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Review Essays

Terryl Givens, Fiona Givens, and the Rehabilitation of Mormon Theology

Matthew Bowman


Since his By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion (Oxford, 2002) attracted wide attention, Terryl Givens has become a Mormon scholar as much as a scholar of Mormonism. His books—all featuring a trademark mix of silken style, wide-ranging command of what scholars used to call the Western canon, and thoughtful cultural analysis—increasingly bring to mind the sort of grand statements about human purpose and meaning cloaked in an essay ostensibly about Renaissance art or early Federal shipbuilding that Walter Pater, Henry Adams, and other nineteenth-century intellectuals used to write. But while Pater mused about the nature of beauty and Adams about the slow decay of American democracy, the ur-subject lurking behind Terryl Givens’s footnotes is the Mormon worldview as he understands it. Unlike much of his earlier work, The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life (cowritten by Terryl and his wife, Fiona) is explicitly a statement of theology. It was born, quite clearly, from both
Terryl and Fiona Givens’s deep immersion in Western literature and interest in theology. But it also draws together much of Terryl Givens’s intellectual project to date. In short, the book offers a succinct and eloquent presentation of the ideas we have heretofore received only in fragments.

Givens’s first book, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (Oxford, 1997; rev. 2013), was a pioneering study of anti-Mormon literature. It cleared the path for the work of Spencer Fluhman, Megan Sanborn Jones, Patrick Mason, and other scholars interested in why other Americans found Latter-day Saints so objectionable through much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. What was unique about Givens’s argument was that while most previous commentators located hostility to Mormonism in Mormon clannishness and separatism, American scandal over the practice of polygamy, or other social and cultural factors, Givens asserted that these fears were epiphenomenal. At the root of them all lay theological disputation. For Givens, Joseph Smith was “a defiant reminder that, much as it tries to, orthodoxy cannot escape the fact of its own construction.” Hence, Mormonism produced religious anxiety among American Protestants desperate to reassure themselves that their religions offered correct and pure knowledge of God (p. 102). Givens devotes much of the rest of the book to exploring the ways that American Protestants pushed Joseph Smith to the margins of true religion, draping him in a cloak of exotic, despotic orientalism.

This is a good argument, but for our purposes, what’s more interesting is Givens’s characterization of Mormonism in *Viper on the Hearth*. Fundamentally, Givens argues that American Protestants were distraught by Mormonism’s “reconceptualizing of the sacred that is not amenable to Christian orthodoxy, its thoroughgoing demystification of the numinous, its radical historicizing of Christian origins” (p. 8). Here Givens offers a nascent version of the Mormon theology that he develops more fully in later work.

In a devotional speech at Brigham Young University in 2005, Givens compared Smith to Thomas Carlyle’s notion of the “Great Man,” dropping like lightning from heaven and setting the souls of others ablaze. He argued that Smith’s great contribution was his elevation of human capa-
bility, liberty, and genius and his unwavering conviction that these things lie at the heart of humanity’s relationship with God.1 Viper on the Hearth is rooted chronologically in Givens’s period of academic training, the Romantic era, and it seems evident that Romantic values—those of Shelley, Keats, Whitman (and Thomas Carlyle, for that matter): a preoccupation with liberating the authentic self from institutions, great faith in human potential to understand and commune with the world, an intense devotion to emotion and the sentimental relationships that foster it—are the lens by which Givens understands the nature of the freedom that Mormonism grants. Indeed, in his essay “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude” he explicitly uses Romanticism to explain Smith’s spiritual impulses, citing the prophet’s fascination with recovery of the past, desire to privilege the pursuit of truth against formal institutions (like creeds or denominations), and conviction that human progress is a never-ending, ever-expanding effort to master the universe.2

These influences gave Givens’s developing Mormon theology two primary thrusts. The first, what Givens calls “dialogic revelation,” is enunciated nowhere so well as in his book By the Hand of Mormon. There he contends that the Book of Mormon is important to Mormons as a sign as much as a text—a sign of “revelation as a personalized, dialogic exchange,” as from prayer that “dramatically evokes an answer that is impossible to mistake as anything other than an individualized, dialogic response to a highly particularized question” (p. 217). Givens locates such interaction between human beings and God throughout the Book of Mormon and maintains that the book’s primary contribution to Latter-day Saint theology is that it presumes this relationship to be normative.

We should not stop there. The concept of dialogic revelation underlies many of the ideas that led to The God Who Weeps. It illustrates Givens’s conviction that the end of Mormonism is the elevation and perfection of


relationships, taking humanity’s relationship with God as a model. His *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford, 2007) takes for one underlying theme the intense sociality of Mormon life, observing that Mormon art of all varieties has often been the medium through which Mormons have built spiritual relationships with each other. As Givens puts it, “Like the family into which one is born, wards became the inescapable condition of a Mormon’s social and spiritual life” (p. 104). Givens has become somewhat famous for his vivid description, on the 2007 PBS documentary *The Mormons*, of Mormonism’s seemingly odd enthrallment with dance, but in *People of Paradox* he places that fascination in the context of a “sociability [that] was not a distraction from a higher order of things, but a preview of higher things” (p. 133). With such a perspective, the dances that the original Nauvoo Temple occasionally hosted seem altogether fitting as religious practice. From Givens’s point of view, dialogic revelation should not be understood to exist solely between humanity and God—rather, it is a model for the sacred nature of all loving human relationships.

That sociality is given further weight by the second thrust of Terryl Givens’s theology: his intense optimism about human nature. *People of Paradox* places Mormonism’s sociality in tension with other impulses in the faith: toward radical individual freedom and toward humanity’s restless, unceasing quest for perfection. The notion of the transcendent nature of human freedom may be Givens’s most powerful vision; certainly it is the one that he (and Fiona) write most passionately about. But this idea of freedom has a certain cast. Givens’s most recent work before *The God Who Weeps* was *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford, 2010). It posits that the notion that human beings existed before their mortal birth has deep and wide roots in Western history. Givens finds this idea undergirding a number of desirable features of human nature: free will, the very concept of transcendence, the aesthetic appeal of the sublime, and the powerful bonds of human relationships (as well as some not-so-desirable side effects, the brutal randomness of human inequality chief among them). Mormonism receives only a brief treatment in the book, but many of the values that Givens
locates in the idea of preexistence emerge again in his other writings as examples of the powerful explanatory power that Mormonism offers concerning questions of human existence—particularly the libertarian, absolute version of free will that he believes preexistence postulates. “Lightning out of Heaven” and “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude” both embrace that idea; in the former essay, Givens declares, “In Joseph Smith, religion and freedom found their first perfect, seamless synthesis.”

Givens’s work has maintained the form and rigor of contemporary academic scholarship while venturing further and further across the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines and content, away from painstaking analysis of detail and toward something far more romantic and primeval. The God Who Weeps is in some ways an explicit statement of the Mormon way of thinking that Givens developed in his previous academic work; and like much of that work it is somewhat unclassifiable, but for different reasons. These reasons likely include the devotional intent of the book; it is written for lay audiences first and scholars second, and so its rigor of thought, while present, fades into the background. Indeed, the book better resembles a homily or exhortation than a systematic theological exposition. It reminds me of some of the best sermons from the great literary nineteenth-century masters of the form, like Henry van Dyke or Charles Parkhurst, a passionate invocation of an essentially optimistic theology, studded with as many stirring quotations from Tennyson or Sophocles as references to scripture or theologians. This lyricism is another mark of the book’s intellectual genealogy and probably reflects Fiona’s influence (as a teacher of language and a disciple of the liberal arts) as much as Terryl’s, and it is probably appropriate. That the authors rely as much (or more) on poets and novelists as they do on philosophers and theologians indicates their success at framing this thoughtful work as essentially pastoral and embracing the basically romantic (though, perhaps, not to say less Mormon) impulses behind their theology.

The God Who Weeps should be applauded for simply existing, and Latter-day Saints should be applauded for purchasing it (if reports are
true, these buyers are vast in number). For two generations, the Mormon faithful have been suspicious of “intellectuals” for reasons ranging from a fear of anti-Mormonism (sometimes justified) to, more often than not, an admirable commitment to the lay leadership of their religion. To some, Mormon intellectuals can be suspect usurpers of the magisterium entrusted to the church’s highest governing bodies; these intellectuals are often castigated for complicating the presumably simple tenets of the religion, or even undermining them.

Therefore, much—even, sadly, the vast majority—of what passes for Mormon devotional literature today consists of quotations from old addresses by church leaders mixed with evocative and often sentimental anecdote. That form, unfortunately, has given the category a bad name among Mormon intellectuals. Yet this book reveals precisely just how serious, rigorous, and powerful good devotional writing can be. At its best, devotional work correlates the insights of sound intellectual analysis with the practical task of Christian living. More than merely evoking sentiment, it reorients how a believer might understand scripture, God, or the nature of faith. It reveals new universes of meaning in things previously deemed mundane, draws connections out of things seemingly unrelated, and hence creates order out of perceived chaos. Good devotional literature deepens understanding and makes religious life more profound, more colorful, and more full. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*, Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, and even Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love* fall into the same category as *The God Who Weeps*.

But the best homily rests upon theology, and perhaps what is most refreshing about the book is that in addition to accomplishing the task of good devotional writing, the authors offer a clear statement of a Mormon theology. I say “a Mormon theology” because there have been multiple Mormon theologies that have attempted to systematize and regularize the torrent of vision and work produced by Joseph Smith, dating to even the first decades of Mormonism’s existence, when the brothers Parley and Orson Pratt attempted to line up Smith’s revelatory corpus and use it to cogently explain the machinery of the universe.
The romantic theology expressed in *The God Who Weeps* seems firmly planted in a strain of Mormon theology that reached its height with B. H. Roberts and John Widtsoe, two of the leading lights of Mormon theology’s golden age in the early twentieth century. Roberts and Widtsoe naturally drew on the resources that Mormonism provided them: Joseph Smith’s firm denial of human depravity, his exaltation of human potential until it reached even the boundaries of the divine, and the extrapolation of that humanistic turn into a firm and confident materiality that Brigham Young and the brothers Pratt pursued.

For Joseph Smith, human beings were of the same type that God is, and for Young and the Pratts, this meant that the universe is not governed by a mysterious and implacable divine will, but rather is a rational place that human beings possessed the ability to comprehend. But the emphases of Roberts and Widtsoe’s generation were distinct: humanity did not merely enjoy inexhaustible possibilities in the future but vast capacities today. For Roberts and Widtsoe, the achievement of human salvation is unfettered by original sin and enhanced by science. Drawing on the philosophy of a post-Darwinian world (particularly that of Herbert Spencer and John Fiske, who believed that Darwin’s theory of environmentally driven change over time could be read not simply as blind adaptation but as teleology: a way to imagine progress), Roberts and Widtsoe argued that humanity’s divine potential was best understood as the product of the development of character and capacity. Further, it was best achieved through a vaguely Darwinian process of struggle against obstacle; testing one’s strength and character against limits; and gradually, as a result, expanding one’s ability. As Roberts wrote, “I believe it consistent with right reason to say that some of the lowliest walks in life, the paths which lead into the deepest valleys of sorrow and up to the most rugged steeps of adversity, are the ones which, if a man travel in, will best accomplish the object of his existence in this world.”

Heaven, for Roberts and Widtsoe, is a determinedly humanistic affair: divine virtues could

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be cultivated on this very earth; our relationship with God is not simply like but is the relationship between a parent and child; and exaltation, the end of our salvation, is different from human achievement and human sociality only in degree (though not very much), not in kind.

Aspects of this version of Mormonism remain popular today. The leaders who have most deeply shaped the character of Mormon religious culture to the present day continue to think of Christianity primarily as a religion of effort and exertion, maximizing humanity’s presumed capacities. This is distinct from the Catholic vision of Christianity as ritual observance and the Protestant understanding of Christianity as the practice of gratitude for unearned grace. As the LDS apostle Neal A. Maxwell put it in 1997, “Just as Jesus has invited, we can indeed strive to become ‘even as [He is]’ (3 Ne. 27:27). This process of developmental repentance occurs when we truly take His yoke upon us, thus finally qualifying for God’s greatest gift—eternal life.”

The God Who Weeps reveals that its authors’ intellectual genealogy reaches to Roberts and Widtsoe in multiple ways. For one thing, their unashamed willingness to draw from non-Mormon sources to illuminate aspects of Mormonism mirrors the approach of Roberts and Widtsoe, who eagerly sought dialogue with philosophers and theologians of the non-Mormon world. But there are theological debts as well. Terryl and Fiona Givens interpret original sin not as a spiritual incapacity, but as the result of our biological predisposition for self-preservation—and thus as an accidental, though not fundamental, feature of human existence (p. 68). They draw on Darwin to describe the constant wrestle with adversity that drives forward the cultivation of the human soul; and most of all, even in the very title of their book, they draw heaven very close to earth indeed.

All of this indicates something particular about the theology of The God Who Weeps, and perhaps about Mormon theology in total. The conventional definition of systematic theology (that is, comprehensive, totalizing, cosmos-explaining theology, as opposed to other versions of

theology narrower in aim and method) demands the theologian to orient his or her effort around a core philosophical principle or set of principles, to anchor that interpretation of the cosmos with the strong tether of a fundamental premise. John Calvin famously stated his first principles in the opening lines of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “No man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.” Calvin’s fundamental principle was the absolute sovereignty of God, and his interpretation of all else in Christianity flowed from it.

The core principle of the Givenses’ theology is the authoritative nature of the human understanding, by which I mean intellectual capacity as well as desire, longing, sentiment, and impulse. It is evident to the authors, for instance, that the nature of God’s righteousness and justice might be deduced from the impulses of human conscience; that the Babylonian deities who demanded child sacrifice hold no claim on human faith because of the abhorrence of their liturgies; and that, conversely, a God who validates the repugnance of human suffering is a God who moves in harmony with human feeling and only thus is worthy of our worship (pp. 13–20). For the authors, the earthly family is an appropriate image for heavenly sociality (pp. 107–8), God is rightly described with the language of human experience and emotion (pp. 24–25), and human potential rightly understood is the very status that God now holds (pp. 2–3). Faith is the appropriate response to our impulse toward charity, our desire for intimacy, our hope that our love might transcend death. And indeed, that faith can be in, simply, our own perception of what the good ultimately is. As the authors put it, “If we find ourselves inclined to believe that a powerful deity presides over the universe, the assumption that he would be a more perfect embodiment of the morally good that we recognize and seek to emulate is not wishful thinking” (p. 18).

This confidence that human sensibilities are an accurate mirror for the primeval realities of the universe is profoundly optimistic, and profoundly romantic too. It is perfectly in line with Terryl Givens’s theology as developed over his career. This should not minimize the many ways in which this project is also profoundly consonant with Mormon method and ideas. Indeed, the argument reflects some premises of the entire project of Mormon religion-making. For example, Terryl Givens and Samuel Brown have argued elsewhere that Joseph Smith found traces of his new church scattered throughout the great library of human achievement (shades of the romantics’ love for ruins à la Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and Shelley’s “Ozymandias”). And the Mormon theologian and scholar Hugh Nibley built an academic career locating parallels to Mormon thought strewn across the ancient world. The Givenses’ wide net functions similarly: While Nibley looked to architecture, archaeology, and religious practice, they construct a Mormon theology from the collective yearning of the great Western poets, finding universal human fears and sympathies and demonstrating how their Mormon theology provides answers concerning them.

The Givenses’ emphasis on human capacity, indeed, borders on the heroic. This, no doubt, contributes to the book’s popularity, but it also indicates those points at which it is wise to remember that this is a Mormon theology, and thus will hopefully open rather than foreclose further conversations. Mormons—particularly American Mormons raised on a steady diet of American individualism—will find the intense rhetorical emphasis on choice, responsibility, and “authenticity” to be empowering. For instance, “What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love” (p. 4). For the authors, heaven consists of freely entering into relationships with “authentic others,” those who through choice, failure, and renewed exertion have cultivated the divine capacity to love unfettered by any limitation.

The authors’ passion in defending this vision leads them to occasional rhetorical disbelief of the muddleheadedness of those who do not share it. Their treatment of St. Augustine, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and other Christians who subscribed to theologies that the Givenses find unappealing (like predestination or original sin) occasionally borders on the one-dimensional. For instance, early in the book they cite Edwards’s unfortunately famous (unfortunate because it poorly represented Edwards’s total project) sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” offering it as an example of the grim and arbitrary God they claim so many Christians have believed in. They then turn to Edwards’s wife, Sarah, who “was drawn to a different version of God” (p. 31). They describe Sarah’s fervent prayers and conversion experience and her delighted peace and happiness when she realized that God was a personal God who loved her and offered her salvation. It is worth pointing out that this story of Sarah’s conversion actually appeared first in Jonathan Edwards’s own 1746 work *Religious Affections*; that Sarah claimed to have sought that encounter with God at her husband’s urging; that she professed equal faith as did he in the doctrines of predestination and election; and that Jonathan included the story in his book as one example in support of his elaborate and powerful meditation on the love of God, a subject on which he wrote more powerfully and eloquently than any other Calvinist theologian.

Similarly, there are other strands of Mormon theology that press back against the intense individualism the Givenses espouse. For instance, in the mid-twentieth century, Bruce R. McConkie and Joseph Fielding Smith promulgated a version of the faith equally as convinced of humanity’s divine potential yet also, unlike the Givenses’ expansive and optimistic Mormonism, pessimistic about humanity’s propensity toward sin, unfriendly toward the intellectual world outside the church, and insistent on obedience to church leadership and reliance upon institution. Indeed, while the Givenses rely heavily on Joseph Smith’s divine anthropology, they have virtually nothing to say about his equally fervent ar dor for institution building, submission to authority, and devoted sacramentalism. It is a measure of Smith’s complexity that he built a religion that, if viewed from
one angle, might be taken simply for a deeply humanistic equivalent to the vaguely sci-fi sixties-era Human Potential Movement but that, if viewed from another angle, might seem as distant from contemporary American individualism as the deeply sacramental and hierarchical world of medieval Catholicism. Both visions are beautiful, in their way—the one the rough and striving beauty of the pioneer trek west and the glory of self-creation, the other the regular and ordered beauty of cathedral bells and monastic humility. Now, it should be remembered that though the Givenses clearly prefer the former to the latter, they are not attempting to construct a systematic theology of Mormonism. Their book explains, as the subtitle puts it, “How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life” and is an exploration of Mormonism’s vision of the human condition, a particular and narrow theological question. Nonetheless, it is striking that those very things that sit so near the center of actual Mormon experience—Sunday worship, ordinances, wards—make no appearance here.

Despite my caveats, it should be emphasized that Terryl and Fiona Givens have written a meaty and impassioned study of those ideas that make Mormonism unique, and most particularly, those that make it most beautiful. The book deserves to stand alongside Sterling M. McMurrin’s Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion and B. H. Roberts’s The Truth, The Way, The Life as seminal statements of Mormon theology. But it also deserves to join G. K. Chesterton’s Orthodoxy and C. S. Lewis’s Mere Christianity in the pantheon of statements of Christian devotion. More, it has established a place for Mormon voices in that pantheon. We will be lucky indeed if others follow.

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