2001

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Faith without Caricature?

Raymond Takashi Swenson

Mormon America seeks to be a general introduction to all aspects of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from the perspective of two "conventional Protestants":

A candid but nonpolemical overview written for non-Mormons and Mormons alike, focusing on what is distinctive and culturally significant about this growing American movement. If we have succeeded, the outsiders will find some fascinating information and want to learn even more. And the insiders will see themselves portrayed fairly while learning some things they would not have known otherwise. (p. xi)

In other words, the authors believe they know more than most members of the Church of Jesus Christ do about certain aspects of the church, particularly its governance, its history, and its doctrines. This "more intellectual than thou" attitude is pervasive throughout the body of this work.

Richard Ostling is currently a religion writer for the Associated Press; he was writing for Time when he coauthored the 4 August 1997 cover story "Mormons, Inc.,” in which he tried to estimate the

church’s revenues. That analysis is updated here in a chapter of the same title (p. 113). He holds master’s degrees in both journalism and religion. His wife, Joan Ostling, is the author of a comprehensive bibliography of books by and about C. S. Lewis, has master’s degrees in English and political science, and has also worked as a journalist. Although this fact does not appear in their book, a review essay by Richard John Neuhaus, editor in chief of the journal First Things, notes that his good friends the Ostlings are evangelical Christians.¹

Mormon America is very much like two books in one. The first depicts individual Latter-day Saints “as a model minority, a hard-working people with more education than the American average, deeply committed to church and family” (p. xxiv). When the authors describe ordinary living Latter-day Saints, the picture comes across as factual, reportorial, and free of polemical bias, although their portrayal does not provide any deep insight into the personal beliefs of their subjects or the role that scripture study, prayer, and the witness of the Holy Ghost have had in establishing their convictions. The Saints are portrayed as people who would be good neighbors to anyone. The writing in these parts of the book (such as “Some Latter-day Stars,” p. 130) is chatty, witty, and superficial, in the style of an article from (surprise!) Time, but the Ostlings give no explanation for the reason Latter-day Saints like to hear all those general conference talks that are “routine, even banal” (p. 202) and all the sacrament meeting talks that are so bad that “even a mediocre Protestant preacher is bound to present better Sunday sermons than the ward talks from Mormonism’s lay amateurs” (p. 384), presumably including bishops and high councilors.

Yet in the second part, when the Ostlings begin to discuss the church’s doctrines, its history, and its leaders, they paint a landscape that, to a knowledgeable Latter-day Saint, is selective with a bias toward the sensational.

Clones of Quinn

It is clear that the authors' views on religion led them to rely extensively on D. Michael Quinn and his writings for their understanding of Latter-day Saint issues and history, a choice that will likely be viewed as unfortunate by many readers of the *Review.* Their citations of Quinn and his works appear throughout their book. They load praise on him as their ideal of what a Mormon intellectual should be. “D. Michael Quinn would be an example of a ‘new Mormon history’ scholar who attempts to combine the goal of objective scholarship and candor with taking faith claims seriously” (p. 416). Quinn is one of the “best and brightest, . . . a brilliant analyst” (p. 383), a “male sympathizer” of feminists (p. 364), and “the most important scholar” among six excommunicated in 1993 (p. 357); they even award him the alliterative title of “the historian of the hierarchy” (p. 381).

The Ostlings use Quinn to chastise “traditional Mormon apologists” for not recognizing that “there is . . . such a thing as simple honesty among scholars” (p. 251). A persistent reader would therefore be surprised to find the Ostlings' uncomfortable and tardy acknowledgment in an endnote at the very end of their book that they have failed to tell us up front that their star witness, Quinn, has been openly homosexual since 1996, “but that issue played no part in his years of difficulty with LDS officials. He took no leadership role in the Mormon homosexual movement, but has published a book about the history of same-sex behavior among Mormons” (p. 427). One wonders how the Ostlings determined that Quinn’s previously hidden homosexuality played no role in his attitude toward the church and its leaders, or how it is not “taking a leadership role” to write a book that claims that homosexuality was previously accepted among

Latter-day Saints. Certainly they must know that this fact will under- cut Quinn's credibility as an objective scholar of religion among many of their readers, both members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and nonmembers who take seriously biblical teachings on sexual morality. The Ostlings clearly identify themselves as scholars, but where is that "simple honesty"?

The Ostlings follow Quinn's lead in chapters on polygamy ("Polygamy Then and Now," p. 56), temple rituals ("Rituals Sacred and Secret," p. 184), the Church Educational System ("Saintly Indoctrination," p. 220), church history ("Faithful History," p. 238), the Book of Mormon ("The Gold Bible," p. 259), the Pearl of Great Price ("Discovering 'Plain and Precious Things,'" p. 278), and Mormon intellectuals ("Dissenters and Exiles," p. 351). Repeatedly the Ostlings accuse the church "hierarchy" of a strong anti-intellectual bias and active suppression of information about the church's history, its leaders (especially Joseph Smith), and its distinctive books of scripture. The real bogeyman of Mormon America is Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "the most doctrinaire of today's apostles and the most likely to enforce an even harder party line" (p. 381), whose position as second in line to become president of the church is cited with foreboding.

Most of the apostles are only mentioned in the very last endnote of the book (pp. 430–31), with one-sentence biographies. Somewhat more attention is given to Elder Dallin Oaks, "a true intellectual, a rarity among the Apostles" (p. 231). One wonders what the Ostlings' definition of an "intellectual" is, in view of the fact that they themselves report that Russell Nelson has a Ph.D. as well as an M.D.; that Jeffrey Holland has a Ph.D. from Yale and Henry Eyring a Ph.D. from Harvard; that Neal Maxwell was a professor of political science; that Robert Hales earned a Harvard MBA, Richard Scott an engineering degree emphasizing nuclear reactors, and James Faust a J.D. The authors disparagingly note that President Packer has only a "less academically rigorous Ed.D." degree instead of a Ph.D. (p. 381). Since Elder Maxwell's many books occupy shelf space in every Deseret Book outlet, one wonders how the Ostlings missed his status as an articulate and educated author, which resulted in his being inter-
viewed for the PBS television series Searching for God in America. But such inconvenient facts would undercut their thesis of an innate anti-intellectualism and narrow worldview among the church’s leaders.

In their introduction, the Ostlings claim, “This is a real faith and must be understood in those terms, without caricature” (p. xxvi). Despite these stated good intentions, like most modern American journalism, Mormon America uses the reportorial shorthand of stereotypes to tell its readers how they should view the subjects of its presentation. Like a Japanese Kabuki play or a B-grade Hollywood Western movie, the Ostlings tell us clearly who are the dupes, villains, and heroes of their story. The ordinary, unquestioning Latter-day Saint is fed strange doctrinal teachings that have never been properly tested through examination by credentialed theological scholars. They get this feeding through their weekly Sunday meetings and through Brigham Young University and the Church Educational System’s seminaries and institutes of religion. True information about the doctrines and history of the church, as well as its financial activities, is actively censored by a hierarchy made up of businessmen, whose goal is to ensure that the church is a growing and financially strong institution. The intellectuals who are in, or who have been excommunicated from, the church are fighting a constant battle against the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to get the truth out to the members at large.

If this assessment of the Ostlings’ thesis seems harsh, I would cite in my defense the conclusions drawn from their book by Father Richard John Neuhaus, who was prompted to feature Mormon America in his monthly “Continuing Survey of Religion and Public Life” in First Things, a journal that advocates the propriety of religious voices being heard on issues of public policy. His essay was entitled “Is Mormonism Christian?” following the Ostlings’ chapter titled “Are Mormons Christian? Are Non-Mormons Christian?” (p. 315). Unsurprisingly, following the lead of the Ostlings, Neuhaus answers no. He says that

In the conventional version controlled by LDS authorities, [the church] is true if you believe it is true. Thus is the back door shut against potentially subversive reason. . . .
There is, moreover, a corrosive tradition of make-believe in the LDS, such as the claim that Joseph Smith translated the *Book of Abraham*. . . . The sanitized story of Mormonism promoted by the LDS tries to hide so much that cannot be hidden. . . . And how, except by a practiced schizophrenia, can LDS biblical scholars engage with other scholars if they are required to give credence to . . . Smith’s "translation" (i.e., re-writing) of the King James Bible? There is a . . . history of LDS leadership in backstopping secretiveness with mendacity.3

While these words are grating to church members' ears, they are the perceptions of a distinguished Catholic scholar about the message triumphantly announced in *Mormon America*.

Recognizing the harshness of his critique, Neuhaus justifies himself by asserting that the Latter-day Saints "are no longer an exotic minority that is, by virtue of minority status, exempt from critical examination and challenge,4 paraphrasing the Ostlings, who cite Jan Shipps's statement that "Mormonism can no longer employ special pleading for itself as a protected minority" (p. xxvi) and that "a church that has millions of adherents loses 'the protection of minority religious status.'5 But the thin-skinned and image-conscious Mormons can still display some immature, isolationist, and defensive reactions to outsiders, perhaps because there is no substantive debate and no 'loyal opposition' within their kingdom" (p. 376). Neither Neuhaus nor the Ostlings identify when this golden age of "no piling on the Mormons" occurred (perhaps I missed it when I was on my mission in Japan and couldn't read *Time* magazine), but they make it clear that it is now open season on Latter-day Saints and their beliefs. We Latter-day Saints just don't know how to take constructive criticism. "The FARMS team is particularly shrill in its rhetoric, an odd pose for an organization that seeks to win intellectual respectability for the church" (p. 376).

4. Ibid., 99.
Intellectuals, Arise!

Both the Ostlings and Neuhaus find the only hope for truth and enlightenment in Mormonism among the intellectuals, who are all critical of the church and live under constant threat of excommunication for applying scholarly methods to their study of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine ("Dissenters and Exiles," p. 351). "Over the next century and more, those who are now the 'dissidents and exiles' may become the leaders in forging, despite the formidable obstacles, a rapprochement with historic Christianity."^6

Neuhaus's essay prompted a strong reaction from many Latter-day Saint readers of First Things,^7 nine of whose letters were published in the June/July 2000 issue. He responded, "I am now inclined to think that my essay, like the Ostling book (Mormon America) that I cited favorably, overestimated the degree to which Mormon intellectuals who explore difficult and sometimes embarrassing questions are viewed by the LDS as 'dissenters and exiles.' There are academics and others in very good standing who are wrestling with these questions and are eager for dialogue with (other?) Christians."^8

In fact, the Ostlings almost ignore the existence of qualified scholars at Brigham Young University and FARMS. "Very few Mormons are fully credentialed in scriptural studies, ancient languages, and related critical studies. . . . When Mormons step outside [their] enclosure, they tread on thin ice" (p. 268). In the chapter on the Book of Mormon, virtually the only products of pro-Latter-day Saint scholarship that are mentioned appear in a single paragraph that reads, in its entirety, as follows:

Emphasis is currently being placed on studies that attempt to show that the Book of Mormon had many writers rather than just one (that is, Joseph Smith). The work includes wordprint analysis, which aims to show that different patterns of word usage prove different authors. Another

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7. Including myself, since I subscribe to First Things.
approach is the study of chiasmus by John W. Welch, a BYU law professor [his other credentials are omitted] who is on the board of FARMS and is editor-in-chief of BYU Studies. Chiasmus is the use of parallel phrases repeated with some reversals, seen frequently in the Bible. Welch argues that these complexities [found in the Book of Mormon] imply ancient authorship. The extensive scholarship of BYU’s Hugh Nibley over the years has emphasized parallels between the Book of Mormon and ancient Near Eastern culture and language. The aim of Nibley’s work is to provide evidence for Book of Mormon cultural materials that were not known in Joseph Smith’s time. His extensive scholarship has included study of the Book of Mormon in relation to ancient names, geographic detail, and military, social, and political institutions. (pp. 274–75, emphasis added)

Note that the Ostlings repeatedly talk about “attempts” and “aims” and “study,” without admitting that either Welch or Nibley ever asserts that he has reached any conclusions after undertaking his “studies.” The fact that chiasmus actually appears in the Book of Mormon, or that some names in the Book of Mormon have Egyptian cognates, is not even mentioned. The picture drawn is of a couple of Latter-day Saint scholars valiantly but hopelessly straining to find some evidence to support the Book of Mormon, without success. The only books the Ostlings cite that have been produced in the last fifty years by any pro-church scholars on the Book of Mormon are Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins,9 An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon,10 and Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion.11 This level of omission, when a visit to any Deseret Book

outlet could find most of FARMS’s published books, is a deliberate distortion of the facts.

This is the Ostlings’ pattern throughout their book. They cite only Latter-day Saint doctrines and beliefs sufficiently to create a straw man for their non-Latter-day Saint critics to shoot at, at length. Hardly any quotations from the Book of Mormon itself appear, except for passages that mention polygamy (p. 66); even there the Ostlings quote the rule in Jacob 2:27 but pointedly omit the exception in verse 30. All the reader hears from the Book of Mormon is a paraphrase of the most basic outlines of the story, without any sense of the strong message of Christ and his atonement. They quote the testimony of Daniel Peterson of the Book of Mormon (p. 277) without anywhere quoting Moroni 10:3–5 or noting its importance to Latter-day Saint conversion.

The Ostlings show no awareness of the facts reported by evangelical scholars Carl Mosser and Paul Owen in their article “Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?” Mosser and Owen note that the hope of critics of the church that liberal Mormon intellectuals will alter the church’s distinctive doctrines through exposing their unscholarly underpinnings is a myth, and that “Currently there are . . . no books from an evangelical perspective that responsibly interact with contemporary LDS scholarly and apologetic writings. . . . Many of the authors promote criticisms that have long been refuted.” That accurately describes Mormon America as well.

Manipulating the Truth

Given the Ostlings’ call for the honest treatment of church history and doctrine, I hope it is not discourteous to point out their shortcomings in this regard. A knowledgeable Latter-day Saint reader will note some obvious errors and distortions. Lucy Mack Smith’s

13. Ibid., 181.
account of how Joseph Smith Jr. would discuss with his family the Nephites and Lamanites is transposed backward in time by the Ostlings, from after Moroni’s visit to a time before the first vision (p. 24) in an effort to show that Joseph was speculating wildly about Indian origins before he got the idea for the Book of Mormon. The authors first observe “Joseph Jr.’s youthful fascination with Indians” and that “Joseph was also obviously a highly imaginative and intelligent young boy, interested in the Indian culture hinted at by the burial mounds in the area” (p. 23). After they quote Lucy’s story, they then discuss Joseph’s first vision at age fourteen and his vision of Moroni at age seventeen. Yet the full text of Lucy’s account confirms that the “family home evening” took place when Joseph was “eighteen years of age,” after seeing the record and meeting with Moroni.14

According to the Ostlings, the Book of Mormon “tells about the Lamanites, Native Americans who are considered by Mormons to be part of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel” (p. xix).

The Ostlings seem to be particularly confused about the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. They first declare that “Of the eleven official witnesses who testified that they saw the Book of Mormon’s golden plates . . . [o]nly Smith’s own father and two brothers remained steadfast in their commitment” (p. 12). Later, in contrast, they claim that “to the end of their lives, none of them [the witnesses to the Book of Mormon] disavowed their written testimonies even though most broke with Smith’s church” (p. 266). But then they cite “conflicting reports” that the witnesses never saw the actual plates (p. 267) before admitting that David Whitmer “always maintained his Book of Mormon testimony” (p. 288). The Ostlings quote neither the official testimonies nor any of the later affirmations of the witnesses (lest they be too unequivocal?).

The authors’ attempts to show church manipulation of history go to ridiculous lengths. They claim that the text for a BYU church history course, Religion 341–43, “devotes four pages to the Haun’s

Mill Massacre of 1838,” while “by contrast, the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857” is only “described in two pages” (p. 230). Even if we were to agree with the Ostlings’ belief that the length of each passage has any relationship to its assigned significance in church history, the actual textbook reveals that the Haun’s Mill discussion pages have photographs, but the material contains only about twenty-one column inches of text versus approximately fifteen column inches used to describe the Mountain Meadows Massacre. The Ostlings maintain that the text omits the fact that John D. Lee, “executed twenty years later for the crime . . . , was made the scapegoat” (p. 230), while in actuality the text says, “John D. Lee, a key participant, but certainly not the only officer responsible for the deed, was the only Latter-day Saint indicted. . . . Lee was finally convicted in September 1876 and a year later was taken by federal officials to the area of Mountain Meadows and executed.” Since the authors claim to have made a close reading of the textbook, these sensationalized misrepresentations can only be intentional.

In their discussion of distinctive Latter-day Saint doctrines on the nature of God and the meaning of salvation, they deliberately devalue the argument made by Stephen Robinson in Are Mormons Christians? that the doctrine of theosis—that full salvation consists of men becoming godlike—is a recognized part of both Mormonism and orthodox Christianity. The Ostlings fail to quote any of the passages cited at length by Robinson and instead quote orthodox and other scholars on the difference between the orthodox and Latter-day Saint concepts of God (p. 310). They change the subject because here, in this instance, clear traditional Christian teachings (albeit not Catholic or Protestant) uphold a Latter-day Saint doctrine they want to criticize.

15. Church History in the Fulness of Times (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 201–4.
16. Ibid., 371–73.
17. Ibid., 372–73.
19. See, for example, the article on deification from The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology excerpted at Robinson, Are Mormons Christians? 62.
The Ostlings have a hard time giving credence to the term anti-Mormon as applied to professional critics of the church (pp. 345–50); they have almost nothing negative to say about them, their tactics, and their distortions. In fact, they have high praise for Jerald and Sandra Tanner, claiming that they "gained credibility in 1984 by early proclaiming Mark Hofmann's Martin Harris 'salamander letter' to be a phony. . . . Jerald astutely spotted the fraud, even as the LDS Church's experts were judging the document to be genuine. The Tanners were bold and honest enough to expose Hofmann's forgery immediately" (p. 348). However, a check of the record in Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts's *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, clarifies that the Tanners were at first supportive of Hofmann's supposed recovery of various historical documents,20 that Jerald "expressed doubts about the letter's authenticity" because of its close parallels to E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unvailed*,21 and that Hofmann told Sandra Tanner that "You, of all people, should not be attacking this letter."22 The Ostlings have, 1984-like, transformed the Tanners' suspicion that some unknown person had forged the letter, possibly at an indeterminate time in the past consistent with the apparent age of the document and based solely on textual comparisons, into an unequivocal proclamation that the letter was a modern forgery created by Hofmann himself. The Ostlings omit any mention of efforts by Latter-day Saint historians to authenticate the document and do not credit the church with being "bold and honest enough" to publish in its own periodicals a document that could be used to criticize its official history.23

22. Ibid., 288.
23. For example, "Ron Walker and Dean Jessee were still pressing for provenance and authentication before publishing anything." Ibid., 287.
This Is as Good as It Gets

_Mormon America_ can be read to provide insight into how even well-educated and well-meaning Christians can deceive themselves into believing that they are being objective when they report on the church and its beliefs. The fact that the book is displayed prominently at the downtown Salt Lake City Deseret Book undercuts the Ostlings' central thesis, alleging that the church and its institutions try to suppress criticism and questions. The book is not an accurate summary of Mormonism for Latter-day Saints, and it will seriously mislead non-Latter-day Saints. If _Mormon America_ "is probably as thorough and fair a treatment of the LDS by outsiders as they are likely to get,"24 we Latter-day Saints can only depend on ourselves to get the truth out about the church, its doctrines, and the scholarly evidence supporting our faith.

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