The Strength of the Mormon Position

Neal W. Kramer

The Strength of the Mormon Position

In 1859, John Stuart Mill published his great essay On Liberty. Chapter 4, "Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual," concludes with a brief discussion of how the principles of liberty apply to even the most vexing case of intolerance Mill has encountered: religious persecution, "a belief that God not only abominates the act of the misbeliever, but will not hold us guiltless if we leave him unmolested." Especially troubling is "the language of downright persecution which breaks out from the press of this country [Great Britain] whenever it feels called on to notice the remarkable phenomenon of Mormonism." Mill makes no attempt to respect Mormonism, a form of "barbarism" that countenances marital practices that are no more nor less than a "riveting of the chains of one half of the community, and an emancipation of the other from reciprocity of obligation towards them." But he stops short of proposing, as a "recent writer" has, "not a crusade, but a civilisade, against this polygamous community, to put an end to what seems to him a retrograde step in civilisation." Mill's own sense of probity will allow him only to agree that Mormonism is indeed "retrograde" while never admitting that "any community has a right to force another to be civilised."
Terryl L. Givens, associate professor of English at the University of Richmond, has written an important new book about a significant aspect of this nineteenth-century *civilisade*, the attempt to use fiction to force the Mormons to become civilized. Givens’s book is noteworthy for many reasons. However, I will pay special attention to three aspects of the work that shed new light on the strategies used by anti-Mormon writers to represent Mormons. The first of these is Givens’s use of scholarly methodology more typical of literary historians than social or political historians. Derived from the theoretical work of Michel Foucault, this “New Historicism” explores how language is used to establish power relations, especially as an organized group uses language to exclude “Others” from the social order. Mormon historians have generally avoided new historicist methods—preferring a literalist revisionism that has come to be known as the New Mormon History. The second aspect is Givens’s identification of two competing narrative forms that attempt to represent the identity of Mormons: the conversion narrative and the captivity narrative. Givens focuses our attention on themes of bondage and emancipation in captivity narratives, and themes of gathering and separation in conversion narratives, to show how Mormon identities were constructed in various nineteenth-century texts. The third aspect is Givens’s identification of heresy as the means whereby Mormonism is politicized and vilified in fiction and the press. Rather than hide from the reality of religious persecution, Givens demonstrates that even writers who studiously avoid mention of religion as the basis of their hatred for Mormons rely on the rhetoric of heresy to condemn Mormon politics or culture.

The New Historicism

*The Viper on the Hearth* is about representations and images and the conflict they engender. It explores the process whereby selves and identities are fashioned by forces inside and outside of communities. Givens explains that “the sources of social conflict and religious strife are invariably fraught with images, impressions, anxieties, and fears, none of them easily reducible to historical ‘facts’” (p. 14). The New Historicism supplies the historian with psychological and rhetorical tools that can illuminate more
potential causes of conflict than the literal "facts" alone. This collection of methods assumes that facts and the documents that contain them never simply speak for themselves and that writers often hide their motives of conquest and domination beneath the subterfuge of objective reporting. Hence, this book operates under the assumption that "images of entire peoples do not take shape unhindered and unfiltered, like the forms in reflecting pools. They are constructions that are shaped by impassioned political rhetoric and by media portrayals, by pulpit bombast and by travelers' narratives" (p. 14).

Careful examination of representative texts allows Givens to demonstrate that "The decisive factor in the way Mormonism is perceived and depicted has to do with its emergence from indigenous origins into a community with cultural autonomy" (p. 17). That is, Mormons see themselves as more than just another Protestant denomination. And their enemies see them the same way. Mormons see their uniqueness as something to champion and celebrate. Their enemies see Mormon culture as so different as to be perversely peculiar and finally worthy of violent extermination. Mormons see their gospel as purifying a fallen world. Anti-Mormons see this same gospel as a Satanic perversion of truth that must be opposed and destroyed. Givens notes that Alexander Campbell, for example, "accused Mormonism of being a Satanic imitation of his own version of primitive Christianity" (p. 68). Givens's discussions of the Missouri persecutions and the pseudo-scientific discussions of Mormons as a new race illustrate the point.

The persecutions of Mormons in Missouri, characterized by violence and death and culminating in the imprisonment of Joseph Smith and the expulsion of the Mormons from the state, have been the object of many scholarly studies. A variety of motives for these brutal persecutions has been brought forward. Some have claimed that Mormons were abolitionists and therefore automatically targets of Missouri wrath. Others have pointed to Mormon clannishness and voting patterns as legitimate causes for frontier alarm. In general, though, as Givens documents, "recent studies . . . have attempted to downplay or dismiss altogether the religious component to the Missouri persecutions" (p. 45). Givens is not persuaded by these studies. "To discount religious
motivations . . . is to ignore the mechanisms by which ideology and acts of self-fashioning work to conceal inherent tensions and inconsistencies that arise when espoused values and political imperatives collide” (p. 45).

As Givens sees it, the Missourians took great pains to hide the religious aspect of their persecution of Mormons. They did so because they knew religious persecution violated their sense of themselves as advocates of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian religious toleration. But even though their subterfuge seems to have worked with some contemporary historians, Givens will not give in to the temptation to view the conflict in purely secular or political terms. “An exaggeration of the Mormons as radically, threateningly Other was the rhetorical foundation on which the anti-Mormons in Missouri based their collective decision to ‘raze to the ground’ the Mormons’ printing office, confiscate their property, and expel their members” (p. 46). But the use of certain rhetorical ploys should not be so construed as to avoid the importance of understanding “that religious difference of a particular kind aggravated, if it did not generate, the conflict” (p. 46).

The Missouri ruffians’ brutal treatment of Mormons might possibly be attributed to their relatively uncivilized or uneducated background. More difficult to comprehend, though, are the efforts to marginalize Mormons by describing them as a new and inferior race. This effort is consistent with attempts by many writers to “orientalize” Mormons; that is, marginalize them by comparing them with Muslims rather than with other Christians. Polygamy would seem to be the most obvious source of such comparisons, but Givens is quick to show that a fundamental tenet of Mormonism is the more likely cause. As early as 1834 Joseph Smith was compared by E. D. Howe “with ‘the great prince of deceivers, Mohammed’” (p. 131). Givens therefore argues that “it was apparently not his marital practices, but his claim to prophetic authority and patriarchal rule that occasioned that appellation” (p. 131). The felicity of such comparisons, of course, is that Joseph’s claims to revelation may be dismissed because he is so radically different. He simply cannot be a true prophet. He must, therefore, resemble a seductively alien deceiver.

Through their association with the Prophet Joseph and his teachings, all Mormons became tarred with a similar brush. As
Givens says, “What all such representations share is the function of throwing into stark relief the un-Christian, un-American, un-Western nature of the Mormon religion” (p. 132). Nothing could be more un-everything than a new race. Warren Foote, whose interesting diary is an important source of Mormon experience for Givens, reports the following advice from a woman he met on the way west in 1846: “If the Mormons would scatter around amongst the white folks, they could live in peace” (p. 136). The fascination with Mormon “whiteness” led to some remarkable discoveries. Perhaps the most outrageous was presented at the New Orleans Academy of Science in 1861. Based on the report of Assistant Surgeon Roberts Bartholow of the U.S. Army, Dr. Samuel Cartwright and Professor C. G. Forshey concluded that a “new race, the production of polygamy” had emerged. “The older men and women present all the physical peculiarities of the nationalities to which they belong; but these peculiarities are not propagated and continued in the new race; they are lost in the prevailing type” (p. 137). Givens rightly refers to such “science” as “inventive literary ethnography,” but he also recognizes the success of this rhetorical strategy in further marginalizing Mormons. This separation of Mormons from other white folks effectively recategorizes them as non-Americans, opening the door to further attacks and persecution.

Convert or Captive?

Since its organization, the LDS Church has been aggressive in its attempts to proselyte new members. In fact, it is possible to see the new convert as the lifeblood of the church. Proselyting zeal alone, however, cannot effectively account for the church’s phenomenal growth. That growth, in fact, may have been a significant cause of persecution. As Givens acknowledges, “the Mormons, with their aggressive and phenomenally successful proselytizing, presented a serious threat to contemporary preachers” (p. 47). The most obvious threat is loss of members. But the less obvious threat is that Mormonism might be true in just the ways Joseph Smith proclaims it to be. Givens offers three examples of doctrines that were both fundamental and objectionable. “First, Joseph Smith ‘claims to associate with spirits and
Second was the publication and promulgation of the Book of Mormon itself. Soon, Smith’s claim to prophetic authority was added to the list of offenses against respectable Christian notions” (p. 58).

Solid evidence of Mormonism’s possible truthfulness is found in the narratives of conversion written by new Mormons in the nineteenth century. A brief example from a convert’s journal illustrates the typical challenge to “respectable Christianity.”

I never had a lighter heart in my life; indeed, I might say I never knew what joy was till I became a Mormon. It appeared to me that I had been blind and had suddenly received my sight. My mind was enlightened, everything seemed perfectly plain and natural, and I was not ashamed to bear testimony to the truth, for the Spirit of God bore witness with my spirit that the Kingdom of God was once more established on the earth with all its power and authority, even the Holy Priesthood.6

Anti-Mormons had to find ways to counter the fervent testimony of such converts that the gospel had been restored. “Critics ... had a vested interest in framing their objections to Mormonism in nonreligious terms” (p. 42). But Givens emphasizes that the reasons for opposing Mormonism were anything but non-religious.

As late as 1898, the multidenominational League for Social Service published its manifesto of anti-Mormonism, Ten Reasons Why Christians Cannot Fellowship the Mormon Church. Their major objections? Belief in modern prophets, continuing revelation, an authority vested in the priesthood, and a repugnant doctrine of deity. (p. 59)

Attackers of Mormonism developed sophisticated responses to accounts of conversion, constructing narratives of coercion and captivity to explain away the proselyting success of Mormons.

6 Frederick William Hurst, Diary of F. W. Hurst, typescript in possession of the author, 13.
Mormons bore testimony of their choice to leave the world behind and gather to Zion. Anti-Mormons countered with novels masquerading as memoirs filled with lurid tales of kidnapping, captivity, and deviance. Givens describes these narratives as "facilitating a kind of unpoliced rhetorical violence" (p. 108). Such "memoirs" carried with them "the force and credibility of the personal account" (p. 110) and so provided a fictional counterbalance to the ongoing actual migration of Americans and Europeans to Mormon Utah.

Deep anxiety that nearly anyone might be seduced by Mormonism is a possible psychological explanation for such demeaning fictions. "Watching kinsmen and neighbors fall prey to what was thought to be at a safe remove is downright disturbing" (p. 129). Mormonism thus must be cast as a kind of secret conspiracy which deprives poor innocents of their free will and their virtue. Such captives must be taken far away and then carefully guarded: "sentries are even posted to keep gentiles outside—and to keep, as per the usual bondage theme, the Mormon maidens in" (p. 133). "In this realm of moral desolation, brutality and depravity know no bounds" (p. 134). Popular images of new Mormon converts portray them as victims of powerful forces imitative to truth, justice, and the American way, who must be taken far away where they can continue to be mesmerized by their radically Other captors.

Givens defines this anxiety as "the dread of assimilation" (p. 138), the fear that anyone even slightly careless could fall under the seductive charm of the next Mormon missionary to pass through town. Coping with this dread requires "the insistence that participation in the alien system could never be the result of conscious choice. Conversion, in other words, was rewritten as coercion" (p. 138). Women are especially vulnerable to the forces of seduction. Givens reports that Maria Ward's heroine Ellen explains her "seduction" by Joseph Smith: "he exerted a mystical magical influence over me—a sort of sorcery that deprived me of the unrestricted exercise of free will" (p. 139). She later tries to break the spell another Mormon has cast over her, but in her feminine weakness she fails. "In vain I struggled to break the spell. I was like a fluttering bird before the gaze of the serpent-charmer" (p. 139). The rationales of these authors are obvious.
Given explains that “these mythologies of mental and physical coercion avoid the unsettling specter of countrymen voluntarily affiliating themselves with Mormonism. What would seemingly be Mormonism’s vindication thus turns out to be its condemnation—its reliance on converts to the system” (p. 142). One must somehow account for the steady flow of converts by the “magnetic attraction, compulsion, captivity, enslavement, kidnapping” (p. 138), which ultimately make more sense than the alternative of genuine conversion. “Given a choice, the writer of anti-Mormon fiction does not hesitate. Captivity, not conversion, defines the narrative structure” (p. 142).

Heresy

The most important contribution of The Viper on the Hearth is to demystify the rhetoric of heresy, the collection of literary genres and modes of reporting used to characterize Mormons as radically different from other Americans. Givens locates the source of heresy in conflicting choices, “with competing, and mutually exclusive, options. Heresy is the choice that loses” (p. 77). For there to be heresy, there must also be orthodoxy. While Givens never says so directly, the implication of his work is that American orthodoxy is mainline Protestant. Mormonism’s heresy, therefore, lies in its rejection of the basic tenet of Protestantism: reformation.

Unlike the reformers who preceded him, Joseph Smith insisted that his role was to usher in a new dispensation, a full restoration of Christianity in its pristine purity. He proclaimed the apostasy from authentic Christianity complete, the apostolic succession long broken, and authority to act in God’s name completely removed from the earth. A reinauguration, not merely a reformation, of Christianity was called for. New scriptures and new doctrines rapidly followed, effecting further differentiation from contemporary Christian faiths. (p. 61)

Joseph Smith’s announcement that this was not a mere reformation was also his announcement that traditional Protestantism
was inadequate for salvation. The Book of Mormon is even more direct. “Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth” (1 Nephi 14:10). Protestants had early recognized the Roman Catholic church as this whore. Mormons, however, were teaching that God told Joseph Smith that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). And Joseph had asked specifically about Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. This Mormon announcement of the essential inadequacy of reformation necessarily initiates an inquisition.

For Givens, heresy “marks the limits of religious freedom which any one particular community will tolerate” (p. 77). The limits of religious freedom for Protestants willing to tolerate other Protestants found definition in the existence of Catholicism on the one hand and Mormonism on the other. “By general nineteenth-century consensus, Mormonism was self-evidently beyond the pale of mere difference, a fit candidate for the label of heresy” (p. 77). For Protestants, toleration has often meant recognizing a new sect as appropriately Christian. Appropriately Christian typically means a willingness to recognize the spiritual efficacy of Protestantism. Therefore, a sect which denies spiritual efficacy to Protestantism is intolerable. Mormons have understood tolerance differently. While Mormons claim to be the one true church, they allow all people the privilege of worshiping as they choose, under whatever name they choose. Nineteenth-century Americans were not so generous.

Givens suggests a number of ways in which Mormonism crosses the line between the barely tolerable and the heretical. One of the most interesting is the idea that Mormonism amounts to “a rehistoricizing of Christianity” (p. 85). The problem with Mormonism is not a particular doctrine so much as its announcement that God speaks to real people in the here and now. For Givens, “religions seem to carry as part of their own self-conceiving the means of obscuring seminal moments of their history, thereby creating an opening for the divine, the transcendent, the eternal, to
intervene and create the rupture with historical reality that is the root of the sense of the sacred” (p. 88). Thus the sacred and the mysterious are combined into a distantly holy other world. The creation of sacred distance protects the believer from the possible mockery of the simplicity or even the vulgarity of everyday beliefs. It creates a rhetorical space for allegory instead of history.

Such sacred distance, of course, begs the question of the historical origins of religion. Mormonism transgresses the boundary between the sacred and the historical from its earliest beginnings.

Smith’s unrelenting anthropomorphizing; the chronological and geographical specificity of his encounters with the divine; his commitment of heavenly revelation to the process of transcription, publication, and marketing; his enactment of prophetic restoration through the medium of legal incorporation—these and related aspects of Smith’s work rendered religious allegorizing of his message impossible. (p. 90)

Joseph Smith stubbornly insisted that he had seen visions and that they happened in real time and real space. They were historical. “The fullest implications of this ‘heresy’ were not unfolded until the spring of his last year, at which point he was publicly teaching that God himself ‘was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!’” (p. 92). Givens urges us to see “Mormonism’s radicalism” as its refusal to endow its own origins with mythic transcendence, while endowing those origins with universal import since they represent the implementation of the fullest gospel dispensation ever. The effect of this unflinching primitivism, its resurrection of original structures and practices, is nothing short of the demystification of Christianity itself. For Mormonism replicates the process of canon formation, prophetic utterance, communion with supernatural entities—all this without the veil of intervening history, mythic origins, or tradition. The church is reintegrated into the ongoing flow of human history, origins are concrete and proximate, the process of doctrinal formation is laid bare. (p. 83)
Mormonism is heretical because it testifies that encounters with the divine are as real as a trip to the woods or the grocery store. And that claim threatens to delegitimize the transcendental mystery of traditional Christianity.

The rhetoric of heresy persists even today as Protestants charge that Mormons are not Christians. Perhaps the most common form of the charge is that the church is no church at all; rather, it is a “cult.” Givens notes that “some four hundred ‘anti-cult’ groups are currently aimed specifically at Mormonism” (p. 80). But such persistent insistence on the church’s cult status arises from anxiety that Mormon heresy may in fact be true. And if Mormonism is truly Christian, that fact casts considerable doubt on similar claims made by traditional Christians. Givens defines two very contradictory ways in which Mormonism may be taken to be Christian. “Mormonism’s controversial status as a Christian sect may depend on whether ‘Christian’ is taken to refer to a historical tradition or a mode of Jesus-centered discipleship, however idiosyncratic its articulation” (p. 81).

The “historical tradition” definition arises out of the uneasy relationship between Protestants and Catholics. Protestants rely on their continuity from Catholicism to legitimize their claims to be Christian. But from the very beginnings of the Reformation, Protestants have had no qualms about calling the Pope antichrist. There is no stronger claim that any church is not Christian than that. Mormon claims of origin, however, deny the need for the historical tradition. In fact, the historical tradition for Mormons translates into “the great apostasy.” Rather than charge Mormons with having perverted the tradition, as had the Catholics, Protestants charge that Mormons have simply denied the tradition. A charge which Mormons, as Givens remarks, do not deny. As Orson Pratt taught, a fundamental tenet of the tradition required ministers to teach their congregations that “they were not to believe in anything except it was bound in their ancient books” (p. 81).

Mormons prefer to define Christianity independently of any apostate tradition. They therefore opt for a definition closer to Givens’s “mode of Jesus-centered discipleship.” That leaves rhetorical room for tolerance of all claims to worship Christ on the one hand and for the claim that Mormonism is exclusively true on
the other. But it also means that Mormons have typically had little interest in making any accommodation toward either Protestants or Catholics. In addition, because Mormons have chosen the second definition, they are often dismayed at the orthodox charge. "Mormons . . . officially and personally find the accusation repugnant, erroneous, and hurtful" (p. 81). Givens, however, is a bit confused by the response. "For Mormons to insist on their Christianity, given that label's evolution as a historically conditioned category of belief and practice, is to minimize Mormonism's innovations and to subvert its own insistence that restoration rather than mere reformation was necessary" (p. 81). Givens's explanation seems like a perfectly reasonable response to the dilemma, unless one is unwilling to discount the ongoing propaganda value of the original charge. Then it becomes much more than a simple intellectual disagreement. It becomes a question of who will be saved and who will not, a point which Givens seems to be making everywhere else in the book.

The Viper on the Hearth is an important new contribution to the study of Mormonism and its detractors. Its great strength lies in its ability to refocus our attention on Mormonism as a religion rather than as a social movement, a political dilemma, or a peculiar economic system. Not since Richard Bushman's Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism or Lawrence Foster's Religion and Sexuality has Mormonism been taken so seriously as a religion by scholars. If Mormonism can be taken seriously as a religion, then anti-Mormonism must be seen for what it is: cruel and repugnant intolerance masquerading as overzealous patriotism or moral crusading. Terryl Givens's book reminds us what "a great scholar" once told Orson F. Whitney:

You Mormons are all ignoramuses. You don't even know the strength of your own position. It is so strong that there is only one other tenable in the whole Christian world, and that is the position of the Catholic Church. The issue is between Catholicism and Mormonism. If we are right, you are wrong; if you are right we are wrong; and that's all there is to it. The Protestants haven't a leg to stand on. For if we are wrong, they are wrong with us, since they were a part of us and went out from us; while if we are right, they are apos-
tates whom we cut off long ago. If we have the apostolic succession from St. Peter, as we claim, there was no need of Joseph Smith and Mormonism; but if we have not that succession, then such a man as Joseph Smith was necessary, and Mormonism’s attitude is the only consistent one. It is either the perpetuation of the Gospel from ancient times, or the restoration of the Gospel in latter days.7

And that, as Givens so carefully presents, is the essential ground of all orthodox persecution of Mormons. That, as Whitney wrote so long ago, is the “Strength of the ‘Mormon’ Position.”