

The September Six and the Soul of Modern Mormonism: A Review Essay

Sara M. Patterson. *The September Six and the Struggle for the Soul of Mormonism*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2023. 374 pp. Hardback: \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1560854661.

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In my estimation, Sara M. Patterson's *The September Six and the Struggle for the Soul of Mormonism* will be regarded as one of the most important works of Latter-day Saint/Mormon scholarship of the twenty-first century. It will be so, I believe, not only because it is a masterful work of scholarship but because it bridges the development of this uniquely American religion from the turbulent twentieth century, when Mormonism emerged from its pioneer past to become a modern global religion, to the twenty-first century, where it has the promise of becoming a world religion. I believe that what the Church, its leaders, and its members can learn from the September Six experience could help determine whether it will indeed fulfill that promise.

I don't think anyone could ask for a more thorough or responsible study of this important hinge in the Church's history than what Patterson gives us. Having lived through the cultural period Patterson explores and excavates; having wrestled with, studied, and written about most of the core doctrinal and social issues the September Six scholars got in trouble for addressing; having personally known and been friends with most of those who constitute this infamous half-dozen; and having faced similar challenges with regard to my devotion to the Church and allegiance to its doctrine and authority, I have a keen awareness of what these individuals went through and what it has taken for Patterson to capture this period so well, both intellectually and compassionately. Her book is a model of modern scholarship.

Patterson centers her discussion of the September Six on the exploration of what she identifies as the Latter-day Saint “purity system” and, in doing so, devotes an introductory chapter to four categories of purity: history telling, doctrinal purity, familial purity, and bodily purity. The narratives of the September Six fall within one or more of these categories and include the three pillars of purity: “orthodoxy, conformity, and hierarchy.”

The strong emphasis on purity within the Latter-day Saint tradition has its roots in America’s Puritan past. I first became aware of that past when I studied early American literature in graduate school and then taught courses on it as a member of the UCLA English faculty. Understanding the minds and spirits of such Puritan writers as Cotton Mather, Anne Bradstreet, and Jonathan Edwards helped me see the Puritan streams and strains in my own religious culture, just as studying and teaching writers such as Hawthorne, Emerson, and Whitman helped me see how there could be both a rejection of Puritan excesses and extremes on one hand and an acceptance of and accommodation to its virtues on the other. The tension between these poles of purity is what led to the disciplining of the September Six and, I believe, continues in Mormon culture today, although, thankfully, with fewer extremes and hopefully less drama than it did thirty years ago.

What I mean is that in a conservative religious culture like Mormonism, there is an inevitable pull to the inside, to a place that is safe, controlled, and consistent, a place governed by modern prophets who receive truth and direction from heaven and who can therefore state categorically what is right and what is wrong. But in a growing, changing, and increasingly evolving educated, diverse, and modern church, especially one that has sought acceptance by and accommodation to the outside world, there will always be an inevitable attraction and counter-pull, one that tends to be perceived by those on the inside as rejecting and dangerous and by those looking from the outside as necessary and correcting. As with most polar opposites, the most mature place might

be somewhere in between, the place the *New York Times*' columnist David Brooks identifies as "the edge of the inside." That is the place where many progressive Latter-day Saints find themselves, or at least hope eventually to be and to serve.

Nearly every member of the September Six (all except Avraham Gileadi and Lynne Kanavel Whitesides) is a friend of mine (including Lavina Fielding Anderson and Michael Quinn, who passed away last year). The excommunication of each was painful to them and to those of us who knew and suffered with them through their ordeals. Altogether, what happened to them seems tragic—especially since none wished to be separated from the Church, aware that such action results in the loss to the faith community of not only that person but also of his or her family and, often tragically, of succeeding generations.

When I served as a bishop, I decided that I wasn't going to excommunicate anyone. I know there are times when that action is appropriate, but I hoped to do everything I could not to take so draconian a step. One of the realizations that confirms that conclusion is the consensus among many that such excommunications would not likely happen today. As Jana Riess states, "In many ways, the unforgivable crime of the September Six was to be out of sync with their time—'getting in front of the brethren,' as the saying goes."¹ In hindsight, each of the Six might have felt, as did Hamlet, "The time is out of joint—O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right!" (act 1, scene 5). From my understanding of what transpired, I don't believe that these Latter-day Saints were deliberately rebelling against or undercutting the Church but rather honestly searching for ways to expand and improve it.

The shadow that falls across the September Six—and the decades that preceded and followed it—is that of Apostle Boyd K. Packer. I speculate that without his zeal for purity, protecting, and punishing, and the disciplinary actions that ensued, this period would not have been

1. Jana Riess, "A Question of Authority," *Dialogue* 56, no. 3 (2023): 75.

as dark and dramatic as it turned out to be. Brother Packer reminds me of Nick Carraway, the narrator of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. After returning from what he experiences as the decadent world of New York to the safe haven of the Midwest, Carraway states, "When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever." Although I always sustained him, it was difficult not to conclude that Packer was on some kind of campaign to protect the Church from those he identified as a threat to it: "The dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement . . . and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals."²

As someone passionately involved in Mormon studies, I remember the interest with which I read Paul and Margaret Toscano's *Strangers in Paradox: Exploration in Mormon Theology* (Signature, 1990), Maxine Hanks's *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism* (Signature, 1992) and Michael Quinn's *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Signature, 1994). All explored aspects of Mormon history and theology that have been influential in broadening the scope of Mormon studies. The challenge scholars must continue to face is that there is little room for either speculative theology or scrupulous history in Mormon culture, although, as stated earlier, that is less so today than it was during the last decades of the twentieth century.

I have thought about my own experience with the Church's purity culture in light of the experience of the September Six and realize that at a different time and under different circumstances, I might well have experienced a similar fate to theirs. For example, as the editor of *Dialogue* in the early 1970s, I was warned by my former mentor and then vice president of BYU, Robert Thomas, that I would be disciplined ("face serious consequences") if I published Lester Bush's landmark article "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine." I told him that as an editorial

2. https://archive.org/details/coordinating_council_1993_boyd_k_packer/page/n3/mode/2up.

board we had prayed about what to do and felt publishing the article was the right decision but then decided to publish it with responses from three respected scholars (Hugh Nibley, Eugene England, and Gordon Thomasson) so as to give our readers as broad a context as possible to consider its implications for the Church.

I asked Thomas how he knew the brethren would disapprove of our publishing the article, and he responded, "From a source high up." I replied, "We are doing this in good faith. I assume if my decision proves to be wrong, they will forgive me." He replied, "They won't!" Later, I discovered from Bush that the likely person making the request was Elder Packer. According to Bush's record, he broached the possibility of withdrawing the article from *Dialogue*, but Packer, unaware of how seriously we wrestled with the dilemma, replied, "They would just publish it anyway." As I wrote later, "I was disturbed by the prospect that acting in what I considered a morally responsible way could cost me my membership, but I felt that it was a risk I would have to run."³ Fortunately, there were no adverse consequences from our decision and ultimately very positive results.⁴

Unrelated to this episode, several years later I was released as a member of the high council in the Los Angeles Stake for refusing to shave my moustache. (My reason was that I didn't want to validate a request that seemed to trivialize something as significant as obedience to authority, and, besides, my wife preferred that I not shave!) The stake president sent the regional representative to persuade me. We met in an office where I later served as bishop. On one wall was a picture of the Savior and on another paintings or photographs of all the prophets of the Restoration from Joseph Smith to Spencer W. Kimball. I asked the leader why it was necessary to shave my facial hair. He said, "To follow

3. Devery S. Anderson, "A History of Dialogue, Part Two: Struggle toward Maturity, 1971–1982," *Dialogue* 33, no. 2 (2000): 24n124.

4. See my article, "Blacks and the Priesthood: A Retrospective Perspective," forthcoming in *Dialogue*.

our leaders.” I pointed to the picture of Jesus who had a full beard and said, “That’s my leader.” He replied, “I mean modern prophets.” I pointed to the other wall and identified seven who had beards. He then said, “I mean the living prophet.” I then said, “When I was in the temple recently, not only were the Father and the Son shown as bearded, but the worker who helped me through the veil had a beard.” He replied, “Yeah, that really bothers me!” That ended the conversation and initiated my release.

Later, when serving as bishop of the Los Angeles First (singles) Ward in the late 1980s, I welcomed gays and lesbians into our fellowship and, with the support of the stake president (a different one from the moustache episode), held periodic meetings with lesbian and gay members to talk about their experiences in a supportive environment (“no church bashing and no gay bashing”). Later, I learned from a friend, a regional representative of the Church at that time, that he had been asked to end the meetings, which he refused to do. During this time, I had several conversations with Elder Marion D. Hanks of the Seventy about my work with LGBTQ people. Hanks, who was a friend, said, “Bob, on this issue I’m afraid you are ahead of the Church—and that’s a very uncomfortable place to be.” And so it has proven to be.

After serving a three-and-a-half-year mission in the Saint Petersburg Russia Mission and then the newly organized Baltic States Mission (1992–1996), my wife and I moved to the Santa Cruz, California, Stake where I was again called to the high council. It was during this time that the Church waged a vigorous campaign in support Proposition 8, which would have permanently forbidden same-sex marriage in California. Despite encouragement from ward and stake leaders that I campaign on behalf of the proposition, because of my ministry among LGBTQ Latter-day Saints, I felt I could not in good conscience support the proposition. I published an op-ed in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, not attacking the proposition or the Church’s position but rather emphasizing the Church’s long-held policy of leaving such matters up to the judgment of individual Saints. Because my stake president interpreted

this as “public and open opposition to the Church,” I was released from the high council, had my temple recommend rescinded, and was silenced for an entire year, which meant that I was forbidden from praying, speaking, teaching, or bearing my testimony.

I don’t recite this litany to claim any righteousness (or spirit of rebellion) but rather to emphasize that in each instance I was prayerfully and thoughtfully following my conscience. Each episode was painful because I didn’t want to be seen as being in opposition to the Church or its leaders. I have a deep and abiding testimony of the Restoration. I have gladly raised my hand to support the leaders of the Church for seventy-eight years since I joined the Church as a ten-year-old boy. I have tried, in the words of Robert Bolt’s Sir Thomas More (in *A Man for All Seasons*) to serve God “wittily [i.e., in the archaic meaning ‘intelligently’] in the tangle of [my] mind.” I admit that my mind is at times tangled as I go about trying to understand who I am as a latter-day disciple of Jesus Christ and how I can best serve God and others in such a tangled world, but nevertheless this is how I see my discipleship.

Latter-day Saint theology includes two central, fundamental, yet potentially conflicting principles that are at the heart of faithfulness: prophets are entrusted with the responsibility of receiving revelation for themselves and for the Church, and individuals are responsible for receiving revelation for themselves and for their spiritual jurisdictions (families and ecclesiastical callings). In the best circumstances, these two revelatory responsibilities are in harmony, but there are times when they are not, when individuals experience a tension between being obedient to ecclesiastical authority or their own inner spiritual conviction. Some prophets acknowledge this conflict. For example, Joseph Smith said the following in regard to a brother called in for discipline:

I never thought it was right to call up a man and try him because he erred in doctrine, it looks too much like Methodism and not like Latter day Saintism. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be kicked out of their church. I want the liberty of believing as I please, it

feels so good not to be trammelled. It dont [sic] prove that a man is not a good man, because he errs in doctrine.⁵

And Brigham Young stated:

What a pity it would be, if we were led by one man to utter destruction! Are you afraid of this? I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually.⁶

In her conclusion, “Thirty Years Later,” Patterson speaks about the controversial subjects that surrounded the Latter-day Saint world in the early 1990s, including issues relating to race, feminism, history, sexual orientation and gender identity, and so forth. She also catalogues some examples of progress that have been made following that period, including the Church publishing the Gospel Topics essays, changing some policies relating to LGBTQ issues, and being more open and flexible regarding women’s issues. Nevertheless, she argues that the purity system is still very much alive in the Church, especially at BYU and other educational programs and institutions under the direction of the Church Educational System. It is also evident in congregations where the protectors of purity are seemingly ever vigilant.

Patterson does not acknowledge the fact that there are counter-vailing purity systems in our culture, including in Mormon culture.

5. Discourse, April 8, 1843, as reported by William Clayton—B, p. 2, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed February 2, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper>.

6. *Journal of Discourses*, 9:150.

That is, there are tests of loyalty and allegiance whether one moves toward or away from the center (i.e., moves closer to or away from orthodoxy). Each side tends to characterize and label (and have the impulse to disfellowship) those who do not adhere closely to what it sees as true and right. Thus, it is possible for those who see the world as complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical to be suspected and judged as wanting by both purity positions. That can be lonely territory!

Patterson ends her study on a positive note:

But at the local and communal level, the church is changing, prodded in part by online communities and connections. Some people are leaving the pews because of the church's policies about LGBTQ identity and gender expectations that are rooted in a patriarchal system. Others are staying in the pews but demanding a more inclusive vision of the Restoration. At that level of the laity, people are embracing their sense of personal revelation, driven by the Spirit toward a more egalitarian community. At that level, the September Six and their legacy continue on, shaping people's memory of individuals willing to stand up to the institution in the struggle for the soul of Mormonism.⁷

In spite of Patterson's optimism, there are signs that serious conflicts remain over issues relating to sexual orientation, gender identity, race, and women's roles as well as potential divisions over some emotionally charged social and political issues. In spite of what Jana Riess lists as progress since the September Six excommunications, her observation that "the question of authority lies at the heart of all these conflicts, just as it did in 1993,"⁸ should be a flag of caution to those who write and speak about them.

7. Patterson, *September Six*, 314.

8. Riess, "A Question of Authority," 70.

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