ARTICULTURE

SELLING THE LDS SACRED: A VISIT TO THE LDS BOOKSELLERS CONVENTION

By Allen D. Roberts

IT MAY HAVE come as a surprise to Mormons and non-Mormons alike when Methodist historian Jan Shipps concluded in her book that Mormonism has become a major world religion. Whether we accept Shipps's conclusion, most observers will at least agree that Mormonism has managed to infuse itself into the mainstream of American culture. Some have gone so far as to say that Mormonism—especially its cultural manifestations—is now the standard by which mainstream America can be measured. I have thought this claim to be hyperbolic and even if true, not necessarily a compliment for either Americanism or Mormonism. Nevertheless, Mormonism is deeply interwoven into the fabric of American culture, the standard for which, in almost all categories, is mediocrity.

Late twentieth-century Mormon culture has not elevated itself from its host environment. Its art, architecture, and literature are not distinguished. On the whole, Mormon social statistics follow the national patterns, even in such areas as divorce, suicide, incidence of homosexuality, percentage of working mothers, and a host of other categories in which Mormons, by virtue of their religious beliefs, could be expected to differ significantly. Having experienced all sorts of people from coast to coast, it seems to me that Mormons are no more culturally enlightened than the average American.

I submit the recent LDS Booksellers Convention and Trade Show as an exhibit in evidence. Held on the third floor of Salt Lake City's Expomart, the convention/trade show is unfortunately not open to the public. It is an in-house forum where buyers and sellers of Mormon products display and promote their wares. A decade ago, this annual event was organized by and for booksellers. To understand the setting of the today's main exhibit room, picture a sort of religious state fair minus the animals (unless you count all the stuffed ones). Of the eighty-eight booths, less than half sell books. The others advertise the most wide-ranging variety of Mormon-related objects imaginable.

There are the New Age and what I'll call LDS-New Age fusion products, including casettes of soft, ethereal, subliminal music and self-actualization literature. There was even a "New Age Hearing Instrument" in which the open-hearted sits in a seat within a an open-ended egg-shaped chamber and soaks in melolus tones aimed at comforting the troubled soul.

Paintings, prints, scripture covers, portraits in lace, and other materials depicted every conceivable LDS subject. There were the arresting if inevitable plaster statuettes of Jesus, Joseph Smith, Ammon and other Book of Mormon characters, all striking dramatic poses with their Fribergian anatomies. All cultures have religious heroes and mythical figures. Mormons, too, give their heroes mental and spiritual qualities of extra human proportion, but must they look like Rambo or Schwarzeneggar to merit our respect? In proportion, but must they look like Rambo or Schwarzeneggar to merit our respect? In contrast, the portrayals of Mormon women (none cast heroically) range from Dolly Parton types to emaciated models in long dresses, trumpet, or a paper decal of the same-colored, plastic, sticky-sided bas-relief of angel with trumpet, or a paper decal of the same—came when the innovator's family was left helpless in a broken-down car in the Idaho outback one cold December night. They then realized that if their car had had some symbolic emblem identifying them as LDS, other...
Saints probably would have stopped and helped. The emblem would also be useful in locating lost cars in parking lots. I was told.

Why stop at stick-on Moronis? I inquired.

Why not glue two angel halves together and make a three-dimensional angel suitable for a hood ornament? Instead of Pontiac or some reclining woman, interstates and car lots could proclaim the Mormon presence as never before. “Good idea,” the proprietor exclaimed with such enthusiasm that I feared she meant it.

Predictably, missionary goods were popular items, as were Mormonized clothing. For some reason, their makers assume that Mormons wear only t-shirts and sweat suits. Then again, who would want to wear a serious piece of clothing declaring in bold, colored lettering, “I AM AN EIGHT COW WIFE”? On second thought, that kind proclamation would elicit more questions than simply wearing a golden question mark.

Bookselling still remains the single largest sales category at the LDS Booksellers Trade Show. I will not attempt to describe or evaluate the range of publications now available, but there is literature to suit the interest of every type of Mormon. Publishing houses still tend to cater to specific audiences, so Deseret Book, Bookcraft, Horizon, Hawkes, Randall, et al., provide largely apologetic and faith promoting non-fiction and romanticized Mormon fiction while Signature Books and a few university presses deliver scholarly histories, theological treatises, and thoughtful fiction and poetry. Given the highly competitive nature of book publishing in Utah, it is remarkable that the numbers of titles continue to proliferate at the rate it does. Does this signal a surge in religious literacy? Not really. The consensus among the booksellers is that Mormons generally purchase books for well-intentioned gift giving rather than out of a thirst for knowledge. There must be a lot of mist condition books on LDS shelves.

And as long as Mormons must buy domestic necessities, they may as well achieve the double good of advertising the faith and patronizing Mormon manufacturers at the same time. You can now buy LDS greeting cards, shopping bags, and nametags. Apparently, missionary look-alike nametags are the high volume, low-cost item none of us can excuse ourselves for not donning. The company “Member Marks TM” specializes in “nothing over $1.25” and offers “tiny name tags for the little missionary in us all.”

Perhaps we need the nametags because we’re not sure who we are. In some ways, Mormon history has been a story of perpetual identity crisis, partly because Mormon culture is always changing and partly because the sub-culture has never fit hand-in-glove into the larger culture. Given the strength of our self-annunciation, one would gather that we are a mature, confident people. We are always shouting “we know who we are and where we’re going,” but in such boasting I sense the insecurity of an adolescent religion—healthy, growing, but still a little bit uncertain of itself. I don’t think this is a problem for Mormonism. On the timeline of world religions, Mormonism occupies only a little 160-year dash on a measuring tape stretching over thousands of years.

Growing pains are expected, but at the booksellers show I saw other disturbing portents, particularly materialism and its erosive effect on spirituality. Of course, there is the familiar scriptural warning about trying to serve God and mammon, and the unlikelihood of the wealthy earning the kingdom of heaven. But its not just that Mormons are becoming so consumer-oriented, thanks in part to the plethora of religious goods they somehow feel obligated to buy, its when ownership of religious material is equated with righteousness that I really worry.

While touring the trade show I thought about how David O. McKay taught that we should be concerned with being, not having. Remember the song that begins “I don’t care if it rains or freezes, long as I’ve got my plastic Jesus, sitting on the dashboard of my car.” The fact that Mormons stop short of actually worshiping their icons doesn’t release them (and their makers) from responsibility for commercializing, trivializing, and thereby desacrilizing their religion. This issue goes beyond that of taste or art-versus-sacrifice. It has more to do with Jesus’ motivation for driving money-changers out of the temple. What do we do to ourselves when we reduce the most sacred to the most common, when we surround ourselves with objects which give the appearance of religious life without requiring real religious experience? Perhaps the dead can be redeemed vicariously but can the living also practice their religion vicariously through possessing religious paraphernalia? Passively watching or listening to videos and tapes seems more escapist entertainment than working out one’s salvation through fear and trembling, by trial and error, by acts of faith, regardless of the rigor. I suspect that should Mormonism continue its materialistic, armchair style of religion—as evidenced at the booksellers convention—it will eventually be redefined by our observers and critics accordingly.

There seems to be no end to the possibilities of commercializing Mormonism. Where are the inhibitions? The Church has reportedly decided to reduce the number of products it sells. Given the disparity in economic status between U.S. and Third World Mormons, apparently it has been deemed wise to sell only the items absolutely needed by members in good standing (scriptures, correlated manuals and magazines, garments, and the like). A good idea, I think. But rather than follow this lead, private entrepreneurs seem to view this policy as an open invitation to manufacture items previously produced by the Church. And, in truth, until the Church’s retreat it never seemed quite right to directly compete with the Church anyway. Unfortunately, those little tinges of guilt or sensitivity have rarely been applied to questions of taste or appropriateness of content. Any figure or subject, no matter how sacred, seems fair game for the icon-makers. Yes, icon. The images and representations made are venerated as sacred or they wouldn’t be valued and wouldn’t sell. It is remarkable that a people who profess such an aversion to Roman Catholic relics have no stronger senses of iconoclasm themselves. Ironically, Mormon meeting houses are, by policy, discouraged from displaying religious art, yet the walls and furniture of Mormon homes contain veritable shrines featuring paintings, sculptures, and sayings of every sort. The fact that the vast majority of this “art” is poorly designed, mass produced kitsch simply demonstrates how middle-American it is.

Ideological considerations of this sort are not the subject of debate in business meetings of the LDS Booksellers Association. Instead, its sometimes heated discussions deal with accusations of unfair unethical practices and other industry-related problems. The acrimonious infighting and splintering is itself reminiscent of the kind of capitalistic brawling we have come to expect in the United States. This behavior is consistent with the nature of the trade show itself: A squarely mainstream American cultural phenomenon with all the strengths and weaknesses that come with the territory.