Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young, eds., *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*

Reviewed by Randall J. Stephens

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In his 1997 classic, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity*, the Vanderbilt University historian Paul Conkin took up the sprawling subject of America’s *sui generis* religions. Of course, even new faiths had their roots deep in European soil. That was the case even if practitioners refused to acknowledge it. “North America provided special opportunities for religious innovation,” observed Conkin. “The desire for immigration and population growth and the eventual absence of an established church all combined to provide opportunities for religious prophets and reformers.”

A whole range of questions about such American originals continues to fascinate scholars and lead researchers down fruitful paths. Several related questions—some that are real head-scratchers, ideal for the classroom or seminar table—deserve our attention. Why did some eras of American history prove more vital to religious creativity and fecundity than others? What accounts for the nineteenth-century profusion of religious mavericks, prophetesses, and seers? How do we make sense of innovation? Fittingly, religious studies scholar Stephen Stein has taken up the question of religious innovation for those groups on the margins of America’s religious culture. Stein remarks: “It is impossible to understand outsiders without a clear appreciation for the ways they dissented consciously from the mainstream. Any effort to tell the story of religious people at the edges must deal with both the margins

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and the mainstream, for tensions and dissent are at the heart of the outsider experience.”

Perhaps the most perplexing questions that follow such observations are: How have religious outsiders (to borrow R. Laurence Moore’s term) imagined their relative place in the cosmos? How have they understood and thought through their relationships to other traditions? *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy* takes up many of the above questions and others as well. As a whole the chapters explore the dynamic, sometimes messy, yet always fascinating ways that Mormons made sense of their place within Christian and biblical history and tradition. Such stories resonate across space and time. Hence the inclusion of other traditions and Mormons’ reflection on these works out wonderfully.

Stalwarts in new religious movements—be they Disciples of Christ, Adventist, Pentecostal, Jehovah’s Witnesses—need to locate themselves within the arc of Christian history. If a new revelation, set of doctrines, or visions are essential for the true faith, then almost certainly new light will need to be cast on denominations and historical traditions of other colors. Many Pentecostals, for instance, held that a “latter rain” of the Spirit was being poured out in the last days. After hundreds of years of apostasy, the true apostolic Christianity of the New Testament was being restored. What is more, they were at the center of the drama.

Latter-day Saints—suffering persecutions and developing their own ideas of salvation history—rethought apostasy and their place among the historical churches. In the introduction to this volume, Wilcox and Young handily summarize the book’s purpose: “*Standing Apart* explores how the idea of apostasy has functioned as a category to mark, define, and set apart ‘the other’ in the development of Mormon historical consciousness and in the construction of Mormon narrative identity” (p. 3). The contributors’ intricate, sometimes counterintuitive ways of exploring this theme make up one of the many strengths of this volume. It

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also aligns the book with a recent trend in Mormon studies. Books by Spencer Fluhman, Patrick Mason, Kathleen Flake, and others are showing us that Mormon history is not as tidy as once imagined and are also revealing the stark differences that separate the Mormon twenty-first-century present from the movement’s nineteenth-century past.

Several chapters note that even though the great apostasy, the declension of the church, has played an instrumental role in Mormonism, it has seldom received commensurate scholarly attention. That is unfortunate, in part because the subject is so varied and rich. The book makes clear that the very variety of ideas about the great apostasy make it impossible to speak of one standard interpretation. Hence, Christopher Jones and Stephen Fleming reveal the many nuances that existed among early Mormon theories of apostasy, ranging “from harsh and blanket condemnations to more conciliatory” ideas about Christian history (p. 56).

Other contributors in the first section (“Contextualizing the LDS Great Apostasy Narrative”) focus on the key interpreters of the great apostasy—James Talmage, B. H. Roberts, and Joseph Fielding Smith among them—who set the tone for believers. Eric Dursteler observes that many popular LDS notions of apostasy, influenced as they are by such interpreters, still draw on outmoded Burckhardtian ideas about the “Dark Ages” and the “Renaissance.” Matthew Bowman zeroes in on the critical function of confessional historians and their links to similar Protestant authors. Likewise, Miranda Wilcox uncovers “how religious communities tell historical narratives to define and maintain their distinctive identities” and how “these historical narratives function as cultural traditions transmitted to and renewed by each succeeding generation” (p. 95). It is little wonder, then, that Mormons during the Cold War would have understood key concepts of their faith quite differently from how their antebellum predecessors did. In some ways it is reminiscent of how premillennial and postmillennial theologies have changed, morphed, or faded with succeeding Protestant generations.

A second section of Standing Apart is organized around the theme “Renarrating the Apostasy: New Approaches.” Models for a usable past are carefully laid out. Cory Crawford takes on the LDS understanding
of history and the Hebrew Bible. The biblical canon itself, argues Crawford, contains different views and arguments and a range of ideas about the divine in history. The Bible could, he concludes, “provide a heuristic model for rethinking diversity in LDS historical narratives” (p. 142). Matthew Grey looks at ideas of Jewish apostasy in the time of Jesus and “suggests some ways in which the Jewish world of the New Testament can be reconceptualized in light of Latter-day Saint scripture” (p. 148). Taylor Petrey continues with a focus on the early church and the challenges of doctrinal diversity. If the early disciples of Jesus, to whom Paul ministered, were a “diverse lot,” asks Petrey, “how does acknowledging this diversity challenge the way that Mormons situate themselves as heirs of the pure church established by Christ?” (p. 174). Historically, too great a focus on the “purity” of the early church has obscured or paved over the real diversity that existed in the first century. In a related sense, as Lincoln Blumell points out in his chapter, the first ecumenical council of the ancient church at Nicaea has not received the critical attention and scrutiny it deserves. Blumell contends that a more subtle understanding of the council and creed would aid dialogue with other traditions and give Mormons greater self-understanding. Ariel Bybee Laughton considers the Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley. She uses comparative history—of Arian Christians in the fourth century and Mormons in the twenty-first century—to explore the boundaries of Mormon belief, while using Nibley to rethink heterodoxy and the usefulness of the label Christian.

Further examining the idea of the Dark Ages, as Dursteler did in the beginning of the volume, Spencer Young and Jonathan Green rethink how Mormons have (mis)understood the Catholic tradition and the Protestant-Catholic conflicts of the sixteenth century. Both call for a sympathetic reading of other past traditions. “Latter-day Saints who desire a more informed treatment of Mormon doctrines and practices,” Young counsels, “should make a reciprocal effort in their treatments of the doctrines and practices of other traditions” (p. 254).

Moving beyond Christianity and providing further insights on charitable views of other traditions, David Peck considers how the Qur’an treats other faiths. Lessons can be learned, Peck recommends, in how Islam
“engage[s] other religions in an inclusive, nonbinary fashion” (p. 302). John Young, like others in this collection, calls for a new approach to understanding apostasy. He proposes a more expansive idea of God’s work in history and “a more nuanced view of humanity’s interaction with God than the traditional LDS narrative contains” (p. 310).

Terryl Givens offers a helpful epilogue to draw together some of the themes that make up Standing Apart. Givens, fittingly, turns to Joseph Smith, who called on believers to embrace the past and view themselves in continuity with it. By contrast, says Givens, “Mormons have largely adopted an apostasy narrative that emphasizes radical loss and abrupt reinstitution” (p. 336). In Givens’s view such a perspective is at odds with Joseph Smith’s actions and language.

This collection is ambitious and wonderfully readable. The book surely will appeal to Latter-day Saints, though, as an outsider to the tradition, I cannot help but wonder how many feathers it will ruffle. Will the average man or woman in the pew be willing to reconsider tradition, history, and belief as the authors in this collection recommend? Beyond its appeal for the faithful, Standing Apart would make for excellent reading in a graduate seminar on American religion or in an upper-division undergraduate course. The questions asked about the past and historical interpretation, along with the connections made to other traditions, draw it far out of the strict realm of Mormon history. Standing Apart is a model of how scholarship can contextualize a religious tradition and appropriately challenge the devout. Finally, it reveals just how dynamic, vibrant, and contested the Latter-day Saints’ understanding of the past and of apostasy has been from the start.

Randall J. Stephens is a reader in history and American studies at Northumbria University. He is the author of The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South (Harvard University Press, 2008) and The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age (Belknap Press, 2011), coauthored with Karl Giberson. He is currently completing a book on the intersection of rock music and Christianity since the 1950s.