

The Bountiful Utah Temple pokes through the fog as it envelopes the valleys along the Wasatch Front in this 2004 photo. | Ray Boren, Deseret News

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# Perspective: Under the Banner of Hollywood

Too much real-life anger comes out of Tinseltown. It's time for Dustin Lance Black and company to let go of the angst toward Latter-day Saints

By Hal Boyd |



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As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints my faith teaches me to forgive 70 times 7. “Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek,” Jesus Christ says, “turn to him the other also.”

My faith admonishes me to love my enemies, to bless those that curse and to do good to those who hate. The current president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the 97-year-old former heart-surgeon Russell M. Nelson, recently pled with fellow Latter-day Saints “to do all you can to end personal conflicts that are currently raging in your hearts and in your lives.”

And yet, FX’s new serial drama “Under the Banner of Heaven,” a redux of Jon Krakauer’s book by the same name, is built on the premise that my faith is dangerous — violent even.

It’s an odd thesis.

But the logic goes something like this: By placing “revelation” above “reason” religionists are particularly susceptible to violence.

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The irony, of course, is that Krakauer extols “reason” while committing a fundamental logical fallacy — the fallacy of composition — assuming that what’s true of the parts (some religionists are violent) is also true of the whole (all religions/religionists are violent).

But, in fact, when it comes to Latter-day Saints, statistics support the idea that communities with a high percentage of Latter-day Saints tend to have lower-than-average rates of violent crime. Utah, the state with the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the country, ranks as the 13th least-violent state in the nation, according to annual FBI statistics. Idaho, the state with the second-highest percentage of Latter-day Saints, ranks as the 10th least-violent state.

Some of the safest cities in Utah (Bountiful, Farmington, Pleasant Grove, Spanish Fork, etc.) are communities with higher-than-average Latter-day Saint populations (between 70%-90%). Meanwhile, the safest city in Idaho, Rexburg, is home to Brigham Young University-Idaho with a population that’s 90% Latter-day Saint.

When Krakauer’s book first arrived in the years following Sept. 11, 2001, violence and religion were still on the minds of many Americans. Some commentators thankfully drew careful distinctions between the very small group of violent terrorists who carried out the attacks and the millions of Muslims for whom faith inspires peace.

But Krakauer, Richard Dawkins and other atheistic types (Krakauer says he's a nonbeliever, not an atheist) often displayed the limits of their own rationality by painting with too broad of brushstrokes and, *ipso facto*, equating religion with violence.

In his book, Krakauer uses the Lafferty murders, and the conflicts of early Mormons, to weave together a clever narrative that makes for an entertaining read, but ultimately presents an irrational argument.

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The redux of “Under the Banner of Heaven” commits similar sins, depicting a fictional detective who gradually becomes disillusioned with his faith while investigating the Lafferty murders. But these sins seem less justified coming more than two decades after Sept. 11. With a release date in 2022, the schtick comes across as anachronistic at best, and just plain bigoted at worst.

There's an actual war in Ukraine right now. Latter-day Saints are sending humanitarian aid. Meanwhile the self-styled auteurs behind “Under the Banner of Heaven” are doing media junkets.

In fact, if any American community has the nation's attention today for its acts of violence and irrationality, it wouldn't be the suburbs of Salt Lake City. It would probably be Hollywood.

From the steady stream of Kevin Spacey-type #MeToo revelations to the recent right hook heard around the world to Johnny Depp's ramblings on a witness stand to the shocking events on the set of “Rust,” the one culture that seems closer to producing “dangerous men” — a phrase used in the first episode

of “Under the Banner of Heaven” — would likely be Tinseltown.

So while there’s certainly room for reasoned critiques of religion in general, and my faith in particular, Hollywood today lacks the moral authority and “Under the Banner of Heaven” simply misses the substance.

But none of this is all that surprising.

When the Deseret News asked if any active Latter-day Saints were hired to help with the production of “Under the Banner of Heaven,” a publicist said they would check. They later confirmed that no active church members were paid to write or produce the show. But they did find some active Latter-day Saints working in costume design and with the “crew.”

So, there’s that.

Imagine Hollywood spending millions of dollars to produce a series focusing negative attention on a minority faith in America and then deciding not to integrate their voices into the writing or production.

You don’t need to imagine. Hollywood just did that.

To be fair, the show's 47-year-old writer-producer Dustin Lance Black grew up as a member of the faith. And they had two other former church members involved. But Black's career has also been punctuated by projects needling his childhood church.

For those not attuned to the oh-so-important happenings of Hollywood, Black cut his teeth (and a few checks for himself) while working on HBO's "Big Love," a drama about a polygamist family, as well as the not-so-friendly documentary titled "8: The Mormon Proposition."

"Perhaps it's controversial," Black recently said about his latest work, "Under the Banner of Heaven," "but listen, if you do a deep dive into any religion, but I think particularly the Mormon religion, there's only two ways to go. It is either going to become a musical comedy or it's going to turn to terror and horror."

Seems pretty even-handed.

Utah has actually been in a nearly-two-century "deep dive" into the "Mormon religion" and today the state has one of the strongest economies in the country (The Wall Street Journal dubbed it an economic "star") as well as one of the highest rates of upward mobility. By at least one measure, the state ranks as the happiest in the country and has the highest percentage of children being raised by two parents under the same roof.

Oh, the terror. Oh, the horror.

It's public knowledge that Black takes issue with the church's past political efforts to define marriage as being between one man and one woman (reminder: In 2008 Barack Obama believed the law should define marriage as being between one man and one woman). Black was angered by the politics of California's Proposition 8.

But we're now almost a decade and a half removed from Proposition 8. Same-sex marriage is the law of the land. As recently as 2019, Utah ranked second in the nation in terms of overall support for LGBTQ nondiscrimination laws. The church is pushing for federal legislation that seeks to balance religious liberty and LGBTQ rights. Noted thinkers and longtime advocates of same-sex marriage such as Jonathan Rauch, of Brookings, and William Eskridge, of Yale Law School, among others, have publicly encouraged such efforts.

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Despite the constant drumbeat in some quarters that gay Latter-day Saint kids are far worse living in Latter-day Saint homes, researchers from Bowling Green State University recently published findings suggesting that gay Latter-day Saint kids may actually have lower suicidality than non-Latter-day Saint kids in Utah. Scholars attribute these findings to lower rates of drug use — Latter-day Saints eschew drugs and alcohol — and more stable two-parent households.

Utah, of course, isn't all glowing statistics. It has plenty of flaws. And so, too, do Latter-day Saints.

But "Under the Banner of Heaven" doesn't take much of an interest in the contemporary issues that could actually foster a better understanding of my faith tradition. Instead, the production comes across as yet one more mile marker in a decadeslong trail of angst.

In old times you heard the words "thou shalt not kill," Jesus says in his sublime Sermon on the Mount. But anyone who is "angry," he continues, is in danger of judgment and in need of reconciliation. So leave your offering at the temple, he tells his followers, and go and make things right.

America is in desperate need of reconciliation.

We must work to foster genuine peace. But it won't happen if our entertainers continue to sell us fear and resentment. Sadly too much of the latter is what's produced these days under the banner of Hollywood.

*Samuel Benson contributed to reporting in this piece.*

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