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Still the Seed of Abraham?

David A. Hollinger

Review of Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

AN IRONY OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HISTORY is that the founding myths of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were for many decades mocked by millions of people who took seriously stories about a preacher who was born of a virgin, walked on water, fed a multitude with a handful of fish and loaves of bread, and, after being dead for a while, walked around visiting with his friends. He even claimed to be able to save people from the destruction of the world if only they quit their jobs and followed him around. Somehow Joseph Smith's revelations and claims seemed much more far-fetched. Perhaps this was because they were of such recent date and had not served as adhesives for a community over many centuries.

The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism opens with the sage observation of historian Jan Shipps that Mormons have become an ethnic group, held together in part by LDS lore and ideology. To the most educated of today's Mormons, the wild dreams of Joseph Smith can be appreciated for their functions in maintaining a wholesome community. The forty-one articles in this welcome compendium of knowledge and critical reflection enable the reader to understand how this process of

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steady enlightenment is taking place. Just as countless Methodists and Presbyterians and Catholics and even some evangelicals recognize that religious doctrines need to be taken more or less seriously depending on the historical circumstances of the community that treasures them, so do many Mormons. Most of the authors here are rightly focused on Mormonism as a distinctive social presence in the world. If there is a single argumentative thread throughout the 656 pages, it is that Mormonism is now in the American club. Mormons are a group like many others, with its own peculiarities, but able to function well enough in a pluralistic nation and globe if others will cut them some slack.

This worldly wisdom is most true of the historically centered articles, which together constitute by far the strongest component of the volume. Daniel Walker Howe, Richard Lyman Bushman, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Sarah Barringer Gordon, and Noah Feldman join Shippis in providing readers with detailed and sophisticated accounts of the political, legal, intellectual, and social history of Mormonism. Similarly, the sociologically focused articles—especially a statistic-filled demographic portrait of the Mormon community by Tim B. Heaton and Cardell K. Jacobson—reveal the ways in which ancestry, geography, and shared historical experience promote and perpetuate certain social values and discredit others.

Another battery of articles devoted to issues in the Mormon belief system does not register quite as consistently the sense that Mormonism is now an ethnicity rather than an embodiment of divine instruction, full stop. But in those articles too, debates over doctrine and religious practice are shown to be worked out by Mormons acutely aware of their contemporary surroundings. Philip L. Barlow's illuminating essay, "Mind and Spirit in Mormon Thought," explains the emergence "since the 1960s" of a substantial "Mormon intelligentsia" made up of "well-educated and committed" intellectuals who reject the anti-intellectualism that long kept Mormons apart from other comparably educated and engaged Americans (p. 239). These essays on Mormon thought and practice would be better if they dealt more systematically with the reasons why ecumenical Protestants and secular thinkers find Mormon beliefs lacking in cognitive plausibility, but here one does find

clear and careful expositions of Mormon ideas about the atonement, theodicy, scriptural authority, and other theoretical questions. A great value of these articles is the substantive picture they present, in contrast to the popular culture images of Mormonism that continue to be dominated by the renegade polygamist groups in the remote deserts of southern Utah and northern Arizona. The *Handbook* should be in the personal library of every journalist who writes about Mormons. It could do much to counteract popular prejudices.

At the very end of the book, the evangelical leader Richard Mouw, whose constituency has been especially suspicious of Mormonism, concludes that the Mormons have “earned the right to be given an important role in interfaith conversations” (p. 633). That this symbolically freighted welcome to the club is offered by a former president of the resolutely evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena rather than by a former president of Union Theological Seminary in New York or the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley tells us much about the specific terms on which the Mormon community is being assimilated into modern America. Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada may be a political liberal and still a Mormon, but *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* shows again and again that the America into which the Mormons are being the most comfortably accepted is decidedly and overwhelmingly conservative on virtually every political and religious spectrum.

Sixty-five percent of US Mormons say they are Republican, while only 22 percent say they are Democrat. Additional findings of survey researchers are even more revealing. While only 43 percent of Americans think that “abortion should be illegal in most or all cases,” 70 percent of Mormons do, a figure strikingly above the 61 percent for evangelicals. Mormons are much more likely than the average citizen to want government to enforce proper morals, and much less likely to want government to help needy Americans. When it comes to economic ideology and practice, the conservative tilt is unmistakable: the tradition of Mormon cooperation flourishes today “in robust church welfare, education, and humanitarian aid programs,” J. Spencer Fluhman summarizes in his discerning essay on Mormon communitarianism, but it

does so “firmly *within* the standing capitalist order” (p. 586, emphasis in original).

Only 24 percent of Americans and 36 percent of evangelicals think their own faith is the only one “true faith,” but a staggering 80 percent of Mormons declare this about their own religion. Although Mormons do not take the Bible as literally as most evangelicals do, on most other theological issues (e.g., absolute certainty of God’s existence and the belief that God is “personal”) Mormons share more with evangelicals than with other religiously defined segments of American society, including ecumenical or “mainline” Protestants. European ancestry, the most consistent demographic predictor for conservative culture and politics, is no longer as dominant in evangelical churches as it once was, but 85–90 percent of American Mormons are Anglo-Saxons. It was not until 1978 that the LDS Church ended its traditional ban on black people from the Mormon priesthood.

The particular division of the American club of which the Mormons are now an indisputable part is further clarified by the LDS position on women’s rights and same-sex relationships. Mormons in the 1970s and early 1980s “played a decisive role” in the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, notes Matthew J. Grow (p. 60). Yet the easily recognized claims to gender equality represented by the Equal Rights Amendment are not even mentioned in the single article in the *Handbook* where one would most expect those claims to be confronted. In “Mormon Doctrine on Gender,” Valerie Hudson argues that “the LDS faith is the most feminist of the Christianities” and is the one most fully committed to the equality of men and women. Hudson explains that “God” for Latter-day Saints means “an exalted man and an exalted woman united in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.” Since there is “a Heavenly Mother, who stands as an equal to our Heavenly Father,” Mormonism demands gender equality from the start. Hudson praises Mormons for “enduring great hardship”—meaning, apparently, their being criticized by other people—during their efforts to protect “the heterosexual definition of marriage” during the 2008 election in California. Proposition 8, backed by Mormon money and lobbying, overturned

a court ruling expanding access to civil marriage. To enter marriage “is to walk the path of divinity,” and “marriage has been defined by God as inherently heterosexual” (pp. 350–52, 361). The frankly theocratic Hudson displays no concern for the obligation of a pluralistic civil polity to respond to the beliefs of non-Mormons. That she quotes with ritual deference, and by name, no fewer than seven Mormon authorities in a span of ten pages (pp. 350–60) calls into question her intended audience. For Oxford’s scholarly readers, facile appeals to religious authority seem both out of place and an unintended echo of Hudson’s seeming dismissal of pluralistic realities.

A similar conservatism is revealed in yet another cluster of articles, those devoted to Mormon missions and the growth of LDS congregations beyond the United States. These essays are less tendentious than Hudson’s and are among the most valuable in the volume. Their authors convey a large amount of specific information about just when, where, and with what success Mormon missions developed abroad. What makes the takeaway impression so conservative is above all the Eurocentrism of the LDS missionary project. Mormons have been chiefly concerned to win converts within the Europe-centered West, where people who could most credibly be claimed as the descendants of Abraham could be found. In keeping with this unabashed genetic invidiousness, in the nineteenth century, 93 percent of Mormon missionaries worked in the North Atlantic domain. Not until World War II did LDS missionaries begin to work in Latin America on a large scale. Mission work in Korea did not begin until 1956 (pp. 190, 516, 563). “The Latter-Day Saints have historically focused on preaching Christ among Christian peoples,” Reid L. Nelson concludes in the most instructive of the articles on the international dimensions of Mormonism, “rather than exporting Christianity and Western culture to non-Western nations” (p. 192). The contrast to the missionary project of the major Protestant churches could not be more pronounced.

The Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Quakers, Disciples of Christ, and other denominations sent thousands of missionaries to China, India, and Japan, as well as to other areas

scattered throughout the Middle East, Africa, and the Pacific Islands. They were much quicker than the Mormons to understand service, rather than conversion, as central to the missionary endeavor. The enduring Mormon focus on conversion and church membership is a highly conservative disposition, placing a low priority on an indigenous community's own sense of what it needs from Western Christians. Moreover, the Protestant missionaries spent most of their lives abroad, sometimes for two and three generations, yielding a more extensive immersion in alterity than could be allowed by the two-year term of service normal for Mormon missionaries. Most Protestant congregations back home carried out correspondence with individual missionary families for decades, ensuring close contact with reports of the foreign. The results were cultural cross-fertilization and deprovincialization on a vast scale.

Missionary daughter Pearl Buck with her 1931 book, *The Good Earth*, did more to change Western perceptions of the Chinese people than anyone since Marco Polo. Countless ex-missionaries pushed their denominations in ecumenical directions altogether foreign to Mormon insularity. Missionary sons and daughters as scholars and professors developed the rigorous study of foreign societies in American universities, and as Foreign Service Officers and journalists advanced policies hostile to European colonialism and friendly to the nationalist aspirations of decolonizing peoples. Deep and long-term engagement with life in the villages of Siam or Lebanon or Korea made Protestants more cosmopolitan.

A striking omission in the *Handbook* is an inquiry into the effect on Mormon missionaries of the time they did spend abroad, even if only briefly and in Europe. Two years spent in Germany or Spain might be expected to broaden the perspective of the young males (and until recently they were mostly all males) who served as missionaries, but none of the contributors even ask the question. This is again a sign of the insularity of the Mormon community. The articles on Mormon converts residing in Africa, Mexico, and elsewhere—won mostly in the last seventy years—do mention the challenges of advancing a genuine LDS

faith in diverse cultural contexts, but there is precious little suggestion that the Mormons back in Utah or Idaho had anything to learn from other peoples. When the great Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones wrote *The Christ of the Indian Road*, he was trying to get the faithful back home to recognize how much they had to learn from people like Gandhi. That was in 1925. If the Mormon missionaries advanced such views at home even in 2015, ninety years later, this volume does not make us aware of it. Since the missionary endeavor is an important part of Mormonism, the absence of an article on the impact of the experience on the missionaries is a missed opportunity for the *Handbook*.

Another missed opportunity concerns the history of Mormonism since World War II. The historical essays that impressively distinguish the *Handbook* are largely devoted to the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries. Moreover, many of these essays encapsulate what the authors and others scholars have already published. Matthew J. Grow's "The Modern Mormon Church" devotes eight valuable pages (pp. 58–66) to this recent period, but his major contribution set forth an agenda of questions for future scholarship. Grow is surely correct to ask for "more and better studies of what it meant to be a Mormon at a particular time and place" and to insist that Mormon studies be carried out with greater engagement with "other scholarly contexts," especially studies of other varieties of Christianity in the United States and globally (pp. 64–66).

But what most matters about the *Handbook* is what it does achieve. This volume is cause for genuine rejoicing. There is no more efficient and authoritative guide to things Mormon. Designed for a readership of non-Mormons as well as Mormons, the *Handbook* is a striking step toward the more complete integration of the study of Mormonism into the study of American history, politics, society, and culture. Two insights are especially important as this integration proceeds. First, the mythology that provides social adhesives for the Mormon community is not so much weirder by prevailing standards than the mythologies of other Christian groups. Second, like other ethnic groups in the United States, the Mormons are caught up in the tension between roots and

wings, the conflicting claims of community maintenance on the one hand and of greater experience in the world on the other.

David A. Hollinger is Hotchkis Professor of History Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, where he completed his doctorate in 1970. His books include *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History and Science*, *Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History*. His next book, *The Protestant Boomerang: Foreign Missions and American Public Life*, will be published in 2017 by Princeton University Press. He is a former president of the Organization of American Historians and is an elected fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.