

**Four LDS Views on
Harold Bloom**

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HAROLD BLOOM. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Touchstone with Simon and Schuster, 1993. 271 pp. Index. Paperback, \$12.00.

Introduction

M. Gerald Bradford

Every now and then a book is written about Mormonism which by all accounts is fascinating, meaning that it both attracts and repels its readers. On the whole, the insights in such books override their points of inaccuracy. The authors of such works usually stand outside the LDS tradition, are recognized as intellectuals, and come from the world of academia.

Nearly forty years ago, for example, Thomas F. O'Dea wrote *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). His treatment of Latter-day Saints, ostensibly from a sociological perspective but going far beyond any single discipline, was just such a book. Coming to his subject from a somewhat modified Marxist view, O'Dea revealed, between the lines, that he had a soft spot in his heart for the Mormons and that, in some important respect, he had genuinely understood what was distinctive and worthwhile about the religion.

Another equally fascinating book about the Mormons and other religious groups in the United States is Harold Bloom's *The American Religion*. Bloom is an internationally recognized literary critic. What he says about the LDS tradition, Joseph Smith, and the future of the Church, has engendered a wide range of responses. Accordingly, BYU Studies has gathered four discussions of this book, one by an essayist, another by a Mormon

philosopher, a third by one of Bloom's current students, and a fourth by a physicist.

Eugene England, for instance, adopts without reservation Bloom's postmodern notion that it is never possible to perfectly interpret a text or the ideas of another person. Every interpretation is but a "misreading"—either "strong," meaning going beyond and expanding upon what was originally said or written, or "weak," in that what is said about the initial insight is distorted or perverted. According to England, Bloom's "misreadings" are on the whole "strong," getting Joseph Smith's teachings and Mormonism's orientation within the canopy of religions in America basically right. England's focus is on what many believe is Bloom's major point—that the American Religion (by which he means mainly Protestant Fundamentalism and, even more so, Mormonism) is becoming, in England's words, "increasingly conservative, anti-intellectual, powerful, resentful, and repressive of diversity" with all that this foreboding picture portends for the future. While disagreeing with the prophecy, England believes we should nevertheless take warning from Bloom's assessment of what England believes to be our abandonment of the "social gospel."

Truman Madsen, on the other hand, refers only in passing to the political agendas of *The American Religion*, seeing Bloom's Americanized orientation toward Mormonism as out-of-date. The Church's rapid growth in becoming a worldwide movement significantly alters Bloom's predictions about its future trends. Instead, Madsen focuses on Bloom's analysis of Mormonism in terms of some lost, ancient "gnostic" view of the world. The more plausible explanation, according to Madsen, is to see the essence of Mormonism as the restoration of ancient things that had been lost sight of, even though they were present all along in the scriptures and other sacred texts. Still, in spite of this weakness in Bloom's approach, Madsen sees value in Bloom's implicit recognition that a successful explanation of Mormonism must reach beyond nineteenth-century American factors.

With Randall Paul's discussion, we return again to postmodernism for a celebration of all things Bloomian. Paul rightly shows

that Bloom's desire to know how we should face the inevitability of death animates Bloom's interest in the power of human imagination, which explains Bloom's fascination with the LDS doctrine of the eternal self. So fully does Paul share Bloom's enthusiasm for this view that he gets carried away in praising Bloom as a religious critic and in seeing Bloom as the first outside intellectual both to admire and criticize the teachings of Joseph Smith. Among other such critics, O'Dea jumps to mind as a counter example. Still, Paul is correct in stressing the importance of having someone of Bloom's stature pay attention to Joseph Smith. But only time will tell whether Paul's prediction about Bloom's very popular book bringing Mormonism out of darkness will be any more accurate than Bloom's prediction written in 1991 that a Democrat would never again be elected President of the United States.

Richard Haglund is less sure that Bloom ranks in the grand tradition of religious critics. How, Haglund asks, could Bloom miss the main point of the Latter-day Saint faith and thereby claim that LDS references to Jesus Christ are simply a facade behind which "post-Christian" ideas hide and develop? Haglund suggests at least a partial answer by exploring the question: Can someone for whom the sacred, the transcendent, and particularly the idea of God, amounts to nothing more than metaphysical flourishes and "spilt poetry" ever engage in meaningful religious criticism? Maybe, Haglund argues, religious critics have to be in some sense religious themselves to understand the subject they are studying.

Which brings us back to the example of O'Dea. What he would never express publicly, but what he said more than once privately about the Mormons, evidenced that whatever openings to the sacred he may have experienced during his Roman Catholic upbringing were never fully abandoned. Maybe those centers of influence were awakened in him, on occasion, when he lived with the Mormons and shared some of their religious experiences. Perhaps that is why sometimes what he said rang true to some insiders. If so, O'Dea becomes both a test case for Haglund's thesis and a critical threshold that people like Bloom have yet to pass. Based on the views of our panel, the jury is still out on how religious a productive religious critic needs to be.

I

Eugene England

For me, Harold Bloom's address at the University of Utah on November 15, 1990, was a fascinating and unique cultural experience. His reputation as America's most distinguished literary critic and his announced topic, "The Religion-Making Imagination of Joseph Smith," brought a huge crowd, which included many University of Utah professors and students. At least some of these, I had reason to believe as a graduate of the "U" myself, came to hear Bloom roast Joseph Smith and local Mormon culture in the grand style. You can imagine, then, the shock as Bloom began by calling Joseph Smith "an authentic religious genius [who] surpassed all Americans, before or since" (96-97). He stated baldly, "If there is . . . any authentic version of the American Religion then, as Tolstoy surmised, it must be Mormonism, whose future as yet may prove decisive for the nation, and for more than this nation alone" (97).

Imagine how this tension increased among those who had come to see the Prophet excoriated when Bloom confessed he could not explain Joseph Smith's recovery of ancient insights into the theomorphic nature and divine potential of men and women except as revelation and pronounced him not only an authentic prophet for Mormons, but also our *national* "prophet and seer."

Those of us in the audience who were believing Mormons also felt some shocks, even embarrassment. I came with trepidation, then experienced surprised joy (and, I confess, some satisfaction at the discomfiture around me) as Bloom moved with extraordinary insight to what I have long felt are the heart of Joseph Smith's genius and the central empowering truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. But I was also surprised at how terribly wrong a person with such insight could be about other aspects of Mormonism. Nevertheless, all of Bloom's address made me think again about the Americanization and resulting ethical decline of some of us Mormons.

Bloom is perhaps best known for his ideas about "misreading," especially his notion that all we can do with texts and historical figures is misinterpret them; the question is whether our

misreadings are “strong” or “weak”—producing even more insight than the original or merely parodying or perverting it (108).¹ *The American Religion* provides a very strong misreading of Mormon theology and history. Sometimes this misreading is misguided, even dangerous, but I believe it is potentially a very encouraging and helpful challenge to Mormons and others precisely because of Bloom’s political emphasis, though that is what some of his critics have found most objectionable.

That remarkable address at the University of Utah became the second of four chapters on Mormonism that appeared in Bloom’s book a year later. There he focuses appropriately on the Mormon concept of an eternal, uncreated, and thus noncontingent, free, and indestructible intelligence in each of us: our nature is godlike, and our destiny is to become literal gods.

But Bloom goes wrong by going too far. He sees that in many ways the climax of Joseph Smith’s increasing understanding of the essential relatedness of God and humans is sections 131 and 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, where the new and everlasting covenant of marriage is revealed. Bloom is dead right, I believe, in seeing that “sanctified human sexual intercourse essentially is theurgical” (105); in other words, the ultimate and most powerful insight into the genuine interrelatedness and interdependence of godhood and humanity is Joseph Smith’s understanding of divine beings ultimately as embodied, divinely heterosexual couples whose creativity is in part a function of their sexuality and of human sexuality as both a necessary part of God’s “work and . . . glory” in giving us “immortality and eternal life” and a preparation for godhood like that of our Heavenly Parents (Moses 1:39). And Bloom is dead right, I believe, in saying that for Joseph Smith and Brigham Young “Celestial Marriage and consequent progression towards godhood were the true essence of becoming a Latter-day Saint, the heart of Mormon religion making” (108). Bloom is dead wrong, however, in taking an extra step and equating *plural* marriage with celestial marriage. These two principles are independent and separable. Bloom, however, insists, “Male nature being polygamous, the restoration of all things demanded a sanctification of that polygamy, rather than an abolishment of a nature that could not be corrected” (109). Bloom’s insight into Joseph’s supreme insight—that

male, female, and divine natures are all sexual and are fulfilled through their sexuality—is marred when he reduces that insight with the unproven, sexist, and degrading rationale that male nature is polygamous.

Bloom perceptively hints at what I believe was one of the reasons why God inspired Mormons to practice polygamy when he quotes R. Laurence Moore's claim, "Mormons [learned] . . . that one way of becoming American was to invent oneself out of a sense of opposition" (88). Bloom writes, "Marked by the glory and stigma of plural marriage, the Mormons of 1850 through 1890 indeed became a peculiar people, a nation apart" (106) and were thus able to preserve a coherent and powerful identity in the formative period. But he goes far wrong again, I believe, when he writes, "I cheerfully do prophesy that . . . not too far on in the twenty-first century, the Mormons will have enough political and financial power to sanction polygamy again. Without it, in some form or other, the complete vision of Joseph Smith never can be fulfilled" (123).

At one point, arguing that a rational theology is not needed for the growth of religion in Fundamentalist, anti-intellectual America, Bloom claims that the Southern Baptists flourish despite a negative and minimal theology and that the fast-growing Mormons have a "theology that is so jerry-built that no one can hope to get it straight" (67–68). Part of my "misreading" of Bloom is to perceive in his response to Mormonism the outlines of what Bloom himself does not see, a remarkably cohesive and empowering theology—but a theology that is indeed threatened by the increasing influence of Mormondom's anti-intellectual extreme right wing, who, as Armand Mauss shows in his recent book *The Angel and the Beehive*,² controls much of Mormon education and popular thought.

Bloom demonstrates uncanny understanding of the nature and power of what for me is the beginning point and foundation of any uniquely Mormon theology: what he calls the "gnostic" sense of a "self" within the self that existed before creation, that can *know* rather than merely trust or believe. For Mormons, that uncreated "intelligence" is the ground of human relations to a similar, ultimately uncreated self within God and is what ultimately makes us free—but also potentially terribly alone unless we make bridges of love to other selves, such as spouses, neighbors, all humans,

and God. And that emphasis on our eternal self can make us destructively selfish if we fail to build such bridges. Almost all Mormon theology, as B. H. Roberts, John A. Widtsoe, and Lowell Bennion have shown, builds in a rational and systematizable way from that foundation. In fact, built firmly on that foundation are the two other insights of Joseph Smith—and consequent Mormon activities—that Bloom is most moved by: (1) the record gathering and temple work for the dead, which seals together and potentially unites in healing love the whole human family of intelligent spirits in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy and (2) the eternal vista of "sexual theurgy" (126), in which godhood includes and is even defined by the joys, exaltations, and sorrows of creating spirit bodies for unborn intelligences and then creating universes for their development—a "continuation of the seeds forever" (D&C 132:19). In other words, Bloom is simply uninformed and wrong about the supposed "incoherence" of Mormon theology. (He also—especially as a supposed careful reader—wildly misjudges the nature and value of the Book of Mormon.)

My final "misreading"—I hope a "strong" one, that is, a powerfully useful reinterpretation—is of Bloom's subtext, his general concern expressed throughout the book that the American Religion is becoming increasingly conservative, anti-intellectual, militant, powerful, resentful, and repressive of diversity—and his very specific concern that the chief institutional form of the American Religion, the LDS Church, will continue to increase in size and influence until it will afflict the United States and possibly the world with increased tyranny and violence. I believe he is quite wrong—but I believe Mormons and all Americans can learn from his misreading.

Mormonism did indeed (as Thomas Alexander has documented in books on Wilford Woodruff and on the transitions in Mormon thought at the turn of the century³) compromise a good deal of the social gospel of Christ, especially its proscription against joining in America's wars, in order to survive and become accepted as part of the American mainstream. Hugh Nibley, in *Approaching Zion*,⁴ has documented our tragic turn in the twentieth century from the gospel of Christ towards militarism, materialism, and anti-environmentalism. And President Kimball warned at the time of the American bicentennial that we Mormons, like

other Americans, had become idolatrous both in our materialism and in becoming a “war-like people” who depend on missiles, gods of stone and steel, to protect us rather than trusting the Lord’s call to change our enemies through love.⁵ Increasing evidence exists now to support Bloom’s fear that we may join the political extreme right in militant disregard of others’ social needs and join the religious extreme right in militant anti-intellectualism and disregard for others’ basic rights of action and expression—that our emphasis on uncreated, potentially divine selves may indeed become selfish.

Though I believe Bloom is wrong in his prophecies, my misreading suggests he can be a warning to us as we stand at the crossroads one hundred years after our earlier necessary, but dangerous and costly, compromise. Prophets—particularly President Gordon B. Hinckley⁶ and President Howard W. Hunter⁷—have regularly called us in the past twenty years to return to the religion of Jesus. As the most hopeful sign, the Church has, in the past fourteen years, moved more dramatically into humanitarian service—including fasts and food for starving Africans, relief projects all over the world, weekly community service days for all missionaries, and the assignment of some full-time service missionaries to simply helping others. Perhaps Mormon historians, theologians, and cultural critics at the very least can find in Bloom incentive for further studies that will help us understand how some of us have strayed in our cultural and political perversions of Joseph Smith’s restored gospel, and perhaps all of us can find incentive to join the prophets in returning to the straight and narrow, more excellent, way of unselfishness and mercy.

II

Truman G. Madsen

Harold Bloom is the audacious author who generated a stir in recent times with his *Book of J* (1990), which assigns to a woman responsibility for the alleged J-strand of the Pentateuch. This is the Harold Bloom of no less than one hundred books, a professor at both Yale and New York universities who is—as at least one dust

jacket affirms—the leading literary critic of our time. Due to his “involuntary” enchantment with ancient gnosticism, Bloom has followed his own lights, spent five years looking at interpretive accounts of the lesser-known American religious groups, and then produced a book called *The American Religion*. Emphasis on “The.”

Bloom approaches religion as he approaches poetry, for religion is, according to Bloom, “spilled poetry” (80). It is a product of creative imagination, more stimulating if it is off-track, arcane yet with some flair of originality. He is a Jew who has disposed of normative Judaism and of God, because if there were a God he would not permit Auschwitz. Bloom’s reputation as a broad-stroke literary critic enables him to ignore or wave off the empirical study of religious movements as well as their textual pedigrees, that is, the ways they consciously link themselves to sacred texts. So he has trouble with doctrinal fixities, traditions, hierarchies, establishments, sacraments. Latter-day Saints will also note that he brackets, if he does not negate, all appeals to supernatural origin or influence. He takes the history of religion as the ebb and flow of conventional human stresses, notably the quest for immunity from death, for “death, in life, is the father of religion” (257). He finds Freud, Kafka, and Scholem to be more significant, or at least more interesting, figures than Jesus, the Apostles, or Rabbi Akiva. He labors to isolate something that all born-in-America religions have in common, thereby defying their primary differentia. Thus in his survey Bloom ignores almost three-fourths of the religious groups in America: Roman and other Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and even his own people, American Jewry. All are sidestepped in advance because they are mainstream and have European roots.

Bloom’s overall conclusion, given these postures, is perhaps predictable. But it is also exotic: American religions, if they are really American, are a revival of certain admirable ancient gnostic heresies. What if their adherents explicitly reject Bloom’s labels? No problem. One can be a self-centered gnostic unaware, even after being informed by Bloom. Heavy weights are put on pivotal words like “private, inner, innermost” (for Bloom something is more inner, even, than the soul) so that authentic religion is utterly solitary and therefore humanly incommunicable (31, 264). Yet on

nearly every page he puts into words his privileged insight into these hidden regions.

What would such a man with such a background say about Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints?

Comparatively speaking, as an American visionary and charismatic, Joseph Smith excels everyone, before or since, even Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and Edward Young Mullins, all Bloom's heroes. Whatever their vision, "Not one of them came near him in courage, vitality, or comprehensiveness, or in so honest a realization of the consequences of a charismatic endowment" (109). Bloom recognizes his "genial and loving nature" (109) and his "genius for restoration" (104), describing the Prophet as one who "moves and alters my own imagination" (127). "Where in all of American history can we find his match? . . . In proportion to his importance and his complexity, he remains the least-studied personage, of an undiminished vitality, in our entire national saga" (95). And Joseph Smith stands out from all other American luminaries with a further distinction: he created men in his own likeness, notably Brigham Young. Joseph Smith was "so rich and varied a personality, so vital a spark of divinity," that he is "almost beyond the limits of the human. . . . I end as I began, with wonder" (127).

Bloom's superlatives sometimes clash with each other. We read that Joseph was a man whose "life, personality, and visions far transcended his talents at the composition of divine texts" (82). Yet Joseph Smith's writings are also transcendent; verses from the Doctrine and Covenants carry his "authentic religious genius" and are transliterated by Bloom into some electric passages of kabbalah (82). On the other hand, the Book of Mormon—the product (not the translation), Bloom believes, of this same genius—is, Bloom alerts us, pedestrian, "tendentious . . . tedious" and is no longer and should no longer be given attention even by Mormons (85). This is all clear to Bloom, though he acknowledges he has never read the book. On still another hand, Joseph the writer is excelled by Joseph the reader. "Joseph Smith's subtlest insight was an exercise in repetition; he absorbed the Bible, and he understood implicitly the burden of Jewish history: the religion preceded, and produced, the peculiar or set-apart people" (88–89). Yet

again, Bloom is confident Joseph did not need to read, for Bloom considers it more likely that Joseph reinvented his insights: "I hardly think that written sources were necessary" (100).

Bloom's own prepossessions lead to his main thrust: Joseph Smith managed to circumvent centuries of accumulation and tradition and revive understandings found only in hidden pockets of ancient lore. Thus Bloom "can only attribute to [Joseph Smith's] genius or daemon his uncanny recovery of elements in ancient Jewish theurgy that had ceased to be available either to normative Judaism or to Christianity, and that had survived only in esoteric traditions unlikely to have touched Smith directly" (101). Theurgy, at its worst, is the occult attempt to manipulate God or the gods. But Bloom reads theurgy to mean "strengthening . . . God" (253). Joseph envisioned "a God within us whose best efforts were needed to reinforce the exalted Man in the heavens" (102). God is as dependent on man in some ways as man is dependent upon God.

So is that new, or a departure, or distinctly American? Bloom insists that Mormons are almost alone in such beliefs, since Joseph Smith's vision takes one back to the original religion of Yahweh, to the J-document, where God is related to space and time and process. It also leads to theomorphism. Primal man (and as Bloom notes from Jewish lore, primordial Adam) himself has a soul or self that "is no part of the Creation, . . . older than the Bible, and is free of time, unstained by mortality" (15), free, and even after the fall, not wholly separated from the divine nature. Here, Bloom fleetingly acknowledges, Joseph Smith's teaching reflects pretheologized Torah and the New Testament rather than the later and dominant traditions of Rabbinical Judaism and classical Christianity. He does not observe that with modifications Joseph Smith's teaching on the divine in human nature is the *theosis* of Greek orthodoxy and can be found in the fine print of Roman Catholic theology.

For such achievements, Bloom assures us, Joseph Smith is an authentic prophet (read "authentic religious genius" (82) and speculator). And he is worthy of such terms as "uncanny," "unique," and "extraordinary" (83, 82, 85).

Bloom sometimes imposes upon American religion the gnostic Demiurge, an evil-disposed creator identified with the primordial Abyss. Matter is *the* evil. Embodiment is imprisonment;

salvation or redemption is escape. But Bloom should know that this will not do for LDS faith. For the New Testament (and therefore for Joseph Smith), the contrary is true. The body is a temple, a sacred vessel; resurrection is glorification, not a return to the “outlandish slough”; and God himself, as God, overcomes the assumed radical distinction between temporal and spiritual. These are heresies to most gnostics. Why, then, call them gnostic heresies?

Bloom’s further reading of “American gnostics” is a parody: this amorphous group is a creedless and even Bibleless group intent on Americanizing Jesus so that he is a friend near at hand identified with one’s essential private inward solitude and quite reachable by human effort alone. “Soul competency” is the word he uses approvingly for the Baptists (41). Such seek esoteric knowledge not of God but of the sacred self within themselves as uncreated sparks of divinity. But to affirm a sacred self and turn away from a sacral God is a self-contradiction for both Mormons and Southern Baptists. And Bloom seems unacquainted with authentic senses of dependence upon God.

Is “gnostic” then mainly a purr-word for ideas and practices that have a distinct fascination for Bloom? One can make that case. But he does not see that one need not resort to archaic pockets, kabbalah, or the primal self to find such ideas and practices in scriptural sources. For example, Bloom is enchanted in Mormon thought with primal materials in creation. Nothing is more “American,” he argues, than the view that God did not bring all that is into being by fiat, but “organized” elements (101). But the Hebrew creation narratives say that this world was formed out of previously existing matter. The dogma of *ex nihilo* creation was invented later.

He repeats, even revels in, the kinship reintroduced in LDS thought between God and man (and stands among the few who recognize that Joseph Smith did *not* teach that God is “human all too human”). He shows that this kinship undercuts typical views of original sin and doctrines of total human depravity. So it does; but so also do the more extreme Jewish views of the evil inclination which are, again, a later importation. And this kinship, too, is in the earliest texts. *Likeness* and *image*, *tselem* and *demuth* in Hebrew, mean that man resembles God as a statue resembles a person, a point that was embarrassing to later interpreters who often reduced the similarity

between God and man to the single trait of rationality. Even the Exodus text on the Divine name, “I am that I am,” which has been cited for centuries as the foundation of the monoliths of Plato and Aristotle, may read “I will become what I will become.” The Platonic absolute, the static, the utterly unconditioned was later written into the official theology. It is absent in the biblical texts. Indeed the kinships Joseph Smith affirmed are present in Psalm 8. The man of whom God is mindful is “a little lower than the Eloheim (the Divine)” — not, as the KJ translators have it, than “the angels”—and is “crowned with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5).

Bloom is attracted to the LDS teaching of the “sacredness of human sexuality” and finds similar teachings in archaic sources (106). He explains this with references to Freud and to the much earlier Sabbatai Zvi, whose doctrine of the holiness of sin (“redemption through sin” [106]) was the betrayal of his Messianic claim. Bloom argues (as Joseph Smith did not) that if marriage is sacred then plural marriage is inevitable. And there is hidden eroticism in Bloom’s argument. But he misses the point. Abraham was not promised a harem, but a lasting and glorious posterity. All this is likewise Hebrew-Biblical. But since Augustine, the sacredness of human sexuality is unfamiliar or heretical.

Intrigued by the prominence of Enoch in Mormon sources, Bloom claims with poetic license a “virtual identity” between Enoch and Joseph Smith (100). Enoch created a city-Zion, did not die, and will bring it anew. He is Metetron in the pantheon of kabbalistic lore. But there is no hint in Joseph Smith of this identification nor of reincarnation. If one is serious about the past, present, and future of David’s “congregation of the mighty” (Ps. 82:1), he must add Adam, Eve, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, John, and Elijah, plus others who have received renewed prominence in the Restoration (D&C 138:38).

Bloom ascribes to Joseph Smith the ancient Hebrew sense that “word, event and thing” are one and calls this transumption (100). He does not note that, by this definition, the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament Apostles, and Jesus himself were gnostics. In other company, including religions, this is often taken as a misguided quest for certainty, or as a mystical retreat from reality, or a bromide to palliate brooding about death and despair. For Latter-day

Saints, it is none of the above. In affirming the present possibility of face-to-face communion with God like that of Moses, Joseph Smith was not a radical revolutionary nor an original. He was, instead, what he said he was: a restorer. On a comprehensive scale.

Bloom sometimes reverses his implicit-to-explicit mode, as is illustrated by one telling example. The absence of the cross in Mormon architecture shows, Bloom says, that Mormons and the American Religion in general have lost touch with the historical Jesus (40). Bloom, who asserts the primacy of the interior, might have intuited what he could not see. The earliest Christians placed Easter ahead of the Crucifixion and so do Latter-day Saints. A glorified Christ who bears the nail prints is in all ways the embodiment of the new beginning. The cross testifies most of the mortal end. Precisely what Bloom says is absent in LDS faith is present: one may hypostatize the cross, as in classical theology, or he may take it up inside and “deny himself of all ungodliness” (Moro. 10:32; Alma 39:9). In the Book of Mormon, more than in any other document, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are vividly combined both in anticipation and manifestation. Bloom’s stumbling here and elsewhere is incompatible with what he himself avers: namely, that the reunion of the historical, the literal, and the actualized—and with symbols that deepen rather than evade—is at the heart of Joseph Smith’s mission.

Another example. Bloom has discovered that Joseph Smith organized a Council of Fifty in Nauvoo, some of whose members were men of other faiths, pointing toward the extension of constitutional government. (One might add that few others have given such a religious dimension to the American Constitution). This, at Bloom’s instant touch, is transmuted into something sinister, “the gradual, subtle growth of the Mormon Kingdom of God in America” (94). Who in the Jewish-Christian world does not pray, “Thy Kingdom come”? The Latter-day Saint pattern is the same as that in ancient Judaism—as Bloom himself says, “a religion becomes [became] a people” (106). The Mormon people became a community, which, like the New Testament community, sought and continues to seek to become a kingdom. The Saints are the last people on earth to be confused on who the King is or how, in contrast to petty despotisms, he will govern.

Other inversions beset Bloom's exposition: For Bloom, *The American Religion* is all about a loneliness related to the American "experience of the abyss of space" (103). But the New Testament model and the faith of the Latter-day Saints is—through and through—about togetherness, the solidifying and hallowing of relationships in a way that reaches eternity and the experiencing of the endlessness of time. Thus, there has never been an isolated self; there have always been relationships, family, community. God himself was never completely alone.

Bloom's subtitle is "The Emergence of the *Post-Christian Nation*." But the faith of the Latter-day Saints is the *pre-Christian* religion of Christ. It is Judaism at its crest and the religion of disciples of Jesus before they were victimized by diaspora—by dilution and embellishment, addition and subtraction—and by official amalgamation to the state, all of which pulled the faith from the moorings of Jesus into metaphysical monoliths.

"Mormonism . . . of today is not my subject," says Bloom (106). But then he proceeds as if it were. What attracts him religiously appalls him politically. Much of the book is strident and erratic sociopolitical commentary. Mormons, Baptists, and Christian Scientists receive their share; Christian Fundamentalists and Pentecostals, more than their share. As for the Mormons, Bloom becomes altogether conventional and repeats the journalistic stereotype: the present-day LDS Church is stunningly wealthy, respectable, politically monolithic, and too much an influence in government: "It began as a scandalous heresy and now is an eminently respectable, established church, wealthy, vaguely Christian, and mostly right-wing Republican" (53). Yet the verifiable consequences of the international growth of the LDS community stand this stereotype on its head. The LDS Church today—clearly Christian in its full embrace of the law of tithing and its full rejection of professional caste—is financially stretched. Nevertheless, it is doing many of the very things for the underprivileged worldwide that Bloom says it cannot do. As an organization and community, it remains widely misunderstood and maligned. Has not Bloom himself joined that choir? Moreover, the Church is politically diverse in ethnic, national, and party allegiances. In fact, its international diversity, had he recognized it, would have cost Bloom his title and

his topic. Pigeonholing the Latter-day Saints, even those of the first generation, as “American” is as anachronistic as describing Jews or Christians or Moslems as Jerusalemites.

Bloom also urges, indeed labors, what has now become another flawed claim in recent literature about the Latter-day Saints (and Bloom extends the lament to other American religions): that they have lost touch with their origins. Plainly, he argues, the present-day religion “is only a compromise with gentile America, rather than being the authentic vision of Joseph Smith” (106). If they were faithful to “the most crucial teachings” (91), the Latter-day Saints he says would be utterly different. How can a writer be so sensitized to the subtle and so oblivious to the palpable? The melancholy failure to live up to their high estate is the story of the Jews, as it is of Christians, including Mormon Christians. But “not now” is not necessarily “not ever.” Religion need not abandon what it postpones. It may even intensify the inner ideal while weighed down by impediments.

Moreover, with a clipboard and a gifted interviewing style, Bloom might have consulted a fair sample of recent converts to the LDS Church. If he did not impose his paradoxical indifference to self-awareness, he could glimpse what is stirring and moving their lives. Recent studies show that the dominant moving appeal among the Mormons is the thrust toward experiential religion—more so, in fact, than in the Baptists whom Bloom says still retain the Puritan quest for the “inner light” (54, 204). And it is the Jesus of the New Testament—the one who said he would not be locked within that time or place—along with what he was, what he promised, what he portrayed and taught, that is sought by these new adherents. Their religious experience is a kind of knowing. It is life eternal, the whole of life, and the relationships of life—life that begins now and here with Christ. A creative “misreading” of Bloom’s message is that persons the world over are unconsciously striving toward this faith (which was also Joseph Smith’s faith), spawned by an innate and archetypal religious awareness.

Finally, Bloom steps unabashedly into the realm of forecaster. His expectations discourage him: the Jehovah Witnesses will be increasingly pathological, the Christian Fundamentalists will dominate the political process, and moderates among the Baptists will lose to the fundamentalists, who make an idol out of an inerrant

Bible. Pentecostals will continue to be noisy and ineffectual. The Latter-day Saints, “the Established Church of the American West” (263), will, by the year 2020, compose more than 10 percent of the population of the United States. Though they have traded their “original vision” for business suits, Mormons will become the wave of the future. Here he is not speaking parables. Time will confirm or discredit him.

Can, then, a determined or ambivalent outsider, even with the wit, brilliance, and verbal virtuosity of a Harold Bloom really enter into the sovereign realm of individual religious faiths? On that issue, this book is not reassuring. But it is notable that a man who has spent his life studying and trying to identify with the great literary figures finds visions and vision of great depth and wide-ranging pre-eminence in Joseph Smith and the movement that arose under his leadership. This may encourage some literary or religious minds to look again at LDS source materials—including dehellenized manuscripts and the Book of Mormon—and find what Bloom only touches in an eccentric, piecemeal, and at best one-sided way.

Meanwhile, Latter-day Saints recognize what both attracts and repels Bloom: Joseph Smith was in the profoundest ways a Christ-intoxicated man. At the end of his life, Joseph Smith described the Restoration as encompassing all the truth the Jewish-Christian world possessed and, in addition, renewed access to its ultimate source. Thus Latter-day Saints have every reason to understand Bloom’s minimal thesis: that Joseph Smith and his heirs were neither chronic borrowers from a nineteenth-century milieu, nor *ex nihilo* creators of something wholly outside the Jewish-Christian heritage. But if these alternatives are in apropos, then who were these people, and who are they now? If Bloom stirs any interpreters of this religion to open or reopen that question, both academically and religiously, that will be a service.

III

Charles Randall Paul

Harold Bloom is a husband, father, teacher, scholar, and a life-long addict of the written word, who said if he were marooned on

an island for the rest of his life and could bring only three books, he would choose the Bible, Shakespeare's complete works, and—paralyzed at the horror of abandoning all but one of his other literary loves—he declined to select a third.⁸ Wayne Booth says we can tell about people from the written company they keep. If so, Bloom, whose favorites are Yahweh and Falstaff, is a man of extremes: dour and playful, spiritual and earthy, uncanny and hearty. Acquaint yourself directly with Harold Bloom by reading *The American Religion*, *The Book of J*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, and *The Western Canon*.⁹ I recently discussed Bloom's last four books with him during a visit to New York University.

Each of these books treats the big question: As we face death, how should we live? He believes this is the energizing subject of all poetry and religion. Bloom appreciates religious writings because they transmit God as a literary character in a text, making the Almighty partially accessible to a devout reader. He has extensively read the Hebrew scriptures, the early gnostic pseudepigrapha, and many American religious and poetic writings to complement his ample knowledge of classic Western literature. His Mormon reading emphasizes Joseph Smith's revelations, especially the books of Moses and Abraham; Joseph Smith's personal history; and Doctrine and Covenants sections 1, 10, 76, 88, 93, 121, 122, 128, 130, 131, and 132. As a critic, he quotes very little and assumes his readers have an extensive knowledge of the primary texts. He is not a theologian or historian of religion, but he is a broad and deep reader and an eloquent respondent. His scope is so wide that he might be granted a plenary indulgence for his inevitable errors of perspective and detail. Most scholars have avoided directly criticizing particular religions because of fear of offending or a lack of sufficient evidence about supernatural matters. Bloom's open, candid criticism elicits counterargument, begging the reader to engage him with cheers and jeers.

Reading Bloom is a difficult pleasure. His feisty style invigorates if you lean, like a fighter, right into his audacity, punching and embracing at the same time. His signature is arresting overstatement tinged with a mordant, sympathetic, heavyhearted humor. He is not coy. One learns in a few pages whom he hates (anti-intellectual know-it-alls) and whom he loves (hearty, poetic/spiritual

originals). His religious criticism is never snootily contra naturalism or supernaturalism but is instead openly skeptical, allowing for—even wishing for—things that to him seem too good to be true.

Bloom cannot be dismissed as a secular humanist, a rational idealist, a mechanistic naturalist, or a mystical absolutist. He, like Milton, is a unique mix, a religion of one: a gnostic Jewish existentialist reader who experiences beauty, truth, and goodness by textual comparison; who quarrels impatiently with coercive, authoritative individuals or organizations; who is bewildered and disappointed at uninvolved or uncaring divine powers; and who still hopelessly desires that something like Joseph Smith's visions of eternity might be fulfilled in reality. He trusts his readers enough to reveal all these aspects as he invites them into his mind for a serious discussion about how we might live religiously in the face of death.

Harold Bloom is the first intellectual outside the Mormon tradition to both passionately admire and carefully criticize the writings and life of Joseph Smith. Bloom joins Tocqueville, Emerson, and William James as a serious practitioner of religious criticism. No author since James (and even he avoided criticizing specific religions) has written an appreciative yet critical exposition of American religions' responses to these religious questions: Where were we? Where are we journeying? and, best of all for Americans, What makes us free?

The American Religion lauds an American elite of poets and prophets in the following order of eminence (the critic must prioritize): Joseph Smith, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Young Mullins, William James, and Jonathan Edwards. The names Smith and Mullins on this short list are the scandal of American religious history by their absence from serious discussion—until now. The book, written to a broad intellectual audience, attempts to disclose the genius of Smith, Mullins, and other religious originals who have often been misunderstood. Like an enthusiastic treasure hunter who alone has uncovered a pearl of great price, Bloom runs at us urging us to come see what he has found by close reading and meditation.

What he displays, glimmering within us, is the free, uncreated individual, the center of the human soul. This center is the self's self, Walt Whitman's "me myself" (26), or Joseph Smith's

“intelligence”—a self so free as to be coequal in eternity with God’s self. This radical self-knowledge is the basis for the unique American religions and poetics that were created in the early nineteenth century by and for modern “gnostics,” those who know that before heaven and earth were organized, they were already there. Our treasure hunter concludes that anyone, regardless of creed, who looks inward can rediscover this truth of the ages: we have always been; we are radically free; we are lone individuals.

Kirkegaard and Sartre found the radical freedom of an uncreated self somber knowledge, whereas the Americans from Walt Whitman to Joseph Smith found in it a romantic adventure of open, upward possibilities. Bloom sensed what Richard Hughes discovered in comparing restoration movements; namely, Latter-day Saint restorationism focused on the ancient *method*—opened heavens pouring down new revelation—making their religion a creative adventure, whereas the Campbellites’ Disciples of Christ centered more on the ancient *form*—a restored organization functioning correctly, legally assuring salvation to its adherents. The open canon of Mormonism allowed for romantic perfection through everlasting progress, whereas the Campbellites sought perfection through their disciplined, retrospective conformance to biblical law. The former was for Bloom the best example of the American Religion, the latter a case of traditional European revivalism.

Bloom’s historical thesis is that imported European religions (except for rarer gnostic, kabbalistic religious forms) emphasized the question What is our final destination? For them, predestined heaven or hell was the typical answer. In contrast, the American Religion—which came to maturity at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the orphic outpourings at Cane Ridge and western New York revivals—emphasized implicitly the primal question Where did we originate as free selves? The American need for personal salvation derived from a feeling of ignorance, not of depravity. At the core, successful seekers found themselves uncreated collaborators with Deity, radically free from ultimate coercion by God, the devil, or other humans (recalling Joseph Smith’s “three independent spirits” of God, man, and the devil).¹⁰ These American gnostic revivalists welcomed Jesus (or the divine) to settle with them as a friend, thus rejecting without overt

rebellion their prior vassalage to a sovereign God. They came to adopt a spiritual peerage system, of becoming coinheritors of the kingdom of God. When Americans lauded Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords, subtle self-praise was right there too. Tocqueville missed this spiritual toryism when he democratized the American Religion, but had he visited the kingmaker Joseph Smith in 1831, he might have smelled an aristocratic familiarity in the western air. A nation of soul sovereigns serving with their high king Jesus was the actual vision for the Mormon Zion and the Baptist's spiritual kingdom of God.

In American religion, Jesus—our persistent, divine friend—is the one calling us to courageously face ourselves. This lonesome showdown is solid Mormon doctrine: “Behold the way for man is narrow, but it lieth in a straight course before him, and the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there . . . and he cannot be deceived” (2 Ne. 9:41). Personal particularity is at the root of ancient Christian thought, yet in its American religious mode, it becomes uniqueness. We are not just different; we are singularities.

Truman Madsen once quipped that the Declaration of Independence used imprecise terms; Jefferson should have written that all men are uncreated unequal. Such “unequality,” according to Bloom, spawns resentment. As eternal, uncreated individuals, we go beyond our close Freudian family resentments to resent our powerful cultural forefathers. Their intimidating excellence impedes our own original creativity. With our uncreated freedom, we self-critically ask why we have not done more—we must somehow be responsible for our own situation—and we resent those who surpass us merely by their greater desire. Inexcusable human differences cause the resentment of competition for eminence that is the burden of radical freedom.

Bloom's school of resentment can be healed only by a friendly, personal God that sits down with you and says, “Okay, I know you are not as strong as Atlas, as beautiful as Helen, as bright as Pythagoras, or as talented as Homer, but what makes you divinely interesting, after all, is your desire to become something original. What interests me is your next creative move, your unique new self.” What keeps the gods interested and interesting is the next miraculous moment of change: *creatio ex libertas*.

When visiting Utah, poetic writers from Twain to Emerson could not grasp that the cold gray granite of the Salt Lake Temple cloistered the sacred fire of the ages: the romantic quest for eternal life and love. Bloom says, "American religion, like American imaginative literature, is a severely internalized quest romance, in which some version of immortality serves as the object of desire" (40). This religious/romantic motif was epitomized by Dante's religious poetry and Joseph Smith's poetic religion. Isolated pilgrims can find their true loves and together create their rightful paradisaical kingdom where they reign as kings and queens. Until religious critics understand the power of the Mormon marriage rite, they will never quite understand why polygamy was a voluntary sacrifice or why a 10 percent tithe is a pittance compared to what a committed Mormon questor is willing (almost aching) to give. Those like Bloom who know the power of the romantic quest in fictional literature stand in awe of the motive force it has in nonfictional religion. The sincere audacity of Mormons, who eternally seal themselves in love and then do the same vicariously for the entire human family, motivates a massive effort, unparalleled in history, of genealogical research and vicarious ritual. The practical Latter-day Saints are uncannily impractical about this quest—they spend millions of dollars each month assisting the dead.

This reach beyond the grave was consistent with Joseph Smith's eros for increase, his divine desire for expansion: "Thy mind, O man! . . . must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God."¹¹ To expand, the Prophet stretched himself and his people beyond any prior American mold. Recognizing this expansion is one of Bloom's best insights and the force behind his fascination with the Mormon doctrine of celestial marriage. According to Bloom, Joseph Smith enjoyed the pleasure of sacred marriage, but his great passion was for new and more life in a time without boundaries. Bloom's cheery prophesy for polygamy's return (123) shows his wish for a living religion so vital in originality and abundance that it continually explodes its previous limits—continual revelation indeed. He would that all Israel were prophets—that there were not just three Nephites, but millions of Enochs, men and women together, living translations of the mysteries of godliness.

Using Hebrews and Enoch and personal experience as texts, the Prophet taught that “our God is a consuming fire”¹² who dwells in everlasting burnings, who dwells in bodily temples. His language for deity was as fiery as the kabbalists’ and Zoroastrians’. Fire signifies transformation and freedom, purity and power, conflict and desire. He sensed that the character of God included all these. Joseph Smith’s temple was always on fire. Images of his glowing Kirtland and blazing Nauvoo temples pale beside the pyrophoric bodies of the Father, the Son, Moses, Abinadi, Moroni, and the American prophet who communed with them all.

No man knows Joseph Smith’s history,¹³ and none would believe it if they did. Nevertheless, due to Harold Bloom’s literary talent and spiritual audacity, I predict that in twenty years, when selections from the *Joseph Smith Reader* are required in any college American history class, millions (who otherwise might not have) shall know Brother Joseph again.¹⁴ It will not have been the biographical psychohistories, nor the critical exposés, nor eloquent philosophical explanations, nor incisive historical syntheses, nor faithful histories, nor sociological surveys, nor comprehensive encyclopedias that bring Mormonism intellectually out of obscurity. Though all the above will have been influential, finally, the most illuminating breakthrough will have begun with a book that was unacceptable to any religious camp or academic persuasion, a book that experts first ignored, later decried, and finally accepted as seminal to a serious understanding of the doctrine of the uncreated, free individual that was restored to American religion most powerfully by Joseph Smith. It will be *The American Religion* and Harold Bloom, who actually read Joseph Smith’s revelations and life with the reverence and awe they deserve compared with other great poetic and religious writings of the world. Hear Bloom summarize his thoughts about the American prophet:

So self-created was he that he transcends Emerson and Whitman in my imaginative response, and takes his place with the great figures of our fiction. . . . So rich and varied a personality, so vital a spark of divinity, is almost beyond the limits of the human, as normally we construe those limits. To one who does not believe in him, but who has studied him intensely, Smith becomes almost a mythology in himself. . . . We do not know Joseph Smith, as he prophesied that even his own could never hope to know him. He requires strong

poets, major novelists, accomplished dramatists to tell his history, and they have not yet come to him. He is as enigmatic as Abraham Lincoln. . . . We cannot be certain what baffles us most. As an unbeliever, I marvel at his intuitive understanding of the permanent religious dilemmas of our country. . . . Our deep need for originality gave us Joseph Smith. . . . There is something of Joseph Smith's spirit in every manifestation of the American Religion. (127)

Bloom believes that “the Mormon perspective is available only to Mormons, or to those few who can imagine themselves into that people” (126). Great virtue exists in such an imagination, one that can get close to becoming something other than itself. Empathetic, imaginative criticism is the only kind that is effectively heard. It creates new possibilities for loving one's enemies as they are, as we are, without the facile separation of sin and sinner. Further, it lets us regret that another's religion is not our own, even while we criticize that religion's weaknesses and affirm our own faith. We can argue in light and truth without resorting to wimpy relativism.

Most nineteenth-century European thinkers (even the few who remained theists) felt fearful and betrayed by their forefathers' religion as they stared sullenly into the empty abyss and saw no God, whereas American gnostics, seeing nothing in their way, freely looked around and found God himself gazing into the vast openness, exhilarated at its limitless possibilities.

In the eighteenth century, the founders crafted American liberal democracy on Montesquieu's and Locke's assumption of non-intercessory Providence. “Freedom from” the other, especially the other's religion, was derived fundamentally from the observation that since Deity had not clearly established one religion in the world men would try to rectify that oversight. It was expected that competitive American religions would vie for hegemony and thus create an oligarchical balance of power that neutralized religious influence on politics and avoided European-style religious wars. However, America's second founders, Joseph Smith being their Jefferson, envisioned that religion, and one in particular if possible, should become the most powerful element in social and political life. Bloom celebrates (and fears) the chutzpa of the Saints, who considered American society fallen and actually offered a new and living political-theocratic alternative in Zion.

Madison's wisdom was to disestablish political religion, hoping that various separate religious fires would contain each other due to their equal size and power. That plan worked until the powerful nineteenth-century religious forces consolidated into new cross-denominational religious expressions that pressed for a coup d'esprit that evaded religious and political checks and balances. In the twentieth century, the waning of mainline Protestant power and the pervasive assumption that secularization is inevitable have lulled many into thinking that religion is impotent energy. For the well-educated, too often "intelligent believer" is an oxymoron and "religious' fanatic" is redundant. Bloom wants this sophisticated simplemindedness to cease. He wants to create a new public awareness of intelligent, passionate religion that will act as a defensive crossfire to the violent totalitarian varieties flaring around us. Perhaps his critical book will show one way to vent our perennial, competitive, religious hegemonic desires and to avoid massive uncontrollable explosions.

IV

Richard F. Haglund Jr.

Even physicists have heard of Harold Bloom, and his compelling title, suggesting a sociological or cultural study of religion in America, was enough to persuade this physicist to investigate. If, as Bloom implies, there have been no criticisms of "the American Religion" analogous to Nietzsche's critique of traditional European Christianity, it is high time we had one (38). However, the agenda of *The American Religion* turns out to be less sociological and cultural, let alone religious or spiritual, than frankly political. As befits the author of a political tract, Bloom has ignored all that does not fit his peculiar, gloomy vision of an America taken over by the right wing of its diverse religious communities.

Nevertheless, in analytical enterprises—science being a prime example—one can make progress on thorny problems even when the initial attempts are off the mark, provided one clearly identifies the errors in the incorrect attempt. If Bloom's attempt is unsuccessful, as I think it is, we ought to understand why so the enterprise of religious criticism can go forward.

One of Bloom's recurring, egregious methodological errors is letting his prejudices interfere with a careful analysis based on logic and cause-and-effect. A notable example is his fear and loathing of Protestant fundamentalism, which fairly drips off the pages. His fervid attacks on the political views of the American Religion do not appear at first glance to be motivated primarily by contempt for Fundamentalists, though he does not mind an occasional poke at those who, in H. L. Mencken's words, "are everywhere where learning is too heavy a burden for mortal minds to carry" (56). But he finds it so easy to entertain himself with clever asides on the personal foibles of Fundamentalist televangelists that he neglects to analyze the origins and evolution of this variety of the American Religion.

Though he may be moved by Fundamentalist religious fervor and while he lusts for their political power, he still can find nothing worthy of thought in their beliefs or practices. Thus, he reflects the current impoverished state of American intellectual or political discourse, which seems incapable of engaging anything except caricatures of people and ideas. For this problem, religion, ethics, and the re-creation of real civic virtue are the only cures, but these cannot flourish in an atmosphere of fear, contempt, and recrimination. Whatever else religious criticism may be, or should be, it cannot be an exercise in ridicule or free association masquerading as analysis.

A second error which dogs Bloom's analysis of the American Religion is his evident willingness to overlook evidence which fails to support his view. Bloom admires Joseph Smith, the Prophet, as he admires Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Sage of Concord, and Edward Young Mullins, the Baptist savant whom Bloom sees now as a prophet without honor in his own country. However, his selective reading of the evidence leads him to draw conclusions that are simplistic and unsupported. He misreads Mormonism, leaving its complexity unheeded. His tack reminds me of Ambrose Bierce's definition of *critic* in *The Devil's Dictionary*: "A person who boasts himself hard to please because nobody tries to please him."¹⁵

Leaving aside the pejorative references to organizations which are anathema to his liberal political creed, Bloom essentially re-treads the now familiar claim that gifts of original charismatic leaders

are routinized in the lives of their followers by a straitjacket of institutionalization. Bloom argues that Joseph Smith's re-creation of scripture and primitive Christianity is too radical for modern members of the Church he founded in 1830—who are today, he is pleased to note, found in disproportionate numbers among the ranks of the FBI and the CIA. His wildly incorrect innuendoes about the tentacles of the Mormon octopus curling into American corporate boardrooms are part of the same picture of a once heretical sect become respectable.

But Bloom's misreading of the doctrinal and historical record of the Latter-day Saints goes beyond these titillating tidbits from tabloid journalism to imaginative generalizations that completely ignore masses of evidence that contradict his thesis. Bloom observes that

pragmatically, the Mormons are allied in warlike patriotism, opposition to abortion, and refusal to seek economic and social justice to their doctrinal enemies: Southern Baptist Fundamentalists, Assemblies of God Pentecostals, Evangelicals of every denomination. (88)

The data on which such a generalization might be based are nowhere revealed in the book. In this particular case, those data would show a complicated picture. Conscientious objection to war is sometimes approved in the Book of Mormon. Spencer W. Kimball, the president of the Church, whom Bloom quotes on Mormon temple activity, also opposed the siting of the MX missile in Utah,¹⁶ presided over the extension of the Mormon priesthood to blacks, and put in place a massive effort to call Mormon retirees with appropriate expertise to serve health and welfare missions to improve conditions in developing nations. With regard to economic and social justice, Latter-day Saint skills and programs for the temporal welfare of their members are nothing short of legendary.

The errors in perspective introduced by Bloom's selective reading of the evidence are compounded by his failure to see when complexity is an essential feature of the landscape. The Mormon community is complex—paradoxically, especially because of its missionary fervor, which, like Matthew's gospel net, "gathered of every kind" (Matt. 13:47). Such a community defies simplistic generalizations. No one who knows Mormon communities outside the intermountain West—communities that increasingly outnumber those in

the historic heartland of the Church and rival them in influence—can fail to see the simplemindedness of Bloom’s broad generalizations. For example, Joseph Smith is pictured by Bloom as the dictatorial ruler in a world kingdom governed by the Mormon priesthood and crowned in secret rituals. Yet the same Joseph Smith, when asked how he ruled his people, responded in theory and in practice: “I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves.”¹⁷

The combination of these methodological errors and skewed perspectives is most visible in Bloom’s predictions of the approaching Fundamentalist political hegemony in the United States. Central to his view of the future is the idea of the literal Mormon kingdom of God, which he suggests might be established in the United States in the twenty-first century. The secret coronation of Joseph Smith as head of an earthly kingdom of God is reported by Klaus Hansen in his *Quest for Empire*¹⁸ and has been a subject of great interest to historians in recent years. Whatever may have occurred—and I stress that the matter of what did occur is still a matter of dispute because of the scarcity of reliable sources—LDS theology clearly regards all earthly kingdoms that fail to acknowledge God as their lawgiver to be more or less illegitimate. For the present, we are obliged, as was Jesus himself, to “render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21).

Bloom’s obsession with what he perceives as the Fundamentalist conspiracy to stamp out all that is socially and sexually liberal in American democracy leads him from the picture of an imaginary theocracy to the claim that “the Mormons fully intend to convert the nation and the world; to go from some ten million souls to six billion” (94). Yet Brigham Young pointed out repeatedly that Latter-day Saints must not expect to be the only ones who will live on the earth during the millennial kingdom and that part of our preparation for that kingdom was to understand and be at peace with people of goodwill from many different religions.¹⁹ I can only explain Bloom’s appalling misreading of the data by assuming that he has fallen victim to a single vision and a crass literalism which is, ironically, a hallmark of the “Know-Nothing” Fundamentalists (56) against whom he rails in his book.

Latter-day Saint theology, whatever else it does or does not teach, explicitly states that in mortal life we work out our individual salvation through God's grace and our own best efforts in a dynamic, soul-stretching tension between the polarities of human experience: sickness and health, pleasure and pain, joy and sadness, ignorance and enlightenment. Above all, this is a complex vision, not easily captured by the facile generalization based on carelessly selected data.

Bloom appears to have turned to gnosticism to explain the vitality of the American Religion because he is himself unable to find meaning in the "mainline" (217) denominations that came to these shores from elsewhere. Misplacing the context, however, leads him to reduce various religions to caricatures. While gnosticism involves knowledge of God, a felt personal relationship with the object of belief, and a belief in a Manichean universe where good and evil are at war with each other, these same elements can be found in conventional Christianity in contexts that are clearly *not* gnostic. Bloom's hypothesis that gnosticism is essential to the American Religion fails because Baptists, Mormons, and Pentecostals alike believe in the Jesus of the New Testament, not the one we find in the apocryphal, gnostic texts. By missing this point, Bloom is forced into implausibly arguing that the American believer reads the Gospels from a gnostic standpoint.

Whereas the ancient gnosticism was or is an ascetic, elite, "insider" religious activity, Bloom's American Religion is a community of the middle class, offended by the intellectual posturing, moral bankruptcy, and sexual permissiveness of the cultural elite and largely shut out, as individuals, from the largesse of the affluent and the politically powerful. The desire to be with Jesus is the desire for the promised new life and for the inward power to control and shape the destiny of the human soul. Bloom is farthest off the mark in failing to understand that this thirst for control is the key to the vitality of the American Religion.

While *The American Religion* disappoints in many respects, we must not be diverted from the serious question posed by this book: Can there be, and do we now need, an informed religious criticism of the American Religion? Let us assume that religious criticism is not what Bloom has written in this book, but what he

says it is—an earnest engagement of all the force of philosophy, theology, and history in pursuit of the roots of the spiritual. If this definition were accepted, the answer to this question is clearly affirmative. But if we are to have a religious criticism worthy of the name and of its subject, it must have a different base and a different methodology than what we see between the covers of this book.

The most important purpose of such criticism can perhaps be clarified by an example. For me, the most offensive line in Bloom's book was his statement that "the current Mormon rhetoric in invoking Jesus Christ does serve as a perhaps deliberate veil behind which a post-Christian religion continues its complex development" (88). This sort of sentiment might have made Walter Martin, that veteran warrior against the "Kingdom of the Cults," a proud and happy man. True, Latter-day Saints do not accept the philosophical strictures of the traditional creedal formulations about Jesus Christ. Latter-day Saints believe that the theological formulas of conventional Christianity have less to do with the Jesus of the New Testament than with Greek philosophy—a position increasingly tolerated by at least some biblical scholars. But both the Book of Mormon and the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants make plain the Latter-day Saint commitment to the Christ of the New Testament. The issue is one of definition.

It seems to me that religious criticism ought to address just such issues. The methodological challenge is to do so, if possible, in a neutral way that allows for the development of an informed consensus on concepts and facts, as nearly as we are able to ascertain them. The interpretation of these facts, as in science, would have to be viewed as provisional and open to continual review. The method of this discourse, as Hugh Nibley has pointed out, is "to talk about the material at hand, hoping that in the course of the discussion every participant will privately and inwardly form, reform, change or abandon his opinions . . . and thereby move in the direction of greater light and knowledge."²⁰

One of the key elements of religious criticism should clearly be to develop paradigms for such an enterprise. The first task in developing the paradigms for any analytical enterprise involves a struggle with language. "In the beginning of the investigations," writes Heisenberg, ". . . the words are connected with old concepts,

the new ones do not exist yet.”²¹ Just as a dispute about grammar cannot be resolved by the rules of spelling,²² so the paradigm must be grounded in a suitable conceptual framework. Bloom seems to lack the subtle language and experience for this task because of his extreme bias toward secular interpretations of the religious community and its beliefs. We may yet have to admit that religious criticism will be most productive when its protagonists are chiefly, though not exclusively, religious, much as we subscribe to the notion that electromagnetic theory is best carried out by those who know Maxwell’s equations.

The practice of experiential, charismatic, and prophetic religion, as Bloom notes in his comments about Joseph Smith, is a dangerous one, given the imminent potential for martyrdom. It is also, however, a practice that bears little fruit without a framework for sustained retelling, reexperiencing and reenacting the creative revelation that stands at the heart of the American Religion. The ultimate role of religious criticism is to make possible growth in both personal faith and institutional vitality by reexamining the foundations. A religious criticism of this stamp, by helping religious communities to understand the roots of belief as well as experience, might even be a stimulus to greater toleration and cooperation.

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NOTES

¹See also Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

²Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

³Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) and *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).

⁴Hugh W. Nibley, *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989); see especially “We Will Still Weep for Zion,” 366–67.

⁵Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign* 6 (June 1976): 6.

⁶Gordon B. Hinkley, "The State of the Church," *Ensign* 21 (May 1991): 52–53.

⁷"A More Excellent Way," *Ensign* 22 (May 1992): 61–63; "Jesus the Very Thought of Thee," *Ensign* 23 (May 1993): 63–65; and his first statement as the new Prophet, *Ensign* 24 (July 1994): 4–5.

⁸Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 525.

⁹Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); *The Book of J* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); "A Reading," in *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, trans. Marvin Meyer (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 111–21.

¹⁰Joseph Fielding Smith, *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 215.

¹¹Joseph Smith Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 3:295.

¹²*History of The Church* 6:366; Hebrews 12:29.

¹³Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945).

¹⁴"Praise to the Man," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 27.

¹⁵*The Devil's Dictionary* (New York: Printed for the members of the Limited Editions Club, 1972), 36.

¹⁶Ironically, Ronald Reagan also misread the Mormon view of the MX issue.

¹⁷*Millennial Star* 13 (November 15, 1851): 339.

¹⁸Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967).

¹⁹See Brigham Young and others, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 2:316–17; 11:274–75; 12:274, 279. See also Arnold Green, "Jews in LDS Thought," *BYU Studies* 34, no. 3 (1994/1995): 159–60 n. 27.

²⁰Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), xiv.

²¹Werner Heisenberg, "Tradition in Science," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 29 (December 1973): 4.

²²Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1967), 33–37.