

Review

Make Yourself Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism. By Peter Coviello. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2019. 293 pages. \$87.00 (Hardcover); \$29.00 (Softcover).

Make Yourself Gods is written by Peter Coviello, a Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago who specializes in American literature and queer theory. This book is about religion, but a strange, aberrant sort of religion, that was loathed and reviled by mainstream America, until it was finally tamed by force and secularism at the end of the nineteenth century. The title comes from an injunction of the charismatic founder, Joseph Smith, relating to the religion's defining practice of (patriarchal) polygamy that so outraged Americans. It is likely that Smith had somehow experienced that fusion of erotic and mystical experience that has long lurked on the fringes of enthusiastic monotheism. The relevance for *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* readers is not so much the sex as the hostile secularism. Seen from the perspective of the persecuted Mormons, and with the author's own queer orientation, here secularism is reinterpreted as something other than the enlightened commonsense of a civilized modern culture. Although the book does not mention Science as an ideology, the historical entanglement of science with secularism gives this outsider's view a real relevance for *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*.

The book presents an intimate mixture of history, social analysis, and methodology. Its running theme is "secularization," and it opens with "axioms" about that topic. Then it embarks on a roughly chronological account, first (with a section entitled "Joy") with "the radiant body," and then "Gods in subjection" about the oppression of women (there was actually one who claimed that she too had the keys to divinity through multiple sex). Then there is a history of how the many contradictions in the original message were managed, under increasing pressure from the sect's enemies; the title of the section is "extermination." The last of its chapters is "the biopolitics of secularism," a reminder that monogamy was also packaged with a particular family structure and property relations. In this respect the Mormons had some affinity with the Native Indians (as well as believing in their status as descendants of the Israelites), so that this aspect, along with their similarity to Muslims, made them suspect as not entirely "white." Finally, the summary on secularism has the richly ironic title "theodicy," and introduces the unavoidably jargonistic term "protohomonationalism." There the author makes plain his sympathies, seeing the early Mormons as being on the wild side, rather like ideologically consistent modern homosexuals, or in more recent parlance LGBTQ or "non-binary" people. He is honest about his regrets over the process of taming that the Mormons underwent in order to survive in the imperialist, secularizing United States of America.

The relevance for science-and-religion is the glimpse of ourselves as others see us, under the title of "postsecularism." This term is familiar to students

of modern religion, with its classic text by Charles Taylor. But Coviello espouses an altogether more radical version, in which modern institutionalized religion is itself part of the secularization process. Although he does not explicitly discuss his own demarcation, it is clear from his example, and his personal affinity, that he considers "Apollonian" religion to be utterly domesticated, and prefers the "Dionysian" style of the early Mormons to be authentically non-secularized.

His views are set out with admirable clarity in a series of axioms. The first is that secularism is not hostile to "religion" as such; rather (according to Charles Taylor) it redefines and redistributes it, in a process beginning around 1500. Second, its enemy is "bad belief," defined by Talal Asad as those which do not "adhere to the conventions of liberal polity," and who reject its focus on ethically uplifting behavior. Then secularism becomes a "normative project," a discipline, in Foucaultian terms a *discourse*, a "knowledge-power," "wedded to a liberalism forged in empire." Fourth, "secularism has a body," so that other ways of organizing gender relations, as in Islam, are seen as inherently backward and evil. It follows that "secularism is a biopolitics," for which the evidence here is "The Code of Indian Offences" of 1883, including ritual dances, plural marriage and medicine men. Become reflexive, the next axiom is that the "secularization thesis" is a "distorting, partisan way of telling the story" of its rise. And finally, that story is "a theodicy: the racialized theodicy of hegemonic liberalism." That description leaves little room for complacency!

What does all this have to do with science? First, since the image of science is historically so bound up with secularism, this critique can serve to alert us to a possible parallel critique of science, at least to the workings of its ideology. We already know how the practice of science applied to human affairs, in health and in society, has reflected the general patterns of oppression as of gender, race and ethnicity. Could these distortions be seen not as unfortunate accidents, but as inherent to its conception as we have inherited it? Also, is it possible that the image of modern science as essentially benevolent is as much a folk-history as the complacent secularization thesis itself?

We come closer, finally, to the special concerns of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. In this author's framework, the classic debates of "science and religion" have all been *within* the secular framework. We need only observe that a religion whose beliefs are mainly based on a narrative claiming to be historical, is vulnerable to the analyses provided by the historical disciplines. The rise of modern science has coincided with the decline and marginalization of "enthusiastic" religion, certainly in the West. Even the "joy" of Joseph Smith's disciples seems not to have survived his death. But experiential religion, or what we might call transdimensional experience, cannot be permanently suppressed, or dismissed as irrelevant to our modern, hegemonically secular science-based culture. The New Age spirituality, with its own countercultural versions of science, seems to be here to stay. And for interactions with mainstream science, there is the vivid historical account of *How the Hippies Saved Physics* by David Kaiser.

Given that the author's subject is multiply marginal, and his perspective deliberately queer, *Make Yourself Gods* does definitely have something to offer to the perennial science–religion dialogue as it has developed to our time.

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