A Study in Spirits

Arthur Conan Doyle's Linkage of Mormonism, Spiritualism, and the Pursuit of Primitive Christianity During His Second Spiritualist Tour of America

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores Arthur Conan Doyle's visit to Salt Lake City, Utah on his 1923 tour of America during which he proslytized Spiritualism. By reading local reports of Doyle's tour, his travelogue, and transcripts of his speeches, I argue that Doyle presented Spiritualism as restorationist form of Christianity akin to Mormonism. I situate my argument against the view that Spiritualists promoted their beliefs by claiming to reconcile scientific and religious tensions that characterized the turn of the twentieth century. In his Spiritualist rhetoric, Doyle's engagement with a diversity of American religious desires that often superseded his intents to present the religion as scientific and rational. In Salt Lake City, Doyle appealed to a predominantly Mormon audience by focusing on religious similarities between Spiritualism and Mormonism and stressing their shared lineage as new religions that seek to foster a restoration of "primitive Christianity." I trace the development of Doyle's interest in Mormonism through an investigation of his first Sherlock Holmes story,* A Study in Scarlet. *In* A Study, *Doyle was highly critical of the Mormon church hierarchy, but presented Mormonism as having an eclectic combination of modern and primitive values that fosters social progression. This notion of Mormonism as an innovative hybrid of ideas reappeared in Doyle's Spiritualist rhetoric as he argued that both Spiritualism and Mormonism seek to restore primitive Christian practices by looking to otherworldly sources. Despite this positive view of Mormonism, Doyle utilized his tour through Salt Lake City to ultimately argue that Spiritualism was the superior religious choice. After his tour, Doyle continued to criticize the authority of the Mormon priesthood, arguing that it encouraged polygamy and excluded outsiders. On the other hand, Doyle proposed that Spiritualism offered an egalitarian method of accessing primitive Christian truths, unrestrained by institutionalism and offering a clearer path towards social progress.*

The Appeal of Spiritualism:

On May 11 of 1923, Arthur Conan Doyle set foot in Salt Lake City for the first time in his life. He entered the city with the purpose of proselytizing Spiritualism, which he thought to be the "New Revelation" of the twentieth century. While Conan Doyle's legacy as the creator of Sherlock Holmes often brought recognition and respect to his Spiritualist lectures, Salt Lake City seemed to be the exception. Although he had not visited the city before, Doyle had previously voiced criticisms against the city's predominantly Mormon population in his first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*. In *A Study*, Doyle participated in a broader culture of Mormon sensationalism in Victorian England, but he also wrote positively of Mormon society, attributing the prosperity of the Mormons to their religious eclecticism and their attempts to restore a primitive form of Christianity. When promoting Spiritualism in Salt Lake City nearly forty years after writing *A Study*, Doyle continued to focus on Mormonism's eclecticism and belief in Christian restoration, linking these values with the form of Spiritualism that he proselytized. In so doing, Doyle's Spiritualist rhetoric in Salt Lake City complicates a larger historical narrative which dictates that Spiritualists promoted their beliefs by claiming to reconcile scientific and religious tensions that characterized the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, Doyle's engagement with a Mormonism shows that he often prioritized stressing Spiritualism's shared beliefs and values with other American religions, over his attempts to present the religion as scientific and rational.

Many scholars have attributed the rapid spread of Spiritualism throughout the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century to a cultural reaction to emerging materialistic worldviews and to major world conflicts that caused massive casualties. In these narratives, Spiritualist rhetoric is often presented as emerging in response to scientific materialism and aiming to provide an empirical and rationalist explanation for otherworldly phenomena.[1] For instance, in one of the most extensive histories of Spiritualism, *In Search of White Crows*, Robert L. Moore argues that argues that American curiosity in Spiritualism was catalyzed by a yearning for scientific and religious reconciliation:

[1]For examples of historical narratives that frame the development of Spiritualism around modernist crises of see Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England: 1850- 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); also: Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

> Over the past 175 years Spiritualism and then psychical research have offered Americans a 'reasonable' solution to the problem of how to accommodate religious and scientific interests.[2]

By tracing Spiritualist popularity through its ability to relieve scientific and religious tensions, Moore overlooks other aspects of Spiritualism that resonate with its practitioners. By focusing only on the "rational" element of Spiritualist justification, Moore ignores lived religious practices that have historically informed Spiritualist thought and that have permeated through American religious culture.

Viewing Spiritualism as a reaction to the increasing popularity of scientific materialism, to the loses of war, or to disenchantment with modern life has become a pervasive view. Those in favor of this sort of telling of Spiritualist history frequently point to the empirical nature of Spiritualist practices in justifying their view. One frequently cited case is Mary Farrell Bednarowski's examination of nineteenth century Spiritualists' attempts to provide scientific explanations of the afterlife:

> Spiritualism represents a concerted, perhaps even a desperate, effort to reconcile science with religion, to supply those suffering from religious skepticism [with] scientific data, [namely] the spirit manifestations, upon which to base their beliefs in an afterlife.[3]

Associating Spiritualism with empiricism, many scholars see it as an answer to materialistic views that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and to the losses of the American Civil War, and World War One. Many histories of Spiritualism attribute its popularity to a reaction against major cultural shifts that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century. When the development of biblical archaeology and the theory of evolution brought into question the role of the supernatural in human history, Spiritualism offered empirical evidence of the supernatural.[4] When massive wars separated millions of people from their families and loved ones, Spiritualism offered the ability to reconnect with the dead.[5]

This tendency to attribute Spiritualism's popularity with its empirical nature has also affected scholarship on Doyle's Spiritualist career. Michael Saler attributes the popularity of Sherlock Holmes to the character's ability to answer an intellectual climate of cultural pessimism. Saler argues that the *fin de siècle* was characterized by a cultural desire for "communal beliefs and higher ideals in an age that seemed dominated by positivism and materialism."[6] Saler approaches Spiritualism as a reaction to this desire, writing that it was an effort to escape the "iron cage of rationality" that gripped early twentieth century intellectual culture:

> "Modernity" was widely associated with progress toward the rational and away from the supernatural, and efforts by believers to impart the veneer of scientific respectability to the supernatural was frequently greeted with scepticism if not outright disdain by contemporary commentators. Thus psychical research and spiritualism, both nineteenth century efforts at finding a *via media* between science and religion, tended to be marginalized by established science at the start of the century.[7]

Saler sees Spiritualism as an attempt to alleviate tension between science and religion, while still showing a commitment to social progress, by providing a scientific or empirical bases for religious phenomena. This analysis

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[2] Robert L. Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), xii.

[3] Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at Scientific Religion" (PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1973), 20.

[4] For an account of how Spiritualism provided empirical evidence in response to a modernist crisis of religion see: Kenneth D. Pimple, "Ghosts, Spirits, and Scholars: The Origins of Modern Spiritualism," in *Folklore and the Supernatural*, ed. Barbara Walker (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1995), 75–89; also: Turner, *Between Science and Religion*.

[5] For an account of how Spiritualism served the needs of those mourning the loss of loved ones following the American Civil War see: Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

[6] Michael Saler, "Clap If You Believe in Sherlock Holmes: Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity," *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 3 (2003): 602.

[7] Saler, 602. (Emphasis added).

of Spiritualism proves to be harmful to Saler's analysis of Doyle as he explains that Doyle's disenchantment with atheism and a materialist understanding of the world "led him" to explore Spiritualism.[8] This implies that Doyle's exploration of Spiritualism was solely due to a rejection of materialism and the "iron cage of rationality," rather than any deeper sort of intellectual influence. In this analysis, Saler focuses solely on Spiritualism and Doyle's writing within the context of religious crises. This analysis ignores other cultural desires that Doyle and other Spiritualist figures addressed and essentializes Spiritualist rhetoric as merely reactionary toward materialism.

In reality, Spiritualists such as Doyle did make empiricist and rationalist arguments, but this does not mean that they did not simultaneously appeal to range of religious desires which existed prior to the development of scientific or materialist rhetoric. As evidenced by his two-volume History of Spiritualism, Doyle was well-read on the values and tenets of Mormonism, Swedenborgianism, Fourierism, Shakerism, Theosophy, and Harmonial Philosophy. All of these traditions had significant followings in the United States while Doyle was speaking; failing to account for them overlooks a large segment of Doyle's audience. Recognizing that Spiritualist rhetoric can be examined outside of the "modernist crisis" allows for a richer range of interpretation to be explored, including Spiritualism's appeal to these American religious trends.

Doyle himself acts as a good example of how individuals were drawn to Spiritualism not by its scientific allure, but by the tenets of Spiritualist practitioners. In his 1924 autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*, Doyle provides an account of his disillusionment with Catholic theology and attraction to Spiritualism. He recalls being a boy and looking at a priest in horror who declared "that there was sure damnation for every one outside the Church." This is a clear critique of the particularist soteriology of Catholicism, as Doyle describes this moment as the "first rift" of a "chasm" that would come to develop between himself and his Jesuit guides.[9] This section is expressive of the idea that Doyle's conversion to Spiritualism was based on more than empirically-based evidence of the afterlife being provided, but was also theologically motivated. In contrast to the rift he felt growing between himself and Catholicism, Doyle extols the universal applicability of Spiritualism, claiming that the belief in the "continuity of personality" can be "reconciled with any religion."[10] Doyle also gives a number of other possible explanations for his conversion from Catholicism, each revealing of his religious beliefs. In defense of his conversion to Spiritualism Doyle also expresses frustrations with organized religion and disbelief in Catholic doctrines of papal infallibility and Immaculate Conception.[11] Again, Doyle's theological criticisms are not driven solely by a desire for "provable" religious beliefs, but also problems with religious authority. It would have been sufficient for him to take a skeptical stance against Catholicism if he were only looking for an empirically-based religion. However, Doyle had an invested interest in the philosophical aspect of Spiritualism that led him towards a range of criticisms against his prior faith.

When Doyle entered Salt Lake City to promote his Spiritualist beliefs, he was well aware of the fact that he needed to rely on more than his spirit photographs to win over his predominantly Mormon audience. However, he was well prepared for this given that he not only possessed a background researching the history of Spiritualism, but also understood that Spiritualism and Mormonism shared a common origin in that burned-over district of New York. In this article, I will focus particularly on how Doyle appealed to elements of religious eclecticism and Restorationism that developed in both Spiritualist and Mormon thought.[12] Doyle's knowledge of Mormonism's intellectual history and religious appeal can be uncovered through an investigation of his first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, which was published in 1878. In what follows, I first examine sources that informed Doyle as he wrote *A Study* to provide insight on how Doyle's early views of Mormonism were informed by

[8] Saler, 607.

[9] Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* (London: Hodder; Stoughton, 1924), 29.

[10] Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, vol. 2 (Cassel & Co., 1926), 246.

[11] See Arthur Conan Doyle, "Are We Becoming Less Religious?" in *Letters to the Press*, ed. John M. Gibson and Richard L. Green (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1926), 121; Doyle also expresses a critique of organized religion in Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, 4.

[12] Here, Restorationism refers to the belief that Christianity ought to be restored to a purer and more ancient form practiced by the apostolic early church. See: Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge, eds., *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 225.

sensationalist literature. I then draw from the content of *A Study* to demonstrate that Doyle's criticisms of the Mormon church hierarchy and fascination with Mormon eclecticism were strongly influenced by other Victorian sources. In the final section of this article, I examine newspaper coverage of Doyle's visit to Salt Lake City, as well as his own travelogue, to show continuity in his feelings about Mormonism as he continued to express worries about authoritative clergy, the exclusion of non-believers, and a lack of adherence to Victorian sensibilities. However, in Salt Lake City, Doyle diluted his criticisms of Mormonism and ultimately presented Mormonism as reconcilable with Spiritualism, with both religions sharing common desires for a restoration of primitive Christianity and cultural eclecticism.

Mormonism, Sensationalism, and Eclecticism in Victorian England:

In the mid to late-nineteenth century, the British press persistently criticized Mormonism for its oppressive social structures and lack of civility. Michael Homer, a scholar of early Mormonism, notes that sensationalist pieces concerning Mormonism were very popular in United Kingdom in the 1880s, as Mormon missionaries had been successfully proselytizing the country for forty years and politicians, newspapers, and journalists were paying considerable attention to the movement.[13] The British yellow press at the time was especially xenophobic towards an influx of Mormon missionaries to England with the *London Quarterly Review* urged for the hanging of Mormon missionaries who they claimed were kidnapping English servant-girls.[14] These depictions of Mormon society were not limited to the yellow press but were also frequently found in more reputable journals such as *Atlantic*, *Harpers*, and *Saturday Review*.[15] Rebecca Cornwall and Leonard Arrington examine sensationalist works that may have influenced Doyle and note that the London Times published a report on the latest efforts of the U.S. government to rid Utah of polygamy on March 30, 1886, which was around the time Doyle started writing *A Study in Scarlet*.[16] This report sensationalized conditions in Utah, describing a suppression of dissent and threat of violence by Mormon theocracy, that closely paralleled the setting of the novel.[17] A fascination with the mythology of a Mormon theocracy was not only a popular topic in Britain, but was a topic that Doyle explicitly addressed in *A Study*.

Both the yellow press and more well-known magazines attacked the tenets of Mormonism and its restorationist principles, or call for a return to a primitive form of Christianity. Sebastian Lecourt indicates that descriptions of Mormon society in this period often focused on their attachment to "primitive" or "premodern" values through fixating on "outward forms" of religiosity and reinstating the "practices of Biblical times."[18] Mormon tithes, laws of health, and adherence to the Sabbath were targeted by British and American media alike, and Doyle himself later criticized the Mormon priesthood for justifying polygamy through reference to the Old Testament.[19] Magazines portrayed these practices as a kind of or cultural regression. For example, Charles Marshal of *Fraser's*, a popular London magazine with a strong Tory slant, called Mormonism: "a huge stride backward in the civilisation of the race," "a system of priestly tyranny more oppressive than that of Rome" that "renews the visions and miracles of primitive times."[20] The new religious practices of the Mormons were depicted as not only overly authoritative and violent, but as degeneration of the social progress the British had encouraged throughout the world.

[13] Michael W. Homer, "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Spiritualism and 'New Religions'," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 4 (1990): 100.

[14] Rebecca Foster Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington, "Perpetuation of a Myth: Mormon Danites in Five Western Novels, 1840-90," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1983): 160.

[15] Cornwall and Arrington, 160.

[16] Cornwall and Arrington, 161.

[17] Cornwall and Arrington, 161.

[18] Sebastian Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," *Victorian Studies* 56, no. 1 (2013): 90.

[19] Arthur Conan Doyle, *Our Second American Adventure* (Boston: Brown; Co., 1924), 207.

[20] Charles Marshall, "The Characteristics of Mormonism," *Fraser's Magazine*, 1971, 692; Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," 86.

However, as news of Utah's quick development spread to England in the 1870s, sensationalist narratives quickly shifted to claim the Mormon's successes as an indication of what Doyle would go on to refer to as "Anglo-Saxon tenacity" in *A Study*.[21] Lecourt writes that this innovation came with the development of the transcontinental railroad, which allowed middle-class tourists and travel writers to visit Salt Lake City.[22] The quick industrial development of Salt Lake City brought to light a tension in the English conception of Mormonism: how could the Mormons, a people tied to primitive religious beliefs and social structures, have brought forth modern social developments so quickly? In writing *A Study*, this question operated as a subplot for Doyle as he praised the virtues of Mormon settlerism while also presenting Salt Lake City as controlled by a repressive theocracy.[23] Lecourt notes that Doyle's Brigham Young projects a model image of suburban civilization: "In the town, streets and squares sprang up, as if by magic. In the country, there was draining and hedging, planting and clearing, until the next summer saw the whole country golden with the wheat crop."[24] In *A Study*, Mormon society is portrayed by Doyle as developing so quickly that the agents who plan, plant, and build, are conceived of metaphorically as magical forces. Yet, despite his descriptions of extraordinary social progression, Doyle still drew from sensationalized sources in describing Mormon religious structures and leveled harsh criticisms against the religion.

Scholars have traced sensationalist influences upon A Study in Scarlet through the content of the novel, sources found in Doyle possession, and the general popularity of sensationalist sources about Mormonism during the time it was written.[25] Homer argues that Doyle may have chosen Mormon society as the setting for his novel to take advantage of this popularity and to generate income.[26] The influence of sensationalist literature on Doyle is substantiated by articles found in his personal collections. Rebecca Foster Cornwall and Leonard Arrington note that:

> In the International Review of February 1882, a copy of which was found in Doyle's papers, an unfriendly report on the Mormons appeared which contained a description of the Great Basin markedly similar to Doyle's in Study.[27]

While it is impossible to know the Mormon literature that Doyle was ingesting, other scholars have pointed to sensationalist works that have similar plot structures to *A Study* including a short story by Robert Louis Stevenson titled, "Story of the Destroying Angel."[28] Lecourt writes that both stories express a fear of Mormon expansion through portraying "the Mormons' failure to respect the boundaries of the domestic sphere."[29] In *A Study* Doyle synthesized many similar concerns about Mormon eclecticism and hierarchy. In so doing, he reflects the British press's: fear of Mormon expansion, portrayal of Mormons as possessing "primitive" values, concern over authoritarianism, and fascination surrounding the relationship between Mormonism and the idea of English globalization.

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[21] Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1994), 79; Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," 86.

[22] Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," 92.

[23] Lecourt, 97.

[24] Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 67; Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," 96–97.

[25] Michael W. Homer, " 'Recent Psychic Evidence': The Visit of Arthur Conan Doyle to Utah in 1923," *The Utah Historic Quarterlu* 52, no. 3 (1984): 246.

[26] Homer, "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle," 101.

[27] Cornwall and Arrington, "Perpetuation of a Myth," 161; Jack Tracy also reports that a sensationalist autobiography by an ex-Mormon, Fanny Stenhouse, has also been found in Doyle's library collection Jack Tracy, *Conan Doyle and the Latter Day-Saints* (Bloomington: Gaslight Publications, 1979), 15–16; T. B. H. Stenhouse, *"Tell It All": The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism* (Hartford: A. D. Worthington; Co., 1875).

[28] Homer, "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle," 101.

[29] Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," 100.

Early Conceptions of Mormonism in *A Study in Scarlet*:

The content of *A Study* is reflective of sensationalized accounts that presented Mormon society as rife with violence and polygamy that was enforced by an authoritative priesthood. In *A Study*, John Ferrier and his adopted daughter Lucy are stranded in a desert and are eventually saved by Brigham Young and a party of Mormons. John then joins the Church of the Latter-Day Saints and subscribes to all tenets of Mormonism except for polygamy, refusing to allow Lucy to marry Mormon polygamists. John and Lucy attempt to escape Mormon society with a non-Mormon coal miner, Jefferson Hope, to whom Lucy becomes engaged. However, they are stopped by the Avenging Angels, members of the Danite band who are described as enforcers of polygamy for the Church hierarchy.[30] The Avenging Angels kill John while Lucy later dies of a broken heart. Twenty years later, Jefferson Hope tracks down and kills two of the Avenging Angels and Sherlock Holmes is called to investigate the case.[31] This story is representative of Doyle's view of Mormonism and his larger critiques of institutionalized religions being overly authoritative and antagonistic towards outsiders. Doyle presented Mormon society as lacking civility by describing how immoral behaviors, such as polygamy and violence, are enforced through the Church hierarchy. Later, in *Our Second American Adventure*, Doyle acknowledges that he sensationalized the prevalence of violence and polygamy in Mormon society but maintains his criticism of the church hierarchy and holds fast to his historical depiction of the Danite band.[32]

Despite Doyle's criticisms of Mormon polygamy and authoritarianism in A Study in Scarlet, he also often takes a sympathetic approach to Mormon society in the novel and values what he sees as eclectic beliefs drawn from primitive traditions. He not only voiced appreciation for the industriousness of Mormons, but also acknowledged the religious merits of Mormonism as John Ferrier accepts every tenet of the religion aside of polygamy. He was not alone in voicing this admiration; Lecourt notes that many English writers of the period were fascinated by Mormonism's variety of religious influences and provides a quote from William Hepworth Dixon's New America:

> [Smith] taught his disciples . . . to extract the grain of good out of every old creed… He took much from Mohammed, more from Paul, most of all from Abraham; but in his free handling of religious notions, he had no scruple about borrowing from the Hindoos, from the Tartars, from the Mohawks.[33]

Lecourt argues that English writers of the period, including Doyle, often discussed how foreign and antimodern values helped facilitate English expansion.[34]. He notes that Doyle's value of eclecticism is shown in A Study in Scarlet through both Sherlock Holmes and the Mormon Jefferson Hope. Both characters are shown to be cunning through their ability to channel "the forces of the primitive toward modern ends:" Jefferson Hope is repeatedly described as savage-looking and possessing vindictiveness learned from the Indians, while Holmes' is said to be possessed by "a purely animal lust for the chase."[35] For Doyle, there is a fine line between the innovative bricolage of Holmes and the backwards, yet still pragmatic, religious beliefs of the Mormons. As we will see in Doyle's 1923 visit to Utah, this distinction between innovation and social regression plays a strong role in his Spiritualist rhetoric.

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[30] Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*.

[31] Doyle.

[32] Doyle's account of the Danite band was unsubstantiated. Although Brigham Young did organized a militia to pursue raiders of Mormon cattle and horses, sources which reported on their efforts to capture, kill and torture those who crossed Young fail to produce evidence of such claims. See: Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

[33] William Dixon, *New America* (London: Hurst, 1887), 263; Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," 101.

[34] Lecourt, "The Mormons, the Victorians, and the Idea of a Greater Britain," 97.

[35] Lecourt, 103–4.

Doyle's Linkage of Spiritualism and Mormonism in Salt Lake City:

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