

and help all human beings to grasp that they are a reflection of God's image.

Note

1. Brigham Young discourse of 5 Jan. 1852, George D. Watt transcript, Box 1, Folder 17, CR 100 317, Church History Library.

Anti-Mormon Moment

J. Spencer Fluhman. *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 256 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0807835715.

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With Mitt Romney's loss and the end of the 2012 campaign season, many have declared an end to our current Mormon Moment. But while America's recent attention to the Mormons may have been unusually focused—particularly on exploring the actual beliefs and experiences the Latter-day Saints—it was hardly new. In fact, Mormonism has been a staple of popular culture and discourse about religion in the United States since it first appeared in upstate New York nearly two centuries ago, and popular depictions haven't always painted a pretty (or realistic) picture. In *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America*, J. Spencer Fluhman, Assistant Professor of History at Brigham Young University, explores the roots and development of the American fascination with and antipathy toward the Saints. He also demonstrates that the nation's long, troubled relationship with its most successful homegrown religion is illustrative of Americans' complicated and fluid understanding of what makes a "real" religion: "through public condemnation of what Mormonism was, Protestants defined just what American religion could be" (9).

Fluhman's book contributes to the growing body of literature on anti-Mormonism in American history. His approach, however, differs from that of many of his predecessors. Whereas *"A Peculiar*

People” examines responses to the Saints throughout the nineteenth century, many earlier treatments focused more narrowly on the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These decades were marked by major accommodations on the part of the Saints to the demands of non-Mormon American society in the form of the end of polygamy and the discontinuation of theocratic governance in Utah. This “Americanization,” in turn, inspired significant change in non-Mormon perceptions of the Latter-day Saints in the United States. Earlier examinations of the turn of the twentieth century are also more focused in their subject matter. Sarah Barringer Gordon examined American legal responses to plural marriage in *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (2001). Kathleen Flake chose a specific political conflict to guide her exploration of this transitional period in her book *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (2003). Patrick Mason focused on anti-Mormon violence in a specific region in his *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Antebellum South* (2011). Jan Shipps, in her classic essay “From Satyr to Saint: American Attitudes toward the Mormons, 1860–1960” (published in *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Saints*, 2000), and Megan Sanborn Jones, in her book *Performing Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (2009), both chose to limit their inquiries to a specific genre of writing about the Latter-day Saints.

Fluhman’s book more closely follows the model of Terryl Givens’s *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (1997) by examining anti-Mormonism writ large across the nineteenth century. Like Givens, Fluhman steps back to examine the bigger picture of anti-Mormonism’s origins and early development as they appeared in a variety of media. Rather than focusing on a single theme within anti-Mormon sentiment, a specific high-profile incident, or a particular genre of anti-Mormon writing, Fluhman sifts through newspapers, political discourse, religious screeds, and fiction and nonfiction books in an effort to show the broader contours of nineteenth-century American responses to the Latter-day Saints. In so doing, he uses anti-Mormonism as a window onto larger American

understandings of religion and of the proper relationship between religion and society.

Fluhman describes four major periods of nineteenth-century American anti-Mormonism: Mormonism's origins and development in the 1820s and '30s; the Nauvoo period of the late '30s and early '40s; the removal to Utah and subsequent open practice of polygamy and experimentation with theocracy and economic communalism from the 1840s through the 1890s; and finally the "Americanization" of Mormonism (and its image) in the decades immediately after the 1890 Manifesto. This first period lasted from the religion's origins in the 1820s through its early development in the 1830s under Joseph Smith. As Americans struggled with both religious and political disestablishment, having to decide for themselves who could best lead them politically and religiously, evangelical revivals and new religious movements flourished. During this period, Americans not only dismissed the Latter-day Saints' most unique beliefs, including their prophet's receipt of ongoing revelation and his most significant work, *The Book of Mormon*. They also condemned the religious enthusiasms the Saints shared with many evangelicals: physical demonstrations of the Spirit like glossolalia (speaking in tongues), bodily manifestations (the quaking and shaking that came to define other religious minorities), and faith healings were not regarded as appropriate religious behavior in post-Enlightenment America. Many Americans viewed the Mormons as practicing superstitious magic rather than authentic religion—with potentially dangerous consequences. Fluhman shows that Mormonism and other minority religions were regularly cited as the root cause of insanity among patients admitted to the nation's asylums (61–66). In short, Mormonism was dismissed as an imposture and not a "real" religion at all.

When Smith ordered the Mormons to gather at Nauvoo to build an earthly Kingdom of God, anti-Mormon rhetoric shifted dramatically. This apparent nation-building was characterized by the Saints' growing economic and political power and their acceptance of the theocratic blending of religious, political, and military institutions and leadership. Their neighbors feared that the Mormon prophet would come to control the economic and political lives of not only his followers, but also their non-Mormon

neighbors. Fluhman argues that Mormonism was imagined not primarily as a religious threat, but as “an ideology inherently at odds with republicanism.” Many Americans believed that it was “unassimilable within American society” (82). Rumors of Smith’s theological innovations, which carried Mormonism ever further beyond the bounds of what most Americans thought of as acceptable religion, reinforced these fears. Many believed that the Saints had to be driven out or destroyed before they overwhelmed surrounding non-Mormon communities, and in 1844 mobs in Illinois murdered Smith and eventually forced his followers to move west.

But the destruction of Nauvoo didn’t kill Mormonism or its dreams of establishing God’s kingdom. Rather, the removal to the intermountain West gave the Mormons a new kingdom where their unique beliefs and practices and their theocracy blossomed. After Brigham Young brought Smith’s most radical—to the minds of most non-Mormon Americans—innovation, polygamy, out into the open, Americans reimagined Mormonism not just as a threat but as a *foreign* threat. Protestant Americans regarded Mormon women as enslaved in polygamy, and all Mormons as enslaved under the theocracy that allowed Young to be both president of the Church *and* governor of the territory. Images of Joseph Smith as an American Mohammed, which had been in vogue since before Smith’s death, were embellished, and the Mormon leaders in Utah were depicted as Eastern potentates reigning supreme over their extensive harems. Fluhman describes how such practices made the Mormons themselves seem alien, and, as Terryl Givens has also noted, images of the Saints began to illustrate what one nineteenth-century writer referred to as Mormonism’s “impress upon the countenance” (113). Mormons didn’t just act and look the part—in the popular imagination they came to physically embody it. Perceived political and cultural differences combined to construct Mormon individuals and their community as truly foreign bodies.

The final phase of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism took shape at the century’s close, in the period that many previous studies of Mormonism and anti-Mormonism examine. Once the Civil War ostensibly eliminated the evil of slavery, the nation

turned its attention to the relic of barbarism flourishing beyond the Rocky Mountains. After decades of federal crackdowns on polygamy and demands for a clear separation of church and state in Utah, in 1890 the Church finally agreed to discontinue the practice of plural marriage and give up the reins of the state. At the same time, Fluhman shows, popular thinking about religion was changing. The 1893 World's Fair in Chicago hosted a Parliament of Religions that admitted not only Protestants and other acknowledged Christians, but also groups as foreign to the average American concept of religion as Hindus. While Protestants still dominated the interreligious conversation at the Parliament—Mormons were, in fact, excluded—the event demonstrated Americans' expansion of the category of religion to include groups that had long been denied the label. During the same period, history was developing as a discipline and the writing of history became professionalized. Scholars were reframing the story of American religion, and in a way that finally admitted Mormonism to the ranks. But while these new approaches claimed to present factual accounts of American religious history, the "earlier master accounts" continued to drive the narrative (137). Mormonism was now acknowledged as a religion—but a false one. This ambivalence toward the Saints took root, Fluhman argues, and continues to characterize America's relationship to the Latter-day Saints today. Where Mormonism has found acceptance, it has been through non-Mormon Americans' ability to "imagin[e] its people apart from their religion" (144).

Key to Fluhman's argument about the nature of nineteenth-century American anti-Mormonism—and American responses to other minority religions in the period as well—is his claim that religion and politics were not confined to separate spheres in nineteenth-century America. Nineteenth-century Mormons and their critics—and, he maintains, their recent chroniclers—too often focus their discussions of the American treatment of Mormonism on a false dichotomy between the religious and the political in the United States. Mormons and their supporters, then and now, argue that Americans' responses to the Saints were driven by religious intolerance, and thus betrayed both the nation's laws and the spirit behind them. Critics of the Mormons, on the other hand, have argued that American actions against the Saints were

political or social in nature, and therefore not restricted by the First Amendment. But, as Fluhman convincingly argues, “by drawing too stark a line between the secular and the religious in the nineteenth century, one risks clarifying with contemporary lenses what was muddled for historical subjects” (54). He consciously situates himself between these extremes, thus distancing himself on the one hand from arguments like Givens’s in *Viper on the Hearth* that nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism was essentially religious, and on the other hand Kenneth Winn’s assertion in *Exiles in a Land of Liberty* that the conflict was political in nature (53–54, 160 n. 21). Rather than being *either* a religious *or* a political problem, Fluhman shows us that “Mormonism exposed the American fantasy that religion and politics could be easily defined and separated” (95).

While these arguments are convincing, they would be more effective if bolstered by more specific evidence and broader historical context. Fluhman packs the book into a compact 147 pages, and he does an excellent job of providing signposts to guide those knowledgeable about Mormon history. This is not, however, a book for newcomers to the subject, as it gives only an outline of key events and those that are discussed are largely internal to Mormonism. Somewhat surprisingly, many events that put Mormons and non-Mormons in direct contact and conflict are little discussed. Fluhman notes the “richness and comprehensiveness of modern accounts of Mormon theocracy, polygamy, and the Mountain Meadows massacre,” and explains that he, therefore, “makes no attempt to replow those fields” (12). But events like the failure of the Mormons’ Kirtland Safety Society (1837), the Utah War (1857–1858), and the Mountain Meadows massacre (1857) and eventual conviction and execution of John D. Lee for his part in it (1877), all provided significant grist for the mill in both nineteenth-century and later American portrayals of Mormonism. The Mountain Meadows massacre alone has remained a staple of American popular culture, from Jack London’s 1915 science fiction novel *Star Rover* to the 2007 film *September Dawn* starring Oscar-winner Jon Voight. Not to discuss the origins—both real and imagined—and development of a representation of Mormonism that has been continuously recycled in American culture across three centuries not only ignores the sig-

nificance of Mountain Meadows in shaping American opinion about the Saints in the historical period that Fluhman is exploring, but also the contemporary relevance of his study. By avoiding Mountain Meadows Fluhman also misses an opportunity to contribute to a discussion, most notably engaged in R. Laurence Moore's seminal *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (1986), of the ways in which Mormons contributed to both the conflicts that sparked anti-Mormon representations and to the shape of the resulting images. While there is no need to discuss these events in minute detail, some engagement with them would have enhanced his analysis of discourse about Mormonism in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Greater attention to how other minority groups in the United States were treated during the same time period also would have enriched the study. While Fluhman mentions tensions between American Protestants and other minorities including Shakers, Jews, and particularly Roman Catholics, he does not delve into the parallels and differences between anti-Mormonism and the specific forms of intolerance aimed at these other groups. Fluhman's project is not intended to be a comparative one, but he does set out to describe not just Mormonism but American religion more broadly. Exploring American prejudice against other religious minorities would have strengthened his claims that the understandings of religion and its place in American society he sees illuminated by anti-Mormonism are, in fact, more universal. Such comparison could have demonstrated further that the ideas about religion articulated by anti-Mormon writers were not simply the rhetoric deployed against the Latter-day Saints, but in fact illustrate nineteenth-century Americans' ideas about religion more generally.

As we begin to imagine the shape that America's relationship with the Latter-day Saints will take after this Mormon Moment, we need to understand the history behind that relationship. J. Spencer Fluhman's "*A Peculiar People*" is a useful introduction to the origins, development, and complicated causes of America's ambivalence toward the Saints, and a valuable contribution to the historiography on anti-Mormonism in American religious history.