The Mormon Temple Lot Case: space, memory, and identity in a divided new religion

Abstract

Mormonism is among the most studied religious phenomena of American history. Yet little attention has been devoted to one of its most telling and, at the time, most famous chapters, the “Temple Lot Case” of 1891-1896, a legal battle over sacred space, cultural memory, group identity, and judicial intervention in religion. The suit involved three rival Mormon sects: Granville Hedrick’s Church of Christ, based in Independence, Missouri; Joseph Smith III’s Reorganized Church, based in Lamoni, Iowa; and Brigham Young’s LDS Church, based in Utah. In previous decades, the churches had forged distinct identities from one another, stemming from their divergent interpretations of Mormonism’s founding prophet, Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844). The “Hedrickites” lionized the teachings of Smith’s early years, the “Josephites” emphasized the moderate teachings of Smith’s middle years, and the “Brighamites” institutionalized the controversial semi-secret teachings of Smith’s final years. In 1891, the Reorganized Church filed suit in the Eighth Federal Circuit Court for possession of the Temple Lot Smith dedicated at Independence in 1831. The Hedrickites owned it, the Josephites thought they had a better claim to it, and the Brighamites sought to prevent the Josephites from obtaining it. The Reorganized Church presented evidence demonstrating it was the rightful successor of Joseph Smith’s church; the Hedrickites and Brighamites countered with evidence of their own. The case produced an array of notable witnesses, including elites from Mormonism’s founding generation, leaders from its divided second generation, and figures from Missouri’s colorful past. Newspapers from the New York Times to the Anaconda Standard followed the suit closely. The present work is the first book-length study of the Temple Lot Case. It offers one of the most in-depth treatments of a U.S. religious property suit to date. It chronicles the establishment and fragmentation of arguably America’s most successful native-born religion. It examines the contestation of an American sacred space. And it traces the differentiation of collective memory and identity among competing religious siblings.
Finding the lost. While on a tour to publicize his book, “Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness,” Reeve says lots of Latter-day Saints would ask him if he knew of a black Mormon in their ancestry or ones they had discovered. It prompted him to wonder why there was no repository where information on these members could be assembled and available to scholars. So he set about to rectify that. This work will help scholars and lay members alike understand, he says, “what it means to be a member of a minority in a suspect minority religion.” It also will give black Latter-day Saints themselves a pioneer past to celebrate, he says, and an identity in the fabric of Mormonism. Indeed, Reeve says, they have always been there. Comments ().

Here in the U.S., the three Mormon denominations present at Temple Lot have found a way to peacefully share the contested space, as well as two other sites nearby. The roots of their disputes may not be as deep as the ones that entangle contested sites overseas. The LDS church and the Church of Christ (Temple Lot) retain their belief in a literal and imminent return of Jesus to Independence, while the Community of Christ does not. The LDS church has “temple ordinances” — sacraments and rites performed in temples for baptism of the dead, marriage and “sealing” families as “eternal.” I never would have guessed in your case.