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The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith

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Matthew Bowman. *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*.

New York: Random House, 2012.

Reviewed by Armand L. Mauss

Matthew Bowman is an up-and-coming young scholar of the generation now rising with the relatively new field of Mormon studies. Having completed his doctorate in American religious history at Georgetown University in 2011, he has nevertheless already been very visible for some time at academic conferences and in periodical literature of both Mormon and American religious histories. He has appeared on various public media sites, electronic and otherwise, as a commentator about Mormons and Mormonism, including discussions of his new book.¹

1. For example, on February 3, 2012, he had an important if somewhat difficult interview on the MSNBC program "Morning Joe," led by *Washington Post* religion commentator Jon Meacham, who, as it happens, was his editor for this book. See Jeffrey Meyer, "The Religion 'Double Standard' on MSNBC," *NewsBusters*, <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/jeffrey-meyer/2012/02/03/religion-double-standard-msnbc>. He was also interviewed about the book for more than an hour on a FAIR podcast (episode 15, March 7, 2012). See FAIR Conversations, episode 15: "Matthew Bowman on His New Book, 'The Mormon People,'" *FAIR Blog*, Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, <http://www.fairblog.org/2012/03/07>. See also these articles based on interviews with the author: Jana Riess, "Rising Star Matthew Bowman Discusses 'The Mormon People,'" Religion News Service, <http://archives.religionnews.com/blogs/jana-riess/rising-star-matthew-bowman-on-the-mormon-people3>; Marjorie Kehe, "Author Matthew Bowman Talks about 'The Mormon Moment,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2012/0301/Author-Matthew-Bowman-talks-about-the-Mormon-moment>; Michael Morella, "How Mitt Romney's Mormon Faith Makes Him More American," *U.S. News & World Report*, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2012/03/08/how-mitt-romneys-mormon-faith-makes-him-more-american>; and Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Author: 'Mormons Are Deeply Aware

This book provides eight solid chapters, a brief introduction, and an even briefer conclusion, followed by four appendices, a bibliographic essay, endnotes, and an index. The chapters are arranged chronologically, with the first taking us to 1831, the second to 1839, the third to 1846, the fourth to 1877, the fifth to 1896, the sixth to 1945, the seventh to 1978, and the final chapter to 2011. The significance of this periodization will be readily apparent to many Mormon readers, and Bowman makes it clear enough to non-Mormon readers as well. He appropriately dedicates the book to Richard Bushman, who is not only his principal mentor but also was instrumental in connecting him with the publisher.

The author uses a strategy for his references (likely at the urging of his publisher) that makes the text read smoothly without interruptions from footnotes. The chapters are actually rather lightly footnoted (averaging usually about one note per page of text), and all the notes appear in a single section at the back of the book. The sixteen-page bibliographic essay preceding the notes thus carries the main burden of explaining the most important sources used by the author. The reader can thereby recognize that the author has relied mainly on secondary sources for the general story line and the major events and episodes of Mormon history. The chapter notes themselves cite mainly primary sources, but these citations function more to illustrate the story than to carry it. This is not intended as a criticism, for the author himself indicates that his book is largely a synthesis of the work of others, especially the first five chapters.

Within the nineteenth-century period, I thought that chapter 5, on the rise and fall of plural marriage in Utah, was an especially successful presentation. Through the theological treatises of Parley P. Pratt and others, the rationale offered for polygamy, with its emphasis on the eternal importance of complicated social networks, made this seemingly radical practice somewhat understandable.

The final three chapters, however, all of which deal with the twentieth century and beyond, display the most originality. Indeed, no earlier general histories have devoted such a large proportion of their treatments to this second half of Mormon history. Aside from the sheer quantity devoted to the more recent period, the book also has an important original argument in these final chapters—namely that the Church was strongly influenced by the Progressive movement so prominent in

of Their Own Oddness,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/lifestyle/53660113-80/american-author-book-bowman.html.csp>.

its American surroundings during the first half of that century. Thomas Alexander, whose volume on that same period remains the standard text, occasionally acknowledges the parallels between Progressivism and developments within Mormonism.² Yet Bowman goes further in using the convergence with American Progressivism as an underlying theme in the way that Mormon institutional life unfolded, whether in the theological rationalizations of B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and John A. Widtsoe, or in the hard work, financial acumen, organizational efficiency, and wholesome living advocated by Heber J. Grant. Many earlier scholars have recognized the assimilation or “Americanization” of Mormons that occurred during this period, but Bowman points to Progressivism as the main inspiration for that assimilation (chapter 6).³

Yet the second half of the twentieth century saw a turn away from Progressivism toward what Bowman calls “retrenchment Mormonism,” a concept he acknowledges in a reference to my 1994 book.⁴ The chief vehicle of this retrenchment was “Correlation,” which gives chapter 7 its name. As an organizational framework emphasizing simplification, efficiency, and centralized control in a rapidly growing church, Correlation might be seen as simply an extension and intensification of Progressive forms of governance, which Bowman sees also in corporate America more generally.

However, one of Correlation’s implications, ironically, was a certain skepticism toward the kind of rationalized theology of the earlier period and, by extension, a suspicion of intellectuals who engaged in it. The expansive theological thinking of Roberts, Talmage, and Widtsoe was eclipsed and largely displaced by the more cautious and circumspect doctrinal teachings about scripture, creation, and the supernatural promulgated by Joseph Fielding Smith, Bruce R. McConkie, Ezra Taft Benson, and others of similar thought. Of course, Correlation’s influence could be seen in many other aspects of church life as well, including some loss of autonomy for the auxiliaries, especially those traditionally run

2. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

3. While this assimilation was apparently a deliberate policy preference on the part of the LDS leadership, there was some resistance to it, and it was certainly not inevitable. For an interesting study in “what might have been” during this period, see Ethan R. Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

4. His reference (290) is to my *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

by women; a simplification of the missionary message and approach to emphasize behavior and commitment over theological persuasion; and more overt involvement in political campaigns wherever the Church saw crucial moral issues involved. Indeed, if correlation and retrenchment can be seen partly as an extension of the Progressive philosophy of efficient corporate governance, they must also be seen as a reaction against an increasingly secular and hedonistic American culture more generally. In any case, the chapter on Correlation and its consequences offers a treatment that is a satisfying combination of the succinct and the comprehensive.

Chapter 8 picks up after the 1978 revelation on priesthood policy and brings us down to the present. While acknowledging the important work of others on issues in the late twentieth-century Church, Bowman cites (291) Claudia Bushman's *Contemporary Mormonism* as "most useful."⁵ Although the title of this chapter indicates that it deals with the global Church, it does not drop the subject of Correlation introduced in the previous chapter. Correlation did not end in 1978 but continues with us still, and its accompanying wariness toward independent intellectuals lasted at least through the administration of President Benson. Furthermore, the discussion of the global Church in chapter 8 is not an account of the Church's experiences in the various countries of the globe, but it does discuss somewhat the struggle of several departments at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City to deal with overseas growth, both logistically and culturally. The publisher made clear that the book was to be limited in scope to the American experience, so the author did not venture far beyond that limit. A much larger book would have been required for a truly global treatment.

Of course, that still leaves a lot to discuss about the Latter-day Saints in the U.S. itself, including the expansion of the Church nationwide, in large part through the dispersion of prominent members and families (including the Romneys); the ambivalent relationship between Mormons and Protestant Evangelicals; and the political exertions of the Church on behalf of traditional family and gender roles, especially through campaigns against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and same-sex marriage. The chapter includes brief forays into the significance of independent cultural developments among Mormon intellectuals and artists of recent decades, including the "new Mormon history" introduced by

5. Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006).

Leonard J. Arrington at the Church's own historical department, the Mormon History Association, Book of Mormon scholarship, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), and the publication of *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*. The author acknowledges resistance from Church leadership to some of these developments, and this resistance eventually expressed itself in some highly publicized excommunications during the 1990s. The chapter closes on an upbeat and optimistic assessment of a future, in which the Church exhibits a new openness and transparency about its past, as well as a new appreciation for the religious truths and impulses in other faiths.

I noticed two other general features of the book that will likely increase its appeal to non-Mormon readers and to intellectually persuaded Mormons: For one, the book is quite candid and transparent about many of the more curious, troubling, and misunderstood features in Mormon history that have so often been passed over—for example, reports of Joseph Smith's treasure-seeking background; accounts of his translation sessions involving simple dictation, without resort to the plates (but sometimes with a seer stone); the controversy around the Fanny Alger case; the secrecy and apparent deception, even of Emma, during the establishment of plural marriage in Nauvoo; the tragic saga of Emma's eventual break with the main body of the Church; Mormon contributions to the violence in Missouri; the continuation of post-Manifesto polygamy by authorization of key Church leaders; the perceived dissembling by the Church President and some Apostles during the Smoot hearings; the slow and ambiguous decline in women's authority to perform healing blessings; the dubious origins and periodic recurrence of the race issue; and the transformation of the proselytizing system from an emphasis on reason and persuasion to a program relying more on an extraordinary conversion event. Bowman's treatment of all these issues is done with great discretion—revealing but not in any way salacious.

A second appealing feature of the book is its occasional citation of intellectual and artistic products, whether by Mormons or non-Mormons, to illustrate or symbolize important historical developments—for example, the doctrinal significance of the book *Added Upon* and its later connection to *Saturday's Warrior*; Darryl F. Zanuck's film *Brigham Young* and the popularity of the Tabernacle Choir as indicators of Mormon assimilation into the broader culture; conservative non-Mormon sources finding use in James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ* and in Joseph Fielding Smith's *Man: His Origin and Destiny*; the manifest resort to Mormon themes in the fiction of Orson Scott Card and Stephenie

Meyer, in the work of filmmakers such as Richard Dutcher, and in recent Broadway plays and musicals; and even in such popular intellectual ventures mentioned above, as well as the extensive bloggernacle.

All in all, this book is a pleasure to read. The prose communicates well and colorfully. It would be an excellent basic textbook for a course in Mormon studies at either the graduate or the undergraduate level. I expect it to enjoy a wide readership, partly because of the features I have discussed here, but also because it has the benefit of marketing by a well-known commercial publisher.

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