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How Mormons Became American

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By Terryl Givens | November 14, 2012

(Getty/Frank Scherschel)

Acentury ago, it was once a simple matter to assume a norm for American culture and situate the Mormon well outside it. Polygamy was likened to slavery in the nineteenth century (as the first Republican Party platform did in 1856). Brigham Young was compared to an Asian despot. Mormon women were victims in need of mythic frontier heroes like Captain Plum and Buffalo Bill to save them. Even Joseph Smith's martyrdom could be seen as the penalty for his violation of the right to a free press. Mormonism made available to the playwrights of the Great American Saga the heroes and antiheroes, the virtues and vices, of that dramatic self-creation.

But today, in fiction, in film, on stage and even in the academy, the Mormon has not only been assimilated into American society, but has *become* American society—"American to the core," as Harold Bloom writes in *The American Religion*. "It is weirdly true," he continues, "in 1991, that the Mormons are as mainstream as you are, whoever you are." To borrow from novelist Cleo Jones, author of *Sister Wives*, a melodrama of pioneer (and polygamous) nineteenth-century Utah, the LDS Church's flagship education institution, Brigham Young University, has become "the third largest supplier of army officers. Mormons were Howard Hughes's right-hand men. And so on." The stereotypical Mormon is successful, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, suburban, in a traditional family with one working parent and a stay-at-home mother and five children. If Tom Clancy wants a shorthand way of creating a young, clean-cut, patriotic guy-next-door, he may simply make him LDS, like *Hunt for Red October*'s Randall Tait. (The fact that the Russians consider him "a religious fanatic" is presumably to his credit.) Similarly, Clancy's hero in *Clear and Present Danger* says that Mormons are "honest and hardworking, and

fiercely loyal to their country, because they believed in what America stood for."

Once the target of a federal expeditionary force under President Buchanan, charged with rebellion and sedition, the Mormons are now seen as the embodiment of public-spiritedness and "traditional values." In film, the reversal is captured perfectly by the Coen brothers in their quirky 1987 comedy *Raising Arizona*. The movie ends with Nicolas Cage's vivid dream of domestic bliss in a utopian place "where all parents are strong and wise and capable and all children are happy and beloved." It has all the earmarks of heaven. But then again, he concludes, "maybe it was Utah."

The meaning of this new role, however, is especially dubious in today's intellectual and political climate (not to mention in a world that now has more Mormons in foreign countries than in America). It is now because Mormons occupy what used to be the center that they fall into contempt. The embrace of ultraconservative values, not their flagrant rejection, is now construed as the source of Mormon perfidy. For since Vietnam at least, employment in covert activities can suggest criminality as readily as it can be read by others as loyalty (as the case of Oliver North demonstrated). The nuclear family seems a distant relic, as Murphy Brown and the Gilmore Girls replace Ozzie and Harriet and the Waltons. Then *Modern Family*, with its gay white adoptive parents of an Asian baby and a cross-cultural second marriage, celebrates the definitive end of hegemonic family models. Multiculturalism rather than melting pot is now the ruling paradigm. The repercussions of these developments for the Mormons were suggested as early as a 1971 *Ramparts* article by Frances Lang that faulted the church for providing the FBI and CIA with a steady supply of reliably conservative defenders of capitalist interests. In his novel *The Russia House*, John le Carré captures the irony, the simultaneous gain and loss, of Mormonism's new place in American society. Two agents sent by the CIA to assist in a British operation are described as faceless twins, "Americans, so slight, so trim, so characterless," whose "Mormon cleanliness I found slightly revolting."

More recently, *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner's Pulitzer and Tony award-winning "gay phantasia," reprises nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism, but from the opposite end of the political spectrum. The culprit in this case is not sexual deviance but rather its opposite: sanctimonious sexual piety. And its human icon is one "Joe Pitt, Utah Mormon"—and closet homosexual. And as a Mormon, his wife, Harper Pitt, doesn't drink tea or coffee but is a Valium addict, reinforcing Kushner's personal vision of Mormonism as not just "horrible," but "disingenuous." In the play, Mormonism's function as the embodiment of repressive conservatism is reinforced by scenes set in the Mormon Visitors Center, repeated references to Harper's religious affiliation, and depiction of the eponymous Angel as a parodic version of Mormonism's Angel Moroni. Harper's decision at play's end to abandon Mormonism for the "heaven" of San Francisco suggests a twofold hope, for America's cultural future and Mormonism's oppressed victims. Cristine Hutchison-Jones has noted that in spite of its Mormon angels, characters, setting, and history, of almost four hundred reviews of this celebrated play, the vast majority fail to mention the religious component. This may be a reflection of the unsettling moral dissonance at the play's core: religion is mercilessly caricatured to promote "acceptance, not just tolerance, [as] the only legitimate principle guiding human behavior."

Mormonism had seemingly effaced all traces of otherness, only to find the model of "Americanism" it appears to have embraced fast becoming the new antihero of the Great American Saga. We have reached a point in contemporary culture where the politics of the periphery have devalued the center. Indeed, in the politics of marginalization and collective guilt as they operate today, status as an oppressed group is not without its political advantages. The furious storm of opposition to E. D. Hirsch's 1988 "Cultural Literacy" project, in which he attempted to establish a baseline for a common national culture, like the desperation and rejection of Pat Buchanan's 1992 Republican convention speech in which a beleaguered, fading majority sought to consolidate its stewardship of cultural values, suggests that the word "mainstream" had by the century's turn become almost as obsolete as it was already becoming opprobrious, though the culture wars continue unabated into the new millennium.

In this new climate where the center seems to be fading and the margins are imbued with new vitality and worth, difference acquires new value. Yet toleration can only be demonstrated in the face of acutely felt difference: "the Jew, the Mahometan, the Pagan, and even … the *Atheist*, " as the author John Russell described America's religious undesirables more than a century ago. In order to lay claim to

such tolerance, in other words, one must first define the Other as sufficiently different or threatening to make tolerance necessary. The precondition for one's claim to this American virtue is therefore the identification of an unorthodoxy situated outside it. Therefore, it is necessary to exaggerate difference, to demonize the Other, and to the same degree valorize one's tolerance as generous enough to embrace even such difference. This is the root of the tension that characterizes nineteenth-century literature of the hostile imagination that does not entirely succumb to the paranoid style, caught between xenophobia and the need for self-presentation as a tolerant, law-respecting American.

As diversity becomes more valued than conformity, the ideological investment in exaggerating difference becomes even more important than it was for Russell. This shifting paradigm is clearly illustrated in the case of a *Picket Fences* television episode in which Mormonism featured prominently. A young girl is observed engaging in an apparently incestuous liaison with her father. The case is prosecuted over the girl's objections, and in a startling courtroom revelation we learn that what appeared to be incest is actually clandestine polygamy. Sexual aberration, of course, is still the issue. As one horror is substituted for another, the dramatic interest is heightened by the fictive transgression of not one but two societal taboos. With shock and repugnance at an appropriately high level, the ensuing courtroom scene plumbs the complexities of this conflict of religious conscience and law. There appears to be no victim; any constraints on loving, sexual relationships are made to appear outdated and hypocritical; and the viewer is challenged to reconsider this sympathetically portrayed "difference."

Two Mormon-affiliated stations, in Utah and Washington State, pulled the series in protest, even though the writers had incorporated a disclaimer that made clear the Mormon church no longer officially sanctions polygamy. So the piece could not be accused of misrepresenting the church, and the Mormons were in fact fairly likable characters; what was the problem? The point, of course, is not merely that juxtaposing Mormonism and polygamy has a power of association that no disclaimer can really temper. Neither is the show's thematizing of perverse deviance exactly subtle. Concurrently running subplots include a case of psychic twins who enjoy vicarious orgasms and a religious cult that engages in the theft and ritual sacrifice of domestic animals. More seriously, the network, like Russell, was clearly engaged in the use of deviance as a mirror in which the viewer's tolerance and generosity of spirit may be reflected—or at least interrogated. The outrageousness of the transgression becomes the measure of the liberalism of spirit that can accommodate it. Difference has not been embraced—it has been prostituted to the parading of pluralism.

The same logic was again at work in the series *Big Love*, demonstrating that prurience sells as well in the twenty-first as in the nineteenth century, even if it is now marketed under the banner of intriguing diversity rather than moral indignation. The blockbuster drama of a modern family with a twist—three wives for one husband—ran for five years (2006–2011). As with the *Picket Fences* episode, a good deal of disingenuousness was in evidence. HBO attached a disclaimer, acknowledging that the Mormon church had banned polygamy in the nineteenth century. But by situating the series in Salt Lake City, Mormonism's Vatican City, making the lead character and polygamist a Utah state senator, and depicting one of the sons as sexually attracted to his plural mother, HBO successfully equates polygamy with both modern Mormonism and sexual perversity. Plenty of murder, statutory rape, mental illness, and psychopathology helps round out the picture of this portrait of Mormon—but not really Mormon—culture. Beneath the trendy veil of appreciative diversity and difference lurk the familiar nineteenth-century slurs.

An appeal to diversity and tolerance generally requires an object of condescension if not contempt, and will create one where it does not find one. Consider a late twentieth-century study titled *Foundations of Religious Tolerance*. In the context of urging forbearance toward beliefs—and believers—we find especially repugnant, the author draws the following comparison: "We can trust Aristotle when he tells us that he loves truth and wisdom and is prepared to devote his life to them. But what about these young Mormons … who come proselytizing? We should be patient and rational in dealing with these … self-professed defender[s] of truth." In other words, Mormons again serve, both rhetorically and ideologically, to affirm a value system predicated upon one's own ability to indulge even the most distasteful manifestations of difference.

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University of Richmond. This piece was adapted from his book, The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy *(Oxford), which will be re-published in an updated form in January.*
