



When certainty reigns, reason goes into thin air

Jon Krakauer looks for the nature of faith in the violent murders committed by aberrant Mormons

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By Jane Lampman

"God is greater than the United States, and when the Government conflicts with heaven, we will be ranged under the banner of heaven and against the Government.... Polygamy is a divine institution.... The United States cannot abolish it."

Those are the provocative words of John Taylor, who in the late 19th century followed Brigham Young as "president, prophet, seer, and revelator" of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A decade later, however, the Mormon church reversed itself so that Utah could become a state.

Today, the church excommunicates those who practice polygamy, or "plural marriage." Yet communities of polygamists exist in Utah and elsewhere, and apparently continue to draw recruits from the mainstream. They see current leaders as having abandoned the true faith practiced by church founder Joseph Smith and successor Brigham Young, and believe God will raise up from among them a leader who will set all back in order.

It is into this zealous and startling world that Jon Krakauer takes readers of his latest book, "Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith." The best-selling author of "Into Thin Air" and "Into the Wild" - portrayals of people who explore physical extremes - turns here to an exploration of religious extremism.

In 1984, Ron and Dan Lafferty, devout Mormon fundamentalists, brutally murdered their young sister-in-law and her 15-month-old daughter because she had urged wives to resist their plan to become polygamists. Dan, now serving a life sentence, and Ron, on death row, firmly believe that God told them to commit the murders and have shown no remorse.

In unraveling the origins of these horrific murders the author expressly links the violent acts not only to religious fanaticism but also to the history and teachings of America's fastest-growing religion.

Indeed, he aims to understand such fundamentalists "for what [they] may tell us about the roots of brutality, perhaps, but even more for what might be learned about the nature of faith."

A professed agnostic, Krakauer early on expresses his view of religion - "those murky sectors of the heart and head that prompt most of us to believe in God - and compel an impassioned few, predictably, to carry that irrational belief to its logical end.

"Faith is the very antithesis of reason, injudiciousness a crucial component of spiritual devotion," he adds.

It may not be surprising, then, that while this compelling book raises important issues - some pertinent to today's news - it also delivers a skewed and misleading picture of a faith now practiced by 11 million people worldwide.

Krakauer interweaves the story of the Laffertys, intimate views of polygamist life in several communities, and the history of Mormonism. He zeroes in on elements of church history particularly pertinent to his theme: violent clashes with non-Mormons in Missouri and Illinois (including Joseph Smith's murder by a mob); Smith's polygamy, which at first was surreptitious and later enunciated as a divine commandment; and church leaders' involvement in the 1857 Mountain Meadows massacre of a wagon train heading to California.

It's a provocative mix, which draws legitimately on the work of some Mormon historians who published church history with all its warts, history which leaders would have preferred to keep secret. But it is not tempered by discussion with church leaders or ordinary Latter-day Saints, whose lives evince a very different ethos.

A brief analysis of the recent case of Elizabeth Smart, who was kidnapped by a Mormon fundamentalist keen to make her one of his seven wives, breaks no ground beyond news accounts.

The book's value (apart from as a riveting read) lies in its illuminating depiction of theocratic, polygamist communities, and family life as told by participants. It reveals marriages of teenagers and others "by commandment," sexual abuse - and how thousands are able to live freely and often take in millions in welfare checks while defying the law. It also includes voices of men and women who view the practice positively, such as a Mormon mother and daughter whose family is now for the first time considering polygamy.

After the church banned plural marriage in 1890, some leaders continued to condone and even practice it for a time; most Saints eventually turned against it. Yet, says Krakauer, Section 132 of the church's "Doctrine and Covenants" - Smith's revelation on the subject - remains part of scripture.

The recent Supreme Court decision on the private relations of homosexuals has already led some Americans to warn that it paves the way for a religious-freedom case for polygamy. Indeed, fundamentalists have pressed that case in the past.

Not surprisingly, the book has stirred strong reaction from the church. The implication that the Laffertys' crime followed in a line of violent past actions resulting from church teachings could lead readers to conclude "that every Latter-day Saint, including your friendly Mormon neighbor, has a tendency to violence," said Mike Otterson, church spokesman, in a statement. "Krakauer unwittingly puts himself in the same camp as those who believe every German is a Nazi ... and every Arab a terrorist."

The author's propensity to see religion as the natural source of violence is simplistic. Those who have studied religion's involvement in conflict see a much more complex picture - faith intertwining with nationalist/cultural elements on the political scene and with psychological/social factors in individual experience.

Krakauer himself mentions, for instance, that the Laffertys' strict father regularly hit them and their mother, and beat a family dog to death with a baseball bat in front of them. Just before the murders, Ron Lafferty's wife had left him and taken the children to Florida, and he was also in dire economic straits.

This is a gripping tale likely to capture a wide audience and draw attention to the Mormon church and little-known aspects of its history and teachings. It offers no clue, however, to what has spurred the faith's astonishing growth in recent decades. Nor does Krakauer offer, in the end, fresh insights on his stated aim of learning more about "the nature of faith."

• *Jane Lampman writes about religion and ethics for the Monitor.*

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