

Fall 12-20-2012

# Bad Religion: How Ex-Mormon Fiction Reinforces Normative Views of American Religion

Ilani S. Blanke  
*Georgia State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs\\_theses](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Blanke, Ilani S., "Bad Religion: How Ex-Mormon Fiction Reinforces Normative Views of American Religion." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2012.  
[https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs\\_theses/38](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses/38)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

BAD RELIGION:  
HOW EX-MORMON FICTION REINFORCES NORMATIVE VIEWS OF AMERICAN RELIGION

by

ILANI BLANKE

Under the Direction of Dr. Isaac Weiner

ABSTRACT

This project examines recent fiction by ex-Mormon authors and highlights how these novels reinforce an American ideal of “good religion.” These texts reveal the boundaries of American religious freedom by illustrating examples of “bad religion” and providing favorable alternatives. The paper looks at scholarship on 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Mormon literature, which provides a foundation for the more modern literature at hand. Through the recent narratives, authors point to an abstract concept of benign, acceptable religion, marking as harmful that which does not share these key characteristics. While these fictional sects appear differently in each work, they comment on similar themes, such as the threat of rigid authority structures and figures, community isolation and insulation, coercive proselytizing and manipulation, and an emphasis on escaping the sect. These themes highlight the existence of a particular brand of American “good religion,” which is antithetical to such groups illustrated in these texts.

INDEX WORDS: Ex-Mormon, Religious tolerance, American religion, Anti-Mormon, Anti-Catholic

BAD RELIGION:  
HOW EX-MORMON FICTION REINFORCES NORMATIVE VIEWS OF AMERICAN RELIGION

by

ILANI BLANKE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

Copyright by  
Ilani Silver Blanke  
2012

BAD RELIGION:

HOW EX-MORMON FICTION REINFORCES NORMATIVE VIEWS OF AMERICAN RELIGION

by

ILANI BLANKE

Committee Chair: Isaac Weiner

Committee: Kathryn McClymond  
Molly Bassett

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2012

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like express my gratitude for my committee members, Drs. Isaac Weiner, Kathryn McClymond, and Molly Bassett. Their time and guidance throughout this process helped me to significantly refine this project. I am particularly grateful for Dr. Weiner's continued support and direction of my work over the past two years. His consideration of and involvement in my thesis project was integral to my success in the Religious Studies program.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 GOOD V. BAD RELIGION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3 REVIEW OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4 FICTION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction to Novels .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.2 Novel Synopses.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4.3 Theme: Threat of Rigid Authority Structures .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>4.4 Theme: Isolation &amp; Insularity.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4.5 Theme: Proselytizing &amp; Manipulation .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4.6 Theme: Escape from the Group.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>5 CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>44</b>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Even after seven days in the van, my partner and I were still learning about America. The Church's founders had called the place "Terrestria," refusing at first to vote in its elections, supply troops for its armies, or recognize its currency, and though they capitulated in 1913 in a bid to escape imprisonment, Bluff had remained a world apart.*

*Mission to America, Kirn<sup>1</sup>*

In modern American society, many seem to take for granted a type of religious tolerance that assumes equality among religious groups. Recent polls surveying Americans' attitudes toward religions other than their own have been used to argue that there is a laudable degree of religious tolerance throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars link the increased cultural and religious diversity of the past two centuries to a heightened pluralism in the U.S. and present an image of an accommodating and tolerant America.<sup>3</sup> In comparing modern attitudes toward religious diversity in America to those held 150 (or even 50) years ago, it is apparent that Americans are now more accepting of religious cultures distinct from their own. To consider recorded abuses against various non-Protestant groups and individuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, one notes a contrast with today's more pluralistic culture. For example, the expression of anti-Mormon sentiment – and violent acts that stemmed from it – that was characteristic of the 1850s seems to have subsided significantly. Citing the aforementioned surveys, one can reasonably argue that Americans today generally regard the LDS Church much more favorably than did previous generations. Similarly, it would be easy to show that anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic publications that were commonplace in the 19<sup>th</sup> century do not exist to the same degree in contemporary America.



Such examples suggest that the U.S. has made beneficial strides in terms of fostering a more accepting and religiously harmonious society.

Nevertheless, while American religious tolerance seems much more pervasive now than in previous eras, it appears that religious intolerance remains, though its form of expression and the context in which it is situated have changed. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, a common plot in stories about traveling members of the LDS Church involved the male missionary who sought to steal away unsuspecting Southern women and coercively convert them to Mormonism.<sup>4</sup> Today, fiction classified as “anti-Mormon” is more nuanced and involves veiled narratives that suggest what good and benign religious practice looks like by contrasting it with destructive and dangerous religious practice. In terms of examining modern attitudes toward American religious tolerance, these novels make normative claims about “good” and “bad religion” and are perhaps not as far removed from 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-religion rhetoric as they initially seem. By couching criticisms and examples of dangerous religion in fictional narratives, an author can construct (and ultimately destroy) a sect comprised of key characteristics of “bad religion,” which serves as a straw man against the “good religion” that wins out.<sup>5</sup> The texts I examine in this essay function in this way, though ostensibly they are just fictional accounts of protagonists involved in a made-up religious sect.

Over the past two decades, self-described ex-Mormons have written fictional texts that implicitly comment on what acceptable American religion should look like, and they expose the limits of American religious tolerance. Through harrowing tales of dehumanizing missionary work, adolescent woe over deviant religious practices, and descriptions of depraved clergy members, these authors construct images of religion that they condemn as unacceptable and ultimately detrimental to participants. The novels considered here, *Mission to America*, *Converting Kate*, and *Father of Lies*, present disparate narratives, though each appears to build on a perception of what “bad religion” looks like. In this paper, I will explore examples of “bad religion” and the anxiety it arouses. These texts function primarily by construct-

ing specific images and vignettes of how “bad religion” often appears. Such images and the authors’ commentaries on them reveal the boundaries of American religious tolerance. The absence of autonomy and free will plays a central role in negative depictions of religious groups, for example, highlighting characteristics of a religion that pose a threat to the ideal of individualism in American society. By contrast, the reader learns how “good religion” should function, and the narratives advocate for this alternative. “Bad religion” functions as a foil against which characteristics of “good religion” can be implicitly defined and as a model to demarcate at what point a group is not covered by the good will of religious tolerance in America. I have isolated particular themes that run through each novel, in order to pinpoint examples of how religions are classified as positive or negative. The authors depict their fictional sects a bit differently, but they all comment on similar issues, such as the threat of rigid authority structures, community isolation and insulation, coercive proselytizing and manipulation, and an emphasis on escaping the sect. These underlying themes reinforce the idea that the abstract notion of “good” religion is antithetical to the groups and behavior depicted in the text.

I chose to examine these three novels (written between 1998 and 2007) because this perspective of ex-Mormons writing about “fringe” religions is a new and unique lens that can illuminate how former insiders to this group view the LDS Church, particularly in terms of how they appraise its negative characteristics. These novels point to specific anxieties about different types of religion and, at times, function in similar ways as earlier examples of anti-Mormon (and anti-Catholic) literature. In the past, as I will discuss shortly, writers fabricated accounts about being forced into a particular religious group, often with harmful or violent consequences. These recent novels, penned by individuals who spent much of their lives in the LDS Church, offer much different stories. While the authors write from the unique perspective of being formerly affiliated with the LDS Church, the criticisms couched in the narratives are not restricted to Mormonism. Instead, each author creates a fictional sect to provide the cultural context for the characters, a culture against which their protagonists rebel. Through these varied

accounts, the narrators condemn the characteristics of these sects that render them dangerous to members as well as incompatible with American society.

## 2 GOOD V. BAD RELIGION

By presenting unsettling – and purposefully shocking – depictions of their fictional religious universes, these ex-Mormon authors define the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” American religion. In his essay “Snakes Alive,” religious studies scholar Robert Orsi considers this dichotomy and how it functions, implicitly criticizing how the religious studies academy has embraced and used it in their own research and scholarship. He contends that scholars often approach their work in such a way that appraises religious groups in normative terms, differentiating between “good” and “bad” religious expression, which infuses theory with problematic assessments. He posits that “a normative vision of a certain kind of moderate liberal Protestantism was embedded in analytical tools of religious studies and represents itself as theory.”<sup>6</sup> While Orsi’s particular focus here is on the role of religious scholar and not on examining fiction – as mine is – this process of delineating “good” from “bad religion” is key to understanding how these novels function. He highlights the notion of “compulsive attraction of otherness,” which he describes as “otherness that cannot [be bridged] and that offers only the alternatives of surrender or repulsion.”<sup>7</sup> Looking at these recent ex-Mormon works, we can glean that the respective narrators seek to dissuade the reader from sympathizing with such sects, instead creating fictional worlds that are at times unsettling, corrupt, and dysfunctional. Earlier “anti literature” relied on accounts that were intended to be similarly repellant to readers, thereby defining “good religion” by presenting examples of characteristically “bad religion.”<sup>8</sup> The more recent novels, however, are noteworthy in that the authors were previously affiliated with a religious group historically classified as “bad.” While the fictional groups they describe might be understood as analogous to the LDS church, they appear to comment on something broader than their own former religious affiliations. Through these narratives, the authors point to

an abstract concept of benign, acceptable religion, marking as harmful that which does not share these key characteristics.

Robert Orsi devotes much of his essay to “the mother of all religious dichotomies – good and bad religion.”<sup>9</sup> He remarks on the “evolutionary model” of religion that is used by some scholars, noting that “religions described as more modern” are normatively viewed as superior to more “primitive” expressions of religion.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, “good” religion is often synonymous with “civilized” religion, which Orsi argues “has always been included in American nomenclature for particular forms of acceptable religious belief, practice, and emotion.”<sup>11</sup> The novels considered here present examples of religion that are in direct opposition to civilized modern religions, and in the case of *Converting Kate*, the author provides a specific, favorable alternative. Clearly, the role of the scholar differs greatly from that of the novel author in that the scholar pursues a degree of objectivity and veracity about her subject, while the author does not necessarily require either. However, even though a novel reader does not expect academic treatment of the subject presented in fictional form, this does not preclude the novel from having the effect of defining a similar religious dichotomy. Though authorial intent of these two writer types differ – as do their audiences – the effect of marginalizing a certain brand of religion or religious expression can be achieved by both.

In a discussion that speaks to the themes I will explore in this paper, Orsi describes the characteristics of “true religion,” positing that it is “rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated and agreeable to democracy, monotheistic, emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter.”<sup>12</sup> While such a laundry list of qualities has historically been used to undermine groups such as Catholics and Mormons as problematically religious, the same can be achieved with smaller, less visible groups, as well as with these fictionalized groups. Perhaps due to their own discrete experiences within the LDS Church, these authors echo anxieties expressed in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, concerning religious cultures

that challenge what is deemed acceptable practice and expression. It is important to note, as Orsi does in his essay, that this conception of “good religion” has evolved over the years, contingent on political, social, and economic factors.

### 3 REVIEW OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY LITERATURE

“Anti literature” transmits anxieties about a variety of religious groups, and these recent novels include similar themes as their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, a body of literature that will shed some light on how these recent works function. The scholarship on 19<sup>th</sup> century “anti literature” considered here provides a historical foundation and frames how recent ex-Mormon fiction can function; both bodies of literature isolate characteristics deemed unfavorable and dangerous within a particular religious group. Religious studies scholars, such as Terryl Givens and Patrick Mason have highlighted the 1850s as a time when anti-Mormonism was particularly rife in the U.S., and they present examples of propaganda in the form of exaggerated apostate narratives and sensationalist news stories. Much of this early literature was ostensibly anti-Mormon, though it exists within the broader scope of presentations of “bad religion.” Similarly, while the authors of the three recent novels are admittedly ex-Mormons, the depictions of the fictional sects do not indict only Mormonism but any religion that can be characterized as archetypally bad.

One of the prevailing tropes in early anti-Mormon literature is the depiction of Mormons as intimidating people, threatening to outsiders and intent on capturing and converting non-Mormons. Such depictions occur in anti-Catholic literature as well, and these characterizations are clearly intended to promote anxiety and apprehension about these cultures. Such characterizations are present in the three recent novels, in which protagonists are pressured and intimidated by other members of the sect. In his text *The Viper on the Hearth*, Terryl Givens, a Mormon studies scholar, discusses patterns in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature that contributed to anti-Mormon persecution. He discusses characteristics attributed to “the

Mormon villain,” which often include intimidation to outsiders, sexual deviance, and other “dangerous” behavior.<sup>13</sup> He looks at examples of both fiction and memoirs that were characteristic of the “moral crusades” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which often issued anti-Mormon polemics. He explains, “Anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon writers more commonly – but spuriously – claimed the genre of ‘memoirs.’”<sup>14</sup> These accounts, such as *The Fate of Madam La Tour* – a seemingly non-fictional narrative of a woman’s experiences with Mormons in the west – often purported to be written by people who had lived in Mormon communities in Utah and had witnessed a variety of crimes and atrocities committed by Mormons.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to fabricated exposés, there is a significant body of anti-Mormon fiction published around the same time, which typically includes depictions of forced polygamy and captivity narratives. Among the texts Givens analyzes is John Russell’s *The Mormoness; or the Trials of Mary Maverick*, described by the author as “a narrative of real events” about a “good gentile” man, James Maverick, who is initially virulently anti-Mormon but is eventually indoctrinated into the religion.<sup>16</sup> Givens argues that while this text outwardly promotes religious tolerance and condemns anti-Mormon violence, it also depicts the lure of Mormonism as “an encroaching menace that spiritually devours James” and his family.<sup>17</sup> Givens highlights the pervasive “anxiety of seduction” theme that is evident in many of these 19<sup>th</sup> century accounts.<sup>18</sup> He contends that many literary accounts at this time depicted Mormons as preying upon weak-willed people and emphasizing a lack of free will in conversion to Mormonism; he highlights the notion of falling into the “snare” of Mormonism.<sup>19</sup> We find examples of this theme in these recent novels, wherein the narrators describe members of the fictional sects as particularly manipulative and coercive.

In addition to the unfavorable depictions of Mormons discussed by Givens, narratives emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, referred to as “atrocities tales,” which were purportedly written by former insiders of a particular sect, apparently to reveal closely guarded secrets as well as to expose corruption and criminal activity.<sup>20</sup> More often than not, these accounts were fabricated. As with other “anti literature,” they

are not limited to ex-Mormon accounts but include narratives of several religious groups. Historian David Brion Davis conducted a study in 1960 that examined non-Protestant and fringe religious groups and their perceived degrees of subversion.<sup>21</sup> Davis argues that due to these religious groups' threat to American "ideals or a way of life," counter-subversive movements began to appear.<sup>22</sup> Davis comments on the reaction to several groups; he argues that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, groups such as the Catholics, the Mormons, and the Masons "merg[ed] into one stereotype," a culture that was antithetical to American ideals.<sup>23</sup> He describes the anxiety that emanated from Americans' mistrust of societies that were secretive or less than forthcoming with information regarding the group. Davis contends that "secret societies are particularly dangerous," and that those outside of such societies saw a need for "freedom of public inquiry."<sup>24</sup> This fear of the unknown and of groups that emphasize confidentiality and secrecy pervades both 19<sup>th</sup> century and modern literature. Generally, it seems that secrecy of an organization is often conflated with an assumption that something dangerous is intentionally hidden from public view.

Davis provides some examples of jarring representations of certain religious groups: "Masons disemboweled or slit the throats of their victims; Catholics cut unborn infants from their mothers' wombs and threw them to the dogs before their parents' eyes; Mormons raped and lashed recalcitrant women, or seared their mouths with red-hot irons."<sup>25</sup> Self-described memoirs by apostates were often more compelling to readers than literature written by outsiders, perhaps in part because of the perceived authority of their experiences. Davis points to apostate narratives (both legitimate and fabricated) from these three aforementioned groups, and argues that the apostate confessional narrative was particularly salient for those he refers to as the "nativists," Americans living in the mid-1800s characterized by a reluctance to cultural change and an "abstract nationalism" from which a self-identity was loosely forged.<sup>26</sup> The confessional narrative indicated first-hand experience with threatening societies, which was preferable to a work of heavy-handed fiction or diatribe written by an outsider. He explains, "Men who had been associated in some way with un-American conspiracies were not only capable of

spectacular confessions of guilt, but were best equipped to expose the insidious work of supposedly harmless organizations.”<sup>27</sup> For those who had once been affiliated with Masonry, Mormonism, or Catholicism, there appeared an audience interested in salacious tales of corruption, captivity, and sexual deviance, whether or not the tales were truthful. Apostate accounts served to validate fears Americans had regarding these “secret societies” and to reinforce hyperbolic perceptions of these religious groups. Such accounts exacerbated negative perceptions of such groups among 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans, Davis contends, with the outcome of “the nativist [finding] unity and meaning by conspiring against imaginary conspiracies.”<sup>28</sup> Davis’ analysis of such anti-Masonic, anti-Catholic, and anti-Mormon literature suggests that accounts – even falsified narratives such as those penned by Maria Monk – written by former members of a certain group carries a high degree of authority, perhaps higher than that of self-described Protestants who vocalize their disapproval of other religious groups’ practices.<sup>29</sup> The literature I explore here is fiction and is not intended to provide an objective account about a particular religious group, though the authors’ positions as ex-Mormons are public knowledge and may influence a reader to believe that these disparaging tales of life within a sect are reliable accounts. It is possible that readers perceive fiction written by ex-Mormon authors as more authoritative (on Mormonism) than nonfiction written by non-Mormons.

While Givens is specifically interested in examining cultural moments of Mormon history and how LDS members have been depicted in literature, Davis’ work seems to indicate that the reasons behind such unfavorable depictions are cross-cultural and contingent on a variety of factors. Considering Orsi’s discussion of the “good religion” versus “bad religion” dichotomy, a religious group that promotes secrecy as a tool is often cast as suspicious and untrustworthy. As I will illustrate in the following section, the novels I examine include negative depictions of fictional sects that rely heavily on secrecy and, in certain instances, oppressive guarding of information.



More recent apostate narratives tend not to be fabricated – or are at least penned by actual former members of a sect. Like their predecessors, the main intention of such texts is to expose sordid goings on within the group and to indirectly condone outside criticism and invalidation of the group. Scholar James R. Lewis, whose work in religious studies focuses primarily on “new religious movements,” explains that anti-Mormon apostate accounts in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century “were capable of evoking violent, vigilante-style activity and governmental invention.”<sup>30</sup> He argues that more recent apostate accounts do not generally incite such reactions, though he argues that most modern accounts are not fabricated as they had previously been, and instead are often written by “genuine ex-members.”<sup>31</sup> Regarding the effects of the apostates’ narratives, Lewis explains, “The testimony of ex-members who have “actually been there,” and who have supposedly witnessed all of the horrors about which outsiders can only fantasize, provide the stereotype with its most important source of empirical evidence.”<sup>32</sup> The focus of Lewis’ study deals with the effect of the “anti-cult movement” on apostates’ telling of such stories, which he sees as often less-than-accurate and manipulated for certain ends. Lewis concludes by stating that the main purpose of apostate stories parallels “their nineteenth century predecessors, which is to legitimate the persecution of marginal religious movements.”<sup>33</sup> Continuing in this line of thought, one can consider Orsi’s characterization of “good” and “bad religion,” which acts similarly in defining one group by marking it as distinctive from another. The novels considered here – while in a different format than the apostate accounts – present diametrically opposed religious worldviews, which implicitly require the reader to choose one over the other.

Though the format and perspective of the modern ex-Mormon novel is quite different from its 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, the scholarship on this earlier literature suggests that we have not moved far away from this type of American religious intolerance. More specifically, Americans seem to cling to a rigid conception of what “good religion” should look like and how it should function. Historically, the aforementioned themes are present in a prolific body of “anti literature,” including anti-Mormon, anti-

Catholic, and anti-Masonic literature, much of which was penned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By examining work from religious studies and sociology scholars, I posit that – despite differences in format and historical context – these novels echo similar sentiments and function in such a way as to marginalize unacceptable forms of religion. The authors’ unique perspectives add another layer that adds another facet to this discussion about American religious tolerance.

## 4      FICTION

### 4.1    Introduction to Novels

By way of unflattering representations of the fictional sects constructed for these texts, the authors characterize them as antithetical to more accepted forms of American religion. Considering research on “anti-cult” movements as well as texts from scholars such as Givens, I will discuss how four particular themes illustrate certain features of anxiety about religious groups including LDS, and I will point to specific examples within the fiction that perpetuate such responses. Some of these themes are extensions of ones that pervaded 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and propaganda, though there are apparent differences. The themes and tropes I isolate include: rigid authority structure; isolation and insulation as a community; coercive proselytizing and manipulation; and an emphasis on escaping the religious group. While the first three themes have roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, the fourth appears to be particularly characteristic of recent ex-Mormon fiction.

Speaking more generally, these four themes highlight key features of “bad religion,” as perceived in the context of contemporary American culture. The themes I explore here are evocative of earlier anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic literature and were often used to discredit and distance oneself (or a particular group) from such religious communities, and they serve to reinforce an ideal of what good American religion should look like. These themes point to an illustration of the groups that renders them dangerous, illegitimate, and outdated. Because the authors were previously affiliated with the LDS

Church, their role in creating these narratives differs from the Southern Baptist author in the antebellum South who penned a falsified, vitriolic novel about the evils of Mormonism. However, depicting fringe movements as overly authoritarian, insular, proselytizing, and enslaving seems to prey upon existing anxiety in America about smaller, more recently established religious groups and constructs a normative litmus test for what acceptable religion is. For example, presenting these fictional sects as overly restrictive and authoritarian seems to imply that a more desirable form of religion is one that affords a person a higher degree of autonomy and free will. The narratives – while they pursue different arcs and deal with disparate plots – play with and perpetuate existing stereotypes about certain religious communities in America. It is noteworthy that, though the ex-Mormon perspective is a significant change in viewpoint from previous perspectives, it still appears to function as a tool to disparage such seemingly “extreme” fringe movements.

Before examining the various themes at work in these texts, it is necessary to provide a brief synopsis of each novel. These novels vary greatly in subject matter and writing style: Each author has spoken publicly about having left the LDS Church for different reasons, and the stories are markedly different. In Walter Kirn’s *Mission to America*, the narrative centers around a fictional sect that is, more than anything, cut off from greater American society and hopelessly sheltered from many aspects of it despite members’ attempts to bridge a cultural gap. Prior to writing this, Kirn received critical acclaim for his novels *Up in the Air* and *Thumbsucker*, both of which were adapted into films. In recent interviews, Kirn has described his departure from the LDS Church in somewhat amicable terms, citing his own “loss of nerve” instead of a breakdown of personal faith or unpleasant event.<sup>34</sup> *Mission to America* is not a thinly veiled indictment of the LDS church but a story about a fabricated religious sect – the Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles – facing myriad problems in integrating itself with modern American culture. Much of the action in this novel can be described as bizarre, even surreal. Not an outright criticism of a particular type of religion, the book instead explores characteristics and practices that render such a group incom-

patible with a conventional conception of American religious life. The narrative harshly criticizes aspects of American society – referred to as “Terrestria” – including the corrupting decadence of affluent people and a general hostility that seems to characterize much of the population. This book comments on more than the failings of the Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles, though it plays with similar themes as the other two novels.

Beckie Weinheimer’s *Converting Kate* was marketed as a young adult novel and focuses on the story of a teenaged girl who struggles with life in the ultra-conservative Church of the Holy Divine. Kate’s experiences with the Church leave her feeling alienated, restricted, and guilty for cultivating a more accepting social group. Weinheimer provides an “Author’s Note” at the conclusion of the novel, in which she discusses her own struggles with the LDS Church:<sup>35</sup> “I broke away from a church that dictated what I thought, drank, wore, read, and saw.”<sup>36</sup> She explains that her own experiences with leaving a conservative church greatly influenced her writing this book and indicates that the text very closely reflects her own experiences as an LDS defector.

Brian Evenson experienced an acrimonious departure from the LDS Church, stemming from what he viewed as censorship of his writing. In 1994, he was a faculty member in the English department at Brigham Young University, but after a student complained to university authorities about the graphic violence included in his novel *Altmann’s Tongue*, BYU made it clear that such content would not be tolerated from a faculty member.<sup>37</sup> Evenson chose to leave his faculty position and the Church. Shortly thereafter, Evenson wrote *Father of Lies*, a novel that sharply criticizes a fictional sect, The Corporation of the Blood of the Lamb, a group that is written as a thinly veiled analog for the LDS Church and includes disturbingly violent and sexually perverse accounts of church authority figures.

At first glance, these novels appear to have more differences than similarities. However, by way of the narratives’ characterizations of these fictional sects, I believe that they function comparably, inasmuch as they show these groups to exist outside the limits of American religious tolerance. The four

themes I have isolated figure in each of these novels, and each theme is significant in the way that it highlights the line between what Americans perceive as acceptable and unacceptable religious behavior. For their many differences, these books provide detailed examples of problematic religion, using their respective protagonists' plights to emphasize a group's tenuous position in American society. Below, for further clarification, I have provided brief plot synopses of each novel.

#### **4.2 Novel Synopses**

*Mission to America* details the journey of protagonist Mason LaVerle, a young missionary of the Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles, a matriarchal religious sect based out of rural Montana. The insular and dwindling community of Apostles emphasizes the importance of attracting new members, and LaVerle, along with another church member, Elias Stark (often referred to as Elder Stark), set out on their mission. A factor considered particularly important is that not only must they convert new Apostles; they must find mates in order to strengthen the gene pool of the group. It immediately becomes evident, as the two men travel to various towns in Wyoming and Colorado, that they have had very little exposure to America outside of their own community; they refer to greater America as "Terrestria."<sup>38</sup> It becomes apparent that the leader of the AFA, a woman known as the Seeress, is nearing her death, and another member, Ennis Lauer, vies for this position of authority. Additionally, Lauer wants to insure that LaVerle and Stark visit affluent ski towns in Colorado in order to attract particularly wealthy and well-known people to the sect. Upon reaching such a town, both missionaries deal with personal conflicts and difficulties in converting people, though they are not entirely unsuccessful. While they manage to convert some people they meet in Snowshoe Springs, Colorado, LaVerle becomes increasingly disillusioned by the mission, pointing out Lauer's somewhat corrupt and materialistic motives. On a hunting excursion with wealthy prospects, a mishap occurs with one of the guns, and as a result Elder Stark is impaled by a bull's horn and killed. Following the gruesome incident, LaVerle returns home to Montana – with a

woman, Betsy, whom he has befriended – and the Seeress tells them cryptically, “It’s finished here. It’s complete.”<sup>39</sup> The novel concludes with LaVerle and Betsy leaving town together, the AFA now defunct.

The narrative of Weinheimer’s *Converting Kate* deals with a 16 year-old girl, Kate Andersen, who has recently moved with her mother to Puffin Cove, Maine, the town in which her father grew up. She struggles with the recent death of her father and her mother’s overbearing and controlling demeanor. Prior to moving, Kate was active in her mother’s conservative church – the Church of the Holy Divine. She finds herself questioning the foundation of her faith and begins attending a more liberal Protestant church with some new friends from school, greatly upsetting her mother. There are subplots in the text, including one about the homosexual “outing” of the pastor of the church, Kate’s romantic feelings toward her classmate Will, and her burgeoning relationship with her Aunt Katherine. The overarching issues in the novel are Kate’s feelings of doubt and discouragement about the Church of the Holy Divine, as well as finding her own voice away from her mother’s control.

*Father of Lies* involves a disturbing tale of a religious group’s provost, who engages in acts of murder and pedophilia but uses his clout in the church to cover up his actions. The religious group, known as the Corporation of the Blood of the Lamb, is described as a “largely conservative religious sect,” with members who are colloquially referred to as “Bloodites.”<sup>40</sup> The protagonist (and character whose first-person perspective narrates much of the story) is Dr. Alexander Feshtig, a psychologist in the church-funded Institute of Psychoanalysis, who begins to work with Provost Fochs after Fochs’ wife becomes concerned with his troubling habit of sleep-talking in a malicious voice. Fochs describes to Feshtig his vivid and violent dreams, in which he abuses and murders children. During portions of the novel, the narration switches to Fochs’ point of view, and he divulges that he actually performed these acts he describes to Feshtig as dreams. As the psychologist begins to suspect that Fochs’ accounts are not simply retellings of dreams, and the media becomes preoccupied with the murdered children’s stories, the church feels pressured to quash negative rumors about its provost. Various authority figures within the

church attempt to convince Feshtig to give them his notes on the case, ultimately resorting to stealing the papers from his office. The rest of the narrative involves various aspects of suppressing this evidence, of silencing people whose testimonies and negative experiences with the church are deemed harmful, and even of killing Fochs' wife when he suspects that she is aware of his crimes. After having been exonerated and the files on him destroyed, Fochs appears to be in the clear, and at the conclusion of the novel, he shows no remorse and begins an incestuous relationship with his eldest daughter.

### **4.3 Theme: Threat of Rigid Authority Structures**

Placing these texts in the context of scholarship on "anti literature" and propaganda, one notices interesting similarities between them and earlier fiction. By way of illustrating a religious group as rigidly organized and including figures that wield a great deal of power within the group, authors (both modern and earlier) present it as a threat to personal freedom. One of the most common criticisms of both the Catholic Church and the LDS Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century hinged on the dangers of an unyielding hierarchical body of authority. Terryl Givens contends that anti-Mormon sentiment originally "was written as a political threat rather than a religious one, [whenever possible]," and sees the foundation of this in anti-Catholic rhetoric.<sup>41</sup> In other words, it appeared less problematic and unfairly bigoted to lodge a political criticism, keeping one's derision about a religious group in a more secular realm. One could not be accused of impinging on the cherished American value of religious tolerance if the concern were instead rooted in politics. Exploring various literary examples, Givens argues, "As was the case with anti-Mormon fiction, a frequent purpose of the anti-Catholic fiction of the nineteenth century was to portray Catholicism as an institution inimical to the ideals of the American political tradition."<sup>42</sup> Authority figures such as Catholic priests and Mormon elders are often presented in such literature as wielding a power that they use for nefarious purposes.

In addition to particular characters abusing their power, authors criticize the rigid structure of various religious groups. David Brion Davis argues that from "the nativist perspective," the "distinguish-

ing mark” of groups such as Catholics, Mormons, and Masons was “a secrecy that cloaked the members’ unconditional loyalty to an autonomous body.”<sup>43</sup> Not only was there a perception of these religious governmental bodies in direct opposition to the American government, the organizations appeared secretive and exclusive, indicative of some “mystic power” that was impenetrable to outsiders.<sup>44</sup> In part, these groups’ internal organizations aroused mistrust from Protestant Americans. Through the lens of such a person, Davis describes the unease with which these other religious members were perceived: “Trapped in the meshes of a machine-like organization, deluded by a false sense of loyalty and moral obligation, these dupes followed orders like professional soldiers and labored unknowingly to abolish free society, to enslave their fellow men, and to overthrow divine principles of law and justice.”<sup>45</sup> In part, this anxiety about such religious organizations stemmed from a fear of conspiring forces intent on doing harm to America and American values, but also a more subtle fear that they too could be susceptible to being similarly “duped” by these groups. More generally, organized religious authority is often seen as directly threatening to one’s personal freedom, a central ideal to American individualism and one that is present in much 19th century nativist literature. Frequently in this type of literature, such organization within a religious group is also tied to reports of corruption or dangerous abuses of power. We can see that while the historical context differs, the modern fiction considers these ideas as well. The ex-Mormon authors use similar archetypal characters and power structures in their work in order to mark these sects as threatening and harmful to society.

In *Mission to America*, the story commences with Mason LaVerle discussing his imminent mission to “Terrestria,” where he and another member of the Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles (AFA) will attempt to find converts and brides, in order to expand the sect’s population. The novel does not describe an elaborate hierarchical authority structure, but the reader learns that the Seeress is the overarching authority figure of the group, in charge of smaller governing bodies.<sup>46</sup> Lauer, a recent addition to the AFA and its missionary work, explains to LaVerle how he came to be in a position of power: “I’ve been



authorized by a select committee to recruit volunteers for an historic undertaking meant to address the concerns we've just discussed."<sup>47</sup> Throughout the narrative, as LaVerle becomes increasingly disillusioned by his experiences as a church missionary, Lauer's materialistic motives become apparent. (It also becomes clear that one of the reasons Lauer chose LaVerle to serve on the mission was in order to pursue LaVerle's girlfriend, Sarah.) While still pressing on with the mission in Wyoming, LaVerle speaks to Lauer on the phone, who emphasizes the need for visiting towns where the population is "denser and more affluent."<sup>48</sup> LaVerle reflects, "Sometimes I wondered if Lauer had sent me here to give himself a freer hand back there, maybe to erect a tall new guesthouse."<sup>49</sup> Only upon reaching a ski town in Colorado is Lauer satisfied with the prospective converts with whom they come into contact.

In this example, the governing structure of the sect is not initially depicted as corrupt or abusive in its power, but with Lauer's continued involvement in the mission, the narrator suggests that he would refocus his attention entirely, as a church leader, on seeking members who could provide ample financial support for the sect. At this point, the reader views him as a money-grabbing authority figure, manipulating and taking advantage of those in his charge. Near the end of the novel, Stark explains to LaVerle that upon the Seeress' passing, the authority structure will change:

The hierarchy has been reorganized...Lauer's been planning it for a year or two. The goal is a more dynamic leadership, not so reactive...The government of Great Britain would be the model here. There's a titular royal head, the king, the queen, but the locus of real-world, practical decision making [would be a role filled by Lauer].<sup>50</sup>

The discussion about who will succeed the Seeress suggests that the group's organization will change significantly and focus more on opportunities for profit; moreover, the mention of Britain implies that such an organization will be in direct opposition to or disregard established American laws that are not compatible. Ultimately, the Seeress directs LaVerle and the newly converted Betsy to flee the small Montana town and explains that the religious group has met its end, perhaps due to the increasing em-

phasis on such materialistic ends. This outcome seems to point to the idea that such a religious movement – small in size and insular – is susceptible to falling into the hands of a corrupt leader; this is highlighted by the tragic ends met by several characters throughout the story. If a lesson is to be absorbed from this narrative, it seems to be that such corruption can be avoided with the erasure of a venal power structure.

*Converting Kate* contrasts Kate's former religious affiliation with the Church of the Holy Divine (CHD) with her recent experiences in a liberal Protestant church. This text contains some of the most obvious contrasts between "good" and "bad religion," in which the author constructs a more palatable, acceptable form of religious practice, in lieu of the CHD. In the first chapter, Kate reflects on her younger years as an obedient member of an oppressive church: "How far would I have followed our High Priest, Mom, and other church leaders if Dad hadn't died?"<sup>51</sup> The "liberal minister"<sup>52</sup> Pastor Browning serves as a foil to the High Priest she describes, both physically and ideologically. She notes that the pastor wears a "regular suit, no robe or anything."<sup>53</sup> Upon having a conversation with Browning, she comments on how she finds this discourse more casual and less intimidating than with the High Priest at her old church; she recalls instances in which her former priest questioned her about personal behavior such as homosexual activity and masturbation.<sup>54</sup> This commentary is reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Catholic rhetoric, in which priests are depicted as overly invested in ascertaining detailed information about sexual behavior of congregants. In her essay on anti-Catholic literature, Marie Anne Pagliarini contends that such depictions were often tied to non-Catholics' negative perceptions of priestly celibacy: "The institution thus transformed, in a very short time, an ordinary male into a raging sexual madman capable of any act of wickedness to satisfy his exorbitant and unrestrained lust."<sup>55</sup> In this instance, the novel illustrates the threatening, over-sexualized priest in direct opposition to the non-threatening, liberal, and sympathetic pastor, creating a straw man out of the CHD sect.

In addition to illustrating the authority figures of the Church of the Holy Divine as repressive and perverse, Weinheimer's narrative suggests a militaristic quality of the sect's members. As Kate struggles with acclimating to her new school, she recalls the language of her former church: "I am a youth in God's Army. I represent Him and His purpose."<sup>56</sup> When friends question her about the group's organizational structure, she explains, "The church is led by a prophet and assisted by his twelve disciples, all male, of course."<sup>57</sup> Kate discusses these details with regret and ultimately reaches the conclusion that she cannot be affiliated with the church due to her increasing doubts. Kate's mother, a devout member of the CHD, expresses disdain for the Protestant church Kate has been attending, especially when it becomes public knowledge that Pastor Browning is homosexual and is subsequently asked to resign from his post: "[T]hat's what happens when you let the congregation decide who is to lead your church instead of letting God make the decision."<sup>58</sup> Throughout the narrative, Weinheimer presents Kate's mother as a caricature, overbearing and unreasonably close-minded. Her character seems to embody the qualities of the fictional sect that Weinheimer views as harmful and overly controlling, not unlike the leaders of the church. The more accepting and accommodating approach of Pastor Browning – even after he is not affiliated with the protestant church Kate visits – is presented as much more favorable to involvement with the CHD. Similar to Kirn's characters, the villains in this text present a threat to individual free will and engage in an organizational structure that potentially challenges that of the government, or in this case, the public school Kate attends.

In *Father of Lies*, the rigid structure of the fictional religious group – and the corruption that emanates from it – is one of the most sharply criticized aspects of it, and the conspiratorial nature of the group is shown in cartoonish (albeit extremely sinister) terms. Tellingly, the group is known not as a church but as a corporation: "The Corporation of the Blood of the Lamb."<sup>59</sup> Church authority roles within the novel include provosts, apostolic elders, and directors of church "institutes" and "committees." Provost Fochs, the depraved antagonist, reassures his wife that he had nothing to do with the mysteri-

ous murder of a girl, using his position of authority to defend himself: “You have to put your faith in God. And in his earthly representatives.”<sup>60</sup> Evenson’s novel constructs an extreme example of corruption, illustrating the chain of events that lead to the cover-up of the provost’s sordid crimes and elaborate plans to silence naysayers. Through the lens of his psychiatric sessions with Feshtig, as well as through first-person narrated accounts, the reader finds out that Provost Fochs suffers from visions and hears voices that tell him to commit violent acts. Evenson’s narrative comments on the disturbing idea that someone with such an unstable mind, capable of such heinous crimes, would be able not only to achieve a position of authority but to maintain it through conspiratorial feats with other church leaders.

When allegations against Fochs reach the media and his guilt seems apparent throughout the community, leaders within the Corporation resort to drastic measures to cover it up. Through cryptic letters to Feshtig, asking him to hand over files on his patient, the church directors appear conspiratorial and secretive. A trial is held for two women who are accused of “unchristianlike conduct and disobedience to your elders,” after they express mistrust of Fochs’ intentions.<sup>61</sup> The councilmembers present at this trial emphasize that “to attack the church is the same as attacking the Lord.”<sup>62</sup> Such statements condemn the idea of authoritarian religious structures, underscoring the danger of conflating human power with divine power.

At the conclusion of the novel, the gravity of this cover-up is encapsulated by the words of one of the church rectors, to Fochs: “You won’t go to jail. The woman has agreed not to press charges. Besides, it would be too damaging for us. We’ve invested ourselves too thoroughly in this.”<sup>63</sup> Revisiting Davis’ work on anti-Masonic and anti-Catholic rhetoric, it is interesting to note his discussion about “alarmist writers” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who sought to expose plots to “subvert the American social order.”<sup>64</sup> Evenson’s novel appears to mimic these earlier (and purportedly factual) texts by illustrating a highly organized and extremely corrupt chain of command within the “Bloodite” sect. The narrative reemphasizes the message that the mystery in which such organizations are shrouded is sinister and

dangerous. Clearly, Evenson's narrative warns against the dangers of relying on a self-preserving and virtually unconquerable hierarchy.

#### **4.4 Theme: Isolation & Insularity**

In examining the theme of religious authority structures in these texts, it becomes clear that these fictional sects are particularly insular and isolated from other parts of American society. While ethnic and physical differences are not at play here, cultural distinctions among people who affiliate with isolated religious communities are significant. Those not involved in the sects appear to mistrust the authoritarian hierarchy present in these groups; yet there is also something inherently untrustworthy about a community that secludes itself from mainstream society. The protagonists in these novels – especially in Kirn's and Weinheimer's – are culturally sheltered, which presents many difficulties for them.

Terryl Givens' scholarship on 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Mormon literature is useful here, as it illuminates one way in which the isolation of a religious group functions. Givens discusses a sort of "Othering" of the Mormons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was achieved in part through the publication of journalistic accounts as well as fictional works, noting that fiction "reflect[ed] and exploit[ed] deep-seated anxieties and interests."<sup>65</sup> He argues, "The literary consequences – attempts to evoke the exotic and invoke the violent – represent one strategy to contain a threatening Other that proves resistant to both extermination and assimilation."<sup>66</sup> In other words, authors of such literature render Mormons a strangely impenetrable community by presenting them as a unified group unlike any other American cultural group. Because Mormons were not physically distinct from other Americans, Givens contends that by fabricating distinct Mormon characteristics, the perceived cultural threat is diminished. In the recent ex-Mormon texts, a certain type of "Othering" occurs, and the outcome distinguishes the fictional sect as subversive and potentially dangerous.<sup>67</sup>

In *Mission to America*, the narrator describes the AFA as existing on the fringes of American society. As noted earlier, the narrator uses the term “Terrestria” in *Mission to America* in order to describe American society outside of Bluff, Montana. As missionaries LaVerle and Stark venture to unfamiliar towns to recruit new AFA members, LaVerle comments on their uncomfortable acclimation to new, unhealthy food and explains, “Even after seven days in the van, my partner and I were still learning about America.”<sup>68</sup> Many of the on-the-road anecdotes entail unpleasant cultural shock for the two sheltered men. Frustrated with LaVerle’s awkwardness in becoming accustomed to this world, his friend Betsy admonishes him: “Just try to pretend you’re American.”<sup>69</sup> LaVerle later reaches an ominous conclusion, explaining that the outside world into which he had recently been thrown was “fatally inhospitable” and he wanted only to return to Montana.<sup>70</sup>

The narrative presents members of the Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles (and, as an extension, the sect itself) as incompatible with mainstream society, presenting it as a sect extremely withdrawn from a more generic brand of acceptable American religion. For instance, LaVerle expresses wonder upon learning about Christian theology: “He believed in the Bible but only in the one Bible, as though God had retired a couple of thousand years ago having said everything he wished to say.”<sup>71</sup> His confusion over this Terrestrial religion is indicative of his far removal from American culture, for which he seems detrimentally unsuited. Explaining the sect’s history, LaVerle cites the AFA’s refusal “to vote in [America’s] elections, supply troops for its armies, or recognize its currency...though they capitulated in 1913 in a bid to escape imprisonment.”<sup>72</sup> The isolated AFA sect does not appear to be particularly sinister, but its status as a small, exclusive society sheltered from the outside world suggests it is politically and culturally distant from other experiences of American society. The depiction of the AFA as an “other” religion (and its unique quality of having an “end”) suggests its illegitimacy a sect, in the eyes of outsider characters; moreover, LaVerle’s growing unease about the sect implies even internal uncertainty.

In *Converting Kate*, the Church of the Holy Divine is described from the outset as a religious group that shares little in common with the values of students attending Kate's high school in Maine. In the first few pages of the narrative, Kate comments on girls she sees at her new school who are dressed in the conservative CHD attire: "They march to their table, right past me, just like I'm any generic person from the outside world! I look normal! I blend in!"<sup>73</sup> In part, Kate's fixation on being "normal" is characteristic of the young adult genre in general, but it also expresses her unease at being part of a religious group that is in many ways deemed strange and socially unacceptable. While her experiences with social anxiety and insecurity are characteristic of teenagers' experiences in general, they also seem to suggest the CHD's incompatibility with other religious groups and individuals. One of the more outspoken and tactless characters, Chelsea, openly mocks the girls in the CHD, spurring in Kate anxiety about her own involvement. She asks herself, "How many people back in Phoenix had talked like this about me?"<sup>74</sup> This is a particularly interesting comment, as it shows her as insider-cum-outsider, attempting to gauge how she was previously perceived by outsiders. This is the most obvious discussion within these texts of a character who struggles with the transition of member to former-member. Kate later refers to the CHD as "this measly little church that most of the world didn't even know about," suggesting its status as an insignificant and invalid religious group.<sup>75</sup> Given her subsequent discussion about the book and her motivations for writing it, Weinheimer seems to engage in this line of plot as a way to explore her own struggles with leaving the LDS.

In addition to presenting the CHD as a conservative, strict, and insular community, Weinheimer portrays it as a group that has sheltered Kate in many ways. The text suggests that Kate has suffered some social and cultural deprivation by being indoctrinated in her childhood by her mother's church; the sheltering environment in which she was raised is eroded when she begins attending the new church with her friends. Near the beginning of the narrative, Kate expresses surprise and disgust at the openness in conversations other characters have regarding homosexuality and at their relatively immodest

clothing. Due to the CHD restricting members' children from reading secular texts – such as the class-assigned book *To Kill a Mockingbird* – Kate has no exposure to such works until after she finds her father's collection of books. She reflects, "I wanted to read more and more. I was so thirsty for information about the outside world I'd always been protected from."<sup>76</sup>

To further emphasize the cultural distance she perceives between the CHD and the community she joins in Puffin Cove, she describes the Protestant church she visits as "a foreign country" but notes that she finds her visit a positive experience.<sup>77</sup> Kate questions the confidence with which CHD members approach matters of theology and wonders, "How can [my cousin] Charity, who has spent her whole life in a small town in the desert of Arizona, with no cable or internet access and no newspaper besides the *Weekly Holy Divine*, know anything?"<sup>78</sup> Kate's journey from sheltered child to increasingly aware young woman underscores the potential negative, growth-stunting effects a group such as the CHD can have; at times, the narrative seems to heavy-handedly advocate for groups that are less restrictive and more liberal in ideology. This text, in particular, illustrates a version of this religious dichotomy, with "bad religion" presented as oppressive and "good religion" as liberating.

In *Father of Lies*, the theme of insularity takes on a much more sinister tone than it does in the other two novels. This is most evident in the way that authority figures interact with church members. Due to the Corporation's elaborate structure of committees and councils, the Bloodites ultimately deal with transgressions, conflicts, and other matters "in-house," limiting the involvement of outside forces and government. In the case of the two women who accuse Fochs of sexually abusing their sons, they drop their charges in order to protect their children's exposure to the case, but they are dealt with by a church council who decides "unanimously" that they should be excommunicated.<sup>79</sup> After Fochs manipulates a car accident to kill his suspecting wife, he worries about the degree to which he will be suspected for various crimes. He is reassured, however, by the fact that the Corporation has stepped in to shield him from legal action:



[T]he Church's public relations person unequivocally denying any involvement on my part, claiming "We have investigated the matter thoroughly and see no evidence of wrongdoing." The man has not spoken to me at all and, as far as I can tell, is only taking the area rector's word on everything. There never has been – and I hope never will be – a legitimate investigation by the Church.<sup>80</sup>

The discussion about corruption of the authority structure continues here, as Evenson depicts a scenario in which the leaders abuse their power in order to protect one of their own and for self-serving purposes. In this instance, the religious community's autonomy is dangerous and exists outside the realm of the American legal system. One attribute of positive religion that Orsi mentions is that it is "unmediated and agreeable to democracy," a quality that Evenson seems to purposely contrast in this damning narrative.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, the Corporation is depicted as an example of the most depraved and un-American embodiment of religion.

#### **4.5 Theme: Proselytizing & Manipulation**

As free will and individual choice appear at the top of the list in terms of marking a religion as acceptable by American standards, proselytizing is often seen as particularly problematic. One of the most pervasive themes in anti-Mormon rhetoric and literature is that of a coercive practice of proselytizing, in which choice is challenged. Perhaps because such proselytizing appears to restrict choice and to serve as an almost bullying practice, it is not welcomed in "good" American religion. Patrick Mason, whose text *The Mormon Menace* examines violent incidents against Mormon missionaries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century South, highlights the "anxious rhetoric about the Mormon seducer"<sup>82</sup> and describes the mistrust with which many southerners perceived such missionaries. While vitriol against Mormon proselytizers does not appear to be the norm today, proactive missionary practices are critiqued in these texts. James R. Lewis, writing about apostate tales and "anti-cult literature," contends, "It is thus in the contemporary period that we see the full development of notions of brainwashing techniques that

‘make captive’ the individual’s ‘information-processing capacities.’”<sup>83</sup> Proselytizing, in these examples, is not a benign, well-intended action but one with ulterior motives of forcible change, one that relies on psychological and emotional manipulation. The ex-Mormon authors often deal with protagonists who are described as impressionable, naïve, or particularly susceptible to such conversion tactics. In Kirn’s and Evenson’s novels, the authors depict such mind control as invoking violent consequences.

In *Mission to America*, the entire narrative focuses on a missionary trip whose goal is to recruit “new blood” for the Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles. LaVerle explains that the impetus for the extensive mission is in part “to introduce[e] new bloodlines into our gene pool,” suggesting a need for diversification within the sect.<sup>84</sup> Rising authority figure Lauer explains that without such a mission, “our descendants will all be idiots...and there won’t be enough of them, in any case.”<sup>85</sup> Once people within the sect are chosen to participate in the mission – mainly those who had a reputation for “speaking well” – Lauer discusses “mind tricks” that missionaries can use to sway prospective members.<sup>86</sup> The way in which Lauer educates his charges about how to effectively proselytize is based on sales techniques: “He told me he’d learned it from a Phoenix businessman who’d earned almost eight million dollars in one year selling therapeutic car-seat covers impregnated with ionized powdered copper.”<sup>87</sup> Such “tricks” are evocative of the materialistic motivation that permeates the narrative, but they also seem to underscore the anxiety about religious groups that rely on strategies and techniques to attract members, as opposed to an individual’s personal inquiry into a particular religious group.

A conflict steadily builds between LaVerle and Lauer, which highlights ethical concerns over using tactics of manipulation in order to convert members. As a means to “hook” prospective members, Lauer enumerates small things that LaVerle and Stark can do, including “indebting” the people with a gift and standing with “an angled stance” to invite the person to listen more closely.<sup>88</sup> These manipulative techniques disconcert LaVerle, who questions Lauer about their legitimacy: “If these tricks can really

convert people, then people aren't worth converting. They're machines. And AFAs are fools."<sup>89</sup> At this point, he remains committed to the AFA, but his doubts about Lauer's practices mount.

Nearing the conclusion of the novel, LaVerle and Stark deal with unpleasant and violent fallout from their attempts at conversion. While their initial intentions may have been based on gaining new members and revenue for the sect, the outcome of Lauer's initiatives is destructive. Lara, a prospective AFA member, is an emotionally unstable former-actress whom the missionaries befriend on their journey to a wealthy Colorado ski town. After agreeing to join the AFA, a series of events involving Lara's personal life and romantic affairs occur, and she commits suicide. LaVerle reflects on this, thinking, "Lara was our first victim, our first sacrifice."<sup>90</sup> He also expresses concern about his partner, Stark, who appears to be increasingly taken in by their new acquaintances in Snowshoe Springs, Colorado, whose decadent and indulgent lifestyles are immensely appealing to him. Soon, LaVerle becomes completely disenchanted with the mission and resigns himself to abandon his attempts at conversion: "I'd sworn off proselytizing but Edward [another local] had converted anyway."<sup>91</sup> He expresses the ease with which one can be baptized into the sect, explaining that "all it takes is fresh air, a yes or two and less than a minute of your precious time."<sup>92</sup>

The Effinghams, the family with whom the missionaries have been staying, decide to go on a "safari" in the woods and invite the men along. Elder Stark accidentally misfires a gun, and as he goes to retrieve it from the muddy terrain, he is gored by a bison that was startled by the blast. After Stark's death, LaVerle returns to Bluff, Montana, with his "sad cargo" in the back of his truck.<sup>93</sup> He meaningfully comments, "Our mission reversed itself along those highways," explaining that while his life had been miserable in Terrestria, he now feels as though "strange hands emerged to shepherd us home across the barbed-wire deserts."<sup>94</sup> While much of this narrative is an indictment of people like the Effinghams who are depicted as depraved and hopelessly self-unaware, the mission itself appears to originate from underhanded, greedy motives. The termination of the AFA sect at the conclusion of the narrative under-

scores the inefficacy and ill-conceived nature of the mission, an endeavor that was continuously tainted by the corrupt motives of a would-be church leader.

Neither *Converting Kate* nor *Father of Lies* includes a narrative focused heavily on proselytizing or missionaries, though they both address the issue of manipulation within the sect. In Weinheimer's novel, she points to the negative effects that Mrs. Andersen's proselytizing has on Kate, and Kate reflects on her own feelings about being blindly indoctrinated as a child into the Church of the Holy Divine. Initially assessing her liminal position as both a lapsed-insider and an outsider to the CHD, Kate explains, "Up until high school, kids who belong to the [CHD] are homeschooled, but once you're fourteen, you're considered ready to go out into the world and bring others *the truth*."<sup>95</sup> She later discusses her reservations with the militaristic idea of being "a youth in God's army," and comments on various teachings she was trained to recite, as if they were on "autoplay."<sup>96</sup> On numerous occasions, Kate describes various aspects and memories of CHD as involving indoctrination and unquestioning obedience.

As she observes her mother's attempts to convert a friend's mother, Mrs. Riggs, Kate reflects on the manipulative strategies for attracting outsiders to the church: "Look for situations where you can bring up people's talents. Make them feel important. Make them feel loved. After you have prepared the soil with friendship and trust, then introduce the seeds of the True and Everlasting Gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>97</sup> Such techniques are similar to the ones used in *Mission to America*, illustrating a calculated process by which to convert new recruits. Kate comments on the danger of her mother's efforts, likening Mrs. Riggs to "a mouse who smells cheese but doesn't see that little wood trap with the wire snap until it's too late."<sup>98</sup> One of her overarching concerns regarding people becoming involved with the CHD is her skepticism over the attainment of accurate metaphysical knowledge. She highlights the dangers of blind obedience within her religion, noting that it wasn't until this year that she had been able to read "banned" books. Fittingly, she recites a quotation from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, casting doubt on her mother's actions: "Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the

hand of [another].”<sup>99</sup> Similar to Kirn’s novel, the protagonist questions and doubts another’s sincerity and intentions in bringing new members into the religious group. The proselytizing – while not particularly coercive – is strategically plotted out.

In *Father of Lies*, there is little emphasis on proselytizing, though there are implications of the coercive nature of those in power within the Bloodite faith. After Feshtig begins to suspect that Fochs’ dreams are more tied to reality than his patient admits, he visits Fochs’ brother on a remote farm. The brother, Myra Fochs, does little to assuage Feshtig’s fears, and indicates that Eldon Fochs has an alarming history of violent behavior. Myra expresses his relief that he’s now “free of the Church,” and wants nothing to do with the investigation for fear of becoming drawn back in against his will.<sup>100</sup> He ominously refers to the pattern of corruption that the reader has witnessed: “Besides, they’re all good Bloodites around here. They protect their own, especially if he’s a provost...[I] can’t help you.”<sup>101</sup> This seems to have its basis in the discussion of the Bloodites as a self-protecting community, though it also suggests the alarming power the church has over its members (and even ex-members). Within this narrative, Evenson suggests that such a religious group, on top of being isolated and nepotistic, is coercive in terms of recruiting and maintaining members.

In addition to manipulative conversion tactics, there is a precedent for coercive and sexually threatening depictions of religious members in 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Mormon literature. These narratives often include images of Mormons as physically threatening and particularly dangerous to single women. Patrick Mason examines the anti-Mormon culture in the Postbellum South and various occasions of violence against Mormons during this period. While Givens discusses a variety of ways in which Mormons are depicted as coercive agents, Mason focuses specifically on how they were perceived as sexually aggressive. He notes that many American southerners perceived LDS members as “seducers intent on wrecking homes and enticing women to join them in the West, where they would become veritable slaves in the Mormons’ degraded polygamous society.”<sup>102</sup> Mason highlights this motif of sexual coercion,

noting that perceptions among southerners pointed to a “rotten Gomorrah” in Salt Lake City, with fears abounding of southern Christian women straying “from paths of virtue.”<sup>103</sup> He points to a piece published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* in 1879, following the murder of Joseph Standing, a Mormon missionary who was killed by a mob in Whitfield County, Georgia.<sup>104</sup> The feature was entitled “The Lustful Lout” and ultimately vilified Standing by detailing his alleged sexual exploits with young women in the surrounding areas. Mason questions the veracity of these facts and concludes, “The particulars outlined in [the article] can therefore be dismissed as a sensational attempt to reduce the real person of the murdered Joseph Standing to a caricature of the lecherous Mormon polygamist.”<sup>105</sup> There appear to be many similar articles and narratives depicting Mormon men as lecherous and manipulative of women.

Because sexually depraved acts are often considered to be particularly offensive, to depict members of a group engaging in them indicts the group as dangerous and morally contemptible. The plot of Evenson’s novel is heavily focused on disturbing images of violence and sexual aggression, which serves to vilify the Bloodites and distance them from other parts of American society. In Feshtig’s interviews with Fochs, the provost details dreams – which turn out to be factual events – about raping two boys in the Bloodite congregation: “He found a second boy in the hall, confused, nervous, reluctant to enter. Fochs brought him in and without the preliminaries of an interview told the boy he had to force the evil out and summarily raped him.”<sup>106</sup> Toward the end of the novel, after resolving the charges against himself, Fochs is seen going into his daughter’s room and sexually assaulting her.<sup>107</sup> Evenson characterizes the Corporation as unconditionally reprehensible through the violent and sexually depraved crimes committed by Fochs. Perhaps one of the more heavy-handed characterizations of “bad religion,” the narrative serves to cast this sect as incompatible with American society, its members preying upon and destroying others (even others within the group).

#### 4.6 Theme: Escape from the Sect

The motivation to escape an oppressive religious sect – even after having lived in it for years – is obvious in these novels. Provided as a desirable alternative to remaining in the corrupt and flawed group, these protagonists seek something else, an alternative advocated by these authors. A good deal of overtly anti-Mormon or anti-Catholic 19<sup>th</sup> century literature focuses on narratives involving the captivity and forced membership of religious outsiders, while in these recent works, there is more of an emphasis on the ways in which one disaffiliates from a religious group and the ensuing consequences. Regarding the theme of captivity in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, Givens explains, “Such loss of autonomy was one fictional response to the peculiar anxiety of seduction Mormonism occasioned.”<sup>108</sup> There is a presumption of a certain amount of power the LDS church has in converting and even “kidnapping” would-be members. In Lewis’ article on apostate narratives, he observes, “In addition to the ‘deluded follower’ theme used to describe Catholic bondage, one finds the first theory of ‘hypnotic mind control’ in anti-Mormon literature.”<sup>109</sup>

Each modern text deals with this idea of mind control in some way, though the narrators also deal with characters’ attempts to reverse or rebel against this. An important detail to keep in mind is that each of these authors has personal experience with becoming disaffiliated from the LDS Church, and a reader might assume they use their own experiences to inform the text. Ex-Mormon (and other groups that focus on post-involvement issues of a religious sect) websites that have flourished in the past decade focus on the transition one makes from affiliated to disaffiliated, often offering support in the form of message boards and personal testimonials.<sup>110</sup> If freedom and autonomy are seen as specifically characteristic of “good religion,” this act of disaffiliation seems to be an important first step for these protagonists.

For these novels, the reality of escaping the religious sect is central to the narrative, though each handles the act differently. Kirn’s novel displays disillusioned and lost characters, uncertain how

they will function after the AFA collapses. In *Converting Kate*, while eschewing the Church is initially difficult, Kate has an abundance of optimism about her life after she renounces the Church. Evenson's text has a more fatalistic ending, suggesting that Feshtig – who clearly wants to leave the group – has no chance of escaping the Bloodite faith at this point. Though the characters within these texts incur varying consequences in considering leaving their sects, the possibility of disaffiliation is presented in a positive light in all three; against the background of corruption and manipulation within each fictional religious sect, apostasy seems the most attractive option.

In *Mission to America*, LaVerle's disillusionment with AFA builds early in the narrative and reaches a fever pitch as his mission partner meets his gruesome end. Upon understanding Lauer's monetary motivations for organizing the mission, LaVerle becomes discouraged about his role in the southward journey.<sup>111</sup> After hearing that the Seeress might be replaced by a laywoman, LaVerle reflects, "I felt the mystery draining from my world," adding to his doubts about the sect.<sup>112</sup> At the end of the novel, when LaVerle returns to Bluff and is summoned to speak to the Seeress, Lauer derisively explains to him that "it's all made up."<sup>113</sup> While LaVerle seems to be nearing the end of his involvement with the AFA, it is the final dissolution of the religious group that leads to his disaffiliation. The Seeress explains to him, "It's finished here. It's complete...Go reifold yourselves."<sup>114</sup> The AFA has the peculiar characteristic of being a terminal religious group, with a finite lifespan, and its end leaves followers in a state of doubt and confusion. It is unclear whether the Seeress' decision was related to the corrupt behavior of characters like Lauer or the fallen Stark, but it suggests that the group has become nonfunctional for a variety of reasons. Perhaps this is to be viewed as an example of what will naturally occur (i.e., termination of such a group) when such characteristics of "bad religion" persevere. Not only is the mission unsuccessful at generating new members, it results in the casualty of a missionary and detrimentally exposes other members as scheming and dishonest.



Of the three novels, *Converting Kate* considers the realities and consequences of disaffiliation the most thoroughly. Kate moves to Puffin Cove from a small town where she was heavily involved with the Church of the Holy Divine, allowing for what appears to her as a blank slate. After repudiating the CHD in front of her new acquaintances, Kate begins to participate in activities at the liberal Pastor Browning's church, much to the horror of her mother. Describing her new church as "peaceful" and the services as "painless," she illustrates it as a stark contrast to her previous religious experiences.<sup>115</sup> Kate's doubts about these experiences surface throughout much of the narrative, and she confesses, "Slowly, day by day, I began to doubt."<sup>116</sup> By extending her mother's analogy about her "true" religion being like the yeast used to bake bread, she says, "To tell you the truth, I think the yeast needs to be thrown out and a fresh batch started."<sup>117</sup> Initially, Kate's doubts manifest themselves in adolescent acts of rebellion against her mother, but toward the end of the novel, she has become more thoughtful about her position outside her former church. She questions the allegedly infallible knowledge that those in the CHD claim to possess, referring to her mother's "perfect world of black and white."<sup>118</sup> As an alternative, she becomes enamored of a passage in Corinthians, particularly focusing on the line "For now we see through a glass, darkly."<sup>119</sup> She presents Kate's break from the CHD as difficult but as an overwhelmingly positive choice, closing the book with her personal note regarding her experience in a similarly restrictive religious group.

*Father of Lies*, like the other novels, narrates the protagonist's increasing doubts about his religion and his thoughts about leaving the group. In one of the last chapters in which Feshtig narrates – later, Fochs narrates the story – he expresses his disgust with the church's behavior. After being given an ultimatum by a church elder about being "on the team or against the team," Feshtig says, "There are good things about [the Church]...even though its leaders often choose to operate by coercion. The Church makes a lot of people happy. But it destroys people as well."<sup>120</sup> Immediately after making this damning claim about the Bloodites, Feshtig refers to the sect as "hell," but acknowledges that he will

lose his job if he defects.<sup>121</sup> The remainder of the text follows Fochs' violent, destructive actions against children within the church and details instances of psychological breaks during which he sees and interacts with demonic creatures. Feshtig becomes a nonentity for the remainder of the novel, existing only as a reminder of what he was not able to accomplish with Fochs. The narrative suggests that the doctor's attempts at revealing the truth about Fochs were no match for the church authorities, intent on protecting the Corporation by all means necessary. As noted earlier, Fochs' brother Myra had managed to escape the church years earlier, but he lives in a secluded farm town and appears to have little interaction with any community. The consequences of leaving the church are too burdensome for Feshtig, as his livelihood would be at stake. In this way, Evenson presents a culture that is so coercive and manipulative that escape is nearly impossible.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, these novels warn against a brand of religion that possesses the characteristics outlined above, echoing and illuminating assumptions many have made about so-called "fringe" religions, or at least religious groups that do not adhere to a particular set of standards. By negatively portraying sects as authoritarian, the authors advocate instead for something that allows for more personal autonomy. In the case of *Converting Kate*, the reader finds the titular character pursuing a more liberal and individualistic type of Protestant Christianity, leaving by the wayside her previous allegiance to a decidedly restrictive group. Recalling instances in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature in which the Catholic and LDS Churches are depicted as destructively despotic, one sees that these authors echo similar sentiments regarding their fictional sects.

In the instance of the Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles' collapse in *Mission to America*, the isolation of the group seems to be one of its most damning qualities, preventing it from being understood and accepted by outsiders. Much like the idea of secrecy within a group being threatening, a group that ap-

appears to exist on the sidelines of society is shown, in these novels, to be unsustainable and dangerous. This danger is most pronounced in *Father of Lies*, as a litany of heinous crimes are committed and the perpetrator is protected by an insular – and overwhelmingly sinister – community of church administrators. Fochs resides in the land of Corporation of the Blood of the Lamb, a land outside the jurisdiction of state or federal laws. Such extreme examples as this emphasize what the Corporation lacks: fairness and transparency, qualities that are exemplified by “good” or “true” religion.

Though the notion of coercive proselytizing is not apparent in all examples of bad religion, it has the potential to restrict free choice. Such proselytizing – wherein one attempts to manipulate the subject in some way – is reminiscent of Givens’ discussion of the “anxiety of seduction,” by which people easily fall prey to enticing promises and incentives. Criticism of such proselytizing – in 19<sup>th</sup> century “anti literature” and in the recent novels – appears to emanate from a sense of concern over groups that indoctrinate people en masse. In *Converting Kate*, Kate reflects on feelings of anger that stem from being manipulated and brainwashed by the CHD from a very young age. She ultimately seeks out a preferable alternative as she relies on her own experiential research into other churches, emphasizing the need for individual choice in matters of conversion. In this case, the authors exemplify good religion as entailing freedom of choice and suggest that a religion worthy of being a part of does not require such proselytizing practices.

One of the most interesting aspects of these texts – one that deviates from earlier “anti literature” – is the eventual outcome of (or desire for) escape. Instead of focusing on the theme of captivity, as many anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic texts did, the protagonists here (with the exception of Feshtig, who merely yearns for escape) experience a life-altering liberation from oppressive religion. Apparently as a result of the amalgamation of undesirable qualities of and practices within these religious groups, the characters in these stories become increasingly disillusioned with and angry about their experiences. As noted in the discussion of *Father of Lies*, this novel also highlights the obstacles one can face when

trying to separate from such a group. Again highlighting the importance of autonomy and individual choice, these authors show such escape to be a necessary step in one's journey to pursue a more liberating form of religion.

A tradition of American "anti literature" has emerged, wherein the parameters of "good" and "bad" religion are set. The themes discussed here extend and are often founded in "anti literature" from previous centuries, albeit using a different vehicle. By commenting on specific characteristics of these fabricated religious sects, these authors reinforce a list of characteristics that are seen as favorable in "good" American religion. The images created within these novels differ from earlier illustrations of captive nuns and "the Lustful Lout," but they function by encouraging anxieties about religious groups whose practices specifically challenge autonomy and free will.

We see the limits of American religious tolerance defined within these narratives. Though these are but a few examples of a loosely defined modern genre of ex-Mormon fiction, a narrator's commentary on a character's behavior is an indictment of a particular (and wrong) way of being religious. Looking at the scholarship of Givens and Mason, it appears that American society has become more accepting of a broader range of religious cultures, has embraced pluralism, and has scaled back the vitriol against minority religious groups. For instance, the LDS Church in America is now by and large more accepted as a religion than it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> and even early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, though such groups have become more of a stable fixture in the religious landscape of this country, there remain criticisms of the Church that keep it at an arm's length from other segments of American society. Moreover, these criticisms seem to be iterations of earlier critiques of Mormonism, with rhetoric focused on depicting Mormons as secretive, coercive, and threatening. The oft-discussed ideal of religious tolerance is not unconditional; if the tenets or organizational structure of a religious group run counter to those of greater American society or the touted ideal of free will, it is not included in this list of tolerated religions.

Though many might argue that the U.S. has come a long way with regard to maintaining a religiously diverse and tolerant society, these novels paint a more complicated picture. If we look at these texts as cultural artifacts, we glean from them that there exists a small (but perhaps growing) group emerging that is vocal about their own negative experiences within the LDS Church. While fictional accounts do not explicitly indict the Church, they notably comment on elements of religion that they consider dangerous and destructive. Drawing on the previous discussion about atrocity tales, it is entirely possible that readers aware of the authors' insider-cum-outsider perspectives project more authority and validity onto claims made, even within these fictional accounts. More than providing an entertaining account of a religious group gone awry, these novels underscore the problem that exists in American society. On the one hand, Americans emphasize the necessity of religious tolerance – so much so that it often becomes prioritized over other ideals. On the other hand, religious groups that are perceived to undermine the accepted principles of individualism, autonomy, and freedom of choice are seen as incompatible with and harmful to American society. While this is not a new problem, these novels highlight it as particularly relevant in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Is it then inaccurate to refer to religious tolerance as an American ideal, if it appears to be so limited? Is it instead an American *brand* of religious tolerance, one that has conditions but is ultimately deemed acceptable by most Americans?

In these novels, we as readers are exposed to examples of “bad religion.” It is not apparent that we are to take these at face value – as explicit criticisms of the LDS Church – though the thematic similarities between such disparate texts indicate that these negative attributes are lodged somewhere in the American subconscious. For instance, directly or indirectly, each author comments on the potential danger of engaging in a group that operates authoritatively and attempts to dictate the behavior of its members. Whether or not one accepts this commentary on “good” versus “bad religion” as valid, these assessments are made, and they are – at least in part – founded on those made 150 years ago. These

subjective limits of religious tolerance evolve and mutate over time, though it is interesting that the tropes we find in these novels so closely parallel those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Overall, these narratives indicate that Americans still grapple with what is to be included under the umbrella of religious tolerance and what values we rely on to make such decisions. They also illustrate that 19<sup>th</sup> century “anti literature” provides a basis for many of the criticisms discussed in modern fiction, which in turn suggests that American religious tolerance is not as far removed from the earlier era of fabricated tell-all’s and venomous diatribes as many assumed. In terms of religious studies scholarship, this body of fiction is worth paying attention to, as it reveals attitudes about modern religious life in America. However, instead of an insider versus outsider relationship that we saw in previous eras, these texts point to a more nuanced relationship, in which the authors use their own experiences to present a picture of an unsavory brand of religion, not strictly limited to the LDS Church. There appears a new discussion about American pluralism, one that does not simply take into consideration the existence of multiple groups but one that accounts for the variety of experiences of a member of any given group. Reading these texts as examples of such experiences, one sees a much more complex depiction of American religious society and how standards of acceptability and tolerance are constructed and maintained. Not only are previous definitions challenged, but prior criticisms of religious experience and practice are reimagined.

In addition to encouraging a more complex conversation about religious pluralism in America, examining these texts raises questions about what fiction can tell us about religion. For instance, what information can these imagined narratives provide scholars that could not be gleaned from historical or ethnographic data? What benefits and disadvantages exist for focusing primarily – if not entirely – on a body of fiction? Though an exhaustive response to these questions cannot be achieved in the scope of this paper, engaging in scholarship that considers the intersection of fiction and religion may yield illuminating results we might not otherwise encounter. Perhaps due to the unrestrictive nature of fiction

writing, an author has more freedom to manipulate a narrative in a way that expresses only the story that she wants to tell, in a sense providing an alternative to looking only at “lived religion.” Fiction may also allow readers to glimpse certain aspects of a religious culture that would otherwise be more obscured. It could work in concert with ethnographic scholarship, providing insight into and information about a group. For example, by studying how magical realism appears and functions in South American novels, one could conceive of cultural events that rendered this particular storytelling vehicle integral to this region; furthermore, it could assist scholars in reading and interpreting sacred literature of the same culture. By examining and questioning imagined experiences as well as lived experiences, a scholar can perceive a more comprehensive picture experiences and worldviews of a religious group.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Kirn, *Mission to America* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Forum, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” Pew Forum Survey, <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons#> (accessed May 15, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Neela Banerjee, “Survey Shows U.S. Religious Tolerance,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I use “bad religion” as a term to refer to a collection of practices or behaviors that are deemed unacceptable or unpalatable to a group of people; in this particular instance, it is the authors and narrators who comment on this type of religion, though the sentiments echo widely held concerns about religious cultures that deviate from accepted norms.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), 190.

<sup>7</sup> Orsi, 182.

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this essay, “anti literature” is a phrase used to denote a large body of texts/propaganda, similar in their intentions to depict a particular religious group in a negative manner. Though authors such as Givens and Pagliarini do not use this particular terminology, it is a useful way to encapsulate the variety of literature with anti-Catholic, anti-Mormon, anti-NRM, and anti-Masonic themes.

<sup>9</sup> Orsi, 183.

<sup>10</sup> Orsi, 189.

<sup>11</sup> Orsi, 184.

<sup>12</sup> Orsi, 188.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 23 and 124.

<sup>14</sup> Givens, 110.

<sup>15</sup> Givens, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Givens, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Givens, 127.

<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this essay, “anxiety” here refers to the sense of apprehension and even paranoia that is often tied to negative perceptions about the religious groups and its members.

<sup>19</sup> Givens, 139.

<sup>20</sup> Atrocity tales can be defined as narratives that relate shocking and often graphic tales of experiences with “fringe” religious groups, most of which are written after having left the group

- 
- <sup>21</sup> David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (Sept. 1960): 205.
- <sup>22</sup> Davis, 205.
- <sup>23</sup> Davis, 207.
- <sup>24</sup> Davis, 212.
- <sup>25</sup> Davis, 221.
- <sup>26</sup> Davis, 210.
- <sup>27</sup> Davis, 221.
- <sup>28</sup> Davis, 224.
- <sup>29</sup> Maria Monk is a woman who purportedly recounted her horrific experiences as a nun in a Canadian convent in the 1830s. Many of her allegations against the convent were regarding sexually exploitative and violent acts. Her account, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, has since been called into question by many scholars who have concluded that the account was ghostwritten and was a tool for anti-Catholic citizens and clergy.
- <sup>30</sup> James R. Lewis, "Apostates and the Legitimation of Repression: Some Historical and Empirical Perspectives on the Cult Controversy," *Sociology of Religion* 49, issue 4 (1989): 388.
- <sup>31</sup> Lewis, 388. Examples of such apostate accounts include those posted on ex-Mormon websites and forums. Most of these accounts discussed are in personal narrative form, as opposed to fictional form.
- <sup>32</sup> Lewis, 394.
- <sup>33</sup> Lewis, 395.
- <sup>34</sup> Walter Kirn, "Confessions of an Ex-Mormon: A Personal History of America's Most Misunderstood Religion," *The New Republic*, July 13, 2012.
- <sup>35</sup> She does not explicitly indict the LDS Church in this note, though she discusses the issue candidly in various interviews, such as this one with Affirmation.org. [[http://www.affirmation.org/books/larger\\_more\\_inclusive.shtml](http://www.affirmation.org/books/larger_more_inclusive.shtml)]
- <sup>36</sup> Beckie Weinheimer, *Converting Kate* (New York: Viking, 2007), 313.
- <sup>37</sup> Brian Evenson, "When Religion Encourages Abuse: Writing Father of Lies," *The Official Website of Andrew Vachss*, [http://www.vachss.com/media/righteous/evenson\\_1.html](http://www.vachss.com/media/righteous/evenson_1.html) (accessed May 9, 2012).
- <sup>38</sup> Kirn, 35.
- <sup>39</sup> Kirn, 271.
- <sup>40</sup> Brian Evenson, *Father of Lies* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998), 9.
- <sup>41</sup> Givens, 121.
- <sup>42</sup> Givens, 122.
- <sup>43</sup> Davis, 212.
- <sup>44</sup> Davis, 211.
- <sup>45</sup> Davis, 208.
- <sup>46</sup> Kirn, 2-3.
- <sup>47</sup> Kirn, 7.
- <sup>48</sup> Kirn, 63.
- <sup>49</sup> Kirn, 64.
- <sup>50</sup> Kirn, 239.
- <sup>51</sup> Weinheimer, 8.
- <sup>52</sup> Weinheimer, 47.
- <sup>53</sup> Weinheimer, 61.
- <sup>54</sup> Weinheimer, 122.
- <sup>55</sup> Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and American Culture* 9, no.1 (Winter 1999): 104.
- <sup>56</sup> Weinheimer, 32.
- <sup>57</sup> Weinheimer, 206.
- <sup>58</sup> Weinheimer, 212.
- <sup>59</sup> Evenson, 9.
- <sup>60</sup> Evenson, 76.
- <sup>61</sup> Evenson, 156.



---

<sup>62</sup> Evenson, 157.

<sup>63</sup> Evenson, 196.

<sup>64</sup> Davis, 208.

<sup>65</sup> Givens, 151.

<sup>66</sup> Givens, 152.

<sup>67</sup> The use of the terms “other” and “othering” can be understood here to refer to the cultural distancing of a group of people from another – often more socially accepted – group, which has the effect of vilifying or marking as entirely distinct the group and its members; this can also have the effect of alienating or marginalizing people belonging to a particular group.

<sup>68</sup> Kirn, 35.

<sup>69</sup> Kirn, 145.

<sup>70</sup> Kirn, 166.

<sup>71</sup> Kirn, 109.

<sup>72</sup> Kirn, 35.

<sup>73</sup> Weinheimer, 7.

<sup>74</sup> Weinheimer, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Weinheimer, 79.

<sup>76</sup> Weinheimer, 79.

<sup>77</sup> Weinheimer, 65.

<sup>78</sup> Weinheimer, 83.

<sup>79</sup> Evenson, 158-159.

<sup>80</sup> Evenson, 178.

<sup>81</sup> Orsi, 188.

<sup>82</sup> Mason, 15.

<sup>83</sup> Lewis, 388.

<sup>84</sup> Kirn, 6; 1.

<sup>85</sup> Kirn, 6.

<sup>86</sup> Kirn, 7.

<sup>87</sup> Kirn, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Kirn, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Kirn, 24.

<sup>90</sup> Kirn, 209.

<sup>91</sup> Kirn, 224.

<sup>92</sup> Kirn, 225.

<sup>93</sup> Kirn, 261.

<sup>94</sup> Kirn, 261.

<sup>95</sup> Weinheimer, 9.

<sup>96</sup> Weinheimer, 32.

<sup>97</sup> Weinheimer, 140.

<sup>98</sup> Weinheimer, 143.

<sup>99</sup> Weinheimer, 141.

<sup>100</sup> Evenson, 95.

<sup>101</sup> Evenson, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Mason, 15.

<sup>103</sup> Mason, 47, 48.

<sup>104</sup> Mason, 24.

<sup>105</sup> Mason, 32.

<sup>106</sup> Evenson, 30.

<sup>107</sup> Evenson, 193.

<sup>108</sup> When discussing the term “captivity” in this essay, I consider it to refer to a condition of being held against one’s will, usually as a result of being unwillingly forced into a particular religion; Givens 120.

---

<sup>109</sup> Lewis, 387.

<sup>110</sup> Examples of such ex-Mormon websites include [www.exmormon.org](http://www.exmormon.org), [www.postmormon.org](http://www.postmormon.org), <http://www.iamanexmormon.com/>, <http://www.lifeaftermormonism.net/>, <http://www.mormoncurtain.com/>, and <http://www.exmormonscholarstestify.org/>

<sup>111</sup> Kirn, 64.

<sup>112</sup> Kirn, 163.

<sup>113</sup> Kirn, 269.

<sup>114</sup> Kirn, 271.

<sup>115</sup> Weinheimer, 46; 66.

<sup>116</sup> Weinheimer, 78.

<sup>117</sup> Weinheimer, 79.

<sup>118</sup> Weinheimer, 286.

<sup>119</sup> Weinheimer, 285.

<sup>120</sup> Evenson, 102.

<sup>121</sup> Evenson, 103.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Banerjee, Neela. "Survey Shows U.S. Religious Tolerance." *The New York Times*, June 24, 2008.
- Davis, David Brion. "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (Sept. 1960): 205-224.
- Evenson, Brian. *Father of Lies*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998.
- Givens, Terryl. *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myth, and the Construction of Heresy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Kirn, Walter. "Confessions of an Ex-Mormon: A Personal History of America's Most Misunderstood Religion." *The New Republic*, July 13, 2012.
- Kirn, Walter. *Mission to America*. New York: Doubleday, 2005.
- Lewis, James R. "Apostates and the Legitimation of Repression: Some Historical and Empirical Perspectives on the Cult Controversy." *Sociology of Religion* 49, issue 4 (1989): 386-396.
- Mason, Patrick. *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004.
- Pagliarini, Marie Anne. "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America." *Religion and American Culture* 9, no.1 (Winter 1999): 97-128.
- Pew Forum. "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey." Pew Forum Survey. <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons#> (accessed May 15, 2012).
- Weinheimer, Beckie. *Converting Kate*. New York: Viking, 2007.