

## Historicizing Sects

Stewart Davenport. *Sex and Sects: The Story of Mormon Polygamy, Shaker Celibacy, and Oneida Complex Marriage*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022. 362 pp. Cloth: \$150. Paper: \$35. ISBN-10: 0813947065.

*Reviewed by Dana Logan*

Stewart Davenport's *Sex and Sects* is not a Mormon studies book, but then again why is there a Mormon Studies but no Oneida Studies or Shaker Studies? We all know the answer (there are zero Oneida Perfectionists or Shakers living today), but rehashing this question in the context of a book that compares followers of John Humphrey Noyes, the Shakers, and the Mormons helped me think about several adjacent fields: communal studies, American religious history, and Mormon studies. Books that compare the Mormons to other perfectionist groups in the nineteenth century are part of a communal studies tradition that is based in a sociological methodology that studies, mostly, the past. The most famous book in this tradition is Lawrence Foster's 1984 *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* that, as Davenport explains, is a sociological account of these three groups. It provides a picture of each group and then compares the social functions of their practices. Davenport explains that he, unlike Foster, will historicize them and show the power of religious stories in these communities' lives. To do this, Davenport explains the cosmology of each group and puts their geneses in the context of the Second Great Awakening in the Burned Over District where many seekers wanted "more" than the standard salvation offered to them by evangelicals. He also narrates each distinct era of all three groups, including moments of historical tension and their shift at the end of the nineteenth century out of sectarianism. For teaching undergraduates this book would serve

as a highly readable introduction to any of these groups and a useful meditation on sex and sectarianism.

There are three highly detailed stories of religious communities in this book. The narratives of each community align generally with the scholarship in those fields—by which I mean the account of polygamy will not seem controversial to Mormon scholars, the account of Ann Lee’s interest in celibacy follows standard accounts in Shaker history, the account of stirpiculture (Noyes’s human “breeding” program) will be familiar to those well versed in the history of Oneida. Davenport tends to cite primary sources more than secondary scholarship, which demonstrates his wide-ranging archival work. So, the question then is how the interweaving of these accounts around key themes such as children, institution building, or gender allow us to see these communities differently. Davenport argues that this interweaving allows us to see what it feels like to belong to a “sect,” a group in which every practice that repels outsiders brings you closer together, and sometimes creates disappointment. Or, for example, having friends in high places (Oneida) allows you to remain in the nation, while not having those friends forces you to leave and create your own (the Mormons). We also see the different, but parallel, stories of institution building followed by endurance (the Mormons) and declension (Oneida and the Shakers).

Scholars of any nineteenth-century “sect” benefit from becoming well-versed in the parallel stories of radical religious communities during this era. Davenport, despite his turn from Foster’s sociological model, remains highly focused on the human forces that apply equally to the Mormons, Shakers, and Oneida: a desire for theological experimentation, authoritarian leadership, and prickly family dynamics. He excels at showing how each group’s theology informed their practices, which might seem very odd to the uninitiated. The chapters on family dynamics and theologies of sexuality also show that these three groups are especially tethered in the nineteenth century through their shared emphases on a rethinking of pleasure and biological kinship. You could compare each group to other nineteenth-century groups, but there is

an enduring value to sticking to this sex triumvirate as established by Foster. As promised, Davenport does not treat these groups as static, and the book captures the changing dynamics of all three groups through historical vignettes with plenty of action. None of these groups ends up where they started with their charismatic leaders' initial visions.

Davenport's book has made me wonder: do groups who are part of the same historical story need to be compared when we can historicize their relationship to one another and to the world around them? The field of history of religions (defined at this point by scholars such as Tomoko Masuzawa) argues that comparison is an inherently ahistorical project. Comparison of these groups happened within nineteenth-century American history. The white evangelicals that loom in the background of this book compared various sects using their own nineteenth-century tools of exoticization. Comparing the three might continue these nineteenth-century evangelicals' project, even when we are trying to be more empathetic or objective. The Mormons, the Shakers, and Oneida also existed in the same time and space (loosely), and so we could talk about the common material forces that shaped them: capitalism, race, and secular governance. This is a move that is happening in Mormon studies to great effect; see, for example, David Walker's *Railroading Religion*. But this analysis in Mormon studies of Mormonism's relationship to material historical forces rarely includes other sectarian groups. This would be, I think, too big of a project. Davenport's analysis of these three groups, however, is an invitation for more big projects. We will always see more if we do not imagine any one religious community as exceptional.

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