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Anti-Mormonism and the Question of Religious Authenticity in Antebellum America

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Abstract

When antebellum anti-Mormons took up their pens to thwart the Mormon "menace," they not only rehearsed various critiques of Mormonism, they participated in a larger conversation about the place of religion in the nation and the ways citizens might separate "real" religion from the religiously inauthentic. While Protestants of the period assumed "objective" descriptions of various religious groups might calm a vexed post-disestablishment religious scene, their incorporation of a long-standing polemical strategy that sought to expose religious impostors illuminated an array of conflicting attachments and various cultural tensions that attended the new republic's "free market" in churches.

Introduction

[1] Antebellum Americans who rejected Joseph Smith's religious claims were left with few interpretive options when writing about him. Lacking the intellectual tools that allow some modern scholars to "table" truth claims in their historical analyses, non-Mormon folks in the nineteenth century had a relatively simple choice: they needed only to decide whether Smith was a madman or a fraud. Tellingly, most antebellum commentators chose the latter and portrayed him as a self-conscious deceiver. Indeed, the practice of narrating Joseph Smith as a religious imposter was so commonplace that one can scarcely find an early anti-Mormon book whose title did not make the point: Origen Bacheler, *Mormonism Exposed, Internally and Externally* (1838); William Harris, *Mormonism Portrayed; Its Errors and Absurdities Exposed* . . . (1841); Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* [sic] . . . (1834); E. G. Lee, *The Mormons; or, Knavery Exposed* (1841); Richard Livesay, *An Exposure of Mormonism* . . . (1840); Adrian Van Brocklin Orr, *Mormonism Dissected; or, Knavery "On Two Sticks" Exposed* (1841); Tyler Parsons, *Mormon Fanaticism Exposed* . . . (1841); LaRoy Sunderland, *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted* (1838); William Swartznell, *Mormonism Exposed* . . . (1840); Samuel Williams, *Mormonism Exposed* . . . (1842). In exposing or unveiling Mormonism, though, anti-Mormons did not invent the language of religious imposture but rather brought Smith and the Latter-day Saints into a long-standing conversation about religious authenticity, authority, and the place of religious variety and innovation in Christendom. I intend what follows to serve as a comment on the place of what one scholar has called the "imposture thesis" of religion in America and an explanation of why anti-Mormon polemicists almost unanimously adopted it as a framework for understanding the Mormon prophet – or, put another way, why so much of the first wave of anti-Mormonism took the form of "anti-Smithism" (Manuel: 47-53, 65-70).

American Fears of Religious Deception

[2] In short, I argue that the historical circumstances attending the antebellum years, including the pervasive sensitivity to illusion and deception, coupled with both Protestant understandings of religious history and the uncertainty facing American churches, made Smith's claims to prophetic authority, additional scripture, and ecclesiastical superiority particularly compelling

for some Americans and obviously false for far more. The very conditions, in other words, that gave rise to movements like Smith's also engendered the uncertainties that in turn shaped critiques of Mormonism throughout its early history. Anti-Mormons, moreover, felt no sting at the charge of "religious persecution" because they typically denied the very label of religion to Mormonism. In the end, works like *Mohammetanism Unveiled* (1829), *Mormonism Unvailed* [sic] (1834), *Noyesism Unveiled* (1849), and *Spiritualism Unveiled* (1866) shared more than just similar titles. They each betrayed the admission that religious claims are complicated, that if left to themselves people might just choose amiss, and that in a religiously voluntaristic and disestablished United States, a free market in churches might entail unintended – and for some, woeful – consequences.

[3] The antebellum cultural preoccupation with deception is easily detected but not as easily explained. Add complicated and unprecedented religious circumstances to the formidable political, social, and economic upheavals that marked early national culture, though, and the historical admissions of anxiety (or downright befuddlement) become comprehensible (Noll: 195; Sellers). Colonial churches were thrown into varying degrees of disarray by Revolution and met an entirely new environment thereafter, as disestablishment, drawn-out but more or less complete by the mid-1830s, made it impossible for traditionally dominant churches to combine with the institutions of state to fence out religious upstarts (Curry; Lambert: 236-64). Anti-Mormon reactions to Smith and the *Book of Mormon* no doubt constitute the recognition that the new arrangements provided in some ways too much room for religious expression, a circumstance traditionalists had warned against during the disestablishment debates.[1] The ambivalences about the relationship of Christianity to the republic, the pitfalls of religious freedom, and the management of religious variety that had flared as colonies became states were by no means resolved by the time of Joseph Smith. That prominent religious commentators experienced early national religious liberty and pluralism as a profound, if somewhat subterranean, tension is arguably most evident in their efforts to organize American religion into a comprehensive narrative or to situate Protestant Christianity in the context of other religious traditions.

Antebellum Commentators and Religious "Imposture"

[4] Notably, many of these writers saw their efforts as vital means of educating a sometimes fractious body of Christians, with the desired end of a more peaceable pluralism. Thomas Branagan intended his *Concise View of the Principal Religious Denominations in the United*

[1] Indeed, the prospects of religious pluralism and an unforeseeable future had haunted both pro- and anti-establishment arguments; those attacking the colonial establishments had wondered what might happen in a future where Catholics or non-Christians came to dominate a particular locale. Would they be permitted to establish Catholicism or, even worse, "The Tenants of Mahomed"? Proponents of establishment also worried about the future. What if non-Christians came in numbers sufficient to imperil a truly "Christian" republic? Would not an establishment of Christianity guard against such a catastrophe? The practical questions of how to establish "Christianity," though, were complicated enough to give anti-establishment statesmen and Protestant dissenters the day and Christian churches, newly unhinged from institutions of state, came to exist on a theoretically even playing field. For example, conservative Virginians' attempts to establish Christianity (as opposed to a particular denomination) reveal that when they said "Christianity," they really meant "Protestantism." Their proposed test oath would have effectively excluded Muslims and Jews from the polity but also Catholics and possibly Quakers (Buckley: 186-88). Protestants would try to amend the federal Constitution to explicitly characterize the United States as a Christian nation in the mid-nineteenth century. The National Reform Association's attempts at the quasi-establishment of Christianity in the 1860s and 70s are detailed in Hutchison: 78-82.

States of America, published in 1811, "as a persuasive to *Christian Moderation*." Young people, he warned, were too often poisoned by "wrong impressions" about religion, which "produce[d] bigotry and intolerance, with all their destructive concomitants." Branagan was certain correct information would mitigate religious intolerance and accordingly proposed to offer readers the "true sentiments" of various Christian and non-Christian groups. He took care to note that he had undertaken his project "without passing my opinion relative to them individually," thereby avoiding "any slanderous reports to prepossess the reader against any of them" (iii-vi, 176, 181). Branagan's ensuing descriptions, however, seem, to modern eyes at least, to repudiate his envisioned impartiality. Catholicism, for instance, did not receive separate treatment, functioning only as the foil to the Reformers' heroism. He provided just enough space for the Unitarians to note that theirs was not the "side . . . supported by scripture." His descriptions of Jemima Wilkinson's "pretensions" and the Shakers were even less flattering (22, 45, 52, 92). When he detailed what he called "Anti-Christian" groups, Branagan candidly related that he purposed

> to shew the superiority as well as super-excellence of the Christian system . . . when put in competition with the most refined of the Anti-Christian Sects. I have taken the liberty to particularize a number of the most celebrated of these unenlightened sects, that the Christian may prize his privileges, and love the divine system of theology taught by God himself (105-6).

Accordingly, his treatment of Deism, atheism, Judaism, and Islam ran from patronizing to visceral. After lambasting Paine and Spinoza in turn, he concluded by tracing Muhammad's rise "from a deceitful hypocrite" to his becoming the "most powerful monarch of his time" (110, 113-14, 116-18, 125, 128-29).

[5] Branagan had at least one thing right. American Protestant churches were "in competition," both among themselves and, at least in the abstract, with non-Christian religious traditions. Other writers of religious reference works were forced to admit the same: their task was not simply to describe different faiths objectively, but as ardent Christians and (often more conspicuously) adherents to particular varieties of Christianity, they were duty bound to compare, to weigh, to assign value – to educate in the more dogmatically Protestant sense of the term. Accordingly, later writers felt no pressing need to adjust Branagan's approach.

[6] Hannah Adams' *Dictionary of All Religions*, published in several editions in the United States and England, was undertaken, as readers were informed in the opening pages, with several rules in mind. First, "To avoid giving the least preference of one denomination above another: omitting those passages in the authors cited, where they pass their judgment on the sentiments, of which they given an account: consequently the making use of any such appelations, as Heretics, Schismatics, Enthusiasts, Fanatics, &c. is carefully avoided." Second, "To give a few of the arguments of the principal sects, from their own authors, where they could be obtained." Third, Adams intended to give as "general" an account of each group as possible and, fourth, to provide quotations rather than synopses, "to take the utmost care not to misrepresent the ideas" (1-3). This admirable concern for fair representation did not, however, extend to the "heathen nations," whose "obscene and ridiculous ceremonies" pervaded before the advent of Christ (the state of the Jews, she noted, was "not much better") or the Anabapists, whose "pretensions" had sown "insurrections" and social discord (6, 12, 23, 132). In Adams' account, the "French Prophets" were notable only for their "strange fits" and "pretended" prophecies. Similarly, she wrote that "Hindoos . . . pretended" to have been bequeathed the

"*vedas*" from "Brama." Descriptions of Muhammad's "pretensions" followed; his successes dismissed with the allegation that he "contrived by the permission of poligamy and concubinage to make his creed palatable to the most depraved of mankind." Shakers in Adams' telling were noteworthy in that they "pretend to have the power imparted to them of working miracles" (84-85, 106, 156-57, 269).

[7] J. Newton Brown's massive *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1836) followed suit. His entry for "Bigotry" is worth an extended quotation. Bigotry consists, he wrote

> in being obstinately and perversely attached to our own opinions . . . Bigotry is mostly prevalent with those who are ignorant; who have taken up principles without due examination; and who are naturally of a morose and contracted disposition. It is often manifested more in unimportant sentiments, or the circumstantials of religion, than the essentials of it. Simple bigotry is the spirit of persecution without the power; persecution is bigotry armed with power, and carrying its will into act. As it is the effect of ignorance, so it is the nurse of it, because it precludes free inquiry, and is an enemy to truth: it cuts also the very sinews of charity, and destroys moderation and mutual good will. . . How contradictory is it to sound reason, and how inimical to the peaceful religion we profess to maintain as Christians! (1836: 239).

Brown's entries for "heresy" and "orthodoxy" complicated matters, however. He granted that "heretic" was often used as a term of reproach, but defined it as one who defied "what is made the standard of orthodoxy." His passive construction obscured the real dilemma: who, in a pluralistic, disestablished American, decided what or who was orthodox? Brown had no such doubts and assumed that he was numbered among the qualified. Orthodoxy, he wrote, consisted in "soundness of doctrine or opinion in matters of religion," particularly, and this is the point, those doctrines "considered as orthodox among us," namely, "the fall of man, regeneration, atonement, repentance, justification by free grace, &c." (1836: 615, 894). Latter-day Saints, despite adhering wholeheartedly to each item (albeit ambiguously in the case of the last item), were clearly unorthodox, to say the least, in Brown's estimation.[2] He pitied Smith's "misguided followers," whom he regarded as "simple and credulous" for believing in a book Smith "pretended to interpret." He deplored the actions of some anti-Mormons in Missouri, but Brown nonetheless felt it his duty to make "the facts [regarding Mormonism] known . . . which show the real foundation of the imposture" (1836: 844).

[8] In even the most moderate attempts to catalogue American religious variety, writers still faced the reality that, given their ideological commitments, some of their subjects were simply unpalatable. John Hayward, who followed his *Religious Creeds and Statistics* . . . (1836) with

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[2] Though some Mormon leaders eventually moved away from what most Protestants then and now would regard as a "free grace" position, it would be anachronistic to regard the alleged divergence from orthodoxy to have been anywhere near complete by 1836. Indeed, the document most approaching a creedal formulation (Smith remained a devoted opponent of creeds) by that time incorporated language that may have been innocuous if it had come from another source. Dubbed the church's "Articles and Covenants" or "Church Articles," the revelation summed up justification thusly: "And we know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true." See *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 20:30. The *Book of Mormon* was even more harmless; see, for instance, 2 Nephi 2:5-6, 8. There are more Arminian elements in early Mormon scripture, to be sure, but hardly out of step with widely accepted contemporary theologies (Noll: 231-32).

the more detailed *Book of Religions* (1843), endeavored to gather information from "the most intelligent and candid among the living defenders" of each denomination (1843: 3). He went so far as to seek out newly-arrived Latter-day Saint preacher Joseph Young (Brigham's brother) in Boston for an authoritative representation of Mormon belief. Hayward described Young as "a very civil man" and included Young's written outline of Mormon belief in full. His interaction with Young hardly changed Hayward's mind, however (his article on Mormonism was culled from standard anti-Mormon sources), as his summation of Young's statement revealed. "Elder Young," he wrote, "seems to think that revelations from heaven, and miracles wrought, are as necessary now, and as important to the salvation of the present generation, as they were to any generation in any preceding age or period. This appears to be the sum and substance of the Mormon scheme" (1836: 139-42). To be fair, it should be noted that Hayward was quite candid about his endeavor of religious description. He had described the various "systems [to] settle the minds" of those without "definite opinions" about religion, and to "lead us all . . . by contrasting the sacred truths and sublime beauties of Christianity with . . . the absurd notions" of the heathen, skeptics, and, as it turned out, those who he felt only pretended to profess Christianity (1843: 3).

[9] Several important insights emerge from these reference works. First, antebellum Americans agreed that the propagation of true religion was critical for maintaining the republic's strength. They also agreed, at least in principle, to the denominational theory that versions of the truth might reside (and peacefully coexist) in various Protestant churches. Second, not all movements claiming to be religious were accepted as valid. Disquieted by fears of religious deception, many antebellum Protestants found the old grounds for determining heterodoxy or fraud from orthodoxy ineffective. This uncertainty owed much to the period's sectarian proliferation and the perception that the post-establishment religious scene was rootless and hyper-competitive. Third, as a result, much of the period's polemical literature took the form of exposing religious impostures. This conceptualization was almost always applied to innovators or leaders of various religious groups; their followers, on the other hand, demanded other rhetorical tools. (Such a framework for understanding "false" religions in the past, incidentally, provided unintended but perhaps not unwanted consequences when attached to contemporary movements – rendering Mormons, for instance, as pseudo-Christian or non-Christian, more by a process of historical association than theological taxonomy.) Fourth, the seeming contradiction between the authors' stated aims of objectivity or toleration and their treatments of non-Christian and unpopular Christian groups is made comprehensible if viewed in conjunction with a particular set of assumptions and a certain corresponding logic, namely, that true religion was vital to the health of the young republic and should be tolerated and encouraged in its variety, but what appeared to be religion in other cultures—or unpopular movements at home—was not real religion at all and was thus worthless or even harmful. The question of tolerating these groups was correspondingly muddled.

[10] Seen in this light, "imposture" was in fact an indispensable rhetorical device for antebellum Protestants. It ostensibly resolved the potentially pesky perplexity lurking in the term "religion," for it granted that untrue religion could imitate real religion by evoking deity, redemption, spiritual power, creation, salvation, etc. Untrue religion, in other words, could mimic the "form of godliness" even if it lacked the power. These assumptions about *real* religion and the world's religions is clear, for instance, in Hannah Adams' assertion that religious history *began* with the advent of Christ, her acknowledgement of pre-Christian religious traditions notwithstanding (7). The concept of imposture, though, was not without its

problems. For one thing, the theory had a complicated past. As historian Leigh Eric Schmidt has shown, the origins of the framework are complex: the "imposture thesis" had been wielded with comparable utility by Protestant polemicists against the church in Rome and by early Enlightenment skeptics against religion in general. The use of imposture as an explanatory strategy during the century or so preceding the advent of Mormonism was so tangled, Schmidt concludes, that "it is difficult to mark where the Protestants' polemic ends and the rationalist's begins." The antebellum Protestants who wielded the concept against Mormonism, however, were either unconcerned or unaware of such complications, never hinting that believers of almost every stripe had been exposed to the "imposture" thesis at one time or another (85-86).

[11] Mormons and anti-Mormons, then, found ready-made conceptual tools when they plunged headlong into this long-standing cultural conversation about religious legitimacy. Furthermore, while it is certainly the case that early Mormonism provided fodder for the charge of imposture, it remains true that anti-Mormons were considerably less concerned with LDS theology than with the figure of the prophet, at least initially – the *message* of either the prophet or his book was (almost) beside the point (Givens: 64). Early opponents were thus more concerned with Mormonism as form than as content; the combination of the period's multiplicity of spiritual voices and American attachments to religious freedom (at least in terms of one's religious "sentiments") presumably made countering any particular tradition's theology problematic. Latter-day Saint theology *became* important for anti-Mormons, but only as further evidence of Smith's perfidy and long after they had concluded that he was a mere, if somewhat talented, charlatan. Hiram Mattison's *A Scriptural Defence of the Doctrine of the Trinity* . . . (1846), in which he upbraids Mormons and other purveyors of what he considered modern "Arianism" for their heterodoxy, thus reads like a very different kind of attack because it was. Mattison's work and others like it, in taking up Mormonism as a theology (albeit a fatally flawed one), signaled a certain maturity in both Mormon and anti-Mormon thinking. The earliest critiques of Mormonism, though, could not dignify it with the label of theology because none were prepared to credit Joseph Smith with anything but imposture, least of all theology.

Conclusion

[12] In sum, antebellum narratives of false religion turned to everything but religion – and history's false prophets necessarily became despots, charlatans, and crooks – because nineteenth-century Americans had invented no other frameworks for understanding a figure whose religious claims they utterly rejected. In actuality, anti-Mormons could defame Smith, endeavor to thwart his movement, and even seek his demise, and at the same time claim quite sincerely that they had no argument with Mormon religion whatever. Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois during the Saints' controversial stay at Nauvoo, could thus maintain that he held no personal prejudice against Mormonism while at the same time lamenting that he felt "degraded by the reflection, that the humble governor of an obscure State, who would otherwise be forgotten in a few years, stands a fair chance . . . of being dragged down to posterity with an immortal name, hitched on to the memory of a miserable impostor" (360).

[13] In his theorizing about deceivers and society, anti-Mormon Origen Bacheler articulated the often-unspoken social logic that underlay decades of anti-Mormon polemics. "I respect the rights of conscience;" he wrote, "I am opposed to persecution for opinion's sake." But, he cautioned, it would be a grave mistake to extend the same "forbearance and compassion [due the] dupes of the Mormon imposture" to the "lying knaves who dupe them." Joseph Smith, he argued, was "entirely out of the pale of charity" and could be "viewed in no other light than

that of [a] monsterous public" nuisance. Bacheler's contention that such a nuisance "ought forthwith to be abated" – he left to readers to figure out how – rested on the assumption that among the "social obligations" that fell to every "member of the community" was the responsibility that "he shall not knowingly deceive and impose upon that community." Not surprisingly, Bacheler charged that Smith had done precisely that and, as a result, all of the trouble between Mormons and their neighbors could rightly be blamed on him and other leading Mormons: "By their deception and lies, they swindle [their followers] out of their property, disturb social order and the public peace, excite a spirit of ferocity and murder" (48). Such logic not only led Smith into an 1831 South Bainbridge, New York, court on charges of being a "disorderly person" (i.e., "setting the country in an uproar by preaching the Book of Mormon") but ultimately to an early end in Illinois in 1844 (Bushman: 162; Firmage and Mangrum: 50-51). In the end, the antebellum histories of the "imposture thesis" and Joseph Smith paradoxically reveal on the one hand the promises of American religious liberty and, on the other, our conflicted and still-forming commitment to religious pluralism.

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