



1-1-2017

# The Peculiar Mormon Paradox

Molly Worthen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Worthen, Molly (2017) "The Peculiar Mormon Paradox," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol4/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu).

## Review Essays

### The Peculiar Mormon Paradox

*Molly Worthen*

Review of Randall Balmer and Jana Riess. *Mormonism and American Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016; Neil J. Young. *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016; David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson. *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

WHEN JOSEPH SMITH RAN FOR PRESIDENT IN 1844, he spoke like a radical democrat. “In the United States, the people are the government,” his campaign platform proclaimed. He enthusiastically endorsed popular sovereignty, offered a plan to abolish slavery by gradually buying out slaveholders with revenues from the sale of public lands, and proposed to pardon every convict, “blessing them as they go, and saying to them in the name of the Lord, go thy way and sin no more.”<sup>1</sup>

Smith’s rhetoric reflected the high view of human nature that is a cornerstone of Mormon theology. “He thought humans bore the seeds of godhood within them, and in time could enjoy the fullness of godly

---

1. Quoted in Richard Lyman Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Presidential Ambitions,” in Balmer and Riess, *Mormonism and American Politics*, 8, 11.

power,” writes Richard Bushman in his essay in *Mormonism and American Politics* (p. 12).

Yet Smith was no democrat. He believed in the rule of the Saints, and he ruled those Saints. Smith entered the presidential race after the other candidates failed to assure him that they would look out for the Mormon people—or, to put it more bluntly, that they would permit Mormons to practice polygamy and theocracy in peace.

Smith’s campaign was cut short by his brutal death that summer, at the hands of an anti-Mormon mob. Most modern Mormons dwell far more on his martyrdom than on his brief bid for president. Yet Smith’s campaign encapsulated his faith’s fundamental paradox: the tension between individual freedom and obedience at the heart of the Mormon religion. This paradox has had profound political consequences.

The tension between liberty and authority pervades all religious communities making their way through the modern world. And yet many scholars—and most Mormons—have long insisted that Mormons are, somehow, different. The usual word is *peculiar*. The books under review here—a bold reinterpretation of the rise of the Christian Right, a provocative collection of historical essays on Mormons and politics, and a data-driven sociological study of Mormon political culture—all affirm that peculiarity.

At the same time, they integrate the Mormon story into the broader narrative of American conservatism and the Christian Right, a burgeoning field that has often treated Mormons as an afterthought. Mormons have forged a unique theology and a powerful culture of institutional authority that help them negotiate secular modernity’s demands on their minds and bodies. The LDS experience both echoes and defies the broad patterns that scholars have observed in other conservative religious traditions. Mormons are—and yet sometimes are not—a peculiar people.

## The authority problem

Early Mormons' battles with the federal government unfolded as evangelicals and Catholics struggled to reconcile their own ideas of religious authority with the demands of the wider culture. Two years after the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act criminalized plural marriage in US territories, Pius IX promulgated his Syllabus of Errors. The document decried autonomous human reason, religious freedom, the rule of civil law, and other features of Western modernity as abominable heresies. In 1870 the First Vatican Council proclaimed papal infallibility, declaring that God would protect the pope from error whenever he spoke *ex cathedra*.

In the years that followed, as Mormons' clashes with Washington accelerated, conservative Protestants at places like Princeton Theological Seminary waged a battle of their own. They sought to shore up the Bible's authority against the attacks of theological modernists who had reinterpreted scripture in light of the latest historical and scientific discoveries. Charles Hodge, the seminary's principal from 1851 to 1878, called the Bible a God-given "storehouse of facts" free of any error, even in matters of history and science.<sup>2</sup> Viewed from a certain angle, this doctrine of biblical inerrancy is the Protestant version of papal infallibility, and it provided the intellectual foundation of the twentieth-century fundamentalist movement.

At first glance, it may seem that Mormon battles to defend their right to practice polygamy and enjoy political independence had little to do with Protestant and Catholic fights over faith and reason. But this is to understand these conflicts too narrowly. All three were profound crises of authority. All three compelled church leaders to defend the prerogative of their institutions against the claims of the culture around them. In each case, esoteric theological debates intersected with broader questions of social boundaries and cultural change. And all three fights have cast long shadows across the twentieth century and beyond.

---

2. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1873; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:10.

Is polygamy really so important to the modern Mormon story? In the most provocative essay in *Mormonism and American Politics*, Mormon feminist Joanna Brooks declares that it is. “Polygamy is to Mormon experience as slavery is to American experience: defining, materially and ideologically constitutive, contradictory to some of its stated ideals, and lasting in its cultural consequences,” she writes (p. 195).

What does she mean? After all, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has waged a concerted effort to distance itself from plural marriage for more than a century. But the LDS leadership never repudiated Joseph Smith’s account of plural marriage as a gateway to the celestial kingdom. As Brooks puts it, the practice is still “on the books” in Mormon scripture and in some elements of temple ritual (p. 194). A divorced Mormon woman must seek a temple cancellation to unseal her from her ex-husband in order to remarry in a temple, but the same does not hold for men.<sup>3</sup> There appears to be some room for plural marriage in the afterlife.

It can be hard to interpret such theological residue. Too many non-Mormons have wandered into the land of paranoid speculation about “secret” LDS teachings. The more pressing legacy of plural marriage is at once simpler and more profound. Perhaps the best analogy is not the aftermath of slavery, but the legacy of nineteenth-century battles with secular modernity among today’s Catholics and evangelical Protestants.

The Mormons’ great fight, their story of the church against the world, has left them with a keen sense that their church’s commitment to marriage sets them apart and has been attacked and misunderstood in the past; that defending the institution of marriage as their church defines it is essential not only to the preservation of civilization, but to salvation. No other Christian community holds quite the same view. Recently scholars such as Amy DeRogatis have stressed the theological importance of marriage, sex, and reproduction for conservative

---

3. Melvyn Hammarberg, *The Mormon Quest for Glory: The Religious World of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43.

evangelicals, but they don't come close to Mormon beliefs.<sup>4</sup> In Mormon theology, as Brooks writes, marriage is “an ordinance necessary to the eternal well-being of the soul” (p. 193).

Brooks sees the nineteenth-century Mormon “underground,” the social network that helped polygamous Mormons evade federal persecution, as a model for the church's modern approach to political conflict with the state: “a split between private or insider and public communication that manifests both in practices of social insularity as well as in the careful use of public speech as deflective action rather than communicative reason—the assumed speech norm of modern civic life” (p. 194). In other words, when the church hierarchy instructs members to invest in a controversial cause and trust only official LDS sources of information, Mormons fall into line—and become stealth culture warriors.

She dwells on the 2008 example of Mormon mobilization to support California's Proposition 8, the state constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. The church issued a letter to congregations urging members to “do all they could” to support the measure (p. 197). “It was communicated by priesthood leaders in Sunday meetings and widely believed by LDS Church members that the legalization of same-sex marriage would force the LDS Church to marry gay couples, and that the church would be forced to shut down its own temples rather than comply” (p. 201). Although Mormons make up only about 2 percent of California's population, they donated between 50 and 70 percent of the funds raised by the “Yes on 8” campaign (p. 198), funds funneled through “surrogate channels,” such as ProtectMarriage.com, to give the church “a layer of protection against public scrutiny” (p. 199).

It may be that Brooks draws too straight a line from nineteenth-century theology to the modern culture wars and that her account of Mormon political involvement is a shade too conspiratorial. Yet she puts her finger on something real: the way conservative churches' battles with modernity in centuries past have shaped their engagement with secular pluralism today.

---

4. Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

## Mormons and the Christian Right

By 2008, were not most Mormons comfortable members of the Christian Right, that amorphous collection of activists who seek to shore up the authority of conservative Christianity over American culture? Were their unique doctrines really all that relevant to politics? Theology does not figure prominently in most histories of the Christian Right. Scholars—and some activists—have implied that when Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, and a few conservative Jews realized the magnitude of the threat posed by “secular humanists,” they set aside their squabbles about the authority of the pope, the inspiration of the Bible, or the divinity of Jesus. Ralph Reed, the first director of the Christian Coalition, sidestepped such debates by calling his diverse allies “people of faith.”<sup>5</sup>

The historian Neil Young explodes that diplomatic narrative in *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics*. As the cultural authority of churches and white men declined precipitously in late twentieth-century America, conservative activists did indeed begin to seek new partners. But Young demonstrates that evangelical, Catholic, and Mormon interfaith relations were never exactly hunky-dory.

Most historians have located the immediate origins of the modern Christian Right in the 1960s, when some of the oldest sources of prejudice dividing evangelicals, Catholics, and Mormons waned and common enemies emerged. Racial prejudices against white “ethnic” Catholics had faded; the practice of polygamy was ancient history, at least among mainstream Mormons; and the Second Vatican Council had smoothed interfaith relations by deeming Protestants “separated brethren” instead of heretics, emphasizing the authority of the Bible, and permitting Mass in the vernacular. Mormons saw in the Vatican Council some affirmation of their own faith, particularly Vatican II’s declaration that official church pronouncements should be considered “revelations” (p. 62).

---

5. Ralph E. Reed, *Politically Incorrect: The Emerging Faith Factor in American Politics* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 11, 58, 263.

Yet many evangelicals remained cynical that the church of Pius IX could now truly affirm religious freedom and individual access to scripture. Mormons stood by their familiar critiques of Protestants and Catholics: “A reformation cannot lead them back, but this new revelation can,” Hugh Brown, first counselor in the LDS Church’s First Presidency, said in 1964 (p. 62).

At the same time, all three communities wrestled with internal debate and transformation: developments that followed the broad patterns set in the nineteenth century. Here Young’s account of the divisions between evangelicals, Catholics, and Mormons is slightly incomplete. In the mid-1960s, the first tremors of the “Battle for the Bible”—a titanic clash between conservatives and moderates over scripture’s authority—began to roil evangelical circles, as conservatives worked to ferret out colleagues they deemed “weak” on inerrancy. Vatican II threw Catholics in the West into turmoil. Conservatives lamented the reforms as a capitulation to modern materialism. Liberals complained the Second Vatican Council had not gone far enough and merely reasserted the First Vatican Council’s high-handed authoritarianism with a velvet glove.

The Mormons, on the other hand, were entering a period of consolidation, confidence, and insularity. Here, in the era of Correlation, we might trace the broad legacy of the underground: the church’s tradition of protecting and shepherding its own. Harold B. Lee, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, launched the internal reform movement in 1960. Lee began with the mandate to focus on “correlating” the church’s educational curricula and auxiliary activities to standardize LDS teaching ministries, but he “envisioned much more,” writes Matthew Bowman in *The Mormon People*.<sup>6</sup> Lee sought to centralize authority in the priesthood quorums to yield hierarchical efficiency modeled on American corporations he admired.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Bowman has compared Correlation to the sixteenth-century Council of

---

6. Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 195.

7. Bowman, *Mormon People*, 196.



Trent, when the Catholic Church enacted reforms to ensure individual conformity to church teachings and strengthen hierarchical control.<sup>8</sup>

The “Battle for the Bible” and Vatican II struck evangelicals and Catholics with centrifugal force. Dissenters spun further away from the control of institutional authorities, while conservatives called for holy crusade. Many found a new source of authority—and another means to challenge secular modernity—in the charismatic renewal movement, a worldwide Pentecostal revival that began in the late 1950s and had left few evangelical and Catholic communities untouched (and encouraged them to respect each other’s piety) by the time it began to wind down twenty years later. All these developments hastened what the sociologist Robert Wuthnow called “the restructuring of American religion”: the division of Protestants and Catholics into conservative and liberal camps more willing to collaborate across confessional lines to advance a shared political agenda.<sup>9</sup>

The Mormon experience of the 1960s and 1970s was different. Correlation sprang from the same motivations that drove Catholic bishops to seek reform and evangelical inerrantists to hunt out doubters: all three movements were efforts to shore up traditional religious authority. But while Protestants and Catholics had more discord on their hands, Correlation helped Mormons reinforce the boundaries between their church and the rest of the world (it is not an accident that they seem to have been the only Christian community virtually untouched by charismatic revival). Correlation made possible the kind of mobilization and information control evident in the church’s response to Proposition 8.

Yet the 1960s and the 1970s also brought a wave of social and political change—the expansion of global communism; secularization and liberation movements at home—that left many evangelicals, Catholics, and Mormons on the same side of the emerging culture wars. If any issue promised to compel Mormons to leave their citadel and work

---

8. Bowman, “Saturday’s Warriors,” *Slate*, April 25, 2012, <http://www.slate.com/>.

9. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

alongside Catholics and evangelicals, it was the fight to halt the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

## The Equal Rights Amendment

The amendment, passed by Congress in 1972, declared that “equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” To many conservative Christians, it defied the complementary gender roles set forth in scripture and church tradition. Historians such as Donald Critchlow, biographer of the prominent Catholic anti-ERA activist Phyllis Schlafly, have told the story of coffee klatches that blossomed into rallies and voting drives and halted the amendment just shy of the thirty-eight state ratifications needed.<sup>10</sup> Neil Young builds on this narrative by identifying the anti-ERA movement as a key turning point in Mormon collaboration with the Christian Right.

The campaign attracted enthusiastic grassroots Mormon support—in no small part because the LDS hierarchy officially endorsed it. The First Presidency released an official statement opposing the amendment in 1976, warning that it would bring women “far more restraints and repressions.” “The ERA’s bid for a constitutionally protected equality of the sexes struck at the very core of Mormonism’s deepest beliefs about the gender-specific functions for men and women in life,” Young writes (p. 159).

The fight over the ERA proved to be the first mainstream culture war battle that Mormons entered with gusto, proving to themselves and to other Christian activists that Mormons were capable of methodical organization and dogged political action. Reluctant to collaborate too closely with other activists, the church created its own anti-ERA groups, “building, coordinating, and directing an internal movement against the amendment through its grassroots organizations” (pp. 159–60).

---

10. Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

In *Seeking the Promised Land*, a study of evolving Mormon political attitudes by the political scientists David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, the authors note that most Utah Mormons initially agreed with the ERA's statement of gender equality. Yet the LDS hierarchy persuaded most of them to vote against the amendment, "notwithstanding their general support for women's rights" (p. 134). The church honed the methods of organization and internal communication that would prove so effective in supporting Proposition 8 decades later—while building on theological priorities and a powerful culture of top-down authority that their ancestors would have recognized.

### Disorderly pro-lifers

Yet the campaign against the ERA did not play midwife to a harmonious Christian Right. The year after conservative Christians began their anti-ratification fight, the Supreme Court legalized abortion in all fifty states. Historians such as Daniel Williams have chronicled evangelicals' early ambivalence toward the largely Catholic pro-life campaign.<sup>11</sup> But Young reveals just how fractious the movement was.

Mormons did not embrace the pro-life cause as they did the defense of traditional marriage and gender roles. They had opposed abortion since the 1850s, but historically Mormons did not equate it with murder. LDS doctrine was ambiguous on the question of when life began. Brigham Young declared that it began at "quickening," the moment when the mother feels the fetus stir in her womb (this was the Catholic position until 1869, when Pius IX banned all abortion). David O. McKay, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1951 until 1970, believed life began only with birth (p. 101). McKay's view seems to have been exceptional, but Young notes that the church never pursued the overturning of *Roe* with the zeal that it brought to the fight against the ERA.

---

11. Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 117ff.

Even committed pro-life activists remained divided over strategy and theology. Young recounts the story of dueling pro-life legislation in the early 1980s. Senator Orrin Hatch, a Mormon from Utah, proposed a constitutional amendment protecting the right of states to pass their own laws on abortion. The amendment would exploit federalism as a means to gradually reverse *Roe*. Jesse Helms, a Baptist from North Carolina, proposed a Human Life Bill that declared that life begins at conception and denied the courts jurisdiction over abortion. The two bills pitted pragmatists against pro-lifers of principle.

By the time both bills had failed in 1983, pro-life organizations remained divided along confessional and tactical lines. “We are a movement in disarray,” said Paul Brown of the National Right to Life Committee (p. 215).

The central argument of *We Gather Together* is that Brown’s assessment ought to apply to the Christian Right more generally. Not even at the apparent climax of their political power did Christian Right activists perceive themselves as a unified movement on the brink of reconquering American culture. Evangelicals had gradually warmed to the prospect of working alongside Catholics, but they grew even more wary of Mormons in the wake of LDS missionary gains in the Bible Belt. Leaders in all three communities believed they faced “a time of religious crisis that demanded clear messages that distinguished and promoted their particular faiths” (p. 177).

## Peculiar nonetheless

If observers have exaggerated the unity of the Christian Right, if evangelicals and Catholics championed different priorities and worried about the costs of collaboration, then perhaps Mormons are not so peculiar. Yet it is a mistake to cast Mormons as interchangeable with other “family values” activists. “What makes a Methodist a Methodist differs from what makes a Mormon a Mormon,” Campbell, Green, and Monson write in *Seeking the Promised Land* (p. 29).

The authors base most of their conclusions on two ambitious surveys of Mormons and Americans' opinions of Mormons: the Peculiar People Survey and the Mormon Perceptions Study. Mormons have defied Wuthnow's "restructuring of American religion" by remaining a fairly distinct "ethno-religious group" whose members seek shelter under a unique "sacred tabernacle" (p. 38). The term riffs on sociologist Peter Berger's notion of a "sacred canopy," a system of shared metaphysical beliefs that provides a sense of reality that all members of a community can take for granted.<sup>12</sup> A tabernacle is large and communal like a canopy—and not as individualistic as a "sacred umbrella," sociologist Christian Smith's appropriation of the Berger metaphor for modern evangelicals.<sup>13</sup> But, like an umbrella, it's ready to pack up and go anywhere, "especially into hostile landscapes" (p. 38). (The authors have in mind something more like modest "tentlike structure" of the ancient Israelites and less like the imposing Tabernacle in Salt Lake City.) The sacred tabernacle is built of shared history, theology, culture, church institutions, and idioms, all of which have led many observers to see Mormons as a quasi-ethnic group. These are the practices and principles that allow Mormons to "create tight-knit communities wherever they are found" (p. 38). The Peculiar People Survey revealed that Mormons are remarkably homogeneous in their politics: today even more Mormons lean Republican—65 percent—than do evangelicals (p. 79).

Yet in 1896, 73 percent of Utah Mormons voted for the great populist crusader William Jennings Bryan. While *Seeking the Promised Land* sketches in broad strokes the historical development of Mormon politics, the essays in *Mormonism and American Politics* flesh out some of the most interesting transformations that divide the Mormons of Bryan's day from today's "Republican Party at prayer." They suggest that it may be Mormons' theory of human nature, as much as the political legacy of polygamy, that has carved the church's path through the twentieth century.

---

12. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

13. Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 106.

## A peculiar anthropology

Joseph Smith's genius lay in turning the Puritans' dark vision of human depravity and predestination on its head while retaining a vision of theocratic authority that would have filled Cotton Mather with envy. He crafted "a modern Pelagianism in a Puritan religion," the Mormon philosopher Sterling McMurrin wrote.<sup>14</sup>

In one of the most fascinating essays in *Mormonism and American Politics*, Matthew Bowman explains how Mormons' exaltation of free will and the path to godhood found a certain harmony with the principles of the Progressive era. Church leaders such as John Widtsoe, James Talmage, and B. H. Roberts placed great faith in the potential of science and education to improve humanity's lot and propel the species toward godhood. Widtsoe's *Joseph Smith as Scientist* (1908) cast the prophet as a quintessential progressive who anticipated modern reformers' embrace of the scientific method to bring "applied Christianity" to the world. "The theology which rests upon the few basic laws of nature is unshakable; and the great theology of the future will be such a one," he wrote.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the protestations of many evangelicals and Catholics, Widtsoe and other Mormons endorsed Herbert Spencer's theory of evolution. The British scientist proved an unlikely guide who helped Mormon thinkers negotiate the church's transition into the mainstream after the Woodruff Manifesto renounced polygamy. Spencer's worldview persuaded Mormons that "they might think of their connection with God in terms of evolutionary, ontological inheritance rather than in the dynastic language of polygamy. . . . They began to think of 'eternal progression' as a function of Spencerian evolution—the cultivation of progress through struggle, refining personal character through education, confronting obstacles, and committing to the character-building work of their church," Bowman writes (p. 61). He suggests that the consonance between LDS theology and the secular Progressive worldview

---

14. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000 [1965]), foreword.

15. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy* (Salt Lake City: Young Men's Mutual Improvement Associations, 1908), 1.

helps explain why Mormons “so readily gave up their Zion in the desert, their marital radicalism, their economic communalism and instead made common cause with that very American society that had just spent a decade punishing them” (p. 56).

The embrace of “progress through struggle” is a key turn in Mormon thought, one that may have paved the way for the eventual Mormon embrace, not of progressive reforms, but of the brutalities of free market capitalism—that dimension of the contemporary conservative message that can seem contrary to the church’s communitarian ethos. Despite suffering alongside most other Americans during the Great Depression—and embracing the New Deal over the protests of LDS leaders—Mormons later emerged in the popular mind as paragons of economic buoyance and self-reliance.

Jan Shipp recounts the rise of this popular mythology, promoted by admiring accounts such as “Those Amazing Mormons,” a 1952 article in the magazine *Coronet* (a rival of *Reader’s Digest*). The article “provided a picture of a people with all the Boy and Girl Scout virtues who didn’t drink alcohol, didn’t smoke, kept a year’s larder full of foodstuffs, and, of the greatest importance, ‘took care of their own’” (p. 79). Mormons themselves came to forget the real story of the Great Depression and, under the guidance of zealous anti-Communist leaders like Ezra Taft Benson, endorsed the Cold War-era fusion of traditional Christianity and economic libertarianism that has come to form the bedrock of today’s Christian Right.

Other conservative churches suffered the same amnesia, as historian Alison Collis Greene explains in her recent book *No Depression in Heaven*, an account of Southern evangelical churches’ desperate acquiescence to the New Deal after their own resources ran dry.<sup>16</sup> Mormons are not unique in their misplaced nostalgia for a pre-New Deal arcadia when church communities supposedly cared for their own until the federal government stomped into town. Was this mythology the logical

---

16. Alison Collis Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

application of Mormonism's vision of gods in the making, freed by their Heavenly Father to thrive or fail—or its ultimate distortion?

Sterling McMurrin—who called himself a “good heretic”—once wrote that “the church doesn't do justice to its own theology.”<sup>17</sup> Twentieth-century Mormons had permitted the “general framework of historic Christian fundamentalism” to flatten the most radical insights of their faith.<sup>18</sup> (He tended to ignore the legacy of polygamy.)

The Pelagian Puritan; the theocratic freedom fighter: this is the paradox of Mormon peculiarity, the way American Mormons have become both insiders and outsiders at once. “While Mormons may have started down the path of assimilation, they did not go very far before veering off into another direction,” Campbell, Green, and Monson write (p. 258). They describe the posture of the modern LDS Church as neither acculturation nor separation, but “*engagement* with society. Mormons would not retreat from or surrender to it, but instead choose their battles carefully.” You can take the prophet out of the wilderness, perhaps, but you cannot take the wilderness out of the prophet.

**Molly Worthen** is assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her most recent book is *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

---

17. Quoted in McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (introduction by L. Jackson Newell), x, ix.

18. McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, foreword.