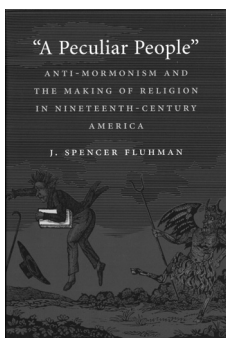
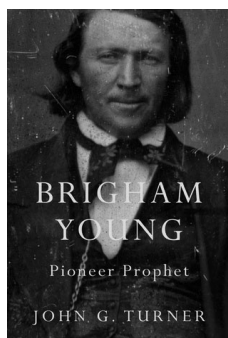


Review Essay

“A Hall of Mirrors”: Two Recent Works in Mormon Studies

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BRIGHAM YOUNG: Pioneer Prophet. By John G. Turner. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2012.

“A PECULIAR PEOPLE”: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America. By J. Spencer Fluhman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2012.

In his preface to *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*, John Turner argues that “the field of Mormon history is a hall of mirrors, full of distorted and incomplete reflections of nearly any event” (viii). Turner’s metaphor points to the mass of textual evidence and competing claims found in the short history of the Latter-day Saints (LDS). As do most historians, Mormon Studies scholars must sift through contradictory accounts that change over time; added to that, the documents are often chock-full of angels, golden tablets, and divine revelations. And Mormon Studies scholars are not often left wanting for documentation. After all, it was on April 6, 1830, at the first meeting that organized the new church, that Joseph

Smith, Jr., presented a revelation that instructed church members that “[t]here shall be a record kept among you” (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1). Contributing to the hall-of-mirrors effect is the fact that scholars of Mormonism have not always had access to the documents that they need to help clarify the story, documents that are housed in the church’s archives. New scholarship in the field of Mormon Studies has to confront the hall of mirrors with a careful historical eye and a strong theoretical approach, as it attempts to clarify the workings of this relatively new religious movement.

Turner’s *Brigham Young* and J. Spencer Fluhman’s *“A Peculiar People”*: *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* represent this new scholarship in the field of Mormon Studies. In researching their books, the authors enjoyed greater access to documentation than scholars in the past. As part of the growing field of Mormon Studies, these two books “avoid the parochialism and polemicism that has been endemic to Mormon history” (Turner, viii). Instead, they seek to contextualize Mormonism within the broader narratives of American history in order to better understand both histories. Using different approaches, both texts explore the dialectic of identity formation within and outside the Mormon community. Mormon identity was forged and changed over time in conversation with outsiders. Both Turner and Fluhman take that identity formation seriously and explore it through the lenses of critical race and gender studies, providing us with narratives that help us better understand the role of Mormonism in American history.

Even though Latter-day Saints make up only two percent of the population of the United States, the movement has “achieved an outsized cultural relevance” (2). Debates about Mormonism—on whether or not it is a Christian tradition, on whether it can produce a trusted president of the United States, on its revelation that prohibits hot drinks, alcohol, and tobacco—continue today, and both Turner and Fluhman investigate the role of history-telling in those debates. In his introduction, Fluhman examines the differences between discussions about Mormon history within the LDS community and within the academy. Within the LDS community, Joseph Smith’s life, “the emergence of the Book of Mormon, and the persecution of early Mormons [and] the heroism of the western trek” begin the narrative of the Mormon tradition. Then that narrative skips to “late twentieth-century international growth,” leaving gaps in the chronology that contain “elements that fit awkwardly with Mormons’ current emphasis on public relations” (6). Those gaps would include the church’s culture in the state of Utah and the formation of the reorganized church that gathered around Joseph Smith’s son in Missouri. In work that runs counter to the LDS narrative, academic historians have had an “ongoing fascination with Mormon cultural deviance”—particularly its embrace of polygamy and theocracy—that upsets the “strategic forgetting” within the LDS community but has its own bias. Both groups focus on the nineteenth century, either in “hagiographical or exoticized shades” rather than the twentieth-century narrative of assimilation. Fluhman’s text engages the tension between the two narratives and reveals the way that, in

American discourses about religion, the view of Mormonism shifted from that of an alien faith to a heretical one. Fluhman argues that this shift allowed Latter-day Saints a seat at the table of political discourse and economic exchange in the United States. Turner, too, addresses this narrative tension by uncovering the life of Brigham Young, the leader of the branch of the church that moved westward after Joseph Smith's murder. In the American imagination, Young often represents all that was exotic and strange about the Latter-day Saints—such as polygamy and a theocratic system that collapsed the political and the religious—aspects of the faith that were deemed decidedly *un-American*. Yet as Turner contextualizes Young in nineteenth-century American culture, he is able to show how in many ways Young was decidedly American, emphasizing ideas, theologies, and ideologies that were very much in line with his cultural context.

Turner's contextualization allows us to see how thoroughly embedded Young was in nineteenth-century America. Turner demonstrates that "within a Protestant America dedicated to monogamy, monotheism, and Jacksonian democracy, Young advocated the plurality of wives, a plurality of gods, and a unity of power" (4). However, even though those ideals were on one level anathema in the culture in which he lived, Turner manages to show how, at the same time, many of Young's ideas were deeply rooted in the political and social worlds of his time. Although Turner reminds his readers that Young was thoroughly nineteenth century and cannot be understood outside of that context, he avoids "any tortured attempt to make [him] palatable for a twenty-first-century audience, Mormon or otherwise" (5). While not in the practice of apologetics, Turner nonetheless provides a sympathetic and evenhanded reading of Brigham Young and the world that he lived in.

Turner's portrait of Young is not only of a politically savvy, singularly focused man, but also of a personal, family man who revised his understanding of family and marriage because Joseph Smith, a man he believed was a prophet of God, told him of a heavenly vision of family and community. "Young frequently discussed his embrace of polygamy as the simple acceptance of revelatory truth and Joseph Smith's authority," Turner explains (96). Plural marriage functioned to bind the community together as did the practice of adoption. Through ceremonial adoptions of people, Young "ritually welded them and their sealed children into a priesthood chain that stretched back to Adam. In the process, church members aligned their earthly and eternal futures with those of their ecclesiastical leaders" (139). These ritual activities allowed Young to foster a sense of community through familial relationships. Formed within a religious community, these relationships promised an afterlife of continued joy with the people one loved in this world. Thus, Young promoted the idea that Mormons were a people set apart both in this life and the next. As part of this creation of a sense of peoplehood, Young married for time (in this world only), for eternity (for the afterlife), or for time and eternity, at least fifty-five women. Not all of these marriages were consummated nor did Young father children within all of them. In participating in these marriages, Young helped to cement an understanding of a chosen people,

a divinely-ordained kinship network of people called to set up the Kingdom of God on earth.

Alongside Young's commitment to family and community, Turner highlights his singularity of vision. When Young, then about thirty, dedicated his life to Joseph Smith's church, he saw the success of that church as his sole focus. Everything else was secondary. Much shaped Young's commitment, though perhaps the most profound experiences were those of anti-Mormon animosity and violence. Young was there when Mormons were run out of Missouri, and he was a member of the church's Quorum of the Twelve when an anti-Mormon mob murdered Joseph Smith. It was in the fires of anti-Mormonism that Brigham Young's religious commitment was forged. Turner explains many of Young's later decisions as a prophet of the church and as governor of Utah territory in light of those early experiences. Young felt that he must be ever-vigilant, looking out for those who might attempt to harm his community and stand in the way of his vision.

Some of Young's critical decisions were economic ones. Young was concerned that the Saints (a term Mormons used to refer to themselves as a group) would be economically dependent on non-Mormons, who had not treated them kindly in the past. He therefore encouraged economic autonomy and actively sought to set the new territory apart in this way. Promoting the use of handcarts as a cheap form of transportation of material goods and new emigrants to the west, Young supported the idea that the Saints would help one another to not be dependent on outsiders (25). His efforts to save money did not always work in the community's best interest. The Willie and Martin Handcart Companies disaster—in which emigrants died on their journey west without the necessary warmth and supplies—is one such example (250–52). At other times, Young advocated an economic boycott of non-Mormon businesses in order to make a point or to assert the church's power. In each instance, Young exercised his authority over believers' political, economic, social, and religious lives.

It was in the American west that Young's leadership and political identity formed as "the greatest colonizer in American history" (3). And it was there that Young sought to build an autonomous theocratic Kingdom of God. That vision of the west ran counter to the plans of the American nation and its movement westward. Though Young's vision did not reign supreme in the end, Turner demonstrates the ways that aspects of Young's vision continue to this day.

Turner recounts the various strategies—economic, military, and political—that Young employed to protect his vision and his people. At the same time that Young attempted to thwart the plans of those non-Mormons who did not share his vision of the kingdom, he was also swift to quiet any voices of internal dissent from believers who might offer a different vision of the Saints' future. Young often dealt harshly with individuals who challenged his authority, but he also continuously sought reformation within his religious community, reflecting the belief that *how* the Mormons lived in their new Zion would determine whether or not that Zion would succeed.

Where Turner focuses on the formation of Young's vision of the Kingdom of God, J. Spencer Fluhman focuses his work on those who critiqued that vision. Although anti-Mormonism is his topic, his work also addresses the fact that Mormon identity took shape in conversations and debates with detractors. Fluhman asserts that anti-Mormonism changed over time as both American culture and Mormonism itself changed. In the culture of the early republic, where everyone was attempting to assess claims to authenticity, Mormonism was initially identified by its detractors as "a fraudulent approximation of true religion." However, by the mid-nineteenth-century when the Latter-day Saints set up shop in Utah under Brigham Young's leadership, Mormonism was considered a foreign, alien faith (Fluhman, 8). By the end of the nineteenth century, with the public announcement of the end of the practice of plural marriage, anti-Mormons finally designated Mormonism a false religion or heresy (9). Fluhman's work challenges the overly simplistic categorization that too often happens in American Studies that refers to Mormonism as the quintessential "American" religion, by suggesting that "such a characterization obscures the depth of anti-Mormon animosity" (16).

The Mormon peculiarities most identified in scholarship today are its polygamous practices and attempts to build a theocratic Kingdom of God. Yet Fluhman reminds us that these distinctions were not Mormon practice when the earliest anti-Mormonism was already in full swing. Rather, "early national anti-Mormonism constituted an implicit concern that disestablishment had left too much room for religious expression" (9). It was during this period that anti-Mormonism was in its "bloodiest phase." And outsiders focused their attention on Joseph Smith, Jr., a man who seemed able to dupe unsuspecting individuals into believing anything that he said. His followers were quickly deemed deluded or mentally ill in an attempt to expose Smith's claims to authenticity and authority as false ones.

The anti-Mormonism of the 1830s and early 1840s culminated in the murders of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. That same anti-Mormonism drove Mormons westward searching for a place where they could practice their faith freely. In many ways, it was their theological vision that made them intolerable to other Americans: "The fact that the Latter-day Saints envisioned their church as a holy city rendered their movement both inescapably conspicuous and utterly problematic" (79). After the death of Joseph Smith, Jr., it was the vision of Brigham Young, a vision profoundly shaped by Smith's prophetic career, that inspired anti-Mormonism. Young's world appeared to be the antithesis of how the nation imagined its own identity—how many Americans imagined what it meant to be American. "The Latter-day Saints' geographic exodus from American centers of power anticipated the discursive trajectory of postbellum anti-Mormonism," writes Fluhman. "Increasingly, Mormonism was construed as religiously and culturally alien" (104).

Once in the west, Fluhman suggests, Mormonism became a straw figure upon which Americans could write their anxieties and fears. Non-Mormons portrayed Utah as all that the country did not want to be. Polygamy and theocracy were

heralded as that which was different, the foreign *they* against whom the American *we* was defined. This standoff held true until the 1890 Manifesto that officially ended polygamy. Once Mormons had publicly given up that which made them an intolerable peculiarity, once they appeared to have conceded what marked their difference, they were able to gain a seat at the table—the table of US government, the table of religious discussions, and the table of being considered “American.”

Part of Fluhman’s larger project is to explore the role of Mormonism in defining “religion” in the new nation. A key theme throughout the book is an exploration of “the underlying problem haunting American religious liberty: Who decides what is religious in a disestablished polity?” (10). The disestablishment of the early republic felt dangerous to many precisely because religion was not associated with government. Fluhman argues that “through public condemnation of what Mormonism was, Protestants defined just what American religion could be” (9). Once Mormons had given up the practices that made them appear decidedly un-American, they entered a phase of assimilation. In becoming more like their Protestant contemporaries, they were allowed the status of merely a heretical religious tradition rather than a false or alien one.

Recent scholarship in Mormon Studies has engaged the question of how Mormons related (and relate) to other Americans and how identity formed in the process. That identity formation goes both ways—Americans, particularly in the nineteenth century, used Mormons as a foil against which they defined themselves. Similarly, Mormons embraced their identity as intentional outsiders in the nation. Latter-day Saints fostered their sense of themselves as a “peculiar people” and took their outsider status as a sign of God’s favor. The hatred of others they read as the contempt that non-believers would have for God’s chosen people. Both Fluhman and Turner continue these lines of inquiry and investigate the ways that gender and race played a role in Mormon identity formation and in non-Mormon understandings of Latter-day Saints. This move, to utilize the work of critical race and gender theorists, is a relatively new one within Mormon Studies—but it is already yielding great rewards, as evidenced in the works of Turner and Fluhman.

Together, these two texts shed significant light on nineteenth-century racial taxonomies and their roles in identity formation. On one hand, Latter-day Saints constructed their own racial taxonomies that were not unlike those at play in the larger culture. In Mormon taxonomies, American Indians were considered to be Lamanites, descendants of ancient Jews who had turned away from their relationship with God and were currently in need of Mormon missionaries to return them to their true religion. While this mythology taught by Joseph Smith held powerful sway in the Mormon community, supporting national narratives told about the potential “noble savage” of the Americas, who would be converted to the faith before the second coming of Christ, Brigham Young and others also saw indigenous peoples as savages or Canaanites disrupting Mormons’ easy entry into their promised land. Both visions of native peoples—as noble savages in need of salvation and as uncivilized, dark-skinned obstacles to progress—tugged

at the Mormon imagination (Turner, 208). Although Brigham Young vacillated between these two perspectives on indigenous peoples, he most assuredly held African Americans in less regard. Young "concluded that God had cursed another dark-skinned people with much bleaker earthly and eternal prospects." Though there were a few black men ordained as elders in the Mormon priesthood (a priesthood offered to all male members of the church), Young believed that "God had punished the 'seed of Cain' with blackness, which meant an inferior position within society, the church, and, ultimately, in the 'eternal worlds.' At some point, after Abel's posterity—non-black people—had received their blessings in full, God would remove the curse" (222). Thus, there were somewhat distinct Mormon theological justifications for a view of a racial hierarchy that looked quite similar to other European Americans'.

On the other hand, and in the discourse of anti-Mormons, Latter-day Saints were believed to have earned their own place in the racialized hierarchy as non-white, a status that allowed other Americans to see their presence in the American west as an obstacle that had to be overcome by the "civilizing" forces of the United States. The narratives told about Mormons after their exodus westward focused on the idea that members of the faith were culturally different, foreign, alien. The central focus of these accusations was the practice of polygamy; anti-Mormons made the claim that Mormons were forming a new non-white race with their sexual practices, thus their racial claim appeared to be rooted in biology. Commentators and editorialists "found that polygamy not only constituted a ready analog to the non-Christian and non-white, it also begged questions about Mormon bodies. Were Mormons simply *like* non-whites in their familial or religious practices, or were Americans witnessing a new, threatening racial category in the making?" (Fluhman, 112). And so, Mormons operated as a destabilizing unknown racial group, a viewpoint that supported the imperial expansion of the American nation. They became a non-white, non-Christian obstacle to American manifest destiny.

"The racialization of Mormons went hand in hand with representations of Mormon women," writes Fluhman, "as representatives of civilization's march or decline" (117). As things came to a head over the issue of polygamy and as non-Mormons rallied around the idea that polygamy indicated savagery and barbarism, the non-Mormon imagination abounded with images of Mormon women held in captivity and forced into plurality. These stereotypes were reinforced when Ann Eliza Webb Young, a plural wife of Brigham Young, published her book *Wife No. 19* and began to tour the United States. The narrative she told portrayed non-Mormons as "agents of 'liberation,' not persecution" and suggested that "life in polygamy resulted from ignorance, not faith" (Fluhman, 121). Her tour of the United States, where she became "an overnight celebrity and newspaper darling" led to her role as "the most formidable female antagonist Brigham Young ever encountered" (Turner, 389). Ann Eliza Webb helped keep the issue of polygamy at the forefront of the American imagination and reminded her audiences that no country could claim its status as a "civilized" nation while

polygamy continued within its borders. Thus, a gendered narrative functioned in concert with a racialized one to support the idea that “real” Americans could not tolerate the “Mormon menace” in their midst.

Even though the press portrayed Mormon polygamy as the degradation of pure womanhood employed to promote the oversexed desires of powerful men in the guise of religious leaders, many Mormon women defended the practice as part of their lives of faith and argued that the practice fell under the freedom of religion. In so doing, they challenged the gender assumptions and conventions of their time. Not every woman was happy in a polygamous marriage, but Brigham Young’s leadership at times allowed women greater freedom to divorce their husbands and at times chastised men who wanted to divorce their wives (238–42). Thus, what happened in Utah did not fit with what Americans imagined was happening in Utah. Together, Turner and Fluhman offer us a window into the differences between the narratives being told about Latter-day Saints and the narratives that the Saints were telling about themselves and to themselves.

There is a spatial component to these studies as well, one that reflects recent work in Mormon Studies on the significance of space and place in this religious tradition. When Latter-day Saints fled to the west, they believed that they were living out their own biblical exodus story, led by their Moses, Brigham Young, to their promised land. Other Americans saw the west as their rightful inheritance and manifest destiny as well. The west was going to be the place where American ideals were played out and for this reason, “politicians in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s could hardly leave Mormons alone” (Fluhman, 106). By the 1860s, Mormons with Brigham Young at their head were in full-scale argument with the federal government and there was a “clash between Mormon and federal empires” (107). Brigham Young struggled with federal authorities for autonomy for his religious group and fought with every type of weapon he had. It was, indeed, a clash between visions of empire. For this reason, the Mormon example serves as an instructive study in US history, and an occurrence such as the Mountain Meadows Massacre is an intriguing and helpful case.

This event has led to much historiographical debate, most significantly around Brigham Young’s and the church hierarchy’s knowledge of and role in the events. On September 1, 1857, members of the southern Utah Nauvoo Legion massacred the prospective settlers of a large wagon train heading westward. According to Turner, Young “feared that full knowledge of Mormon responsibility for the massacre would foment anti-Mormon sentiment across the country . . . giving him good reason for wanting the truth buried in the shallow red dirt of southern Utah” (Turner, 282). In this instance, we see not only different visions of the west and empire conflicting with one another, but also the power of narrative and collective forgetfulness operating alongside one another. Historians continue to return to the question of who bears responsibility for this tragic event. Narratives of empire and the powerful claims to space that were made are put in stark relief in the study of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. In the end, Brigham Young’s vision of an autonomous kingdom in the American west failed. His vision

of what the west might be and the way he worked to shape narratives in order to support his civilizing project clashed with American narratives attempting to do the same thing. That clash highlights the power and lasting influence of the narratives told in nineteenth-century America.

Once Latter-day Saints gave up that vision and their practice of plural wifery, as Fluhman reminds us, they opened up the path to representation in the federal government, statehood for Utah, and cultural acceptance, or at least tolerance. That acquiescence was also accompanied by its own expectation that Mormons be more tolerant than they had been of non-Mormons in their promised land. This shift marked a dramatic change in Mormon identity. Where Brigham Young had claimed that individuals became Latter-day Saints not “in the waters of baptism but through trials, tribulations, and ‘living their religion,’ which meant great sacrifice and perfect obedience,” Mormons decades later attempted to live their religion while getting along with their Protestant neighbors (410). Though it may appear to outsiders that Mormons completely changed their identity over the course of a few decades, many Mormons did not experience that shift in the same way. In a tradition that embraces a theology of continuing revelation through a living prophet, it is always possible that God may present a new revelation that would change expectations for believers’ behavior.

John Turner’s *Brigham Young* and J. Spencer Fluhman’s “*A Peculiar People*” help flesh out the nineteenth-century changes and trajectories in Mormon identity and experience. Chronologically, their works leave off where books like Sarah Barringer Gordon’s *The Mormon Question* (2001) and Kathleen Flake’s *The Politics of American Religious Identity* (2003) pick up the narrative of Mormon experiences in the United States. And, though Mormon Studies may well be a “hall of mirrors,” Turner and Fluhman give us insights into how those reflections and refractions operated in the lives of nineteenth-century Mormons and their critics.

