


People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture

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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.

People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture Details

Date : Published August 29th 2007 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published July 30th 2007)

ISBN : 9780195167115

Author : Terryl L. Givens

Format : Hardcover 414 pages

Genre : Christianity, Lds, Religion, Nonfiction, Mormonism, History

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From Reader Review People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture for online ebook

Jeffrey Howard says

Another phenomenal book from Terry. His ability to expertly cover such a wide array of topics always impresses me. I would agree that understanding Mormonism as a tension between paradoxes is very refreshing and intellectually satisfying. He treats these paradoxes with clarity. Despite his characteristically verbose and sometimes unnecessarily elevated language, he provides an intelligent cultural history of Mormonism that is honest, thoughtful, and unafraid of presenting the difficult realities of the Mormon experience.

Whether it is read front to back, or approached as a collection of essays, his book should be read by Mormons who want to gain a deeper understanding of how and maybe why, they are perceived by the world as they are. Additionally, his articulations will provide Mormons with a clearer sense of their identity and contributions in the arts.

Beautifully connects Mormon culture with Mormon history and Mormon theology.

Scott Smith says

This was a great book. The author is LDS, which is different from the other books I've been reading, but he does not seem like he comprises academic inquiry for it. He doesn't just rehash the same old stuff again like so many other, but instead brings up some great observations on Mormon culture. The main idea is that LDS people are peculiar in that several aspects of their social life are paradoxical in nature. For example, how to balance between belief in belonging to the only true church and yet not isolate yourself from the rest of humanity, how to study and get educated but not become worldly, etc. He does it better than me. You should check it out if you want to read some thought provoking stuff from the perspective of an LDS writer.

Dallin says

Probably one of the best Mormon studies books I've read, Givens traces four different "paradoxes" or tensions in Mormon belief that forms the groundwork of Mormon arts and letters. Some of the most insightful "paradox" chapters were: the tension between individual knowledge and hierarchal authority, "certainty" and eternal progress/learning, and the conceptual collapse between what is spiritual and temporal. Apart from these opening arguments, I really enjoyed his thoughts on past and present Mormon intellectualism and his perspective on Mormon literature and cinema. While not directly apologetic, Givens makes a strong case for how unique Mormonism was during its inception and how complex its doctrines and beliefs truly are. After reading this book, I don't know how anyone could pass us off as a "cult" or a bunch of brain-washed sycophants. More and more, smart scholarship like this forces religious scholars and laypeople alike to recognize that the LDS church is not only a growing church, but a dynamic and vital one as well. And to an LDS audience, it not only gives insights into our past and present culture, but it reminds us the importance that the arts should play in our spiritual lives. I never would've guessed before this book that Brigham Young not only commissioned a theater to be the first building constructed in the valley after the

temple, but that he was even an actor in a number of Nauvoo productions. Overall, it is a great addition to understanding the beautiful mosaic of Mormonism.

David says

In the final pages of Given's exceptional book, he writes, "It is not easy to define the self in relationship to the other, without distorting both in the process." This is as much an apology for the preceding 300+ pages as it is an apology on behalf of the Mormon people themselves. At the heart of this book, is the story of a young religion struggling to figure out its place in the world and how that place aligns with its accompanying doctrines. There is not paradox but many here and each is addressed thoroughly through the eyes of LDS cultural arts. The struggle to keep the sacred as such in a religion that teaches the everyday is sacred is explained beautifully in discussion on LDS architecture. The differences between principle and preference are expounded on in seeing varying views on dance between Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. The reconciliation of both grace and works is discussed in frank and necessary details in the section on literature. The struggles between revelation and orthodoxy, free will and commandments...it's all here. Like CS Lewis' "Experiment in Criticism," it becomes apparent that the arts are indeed a mirror of the people. This book, while acknowledging the complexities and criticisms of Mormonism, never condemns the faith. Rather, it enriches it, presenting it as something worth study and worth true pondering, and as something that has been worthy of great sacrifice for many. An excellent and thoughtful book.

Greg Diehl says

POP is Givens at his best. Turning a Mormon cliché on its ear, I've often wondered if it was feasible to be fully "in" the church and not "of" the cultural foibles it tends to generate. This may be like asking if, once aware of the water you are swimming in, can you consciously choose to get out, towel yourself off and still breathe as a fish?

Knowing the answer doesn't make exploring the question any less tantalizing. In POP, Givens compares Mormon Culture to a "second skin" which we "cannot elude" if we wish to effectively navigate cultural/conceptual vocabularies, and/or find breathing room when competing cultural "certainties" collide.

Givens is particularly adept at capturing these paradoxes through a lens that is effectively calibrated from both a thoughtful and faithful perspective. As with his other works, Givens provides his readers with a potential path for compassion, understanding, and finding hope when we find our "second skin" actually getting under our skin . . .

Breck says

Givens is easily one of my favorite LDS authors. I've read a few of his articles/speeches, so I thought it time to read one of his books. The first four chapters have been excellent, the first and third my favorite. Givens has a unique way of describing his faith and he does so in a very dramatic/artistic way. For instance he references the temple as "a microcosm of heaven in architectural space." To him Mormonism is exciting; when speaking you can hear it in his voice.

To get a better feel for Givens I highly recommend this BYU speech on Joseph Smith:
<http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader...>

An excerpt from the above speech:

"Joseph Smith ignited something in thousands of men and women that connects them to God and to each other in powerful ways. In part, this was because he was, like Esther, born to his hour in human history—an hour when the passion for human liberty never burned brighter."

This is a Q&A session he did for PBS's "The Mormons":

<http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews...>

I have to admit, I read a good portion of this book, but didn't complete it.

John says

I start by saying this was not light reading. Givens is often too wordy. I chuckled at the exhaustive sentence structures, wordiness, and unusual word usage. Some chapters were also less engaging than others.

BUT...Givens offers tremendous value as he is one of the few LDS authors who doesn't just regurgitate what others have said – he offers innovative thinking and careful thoughtfulness. His approach of LDS theology being a series of paradoxes rather than a set of fixed principles is an intriguing premise.

His topics include: Iron Rod vs. Liahona, rigid central/hierarchical authority vs. individualistic freedom & personal revelation, a culture of certainty where members testify about all the things they "know" vs. constantly searching for truth, existence in exile as a chosen people vs. craving for integration & acceptance, practical aspects of daily life vs. the supernaturally sacred. I particularly enjoyed his thoughts on intellectualism as well as the evolving treatment of history within the church. He also addresses little-covered topics such as LDS architecture, music, theater, visual arts, dance, and literature. Overall a good read, but you must come with the appetite. I will likely find myself referring back to certain concepts & chapters in the years to come.

Joseph says

By culture, Givens is referring primarily to the arts. That makes for a fascinating journey through the history of the Mormon artistic tradition, although I think sometimes that journey involves a little too much for Givens to include. For the most part, this book was really enjoyable. The paradoxes which Givens points out in the beginning of the book are certainly some of the most fascinating nuances of Mormonism; demonstrating how they have influenced the Mormon culture of art was more for me like an interesting side note - a very long, detailed side note. The only criticism I have of Givens is his style doesn't always communicate clearly the relationship between the paradoxes of Mormonism and the works he discussed. At times it felt like two different books: one on paradoxes and one on dry history. But overall, I'd recommend this as a perceptive account of what it means for many of us to be Mormon.

Jonathon says

Published by Oxford University Press, this is an impressive and important work.

A vast array of cultural expressions have been birthed in less than two hundred years since the advent of Mormonism. Terryl Givens' examination of Mormon cultural history illuminates the innate and beautiful paradoxes one can find among the Latter-day Saints.

Mormonism appeals to certainty, yet it is a faith that values, and was founded upon, inquiry. Mormonism emphasizes human agency and individualism, yet stresses the importance of collective obedience. Latter-day Saint leaders have formulated rigid doctrines based on "all that God has revealed," yet Mormonism concedes that God "will yet reveal many great and important things..."(A of F 1:9).

If you are hungering for a tremendously satisfying feast of Mormon contemplation, I highly recommend this book.

Craig says

I liked this book, even though it was too long. The book examines Mormon culture, focusing specifically on some of its polar dualisms. For instance, the Church emphasizes above all loyalty and strict obedience while at the same time glorifying man's free will and obligation to obtain personal revelation. Such mixtures of seemingly polar-opposite ideas embedded in our culture invites misunderstanding and warped perceptions, and can make it difficult to help outsiders fully appreciate our culture. Heck, even insiders don't fully appreciate the ambiguity that exists in Mormon culture.

But the book is more than just an examination of Mormon teachings. It examines the evolution of Mormon literature, art, and scholarship -- controversy and all. I think this part was just as interesting as the section on the paradoxes.

One nit-pick: the type is so small that the book is physically difficult to read. (I kept checking to see whether it was available on Kindle so I could enlarge the print). Either I'm getting old, or Givens was trying to take the cheap way out of not editing his book. Indeed, Givens does a poor job at editing. From my perspective, several chapters were overlapping, and I was tempted on multiple occasions to not finish.

Jeff Free says

Not so much a review of Mormon culture as a review of Mormon liberal arts. There's no discussion here of sports culture or business culture, for example. Lots of quotes in this book but also some keen insights by Givens. The first section is great reading and the chapter on modern intellectualism in Mormonism is very good. The rest is more or less a series of reviews by the author of Mormon arts. Those parts weren't terribly interesting.

Maggie Maxfield says

As a teenager, I pored through General Conference talks to add to my collection of God-approved quotes, and I agonized over word choice in the "For the Strength of Youth" pamphlet to save myself from unwittingly forming improper relationships with boys or wearing immodest clothing. I wanted to epitomize obedience and, admittedly, chosen-ness. I did this while growing up in a home where Sunstone Magazine was read out loud on car trips, where Mom frequently asked my little brother for more stories about his former life in Africa, and Dad mused about the dubious historical moorings of the Book of Mormon. In my home, Tarot cards and past life regressions were just as common to me as patriarchal blessings and mission calls. But my desire to be an ideal Mormon and my home life seemed so disparate. How could I reconcile the content of my young women class and my family's dinner table discussions? Luckily, life has sent me on a wonderful journey of self-discovery that has allowed me to find personal answers to this question that change somewhat with every stage of life, but always turn me back to Jesus Christ.

Fifteen years later, I have finished reading this book that poses Mormon ideals as a series of tugs-of-war between authority and radical freedom, searching and certainty, the sacred and the banal, and election and exile. According to Givens, and as a refreshing scholastic answer to my teenage angst, there is no clear winner in any of these tugs-of-war. Each has had its time in the sun, championed by some church leader or other at any given time, and explored in various art forms: literature, cinema, theater, visual art, and music. I can't help but wonder what Givens would want to add from the apparent exponential rise of LDS creators since this book's publication in 2007. And now that I write that, I'm wondering if this book, Givens' contribution to the conversation, provided the very space for so many new thinkers in the religion I love. I would add Joanna Brooks, Kate Kelly, J. Kirk Richards, Brian Kershisnik, Dilleen Marsh, Brandon Sanderson, and my own mom, Lisa Hansen, as current cultural contributors who have picked up the torch. And I haven't even been heavily involved in what Givens calls Mormonism "on the fringes of faith." What am I doing to ensure every paradox remains unsolvable?

Rex says

Givens is an astute observer of Mormon culture and does an admirable job of explaining the history from which Mormon culture has emerged. In explaining this history and the current state of Mormon culture, Givens highlights tensions within Mormonism—hierarchical authority and radical individualism; prophetic certainty and the celebration of pursuing knowledge; the impulse to seek acceptance from society while highlighting Mormonism's distinctiveness; and the tendency to merge the sacred with the banal. (Givens, at least in the title, calls these tensions "paradoxes," but I think "tension" is more apt as Givens does not provide a neat resolution to these tensions.)

Givens, while certainly presenting a sympathetic view of Mormon culture, is not afraid to lament what he perceives are shortcomings. But more remarkable than Givens's mild lament is his ability to articulate the tensions that are part of the lived experience of thoughtful Mormons.

Overall, while the language was rather stilted, I found the book thoughtful and accurate. My principal hesitancy in picking up the book was that reading about Mormon culture would be nothing more than self-indulgent navel gazing. However, Givens' thoughtful treatment of Mormon culture is an important text to

help Mormons (1) recognize our cultural idiosyncrasies, (2) think about how to improve our culture, and (3) engage in more productive ways with society in general.

Alvin says

Givens does some solid research for this book. He is unabashed about employing opinions by unsympathetic or disaffected members whose point of view he considers significant to the development of his argument that Mormon culture is paradoxical, and at times contradictory. Overall I think that he did a good job though I take issue with some of his positions, especially his take on the liberal arts, a sense of the mystical, and our concept of grace in the face of self-reliance. Nevertheless, the work accomplishes its primary task of obliging the outsider to look with more compassion on the complex cultural system that is "Mormonism," as well as discomfits members into reevaluating or at least thinking more deeply about the foundations of their belief. Unfortunately, those who would benefit most from this book are not those who would pick it up and read it!!!!

thethousanderclub says

Adam C. Zern shares his thoughts . . .

"I am a devout Latter-day Saint, and I am interested in Latter-day Saint culture. It might seem intellectually redundant to both live in a culture and then make a special effort to learn of that culture, but just like a fish doesn't appreciate water, we often don't appreciate the environment and culture we are daily surrounded by and participate in. I stumbled upon Terryl Givens's *People of Paradox* while reading a post on the official LDS Newsroom. Its subtitle—*A History of Mormon Culture*—was enough of an impetus to buy the book and add it to my Thousander list.

As with any book that attempts to achieve a truly lofty goal, such as documenting the cultural history of an entire people, *People of Paradox* attempts to provide sufficient detail to the cultural history of the Mormon people without becoming superfluous in its details. Apparently in an effort to focus the thrust and purpose of the book, Terryl Givens attempts to focus on the 'paradoxes' of Mormon culture and spends significant attention to the conflicts that arise therefrom. Some of these conflicts include the Latter-day Saints' uncompromising belief in the moral agency (freedom to choose) of each human soul while at the same time being stubbornly loyal to Priesthood leadership as well as moral and cultural standards in opposition to unhindered artistic expression. The book is at its strongest when it outlines LDS beliefs and their impacts on LDS culture. The book wavers a little bit when the author seemed to become more of a movie/literature/architecture/art critic instead of a historian. The episodes are relatively short-lived, but they do hurt the book, in my opinion.

The most challenging, compelling, and irritating parts of the book are the ones that deal with the conflict between religious orthodoxy and Mormon intellectuality. At times it was challenging to make perfect sense of the balance between LDS beliefs and secular knowledge. At others times it was compelling because of the Mormon cultural and doctrinal expectation to embrace all truth, whatever its source and wherever it is found, and the impact that has on Latter-day Saints. And at still other times it was irritating because it appears that many LDS intellectuals whine too much and the author gives them far too much credit.

Overall, I really enjoyed People of Paradox. As a Latter-day Saint, I have a greater appreciation for the water that I swim. At the very least, I know it exists, and I think coming to that knowledge alone justifies the reading of People of Paradox."

<http://thethousanderclub.blogspot.com/>

Dave says

Givens' introduction was well thought-out, complex, and a fitting tribute to the paradoxes of Mormonism. Section II, focusing on the first 50 years of Mormon cultural innovation seemed hurried, but it might be that there just wasn't much to say. The chapter on literature felt particularly stretched for substance. My main complaint was with the third section, which purported to be the history of Mormon artistic culture since 1890. If Givens had subtitled his book "A History of Mormon Culture in the United States," he may have been somewhat justified in his approach. But the book in its existing form ignores or fails to research the breadth of exciting artistic endeavors in a worldwide religious tradition that goes far beyond the boundaries of the Inter-mountain West. Think of this book as a useful collection of already published material, but don't expect any brilliant new research.

Spencer says

obviously i am not going to read 400+ pages of anything. I read it because I dont participant in mormon culture in the least bit. And I was hoping to see and feel the allure. Maybe? But here are some quotes from the first part, primarily abt mormon theological paradox.

artistic imagination responds to the great moral dilemmas of life. But lds rhetoric suggests satiety. Therefore it is presumptuous to turn to poets when God sends prophets -Terryl Givens

I do not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks to much like the Methodists. And not like the latter-day-saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be kicked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammed. -Joseph Smith

most people tend to confuse heresy with apostacy. An apostate is someone who turns against the church. A heretic is someone who does not believe in whole or in part of the teachings of the church. _sterline
mcmurren

Samuel says

This book was absolutely amazing to me. As I said to myself while reading it, "I was planning on writing this book." Which is to say, I have a fascination with the history of Mormon culture and would love to write about it. This book is organized into three parts: (i) Foundations and Paradoxes in Mormon Cultural Origins, (ii) The Varieties of Mormon Cultural Expression, Beginnings (1830-1890): The Dancing Puritans, and (iii) The Varieties of Mormon Cultural Expression, A Moveable Zion (1890-present): Pioneer Nostalgia and Beyond the American Religion. It covers a wide host of Mormon cultural considerations including doctrine, history, architecture, performance arts, literature, and visual arts.

In general, Givens explores the tensions and paradoxes that exist in the Mormon culture (to give two examples: balancing between obeying authority and seeking personal revelation AND knowing absolutely that your testimony of the Church is true and eternally seeking knowledge and progress) while asserting that these tensions play out in a healthy fashion in the lives of believers (as Joseph Smith allegedly intended) rather than in a self-defeating manner as some critics are wont to assume. There are many chapters and sub-headings within chapters that cover things as pervasive as Stake road show competitions that ran from the 1930s-1999 to Science Fiction popularity due to authors such as Orson Scott Card (25% of the top science fiction award-winning books either have reference to or connections with LDS themes or Utah geography). So even if you might be someone who finds historical analysis tedious, it might be worth reading the introduction and then skipping around to parts of the culture that you find interesting or curious (there is even a thorough discussion of the more campy films like the RM, the Singles Ward, and Sons of Provo).

Noticeably absent however is a chapter on sports; it seems to me that there is a wealth of discussion in Mormon basketball alone (beginning with a prayer and ending in an all-out brawl). Furthermore, I found the parts on architecture to be quite brief in comparison to the other sections. Perhaps there are still some chances yet for me to contribute some future works on Mormon cultural history.

Maria says

Givens highlights 4 paradoxes in LDS culture, like our belief that individual agency is essential to salvation and the fact that we have the most authoritative leadership on any church. After discussing these paradoxes, Given then goes on to describe the artistic achievements and efforts from the beginning of the Church in 1830 to the present.

Why I started this book: I requested this book through interlibrary loan, because surprise, surprise, my public library didn't have it. ILL books have limited deadlines so when it came, I immediately started reading it.

Why I finished it: Givens does an excellent job in describing the tensions that are inherit in LDS theology and culture. I also loved reading this book because it compared and contrasted the LDS experience with other religious traditions. Be aware that this is going to be a book that you want to discuss. I grabbed family (during Thanksgiving) and passing co-workers (during lunch) to discuss it.

Michael Escalante says

I loved People of Paradox. Givens searingly explores pervasive tensions in Mormon life spurred by unique cultural and philosophical paradoxes. This book has expanded my understanding of Mormon history more than any other book aside from perhaps Rough Stone Rolling. Givens insights increase my appreciation and love for Mormonism and fuels my desire to help evolve its culture to be less fiercely homogenous. I highly recommend to anyone interested in the Mormon experience.
