

Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom

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Review

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McBride, Spencer W. *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$29.95 ISBN 9780190909413 pp. 269.

On July 4, 1844, Americans celebrated sixty-eight years of independence with feasts, parades, and fireworks. Over three million enslaved Black people, however, were not celebrating. As Frederick Douglass would declare eight years later, “What to the slave is the Fourth of July?” Amongst other mechanisms, the southern Slave Power continued to enthrone states’ rights as a “political strategy...to maintain a carefully constructed—and deeply unjust—economic and social hierarchy (209).”

In the North, Independence Day passed with an uneasy calm in Philadelphia. Tragically, however, the next three days saw nativist mobs reignite anti-Catholic violence begun two months earlier. One thousand miles west in Nauvoo, Illinois, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) were mourning. A week earlier their prophet and presidential candidate Joseph Smith had been assassinated while in Illinois State custody. Hundreds of electioneer missionaries canvassing the nation for Smith were just learning of his murder and would dejectedly begin returning to Nauvoo. Sustained anti-Mormon violence would expel them from the nation only eighteen months later.

This treatment of Catholics and Mormons demonstrated that in antebellum America religious freedom was not universal. But why? Spencer W. McBride, an associate managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers, argues in his book, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*, “that the states’ rights strategy was as effective at impeding efforts to establish full citizenship rights of religious minorities as it was at blocking efforts to establish the personhood of men and women of African descent enslaved in the American South” (209). In this important work, McBride employs the causes and outcomes of Smith’s sincere but quixotic campaign as a lens to effectively evaluate antebellum religious inequality and the systems that perpetuated it.

“Joseph Smith’s new religion, with its community building and its anti-slavery and pro-American-Indian beliefs engendered staunch opposition from Missourians who feared Mormons’ growing economic and political power.” When tension turned to conflict, the governor of Missouri ordered the infamous “Extermination Order.” While Smith languished in jail, militia-mobs forced his people into Illinois—victims of theft, violence, and even rape.

After gaining his freedom, Smith traveled to Washington D.C. seeking federal assistance for protection and redress. Here McBride excels, meticulously immersing Smith and the reader in the larger context of American political life and realities. When the president and Congress offer no assistance behind the guise of states’ rights and electoral politics, Smith lost confidence in the American political system and even democracy itself.

No longer politically naive, Smith built a new community in Nauvoo, Illinois, by playing hardball with the state’s Whigs and Democrats. Both parties, desperate for the thousands of incoming Mormon votes, gave Smith a liberal charter and a city militia that he used to protect himself and his followers. In fact, the first law passed protected the religious freedom of all faiths, the prime reason that Smith had sought political power.

In self-preservation, Mormons engaged in block voting for the candidates who offered them the most protection, eventually becoming the kingmakers of the 1842 gubernatorial race. Many western Illinoisans saw these moves as a threat against democracy and formed the Anti-Mormon Party. While Americans were comfortable with Protestant religious leaders as politicians, Smith’s power mirrored Catholic loyalty to the Pope, which the Protestant majority considered dangerous to the Republic.

Desperate to avoid another Missouri, Smith wrote to the likely candidates for the 1844 presidential election. Again, McBride deftly describes each of these men and their positions in and on contemporary American politics. Those that answered Smith refused to help, chiefly citing states’ rights concerns.

Therefore, in January of 1844, Mormon leaders decided to run Smith as an independent candidate. Smith crafted a political pamphlet mailed to newspapers and leaders throughout the nation. Among other items, he called for the abolishment of slavery through remuneration, the annexation of Texas, bank and prison reform, and, above all, power for the federal government to intervene within the states to protect the constitutional freedoms of life, liberty, property, and religion. This is the strongest part of the book. McBride gives the best scholarly treatment to date

of each policy proposal and its place in the wider American conversation. Equally powerful, he demonstrates each proposal was “personally poignant” to the prophet-candidate, stemming from the injustices he had experienced (90).

Smith and his followers came to see his campaign as the means to redeem the nation spiritually and politically. In March of 1844, Smith created the secret Council of Fifty which he believed was the genesis for the Kingdom of God that would govern after Christ’s return. As the American government had repeatedly failed them, they looked to create a “theodemocracy” either in independent Texas, somewhere in the Mexican-controlled half of the continent, or in the United States with Smith’s election as president. Soon they determined to go all in on the election doing what no other presidential candidate had ever done, not only in dispatching hundreds of men throughout the country but in having them preach as well as politick.

While many of the nation’s newspapers commented on Smith’s campaign, most did so mockingly. However, behind the mocking McBride adroitly captures an undercurrent of genuine fear that Smith and others like him threatened democracy and needed to be marginalized.

Smith’s campaign ended abruptly in late June as the mobs that he and his electioneers were campaigning against murdered him. The assassins escaped justice and soon the Mormons fled Illinois and the nation. In antebellum America, such extra-legal action against the Mormons was not seen as violating religious liberty because the minority Mormons were not deemed a true religion.

In time, a civil war and the Fourteenth Amendment would open the way for greater religious equality with the federal government being able to apply constitutional freedoms within the states. However, it would not be until the 1920s that such equality was consistently applied. This the Mormons knew well. The very federal power they had campaigned for in 1844 was turned on them for decades in the fight against their practice of polygamy. “Indeed, the federal government proved just as willing to discriminate against Mormon citizens as state governments” (213).

Joseph Smith for President is beautifully written and delivers throughout the correct amount of context without stalling the narrative flow, making it widely readable, yet incisively informative. McBride effectively engages his training and scholarship of the early republic and his extensive knowledge of the primary source material regarding Joseph Smith to create the

most comprehensive exploration yet of Smith's presidential campaign in its wider American historical context.

There are some holes that limit the book. I mention two. The subtitle reads "the prophet, the assassins, and the fight for American religious freedom." While the book analyzes in detail Smith and religious freedom, there is a noticeable lack of material on the "assassins" and their conspiracy. McBride catalogs the events leading to the assassination but does not give any extensive analysis of the conspirators and their motives, despite there being, as he admits, a large amount of scholarship to draw from. He does make some definitive declarations, but these often contradict the evidence he has given.

The most puzzling omission is the lack of in-depth discussion of Catholics, the other, and much larger, persecuted religious minority. McBride mentions only in passing the concurrent anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia that spring and summer. These events would seem central to the arguments he is making, especially since Joseph Smith's campaign wrote to the Catholic figure at the center of the riots proposing a political alliance. Perhaps it does not fit his systemic argument because in the case of the riots, state militia units fought *against* the mobs (more militiamen and nativists died or were wounded than actual Catholics), whereas with Smith, disbanded militiamen *formed* the mob who assassinated him while *in* state custody.

Overall, McBride's excellent treatise using Joseph Smith's campaign as an "indispensable lens" on the "persistence of religious inequality in American society," delivers (5). For those studying antebellum intersections of religion and politics, particularly non-Protestant religions, this book is a must read. Antebellum historians must grapple with McBride's findings and the treatment of Mormons as a harbinger of the Civil War. It also reminds its readers that even today seemingly neutral laws and policies can ignorantly or intentionally deprive citizens of their full exercise of constitutional rights.

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