

## FILM REVIEW

# IMAGES OF FAITH: HELEN WHITNEY AND THE ART OF MORMONISM

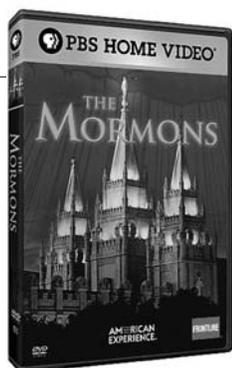
### THE MORMONS

a film by Helen Whitney

A *Frontline* and *American Experience* co-production

with Helen Whitney Productions, 2007

Reviewed by Matthew Bowman



*It seems that what particularly draws Whitney to the Mormon faith is the artistic appeal of the unresolved paradoxes she senses within it. She does not want to explain the Mormons; she wants to present their experience as a work of art.*

THE OPENING SEGMENT of the second part of Helen Whitney's documentary *The Mormons* is titled "The Great Accommodation." It recounts the period of Mormonism's "Americanization" or assimilation, a period of sixty years or so that began with the 1890 Manifesto, rejecting the practice of plural marriage, and ended in the Cold War era with such symbolic acts of acculturation as Dwight Eisenhower's selection of Apostle Ezra Taft Benson for a cabinet post. Historians generally characterize these years in terms of Mormonism's increasing acceptance of American cultural and political life and renunciation of its own distinctive theocratic social practices, such as polygamy, economic communalism, political separatism, and long, patriarchal beards. Summarizing widely shared sentiments, journalist Ken Verdoia appears in the film describing the Mormons today as "the embodiment of the mainstream." In her opening, Whitney makes these points visually, showing us nineteenth-century political cartoons depicting Utah as "Hell on Earth" giving way

to contemporary images of Mormons prominent in American society such as clean-shaven politicians Mitt Romney and Harry Reid. Finally, we see the striking image of the Salt Lake City temple draped in an American flag, celebrating Utah's admittance to the Union in 1896. Narrator David Ogden Stiers offers a neat parallelism: at their inaugurations, American presidents once denounced such Mormon villainies as polygamy and theocracy; today the Mormon Tabernacle Choir performs at those events.

Despite this scholarly consensus, it is apparent that the Mormons have never quite attained full assimilation into American culture. Indeed, one of Whitney's own examples—the candidacy of Mitt Romney for the presidency—has revealed an abiding American distrust of the faith. Mormonism is secretive; it teaches strange doctrines; its members follow their leaders mindlessly. Many evangelical Christians continue to declare that Mormonism is a cult, not a respectable branch of Christianity. Polling over the past several months has revealed that

some 40 percent of Americans would not vote for a Mormon candidate for the presidency. This is where Helen Whitney comes in. She made her documentary, as she claims, with the intent to "shatter stereotypes" about the Mormons, to dispel with the clean light of knowledge the lingering clouds of distrust that have shrouded the faith. But does she succeed?

IN her choice of subjects, Whitney seems to be content to explore in detail those well-worn themes that non-Mormons find interesting or provocative: polygamy, church authority, the church's legion of young missionaries. Whitney gives us Mormonism as a rainbow of engaging personalities. Through her interviews and profiles, we meet missionaries, apostates, polygamists, scholars, and prophets—Mormons all. They are empathetic, compelling, fervent, even funny.

The film attains moments of true grace and beauty, of honesty about human experience, of the pain and joy Mormonism evokes in the hearts of its members. The affection Whitney has for some of her subjects shines through the screen. There is value in putting a human face on a movement, to recognize and depict acts of faith and the meanings that people draw from them. But, of course, it is Whitney's purpose to weave these individual threads into larger cloth; to explore the meanings of the movement, not simply host an assortment of individual lives. And introducing this diversity of people to her viewers is not the same as explaining them or their faith. While Whitney clearly likes the Mormons, in the end, their faith is still a cultural other for her. Indeed, it seems that what particularly draws her to the faith is the artistic appeal of the unresolved paradoxes she senses within it. In short, she does not want to explain the Mormons; she wants to present their experience as a work of art.

Although Whitney's documentary is sponsored by the WGBH-produced programs *American Experience* and *Frontline*, it is not a typical episode of either. It is idiosyncratic, reflecting Whitney's own artistic sensibilities rather than providing the general introduction to a given topic that the programs usually feature. In her film, Mormonism is not so much explained or parsed or diagrammed as it is acted out, in thematic, rather than rigidly chronological, chapters. Whitney bothers little with exploring Mormon doctrine or leadership structure or the daily life of Mormon congregations; rather, she wants to tell a good story.

It is no coincidence that she divides the



MATTHEW BOWMAN attended the University of Utah and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in American history at Georgetown University, doing work on the rise of Protestant fundamentalism. He occasionally dabbles in Mormon studies.

film into ten segments she calls “acts.” For her, the faith is a work of narrative art as much as it is a religion, its history a grand novel, and the stories of its members, compelling anecdotes. She never quite shakes an old, old romantic impulse: her Mormonism is that of the lurid nineteenth-century tabloids which breathlessly described Brigham Young’s harems or warned of the mesmerizing powers of Mormon missionaries; the religion is foreign, exotic, romantic, and above all else, appealingly unexplainable to the modern mind. It is as odd and mysterious for Whitney as for those evangelicals who call it non-Christian. The difference between them and Whitney is primarily one of sensibility—while evangelicals object to Mormonism’s exoticism, Whitney revels in it.

Joseph Smith claimed that truth was to be found through proving contraries, but Whitney never quite manages the feat. She gets only halfway—delighting in juggling Mormonism’s contraries but never pushing further to conclusions. She seems taken with a question posed by Will Bagley, a historian and journalist who has done a great deal of research on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the 1857 incident in which a group of Southern Utah Saints attacked a wagon train, killing more than a hundred California-bound immigrants. The question Bagley asks is: “How did these decent, religious men who had sacrificed so much for what they believed in—how did they become mass murderers?” Whitney poses the question several times but does not provide an answer. Bagley argues that the root of the crime rests in the paranoia and orders of Brigham Young. However, immediately following Bagley’s assertion that nothing happened in the Utah Territory that Young was not aware of, Whitney cuts to Glen Leonard, co-author of a nearly finished book on the massacre, who states unequivocally that Young had nothing to do with the tragedy. And Whitney leaves it there, with dueling and unresolved contraries.

This ambivalence symbolizes well her approach throughout the documentary. Again and again she allows her interview subjects to contradict each other; then she moves on, leaving the issue unresolved. Do Mormon women feel oppressed? Theologian Margaret Toscano speaks of Mormonism’s demand for domestic perfection, submissiveness, and early marriage; medical doctor Anne Osborn Poelman denies such pressure. Is the rigid discipline of the Mormon mission potentially traumatizing to those youth who serve it? Returned missionary and musician Tal Bachman says yes, describing his own lack of

preparation for the trials of his service in rural Argentina; returned missionary and General Authority Marlin Jensen says no,

by its mysteries, its inconsistencies, its compelling controversies, and its charismatic and mystifying history. An unwillingness to ex-

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emphasizing the spiritual rewards of his service in Germany.

One gets the sense that Whitney is not only content to give contradictory answers to every question and to let the Mormons remain a paradox; it is her desire to do so. Why this should be is an intriguing question. Is Whitney striving for even-handedness? Certainly, in part; this presentation of contrasting views is part of good journalistic practice. But another, and more deeply accurate, answer seems to rest in Whitney’s sense of herself as an artist and in her recognition of a deeply resonant streak of romanticism within the origins and doctrines of the faith she studies. For her, Mormonism is defined

plain, to come to categorical conclusions or to outline casual factors, lies at the heart of Whitney’s Mormonism. And therefore, ultimately, the Mormons remain elusive. It seems that she prefers them that way. This inclination has led her to create an artistically intriguing and resonant film; however, we would be wise to recognize that the same ambivalent impulse lies at the heart of forces that keep Mormons from the center of American life.

**W**HITNEY may be an even-handed journalist, but she is also an artist, and artistically, the film is a triumph. Just as her subjects were and



JANETTE ATWOOD

*“How many times have I told you, we don’t allow that filth in this house!”*

are, Whitney is compelled by the charisma and mysticism that permeate the life of Mormonism's young founder, Joseph Smith. She strives to use the language of film to draw from the dry pages of history the dramatic power of Smith's experiences. She begins with the land of his youth, the forests and fields where he had his first encounter with God, reportedly in the spring of 1820, when he was fourteen. The New York of the Second Great Awakening is illustrated with the stark black and white photographs of Rocky Schenck, featuring windswept landscapes, lonely trees, dark farmhouses huddled under gray skies. All of this is accompanied by eerie minor key music. We are told that prophets and preachers roamed

eyes; Southey's enigmatic triptych portrait; the dual profile, one in color, one a photographic negative, which graces the cover of Dan Vogel's skeptical biography *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*. For Mormons today, Smith has a variety of roles. He is the translator of the Book of Mormon, scripture the equal of the Bible. He is the high priest who restored God's priesthood authority to earth. Most of all, he is confident, settled, authoritative.

But for Whitney, Joseph Smith was first and foremost a charismatic visionary, a mysterious and strangely attractive seer whom we cannot today understand. In her telling, Mormonism rests neither upon the Book of Mormon nor upon the priesthood authority that allowed Smith to administer saving ordi-

Mormonism. Historian Kathleen Flake tells us why the membership of Smith's church exploded—it was, she says, because Smith promised the poor, the dispossessed, the marginals of society that they, too, could be like him, that they, too, could see God. Flake's proclamation comes early in Whitney's four hours, but we remember it again and again: when Marlin Jensen recounts a miraculous experience he had on his mission, when the charismatic convert Betty Stevenson explores her gritty conversion, when the Mormon father James Dalrymple tells of a divine prompting to have another child that he and his wife received. The heavens hang low for Whitney's Mormons; God guides their paths in the essential and

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the countryside in bearskins, that there is nothing today like the "strange and fervent place" of the Burned-Over District during Smith's formative years. And indeed, as depicted in both word and image, this is a country alien to twenty-first-century Americans, as distant in its landscapes as the deserts of the Exodus, as foreign in its culture as Egypt of the pyramids. And yet, for all its exoticism, it is weirdly compelling. Whitney chooses to bypass the standard artwork depicting the visions of early Mormonism; the naturalistic, often bland, somewhat sentimentalized prints that hang on the walls of every LDS chapel. These show Joseph placidly communing with a God and angels serene and statuesque; they are as dignified and as clean as classical sculpture. Instead, Whitney favors the expressionistic, dramatic renderings of artists such as Trevor Southey and J. Kirk Richards, whose conceptions of the supernatural events of early Mormonism are enigmatic, haunting, and jarring to Mormon viewers denied the comfort of the familiar. In this, perhaps, Whitney hopes to share with the viewer the darkly attractive weirdness that she herself sees in the birth of Mormonism.

And then we are introduced to Joseph Smith himself, with whom Whitney seems to have fallen a bit in love. Again and again, the images she selects illustrate him as a figure of contradictions and elusiveness—we see extreme close-up shots of Smith's placidly deep

nances—those things Mormons today stress as key to understanding or attaining salvation—but on the dramatic power of Smith's visitations, first of God the Father and Jesus Christ, then of a series of angels who guided him as he created his new church. This is history Whitney finds compelling on a deep aesthetic level.

When she lines up Smith's advocates, they include not only such prominent Mormons as Apostle Jeffrey Holland and historian Terryl Givens, figures one would expect. Whitney also includes such artistically inclined figures as the poet Alex Caldiero and the iconoclastic literary critic Harold Bloom, who extol the artistic genius, the metaphoric truths, the visionary sensibility of Smith's vision narratives. Even Smith's naysayers, such as the archaeologist Michael Coe and the Presbyterian evangelical Richard Mouw, are forced to concede that Smith's brilliant incomprehensibility is beyond them. As Coe says, Smith somehow managed to transform "something that was clearly made up into something that was absolutely convincing." The evangelical Mouw is able only to duel Smith to a draw; he concludes his discussion with a wistful smile and the concession, "I must live with the mystery."

**T**HAT mystery—of the nature of spiritual experience, how it is attained, and what it bestows—rests at the heart of Whitney's understanding of

the mundane, and one gets the sense that the sheer drama of God-touched lives fascinates Whitney, though she does not claim to understand it.

In her retelling of the succession crisis, when Smith's abrupt death threw the leadership of his church into chaos until Brigham Young seized the reins, Whitney does not follow the standard Mormon narrative, which stresses Young's confidence in the priesthood authority Smith had given him. Instead, she tells a story few Mormons have heard: of Young's self-doubt and confusion, of his pervasive fear that he was not "like Joseph"—in short, that he was not a prophet. For Whitney, this lack of visionary confidence is powerfully significant; it strikes to the heart of Young's legitimacy as a Mormon leader, despite the institutional authority emphasized in the more well-known story. It seems entirely correct to her that Young should doubt. Young's fear, we are told, was resolved when Young himself had a vision of the martyred Smith, confirming to Young his rightful place at the head of the Saints. Similarly, Whitney even persuades current church president Gordon B. Hinckley to describe the powerful spiritual experience that occurred in 1978, when the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—of which Hinckley was then a member—received divine affirmation (which Hinckley describes as "pentecostal") lifting the ban on ordaining male blacks to the priesthood.

Whitney may be fascinated by such revelation, but she does not quite trust it. It is simultaneously attractive and dangerous, compelling and antinomian. Bagley's haunting question—how could pious Saints engage in horrific violence—remains ultimately unanswered, and Whitney marshals the same cinematic vocabulary she used to illustrate Smith's genius to explore its sometimes troubling fruits. Place is a potent tool in her language; the haunted wilderness of prophetic New England gives way to the twisted strangeness of southern Utah rock formations at the same time that Joseph Smith's religious ecstasies give way to the religious paranoia of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Whitney's presentation of Margaret Toscano's excommunication uses similar themes. Here, she seems to illustrate the artistry of Joseph Smith gone awry—again we are given the sort of dissonant music that accompanied Smith's visions, and the starkness of her burned-over landscapes are matched by the harsh light cast upon the vivid image that illustrates Toscano's narrative: the empty chairs of the church court. New England's loneliness—those solitary trees, those isolated church steeples—is echoed again in the painful narrative of loss—of family, of faith—that Trevor Southey, a homosexual and eventually an excommunicated Mormon, experiences. And indeed, Whitney even recycles some of the same artwork: a single figure, tiny and lost in a bleak black and white landscape. While once the viewer might have identified this wanderer as Joseph Smith, now, perhaps, it is Southey. Thus does Whitney visually yet subtly prod the viewer to connect the experiences of the two men and ponder the inheritance of Joseph Smith's prophetic spirit. And one gets the sense that Whitney is not completely at peace with that inheritance.

FROM one perspective, then, the viewer can see in Whitney the same sort of suspicion of Mormonism that has persisted since the nineteenth century, a suspicion based fundamentally on the faith's claims about the authority granted it through its claimed access to God's will. But it is true that Mormonism makes these claims—to be the only true faith, to possess exclusive access to the authority of God. Perhaps, then, it is entirely proper that Whitney keep her distance. Mormonism, certainly, has jealously maintained its own distance from the world. The Great Accommodation of the early twentieth century went only as far as was necessary. Whitney is correct to emphasize the cosmetic nature of many of its tactics—an

increased concern with public relations, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's quest for commercial success; indeed, many Mormon leaders were convinced that the 1890 renunciation of polygamy was essentially a public relations move. Since that period, the Mormons have zealously pursued a campaign of integration into selected areas of American life. The Church encourages political involvement and has extended its charitable endeavors beyond its own borders, as Whitney illustrates in her coverage of Mormon efforts to relieve the damage of Hurricane Katrina. In the religious realm, Whitney accurately documents the recent maneuvers Church leaders have undertaken to emphasize their often questioned Christianity—a redesign of the Church logo to emphasize the words "Jesus Christ," an added subtitle to the Book of Mormon featuring the same words. More recently, Mormonism has found itself in common cause with other social conservatives, abandoning nineteenth-century political separatism and plunging into the thick of the culture wars over issues such as abortion and gay marriage that today dominate mainstream political discourse in the U.S.

However, scratching the surface of Mormonism's commitment to the nuclear family and monogamous marriage between a man and a woman reveals a theology—of marriage between literal, embodied Fathers and Mothers in Heaven—that makes the Mormons' allies in the culture wars cringe. Ironically, Mormon fervor for the conventional issues of social politics stems from doctrine decidedly outside the mainstream. Commitment to this sort of doctrine runs just as deeply through the core of Mormonism as its passion for the nuclear family, and it has led Mormons to keep their distance from the interdenominational coalition of American evangelicalism, wearing the badge of "peculiar people" with pride. They continue to insist on aggressive mission work and the necessity of their own ordinances for salvation; they claim a monopoly on authoritative revelations from the divine. Their leaders have taken only the most tentative steps toward ecumenical dialogue and none to-

ward ecumenical organization; they cling to secrecy in leadership, finances, and temple worship in a nation whose public culture demands rough and tumble transparency. None of these traits are likely to change in the foreseeable future, and they continue to make Mormonism an enigma to many Americans. If that is what intrigues Helen Whitney about the Mormons, it may be that the Mormons prefer it that way. ☞



## SHAMAN

Now the wounded healer makes himself a stick,  
One leg pronged in the bank of a rundown river.

When I walk the path beside it, head down hoping  
To find prehistory artfully etched in stone,

And get close enough to be too close,  
He spreads his wings and makes himself a shadow

Of clouds on the roiling ramble of waterway.  
But only for seconds. He alights almost

At once with a nonchalance born of long practice  
And its cousin kismet on a boulder

In the river's middle, resuming his disguise  
As a stick the water threw

Up, then missed catching when it came back down  
And sank itself instead in artless stone.

The path is afternoon, and full of children,  
Not one of whom isn't mine. And now he breaks

His trance to turn his head  
And stare me back into my name,

Water-Watcher, walking where  
The gray cranes come to leave themselves behind.

—PAUL GRANT