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## *The Mormons* by Thomas F. O'Dea

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*The Mormons.* By Thomas F. O'Dea. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957. 289 pp., \$5.00.

This book is a refreshing and provocative variation from most books on Mormonism because it neither attempts to prove the ultimate truth or falsity of the religion nor is it devoted to the sensational aspects of it. It is not a monumental work devoted to a meticulous study of Mormon history, organization, or theology *per se*, but to an analysis of these areas as a means of understanding Mormonism as a social and religious movement. It is a naturalistic, rather than a religious, attempt to explore the conditions and events that gave rise to Mormonism, the factors which have influenced its growth, and the dilemmas with which it is faced at the present time.

The book would seem to have something of interest for al-

most any reader. For the average non-Mormon, the book presents what is probably the most objective and best general statement on the Mormons; for the average Mormon, it presents a challenging and provocative opportunity for self-examination; and for the scholar it presents a whole series of hypotheses which need further examination. It is on this latter point that, to this reviewer, the book has the greatest contribution to make. For example, the following are but a few of the questions raised by O'Dea which need further examination and which are of vital concern to Mormonism: Are basic Mormon beliefs being diluted by universal secular trends? What will be the ultimate effect on a religion which seeks to retain conservative beliefs (as compared to other religions and current secular thought) and which at the same time encourages education and makes axiomatic the statement that "The Glory of God is Intelligence"? Despite the fact that Mormons have their own educational system, is not the Mormon emphasis on higher education putting Mormon youth into contact with the very elements in modern thought which are likely to act as a solvent to some basic beliefs? Is the Mormon tendency to compartmentalize life—that is, to encourage such socialistic practices as the Welfare plan and other cooperative ventures within the Church while condemning the same in secular life—a source of weakness or strength? Is the amazing vitality of Mormon organization being sapped of its strength by a tendency to make organization an end in itself? What social and psychological forces are involved in the ability of the Mormon organization to remain vital and strong in the face of such philosophical and organizational inconsistencies as absolutistic theocracy vs. free agency, the concept of eternal progression vs. the concept of a Satan and absolutistic God, centralized control vs. democratic congregationalism or the emphasis on activity, and "this-worldliness" vs. the apparent need in modern life for contemplation and spirituality?

While the historian, theologian, or sociologist might take exception to certain of these questions or to many of the conclusions drawn by Professor O'Dea, his efforts have helped to open up an area of scholarship which Mormon scholars, with their insights both from within and without the Church, might

have opened up more completely a long time ago. But because they found themselves suspect both from within and without the Church, they failed to do so. Perhaps with the impetus provided by this and similar works, the field might be more completely covered.

In discussing the strains and problems faced by modern Mormonism, Prof. O'Dea suggests the need for an empirical and rational approach to their solution. But by taking this naturalistic approach, he underestimates one of the most important and powerful forces in Mormon life today: the tendency to dichotomize ways of knowing into two types—religious and secular—and to believe that, while investigation and rationality are valid approaches in some aspects of Mormon life, anything so important as the problems raised above is best solved by religious methods—faith, authoritarianism, inspiration, and revelation. Consequently, it remains to be seen whether the Church as a whole even feels the need for the intellectual approach which he suggests. But whatever the outcome, he feels that Mormon flexibility and viability under adverse conditions argue well for the future of the Mormon Church.

LaMar T. Empey