at the Chicago Exposition. Their farewell concert was standing room only, journalists raved to a receptive public about the singing sensation, and Concert promoters lobbied the choir to tour the east. Suddenly, Mormons were not just legitimate, they were popular.

And then, a funny thing happened on the way to the festivities. In conjunction with the grandiose Columbian Exposition, organizers had planned a World's Parliament of Religion for September 11-22, 1893, in order to "promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of diverse faiths. Over three thousand invitations had been sent worldwide, to bring together representatives of every world faith and Christian denomination in a momentous gesture of interfaith respect and dialogue. Many faiths were underrepresented—but only one group was deliberately and conspicuously left out altogether. And that was, not unpredictably, the Mormons. Learning of the

parliament, feisty Mormon intellectual and Seventy B. H. Roberts began to lobby church members and leaders to demand a seat at the table. Initially, they were reluctant. They were rather used to not being invited to the party and felt protest would be futile and undignified. Finally, mere weeks before the event, the First Presidency petitioned the Parliament chair, Charles Bonney. They then dispatched Roberts in person. Roberts was ready for a brawl, and he got one. He learned that the LDS proposal did not have committee support, but persistently appealed to basic principles of fair play. A bare two weeks before the Parliament convened, the organizers relented and granted the Mormons provisional representation, conditional on acceptance of a paper proposal. As the opening ceremonies approached, they gave permission. The parliament began on Monday the 11th of September. Taoists and Zoroastrians, Unitarians and Swedenborgians and more than a hundred others made presentations over ensuing days. Then, without warning, Roberts was informed that he could not present his paper on Mormonism. in the conference hall. He could, if he wished, do so in a small room off a side street away from the main event. Justifiably indignant, Roberts refused.

What I am most interested in from the perspective of a history of the Mormon media image, is the lesson Church members and officials gleaned from this decisive week in Chicago. One minute, Mormons won silver medals and were America's darling. The next minute, in the same venue, they were once again demeaned, marginalized, silenced. Reid Neilson, in his forthcoming

history of the Chicago Exposition, frames the lesson learned this way: “LDS administrators realized ... the importance (from a public relations perspective) of deemphasizing their church’s polarizing *spiritual* beliefs and practices and emphasizing their religion’s *cultural* contributions.” In other words, from the days of Chicago to the present, the church has achieved a kind of accommodation with the American public, that looks a little like this: They will let Mormons sing and dance, enjoy their terrific football, and say great things about Mormons as a cultural phenomenon. Mormons produce great business leaders, create good pop groups, win all the slots on “You think you can dance,” and keep the NFL supplied with a steady stream of quarterbacks. Oh, and they are pretty good in a disaster, too. As Charles Dickens said, “What the Mormons do seems to be excellent.” But in return for such qualified esteem, the public reserves the right to not have to take Mormonism seriously as a belief-system. As Dickens again said, “what they say is mostly nonsense.”

Phase IV; The Future

Mormons might have chosen another strategy. And still may. I wish to spend the balance of my remarks revisiting an instance of this alternative path, and ask what it might mean as a possible pattern for future directions.

This story goes back to the first anti-Mormon book I mentioned earlier—Mormonism Unveiled. Building on that book’s anti-Mormon

foundations, was the work of La Roy Sunderland, a revivalist preacher who had come to be deeply engaged in social reform movements.

In 1834 he presided at the organization of the first Methodist anti-slavery society, and the next year helped found, and became editor of, Zion's Watchman, organ of the movement. Sunderland would transition from preacher to abolitionist then on to mesmerism, spiritualism, and atheism before his career was over. But in 1838, enough of the Christian apologist remained for Mormonism to arouse his ire.^{viii}

Pratt's promotion of Mormonism had been widely disseminated, with his 1837 Voice of Warning quickly achieving a quasi-canonical status both within and outside the church. It was largely in reaction to Pratt's book that Sunderland published a weekly series of eight installments on Mormonism in the first months of 1838. The intensity of his denunciations must have struck a sensitive chord in a Mormon who had already suffered persecution and expulsion from his home as a result of anti-Mormon rhetoric that rapidly escalated to violence in the state of Missouri. Sunderland condemned Mormonism as "a delusion . . . manifestly and monstrously absurd," "nonsense and blasphemy." (You see, we are back into that first phase of Mormonism as fraud).^{ix}

Sunderland lists several of what he considers absurdities and evidences of fraud: the doctrine of "infallible inspiration," spiritual gifts accessible to all members, visitations by angels, a New Jerusalem situated in Missouri—and most outrageous of all, the Mormon belief that their leaders

were on a level with the New Testament apostles, and their teaching that humans could eventually be equal with Christ.

In his reply, Pratt broke sharply with Mormon precedent. Until Pratt, Mormon missionaries had done little to respond in print to criticisms from without. Those who did venture into print as Mormon apologists and expositors often emphasized commonalities with Christian tradition. Even Joseph Smith, in his articles of faith written in 1842, would neglect to mention most Mormon distinctives: pre-mortal existence, God's corporeality, human theosis, suggesting instead a trinitarianism and Christology shared with most Christians.

Pratt, on the other hand, gave Protestant writers a target painted in florescent colors. He might have had a deliberate strategy in mind. The focus on Mormonism as a fraud kept Mormons on the defensive. Alleging fraud and deception, or lascivious motives, detractors steered the debates away from serious theological engagement with Mormon beliefs.

The very title of Pratt's response to Sunderland demonstrated his determination to take control of the discussion. If anyone is to unveil Mormonism, he was clearly suggesting, we will do the unveiling.

Pratt injected doctrines into the discussion in ways impossible to ignore. He noted that Sunderland objected to Mormons "placing themselves on

a level with the Apostles.” He replied unapologetically, “this, we acknowledge, of course, for they were men of Adam’s fallen race, just like every body else by nature. . . . I know of nothing but equality in the Church of Christ.”^x But Pratt pushes his point much further. Sunderland indignantly quotes the Saints as believing that they “shall be filled with glory, and be equal with [Christ],” which is a paraphrase of DC 88:107. Similar phraseology is biblical (i.e., the “joint heirs” of Rom. 8:17), but Pratt ignores the innocuous readings of precedent, and pushes possible metaphor into a literal reference to theosis (human divinization). Indeed, Pratt proclaims, “they [will] have the same knowledge that God has, [and] they will have the same power. . . . Hence the propriety of calling them ‘Gods, even the sons of God’”^{xi} The latter language was from Mormon scripture (DC 76:25), but it had never been explicated publicly to mean literal deification. Modern Christians like Sunderland may call this blasphemy, yet Pratt will not retreat from what he celebrates as “this doctrine of *equality*.” Here we have a clear intimation of Mormonism’s most audacious doctrine, not taught publicly by Joseph Smith until six years later in the King Follett sermon.

Pratt took Mormon blasphemy a step further a few pages later, when he implicitly introduces an emphatically non-creedal conception of God, without Sunderland even having referred to the belief. Pratt mocks the Methodist Episcopal Church for believing (as did all who subscribed to the Westminster Confession), in “a God without body or parts.” Why worship a God, he wonders,

“who has no ears, mouth, nor eyes,” and then adds with humorous sarcasm, “that we do not love, serve, nor fear your God; and if he has been blasphemed, let him speak and plead his own cause: but this he cannot do, seeing he has no mouth. And how he ever revealed his choice of La Roy Sunderland, as a ‘Watchman’ for his Zion, I am at a loss to determine.” On the other hand, Mormons, he affirms without apology, “worship a God, who has both body and parts; who has eyes, mouth, and ears, and who speaks when he pleases.”^{xii} Pratt’s explicit pronouncements in his 1838 pamphlet were now forcing Mormonism’s most heterodox teachings into the public arena. Emphasizing radical difference, not commonality, was where Pratt excelled.

What Pratt accomplished with his pamphlet was to successfully force the conversation toward theology. He did this by leading with an unabashed presentation of those doctrines that most radically differentiated Mormonism from its competitors in the marketplace of ideas. That reversed the usual dynamic, by putting his audience in a position where they could not help but respond to the bold ideas he put forward. In analyzing the persistence of religion even in our enlightened age, a Marxist critic notes that, “the so called “new atheism” notwithstanding, “science, reason, liberalism and capitalism” all have had their chance—and they “just don’t deliver what is ultimately needed.” What IS needed, he continues, is something that can address not “local satisfactions,” but “nothing less than the nature and destiny of humanity itself, in relation to its transcendent source.”^{xiii}

Pratt understood that Joseph Smith posited a story of human origins and human destinies unlike anything else in the religious or secular world. Presenting that story without compromise was a risky undertaking. But it was better than the alternatives, which involved fighting a defensive war against, fraud, and against philandery, or being happy with success at football---and singing and dancing. Pratt's attitude seemed to be, if you will excuse the anachronism, Christendom was a ship beginning to sink. Mormons had reached the lifeboats. While some of his fellow believers were paddling furiously to return to the Titanic, Pratt wanted to strike out for the open sea. How Mormonism will steer its boat in the 21st century is not yet clear.

ⁱ Improvement Era 53.12 (December 1950).

ⁱⁱ Autobiography, 109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Autobiography, 211-12.

^{iv} Origen Bachelier and Robert Dale Owen, Discussion on the existence of God and the authenticity of the Bible (London: James Watson, 1853).

^v Charles Knowlton, Speech of Dr. Charles Knowlton, in support of Materialism, Against the Argument of Origen Bachelier, the Great Goliath, and Champion of the Cross (Philadelphia: 1838).

^{vi} Origen Bachelier, Mormonism Exposed, Internally and Externally (New York: 1838).

^{vii} The debate was described only long after the fact in "The Mormon Church," The Detroit Tribune, 1 February 1872. Excerpt cited in Rudolph Etzenhouser, From Palmyra to Independence (1894), 269-70. Article republished in full in Chicago Tribune XXV.180 (4 February 1872). Both cited in "Uncle Dale's Readings in Early Mormon History," <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IL/mischig.htm>

^{viii} J. R. Jacob, "La Roy Sunderland: Alienation of an Abolitionist," Journal of American Studies 6.1 (April 1972): 1-17.

^{ix} "Mormonism," Zion's Watchman (13 January 1838).

^x Pratt, Mormonism Unveiled, 9.

^{xi} Pratt, Mormonism Unveiled, 27.

^{xii} Pratt, Mormonism Unveiled, 31.

^{xiii} Stanley Fish paraphrasing Terry Eagleton in "God Talk," New York Times 3 May 2009.