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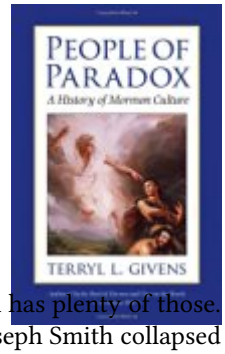
Terryl Givens. *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xvii + 414 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-516711-5.



Reviewed by Seth Perry (University of Chicago Divinity School)
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Terryl Givens, professor of literature and religion at the University of Richmond, has distinguished his study of Mormon cultural expression with two remarkable accomplishments. The first is that Givens has derived his discussion of Mormon culture from the details of Mormon theology, uniting the practical and theoretical elements of religious life with a sincerity and seamlessness rarely achieved in academic study. Second, rather than elude or attempt to explain away the contradictions inherent to Mormon theology (as much as to any), Givens situates them as the core of the book. Part 1 sets the scene with an exploration of "four especially rich and fertile tensions" in Mormon thought, while parts 2 and 3 comprise the engaging discussion of Mormon culture that is the author's true aim (p. xiv). From dancing and theater to literature and architecture, he describes nearly two centuries of development in Mormon intellectual and artistic expression, material that has almost certainly never been so carefully presented to a non-Mormon audience.

Implicit in a study such as this, of course, is the assertion that there *is* a distinct Mormon culture. Recognizing a need to define what exactly that means but justifiably wary of getting bogged down in defining "culture," Givens merely asserts three general meanings invoked by the term–a culture is "a general habit of mind, the intellectual development of a society, and its general body of arts" (p. xiii). "Peoplehood" is a status that Mormons have sought in various metaphorical and literal ways, since the church's beginning, and scholars inside and outside the faith debate the extent to which it has been achieved. Givens answers the question by emphasizing an agonistic view toward the origins and engines of cultural expression: tension and conflict are some of the most important motivators of cultural expression, he states, and Mormonism has plenty of those. "Mormonism, a system in which Joseph Smith collapsed sacred distance to bring a whole series of opposites into radical juxtaposition, seems especially rife with paradox–or tensions that only appear to be logical contradictions" (p. xiv).

As with his definition of culture generally, Givens spends little time making plain the connection between tension and expression, and, here, a more substantial theoretical introduction may have been in order; brief references in this text and in Givens's other work make clear that he is fluent with the relevant theory. The way tension is applied throughout the book as an organizing trope makes the connection plain enough: cultural production is, in part, a process of elucidating a given set of beliefs and historical experiences, and it takes a sufficiently complicated set of beliefs and experiences to produce a viable, distinct "culture." Mormon culture, as explored by Givens, suggests that Mormonism constitutes such a fertile field.

Givens organizes his study organically around four distinct clusters of tension, and spends a chapter highlighting the theological and historical sources of each. The first of these is "the polarity of authoritarianism and individualism" (p. xiv). In formulating his theological framework, Smith exalted individual ability. Joining a widespread tendency in his day toward repudiating Calvinist determinism, he empowered each soul to choose his or her own salvation and even to accede to godhood, in part, by virtue of his or her own works. At the same time, the church that Smith founded demands obedience to authority–the counsel of the Prophet and the various levels of priesthood is understood as divinely inspired, in many ways equating disobedience to lead-

ers with disobedience to God. The insistence on individual freedom and its restraint exist side by side in Mormonism.

The other tensions–between epistemological certainty and continuing revelation; the intermingling of the sacred and the everyday; and insularity and universality in church teaching and growth–are similarly developed, with Givens tracing the theological and historical underpinnings of each. These early chapters are not intended to be a full-scale history of the early church, but rather a topical introduction to threads in Mormon history and thought that have had an impact on how it has grown and been experienced by generations of Mormons. Brief and yet thorough, though, these early chapters could stand on their own as a nuanced introduction to the background that informs the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The threads of theology and history persist in Givens's exploration of Mormon expression in parts 2 and 3; the tensions elucidated in the opening chapters are never far from his discussion. He remarks that the architecture of the Salt Lake Temple "succeeded in conveying the twin inclinations toward militant solidity and otherworldly intimations," for instance; and he describes the work of novelists, poets, and filmmakers who have plumbed the difficulties of nineteenth-century polygamy, the paradoxes of divine action in everyday life, and the challenges of living the commandments of God and church leaders (p. 111). A Latter-day Saint himself–Givens provided a large amount of insider commentary in the recent PBS documentary *The Mormons* (2007)–he approaches sensitive issues with a rare grace and humor, giving equal emphasis to such "official" church expressions as architecture and hymnody as well as the work of individual artists and thinkers who sometimes challenge church norms.

In a purely practical sense, the book is a valuable resource for those looking to understand a rich and fascinating subculture that can often seem bewildering to outsiders. Such twentieth-century Mormon thinkers as Eugene England and Hugh Nibley and such writers as Carol Lynn Pearson and Levi Peterson are household names in Mormon culture, referenced so commonly and casually that it can take an outsider unfamiliar with their work quite a bit of effort to keep up in conversation. Givens covers all of these figures and many others, providing outsiders with an eloquent view into a recognizably distinct culture that is often overlooked.

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