

ing events in the past but which narrows with Joseph Smith's appearance and, from that point on, presents only those events that can be funneled into the Mormon experience. World events before Joseph Smith contain a number of references to world religions, especially to Christianity (for example, various Bible translations, the Reformation, etc.). However, after Joseph Smith and the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, no other religious events appear on the world timeline, not even Vatican II in the 1960s. The only possible exception might be: "The nation of Israel is founded [1948] as the world's only Jewish state," which can be viewed as a fulfillment of prophecy and hence as an aspect of LDS doctrine (21). Many world events listed on the timeline for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are related to innovations in science and technology, particularly those technologies—such as the development of the telephone, the computer, and the internet—that have assisted the LDS Church in its expansion. So while events in the history of other world religions disappear in Bigelow's rendering of the last two centuries, the book emphasizes the LDS Church's association with these scientific and technological icons of human progress.

The book concludes with a fold-out family tree that allows the reader to record six generations of family history. I see this chart as an invitation for the readers to become part of the all-encompassing history presented on the timelines, charts, maps, and summaries of doctrine. Not only does the influence of the LDS Church reach far into the past and far into the future, it reaches as far as 13 million people worldwide and as near as the individual holding this book in his or her hands.

## The Long-Distance Mormon

R. A. Christmas. *The Kingdom of God or Nothing!* Durham, N.C.: Lula Press, 2008. 60 pp. \$11.00

*Reviewed by Paul Swenson*

With his poem, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Mormon," R. A. (Robert Allen) Christmas, among the most flickeringly idio-

syncretic lights in the Mormon literary cosmos, may have (purposely or unconsciously) described himself as a living exemplar of the poem's evocative title. The poem's protagonist, however, is a high priests' quorum instructor named Melvin, who was married for fifty years to a Mormon woman before he joined the Church and took his wife to the temple—but only after realizing he was too old to continue playing tennis on Sunday.

Christmas, converted to Mormonism in 1957 by his high school sweetheart, has since set his work apart as an exotic growth—less lush than pointed and prickly, less lyrical than prosaic. In such anthologies as *Greening Wheat, Harvest, and Tending the Garden*,<sup>1</sup> he distinguishes himself as a tough, resilient vine that wraps its tendrils around our shared cultural eccentricities and won't let go. In contrast to the more aesthetically pleasing, but sometimes less adventurous growths in the garden, Christmas's poems insinuate themselves with frankness and a satiric, serpentine humor.

In "Loneliness of the Long-Distance Mormon," Melvin's priesthood lesson on eternal marriage provokes meditation by a thrice-temple-married quorum member who "can't imagine his wives / (past or present) expressing / a Melvin-like satisfaction / with him—or he with them / so he says nothing (as usual) / during the discussion. / It bears scant resemblance to the life he's led. / Tennis on Sunday mornings. / Doubles say, with some friends. From where he sits (left, rear) / it doesn't sound half bad" (32)

*The Kingdom of God or Nothing!* reveals the poet's fascination with (even pride in) the peculiarities of a peculiar people. He identifies with the naiveté of a long-time temple goer in "Temple Film Ruminations," who "thought he was hip, but it was / years before he realized all those / shoulder-high hedges and holding / of lambs and flowers against / chests were meant to indicate / that Adam and Eve were naked" (14).

Someone unfamiliar with Mormon culture might find this scene amusing (if not totally comprehensible), while other references might provoke, puzzle, or absorb the outsider, including such titles as "Savior on Mt. Disneyland," "The Matriarchal Grip," and "Beard Card." Thematically, Christmas is nothing if not eclectic, writing breezily yet probingly about polygamy, polyandry,

high school football, strategies for staying in the LDS Church, and the tendency of Latter-day Saints to claim a patent on the family.

Capable of an innocent yet brazen wit, Christmas can catch you off guard. Consider the delicious metaphor of “Soft Taco.” The poem’s first stanza reads:

It’s a lousy Latinate euphemism  
that sounds like something wrong with  
a snake—or like a defect in a kid’s  
construction set. Erectile—you gotta be  
kidding!—is politically comic—but  
not when it’s your serpent, or your  
tower that’s always collapsing. (34)

The cover of *The Kingdom of God or Nothing!* is a photograph from the 1880s of Mormon polygamists, including Apostle George Q. Cannon, wearing the traditional striped garb of prisoners while incarcerated at the Utah Territorial Penitentiary, then located in Salt Lake City’s Sugarhouse neighborhood. The phrase itself, of course, comes from Church President John Taylor’s self-proclaimed motto.<sup>2</sup>

A curious aspect of the book is that Christmas devotes more than 5,000 words of the slim volume’s sixty pages to prose—a faux history of LDS polygamy, attributed to a fictional Associated Press reporter named Scott Holiday. The story reports the U.S. government’s return in 2025 of the Salt Lake Temple (plus temples in Logan, Manti, and St. George) to the LDS Church after 125 years in federal control. Christmas wants us to meditate on how the Mormon story might have taken an entirely different twist had the federal government decided to pursue violations of the Edmunds-Tucker Act (1887) when it discovered that polygamous temple unions were performed after the Church’s 1890 Manifesto had purportedly ended the practice of plural marriage. In this counter-history, most Mormons made another great migration in 1900 to settle in Mexico, where the Church became headquartered. How willingly, he appears to be asking, would we and our ancestors have given up everything one more time?

Having stuck in there himself as an active Mormon for more than half a century (including two full-time missions with his

wife), Christmas feels comfortable enough to ponder in print the mysteries of sacred underwear, wondering

to what General Authority or  
Authority's wife), did he owe thanks  
for his two-piece garments?"  
The old "one-piecers" had beaten a  
retreat from wrist to upper-arm, and from  
ankle to knee—but now, here came

this slice—across the middle.  
God was behind it—but why? All he  
knew was his wife loved them.

He remembered shopping for garments  
in 1964 in Pocatello, Idaho,  
when you could buy them at Penney's.

In one of the aisles a portable hi-fi  
was playing The Beatles first album: "Roll-  
over, Beethoven"—stuff like that.

It was the first time he'd heard them,  
and he was enchanted. He prolonged his  
purchase, because there was something

in the air. (It was radical change;  
but he didn't see it coming, and had  
no inkling it would go so far.) (7)

Some readers may judge R. A. Christmas for his seeming irreverence; others will bless this book for its invitation to take a good, long look in the mirror and laugh.

### Notes

1. Levi S. Peterson, ed., *Greening Wheat* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1983); Eugene England and Dennis Clark, eds., *Harvest* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); Eugene England and Lavina Fielding

Anderson, eds., *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996).

2. This motto inspired the title of his biography by grandson Samuel W. Taylor: *The Kingdom or Nothing: The Life of John Taylor, Militant Mormon* (New York: Macmillan, 1976; rpt. as *The Last Pioneer: John Taylor, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).