

Claudia L. Bushman. *Contemporary Mormonism:
Latter-day Saints in Modern America.*

Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006

Reviewed by Armand L. Mauss

This book is a welcome addition to a growing list of solid introductory works on the Latter-day Saints. The increasing number and prominence of Saints in the United States and the emerging academic discipline of Mormon studies have combined to necessitate a variety of such one-volume introductory texts, each aimed at a somewhat different kind of audience. Among the most recent of this introductory genre is Terry Givens's *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America*, which combines history, literature, and contemporary LDS life in a dignified but readable academic style.¹ In contrast is the lighter *Mormonism for Dummies*, by Jana Riess and Christopher Bigelow, which, despite its whimsical title and style, is both thorough and reliable.² Claudia L. Bushman co-authored two earlier historical overviews with her husband, Richard L. Bushman,³ but the present book, with Claudia as sole author, focuses less on history and more on contemporary LDS experience. It takes an appealing middle ground between the lighter *Dummies* and the more academic *Latter-day Saint Experience*. It is not only a thorough introduction to the Saints and their religion for the curious and intelligent non-Mormon in general, it would also make an ideal textbook for an upper-division or graduate college course in Mormon studies.⁴

Claudia Bushman is among the most productive and knowledgeable scholars in the field of Mormon studies today. Those of us in her generation will always remember her and her distinguished New England colleagues for the early and wonderful collection of historical essays *Mormon Sisters*, and for the periodical *Exponent II*, which they founded in the 1970s.⁵ More recently she was the editor of a distinguished set of graduate seminar papers produced under her tutelage during a summer seminar at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute at Brigham Young University.⁶ Furthermore, Claudia brings to her work not only a lifetime of research and study of the Latter-day Saints, but, like her husband, Richard, she is also

a seasoned scholar in Americana more generally, having authored two books based on early American personal journals plus a commemorative book for the quincentennial of Columbus's voyage of discovery.⁷ Probably less well known among LDS readers in the western United States is Claudia's personal civic involvement in many important historical commemorations and projects during the years she has been living along the eastern seaboard. All of this rich background in American and Mormon history lies behind Claudia's work, including this present book.

Contemporary Mormonism has eleven chapters, a preface, a very useful chronology emphasizing the modern period, thirty-three pages of end-notes, and a relatively brief index. The chapter headings are indicative of the contemporary (as contrasted to historical) focus that is the book's main difference from the earlier introductions to Mormonism: (1) Encountering the Mormons; (2) Identity, Beliefs, and Organization; (3) Families; (4) The Missionary Experience and the International Church; (5) Temples and Genealogy; (6) Race, Ethnicity, and Class; (7) Gender and Sexual Orientation; (8) The Public Faces of Mormonism; (9) The Intellectual Activities of Recent Years; (10) The City of Zion; and (11) The Church at One Hundred and Seventy-Five. With neither the length nor the intention that would make this an encyclopedic work, it nevertheless is rich in reliable and interesting information about the Saints and the Church.

The book has three features in particular that sustain reader interest from beginning to end: First, the book takes on some difficult and touchy issues in today's LDS Church with balance and fairness but without flinching; second, the author is refreshingly candid about the problems, dilemmas, conflicts, and diverse opinions that surround many of the doctrines, practices, and policies of the Church, making it clear that Mormons do not all march in lockstep; and third, the main points of the book, whether touchy or not, are often personalized with illustrations taken from oral histories or interviews, conducted either by Bushman or by others whose writings she samples liberally for these personal voices.⁸ Readers may come away feeling that they have had an inside glimpse of what Mormons as "real people" think and feel and discuss among themselves. The author thus succeeds in her stated desire to approach her work "with the eye of an amateur anthropologist observing her native people" (xiv).

Space will permit only a few examples: Chapter 3 juxtaposes the official "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" against the realities of trying to live up to the ideals in that document, particularly in the face of widespread singleness, divorce, and changing family dynamics. Bushman cites statistical studies showing four ways that LDS families differ from other middle-American families: "Mormons (1) are more conservative

about sexual behavior before marriage; (2) are more likely to marry, less likely to divorce; (3) have larger families; and (4) have families marked by more male authority and traditional division of labor” (46). But these differences are not as dramatic as Mormons might expect; Mormons and their families are “just a little different than other Americans and are squarely within the standard norms for the United States” (49). The ideals in the Proclamation set high standards and induce a certain amount of pressure—not to say guilt. “Many hard realities work against Latter-day Saint family ideals,” but “even Mormons who cannot rise to ideal behavior defend the Proclamation as the way things should be. Like many LDS aspirations, this is a tough one, but one that many strive for and some may have achieved” (51, 55). Chapter 3 includes a brief but candid overview of modern polygamy and its origins, distinguishing appropriately among the various styles and networks in today’s polygamous landscape.

These days, some discussion of race, class, and gender is *de rigueur* for social scientists and social commentators on almost any group or community. Chapter 6 provides a candid explanation for the traditional LDS struggle with racism, not only where black people are concerned, but also with Native American and Spanish-speaking Church members in the United States. The author rightly attributes the ban against ordaining blacks to the priesthood before 1978 to Brigham Young rather than to Joseph Smith. The discussion of class in this chapter deals not so much with socioeconomic differences among LDS members (which, in fact, are not very extreme in the United States), but rather with various projects undertaken by the Church to assist the very poor in this country and elsewhere.

Chapter 7 takes on the two hot-button topics of gender and sexual orientation. On the first of these issues, Bushman writes as much out of personal experience as out of historical understanding. She analyzes the changing posture of Church leadership toward the roles and prerogatives of LDS women, arguing that the posture was expansive during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and more conservative during the second half of the twentieth century, with some effort made in recent decades to accommodate the aspirations of modern LDS women. The overt intervention of Church leaders during the 1970s in the International Women’s Year and Equal Rights Amendment campaigns is candidly explained and some of its consequences identified. Having noted in chapter 3 the strain between the family ideals in the Proclamation and the realities of actual experience, Bushman points out in chapter 7 the related contradictions in the normative roles for women in the Church. “Women feel they are sometimes given contradictory lessons,” she notes, citing differing counsel from Presidents James E. Faust and Ezra Taft Benson about whether LDS

women belong in the employment marketplace (116–17). Yet Bushman’s discussion of the women’s situation in the Church is carefully nuanced to take into account the gospel values at stake and the varieties of attitudes, aspirations, and needs among different Mormon women.

Bushman demonstrates candor and balance especially well in her treatment of the Church’s concern for homosexuals. She cites again the proclamation on the family as the doctrinal basis for the rejection of homosexual relationships by the Church, but distinguishes (as does the Church) between homosexual acts and homosexual orientation. She candidly outlines LDS efforts in the political arena to prevent same-sex marriage from being accepted in public policy but notes that the Church also recognizes the ambiguity around the question of whether homosexual orientation can be changed. She acknowledges differences among Mormons at the grassroots over whether and how the Church might somehow accommodate same-sex unions. Acknowledging that “the powerful image of a faithful family” makes this an especially difficult issue for “a basically conservative Church to respond to positively,” she also recognizes that members “wish to avoid hurting those caught in the crosscurrents” of the controversy over how to deal with the condition of homosexuals in the LDS Church and in Mormon society (129).

This is a truly engaging introduction to real life among today’s Mormons in the United States. It deserves widespread adoption in college classes, and it will inform general readers from a grassroots perspective, which is not always possible with official Church literature.

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1. Terryl L. Givens, *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2004).

2. Jana Riess and Christopher Bigelow, *Mormonism for Dummies* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2005), part of the well-known Wiley *Dummies* series.

3. Claudia L. Bushman and Richard L. Bushman, *Mormons in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Both of these are rather short overviews focused mainly on Mormon history.

4. Like other publications from the Greenwood Publishing Group, however, *Contemporary Mormonism* is relatively high priced, which might unfortunately reduce its appeal as an undergraduate textbook.

5. Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press, 1976; 2d edition Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997). *Exponent II* is published quarterly when possible, otherwise occasionally, at Arlington, Massachusetts. The most current volume is No. 28 (2006–07). After the first two issues of that volume, the publication is to be published electronically only—no longer in print.

6. Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Latter-day Saint Women in the Twentieth Century* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2004).

7. Claudia L. Bushman, *A Good Poor Man's Wife: Being a Chronicle of Harriet Hanson Robinson and Her Family in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1981); Claudia L. Bushman, *In Old Virginia: Slavery, Farming, and Society in the Journal of John Walker* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); and Claudia L. Bushman, *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992).

8. One of the author's most common resorts for these personal voices was to Susan Buhler Taber, *Mormon Lives: A Year in the Elkton Ward* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), a ward in which the author once lived with her husband, who was the ward bishop. Other ward histories were also occasionally cited.