

## **review essays**

### **cult books**

### **recent scholarship on**

### **new religions**

A KINGDOM TRANSFORMED: Themes in the Development of Mormonism. By Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982. \$19.95. JOSEPH SMITH AND THE BEGINNINGS OF MORMONISM. By Richard L. Bushman. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984. \$17.95. MORMONISM: The Story of a New Religious Tradition. By Jan Shipps. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985. \$14.50. STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF MORMON. By B. H. Roberts; edited by Brigham D. Madsen. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985. \$21.95. A NEW WORLD JERUSALEM: The Swedenborgian Experience in Community Construction. By Mary Ann Meyers. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983. \$29.95. THE UNITARIANS AND THE UNIVERSALISTS. By David Robinson. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985. \$35.00. AMANA: From Pietist Sect to American Community. By Diane L. Barthel. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. \$19.95. AFRO-AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY: A Documentary Witness. Edited by Milton C. Sernett. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1985. \$45.00 cloth, \$16.50 paper. THE SHAKER SPIRITUAL NARRATIVE. By Diane Sasson. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983. \$19.95. LETTERS FROM A YOUNG SHAKER: William S. Byrd at Pleasant Hill. Edited by Stephen J. Stein. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985. \$15.00. THUNDER AND TRUMPETS: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850. By David L. Rowe. Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985. \$29.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper. RELIGION, SOCIETY, AND UTOPIA IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA. By Ira L. Mandelker. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984. \$22.00. THE CULT EXPERIENCE. By Andrew J. Pavlos. Westport, Connecticut: Green-

wood Press, 1982. \$27.50. RELIGIOUS OUTSIDERS AND THE MAKING OF AMERICANS. By R. Laurence Moore. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. \$24.95. TO SECURE THE BLESSINGS OF LIBERTY: American Constitutional Law and the New Religious Movements. By William C. Shepherd. New York and Chico, California: Crossroad and Scholars Press, 1985. \$9.95. THE ANTI-CULT MOVEMENT IN AMERICA: A Bibliography and Historical Survey. By Anson D. Shupe, Jr., David G. Bromley and Donna L. Oliver. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984. \$19.95.

A few years ago the general-audience press was full of breathless information on Moonies, Hare Krishnas, Children of God and many of their spiritual siblings in other religious movements. That wave of hysteria has abated, although not vanished, probably because the current generation of new and seemingly exotic religious movements arrived long enough ago that revelations about them can no longer feed society's insatiable appetite for novelty.

Yet religious movements and literature about them are very much with us. It is important for readers to be aware that scholarship on new religions is flourishing and that the general thrust of the scholarly books is decidedly unlike that of the popular press. Here the hysteria of the popular press gives way to dispassionate information; the scholars who have done quiet dissections of various movements by and large tend to be quenching the anticult fires.

The books reviewed here do many different things: some provide historical perspectives on dissenting religions, others focus on social theory, and the remainder suggest directions for further scholarship. With one duly noted exception, however, they provide solid data about religious movements of the past and present. And solid information undermines the hysterical perspective; what we see is not so much a group of juggernauts masterfully piloted by brilliantly cunning maniacs, but rather mundane organizations run by human beings with all the failings and strengths the human condition is heir to.

The historical perspective that several of these books offer is especially useful. It is important to remember that the late twentieth century is not the only time in which "cults" have been despised and attacked, but rather that the groups under fire are merely different ones than were around a century or so ago. Groups in earlier days which were attacked every bit as vehemently—in many cases, more so—as today's marginal movements have largely either disappeared (the Shakers and Oneidans), become utterly respectable diners at the American table (the Mormons and Swedenborgians) or have become accepted as enduring, relatively harmless oddities (the Adventists and Amanans).

These sixteen books represent a very modest sample of recent scholarship on new religions. Given their enormous diversity in topic and approaches, they are best treated separately except for four books on the granddaddy of American dissenting religions, Mormonism.

No movement's history has been examined as thoroughly as that of the Mormons. The reason is that Mormonism now numbers several millions of adherents, and they have produced a plethora of historians. Mormonism is by its nature quite concerned with its own history; as Bushman reminds us, "The core of Mormon belief was a conviction about events. . . . Mormonism was history, not philosophy" (188). But leaving Mormon history in the hands of Mormon historians, for the most part, has not been entirely satisfactory. The Mormonism that demands real, literal belief in specific events related to its founding has no room for liberalism. If you doubt the literal veracity of things at the core, you're really not a Mormon any more: witness that Fawn Brodie, who wrote a critical but

important and honest biography of founder Joseph Smith, Jr., was excommunicated. In many cases acceptable historical accounts can emerge under such circumstances, but certain topics, particularly those involving the rise and early years of Joseph Smith and Mormonism, become terribly problematic. Two of these books, including, curiously, one written by a nominal nonmormon, suffer from this problem.

The Shepherds' book, because of its subject matter, is free of such trouble. Although the first chapters do provide an overview of Mormon history, the real meat, the original contribution, is in the later chapters, which provide a content analysis of major speeches by Mormon leaders at the annual general conferences of their church from the first in 1830 through 1980. Given Mormon belief in contemporary revelation through prophetic leaders, it is sensible to assume, as the authors have, that the rhetoric of the leadership is one important way to follow the development of Mormon thought. Among the themes discussed are human nature, human destiny, church order, plural marriage, the family, authority and millennialism; the authors show how official rhetoric changed with time, moving from idealism and doctrinal purity toward naturalism and the development of group commitment as the movement matured and accommodated itself to American society. The material will be quite useful to serious students of Mormon history; casual readers will profit more from other books.

Bushman, let us say quickly, has made an exceedingly important contribution to Mormon history here. This major historian's latest work is a meticulously researched narrative of Mormon history in its earliest days—up until the nascent movement left the upstate New York locale of its founding and moved to Ohio in 1831. The story begins with tales of the families of the parents of founder Joseph Smith, Jr., and follows the family from Vermont to Palmyra, New York. Subsequent chapters describe life at Palmyra, the beginnings of Smith's alleged revelations, the process by which he claimed to receive the hieroglyphically-engraved golden plates containing new scripture, the process of "translating" the plates through the use of magical devices such as seer-stones, the content of the resulting Book of Mormon, the founding of what was originally called the Church of Christ in 1830 and conversions and other important events in the first year of the life of the new organization. Bushman's history is highly readable—one can almost hear the hoofbeats and smell the manure when the characters travel—and thoroughly grounded in original documents.

Despite the impressiveness of his research and organization, however, his book has the same problem of orientation, of tone, of inflection that other in-house Mormon historical works have. Historically there is a great deal of dispute about Joseph Smith, Jr: was he a prophet, was he a fraud or perhaps simply mad? There is more than a little evidence, at least circumstantially, for a judgment of fraud; although Bushman acknowledges the more important failings that critics have pointed out in the Mormon account of things, the hero of the story nonetheless comes through as a true prophet. Contrary evidence manages to slip away before its full value is plumbed. For example, the story of a major disconfirming event, the loss of the still-fragmentary manuscript of the Book of Mormon while it was in the custody of Martin Harris, is related; but whereas most nonmormon scholars see Smith's unwillingness (or inability) to retranslate the lost portion of the story as evidence that the translation was a sham (surely God could dictate the same words again, but if the book were only a human composition, Joseph Smith very likely would not be able to reproduce over 100 pages of manuscript verbatim, and thus would be exposed as a fraud should the original version resurface), Bushman turns

things around and makes the situation simply a lesson in the perils of disobedience of God, a minor eddy in the process of “mighty forces pouring out of heaven into the earth” (94).

Bushman has provided a work of Mormon orthodoxy: Joseph Smith was a prophet, and the institution he founded thus the true church. If the reader can cope with Bushman’s framework of faith, this book will prove immensely valuable for the critical period it covers.

Shippo has provided us with a book with a special unique appeal: it is one of the few comprehensive histories of the first century of Mormonism by a nonmormon scholar free of hostility toward America’s biggest dissenting religion. Shippo’s openness, however, is as much bane as boon. She seems so eager to be fair to the Mormons, especially in those critical and highly controversial opening decades, that she seems more concerned with showing the plausibility of the Mormon view of things than with weighing all the evidence, including the discrediting data. Shippo’s scholarship is extensive and sound, but one can’t escape the feeling that through her years of living in Utah and, more recently, her presidency of the Mormon History Association, she has become so closely identified with the object of her research that she, like her Mormon colleagues, has lost her independent stance.

At its best *Mormonism* is quite well done, as in Chapter 6, where there is an illuminating discussion of the Mormon version of the ancient quest for living simultaneously in the spiritual and temporal worlds. An appended eighteen-page chronology of nineteenth-century Mormonism will be very helpful to scholars.

Fawn Brodie’s biography, published in 1945, placed Smith in an earthly nineteenth-century setting rather than a divine, timeless one, and since then nonmormon historians have tended to analyze Smith and his movements as products of their social context. The works of Shippo and Bushman may signal a change of direction for Mormon history, pushing, as they do, for Mormon distinctiveness. What we now need is a synthesis, the balanced and fair history of the Mormons which has yet to be written.

The Roberts book rates only a brief notice, since we don’t usually review collections of essays. Roberts was the most prominent Mormon historian of the early twentieth century; this volume contains several of his manuscripts and previously unpublished letters. They are mainly vigorous defenses of the alleged truth of the Book of Mormon against the claims of skeptics. Roberts gets an E for effort and an O for orthodoxy; he is more dogmatic and less persuasive than Bushman or Shippo.

The Mormons are not alone among dissenting religions in having achieved widespread cultural acceptance. The Church of the New Jerusalem shares with Christian Science the distinction of being a sharply sectarian movement, rooted in Christianity, which has appealed to the upper middle class. The Swedenborgians, however, are by comparison very few in number; thus they have been little noticed by scholars or the American public. Meyers’ monograph provides a nice, accessible introduction to one of the few dissenting Christian groups believing in “realized eschatology”—that the Second Coming of Christ has already occurred and that a selected few are now living in a world in which the Last Judgment has already taken place.

Nearly a third of the American Swedenborgians live in a community they built shortly before the turn of the century, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. Meyers’ book focuses on that community. The content is standard: there are chapters on beliefs, history, organization, daily life, contemporary

challenges and the like. Meyers concludes that despite schism and more interaction with the outside world than most communities experience, the established sect of Swedenborgianism is alive and well, trying to maintain the distinctive ideas and commitments essential to the faith while remaining flexible and modern on nonessentials. The works of founder Emanuel Swedenborg may be difficult, but this book is not.

Unitarianism and Universalism represent a different kind of religious dissent, one which never was socially marginal, and one which isn't populated by fervent true believers. David Robinson's first volume in a new Greenwood series ("Denominations in America") will stand for some time as a standard history of a movement always small in numbers but large in intellectual influence. Robinson's history is comprehensive and is organized in conventional chronological fashion, from proto-Unitarianism in the first half of the eighteenth century to contemporary ideas and issues. The research is solid and extensive in both primary and secondary sources.

Two special features enhance the book's usefulness as a standard reference. Robinson's first chapter is a short (eight pages) overview of Unitarian history, a quick summary useful to scholars unfamiliar with the territory or the casual reader who would like to scan the subject matter before choosing parts of it to peruse in depth. Then, following the main text, we are given a lengthy (nearly as long as the main text) biographical dictionary of Unitarianism and Universalism, including sketches averaging a page or so in length as well as bibliographies of works by and about each biographee. In short, this will serve as a valuable reference work.

Some sectarian religious groups have overcome hostility from outsiders but have never spread into the larger culture; such is the Amana Society, which still exists only in Iowa County, Iowa. Diane Barthel, though a sociologist, has provided us with a blessedly jargon-free, readable survey of this movement. The emphasis is mainly historical, with a lengthy look at the shift that occurred in 1932 when the community, under economic pressure, dissolved its totally communal structure and became a corporation. Barthel, whose mother grew up in Amana, is sympathetic but honest in her work. She sees Amana as an "escape hatch," a frontier for those dissatisfied with society, and as a myth, or rather two interwoven myths: an agrarian utopia and a citadel of new technology.

This book doesn't plow a lot of new ground, except by way of offering some new analysis and synthesis, and interesting stories from Barthel's fieldwork; those who have studied Amana in moderate or greater depth will find little new here. But the author has been thorough in covering the material, and her book will stand as a standard monograph on Amana until the expected *magnum opus* of Jonathan Andelson appears in a couple of years.

New religions are not all rural or communal, of course; the thriving black sectarian movements are, in the majority of cases, neither. Milton Sernett has provided an interesting entree into that world. His book is a collection of fifty-one mainly primary documents on black American religion, beginning with African roots and running through slavery, the rise of black churches, emancipation, urbanization and the civil rights movement and its aftermath. Of special interest to students of new religious movements are the five selections on black sects and cults: four are original works by Marcus Garvey, Rabbi Matthew (of the Black Jews of Harlem), Father Divine and Wallace Muhammad (the current leader of the Black Muslims); the fifth is a perceptive essay on the black dissenting movements written in the 1930s by black church historian Miles Mark Fischer, who argues that the cults were a much more important part of the black

community, especially as sources of ideology and of social services, than other observers would then admit. The anthologized selections are supplemented by brief bibliographies of the movements covered.

No survey of sectarian American religion would dare omit the Shakers, America's most important communal movement. The Shakers documented their history more extensively than any other dissenting group, before or since, has ever done; so extensive are the depositions that much of the material has lain uncatalogued for the better part of a century. Thus scholars of this celibate movement which believed it was living in the early days of the millennium will have plenty of work in the future. Diane Sasson's contribution to the project is useful: roughly half provides a brief history of the Shakers and a well-informed discussion of the genre of Shaker testimony and spiritual autobiography; the other half is an exposition of specific narratives. The first portion provides a lucid explanation of the Shaker use of symbol, metaphor and vision, focusing most heavily on the visionary experience—often depicted as supremely joyful, but ineffable—and its transformational impact on its recipient; Sasson here also traces the development of narrative-writing among the believers. The second section of the book reproduces only fragments of the actual narratives; the larger part of it summarizes and analyzes the narratives, and more useful information is thus provided to the reader than would be the case with what one would expect here, lengthy excerpts from the primary sources. Sasson finds that the narratives demonstrate the Shakers believed that the will of God could be discerned through individual experiences as well as through history and scripture, and helped to undergird such distinctive Shaker theological tenets as the dual (masculine and feminine) Godhead and the spiritual necessity of celibacy. An important book for Shaker history, but not one which the general reader would likely find compelling.

A second Shaker volume, Stein's edition of William S. Byrd's writings, crossed our path recently. Byrd, a member of the prestigious family of Virginia by that name, was one of the most celebrated converts to Shakerism. Most of these letters were written to his father between young Byrd's arrival at the Pleasant Hill (Kentucky) Shaker village in 1826 and his father's death two years later. Byrd's earnest entreaties to a skeptical father (parents never *did* like for their kids to join cults) provide insights on daily life and conflict within Shakerism, and help the modern reader understand something of the appeal the movement had to seekers, especially the sense of putting born-again faith to work in everyday life. Several other related documents are included in the volume, along with an introduction and annotations by Stein.

The Millerites, whose heyday was a century and a half ago, are still with us as Seventh-Day Adventists. Accounts of their history in its early stages under William Miller have most often focused on its sensational aspects—on believers who allegedly gave away their possessions, refused to plant crops and put on white robes to await the imminent arrival of Christ in the Second Coming. Rowe wisely relegates such phenomena—which in any event were originally recounted by opponents of Adventism, and thus are hard to delineate clearly—to a minor position in his book. Instead he provides us with a nice piece of social history—a biography of Miller and a comprehensive history of the movement, from its beginnings in 1831 through the aftermath of the failure of the event to occur on either of its predicted dates in 1844.

Rowe has provided much more description than analysis here, and the book will thus provide solid support for other scholars interested in religious enthusiasm in the nineteenth century. Most importantly he has departed from the tradition of

ridiculing the Millerites, instead explaining the social and intellectual forces which powered their movement. Rowe's Millerites are not lunatics, nor are they pawns on William Miller's chessboard; their behavior, he argues, can be attributed at least in part to things like epidemics of disease and the collision of enlightenment Deism with frontier revivalism.

Ira Mandelker's book stands in a long line of works based on Max Weber's analysis of the tension between religion and "the world," i.e., secular life and values. He argues that utopian communal social experiments represent an attempt to transcend that tension by merging religious and worldly values within the community. But, he says, the tension never disappears, partly because the outside world is always there to present the utopia with conflict.

The case study here is the Oneida Community, the perfectionists who practiced "complex marriage" in New York state. Mandelker uses over half his space laying the groundwork of nineteenth century social history (discussing industrialization, urbanization, revivalism, reformism and the conflict between religion and science, among other things), then introduces the Oneida Community and explains the ways in which it tried to achieve an unconflicted existence—and in which it failed. There is little new information on Oneida here, but on the whole Mandelker has written a good book on the sociology of religion and religious movements; the work is marred by a wooden literary style, occasional lapses in usage and a few inexplicable errors (such as the consistent addition of an "s" to the last name of Robert Dale Owen).

So far we have looked at books dealing with specific movements; Andrew Pavlos has provided a broader view of contemporary new religions. However, his book has the dubious distinction of being, arguably, the worst single volume, apart from the hysterical popular pulp books, yet to appear on the phenomenon of "cults." Why it was published by such a respectable scholarly house as Greenwood is indeed a mystery. The table of contents looks quite sensible, listing chapters on conversion to "cults," leadership styles and so forth, but things take a nosedive shortly thereafter. Pavlos, despite a hefty bibliography, doesn't seem to be very familiar with the extensive literature available on religious movements, nor does he seem to have had much actual contact with contemporary new religions. Thus there are errors of fact aplenty. He tells us, for example, that there are, "no doubt," 10,000 to 30,000 Moonies in America (94); he doesn't seem to realize that a rigorous analysis of Unification Church membership was conducted several years ago by David Bromley and Anson Shupe (and published in book form well before Pavlos' book emerged), and they concluded that there are perhaps 2,500 to 3,000 Moonies in the U.S. Such basic flaws are frequent; even the glossary, which should be a useful tool in the jargon-laden cultic world, has many errors. The book is loaded with simplistic generalizations about religious movements and their members and has little sense of the diversity of the cultic world. On top of all that, the book is indifferently edited and difficult to read. Definitely the work on the subject to avoid. Don't confuse it, incidentally, with the useful book by J. Gordon Melton and Robert L. Moore which bears the same title.

Most of the books discussed thus far make the case, explicitly or implicitly, for sectarian distinctiveness. What is interesting about the new religious movements is their unusual demeanor, their strange theologies and ritual practices. Moore provides a closely reasoned argument against all that. Our parameters for the religious mainstream, he argues, have been too narrow. These dissenters who have long been dismissed as minor, useless and exotic are actually full-fledged, normal Americans. Why then are they outsiders? In large part because their success has

depended on such a perception; internally perceived distinctiveness helps solidify the group, and externally it makes a movement more visible against the gray backdrop of mainstream religion. Actually, however, Moore maintains that the would-be outsiders have embodied and advocated some of the most basic American goals and values—things such as equality, honesty, decency, fairness, humaneness and industry. Were Mormons persecuted because they were different? No: “Mormons aroused opposition precisely because they were so profoundly a part of the American scene” (preface). Moore looks at outsidership among the Catholics, Jews, Christian Scientists, Premillennialists, Fundamentalists and Blacks, as well, and finds that “religious groups that have founded their identities on a strong sense of being outsiders have been an indisputably dynamic force in American religious history” (21).

Deprogramming, the attempt to force members of new religious movements to deconvert, has become contemporary society’s most prominently aggressive weapon in its battle against the perceived threat of the “cults.” But the legality of that process has always seemed dubious: adults are presumed free to make their own decisions about religious belief and association, and interference with constitutional rights is unacceptable. William Shepherd in this posthumous work provides a review of court cases involving the application of religious freedom to minority faiths, from the Mormon polygamists to today’s true believers. He certainly has his opinions on the issues involved; at one point he argues that the failure of the courts to punish those who engage in kidnapping and deprogramming new religionists needs to be addressed and that “a few sentences to life imprisonment under kidnapping statutes would quickly quash the voluntary counterindoctrination business.” However, the greater value of this important book lies in its wealth of legal research. The history of court action over the past century is clearly recounted and documented; future scholars of constitutional religious liberty will find this work an important resource.

Finally, since we have given the new religionists all these pages, it’s only fair to mention that some people are working the other side of the street. Shupe and Bromley (Oliver is a new addition to their team) have been at the forefront of sociological research into new religious movements for several years, having written the definitive study of the Unification Church as well as a number of well-received theoretical and analytical pieces. In the course of their research they kept bumping into parents of so-called cultists and other individuals who, it became apparent, were as dogged and slippery and ideologically committed in their anti-cult work as their enemies, the cultists, were in theirs. So a study of “The New Vigilantes” became a Shupe/Bromley work in itself. Now they have shared their extensive bibliographic compilations in this volume in Garland’s series on “Sects and Cults in America: Bibliographical Guides.” The seven chapters in the present book provide a topical description of the anti-cult movement (a chapter on the history of the movement, one on family-based associations and deprogrammers, one on cults and the mainline religions and the like) and exactly 1001 specific bibliographic entries. For those studying the cultural clash between new and old religions, this little volume will prove indispensable.

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