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# Review of Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945, by Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner, eds.

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PATRICK Q. MASON OPENS THE INTRODUCTION TO *Out of Obscurity* with a few short words and phrases. They include Joseph Smith, polygamy, golden plates, *The Book of Mormon* musical, Mitt Romney, and Proposition 8. Mason's point is that Americans know a lot about the controversial origins of Mormonism and a lot about the impact that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has had on recent American politics. They don't know much about what has transpired in between. Mason is exactly right. This book represents the efforts of Mason, coeditor John G. Turner, and thirteen other scholars to explain how Mormons, in the decades since the end of World War II, have emerged as one of the world's most influential religious movements with over fifteen million members who are transforming cultures in the United States and abroad.

This is an excellent collection of essays. The editors did a masterful job of selecting both more experienced professors as well as newly emerging scholars including a few graduate students for this assignment. Many contributors are practicing Mormons, and some are not. Their goal was to offer a more "robust, multifaceted, and analytical" analysis of this period of Mormonism's "greatest growth, acceptance, and success as an increasingly global church" (p. 5). Furthermore, this is not just a book about the LDS Church. The editors wisely pushed the contributors to use Mormonism as a lens into making sense of more general American history. This study, Mason explains, "gives insight

into religion in a modern age of mass industrialization, near-universal literacy, urbanization and suburbanization, shifting norms of gender and sexuality, civil rights and youth movements, corporatization, globalization, Americanization, and technological revolutions” (p. 7). They do this using primarily a historical approach, but numerous authors are well versed in and draw from a variety of other disciplines as well.

The editors divide the fourteen essays into four categories: internationalization, political culture, gender, and religious culture. But this collection really could be more aptly characterized as two chapters on internationalization, and then culture, culture, and culture. But perhaps having distinct sections makes the book easier for readers to follow. The essays on politics offer much to digest. Some of the chapters offer insight and analysis on topics that have received a lot of attention recently. Neil Young, in a smart piece, explains the long history behind LDS efforts to oppose same-sex marriage in California and shows how the church is evolving in its dealings with those attracted to others of the same sex. J. B. Haws uses the varying successes of George and Mitt Romney to demonstrate how in some ways George’s religious faith was less controversial in the 1960s than his son’s was in the twenty-first century. Other essays on politics deal with less well-known topics. Mason’s essay is a brilliant exploration of the ideas and influence of former secretary of agriculture and church prophet Ezra Taft Benson, whom he identifies as “one of the primary shapers, if not the chief architect, of late twentieth-century Mormon political and economic conservatism” (p. 66). James Dennis Lorusso explores how and why Mormons became such big boosters of free market capitalism, especially since early Mormons were not. “Pro-business rhetoric,” he writes, “gave the church a means to sustain its distinctiveness for its members while simultaneously endearing itself to the broader American public” (p. 122). Max Perry Mueller offers a compelling, and somewhat troubling, account of the battle between the church and protestors over the use of Temple Square.

The two essays on internationalization offer important insights into narrow topics. Nathan B. Oman looks at the ways in which the church has handled legal conflicts abroad, often choosing to submit to local

authorities so as to avoid conflict. “The dominant theology of the state in Mormon discourse,” he argues, is “quietist and nonconfrontational, a marked contrast from the theodemocratic ambitions of the nineteenth century” (p. 18). Taunalyn Rutherford explores how LDS missionaries translate the faith into the idioms of foreign cultures such as India. “The next major horizons of LDS church growth,” she explains, “will require greater understanding of and engagement with religious cultures outside of western Christianity” (p. 51). While these two chapters highlight the internationalization of the church, it is clear that much more work needs to be done on this topic. The authors offer little more than a tease about the ways Mormonism is evolving outside of the United States and the impact it is having on other cultures. Sara M. Patterson focuses on internationalization in a different way. She offers a fascinating discussion of the sesquicentennial of the Mormon trek and arrival to Salt Lake City. She shows how dramatically the church has evolved from treating Utah as the Holy Land to focusing on grafting outsiders, regardless of their location, into the history of the church.

Numerous essays also examine issues of gender and family, topics that have been at the center of public perceptions of Mormonism in recent years. Amanda Hendrix-Komoto offers a thoughtful analysis of the church’s Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii, where women reenacting supposedly traditional rituals wear native clothes that Mormons would otherwise consider inappropriate. Caroline Kline focuses on a different kind of gendered performance. She examines the ways in which Mormon couples split up their obligations in the family. For Kate Holbrook, housework is an important arena through which to make sense of LDS gender ideologies. Kristine Haglund investigates yet another kind of gendered LDS performance—the rise of the mommy blog, which has proven to be a prominent space for laypeople to work out debates about the proper role of women in the church and family. Finally, Rebecca de Schweinitz tries to make sense of the Latter-day Saints’ record of success at keeping Mormon children in the church as they enter their teens and beyond. She argues that church leaders “drew on pre-existing doctrinal principles (about human society, freedom, and

identity) that corresponded with contemporary youth values, and successfully appropriated some of the rhetoric and the spirit of the sixties to revitalize the church's messages, structures, and programs" (p. 301).

Two final essays deal with the ways Mormonism is presented to the public. First, Matthew Bowman offers an intriguing analysis of the rise of the anti-Mormon countercult movement. Finally, in the last essay in the book, John Turner focuses on the role of the church in shaping its history and protecting access to its archives. However, he explains, in recent years, the church has become far more open to serious, rigorous scholarship, which this book both acknowledges and models.

As a whole, this collection of essays offers a variety of insights for scholars and students alike. First, they show that post-World War II Mormonism is certainly much more than what can be summarized in an episode of *South Park*. Despite the top-down ecclesiology of the church, success is bringing challenges that are leading to increased diversity. Second, Mormons are at the forefront of American life at dealing with challenges and changes to gender roles. Mormons' emphasis on "family values" has been one of its most attractive recruiting pitches, but defining what those values are is in constant flux as the culture evolves. Third, the church has had a substantial impact on American politics but continues to rethink its strategy and which issues should be most important. With Trump assuming the presidency, the church is going to have to work even harder to balance its commitment to a politics that celebrates individual character and integrity and one that celebrates the free market. Something may have to give. Fourth, the growth of the church abroad may yet offer another challenge to the church's politics. The less white and the less consumerist the church becomes as its members increasingly come from foreign lands, the more soul-searching the church will likely have to do to separate what is truly an issue of faith from what is simply a product of the American way of life that has been packaged as faith. Finally, the church has made excellent strides in recent years at dealing honestly with its past history. This is a challenge that will continue as more and more young Mormons are discovering some of the thorny parts of Mormon history via Google searches. The

church will need to continue to wrestle with how to deal with its past, especially when scholars still have many questions about the historical accuracy of elements of the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, the church has for decades trained an army of truly top-tier historians who teach in some of the best universities in the country. I have no doubt they will continue to offer many insights into how best to deal honestly with and make sense of the church's past.

In sum, this is an excellent and provocative collection of essays. The editors have done a superb job of putting it together, choosing the topics, and ensuring that every piece is clear and well organized and makes a significant argument. It will, I am sure, inspire much debate and new scholarship for many years to come.

**Matthew Avery Sutton** is a Guggenheim Fellow and the Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor of History at Washington State University. He is the author of *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014) and *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

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*Reviewed by Jennifer Graber*

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