
Reviewed by Stephen T. Betts

Frederick Jackson Turner first introduced his now famous “Frontier Thesis” at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition (World’s Fair) in 1893. The Frontier Thesis theorized the “western frontier [as] a type of factory where people could be transformed into Americans, and where society could be made both free and democratic” (140). The civilization/frontier binary critical to this formulation was particularly salient in 1893 for Mormons. Despite embodying the “Americanness” associated with subjugating the frontier, Mormons were denied representation at the fair’s Parliament of Religions because of their polygamy (despite the 1890 Manifesto). This snub notwithstanding, the fair did feature a successful “Utah Day” in which Utahns, “particularly Mormons, were presented as hardworking, cultured, and progressive Americans—in line with Turner’s Frontier Thesis” (162).

In *Frontier Religion*, Konden Smith Hansen persuasively argues that mythologies of the frontier—including and especially Turner’s—framed Mormon and Protestant interreligious conflict as well as each group’s respective negotiation of the place of religion vis-à-vis the state. Smith Hansen innovatively interprets the Utah War, the “antipolygamy crusades,” Mormon inclusion and exclusion at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, and the Reed Smoot hearings as continuous evidence for the centrality of such frontier mythologies to Mormon Americanization. More importantly, for Smith Hansen, Mormonism’s journey from kingdom to denomination serves as a limit case for understanding broader fin de siècle American contestations of “the secular and the religious, manliness and womanhood, [and] the private and public” (232).

For Smith Hansen, the logic of beginning the story with the Utah War is to highlight the pre-Turnerian frontier mythos that characterized initial Mormon-Protestant tensions, namely, their “competing visions of the frontier as it related to the kingdom [of God]” (3). While Mormons, perhaps the consummate frontier settlers, saw the role of their theocratic frontier...
kingdom as the “redeemer of the nation” (84–85). Protestant America still viewed itself as the “redeemer nation” (84–85). Mormonism’s practice of polygamy provided the opportunity for the Protestant “establishment” to narrate Mormons as an ideological foil of “the national narrative . . . [that viewed itself as] fulfilling Christ’s kingdom, a narrative in which the white-Protestant influence appeared unchallenged, natural, and providential” (86).

After decades of legislative “warfare” culminating in 1890 with the Mormons’ formal renunciation of polygamy, the 1893 World’s Fair served as a useful symbolic departure for the millenarianism of both sides. Tectonic shifts in industry, urbanization, the rise of the scientific study of history (embodied in Turner’s Frontier Thesis) and the scientific study of religion (illustrated by the Parliament of Religions) indexed a major change in the construction of American identities. The new Americanness drew strength from a “new myth of progress rooted in modernity and its corollaries” (131) contextualized over against the now closed frontier. Despite the Mormons’ rejection from the Parliament of Religions, the Frontier Thesis offered the possibility that “Mormon barbarism, including polygamy, was potentially part of this past era—even a relic of the frontier” (162).

The success of Mormon frontier Americanization was tested for a final time (or perhaps, accomplished), argues Smith Hansen, in the Reed Smoot hearings. Despite quietly continuing to solemnize polygamous marriages after 1890, Mormons also embraced a new “postfrontier progressive impulse,” a romanticized “masculine-progressive nationalist vision of [America]” championed especially by Theodore Roosevelt and his “strenuous living” ethos (216). This nostalgic gendering of the frontier “was associated with . . . relegating the feminine as private (religion, emotion, gentleness), and the masculine as public (aggression, reason, roughness),” thus reinforcing both the progressive ideal of social action and the privatization of religion (222). In the Mormons and their pioneer heritage, Roosevelt saw kindred spirits (and votes), and lent his considerable support to Smoot. Importantly, the Smoot hearings resulted not only in the formal reconfiguration of Mormonism’s relationship with the state, but a fundamental change in the Mormon habitus itself. “[T]he Progressive Era and the noteworthy events during this era taught Mormons how to think like Americans” (242).

The scope of Konden Smith Hansen’s Frontier Religion is ambitious. Indeed, any of the three major elements of this book (the kingdom of God and the frontier; secular modernity, religion, and the frontier; and the Progressive movement, religion, and the postfrontier) could fill its own volume. However, if ambitious, Smith Hansen dexterously navigates issues ranging from religious liberty and secularization to millenarianism and the popular reception of the Frontier Thesis, all while weaving these themes through an innovative treatment of Mormon history in its national context.
Frontier Religion is a strong, original addition not only to the literatures of late nineteenth-century Mormon history and its post-1890 transition period, but to broader religious studies-based meditations on the place of religion in frontier and postfrontier American governance. Highly recommended.

STEPHEN T. BETTS is a doctoral student in American religious history in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia.