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Review Essays

What Kind of Prejudice Was Anti-Mormonism?

Chris Beneke

Review of J. Spencer Fluhman. *“A Peculiar People”: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012; Terryl L. Givens. *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*. Second Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013; Patrick Q. Mason. *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Megan Sanborn Jones. *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

IN THE 1879 SUPREME COURT CASE of *Reynolds v. United States*, Chief Justice Morrison Waite rendered a decision that reverberated throughout the twentieth century. For the first time in what was then a very short history of First Amendment jurisprudence, Waite invoked Thomas Jefferson’s now-famous claim that the federal religious clauses had established a “wall of separation between church and State.” Because the term *religion* wasn’t defined in the Constitution, Waite indicated that he would need to investigate its original meaning. He never did. Instead, Waite went on to explain that the First Amendment prohibited congressional interference with religious belief. Religiously inspired action was another matter. Waite’s conclusion: even though polygamous marriages proceeded from a religious belief, its practitioners were still

bound by the reinforcing imperatives of social duty and civil order. In other words, when it came to plural marriage, they weren't protected by the Constitution.

Reynolds was only a faint premonition, a muffled historical rumbling, of the cascade of First Amendment jurisprudence that crashed upon twentieth-century America. The case had come to the Supreme Court's attention because the US Congress had taken the unusual step of forbidding something that resembled the free exercise of religion in an area—Utah Territory—over which it had direct jurisdiction. At least that was the constitutional justification. Underlying the *Reynolds* decision was a long-standing cultural and political animus against Mormonism, and especially Mormon polygamy, that had been mounting for half a century.

Though it has always proved hard to characterize, anti-Mormon prejudice has never been difficult to find. With the possible exception of twenty-first-century Islam, no other American religion has inspired such a riot of epithets, such a profusion of calumny, as Mormonism. This brazen faith, which struck like lightning amid the storm of Upstate New York's evangelical revivals in the 1830s, jolted everyone with whom it came into contact. To orthodox Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, Mormonism was at once both exceedingly strange and unsettlingly familiar. Critics called its prophet (Joseph Smith) a charlatan, its revelations a ruse, its scripture a fabrication. In some ways, Mormonism fit right into its time. It was a proselytizing faith in a proselytizing age, a biblical faith in a biblical era. But that didn't make Latter-day Saints any less inimical to their neighbors. There's nothing that religious groups like less than to see one of their own converted to another faith, unless it's having their scripture revised.

It didn't help that Mormons had few nice things to say about other groups and much to say in outright opposition to them. Ecumenism is the luxury of older, staid traditions whose theological respectability has already been proven. It has little appeal or utility for the upstart faith striving to make its mark on the religious landscape. If it had only remained a speculative religion, its leaders content with soteriological musings and material prosperity, Mormonism might have escaped much

of the unfavorable attention. But this was a faith of action. It demanded communal expression and heroic feats of evangelization. Most religious groups settle into institutional and theological complacency after a couple of decades of radical innovation. Not the Mormons. The revelations and the institutional inventions continued unabated, and the Mormons themselves proved irrepressible.

The revivalist antebellum period into which Mormonism was born also saw the rise of a new wave of religious prejudice. Mormonism began its blazing ascent when Protestant bigots burned Catholic churches and convents while others vied to distinguish themselves as adversaries of religious skepticism and free thought. The year 1844 may have been the bleakest in the history of American religious relations. As Roman Catholics and Protestants battled in the streets of Philadelphia, Joseph Smith was assassinated in an Illinois jail. Within the space of a decade, the Mormons were driven from Missouri and then Illinois. Had the federal government been more powerful and more resolute, it might have driven the Mormons from their eventual homeland in Utah too. Instead, the 1857–58 “Mormon War” came to a largely bloodless and relatively amicable conclusion. By that point, the rawest forms of anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment were subsiding. Yet some of Mormonism’s greatest trials lay ahead.

The persistence and ferocity of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism presents historians with something of a puzzle. What sort of prejudice was this? Was anti-Mormonism about religion or about something else? These are actually old questions, asked many times about other American religious traditions such as Catholicism and Judaism. Historians have long debated whether anti-Catholicism was an expression of hostility toward the papacy, overbearing priests, and Roman Catholic theology—or simply an aversion to poor Irish folks. They have likewise debated whether anti-Jewish prejudice is better characterized as hostility to Jewish beliefs and practices—or to people of Semitic heritage. Despite the unoriginal character of the endeavor, there is value in raising parallel questions about anti-Mormonism. The faith’s American origins, the immediateness of its revelations, and the Anglo-Saxon background of

its converts challenge us to reconsider the factors that inspire prejudice toward minority religious groups and to weigh the sometimes competing imperatives of theology, economy, race, and culture.

It is a propitious moment for such an enterprise. A swelling tide of scholarship on the Latter-day Saints has emerged along with an expansive new literature on the significance of tolerance and intolerance in American history. Terryl L. Givens was ahead of the times when he published his elegant and combative meditation on anti-Mormonism, *The Viper on the Hearth*, in 1997. Already a classic in the religious studies field, it was recently updated with trenchant reflections on the satiric musical *The Book of Mormon* and a concluding nod to the irony of Stephen Colbert. But the 2013 iteration has retained the lyrical prose, tongue-in-cheek humor, and piercing insight that distinguished Givens's original. "What is it about Mormonism," he asks, "that accounts for such an enduring and tenacious fixation on this marginalized and relatively minor denomination as one of the most significant threats to presidents, Christianity, and good airlines that America has ever known?" (p. 42).

Givens's updated edition also retains the original's emphasis on the singularity of anti-Mormon prejudice, as well as its theological motivations. *The Viper on the Hearth* still constitutes a thundering salvo against the conventional position that anti-Mormonism can be explained by reference to economic grievances, political disagreements, or social deviance—that is, to something besides the faith itself. As Givens sees it, the conflict between Mormonism and American culture has always been fundamentally theological. As long as the faith abides, so does its irresolvable tension with the contented, uninquisitive Christianity to which the majority of Americans subscribe. Since its inception, Givens argues, Mormonism has confronted Protestants and Catholics with the alarming possibility that their own faiths might be grounded in historically contingent circumstances, while denying them the reassuring illusion that God could be kept at a safe distance.

For Givens, the underlying cause of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism wasn't that other Americans were ignorant of what Joseph Smith was telling them; it was that they understood it too well. The

Latter-day Saints “demystif[ied]” Christianity, exposing its fragile rusting buttresses (p. 91). Most faiths rely on origin stories that are entombed in the past, sealed by the passage of time and the paucity of records kept during the era in which they arose. Mormonism isn’t like that. Whereas we know of just a handful of contemporary references to Jesus, early nineteenth-century references to Joseph Smith are still beyond reckoning. Mormons challenged antebellum America—and have challenged every era since—by “re-materializing” and “re-historicizing” Christianity (p. 92).

Givens understands the interpretive challenge before him. He acknowledges that Mormons were not the most theologically innovative sect of their day, nor the only one that endured religious violence. He is also aware that early Mormons had an annoying tendency to claim the status of a chosen people (and to refer to non-Mormons as “gentiles”), to strive for communal self-sufficiency, and to combine church authority with state power. Yet, Givens maintains, neither the comparable treatment of other radical religious groups nor the distinctiveness of Mormon social life can account for the virulent opposition that Mormonism inspired. Modern Americans are heirs to this dismal legacy. The culture remains beholden to a satisfying and highly fictionalized narrative about Mormonism, a gross caricature featuring domineering bigamists and sexually exploited women, relentlessly mustered in the service of an elaborate and long-lived theological evasion.

While paying homage to Givens, J. Spencer Fluhman offers a more nuanced and fuller taxonomy of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism. Fluhman’s *A Peculiar People* shows how the age’s most cutting deprecations were summoned against the Latter-day Saints, exhibiting a virtual panorama of contemporary anxieties about politics, society, and religion. Nineteenth-century Mormons suffered assaults from every side. Even groups with tenuous claims to Christian legitimacy (e.g., the Shakers) excoriated them. On some occasions, critics treated Mormonism as just another modern counterfeit or “imposture,” one of numberless schemes to capitalize on the cupidity and “delusions” of the masses (pp. 11, 52). On other occasions, critics identified Mormonism with violent religious upheaval, equating it with the religious “fanaticism”

of groups such as the Münster Anabaptists (p. 85). Aspersions such as these allowed anti-Mormons to ground their critique in the age's most poignant fears, while avoiding the stigma of religious bigotry.

There are interpretive differences between Givens and Fluhman, and they are not inconsequential. What Givens explains as a theological problem Fluhman explains as a problem of conceptualization. Fluhman stresses how reluctant non-Mormons were to admit Mormonism to the family of religions, and thereby to the privileges of religious tolerance. By denying that Mormonism was a religion, non-Mormons didn't have to concede that they were intolerant. Nor did they have to take Mormon theology seriously; there was no theology where there was no religion. This, Fluhman explains, was one of the things that made the 1879 *Reynolds* decision so portentous. By starting from the seemingly unremarkable premise that Mormonism was a religion, Justice Waite accorded it a degree of recognition that it hadn't previously enjoyed. Even as the court's decision "spelled eventual doom for polygamy" by permitting all religious belief but disallowing certain religious actions, Waite's opinion indicated that there might be "space for Mormonism among America's religions" (p. 105).

Fluhman traces a nineteenth-century cultural trajectory from the generally accepted notion that Mormonism was a "false religion" to the generally accepted notion that it was merely "alien" (p. 128). A watershed moment occurred with the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions—just not the sort of watershed one might expect. Parliament organizers issued three thousand invitations to the epochal conference. None went to Mormons. Given that groups as culturally and geographically remote as Hindus and Sikhs were invited (albeit in minuscule numbers), the exclusion of Mormons was notable. Yet there was to be redemption here. "Where Mormon religion had failed," Fluhman writes, "Mormon arts and agriculture met with huge success at the exposition" (pp. 130–31). This was success of a more mundane sort, but success nonetheless. It was also an augury of Mormonism's future as an emblematically American faith whose theology was never fully comprehended nor fully incorporated into the national polity.

As Givens looks to fiction and Fluhman to polemics for evidence of anti-Mormonism, Megan Sanborn Jones's *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* looks to the theater. Long before *The Book of Mormon* enchanted Broadway audiences, there was melodrama and a good deal of it in America. Megan Sanborn Jones has tracked down a dozen extant melodramas (approximately twice that number were performed, but only half of the scripts survive) while focusing "a critical lens on the construction of the Other and its function in the creation and use of hegemonic discourse" (p. 2). The rest of the book isn't quite as soaked in theoretical jargon, though Jones does regularly invoke the icons of poststructuralism, especially the radical social criticism of Michel Foucault, the postcolonial cogitations of Homi Bhaba, and the feminist cultural theory of Judith Butler. Much of this is less helpful than her own perceptive observations on the relationship between nineteenth-century theater and its generating history.

Outside the theoretical interludes, Jones alternates between accounts of general historical developments and detailed descriptions of contemporary drama. Despite the heavy reliance on terms such as "hegemonic discourse," Jones has a great number of sensible things to say (her claim that "early America interpreted freedom of worship almost exclusively to mean a freedom from international interference of Protestant Christian Worship" is not one of them [p. 12]). Among these is her sobering conclusion that "Mormons *looked* like Americans" (p. 8). Jones has a keen eye for recurring scripts and enduring tropes in melodrama, which she sets within the rich context of Manifest Destiny, evangelicalism, nineteenth-century gender relations, and broad patterns of American violence. In contrast to Givens's portrayal of nineteenth-century fiction, Jones characterizes anti-Mormon theater as an effect, the residue of "hegemonic" cultural system, rather than a significant cause of anti-Mormon sentiment. With Givens and Fluhman, Jones shows how mainstream Anglo culture projected distorted pictures of itself onto marginal cultures, expiating collective sins and satisfying middle-class Protestant fantasies in the process.

Patrick Mason's *The Mormon Menace* has little use for theory. Instead, he presents a carefully measured story about violent anti-Mormonism in the postbellum American South. The book is modest in chronological and geographical scope. It is also vital to our understanding of anti-Mormon prejudice. Mason's volume opens with bracing scenes of religiously inspired murder, searing emblems of the rage that was vented against Mormons, as well as the reluctance or inability of non-Mormon authorities to do anything about it. Mason is careful to make the fine distinction between religious intolerance and religiously inspired criticism, and he's aware that the nineteenth century witnessed all manner of incendiary religious controversy. But the anti-Mormon violence he documents was intolerance of a most unambiguous kind.

There was little justice for the Mormon victims of southern violence. As with the lynching of black men, local vigilantism against Mormons was abetted by the tacit approbation and shameful lassitude of public officials. Local authorities sometimes even cooperated in expelling Mormons from their jurisdictions. Mormon victims had their advocates, including new converts, sympathetic clergymen, and liberal opponents of intolerance. But these were a small minority. The hostility seemed most acute following Mormon missionary successes. Charges of sexual promiscuity and the appropriation of local women figured heavily in the justifications offered by anti-Mormons. They were akin to the charges of female seduction and abuse that inspired antebellum mob violence against Roman Catholics, particularly the infamous 1834 burning of the Charlestown convent. Emboldened by a robust tradition of extralegal violence and stirred by hyperbolic accounts of sexual exploitation and the conversion of family members into a religious community that seemed intent on drawing them irrevocably away from faith and home, white Southerners attacked.

The Mormon Menace demonstrates that federal anti-polygamy legislation had Southern roots and was strongly correlated with the anti-Mormon violence that occurred there. Though Mason evades a direct confrontation with Givens, their interpretations are at definite odds. There was, Mason shows, something happening in the postbellum

South that theological difference cannot explain, a surplus of violence, a remainder of invective, that cannot be accounted for by the enumeration of theological differences. The trifling fraction of Southern Protestants who actually understood Mormon theology tended to be unsympathetic. But “sexual and social” concerns triggered the fiercest opposition (p. 15). Also threatening, albeit less well known, were the Mormon principle of “theodemocracy” (p. 108) and the specter of the “Mormon theocrat” (p. 124), Mormon militia activity, and the general lack of transparency that characterized the elaborately interwoven complex of Mormon church and state activity.

Bereft of other terms to describe what they didn’t like about Mormonism, Americans reached for the one that alternately titillated and terrified: polygamy. Whether plural marriage was a defining feature of nineteenth-century Mormon faith or not, it was a defining feature of how non-Mormons perceived it. In postbellum Southern thought, Mormonism and polygamy were virtually interchangeable. Mason persuasively argues that late nineteenth-century Southern accounts of Mormons “left readers with the impression that polygamy was ‘the taproot of Mormonism,’ the sine qua non of the entire religious system” (p. 62). The same was true elsewhere, though for how long and to what degree is uncertain. The LDS Church publicly acknowledged the doctrine in 1852, and legal historian Sarah Barringer Gordon has shown that polygamy was already a major object of anti-Mormon sentiment by the 1850s. The 1856 Republican Party platform paired it with slavery and jointly designated them the nation’s “twin relics of barbarism.” “By 1860,” Gordon writes, “anti-polygamy so overwhelmed other forms of political anti-Mormonism that it subsumed them almost entirely.”¹

In the end, it’s clear (à la Givens) that anti-Mormon prejudice can’t be dismissed as the superficial residue of political and social tension. However, it’s also clear (à la Mason) that it can’t be reduced to theological prejudice either. Once polygamy was officially jettisoned in 1890,

1. Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 57.

Mormonism began an expedited journey into the American mainstream. There was, as anyone who admires Givens must appreciate, little actual theological reconciliation. More than other faiths, Mormonism simply couldn't concede what Christian ecumenists and assimilationists demanded. Mormons had no recourse to the theological penumbra of "things indifferent" or the "Mystery of Faith" that Protestants and Catholics had called upon to evade the most penetrating and conflict-inducing questions. Moreover, racial politics, as Givens, Fluhman, and Jones all expertly explain, figured heavily in the reconciliation process. Despite overwrought nineteenth-century efforts to cast Mormons as a racial "Other" (in particular, a harem-enamored Muslim "Other"), the Latter-day Saints remained steadfastly white. That did them little good when the nation's attention was riveted on plural marriage. But once Utah agreed to disband the practice, non-Mormon Americans began to notice that Mormons looked and acted like the sort of people they regarded as typically American. The awkward, mutual embrace between the nation and the Latter-day Saints (à la *The Book of Mormon* musical) thus commenced.

Nineteenth-century Mormons were regularly ridiculed, frequently harassed, and occasionally shot. The ridicule hasn't ended, but the shooting and outright harassment have. And so have many other manifestations of anti-Mormon prejudice. Economically, Mormons have done about as well as mainline Protestants and slightly better than Roman Catholics.² Encumbered by the Saints' opposition to alcohol, Mormon cultural assimilation remains far from complete. Nonetheless, Mormons already occupied some of the nation's most important leadership positions by the late 1950s, even in the White House. The question raised in harrowing form by the assassination of Joseph Smith—could a Mormon ever run a successful political campaign that was not severely handicapped by his Mormon faith?—has been answered in the affirmative. Before he stumbled over nonreligious problems, Michigan governor and devout Mormon George Romney was considered a leading candidate for the US presidency in 1968. In 2012 his son Mitt garnered

2. <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons>. From "Demographics," go to "Income Distribution of Religious Traditions."

47 percent of the popular vote. Much of that support came from conservative Catholics and Protestants.

Now that Mormon voters are comfortably settled into the country's conservative wing, anti-Mormon prejudice tends to emanate most luminously from the secular left. For progressives, Mormonism has come to symbolize the retrograde irrationality of all Western religion. The long exclusion of African Americans from the priesthood (until 1978) and the continued exclusion of women from the same have rendered Mormonism an easy target; the historical proximity of its revelations and the practice of polygamy (though long abandoned) have rendered it all the easier. Indeed, if anti-Mormon animus has ever been the theological prejudice that Givens describes, it is so in our own day, which exudes a discernible wariness about all theology and all revelation. Yet, as controversy surrounding the recent excommunication of Mormon feminist Kate Kelly suggests, tensions with liberal democracy and mainstream culture have not wholly subsided. Mormons remain a complicated people, and anti-Mormonism a complicated prejudice.

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