

able and controversial chapters of history, once aired to truth and light, lose their spectral danger to the Church image.

To complete the circle: Bailey told me that the sale of *Jacob Hamblin* abruptly ceased when he published a book disapproved by the Brethren, *For Time and All Eternity*.

As a writer, the fact that I am steeped in Mormon lore has been more hindrance than help to me. I have never been able to purge from my stubborn mind a conviction that the Mormon tale is one of the most unique and interesting dramas in the annals of America. It has been my soaring wings; it has been my cement coffin. . . .

I am convinced that this wonderful tapestry has been only superficially scrutinized, and that many books in depth are yet to come. I am equally convinced that, when they are written, it will be well if their authors are not born in the heritage.

Problem is that only those so born can tell the story in depth. Such is the eternal dilemma of the Mormon writer under a managed media. Few have coped with it so well as Paul Bailey.

From its beginning in the early Nineteenth Century, the Mormon movement was revolutionary, pugnacious, explosive and militant. It was a striking out against the "establishment" of those days, and was full of wonderous hope for the sad, the down-trodden, and the spiritually alive. . . . Its young and aggressive leaders . . . planted a future—but they have harvested only a past. . . .

Today the movement is running down into staid conservatism, and monolithic and empirical thought control. The books about the Mormon heritage that are acceptable, are published within the Church. . . . The Gentiles, whose approval they so assiduously court, literally gag on those sanctified effusions.

How true it is. Gentiles can't read "approved" literature; so only mavericks speak for the Church to the outside world. As a fellow maverick, I wear the badge proudly.

If I have inadvertently given the impression that this is a "negative" book, let me say it actually is one of the very best missionary tools I can imagine. It is a book Gentiles can read and enjoy. They will know it is honest. They will be able to accept both Bailey's criticism and his testimony:

The Mormon heritage is a strange thing. Some there are who wear it as a shining armor turned to the world. Others wear it like a tattered cloak of many colors, but few there are who put it entirely away. . . .

Being a Utah boy, the cloak of my heritage is comfortable. . . . By wearing my cloak a bit loose, by opening it to the wind and the storms, I have frayed its edges, and have weather-spotted it a little more than it should be. . . .

My heart and my mind are stuffed full of endless words in love of my heritage. I still wear my comfortable old cloak. I like my comfortable old cloak. I hope it will never be taken from me.

## Mormonism as an Eddy in American Religious History

MILTON V. BACKMAN, JR.

*A Religious History of the American People.* By Sydney E. Ahlstrom. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972. 1158 pp. \$19.50.

For the past one hundred and thirty years various historians have attempted to write a panoramic history of religion in the United States. The 1960s saw the publication of three major surveys: Clifton E. Olmstead's *History of Religion in the United States* (1960), Edwin Scott Gaustad's *A Religious History of America* (1966), and Winthrop S. Hudson's *Religion in America* (1965), all significant contributions.

The latest analysis of religion in America from its European heritage to the present is Sydney E. Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People* (1972). Like Olmstead's work, approximately one-third of Ahlstrom's study discusses the European background and the colonial era, another third considers the era from the Revolution to the Civil War, and the last third emphasizes religious trends during the past hundred years, including a chapter on ecclesiastical trends during "The Turbulent Sixties."

Although Ahlstrom emphasizes major developments within the largest Protestant faiths, he also discusses the history of the Roman Catholics, Eastern Christians, and uprooted Jews who settled in this land in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and several chapters are devoted to the history of the blacks in America. His sympathetic discussion of contemporary theology is the most comprehensive discussion of this topic in a general religious history of this country. In Ahlstrom's opinion, "viewed as a whole . . . American liberal theology was an impressive intellectual movement, and one that tends to confirm the idea of the Great Century" (p. 763). Since there are also short descriptions of theosophy, rosicrucianism, the Bahai faith, Buddhism, and the new Jesus movement (included as a lengthy footnote), the work could serve as a handy encyclopedia of information on religious societies in America.

A few strictures deserve notice. Ahlstrom has a much better understanding of religious developments in colonial New England than in the middle or southern colonies and devotes more attention to these New England trends than to the ecclesiastical history of all colonies located south of Connecticut. He especially neglects religious developments in colonies such as New Jersey and the Carolinas. His description of the expansion of the Church of England sometimes declines into a series of disconnected facts, failing to provide his readers with a clear picture of major trends in colonial Anglicanism.

Ahlstrom's descriptions of the Anglican establishments in the South are also ambiguous, for he fails to describe the contrasting characteristics of the state churches which had been created from Maryland to Georgia. When considering the early religious history of South Carolina, for example, he mentions a number of laws that were repealed and had no significant influence but fails to discuss the Ecclesiastical Act of 1706 that defined the characteristics of the tax-supported religion in South Carolina. Although there were eight amending articles to that act, the establishment remained virtually unaltered from 1706 until the era of the American Revolution.

While William Warren Sweet emphasized the impact of the frontier, Ahlstrom tends to concentrate on the influence of Puritanism on the religious history of this land. Ahlstrom aptly states that as a result of English colonizing activities "Protestantism, predominantly in its Puritan form became a major factor in the spiritual shaping of a 'great nation'" (p. 17). But he incorrectly concludes that "Puritanism provided the moral and religious background of

fully 75 percent of the people who declared their independence in 1776" (p. 124). A footnote compounds the exaggeration: "If one were to compute such a percentage on the basis of all the German, Swiss, French, Dutch, and Scottish people whose forebears bore the 'stamp of Geneva' in some broader sense, 85 or 90 percent would not be an extravagant estimate" (p. 124).

Although reliable membership figures are not available for colonial religious societies, Ahlstrom's estimate concerning the percentage of Americans in 1776 who were Puritans or whose historical roots stem from John Calvin should be seriously questioned. Ahlstrom defines Puritanism "in its broadest sense" as a "widely ramified movement of religious renovation that gradually took shape in Great Britain under the leadership of men who were committed to the Continental Reformed tradition" (p. 125). Using this guideline, Anglicans, Quakers, Freewill Baptists, and many German faiths would not be classified as Puritans; and undoubtedly these groups comprised more than 25 percent of the church members. Ahlstrom also fails to qualify some statements by recalling that about 20 percent of the colonists were black, that many colonists lost an identity with a particular denomination, and that most Americans were not affiliated with any religious society throughout the eighteenth century.

Eight of the 1096 pages included in this work (excluding an excellent bibliography and index) are devoted to the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These pages are marred by a number of mistakes and conclusions unsubstantiated by a thorough examination of primary sources. Ahlstrom employs as one source for his description of Mormonism Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, a work he regards as "sympathetic" and "unequaled in its insights" of the Mormon Prophet (p. 504).

A few of the mistakes in his description of Mormonism appear as careless errors. For example, he writes that five months after the Church's founding, the Prophet sent a "three-man party [should be four] to look for land" for a New Jerusalem that was to be erected "on the borders by the Lamanites" (p. 505). Another obvious mistake is the statement that on July 4, 1838, "at a great celebration, Joseph delivered an oration which ended with a spine-chilling promise to wreak vengeance on his oppressors" (p. 506). It was Sidney Rigdon, not Joseph Smith, who delivered a controversial sermon on July 4, 1838, that provided a setting for the "Mormon War."

Ahlstrom further writes that in 1816 the Smith family moved to Palmyra, New York, "in the Erie Canal Boom country. But the boom passed them by" (p. 502). Since Palmyra did not become a canal town until 1822, four years after the Smith family had settled in Manchester (about two miles from the canal), the inference that "the boom passed them by" is not an objective description of the economic accomplishments, hardships, and misfortunes of the Smiths in Manchester.

The claim that Joseph Smith "was once found guilty in a local court of being 'a disorderly person and an imposter' for use of a certain 'seer stone'" has not been verified; and it is a major oversimplification to write that "when in 1857 President Buchanan replaced Young with a non-Mormon as territorial governor, another 'Mormon War' broke out" (p. 507).

After suggesting as "farfetched" the view that Rev. Solomon Spaulding or Sidney Rigdon wrote the Book of Mormon, Ahlstrom echoes the popular non-

Mormon opinion that Joseph Smith was the author of that publication and that the work reflects the "anti-Catholic" and "anti-Masonic movement" occurring in western New York in the 1820s. As further evidence that the Book of Mormon was a product of the times, Ahlstrom notes that in the 1820s people were considering the question of Indian origins; and then he contends that the Book of Mormon not only answered that question but reflected the "total social and spiritual situation of the 'burned-over district' of western New York" (p. 503).

Critics continue to assert that the Book of Mormon reflects the environment of the early Republic. While some parallels between beliefs and patterns of behavior described in the Book of Mormon and those held and practiced by Americans in the 1820s do exist, there are also many parallels in patterns of belief and behavior between our age, the era of the Reformation, the Middle Ages, and other ages. Moreover, the critics fail to mention the innumerable differences between the social, political, religious, and economic patterns described in the Book of Mormon and popular views and practices of individuals who lived in the early Republic.

Most of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after 1850 is summarized in one paragraph which emphasizes the polygamy issue. Mormonism during the twentieth century, including the welfare program, is ignored.

Although one might challenge portions of Ahlstrom's study, in most respects his history is accurate. He has produced, with some qualifications, an exceptional summary of the religious history of America.

## Brief Notices

### DAVIS BITTON

*Ensign to the Nations: A History of the Church from 1846 to the Present.* By Russell R. Rich. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Publications, 1972. 663 pp.

A pedestrian treatment of L.D.S. history from 1846 intended for B.Y.U. Church history classes. The closing chapters plod through developments, one president at a time.

*Special Slippers.* Words by Roger Knight. Drawings by Karin Knight. Santa Barbara, California: Sandollar Press. 35 pp. \$2.50.

A story by an L.D.S. couple "assembled for James, who considers [it] his very favorite story in the dark." Delightfully illustrated.

*The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History.* Edited by F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards. Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973. 357 pp.

An introductory essay and twelve chapters by a group of L.D.S. and R.L.D.S. historians. Uneven, as all such works are, this collection contains some very good chapters indeed. Examples: "Mormonism and American Culture: Some Tentative Hypotheses" by Klaus J. Hansen; "Nauvoo and the Council of the Twelve" by T. Edgar Lyon; and "Theocratic Democracy: Philosopher-King in the Reorganization" by Paul M. Edwards.

*The Reminiscences and Civil War Letters of Levi Lamoni Wight: Life in a Mormon Splinter Colony on the Texas Frontier.* Edited by Davis Bitton. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1970. 191 pp. \$7.00.

Not previously reviewed in *Dialogue*, this small work is relevant to Mormon, Texas, and Civil War history. Levi Wight was the son of Lyman Wight, the Mormon apostle who led a splinter group to Texas in 1845.