Julie K. Allen: *Danish but Not Lutheran. The Impact of Mormonism on Danish Cultural Identity, 1850–1920*

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This book is a case study of an unacknowledged cultural equation disrupted by history. What happens when a hitherto unquestioned identity is shown to be contingent? Is America necessarily white, or power necessarily male? Of course not, but the struggle to disentangle such blind equations is rocky. So it was with the effort to define modern Danish identity without default Lutheranism. Mormons, according to Julie K. Allen, Professor of Comparative Arts and Letters at Brigham Young University, were the entering wedge that would not let the lazy conflation of nation and church stand. Mormonism exposed fissures already growing in Danish society and intensified the long simmering question of whether religion was negotiable. This book is not only a fascinating case study but an informative historical backdrop for debates today about the place of minorities in a free society, especially those who seem threatening to the host. With Mormons in the nineteenth century and Muslims today (who compose about five percent of the nation’s population), Denmark continues to be a hotspot for sorting out the place of minority religions.

This book speaks especially to two audiences. For contemporary Danes, Allen unfurls the fascinating presence and past of Mormons in Denmark. Denmark has long since cea-
sed to worry about Mormons, a relatively stable and prosperous population of around five thousand over the last century. But in the 1850s and 1860s and beyond, Mormons were the group whose doctrines and practices aroused severe anxieties about threats to Danish culture. For American descendants of Danish immigrants, especially Mormons, Allen wants to add to vague ethnic pride knowledge of the complex lives and choices of their ancestors. Becoming a Mormon in the 1850s and after was a fraught existential choice that could split families, change destinies, and scramble everything one ever thought was certain. The book’s story should resonate for millions of Mormons and Danes, and for anyone puzzled about how to build a just, free, and plural society.

When missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (“Mormon” is a nickname) arrived in Denmark in 1850, they stepped into a bubbling social cauldron. The June Constitution of 1849 extended the franchise to Danish men and capped many long processes of social liberalization. Mormonism triggered preexisting questions about freedom of worship and Danish identity. Using her solid historiographical skills, Allen shows the complicated debates about the state church. Rural Lutheran pastors had long been agents of the state, presiding at the chokepoints of life—birth, confirmation, marriage, death—as record-keepers and bureaucrats. To opt out of the church would be to lose not only social privileges but even one’s name and identity. Before Mormons, there had been religious minorities—Afro-Danes, Roman Catholics, Jews, and Calvinists—but a variety of methods defused their threat. At first, for instance, Catholic and Reformed worship were possible only at foreign embassies, essentially removed from Danish soil. An 1842 ordinance allowed Baptists to live in Denmark—as long as they baptized their children as Lutherans! This almost comical measure, which obviously contradicted the Baptist tenet of adult (mindful) baptism, was opposed by more liberally minded clergy as well as Queen Caroline Amalie, but shows how hard it was to disentangle Danishness from membership in the Folkekirke.

We meet a number of fascinating figures, known and less well known, in Allen’s account. The driving force behind the June Constitution was Ditlev Gothard Monrad (1811–1887), a Lutheran bishop and politician who was also a civic rather than ethnic nationalist, lover of freedom, and early reader of Tom Paine. Of course we meet N. F. S. Grundtvig, a key architect of modern Danish identity, thanks to his tireless work as scholar, poet, educator, philosopher, theologian, and cultural broker. Grundtvig saw Christianity as benefiting the here and now and offering a truth freed from historical foundations. As a philologist, he recognized the higher criticism’s threats to traditional biblical authority. As a Danish patriot, he had a fierce dislike of Germany, the conquering menace to the south, even though he owed much of his vision of language and culture to German thinkers such as J. G. Herder. Like Monrad, Grundtvig insisted on freedom of conscience: one could be a Dane without baptism, confirmation, or marriage in the state church. Monrad and Grundtvig are key hinge figures in Denmark’s journey from constitutional monarchy to secular modernity. Prescient critics worried that their call for freedom of religion could lead to freedom from religion—a worry that a look at contemporary Denmark confirms! Grundtvig believed in the right of civil marriage, and the very first civil marriage in Danish history occurred in 1851, to two Mormons. (Wherever marriage is tested, you always find Mormons present.)
Two of the book’s most fascinating figures, and chief among its discoveries, feature in chapter 2 on how elites received Mormonism in its first two decades in Denmark. Peter C. Kierkegaard, older brother to his more famous brother Søren, was a Lutheran bishop and theologian, and like his brother, a fearsome debater and polemicist. As one who refused to baptize Danish children as Lutherans, Kierkegaard was close to Grundtvig, but he was not a liberal when it came to Mormons. His treatise, *About and Against Mormonism* [*Om og mod Mormonismen*] (1855), is a sustained criticism of the movement that tackles its doctrines large and small. Kierkegaard thought, for instance, that the Mormon claim of a great apostasy (the historical loss of the true church on Earth) was tantamount to denying Christ’s divinity since a divine Christ would have assured the endurance of his church. Allen summarizes Kierkegaard’s central finding: “the Mormon brand of Christianity was, by definition, un-Christian—and since Denmark legally defined itself as a Christian state, un-Danish as well” (96). Mormonism has always stirred about deep questions about what counts as Christian.

Allen orchestrates a wonderful counterpoint with Søren Kierkegaard’s *Attack on Christendom* from the same year. Søren was ferociously critical of the institutional church: Christendom (the ecclesiastical apparatus) had destroyed Christianity (the subjective truth). You cannot not be a Christian in Denmark, even if you are infidel: the church deprived you of the very thing that makes a Christian—the choice to dive into the icy waters of faith. Automatic Christianity was no Christianity at all. Unlike his brother, from whom he had been estranged for years, Søren made only glancing comments on Mormonism, and it is doubtful that they communicated on this matter in any way but “indirectly.” Søren Kierkegaard is, like Friedrich Nietzsche, a thinker often eagerly read by Mormon intellectuals as a fellow-traveler critic of institutional Christianity. (As with Nietzsche, the fit is not exact!) Allen has richly complicated the Kierkegaard family tree.

The other major find in chapter 2 is Elise Stampe, a baroness, author, and Danish nationalist deeply connected through personal and family ties with the intellectual elite. Stampe wrote an unpublished 400-page treatise on Mormonism. She had a close female friend who had converted to Mormonism and died suddenly (a death Grundtvig found merciful on God’s part!). Stampe’s manuscript mixes critique and sympathy for Mormonism, and perhaps remained unpublished for the second of those reasons. She practiced a delicate hermeneutics which led her to acknowledge the beauty in other religions regardless of source. Stampe’s reading seems unusual and interesting, and worthy of being translated into English.

In addition to social history and intellectual history, Allen uses methods from cultural studies. Allen is always keenly aware of the negotiations people have to make. Around three hundred Danes were baptized into the Church in 1850, and by 1855 over two thousand had joined the Church. Allen adds wrinkles to the standard account that converts came from the already marginalized within Danish society. Becoming Mormon in Denmark often increased marginality—even productively so. The first Mormons in Denmark, with rare exceptions, were Danes rather than Americans (as the Mormon missionary system has typically worked up to this day) and many missionaries made repeat trips between Denmark and Utah. Danish missionaries were uniquely mobile, both internationally and within Denmark, during a time of slow and rare travel. The intense opposition, both popu-
lar and elite, that Mormons faced in the 1850s and 1860s looks like a class carnival. The Mormon insistence on a lay ministry was a particular sticking point. Mormon missionaries were enthusiastic rather than educated, craftspeople or farmers who knew not a word of Latin and reveled in their lack of learning as proof of God’s power to make weak things strong. Peter Kierkegaard even criticized lay missionaries for quoting scripture by heart instead of reading from the Bible! Mormons had the nerve to send missionaries, not as the Danes did to Africa and other putatively non-Christian regions, but to Protestant Europe. Doing so accorded with the Mormon doctrine of the apostasy but rankled self-respecting Danish Christians.

Mormon converts also had to cope with the identity demands of moving to America. Danish emigration started later than other Scandinavian countries, but between 1850 and 1920 three hundred thousand out of a total of two million Danes emigrated, overwhelmingly to the United States. Half of all the emigrants in the 1850s and 1860s were Mormons, who were thus again early bellwethers of wider social trends in Denmark. Denmark, in turn, was important in nineteenth-century Mormonism: Danish was the second language after English into which the Book of Mormon was translated and probably the second most commonly spoken language in nineteenth-century Utah. Allen’s chapter 4 is particularly acute in exposing the complex, sometimes excruciating identity work of Danish Mormons. Here again, she has a fresh archive of documents and characters filled with poignant vignettes. (Among Allen’s many archival gifts are the fascinating images that adorn the book.) Many converts gave up everything—marriage, family, reputation, and jobs. Other (poor) converts gave up relatively little, but then had to suspend their new lives in Utah to return as missionaries. I was particularly taken by Frederik Ferdinand Samuelsen, a Mormon socialist in the Danish Parliament, who, driven by political scandal, finally emigrated to Utah in 1919 with a major loss in status and income, where he eventually died in obscurity. Samuelsen, an exceptional case, proves the rule that emigration improved the lot of the lower class and complicated that of the middle.

Allen touches on novels, treatises, paintings, popular ballads, newspapers, diaries, film, and other media throughout, and especially in chapter 3 on the representation of Mormons in popular culture. Allen’s report: fifty shades of negative. Polygamy, of course, was a flashpoint, especially from the 1870s on. It was a scandalous, exotic, pedagogically salacious mirror for changing mores in Denmark. The fact that female converts slightly outnumbered males also fueled the suspicion that Mormons were on the hunt for wives. Mormons were often depicted as pimps and recruiters for the white slave trade. They could be frightening but also farcical, freakish, and funny. Summer Voyage 1911 [Sommerrejsen 1911], a stage review, was sensational and satirical, with over a dozen songs, and sounds like a forerunner of the Broadway musical The Book of Mormon exactly one hundred years later. Mormons also made good villains and comic figures in Danish silent film, which in the 1910s was the second largest film industry in the world. Mormonism provided ready material for its hallmark genre of erotic melodrama. The first cinematic depiction of Mormon villains was Danish (literary depictions, of course, were found through the late nineteenth century in many countries). Allen notes that gender roles—the freedom of women to choose their lives—were often a subtext. Theology was often secondary to the threat Mor-
mons posed to the bourgeois order along lines of class, gender, and place, with the lure of America and their Zion in the west.

I have only a few quibbles with the book. Poor Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss aristocrat and comparative linguist, is misunderstood as a defender of the oppressed (11). (Allen is in good company in not getting him right! 1) There are some repetitions and redundancies that could have used a good edit; really, any reader who has made it to p. 228 and still needs to be told that polygamy gave Mormons international notoriety doesn't deserve the help. Finally, I wondered if the cultural-studies notion of “identity,” however much it celebrates contingency and negotiation, couldn't be a straitjacket in some contexts. In chapter 4 especially, as Allen looked for notions of Danishness or Americanness in her wonderful close-ups on emigrants’ lives, the real discovery seemed to be neither/nor. I suspect identity is a luxury good that belongs to a more inward-looking psychology-heavy society like ours, and thus not so well suited for people who had so many more urgent matters on their minds.

On a personal note, this book was of great interest to me. Caroline Mortensen, née Pedersdatter, my grandfather’s grandmother, was born on the island of Møn in 1850, and as a child emigrated to the United States after her parents joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1856 she sailed from Copenhagen to Liverpool and from there to New York, where she took a train to its end in Iowa City, Iowa. She survived the harrowing trek across the plains in the disastrous Martin handcart company and at age 17 married Thomas Durham, an English convert twenty-two years her senior, as wife number three. They had ten children together in the parched desert of southwestern Utah, surely as different a landscape as could be imagined from her childhood. She died in 1915, and has many distinguished descendants. A different facet of Danish-American emigration is found in my wife’s non-Mormon paternal grandparents, who emigrated from the island of Fyn to Minnesota in the 1870s. That Danishness, Americanness and Mormonness are now happily tied together in my family when their relation was once so toxic makes Allen’s ultimate point: to learn from history how to have a happy ending when cultures clash.

1. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/embarrassing-ourselves/#!