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Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings

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Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, eds. *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings.*

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Reviewed by Camille S. Williams

The editors of *Mormon Feminism* seek to introduce readers to "the Mormon feminist movement through the words of the women who have lived and built it" (1). For the editors' purposes, "Mormon" is broadly defined to include "anyone who identifies with the Latter-day Saint movement" (2), including those from other faith traditions and those who reject various teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From the outset of the book, "feminism" is defined as "espous[ing] fair and equal treatment for all" persons (3),[1] divorcing the term from aspects of its history that are troubling to many Church members and are in conflict with LDS doctrine, such as the view that elective abortion is central to female autonomy. The book includes sixty-one writings from 1970 to the present, purported to "have played a historic role in developing Mormon feminist history and theology, or have articulated key issues, tensions, and dimensions of Mormon women's lives" (9). Forty-one authors are included, most of whom are academics or independent scholars; while *Mormon Feminism* is published by a highly respected academic press, the book is written for an educated general audience and frequently departs from a scholarly approach. Consequently, readers will not find here a very deep or methodical exploration of those aspects of feminism that are valued and integrated into the religious lives of many Latter-day Saints around the world.

Despite the initial apolitical definitions of feminism, many of the writers critique the Church, along with its subculture in the United States, via a species of "the personal is political" feminist analysis. Liberal

1. Kent Harrison and Mary Stoval Richards, "Feminism in Light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 2 (1996–97): 195.

feminist[2] views, such as Elouise Bell's Brigham Young University speech (47–49), are fewer in number than the structural feminist analyses, such as those excerpted in part 2. Structuralist views are illustrated by the editors' comment that "with the consolidation of Church bureaucracy around an all-male priesthood chain of command, dimensions of Mormonism significant to women—including the doctrine of Heavenly Mother and the time-honored woman-centered forms of religious authority and spiritual practice—[have] been diminished or lost" (118). Poststructuralist power analyses included in parts 3 and 4 are characterized as arising from a "critical mass of Mormon feminists . . . who pushed the movement toward new frontiers in consciousness, theology, and action" until a "backlash followed," and those who advocated for new conceptions of priesthood, worship, gender, and Church government were disciplined (171). The proffered minimalist definition of feminism contrasts sharply with structuralist assumptions embedded in many of the writings, most starkly in the invective of Sonia Johnson (73–78) and the womanist intersectional polemic of Gina Colvin (271–73), who opines that correlated Mormonism "has many of us dribbling with boredom" and has "given rise to a tide of viciousness and meteoric cruelty from those thinking they are doing the work of Jesus with their spew of vile recriminations" (272).

Joanna Brooks's general introduction (1–23) is a sociopolitical analysis of Church doctrine, history, policy, and practice, from what might be deemed a poststructuralist feminist perspective, highlighting works that explore what she lists as "aspects of Mormon doctrine and practice that offer mixed or contradictory messages about gender, equality and power." Brooks identifies the major themes of Mormon feminism as: the role of Mother in Heaven in "Mormon liturgy and practice"; "the spiritual value of gender roles" in the family and the Church; the "unresolved issue of polygamy"; "women's access to priesthood"; and the "racial privilege and bias within the LDS Church" (3–4). Some LDS faithful may feel that her introduction evinces a sociopolitical feminist analysis that, when applied to a Church directed by continuing revelation that is neither ahistorical nor merely contingent, does not properly address the fundamental nature and reality of the Church.

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2. In general, I have classified types of feminism consistent with Amy Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive: Summer 2014 Edition,* http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/feminist-power/.

The book includes a timeline titled "Key Events in Contemporary Mormon Feminism, 1940–present" (24–32), followed by selected and often excerpted writings grouped into four parts, ostensibly representing Mormon feminist thought during each decade or so since the 1970s. Included are personal essays, talks, articles, interviews, poetry, plays, excerpts from other anthologies and books, satirical writings of LDS culture and practices, letters and public statements, and blogs and Internet postings.

Most of the writings are briefly introduced with biographical information about the author and some contextual or interpretive commentary by the editors; many are followed by references and a list of additional readings. Also included are a glossary of names and terms (293–301) designed to be helpful to non-Mormon readers and a "Study Group Guide" (307–8) that outlines an approach for groups desiring to raise consciousness about oppression and to marshal support for advocacy efforts.

Anthologies are unavoidably selective, and most of the writers included in this volume struggle against what they view as a socially and politically conservative Church culture, which Laurel Thatcher Ulrich contends "simultaneously enlarges and diminishes women." She rejects either keeping quiet or picketing the tabernacle because "to do either is to accept the very heresy we want to overcome—the misguided notion that the Church is somehow to be equated with the men at the top" (115). Feminist approaches are represented as minority voices within the Church seeking a more egalitarian organization, often based on the view that Joseph Smith envisioned the ordination of women but was thwarted by Brigham Young and successive leaders. Pitting dead prophets against the living, praising Joseph for his purported plan to ordain women while castigating him for polygamy, is at minimum inconsistent.

The general approach of the editors and most of the writers in this volume is consistent with progressive Mormonism and spirituality.[3] Elizabeth Hammond, for example, posits that temple ceremonies reflect pioneer-era perspectives, which mainstream Mormonism itself has rejected and outgrown. She states her intent to help women distressed by "gender messages" (281) they receive in the temple. Her appraisal of temple ordinances, which, granted, was taken from a blog post, might have benefitted from considering relevant scripture, revealed doctrine, and fewer individualistic

3. See *LiberalMormon.net,* http://www.liberalmormon.net/500ndx.shtml; and Julienna Viegas-Haws, "What Do Progressive Mormons Want? A Dialogue about Change," *Salt Lake Tribune,* July 18, 2015; updated February 17, 2016, at http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/2735147-155/op-ed-what-do-progressive-mormons-want.

interpretations. Without these, some of her considerations and conclusions about sacred rituals appear inappropriate, strained, or mistaken. As with Hammond, the writers in this volume are skilled at using feminist approaches to analyze the Church, but not enough attention is given to using the restored gospel to critique feminist approaches.

Mormon Feminism does include excerpts that readers may find to be more consistent with LDS doctrine, such as those informed by concepts of gender complementarity. Valerie Hudson Cassler's "The Two Trees" (249–52), which "conveys a confidence that Mormon doctrine is already egalitarian and could reshape Mormon culture if understood correctly" (248), and Neylan McBaine's "cooperative paradigm" foreground Church teachings about the importance of motherhood and the different but equally valued roles of women and men, respectively. McBaine argues that "the Church does not satisfy secular gender-related egalitarian ideals, period. . . . But the Church does not, and should not operate according to secular concepts of power, status, and if we attempt to justify ourselves in [that] paradigm we will not only fail, but betray our own ideals" (261).

Eloise Bell's 1975 acknowledgement that some feminisms include "unwise goals" (49) or that there may be other alternative feminist analyses is not sufficiently explored by the editors. For example, they attribute "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" as a response "to new theological pressures around conventional notions of gender" (18) and part of a "backlash" against "Mormon feminist writers, scholars, and activists more generally" (171). Also, priesthood correlation is noted as "a bureaucratic initiative" in which "all LDS Church programs and operations had been placed under the supervision of the Church's all-male priesthood hierarchy," and the "female leadership of the once-independent Relief Society lost the authority to develop and administer its own programs, finances, and publications" (107).

Such commentary leaves alternative explanations unexplored, such as scriptural and doctrinal reasoning for placing Church organizations directly under the offices and callings holding the various keys of the priesthood. Certainly going back to a more independent, unfunded, "uncorrelated" Relief Society could, under a different feminist interpretation, be seen as evidence that the Church does not value or properly integrate women. It also overlooks the potential for problems related to tax status among related entities, or message confusion among independent entities that each represent "the Church." The editors might have acknowledged the need of the twentieth-century Church to correlate "doctrines . . . [of] fundamental" belief for an international Church that

is expanding so quickly that it needs to "build a chapel a day for the next foreseeable future . . . [and] figure out how to get out of some country or into some country."[4] Rather, correlation is viewed as assimilation into the American mainstream culture that contributed to "theological retrenchment, which brought renewed fundamentalism, literalism, conservatism, and for women, a new emphasis in over-the-pulpit messaging on their domestic role" (11). The recommended remedy is not less assimilation but greater assimilation into the contemporary global academic culture (21–23).

These excerpts concerning correlation and the family proclamation illustrate the underlying tension about how to apportion or recognize authority—that of prophets, various general and local authorities, and the individual, and how to negotiate individual and collective callings, responsibilities, burdens, demands, and rewards in the LDS culture, the home, and the Church. *Mormon Feminism* may be most valuable as part of the social history of a group of women who label themselves as Mormon feminists and who want women to be included in "theological decision-making" to promote changes in the Church that would give women "equal say" in shaping all aspects of the Church, from budgets to "articulating prophetic truths" (7–8). However, standard power analysis cannot yield an accurate understanding of the power of God in the Church or the power of the priesthood. The power of the priesthood is far more likely to bring a man—CEO or day laborer—to his knees and to convince him that without God he is nothing, than it is to form the basis for him to dominate others. The same could be said of women who serve with authority under the direction of the priesthood—such callings are likewise not given to satisfy certain notions of control or autonomy.

Mormon Feminism may also be seen as part of an ecumenical feminist movement, in the sense that the editors prepared the book "for a broad audience of non-Mormons and Mormons, scholars and lay people," seeking to "deepen conversations within Mormonism" about what they see as "the gains and setbacks of the last forty years, and foster conversations and comparisons with people of faith and scholars in other traditions" (9). They suggest that "feminist research now in progress engages how Mormon women of color and LGBT Mormons create meaning and manage such tensions in their religious lives," and hope to "address points of irresolution and potential within our own

4. See PBS, "The Mormons: Interview with Kathleen Flake," April 27, 2006, http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/flake.html, under the question "What is it like being an intellectual in the church?"

theology and join with other feminist theologians of other faiths in the larger project of analyzing what Rosemary Radford Ruether calls 'God talk'" (22–23).

In contrast to the LDS suffragists of the nineteenth century who fought against disabilities under the law, the "first generations of Mormon feminists developed analyses of power disparities between Mormon men and women," and the editors see future "work to be done in analyzing modes of power that have been available to Mormon women." They observe that Mormon women have availed themselves of the "use of public piety, submission, ostracization, and other forms of microaggression to establish hierarchies among Mormon women and to manage our relationship with the non-Mormon world" (23). This may rightly be seen as a cynical and dismissive view of the way LDS women use power. Such an analysis is—as Daniel Dennett said of evolutionary theory infringing on moral philosophy—a "universal acid" that "eats through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionized world-view, with most of the old landmarks still recognizable, but transformed in fundamental ways."[5] Some readers might be less sanguine about such a transformation than are the editors.

Those who hope, as I had hoped, to find in this volume a work weaving the best of feminist thought enlightened by commitment to the doctrines of the LDS Church—something akin to *Women, Sex, and the Church: A Case for Catholic Teaching*[6]—will be mostly disappointed by *Mormon Feminism,* which might be more accurately subtitled *Feminist Critiques of the LDS Church, Its Leadership, Policies, and Culture.*

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5. Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 63, as quoted in "Daniel Dennett," http://bevets.com/equotesd5.htm.

6. Erika Bachiochi, ed., *Women, Sex, and the Church: A Case for Catholic Teaching* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2010).