

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MORMON STUDIES

Volume 3

Spring 2010

PUBLICATION DETAILS

EDITOR

David M. Morris

EDITORIAL BOARD

Zachary R. Jones

Kim B. Östman

The *International Journal of Mormon Studies* is a European based internationally focused, peer-reviewed online and printed scholarly journal, which is committed to the promotion of interdisciplinary scholarship by publishing articles and reviews of current work in the field of Mormon studies. With high quality international contributors, the journal explores Mormon studies and its related subjects. In addition, *IJMS* provides those who submit manuscripts for publication with useful, timely feedback by making the review process constructive. To submit a manuscript or review, including book reviews please email them for consideration in the first instance to submissions@ijmsonline.org.

International Journal of Mormon Studies (Print) ISSN 1757-5532
International Journal of Mormon Studies (Online) ISSN 1757-5540

Published in the United Kingdom.

©2010 *International Journal of Mormon Studies*

All rights reserved.

<http://www.ijmsonline.org>

REVIEW – PEOPLE OF PARADOX: A HISTORY OF MORMON CULTURE

Reviewed by Carter Charles

Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Paperback: \$29.95.

Terryl Givens' *People of Paradox* is with two exceptions a carefully worded, structured, and well-documented book (67 pages of index and endnotes) that mobilizes various humanistic fields (history, sociology, philosophy and arts, mainly) in an attempt to map out and to explain "some key components of [Mormonism's] cultural identity" since the LDS Church's inception in upstate New York (viii). His panoramic view of Mormon culture stretches from the invisible and at times irrational aspects expressed in words (books) to the more concrete, outward manifestations of that culture as they appear in city planning and architecture, or in painting and cinema. Givens' emphasis is on the making of institutional Mormon culture and how it situates in the larger American context, and on dissonances generated by the way individual Mormon artists and intellectuals negotiate their places inside the faith. The diversity in approach and the content of the book will appeal to a wide readership. But they also make it more difficult to produce a comprehensive enough review.

As one will gather from the book's, and several chapters' well-chosen titles, the intellectual and artistic experience in Mormonism is replete with paradoxes, divergent dynamics, which Givens has referred to as "a field of tensions", a phrase borrowed from a third party (xiv). The first part of the book is devoted to explaining how those tensions, paradoxes, are a constituting part of Mormon religious and cultural identity: they are the outward expression of something deeper, something couched in holy writ and prophetic statements,¹ fossilized in language ("I

¹ On page 5, Givens quotes D&C 93:29-30 which likens "the agency of man" to independent truths: "All truth is independent" says the first segment of verse. But the same passage specifies the bounds of independence/agency: it

know”; 26), and in history and tradition.² According to Givens, the existence of such tensions is validated by Joseph Smith, *the prophet of Mormonism*³: he introduces the book quoting Smith’s statement that “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest” (xi). Unfortunately, Givens does comment on the statement.⁴

The book shows that Givens is heir to a Mormon tradition of intellectualism. But, he has to keep a delicate balance as an author and a Mormon intellectual writing on Mormonism for a wide readership. As such, he tries to assess without over-alienating inside while making sure that his work is not labeled “apologetic” outside. But even the distinguished scholar that he is has not yet found how to maintain the balance without offending “by dint of something left out, something overpraised, or something undervalued” (vii). This delicate balance, how Mormon artists reconcile religious demands (orthodoxy, *The Iron Rod*) and personal judgment (*The Liahona*),⁵ is one of the major themes that cuts through the book. His “Fomenting the Pot” chapter and the discussion on Eugene England’s “path of faithful dissent” (216) is quite illustrative of something typically Mormon that “even careful observers”

must be constrained within the “sphere in which God has placed it”. Givens implicitly shows the parallel of such paradox in summing up Jonathan Edwards’ argument that “men are both free *and* morally determined” (Givens’ emphasis).

² A precedent was established in Oliver Cowdery’s assertion of personal judgment over ecclesiastical authority when it comes to his temporal affairs (12). See also page 94 for a concrete application of that precedent.

³ My italic to render Givens’ “unique place [of Joseph Smith] in Mormonism” (xii).

⁴ I am more than prudent with Smith’s statement because of its polysemy. It does not tell what and whose truth will be made manifest. Is it the truth that will help understand why contraries do not go together? How do we go about proving contraries? Did he mean that by experimenting different, opposing values one will ultimately come to a personal opinion/truth? Or, did he mean that by placing side by side opposing values one may be able to discriminate/tell fundamental differences?

⁵ “*The Iron Rod*” in Mormon belief system is a sort of safety barrier that protects from falling into the Precipice as they walk “the strait and narrow path” that leads to eternal bliss (1 Nephi 8 and 11). It also carries the idea of “compulsion” (discussed on page 5), of “religious imperative” and “ecclesiastical authoritarianism” (15). And the *Liahona* is a miraculously compass that guided one of the parties mentioned in the *Book of Mormon* (1 Nephi 16:10; see also Alma 37:38). The *Liahona* is also understood to be a Mormon’s right to personal guidance from God.

may not fully grasp (15). It is clear that this readership is the main target of the book.

But a distinction is to be made between what observers may not fully understand and what they may fairly be critical about. Some may for instance find issues with Givens' lengthy quotes of Mormon religious writings or history which he could have summarized as he has done with some biblical stories.⁶ Givens tries to rationalize Mormonism and does not try to "mormonize." So it may well be argued in his favor that the lengthy quotes are the result of a desire to provide his readership with as many first-hand accounts as possible of the defining constituents of Mormon identity.

Mormons not accustomed to exegesis of their theology will have to read some passages of the book a couple of times before they can fully grasp their meanings. Such is the case of the passage beginning from the end of chapter 2 (30) through chapter 3. Such careful reading is recommended because those readers might otherwise come out with the impression that they are on a sort of Ulysses voyage. For although we have "a relentlessly optimistic theology" in that we do not preach "hell, fire and damnation" anymore, "salvational fullness", *the end* is actually "endlessly deferred", "relegated to a future that seems indefinitely remote" (34). One year supply will definitely not be enough. Givens' subsequent discussion in the same chapter on how and why the sacred and the banal sometimes merge in Mormon culture is a good way to keep busy during the trip,⁷ to forget about its near-endless nature and worry about "now".

Another way Mormons keep busy during the trip is through the quest of knowledge or education whose principle Givens lays down in chapter 2, and whose evolution he surveys in the history of Mormonism at large, especially in the second part of the book. It will be no surprise to anyone that Mormons have always been interested in education. The interest of the book on this issue is that it sheds light on what might

⁶ Contrast for instance the story of Balaam and his ass (7 lines) to the account of the "First Vision" which covers more than one page (159–61). About the same length for the quotations on the Haun's Mill Massacre (163–164); although he tries to make for the imbalance with almost a page summary (not direct quotations) on the Mountain Meadows Massacre (211–12).

⁷ Reminds also of the use of the same building for both religious and mundane activities (146).

have escaped Mormons and observers: the details that matter,⁸ the historical shifts and phases, the main actors and the way the pursuit of secular knowledge and faith have been intertwined or disentangled.⁹ A case in point is the fact that the Mormon millennial enterprise, something wholly religious, began with the construction of something wholly secular, “a school, not a temple” (72). It is helpful to learn about the tradition of debates and intellectual jousts that characterized early Mormonism¹⁰ to understand why some of today’s Mormon intellectuals may sound a bit nostalgic of a past, of a time when it was possible to dissent without being ostracized and labeled an “apostate”.¹¹

Instead of the label “apostate”, Givens prefers to speak of “modern Galileos” in Mormonism. He advocates that “they deserve their day in the court of public opinion”, citing Joseph Smith in support of his case (220). This position will definitely please the “Liahona Mormons” but the “Iron Rod” ones¹² and the Church’s hierarchy will probably reply that the Church is no public court. Nor will his quoting Joseph Smith help. For as shown in his introduction, Brigham Young instituted the doctrine that the words of the living oracles have precedence over those of the dead prophet; though we may esteem him. That is a twist (paradox?) of continuing revelation.

Given the fact that Givens constantly refers to the internationalization dimension of Mormonism,¹³ I find it appropriate as a non-American Mormon interested in this process to conclude my review with a few remarks on it. To begin with, it is fair to note that unlike some

⁸ See for instance page 99 for comparative data showing Utah Mormons’ access to education and literacy rate between 1870 and 1888.

⁹ The “Godbeites,” and “the demise of the Polysophical Society” period under Brigham Young when some began to feel “that Mormonism was becoming inhospitable to true intellectuals” (92–94). See also the development on the Church Educational System and the post Talmage, Roberts era (206), the Correlation program of the 1960s and its impact “on the fortune of Mormon art” (338).

¹⁰ Orson Pratt’s boldness defending Mormonism outside and dismissing President Young’s declaration inside the faith (96–97) as illustration that the thinking began only after the Brethren had spoken.

¹¹ Compare for instance the account of William Smith siding against his prophet/brother (80) with the cases of Juanita Brooks (212), Heber Snell and Sterling McMurrin (235–36).

¹² Richard Poll’s categorization quoted by Givens (16–17).

¹³ He discusses the internationalization of the Church in his introduction and closes the book on the question. See also page 59–61.

Mormons who feel that they always have to preach the universality of the Church;¹⁴ Givens does not try to deny the Americanness of Mormonism. For him, “it is *rooted* in a plethora of circumstances” which eventually make it difficult to tell “which aspects [in Mormonism] are essential to the faith and which are expendable features deriving from American culture” because “the two ... have become imperceptibly fused” (61; my emphasis). In my opinion, such acknowledgment is the beginning of the true international dimension of the Church. Sure, the Church can never be a utopian United Nations but accepting that it is so far inherently American implies that it is not impossible to make room for other cultural influences. Otherwise, it will continue to be perceived abroad as an arrogant religion, even by such faithful Mormons as the Mexican stake president (338).

That Givens concludes the chapter in which he acknowledges the Americanness of Mormonism, stating that “the challenge would be to exploit the accoutrements of the host culture without suffering contamination or loss of mission and identity in the process” (62) is paradoxical (internal paradox?), maladroit and unfortunate. So is the comparison of the Mormon nightmare in Missouri with “ethnic cleansing” (153). Why? Because in its globalization process, Mormonism goes or may go to countries that have been traumatized with colonialism (African nations, my home country of Haiti, for instance) and which have experienced *real* ethnic cleansings (Rwanda, Ex-Yugoslavia). There is no denying that the early Mormons suffered unspeakable atrocities because of their religion. But that chapter cannot be called “ethnic cleansing”; even if the religion has an entry of its own in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups* (56). The words “exploit” reminds of the oppressor, the imperialist; “without suffering contamination or loss” are so American, they remind of Truman’s “Containment” with its idea of quarantine and protection. It is impossible to evoke “contamination or loss” when it comes to contact to other cultures without implicitly casting them as inferior and malignant.

Those last words sound very harsh for a book which I actually enjoyed reading and which I maintain has been otherwise carefully worded. They are a sign that beside talking to those who are not of the

¹⁴ Givens speaks in his introduction of Mormons who “are [...] rethinking the limitations and obstacles” of the Americanness of Mormonism and who are “raising the possibility of a church surreptitiously engrafted with at least some expendable and merely *accidental* local baggage” (xvi, my emphasis).

Mormon faith for greater understanding, Mormons also need to bring down the national barriers and the distances that separate them and have constructive dialogues.

Carter Charles
University of Bordeaux, France
c_jcharles@hotmail.com