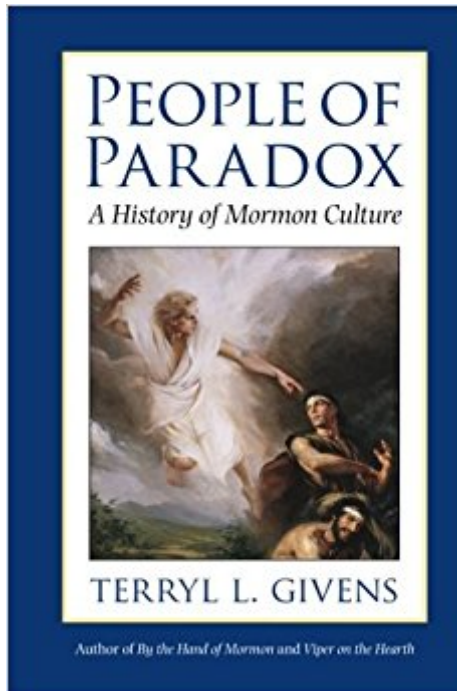




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People Of Paradox: A History Of Mormon Culture



Synopsis

In *People of Paradox*, Terryl Givens traces the rise and development of Mormon culture from the days of Joseph Smith in upstate New York, through Brigham Young's founding of the Territory of Deseret on the shores of Great Salt Lake, to the spread of the Latter-Day Saints around the globe. Throughout the last century and a half, Givens notes, distinctive traditions have emerged among the Latter-Day Saints, shaped by dynamic tensions--or paradoxes--that give Mormon cultural expression much of its vitality. Here is a religion shaped by a rigid authoritarian hierarchy and radical individualism; by prophetic certainty and a celebration of learning and intellectual investigation; by existence in exile and a yearning for integration and acceptance by the larger world. Givens divides Mormon history into two periods, separated by the renunciation of polygamy in 1890. In each, he explores the life of the mind, the emphasis on education, the importance of architecture and urban planning (so apparent in Salt Lake City and Mormon temples around the world), and Mormon accomplishments in music and dance, theater, film, literature, and the visual arts. He situates such cultural practices in the context of the society of the larger nation and, in more recent years, the world. Today, he observes, only fourteen percent of Mormon believers live in the United States. Mormonism has never been more prominent in public life. But there is a rich inner life beneath the public surface, one deftly captured in this sympathetic, nuanced account by a leading authority on Mormon history and thought.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. With his fourth book on Mormonism, Givens (*By the Hand of Mormon; Viper on the Hearth*) earns his place as one of the great LDS scholars of his time. Students of religion, history and culture will find this an authoritative analysis of four fascinating and powerful tensions at the core of Mormonism that feed into its cultural life: authority and radical freedom; searching and certainty; the sacred and the banal; and election versus exile. In the first section, Givens fluently translates the often-insular views of the LDS faith into the language of Western philosophy and puts Joseph Smith's teachings into historical perspective alongside Hegel, Marx, Faust and others. The remainder of the book is divided into two time periods: the formative years of a beleaguered and isolated religion from 1830-1890, and the period since 1890 characterized by normalization and global growth. For each, Givens explores Mormonism's wide-ranging cultural contributions in architecture, city planning, music, dance, theatre, film, literature, rational inquiry, and the visual arts. Sprinkled with photos and illustrations, with topics ranging from the "art missionaries" of Utah who studied in Paris at the turn of the century, to the Mormon dominance in science fiction, this scholarly tome actually lives up to its ambitious subtitle. He convincingly concludes that Joseph Smith has provided Mormonism "with sufficient paradoxes to generate vigorous artistic and intellectual expression for another 200 years." --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Terry L. Givens takes readers on a fascinating tour of the remarkable achievements of Mormon culture; its distinctive contributions to art, literature, music, theater, science, and to the life of the mind. Eventually, one realizes that this is not only a book about Mormon culture, but that it makes a substantial contribution to that culture." --Rodney Stark, author of *The Rise of Mormonism*"Terry L. Givens provides an elegant introduction to some of the central tenets, practices, and psychic investments of the Mormon faith. Linking Mormon teachings about agency, authority, salvation, and revelation to broader impulses in Christian and American theology and aesthetics, Givens comprehensively explores both the distinctiveness of Mormon cultural production and its continuities with wider religious currents. He describes the contradictions and persistent problems that arise, as they do in all faiths, within the lived experience of Mormonism. An outstanding work of intellectual and cultural studies, *People of Paradox* represents a creative and singular contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on the Mormon tradition." --Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, author of *Religion and Society in Frontier California*"Givens's proposal that Mormon belief be conceived as a series of paradoxes rather than a set of fixed principles is one of the most significant advances in Mormon thought in a generation. It puts Mormon culture in a brilliant new light. Moreover, by displacing the

standard themes from their usual position at center stage and exploring Mormon cultural expression instead, he gives us a fresh, new history of the Latter-day Saints. This book is filled with treasures."

--Richard Bushman, author of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* "People of Paradox confirms Terryl Givens's status, if it was ever in question, as the leading mid-career scholar of Mormonism. People of Paradox will likely, for a generation or more, be the statement on Mormon culture with which scholars must wrestle. This well-researched cultural history succeeds brilliantly in what it sets out to do-synthetically identify and explain fundamental issues and trends within Mormon culture. It is even more exceptional as cultural criticism. No summary can adequately convey the elegance of Givens's prose or the subtlety and profundity of his insights. The book is a superb historical introduction and agenda-setting conceptualization of Mormon culture."--Western Historical Quarterly

"This is an impressive work of synthesis that engages a broad secondary literature in discussing each aspect of the Mormon intellectual and artistic heritage. While other scholars have produced excellent studies treating Mormon literature or music or visual arts, Givens is the first to offer a comprehensive survey of key aspects of Latter-day Saint cultural life across the full span of Mormon history. ...The breadth of its coverage, the insightfulness of many of its observations, and the effective use it makes of paradox to provide a richly textured portrait of Mormon intellectual and artistic life make it a solid contribution to the growing field of Mormon studies. It deserves to be widely read and discussed, and its superior literary style insures that enjoyment as well as insight will repay its readers." --American Historical Review

"Givens has accomplished something quite special with this masterful study of Mormon cultural expression: in deriving his discussion of Mormon culture from details of Mormon theology, he suggests a union of the practical and theoretical elements of religious life with a sincerity and seamlessness rarely achieved in academic study." --Choice

One of the most thought provoking books I have read and the only one that I know of that addresses culture which is such a big part of the Mormon experience. We spend a lot of time talking about History and Doctrine but we experience culture and so the topic deserves a lot of attention. I think this book goes a long way towards explaining how people can have such a different experience in the church. I read stories of people who feel stifled by their activity in the church and wonder if they are attending a different church than I. I have a sister who is inactive because she experienced one aspect of these paradoxes and not the other and so never experienced the balance. Because she stopped learning, her understanding has never matured beyond that of an 18 year old girl turned off to the "Iron Rod" aspect of obedience. The book mentions paradoxes and I

think that they do seem like paradoxes at first blush. However, once you dig in a little more, I think that there is more compatibility than the word paradox implies. A good example is the first chapter: the Iron Rod and the Liahona. An analogy that works for me is to compare life to a football game. The Iron Rod aspect defines what the boundaries of the field of play are and who is on offense and who is on defense along with rules about holding, pass interference. etc. The Liahona aspect is where you get to run any offensive play you want or any defensive alignment you feel is appropriate. Sometimes you are the coach and sometimes you are the player. When you are the coach, you have the responsibility to decide what actions the team should take and when you are the player you have the responsibility to execute your assignment to the best of your ability. With that in mind, is there really a paradox between the rules of the game and your ability to enjoy playing either as a coach or a player? Most who enjoy the game of football would say no. This is the way the game is best enjoyed based on years of experience. Complaining about the rules of the church is a little like complaining about whether or not there should be holding penalties or pass interference penalties. I personally love to watch a football game where the players and the coaches are on the same page, show excellent teamwork and commit few penalties. Perhaps we as a society don't place enough value in the paradoxes that are part of our lives. Perhaps they provide optimal tension that provides a means for struggle and thus progression.

I already read the author's "By the Hand of Mormon" and looked forward to reading this one. I feel that Givens was more focused in this book than he was in that (I gave that book a 4-star review), but his fantastic insights and scholarship show through in both books. There were aspects of Mormon culture that didn't interest me at all (such as architecture and short stories) and some that fascinated me (such as intellectual culture, music and movies), but that's all on a personal level- kudos to Givens for addressing all aspects of Mormon culture. Here are some gems that I picked up from the book-1. To the query about how a strict and somewhat rigid church can be so open to all forms of dancing- "If you can't beat them, supervise them, seems to be the Mormon response."2. (From a study) "Mormons generally have high expectations for their youth and invest a lot in educating them... These investments pay off in producing Mormon teenagers who are, by sociological standards at least, more religiously serious and articulate than most other religious teenagers in the US."3. Mormon theology, in contrast with Evangelicals, is much more open to science. That's why BYU can have many programs dedicated to evolution/dinosaurs. Dallin Oaks said, as BYU president, "The bones are there and cannot really be ignored by a major university that is almost literally sitting on top of them."4. "One paradox of Mormon culture is its rootedness in

a rigidly hierarchical, authoritarian church- and yet this church was established in the context of 2 fantastically individualistic phenomena that converged in antebellum America: Western Romanticism & Jacksonian democracy"⁵. On music- Although there are few adult hymns centered on the Book of Mormon, some of the most popular Primary songs are BoM centric. Givens states that "Book of Mormon Stories" song is for LDS kids what "Old McDonald Had a Farm" is for regular American kids and he foresees a day in the near future when BoM characters such as Nephi and Alma are more known to LDS kids than Bible figures such as Noah and Job.⁶ Our foundational history, as a people, is a better epic than any fiction could be. We are still waiting for our "Mormon Shakespeare" to come along and really capture it in literature or poetry. And so much more. Fabulous insights with an approach that will appeal to the non-LDS sociologist as well. In my opinion, Givens is among the best LDS scholars writing today along with Richard Bushman and Grant Hardy. I will soon be buying and reading his book on Parley P Pratt and I very much look forward to it. One negative is that there are a few typos and errors on the Kindle version, but that's not the author's fault.

Much has already been written about the content of this book by other reviewers, so I won't summarise the content in any meaningful way here. Instead I'll make the following points: Givens has written a deeply thought-provoking book that challenges thinking, and points out remarkable insights into the paradoxes of mormon belief. I was absorbed by Part I where the paradoxes were elaborated on and explored. And as a 'thinker', I found his treatment of intellectualism in the LDS Church outstanding (in Part III). I am not familiar with the fine arts in any way. This book introduced me to a world that I am surrounded by but never knew it. I have become aware of the impact of the arts on a culture that I accept and participate fully in, but had never acknowledged or considered in such a way. The language of the book is dense. It might be a challenging read were it not for the continual insights and thoughtful descriptions of various subjects. I found doctrinal depth, intellectual wisdom, historical a-ha's, and much more in this excellent book. As I turned the final page I exclaimed out loud, "what an amazing book."

Long description of many aspects of Mormon doctrine and culture in great detail. Definitely more detail than I expected, but gave me a good idea of why attitudes are the way they are. Finally understand why BYU religion professors make their classes do awful--they are trying to prove to the world how rigorous they are, not trying to help their students develop their testimonies. Enjoyed learning lots of new things.

Outstanding argument... and one can see this very paradox live and well in the church today.

I am very interested in this book.

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