



1-1-1992

The Divine Supermarket: Shopping for God in America Malise
Ruthven

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Recommended Citation

Midgley, Louis (1992) "*The Divine Supermarket: Shopping for God in America* Malise Ruthven," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol32/iss1/24>

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MALISE RUTHVEN. *The Divine Supermarket: Shopping for God in America*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1989; New York: William Morrow, 1989. x; 317 pp. \$18.95.

Reviewed by Louis Midgley, professor of political science at Brigham Young University.

Books need not be written for professionals in order to be valuable. For example, when written by a gifted writer, a travel diary can be a source of pleasure and instruction, for a visitor may see things that go unnoticed by those who inhabit a land. Thus I confess a fondness for the genre for which Alexis de Tocqueville set the standard.¹ In the 1850s, the Latter-day Saints first became a focus for travel writers, and two of these writers, Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, borrowed somewhat from Tocqueville.² The most recent entry into this field is an English journalist, Malise Ruthven, author of *The Divine Supermarket*. Like Richard F. Burton a hundred and thirty years earlier, Ruthven has written at different times about both Islam and Mormonism.³

Having been raised in England in “mainstream, liberal Protestantism” (7), which he now disdains, and having come from a privileged background (6), Ruthven deals with religion in America in a charming, fashionably condescending manner. He writes as one mildly amused by the strange behavior he finds rampant among Americans. “I have,” he explains, “deliberately selected subjects like Mormonism and fundamentalism, that seemed exotic and alien to my own way of thinking, to seek out differences rather than explore common ground” between American and European (or British) religiosity. Thus in *The Divine Supermarket*, he exploits the seemingly bizarre manifestations of religion in the United States, which he insists are unlike religion in Britain (3).

A secular fundamentalism forms for Ruthven the natural horizon from which he assesses the religious world. He does not seem to question his own disbelieving dogmas, and he finds no need to defend his stance from skepticism. Hence he writes with charming and refreshingly boyish self-confidence, easily confessing his secular biases. For example, he confesses that the “mainstream, liberal Protestantism” of his youth “contains no mystery” and hence has “no appeal” to him (7). In spite of this admission, his views are closer to staid liberal churches whose intellectuals have reached an accommodation with secular modernity. He prefers manifestations

of incredulity about divine things, and he will have nothing to do with what he sees as the irrationality and hocus-pocus of the Latter-day Saints. Accordingly, he expresses a fondness for those Saints of a liberal bent who have jettisoned the Book of Mormon and the story of angels appearing to Joseph Smith.

Nevertheless, I found myself agreeing with some of Ruthven's observations about American religiosity. For example, I am also annoyed when preachers in the Electronic Church refer to "Jeeeeeesus" as they work their audiences. But one must guard against the urge to agree with his mocking of unpopular (and hence vulnerable) people and things. When tempted to brush aside the sincerity of others by seeing greed or incredulity at work, as does Ruthven, we Latter-day Saints might well search for more charitable explanations or withhold judgment, and we should keep in mind that only when one knows something about a journalist's subject are the distortions apparent; otherwise they seem to hit the nail on the head.

These caveats clearly apply to *The Divine Supermarket*. In his search for why religions were the way he found them to be, Ruthven is, as might be expected, anxious to attribute much of the religiosity of Americans to the manipulation of gullibility by preachers driven by outright greed. Ruthven is not the first to attribute the motivation of greed to preachers. This approach has a long history. In 1861, Jules Remy, following suggestions made earlier by Tocqueville, claimed that the "thirst for gold . . . which is so powerful a spring in the commercial and industrial activity of the United States . . . was the first and fecundating inspiration of [Joseph] Smith's religious schemes."⁴

Ruthven admits that he is not equipped to write a genuinely scholarly treatise (313), for even the most able scholars find it difficult to make sense out of the vast variety within American religiosity. Instead, he writes as one who has ventured out to the provinces to see what the natives are doing and returned with some interesting accounts of their strange beliefs and practices. Hence his book contains a series of impressions, buttressed by a bibliography and cleansed by scholarly authorities.⁵ Having traveled for a short time in the United States,⁶ Ruthven, all the while aligning himself with rationality against the forces of unreason, tells of his encounters with New Age religion (including channelling), snake handling, a Hopi corn dance, the remnants of the Bogwam Rajneeshpuram in Oregon, and the Aryan "Nazi" movement at Hayden Lake, Idaho. He probes the Electronic Church in the form of Jerry Falwell's "ministry" (including

Liberty University), provides lurid accounts of the activities and eventual fall of Jimmy Swaggart's "ministry," and investigates Jim and Tammy Bakker and their notorious theme park. He examines partisan quarreling within the Southern Baptist Convention, the "creation-science" type of sectarian fundamentalism, and Robert Schuller's unctuous "theology of self-esteem." In dealing with two elements of Black religiosity, Ruthven is at his best: he provides a fine treatment of the Black Muslim movement, perhaps because of his previous work on Islam, and of the background and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. He quotes from interviews or conversations, on religious matters, with both the informed and the uninformed—academics, clergy, and otherwise. These conversations form the most fascinating portions of the book, for Ruthven was sufficiently knowledgeable, as well as sensitive to certain subtle nuances, to engage in intriguing and revealing conversations. In addition, the portions of the conversations he quotes seem to have been carefully reported, even though he has selected what he quotes from the perspective of his own secular agenda. All of this is woven together with accounts of landscapes, the weather, and the like in an entertaining, amusing, and sometimes instructive way.

Nearly a third of *The Divine Supermarket* is devoted to Joseph Smith and Mormon things. These form his primary example of irrational, absurd religion in America. For this portion of the book, Ruthven acknowledges help from scholars with Latter-day Saint connections including Jan Shipps, Linda Newell, Davis Bitton, and Alfred Bush.⁷ He describes an interview with "Paul Edwards, principal of the Temple School [which the RLDS use, among other things, to train their paid clergy], [who] is widely regarded as the RLDS church's leading intellectual" (95). Edwards turned out to be

friendly, about forty, with an honest, open manner. I felt immediately at ease with him. We talked about differences between the RLDS and the Utah Church. The Reorganized Church had a saying: "Utah has the kingdom, we've got the king." It brought to mind the anthropological distinction between the cult of the person and the cult of the text: Catholics, Shi'as and Reorganites are person-oriented, Protestants, Sunnis and Utah Mormons are peoples of the book. This . . . would explain [the current RLDS president] Wallace Smith's alleged disbelief in the Book of Mormon. So long as the RLDS had the Holy Family, they didn't need Joseph's Golden Bible. (95)

Edwards explained that up to 1915 "family legitimacy was crucial," but "after that the reorganization became protestantised.

I think it has enough identity now to survive without a Smith at its head” (95–96). Edwards further explained that the Latter-day Saints

had managed to establish their church without the legitimacy of the Prophet’s family, enabling them to expand at an unbelievable rate. Although the RLDS had the Family, they had never managed to establish the same sense of legitimacy for their church. They remained a comparatively small, élitist group of about quarter of a million. Most of them lived in the Independence area, and could trace their membership back two or three generations. (96)

Edwards said that the RLDS constitute “an aristocracy,” who have

the princes and princesses of the blood royal; but we also have a whole range of dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies whose fathers or grandfathers held important positions in the church. So while there’s a lot of loyalty to the Smith family, I think there’s even more to their predecessors at court. Most of the members of our Joint Council had fathers or grandfathers on the Council; some even go back to the fourth generation. My impression is that the family aristocracy is a much stronger source of allegiance than any particular religious belief. From the theological point of view, most of our people would be quite satisfied with Methodism or Baptism, though their style is probably closer to the Quakers. (96)

Ruthven next asked Edwards about the “part the Book of Mormon played in the teachings of the Reorganized Church” (96). Edwards said that his “guess would be that it constitutes less than ten per cent of our scriptural readings. We don’t teach it much in our schools. Our people believe *in* it, but they don’t believe it. It’s important as a symbol” (96). For Edwards, the Book of Mormon is something the RLDS have to live with: “It’s a story, a myth, who knows what? For most people I know it’s got nothing to do with anything. It’s the way we explain ourselves. But whenever possible, I avoid bringing it up. If somebody else brings it up I squirm. If somebody wants to know what I think I usually lie” (96).

Ruthven wanted to know why Edwards, given his view of the foundations of the faith, remains RLDS. “The Church,” Edwards said, “has some social and I think, in a very small sense, some religious meaning, and I don’t want to see it destroyed. I’m a member of the Church despite the Book of Mormon, not because of it. I don’t think that’s an unusual position for people in the RLDS, but it’s totally unacceptable to announce it” (96–97). Ruthven asked whether Wallace Smith, the current RLDS president, had announced that he does not believe the Book of Mormon, but Edwards brushed that question aside. About Latter-day Saint evangelism, Edwards maintained that it

is much more committed to the Book of Mormon. It's more difficult for them because they have a less élitist organization. For some of them the Book of Mormon is a positive attraction. The church tells them what to believe, they're not allowed a lot of questions. So you get the impression that the LDS are a bunch of happy, content people, whose questions have been answered. But if you actually know any Mormons, you know better than that. (97)

Edwards complained that a “lot of the Utah Saints don't know we [RLDS] exist. It comes as a great shock to them to discover that a quarter of a million people use the same scripture as they do, but don't think Brigham Young is a prophet” (97).

When he reached Utah, Ruthven was aware of “attacks on the Book of Mormon . . . from within the scholarly community—from the Mormon and non-Mormon academics who wrote about magic and Masonry; in particular the historians and anthropologists who were bound, from the professional point of view, to have questions not only about the book's origins, but about its claim to be a factual account of pre-Columbian American history” (119). He wondered “how educated, sophisticated modern Americans, people with professional backgrounds and interests, could still accept the Book of Mormon” (119). His inquiries took him to Brigham Young University, where his first interview was with Leonard J. Arrington, whom he describes as “a distinguished historian.”⁸

I began by raising the questions of magic, Masonry, and Indian origins. Every day new material was being published about early nineteenth-century American culture which threw the composition or “translation” of the Book of Mormon into greater relief (I picked my words cautiously). Was this not making it more and more difficult to sustain the official version, that there was a 1500-year gap between the Book's original composition and its “discovery” by Joseph Smith? (119)

Arrington indicated that he has always read the Book of Mormon as “sacred history,” which is for him “separate and distinct from the kind of history” (120) done by professional historians in universities:

What the Church tells us is sacred history, and somehow it doesn't bother me that what I'm doing down here—the study of people, and places and events—appears different. I don't expect them to merge together. When I was a student I read George Santayana's *Reason and Religion* in which he discusses the difference between myth or sacred history and actual history.⁹ He presents the idea that there is a sacred epic for Christians, Muslims and practically every other people. . . . So at an early stage I came to accept the idea that there is a truth which does not rest upon historical narrative, but comes under the heading of faith, belief or religion. Nothing that has come up, in the form of new

historical data, has ever bothered me. The story, the way that it's told, is something that's in your heart. When you hear songs sung, or poems read, or see pictures that show these things, whether it's Christian history, or Mormon history, or whatever, it stirs you inside. But it does not affect what you're writing professionally. Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim historians have found ways of pursuing their work and displaying their integrity while maintaining their faith. Why shouldn't Mormons do the same? (120)

Of his encounters with other Latter-day Saint intellectuals, Ruthven's interview with John W. Welch was in some ways the most intriguing precisely because Welch did not avoid the issue of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon by attempting to explain it away as a kind of founding myth. He set forth an argument for the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon that both stumped and annoyed Ruthven. Though Ruthven had been prepared by others with ways to counter Welch's favorite arguments, Ruthven could not handle them and hence brushed them aside by describing Welch as the type of person he instinctively disliked and then by adding a bit of humor. And yet Ruthven came away from his conversation with Welch ready to admit that "there was obviously more to the Book of Mormon than met the eye—at least, the eye unendowed with faith" (126). Though he "remained sceptical, the Mormon intellectuals had been persuasive ambassadors for the faith. Even if one didn't accept their arguments, it became possible to begin to see things from their point of view" (126).

Apparently what made Ruthven certain of the absurdity of the foundations of Mormonism was an assumption about the absurdity of all religion. For him, religion

is a by-product of human biochemistry that, like other cultures in the organic realm, has the ability to transform or modify the substances upon which it feeds. What Mormondom had created out of the repetitious flights of Joseph's fancy, his impoverished romancing, was no less impressive in its way than those much vaster edifices of myth, theology, mystery and drama that Christianity had built out of the bleeding, tortured corpse of its founder. In Provo the quest for truth about Mormon origins became meaningless. The truth was plain enough, in the passion with which the scholars, like early Christian fathers, defended the impossible and then, by trimming its more preposterous edges, gradually negotiated its acceptance in the wider world. (127)

In 1861 Remy, equally certain of the absurdity of Joseph Smith's presumed imposture, had argued that "absolute liberty" of conscience makes it possible for such movements as Mormonism to

flourish. “If Mormonism be a stain upon the United States, liberty is to be made responsible for it.”¹⁰ Remy felt that “the use and abuse of religious liberty, in a society of low intellectual culture, must rapidly bring back the principle of authority,” or terrible consequences, which the Latter-day Saints illustrate, can be expected.¹¹ Ruthven’s explanation for the religious mischiefs he finds in America is similar to that proposed by Remy. It is an explanation that deserves critical scrutiny because in the end, it advocates that the government engage in “quality control” over matters of conscience.

Ruthven argues that the American founders “sought to preserve political freedom by protecting the state from religiously sanctioned tyranny” (19). Freedom of conscience was coupled in the First Amendment to a prohibition on the establishment of a national church and eventually involved the disestablishment of state-supported churches. Ruthven traces the First Amendment back to the work of Thomas Jefferson (and James Madison) to set in place the Virginia statute for religious freedom; he senses that that statute was also an effort to protect the commonwealth of Virginia from the tyranny of an established church, thereby ensuring freedom of conscience, for the one could not be accomplished without the other. From Ruthven’s perspective, “The First Amendment is a two-edged sword. The disestablishment of religion is a condition of its free exercise. Freedom of worship means freedom, not just from the coercive power of the state, but from public scrutiny—freedom from anything resembling religious quality control” (307). From Ruthven’s perspective, the primary flaw in the First Amendment is that “the wall of separation erected to protect the state from ecclesiastical tyranny had the complementary result of protecting any group which organizes itself into a ‘church’ from embarrassing scrutiny by the state.” Because of this flaw, the unintended result has been that in the United States there has been no public authority to effectively suppress such mischiefs as “the absurdities in Mormonism” (309) or the host of other manias that dot the religious landscape of America. Ruthven believes that such “distortions would find it harder to entrench themselves in a Europe with established priesthoods manned by worldly professionals” (309–10).

Although Ruthven’s theory is correct if and only if the amendment was intended solely to protect the state from the tyranny of organized religion, he ends up defending the establishment of churches as an appropriate device to foster and protect enlightenment

from the ravages of the irrational “religious impulse” and thereby avoid the tyranny he sees inherent in all religion:

Most religions are absolutist. Claims to revelation militate against rational argument and compromise. In this sense all religions contain totalitarian possibilities; for totalitarianism, which welds the state into a single body “knit together as one man” (to borrow Governor Winthrop’s phrase) is really the religious impulse, the worship of leadership and ideology, the cult of Person or Book, directed towards secular ends. (310)

Thus the religious impulse necessarily involves “the possibility of totalitarianism, of a state which abolishes the individual will, just as surely as did Prussia or the empire of the Tsars. Anyone who doubts this possibility is unlikely to have witnessed the *apparatchiks* of Utah obediently voting for their geriatric ‘prophet’” (310). Ruthven thus feels that democracy is threatened by churches and the religious impulse: “Utopian dreams, millennial yearnings and other irrational manifestations of the religious spirit all tend to undermine democracy, whose principal moral resource is reasoned discourse. All of these things flourish in America as surely as in other parts of the globe, including the world of Islam. They thrive on the same insecurities, embracing as they do the same paranoid responses to the moral uncertainties and social disruptions of modernity” (311). Religion, therefore, has no genuine role in a republic.

Such an assessment of religion is grounded in Ruthven’s dogma that all religion is inherently irrational, absurd, and dangerous. There is a corollary: enlightenment or secularization or reason should have caused churches to disappear or at least should have helped restrict the religious impulse to a harmless sphere. Instead, in America, religious liberty has prevented reason and enlightenment from penetrating the hearts and minds of Americans enough to exorcise the fanatic enthusiasm of witless parochials. Where Tocqueville saw a major role for religion in a genuinely democratic regime, Ruthven sees religion as a crude instrument of unreason that industrialization and/or enlightenment should have swept aside. He insists that America has therefore failed to keep pace with Europeans, and especially the British, in managing to turn religious devotion into a genteel and harmless “museum culture” and sparing themselves the ravages of religious enthusiasm.

Europe and Britain succeeded precisely because the state could exercise some quality control over religion. In Europe “an accommodation had been reached in which the church was

subordinate but nevertheless remained part of the public realm"; the state could suppress somewhat the irrationality of religion, rendering it harmless, impotent, and hence relatively safe. The kind of religious flowering that Ruthven finds on the American religious landscape has not taken place elsewhere except "among the confused, the deracinated, the health-conscious, the unhappy or the merely curious" (306)—a nice way of admitting that such a flowering has been and still is taking place virtually everywhere, even or especially in stodgy old Britain, where once separatist independents fought for freedom of conscience and where a multitude of faiths bloom even now despite the dreary accommodation with secular modernity by the fashionably liberal religious establishment.

NOTES

¹ *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1969).

² Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City with a Sketch by Jules Remy of the History, Religion, and the Customs of the Mormons*, 2 vols. (London: W. Jeffs, 1861), iv–cxxx; for the allusion to Tocqueville, see ix, c, cii, cxxv–cxxx.

³ See Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints and across the Rocky Mountains to California* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861; 2d ed., 1862); reprinted as *The City of the Saints*, ed. Fawn M. Brodie (New York: Knopf, 1963). See also Ruthven's *Islam in the World* (New York: Oxford University, 1984); *Torture: The Grand Conspiracy* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1987); and *Cairo* (Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1980). Ruthven was a visiting professor of religion at Dartmouth College in 1989 and later taught in religion and history at the University of California, San Diego. See his "The Mormon's Progress," *Wilson Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1991): 24. This essay is stridently anti-Mormon. Though the *Wilson Quarterly* featured Ruthven's essay, it has received strong criticisms. See Martin Ridge, "Tasteless at Best, Offensive at Worst," *Wilson Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1991): 138; Thomas G. Alexander, "A Victim of Sources," *Wilson Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1991): 139; and Paul E. Edwards, "A Bag of Tricks," *Wilson Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1991): 138–40. But Martin E. Marty praises Ruthven for having "done his job well: He has caught the genius and captured the guise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Such an endorsement of Ruthven is disappointing, even though Marty, distinguished University of Chicago church historian, promotes and defends revisionist accounts of Latter-day Saint things. On Marty's opinions about recent Latter-day Saint historiography, see Midgley, "The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter of Secular Modernity," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:502–51.

⁴Remy and Brenchley, *A Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City*, xxxi. For Remy, Joseph Smith was “the greedy speculator, without conscience, and without shame” (xxxii).

⁵For example, Jan Shipps, whose *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985) is not mentioned by Ruthven, is credited with having read the portions of *The Divine Supermarket* dealing with the Latter-day Saints and with having straightened out some details. When we notice that Ruthven describes Mormonism as “a new religious tradition” and that he paraphrases the architecture of Shipps’s explication of the central thesis of her *Mormonism*, we might conclude that his debt to Shipps seems greater than he grants. For an additional indication of his debt to Shipps, see Ruthven’s “The Mormons’ Progress,” 22–48, which has appended to it an inaccurate, revealing bibliographical essay by Shipps entitled “Background Books,” 48–50. There are other anomalies. Ruthven claims to have consulted Richard L. Bushman’s *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); yet he does not mention Bushman’s highly relevant *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984). Shipps also fails to mention this book in her “Background Books,” though she celebrates Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History* and her own *Mormonism*, as well as books by writers such as Sterling M. McMurrin and by non-Mormons Lawrence Foster, Mark Leone, and Kenneth H. Winn.

⁶It is difficult to determine the exact date or length of his visit. And he has not indicated how he acquired insider information that allowed him to locate and play with those he interviewed.

⁷He cites, though sometimes inaccurately, the following authors and authorities: Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Greed, Forgery, Deceit and Death* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988); Robert Lindsey, *A Gathering of Saints: A True Story of Money, Murder and Deceit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (New York: Knopf, 1984); Robert Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, *America’s Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (New York: Putnam, 1984); as well as books by Fawn M. Brodie, Ed Decker, Leonard J. Arrington, Roger Launius, and Robert Bruce Flanders (“A Note on Sources,” 314).

⁸Arrington preferred not to be mentioned by name. Ruthven’s interviews with Latter-day Saint academics (Wells Jakeman, John L. Sorenson, and John W. Welch), unlike his interview with Edwards, do not include direct mention of their names, but they are identified in his “Acknowledgments” (ix–x) and through his descriptions. John W. (Jack) Welch, for example, is described by Ruthven as a “formidably clever” lawyer involved in “textual analysis” of the Book of Mormon whose “specialty—or rather, obsession—was *chiasmus*, a form of inverted parallelism found in Hebrew and other ancient literatures” (124–27).

⁹Compare with Arrington’s personal essay entitled “Why I am a Believer,” *Sunstone* 10 (1985): 36–38—reprinted with editorial polishing in *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, ed. Philip L. Barlow (Centerville, Utah: Canon Press, 1986), 225–33—where Arrington discusses the importance of having read Santayana’s *Religion and Reason* in his own efforts to work out a way of dealing with the visions of Joseph Smith by understanding them as mythological. Ruthven claims that “Mormon intellectuals make increasingly sophisticated

distinctions between real and 'sacred' history, arguing that professional commitment to the former need not undermine faith in the latter as myth." In attempting to make this move, Ruthven feels that "the Saints are travelling down the same bumpy track as other American denominations—the track that leads to the abandoning of literal, historical, factual truth while salvaging the sacred for the private realm." From his perspective, religion can survive only if "it abandons its claims to comprehensive, objective truth. Religion can resist the onslaughts of positivism or the erosions of scientific or historical facts, by redefining itself . . . as a 'special type of symbolism concerned with the meaning of the whole,'" that is, as merely mythological. See Ruthven's "National and Denominational," *Times Literary Supplement* 4497 (June 9, 1989): 630.

¹⁰ Remy and Brenchley, *A Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City*, xxxvii.

¹¹ Remy and Brenchley, *A Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City*, cxxi, xcix.