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## **Mormonism at Oxford and What It Signifies**

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## MORMONISM AT OXFORD AND WHAT IT SIGNIFIES

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Stephen O. Smoot

Review of Terryl Givens and Philip L. Barlow. *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). 647 pp. + index. \$150.00

*Abstract: The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism is a welcomed addition to the current scholarly discussion surrounding the history, theology, and culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It should be read and studied by all interested students in Mormonism and signals that the scriptures, theology, and history of the Latter-day Saints are all increasingly being taken seriously in mainstream academia.*

Should one take Mormonism seriously as a theological, philosophical, or metaphysical system? As The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sets itself on a twenty-first century trajectory, this question is increasingly being asked by scholarly and lay observers of things Mormon. The “Mormon Moment” that attended Mitt Romney’s unsuccessful bid for the presidency of the United States in 2012 has come and gone, but informed writers are still talking and publishing about Mormon history and theology in both popular and academic venues. Taylor Petrey, writing some four years ago during the height of the Mormon Moment, insightfully blogged on what he perceived as a fundamental problem facing public discourse on Mormonism. He writes,

The trotting out of apparently ridiculous Mormon ideas is evidence of just how little Americans really understand religion. Religious people of all stripes should be concerned with the way Mormonism is portrayed because it reveals the

inability of people to ask the right kind of questions about religion and to discern how religious people construct their worlds. Discussion of Mormonism in the media tends to reveal the fundamentally unethical way that Americans think about religion, engaging in reductionism, decontextualization, and stereotyping.<sup>1</sup>

Petrey's point is easily illustrated. It is easy enough to pick apart any given religion when you portray that religion in a prejudicial or stereotypical manner. One must look no further than the satirical (as well as sacrilegious and racist) musical *The Book of Mormon* or Bill Maher's (allegedly funny) documentary *Religulous* to see just how easy (and profitable) it is to do such in the largely secular West. But for those mature enough to "put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11), there are much better ways to discuss Mormon history and metaphysics than by turning to trashy cartoon producers and two-bit comedians.

One such way is to crack open a new book edited by Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow, two eminent authorities on religious studies in general and Mormonism in particular. Published late last year, *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* offers a rich compendium of engaging treatments of Mormon history, scripture, theology, sociology, and culture written by some of the finest contemporary scholars of Mormonism.<sup>2</sup> The book is divided into eight parts: History of Mormonism, Revelation and Scripture, Ecclesiastical Structure and Praxis, Mormon Thought, Mormon Society, Mormon Culture, The International Church, and Mormonism in the World Community. Each section includes several articles pertaining to that category. The part on Revelation and Scripture, for example, contains essays on "Joseph Smith and His Visions" (Richard Bushman, pp. 109–120), "Mormons and the Bible" (Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, pp. 121–133), "The Book of Mormon" (Grant Hardy, pp. 134–148), and "Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism" (David F. Holland, pp. 149–163). Each article contains a helpful bibliography for students to pursue the given subject further.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Taylor Petrey, "Is Mormonism Ridiculous?" online at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peculiarpeople/2012/05/is-mormonism-ridiculous/> (Accessed January 26, 2016)

2 Terryl Givens and Philip L. Barlow, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Subsequent citations of this volume will appear in parentheses in the body of the review.

3 For instance, Grant Hardy's bibliography on the Book of Mormon (pp. 147–148) recommends, among others, such titles published by the Foundation

At least two articles in the book are worth highlighting as examples of the strength of the available offerings: the contributions of James E. Faulconer (“The Mormon Temple and Mormon Ritual,” pp. 196–208) and Kathryn M. Daynes (“Celestial Marriage (Eternal and Plural),” pp. 334–348). Both articles are fair in their respective presentations of these two aspects of Mormon theology. Writing for a primarily non-Mormon audience most likely unfamiliar with Mormon theology, Faulconer and Daynes were wise to avoid a purely devotional representation of their topics, while also maintaining a level of even-handedness given the controversy that surrounds them. This they both succeeded in doing. Writing on the Mormon reluctance to discuss the details of temple ordinances, which can be alienating for non-Mormons, for example, Faulconer explains,

If asked about the temple ritual, Mormons are likely to say that it is “sacred not secret.” Though that way of talking about temple worship is understandable, it is unintentionally inaccurate. LDS scripture says, “That which cometh from above is sacred, and must be spoken of with care, and by constraint of the Spirit” (D&C 63:64). Mormons understand the temple rite from that perspective, as something that comes from above. So the temple is secret *because* it is sacred: it is sacred in that it is a knowledge set apart from other kinds of knowledge and treated differently; it is secret in that the temple and other kinds of knowledge differ at least in that the former is not to be revealed to the uninitiated. (p. 199, emphasis in original)

For her part, Daynes admirably steps away from the sensationalism and luridness found in more polemical treatments of Mormon plural marriage. She confines her treatment to essentially a straightforward recounting of the history of plural marriage, its implementation and eventual decline and abandonment by the main body of Latter-day Saints, and the theological underpinnings and social outcomes of the practice. As must be with any worthwhile discussion of Mormon polygamy, Daynes is nuanced in her treatment, as evidenced in her concluding paragraph:

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for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) as *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (2002), *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (1997), *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (1985), and *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (2004–2009).

Polygamous societies differ from each other, just as polygamous marriages do. Polygamy is not a marriage system; it is a category encompassing many different marriage systems. Rules, traditions, and practices vary between groups and change over time. Living in plural marriage among the Apostolic United Brethren is a considerably different experience from living among the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints, and both differ from the Mormon experience in the nineteenth century. Each is shaped not only by ideas and practices within the group but also by the groups' relationship to the surrounding society. Generalizations and assumptions of similarity between various groups practicing polygamy are thus often misleading. Moreover, mainstream Mormons have retained the original revelation on celestial marriage but tied it to its strictly monogamous marriage system. (pp. 345–346)

Besides being informative in its own right, what Daynes offers in her article is a welcome corrective to much of the misleading and often wildly irresponsible material on the history of Mormon polygamy that is uncritically passed around these days online and in print.

There is much to be commended in the sort of approach advocated by Petrey and manifest in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*. “There is no doubt that public discussions of Mormonism will remain interested in difficult issues from its past, including polygamy and its history of excluding people of African descent from priesthood leadership; and its present, including excluding women from priesthood ordination and its teachings about homosexuality,” he acknowledges. However, “Rather than focus solely on these more problematic and controversial aspects, we might practice an attentiveness toward Mormonism as a paradigm for thinking about religion more broadly, to articulate Mormonism as offering a persuasive evaluation (for some) of human situations.” Petrey therefore recommends,

The questions that we should be asking, and Mormons should be answering: How does Mormonism handle the big questions? What is the meaning of life, of death, of the terrible and the good in the world? How do Mormon notions about the cosmos affect ethical decisions toward others? What do Mormon narratives about the past and the present offer their adherents? These are not simple questions, and the answers

are not simple either. To discuss them at all is a serious endeavor.”<sup>4</sup>

It is a serious endeavor, and one that should be taken seriously. To that end, I strongly endorse *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*. On balance it is a serious (and successful) attempt to talk about Mormonism in a productive and meaningful manner. As a fair warning to those who may be hesitant to purchase such an expensive book, much of the content in this volume will not be new to informed students of Mormonism.<sup>5</sup> There’s very little in the book that I, at least, perceived as new or groundbreaking, with most of the material deriving from each author’s published *oeuvre*. (Or so the case is with those contributors whose work I’m familiar with.) This isn’t to criticize the book but merely to make clear what any potential reader will be getting into by picking up the volume.

Returning to the question asked at the beginning of this review, what *is* significant about *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* perhaps isn’t so much what it says as what it signifies. It signifies that Mormonism as a theological, historical, and philosophical phenomenon should and is indeed being taken seriously in academia. Perhaps it is not being taken as seriously as other religious movements with longer, more venerable historical or theological pedigrees, but it is being taken seriously nonetheless.

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4 Petrey, “Is Mormonism Ridiculous?”

5 This is essentially acknowledged by Givens and Barlow at the outset of the book, who write, “In the present collection, no attempt is made to provide comprehensive coverage of this field coming to be called Mormon Studies. The *Handbook* is not an encyclopedia. ... What the editors have attempt to do is provide a number of chapters by leading scholars in their fields, to convey the range of disciplines and subjects where Mormonism might enrich and recontextualize any number of academic conversations” (p. 3).

