

Under the Banner of Heaven
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A Story of Violent Faith
By Jon Krakauer

A review of by Andrew Johnson

On July 24, 1984, in American Fork, Colorado, an attractive, outgoing young mother, Brenda Lafferty, and her baby daughter Erica were brutally murdered. The assailants, Dan and Ron Lafferty, brothers-in-law of Brenda, slit their victims' throats with a butcher's knife. Convinced that they were carrying out God's will, they were unhindered by emotional or moral obstacles.

On the surface, this tragedy may appear to be just another run-of-the-mill homicide perpetrated by deranged religious fanatics-worth of a few newspaper articles, perhaps, but of no further interest. Yet in Jon Krakauer's masterful narration, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*, it becomes clear that these murders cannot be dismissively pigeonholed as the incomprehensible acts of a pair of lunatics. Dan and Ron Lafferty, in Krakauer's telling, are the intelligible products of a specific religious milieu, Mormon fundamentalism. And Mormon fundamentalism exhibits a perfectly intelligible continuity with historical Mormonism.

Seeking to shed light on the motives of the Lafferty brothers, Krakauer takes the reader on an exploration of their social and theological roots. In the course of his chronicle we are presented with a motley cast of villains and victims, historical and contemporary, famous and unfamiliar. There is „Uncle Rulon" Jeffs, the 92-year-old *de facto* dictator of the polygamist fundamentalist Mormon community of Colorado City, Arizona, who is known to his followers as „the Prophet" and keeps them in line by, among other things, banning all television, newspapers, and magazines. There is the 14-year-old Mormon Elizabeth Smart, who gained national prominence after she was abducted in the middle of the night at knifepoint by the fundamentalist Mormon Brian David Mitchell. Plying Elizabeth's receptive mind with Mormon scriptures, Mitchell brainwashed her into assuming the unofficial role of his second wife-or, more precisely, concubine-until she was rescued nine months later thanks to an episode of *America's Most Wanted*. There is Joseph Smith (Jr.), charismatic founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS Church) and an outspoken proponent of „plural marriage," whose libido drove him to amass some 40 "celestial" wives before, at the age of 38, he met his premature demise at the hands of an angry mob. Not last, and certainly not least, there are Dan and Ron Lafferty themselves, whose metamorphosis from upstanding and respected members of their community into cold-blooded murderers Krakauer documents in riveting detail.

Most readers will already be aware that polygamy is practiced even today by isolated fundamentalist Mormon communities in Utah and other parts of the American and Canadian West. (More precisely, it is *polygyny* that is practiced; luckily for the men, it is apparently not God's will that women have multiple husbands.) What readers might not have been aware of before delving into Krakauer's narrative is that plural marriage is firmly rooted in the early history of the Mormon church, enjoying unequivocal endorsements from the teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. It is such early Mormon polygamist teachings that, at a time when Dan and Ron Lafferty were leading mainstream lives, took unshakeable hold of their imaginations.

When their (first) wives resisted their polygamous designs at the urging of the strong-willed and outspoken Brenda Lafferty, Ron Lafferty, under the sway of another Mormon tradition, claimed to receive a direct revelation from God: „It is My will and commandment that ye remove ... Brenda and her baby For they have truly become obstacles in My path and I will not allow My work to be stopped."

Although the modern-day rogues in *Under the Banner of Heaven* are Mormon fundamentalists and were excommunicated by the LDS Church before they committed

homicide, the LDS Church comes off in Krakauer's investigative report steeped in guilt by association. Painfully cognizant of this, three intellectuals of the church have issued a detailed rebuttal (now available online at www.lds.org) of Krakauer's argument. Much of their ire is directed at Krakauer's often unflattering historiography of Mormonism, and in an interview with *Newsweek* magazine, Krakauer acknowledges some minor errors of historical fact. But with regard to the critical thrust of *Under the Banner of Heaven*, large swathes of the Mormon apologists' rebuttal simply miss the point.

For instance, one of the church's respondents contends that „Krakauer unwittingly puts himself in the same camp as those who believe every German is a Nazi, every Japanese a fanatic, and every Arab a terrorist." But nothing Krakauer says has such a ludicrous implication. In connecting the dots between the Lafferty brothers on the one hand and Mormon scripture and tradition on the other, Krakauer's point is not that all Mormons are would-be murderers, but rather that Mormon scripture and tradition contain dangerous elements that can serve to subjectively justify and thereby encourage the most horrible of deeds in God's name. Chief among these elements in the case of the Lafferty brothers are plural marriage, a kind of „do-it-yourself" divine revelation, and so-called „blood atonement."

The rebuttal's disavowal of these three doctrines can be accepted at face value so far as the present-day LDS Church is concerned, but it scarcely expunges them from historical Mormonism. Plural marriage is a case in point. One of the rebuttal's co-authors lays heavy emphasis on the fact that the LDS Church officially repudiated plural marriage in 1890 and now neither condones nor tolerates polygamy. While this is well and good, it does nothing to alter the fact that such Mormon visionaries as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young both enthusiastically endorsed and practiced plural marriage. In an attempt to reconcile the contradictory stances of then and now, the rebuttal explains that "in the wake of oppressive laws that had been enacted [in the late 19th century], Latter-day Saints believe that the Lord by revelation withdrew the command to practice plural marriage." Those looking for a principled condemnation of polygamy will be disappointed. Not only does the official Mormon line on plural marriage make the traditionally omniscient Christian God look like a bungler in rescinding a command that did not play out as expected, its *ad hoc* appearance invites scriptural purists (like Dan and Ron Lafferty) to dismiss it as nothing more than weak-kneed capitulation to un-Godly resistance.

It isn't just Mormonism that Krakauer, a self-professed agnostic, puts under a critical microscope. It's religious faith in general. At times, it must be admitted, Krakauer seems to get carried away by his agnostic ardor, as when he denigrates faith as „the very antithesis of reason." Given the widespread view among religionists that faith and reason go hand in hand, such sweeping statements as these, in the absence of supporting argument, go too far, even if they are music to secular ears-and even if, in the final analysis, they turn out to be true.

Nevertheless, Krakauer's inquiry into the Lafferty case gives rise to troublesome questions about the rationality of faith. How, for instance, does the justification offered by Christians who claim to be following God's will differ from that of the Sept.-11th hijackers, who claimed precisely the same *imprimatur* for their anti-American acts of terrorism? Most such Christians will give basically the same answer Dan Lafferty gave when Krakauer put the question to him: „They were following a false prophet, and I'm not." Yet in the absence of an objective criterion for distinguishing spurious divine guidance from authentic, the divine-*imprimatur* argument can have no more justifying force for law-abiding Christians than it does for the Lafferty brothers or the Sept.-11th hijackers. Krakauer pushes the logic even further: To the extent that we take the claim of the Laffertys and the Sept.-11th hijackers to be acting „under the banner of heaven" as evidence of mental derangement-as did the Tenth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver, Colorado, in overturning Ron Lafferty's original conviction-what must we think about a respected personage like George W. Bush when he asserts it is God's will that he invade Iraq, or John Ashcroft when he invokes divine sanction for curtailing the civil liberties of Muslims?

Kudos to Jon Krakauer! *Under the Banner of Heaven* is a unique blend of investigative reporting, psychological analysis, religious history, and theological criticism-a tumble of topics which, couched in Krakauer's colorful but unpretentious prose, makes for a gripping read. Aside from the book's intrinsic merits, secular humanists will appreciate its affirmation of their nonreligious world view. And they should take heart from the fact that *Under the Banner of Heaven* spent several months on the *New York Times*' bestseller list after its release last

summer. Americans have tragically been forced to take cognizance of the threat of fundamentalist Islam. It would do them good to take a hard look at the dark side of blind Christian faith as well.

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