Book of Mormon: A Show About Religion, or a Show About Musicals Themselves?

The Book of Mormon recently swept the Tony Awards. Rumor has it that Mitt Romney, the famously Mormon presidential candidate (Jon Huntsman is one too, but less identifiably so), might even attend. But I confess I enjoyed it mostly because at its core, it was a good old-fashioned musical.

In fact, I'm not quite sure if it was a show about religion or a show about musicals themselves. Though we laugh at its songs, The Book of Mormon's "Turn it Off," which tells us to be positive and oblivious, in fact highlights the attitude expressed in songs like The King and I's timeless "Whistle a Happy Tune," which says that "You may be as brave as you make believe you are."

This uplifting attitude is of course a key feature of religious experience as well. Although the romp purports to be about Mormonism, its most striking revelation is perhaps about how much organized religion and musicals share.

The tremendous energy and commitment of the cast illuminated the connection for me. When leaving the theater, it seemed that everyone in the audience was praising the performers for appearing to truly believe in what they said and sang, never winking or sneering at the material. Both religions and musicals work best with energetic and committed believers. Cynicism or detachment would have destroyed the magic -- something true of religion too.

A musical, like most religions, provides the audience or followers with a sense of belonging. Religious services, on the
other hand, with their staged performances, invigorating songs, popular wisdom and shared experience, are almost a form of community theater.

In debates about the role of religion (or amateur theater), it might help to recognize that one major attraction of religion is community. For this, many will adhere to beliefs even in the face of contradictory (or missing) evidence. Organized religion and musicals present tenets to live by that don't entirely make sense but, on the whole, make people who believe them secure, thus giving an appearance of inclusiveness.

There is at least one difference, however. Although The Book of Mormon dismisses contradictions in its religions by attributing their meaning to metaphor -- which works fine for musicals -- religion has a greater challenge. The text of the actual Book of Mormon certainly has some story aspects that sound farfetched, yet which believers may well take literally. And in "debates" over, say, intelligent design, we hear from people who take the word of the Bible so literally as to infringe on what science tells us.

People who dismiss science in favor of religion sometimes confuse the challenge of rigorously understanding the world with a deliberate intellectual exclusion that leads them to mistrust scientists and, to their detriment, what they discover. Yet oddly enough, this exclusion of nonbelievers is more manifest in religions, such as Mormonism, that promise only the faithful a desired fate.

But there is a problem even for those who don't follow the literal word of scripture. Even the many religious believers who are more liberal in their faith nevertheless trust in a deity or spiritual entity that influences the world and our behavior in ways that extend beyond the domain of science.

Science, on the other hand, attributes such phenomena exclusively to the workings of the universe or our biological makeup. It relies on the assumption that material elements influence each other through physical forces that leave physical imprints that we can try to measure. Yes, measurements can be challenging. But there is no evidence yet that this doesn't work.

Conversely, religious thinking usually involves an unmeasurable supernatural foundation. Another distinction is that religious practices tend to involve a great deal of food.

Nonetheless, the differences notwithstanding, the The Book of Mormon can help us reflect on the relationship between musicals and religion as well as on musicals themselves. And while the show might have been only a little about Mormonism, as a work that reflects on musicals and the features they share with religion, it's an unqualified success.

This post has been revised from its original version.