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Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons by Jessie L. Embry

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JESSIE L. EMBRY. *Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994. xv; 270 pp. Appendix, selected readings, index. \$18.95.

Reviewed by Marcus Helvécio T. A. Martins, sociologist, part-time faculty, Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University.

A few years ago, I saw a picture (unfortunately I don't remember where) that immediately caught my attention and made me ponder about it for a long time. The picture showed two women who seemed to be at one of the gates of the Tabernacle in Temple Square, Salt Lake City. One of the women was blonde, tall, and elegantly dressed; the other was Black, shorter than the blonde woman, and simply dressed. The blonde lady was embracing the Black lady in a very tender manner, and since the Black lady wasn't as tall as the other, her head was at the blonde lady's upper chest. The blonde lady had her head leaned and rested over the Black lady's head, while her hands were placed over the other's opposite face.

Since, at that time, I was still grappling with a couple of recent negative experiences involving what I thought to be racial discrimination, my first reaction to that picture was one of a certain uneasiness. Was that picture, I then thought, some sort of prototypical—or maybe stereotypical—view of what the 1978 revelation on priesthood meant to many of the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Was that picture a symbol of what non-Black Latter-day Saints in America had in their minds—a condescending acceptance of some presumed lower-class group who needed to “become like us” in order to perhaps (who knows?) gain some form of lower-class existence in a celestial inner city?

A short while after that, my reaction shifted from concern to mere curiosity. After all, time is still a good medication for certain types of misunderstanding, and I found that what had occurred to me might not have involved any racial discrimination at all. What remained was just curiosity regarding what those two ladies in that picture might have been thinking when the picture was taken and what they might have thought—if anything—when they saw the picture published.

Today we can have a glimpse of possible answers to these questions by reading Jessie Embry's *Black Saints in a White Church*. This book is the report of the findings of two major studies: (1) in-depth interviews of 224 Black Latter-day Saints—conducted as part of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies' LDS Afro-American Oral History Project, and (2) a survey of approximately 200 Black Latter-day Saints in the United States. In Jessie Embry's own words, "The book is a 'group biography' of those who participated in [both studies]."

My first impression was extremely positive. I read her book while on my way to a research trip in Brazil, and for the first time, I wished a plane trip would have been longer. After some thinking, I concluded that this "group biography," as Embry called it, is indispensable to LDS Church leaders, especially those who serve racially mixed congregations. I also thought the book to be historically invaluable. This opinion is based on the following three reasons:

1. The personal accounts featured in the book give us an in-depth view of what it was like to be a member of a racial minority in a racially mixed denomination that at the same time it emphasized Christian fellowship and association was ambiguous regarding the worth of fellows of races other than the dominant one.
2. This study has put on record one major example of what I call the cultural dimension of Mormonism. I have recently argued that this culture grows out of the religion called Mormonism, but as time goes by it tends to develop a life of its own, independent of the original religion and (in great part) of its official doctrines. Parallel to that, since this culture also exists within the context of a broader national culture, it also absorbs many elements of this national identity and psyche.
3. Throughout the book, we find examples of strong faith that can very appropriately be compared to that of the early LDS pioneers of the nineteenth century.

By now, some may be asking to what extent I might be exaggerating in my assessment of the historic value of the contents of this book. I would respond by reminding them of the uniqueness

of the challenge Blacks in general had to overcome in order to become members of the LDS Church. The Native Americans and the Polynesians were recognized as descendants of Lehi and heirs of great promises. The Jews were regarded as the original beneficiaries of the Abrahamic covenant. The Arabs were also considered heirs of Abrahamic blessings through Ishmael. But never was a group so undervalued as were Blacks, a fact subtly but still effectively addressed in chapters 2 and 3 of *Black Saints in a White Church*.¹

A recurring theme throughout *Black Saints*—although not addressed from a doctrinal standpoint by Embry—is the inconsistency that existed (before 1978) between the revealed doctrines of Jesus Christ and the prevailing, racially based social structures. This is not a new subject; in fact, racist thinking has been a part of religious practice throughout history. As extreme examples, we may mention the many “holy” wars that have been undertaken from ancient times until our days. The conflicts in the so-called Middle East, including the Gulf War, and the wars after the breakup of the old Yugoslavia—all these had a religious component that, despite not being addressed by the popular media, was very much a part of the issue in dispute.

Throughout the past two or three centuries, Christian denominations in general supported African slavery, based on existing racist doctrines and explanations. Among the explanations existing in nineteenth-century America, we find one written by Buckner H. Payne² in 1840, published as an article in 1867 and later expanded and published by Charles Carroll³ in book form in 1900, which contended that Blacks were not descendants of Adam and Eve, but were one of the many kinds of “beasts” created by the hand of God. According to Carroll, that would be the reason why Blacks could have been subjected to slavery and also the reason why interracial marriages should be strictly forbidden. Carroll even went to the point of suggesting that interracial marriages were the reason for The Flood and one of the reasons why Christ suffered on the cross. Other Christian denominations discussed whether or not Blacks had an immortal soul that needed to be saved. Many in the scientific world of that time fueled such absurd beliefs with their “findings” based on skull measurements, body shapes, odors, and other variables.

It was in the midst of such a doctrinal-scientific-cultural environment that the early leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints developed their policy in regards to Blacks. Today it is almost impossible to determine to what extent—if any at all—they were affected by the theologians, scientists, and other respected thinkers of their day. As a Black twentieth-century LDS high priest, I want to believe that my brethren in the nineteenth century may have decided to avoid the issue until further revelation on the subject would be granted, a course of action I myself followed on a couple of occasions while serving as a bishop. Under such a hypothesis, the priesthood ban could be understood in our days as a temporary precaution that ended up being mistakenly regarded as a commandment from on high.

Nevertheless, regardless of my hypothesis, the fact is that we can see a subtle connection between general culture and Church policy when we consider such beliefs as the one that says that Blacks have been deprived of certain blessings in this life either (1) because they were “less valiant” in the premortal existence (which belief still survives in the 1990s despite the 1978 revelation), or (2) because Abel had to be vindicated for 6,000 years before Cain’s descendants could be “forgiven” for what Cain did.

By considering such folk doctrines and past sociocultural environments, I arrive at the conclusion that those Blacks who became Latter-day Saints up to the early 1970s—who at times had their inherent and eternal worth and potential denied by a few individuals—and still remained true to the faith despite all logical arguments, rightfully and honorably deserve the title of Modern Mormon Pioneers and Defenders of the Faith. God bless them forever.

Jessie Embry’s book, *Black Saints in a White Church*, records the firsthand accounts of the experiences of some of these men and women of God. We read how they adopted a new life and new beliefs that caused some of them to be ostracized by their families, friends, and communities. But even more important than learning of the opposition they faced, we read about their inner feelings and testimonies as they were fellowshipped in mostly White congregations, about how they formed eternal friendships as Saints and how at times they were hurt by lingering prejudices and stereotypical beliefs.

We also read of their assiduous attendance and faithful service in spite of limitations, even when requested to no longer attend Church meetings with their White brothers and sisters. That led me to conclude that the presence of these Black Saints in places where any degree of racial prejudice had been a historical constant allowed people in those places to better evaluate their own Christlikeness and to learn more about the true nature of God's love for his children.

I should pause here and say that despite these testimonials this book is not written for a general audience looking for a faith-promoting birthday or holiday gift. For example, I recommended the book to my oldest teenage children, but I also told them to read it only after they become more mature in the gospel and in life in general.

A few significant things, in my opinion, are still missing in this study, and I hope to see some of these addressed in the future: Because of my interest in the cultural dimension of Mormonism, I see that in order to get a balanced picture of the subject I need to learn the story of the Black Saints *as seen by* the White Church. The book addresses the perceptions of Black members in relation to their White counterparts, but it doesn't deal (because it was not the original purpose of the Oral History Project) with the perceptions and experiences of the White members (which I have found to be quite diverse) and of those of many other races in the Church in relation to the issues discussed in the book—for example, priesthood ban, prejudice, and cross-cultural communication and socialization.

Other important omissions are (1) information on what those Black members who were not in full fellowship in the LDS Church at the time of the study might have had to say about their experiences, and (2) a commentary on the unauthorized persistence of infamous "pseudo-doctrines," such as the one that says that Blacks will never get to the celestial kingdom despite the 1978 revelation.

From a social scientific standpoint, a few more questions still need to be answered: Are the problems mentioned by the respondents unique to Mormonism? How prevalent are these problems in other religious denominations and in the larger American society? Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reportedly said that the church hour on Sundays is "the most segregated hour of the week" in America.

Thus it is conceivable that any racial concerns in the LDS Church—even if only mild ones—could be the natural result of a combination of two factors: (1) the growth of the LDS Church, which brings thousands of new converts every year from all walks of life, which converts do not abandon their old prejudices overnight; and (2) the fact that the LDS Church does not segregate its congregations, consequently forming racially mixed congregations that may simply bring to light the prejudices that already exist in the larger society.

But all in all it was not the purpose of the Oral History Project to provide definitive answers to these lingering questions. Thus, to be fair, the book must be read and evaluated vis-à-vis its original purposes, in which case it passes with the highest marks.

NOTES

¹For a complete overview—as far as public records allow—read Lester E. Bush Jr.'s "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," in *Neither White nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church*, ed. Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984).

²Buckner H. Payne, *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological Status? Is He the Progeny of Ham? Is He a Descendant of Adam and Eve? . . . What Is His Relation to the White Race?* (Cincinnati: Published for the Proprietor, 1867).

³Charles Carroll, *The Negro: A Beast; or, "In the Image of God" . . . the Negro Not the Son of Ham . . .* (St. Louis: American Book and Bible House, 1900). See also John H. Van Evrie, *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination; or, Negroes, a Subordinate Race, and (So-called) Slavery Its Normal Condition* (New York: Van Evrie, Horton, 1868; reprint, New York: Garland, 1993).