

American University Washington College of Law

From the Selected Works of Kenneth Anderson

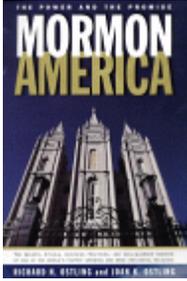
November 28, 1999

A Peculiar People: The Mystical and Pragmatic Appeal of Mormonism

Kenneth Anderson



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kenneth_anderson/56/



LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Sunday, November 28, 1999

'A Peculiar People':

The Mystical and Pragmatic Appeal of Mormonism

Review by Kenneth Anderson

Mormon America: The Power and the Promise

Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling

Accounts of Mormons and the Mormon Church--officially the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints--tend toward one of two extremes. On the one hand, accounts of Mormonism from the church's founding by Joseph Smith in the 1820s have emphasized the sensational, the lurid, the scandalous, the heretical and the titillating, for the reason that, well, there is much in Mormon history, culture and doctrine that is sensational, lurid, scandalous, heretical and titillating, as measured against mainstream American culture then and now. Mormons had (and some dissident Mormons still have) lots of wives; they do not smoke or drink or even drink coffee; the genuinely devout ones wear funny underwear and do strange rituals in temples closed to outsiders; Mormonism's presumably deeply oppressed women bear an unfashionably large number of children, and up until just a couple of decades ago, the Mormon church denied blacks full participation in the church. From the 19th century down to the present day, Mormonism has succeeded in pushing American society's hot-buttons on religion, race and sex.

On the other hand, other accounts of Mormons--accounts of the people rather than the articles of their strange faith--have often emphasized the cheerful virtue, the upright and yet often relaxed, pragmatic goodness of its adherents, their ability to hold together families and raise decent children and provide the consolations of community in the confusing modern world more successfully than many others. These accounts often pass over in discreet silence the sometimes embarrassing tenets of faith that, especially if one were Mormon, might have been thought an inestimably important part of making that moral success possible. If opponents of Mormonism have often asked, "Can't we stop the Mormons from being Mormon?", ostensible admirers of Mormons as people have often asked, at least by implication, "Can't we have Mormons--but without

Mormonism?" This is a circumstance not unknown to minority religions with their peculiar beliefs and customs. But Mormonism is unique in this country's historical experience for being so thoroughly American--deeply intertwined with the history of the United States, especially the West--yet with enough deviation that it becomes more jarring than a religion genuinely alien to American culture. For that reason, Mormons and the Mormon Church have reason to be glad that Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling's new book, "Mormon America," succumbs to neither extreme in reporting on Mormonism. The Ostlings (the co-authors are husband and wife, both journalists and non-Mormons; Richard Ostling was a long-time religion reporter for Time magazine) have succeeded splendidly in their aim to produce a "candid but non-polemical overview written for non-Mormons and Mormons alike, focusing on what is distinctive and culturally significant about this growing American movement." It is a scrupulous, fair-minded account, one that neither shies away from the controversies that have shaped the perception of Mormonism nor has any particular ax to grind about them.

I say this as a lapsed, inactive Mormon, someone who was raised in a devoutly Mormon home and many years ago served a two-year mission for the church, someone who today is non-practicing, although fundamentally sympathetic to the church and its culture (this bit of autobiography is important in a field in which so many commentators bring agendas, hidden and otherwise). I object to accounts that caricature or pathologize Mormonism--starting with what much of educated America today takes as its source book for Mormonism, Tony Kushner's "Angels in America"--even if I do not find enough in the doctrine that I could believe to count myself a practicing adherent. But reading "Mormon America," even with my faculties for detecting patronization and pathologization turned up high, I found the book remarkably careful, fair and untendentious. Whether the Mormon Church and its hierarchy will find it so I am unsure; in dealing with many things in Mormon history and culture, it has seemed simply to hope that if no one discusses them, they will go away. Of course they do not, and "Mormon America" is a useful introduction to the Mormon Church even from the church's point of view because it discusses scandal and controversy in a plain, unadorned fashion with none of the prickly defensiveness alternating with spin-doctor insincerity--what the Ostlings aptly call "isolationist, and defensive reactions"--that, alas, regularly afflicts the Mormon Church's own department of public relations.

And matters of scandal, controversy and embarrassment abound. The religious claims could be considered embarrassing enough, starting with Joseph Smith's founding vision in which, he said, he was visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ in a grove in upstate New York, followed by slews of angels from on high, naming Smith as the person to reestablish Christ's church on Earth in "these latter days." Nonbelievers, religious or irreligious, will find these claims preposterous. Yet they are not, it should be noted, different from the mystical claims of visions and revelations and visitations made by innumerable Christian and other mystics across history, which are always preposterous to unbelievers; I

find accounts of visitations by the Virgin Mary, for example, as absurd as any Catholic must find Joseph Smith's accounts. But the fact that so much of the foundational mysticism of Christianity is alleged to have taken place in the suitably distant past gives it no greater respectability than Smith's more recent claims.

It is not mysticism, recent or distant, whether in Joseph Smith's visions or St. Paul's hearing a voice, that creates special problems for Mormon religious belief. A much more intractable problem is that Joseph Smith's claims go far beyond the mystical to claims of fact which ultimately are historical. The Book of Mormon, for example, the first work of Mormon scripture, purports to be a historically true account of pre-Columbian people in the New World; it teaches that they were part of the Tribes of Israel who were visited and converted in America by the resurrected Jesus. As a matter of Christian doctrine--leaving aside the peculiarity of the geographical location of its story--the book's content amounts to a fairly traditional call for reform of Christ's church. It is all about faith, repentance and baptism and has little to say about the later, vastly more radical religious doctrines Smith preached, such as polygamy and the plurality of Gods, the idea of a Mother in Heaven (accepted from the church's earliest days in principle, although calls by Mormon feminists to recognize prayers to her constitute apostasy in the view of the church hierarchy) and the defining doctrine of Mormonism today, that human beings may individually progress in goodness and knowledge themselves to become gods.

The Book of Mormon also says that Native Americans resulted from a final ethnic war among those people; that they were cursed by God with a dark skin, although the book promises their eventual blessing and return to God. Curiously, the offensiveness to today's ears of such a teaching--the Mormon Church has been quietly and systematically excising the most egregious of those scriptural passages in recent years--is not the only reading these passages of the Book of Mormon have been given. In the 1980s' El Salvador war, for example, guerrilla forces were reported to have included at least a few indigenous Mormons who--quite contrary to the official Mormon Church--had taken those scriptural verses as evidence of having been blessed by God in a just war against white oppression. I recall speaking with a couple of indigenous Mormons in El Salvador in those years--rural political supporters of the guerrillas although not themselves fighters. What they emphasized in their reading of Mormon scripture was a deep satisfaction that, at last, here was a religion that thought them important enough to have been visited by the risen Christ, not merely relying on events in faraway Palestine. It seemed to me then, as now, no worse an ethnic creation myth than what contemporary makers of myths of indigenismo, the Rigoberta Menchus and so on, elaborate, and who anyway ultimately rely in their narratives on various white American and European romanticisms about revolution and armed struggle or the supposed eco-awareness of indigenous culture or New Age presumptions of Native American spirituality.

The underlying problem, however, is that, notwithstanding the heroic efforts of devout Mormon scholars, researchers and scientists, evidence is not exactly mounting to support the Book of Mormon as a genuinely ancient document. Nor is it safely off in realms beyond proof and disproof, the stuff of mysticism, in the way that most religions are careful to do in the face of rational science. It purports to be the historical fact of the world--one of numerous claims by Smith and early Mormons that could not be disputed at the time but that in today's world appear in trouble on the facts.

The problem of the Book of Mormon for devout believers illustrates why, within Mormonism, the relevant subject, the most threatening subject, is history and not theology. A religion that has made, so to speak, many seemingly rash claims about historical matters is specially liable to assault from the discipline of history; likewise, too, a religion that has with scandal and controversy in its past but that also has made a concerted attempt over decades to scrub and polish and airbrush away that past in the interests of achieving respectability must worry about prying historians. To a significant extent, historians with sufficient interest in undertaking these questions of early Mormon practices, sources and doctrines have themselves been Mormon. They have been caught, however, between a genuinely deeply held Mormon theological principle that the advancement of all knowledge is to grow closer to the glory of God and the institutional church's awareness that history is dangerous. "Mormon America" cites perhaps the most reactionary of the Mormon senior leaders, Boyd K. Packer, who said in 1981 that "the writer or teacher who has an exaggerated loyalty to the theory that everything must be told is laying a foundation for his own judgment. . . . [S]ome things are to be taught selectively and some things are to be given only to those who are worthy." Notwithstanding this troubling tension, these Mormon historians' inquiries have taken them into the roots of Joseph Smith's beliefs in magic, sources of Mormon temple ceremonies in Masonic rites, the role and status of women in the early Mormon church and, of course, polygamy. As might be expected, their findings and conclusions have not always been congenial to the church, especially insofar as those findings have been deployed by the (very tiny) band of Mormon intellectuals and--sometimes the same people but not always--social activists who would like to reform the Mormon Church, particularly in matters of gender and sexual orientation. The church has reacted sharply in the last decade by removing various of them from teaching posts and excommunicating them. The Ostlings document these struggles with admirable dispassion, understanding fully, as everyone involved does, that an institution that has constructed so elaborately a sanitized past for itself is likely to continue to find itself discomfited by history.

I sometimes wonder if I might have remained a moderately devout Mormon had I done what I suspect many educated Mormons actually do in the face of uncomfortable historical evidence, which is to conclude implicitly--very implicitly--that none of this matters in its literal truth or falsity. What matters is the evolving institution of the church and particularly its modernization and globalization; let us

not be disposed, in other words, to throw the baby out with the bathwater over such quibbles as whether there really were horse-drawn chariots in pre-Columbian America or to what extent Joseph Smith drew his conceptions of Mormon temple ceremonies out of Freemasonry. Perhaps the spiritually mature way to deal with these things is to do as all religionists have done over the centuries when confronted with inconvenient facts: Undertake a strategic retreat into an un-disprovable mysticism that protects both the religious institution and the possibility of spirituality as a higher, indispensable value. I have no quarrel with mysticism, but it is problematic for Mormon theology in a way more pronounced than for many other religions.

A Mormon withdrawal into mysticism is made difficult by the fact that the theology of Joseph Smith and his successors, such as Brigham Young, is not in its form of expression, mystical. On the contrary, the immense spiritual attraction of Mormonism's doctrines--particularly on the eternal nature of families, the essential goodness of human beings and the idea of eternal progression--is precisely that however mystical they might ultimately be as ideas, they are presented and understood within Mormon life as preeminently reasonable. The tone of the early Mormon prophets even when speaking of the most astonishing doctrines never has the mystical quality of, say, a St. Teresa; rather it is always marked by a reasonableness, a common sense quality that locates it--in discursive tone if not precisely in substance--firmly within the Enlightenment. It deliberately invites judgment on reasonable, rational grounds; it appeals to the faculty of natural reason.

This peculiar commingling of mystical (as well as historically unsupported) doctrines on the one hand and pragmatic rationality on the other is a strong feature of contemporary Mormons as individuals. Educated Mormon culture has long been characterized, for example, by outstanding physical scientists and engineers, as strictly rational as possible in their worldly work yet devout in their adherence to many historical beliefs that would not pass the test of rational science, and believers, moreover, in deeply mystical ideas, even if they would not represent them as such. My own father spent his career as a chemistry professor and university dean, a dedicated and rational teacher of science. Yet in the Mormon Church his function--in a church staffed by lay clergy--for many years has been to deliver blessings, to put his hands on the heads of church members and tell them things as moved by God, which are recorded, transcribed and kept by the church member as a meditative guide to God's intentions for him or her in life. Surely, to an outsider, this is very close to wild mysticism, yet my father is far indeed from being a wild mystic. Nor is it that he bifurcates his rational life from this mystical religious experience and has some sort of existential disconnect between them. On the contrary, his experience of giving these Mormon blessings is that the process of "following the spirit" is itself "reasonable," in a way that is highly characteristic of the Mormon trait of perceiving mysticism as rational practice.

This ability to wrap a mystical worldview in Enlightenment language of reasonableness and rationality has, however, an important consequence for the tasks of modernization and globalization that the contemporary Mormon Church has set for itself. The very fact that doctrines and views that the church itself wants to reform are already expressed in a language of utter reasonableness and rationality makes it considerably harder--not impossible, but harder--to jettison or reform them also in the language of reason and rationality; one is, so to speak, deprived of the tool of language as a tool of modernization because one has already used it as the tool of that which one wants to modernize. Vatican II, by contrast, had an unreformed practice and a hitherto under-deployed language of modernist reform at its disposal, which made the task of reform greatly easier, if only by clarifying what was old and what was new. The Ostlings make very clear that the institutional Mormon Church has, by its own standards, undertaken a deliberate march toward modernization even if it cannot quite characterize it as such; yet the unreformed church has long been set in its ways in a modernizing language.

In a hierarchical church, in which authority comes from the top down, this may not seem an important consideration. If the hierarchy seeks to modernize the church, to get rid of old and embarrassing and disreputable doctrines, then it seems self-evident that it can simply do so and the faithful will follow. What matters to Mormons is their "living prophet"; the Ostlings are correct to quote the late Mormon Church president and prophet Ezra Taft Benson that "a living prophet trumps dead ones." But when the institution is a church and a religion, then the rhetorical tools by which that trump is played matter a great deal. It matters whether the tools of modernizing language have in some sense already been used and used up; for the attempt to reuse them inevitably raises questions of authenticity and legitimacy, even in a religion that prizes obedience above everything else..

And rhetoric matters especially, one might think, in a church which purports to operate by direct, divine revelation. A belief in direct, divine revelation has the virtue of allowing great flexibility at critical moments, as when the early Mormon prophet Wilford Woodruff announced by divine revelation in 1890 the abandonment of polygamy following the passage of draconian federal laws--some of the most radically unjust in the history of the republic--dissolving the Mormon Church. But it also means that the Mormon Church does not have available to it, for example, Catholicism's post-Vatican II understanding that the Catholic Church is a "pilgrim" church, seeking with deep humility a partly hidden and uncertain path through the world; Mormons may individually have the virtue of humility, but the Mormon Church as an institution does not. The Ostlings cite a commonly held Mormon view that "some may see change in the teachings and practices [of the church] as an inconsistency or weakness, but to Latter-day Saints change is a sign of the very foundation of strength," viz., that a "living prophet" guides the church according to God's will. But of course this reflects a certain amount of nervous bravado because all it means is that neither

consistency nor inconsistency with past doctrines constitutes evidence of anything. Plainly, among Mormons and their leaders, a certain anxiety and a certain lurking concern for inauthenticity and illegitimacy--has the all-knowing God really changed His mind or was it just His leaders?--remains, even with the implicit acceptance that what really matters is not doctrine for its own sake but the forward march of the corporate church.

Questions of authenticity and legitimacy in the march toward change are most evident at the fringes of the Mormon world. By and large Mormons worldwide are happy--relieved even more, perhaps--with the tendency of the church to draw itself more into the mainstream of Christian denominations and to simplify, rather than complicate, the theology in order to make it more universally appealing to populations around the world. In no matter was this modernization of greater relief than the final abandonment in the 1970s by the Mormon Church of its official racism, its refusal to allow blacks full standing in the church. (Historically the Mormon Church's position was complicated; despite the theological racism, the church was anti-slavery, and the antebellum presence of sizable numbers of nonslaveholding Mormons in uneasily pro-slavery Missouri was one of many reasons Mormons had troubles with their non-Mormon neighbors. Joseph Smith himself favored the "return to Africa" movement that off and on attracted some followers, black and white.) The Mormon Church was far later desegregating than other American churches, in part because the doctrine was not one of a separate but equal, segregated social order merely but one of actual theology and doctrine. It is possible to speculate that an ordinarily very Mormon language of pragmatic, natural reason was not as readily available as it might have been as an internally legitimate ground of appeal against racism because it had already been elaborately deployed to the ends of racist theology. And this cost the Mormon Church decades not merely in desegregating but in carrying its worldwide mission to Africa and elsewhere--although as the Ostlings observe, it is rapidly making up for lost time in places like the South African townships while hoping against hope that over time the ugly, embarrassing racism of its early theology will be quietly forgotten.

The Ostlings document very well, however, that resistance to the march by the institutional church toward mainstream Christianity and reform has produced at least a small wave of reaction, something that has come to be called "Mormon fundamentalism." Mormon fundamentalism is characterized by a return to the defining feature of early Mormonism, at least in the eyes of the world: polygamy. The attitude of mainstream Mormons toward polygamy is much more complicated than libertarians or liberal do-gooders or conservative Christians have any idea. On the one hand, although Mormons often find it embarrassing to talk about, they--we--are certainly not ashamed of it. The Utah elites that run the Mormon Church, after all, are its descendants. On the other hand, there is complete acceptance that, whatever its theological status in the hereafter, it is gone for good in the temporal world. If mainstream Mormons are not alien to the idea of polygamy because some of them are descended from polygamists, they

are no more comfortable with it in today's world than are their suburban neighbors. Among the millions of converts worldwide who will soon constitute the majority of Mormons, it is a dead letter, a matter of the distant Utah past. However much polygamy, through various breakaway Mormon sects, may wind up on the daytime TV talk shows, it has little to do with contemporary worldwide Mormonism. Still, as "Mormon America" correctly notes, Mormon fundamentalism and its polygamy are here to stay, and no matter how much the official Mormon Church seeks to separate itself from today's polygamy by excommunication or other means of ostracism, it will inevitably be associated with Mormonism.

While making Mormonism mainstream and "respectable" within the culture of suburbia has provoked reaction and radicalism, Mormonism has also experienced the growth of another modestly disaffected group, a small but growing body of intellectuals within Mormonism who experience these days what the Ostlings describe as "palpable worry and alienation." It is, however, important, as the Ostlings observe, not to overestimate the relevance of this intellectual class and its discontents to the Mormon Church just because it is a group which naturally tugs at the heartstrings of intellectuals, writers and journalists outside the church. After all, church discipline in the 1990s aimed at purging Mormon dissident intellectuals, as "Mormon America" says, "barely registered on the Richter scale" of reaction among the church's rank and file.

These Mormon intellectuals tend to exhibit two characteristics in their relationship with the church. First, dissenting Mormon intellectuals sometimes appear simply to wish that Mormonism, with the help of a few opportune divine revelations, would take on all the elements of contemporary liberal culture that befit the social and cultural mores of contemporary liberal intellectuals who also happen to be Mormon--broadly speaking, the political and social views of the National Public Radio constituency, on abortion, feminism, gay rights, the environment, race and ethnicity in America and so on. In that respect, at least, Mormon intellectual dissenters sometimes resemble those ostensible friends of the Mormon people who wish that they could have Mormons without Mormonism. Second, however, increasingly what characterizes Mormon intellectuals is that, although sometimes dissenting, they desire deeply to stay Mormon, to raise their children as Mormon and to stay within the church. Although church authorities deny that there can be within Mormonism a "loyal opposition," an intelligentsia that is able to express itself within a certain range of tolerance of opinion, as a counterpoint to blind obedience to the church hierarchy, in fact it is an indication of the growing intellectual and moral confidence of Mormonism that its intellectuals do not simply drift away--I suppose I am a minor case in point of drift--rather than remaining to dissent. I do not suppose that the Mormon Church hierarchy will recognize it as such, but the fact of intellectuals remaining to dissent indicates some success in the modernization march that the church has undertaken; there is something spiritually there that even those who have all the resources of secular intellectualism at their disposal find they are invested in and are not

willing simply to give up and walk away from, not even when pushed. It ought to be, in fact, some small source of pride to the institutional Mormon Church.

Yet dissent will always remain difficult in a church devoted to obedience, and the Mormon Church is not about to go so mainstream that it adopts Protestant doctrines of the primacy of conscience over obedience to religious hierarchy. And it is, after all, incumbent on dissident Mormon intellectuals to recognize that the process of modernization does not necessarily mean becoming secular liberals and that the function of change in the Mormon Church is not, at bottom, to make the lives of those drawn to secular intellectual culture indistinguishable from those of their secular friends. It is, rather, to promote a singular vision of the kingdom of God, and in that endeavor, whether ultimately it admits of prayers to a Mother in Heaven or a hundred other things that would put Mormonism on the cutting edge of secular ideology, it is certain that Mormons will remain what they always have been, as God in Mormon scripture describes them: a "peculiar people."

(Kenneth Anderson teaches at American University Law School, Washington, D.C., and is Legal Editor of "[Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know](#).")