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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Aird, Polly. *Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector: A Scottish Immigrant in the American West, 1848–1861.* Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. 320 pp. ISBN 0870623699.

In Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector, Polly Aird offers us a unique glance at the life of Peter McAuslan and the events that encircled his life that should not only be enjoyable to students of Mormon History, but any student of religion seeking to understand individual reactions to societal demands of a larger church organization. Aird paints a beautiful picture of Peter's surroundings that allows the reader to see the social pressures that influenced both Peter's conversion to and disillusionment with Mormonism.

Aird details how Peter, a calico printer in 1840s Scotland encountered Mormonism. Then, through the experience of a vision, the promises of Zion, and the works of Mormon theologian, Orson Pratt, Peter left the harsh Scottish industrial revolution for America. Peter and his family and friends traveled to the States and then to the Utah territory. Along the way, they witnessed tragedies both on the sea and across the plains while experiencing firsthand disease and discomfort.

In Utah, Peter had to adjust to a different type of Mormonism than what he had expected when converting in Scotland. Aird gives accounts of how some Mormons enforced doctrine with violence and coercion along with citations of leaders expecting the strictest of obedience. With locusts, drought, famine, hard

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winters, tragedies of the handcart companies, Aird shows the individual and community struggles of the early Saints in Utah. And with the Utah War and the Mormon Reformation completing the picture, the reader begins to grasp the feel of what it must have been like to be a Mormon pioneer in the era.

Aird details the motivation behind Peter McAuslan's decision to leave Mormonism and the Utah territory. These pressures include his losing confidence in Brigham Young as a divine leader, distaste for the blind obedience expected of him, a fear for his personal safety in the face of the threatening rhetoric of Mormon leaders. Aird throughout her book seeks to elucidate Peter's choice to abandon his faith in a fair manner leaving an admirable impression.

Peter's adventure ends with a journey to California escorted by federal troops. There he becomes involved with the practice of spiritualism and reconciles his Mormon past with new experiences. Aird's final portrayal of McAuslan through letters written to his Mormon family members shows a man deeply thoughtful, courteous, and profoundly affected by his past. Aird's account of Peter McAuslan's life will be of interest to anyone who is curious about the social pressures of religion and the inner pressures of conscience.

Eric Bottelberghe, *Utah State University*

Eric Bottelberghe is a senior at Utah State University working toward a BA in philosophy with a concentration in ethics and minors in sociology, political science and religious studies. He was Vice President of USU Religious Studies Club from Fall 2009–Spring 2010 and will be the President of the club for Fall 2010– Spring 2011.

Deutsch, Nathaniel. *Inventing America's "Worst" Family: Eugenics, Islam, and the Fall and Rise of the Tribe of Islam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 253 pp. ISBN 0520255240.

In Inventing America's Worst Family, historian Nathaniel Deutsch traces the development of the "Tribe of Ishmael" from the emergence of the eugenics movement in the nineteenth century to the literature of family and genetics studies in the 1970s. Of particular interest to Deutsch is the contradiction between the actual history of the Ishmael family and scholarly construction of America's worst family. As he tracks the rise and fall of scholarship about the family of Ishmael, Deutsch demonstrates the complicated relationship between race, religion, and science within American politics and popular culture.

Deutsch argues that the so-called Tribe of Ishmael was "made not born"(18). With great attention to detail, Deutsch uses the research notes of pivotal eugenics, family studies, and genetics scholars to expose the construction and reconstruction of a stereotype. Specifically, Deutsch speculates that eugenicist Oscar McCullough relied upon American assumptions and fears about Islam in order to insinuate the potential threat of cultural deviants. Deutsch further asserts that the eugenics movement successfully shifted the meaning of "undeserving poor" from a moral calculus to a biological one under the guise of scholarship. As the primary source of evidence, the Ishmaelites were unfit to receive aid because of their "inferior genes" (15). Deutsch's thorough contextualization, however, reveals that the Tribe of Ishmael was never an easily definable community let alone a distinct genetic disposition.

Deutsch readily admits that the actual story of the Ishmael family is unknown. Misguided genealogies, politicized ideologies, and archival lacunae combine to create a contestable history of the Ishmaelites. The strength of Deutsch's work lies in its exposure of spurious genealogical records, political motivations, and popular assumptions that led three successive family studies scholars to misinterpret the place of the Ishmaels in American history. Deutsch successfully

outlines an alternative history of the Ishmaelites in which the ostensibly "unfit" and "Asiatic" family reflected white, Upland Southern cultural roots. Moreover, Deutsch discovers that the Ishmaels did not rely on charity; instead, eugenicists' records reveal that those considered a part of the Ishmael "tribe" belonged to the working poor, middle, and landowning classes.

Inventing America's Worst Family provides a noteworthy example of scholarship that penetrates several historiographical conversations, including ethnic studies, history of science, and American religious history. For religionists, Deutsch pays attention to the racialization of Islam within American history. Like Native Americans and Mormons, the Ishmael family was symbolically Muslim. Deutsch in particular notes the inverted mirroring of white eugenicists who viewed the "Islamic sounding" surname as an opportunity to otherize the Ishmaels and of African-American Muslims who found pride in Islamic oriented racial identities. Both groups relied upon claims to Middle East origins yet did so for antithetical reasons. Further complicating this genealogy, Deutsch locates appeals to the supposed triracial identity of the Ishmaels in the 1970s. With each turn in the Ishmael tale, Deutsch points to a complex fashioning and re-fashioning of race, religion, and science within identity politics in America.

For Deutsch, America's alleged "worst family" is "a profoundly unsettling counterhistory of the United States"(5). Remarkably, their changes in race and religion over time only marginalize Ishmaelites. As whites with a "Muslim-sounding name," as a triracial community, and as African-American Muslims, the Ishmaelites remain on the outer edges of mainstream society even when the stereotypes of them permeate popular culture. Ultimately, Deutsch seeks to discredit late nineteenth and early twentieth century Protestant reformers. While

eugenics researchers insisted that the Tribe of Ishmael challenged the essential notions of American identity and democratic values, Deutsch concludes that the eugenicists and their supporters challenged the vitality of the nation.

Cara Burnidge, *Florida State University*

Cara Burnidge is a doctoral student in American Religious History at Florida State University. She studies Protestant liberalism in 19th and 20th century America. Currently, Cara is an Endowed Graduate Fellow and an instructor of Religion in United States History at Florida State University. Additionally, she serves as a News Editor for Religion Compass Exchanges.

Taves, Ann. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. 240 pp. ISBN 0691140871.

Religious Experience Reconsidered builds on Ann Taves' previous work in Fits, Trances and Visions by again taking up the comparison of "involuntary," or religious, experiences—this time from a theoretical perspective. She provides a new framework for thinking about religious experiences and sets up potential avenues of inquiry into four issues related to her task: religion, experience, explanation, and comparison. In exploring each of these issues, Taves promotes collaboration among scholars in the humanities and sciences by suggesting ways that scholars from each side could approach a set of questions.

Taves argues that scholars must move away from the term "religious experience," because it limits the range of comparison, and it confuses scholarly purposes with those of religious believers. She suggests that scholars employ the "second-order" term, "things deemed special" in order to preserve the integrity of the their subject's explanations, while keeping scholars from using the language of their subjects. Moving away from William James' definition of religious experience as something individuals experience in private, Taves suggests that "religion" is constituted by group processes of ascription whereby individual experiences, objects, etc. are identified as "special" ("simple ascriptions") and then

organized into "pathways" to achieve spiritual goals ("composite formations").

In her discussion of "experience," Taves contends that special experiences are closely related to alterations in consciousness. Drawing upon recent studies of consciousness, she suggests that special experiences might be studied in comparison to the unconscious processing of dreams. Thus the "explanation" of these experiences must account for both cultural processes of ascribing meaning to them, and the role of embodied, unconscious processing in generating the experience itself. Finally, regarding "comparison," Taves argues that scholars should compare religious subjects with non-religious subjects by stipulating a point of comparison that creates a set of things to compare, such as cross-cultural studies of sleep paralysis.

Despite Taves' emphasis on multi-disciplinary studies, some of the questions that Taves offers might feel foreign to scholars in the humanities. In her chapter on "Experience," Taves emphasizes her inquiry into how experiences occur. She suggests only in passing that historians and ethnographers could take up the question of the cultural meaning of these experiences. In addition, where Taves' methodology seems most applicable to scholars of the humanities, it comes across as something that these scholars have already been doing implicitly. For example, in chapter three, Taves employs "attribution theory" to compare the special experiences of Stephen Bradley and David Brainerd. Attribution theory entails a comparison of the two people's personalities and historical contexts and the historical context of their experiences. Even without the rubric of attribution theory, scholars in the humanities already do this kind of comparative work. Controversially, Taves concludes that "religious studies" should be refocused to a broader study of "specialness." Scholars of religious studies must consider her suggestion carefully, asking whether such a change in focus might not undermine the discipline itself.

However, scholars in the humanities may find Taves' general model for "religion" useful, because it situates religious experiences within the process of

building a religious tradition, which directs scholars to consider the significance of religious experiences beyond the individual level. In addition, by employing "special things" as a descriptor, Taves calls scholars to a more careful consideration of their terminology. Finally in bringing together the sciences and the humanities, Taves demonstrates the value of collaborative work for generating questions, and she reveals the potential for scholars across disciplines to contribute meaningfully to related issues.

Rachel Ozanne, *University of Texas at Austin*

Rachel Ozanne received her BA in Plan II from the University of Texas at Austin in 2006 and her MA in U.S. History from the same institution in 2009. In her dissertation project for the University of Texas, Ozanne will compare the reception of religious experiences in three Antebellum communities-- Hicksite Quakers, Mormons, and Seventh-day Adventists-- and will consider the impact of religious experiences on community ethics.