

Make Yourself Gods:
Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism
By Peter Coviello

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Reviewed by Michael Hubbard MacKay

Borrowing its title from Joseph Smith's far-reaching Nauvoo theology, *Make Yourself Gods* is somehow even more provocative than its title. The average Latter-day Saint reader will chafe under its vocabulary, struggle through its detailed contributions to the study of secularism, and be at odds with its use of queer critique. Furthermore, to the average reader's disdain, this book will be chewed and discussed for a generation to come. It is not likely to be forgotten.

A brilliant literature professor and scholar of nineteenth-century secularism and queer theory, Peter Coviello published *Make Yourself Gods* with the University of Chicago Press in a series disconnected from Mormon studies and is determined to be a provocative and interdisciplinary scholar. He frames his approach as an outsider interested in using the biopolitics within nineteenth-century Mormonism as an ideal lens to view and articulate the complicated, debated, but essential idea of secularism. His book is framed within postsecular scholarship and offers a wholly important framework for queer theory¹ that builds a structure complementing the work of Eve Sedgwick, but ultimately this is a book about "secularism." He contends that the current literature liberalizes nineteenth-century Mormonism, secularizing it, whereas his examination of Latter-day Saint biopolitics places polygamy as the center of the Church's theology, in which the divinization of human flesh demands that the body is the object of enquiry. Though he orients himself by juxtaposing against Jan Shipps's methodological approach in her 1985 classic *Mormonism*, his voice is unlike any other from within

1. Queer theory is an approach that is at odds with the normative and dominant categories of sexuality and gender primarily used in literary and cultural studies, explicated in the work of Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, Jasbir Puar, José Muñoz, and Rod Ferguson.

Mormon studies (save Jared Hickman)—challenging the positions of Paul Reeve, Samuel Brown, and, shockingly, even Richard Bushman.

Coviello is a brilliant writer, and he is very clear about what he is arguing and about what he wants to accomplish in his book. He makes three arguments that run throughout all six chapters that I will list here and discuss further below: (1) using queer theory to shape his argument, he contends that a history of the nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint body is a perfect example to demonstrate the contours of secularism; (2) nineteenth-century Mormonism's march toward the end of polygamy is a history of liberalization and secularization, while the current historical literature in Mormon studies feeds into a similar kind of secularization of Mormonism; (3) this argument also enables a helpful and important vocabulary for articulating secularism. Though Coviello works under the assumption that the reader has a sense for the chronological march of Latter-day Saint history through the nineteenth century, his chapters are organized thematically, beginning with a brilliant chapter on secularism, then moving to the divine body and polygamy, and finishing the first section by examining notions of the female body and the divine. This first section is placed as a theological orientation of the Mormon concept of the body developed before most Church members moved to Utah. Then he addresses imperialism, race, and indigenous peoples. He introduces here an idea he calls "hypernormativity" to mark a fascinating kind of liberalizing (25, 100). The final section uses the Latter-day Saint entanglement with homosexuality to summarize and further explain the biopolitics of secularism. With this brief summary, it's worth stepping backward to further explain his arguments.

First, *Make Yourself Gods* explores the early Mormon concept of body (identifying normative and queer expressions of sex and gender, polygamy and homosexuality, race and godhood) with the scalpel of queer critique, the textbook of queer historiography, and the scholarly sophistication of queer theory. Coviello argues that Mormon history responds well to the "tools" of queer critique, primarily because of the aberrant practice of polygamy. Nineteenth-century normative intimacy opposes the sexual implications of polygamy, which are undeniably and deeply important to Mormonism since polygamy was not just liturgical or occasional but was essential to nineteenth-century Mormon theology, social engagement, community, identity, and sexual practice. Theologically, polygamy was an embodied daily reality of the expression of exaltation, or divinization. In fact, Coviello reads Joseph Smith as teaching that Latter-day Saints were living in divine bodies not yet enlarged; but as an expression of that reality, polygamy enabled them

and the patriarchs “to be Gods” (197). Queering² gender, in particular, Coviello demonstrates that even women held the potential to be gods through polygamy.

It is not that Coviello is simply creating a theological outline of states of the Mormon body but that the carnal body in polygamy and in pleasure is at the heart of the human drama. Furthermore, the same sensorial life continues on into the divine male and female body in the next life. Both blasphemously divine and humanly deviant, the Latter-day Saints are ripe for the picking of the queer theorist. They struggled for whiteness, they were the opposite of “right religion,” they were Mohammedan, and they created the counterbalance of the “normative” in the eyes of Americans, according to Coviello.

Make Yourself Gods follows polygamy from its beginnings to its end in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Coviello sees Latter-day Saint polygamists as radicalizing race, authority, and an imperial kingdom of God within the secular state. The radicalization of sex, race, and gender within polygamous practices created political and social pressures that eventually moved them toward counterpossibilities and normalization. For Coviello, this direction and queer framing exposes the secular reality at work within nineteenth-century Mormon history. He writes, “What we discover . . . is a semivoluntary accommodation to the secular norms of liberal personhood, family, and erotic life, . . . a resonant queer story” (20).

Second, *Make Yourself Gods* reveals the “liberalizing impulse of Mormon criticism” (7). It argues that Mormon studies literature is secularizing Mormonism. Coviello queers Mormon history, framing it against the normative secular liberal worldview, then tracks it like a bobsled down the normative track of secularism. Going from a polygamous to a devoutly monogamous institution creates the momentum, but what is shocking about his thesis is that (while it may have been on a different track) Latter-day Saint scholarly and apologetic literature creates the same kind of momentum down the path to secularism. It’s not that Latter-day Saint scholarship didn’t appropriately or accurately portray polygamy, racism, or Latter-day Saint hierarchy, it’s that they secularized it and misappraised it. Instead of evaluating the queer reality of polygamy, some of the scholarship challenged the violence of Missourians, especially focusing on the liberal secular sentiment of religious

2. “Queering” refers to a reading that challenges the binaries ingrained within heteronormative cultures, used here and below.

freedom. The strongest weapons of liberalism are raised in evaluation of Mormon history. Nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints became victims in this secular analysis. Coviello argues that early Mormons are being rescued by those scholars who assume that Latter-day Saints are the embodiment of liberal personhood—liberally rational, democratic, charitable, nonviolent exemplifiers of modern secularism. The author writes that these scholars “reduce Mormonism . . . to ‘good religion’ by the lights of secularism” (21).

Coviello argues that this literature framed the Latter-day Saints as enlightened secularists, liberal in their devotions to the normative designs of antebellum America. The deviant, abnormal practice of polygamy was neither liberal nor absent from Mormonism. Coviello argues for Latter-day Saints to be a perfect example of the secular and how queer theory can highlight the secular by showing their determined theological refusal to cave to the secular, until the end of the century, of course. Latter-day Saint prophets spent time in jail, and many were willing to die for the cause of polygamy, theocracy, and other antiliberal sentiments. Coviello argues that the secularization of Mormonism was not only demonstrated by the abolition of nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy, but also that twenty-first-century writing and scholarship about polygamy was no vanguard, since it too pushed liberalism’s secular agenda.

Finally, *Make Yourself Gods* creates a brilliant structure and foundation around the current and classic literature on secularism to frame Coviello’s argument, not by demanding the difference between religion and nonreligion but instead by differentiating between “good religion” and “bad belief.” Secularism is not “nonreligion,” but secular religion inevitably shaped itself, socially and bodily, around liberal selfhood. Secularism is a liberalizing behemoth that categorizes faith in opposition to fundamentalism—or proper spirituality in opposition to the problem of zealotry. Because “secularism” has increasingly developed nuance upon nuance to become a field essential to multiple disciplines, Coviello hopes to create in *Make Yourself Gods* definitive axioms of “secularism” in the same way Eve Sedgwick did for queer theory. These axioms may end up being the most important part of his book in the long run. Here are my brief summaries.

The Seven Axioms:

1. “Secularism is not hostile to ‘religion’ as such” (25).

Charles Taylor’s *Secular Age* was correct in asserting that “secularism” is not a force or a social ordering that religion is opposed to. Secularism is also not the replacement of religion after religiosity

fades. Secularism marks the possibility of more live options that are not religion. Secularism also does not supersede, cancel, or replace religion. "Religion flourished in a secular age, and not as a holdover, residue, or unconverted outside" (27).

2. "Secularism's negative, its enemy, is not religion; it is bad belief" (27).

Talal Asad was correct in arguing in *Formations of the Secular* that to understand the secular, one must grapple with the binary propagates that it creates (belief and knowledge; reason and imagination; history and fiction; the natural and the supernatural; the sacred and the profane). These binaries then propagate in what Nancy Bentley calls the "secularization two-step" (27), where a second-level binary is associated with the first-level binary (ennobling and harmful; civilizing and imbruting; tolerable and malign). For example, the first-level binary of religion and secularism moves to the second-level binary of tolerant and intolerant. Political liberalism does not distinguish between religion and non-religion but instead between religion and "bad belief." Departure from liberal virtues creates bad religion.

3. "Secularism is a normative project: a discipline" (29).

Secularism is a discipline that gives a name to a specific way of structuring the world. This way of structuring the world developed historically through a variety of kinds of power that eventually "cohere in the political order of liberalism." It is a discourse of power paired with the kind of liberalism that emerged with Western empires. This axiom is developed around the work of John Modern in *Secularism in Antebellum America*, which charts the emergence of "spirituality" across nineteenth-century America. "His work attunes us to secularism not as object but condition, not as enforceable proposition but as something instead networked, animated by a self-replicating systematicity" (32). It is a normative condition.

4. "Secularism has a body" (33).

Though secularism is a normative project, it still comes in multiple historical forms, different normative models, and varying political realities. With the innumerable possibilities of secular encounter, gender is the creator of the secular, but it is also very clearly created by the secular, for example. It is both generator and generated. Coviello provocatively explains: "The discourse of secularism conjugates what flesh it encounters" (38). Secularism,

in Foucauldian fashion, invents the “objects through and upon which they act” (39).

5. “Secularism is a Biopolitics” (39).

Imagining the embodiment of secularism is to understand secularism. The biopolitical is a kind of power invested into disciplining the body, fostering specific kinds of life and mass social phenomena. In this sense “secularism conjugates the flesh it encounters” and becomes something through which secularism is acted out, all the while the flesh is also being acted upon or shaped because of the performance. The disciplines of secularism are then aimed at things like the racialization of religion or the sexual normalization of a larger economy of life. One can imagine the individual body, as Kyla Schuller explains, working toward a way to “integrate the body [itself] into a system of economic productivity” (39); or the biopolitics that work to adjust population to economic process.

6. “‘Secularization’ is a not a fantasy—change in the conditions of belief is real—but the secularization thesis is a distorting, partisan way of telling the story of that change” (42).

The secularization thesis is dead. The idea associated with the secularization thesis, challenged by Jared Hickman and Coviello (among others working within postsecular critique), is triumphalist, though its inner concepts—the progressive movement of self-emancipation, enlightened skepticism, rationalization, and tolerance—are relevant ways of getting at the story of secularism. In *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa created a “singularity of Christianity” in the name of examining religions across the world. Hickman criticizes secularism as a “name for racialized Christian domination” (45).

7. “Secularization is a theodicy: the radicalized theodicy of hegemonic liberalism” (45).

Secularism is “orthodoxy in other clothes.” Secularism is “a normative sociality, an immanent frame . . . that allows us to know anything at all as ‘religious’ and to know the ‘secular’ as the thing that it is not” (52). Like the theodicy of Job, or of Islam, or of Christianity, the theodicy of hegemonic liberalism is secularism.

In conclusion, *Make Yourself Gods* seems to claim that all potent academic lines of thought lead eventually to Salt Lake City and The Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. If Coviello had included a strain of thought about environmental studies, along with his analysis of religion, gender, race, politics, marriage, sexuality, and all things interesting, then he truly would have led all roads to Mormonism. All jokes aside, he has swung the door wide open for further research on queer theory and queer critique that could get to the heart of central tension within religion in general, but especially in Mormon studies: the concept of normativity. His book shouts resoundingly that Mormon studies is one of the most fascinating studies of religion in the history of the United States and can be used as an example to examine even the biggest ideas in the academy.

On the other hand, I assume that much of the attention Coviello will receive from Latter-day Saints will be dismissive. As you can already tell from this review, it is heavy laden with a steep vocabulary curve. His insistence that early Latter-day Saints were “queer” is likely to be misunderstood, and his direct critique of the current leadership will cause Latter-day Saints to react aggressively or dismissively. But like any gruesome “experiment,” historical or not, it’s hard not to look. In his final chapter, his critique draws your attention. He writes, “Think again of that humble originary scene: Louisa Beaman, standing before Joseph Nobel and beside Joseph Smith, on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River, disguised as a man. Such queernesses were as good as advertised” (216) since Joseph Smith apparently married Louisa that day as a polygamous wife.

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