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Reviewed by Polly Aird

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## REVIEW – WHY I STAY: THE CHALLENGES OF DISCIPLESHIP FOR CONTEMPORARY MORMONS

*Reviewed by Polly Aird*

Robert A. Rees, ed., *Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011. Hardback: \$24.95.

In this volume, editor Robert Rees has compiled “Why I Stay” presentations given at Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City between 2003 and 2010. His introduction gracefully ties together the individual stories that follow. “Deciding whether to stay in or leave one’s faith tradition,” he writes, “is among the most difficult and soul-wrenching decisions a person can face. There are those who feel firmly rooted in their religion for a lifetime; other bolt from a church, temple, or mosque suddenly, impulsively, and ultimately; still others lapse, as Emily Dickinson said of the passing of summer, ‘as imperceptibly as grief.’” (vii). Rees then comments on the essays themselves: “What seems evident from the personal expressions of faith, challenge, and devotion in this collection is that many contemporary Latter-day Saints remain committed to the Church in spite of personal difference or spiritual dissonance over beliefs, doctrines, and practices” (ix).

Towards the end of the introduction, Rees writes, “In Mormonism, as in any religion, there are markers of devotion or, perhaps one might say, orthodoxy—signs and symbols, formulaic phrases, communal rituals that generally indicate a person’s unquestioned involvement with and acceptance by their religious society. For example Mormons are famous for declaring with absolute certainty, ‘I know,’ but there are some who, in spite of a lifetime of seeking, are unable to speak such words” (xv). Rees continues that most of the writers in this volume find “something of great value in their lifetime of devotion in spite of periodic estrangement and occasional (or even persistent) discomfort. Some are held by their own faith, others by the faith of family and friends. Some stay in the hope that their continuing activity may result in their being, to use C.S. Lewis’s phrase, ‘surprised by Joy’” (xvi).

I cannot here describe each essayist’s reasons for staying with the Church, so instead I will concentrate on themes and statements that strike me as memorable. The readers of the *International Journal of Mormon Studies* will find that many of the writers discuss their missions

in widely scattered countries. A recurring factor in staying is family roots. All the writers except one were born into Mormon families, many with long taproots into earlier generations. Thomas F. Rogers says he is “locked in by extensive ancestral and familial ties” (3). J. Frederick “To-by” Pingree declares “I am a Mormon to my bones. My ties to the Restored Church must be intertwined with my DNA” (79). Lael Littke writes, “The Church is my culture, the tribe I belong to” (138). And Karen Rosenbaum says when asked why she stays, “‘It’s who I am.’ I was dealt a hand from a Mormon deck” (158).

And yet being Mormon is not the same for all. Lavina Fielding Anderson, the only essayist who has been excommunicated, has a different view. She describes herself as “being *of* but not *in* the Church” (83). She continues, “Although I am no longer a Church member, I *am* still a Mormon. . . . The Church had power over my membership but does not have power over my Mormonness, which I continue to claim as my own destiny” (89). Music rates high as a reason for staying. William Bradshaw wants to “keep singing the songs, especially the children’s songs with lyrics that ring true” (19). And Robert Rees, the volume editor and author of one of the essays, writes, “I stay because I love to sing Mormon hymns. Joining my voice with others on Sundays is a spiritual, kinaesthetic experience.” Hymns, he says, “unify a congregation in a way that transcends their differences” (184).

But boredom is a problem for some. Mary Lythgoe Bradford says, “If ever I would leave the Church, it would be out of sheer boredom.” Part of her reaction comes from “the deadening influence of assigning subjects to speakers” (111). Molly Bennion echoes Bradford, writing, “Frankly, most of the social activities at Church bore me or conflict with activities I would rather do. Church classes usually bore me even more. . . . The boredom is more than mind numbing and exhausting. I come to Church hoping to be refreshed and invigorated, healed from the wounds of a week’s work and energized to face the challenges of the next week. Instead I can leave weary, frustrated, demoralized, and hungry, both spiritually and intellectually” (148). But still she stays: “I once asked Lowell Bennion why we should attend worship services when the experience is too often unsatisfying. He said, ‘To serve and to bless, to be served and blessed.’ That advice has helped me” (154).

Some of the essayists cope with such problems by being selective in their activities. Molly Bennion writes that she has “become

rather picky in what I will and will not do to help at Church. I will do anything meaningful, but I will not attend useless make-work meetings (149). Karen Rosenbaum says “I attend sacrament meeting and sometimes Sunday school, but not Relief Society and rarely stake meetings. I have said no to many Church callings that I felt I could not, in conscience, perform” (159). D. Jeff Burton finds his definition of staying has changed over the years: “Early in my life, it meant toeing the line in every behavioral aspect of Mormonism. In recent years that need has relaxed and broadened. I am less active in Church meetings . . . but I still consider myself a stayer” (66).

Others keep attending because the Church needs them. Claudia L. Bushman writes that she stays because “The Church needs her intellectuals, people who can talk to secular thinkers who dismiss Mormonism, and not be ruffled. . . . The Church needs people, particularly women, who speak out in frank ways during lessons and discussions, to give courage to those who have things to say but do not dare to say them” (36–37). Morris A. Thurston writes, “I stay, hoping that my voice and others can help prompt changes for the good. . . . It is my Christian responsibility to speak as honestly as I can and as humbly as I am able. I stay because I believe that doing so can make a difference” (63–64). On an especially positive note, Cherry Bushman Silver finds that being a part of the Church “adds zest to life” by “exploring ideas with fellow believers, those acquainted with the terms and issues of Mormondom who have a sense of what is genuinely at stake” (16).

Doubts are difficult. For Rosenbaum, certainty is elusive: “I have never been able to say ‘this is true’ about spiritual life in general or about Mormonism in particular. Despite decades of immersion in Mormonism, despite prayer and study, I feel I *know* almost nothing” (157). Rees writes, “The Church is not a particularly friendly or hospitable place for people who have doubts or questions or who risk speaking out on moral issues” (186). Although Thurston finds some things in the Church and its doctrine make no sense, he understands that “God had given me the right to think and seek personal revelation, and I saw that it was my responsibility to exercise that right in formulating my views on troublesome issues” (56).

But ambiguity is a part of life. Armand L. Mauss has come to understand that “living indefinitely with ambiguity is a sign of intellectual maturity, not weakness” (41). William D. Russell, a member of the

Community of Christ and thus the only non-LDS writer in the book, has earned a master's of divinity at a Methodist seminary. He writes, "I think the question of whether a Church is 'true' is an absurd concept. No institution is fully good. No book is fully true, not even a book alleged to be the most perfect one ever written. No pope, no prophet, no archbishop is perfect. Ambiguity reigns everywhere, in churches and in society" (122).

Several see the Church as a solely human institution. Mauss points out that "the Church has, throughout its history, functioned mainly as a human institution. Since I expect the Church usually to operate as a human institution, and its leaders as human beings, I am occasionally disappointed but never disillusioned" (42). Fred Christensen queries, "Is it any surprise that some defining doctrines of the Church have changed? Polygamy, the bedrock doctrine of early Mormonism, the practice for which my ancestors sacrificed everything, is now considered a sin. . . . We have renounced the communal economics we called the United Order. We have reversed ourselves on the gathering of the ten tribes, the stain of a dark skin, and advice against birth control. We have softened the temple ceremony and accommodated the temple garment to more modern styles" (129-30). He continues, "The strength of the Church is its social organization, not its doctrinal philosophy that is forever changing. We are fundamentally a social organization with doctrinal issues giving us something to talk about" (131).

Social and humanitarian concerns are mentioned by a few. Referring to his master's studies, Bill Russell writes, "Courses on Christian ethics and Christian social concern gave me a greater awareness of the religious significance of social and political issues. . . . I was disappointed with my Church during this time. . . . Our leaders were relatively unconcerned about the Civil Rights Movement and other social and political issues that had clear moral implications" (117). But gradually the Community of Christ took on issues of nonviolence and civil rights for blacks and women. "If the Church had not changed its direction, I would not be actively involved in it today," he writes (121-22). Among the LDS essayists, Thurston "would like to see the Church spend more resources on humanitarian service and less on proselytizing" (62).

After a while the themes begin to blend. Nevertheless I was touched by the essays, each written with openness and sincerity. Sunstone Symposium offers a supportive and sympathetic venue in which

to share struggles and triumphs. The book is particularly interesting to me since it is the flip side of dissent, the history of which has been the focus of much of my writing. Here instead are people bound to their faith “by countless silken ties of love and thought,” as Rees quotes from a Robert Frost poem (xvii). Although dissenters often have compelling reasons for leaving the Church, finding a way to keep those ties from breaking certainly leads to less disruption in a person’s life and less heartache for family and friends. As Burton states it, “there are people who would be hurt if I went away” (69).

My only negative reaction was to a couple of instances of provincialism. When I read that Russian Orthodox believers worship “trance-like,” turning off “critical faculties and hypnotically chanting, fingering beads, or repeating set prayers” (4), I was startled. There is, of course, much more to Orthodox Christianity than that. Likewise when I read that “In sha’ All’a” means “God wills it!” I was surprised (6). “In-sha Allāh” means rather “God willing” or “if it is God’s will” and is used across the Arabic-speaking world in the same sense we might say, “I’ll see you in June, God willing!”

On the other hand, I was heartened by Gregory A. Prince’s statement, “There was a time—and some of you will understand that certitude peaks at about nineteen years of age—when I thought God was only within Mormonism. I have subsequently witnessed too much of him in other churches and elsewhere to deny that his presence is everywhere, and I have come to realize that it is not up to me to tell God where he can spend his time” (95). The writers here are all mature intellectuals who have long considered where they stand in relation to the Church. It seems a given to me that members in their sixties to eighties, the ages of these writers, are unlikely to leave at this stage in their lives. Many had considered leaving at some point, but as Littke writes, “One thing led to another, and there I was, still in the pews” (137). I would have enjoyed reading the perspective of people in their thirties, forties, or fifties when leaving is perhaps a more viable or pressing possibility. Nevertheless, this book is an outstanding tribute to lives of faith and struggle. I highly recommend it.

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