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The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths and the Construction of Heresy Terryl L. Givens

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TERRYL L. GIVENS. *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. x; 205 pp. Index, notes. \$35.00.

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For those who take interest in how Mormonism is portrayed in the public media, *Viper on the Hearth* is a stimulating read. On one level, it is perhaps the most detailed and sophisticated study to date of patterns of representation in nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism, moving beyond a mere recitation of the already well-documented “proclivity to depict the Mormons as a violent and peculiar people” (5–6). Its novelty lies in its explanation of the origins of anti-Mormon literature, with implications down to the present day.

Author Terryl Givens’s argument is that in nineteenth-century America “the pressures of pluralism made it desirable to cast the objectionability of Mormonism in nonreligious terms” (7). The rootedness of religious tolerance in America’s ideological mythology made it virtually impossible to extirpate a *religion* from the body politic. Thus, the Mormon “other” had to be constructed in such a way that its persecution was a manifestation of patriotism rather than bigotry. In this way, specious claims about Mormonism being a social and political threat were reified.

Anti-Mormonism illustrates “the necessary contortions that religion must be subjected to, the rhetorical strategies that must be deliberately and ingeniously applied, in order to maintain intact the underlying value system of pluralism and religious toleration while the aberrant group is proscribed” (21). Lest his approach be dismissed as merely a sophisticated new defense of the old apologetic claim that persecution is really only irrational religious jealousy or Satan’s subversive influence, Givens clarifies that he is not arguing “that the underlying hostilities were or were not really more religious than economic or political. It *is* to say that such hostilities, to be culturally sanctioned, had to take the form of political rather than denominational interests” (22).

Where Givens is particularly effective is in his application of the new literary criticism (and the relativizing perspectives of post-modernism generally) to the study of anti-Mormonism. The entire second half of the book is devoted to a literary critical reading of anti-Mormon literature and as such is the first extended treatment of its kind. The contextual and constructed, as opposed to essential, character of religious categories and categorizations shows through clearly in his analysis. As Givens remarks, “[Christian] orthodoxy cannot escape the fact of its own construction” (93). What outsiders say about the Mormons represents no fundamental, disinterested truth but reflects the narrow world of their own assumptions. Commentators have long pointed out the hypocrisy of anti-Mormonism, but *Viper on the Hearth* does so with a subtlety and sophistication that will delight and enlighten readers.

Through more than 160 pages of incisive analysis and elegant prose, Givens drives home his postmodern point that all religious constructions are inescapably ideological. It is not just the Mormons who are trapped in subjectivity. In dealing with American perceptions of Mormons, scholars should be aware of “the mechanisms by which ideology and acts of self-fashioning work to conceal inherent tensions and inconsistencies that arise when espoused values and political imperatives collide” (45).

One of the lasting contributions of *Viper on the Hearth* may be the way in which it grounds a more adequate source criticism for Mormon studies. One moral to Givens’s story is that scholars should be just as cautious in using non-LDS sources as they are in dealing with LDS sources. Despite the great strides made in Mormon studies in the past generation, a certain lack of source-critical sophistication still lingers when it comes to the use of sources looking at Mormonism from the outside, and some scholars continue to accept a little too readily the self-exculpating constructions of the Saints’ antagonists. In this way, the tropes of the old anti-Mormon literature sometimes appear in contemporary studies in only slightly revised form.

The book is not perfect, of course. Givens’s grasp of American religious history and religious studies scholarship leaves something to be desired, and his use of Mormon history is not always built on the firmest foundation. Still, this interpretive monograph

is as effective as anything in print for disarming—even dismembering—anti-Mormonism and for drawing attention to the subtexts embedded in all texts created by or about Latter-day Saints. That the book was published by Oxford University Press highlights both the soundness of the analysis and the fact that these days sure-footed Mormon studies are welcome at the finest publishing houses.