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Brenda R. Weber is the Provost Professor of Gender Studies at Indiana University. She has published two previous books with Duke University Press, Makeover TV (2009) and as the editor of Reality Gendervision (2014). In both of these works, Weber explored the intersections of media, gender, and sexuality. She continues these emphases in the present work, but adds another dimension: religion. The religion under inspection is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), commonly referred to (and referred to throughout this review) as the Mormons. Weber argues that the Mormons function as both meme and analytic. That is, they are both the ideas and symbols populating cultural and social trends related to media and gender, and the means of thinking through those trends.

In the prologue and introduction, Weber lays out the terms she uses in the rest of the book, especially mediated Mormonism, which is the key concept for Weber’s basic argument. Mediated Mormonism is what we see or hear via media about Mormons. Media includes television, cinema, Broadway performance, books (especially memoirs by ex-Mormons), and the ever-expanding range of digital media: websites, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, and the like. Weber asserts that the Mormons and Mormonism as presented by media provide media consumers in society at large with symbols that can attract and repel, can provide both exceptions to American values and confirmation of those same values. Weber asserts that no other religion reflects social and cultural positions as well as the Mormons do. This is an unsubstantiated claim that would require quantitative work in the sociology of American religions to either confirm or deny, but Weber is certainly onto something important in connecting media and gender with Mormonism. The faith has much to offer to an analysis such as Weber’s.

Keywords Latter-day Saints, religion and gender, mediated Mormonism, New Religious Movements
Chapter one contains several important ideas, most importantly spiritual neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is an economic philosophy that supports freedom for capitalist agents to conduct business without government interference. Spiritual neoliberalism is the adoption of qualities that make for successful managers and workers in an economy (thrift, profit-seeking, economic exchange) in the spiritual realm. In short, Mormons teach that their members, if they work hard, obey the rules and agree to the policies of the Mormon church, will reap rewards not only on earth but in the afterlife. Although linking one’s actions in this life with spiritual status in the life to come is not restricted to Mormonism, Mormons link heaven and earth in ways peculiar to their faith. According to the Great Plan of Happiness, we all pre-exist before entering this life, and must traverse this life, learning as we go, in order to enter the afterlife. Mormon men, especially, benefit in the life to come. If they abide by the requirements for males, they become as gods, in the afterlife, ruling over worlds of their own. Their wives and children will enjoy this rule, as well, if they have been sealed with the father of the family in Temple rituals. This is one of the most striking examples in religious history of a religious system promising powerful incentives to stay within and support a church polity.

Chapter two examines the Mormon Glow, a way of talking about ideal Mormons, those who are on their way toward perfection and thus participate in Mormonism’s spiritual neoliberalism. Many Mormons commonly believe that conversion to Mormonism makes one physically whiter, attaching purity to whiteness and impurity to blackness. African American Mormon men could not be priests until 1978, when supposedly a revelation from God led to a lifting of the ban on black men in the priesthood. However, Mormonism still has an image problem. Mostly white, middle-class people are portrayed in Mormonism, even though the worldwide Mormon church is racially and ethnically diverse.

Chapter three focuses on the progressive polygamists depicted in the reality television show Sister Wives and HBO’s Big Love. The wives in these shows supposedly have considerable agency in their marriages, and rely on one another as well as the husband. But larger culture still regards polygamy as restrictive for wives, rife with possibilities for spousal abuse. Polygamy is compared to LGBTQ+ living arrangements. Both polygamists and queer folks are derided as perverse. Both use terms like “coming out of the closet” to name their process of making their lifestyles and beliefs public.
Chapter four considers the prevalence of polygamy stories in the Mormon mediascape. Consumers can’t seem to get enough of the drama involved in polygamous marriages and families. The best-known polygamous leader in recent times is Warren Jeffs, head of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS). He is currently serving extensive prison sentences for aggravated assault against a child. But before that he was the leader of the FLDS, claiming eighty-seven wives and sixty children. Weber observes that there’s “a certain kind of narcissistic hegemonic masculinity” (192) at large among men like Jeffs. They flout social conventions, living at the top of a secret social hierarchy.

Chapter five discloses toxic femininity, an ideology of womanhood that most Mormon women aspire to. Good women in the Mormon world are self-effacing, self-policing, put the needs of their husbands before their own, and feel shame and guilt when they fail to live within these behavioral boundaries. This is “toxic”, according to Weber, because it corrodes the integrity and spiritual vitality of women. They are constantly compelled by their husbands and church authorities to devalue themselves in order to keep their families and church happy. The name for this ideal in Mormon parlance is Molly Mormon. If a Mormon girl or woman questions leaves this social world, they are demonized.

In chapter six, Weber notes the parallels between expectations of Mormon women and anyone in the LGBTQ+ spectrum. In both cases, correct behavior is limited to that which the church authorities approve. Any deviation from this behavior results in sanctions, even exile from the LDS church. Both women and queer folk are to adopt what Michel Foucault called a “docile body”: let others work on you, to fix you, and accept the techniques and therapies they prescribe.

In an epilogue, Weber discusses her personal journey alongside the many Mormons she knew while growing up in the ultra-Mormon community of Mesa, Arizona. Weber never converted to Mormonism, but was around it constantly, especially when attending school or socializing with Mormon friends.

Why is this book important? First, Weber provides us with a set of original phrases, like spiritual neoliberalism, serving as memes to guide readers through the mazes of Mormon life. Second, Weber makes a series of arguments, deeply informed by theories in media studies and gender and sexuality studies, about the interplay among actual Mormons and media characterizations of them. In the burgeoning field of Mormon Studies,
this is a fresh approach. Until now, historical and theological studies have dominated that field. Third, this book provides thoughtful, well-informed interpretations of numerous aspects of Mormonism. Although not intended as a primer on Mormonism, Weber makes numerous historical and theological excursions so that a reader unfamiliar with Mormonism can gain some understanding of the Mormon belief in the afterlife, the role of Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, the value of Temple rituals, and many other Mormon doctrines and practices.

As a professor of undergraduates in an American university, when I review a book for an academic journal, I always consider the book’s usefulness in the undergraduate classroom. In this case, I would be reluctant to unreservedly endorse this book for use in an undergraduate course. Weber’s prose style is sometimes difficult to follow. Unless one is familiar with gender theory already, this book would most likely leave undergraduates like those whom I have taught feeling lost at sea. However, undergraduates could appreciate some of the points made in this book with some coaching and prompting. For graduate students, however, this book is exactly right. It brings into play various theoretical models for understanding the complex world of media depictions of a significant and woefully misunderstood American religious tradition.