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The Scholar as Celebrant

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Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 432 pp., \$29.95.

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Terryl Givens is doing a great deal in *People of Paradox*, winner of the Mormon History Association's 2007 Best Book award. He offers an ambitious interpretation of Mormon beliefs and then sets out to show how the paradoxes that he identifies as the deep structure of Mormon thought can be traced through 180 years of Mormon culture. He builds on the massive outpouring of scholarly research on Mormonism since 1950, but he firmly transcends the narrow confines of the new Mormon history¹ by doing something that it seldom did: He offers up Mormonism as a big story about big ideas.

The new Mormon history, in contrast, was mainly interested in nailing down the details of past events and chronology, its primary intellectual spur being the constant need to assert its professionalism and legitimacy against both traditional Mormon hagiography and anti-Mormon polemics. To the extent that it offered up a narrative of intellectual drama, it was virtually always the much-touted tension between "official" history and "honest" history. Indeed, at times it seems as if the searing end of Arrington's *Camelot* was so traumatic as to have crowded all other historiographic narratives to the margins.² (Think of the reviews of Richard Bushman's biography of Joseph Smith, *Rough Stone Rolling*; how many of them had anything to talk about other than the question of whether a believing Mormon could write a "real" biography of Mormonism's founder?³) In many cases, the result has been a steady march into the chloroform of internecine debates over minutiae that the protagonists try—with increasingly less success—to endow with enduring ideological significance. As Jan Shipps observed recently in the *Journal of American History*, "The books and more especially the articles that made up the new Mormon history sometimes belabored arguments about issues that readers unfamiliar with LDS historiography probably regarded as minor."⁴ For a concrete example of what I am talking about, consider debates over the dating of the restoration of the priesthood⁵ or the nineteenth-century meaning of the term "secret combinations."⁶

Givens manages to transcend the genre of the new Mormon history

by doing two things. First, he engages the substance of Mormon beliefs but does so using language different than that used by Mormons themselves. In contrast, previous scholarly treatments of Mormonism have tended to either ignore Mormon theology or to treat it in a purely descriptive way. Givens, in contrast, sets forth Mormonism as a system of thought worthy of dignity in its own right. For Givens, the Restoration need not be confined to its own patois for the same reason that one can be a Platonist in a language other than Attic Greek: The interest of both conversations exceeds their particular historical context. It is not clear, of course, that Givens is always correct in how he presents Mormonism in the first part of his book. Carlyle-quoting-Romanticist that he is,⁷ Givens has a penchant for “great man” history, inscribing in the minds of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young cultural tensions that may well have exceeded their thoughts, if not their thought.

Givens’s second strategy is to catapult Mormonism into big conversations, both historically and intellectually. Trench warfare over the precise nature of Joseph Smith’s brush with the law over treasure digging in the upper Susquehanna⁸ is replaced with primal dialectics of freedom and authority, certainty and questing, or the need for a God who both transcends the world and connects intimately to it. And so on. Indeed, the conflicts of the new Mormon historians are not presented as a historiography at all, but rather become a single character in a much larger intellectual drama. Although not quite mingling with gods, in Givens’s book Joseph Smith rubs shoulders with Blake, Jefferson, and other intellectual worthies. Likewise Mormon culture, despite the frequent evidence of immaturity that Givens trenchantly discusses, becomes a theater in which fundamental—and unavoidable—paradoxes are played out. The parochialism of youth reveals a depth worthy of attention.

In this work, I think that Givens is also offering us a model of how Latter-day Saints might conduct scholarship on their own tradition. After publishing his monograph *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, Sterling McMurrin, so the story goes, was accosted by Sidney Angelman, a colleague in the University of Utah Philosophy Department, who complained that the book “made the Mormon religion look better than it is.” In response, McMurrin quipped, “I am aware of that. I attempted to make it look as good as I possibly could because the church’s leaders make it look so bad. The church doesn’t do justice to its own theology.”⁹ Givens lacks the smug condescension that often characterized McMurrin’s dis-

cussions of Mormonism, but the story has possible application to Givens's work. Givens is a critic in the technical sense of the word and, occasionally, in the popular sense as well. It is clear that he is annoyed at the cultural gaffes of the Saints and that he recognizes spiritual and aesthetic dangers within the tensions of Mormon theology. But above these concerns, I think that it would be safe to describe Givens as a scholarly celebrant of Mormonism. He makes it look good.

There is depth and critical bite in Givens's work. Still, he labors hard to dispel the myths of utter Mormon conformity, Mormon banality, and—above all else—Mormon boringness. What he sees is not the stasis of either an inspired perfection of triumphant answers or an empty wasteland of anti-intellectualism and mediocrity. Rather his vision of Mormonism is agonistic: a constant struggle of paradoxical ideas locked together with one another in an arena where no one approach ever claims final victory. There is something very Romantic, in my mind, about the sensibility that Givens seeks to capture and place at the heart of his story. It casts Mormonism as a kind of tragic—or, at any rate, interestingly conflicted—hero. Such an approach ultimately refuses to package itself as simple analysis, however elegantly presented. Rather Givens's book itself is an artifact of Mormon culture, one, I think, that seeks to transform the very thing it describes. In the end we have more than a history; we have a roadmap to the tensions where Givens sees the drama of art as possible. It is not simply a description of Mormon aesthetics, but the construction of a Mormon aesthetics. This construction, however, recasts the materials from which it is built in ways that change them subtly, bringing out what Givens sees as their latent virtues. For those predisposed to see Mormonism as little more than an idiosyncratic offshoot of American fundamentalism, Givens's treatment will seem bizarre. For those (inside and outside the Church) willing to risk a more nuanced picture of Mormonism, it offers a powerful vision of its cultural possibilities.

Notes

1. To forestall the inevitable accusations of intellectual ingratitude that always follow any criticism of the new Mormon history, let me say, for the record, that I like the new Mormon history, I think that it represented a quantum leap forward in the quality of Mormon intellectual discussions, and I do not favor the suppression of events uncomfortable for Mormons when writing Mormon history. More original research is always better than less original research.

2. On Arrington and the end of Camelot, see Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

3. See, e.g., Roger D. Launius, "Defending the Prophet," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 314; Walter Kirn, "Latter-day Saint," *New York Times Book Review*, January 15, 2006; Larry McMurtry, "Angel in America," *New York Review of Books*, November 17, 2005, 35-37.

4. Jan Shipps, "Richard Lyman Bushman, the Story of Joseph Smith and Mormonism, and the New Mormon History," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 2 (2007): 498-516; the quotation is on p. 502.

5. See, e.g., D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 17-26.

6. For my own contribution to this sometimes less-than-exciting genre, see Nathan B. Oman, "Secret Combinations: A Legal Analysis," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 49-73.

7. See Terryl Givens, "'Lightning Out of Heaven': Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 1 (2006): 5-21.

8. See, e.g., Gordon A. Madsen, "Joseph Smith's 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting," *BYU Studies* 30 (1990): 91-108; Wesley P. Walters, "Joseph Smith's Bainbridge, N.Y. Court Trials," *Westminster Theological Journal* 36 (1974): 123-55; Marvin S. Hill, "Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties," *BYU Studies* 12 (1972): 223-33.

9. The story is recounted in L. Jackson Newell, "Introduction" to Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000). McMurrin's book was originally published in 1965.