

## **Liberalism and the American Mormon: Three Takes**

David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson. *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics*. New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 294 pp. Paperback: \$29.99. ISBN: 978-1-107-66267-4.

Richard Davis. *The Liberal Soul: Applying the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Politics*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014. 198 pp. Paperback: \$22.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-583-6.

Terryl and Fiona Givens. *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014. 168 pp. Hardback: \$19.99. ISBN: 978-1-60907-942-0.

*Reviewed by Russell Arben Fox*

The term “liberalism” with all its rhetorical permutations—self-identifying as a “liberal,” defending principles of “liberty,” showing “liberality” in one’s interactions with others, etc.—is a contested concept in America. It’s both an adjective and a noun. It has been associated with a philosophical claim, a mental condition, an epithet, and more. Arguments over liberalism’s meaning and implications have a long history: President Herbert Hoover and his challenger, Franklin D. Roosevelt, argued over which of them advocated “true”—as opposed to “false”—liberalism during the presidential election of 1932, over eighty years ago. In the years since the civil rights heyday of the 1950s and ’60s, and particularly ever since the rise of cultural conflicts over class, sexuality, and religion in the 1970s and ’80s, a term that once primarily referenced individual rights, liberties, and tolerance has gotten tied up with claims about truth, morality, welfare, government, race, gender, social norms, citizenship, and much more. It makes, to say the least, for a pretty complicated intellectual package.

This complication, though, is perhaps of even more concern for Mormons in America, at least for those who feel obliged to pay special attention to statements made by General Authorities of the LDS Church. The fact that Church presidents Harold B. Lee and Ezra Taft Benson, among other leaders, publicly insisted that there was no possible overlap between being a faithful member of the Church and holding to “liberal” ideas keeps the term in contested territory. True, those statements are almost all more than thirty years old, and it might be easy to attribute them to a generation of leaders who spoke in reference to social conditions within and without the American church that no longer exists. But any lifelong member of the Church knows better than that, I think. Probably the simplest functional definition of modern American liberalism is that it is a set of ideas that both embraces and seeks to extend individual choice, diversity, and equality—and consequently, those who agree with those ideas may face serious challenges when their church officially adopts, as it has in many recent political and cultural arguments, a stance in defense of “tradition,” “authority,” “community,” “morality,” and other positions often easily interpreted as anti-liberal. For all these reasons and more, being a Mormon liberal can be hard.

The three books discussed in this review all have something to say about that hardness. They do so through very different methodological approaches and have very different audiences in mind. *Seeking the Promised Land* is a work of social science exploring political perceptions of Mormons and about Mormonism in modern liberal America; it is designed to speak to scholars and students of America’s pluralistic religious and political landscape, whether Mormon or not. *The Liberal Soul* is a book of popular advocacy, harnessing arguments of both social science and scripture to make a case for the moral legitimacy of liberal political positions, and clearly aims to persuade intelligent lay Mormon readers (especially those living in overwhelmingly Republican Utah) to give liberal political ideas a chance. And *The Crucible of Doubt* is a work of scriptural exploration and pastoral advice that hardly ever even mentions the word “liberal,” yet comes

to conclusions that echo the writings of such great (or perhaps notorious) twentieth-century Mormon liberals as Hugh B. Brown, Lowell Bennion, and Eugene England. Despite all these differences, there *is* an important overlap between them in the way they help us better understand just what liberalism can mean for American Mormons today. Given how thoroughly liberalism—whether thought of in terms of one’s political priorities, philosophical perspective, or simply personality—dominates life in twenty-first-century America, that composite understanding is both valuable and very much needed.



*Seeking the Promised Land* is a superb and engaging work of social science. David Campbell, John Green, and Quin Monson use numerous recent surveys conducted by themselves and by such organizations as the Pew Research Center and Gallup to produce a detailed and revealing look at the political preferences and peculiarities of American members of the LDS Church. While some of the information the authors make use of has already been covered in *American Grace* (a blockbuster in the sociology of religion in America that Campbell co-authored with Robert Putnam), here that information is packaged alongside numerous historical observations and other scholarly insights, resulting in something that stands entirely on its own. Of course, as with any academic study that depends largely upon survey research and the self-reporting of those interviewed, the compiled results need to be recognized for what they are: namely, the best conclusions that correlational and regression analysis allow. Still, it’s fair to say that this book by Campbell and Monson (who are both LDS) and Green (who is not) will become a starting point for all serious conversations about American Mormons and politics from here on out.

The primary claim of the research reported in the book is that American Mormons have, to a significant if not an absolute degree, resisted the ideological sorting that has characterized the political journey taken by other white Christians in America’s

liberal democracy. (By way of contrast, the voting patterns of African-American Christians have followed a very distinct partisan path.) Mormons thus maintain a level of “subcultural” political distinctiveness of the sort that was once typical of white Christians in the United States—Irish Catholics voting Democratic, for instance—but which is nearly non-existent now. The liberalizing and homogenizing tendencies of American democracy are well understood and have been since at least the time of Alexis de Tocqueville: the opportunities America’s mostly classless and mostly non-denominational political culture afforded to white Christian males through the nineteenth century resulted in intermarriage, social mixing, and ultimately the shaping of identities more around public opinion than around ethnicity or religion. Thus, American freedom offered liberty to individuals but also pressured distinct cultural groups to politically conform. Most eventually did—and certainly Mormons have as well. (The LDS Church is surely not Amish!) Yet Mormonism’s accommodation to America’s liberal pluralism is not entirely complete, and the authors of this book suggest why.

Survey data of the specific elements of the political ideologies affirmed by voters show that, while obviously the huge majority of LDS voters in America consistently support the Republican Party, that practice is not entirely the result of the same regional or socio-economic or historical trends that, for example, brought about a cultural alliance between evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics. American Mormons, by and large, follow a separate ethno-religious logic when it comes to their political beliefs and actions rather than wholly responding to the “culture wars” that have defined so much public argument over the past four decades. The authors describe Mormon discourse as creating a “sacred tabernacle” within which a few rather unique moral and political distinctions are developed, even as the nation as a whole is shaped by larger trends.

What are the details of this tabernacle? The authors look, in particular, at two “politically inflected religious views”: American Mormon views about the US Constitution and about gender roles.

In regard to the first, the authors review both official and folk doctrines within the Church and note that “Mormons are the ‘most exceptionalist’ of any religious tradition in the country,” with 94 percent of American Mormons agreeing with the statement “the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights are divinely inspired” and 72 percent believing that “the United States has a special role to play in world affairs and should behave differently than other nations.” They conclude that it is “only a short step from Mormons’ reverence for the Constitution . . . to an originalist interpretation,” which is an article of faith among most political conservatives in America (109–12). In regard to the second, nearly three-fourths of American Mormons maintain that “[i]t is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family,” far outscoring the next most conservative Republican-voting religious group in America, evangelical Protestants, of whom fewer than 40 percent agree with the above statement. The authors, observing some movement in American Mormon attitudes toward mothers who work outside the home (today, only a little more than half agree that mothers harm their children by taking a job, down from 70 percent thirty years ago), rather tartly observe that “we would expect Mormon attitudes toward working mothers in 2020 to be roughly the same as what the rest of the population thought in the 1980s” (114–15).

In summary, the data suggest that while such hot-button topics as abortion and same-sex marriage clearly played a role in shaping American Mormonism’s variety of conservatism, what has been most firmly and decisively communicated within the Mormon political tabernacle is the supposed uniqueness of America’s culture and history, and the vital place that a kind of 1950s heterosexual domesticity is assumed to have played in that culture and history. The obvious conclusion is that while conservative American Mormons may appear entirely similar to other “Christian right” supporters of the Republican Party, that assumption isn’t exactly correct.

How this set of relatively unique teachings will endure and/or change over the next couple of generations and what that will

mean for American Mormon voting habits and perceptions are the questions that haunt the final section of the book. However much those who self-identify as Mormons in America continue to exhibit ethno-religious voting habits, the pluralizing—and, thus, collectively homogenizing—trends that have already broken down other old categories show no sign of receding. With every step, however resisted or inconsistent, toward the legal and economic equalization of men and women, blacks and whites, and gays and straights, ideological groupings along philosophically liberal lines will continue to replace ethnic, cultural, and religious communal associations. The politically relevant questions will continually return to taxes vs. welfare, property rights vs. egalitarianism, social libertarianism vs. civil rights, leaving those who orient their political worldview around communitarian or essentialist claims decisively marginalized. To refer directly to the Mormon context, this means that those who maintain, however lightly, a political subculture significantly built out of an attachment to a supposedly God-blessed nation-state or a uniquely normative type of family unit will increasingly feel the stigma of being outside the national conversation.

Campbell, Green, and Monson are quantitative political scientists, not political historians or theorists, so the deeper ramifications of voters' feeling motivated to maintain an even partial tabernacle in the midst of liberal pluralism is not something they focus on. Still, some of the above-mentioned realities and the partisan skewing and suspicions they result in do poke through in their analysis. They point out that the "strong intrareligious bonds of the sacred tabernacle mean fewer inter-religious bridges," and thus "Mormons are viewed with greater suspicion than members of most other religious traditions" (184). After exhaustively reviewing the different strategies of all the major Mormon candidates for president, the authors observe that while "the heyday of [white] ethno-religious alliances, [in which] denominations and parties were intertwined" has mostly passed, the fact that today "it is entirely rational for a voter who leans Democratic to oppose a Mormon candidate, *even in the absence of any other information*" [italics added], is striking. Again employing their characteristically sharp

understatement, the authors observe that “the blurry lines in the public eye between their church and the Republican party should give Mormons pause” (251). In short, American Mormons are playing a political game that stands at least somewhat opposed to the liberal order in which the game is set—and given the way the informal rules and incentives of the political game in America continue to change, the consequent feelings of estrangement (and attempts by everyone from the conservative Mormon leadership to the liberal Mormon minority to respond to that feeling) are likely to continue.

The communitarian roots of the Mormon religious vision are occasionally referenced by the authors of *Seeking the Promised Land* but are not particularly evident in the survey data. Instead, both statistical and anecdotal reports suggest that the great majority of American Mormons—just like the huge majority of American Catholics, American evangelical Protestants, and almost every other variety of American Christians—are fundamentally modern and thus essentially content with a way of voting and governing oriented around questions of individual diversity and personal choice. Hence the authors’ somewhat sad, but surely accurate, conclusion that the “promised land” of American Mormons is a clumsily divided one: the aspiration to be “in the world, not of the world—yet also accepted by the world” (253). That is, to say the least, a peculiar desire and perhaps an unavoidable one—but not, I think, one to be especially proud of all the same.



*The Liberal Soul* is not a complex work of political theology or theory nor a nuanced discussion of political ideology or interpretation; it is not a book written to advance a new political philosophy of Mormonism. In truth, Richard Davis’s book is profoundly “liberal” in the most simple, open-minded sense: rather than engaging in an immanent critique of Mormon practices or beliefs, he merely wants Mormons to see that what are usually labeled in America as “liberal” political choices are legitimate ones that faithful Mormons can make.

For Davis, the “liberal soul” spoken of in Proverbs 11:25 (KJV) presents to us all a divine ideal of generosity, open-mindedness, and collective concern for individuals in all their diverse needs. He does not claim that such scriptural language (which he sees similarly reflected in Isaiah 32:5; James 1:5; and Alma 1:30 and 6:5) mandates any specific set of public policies, but he aims to convince his readers that the reverse is also true. As he writes near his conclusion: “The marriage of LDS faith and right-wing or libertarian politics is not the sole perspective for understanding the relationship between the gospel and the role of government. . . . There are multiple interpretations of the gospel’s intersection with government, not just one” (162). Thus, *The Liberal Soul* puts forward a reading of Christianity’s call to generosity—a generosity that suggests collective political action toward greater economic and social equality and welfare (classic American-style progressive and egalitarian goals that Davis uncomplicatedly presents as representing “liberalism”) is as legitimate a response as any other.

The first and, I think, most important chapter in the book, “Government Is Ordained of God,” lays a strong foundation for this reading. Davis carefully makes the point that there is no non-disputable reason people cannot or should not democratically organize themselves around the governmental provision of public—as opposed to merely personal or familial—goods, and even more carefully criticizes the embarrassing anti-communist obsessions of Benson and other Mormon General Authorities who tended to see any defense of public resources as gospel-threatening socialism. For many, the kind of painstaking and deliberate arguments Davis lays out here may seem pointless, but given his real target audience of ordinary, conservative Utah Mormons, the first chapter does necessary and important work.

As Davis builds on that foundation in later chapters, his moderate Democratic, state-centric, institution-heavy, traditional liberalism is demonstrated repeatedly. He shows little interest in making direct use of Mormonism’s radical legacy of consecration (which he at one point clumsily refers to as “communitarianism”); while he speaks highly of economic equality as a goal closely tied



to the Christian respect for persons, and at one point, subtly (yet snarkily) remarks that this goal “may not be possible today given the broad acceptability of seeking personal gain over community good,” he mostly strikes a note that should be familiar to any reader of liberal political philosopher John Rawls, presenting redistributive taxation and minimum wage laws as examples of government actions that can reflect the generosity and public concerns of citizens (29–39). Rather than contemplating the collective or class responsibility of oppressors to the oppressed in the form of reparations, he presents Joseph Smith’s appeal to the federal government for restitution from the mobs in Missouri as an early ancestor of affirmative action (45–50). Rather than proposing radical alternatives to the welfare state, he defends entitlement benefits, noting in response to criticism about waste and fraud that the LDS Church’s welfare program, like any “large bureaucratic organization,” suffers from waste and fraud as well, only since “the Church’s system is not transparent to the public or even to the Church’s membership,” almost no one knows about it (67–68). Ultimately, there are almost no traces of social democracy or socialism in Davis’s arguments; his liberal Zion is a pluralistic one of generosity and charity where arguments against capitalism are rare and entrenched inequalities are to be addressed through humane appeals, Church assistance, and governmental amelioration.

That isn’t necessarily a criticism. In the same way that *Seeking the Promised Land* chooses to explore options and perspectives for American Mormons as political actors within the parameters of twenty-first-century America’s liberal democracy, it is perhaps reasonable for Davis to have chosen *The Liberal Soul* to advocate on behalf of options and perspectives that downplay or simply ignore the more radical possibilities of Mormonism’s history. Instead, he focuses on Christian fundamentals, which he hopes might lead a politically-interested Mormon living in the American West to question the idolization of the individual actor in the marketplace that permeates his local political culture (given that Davis—again, likely knowing his audience—only rarely associates

liberalism with women's rights, the individual in mind is almost certainly male) and thereby perhaps become more open-minded about the legitimacy of collective generosity. One down side of this, though, is that in defending a rather standard progressive liberalism—rather than some “Mormonized” left-leaning position—as a possible alternative to Utah's dominant libertarian and constitutionalist conservatism, Davis is confronted with the reality of the Democratic Party in America today and the suspicion most American Mormons feel toward it simply on the basis of its support for legal abortion and LGBT rights. Davis's book does little to aid liberal-minded Mormons, however defined, in philosophical arguments with those who are convinced that contemporary liberalism's egalitarian aims have been transformed into a “liberationist” movement, especially in regard to sexual matters. Davis instead mostly ducks those issues and suggests—wisely!—that the political culture of American Mormonism needs “balance” and would be better served by a “holistic approach” that rejects an obsessive focus on avoiding particular evils and embraces the “positive role” that America's larger, liberal, and pluralistic society should play in our lives (xx, xxiv, xxvii).

The concluding chapter of Davis's book, “If Ye Are Not One Ye Are Not Mine,” is explicitly pastoral, aiming to bring his discussions of liberal political possibilities into unity with what he strongly affirms as a genuinely “liberal” moral attitude. He acknowledges the dominance of Republican voters at every level of the American church and presents no comprehensive critique of that state of affairs; rather, he hopefully points out the disconnect between voting habits and ideological self-sorting among Mormons and encourages his fellow members to develop the possibilities of that disconnect by showing greater open-mindedness, more tolerance of diversity, and a firmer commitment to seek compromise with one another, adding as a demographic warning that “time is not on the side of . . . narrow-minded Church members” anyway (153). Ultimately, *The Liberal Soul* seeks to help American Mormons bring the liberalism that—however comfortable with, or bothered by, it they may be—defines the social world through which they

operate into their hearts and minds. If *Seeking the Promised Land* is about the travails and travels of American Mormons seeking to gain some political purchase on contemporary pluralism, Davis's fine book urges them to allow the broader presumptions of contemporary pluralism (to which the great majority of American Mormons have long since accommodated themselves anyway) to gain a great purchase on their political beliefs as well.



Which leads us to Terryl and Fiona Givens's *The Crucible of Doubt*. The connection between the foregoing two books and this one isn't obvious or direct, to be sure; the Givenses aren't writing about liberalism as a social phenomenon or a set of ideas at all; on my reading, the word "liberal" barely makes so much as a single appearance in the whole text. Still, the connection is, I think—at least when one looks at this graceful, thoughtful, and profoundly rewarding book with a certain interpretive lens—undeniable. The Givenses, in their effort to lay out for their fellow Mormons some basic ideas about the nature of belief and doubt in a pastoral way, have also written as fine a defense of being both faithfully and "liberally" Mormon as anything that has been published by Deseret Book in decades.

This connection with liberalism is sufficiently subtle that smart, serious readers of the book can bypass it entirely, focusing instead on processing the suggestions the book makes for addressing the problem of doubt in the contemporary LDS Church. But notice the tenor of those suggestions! Again and again, the Givenses want to suggest that the doctrinal notions Mormon believers may have thought themselves to have received could be wrong, or at least incomplete, and that the only way to resolve—or even just to achieve a degree of peace in regard to—any doubts they have about those notions is to develop greater "openness." Openness in regard to what? Well, to the moral incompleteness of tidy cultural explanations for suffering (chapter 2), or to the lack of spiritual reward that too often characterizes church attendance (chapter 3), or to the genuine inconsistencies the faithful will

encounter in trying to reconcile contradictory scriptures (chapter 4), or to the frustrating reality that Mormon leaders are not infrequently chosen for other than genuinely meritocratic or revelatory reasons (chapter 5), or to the plain fact that popular Mormonism's overly casual claims to holding a monopoly on truth are simply incoherent (chapter 7). What is the point of all that openness? The point is, the Givenses make clear, that it is exactly in conditions of "incertitude," when we are open to the "indeterminacy of it all," that we become able to "act most authentically, calling upon intuition, spiritual intimations, or simply yearning" (32).

Now, a question: exactly how much distance is there between the above statement and, say, the *bête noire* of many religious (including Mormon!) conservatives, the statement made by Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy in his opinion in the abortion-rights-defending case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life"? True, the Givenses might respond by claiming that any truly "authentic" choice will be one that responds to "spiritual intimations," which will, of course, because they come from the same God who stands as the center of the doctrinal claims of the restored Church, greatly limit just what kind of self-definitions any particular person might be able to righteously—and therefore legitimately—come up with. This is a good—and arguably anti-liberal—response. The problem, though, is that such a response potentially undermines one of the basic themes of the Givenses's beautiful, poetic, evocative book: that the individual choosers must work out what they believe for themselves.

The Givenses fall back on either an implied or an explicit assumption of individualism and diversity in the search for belief and the Christian need to respond to such—as a church, as family members, and as individual Mormons ourselves—with generosity (see 79–80, 106–07, and 138 for a start). Nowhere do they do so more persuasively than in the pastoral heart of the book, chapter 8, "Spirituality and Self-Sufficiency," which

begins with Proverbs 5:15: “Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running waters out of thine own well.” That chapter is a ringing defense of seeking truth and solace wherever we can find it and of, as the Givenses put it, “drinking liberally” when we do. It acknowledges the importance of “shared discipleship . . . with a larger community,” but also insists that we are ultimately “responsible for . . . finding spiritual nourishment in our own sacred spaces” (101–02). It uses what, I think, we have to recognize as deeply liberal—in the sense of placing a priority on those relationships we choose to make—stories to make its point: Bishop Edwin D. Woolley’s being rebuked by President Brigham Young and responding with quiet defiance, “[T]his is just as much my church as it is yours”; and an unnamed and doubting young woman who finds the courage to speak in church about her lack of belief and her bare longings for her family and, as a result, “feel[s] free” (103–06). In these stories, and in many others spread throughout the book, there is a bedrock assumption that all faithful voices within the Church, whatever their distinctly individual approaches or paths to belief, stand as equals and that the Church as a body needs the confidence to respect and embrace that diversity.

Obviously, none of that necessarily points toward “liberal” approaches to government or civil rights or economic equality. But to the extent to which Terryl and Fiona Givens want us to fully respect and enlist into the common project of building Zion *all* baptized individuals in their diverse paths toward God’s grace, their arguments are, for example, complementary to Richard Davis’s call for American Mormons to take seriously the possibility of exhibiting in our choices the qualities of a “liberal soul.” Moreover, their claims also speak strongly to the reality Campbell, Green, and Monson document in *Seeking the Promised Land*, showing how our collectively divided commitment to modern pluralism—that is, the American Mormon tendency to both imitate the strategic means of success within our liberal world while insulating ourselves from the implications of being part of it—lessens our potential contributions overall. The

Givens's book is thus, in a sense, the heart of a shared project of all three thoughtful works: before finding a place within (and thus, perhaps, helping to extend) liberal pluralism and before recognizing the value (as well as the limitations) of liberal and pluralistic approaches to political life, American Mormons must accept the liberality and plurality incumbent within the persons, both as individuals and as a church, that they hope to become.



These are wise books. They make the case, either implicitly or explicitly, for an appreciation of certain liberal virtues like tolerance and diversity and generosity (both individually and collectively, both politically and personally) in terms that any curious Mormon can understand and relate to. Also, they provide perspectives and real data on a genuine question: namely, how and why the full extent of contemporary liberal democratic practices (including those that are, from the faithful Mormon perspective, likely viewed as positive, such as a greater attention to the basic rights and needs of all individuals of all stripes, as well those probably seen as negative, such as increased secularism and religious indifference) have challenged American Mormon life. All together, they remind us that liberality and individuality and varieties of self-articulated participation really are deeply entwined in what it means to be a Christian in modern America. They even suggest, I think, that should the law of consecration, led by politically triumphant and genuinely pious Mormons, ever actually replace the liberal capitalist order some day, the responsibilities of—and the need to show respect for—the individual as a chooser, a voter, and a thinker must abide and remain central to Mormon doctrine. We should all wish to approach faith and politics, I think, in terms of the real beating heart at the core of liberal Mormon or liberal Christian belief: a trust in God's grace, that he really does love us as individuals and really will unfold himself to us in all our diverse contexts, and really is attending to us as we seek and we share that which we have, both as individuals and, ultimately, together. In ways both subtle and obvious, direct and implied, Campbell, Green, Monson, Davis, and the Givenses are all talking about exactly those deep religious possibilities. For reminding us of them, they deserve our thanks.