

“I Consider the Proper Authority Rests Among the Mormons”: Oran Brownson to Orestes Brownson on Oran’s Conversion to Mormonism

Matthew J. Grow

In 1846, Orestes A. Brownson, the famous Transcendentalist turned Catholic, received a letter from his older brother Oran announcing Oran’s conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Why had the brothers become fellow converts to the two most despised religions of nineteenth-century America? Oran found foreshadowing for their religious iconoclasm in a dream Orestes had once shared with him in which the two (along with a third brother) “were traveling a road together” before departing on divergent spiritual paths. The Brownson brothers departed from mainstream American Christianity because they believed that Catholicism and Mormonism “possessed proper authority,” an attractive alternative to the chaos they perceived in denominational Protestantism. The outlines of Oran’s sojourn in Mormonism can be discerned through two letters Oran sent Orestes, both of which are housed at the Archives of the University of Notre Dame and reproduced below. This correspondence, though fairly brief and filled with news of economic woes and family matters, remains significant in part because it provides suggestive anecdotal evidence of the similarity in the appeals of Catholicism and Mormonism. In addition, Oran’s sojourn in Mormonism probably shaped his influential brother’s writings on the Latter-day Saints.

The intense social tumult of the early nineteenth century established the context for the eventual conversions of the Brownson brothers. Rapid change characterized the era, particularly geographic and social mobility, political democratization, and economic transformations, including the

MATTHEW J. GROW is a PhD student in American history at the University of Notre Dame. He has published articles in *American Nineteenth-Century History*, the *Journal of Mormon History*, and *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*.

dawning of industrialization and the expansion of the market economy.¹ In the religious realm, the Second Great Awakening encouraged the rise of populist religious leaders, the proliferation of new religious movements, and a spirit of denominational competition and democratization. These diverse changes contributed to widespread attacks on all types of authority, an assault on the power of the traditional economic, political, and religious elite.² Moreover, this cultural celebration of democracy justified the widespread fear and criticism of groups—such as the Masons, Catholics, and Mormons—perceived as authoritative, hierarchical, and secretive.³ (Significantly, Oran warned Orestes to ignore anti-Mormon literature and to get his “information from friends and not Enemies.”)

The repudiation of authority, however, did not resonate with all Americans. Dismayed by the diversity and disunity of the contemporary religious scene, many Americans sought for the reassurance of authoritative truth claims and hierarchical religious structures. Certainly, both Mormonism and Catholicism attracted converts for a variety of reasons. Mormonism’s radical democratic strains—such as the inclusion of all worthy males into the governing priesthood, its communitarian economic ideals, and its empowering call for all converts to join in the exalted task of kingdom-building—were also foundational to its appeal. The Brownson brothers, however, both pinpointed religious authority as crucial to their respective conversions. Oran learned that Orestes converted to Catholicism “because no other church possessed proper authority.” Likewise, Oran told his brother, “I have changed my opinions for the same reason because I consider the proper authority rests among the Mormons.” Like the Brownson brothers, other converts to both Mormonism and Catholicism regularly cited claims to divine authority as the critical factor in their conversions.⁴

The Brownsons also came from the same New England cultural milieu as most early Mormons. Their parents, Sylvester Augustus Brownson and Relief Metcalf, were transplanted Yankees who left their native Connecticut for Stockbridge, Vermont, in the years following the American Revolution; like thousands of other Yankee migrants, the Brownsons later continued on to New York, settling at Ballston Spa in 1817. Sylvester and Relief Brownson were the parents of five children: Daniel, Oran, Thorina, and a pair of twins, Orestes and Daphne Augusta. Sylvester died shortly after the birth of the twins in 1803; Relief, burdened by the economic challenge of raising a young family, gave Orestes and Daphne in 1809 to families in nearby Royalton to raise for a number of years. Besides Orestes, the Brownson siblings rarely appear in the historical record. Daniel, the oldest son, “became distinguished as quite an orator” and attained some social prominence, being known by the title of “Squire.” As the following letters indi-

cate, Oran cast his lot in Ohio, where he raised a large family and made a living as a farmer. Thorina apparently remained single and continued to reside with her mother at Ballston Spa. Daphne married and spent her adult life in Michigan; only she maintained a prolonged, if intermittent, correspondence with Orestes, often imploring her twin brother for financial assistance.⁵

Unlike his siblings, Orestes Brownson rose to national, and indeed international, prominence. His piercing intellect and writing prowess fueled his meteoric rise from rural Vermont to the elite circles of Transcendentalist Boston by the 1830s. Brownson's early career was marked by peripatetic seeking, both in religion and in politics; his friend Theodore Parker once wrote that he was unaware of Brownson's religious opinions, having "not heard from him for eight days."⁶ Raised a Congregationalist, Brownson passed through Presbyterianism, became successively a preacher of Universalism and Unitarianism, and spent most of the 1830s immersed in Transcendentalism and the Jacksonian Democratic Party. He achieved his fame chiefly through his writing, particularly as editor of the *Boston Quarterly Review* (1838–1842) and *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1844–1864, 1873–1875). In 1844, Brownson took the crucial step of conversion to Catholicism and turned his ample intellectual and literary powers to apologetics for the final thirty years of his life. Brownson carried his taste for controversy into Catholicism, becoming America's preeminent Catholic liberal by the 1850s, a development bemoaned by his more conservative coreligionists both at home and at Rome.⁷

At the time he learned of Oran's conversion to the Latter-day Saints, Orestes was already acquainted with Mormonism. Indeed, the Brownsons resided near the Joseph Smith family in Vermont and arrived in New York a year after the Smiths. Like Joseph Smith, Orestes spent several years of his youth in Royalton, Vermont. He later wrote a fictionalized autobiography, the *Spirit-Rapper* (much of which was a thinly veiled narrative of his own life), in which his narrator claimed to have known Joseph Smith: "I knew his family, and even him also, in my boyhood, before he became a prophet." Like many of the Smiths' former neighbors, Orestes linked the family to the folk culture of magic: "He was one of those persons in whose hand the divining-rod will operate, and he and others of his family spent much time in searching with the rod for watercourses, minerals, and hidden treasures."

Besides this possible boyhood connection with the Smith family, Orestes also had other opportunities to explore Mormonism. Brownson's narrator in the *Spirit-Rapper* stated that while living in New York, "For a considerable time the Mormon prophets and elders were in the habit of visiting my house. They hoped to make a convert, and they spoke to me with the

utmost frankness.”⁸ Lord Acton, a prominent English Catholic and nobleman, confirmed Brownson’s interaction with early Mormons following a meeting with him in 1853, “When I asked him about the Mormons, he told me that they had once hoped to make a Mormon of him and let him learn all the secrets and the true story.”⁹ In a published article, Brownson also reported personal conversations with Mormon elders, including two unnamed apostles.¹⁰ In addition, his close friend and fellow Catholic convert Isaac Hecker investigated Mormonism and counted Parley P. Pratt as a friend during the late 1830s and early 1840s.¹¹

Orestes demonstrated his interest in Mormonism by addressing the subject throughout his prolific writing career.¹² In the *Spirit-Rapper*, published in 1854, Brownson associated Mormonism with spiritualism and mesmerism, movements rapidly gaining adherents in America of the 1850s. Referring to Smith’s use of a divining rod, he stated that “every mesmerizer would at once have recognized him as an impressible subject.” Brownson ridiculed the Spaulding theory of the origins of the Book of Mormon; he likewise denied that Smith without assistance could have authored the book. Brownson accurately described the translation process as having occurred by the use of a seer stone placed in a hat, a description he had learned from “one of Joe’s own elders, on the authority of the person who, as Joe’s amanuensis, wrote it.” Having deemed Smith incapable of producing the Book of Mormon on his own, Brownson concluded that “there was a superhuman power employed in founding the Mormon church,” asserting that direct satanic intervention explained both the Book of Mormon and Mormon miracles. In short, “Mormonism is literally the Synagogue of Satan.”¹³

Brownson also addressed Mormonism in the context of questions of religious freedom. In 1857, during the national furor over the Utah War, he asserted that “Mormon reason and conscience are incompatible with the maintenance of the American state.” Nevertheless, Brownson echoed other liberals, such as John Stuart Mill, by defending Mormon religious liberty as the most extreme example of the limits of freedom of religion.¹⁴ A decade later, Brownson clarified that the government could force the Saints to “conform to the marriage law as recognized by the whole civilized world, alike in the interests of religion and of civilization. But beyond this the state cannot go, at least with us.”¹⁵ Brownson’s rhetoric about Mormonism somewhat mellowed in his later years. In 1875, he recounted that a Mormon elder had once healed a close relative (possibly Oran?); rather than attribute the apparent miracle to diabolical power, Brownson simply wrote that lack of understanding of “moral or non-physical causes” explained the event.¹⁶

Oran’s sojourn in Mormonism turned out to be as fleeting as had Orestes’s passages through Congregationalism, Presbyterianism,

Universalism, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism. Indeed, while Orestes quickly became the most prominent American-born Catholic, Oran seems not to have left any discernable mark on Mormonism. The second, undated letter below reports Oran's conversion to Catholicism. George Parsons Lathrop—a prominent author, son-in-law of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and convert to Catholicism—described Oran's conversion in a biographical article on Orestes written in 1896. In 1851, Oran, then a resident of Dublin, Ohio, visited his brother and “entered into a long argumentation with him on religion.” Using information provided by Orestes's son, Lathrop portrayed the encounter: “Orrin would put a question, which Orestes would answer with uncompromising, unsparing force. Then Orrin, without saying a word, would dart out of the house and walk a long time in the hot sunshine; after which he would return and put another question. The same process was then repeated; Orrin still making no rejoinder. When this odd dialogue ended, there was no summing up: Orrin went away in silence.”

Nine years later, even though the brothers had not met further, Oran informed Orestes of Oran's conversion to the Catholic Church. Lathrop concluded metaphorically that “from Dublin, Ohio, he had gone to Dublin, Ireland.” Oran's conversion even merited a notice in the international Catholic press, appearing in the Paris *Univers*. Even with his misspelling of Oran's name and highly favorable treatment of Orestes, Lathrop's description of Oran's conversion seems credible, particularly given his reliance on Orestes's son.¹⁷ In addition, Oran's second letter provides confirmation for several of Lathrop's details, including Orestes's efforts to convert his brother, Oran's visit at Orestes's home, and Oran's eventual conversion to Catholicism.

Dublin Ap'l 5th 1846¹⁸

Dear Brother

Yours dated March 24th was duly rec'd in which you wish me to inform you respecting my troubles. You are aware that I was laboring under pecuniary embarrassments when I left Ballston.¹⁹ When I arrived here or rather in about one year after my arrival I leased a tract of land for six years the use of which I was to have for clearing and fencing the same The land being covered with a heavy growth of timber you may naturally suppose I have had to labor hard I however went to work and before my lease expired had cleared and fenced the same according to contract I have leased another tract adjoining my former lease which I have cleared and fenced which lease has yet four years to run As you wish me to be particular I will inform you that I have been able besides supporting myself and family comfortably, to get a pair of Horses, a waggon, and what farming utensils are necessary to carry on my farming operations without involving myself to any great amount In order that you may have a proper understanding of this matter I will inform you that about one year and a half since an old neighbor and acquaintance of mine came here with his family to reside I entertained them as well as I know how and was of some ser-

vice to him in obtaining a situation where he could comfortably provide for himself and family The manner in which he has repaid me for my kindness to himself and family I will briefly relate The individual refered to having by rather an unwise management of his business involved himself to an amount greater than he could easily pay took it upon himself to send back and get an old claim against me amounting to about 45 dollars principal and Interest This claim he obtained for little or nothing and has transfered it over to one of his creditors in part pay for an obligation he held against him The man who now holds the claim tells me he will give me till the 1st day of may to make out the money and no longer if not paid at the time he will get out an execution and levy on my property I have in as brief and concise a manner as possible given you a history of my troubles and the cause of them I shall be under the necessity of sacrificing my property or borrowing the money which I fear will be a hard matter As in all new countries capital is verry scarce here²⁰ You wish to know something about my family &c. My health is not verry good although much better than it was last winter when I was unable to do any labor my wife is in rather poor health but able to attend to domestic affairs We have had nine children—Louisa is married and lives in Missouri, Mary is also married and has two children she lives in this neighborhood Charlotte was recently married and lives in this vicinity The two boys and Helen and Catharine (the twins) are at home We have had two children since we have been in Ohio Orestes and Eveline. Orestes died a year ago last August age two years and fifteen days Eveline is about a year and a half old With regard to our different religious opinions or while writing of them puts me in mind of a dream which you once related to me the sum and substance of which was as follows that we three were traveling a road together you first left the road then myself and it remains to be seen whether Daniel²¹ will turn out of the road (change his opinion) If he should would not your dream be fulfilled You inform me you and family are Catholics The reason assigned I understand to be because no other church possessed proper authority I have changed my opinions for the same reason because I consider the proper authority rests among the Mormons I have not time nor room at present to give you my views on religious matters You state you are somewhat acquainted with the Mormons Let me caution you to get your information from friends and not Enemies I would esteem it as a favor if you would send me your Quarterly Review²² All letters and communications will find me if directed to Dublin Franklin County Ohio With my respects to yourself and family I remain your affectionate Brother

O A Brownson

Oran Brownson

P.S. dont forget to write whenever it will suit your convenience

O. Brownson

I had forgotten to state that I have no intention of removing from my present situation²³

Narick Ohio January the 14²⁴

Dear Brother and Sister you must forgive me for not writing to you before I have been vary busy when I came home I found all well and my health better I hope you are all well I came by the way of our sister Daphna and found them all well and Wallice came home with me I received a letter from her a few days since they all well and full of trouble they Live in Michigan²⁵ we are well at present I have read the books you you gave me and they have mad Catholic of me I wish you to write me and let me know you and how the boys do in France and when you write to them give my Love to them I wish you to send your review to me and now Dear Brother

and Sister I Cannot fell too gratfull for your kindness to me while at your house for
 wihc may the Lord bless you all all my family send thear Love to all
 give my respect to all
 Oran

Notes

1. Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991). For the application of this argument to the rise of Mormonism, see Wood, "Evangelical American and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61 (1980): 359–86.

2. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

3. David Brion Davis first made this argument in a classic article, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (September 1960): 205–24. For other comparisons of anti-Catholicism and anti-Mormonism, see Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1832–1914* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 75–86; and Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 11, 33, 70, 206. For the best recent treatments of anti-Catholicism and anti-Mormonism, respectively, see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); and Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

4. For the Mormon case, see Mario De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (spring 1966): 68–88; and the exchange between Richard L. Bushman, William B. Cletsch, and De Pillis in "The Quest for Authority," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 2 (summer 1966): 82–97. Marvin Hill has similarly argued that early Mormons sought a refuge from the chaotic pluralism of Jacksonian America; see *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989). For Catholic converts, see Christine M. Bochen, *The Journey to Rome: Conversion Literature by Nineteenth-Century American Catholics* (New York: Garland, 1988), 377, 383; and Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

5. For information on the Brownson family, see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Orestes Brownson: A Pilgrim's Progress* (Boston, 1939; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1963), 1–7, 186–87; and Thomas R. Ryan, *Orestes A. Brownson: A Definitive Biography* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1976), 15–25, 302–3.

6. Theodore Parker to Caroline Healey, 4 April 1843, in John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, Minister of the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society, Boston*, vol. 1 (New York, 1864), 353, cited in McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 43.

7. The scholarly literature on Brownson is voluminous. See Patrick Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: A Bibliography, 1826–1876* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), for an introduction. Full-length biographies include Schlesinger, *Orestes Brownson*; Theodore Maynard, *Orestes Brownson: Yankee, Radical, Catholic* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), and Ryan, *Orestes A. Brownson*. Brownson's son Henry brought together twenty volumes of his writings in *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson* (Detroit: T. Nourse,

1882–1887). McGreevy places Brownson in his context in American and international Catholicism; see *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 43–90. For information on his conversion to Catholicism, see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 337–49.

8. Brownson, *The Spirit-Rapper: An Autobiography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 164–66. For the Smith family's involvement in folk magic, see D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

9. Josef L. Altholz and Victor Conzemius, "Acton and Brownson: A Letter from America," *Catholic Historical Review* 49, no. 4 (January 1964): 525.

10. Brownson, "Christianity and the Church Identical," in *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (July 1857), and reproduced in *Works*, 12:75–76.

11. John Farina, ed., *Isaac T. Hecker: The Diary, Romantic Religion in Ante-bellum America* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 158, 194; and Farina, *An American Experience of God: The Spirituality of Isaac Hecker* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 33–38.

12. For a short discussion of Brownson's anti-Mormonism, see Massimo Introvigne, "Old Wine in New Bottles: The Story behind Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 3 (1995–96): 48–50. For a broader comparison of Catholic/Mormon perceptions, see my "The Whore of Babylon and the Abomination of Abominations: Nineteenth-century Catholic and Mormon Mutual Perceptions and Religious Identity," forthcoming in *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*.

13. Brownson, *Spirit-Rapper*, 164–67.

14. Brownson, "Christianity and the Church Identical," 75–76. For Mill's defense of Mormon religious freedom, see *On Liberty and other Writings*, edited by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 91–92.

15. Brownson, "Union of Church and State," *Catholic World* (April 1867), in *Works* 13:135.

16. Brownson, "Our Lady of Lourdes," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* 29 (July 1875): 386.

17. George Parsons Lathrop, "Orestes Brownson," *Atlantic Monthly* 77 (June 1896): 779.

18. Oran Brownson, Dublin, Ohio, to Orestes A. Brownson, 5 April 1846, Orestes A. Brownson Collection, Archives of the University of Notre Dame, 3 pages. Besides the two letters reproduced here, no other correspondence between the brothers has survived.

19. Ballston Spa, Saratoga County, New York; the Brownsons moved from Vermont to Ballston Spa in 1817.

20. Oran's implicit plea for financial help from his famous brother echoed the letters of Orestes's twin sister, Daphne, who frequently solicited Orestes's help. Orestes often supported his extended family, particularly his mother and Daphne. Ryan, *Orestes A. Brownson*, 302–3.

21. Daniel was the oldest of the three Brownson brothers.

22. *Brownson's Quarterly Review*.

23. Probably a reference to the Mormon doctrine of the gathering and to the Saints' imminent departure to the Rocky Mountains.

24. Oran Brownson, Narick, Ohio, to Orestes A. Brownson, 14 January, Orestes A. Brownson Collection, Archives of the University of Notre Dame, 1 page. A later person, presumably an archivist, has written [1850s!] on the letter in an effort to date it.

25. Daphne Augusta Brownson (1803–1892), Orestes's twin sister, resided at Bay City, Michigan, at the time of her death. Ryan, *Orestes A. Brownson*, 303.