



2016

Mormonism and American Politics

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Recommended Citation

Haws, J. B. (2016) "Mormonism and American Politics," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 55 : Iss. 3 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol55/iss3/15>

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Randall Balmer and Jana Riess, eds.
Mormonism and American Politics.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Reviewed by J. B. Haws

This is a book that lives up to its blurbs. It really does feel “deft, discerning, and nearly definitive” (Jon Butler, from the book’s back cover).

Mormonism and American Politics brings together ten papers (along with three additional essays) that were originally presented at a February 2012 Columbia University conference on Mormonism and politics. It says something that the conference was convened at the suggestion of Mark C. Taylor, then chair of the religion department at Columbia. Timing surely was part of the broad interest this topic was generating in 2012—the conference took place in the thick of the Mitt Romney-driven “Mormon Moment.” But reading these essays four years later will remind readers that questions about Mormons’ place in America’s religious and political landscape are still worthy of study—and maybe more so—one election cycle later. Those who are drawn to Mormon history, especially recent Mormon history, as well as those who are interested more generally in contests about the changing role of American religion in the public square, should not miss this book.

The essays are organized in a roughly chronological order. That ordering strengthens the book, and while each essay can be read as a stand-alone piece, reading the essays in order gives a sense both of transformations in Mormon attitudes about their American host society, as well as the persistence of some underlying Mormon tenets and tendencies that continually create interesting, and often unexpected, tensions. The editors have been effective in arranging the essays so that they build on one another—more on that later. The editors and authors are to be commended, too, for fleshing out and updating the papers as they took them from presentations to published essays. The substantial endnotes that follow the chapters make the volume even meatier.

A number of important things can be said about this book, but here are two things that stand out. First, the editors introduce the book with this line: “The story of Mormonism in America is inextricably tied to politics” (ix). Each essay that follows makes that case well, and several historical episodes and periods in Mormonism take on new vitality when viewed through the lens of political implications.

In chapter 1, for example, Richard Bushman offers a very perceptive reading on how the Book of Mormon envisions and “values a politics of harmony,” one that “measured political success by righteousness, peace, and unity” (10, 12). Bushman’s detection of an affinity between Joseph Smith’s presidential platform and the Book of Mormon “in a shared distaste for dissent and contention” (12) is more persuasive than a superficial reading of the Book of Mormon that might see it as offering unqualified support for some form of modern democracy.

John Turner, in his chapter on Brigham Young’s church presidency years, demonstrates just how betrayed Latter-day Saints felt by what they saw as the U.S. government’s constitutional failings to protect them and their prophet (a sentiment borne out by the new publication of the minutes of the Council of Fifty in the Joseph Smith Papers Project). Turner also highlights how Mormon polygamy befuddled and exposed antebellum proponents of popular sovereignty whose arguments for states’ rights seemed increasingly slavery-specific when confronted by the Mormon case.

In chapter 3, Jana Riess gives an important retelling, from a gendered perspective, of the campaign to deny B. H. Roberts a seat in Congress in 1898–99. Riess argues that American Protestant women’s groups decried Roberts just as vehemently as they had campaigned against polygamy a decade earlier. Roberts parted company with other Mormons in his stance against female suffrage, and this generated extra vitriol among “the temperance-loving, suffrage-seeking Protestant churchwoman of the East” (38). Riess also points out that men became more involved in the anti-Roberts push than in earlier antipolygamy initiatives because “polygamy had become inextricably linked to a ‘male’ prerogative—politics” (42). Riess closes with a look at the Reed Smoot case to suggest how, in just a few short years, American attitudes about gender and polygamy and Mormon men marked a new trajectory for the LDS Church’s public image—a trajectory that Jan Shipp’s essay (chapter 5) then traces through the twentieth century. Shipp’s attention to Ezra Taft Benson as a representative figure both reflects her own astute sense of Mormonism’s national reputation and highlights

Benson's significance in modern Mormonism. In light of Shipp's overview, it is little wonder that Benson is the subject of a number of forthcoming scholarly biographical works.

A second key idea in *Mormonism and American Politics* comes to the fore in Philip Barlow's essay on exceptionalism. Barlow's essay is a pivotal one, not only because the chapter is the numerical midpoint of the book (chapter 7), but also because its "dominant and recessive gene" metaphor is packed with explanatory power in thinking about Mormonism. Barlow uses the gene imagery specifically to address Mormon attitudes about chosenness (Mormons' status as a chosen people, and America's status as a chosen nation), and especially to highlight the sometimes paradoxical strains of exceptionalism *and* inclusivism that run through Mormonism—strains that can seem to appear alternately as dominant or recessive.

Barlow's metaphor can be applied productively in various other places in the book as well. It has something to say in the important attention Matthew Bowman gives to aspects of Mormon theology that resonated with the impulse of progressivism (chapter 4), such that Mormonism's early twentieth-century reshaping can be seen as more authentic and internally driven than is often admitted by analysts who see only a concession to "mainstream" American values. The metaphor has something to say, too, in Russell Arben Fox's discussion (chapter 6) of how Mormon theology continues to make Americans uncomfortable. Despite signs of Mormon patriotism, the preeminence—and primacy—of revelation in the Mormon theological system, Fox argues, raises questions as to whether Mormons should be—or even can be—included in the broad tent of shared American civic religion when the specter of theocracy is hovering nearby.

This persistent American discomfort is at the heart of Randall Balmer's chapter (chapter 8) contrasting the public religious personas of John F. Kennedy, George Romney, and Mitt Romney. Balmer's significant suggestion is that Mitt Romney should have spoken *more* about his religion, since "Americans generally prefer candor to subterfuge" (127). Balmer's point is a fascinating one, and he has done as much as anyone to trace the way religion has influenced presidential politics in the past half-century. But it is difficult to know how such a turn would have played, especially in 2007, considering just how deeply seated Christian fears about Mormons have appeared to be. The Christian antipathy for Mormonism that Riess traces in chapter 3 still has something to say in Balmer's chapter 8.

The dominant and recessive gene framing is also pronounced in Max Mueller's chapter on Mormon attitudes about race. Mueller's nuanced analysis centers on underexplored stories that have led "the modern church [to emphasize] Mormon universalism over racial particularity" (159). At Mueller's hand, these include an important reading of the Book of Mormon that shows it "does not solely teach an ethic of white 'chosenness.' It also teaches the possible redemption of all humanity, even those accursed with dark skin" (163). Thus, while the "Book of Mormon's conception of whiteness as the standard to which all people should aspire rightfully makes us squirm" (164), still, and unlike many contemporaries, early Latter-day Saints "were professing the 'modern' view that racial categories were mutable and constructed" (163). Mueller's call for attention to Mormon stories other than that of "racial exclusion" is provocative; he writes of "a parallel history," "almost never told," of "Mormon empathy, even kinship with African Americans . . . created out of a shared past of persecution by 'white' or 'gentile' America" (160).

Perhaps nowhere in the book are the pushes and pulls of "dominant and recessive genes" in Mormon thought and practice more keenly felt than in discussions surrounding LGBT issues. Claudia Bushman's essay (chapter 11), for example, draws on a number of contemporary oral histories recorded with Mormon women, some of whom are the mothers of gay children. Bushman's chapter, "Mormon Women Talk Politics," gives voice to Mormon women's strong rebuttals of antipolygamy campaigns in the 1870s, as well as Mormon women's views on both sides of the Equal Rights Amendment debate of the 1970s. But half of the essay is devoted to Mormon women's views of recent same-sex marriage ballot initiatives. The expressions of faith and of real pain in these interviews are equally moving. "What we see in these potent narratives is a story in which politics and church instructions impinge on family relationships," Bushman writes, "changing the direction of the story. . . . When the church speaks the response is never simple and in one voice" (189).

In that same vein, Joanna Brooks's chapter on Proposition 8 is a thought-provoking look at an episode that will likely loom large in future histories of twenty-first century Mormonism. Brooks gives us an important take. Her analysis, based on theories of outsider-insider discourse, suggests that Mormons in the California campaign "undergrounded" (Brooks's term) their temple-marriage-based theological opposition to same-sex marriage, but used coded language that appealed to a broader coalition. Brooks points out that this raised old suspicions about Mormon secretiveness. However, what looks like dissembling from one

political point of view can look like consensus building from another. Brooks's essay begs for more discussion about the intellectual weight behind opposition to same-sex marriage, as well as more consideration of contextual differences between the ERA campaign of the 1970s and the 2008 Proposition 8 campaign (and its aftermath); lobbying strength and changes in national opinions seem, at first glance, to be two such differences. Granted, there is only so much that one can do in a limited essay—and what Brooks does, she does well. But if *Mormonism and American Politics* could have been one chapter longer, a chapter surveying contemporary Mormon conservative political thought and the theological bases of such thought on family policy and religious liberty, for example, would have rounded out an already remarkable volume.

These theological bases figure here in part because, regardless of one's political persuasion, Mormon conservatism is interesting for the ways Mormon voters often diverge from expected patterns. This comes across clearly in a crucial chapter by three authors, David Campbell, Christopher Karpowitz, and Quin Monson. Their essay discusses places where Mormon theology seems to position Mormons in a different place on the political spectrum than, say, evangelical Protestants, on issues like abortion or immigration or civil rights for those in the LGBT community. Mormons tend to have more politically moderate views on these points. Here are the surprises of the dominant/recessive genes again. Hence Joanna Brooks notes that “on the issue of homosexuality, it would be inaccurate to characterize the quality of LDS discourse about homosexuals as more intense than that of other socially conservative religious denominations” (193)—this is what makes the Proposition 8 story so complex. These complexities also speak to a strong call issued in the chapter by Campbell, Karpowitz, and Monson for more thoughtful attention to what they call the “costs of partisan homogeneity” in Mormonism (148).¹

Fittingly, Peggy Fletcher Stack's concluding chapter, “Mitt, Mormonism, and the Media,” provides a case study of sorts that brings together all of these historic tensions and surprises, both internal and external. Stack's piece is the type of essay that Mormons will want to have on hand to pass out to religiously curious acquaintances, and reporters

1. Ideas in their essay are treated with more length and more data in David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014)—a good companion read to *Mormonism and American Politics*.

would do well to start their research for any Mormon-related assignment with a reread of this essay. From her prime vantage point as a veteran religion writer at the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Stack was especially well positioned to experience some of the high points and low points in the media's coverage of Mormonism during Mitt Romney's two presidential campaigns. Stack's essay sparkles with insights about the press: reporters often asked the wrong questions; they assumed a Protestant model that missed the essence of Romney's LDS Church callings of bishop and stake president; journalists made a detectable turn to quoting practicing Latter-day Saints as expert voices—and Stack points out that Jon Krakauer, author of *Under the Banner of Heaven*, was conspicuously missing from 2012 media coverage. That 2012 coverage, Stack notes, felt different to many observers than did coverage of Romney's Mormonism four years earlier—from “latent misunderstandings” to “questions about what do Mormons actually do,” in the words of LDS spokesman Michael Otterson (223). This “dance,” Stack writes, “between the mainstream media and the Utah church . . . produced surprising results. Mormons saw themselves reflected in their country's pluralistic mirror, not as outsiders but as part of the crowded field. They faced some of the tougher issues in their history and had a chance to erase false perceptions. Some Mormons discovered more diversity in their own movement than they knew existed. Meanwhile, many other Americans met the real Mormonism for the first time, rather than its tabloid version” (213).

That is a good description, too, of what readers will find in *Mormonism and American Politics*.

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