

CHRISTIAN GELLINEK. *Christus in Amerika? Mormonentum als christliche Religion in vergleichender Kirchengeschichte*. Münster, Germany: agenda Verlag, 1999. 150 pp. Foreword, introduction, bibliography. Paperback, 24.80 DM (\$10.00 from BYU Studies).

Reviewed by Richard D. Hacken

A graphic on the cover of this German paperback juxtaposes the face of the Statue of Liberty with an image of Thorvaldsen's sculpture *Christus*. The title translates as "*Christ in America? Mormonism as a Christian Religion in Comparative Ecclesiastical History*." On closer reading, we realize that the question forming the first part of the title (*Christ in America?*) is not asked with the incredulity and indignation we might expect in a European exposé of *yet another sect*. It is posed with the positively charged curiosity of an author writing for a society that often understands theological differences in geographical terms. In that sense—and with alternate sociohistorical, philosophical, and figurative approaches to the central question—the author is able to give a positive answer. Going beyond the obvious and welcome reference in the subtitle to the LDS Church as a Christian religion, in his final summation he calls the Church "a powerful pacesetter of Christianity on its path to illumination" (141).

The author who came to this unusual conclusion—certainly unusual for a non-Mormon German critic—has a remarkable interdisciplinary background that includes training in civil and ecclesiastical law at Göttingen and a Ph.D. in German from Yale. He has taught at various institutions in Germany, Switzerland, Poland, Canada, and the United States in disciplines as far-ranging as Latin, medieval German literature, comparative urban history, peace research, and migration studies. He is well known for his biography of Hugo Grotius; in fact, he states in the foreword that only by studying the literary elements of Grotius's elegant jurisprudence and theology was he able to make ecclesiastical parallels to the standard works of Mormonism.

After living well over two decades in the United States, and spending the fall 1998 semester at Brigham Young University as a visiting professor, Professor Emeritus Gellinek demonstrates a fair-minded openness to the concept of contemporary revelatory religion. He has gained a perspective on the Mormon Church that is distinctly different from the general understanding (and misunderstanding) in his native Germany. The stated purpose of his book is to help clear away misconceptions and clichés about Mormonism for well-educated people in the German-speaking world. To this end, there is a balanced bibliography (142–46) listing literature in German, Dutch, and English that ranges from the standard works and

Dean Jessee's *The Papers of Joseph Smith* to a recent Swiss-German title that compares the Church to a cancerous tumor.

Although they are not the target audience for *Christus in Amerika*, LDS members who know both German and their own religion well will find certain accent shifts that may offer new and refreshing insights. One is the aforementioned affinity to Hugo Grotius, the father of international law. In an anthropological treatise of 1642, *De Origine Gentium Americanarum Dissertatio*, Grotius allegedly postulated that emigrants from the House of Israel had populated the Americas: one group among them, the "Nephtalitae," practiced circumcision and polygamy—as Grotius claimed to the derision of his contemporaries (72–73). Another forerunner of the Restoration, William Penn, published a little-known pamphlet in 1674 entitled *Urim and Thummim* (65–67). Also of interest is a short section on posthumously published sociological commentaries of Max Weber with regard to the Mormons (136–37). One example is Weber's refutation of sociology's capacity as a science to comment on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The structural progression of the monograph leads through five stages: (1) Church history in the broader ecclesiastical context; (2) Mormon migration and settlement history; (3) processes of change in the LDS Church; (4) biographical vignettes of the Church founders; and (5) comparisons and summary. It is an ambitious project for a book of under 150 pages, and some "major peaks" (the author's own metaphorical formulation, see p. 127) are understandably brought into view more distinctly than are secondary summits. The third chapter ("Turning Points and Continuity in LDS Church History") and the fourth ("The Founding Personalities and Their Comparative Accomplishments for Mormon Society") are the most detailed, together taking up half of the book. This reviewer would have appreciated more depth in the areas of comparison and summation.

Yet Gellinek's analytical distillations can suggest a great deal with very few words. One example is his categorization of the first five Presidents of the Church: President Smith (bearing of spirit); President Young (pragmatism); President Taylor (rigor); President Woodruff (art of transition); and President Snow (openness to the world). On a stewardship spectrum from spirit to matter, he theorizes that Presidents Smith and Taylor were of one "human type," Presidents Young and Woodruff of another, with President Snow in between (127). While some might argue that these varying prophetic "types" only manifested themselves in the face of changing historical needs and circumstances, this theory does provide some mental nougat.

Quite foreign to LDS sensibilities—but not without a certain attraction—is a discussion of the Book of Mormon and other standard works in

traditional Christian terms of “apocrypha” and “canon.” The Mormon canon is not a “hermetically sealed” one, Gellinek finally concludes, but “a living [*lebendig*] mediated message” (20). His occasional references to LDS teachings as “dogma” are likewise not meant in a pejorative sense: a major part of his ecclesiastical comparison contrasts “permanent Calvinistic dogmatic burdens” to the doctrinal “alleviations” offered by Mormonism (134–35).

It is rejuvenating to be reminded by an outside observer—as we are here in the careful and objectively erudite scholarship of *Christus in Amerika*—that the seeming simplicity of spiritual truths may, on closer examination, possess an unappreciated profundity.

[Copies of this book may be obtained inexpensively from BYU Studies—Ed.]

Richard D. Hacken is European Studies Biographer for the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. He received his Ph.D. in German in 1975 from the University of California at Davis. He can be reached through the BYU Studies email address: byu_studies@byu.edu.