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Terryl L. Givens. *People of Paradox:  
A History of Mormon Culture.*

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007

Reviewed by Neal W. Kramer

Despite the recent boom in academic Mormon studies, there has continued to be a gap. History and ancient studies, theology and polemical apologetics, and scriptural interpretation and application have dominated the scene, while relatively little work has been done in the humanistic disciplines. A refreshing and intelligent exception is the work of Professor Terryl L. Givens, literary critic and scholar of religion from the University of Richmond. In *The Viper on the Hearth*, Givens employed the tools of contemporary literary theory to interrogate the production and reception of anti-Mormon literature in nineteenth-century America; in *By the Hand of Mormon*, he explored the Book of Mormon in its rich nineteenth-century religious and literary contexts. Now comes a third book, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*. In the best Givensian fashion, this new book presents us with two impressive explorations. The first is a highly developed and exciting theoretical interpretation of seemingly paradoxical forces at the heart of the restored gospel. The second is an equally impressive interpretation of Mormon high culture in terms of these paradoxes. Givens is the first to attempt so thorough an analysis of Mormon artistic endeavors, and the book admirably fills the gap referred to above. This review will focus on Givens's theoretical matrix for cultural interpretation and the insight the critical paradoxes he identifies brings to the study of Mormon literature.

Cultural criticism has long been an important approach to the study of literature. Cultural critics study the social roles of the arts and of intellectuals, including processes of spiritual, aesthetic, and moral development that lead to the distinctive way of life of a particular people. Givens derives his theoretical understanding of Mormon culture from the careful study and analysis of doctrines and practices that have helped create LDS institutions of high culture and their artistic products: poetry, drama, music, architecture, painting, museums, universities, theaters, journals,

publishing companies, orchestras, choirs, and literary societies, to name a few. By his felicitous and important decision to especially consider the teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, Givens emphasizes the intellectual, spiritual, and social energy vitalizing Mormon society and reminds us of the impact of early revelations and practices on our present culture. From these teachings and practices, Givens identifies four generative paradoxes, conflicts between “authority and radical freedom” (3), “searching and certainty” (22), “the sacred and the banal” (37), and “election and exile” (53). These four paradoxes establish a rich critical framework within which to understand the expansiveness of Mormon culture and evaluate its highest achievements. At the same time, Givens relies on the tradition of the humanities to place the Mormon life of the mind in easily accessible categories: the visual arts, architecture, music and dance, drama, poetry, fiction, and film. Each chapter is a thorough and compact exploration of how paradox informs and enlivens each Mormon art.

### **Authority and Radical Freedom**

Givens’s first paradox bound tightly to Mormonism is the conflict between “authority and radical freedom.” To some, this paradox seems more like a set of options. One may choose either one or the other, but not both. We might think of extreme versions of either option, like fear of “mindless conformity to authority” or absolute “respect for free agency” (16). Givens suggests that preserving the paradox is more important than firmly choosing one alternative over the other, because the tension between the two is productive of high culture. He describes the “resulting collision of views and valuations [as] inevitable” but positive (16). The tension does not separate Mormons into ideological camps so much as it creates a space for creative and imaginative expression. Artists and intellectuals probe the tension and find a richness of belief that can inspire sermons drenched with the call to conformity, novels depicting the happy consequences of obedience, poems exploring individual suffering and conversion, and essays challenging the triviality of thoughtless conformism. Each exploration reveals another perspective on the paradox. Thus, an artist’s critical imagination explores the consequences of the conflict for the community of Saints. The art produced within Mormon culture reveals the weakness of believing one must choose between extremes. Instead, high art evidences Mormonism’s ongoing cultural adaptability and individual Mormons’ capacity to adjust to pressures from within and without the culture and to conform or not conform in utterly trivial ways.

Givens relies on Brigham Young to illustrate how this paradox is inherent in Mormonism. A simple quotation from Brother Brigham illustrates how Saints are not to become extreme conformists and thus mere caricatures of themselves: “I am not a stereotyped Latter-day Saint. . . . Away with stereotyped ‘Mormons!’” The paradox in the doctrine allows for “priesthood authority” to direct Mormons “in the use of . . . agency,” because the priesthood will not “coerce or preempt it.” Such doctrine thunders that “coercion and ignorance alike are antithetical to human autonomy” (17). On the other hand, “the primacy of agency over coercion does not translate into choice without accountability” (19). Authority may be misconstrued as coercive power, but Mormonism rejects such a simplistic view. Mormon culture thrives on the paradox.

### Searching and Certainty

Givens describes the second paradox as the conflict between “searching and certainty.” From its inception, ongoing searching has been central to Mormonism. The quest for “salvation is for Mormons an endless project, not an event, and is therefore never complete, never fully attained, never a realized state or object of secure possession” (28). Such searching typifies missionary work, genealogy, gospel study, and other regular features of Mormon life. Givens locates the paradigm for searching in Joseph Smith’s “insistence that his pronouncements did not always carry prophetic weight,” which “meant that the process, the ongoing, dynamic engagement, the exploring, questing, provoking dialectical encounter with tradition, with boundaries, and with normative thinking should not be trammled by or impeded with clerks, scribes, and disciples looking for a final word, interrupting a productive process of reflection, contestation, and creation” (29). For Mormons, the search is the impetus for revelation and inspiration. The unfolding of eternity is stimulated by individual desire to know and discover.

Such religious exploration may suggest an anxious or even radical uncertainty. That is not the case in Mormonism. Claims of certainty provide the framework within which searching is carried out. For example, Mormon testimonies are assertions of certainty about fundamental gospel truths. Joseph Smith states with sincere and certain clarity that he saw a light and heard a voice and he cannot deny it. The Church itself articulates its authority with a certainty that can distress and even provoke believers of other traditions. Mormon scriptures announce with boldness the restored presence of “the only true and living Church on the face of the earth.” This bedrock certainty enables the search for a vast eternity of treasures hoped

for and available to those who honestly seek. Again, Givens finds that the paradox “spurs vigorous debates in the Mormon intellectual community and provides fodder for artists who both explore and depict the cultural tensions that result” (33). Givens suggests that the tension itself drives the production of a searching yet certain art, depicting scenes such as the First Vision or exploring the travails of a Latter-day Saint in a sometimes brutal and unforgiving world. At the same time, Mormon artists should know their place. Mormon art will never become a panacea for loss of faith. “The Saints may not look to art, as others have done, with the same desperate hope of finding consolation for a heaven that has failed us” (34). Heaven has not failed. Hence, Mormonism continues to produce “genuinely religious art and intellectual expression” (35) that searches and affirms, adding richness and adventure to the lives of the Saints.

### **The Sacred and the Banal**

Givens’s account of the paradox between the sacred and the banal in Mormon teaching and culture again reveals the strength of his critical methodology. Those familiar with Givens’s earlier discussions of dialogic revelation will recognize its similarity to this paradox of the sacred and the banal. Stated simply, this paradox consists of finding the divine in common, everyday human experience. The core of the paradox is the Mormon belief that human beings are literal spirit children of God and therefore have divine potential. The idea is shockingly optimistic. As Givens puts it, “Mormons ennoble human nature to such a degree that even the most exuberant Renaissance humanists would blanch” (42). The consequence of the paradox for Mormon thought and practice is to emphasize the closeness between God and us by minimizing the distance between the realm of the divine and our own daily existence. While Latter-day Saints believe that God is more likely to be found in a temple than a casino, we still are not averse to believing the spirit world is very close, communication from beyond the veil common, and that the Father and the Son could appear to us as they did the boy prophet. Givens describes a rich and fascinating “culture that sacralizes and exalts the mundane even as it naturalizes and domesticates the sacred” (42).

The immediate consequences of this peculiarly Mormon doctrine for artists and intellectuals are not necessarily obvious. Seeing it through the eyes of Mormon audiences may be more revealing. For example, Latter-day Saints are perfectly comfortable with illustration (sometimes seen as simply popular or mundane) as sacred art. Illustration looks normal and down to earth, which is the way we often think of our religion. We want

to sanctify the day-to-day intimacies of family life: bathing children, tilting the hall floor, reading to a child, cleaning a room. The humorous and silly experiences of dating take on the gravity of the eternal in Mormon romance novels. We want scrubbed children and happy parents as the stars of wholesome comedies that depict normal life as the repository of God's glory.

We Mormons are even confident that our Heavenly Father would feel comfortable at family night, singing Primary songs and sampling the marshmallow crispy treats. He might not even notice that the house is not perfectly tidy. In a word, we want life to be *nice*. As Givens notes, this paradox can be painful to anyone interested in producing high art. It is not entirely uncommon for Mormon artists or intellectuals to "crave . . . a source of mystery and splendor" (50) or a human psychological complexity that fusing the sacred and the banal prevents. For fairly obvious reasons, mysterious and complex art finds a small audience among Mormons. The challenge of serious fiction for the Saints moves us away from the banal into a darkened, fallen world untouched by the sacred. While anxiety hovers over such an artist, his Mormon neighbor finds peace in the family room.

### **Election and Exile**

The final paradox Givens identifies, the conflict between election and the experience of exile, manifests itself in the need for Mormons to assimilate with the larger culture while preserving our uniqueness, our special covenant relationship with God. Latter-day Saints have been and can be driven into exile in a wide variety of ways. For example, recent mischaracterizations of LDS beliefs and practices in the media and anti-Mormon literature are powerful methods of creating a form of otherness that is tantamount to exile. Exiles lose their ability to define themselves and become subject to powerful images and prejudices generated by the dominant culture. Exiles struggle to wrest the power to classify away from entrenched cultural institutions like universities, governments, the press, and so forth. This struggle, a part of the tension between being chosen and being rejected, generates significant cultural energy for Mormons. For artists, the project has included mastering the forms, genres, criticism, and traditional values of the dominant culture. From the earliest days of the Church, as Givens writes, "establishing affinities with the dominant culture was . . . necessary to guarantee the church's survival and ability to serve as a force for good" (57). While "the larger world was still a corrupt Babylon," building Zion also led to the realization that "Joseph's open

eclecticism ('we will claim truth as ours wherever we find it') meant some borrowings were not only allowed, but mandated" (59).

Mormon artists have not been entirely successful borrowers. They are often perceived as participating in discourses of exile rather than of election. As Church members continue to be scorned as the unassimilable "other" by ideological critics of all stripes, it seems inevitable that novelists, poets, painters, composers, and playwrights who critically engage Mormon culture will find themselves exiled, often by their own impulses, to the boundaries of the dominant culture.

### **Paradox in Literature**

The conflict between the world and the Church has been especially pronounced in literature. The four paradoxes provide good insight into the production of Mormon literature, and Givens's exploration of the subject serves as an excellent example of the quality of his critical approach.

Givens identifies a core challenge for LDS literature as an expression of paradox: "It is virtually taken as a truism today that great literature must be born of mental anguish and existential disquiet, a mirror of the spirit's turmoil and the world's fractured condition" (157). In other words, the "spiritual" and "absolute self-assurance" (74) of Mormonism find little room in Western high culture these days. If one chooses the dominant culture as the model of excellence in literature, then excellent Mormon literature, by default, will feature little of the optimistic expansiveness of the Restoration and more of the anxiety of "Humean doubt and Enlightenment rationalism" (157–58).

Mormon poets, writers of short fiction, and novelists have struggled, as did Joseph Smith himself, to find a language of transcendence to capture the character of mortality while not rejecting "the collapse of sacred distance" (28) central to the prophet's revelations. This meant for Joseph the development of a sincere naturalistic discourse in which to capture both the sanctity and the normality of his own story. His use of language has been the standard for the personal essay and the Mormon journal ever since.

Givens traces this language into Mormon poetry as well. Verse was the earliest form of Mormon creative expression. In the Church's early days, it seemed that poetry would be a natural form for the expression of sacred truth. Its elevated diction and emphasis on the figural, a characteristic shared with the King James Version, provided a vehicle for bringing the transcendent down to earth. Joseph's own attempt (his authorship cannot be verified), however, to present "The Vision" (D&C 76) in verse turned out

to be “mediocre” (167). He never tried to write a poem again. Others, however, succeeded, and it soon became apparent that poetry could provide memorable and beautiful expression of restored truths. Givens makes special note of Eliza R. Snow and Parley P. Pratt, whose poems were published without much acceptance to the wider literary public but found great and lasting acceptance among the Saints. This relative failure in the wider culture did not remove Mormons’ awareness that poetry and prophecy shared access to inspiration. Brigham Young said that “Joseph Smith was a poet and poets are not like other men; their gaze is deeper, and reaches the roots of the soul; it is like the searching eyes of angels; they catch the swift thought of God” (157). This claim, later seconded by Orson F. Whitney, reveals a vital and driving force in the history of Mormon poetry. Connecting Joseph to the arts became a primary justification for Mormons to embrace literature.

The novel did not make its appearance in Mormon high culture until later. This, too, occurred in response to changes in English and American high culture. But just as importantly, and perhaps underappreciated by Givens, it was also the process of the Americanization of Mormon culture that became more intense in the second half of the 1880s. As another expression of Givens’s paradoxes, Americanized fiction emerged in the middle of a movement toward “home literature” (173), a homegrown culture built on the foundations of Zion itself. It was a call to protect the uniqueness of Mormonism while exploring the greatness of the Restoration within the generic bounds of the world. B. H. Roberts was an important force in laying out the case for fiction, “the most effectual means of attracting the attention of the general public and instructing them” (175), but it led primarily to didactic fiction. Fiction became another form of sermon, though it slowly developed into an outlet for the beautiful expression of gospel principles and explorations of the consequences of gospel living in the lives of Mormons. It also became a means for Latter-day Saints, via their own authors, to encounter the temptations of the world, to see luminous promises of wealth, prominence, and power, and to reject them. Fictional romance between a Latter-day Saint and an unbeliever in the cosmopolitan cities of Chicago or Boston, resolved by conversion or rejection, became a staple plot.

Givens’s handling of the “Lost Generation” (178) of Mormon fiction is particularly helpful. These often praised writers, including Vardis Fisher, Maurine Whipple, and Virginia Sorensen, used Mormon subject matter in fiction crafted for an American national audience. Their commitment to modernism produced a fiction of genuine complexity, addressing the concerns of individuals who were often in conflict with the larger interests



of the Mormon community. This often meant candid explorations of the challenges of the Mormon experience. To Mormon insiders, however, the novels often read like exposés, including severe critiques of Church founders and an unhealthy focus on the abandoned practice of plural marriage. Today it is easier to see how Mormons were not really prepared educationally or emotionally to interpret and understand such powerful fictional modes, but the aversion to these novels ran deep. Here again, Givens's paradoxes help to reveal both the authors' desire to explore and the Mormon audience's uneasiness with the results. The effort is impressive indeed.

### Consequences

The four paradoxes Givens has identified form a credible matrix within which to begin thinking about the production of Mormon culture. They highlight an important and troubling cultural challenge faced by the Church's artists. While the Church defines its doctrines and religious practices, it has no specific inspired standards for art. There is no revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants about writing fiction, painting, or composing music. That obviously creates tension between authority and creativity. But it also means that Mormonism has had to import its art forms from the dominant culture. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the high Mormon culture Givens analyzes is a subset of European and American culture. Until recently, Mormon art has always been defined by complex transactions between European and American culture and Mormon culture, with artists necessarily having to bring a standard of artistic excellence from elsewhere into the Church; the quality of a particular LDS artist has come to be defined by critics who are the arbiters of the dominant culture.

But that is now beginning to change as critical excellence is found from within; *People of Paradox* is the jumping-off point for a new generation of Mormon cultural studies, highlighted by its theory-driven methodology and thorough coverage. We have previously had no such encyclopedic works of Mormon cultural history available to scholars of Mormon high culture. Earlier literary scholars such as William Mulder, Richard Cra

is, and Givens are beginning to provide explanations of work for subtly gifted artists across time will be an important starting point for scholars in the future. While there remains an uneasy suspicion among many scholars that Mormon culture is inferior and parochial, the critical standards of canonicity that once locked Mormon literature out of the mainstream are considerably less imposing than they once were and are now notably

less important to cultural studies. In this new environment, Givens's book leaves us with a sense of the heft, consequence, and value of Mormon culture, a culture that can and ought to be studied in terms of the expectations the culture itself has for the life of the mind and the beauties of art. This book ought to be plumbed by any scholar or artist trying to come to terms with and transcend a worthy tradition.

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