

Terryl L. Givens. *People of Paradox:
A History of Mormon Culture.*

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Mormonism is rife with paradoxes that raise many questions. How do we keep ourselves unspotted while battling against the world? How can we be equally grateful for the good and the bad things that happen to us?

Latter-day Saints often see themselves as living in an evil universe that must be tempered by a huge store of Mormon optimism. As I like to say, we believe in the Atonement but not in original sin. We celebrate the Resurrection more than the Crucifixion. We look to immortality but look away from death. These contradictory views help us make sense of our suffering; but no one has made as much of them as Terryl L. Givens. In his *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*, Givens introduces a set of four central paradoxes embedded in Mormonism.

Givens shows Mormons' complex contradictory responses to their faith and culture, which may surprise observers who consider Mormons to be rigid and fanatical in their obedience to rules. In part 1, he sets out a roadmap of LDS cultural formation based on tensions found between doctrines, practices, and culture. In part 2, Givens abandons his oppositional approach to consider the varieties of Mormon cultural expression. He writes chapters on education, architecture, music and dance, theater, literature, and visual arts from the founding of the Church in 1830 to the pioneer West of 1890. Part 3 explores the same categories through to the present day.

Throughout the book, Givens makes little use of the usual historical events. They are mentioned and assumed, but his foremost concern is the Mormons' culture—the water they swim in but are unaware of. Givens takes seriously activities other historians and theologians consider peripheral, such as music, dancing, art, and fiction. Most Latter-day Saints would relegate these aspects to a lesser order than gospel studies. Givens makes them primary. Perhaps his point of view comes from being a student of

literature, which as a discipline focuses more on interpretation than on austere facts. Consequently, he looks at things with fresh eyes and in elegant prose explores their implications. Givens's work is worth reading as much for its eloquence as for its keen insights.

In establishing the first major paradox, Givens sets out the poles of authority and radical freedom by citing Richard Poll's comparison of "Iron Rod Mormons" and "Liahona Mormons." Poll's genius, I believe, was choosing two positive, equally compelling Book of Mormon images as symbols of dichotomy. Iron Rod Mormons cling to the banister in Lehi's dream, always knowing where they are and how they are guided. Liahona Mormons, named for Lehi's compass, are given information but must puzzle out the directions and find their own way (16–17). Givens also points to the War in Heaven as the "first cosmic conflict on record . . . between the principle of agency and the threat of compulsion" (5). He idealizes the freedom Smith stressed, who taught "correct principles" so people could "govern themselves" (8). Givens then compares Joseph's expansion of the prophetic voice and priesthood governance with the authoritarian control of Brigham Young. Young, he notes, needing a loyal group of followers on the frontier, brought all aspects of life under his direction. Givens finds it ironic that the Church organized by Joseph Smith is now "one of the most centralized, hierarchical, authoritarian churches in America" (8). Mormons are thus divided on the issue of freedom versus authority. While some Mormons "will always be disposed to see unquestioning obedience to priesthood counsel as weakness and abdication of moral autonomy, . . . others will see independent-mindedness as a euphemism for the fetishizing of difference and pride" (19). Such tensions, Givens suggests, are most apparent in those engaged in creative and intellectual pursuits.

The second major paradox is between searching and certainty, between the "Endless Quest and Perfect Knowledge" (chapter 2). Givens further divides certainty into faith and knowing. Ours may be the only religion where a procession of very young children will assure the congregation that they "know" the Church is true. While this behavior may be easy for children, it requires the constant labor of study and prayer for adults, or as Givens says, a "ceaseless struggle through which we must engage the universe—and define ourselves morally" (29). Those with doubts may feel obligated to express more surety than they feel. Givens sees hope for creative Mormons here: "It may be in that very space between security born of possessing precious certainties and abject smallness before the magnitude of an almost unquenchable ignorance that Mormonism finds a tension productive of a genuinely religious art and intellectual expression" (35). I must note that while Mormons are willing to pledge their certainty of

knowledge, the list of “things to know” is not definitive—they subscribe to no creeds and gather “true principles” from all sources.

Givens’s third paradox steers between the sacred and the mundane, or, as he entitles chapter 3, between “Everlasting Burnings and Cinder Blocks.” In this paradox, the sacred distance between God and man is collapsed, making it possible for man to rise to a heavenly state. This view of a God who condescends to bring men and women to godhood is memorably stated in Lorenzo Snow’s couplet, “As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may become” (42). Other Christians deplore what they see as a hubristic human view that eliminates the sacred mystery of God, but Givens makes it clear that this view is not man’s ambition but God’s plan. God wants to elevate his creatures to exaltation. This paradox reflects contrary tendencies in a culture “that sacralizes and exalts the mundane”—the pioneering, the farming, the building—“even as it naturalizes and domesticates the sacred”—the sacrament, the relationship to deity, and the temple ceremonies (42). Joseph Smith’s worldview provides access to the miraculous by doing the ordinary.

Givens’s fourth and final paradox contrasts election and exile in chapter 4, “Peculiar People and Loneliness at the Top.” He compares the Mormons to the Puritans, saying that both claimed exclusivity, but that Puritans lived in a remote wilderness and that the early Mormons lived “in the context of a hostile culture” (53). The Mormons confronted an alien world surrounded by the riches of a host society that offered both temptation and promise. How could they remain pure?

Mormons wanted exclusivity from the time the Christ of the First Vision told Joseph Smith to join none of the churches. Mormons sought to be separate both doctrinally and physically. “The Mormon temple concretizes Mormon exceptionalism,” physically isolating the “spiritual elect in their own domain, while holding the rest of the world at bay, through strictly enforced admission procedures involving worthiness tests” (55). Still, the Mormon sense of uniqueness and exile is counterbalanced with a theology, rituals, and research programs that aspire to universal integration. We want to be part of things at the same time we distance ourselves from them. As Givens says, “After predicating their very existence on the corruption of all other Christian faiths and asserting their unique claim to be its ‘only true’ embodiment, Latter-day Saints are chagrined when they are excluded from the very community of believers that they have just excoriated” (58).

Having explored paradoxes within Mormonism in part 1, Givens sets Mormons’ creative and intellectual expressions into religious and artistic contexts in parts 2 and 3. Besides covering significant people and their

achievements, he supplies the perfect passages and quotations to the topic at hand. In doing so, he illuminates Mormon culture with vivid details: Sarah Kimball, a suffrage leader in Salt Lake City, attended Joseph Smith's School of the Prophets in Nauvoo when she was in her teens; when Joseph Smith got tired of studying Greek and Latin, "he would go and play with the children in their games about the house" to get some exercise (76); Brigham Young sent John Bernhisel to New York City to buy \$5,000 worth of books for the territory's library—it opened in 1852 at "about the same time that Boston's first public library opened, and before Chicago had one of its own" (91); in 1870, a higher percentage of Utah children attended school than did those of New York, Pennsylvania, or Massachusetts; according to the 1880 census, Utah literacy was 95 percent while it was only 87 percent in the nation as a whole (99).

In a time when the major denominations of the nineteenth century "were one in opposing the dance as a wicked sport" (131), Latter-day Saints were establishing a music band and a strong tradition in dance. But the sectarian fervor against music, dance, and other frivolity was difficult for Mormons to abandon at first. As an example of the contraries discussed above, Joseph Smith allowed the mansion house to be used for dances, but was reputed to retire alone to his room as a sign of quiet disapproval. The Church in Kirtland once disfellowshipped twenty-two brothers and sisters "until they [made] satisfaction for uniting with the world in a dance the Thursday previous" (134). Joseph's stance apparently softened in his last years when he authorized the formation of a brass band to be used at dance parties throughout Nauvoo (134–35). Brigham Young was a force that firmly entrenched music and dancing in Mormon society. For example, on February 9, 1846,

by request of Brother B. Young, the band met in the upper room of the Temple; played a few tunes, after which Brother Young arose and said that, as we were about to leave Nauvoo, we had come together, to pass off the evening, and that he thought it no harm to have a little recreation in singing, etc., as long as it is done in righteousness. He then called on the Lord to take charge of the meeting; the brethren and sisters then joined in and danced; during the evening they handed round some of our Nauvoo grape wine, which was excellent. About 3 o'clock they dismissed and all went home.

"Two days later, reported the *Warsaw Signal*, 1,000 Saints were wending their way west across the Mississippi" (130).

In early 1844, a reader wrote to the editor of the Church newspaper to clarify the apparent contradiction, asking whether dancing was approved. The anonymous editor, probably John Taylor, noted that dancing was fine

in the abstract but problematic when practiced. Dancing “leads people into bad company and causes them to keep untimely hours, [and] has a tendency to enervate and weaken the system, and lead to profligate and intemperate habits. And so far as it does this, so far it is injurious to society, and corrupting to the morals of youth” (135). I am so glad to have the question of dancing cleared up.

This book yields many such rewarding historical pearls. Givens continues his cultural exploration to the present, tracing the Church’s rapprochement and distancing from science, the tensions between faithfulness and intellectual striving, and the strains of reconciling Zion and the world. Today we find another seeming paradox: the Church backing away from teachings that would raise doubt or uncertainty and yet moving to a new, open look at the historical record.

Givens explores the arts chronologically with sharp comments and evaluations. He is particularly detailed while analyzing LDS-themed films and literature. He examines three novels published from 1939 to 1942, which received national attention largely due to their literary exploration of human drama created by polygamy. “There is just no getting around the fact that the public’s fascination with Mormonism has been predominantly a prurient obsession with this strange institution” (292). He sees Mormon writers as effective in shaping a Mormon identity with many threads, exploring the ideas, themes, and anxieties of Church members.

But what is in the future? Can Mormon artists find avenues to elaborate a “specifically Mormon theory of the beautiful?” (341). Givens sees promise in exploring human preexistence and in considering our esoteric theology. He thinks that Mormons would do well to move toward the universally human rather than the culturally particular. Mormons should avoid being narrowly provincial. “The tendency toward shallow triumphalism, on the one hand, and facile demonizing, on the other, has plagued more than one people in the process of self-definition,” he says (343). Let us hope that Mormon culture can overcome its limitations and fulfill the artistic promise of the expansive restored gospel.

People of Paradox can be used as a guidebook and should be on the reading list of every student of Mormon culture. I await with interest Givens’s report on our next cultural epoch.

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