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Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair*

Reviewed by Peter J. Thuesen

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As Harline writes, “In the end, conversion may be as inscrutable as love, or God” (p. 93). Inscrutable perhaps, but Harline’s remarkable book sheds a great deal of light on both the dynamics and the consequences.

Randall Balmer is chair of the religion department and Mandel Family Professor in the Arts and Sciences at Dartmouth College. His most recent book is Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter.


Reviewed by Peter J. Thuesen

On November 12, 1911, a photograph buried on page 31 of the Indianapolis Star showed six smiling women with the caption “Pretty Mormon Girls with Tabernacle Choir of Salt Lake City.” In this manner the Star announced the first-ever concert of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in the Hoosier capital on the following Saturday at the Murat Temple, a Moorish revival theater. Subsequent previews in the Star were a mixture of amusement and disdain. The “sight of the average Mormon missionary is enough to make people take to the woods,” quipped the paper’s editorial board, while elsewhere an article noted that the choir members were “traveling ‘de luxe’ in palatial [rail] cars, vastly different from the ox team conveyances with which their ancestors crossed the prairies.”

The choir’s gig in Indianapolis was part of a twenty-three-city public relations tour undertaken just a few years after the nationwide controversy over the seating of LDS apostle Reed Smoot in the US Senate. Receptions along the tour varied widely. In New York, where the group performed at the opening of the American Land and Irrigation Exposition, the singers had to compete with such curiosities as a bust

1. Indianapolis Star, November 14 and 15, 1911, pp. 6 and 3, respectively.
of President William Howard Taft carved in butter. A performance for the real Taft at the White House was a high point, but elsewhere the choir encountered occasional hostility. In Richmond, Virginia, protests erupted and the local newspaper opined that the choir’s tour was a plot to “propitiate favor for Mormonism with the uninformed and thoughtless.” Though the pair of performances in Indianapolis received a favorable review in the Star, the paper’s critic admitted that the choir was “an organization rather unfamiliar in this part of the country.”

What a difference a century makes. When the Tabernacle Choir next appeared in Indianapolis on June 14, 2013, the venue was Bankers Life Fieldhouse, the cavernous home of the Indiana Pacers. Mitt Romney’s presidential bid had made it all but obligatory for future politicians to pay attention to the Mormon vote, so Indiana governor Mike Pence attended the performance as the guest of honor and even conducted the last number. Most striking of all, the choir’s concert came less than a year after the groundbreaking for the LDS Indianapolis Temple, which sealed Mormonism’s rise in Indiana from the status of tiny minority to serious denominational contender.

The choir’s experience in Indianapolis illustrates the public relations success story of the LDS Church in recent years, but as Reid L. Neilson shows in his important new book, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, that story goes back more than a century and is fraught with complexities. Though choir tours have become the most familiar component of the LDS public relations strategy, the church’s (and choir’s) first significant effort to influence public opinion occurred in conjunction with a famous late-nineteenth-century event, the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, which Neilson argues was a turning point in the LDS Church’s engagement with the non-Mormon world. Over seven thousand Latter-day Saints attended the event, some to help run the Utah exhibit, others to participate in associated congresses such as the World’s Parliament of

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Religions, and the Tabernacle Choir to sing in its first major competition outside Salt Lake City. While one might legitimately worry that the narrative of these events could be as tedious as the proceedings of a church convention, Neilson's briskly written account surprises with its level of intrigue and controversy. His amply documented research, moreover, conclusively demonstrates that the Columbian Exposition (as the 1893 World's Fair was known) became the testing ground for the church's future public relations. Recent PR gambits such as the 2013 tour that took the Tabernacle Choir back to Indianapolis, and even the “I’m a Mormon” advertisement campaign (which placed billboards and television spots in Indianapolis and other key markets), reflect in some ways the mainstreaming strategy first developed in 1893. Though Neilson does not take up the Indianapolis case in his book, his study provides an indispensable context for understanding the evolution of the LDS public image in this and other major markets across the country.

Neilson begins with an overview, valuable in its own right, of how Mormons represented themselves to the public prior to 1893, in the founding (1830–1846) and pioneer (1847–1890) periods of the church's history. He concludes that in both eras the church's primary outreach was through “aggressive use of the printed word” (p. 46), much of it heavily apologetic in character. He identifies four main areas of publishing activity: (1) a widening canon of scriptures (Doctrine and Covenants, 1835; Pearl of Great Price, 1851), (2) church-sponsored periodicals, (3) doctrinal treatises, and (4) historical works. His accounts of (2) and (3) are particularly helpful, showing how editors such as Erastus Snow, George Q. Cannon, and John Taylor took the publishing of periodicals to cities outside the Great Basin—St. Louis, San Francisco, and New York, respectively. As one Mormon writer hailed them: “May the Snow storm blow, the Cannon roar, and the Taylor cut until the gainsayers of Zion are silenced” (p. 39). Similarly, multiple editions (and foreign translations) of doctrinal treatises such as Parley Pratt's A Voice of Warning (1837), Lorenzo Snow's The Only Way to Be Saved (1841), and Parley Pratt's Key to the Science of Theology (1855) attempted to silence the gainsayers by showing how Mormonism trumped all
previous theological systems through its restoration of ancient doctrines. The problem with this flood of publications, Neilson argues, is that it “yielded considerable converts but very few friends” (p. 46). That is, it failed as a public relations strategy because it emphasized doctrinal peculiarity rather than the Latter-day Saints’ contributions to mainstream American culture. (Had Neilson’s narrative focused on the twentieth century, it would have been interesting for him to engage Kathleen Flake’s argument that in the wake of the Smoot controversy, the LDS Church actually reembraced a form of doctrinal peculiarity in elevating the importance of Joseph Smith’s first vision as a “safer” substitute for the more inflammatory doctrine of plural marriage.)

What pushed the church toward a new concern for public relations in the early 1890s? A key factor was the quest for Utah statehood, made possible by Wilford Woodruff’s “Manifesto” of 1890 disavowing plural marriage. The 1893 Chicago World’s Fair presented a unique opportunity to showcase Utah’s contributions to the nation. Since the Utah Territory’s population was then 98 percent Latter-day Saint, involvement in the Exposition also became a way for the church to demystify Mormonism by exposing the public to living, breathing Mormons. Neilson points out that because there were still relatively few Mormon missionaries at this time, most Americans had never encountered a Latter-day Saint. He quotes a Chicago Tribune reporter who wrote that local residents had an “overwhelming curiosity to know what manner of creature a real live flesh and blood Mormon is.” After seeing the Tabernacle Choir perform, the reporter confirmed for Tribune readers that Mormons were just like other folks: “They have no eccentricities of manners or costume. The men are manly; the women are sweet, womanly, [and] real pretty many of them” (p. 131).

As a measure of how seriously the church took the choir’s participation, all three members of the First Presidency (Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith) accompanied the singers on

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the journey to Chicago, which included performance stops en route in Denver, Kansas City, Independence (Missouri), and St. Louis. In Chicago, in what Neilson calls the church’s “preeminent ‘Cinderella’ moment of the nineteenth century” (p. 138), the choir was chosen to provide the dedicatory music during the placing of the Liberty Bell at the Exposition. The choir also took the silver medal in the Exposition’s Welsh Eisteddfod (performance festival), coming in second only to a Welsh choir that was the odds-on favorite. President Woodruff proudly recorded in his journal that the choir came in second place “Contesting against the world” and that he and his fellow members of the First Presidency were “Received with open Arms” by the “Leading Men of the world” (p. 139).

The welcome was less than open-armed, however, when the church sought a place at the World’s Parliament of Religions, which met as part of the Exposition. John Henry Barrows, the chair of the organizing committee and pastor of Chicago’s First Presbyterian Church, was an outspoken opponent of Mormonism. When the LDS Church failed to receive an invitation to appear alongside the other major religious traditions represented, B. H. Roberts, a member of the First Council of the Seventy and a well-known apologist for the church, took up the cause. Eventually, Roberts won over another Parliament organizer, Merwin-Marie Snell, a Catholic scholar and writer, who publicly accused his colleagues of not dealing fairly with the Mormons. The controversy spilled over into the local press, and Neilson does a good job of capturing the clash of personalities.

In the end, it was Mormon women who had the most success at winning acceptance by their non-Mormon peers. Two years before the Exposition, the LDS Relief Society had gained membership in the National Council of Women. This paved the way for full LDS participation in the World’s Congress of Representative Women, which convened in conjunction with the Exposition. As a result, members of the Relief Society had the opportunity at the Exposition to win over prominent non-Mormon activists, including Isabella Beecher Hooker and the onetime anti-Mormon reporter Rosetta “Etta” Luce Gilchrist. Neilson
concludes that by 1893 “Mormon women had woven themselves into the fabric of domestic and international feminism” (p. 102).

Yet, as Neilson’s account suggests, the members of the Relief Society achieved inclusion first and foremost as women and only secondarily as Mormons. This is indicative of what Neilson identifies as the larger paradox of the LDS assimilation strategy in the decades following 1893, when the church would go on to participate in a number of world’s fairs. Mormonism, he writes, was “mainstreamed into American culture as a religion because of its nonreligious achievements” (p. 178). In other words, while world’s fairs have often celebrated the exotic and even the peculiar, these classic American spectacles became a way for Mormons to portray themselves as a less peculiar people.

Peter J. Thuesen is professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, where he also serves as coeditor of Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation. His most recent book is Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine (Oxford, 2009), which received the 2010 Christianity Today Book Award for History/Biography.


Reviewed by Tom Simpson

In her 1977 essay “THE IMAGE-WORLD,” Susan Sontag wrote about the revolutions in culture and consciousness precipitated by a new photographic realism—a new way of seeing, remembering, and constructing our world—whose origins lay in the technological advances of the mid-nineteenth century. Employing her academic training in the study of religion, she noted that “image-making at its origins . . . was a practical,