The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle (review)

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Rhetoric & Public Affairs, Volume 8, Number 3, Fall 2005, pp. 501-504
(Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rap.2005.0062

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criticism, showing the rich diversity of Christian response to the media. Journalists and scholars who believe that Christians are monolithic in how they see the media should read this chapter.

The sixth chapter, “Communing with Civil Sin: Mainstream Media Purge Evil,” explores how the media treat the problem of evil. Within the secular view of the media, evil can be eliminated or reduced through human effort, so humans “can self-engineer a better, less evil, more civil society” (225). A secular idea of conversion permeates the media through moralistic discourse that advocates the purging of evil people.

In chapter 7, “Discerning Professional Journalism: Reporters Adopt Fundamentalist Discourse,” Schultze argues for the bankruptcy of the journalists’ fetish for “facts.” Drawing from Scottish Common Sense Realism (as religious fundamentalists have done), journalists present the public with “lifeless” facts or “market-driven” sensational events that are detrimental to the public good. Instead of “objectivity,” Schultze says journalism “needs a broader and more culturally sensitive hermeneutic that is open to religious thought, practice, and tradition as modes of public imagining and understanding that can complement democracy” (298).

The conclusion argues that Americans need to balance four healthy tensions: (1) space-binding and time-binding communication, (2) tribal and public interests, (3) secular and religious culture, and (4) technology and culture. Schultze builds a successful case that the media and Christianity make contributions to negotiating these healthy tensions. Both bring perspectives that challenge and complement each other. Despite tensions between them, religion and media need each other, and that is a good thing for democracy in America.

Christianity and the Mass Media in America is destined to become one of the most important scholarly books on American mass media. It should become required reading for communication, history, and religion courses in universities and seminaries.

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Disputes about the separation of church and state often require leaders to revisit timeless questions of American democracy. One such dispute came to the forefront at the end of the nineteenth century and involved members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons. Because of their
pointedly non-Protestant religious beliefs and practices, namely polygamy and explicit proselytizing, this group had experienced almost a century of persecution ranging from violent military attacks to imprisonment and cultural rejection. Their marginalized status in the United States and around the world made Mormon apostle Reed Smoot’s appointment to serve as a senator for the state of Utah especially controversial. In *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle*, Kathleen Flake, assistant professor of American religious history at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, explores the nexus of rhetoric, politics, and ethics that unfolded when Smoot and the church he came to represent reached Washington. Flake contextualizes and analyzes the 3,500 pages of testimony from four years of Senate hearings debating whether Smoot’s leadership in the Mormon Church was antithetical to the responsibilities of a U.S. senator. Her work effectively illuminates the role these hearings played in solving what many referred to as the “Mormon Problem.”

Flake frames her book by asking two overarching questions: “How do religious communities change over time and retain a sense of sameness with their originating vision?” and “What are the political terms by which diverse religions are brought within America’s constitutional order?” (1). In chapter 1, she introduces the Smoot hearings and their role in the evolution of the Mormon Church. Flake mobilizes a detailed and complex history into a coherent narrative covering the founding of the Mormon Church in 1820 through the Civil War and into the Progressive Era of the early 1900s. Beyond the hearing testimony itself, her narrative draws from editorials, newspaper articles, letters by Smoot’s secretary Carl A. Badger written to his wife, Badger’s court notes, and religious documents. Throughout the book she includes almost 30 relevant political cartoons, photographs, and maps that further illuminate the key players in the hearings and their public reputations.

Several of the topics that Flake explores will be of special interest to scholars of rhetoric and public affairs. In chapters 1–4, she examines the arguments those opposing Smoot’s election to the Senate used against him and the defensive stance that Smoot and other Mormon Church leaders presented in response. Flake discusses and critiques the complaints of the anti-Mormon Protestants during the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. Many of these arguments identify the Mormon practice of polygamy as immoral and anti-American (24). An alliance of Protestant church members, social reformers, and women’s groups argued that because Mormon leaders ignored the law and often performed and engaged in plural marriages themselves, they were explicitly undermining national values. They argued that any representative of the Mormon Church who put his religion before his country in condoning such practices was not fit to be a senator.
In response, Mormon leaders tried to frame polygamy as a dying practice and issued an anti-polygamy manifesto in 1890 (30). Rather than argue the value of polygamy itself, church leaders knew that they had to deny the widespread nature of polygamy and other explicitly unconventional practices in order to gain representation in the Senate and acceptance within the United States in general; Smoot’s reputation as a straight-laced monogamist with few proselytizing credentials certainly added strength to this cause (40). According to Flake, the debate that ensued turned into a competition of deception rather than direct argumentation, as both sides stretched the truth to their own advantage (67). She explains, “The value of the [defense’s] argument is not that it described the L.D.S. Church, but that it described what the state wanted this and all churches to be—or at least to act like” (156). Regardless of what Mormonism stood for in the past, Flake argues that the representatives of the church had to demonstrate Protestant “values of obedience to law, loyalty to the nation, and creedal tolerance” in the present in order to break free from mainstream denunciation and future hostility (8).

In chapters 5 and 6, Flake provides an insightful reading of the Mormon Church’s successful transformation from an organization at odds with mainstream America into an organization known for its law-abiding members and traditionalist values. She draws from Maurice Halbwachs’s work on commemoration and collective memory to identify some of the choices that made this transformation possible. At the turn of the century, Flake explains, the church began emphasizing elements of its history that drew attention away from polygamy and toward the Mormon Church’s resilience over time. In 1905, church leaders ordered a monument built in honor of the church’s founder, Joseph Smith; approved a 30-person dedication party to travel across the country to revisit the path of early Mormon pioneers; and publicized the canonization of Smith’s autobiography that framed the Mormon belief system as differing from Protestant theological systems in terms of history rather than deep-seated philosophy (127). Flake identifies these choices as contributing to the creation of a modern, socially acceptable Mormonism.

Flake ultimately holds four key variables responsible for solving the “Mormon Problem”: (1) the church’s transformation into a modern Mormonism, (2) a Senate vote on April 13, 1906, that secured Smoot’s congressional seat, (3) the weakening of the Protestant religious alliance, and (4) Progressive Era confidence in President Theodore Roosevelt’s antitrust legislation to protect the nation against any potential Mormon business monopolies. With these issues secured, Smoot became a respected leader and loyal Republican senator who held his position for 30 years without giving up his seat as a Mormon apostle. Flake concludes the book by extending her narrative into the present day. She notes that the Mormon Church now boasts over
two million members internationally and that many of the commemorative events developed during the Smoot trial to transform the church into a modern Mormonism still lie at the heart of Latter-day Saint communities (177). By making this rhetorical move, Flake implies that an understanding of theological, political, and ethical discourse today requires an understanding of its evolution over time. Scholars of rhetoric, theology, argumentation, history, and culture will find this book to be a fine analysis of one specific religion’s rhetorical evolution and its relationship to contemporary theological culture.

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Chicago: University of Chicago Press; pp xi + 142. $25.00.

In his preface Bruce Lincoln, a professor of religion and a prize-winning scholar at the University of Chicago, describes *Holy Terrors* as his “attempt to think through the nature of religion, to identify its core components (discourse, practice, community, institution), and to specify its historically changing relation to other aspects of culture (particularly the ethical, aesthetic, and political)” (ix). To accomplish these ambitious goals, he approaches 9/11 and its roots and effects from a religious perspective and relies heavily on rhetorical methods. The first three chapters focus on texts to and from the Islamic fundamentalists who hijacked the jet airliners as well as on the televised responses from Osama bin Laden, President George W. Bush, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson. The final three chapters cover “moments, projects, contexts” (ix) that help explain the events of 9/11 and its rhetorical discourse, drawing from three periods respectively beginning with the Reformation and culminating in the Enlightenment, occurring during nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism and neocolonialism, and taking place in contemporary times when resistance groups attempted to establish their religion’s dominance in postcolonial states. Scattered throughout the book are numerous explanatory models, many created by Lincoln and presented in diagrams that connect history, religious movements, and change.

Chapter 1, “The Study of Religion in the Current Political Moment,” begins with a learned overview and interpretation of scholarship and popular thinking on religion from Kant to Geertz and his critics. Lincoln collapses scholarly interpretations into two schools, the “minimalist,” Kant’s restricted view, and the “maximalist,” in which religion is seen as influencing all parts of our lives; these two concepts are applied throughout the book. He then introduces his alternative approach: a “polythetic and flexible” (5) definition of religion that includes discourse, practice, community, and institution. With this historical