

11-9-2007

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## Recommended Citation

Schmalz, Mathew N. "Meet the Mormons: From the Margins to the Mainstream." *Commonweal* 9 Nov. 2007: 16-19.

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# Meet the Mormons

## From the Margin to the Mainstream

Mathew N. Schmalz

There's been a lot of "Mormon talk" in the air lately. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney has something to do with that, as do the acclaimed HBO series *Big Love* (chronicling a fictional polygamist family that splits from its traditionalist Mormon roots) and the real-life trial of polygamist Warren Jeffs. People have the usual questions. What do Mormons believe? Are they really Christians? How many wives do they have, anyway?

Such talk arises whenever Mormons step into a more prominent role in American public life. In the nineteenth century, the talk was about Mormon polygamy and Utah statehood. In the early twentieth century, it centered on apostle Reed Smoot and whether he could assume elected office as a Utah senator. Now the talk surrounds Romney's presidential bid. Some of the punditry has been less than edifying. Jacob Weisberg wrote in the online journal *Slate* that he could never vote for someone whose religion "is based on such a transparent and recent fraud." Private Mormon temple rituals have been laid bare in the media, and Romney has had to endure one too many stories about traditional Mormon undergarments.

Having taught about new religious movements at the College of the Holy Cross for several years, I've found that my students combine a personal openness to Mormonism (one had a long-term boyfriend who was a Mormon) with deep skepticism about details of Mormon belief. Like many people, my students tend to find the Book of Mormon fanciful at best. Translated by Joseph Smith from golden plates he claimed to have unearthed in 1827 on a hill in upstate New York (Smith said he was guided there by Moroni, an angel who also gave him seer stones with which to translate the

plates' strange markings), the book is both a "testament of Jesus Christ" and a history of two rival American nations founded by the sons of Lehi, a prophet who sailed from Jerusalem to America in 600 BC.

My students have trouble taking Smith's seemingly outlandish claims seriously; and for those committed to Christian orthodoxy, key elements of Mormon doctrine remain deeply alien. Joseph Smith claimed to have seen God and observed that he has a form much like our own—with ears, eyebrows, and other human features. This God is not only the spiritual parent of us all, he is also the spiritual and physical parent of Jesus Christ. According to the Book of Mormon, Jesus also had a prior "unembodied" existence as "Jehovah," God of the Old Testament. In addition to asserting the untrinitarian nature of the Godhead, Smith claimed to have restored the authentic church of Christ, along with the ancient Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods.



Moroni

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Smith's vision of the afterlife was also distinctive. It foresaw a place divided into three levels: the "celestial kingdom," for faithful Mormons and those who receive the full gospel of Jesus Christ in the hereafter; the "terrestrial kingdom," for less faithful Mormons and righteous non-Mormon "Gentiles"; and the "telestial kingdom," for murderers, adulterers, and apostates. In this tripartite scheme, those in the celestial kingdom labor to achieve "exaltation." Some Mormon prophets and theologians have speculated that those who attain exaltation become gods of their own planets and give birth to spirit children who pass from preexistence through corporeal life to the afterlife. This redemptive vision was further clarified when Joseph Smith examined an Egyptian papyrus obtained from a traveling mummy exhibition. On the papyrus, Smith proclaimed, was a depiction of Kolob, the planet or star "set nigh to the throne of God," nearest to the celestial realm.

It was Kolob and associated exotica that first drew me to the study of Mormonism. It all seemed so strange: polygamy, the banning of blacks from the priesthood, the expansive understanding of prophecy. Not to mention the story of Joseph Smith and his many visions—including his 1832 prediction of a future war over slavery starting in South Carolina, and his revelation that prohibited "strong" and "hot" drinks as well as proscribing tobacco. As I reflected on the strangeness of Mormonism, I started thinking about the sense of strange-

ness that had singled me out as the "Catholic guy" in high school, college, and graduate school. I was often asked to present the "Catholic view" on some issue, or publicly pressed by colleagues to explain why Catholics held certain peculiar beliefs. Hearing Catholic stereotypes repeated in conversation, I always wanted to say, "Well, maybe if you'd seriously listen to Catholics, you'd realize we're not all the same."

Mormon friends and colleagues experience similar feelings when they hear people dismiss their religion. But if one sees Mormonism as something more than eccentricity or pathology, one can imagine a more substantive kind of Mormon talk, especially surrounding Mitt Romney's candidacy. Romney could be asked how Mormon beliefs in the salvific significance of America have shaped his understanding of the U.S. mission in the world. Or one could ask him how the Book of Mormon's narrative of a conflict of civilizations has shaped his own understanding of our present moment in history. It would also be interesting to know how Romney understands the challenges facing socially marginalized groups, given Mormonism's—and his own family's—experience of persecution.

A refreshingly different kind of Mormon talk could be heard in *The Mormons*, a four-hour documentary recently broadcast on PBS. The film let Mormons speak for themselves. Their words shed light on the appeal of Mormon belief and prac-



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## Centering

Remember, the frightened sparrow's  
flapping finally calmed into a pattern  
just before it found the window and  
escaped. I mean, while we squinted  
and pointed in the dairy aisle,  
that trapped mind *did* circle, after all,  
in louvered sunlight. Remember  
the housewife's rag circling a window pane  
one lazy morning, or a painter's thumb,  
smudging his purple sunrise with  
little blushing clouds? It's the return  
I'm talking about. Getting to do it over.  
Black cat circling her cushion,  
antediluvian duo whisking  
the ballroom floor like brooms,  
or lips looping *oh, oh, oh*, mouth  
in love with the sound. Oh, after  
a while it feels inevitable,  
the long blue pull of the mind  
that keeps finding more in less  
until the will bends and circles  
home to stillness that feels final, true.

—Jean Murray Walker

rice. On one level, the Latter-day Saints (LDS), as Mormons prefer to be called, have a strong communal identity forged by persecution, exodus, and isolation. On another level, Mormonism has developed a comprehensive and meaningful response to death through its emphasis on family, its theology of eternal progression to godhood, and through rituals such as proxy baptism.

Helpful as it was, *The Mormons* did not give a full sense of the diversity of Mormon life, the surprisingly broad spectrum that exists between orthodoxy and apostasy. I discovered this in 2004, when I attended the Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City. The Sunstone Education Foundation is a Mormon organization that encourages open discussion of LDS experience, culture, and scholarship. Mormon political and cultural views turn out to be much more expansive than most people imagine. *Sunstone* magazine, for example, argues that one can be a practicing Mormon and a Democrat at the same time, and has published articles critiquing Mormon patri-

archy. *Sunstone* also updates readers with reports on Mormon figures such as Rafe Judkins, the self-described gay Mormon *Survivor* contestant.

The LDS participants I met at the symposium hardly conformed to the stereotype of Mormons as the dutiful, clean-cut religious equivalents of corporate functionaries. The symposium included presentations on Mormon doctrine and spirituality, discussions of attitudes toward gender and sexual identity, and reviews of Mormon literature and poetry. It was through *Sunstone* that I became aware of edgy Mormon literature that ventures into R-rated territory—like the “Mormon Kama Sutra,” an imaginary sex manual referred to in the *Sugar Beet*, which is a kind of Mormon version of the *Onion*.

While Mormon life has an air of placidity, a closer look reveals more tension than one might expect. For example, latent feminist themes in Mormonism have recently begun to surface. Likewise, LDS understandings of sexual orientation have started to shift, and Brigham Young University's honor code of conduct now distinguishes between homosexual orientation and homosexual conduct. Some BYU students opposed to the war in Iraq recently held an “alternative commencement” to protest the awarding of an honorary degree to Vice President Dick Cheney. Who gave the keynote speech at the alternative commencement? Ralph Nader. While most media attention has focused on Mormon fundamentalists, progressive Mormons remain an active group.

The most hotly debated issue in Mormonism today is the historicity of the Book of Mormon. LDS leadership in Salt Lake City recently issued a statement reaffirming the book as literally true “history.” And the lack of archeological evidence? “Spiritual matters are best verified by spiritual means,” the statement explains—which is to say that one sees the historicity of the Book of Mormon through the eyes of faith. Other Mormon theologians, however, see a different relationship between faith and historicity. Dan Wooterspoon, editor of *Sunstone*, wrote an essay titled “The Death of Nephi,” referring to one of the sons of the prophet Lehi. In sharing how the story of some Book of Mormon characters spoke to him during a difficult period in his life, Wooterspoon wrote: “I haven't fully decided if he [Nephi] and the others described in the Book of Mormon ever really lived, ever drew real breath; I simply know that they gave life to me and that at times, they've taken my breath away.” Wooterspoon was broaching the issue of whether the Book of Mormon can be considered a kind of “inspired fiction.” That might seem to be a strange category for a sacred text. Yet many Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, consider parts of the Bible “inspired fiction”—passages that relate events with religious significance and truth even though the events may never have actually occurred.

The notion of inspired fiction reminds us that one doesn't have to accept the entirety of a religion's claims in order to take it seriously. In thinking about how to get beyond the limitations of popular Mormon talk in the classroom, I've been



considering turning to the Book of Mormon and using its stories as a framework for discussing Mormonism as a religion. One story I have in mind is that of the mission of the prophet Alma to the Zoramites (Alma 31). According to the Book of Mormon, the Zoramites were once part of the nation founded by Lehi's faithful son Nephi, but they eventually separated to follow their leader Zoram to the land of Antinonum. There the Zoramites began to "bow down to dumb idols." The Zoramites had also placed a platform called the Rameumptom, or "holy stand," in their synagogues. One by one, Zoramites would ascend the Rameumptom and proclaim their own righteousness, only to go home and forget about God until the next service. In Mormon discourse, then, the Rameumptom is mainly a symbol of arrogance and hypocrisy, but it can also be a symbol of unwillingness to engage in genuine dialogue.

Today, this unwillingness may more deeply afflict those who talk about Mormons than it does Mormons themselves. At the Sunstone Symposium in 2004, after I presented a paper on my experiences teaching Mormonism at Holy Cross, the response was given by a professor from Utah State University, a Mormon who had taught moral theology at Fordham University, a Jesuit institution. He discussed how Mormonism combined aspects of liberal Protestantism with the magisterial elements of Catholicism.

As the conversation developed, many Mormons in the audience lamented that, compared to Catholicism, official LDS

discourse lacks complex discussions of moral issues. A Mormon convert who once lived in a Benedictine community commented that while Mormonism values one's personal relationship with God, the LDS church has not clearly formulated how "the Light of Christ" within a person relates to external religious authority. Many Mormons particularly respect the Catholic Church as an institution that has balanced authority and conscience within its framework of theology and canon law. In the context of acrimonious debates over the church's sexual-abuse scandal, the disciplining of theologians, and the withholding of the Eucharist from prochoice politicians, some Catholics would find these perceptions of Catholicism deeply ironic. But they reflect Mormonism's own painful struggles with authority, most famously illustrated by the case of Sonia Johnson, a fifth-generation Mormon excommunicated in 1979 for supporting the Equal Rights Amendment.

As a religion, Mormonism is still quite young—but it is a religion. As *Sunstone's* Dan Wotherspoon told me, "Someone who views others in good faith would assume that these other people have gone through similar processes in sifting the wheat from the chaff of their religion." In other words, we share more than we might think at first. Talking about Mormonism in "good faith" does not mean accepting all—or any—of Mormonism's teachings. Instead, it means accepting that Mormonism is composed of real people who are best seen up close, not from high atop the Rameumptom. ■

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