

**Review of Holly Welker (ed.), *Baring Witness: 36 Mormon Women Talk Candidly About Love, Sex and Marriage*, Chicago: University of Illinois 2016, xiii + 275 pp., ISBN 9780252040344**

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Holly Welker, a single Mormon woman in a religion that positions heterosexual marriage as a prerequisite for salvation and a pursuit for all women, is seeking to understand what 'distinguishes LDS marriage from the women in them' (p. 4). This collection of 36 essays by Mormon women is her response to that question, recording to what extent lived experiences equate to idealized Mormon depictions of marriage. Welker aims that by presenting, what she calls 'thoughtful statements' (p. 15), it authentically discloses how women navigate intimate relationships as both spaces for conflict and contentment in a Mormon context. The publication of this book does significantly contribute to Mormon literature on gender by shifting discussions from the ubiquitous historical accounts of polygamous marriages to a contemporary exposure of how Mormon women embrace, reject or comply with Mormon expectations of 'marriage for all time and eternity' (p. 120). Welker is challenging the insular outputs of Mormon studies, that concentrates on knowledge production by Mormons for Mormons, as this book on Mormonism and gender is to be read by both Mormon and non-Mormons.

To facilitate a broader reach, Welker has given an essential glossary to understand the Mormon lexis, as Mormon congregations cultivate terms of references that are peculiar to their religious culture. An example of the nuances found in Mormon linguistics is the book title 'Baring witness', as 'baring witness' references the Mormon practice of baring testimony of visceral belief in the 'truths' of the gospel and the disclosing of intimate experiences with the divine. Therefore, Welker sees these essays as a form of testimony, offering raw, veracious and deeply personal interpretations of love, sex and marriage. As the overarching theme of this collection is a faithful disclosure of marital and sexual expression in the Mormon community, Welker extends no commentary on the extent these essays are universal or evidential. Instead, she positions the women as knowledge givers and producers and restricts editorial influence to the selection of themes, allowing them to emerge from reflections on the unique issues faced

by Mormon women and how they navigate inequality, sexuality and gender in relationships.

In Section I 'For better and for worse' it articulates accounts of women who begun their relationship invested in Mormon orthopraxis expectations of marriage. As the marriage progresses, these women interrogate how they reconcile lived practice and religious demands of marriage and their desire for self-determination, which result in tension between loyalty and love for partner, their own well-being, and their faith. The situating of shared experiences but different outcomes helps to identify the degree self-fulfillment and autonomy is cultivated or denied in marriage in Mormon communities, which does offer comparison between positive, loving and supportive relationships and encounters that fail to meet expectations. The trauma of partner or own loss of faith and the tension of living a covenant marriage is not exclusive to Mormonism, as it is found in the narratives of women in other conservative evangelical communities. Similarly, discussions on divorce, death, and remarriage in Sections III and IV, although still heavily shaped by Mormon rhetoric, have resonance with the wider community. It is when the essays focus on the unique Mormon practice of Temple marriage in Section II 'Complicated paths to the temple (or not getting there at all)' that innovative paradigms in the field of religion and gender are generated.

Temple marriage vows, a ritual that is only permitted to be conducted with and in front of members, are considered to transcend death and become eternal unions. The decision to marry outside of the temple is framed as an inferior form of marriage and will restrict spiritual, temporal and emotional relationship growth. Thus, there is considerable societal pressure for women to marry within the Mormon community and LDS women are conditioned to select a LDS partner rather than risk eternal exclusion by marrying nonmembers. This intensely contrasts with the concluding section on how marriage expectations are 'met, unmet or exceeded' by suggesting that interfaith and intercultural marriages are the 'happily ever after' (p. 13).

These essays disrupt the Mormon narrative of Temple marriage as the divine union of souls, as for some women, the Temple vows are painful as it positions men as presiding authorities in the home, relegating them to a submissive and subordinate role in the relationship. It reveals the extent of those who marry outside of the temple are stigmatised, as by rejecting temple marriage, it appears to demonstrate a lack of trust in God and in the eternal marriage covenant. The stories that reveal the shame, the betrayal and the trauma when temple marriages fail, challenge Mormon depictions of Temple marriages and disrupt the dominant Mormon narrative of Temple marriage having immunity from divorce.

In exposing an insight into intimate sacred rituals in Mormonism to those outside of Mormonism, these depictions are divulging private religious practice into public spaces, which can deepen and develop religious literacy. This collection also raises consciousness on the impact of singlehood on Mormon women in a religion of emulation, as Mormon theology depicts a Heavenly Father and Mother joined in matrimony as the ultimate model. Single women are not given their own space in this book but are interspersed in the section, discussing how sexual expression outside marriage can be found in a deeply conservative

religion and the process these women go through to re-imagine themselves in a hetero-centric church.

These essays are powerful disclosures on the impact of Mormon theological and cultural mores on the lived experiences of Mormon women, but issue must be taken with the absence of international discourses. By omitting a diversity of women, it offers limited alternative discourses, which results in a book that gives only partial insight into a global religion. However, Welker does recognise that there was inequality in submissions, with accounts predominately from Utah, white, liberal, middle class educated women, restricting intersectional accounts of race, Mormonism and marriage. She also laments the lack of Mormon orthodox accounts of marriage and suggests that conservative Mormon women were reluctant to engage as the book challenged orthopraxis, thus seen as questioning the legitimacy of Mormon doctrine.

In my reading of these essays as both a scholar of Mormonism and a Mormon, I did feel that Welker has facilitated a range of lived experiences on how Mormon women negotiate secular expectations of equality and religious patriarchy. She is creating conversations between Mormon congregations, Non-Mormon communities and Mormon scholarship by informing us how Mormon women rebel, respond and reproduce gender inequality through marriage and expectations of relationships. Therefore, these essays are concrete examples of the contested territory that Mormon women encounter, as they simultaneously re-trench and assimilate between secular values and faith beliefs in a religion that situates its marriage as being of divine design.