

Learn to disagree without ceasing to love. We need to manifest patience, tolerance and good will to handle dissent.

Even though we are excluded and shunned we can remain attached to the church by offering the testimony of presence. (151–54)

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Ezra Taft Benson: Christian Libertarian

Matthew L. Harris, ed. *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2019. 260 pp. Paper: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-0252042256.

Reviewed by Russell Arben Fox

Years ago, I was attending a local discussion group hosted by a fairly traditional (and Christian, though ecumenical) private school near the university where I teach. It was a great discussion, but one participant—a successful businessman then recently retired who has since become an idiosyncratic friend of mine—completely mystified me. He unwound a long theological spiel emphasizing that those who truly understood scripture (particularly John 3:8 and Revelation 22:17) would recognize the priority of an unforced, unguided, “whosoever will” relationship

with God. Moreover, since all interactions between Christians are to be guided by the Holy Spirit, the obvious conclusion is that Adam Smith's unforced, unguided, invisible hand should be emulated as reflecting the will of God. Thus, in any truly Christian society, or even one that only aspires to such, any regulation or redistribution that interferes with the free will decisions of individual Christians regarding how to dispose of their property or share their wealth must be seen as contravening the word of God.

At the time, while I knew (and still know) plenty of devout Christians who consider any kind of socialism an evil, I nonetheless considered this a pretty original theological synthesis. Now that I've read Matthew Harris's fine collection of essays, *Thunder from the Right*, though, I understand: far from simply hanging out and mostly disagreeing with a group of friends, I'd actually received a sermon from President Ezra Taft Benson's doppelgänger. I wish I'd known it at the time.

Harris's book is a short but very smart selection of scholarly takes on President Benson, looking at his political priorities, his government service, his Cold War worldview, his attitude regarding the push for civil rights, and how he articulated all of the above and more through his long and very public life. Benson became president of the LDS Church in 1985, when I was a junior in high school; his ministry, particularly his call to "flood the earth" with the Book of Mormon, structured a great deal of my young adulthood, especially my proselyting mission for the Church (as J. B. Haws explains well in the excellent though somewhat off-topic concluding essay in this volume; see pp. 225–26). But politically speaking, I have considered Benson's archconservative legacy to be embarrassing and, more importantly, uninteresting for decades. This book, by presenting the elements of a theory of a particular kind of Christian libertarianism and individualism through its different takes on Benson, has changed my mind. Engaging directly with Benson's extreme and often paranoid conservatism in either

Mormon congregations or America at large would likely be of little practical value today; it's not as though individuals like my aforementioned friend are thick on the ground. But developing a sympathetic interest in how such ideas hold together, what role they played in the past, and most of all how they continue to evolve in the midst of the present political moment is very valuable indeed, and for that we owe Harris and his contributors a vote of thanks.

I should note that the description I gave of what I called then (and still call) a form of "Christian libertarianism" is not a perfect match with what Matthew Bowman, in his essay, calls Benson's "moralistic libertarianism" (160). But it is a workable enough label, involving as it does an individualism presented in connection with a heavy dose of conspiratorial thinking, theological innovation, and cultural outsourcing. There is no one point in Harris's collection where these disparate elements are brought together as part of a single analytical argument about Benson's personal political philosophy, but Bowman's essay probably comes closest, with those by Brian Q. Cannon, Robert A. Goldberg, and Andrea G. Radke-Moss providing essential pieces of the puzzle as well. Let me emphasize that for anyone interested in post-WWII Mormon history, every essay in this collection is very much worth reading and pondering: Gary James Bergera's thoughtful consideration of Benson's meeting with Nikita Khrushchev and his subsequent retelling of that encounter; Newell G. Bringhurst's eye-opening look at Benson's presidential aspirations (and those who both supported and opposed him); Harris's own thorough examination of Benson's often extreme determination to see the civil rights movement as a communist conspiracy; and of course Haws's concluding essay as well, despite its minimal engagement with Benson's politics. But I believe the strongest intellectual insights of this collection are to be found in the essays by Bowman (on Benson's development of the Mormon notion of "free agency"), Cannon (on Benson's views of farming and his work as Secretary of Agriculture during the Eisenhower administration), Goldberg (on the relationship

between Benson's conservatism and the emergence of the "new right" in American politics), and Radke-Moss (on Benson's traditionalist views regarding women and condemnation of America's changing sexual mores). They all warrant particular attention.

Bowman's essay is built around the idea of the "producerist ethos" (162–63), which is another way of expressing the American attachment to the ideal of self-sustaining agrarian communities, a moral vision of positive freedom that echoed Jefferson's yeoman civic republicanism and was reflected in the populist challenges by farmers to the emergence of industrial capitalism and mass consumerism in late nineteenth-century America. Bowman does not explore all of these aspects of producerism, nor the ways it both paralleled and differed from the communitarian economic arrangements of the early Church's united order experiments. The most important element that Bowman misses is the connection between producerism and place—that is, the fact that producerist thinking assumed the ability, and the right, of people to work productively on their own land. Instead, Bowman presents the Mormon approach to producerism as involving an affirmation of freedom to be "realized through the mediation of tradition, law, and culture passed down from heaven" (167). But that bit of abstraction aside, he persuasively shows how the "moral rigor" demanded by producerism (165) was crucial to the thinking of President Heber J. Grant, Susa Young Gates, and others who shaped the still mostly-rural early twentieth-century Church that Benson grew up in, on his family's small farm in Idaho.

Bowman's thesis is that Benson, through his experiences in Europe delivering aid to struggling Saints following WWII and then later while serving in Eisenhower's cabinet, changed his thinking about freedom. In time, he came to see it less an inheritance tied to productive work and more ideologically, as a "political and economic liberty" that was part of the "plan of God," which "we fought to uphold during the war in heaven" (171–72). This shift is reflected not just in his many public statements, his association with the John Birch Society, and his relentless

anti-communism, but also in how he came to assess his own farming experiences while serving in Washington, DC.

Cannon's essay provides important support for this argument of Bowman's by showing how Benson, though he "instinctively identified with the yeoman ideal" and insisted that the small family farm was "the best way to produce American citizens" (25), was ultimately unwilling to tie those beliefs to the sort of communal practices and places that characterized his early life. That sort of farming stood in opposition to the "production shifts toward a balanced supply in terms of demand" (30) that Benson came to accept as an appropriate element of an advanced free market society, and that meant sacrificing some "suppliers" in order to reflect presumably inevitable economic realities.

Confronted with the fundamental problem of industrial agriculture in the twentieth century—namely, the drive to continually overproduce as expanding farming costs burdened farmers and required they generate ever more product to sell, which then lowered prices and continued the cycle—Benson, first as a county agent in the 1930s and then as a lobbyist through the 1940s, originally emphasized cooperative marketing to lower costs for farmers and enable them to price crops as a block. This, he insisted, was a better alternative to outright subsidies following the Keynesian model embraced by the New Deal. But rather than pushing such ideas more comprehensively later in his career, Benson instead embraced the premise that family farms on their own had to be large enough to be "commercially oriented and economically efficient" (37). Thus, as Secretary of Agriculture, he pushed Congress to change farming programs to recognize the reality that "the nation has an excess of cropland and farmers" and "many would have to quit farming" (42, 45). While Cannon does not explore the theoretical implications here (himself noting that Benson's thinking about social matters was always more ideological than theoretical), they are consistent with Bowman's thesis. In the decades of the Cold War, Benson's producerist resistance to government programs as something that would undermine moral

responsibility—an attitude that would be fully compatible with farming communities organizing themselves cooperatively—was replaced with, or at least overshadowed by, a more individualistic and libertarian resistance premised upon an idealization of Adam Smith’s invisible hand. The disruptive changes that made “the departure of some struggling farmers . . . inevitable” was, to Benson, perhaps nothing less than a reflection of that “eternal principle [of individual freedom] vouchsafed to us under the Constitution” (45). In Benson’s celebration of *laissez-faire* nearly seventy years ago, the neoliberal assumptions of contemporary globalization—which have come to be seen over the past thirty years as a successor to the confusions of a socialism-haunted Cold War world—were fully anticipated.

There was more to Benson’s vision than this, however. Goldberg’s careful documentation of how Benson’s rhetoric through the 1960s increasingly came to focus on what he perceived as various conspiratorial threats to America’s individualistic culture shows his growing—and narrowing—focus on the social contexts that the producerist ethic of his farming boyhood took for granted. Some of these threats, of course, were grounded in his Cold War worldview; others were partially guided by the teachings of the John Birch Society, which Benson remained a member of until the end of his life, even when they claimed President Eisenhower—the man who had defended Benson’s sometimes controversial tenure as his Secretary of Agriculture for eight years—had been an agent of, or at least a dupe within, an international communist conspiracy. This controversial group’s worldview stretched out to touch a wide range of features of modern life: for example, civic organizations (which Benson once harshly condemned as “do-gooders”; see p. 75), the push for civil rights, and most importantly, the traditional family. From his early work on behalf of expanding a productive community’s collective strength, Benson increasingly assumed that our primary concern should be defending an individual (male) producer’s castle against ideological and cultural threats.

Radke-Moss's superb reconstruction of Benson's views on women, family, and sexuality is particularly helpful here. Read in light of the other glimpses of Benson's peculiar conservatism throughout the book, the implications of his fondness for the rambunctious youth captured in the lyrics of "A Mormon Boy" and of his lifelong commitment to the patriarchal idea of male headship in the family come into sharp relief. Benson casts women—specifically, wives and mothers—in the position of providing the support and social formation that under the producerist ideal or its antecedents was presumably to be provided by the whole self-sufficient community. That Benson's wife Flora fully embraced this family-centric ideal isn't to be doubted; as Radke-Moss quotes her saying, "We women should encourage and help our menfolk in their line of duty. . . . Mothers are the builders of men" (190).

Benson, through the 1970s and 1980s, played a central role in shaping the LDS Church's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and, as one might conclude by looking at the past thirty years, propping up collapsing traditionalist assumptions within the Church about women in the workforce, birth control, and a host of other issues. It would be easy to assume that such attitudes were simply the reactions of an older man to changes in American society in the wake of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Certainly with his cheerleading for large families, discouraging of women's educational and professional goals, and blaming juvenile crime on working mothers (194–99), the connection to any kind of libertarian concern with individual freedom might seem distant. Yet if one understands the agency Benson celebrated as a gift from God to be a concept that was coded primarily as male, it makes sense. The model of a loving Mormon home should have gender complementarity, Benson assured his flock, but nonetheless women were "given to man," not the other way around (195). The givenness that was once tied to the shared moral responsibility of the productive community became tied to a righteous family, with definite

roles prescribing who the agent of liberty was and who was there to support him.

These reflections of mine go beyond any specific thesis threaded throughout this excellent book and obviously gloss over dozens of historical insights and observations throughout the collection. One reason for presenting different facets of a particular character is to invite readers to find an argument that they can assemble into a whole. If I had not had the encounter I had years ago with my libertarian friend, it might never have occurred to me to read this excellent collection in the way that I have. But because I did, and because Harris has expertly assembled these scholarly investigations in the way he did, I am now in possession of a new understanding of man who, long ago, loomed so large in my faith life, as well as a new understanding of a kind of conservatism that replaced something else—something, I am comfortable asserting, that was much better—in the politics of mainstream American Mormonism. For all that, I give him my thanks.

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