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Craig Harline, *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America*

Reviewed by Randall Balmer

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defenders of normative, monogamous marriage between a man and a woman” (p. 164). But is it ironic? Talbot has provided a compelling case of how citizenship is given only to those who worship in a certain way, have families in a certain way, and structure their economies in certain ways. But to what extent does contemporary America actually allow for deviation from certain social norms, such as those pertaining to family structure? Americans’ growing support of gay marriage does not necessarily spring from contemporary acceptance of fundamental social difference, but is at least partly due to same-sex marriage advocates’ effort spent pointing out that their families are just like “our” families. Like other marginalized communities, Mormons understand in an intimate and real way the pain of being outside the norm. Given the history that Christine Talbot so forcefully portrays, it is perhaps no irony that Latter-day Saint leaders convey a vision for family life that aligns squarely with what a large share of Americans imagine as normal.

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The formula sounds beguilingly simple, yet it is so difficult to execute. Take an unusually detailed and heartrending seventeenth-century diary about a religious convert and juxtapose it with a twenty-first-century conversion narrative that also entails the discovery of sexual identity. Add to that the sure hand of a narrator who understands both historical context and the dynamics of conversion, and you have a truly extraordinary book.
To combine all of these ingredients, however, *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America*, also required a scholar willing to take risks. Craig Harline, a historian at Brigham Young University, did just that.

Harline, who studies the Reformation, came across the diary of Jacob Rolandus in a Belgian archive. The diary recounts the travails of a son and grandson of Reformed ministers in the Netherlands. In 1654 Jacob, an only son, decides that despite all of his study of language and theology at the feet of his father, he cannot resist the allure of the “true” church, Roman Catholicism. Jacob, twenty-one years old and still legally a minor, plans his escape, under cover of darkness, from his parents’ home in Boxtel, Brabant, to Antwerp, where he can practice his faith freely.

Harline renders Jacob’s furtive escape from the clutches of Reformed Protestantism with the skill of a novelist—the skulking out of the house, the waiting horse, the near detection, confusion over his route. When Jacob finally arrives in Antwerp, he is greeted cautiously by the Catholics there, but impressed with his piety and sincerity, they eventually take him in. Timothy Rolandus, the distraught father and Reformed minister, mounts several sorties to find and repatriate his errant son, but Jacob manages to elude capture.

In addition to the account of Jacob’s escape, Harline also finds correspondence between the young papist and his family, especially his sister, who plays on guilt in her efforts to persuade Jacob to abjure his conversion and return home. These anguished letters tell the story of a family utterly rent apart by a divergence of religious belief, which each party reiterates with passion. Jacob urges his sister to escape to Antwerp as he did and thereby choose the true church; Maria beckons her brother to return to the true faith. “But most moving of all,” Harline writes, “were the tears they shed as they pondered the awful eternal state that awaited the other if the other did not repent” (p. 155).

With the rich material, embroidered with pathos, in these seventeenth-century sources, Harline might have taken the easy course and written a fetching book about the travails of a Reformation-era family rent by theological differences. But Harline opted for the road not taken,
interleaving the Rolanduses with a twenty-first-century family and, to some extent, with his own family history.

Taking a cue from method acting, Harline elects, in his own words, “to search out the specific memories that were causing the Rolanduses to resonate so strongly within me, in the hope that this might help me to understand both the Rolanduses and those memories more profoundly than otherwise” (p. 21). Harline recounts his ancestors’ conversion to Mormonism and the anguish felt by their families, especially when Carl and Mathilda Petersson left their native Sweden for the New World.

The book finds its narrative stride when Harline interjects Michael Sunbloom (an alias) into the story. Sunbloom broke his parents’ hearts when he announced his conversion to Mormonism, thereby forsaking their evangelicalism, which was also the faith of his childhood. Like Jacob Rolandus, Michael Sunbloom did nothing halfheartedly; he converted formally (as young Rolandus had) and threw himself into Mormonism, translating his considerable skills as a schoolteacher to the task of heading the church’s local young adult program.

Although they are centuries apart, Rolandus and Sunbloom are soul mates, and Harline underscores the parallels by alternating chapters between them. Sunbloom tries to explain his decision to his parents, but they resist. When Timothy Rolandus finally brokers a meeting with his son, both men weep, which Timothy misinterprets as Jacob’s remorse and his imminent return to the Reformed fold. Each expected the other’s contrition, so neither was placated and both were crestfallen. “Jacob was speechless,” Harline writes, “as if, like many a grown son, he was paralyzed by the conflicting emotions of wanting both to respect and to separate from his father” (p. 105). It would be the last time father and son would see each other.

Michael Sunbloom’s dawning awareness of his sexual identity, coupled with Mormonism’s conservative sexual ethic, prompted his move away from the Latter-day Saints and caused yet another rift with his parents. Only after many years and the avowed determination on the part of his father that, despite his own confusion over the matter, he
wanted to retain a relationship with his son was Michael reconciled with his parents.

What do we learn from the juxtaposition of these remarkable stories? Although Harline doesn’t call attention to it, readers will find it difficult to miss what we might call the “certitude gap” between the two eras. Jacob Rolandus and Maria, his sister, were both absolutely certain that their understanding of truth was the correct one. Jacob, secure in the notion that Roman Catholicism was the only way to salvation, referred to the Reformed church as the “Deformed” church and allowed that “I’d rather die a thousand times than, as Holy Scripture says, return like a dog to its vomit and a swine to its slop” (p. 172). Not to be outdone, Maria dismissed her brother’s “primped-up and angry words,” which provided “no proof on which the false papist religion could possibly remain standing” (p. 174).

The contestation between Michael and his parents, on the other hand, was no less intense or painful. But neither side, in the end, succumbed to dogmatism. Michael himself was tormented by doubts at every step of his journey, and his parents finally relented in their condemnation. Why the difference? There are perils, of course, in trying to universalize either story for its respective eras, but it does seem that citizens of the twenty-first century might be a bit more inclined to compromise than their counterparts of the seventeenth century. Why? Harline doesn’t speculate, but I wonder if it has something to do with cultural diversity or the Enlightenment or the postmodern validation of an infinite variety of experiences.

Harline does account for social location. “Jacob’s and Maria’s particular social station, familial context, gender, experiences, personalities, ways of feeling and thinking, and more, shaped the lens—even decided the lens—through which each perceived truth” (p. 178). Tragically, each chose to reject the other’s lens.

For the Sunblooms, on the other hand, emerging scientific evidence about homosexuality, together with new understandings about the textual and historical context of biblical passages that appeared to condemn same-sex relations, eventually altered the dynamic between
parents and son. “During their months of uncertainty and thought, the Bible’s passages about love came to matter more to them than all its words about homosexuality, or about hating father and mother and son and daughter, or about Jesus’s message dividing people like a sword,” Harline writes of Michael’s parents (p. 238). “They didn’t have to choose between their faith and their love for their son, because the best version of their faith was to love their son, and everyone else, and to make everything else secondary—even the things they didn’t get” (pp. 239–40). Indeed, Michael’s parents never abandoned their conservative evangelical beliefs or affiliations, but adhering to the New Testament teaching that love trumps law, they opted for a more capacious embrace of their faith. They did so not from the premise of dogma but from the mandate of love.

Therein lies the gospel, the “good news.”

Harline makes the point through all of this that toleration is different from acceptance. Mere toleration suggests reluctance, even coercion (not to mention condescension), whereas acceptance signals a willing embrace of the Other: “what struck me most in general was this: those who rejected or tolerated could not see other-believers as quite like themselves, while those who accepted could” (p. 246). Those who merely tolerate tend to portray others as “dangerously different, so that whatever slurs-of-the-moment they might have suffered individually (heretics, sodomites, lepers, Christ-killers), they in truth had only one name: Other” (p. 246).

*Conversions* provides ample corroboration for the bromide that families are dangerous places. But the two stories have dramatically different endings. Maria’s final words to her brother, who became a Jesuit and who served out his life as a missionary, included intelligence on their parents, who were “reasonably healthy, but your absence, plus your conversion to that abominable popedom, are perpetual wounds” (p. 206). Michael and his partner, by contrast, enjoyed close ties with Michael’s parents, even choosing to relocate to their community, Michael’s hometown, when the gay couple retired.
As Harline writes, “In the end, conversion may be as inscrutable as love, or God” (p. 93). Inscrutable perhaps, but Harline’s remarkable book sheds a great deal of light on both the dynamics and the consequences.

Randall Balmer is chair of the religion department and Mandel Family Professor in the Arts and Sciences at Dartmouth College. His most recent book is Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter.


Reviewed by Peter J. Thuesen

On November 12, 1911, a photograph buried on page 31 of the Indianapolis Star showed six smiling women with the caption “Pretty Mormon Girls with Tabernacle Choir of Salt Lake City.” In this manner the Star announced the first-ever concert of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in the Hoosier capital on the following Saturday at the Murat Temple, a Moorish revival theater. Subsequent previews in the Star were a mixture of amusement and disdain. The “sight of the average Mormon missionary is enough to make people take to the woods,” quipped the paper’s editorial board, while elsewhere an article noted that the choir members were “traveling ‘de luxe’ in palatial [rail] cars, vastly different from the ox team conveyances with which their ancestors crossed the prairies.”

The choir’s gig in Indianapolis was part of a twenty-three-city public relations tour undertaken just a few years after the nationwide controversy over the seating of LDS apostle Reed Smoot in the US Senate. Receptions along the tour varied widely. In New York, where the group performed at the opening of the American Land and Irrigation Exposition, the singers had to compete with such curiosities as a bust

1. Indianapolis Star, November 14 and 15, 1911, pp. 6 and 3, respectively.