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"A Kind of Painful Progress": Contesting and Collaborating on the Mormon Image in America

Cristine Hutchison-Jones

Review of J. B. Haws. *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I WAS AT A CONFERENCE with a number of fellow Mormon studies scholars. I presented a paper on the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, which by most reviewers' accounts was both a vulgar takedown of and a loving tribute to modern American Mormonism by the often sweet but always crude creators of *South Park*, Trey Parker and Matt Stone. I, like most Americans, only knew the work through reviewers' summaries and analyses when it racked up nine Tony Awards in 2011. But, as I argued in the paper, when I finally *saw* the show, it became clear to me that the musical's intent was not simply to skewer the Latter-day Saints. Rather, the show carefully constructed its Mormon characters as the epitome of a certain kind of consumer-oriented, pathologically optimistic American exceptionalism. The sharpest criticism in the play was reserved, to my mind, not for Latter-day Saints' peculiar beliefs and practices—though those unique aspects of Mormonism received enough jabs—but rather for an American mindset that glories in the “paradise” of Orlando's artificial realities and only understands Africa through the lens of Disney's *The Lion King*. I was

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proud of my analysis—and in most ways I still stand by it—but during the course of a vigorous discussion that followed the conclusion of my paper, a Latter-day Saint scholar and friend looked at me and said, “Sure, they’re using Mormons to represent a certain kind of American-ness, but *work out your anxieties on someone else’s body!*”

I am not a Latter-day Saint. And despite many years of examining non-Mormon images of the Latter-day Saints, and the sensitivity that my research has led me to develop toward unfair representations of the LDS Church and community and the misperceptions those images engender, it simply did not occur to me how it would *feel*, as a Mormon, to be the critical lens, the easy target, the butt of the joke once again. My analysis wasn’t inaccurate, but it lacked an awareness of Mormon responses to the images in question.

This tension between non-Mormon representations of and reactions to the Latter-day Saints—however well-meaning—and LDS responses to them is the driving narrative in J. B. Haws’s valuable exploration of the Mormon image in the United States from the national political career of George Romney in the mid-1960s to that of his son Mitt Romney in the 2008 and 2012 presidential election seasons. Haws, an assistant professor of church history at BYU, reviews print and television news media, polling data collected from the 1960s to 2012, materials released by the LDS Church’s communications department in its various permutations since 1960, and interviews with scholars, journalists, and others who have engaged in the study of the Mormon image or who were involved in the major events that Haws describes. Using these materials, he charts the vacillations in America’s visions of Mormonism and Mormons—and the LDS Church’s responses to and efforts to shape those visions.

While Haws offers just one slice of the complex web of public imaginings that have made up the Mormon image in the last fifty years, this is nevertheless an important contribution to Mormon historical studies. In fact, Haws steps into a significant void in Mormon studies scholarship more broadly. While there are a number of notable works on the Mormon image in the United States in the nineteenth century—perhaps

most importantly Terryl Givens's *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (1997; revised edition 2013) and J. Spencer Fluhman's "A Peculiar People": *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (2012)—there is a dearth of scholarship about the Mormon image specifically, and Mormonism more generally, that inquires beyond the First World War. This is an important area that cries out for examination and analysis, and Haws delivers an important foray into this relatively new scholarly territory.

While Haws's time period is largely uncharted, he does not enter his examination of the Mormon image without guides. Scholars Givens, Fluhman, and Kathleen Flake set the stage for any inquiry into non-Mormon understandings of Mormonism in twentieth-century America. In particular, Fluhman argued in "*Peculiar People*" that the LDS community concluded the nineteenth century by eliminating its most peculiar practices, gaining statehood for Utah, and finally being popularly recognized as a religion—albeit a false one—in the American mind. To Fluhman, this status as a false religion divested of the most unique of its historical practices marked the religion's successful Americanization. In *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (2003), Flake argued that the near expulsion from the Senate of LDS apostle Reed Smoot in the first decade of the twentieth century was a key moment in the history of LDS/non-LDS relations, asserting that congressional and national acceptance of Smoot's fitness to serve in the nation's highest legislative body marked the turning point in non-Mormons' acceptance of Latter-day Saints as Americans.

But despite the fact that the Mormons' "Americanization" is firmly settled in the historiography, non-Mormon America's relationship with its most successful homegrown religion has remained fractious, to say the least. And yet, despite the ongoing relevance of discussions of the Mormon image in the United States, not to mention the Saints' explosive growth in America and abroad in the last one hundred years, there is little scholarly engagement with the LDS Church and its members beyond the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Broad general

histories of the Saints, such as Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton's classic *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (1979) and Matthew Bowman's *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (2012), have provided basic overviews of the Saints' expansion and, to a lesser extent, their changing practices during these years, but they do not deliver in-depth analysis. Sociologist Armand Mauss's *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (1994) is an invaluable resource—in part because it is so singular among major scholarly works in giving voice to the Mormon side of the LDS struggle for accommodation in the twentieth century—that examines the changes that Mormonism has alternately embraced and rejected as it struggled with assimilation in the twentieth century. It is a sign of how neglected the Mormon image in the twentieth century is that by far the most oft-cited work on the subject remains Jan Shipps's seminal work "From Satyr to Saint: American Perceptions of the Mormons, 1860–1960," an essay first delivered as a conference paper in the 1970s that measures the improvement in the Mormon image in the first half of the twentieth century through close examination of magazine articles. But Shipps herself noted, in her follow-up essay "Surveying the Mormon Image since 1960" (2000), that the positive trends she charted did not uniformly hold after 1960 and that much work remains to be done in unpacking the changing Mormon image in the age of new media. While Haws's *Mormon Image in the American Mind* is neither comprehensive nor deeply analytical, it nevertheless delivers a significant overview of the shifting Mormon image in the last fifty years.

The book is organized chronologically, with chapters built around major topical trends in representations of the Saints. It begins in the early 1960s as George Romney's political star was on the rise. The popular Mormon governor of Michigan, Romney was considered a contender for the 1968 Republican presidential nomination, and Haws does some of his best work in the book unpacking polling data and the media's treatment of Romney and his religion. It is perhaps surprising, for those who better remember Mitt Romney's more recent campaigns, that religion was *not* a major issue for his father. In fact, the

elder Romney's religion was regarded by the media as something of an asset. As Haws notes, this perspective was fueled in large part by the ecumenicalism of the mid-twentieth century that encouraged Americans to focus on religious dialogue instead of differences. What sunk Romney's campaign, Haws convincingly argues, was not his religion, but rather the candidate's controversial remarks about the Vietnam War. In short, politics, not religion, dominated discussion of the elder Romney's candidacy. But while Mormonism may have been insignificant for Romney's run for the White House, his run was not insignificant for Mormonism (p. 13).

The years after Romney's campaign—the late 1960s and the 1970s—were marked by increased scrutiny of the church's social policies. Whereas the Mormon image in the 1950s and 60s had been marked by a sort of "benign wholesomeness" characterized by family values and patriotism (p. 14), as the 60s progressed the country tacked hard left—and the Mormons did not follow. Despite Romney's reputation as a supporter of civil rights, his candidacy focused the national spotlight on the LDS Church's exclusion of men of black African descent from an otherwise universal male priesthood. In the face of protests nationwide that focused on church-owned BYU's sporting events, the church adopted a new public relations strategy. Rather than simply dismissing the criticisms, it took a proactive approach to offset those criticisms by advancing civil rights—or, just as importantly, the visibility of civil rights—within the LDS community. The church's efforts at damage control were so effective that when the priesthood ban was eliminated by revelation in 1978, non-Mormon America had already largely moved on. After a brief, intense flurry of publicity for the change, Mormonism and race fell from the national radar.

The Mormon community almost immediately faced another national challenge, this time fueled by the church's opposition to the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. While the LDS community remained largely silent during the early years of the campaign for the amendment, as the ERA neared final ratification, church leaders became concerned that the amendment would weaken the

traditional family and encouraged members to work against it. Individual Saints mobilized swiftly, effectively, and in seeming droves, and the ERA's steady march toward ratification was halted in its tracks. To non-Mormons, members' swift action on a political issue in response to a call from their church's hierarchy raised fears of church involvement in politics (p. 97), a breach of the wall between church and state. When highly visible Mormon feminist Sonia Johnson was excommunicated in 1979 for her outspoken opposition to the church's position on the ERA, it played in the national media as a confirmation of those fears.

Just as the Mormon image was suffering from negative responses to its stance on social issues—for decades an area of strength for the Saints in the minds of many Americans—the cultural backlash against the progressive turn of American political and social values in the 1960s and 1970s brought conservative Christian political activism to the forefront of national discussion. And although the Saints and evangelical Christians seemed natural allies on social concerns such as feminism, abortion, and other so-called family values issues, evangelical Christians were not interested in being allied with the Saints—whose growth, particularly in the American South, was viewed as a direct threat to the evangelical community. In what Haws demonstrates was an exercise in boundary policing, the loose coalition of conservative Christians from varying denominations that made up the Religious Right turned on the Mormons (p. 109). The anti-Mormon rhetoric exemplified by the “documentary” film *The God Makers* (1982) demonstrated the group's determination to prove its own Christian bona fides by proving that the Mormons were not authentically Christian. While *The God Makers* was a grassroots phenomenon limited primarily to the evangelical Christian community, the Religious Right's use of similar rhetoric primed the national stage for a resurgence of fear about Mormonism as a false religion defined by secrecy and violence and controlled by a hierarchy bent on absolute authority over its members (p. 126). The media frenzy over forger and murderer Mark Hofmann—who was himself LDS and who had spent years manufacturing fake early Mormon documents in an effort to undermine the church—both fed on and reinforced these

perceptions. The media's use of these images continued into the 1990s, most notably in its coverage of the punishment of the September Six, a group of Mormon intellectuals whose work challenged official church teachings, and the success of Deborah Laake's salacious best-selling memoir about her experiences as a young Mormon woman. Although the church maintained an active campaign throughout this period to promote a positive image of Mormonism, it could not overcome the groundswell of popular suspicion driven by this combination of critical rhetoric and sensational events that seemed to prove popular fears.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative press of the 1980s and early 90s, Haws argues that the final years of the twentieth century seemed to be a return to harmony between Mormon and non-Mormon Americans, as new church president Gordon B. Hinckley—a longtime veteran of the church's public relations program—led Mormons in a new era of bridge building. Hinckley forged a new path for LDS outreach that included greater openness to the media and a proactive approach to public relations that sought not only to present the realities of Mormonism to the non-LDS public *before* rather than *in response to* public relations crises, but also simply to educate non-Mormons about their LDS neighbors rather than trying to prepare non-Mormon audiences for LDS missionizing. These years were characterized by media coverage of Hinckley himself, widely regarded as one of the most respected men in the country; by human interest coverage of the pioneer trek reenactment celebrating Utah's 1997 sesquicentennial; and by the overwhelmingly positive international coverage of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. In relation to all of these topics, the church maintained its new bridge building and public education stances, even going so far as to declare that there would be no missionizing on the streets of Salt Lake during the Olympic Games. And the non-Mormon public was receptive to this new approach. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, against all expectations raised by the troubled and troubling representations of Mormons in the 1980s, non-Mormon Americans generally found the Latter-day Saints "more interesting than threatening" (p. 194).

It was onto this stage, Haws writes, that Mitt Romney entered for his first campaign for the presidency in the 2008 election season. While observers—and Mitt Romney himself—may have reasonably expected treatment mirroring his father’s in the 1960s, in fact Romney’s first turn in the national political spotlight exposed “a latent, smoldering suspicion” about Mormons in American culture (p. 207). For Haws, this suspicion was given clear expression in filmmaker Helen Whitney’s 2007 documentary *The Mormons*, produced for PBS. The film was “a snapshot of American opinion of Mormons and Mormonism” (p. 218), and many Saints were disappointed to find that non-Mormon Americans were still disproportionately interested not in who the Mormons are in the present, but rather in the scandals of the LDS past like polygamy and the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre. The ongoing suspicion was evident in the political rhetoric surrounding Romney’s campaign as well, with other Republican candidates vying to prove themselves as *the* Christian candidate using sometimes subtle and other times blatant jabs at Romney’s religion. And yet, just a short four years after Romney’s unsuccessful 2008 attempt to earn his party’s nomination for the presidency, everything changed. Why? Because, Haws argues, enough evangelicals were ready, in part based on years of dialogue between Mormon and evangelical scholars and theologians, to make peace with their theological differences with Mormonism in order to ally themselves with a candidate whose religious community so clearly aligned with them on social and political issues. In fact, by the time of the Republican National Convention in 2012, the party of the Religious Right was willing to celebrate Romney’s religion as something that proved his social conservatism and humanized his somewhat remote personal image. The opposition to Romney’s Mormonism in the 2012 election cycle came more from liberal opponents than from conservatives, and according to Haws, that opposition was muted for reasons that remain unclear. In the end, for another Romney, defeat apparently was not (in 2012, at least) the result of his religion.

Haws ends by discussing the state of the Mormon image after 2012. He makes no predictions about whether Romney’s defeat signaled the end of the current “Mormon Moment” (going so far as to title his final

chapter with a quote from an LDS official, "I Don't Think This Is Really a Mormon Moment"). He rightly notes, however, that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, while negative images of the Saints persist (alongside the two-dimensional Ozzie and Harriet-like images of family values and patriotism that characterized earlier positive depictions), we have seemingly begun to move into a new era of the Mormon public image. These new representations are crafted by a dialogue between the Saints and their non-Mormon neighbors, rather than being the product of one-sided reactions against each other. The early fruits of this conversation are promising as we begin to see more fully realized portraits of Mormons as complex people inhabiting a multifaceted and by no means homogenous community. According to Haws, dialogue is the watchword moving forward, and the overall quality and tone of representations of Mormonism in the national media point to a brighter future for the Mormon image in the American mind—which may change, but certainly will not disappear.

While Haws's book is an invaluable first step toward filling the enormous gap in scholarship on Mormonism after World War I, it is best regarded as an overview of major news coverage of the period and important responses by the LDS Church's public relations arm. Haws provides limited in-depth analysis of the trends he charts and the rhetoric he catalogs. He does, however, make a number of tantalizing observations that call for further study. Chief among these is the importance of the growing divide in the American mind between individual Mormons, who, Haws argues, are generally regarded as good or at least acceptable, and the institution of the LDS Church, which is generally viewed with suspicion at least and open derision at worst. While he points out this dichotomy throughout the book, he does not closely examine the reasons behind it or the implications of the disparity for the relationship between Mormons and non-Mormons going forward. He also does not place this dichotomy in its larger context not only in the history of Mormonism in the United States—where this divided response has been a staple since the nineteenth century—but also in American history more broadly. In fact, minority groups—religious,

ethnic, or otherwise—have routinely been viewed through this lens, with decent, redeemable individuals constructed as held in thrall to a dangerous organization or community. The rhetoric of anti-Catholicism, for example, exhibited just this dichotomy throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Placing Haws’s observations about the differences between images of Mormon individuals versus Mormon institutions into this broader context not only opens up important questions about America’s relationship to the Mormons, but also presents the opportunity to use the Mormon experience as a case study of religious intolerance in the United States.

This lack of context impacts many facets of the book, as Haws again and again raises issues with connections to larger questions about American religious history but does not engage these broader issues. For example, while discussing how Mormons suffered in the 1970s and 1980s from the Religious Right’s accusations that the LDS Church was a “cult,” Haws makes reference to American fears around the time of the 1978 Jonestown massacre but does not go on to discuss the ways in which the fear of cults swept the United States during this period. Americans panicked during these years about Eastern religious traditions and other unfamiliar minority religions, supposedly widespread Satanic ritual abuse, and sexual abuse more generally, and, worried that their children would be seduced into false and dangerous religious organizations, turned to “deprogrammers” whose methods often looked a great deal like those they accused cults of employing to “brainwash” their members. These popular fears swelled in the 1970s, peaked in the 1980s, and largely died away in the 1990s—following precisely the arc of the heightened fear toward and suspicion of the Saints that Haws describes in this period. Yet Haws neither discusses this context nor attempts to unpack the role that these larger fears played in shaping the Mormon image in these years.

Also key to Haws’s discussion of the changing Mormon image, particularly in the 1980s, is the role of the resurgent Religious Right. But Haws does little to place the evangelical anti-Mormonism he carefully charts within the broader context of the culture wars, in which

the Religious Right represents only one side of an ongoing and heated discussion of major social issues in the United States. By eliding liberal voices, Haws misses the growing strain of liberal anti-Mormonism that made itself felt across the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Liberal opposition to Mormonism was not simply a product of the LDS Church's 2008 support for California's ban on gay marriage (which Haws does discuss at some length). Rather, contemporary liberal opposition is rooted in the social issues that brought the church under fire in the 1960s and 70s and has remained a consistent presence in American culture. Haws himself notes, for example, that raising Mitt Romney's Mormonism in a closely contested 1994 senatorial election secured Ted Kennedy a win in traditionally liberal Massachusetts (pp. 209–10). And liberal attacks can be just as ugly as conservative ones, as when comedian Bill Maher used clips from that evangelical standby *The God Makers* to "explain" Mormonism to viewers of his 2008 film *Religulous* (a source that Haws did not include in this study). In sidelining liberal voices, especially after 1980, Haws tells an incomplete story.

The absence of Maher's *Religulous* raises another issue in *The Mormon Image*: its near total exclusion of popular culture sources. While Haws discusses a handful of images of Mormons found outside journalistic media, he largely ignores the huge number of representations of the Latter-day Saints in popular culture sources including fiction writing, television, and film. Not only could these sources have deepened his discussion of general trends in representation across this period, but they might also have done a great deal to either reinforce or, in many cases, complicate the trends he charts. Often when Haws notes the resurgence of an image he describes as long dormant, that image was in fact alive and well throughout the period in popular culture. In particular the violence that he regards as newly resurrected around the time of Mark Hofmann's murders had long been a staple of depictions of Mormonism in books and film—which in fact explains the relevance of the Mountain Meadows Massacre to Helen Whitney's 2007 documentary, which Haws uncritically noted was regarded by many Mormons as giving too much air time to the 1857 incident. Haws quotes journalist

Peggy Fletcher Stack as saying, regarding the resurgence of negative rhetoric in the news media during Mitt Romney's 2008 campaign, that the negative "undercurrent never went away" (p. 208). He would have been better equipped to discuss the sources of the backlash against Romney in that persistent undercurrent had he done more to examine the popular books, films, and TV shows that kept non-Mormon Americans' suspicions about the Mormons alive.

The question of other forms of media points to another issue raised by Haws, as well as Jan Shipps in her essay "Surveying the Mormon Image": the rapid proliferation of new media platforms since 1960 has radically altered the landscape on which the Mormon image is manufactured and disseminated. In her 2000 essay Shipps noted that print media was no longer the dominant vehicle for news in the United States and had not been for some time, and the number and variety of sources have only increased since then. This begs the question why, then, does Haws primarily focus his inquiry on print news media? And furthermore, why doesn't he address the ways in which new media contributes to the shape of the Mormon image through new formats, the radically increased speed at which information can be disseminated (sometimes at the expense of editing and fact-checking), and the deprofessionalization of content production? To put it another way, how can we compare how Mitt Romney fared in 2008 and 2012 to how his father fared in 1968 without asking whether George Romney's religion would have remained off-limits if readers could have shared their comments on newspaper articles with thousands of others in real time or if private citizens could have created viral YouTube videos in the 1960s?

Regardless of unanswered questions and undermined sources, this book provides a rich resource for those interested in the ongoing tension between Mormons and non-Mormon America. In particular, it provides a valuable overview of the push and pull between images of the Saints in the news media generated by non-Mormons and the communications designed by the church to better explain LDS beliefs and practices to the non-Mormon public. It also raises a number of important issues that invite future scholarship. But perhaps the book's

greatest contribution to our fledgling exploration of Mormonism after World War I is Haws's emphasis on dialogue. This concept is key not only, as Haws argues, to the future of Mormons and their public image in the United States, but also to Mormon studies scholarship. Future studies of Mormonism and the Mormon image will benefit from Haws's example and should be mindful that representations of the Saints are the product not of one group or the other, but of the ongoing interaction between Latter-day Saints and their non-Mormon neighbors as they work both with and against each other.

Cristine Hutchison-Jones earned her PhD in religious and theological studies from Boston University. Her research interests include American religious history, religious intolerance in the United States, and representations of minorities in American culture. She is the author, most recently, of "The First Mormon Moment: The Latter-day Saints in American Culture, 1940–1965" (in *The Lively Experiment: Religious Toleration in America from Roger Williams to the Present*, ed. Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda, 2015) and is currently revising her dissertation, "Reviling and Revering the Mormons: Defining American Identity, 1890–2012," for publication. She is administrative director of the Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology, and Bioethics at Harvard Law School.