On the Road with Richard Bushman

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Richard Bushman invited me to respond to his essay, given my long-standing interest in the Protestant encounter with world religions. With this very short essay of my own, I am pleased to offer a few words of appreciation and thoughts about further inquiries.

"Translation and the World Order" reveals Richard Bushman at his best. It is a work of deep research, focused argument, and elegant prose. It also is a work of courage. Without flinching, Bushman grapples with one of the most formidable challenges of our times: the peril and promise of religious pluralism.

Bushman builds his case for listening—not just hearing but truly listening—to other voices with great care. He shoulders four tasks: The first is to reflect on the process by which Smith translated "reformed Egyptian" script, which he did not know, from the gold plates into the Book of Mormon. The verb *translated* carries heavy freight. Smith did not scan the markings and then rummage through his memory for English equivalents. Rather, he used divinely equipped spectacles to translate them into English words through a gift of prophecy. The key question Bushman addresses is whether those words were restricted to the ancient culture in which the plates were putatively inscribed or whether they also included Christian doctrines and other data Smith had gleaned from contemporaneous culture.

The second task is to explore two standard theories, drawn from Friedrich Schleiermacher, that detail how the translation of religious texts typically has worked. The fundamental challenge is that translation is an art, not a science. Choices have to be made. So one theory holds that

the translator should tip the scale in favor of the author, not the reader. The other theory holds the reverse. Either way, Schleiermacher saw, as Bushman stated, "the translator as a pivotal cultural arbiter whose task was to introduce one culture to another." Though Bushman tries to give both sides a fair shake, in the end, he leans toward the second theory.

Bushman's third task is to evaluate the consecrated status of the Book of Mormon. Is it best understood as sacred history rendered in a transhistorical metal medium? Or is it best understood as a text that freely reflected the earmarks of the time and place in which Smith translated it? Over the years Latter-day Saints have differed on this question. Initially, they emphasized the Book of Mormon's transhistorical character. More recently, they have freely acknowledged the Book of Mormon's embeddedness in the surrounding culture.

The fourth task completes the argument. If it is true that Smith incorporated features of his own cultural environment—which now seems indisputable—into his translation of the Book of Mormon, is it not likely that the sacred records of other Christian traditions and even other religions also found their way into the Book of Mormon and other revered LDS texts?[1]

Bushman is careful not to say that other traditions' records should be viewed as equivalent to the Book of Mormon, let alone the KJV Bible. Or that the goal is to melt all religions into one—as the Harvard philosopher William Ernest Hocking had done in his landmark 1932 study, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years.* Or to deny that other traditions sometimes present grievous moral difficulties that simply cannot be negotiated away. The goal rather is to appreciate the beauty of the diversity itself. That appreciation should extend not only to the content of those texts but also to the hands that produced them. "Prophetic translation is an attitude as well as a gift," Bushman urges. People come first.

The author concludes by noting how instances of empathetic encounter with other religions have proliferated among Saints—"a people not noted . . . for ecumenism," he quips. Tectonic shifts in world culture

1. Elsewhere Bushman writes: "The [Book of Mormon] contains over 50,000 phrases of three or more words taken from the Bible. A word search comparing the Book of Mormon text with a wide variety of writings from the century previous to its publication turned up an inordinate number of parallels from the writings of the eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards." Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 179.

have loosened people from ancient moorings and made alliances among believers of all stripes more needed than ever. Today it is secularism and materialism, not rival sectarian particularities, that should command Saints' and other Christians' attention.

One of my teachers liked to say that the pages in academic articles and books should be weighed, not counted. By that criterion, Bushman's paper is very heavy indeed. Let me proceed with three responses. None is a criticism. All simply point to lines of further inquiry that the essay has inspired.

My first response centers on one of Bushman's key arguments. He writes, "Of all the prophetic figures of his time—Nat Turner, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ellen White, Sojourner Truth, and so forth—only Smith presented his message as a translation." I suggest that if we view Smith not only as a translator but also as the direct receiver of holy words from outside ordinary history, his uniqueness fades into a wider and longer role. He becomes less an anomaly and more a representative figure. How so?

Consider Bushman's examples. Two of the four figures he names—Nat Turner and Ellen White—also saw themselves as instruments of revealed truth, whose words were not subject to mundane validation. Granted, the other two—Ralph Waldo Emerson and Sojourner Truth—imaged themselves less dramatically as something like clear-channel transmitters of divinely inspired insight into reality. But again, their words were not subject to mundane validation.

Let's go on. William Miller, the indirect founder of Seventh-day Adventism, claimed a kind of preternatural discernment of the numerical correspondences between the Old and New Testaments. Mary Baker Eddy, the direct founder of Christian Science, also claimed a kind of preternatural discernment, in her case of hidden truths about the priority Mind in Scripture. The key proponents of the New Theology of the mid- and late nineteenth century, such as the Unitarian pulpit prince William Ellery Channing and celebrity pastor Horace Bushnell, did not claim prophetic powers, but they most definitely did see themselves as avatars of entirely new and indisputably truthful ways of thinking about God, humans, and history.

One of the most explicit analogues for Smith's self-image as translator resided in the early years of Pentecostalism, roughly 1890 to 1920. This movement is worth considering because its distinctive claims and practices rested on supernatural corroboration, very much like Smith's. Moreover, Pentecostalism's spectacular growth, from a dozen or so adherents in the beginning to a half-billion around the world

today, suggests that its way of validating itself reflected very widespread assumptions.

Pentecostals held that four forms of speech were sacred when they were guided by the Holy Spirit: speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues into a vernacular language, xenolalia (the ability to speak a foreign language one has never studied), and prophetic utterances, which might be about past, present, or future events. For economy, let me focus on the first and third, speaking in tongues and xenolalia, which were the hallmarks of the tradition.

The gift of tongues resembled—not replicated but resembled—Smith's experience in a number of ways. Tongues was sacred because it echoed the Holy Spirit's very own voice. The Spirit used the believer's tongue and vocal cords to say exactly what the Spirit wanted to say. Indeed, skeptics who called tongues nonsense-speech teetered on the edge of the unpardonable sin.

The gift of xenolalia, empowered by the Holy Spirit, prompted individuals to believe that they could journey to other parts of the world and preach the gospel to the "heathen" in the heathen's own language, even though they did not know a word of that language. There is no independent documentation of successful instances of xenolalic tongues. Even so, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of zealots believed that they could do it and traveled to distant parts of the world, at great expense and often danger. Except for stray scraps of paper, Pentecostals produced no sacred texts, as Mormons did. But divine manipulation of the tongue stood at the heart of everything.

I mention these individuals and especially Pentecostals in order to suggest that Latter-day Saints grappling with prophetic speech was part of a larger pattern. How did they—and how do we as sympathetic observers—make sense of the quest for direct, unmediated communication with the holy? Was translation from plates to page essentially the same as translation from the mind of God into English words tripping off the tongue? Or into an unlearned foreign language? And however we make sense of it, where, if anywhere, did God's hand fit in that process? What Bushman writes elsewhere about the Book of Mormon seems to apply more broadly: "How the words came to flow from Joseph Smith's mouth into the ears of the scribes and then on to paper remains unresolved."[2]

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2. Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates,* 181.

In sum, Smith's role as a translator was unique in its own way but also representative. This makes him more, not less, important in the grand sweep of American religious history. I propose that we best understand him as a compelling example of how many—eventually millions—of Christians sought to hear the voice of God: *directly,* without the mediation of a pastor or a priest—or a vernacular language. One South African Pentecostal leader captured that aspiration in four words. "God has no grandchildren."[3]

These thoughts bring me to my second line of response. In brief, I strongly suspect that Bushman did not research and write this paper out of idle academic interest. Rather, his concluding pages make clear that this work carries a powerful homiletic punch. He is turning to history to see how the disparate cultures of the world, especially those defined by a positive religious tradition, might find a way to get along.

And with good reason. From start to finish, America's churches have marched with blood on their hands. Today's culture wars, fueled by religion, commandeer the front page of every newspaper. And they are nothing new. The bitterness surrounding the elections of 1800, 1896, and 1960 are evidence enough of that. But culture wars pale in the face of real wars with real corpses to show for them. The American Civil War, with seven hundred thousand dead by arms and another three hundred thousand by disease and hunger, was stirred to new heights of killing frenzy by religious leaders on both sides.

And then there was religion's role in legitimating the displacement of the Native Americans, the repression of racial minorities, and the occlusion of women. The German novelist Herman Hesse captured the tragedy of colliding cultures, again fueled by religion, with grim precision in 1927: "Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap. . . . [There] are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself."[4]

I confess that I am not wholly persuaded that texts drawn from other traditions can offer very much in the way of a pacifying message unless—and this a big unless—Christians invest a great deal of agonizing

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3. David J. DuPlesis, "The Manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the Mission of the Church," quoted in E. G. Homrighausen and others, "Princetoniana," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 53, no. 3 (January 1960): 65.

4. Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf* (1927), rev. translation (New York: Henry Holt, 1963; Picador/eBook edition, 2012), 22.

thought in the process. Empathy is not sympathy, and appreciation is not embrace. But studied disinterest from afar usually misses the pulse of the story too. "The eyes of the heart" are elusive but never irrelevant.[5]

So, how do we separate the toothless pleasantries of interfaith dialogue from the real thing? Enter Smith, the Book of Mormon, and other inspired texts that presented themselves not as inerrant textbooks in history and science but rather as texts as to be believed. "Beyond seeking to represent an ancient people to modern readers," Bushman writes, "the book asked those readers to adopt it as their own—to believe it to be scripture." And so it was that Smith's translated words were measured not only by their supernatural origin but also by their power to bring women and men to a living faith.

Bushman makes this point by citing, with evident approval, the thinking of the ancient prophet Nephi: "[He] requires that we think globally, not locally. He saw the world much as we do today, as a patchwork of cultures, each with its own values, histories, and sacred books." Bushman acknowledges that Nephi's hope for the melding of sacred texts "does not comport with our experience." Dissonance has prevailed. Even so, "for now," Bushman writes, "tokens of mutual understanding and appreciation are enough. We enjoy small encounters . . . and happily place them on a spectrum anchored at the far end by prophetic translation. Is this what Nephi hoped for when he spoke of records running together?"

I come finally to my third line of response. I once heard a preacher say that the most welcome words in any sermon are "in conclusion." Thus instructed, I will keep it short.

Bushman wraps up this essay by invoking the legacy of Krister Stendahl, a Swedish Lutheran theologian, bishop, renowned New Testament scholar, and dean of Harvard Divinity School in the 1960s and 1970s. I was a student at HDS during Stendahl's tenure. I remember him as a man of Lincolnesque stature—tall, lean, slightly stooped—with a bit of an accent, and possessed of awesome erudition softened by a gentle wit and easy smile. He also was blessed with a pastor's heart.

With his usual eagle eye for the apt quotation from the right person, Bushman cites Stendahl's response to the controversial dedication of a Latter-day Saint temple in Sweden. The good bishop "said that he felt a 'holy envy' for what the temple represented." Holy envy. Those two

5. Adapted from Ephesians 1:18.

words, which have been widely quoted, meant that Christians should be willing to appreciate features in other religious traditions that they would like to see in their own.

"Translation and the World Order" tells me that holy envy is an outlook earnest Christians everywhere should seek to cultivate. To be sure, maybe holy envy can't be cultivated at all. Maybe we feel it or we don't. But Smith's work as translator suggests otherwise. Foundational truths about God, humans, and the world not only transcend sectarian particularities but also beg to be shared. And since they apply to everyone, maybe we do not have to live in religious silos after all.

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