

Is “Suspensive” Historiography the Only Legitimate Kind?

Christopher C. Smith*

I am a PhD student at Claremont Graduate University, doing History of Religions in North America, with a particular focus on Mormon Studies. I also happen not to be a Mormon. I have never been a Mormon. My interest in Mormonism is academic, and I’m especially interested in Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith is a fascinating puzzle to me, and I have struggled to make sense of who he was and what motivated him to do the things he did.

That of course puts me in a difficult position, because here at Claremont I am surrounded by believing Mormons, and so I’m constantly aware of the risk that the way I make sense of Joseph Smith and the Mormon movement may be offensive to some of my friends and colleagues here.

As a result, I’ve thought a lot about this question of whether it’s legitimate for me as a scholar and a historian to talk about LDS truth claims. Is it legitimate for me to express views about Joseph Smith that fly in the face of what Mormons believe? Will this be perceived as an attack? Will I be considered biased and anti-Mormon by my colleagues?

My Mormon colleagues here at CGU face a similar problem, but from the opposite direction. If they speak as faithful Mormons from a position of belief in the Church, they run the risk of alienating non-Mormons, of being labeled biased apologists, and of being seen as non-academic and perhaps even unemployable by secular universities.

We often try to alleviate these anxieties by doing what’s called “suspensive historiography”. Suspensive historiography is when we “suspend” or “bracket” faith questions and truth claims in our scholarship, and try to focus on neutral issues that everyone can agree on. In fact, many have argued that this is the one, true way to do religious history.

In this paper, I’d like to argue that suspensive historiography is *not* the only legitimate kind. Granted, I’m not saying that we *always* have to talk about truth claims, or even that they should be a major focus of our scholarship. Clearly there are other important issues we can talk about that don’t involve truth claims. But, should we *sometimes* be willing to talk about truth claims? I absolutely think we should.

* The author has a BA from Fresno Pacific University in Biblical Studies, an MA from Wheaton College in History of Christianity, and is pursuing a PhD from Claremont Graduate University in Religions in North America.

So, I'd like to begin by discussing the *wrong* reasons to do suspensive historiography, then move on to some *better* reasons to do suspensive historiography, and then finally close with some reasons why I think sometimes it's better not to take a suspensive approach at all.

First, I'll start with four *bad* arguments for why we should bracket truth claims in our historical scholarship.

1. The first is the Empirical Argument, which says that religious belief is theological, not empirical. Since historians can only talk about empirical claims, truth claims fall outside our job description. There are two big problems with this argument.
 - The first problem is that many truth claims *do* have an empirical component, and this is especially true of Mormonism. On *Mormon Scholars Testify*, Richard Bushman says the following: "I admire the empiricism of Mormon belief. By that I mean that it is open to empirical testing, using concrete evidence. . . . Hundreds of books and articles have been written arguing one way or the other. Scores of scholars labor away on the question. The issue is hotly debated. Tons of evidence are brought to bear. I like the willingness of Mormon scholars to pursue the question. . . . They are actively putting their faith on the line. They take the risk of failing. I admire their courage, and furthermore their arguments must be taken seriously."¹ I agree with Richard that the empiricism of Mormon belief is admirable. I also agree and that the arguments of Mormon apologists must be taken seriously, and in fact I've spent quite a bit of my own time interacting with them online. I actually think my activities in this regard are *flattering* to the Church. If I felt the arguments for the truth of the Church weren't even worth my time, *that* would be offensive. But when those arguments are persuasive enough to force someone like me to defend my decision *not* to be a believer, that's something to be *proud* of, not to get offended about.
 - The second problem with the empirical argument is that it's not actually possible for a historian to limit him/herself only to "empirical" claims. The moment one moves from the evidence to a claim *about* the evidence—which is in the historian's job description—one leaves the empirical realm behind and moves into a realm of subjective speech that will *necessarily* be colored by one's perspectives, ideologies, and beliefs. It's simply not possible to do valueless interpretation. This leads me to the second bad argument for suspensive historiography, which is that
2. Historians should just report the facts, and leave interpretation up to the reader.
 - Like the first argument, this one is very problematic. If we actually did this, it would make for a pretty boring history book: a list of names and dates, with no narrative and no attempt to make sense of it all. And that's assuming it can even be done. We don't always actually know what the facts are, or which facts are important. We're engaged in subjective interpretation the moment we start making decisions about such things.

¹ Richard Lyman Bushman, "Reasons," available from <http://mormonscholarstestify.org/396/richard-lyman-bushman> [accessed April 23, 2010].

- But leave the philosophical problems aside for a moment, and think about this: are people forced to agree with you about something just because you wrote it in your book? No, obviously not. In fact, if what you really want is for readers to draw their own conclusions, then the best strategy is probably to make as many controversial claims as you possibly can. If you tell someone a fact, you're not even going to *get their attention* long enough for them to draw conclusions about it. But if you give a controversial interpretation of a fact, then now you've attached significance to that fact and given people a *motivation* to draw contrary conclusions.
3. The third bad argument for suspensive historiography is that historians should tell stories the way that the historical actors themselves understood them. There are a couple problems with this.
 - First of all, our access to the minds of historical actors isn't any more direct than our access to the empirical historical facts. We get into their heads only by engaging in a process of study, inference, and interpretation, and those decisions may be strongly influenced by our perspectives on LDS truth claims. A believing historian will probably conclude that Joseph Smith understood himself to really be a prophet doing God's will. A non-believing historian might conclude that Joseph was deliberately manipulating people in order to have sex with them and get their money. Both these historians are telling Joseph's story the way they believe he himself understood it, but they're not *suspending* anything. Their beliefs about Mormon truth claims are still totally coloring their narratives.
 - And anyway, the claim that this is the best way to do history is pretty questionable from the get-go. Presumably, the whole reason we're studying people like Joseph Smith in the first place is because they have some meaning or significance for *us*. We want to know what their relevance is for us in the twenty-first century, not just how they understood themselves in the times in which they lived.
 4. The fourth bad argument is the Pragmatic Argument, which says that what's important about religion is not whether it's true, but how it *functions*.
 - I will say that of the four bad arguments, this is the one I most sympathize with. Pragmatic, phenomenological questions about the functioning of religion are definitely important and worthy of attention.
 - But obviously a lot of people would disagree that these are the *only* important questions. In fact, the effective functioning of a religion usually lies precisely in its claim to truth. The question of function also still leaves us to ask questions like, "Can people really get healed by priesthood blessings? Does prayer really get results?" These are very pragmatic questions, even though they have serious implications for the truth claims of the Church. So, a full investigation of a religion's function really has to also grapple with its truth.

So, those are the four *bad* arguments. In my opinion, these arguments are really just excuses. They serve as a cover for the *real* reasons we don't want to talk about truth claims. So if you should suddenly feel the urge to be honest with your readers next time you're writing the methodology section for your

magnum opus in Mormon history, here are some reasons you might give for doing suspensive historiography:

1. Sheer market forces dictate we should appeal to the widest possible audience, which means it's not really good business practice to alienate large portions of your customer base.
2. Political correctness dictates that we shouldn't offend people. When we do offend people, we run the risk of compromising our academic respectability in the eyes of potential employers.
3. Even though most of us in this room know better than to believe in objectivity, there's no guarantee that publishers or employers will be equally enlightened. So we have an economic incentive to try to appear as objective as possible.

All of these are perfectly legitimate reasons to do suspensive historiography. Granted, putting them in the methodology section of your next book may expose you as a self-interested careerist with mouths to feed at home. But I can't blame anyone who finds these reasons compelling. There are three more reasons that are pretty good as well:

1. First, those of us who are of a compassionate nature also tend not to want to inflict doubt and uncertainty on other people, because we know from personal experience how unsettling these feelings can be.
2. Second, there's a fear that these truth questions are just too divisive, and we may end up with a discipline that's basically bifurcated between believers and non-believers. I don't think it *has* to be this way, but some people are very sensitive to criticism, and other people are very tactless when dealing with sensitive issues. So yes, it is very possible that opening the floodgates on these issues could lead to some ruptures in the discipline. It has happened before, and it could happen again.
3. Third, there's the argument from personal interest. Some people just don't find religious truth-claims interesting or compelling enough to argue about.

Again, these reasons are perfectly legitimate and understandable, and I don't blame those who find them compelling. But notice that these aren't normative, philosophical reasons so much as personal, practical ones. Unlike the four bad arguments I critiqued at the beginning of my paper, these don't suggest that suspensive historiography is the only legitimate kind, and they don't create the false appearance of neutrality or objectivity. If we *do* choose to do suspensive historiography, in my opinion we'd do well to stop masking our motives behind pseudo-philosophical justifications, and start just being honest about the anxieties, preferences, and market forces that are really motivating us.

And now, finally, I'd like to suggest a few reasons to give up on suspensive historiography altogether.

1. Audiences are actually *interested* in truth claims. Even hostile audiences will often read a book that does a good job of arguing some controversial point. Frankly, suspensive historiography is a little bit elitist. It's history for historians, not for the average person. The average person is interested in religious history precisely *because* of truth claims, and isn't going to read a book or article that doesn't have some kind of implication for matters of ultimate concern.

2. Being honest and discussing our religious views in a straightforward way may actually help build bridges between people with different views. When we're very clear about our views and our reasons for them, differences become more understandable, more acceptable, and less threatening.
3. If we bracket truth claims, we're actually doing a disservice to the religion we're studying. It's tremendously patronizing; we're basically saying, "your religion is just too fragile to hold up under serious examination, so we're going to treat you as delicately as possible." I really liked something Richard Bushman said in class one day. He said, "We shouldn't underestimate the strength of these traditions." I absolutely agree with Richard about that. A little healthy criticism actually helps religious traditions renew and innovate in some very fruitful ways.
4. The truth or falsity of religion is not a trivial matter, no matter which side of the fence you're standing on. Besides eternal salvation, there are important social, political, and moral issues at stake. If we minimize the importance of religious truth claims, we're also minimizing the importance of the religious community and again doing a disservice to that community.

So, with all of these reasons in mind, I personally am not a believer in suspensive historiography. Obviously I think we need to be respectful, fair, and responsible in the way we deal with sensitive issues, but I don't think we should avoid them altogether. Let's not "bracket" this important part of the historical conversation.