Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries

Matthew J. Grow

Stephen C. Taysom

Stephen C. Taysom. *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries.*
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Reviewed by Matthew J. Grow

In *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds,* Stephen Taysom, an assistant professor of religious studies at Cleveland State University, has written an intriguing and theoretically rich monograph that compares Shaker and Mormon approaches to religious identity formation and boundary maintenance. Although Shakerism dwindled as a religious movement in the twentieth century, Shakers and Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century stood out as examples of successful new movements on the American religious scene. Taysom's comparison of Latter-day Saints and Shakers places him within a select group of scholars, most notably Mario DePillis, Lawrence Foster, and Spencer Fluhman, who have studied Shakers and Mormons together and placed them within the scholarly world of communal studies.[1] Even though the United States has long been identified in the popular imagination as a land of rugged individualism and free market capitalism, communalism has been a consistent theme throughout American history and has manifested itself in a dizzying array of groups. Taysom's book points to the advantages of integrating Mormonism further within the framework of communal studies.

Taysom, who originally wrote this book as a doctoral dissertation at Indiana University under noted Shakerism scholar Stephen Stein, drew not only from the literature on American communalism but on a broad range of theoretical and scholarly works. He invokes insights from disciplines such as ritual studies and memory studies and from scholars such as Victor Turner, Jonathan Z. Smith, Thomas Tweed, Mary Douglas, and Michel Foucault. While the heavy emphasis on theory contributes to the book's strengths, it may also limit the volume's accessibility for many readers. Nevertheless, when it comes to understanding the question of nineteenth-century Mormon identity and interactions within the larger culture, Taysom's book should be required reading alongside Armand Mauss's study of the same

question for the twentieth century, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*.[2]

Taysom divides his book into four lengthy chapters, plus a brief introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters examine the connections between Shaker and Mormon ideas of sacred space and group identity formation. In the first chapter, "The Shakers in the World: Walls and Bridges," Taysom explores the apparent paradox that in their villages Shakers simultaneously erected strong boundaries between themselves and the world but also remained deeply involved in the outside world by frequently hosting visitors and by selling their renowned products. Taysom resolves this apparent gap between rhetoric and action by arguing that the Shakers interacted with two conceptual worlds: "the one they believed was totally evil, incredibly dangerous, and dominated by supernatural forces, which I call the *culturally postulated world*, and the world that they experienced in their everyday lives, which I call the *experienced world*" (4). Such a distinction suggests how Shakers (and many other religious groups) can both denounce in harsh rhetoric the outside world and yet extensively engage with it.

In chapter 2, "Imagination and Reality in the Mormon Zion: Cities, Temples, and Bodies," Taysom insightfully explores the evolving Latter-day Saint ideas of the meaning of Zion. In the early 1830s, Latter-day Saints imagined the creation of a center community of gathering anchored by a temple in Jackson County, Missouri, but were unable to completely build such a community before their expulsion. For the rest of the 1830s, the Saints longed for a return to Jackson County, until they turned their attention to their new community of Nauvoo, Illinois. Taysom persuasively argues that Nauvoo, with its new temple under construction, soon came to be seen as Zion by Latter-day Saints. However, just as in Jackson County, Latter-day Saint power led to a crisis and expulsion.

Nevertheless, even before the Saints left Nauvoo, their conception of Zion had begun to shift from a communal expression to an individual one. The temple rituals introduced in Nauvoo, Taysom suggests, created a new definition of Zion, in which the "highest expression" of Mormon sacred space was no longer a "holy city with a temple at its center" but an "individual within the temple." Salt Lake City was never Zion in the same sense that Nauvoo or Jackson County had been Zion, "a single sacred city with a single central temple." Rather, Taysom writes, the Mormon view of Zion came to be a "decentralized vision of multiple temples spread throughout the world where individual Mormons could go and receive the sacred rituals" (93). Thus boundaries were not centered on an actual city but within the symbolic boundaries of temple covenants, the temple garment, and the

individual Latter-day Saint. Taysom thus places the transition away from an actual, physical Zion to a symbolic Zion much earlier in Latter-day Saint history than other scholars.

In chapter 3, "Godly Marriage and Divine Androgyny: Polygamy and Celibacy," Taysom compares Shaker and Mormon conceptions of gender and marriage. Notwithstanding the diametrically opposed practices of Latter-day Saint plural marriage and Shaker celibacy, "the structures motivating those behaviors are nearly identical," as both Mormons and Shakers hoped "to behave in ways that imitated God" (100). Latter-day Saints believed in an embodied and married God, while the Shakers "held a view of an androgynous God that transcended all physicality" (101). Celibacy and plural marriage functioned differently, though, in their involvement in boundary maintenance and creation; while both were highly visible markers of religious identity, nineteenth-century Americans disdained Latter-day Saint plural marriage (which could also be legislated against, unlike celibacy) to a much higher degree, contributing to a series of crises between the Saints and the nation.

In chapter 4, "Boundaries in Crisis," Taysom compares two episodes of crisis: the Shaker Era of Manifestations of the late 1830s and the Mormon Reformation of the mid-1850s. He argues that Mormon leaders created a crisis in the Reformation, while rank-and-file Shakers reacted to a genuine crisis in the Era of Manifestations, a period of intense visionary experiences. The Reformation, Taysom suggests, arose during a "prolonged period of peace without the tension that they had come to expect" (152). Taysom correctly paints the Reformation as primarily driven from the top, as leaders used fiery rhetoric and rituals (including rebaptism, public confessions, and the suspension of the sacrament) to encourage rededication within Latter-day Saint communities. Nevertheless, he overstates the case about the Mormon period of peace in the mid-1850s; rather than "too much tranquility," Latter-day Saints in the mid-1850s faced ongoing disputes with federal officials and American Indians in Utah Territory, severe droughts, and the national uproar over plural marriage, which was publicly announced in 1852. In addition, I believe that Taysom imputes too much consciousness to Mormon leaders in the project of boundary formation, suggesting that they "had to find new crises to replace those that they had successfully managed and escaped" (170).

According to Taysom, nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints relied on an "*episodic crisis-driven tension model*," while Shakers adopted a "*stable high-intensity moderate-risk tension model*" (199–200). He means that Latter-day Saints chose boundary markers that drew intensely negative responses from the larger culture, leading to crises and to an eventual shifting and

renegotiation of the original boundary markers. By contrast, Shakers' actions drew sufficient negative responses from the larger culture to define the Shakers as outsiders but not strong enough to threaten the movement as a whole. Taysom thus examines the question of identity formation in nuanced terms and is sensitive to historical trends and particular situations but is also bold enough to see larger patterns that extend beyond the individual case studies of Latter-day Saints and Shakers. His approach should be useful to scholars of other new religious movements in understanding the dynamics of identity formation and boundary creation and should be of interest to Latter-day Saint scholars in placing nineteenth-century Mormonism in a new theoretical model.

At times, though, as with his analysis of the Mormon Reformation, his theoretical model seems to drive his analysis, and many readers will find his theoretical approach (though written in clear, logical prose) to be challenging. Nevertheless, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds* establishes Stephen Taysom as an insightful historian of the Latter-day Saint experience and will shape our understanding of how Latter-day Saints understood their relationship with the broader world.

Matthew J. Grow (who can be contacted via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is Director, Publications Division, Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He received a BA from Brigham Young University in history and an MA and PhD in American history at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *"Liberty to the Downtrodden": Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer* and coauthor, with Terryl L. Givens, of *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism.*

1. Mario S. DePillis, "The Development of Mormon Communitarianism, 1826–1846" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1960); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991); J. Spencer Fluhman, "Early Mormon and Shaker Visions of Sanctified Community," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 79–110. ^

2. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994. ^