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# Terryl L. Givens and Reid L. Neilson, eds., *The Columbia Sourcebook of Mormons in the United States*

Reviewed by Max Perry Mueller

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indexes, list-bound and annotated handbooks. There are other works that skirt—or transcend—the adjective, books of speculation, or long-view summations, or even collections of interviews. There are also mid-ground works: memoirs, confessions, even propaganda with no pretense of objectivity, but that, like Wagner’s *My Life*, are the massive roots to which one must not lay the ax. For intimate but aerial knowledge, one needs all types.

Some might find this book not scholarly enough in its dimensions, feel, tone, point of view, and dearth of footnotes. And indeed it seems like a huge *New Yorker* profile written by and about two non-New Yorkers. But it navigates many domains of what I, at least, regard as scholarship in some of the best and broadest senses. Add the Mormon-ness that broods over the whole work and one must find it an apt object for the contemplation of Mormon studies reviewers.

**Michael Hicks** is professor of music composition at Brigham Young University. His most recent book is *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

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Terryl L. Givens and Reid L. Neilson, eds. *The Columbia Sourcebook of Mormons in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

*Reviewed by Max Perry Mueller*

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IN 2009 THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS opened its new Church History Library (CHL). It is a huge building with a huge collection—230,000 square feet spread over five stories and home to 240,000 unpublished manuscripts along with countless published

materials and photographs. The size and the location of this building, directly across North Temple Street from the Church Office Building, signaled a new era in Mormon history, with ambitions to be more open to scholars working on dissertations and monographs and more open to family researchers filling out genealogical profiles with anecdotes culled from their ancestors' journals and photos clipped from pioneer-era family portraits.

The building is an archive made of Utah quartz monzonite and steel. The newly appointed assistant church historian and one of the church's most celebrated public intellectuals have compiled a book made of paper and ink—a Mormon archive that one can stuff in a backpack. As a portable repository of essential Mormon writings for the field of Mormon studies, which continues to grow outside the “Book of Mormon Belt,” Terryrl Givens and Reid Neilson's *Columbia Sourcebook of Mormons in the United States* meets expectations. In other words, the answer to the question of whether it could become the go-to primary sourcebook to serve the growing number of college courses on Mormonism is an easy yes. Yet the volume's selection of texts to represent Mormonism raises interrelated questions for which there are no easy answers. First, who can claim the moniker “Mormon”? And second, what is Mormon studies?

Before reflecting on what the volume might have to say in response to these questions, I'll explore some of its actual offerings. Not surprisingly, sources that date from the church's first fifty years are plentiful, as are sources authored by different Joseph Smiths. Sources from the most recent two decades are more rare. And despite Givens and Neilson's claims that they've included both “orthodox and heterodox Latter-day Saint voices” (p. xvi), dissenting but still “Mormon” voices are also rare. Still, the selections included in the volume capture the depth and breadth of Mormon history—from the church's founding as a millenarian “family church” born at the height of the antebellum Great Awakening to its twenty-first-century aspirations to become a multiethnic world religion. And Givens and Neilson do not shy away from the inherent tensions embedded in the documents that give shape to this evolving arc.

For example, the anthology's first of eight chapters, "Theology and Doctrine," includes records that give evidentiary support to the oft-repeated adage "The church's theology is its history" (p. 1). According to Givens and Neilson, the fact that the LDS Church does not have a formalized dogma that exists apart from historical experiences highlights how truly "Christian" the church is. In the Mormon imaginary that Givens and Neilson flesh out, Mormons share with other Christians belief in the historical claim that in AD 34 Christ was "crucified, died and was buried" and then, three days later, "rose again from the dead" (p. 1). But this belief is also coupled with the historical claim that in 1820 Christ appeared to the teenage Joseph Smith Jr. to warn him not to join any of the "religious denominations" that proliferated in his corner of upstate New York and to tell him that, in his words, "the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known to me" (Joseph Smith Jr., "Latter Day Saints," 1844, quoted on p. 66). Christ's resurrection marks the historical beginning of the Christian dispensation. For Latter-day Saints, Christ's appearance to Smith 1,786 years later marks the beginning of the end of this same dispensation as well as the restoration of primitive Christianity and its lay priesthood.

As much as Givens and Neilson seek to highlight the New Testament nature of Mormon history cum theology, what emerges from chapter 1's selections is a decidedly "Old Testament" covenantal theology of a Heavenly Father's particular favor for a chosen people, even a chosen family. Christ did not appear to just anybody. He appeared to Joseph Smith Jr., who first shared this message of restoration with his own family. Thus this volume moves from Smith's 1832 "Extract from the Prophecy of Enoch" (pp. 16–19)—his attempt to restore plain and precious things stripped from Genesis (including an explicit curse of blackness on the descendants of the fratricidal Cain)—to 1995's "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (pp. 47–49), in which the First Presidency explained that the "divine plan of happiness enables family relationships," but only heterosexual family relationships, "to be perpetuated beyond the grave" (p. 48). In doing so, this anthology suggests that, like the God of the Hebrew Bible's affection for the Israelites, Latter-day Saint leaders have taught that Heavenly Father has long

avored certain racial and gender-oriented families over others. Herein lies the dialectical tension at the heart of the Mormon people's history and identity: a people fiercely protective (even defensive) of its own peculiarity *and* a people with ambitions to be the global and universal Christian church, open to all, "rich and poor, bond and free, great and small" (Joseph Smith Jr., "King Follet Discourse," 1844, quoted on p. 39).

Instructors who include this anthology in their Mormon studies courses will find ample material related to the Mormon attempts to build a homeland safe for the gathering of a latter-day chosen people and fit to host Christ's imminent return (chap. 3, "Gathering of Zion"). The same goes for the Latter-day Saints' history of creating governmental systems with ambitions to exist apart from, offer correctives to, and assimilate with the greater American body politic (chap. 4, "Government and Politics"). My favorite chapter, "Education and Intellectualism" (chap. 7), includes selections that speak to how the particularly "Mormon" way of knowing is in conflict and conversation with the dictates of "modern" epistemological truth. For non-Mormon students and scholars who struggle to understand how otherwise educated and thoughtful people can integrate, for example, the patriarchal claims that God is still speaking to a set of octogenarian men living in Salt Lake City with their commitments to uphold secular standards of Ivy League history departments as well as foster a feminist consciousness, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's 2002 essay "A Pail of Cream" (pp. 381–85) will likely be a revelation. But perhaps so might be Givens and Neilson's decision not to include LDS apostle Boyd K. Packer's "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect." In a 1981 address, the apostle enumerated a list of "cautions" for Mormon educators, whom, he argued, should value the propagation of faith over the commitments to what Packer called "objective, impartial" scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Why not include this speech that, as Givens himself has noted, created an internecine battle between the

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1. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect," August 22, 1981, CES Symposium on the Doctrine and Covenants and Church History, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mantle-far-far-greater-intellect>.

“Apostles” and the “Historians” and preceded if not produced the aborting of Leonard Arrington’s History Division and its emphasis on “new Mormon history” and the further channeling of “Mormon intellectual life . . . into polarized camps”?<sup>2</sup> (I’ll return to Packer’s speech, and how I see that his “cautions” might have shaped this volume—or at least my reception of it—below.)

I pose this question of omission sincerely, not rhetorically. And I do so because I find the volume otherwise to be successful as a whole and in its constituent parts. As such, and by design, individual chapters of this anthology could also be integrated into courses that are not strictly focused on Mormonism. An instructor teaching a course on “lived religion in America” would be well served to add “Contemporary Religious Life” (chap. 8) to her syllabus. The documents included in this chapter place the “official” meaning of rites like baptism and blessings—as well as the official responsibility of church service and leadership positions of missionaries, priesthood holders, bishops, and Relief Society presidents—into conversation with the Latter-day Saints’ actual experience of these fundamental performative acts of Mormon life. Likewise, “Race and Ethnicity” (chap. 5) and “Sexuality and Gender” (chap. 6) would make compelling additions to courses on race, gender, and religion in American history. These three chapters in particular strike the balance between the church hierarchy’s dictates on the behavioral, gendered, and racial boundaries of what it means to be a Mormon and the lived experiences of the “Mormon folk,” as they integrate, interpret, and sometimes reject the hierarchy’s demarcations.<sup>3</sup>

In their introduction, Givens and Neilson offer an invitation to critique their volume on how well they have provided documents

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2. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 219–20).

3. To put it another way, these chapters pass what we might call the “Orsi test.” They invite students of Mormon life “to study religion dialectically on the levels of the self and culture,” as Robert Orsi explained in his introduction to his canonical *Madonna on 115th Street*, “tracking back and forth between structure and agency, tradition and act, imagination and reality.” Robert A. Orsi, *Madonna on 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, xli).

that answer such boundary questions, which can be summarized by asking, “Who is a Mormon?” They do so by acknowledging that they used Edward Curtis’s *Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (2008) as “the template” for their own. The structure of this new sourcebook, as well as the topics covered, follows the former (p. xvi). However, in limiting almost all the material to the LDS Church, Givens and Neilson do not capture the diversity of the “Mormon” movement that Curtis does for the “Islamic” movement. This volume conflates the “LDS Church” with “Mormon” identity (as the LDS Church has recently attempted to do itself, from the general conference pulpit as well as from the “I’m a Mormon” marketing offices in the Church Office Building—this despite the church’s sporadic efforts to shed or at least downplay the “Mormon” nickname).<sup>4</sup> To be sure, the second chapter of the volume, “Scattering the Saints,” includes sources from some of the “myriad restorationist groups that claim descent from Joseph Smith’s teachings and authority” (p. 55); note that Givens and Neilson here do not describe these movements as “Mormon.” This chapter includes writings from Joseph Smith Jr. contemporaries and contenders to his mantle, including James J. Strange, William Smith, and David Whitmer, as well as writings by leaders of “self-described Mormon fundamentalists” (p. 89) and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Community of Christ). But these sources—and by extension the ways of being Mormon they represent—are walled off into their own section of the volume. This forecloses interaction between, say, the FLDS (which does have a great impact on shaping the “Mormon image in the American mind” and also has a sizable following) and the LDS Church on the topics in other chapters, including “Sexuality and Gender” and “Government and Politics,” to name just two. As he did in the October 2011 general conference, Mormon apostle M. Russell Ballard can proclaim that “no polygamist group, including those calling themselves fundamentalist Mormons or other derivatives of our name,

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4. M. Russell Ballard, “The Importance of a Name,” October 2011 general conference, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/the-importance-of-a-name?lang=eng>.

has any affiliation with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”<sup>5</sup> But these Mormon polygamists do have a historical and ongoing *relationship*—even if it’s an antagonistic one—with the LDS Church. And the volume, I believe, would have better lived up to its own promises by finding ways to acknowledge this reality.

Finally, by way of conclusion, let me reflect on how this volume speaks to the question, “What is Mormon studies?” At the CHL, (most) researchers can have access to everything that is accessible. Yet (most) researchers cannot access records that are extant—sitting in boxes in the building’s cavernous storage rooms—but are not accessible. I don’t mean this to be a tautology. Instead, I believe that it’s illustrative of a corporate church that is only beginning to recognize that openness about its past is not only better (church) business, but also might be existentially necessary. Hence the recent proliferation of “Gospel Topics” essays on controversial topics, including the origins of the Book of Mormon, the race-based priesthood restriction, and polygamy, that were written at the CHL and published on the church’s website.<sup>6</sup> These essays serve as church-sanctioned responses to the innumerable and often anti-Mormon histories found all over the web—histories that have created faith crises for many devout Mormons searching for answers about their church’s past.

What are also readily available on the web are the scores of documents related to the most controversial subjects in Mormon history. Let me focus on the subject that I’m most familiar with: race. A Google search (or a trip to the University of Utah’s special collections) can produce, say, the contents of Jane Manning James’s 1894 “servant” sealing to Joseph Smith Jr. and a century’s worth of Quorum of the Twelve meeting minutes related to the “priesthood” restriction. At the CHL, I’ve asked to see these documents, if only to verify their authenticity. And I’ve been told that either they are too sacred (e.g., James’s sealing, since it pertains to the temple) or they are too corporate (e.g., the minutes of meetings of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, since the

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5. Ballard, “Importance of a Name.”

6. <https://www.lds.org/topics/essays>.

apostles are not just leaders of the church, but leaders of the church's many corporations, the operations of which are also discussed at such meetings).<sup>7</sup> I think this volume would have been a perfect venue to publish some of these documents. And just as I (and many others) have appreciated how church historians have contextualized the issues raised in the Gospel Topics essays, I think scholars and students of Mormonism would have greatly benefitted from hearing how Givens and Neilson would contextualize such important primary documents from their (semiofficial) LDS Church perspective. And it's here where I see the shadows of the fourth and final of Elder Packer's now thirty-year-old "cautions." Packer rejected "the idea that so long as something is already in print, so long that it is available from another source, there is nothing out of order in using it in writing or speaking or teaching." He warned that for those "not mature enough for 'advanced history,'" access to such materials might "crush" a "testimony in seedling stage." "Do not spread disease germs!" the apostle warned, even if the disease germs are historical sources from the church itself.<sup>8</sup>

The implicit message that I take away from the decision not to include these types of documents is the same message I take when I'm denied access to documents at the CHL. The church still seeks to maintain some control over the boundaries of Mormon studies, even as Mormon studies moves out of Utah and plants itself—in the form of prestigious academic chairs and graduate programs—in East and West Coast universities.<sup>9</sup>

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7. A CHL staffer offered the following comparison to me: "Would you expect to get access to Coca-Cola's board minutes, where they might discuss Coke's secret formula?"

8. Packer, "Mantle."

9. I recognize that such discussions over Mormon studies boundary maintenance are not the sole purview of the Church Historian's Office. The *Mormon Studies Review* was founded in part as a space where non-Mormon and Mormon scholars alike can participate in shaping and tracking the evolving field of Mormon studies. Likewise, we also must recognize that there are significant detractors to such evolutionary movements. See John Gee, "Wither Mormon Studies?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 93–130.

This is only natural. And Givens and Neilson's volume stands as a testimony to the fact that the church and its affiliates recognize the changing landscape of Mormon studies and seek to participate in shaping it productively and collaboratively. What's more, I can raise my (relatively small) concerns about this volume because of its overall strength and promised usefulness for students and scholars who seek an archival entrée into the rich and complicated history of the LDS Church. As such, the volume's limitations actually provide springboards to fruitful conversations—drawn from the carefully curated source material and the expertly crafted annotations—that will allow the many courses for which this volume will serve as the primary anthology to explore what it has historically meant to be a Mormon and what it means to study Mormonism today.

**Max Perry Mueller** (PhD, Harvard University) is an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Nebraska. He is the author of *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (forthcoming from the University of North Carolina Press). His next project, *Wakara's World*, is a material cultural biography of the famed Ute chief, horse thief, slave trader, and would-be Mormon.

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John G. Turner. *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

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THIS BOOK IS NOT so much a biography of the Mormon Jesus as a full-length answer to the questions posed in the introduction concerning the relationship of Mormonism and Christianity: