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Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness; For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830-2013

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W. Paul Reeve. *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness.*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Russell W. Stevenson. *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013.*

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014.

Reviewed by Patrick Q. Mason

Mormonism's fraught relationship with American and global racial diversity remains for many observers and believers one of the religion's most troubling aspects. The most perplexing aspect of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' historically racist policies was overturned in 1978 when the Church leadership granted priesthood ordination to all worthy men regardless of color or racial background, and allowed all qualifying members, without respect to race, to enter its temples. Yet the Church and its members continue to wrestle with the legacy of those policies and the flotilla of race-based theological pronouncements assembled and deployed particularly during the religion's first century-and-a-half. Recent decades have witnessed the consistent output of outstanding and truly significant scholarship on Mormonism and race, mostly but not exclusively focusing on the black-white divide.¹ In late 2015, the Tanner Humanities Center at the University of Utah convened a major conference examining the "evolving status of black Saints within the Mormon fold."² For its part, the LDS Church has recently published an official online essay denouncing racism of any form and repudiating past theories taught

1. For a few key examples, see Lester E. Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Spring 1973): 11–68; Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Blacks within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing, 1981); and Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

2. For details, see Tanner Humanities Center, "Black, White, and Mormon, 08–09 Oct 2015," <http://thc.utah.edu/lectures-programs/bwm-conference/>.

in the Church to support racialist policies.³ Furthermore, in its ubiquitous “I’m a Mormon” ad campaign, the Church has gone to pains to demonstrate—and perhaps exaggerate—the degree to which it has become a racially and ethnically inclusive body of Saints.

Two significant additions to this ongoing conversation are Russell Stevenson’s book *For the Cause of Righteousness* and Paul Reeve’s *Religion of a Different Color*. Both award-winning authors, Stevenson is currently a doctoral student in African history at Michigan State University, and Reeve is a professor of history at the University of Utah. Although their books deal with the relationship of Mormonism and race and overlap in certain key respects—notably coverage of the origins and impact of the LDS priesthood-temple ban—in fact the two books are as different as they are similar. Stevenson offers a mostly linear history of LDS racial policies and how blacks who came to believe in Mormonism’s precepts, both in the United States and beyond, sought to navigate the biases of the institution, its leaders, and members. Reeve goes beyond the more traditional narrative of Mormons’ views of racial minorities (especially blacks and Native Americans) to consider how those racial beliefs were constructed as a dialectic alongside the racialization of Mormons by non-LDS outsiders, particularly in the nineteenth century. In its sophisticated conversation with whiteness theory and the history of American race relations, Reeve’s book is the more innovative and theoretically ambitious of the two, though both have important merits.

By way of full disclosure, I reviewed an advance manuscript of *Religion of a Different Color* and provided a blurb for the back cover in which I said, “With prodigious research and a keen eye for detail, context, and irony, Paul Reeve masterfully guides us through the fickleness and combustibility of nineteenth-century American racial discourse, with Mormons as his unlikely subjects.” I can add to that endorsement by saying that *Religion of a Different Color* is a true historical tour de force. It instantly joins the elite ranks of the Mormon studies canon, becoming required reading for anyone interested in the Mormon past (or present). The book’s utility goes far beyond Mormon studies, however, as it should also be consulted by scholars of whiteness and American race relations as an expert analysis of how religion impacted and was impacted by the national discourse about race.

3. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Race and the Priesthood,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

Reeve uses as his point of departure a cartoon published in *Life* magazine in 1904 depicting a “Mormon Elder-Berry”—with his long beard looking suspiciously like Church President Joseph F. Smith, then in the national news in connection with the Senate’s Reed Smoot hearings—out for a walk with his numerous children, who collectively display a panoply of racial, ethnic, and national diversity. As Reeve mentions, the cartoon “was part of an effort to trap Mormons in a racially suspect past” even at the moment that Church leaders sought to legitimate the religion’s place in American society (2). Reeve’s key insight is that historians have not fully taken into account the ways in which “Protestants believed Mormons were physically different” (3). Thus, Reeve convincingly argues, the “whiteness” of Mormons and Mormonism is best examined “as a contested variable, not an assumed fact” (7). In the ensuing eight chapters, Reeve deftly examines the perception, proposed by outsiders and insiders alike, that Mormonism constituted not merely a new religion but also a new race. He spends two chapters reflecting on LDS relationships with Native Americans and the ways in which opponents “imagined Mormons conspiring with Indians against white Americans and sometimes descending below the level of savages themselves” (11). Another chapter considers the “orientalization” of Mormonism, with polygamy as the key factor in linking the overwhelmingly Euro-American Mormons with the “barbaric” and “despotic” Muslims, Turks, and Chinese. These are outstanding chapters, each displaying assiduous research, careful analysis, and broad context. I was particularly fascinated as Reeve showed how the “nits make lice” comment made by a perpetrator to justify his murder of a child in the Hawn’s Mill Massacre had a long history in Anglo-American racial discourse (52–55).

Its other achievements notwithstanding, the greatest contribution of *Religion of a Different Color* is in its quartet of chapters entitled “Black, White, and Mormon.” Here Reeve offers a master class in contextualization, close readings of texts, simultaneous clarity and complexity, subtle and nuanced argumentation, and the interweaving of Mormon and American history. Chapter 5 is, simply put, the single best account and explanation, from an academic viewpoint, of the origins of the LDS priesthood ban. Reeve carefully excavates and analyzes the earliest available manuscript sources, revealing the internal contestations and instabilities within Mormon racial discourse in the 1840s and early 1850s. Brigham Young, Parley Pratt, and others are portrayed

here not as stock characters or villains but rather as mid-nineteenth-century white men who were constructing their religion at the same time that they were writing Utah's territorial laws regarding "servitude" in the context of a national conversation about the impending threat of "white slavery." What emerges is a story more tragic than nefarious: "Mormons legalized their own version of black servitude in an effort to distinguish between black and white, bound and free. At the same time, Brigham Young announced a race-based priesthood restriction partly intended to substantiate Mormon racial purity" (142).

In Reeve's careful and sensitive portrayal, it's like watching a slow-motion car crash as we witness the real if complicated interracialism of 1830s–1840s Mormonism descend into something far more terrestrial, with culture-bound racism and fears of interracial sex and marriage outweighing a commitment to the universalist impulses of the gospel of Jesus Christ declared in both the New Testament and Book of Mormon. Keeping Mormon racial views and the racialization of Mormons in constant dialogue, Reeve provides in chapter 6 a nuanced analysis of how the Mormons' adoption of plural marriage was seen by many as a type of "race treason." That the critics' logic was bad—practicing a "peculiar" form of marriage and sexuality does not equate to the adoption of all manner of supposed depravity—did not prevent it from becoming a powerful discourse used to racialize and thereby marginalize Mormonism and its adherents, who in turn did all in their power to prove their whiteness. In grasping so earnestly for the cultural respectability afforded in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America by the achievement of whiteness, Mormons conflated race, purity, and citizenship, and set aside the integrating impulses of their own theology.

Russell Stevenson's book, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, is commendable in taking the story of Mormonism and race beyond America's shores and including far more than the usual suspects. In addition to detailing the familiar narrative of ecclesiastical racial exclusion, Stevenson also introduces us here to an expanded and truly impressive cast of characters: William Daniels, the unordained black branch president in South Africa; Moses Mahlangu, who attended Church for fourteen years before he was allowed to be baptized; Rebecca Mould, the charismatic Ghanaian leader; and Julie Mavimbela, the South African whose commitment to Mormon principles inspired her to found the organization Women for Peace. Stevenson is a document hound in the best tradition of Mormon historians, and readers will benefit considerably

from the book's second part, which includes over 150 pages of reprinted primary source documents with brief editorial introductions. However, the author's prodigious talent for research sometimes becomes a liability. He seemed intent on including in the book every scrap he discovered in the archives, with the inclusion of material seemingly taking priority over the judicious selection and careful organization of sources.

I was duly impressed by the substance and quality of material that Stevenson compiled in his research, but found myself repeatedly distracted by stylistic matters. The prose often jumps from topic to topic or source to source without clear transitions. A source or event is sometimes mentioned in passing, without full explication or explanation. For instance, "Martin" is mentioned on page 129 but not actually introduced as Wynetta Martin, the first black member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, until page 143. A long section on the white LDS adventurer John Goddard (93–101) is interesting but adds little to chapter 4, and in fact distracts from the narrative about Mormonism in Africa, since religion was seemingly epiphenomenal for Goddard. Indeed, the entire second half of that chapter is about whites (not blacks) in Africa. The chapter's subtitle is "From Aba to Detroit," but Detroit does not figure until an oblique reference in the chapter's last sentence.

The book's gaps are sometimes substantive as well as stylistic. Chapter 5 is all about white Utahans' views of civil rights, blacks, and the priesthood-temple ban, with African Americans appearing as objects, not subjects. This may have been done intentionally, to demonstrate the dynamics of power in which blacks were often silenced in conversations and policies made about them, but if that was his aim Stevenson does not explicitly say as much. Throughout the book the reader is often left wanting more from tantalizing but only briefly mentioned nuggets. For instance, chapter 7—which otherwise includes excellent information about the assimilation of independent Ghanaian congregations into the LDS Church—only remarks in passing on how temple ceremonies were racially integrated even in apartheid-era South Africa. Prime opportunities for critical analysis are frequently missed, such as the chance to reflect further in chapter 7 on the complicated dynamic between African female charismatic and American male institutional authority. The book rushes to the end of its story, containing relatively little history of the past quarter century beyond the collection of a few Church statements and the dedication of the temple in Ghana. All this suggests a manuscript that was somewhat hastily written by the author and not

thoroughly edited by the publisher. A more careful, patient approach would no doubt have addressed many of the book's most easily correctable shortcomings.

As mentioned, the documents reprinted in the latter half of *For the Cause of Righteousness* are themselves worth the price of purchase—though it must be acknowledged that, through no fault of the author, this collection's distinctiveness has been somewhat undermined by the subsequent publication of an entire documentary history of blacks and Mormonism.⁴ Still, there are a number of gems here that are well worth readers' attention, including Eunice Kinney's letter regarding Elijah Abel (217–21); Jane James's pathos-drenched autobiography and letters (222–27, 284–85); Brigham Young's various statements on race (252–54, 261–67); the inspiring testimony of Alabama convert Len Hope (299–302); the Lowry Nelson correspondence, along with the First Presidency's mid-twentieth-century statements (304–12); and ensuing statements by David O. McKay, Sterling McMurrin, and the First Presidency that trace the evolution of the priesthood-temple ban from a doctrine to a policy with “unknown” origins (317, 320, 334).

Despite my critiques, *For the Cause of Righteousness* is a valuable and welcome addition to our understanding of the rich, diverse, and complex history of Mormonism. Scholars will for many years refer to and build upon Stevenson's insights. He has offered a useful critique not only of the religion's racial shortcomings but also of Mormon scholars' near-exclusive attention on the American scene. Those of us in the profession have long noted that one of the next frontiers of Mormon studies must be more thorough attention to nonwhite and non-American voices, contexts, themes, and trends. Hats off to Stevenson for answering the call.

When placed side by side, these two books put into stark relief the differences in approach and achievement between a graduate student and a seasoned historian. *For the Cause of Righteousness* is the product of a talented young scholar who dove into the archives and seems to have come out in a hurry with something important to say. *Religion of a Different Color* is the product of a careful, mature, patient, and highly skilled craftsman expertly plying his trade. Emerging scholars

4. Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

of Stevenson's caliber should be encouraged and indeed celebrated. At the same time, Reeve, the consummate professional, has upped the ante for Mormon studies by producing a genuinely important book that will stand the test of time.

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