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# Review of Irenaeus, Joseph Smith, and God-Making Heresy, by Adam J. Powell

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- Title**      *Review of Irenaeus, Joseph Smith, and God-Making Heresy*, by Adam J. Powell
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like “Relief Society” are usefully broken down into the subtopics “early membership” and “purpose of.”

This moderately priced collection, while primarily aimed at a Mormon audience, offers non-Mormons valuable insights into a woman’s role in the Mormon religion, a role that, until this volume, has received scant attention. In so doing, *At the Pulpit* contributes significantly to understanding and interpreting women’s experiences in American religious history and US history overall.

**Beverly Wilson Palmer**, research associate in the History Department at Pomona College, has edited documentary editions of nineteenth-century reformers, including *The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner* (1990) and *Lucretia Mott Speaks: The Essential Speeches and Sermons* (2017).

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Adam J. Powell. *Irenaeus, Joseph Smith, and God-Making Heresy*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015.

*Reviewed by Stephen C. Taysom*

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ADAM J. POWELL’S *Irenaeus, Joseph Smith, and God-Making Heresy* is not a book for the faint of heart or those allergic to theoretical musings. In just over two hundred pages, Powell manages to produce not only a fascinating comparison between Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century Mormonism and the religious thought of second-century church father Irenaeus, but also introduces an innovative application of the work of Max Weber and Hans Mol to the question of religious conflict management. This is a book about the dynamic nature of religion—how it makes and remakes itself while colliding with ever-present cultural forces.

The book's basic argument is that religions tend to develop a certain mode of soteriology (apotheosis) in response to a specific environmental stimulus (heresy). In simpler terms, Powell argues that, when faced with opposition, some religious traditions respond by developing a model of salvation that results in the deification of individual practitioners. Powell supports this basic assertion by marshalling evidence from two apparently dissimilar religious traditions from different parts of the world, sixteen centuries apart. He argues that sufficient similarities exist between the two historical cases to warrant his comparison. Most importantly, Smith's Mormons and Irenaeus's Christians responded to external opposition that threatened both "solidarity and social stability" by developing and elaborating theological tactics that conferred "stronger identities." Both groups, Powell argues, could do this because each nurtured an "inbuilt flexibility in the belief system." At the heart of the comparison is the presence of "remarkably resourceful religious leaders" who offered the solution of "deification" to their various "existential crises" (p. 78).

Powell acknowledges that he is far from the first scholar to examine how various religious traditions, including Mormonism, have used "tension" between themselves and broader host cultures to their benefit. As one who has worked on this problem myself, I was interested to see how Powell added to the discussion, and I have identified three major contributions of this study to the literature. First, most previous comparative work on Mormonism has set it beside other religions in the nineteenth-century American milieu. My own work compared Mormons and Shakers, and the work of both Lawrence Foster and Louis J. Kern compared Mormonism to both the Shakers and the Oneida Community. Powell takes leave of both the continent and the century by bringing Irenaeus into the mix. Second, and probably more importantly, Powell explicitly addresses the responses of individual practitioners as well as the "collective" to severe persecution. Although he deploys the work of Hans Mol to great technical effect here, Powell's approach also clearly reflects the broader interest in the more impressionistic concept of "lived religion" that has surfaced in the field of religious studies in

recent decades. Finally, Powell devotes a significant amount of space to a painstaking reconfiguration of the category of “heresy” as it has been, and currently is, used in various academic disciplines.

In my estimation, Powell fully justifies his comparative choice. It is true that his work may be subject to criticism on the grounds that he lends probative weight to similarities and dismisses differences in order to support his conclusions. But that is the common criticism of nearly every comparative endeavor. If a reader rejects the value of comparative studies on such conceptual grounds, then, of course, such a reader will not find Powell’s comparisons justified. But that is a general rejection of a method, applicable to comparisons of any or all groups. I can find no reason why, if one accepts the legitimacy of the comparative enterprise, the specific comparison of Mormonism and the religious thought of Irenaeus is anything but enlightening and apt. I am, perhaps, biased on this point since I believe strongly in the primacy of categorical, theoretical, and conceptual thinking over the parochial, specific, and interpretatively impoverished work that has for so long dominated the field of Mormon studies. Comparative studies are difficult to pull off. To do so effectively requires that the author be in control not only of the history and the historiography of the comparative constituencies—no mean feat in this — but also of the theoretical literature that frames the comparison. Powell acquits himself admirably here. In fact, one of the few criticism I have of the book is that it is too comprehensive in its literature reviews. This is a common issue with books based on dissertations, as Powell’s is. When writing for a dissertation committee, the candidate must include explicit nods to a vast sea of scholars in order to demonstrate a firm grasp of the literature and the place of his or her work in it. But books are not dissertations, and a firmer editorial hand could have shorn many of these references away and tucked many others into footnotes where inquiring minds could find them, where they would not get underfoot of interested nonspecialists who will likely make up the majority of the book’s readers. A related concern is that Powell’s writing is highly abstract and overly technical. All too frequently, readers are left to puzzle over sentences like

this: “Heresy must be incorporated into the process of cosmization; the social experiences must be objectivated into a comprehensive nomos” (p. 104). While Powell’s considerable erudition is beyond dispute, the complexity of his thinking deserves greater clarity of expression. Again, the transition from dissertation to book generally requires a stronger editorial hand that preserves the complexity of the author’s thought while rendering it accessible to educated nonspecialists.

There are some minor problems with Powell’s comparisons. In comparative studies, it is common for the author to find one of the comparative elements more familiar, more easily documented, and easier to master than the other(s). Powell appears far more comfortable with Mormonism than with the second-century Christianity of Irenaeus. Part of this stems from the imbalance of source material between the groups. In the Mormon case, there is abundant documentary evidence about Mormons and the various groups that “persecuted” them. Powell has a harder time with Irenaeus. This is particularly evident in his rather impressionistic treatment of “Gnosticism” that overlooks some of the more recent scholarship on the subject. The other potential problem in Powell’s comparison is that Joseph Smith was the founder of a religious tradition and was largely responsible for the doctrinal and theological content and ritual practices introduced in the first decade and a half of the church’s existence. Irenaeus, on the other hand, served as the bishop of what is now Lyon, and while the influence of his writings was indeed wide and persistent, there is a different quality to the positions occupied by the two men. Powell blunts the impact of these differences by focusing on a single idea propounded by both men rather than on the men per se. This may not be sufficient to satisfy every critic, but I am convinced that the various imbalances do not materially impact the overall argument. What’s more, Powell’s mastery of Mormon history is second only to the insights he offers into its dynamics. For instance, consider his observation that “from the outset, Joseph Smith seems to have placed an emphasis on . . . binary opposites in the human experience and the advantageous effects of one force being countered by another” (p. 145). This insight raises important questions about the

degree to which a belief in the cosmic centrality of opposition influenced later Mormon experiences with persecution.

Powell's efforts to address the dynamics of individual identity within the larger collective is impressive, although readers of Mormon studies may not find it particularly useful. As a scholar of religion as a cultural construct, however, I find this dimension of the book deeply interesting and provocative. The inspiration for his argument is the relatively obscure sociologist of religion mentioned above, Hans Mol. Mol, who was most productive in the 1970s, developed a theory that defined religion as any system that provided identity by means of myth, ritual, and emotion. Further, Mol viewed religion primarily as a way of negotiating the opposing forces of differentiation and identity. For Mol, as Powell reads him, the central challenge of religion is maintenance, "the ability to produce meaning and identity while remaining adaptable to the group's needs" in the face of an ever-changing cultural environment (p. 39). There are two basic axioms that are true of historically persistent religious traditions: they are always changing in response to cultural dynamics, and they expend considerable rhetorical energy trying to deny or marginalize those changes. Scholars have long had evidence for how this process works on the level of the social organization. What Powell offers in this book is a detailed and well-grounded theory for how that process works for the individuals that constitute the collective. Powell's insights in this vein will have immediate application to my own work and, undoubtedly, the work of scholars far outside the field of Mormonism.

Powell's final contribution comes in the form of his reinvention—or reclamation, depending on one's point of view—of the term *heresy*. For many centuries, the term has referred to a belief that is unauthorized by or otherwise in opposition to a more dominant religious culture. Powell rejects that and defines *heresy* as "opposition from any or all directions against the solidarity, identity, and the existing worldview of a collective" (p. 27). Elsewhere he defines it as "religious conflict" and as an "ideal type of religious opposition comprised of societal, doctrinal, and personal elements" (p. 5). His conclusions about heresy—that it

has the salutary effect of testing the “conceptual elasticity” of a religion as well as “enhancing dynamism and solidarity when they are needed most”—are not terribly original (p. 222). What *is* original, however, is his willingness to recast such a well-entrenched term as *heresy*. This is an act of scholarly courage that is likely to draw fire from many quarters, but it may be worth the risk if his reasoning behind his new use of the term gains traction. It has the potential for changing the way scholars think and write about religious oppression, opposition, persecution, and dissent, and that makes it a valuable contribution.

Although I have some minor quibbles with the book, I think it deserves a wider audience than it is likely to get. The broader academy has yet to fully embrace Mormonism as a tradition of sufficient gravitas to merit comparison, and this will prove difficult for Powell to overcome. Readers interested in Mormon studies may be put off by the technical prose or the subjection of data about Mormonism (the stories we are so fond of telling) to the service of a much broader argument about religion and culture. However, books like Powell’s are important, pioneering steps toward a more mature notion of how Mormonism can function as a suitable subject of study for scholars interested in the nature of religion as a concept and as a fully integrated cultural agent.

**Stephen C. Taysom**, PhD, is an associate professor of philosophy and comparative religion at Cleveland State University. He is the author of numerous articles on American religious history as well as two books: *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds* and the forthcoming *Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith*.