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Mormon Culture: Four Decades of Essays on Mormon Society and Personality John L. Sorenson

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JOHN L. SORENSON. *Mormon Culture: Four Decades of Essays on Mormon Society and Personality*. Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997. \$16.00.

Reviewed by David P. Crandall, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Brigham Young University.

Mormon Culture is an assortment of essays on institutionalized and processual features of “Deseret Mormon” life. Topics range from the interplay of “Mormon folk” and “Mormon elite” to dissent, disagreement, and error in Mormon thought and from Mormons as cultural Americans to a beginning study of Mormon personality. The essays are written for lay audiences and are commendably clear and straightforward. In many ways, this is a book of hors d’oeuvres, analytical teasers—each essay introducing a topic and direction of analysis but never fully completing its program. Many of the essays are deliberately advocatory in tone, demonstrating the usefulness of anthropological analysis. While the described processes and quandaries of Deseret Mormon life are not unique to cultural Mormonism—but part and parcel of the difficulties of social and personal life everywhere in the world—it seems that some of these problems may be exacerbated in the modern Rocky Mountain West. In reviewing this book, I will look at the essays I found most thought provoking rather than attempting a critical summary of each one.

In “Mormon Folk and Mormon Elite,” Sorenson explores “two strands of Mormon culture” by juxtaposing Mormon elite (the ethos of the financially secure and the somewhat isolated hierarchy of Church leadership) with Mormon folk (the average, faithful Latter-day Saints who live in varying economic circumstances, endure sporadic uncertainty, and move in a world far less insulated than the world of the elites). By citing conflicting attitudes toward the repeal of prohibition, the fine arts versus blue collar entertainments, birth control, working mothers, and polygamy, Sorenson demonstrates the existence of two slightly different world views largely emanating from the material conditions of life—world views that create a certain amount of drift between leaders and followers. Such drifts have little or nothing to do with the core tenets

of Latter-day Saint faith but instead with issues of practicality and American political and social life. Those moving in “higher circles” are portrayed as detached from some of the instabilities of life and therefore better able to pursue the “ideal,” while most of the “folk” believe in the ideal yet must confront it from very “real,” often insecure, circumstances. The result is that elite and folk views influence each other through an uneasy process of accommodation. And more often than not, it is the hardline, ideal, elite positions of Mormon orthopraxy that soften over time.

In “Consider Their Origin,” an essay on family history, Sorenson delves into a pervasive dishonesty in Mormon, indeed American, culture: the difficulty of being candid about ourselves and our ancestors in writing personal and family histories. Sorenson decries the approach to history typified in mass-produced Christmas letters and instead advocates personal and family histories that are honest and forthright—histories that avoid selective memory or the construction of “historical” persons simply too good to have ever existed.

Two central questions issue from this discussion: Why are we dishonest in the first place? and What is the value of a candid family history? The first question is answered in part by received and shared attitudes of the “ideal” that govern our conceptions of what a proper family history ought to be: We best venerate the deceased by removing the blemishes from their lives. And by so doing, we avoid potential embarrassment in the unfortunate practice of comparison, a competition of sorts in which we vie for the most faithful and exemplary ancestors.

In contrast, Sorenson believes the true value of family history lies in portraying ourselves and our ancestors candidly, giving them “flesh and blood” reality as people enduring the same kinds of trials and temptations we all face. In this way, parallel worlds are created, worlds that though different in time and space still share much of the common experience of human beings. One could ask whether the stories of Alma the Younger or Saul of Tarsus would be as powerful if the unflattering details of their lives had been deleted. Perhaps, beyond the call for greater candor in the writing of family histories, this essay demonstrates how powerful a force

intellectual dishonesty sometimes is in our own thinking and re-creation of the past.

“Being Wrong in Mormon Thought” is a discussion of degrees of error based on a sliding definition of *wrong*. Wrong means anything from innocently forwarded errant opinions rooted in ignorance to genuine misunderstanding and from honest differences of opinion to willful rebellion against established orthodoxy. This essay is mistitled, as Sorenson seeks to define wrong by the consequences of “being wrong” in relation to Church discipline and correction rather than the process of determining intellectual error within lay discussions of Latter-day Saint doctrine. Though he hints about the difficulty of knowing for certain—beyond the obvious set of core doctrinal beliefs—precisely what Latter-day Saint doctrine is, Sorenson avoids exploring this very important issue. Perhaps he is justifiably prudent in doing so, but being “wrong” intellectually ought to be defined against being intellectually “right.”

The social processes of establishing accepted orthodoxy certainly occur on an ongoing basis within the Church because of the belief and practice of continuing revelation. Equally obvious is that these processes sometimes occur at the expense of a history of opposing views (witness: Sorenson’s opening paragraph about Elder McConkie’s dismissal of his former statements on the exclusion of certain groups of men from the priesthood). This example alone illustrates how a peripheral belief can be turned on its head. But what is the process that allows people to part with a sometimes cherished belief (truth?) and accept a new one, especially if the old belief was justified by statements of General Authorities? And, beyond the consistent, central doctrines of the restored gospel, how is rightness or wrongness determined in peripheral areas, especially when First Presidency statements and scripture seem to offer no obvious, specific answers? Such difficulties arise in any institution in which human beings participate, and accusations of “being wrong” are often hurled during a confrontation of opposing views on a subject that allows for multiple interpretations. These issues are raised by the article’s content, though unfortunately they are not directly addressed. Yet, for all that is jettisoned and all that remains silent, this piece draws attention to important features of truth and belief.

In his two final essays on Mormon personality, Sorenson presses home the difficulties of being Mormon and “living in the world,” of submission to the will of God in contrast to American-style rugged individualism, of the interplay between the institutional and the personal, the social environment and the self. While he proposes no fresh insights into the predicament he describes, simply by noting this view of “the way things are” he demonstrates the extreme complexity of the human condition, and, in the Desert Mormon context, a predicament that, he feels, leads to superficiality, conformity, divided lives, and syncretism.

As the titles of these two essays suggest, Sorenson is seeking to elucidate common features of Desert Mormon personalities and their putative origins. But these essays hint at much deeper issues of how world views are formed and perpetuated; the various sources of their genesis; the way human beings cobble together their religion, their political views, their aesthetics, and so on, into one totalizing conceptual schema of the world; and finally, what effect this process has on the formation of personality and personal identity. There is no answer here, only a recognition that matters are not as simple as they may first appear.

Sorenson’s essays thus constitute a mere introduction of how Desert Mormonism might be explored anthropologically. His work duly recognizes that the cultural and social processes of Desert Mormonism are hardly unique, but rather a variant of general human social processes. And though I find his essays incomplete as they stand, they are nonetheless useful in what they do provide: the beginnings of an anthropology of Mormonism.