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# [Introduction to] People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture

Terryl Givens
*University of Richmond,* tgivens@richmond.edu

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# PEOPLE OF PARADOX

*A History of Mormon Culture*

TERRYL L. GIVENS

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# INTRODUCTION

> The circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is
> fixed forever in size; it can never be larger or smaller.
> But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a
> contradiction, can extend its four arms forever without
> altering its shape.... It has a paradox in its center.
>
> ~ G. K. Chesterton

> By proving contraries, truth is made manifest.
> ~ Joseph Smith

On August 8, 1844, the restive crowd began assembling in the heat well before 10:00 in the morning. William Marks, president of the Nauvoo Stake, called the meeting to choose a successor to Joseph Smith, who had been murdered in a Carthage jail together with his brother Hyrum six weeks earlier. For ninety minutes, Sidney Rigdon, one-time counselor and confidant of the Prophet, harangued the Saints, urging that he be sustained as the "guardian" of the church. After a break for lunch, Brigham Young addressed the reconvened assembly, expressing his concern that because of their great number, all might not be able to hear. "Heretofore you have had a Prophet as the mouth of the Lord to speak to you," he said, "but he has sealed his testimony with his blood, and now, for the first time, are you called to walk by faith, and not by sight." Then he asked, "Do you, as individuals, at this time, want to choose a Prophet or a guardian to lead you?"

No one raised a hand. "Elder Rigdon claims to be spokesman to the Prophet," he continued:

> Very well, he was; but ... if he wants now to be a spokesman for the Prophet,
> he must go to the other side of the veil, for the Prophet is there.... If 10,000
> men rise up and say they have the Prophet Joseph's shoes, I know they are
> imposters.... [N]o man can put another between the Twelve [Apostles] and
> the Prophet Joseph.[1]

The assembly was persuaded. By the end of the afternoon, there was a virtually unanimous vote to reject any individual's attempt to inherit Joseph's title or status. Three weeks later, the Prophet's brother William would concur that Joseph's role was irreplaceable. He petitioned Brigham to be named Hyrum's successor as patriarch, but said he did not wish to be "prophet in Joseph's place for no man on Earth can fill his place[.] [H]e is our prophet seer revelator Priest & King in time & in Eternity."[2]

So, on August 8, the Quorum of the Twelve, as a body, was sustained "to stand as the head." Brigham Young, as president of the Twelve, would be the chief executive. But it would take three long years, the unprecedented orchestration of a 2,000-mile exodus, and the successful resettlement in Utah of thousands of refugees and convert immigrants before Brigham Young, the American Moses, would presume to take the title that had graced the name of Joseph. Even then, he continued to be known throughout his long tenure as President Young, not "the Prophet Brigham." Now, more than a century and a half later, Mormon custom only reaffirms the truth first evident in that Nauvoo meeting: there could be only one Joseph. When Latter-day Saints refer to "the Prophet" in the past tense, there can be no mistake. It is the Prophet Joseph, matchless in his stature and role within Mormonism, who is the once and forever Mormon prophet.

Joseph's unique place in Mormonism is in this regard rather like George Washington's. There can only be one first Mormon prophet, as there can be only one first American president and father of his people. But in both cases, more is at work than mere chronological primacy. No successor to Joseph even begins to approach the scope of his creative energy as a thinker, a system builder, a revelator. The Book of Mormon he produced is revered as a scripture more correct than the Bible, and it is longer than the Quran or the New Testament. The Doctrine and Covenants (D&C), another compilation of Mormon scripture, has 138 sections. All but 4 were produced by Joseph Smith.[3] The Pearl of Great Price, the final volume of Mormon scripture, is entirely a product of his writings, translations, and revelations. It is for the sheer volume of his scriptural production, the comprehensive scope of his religion-making imagination, and the audacity of his theological innovations that Joseph deserves the title of "authentic religious genius."[4]

As a leader of his people, Brigham Young's thirty-three-year tenure is more than double Joseph's scant fourteen. Young colonized over 300 towns and cities, compared to Joseph's handful; he governed a territory larger than Texas and a church that comprised 130,000 Saints at his death. Young was also a man of profound intellect and imagination. Under his theocratic leadership, Mormon life was more thoroughly pervaded by his temporal and spiritual dictates than

was that of any comparable group of individuals in American history. Joseph Smith laid the foundations, and for the balance of Mormonism's first half-century, Brigham Young shaped the Mormon experience. It is on those twin pillars that the Mormon intellectual and cultural heritage rests.

This book is an exploration of the Mormon cultural identity that Smith and, to a lesser extent, Young founded. What such a study might entail is by no means self-evident. "[N]othing is more indeterminate," wrote the great German philosopher Herder, "than this word [culture]." At the same time, short of identifying culture with all dimensions of human life in a given society, three meanings are commonly invoked by the term: a general habit of mind, the intellectual development of a society, and its general body of arts.[5] I have taken these three emphases, and their interrelationships, as my particular focus: the seminal ideas that constitute a Mormon "habit of mind," their development and elaboration over time, and their manifestations and permutations across a spectrum of artistic media.

Speaking of the development of early Christian cultural identity, Graydon Snyder has written that "it took over a century for the new community of faith to develop a distinctive mode of self-expression."[6] Mormonism has been around for nearly two centuries. While it is still a new religious community compared to the great world faiths and even to Protestant denominations, many factors have conspired to foster its development as a community with a distinctive world view, powerful cultural cohesion, and its own forms of artistic and intellectual expression. A radical theology, emphasizing chosenness and exclusive stewardship over divine truth and authority, a history of persecution and alienation from the American mainstream, together with enormous institutional demands of religious commitment, personal sacrifice, and distinctive religious practices have welded the adherents of Mormonism into a people who so powerfully identify with one another that one writer did not hesitate to call them the only instance in American history of a people who became almost an ethnic community.[7] That striking fact, together with the increasingly real possibility that Mormonism may, indeed, become the first new world faith since Islam, provides ample justification for a study of this nature.

A chronological survey of the varieties of artistic and intellectual expression would miss the point of cultural formation. For some of the most productive stimulants to such expression are the unresolved tensions inherent in a culture—tensions with the dominant society in the context of which a new cultural group emerges, or internal tensions that never manage to find full and satisfactory resolution. Frederick Barnard points to Herder's observation that a people "may have the most sublime virtues in some respect and blemishes in others...and

reveal the most astonishing contradictions and incongruities." Therefore, Bar-
nard writes, "a cultural whole is not necessarily a way of referring to a state of
blissful harmony; it may just as conceivably refer to a field of tension."[8]

A field of tension seems a particularly apt way to characterize Mormon
thought. It may be that all systems of belief rooted in the notion of a God who
dies have, as Chesterton suggests, "a collision and a contradiction" at their heart.[9]
Yet Mormonism, a system in which Joseph Smith collapsed sacred distance to
bring a whole series of opposites into radical juxtaposition, seems especially rife
with paradox—or tensions that only appear to be logical contradictions.

Such dynamic tensions give cultural expression much of its vitality, but are
hardly productive of a cultural tradition that is systematic or linear. For that
reason, I have chosen to organize this study around what I take to be four
especially rich and fertile tensions, or thematic pairings, in Mormon thought,
which have inspired recurrent and sustained engagement on the part of writers,
artists, and thinkers in the Mormon community. Obviously, these four do not
pretend to comprise all the paradoxes one could locate in Mormonism's intel-
lectual or artistic or cultural heritage. And they are hardly manifest in every
instance of Mormon cultural expression. But they provide an effective frame-
work for an exploration of at least a substantial sampling of the several chapters
in the history of Latter-day Saints' efforts to make sense of their place in the
world and to orient themselves to new concepts of the human and the divine.

The first chapter of the book deals with the polarity of authoritarianism and
individualism. It is in the context of those two competing values that Mormon
artists and intellectuals have had to negotiate their place in their culture. One
paradox of Mormon cultural history is its rootedness in a rigidly hierarchical,
authoritarian church—and yet this church was established in the context of two
fanatically individualistic phenomena that converged in antebellum America:
Western Romanticism and Jacksonian democracy. Smith's version of human
freedom was as radical as Rousseau's, even as the model of spiritual authority he
enacted earned Mormonism the name "American popery." Mormonism is, after
all, a religion in which the authority of the one living prophet at the head of the
church is every bit as literal and all-encompassing as that of Moses over the
children of Israel. But it is also a religion in which the priesthood authority is also
given to virtually every active Mormon male, and all members are vouchsafed
the right to personal, literal, dialogic revelation with God. Chapter 1 explores
the impact of those dynamic tensions on the cultural foundations of a Mormon
intellectual and artistic tradition.

The second chapter explores a second fundamental paradox in Joseph Smith's
religion making. The Prophet emphasized in his religious thinking the possi-

bility of epistemological certainty even as he elaborated a theology of audacious scope and a program of eternal learning. Smith made intellectual pursuit a quest of holiness, founding the School of Prophets, establishing a fledgling university, and devoting himself to the study of ancient languages and lore even as he claimed to bypass the learned systems of men with his powers of seership and translation. So it is that Mormons today inherit a tradition rooted relatively recently in concrete artifacts like gold plates verified by eleven witnesses, in accounts of resurrected beings laying physical hands on founding prophets, and in Joseph's testimony of the audible words and visible appearing of Deity itself. And Mormons inhabit a rhetorical world where members give not assertions of fervent belief, but public testimony that they have spiritual knowledge of those events as historical realities. At the same time, such credentials do not attest to personal salvation or blessedness, but only betoken the commencement of an eternal quest for saving knowledge and the burden of an endlessly sought perfection. The mix of intellectual certitude and intellectual insatiability Joseph exuded has left a mixed heritage with which aspiring LDS artists and intellectuals must reckon. While his relentless eclecticism, syncretism, and system building could provoke and inspire, great works of the mind and heart have seldom emerged in the context of the spiritual complacency and sense of plenitude that his theology could also encourage. Chapter 2 assesses the impact of those tensions—searching and certitude—on Mormon understanding of intellectual and artistic endeavor.

The third chapter examines one of the most culturally—and theologically—potent innovations of the Mormon world view, one that appears more as a collapse of polarities than as a tension between them: the disintegration of sacred distance. With God an exalted man, man a God in embryo, the family a prototype for heavenly sociality, and Zion a city with dimensions and blueprints, Joseph rewrote conventional dualisms as thoroughgoing monism. The resulting paradox is manifest in the recurrent invasion of the banal into the realm of the holy and the infusion of the sacred into the realm of the quotidian. The consequent reconceptualization of grace, of humanity's relationship to the divine, and a pervasive suspicion of transcendence and mystery—all follow in turn from the radical paradigm shift instituted by Joseph Smith. Such a reconfigured view of the sacred demands new artistic approaches to the sublime.

Finally, chapter 4 looks at two related tensions in Mormonism: exile and integration, and a gospel viewed as both American and universal. The quest for Zion was for the Saints a search for Eden—but it was always an Eden in exile. The cost of their chosen status appears recurrently in the Mormon psyche as both nostalgia and alienation; and the opposing movement toward integration

into the larger world they had fled was fueled by both a longing for inclusion and an imperative to redeem the world. From its earliest days, Mormon converts embraced a sense of themselves as people of the covenant, peculiar, chosen. Casting all others as "gentiles," and fellow Christians as inheritors of a great apostasy, this rhetoric of difference, together with a history of persecution and geographical remoteness, compounded their isolation into a virtue and a sign of blessedness. But their art and literature reveal a recurrent unease with such difference. Isolation is often felt as a burden of exclusion and is frequently transformed into a quest for connections and universals. Mormons insist on the need for a gospel restoration, but then feel the sting of being excluded from the fold of Christendom they have just dismissed as irredeemably apostate. Or, in a parallel way, Mormons have long identified their faith with America's providential role in history. Mormon origins, the Book of Mormon as artifact and as history, church headquarters, the garden of Eden, and the New Jerusalem—all are identified with a specifically American locale. But in an age of internationalization and global growth, Mormons are necessarily rethinking the limitations and obstacles created by a presentation of the church as an American institution and raising the possibility of a church surreptitiously engrafted with at least some expendable and merely accidental local baggage. In their thoughtful and provocative exploration of these distinctions, Mormon artists and intellectuals may be an effective prod in facilitating the transition of Mormonism into a truly international faith.

The chapters that follow are organized by genre, but also grouped into two major chronological epochs. I make here the usual caveats about periodization: all demarcations are artificial, and others could well be argued for. I have chosen to consider the period from the founding until roughly 1890 as one epoch, because in that year Wilford Woodruff called for the end of polygamy—the practice which served as the most publicly recognizable sign of Mormon difference. Three other contemporaneous developments symbolically if not actually reversed the trend of Mormon cultural self-sufficiency and alienation from the larger society: the fading of the call to Mormons to gather into one geographically bounded cultural community; Orson Whitney's call for the self-conscious production of a Mormon literature; and the sending of art missionaries from the remote Utah desert to the academies of Paris.

The second era I trace from 1890 until the present. This era of LDS history has been almost entirely dominated by first a Utah, and then an American, orientation and has only in recent years seen the beginnings of an international church. The period has seen important changes in Mormon self-conceiving before the world. Mormon intellectual life has been transformed as the church

has addressed the challenges of racial controversies, feminism, and the politics of dissent. Adding to the ferment, Mormon historians began to integrate their studies into secular models, and vice versa, resulting in dramatic tensions between conventional and revisionist modes of understanding the Mormon past and, by extension, Mormon identity itself. Also, under LDS president Spencer W. Kimball's administration, leaders, painters, and writers renewed the emphasis on the project of a Mormon artistic tradition. Equally significant for Mormon culture, Kimball's ambitious vision for an invigorated missionary program and a worldwide church have instigated a still-continuing redefinition of Mormonism as an international, rather than American, institution.

Today, only 14 percent of Mormons live in Utah, and while it is true that Mormonism has at the beginning of the twenty-first century achieved a balance of members that is weighted more heavily with non-Americans than Americans, the fact remains that for the first century and more of its history, Mormon culture was largely a Utah construction. That, and the impossibility of giving fair representation to the forms which the Mormon faith is acquiring in over 100 countries where it is currently practiced, have led me to focus on Mormonism as the essentially American religion it was until the current generation. I express the sincere hope that scholars better qualified will produce examinations of Mormon culture in the truly international complexion being ushered in by the new millennium.