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"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America

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J. Spencer Fluhman. "A *Peculiar People*":
Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion
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Reviewed by George L. Mitton

Latter-day Saints were often surprised or astonished at the amount of anti-Mormon rhetoric and sentiment that seemed to come out of the woodwork during the Romney candidacies. While to a varying degree there has always been an obvious anti-Mormon backdrop, it is an awakening to realize the strong, latent undercurrent that surfaces at times. J. Spencer Fluhman's book on anti-Mormonism in the nineteenth century is a helpful contribution to an understanding of the origins, sources, trends, and implications of such religious aversion. Fluhman is a professor of history at Brigham Young University and editor of the *Mormon Studies Review*. The study is a revised and augmented version of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His wide-ranging research here is a tour de force, often consulting obscure or neglected sources and providing a very useful bibliography. As discussed by Fluhman, the well-selected sources are interesting and instructive. The work presents an insightful overview that not only offers new information and evaluation but also puts in better perspective previous specialized studies of early anti-Mormonism.¹ For this

1. Important specialized works on nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism would include: Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (1997; updated ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Patrick Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Megan Sanborn Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and relatedly Craig L. Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics: A Critical Analysis of Anti-Mormon Pamphleteering in Great Britain, 1837–1860* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2002).

study, the Mormon History Association awarded Fluhman its Best First Book award in 2013.

Fluhman's study is both political and religious. While the historical overview of anti-Mormonism is impressively succinct, the analysis of its affects—not only upon the Mormons but more notably on those who disparaged them and on the American nation generally—is a major strength of the study. Important political and social consequences are discerned and featured, together with the "intellectual dilemmas faced by those who attempted to explain or categorize a controversial but vibrant new faith" (1). Fluhman holds, and convincingly demonstrates, that the exchange between Mormons and other communities helped to determine what was to be considered an authentic religion in America, in contrast to movements thought to be false and to be originated and continued by imposture. This was an important process in a land where there was not to be a governmentally established religion. Fluhman sees his study as "less a history of the Latter-day Saints than it is a history of the idea of religion in nineteenth-century America" and one that, considering the story of the Mormons and their detractors, "offers an unmatched view of the underlying problem haunting American religious liberty: Who decides what is religious in a disestablished polity?" (10). Thus the book "argues that through public condemnation of what Mormonism was, Protestants defined just what American religion could be" (9).

Anti-Mormon approaches varied across the nineteenth century, as did Mormon responses under changing conditions. While admittedly beginning with an oversimplification of a matter that is later discussed in much greater detail, Fluhman first summarizes the development of anti-Mormon efforts in three basic stages. In the first, opponents of the Mormons alleged them to be delusional. Later they claimed the movement to be alien, and finally they labeled it a false religion. The first two chapters of the book provide a good summary of their allegations against the early Mormon leaders, and especially their assertions about Joseph Smith. The Prophet's critics made him appear as one of many in history that formed a long line of religious imposters, while also likening him to contemporary figures that were discredited. The earliest anti-Mormonism appears to have been less concerned with Mormon beliefs than with the character of the Prophet, who was assumed to be a charlatan who duped his deluded followers. This is a useful and informative chapter, where many illustrative examples are given to show the early pattern of opposition to Joseph Smith and the defamation of his character.

The book contains a perceptive discussion of the concept of “delusion,” showing that the charge of Mormons as delusional was made with great frequency. There is much interesting detail here. Mormons believed they had the precious gifts of the Spirit; opponents saw these as delusions and wondered how Joseph Smith could bring about such striking effects on a rather large scale. They often attributed these extraordinary occurrences to “mesmeric clairvoyance” or Joseph’s alleged hypnotic powers (49). They considered these delusions as familiar and typical of phenomena observed at times in the Christian past when fanaticism was manifest. Because they regarded Mormon leaders as frauds and their followers as deluded, anti-Mormons were not disposed to consider Mormonism as simply another church. They interpreted Mormon religious practices “as a menace rather than a unique version of the Christian gospel” (76–77). Many Latter-day Saints sense that this anti-Mormon attitude, formed then, established a pattern that still persists among some today.

In his final chapters, Fluhman embarks on a remarkably concise summary of the effects of Mormon practices and teachings on the Saints vis-à-vis their neighbors and the nation. The doctrine and practice of the Gathering is given particular attention. Mormon gatherings in New York, Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and the Mountain West caused others to take a closer look at Mormon teachings and theology. Such clustering made it easier to assume that Mormon motivations and intentions were dangerous. Mormon prophecies of the end times were deemed particularly troublesome, along with their concepts of the Kingdom and a growing secular and political power. Yet the Saints saw the prophecies as offering great hope and a promise that God was beginning to establish a new and glorious order of peace, harmony, and true religion. These matters are given an enlightening analysis, as are the relations with the nation during the last half of the century—when concepts of theocracy and empire strongly emerged and polygamy was emphasized, only to be strenuously opposed by many as exotic and un-American and eventually abandoned under federal insistence. That abandonment, and subsequent statehood for Utah, brought about some accommodations and changes in Mormonism that have been variously held by scholars to be “transition” or “transformation” or “accommodation” or “Americanization” or “assimilation,” each having their “explanatory strengths and weaknesses” (140).

As a result of these and other changes, the end of the nineteenth century brought a somewhat more hopeful outlook for relations between

the Mormons and the nation. Americans were much more inclined to consider Mormonism as a religion, although important questions remained. "By 1900 . . . Mormonism hovered between Christianity and a non-Christian religion, between history and comparative religion, and between material reality and sacred myth" (146). There is an ambiguity here, Fluhman observes, that "makes debates over Mormonism an unmistakably rich source from which to view American conceptions of religion" (146–47). This fact is surely evident in his concise, informative, well-researched, and insightful book.

George L. Mitton received a master's degree in political science from Utah State University and did further graduate study at Columbia University. Long interested in Church history and doctrine, he served for a decade as an associate editor of *The FARMS Review* and published there. He is now retired from a career in education and state government in Oregon.