

The LDS Church and Public Engagement:

**Polemics, Marginalization, Accomodation, and
Transformation**

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The history of the public engagement of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the “Mormons”) is a study of their political, social, and theological shift from polemics, with the associated religious persecution and marginalization, to adjustments and accommodations that have rendered periods of dramatically favorable results. In two generations Mormonism went from being the “ultimate outcast”—its members being literally driven from the borders of the U.S. and persecuted abroad—to becoming the “embodiment of the mainstream” with members figuring prominently in government and business circles nationally and internationally; what one noted journalist has deemed “a breathtaking transformation.”¹ I will argue that necessary accommodations made in Church orthodoxy and orthopraxy were not only behind the political, social, and theological “mainstream,” but also consistently outlasted their “acceptability,” as the rapidly changing world’s values outpaced these changes in Mormonism.

1830-1889: MARGINALIZATION

The first known public engagement regarding Mormonism was when the young Joseph Smith related details regarding what has become known as his 1820 “First Vision” of the Father and the Son. He would later report that “my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution.”²

It may seem strange that Joseph Smith should be so criticized when, in the intense revivalistic atmosphere of the time, many people claimed to have received personal spiritual manifestations, including visions. But there was something else in Joseph Smith’s story that the revivalist ministers did not like. The message that none of the local churches were right and that their creeds were an abomination in the sight of God did not fall on friendly ears among those who were preaching the revivals and contending for converts.³

Four years later Smith would claim a visit from an angel who delivered to him an ancient record engraven with reformed Egyptian hieroglyphs on metal

1 Verdoia, K. (2007) *The Mormons*, Part 2. Transcript of PBS Documentary. Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/etc/script2.html> (accessed 8 April 8, 2016).

2 Smith, J.S. (2013) *Joseph Smith History 1:22*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

3 See Allen, J. and Leonard, G. (1992) *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 35.

plates, produced by ancient American prophets. He also claimed angelic visitations from John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, and others. These assertions, along with the translation from the plates and subsequent publication of the Book of Mormon; and the establishment of a new church, all combined to intensify persecutions as the residents of Western New York saw friends and neighbors who not only believed Smith's claims, but also supported him financially and eventually joined his movement.

Subsequently Joseph Smith and his followers were forced to relocate to Ohio, near present day Cleveland. As his newly founded church continued to grow exponentially, so did the persecution. When his followers built a temple where ancient rituals were performed, and hundreds of his followers also reporting seeing visions, the persecution and suspicion among local residents intensified. Then Joseph's efforts to establish utopian communalism, along with a failed attempt at an anti-banking company, led to dissension from within. The lives of Joseph and his faithful followers were threatened, and they were driven out of Ohio by mobs consisting of disgruntled citizens and even some former members of the church.

While in Ohio, Joseph had conceptualized a millennial "City of Zion" to be founded in Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, which created panic among the residents of that region as Joseph's followers migrated there in large numbers, purchased over 24,000 acres, and boasted of the prophesied City of Zion and another temple. Understandably disturbed by what the locals saw as a threat to their political and economic interests, in 1834 they drove the Mormons out via "vigilante justice." Joseph's attempts at legal redress were denied in favor of rising public sentiment against the Mormons. After several failed attempts to establish permanent Mormon communities elsewhere in Missouri, church leaders were eventually incarcerated and the remaining Mormons were driven from the state by mobs and state militiamen, empowered by Governor Lilburn W. Boggs's infamous "extermination order," aimed at ridding the state of the "Mormon menace."

By the end of 1839 all Latter-day Saint prisoners had been released and the Mormons began gathering again, numbered in the thousands, in western Illinois and eastern Iowa. The Mormon city of Nauvoo was established under the protection of the government-sanctioned "Nauvoo Charter," and church members looked to a future of peaceful growth and prosperity. However, between the accusation that Joseph was complicit in the attempted assassination of former Governor

Boggs in Missouri—forcing Joseph into hiding—and the persecution from the formerly friendly residents of Hancock County (due to the high influx of new LDS converts) and the perceived evaporation of the locals’ political influence and business interests, peaceful Mormon growth was short-lived. Tensions heightened as the Mormons rejected traditional political affiliations and Joseph Smith decided to run for United States president.

In an explosive political milieu, the Nauvoo Charter was revoked, the arms of the militia in Nauvoo were seized, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were assassinated, and the Latter-day Saints were driven from Illinois and the confines of the United States. The reasons for these repeated violent rejections of Mormonism were deeply rooted: Mormonism was perceived in a predominantly rational protestant religious culture as being unorthodox, fanatical, and even demented—boasting faith healings, angelic visitations, speaking in tongues, and peculiar doctrines such as deification, plural marriage, and secretive temple rituals presumably borrowed from the Masons and altered to their own tastes. In addition, their “gathering to build a utopian communal Zion” was viewed as un-republican and in direct opposition to Jacksonian Manifest Destiny.

Led by Brigham Young, the majority of the Mormons migrated to the Great Basin between 1845 and 1847. They were followed by thousands of converts from the U.S., Canada and Europe. At last, they hoped they could live out their religion in peace and prosperity, isolated from the persecutions and influence of outsiders, while once again laboring to build up their utopian “Zion.” But this hope quickly faded a few years later as the United States’ westward expansion brought the Great Basin into US jurisdiction by the 1850 establishment of the Utah Territory, thus placing the Mormons under federal control, with anti-polygamy laws enforced upon them.⁴

1890-1949: ACCOMMODATION

Gradually, however, church leaders came to realize that for the church to survive, it would have to abandon controversial practices such as polygamy, utopian communalism, and theocracy. As a result of this accommodation, the end of the nineteenth century marked a major shift for the LDS Church, beginning a long process of enthusiastic assimilative movement into the American mainstream. In

4 See Reed, M.G. (2012) *Banishing the Cross: The Emergence of a Mormon Taboo*. Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 25.

1890 church president Wilford Woodruff received a revelation formally banning the practice of plural marriage among the Mormons, pledging allegiance to the US government and all its laws. This led to Utah acquiring statehood, being admitted into the Union on January 4, 1896.

As Mormons assimilated, opposition declined substantially, and by the second decade of the twentieth century the Mormon self-image had made an about-face. No longer playing the role of a rebellious sect standing apart from American norms and lifestyles, Mormons wanted to show the world they were even more American than other US citizens, and that they were just as Christian as Catholics and Protestants. This self-image has continued into the twenty-first century, but public perceptions have lagged substantially.⁵

For example, while the church was intentionally excluded from Chicago's 1893 World Parliament of Religions held in concert with the World's Columbian Exposition, it was provided a central location for agricultural and arts displays, which met with huge success. Additionally, The Mormon Tabernacle Choir finished second in the chorale competition, Mormon women were cast as critical allies of national female leaders, and Utah mining was extolled in superlatives. These temporal achievements helped downplay the church's unpopular theology, while the Mormons relished in their moment in the sun.⁶

However, in 1898 church leader B. H. Roberts, who had entered into plural marriage prior to the 1890 policy change and was still living with his plural wives, was elected to the US House of Representatives. By informal agreement after the church had terminated the practice of plural marriage, it was assumed—though not written into law—that in such cases men would not be punished so long as they entered into no new plural marriages. However, Protestant ministers in Utah accused him and the church of a breach of faith on the issue of polygamy, and after Roberts was elected they promoted a nationwide campaign against him, submitting to Washington a petition with seven million signatures. For six weeks after Elder Roberts arrived in Washington, a specially appointed committee held hearings and investigated the charges against him. In the end the House voted 268 to 50 not to seat him, and he was replaced by a non-Mormon monogamist.

5 See Reed, 25-26.

6 See Fluhman, S.J. (2012) *A Peculiar People: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in the Nineteenth Century*. Chapel Hill: UNCP, 131.

Four years later another church leader, Apostle Reed Smoot, was elected to the United States Senate. Even though Elder Smoot could categorically deny any involvement with plural marriage, he spent nearly five years defending the legality of his election in a Senate investigation. In the end, Senator Smoot retained his seat, despite the majority committee report which recommended his expulsion, because he was a leader in the LDS church.⁷

Despite that victory and the church's efforts to revamp its self-image, the church and its members continued to be presented to the public in popular magazines and novels in an unfavorable light, condemning polygamy or criticizing the leaders as autocrats and denouncing the church as un-American. To counteract the generally negative image still being promoted, The Church Bureau of Information and Church Literature on Temple Square opened on August 4, 1902, and the new information center became a significant force in building goodwill toward the Latter-day Saints. Eastern newspaper editors were among the thousands who went away impressed and so reported to their readers. In addition, the free guided tours of Temple Square helped promote the fame of the Tabernacle organ and the Salt Lake Mormon Tabernacle Choir. By the late 1920s annual visitors numbered 200,000.⁸

Despite these stepped-up efforts at public relations, the Church's image did not become fully positive during the 1920s.⁹ Slowly, however, the tone of periodical literature seemed to be moving from hostility toward neutrality.¹⁰ Then, during the 1930s the public image would become predominantly positive.

Perhaps the greatest boon to the church's public image, and what I believe was the turning point in public engagement, was the church's welfare plan that emerged during the dark days of the Great Depression. Church leaders created a security plan that would put their men back into the work force and make their members self-sufficient and independent of government welfare. During the first summer of its operation the LDS welfare program made impressive strides toward accomplishing these goals. Nearly fifteen-thousand needy Saints were transferred from government to church relief and more than one thousand were placed in jobs.

7 See Allen and Leonard, 444-447.

8 See Allen and Leonard, 451.

9 Shippy J. (2006) *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons*. Champaign: UIP, pp. 51-97.

10 See Allen and Leonard, 517-525.

Sufficient food, clothing, and fuel were collected via private donation to provide for practically all needy families through the coming winter. These accomplishments provided immediate and positive publicity for the church.¹¹ The growth of Mormon acceptance resulted from the new ways Americans saw Latter-day Saints as part of the national capitalist and imperial machine: Mormons could now be celebrated as industrious Americans. Selective forgetfulness, an appreciation of Mormons' temporal contributions, and an eye on future market possibilities made for a workable reconfiguration. In the eyes of many, a sober, efficient, and secularized Mormonism could emerge from its religious fanaticism and polygamous past and become at least partially respected for the ways it seemed to partake of the nation's modern corporate spirit.¹² For the first time, the total number of positive articles in American periodicals exceeded those with a negative viewpoint.¹³

1950 TO THE PRESENT: TRANSFORMATION

In 1950 a twelve-foot marble statue of Brigham Young was unveiled in the rotunda of the United States Capitol in Washington, D. C. Vice-President Alben W. Barkley honored Young as a “man of God” and an “advocate of justice and democracy,” and one of Utah’s “most eminent citizens, illustrious for his leadership as a colonizer.” This was indeed a far cry from what national leaders had said about him and his followers a hundred years earlier.¹⁴

There were other, more general images of the Mormons being created in the 1950s. In national periodicals, there was a generally favorable public image, with the church being praised for its continuing activities in the welfare program. Also, successful Mormon businessmen and civic leaders were often favorably publicized with their church affiliation pointed out. Such was the case with J. Reuben Clark, Jr., a former undersecretary of state and American ambassador to Mexico, who was also known widely as a member of the church's First Presidency, and Elder Ezra Taft Benson of the Council of the Twelve Apostles who, in 1952, was appointed U.S. Secretary of Agriculture by the newly-elected Dwight D. Eisenhower. Other examples included the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, which received a Grammy award in 1959¹⁵ and sang at Lyndon B. Johnson's inauguration in 1963.

11 See Allen and Leonard, 517-525.

12 See Fluhman, 144-46.

13 Allen and Leonard, 532.

14 See Allen and Leonard, 552.

15 See Allen and Leonard, 588-90.

During ensuing decades, church leaders felt a need to continuously engage publicly against such issues as the ERA, legalized abortion, gambling and homosexuality; and in favor of traditional marriage; These stances created new tensions with the mainstream. In addition, strains with evangelical Christianity, coupled with an emerging perception that the church was “controlling, powerful, wealthy, secretive” and “withholding information” about its history and practices caused a huge dip in public approval throughout the 1970s and 80s.¹⁶ Nothing caused more strain, however, than the church’s position regarding blacks and the priesthood. As civil rights emerged as a progressively pressing issue, the church’s denial of its lay priesthood to black males became increasingly problematic and led to picketing, protests, and riots. Church president Spencer W. Kimball’s 1978 revelation extending the priesthood to all worthy males, along with media-savvy church president Gordon B. Hinckley’s continuously positive engagement with the media in the 1990s and early 2000s, alongside an equally open and persistent public relations campaign, all worked to placate negative stereotypes and helped return the church towards the mainstream. Prominent Mormons like the Osmonds, David Archuleta, Steve Young, Danny Ainge, Dale Murphy, Thurl Bailey and Gladys Knight also helped promote a more positive image. The highly successful 2002 Olympic Winter Games hosted in Salt Lake City provided yet another opportunity for positive public engagement.¹⁷

THE MORMON MOMENT?

One noted scholar observed that no other new religious movement has navigated so adeptly both the rapids of religious growth and the still waters of mainstream respectability. Once almost universally hated, Mormons are now lionized as quintessentially American: “thrifty, wholesome, cooperative, industrious, purposeful, patriotic, law-abiding, God-fearing, well-organized and family oriented.”¹⁸

However, in the end, Mormonism’s efforts to become mainstream may yet have long-lasting, negative effects on its overall public engagement. So successful were Mormons at creating a public image that coincided with their self-

16 See Haws, J.B. (2103) *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception*. Oxford: OUP, 162 and 243.

17 See Haws, 171, 174.

18 Prothero, S. (2004) *American Jesus: how the Son of God Became a National Icon*. New York: McMillan, 187.

image, that by the time Mormon Mitt Romney sought the White House for a second time in 2012, he was labeled “the whitest white man to run for office in recent memory”¹⁹—a factor that undoubtedly contributed to him winning the Republican nomination but losing the election to the first black president in US History. What is more, decades of crafting the quintessential image of the “Family Church,” which was mostly mainstream at its inception in the 1970s, has now left the church, once again, nearer the margins of an increasingly secular culture which appears to be abandoning traditional family values and definitions in favor of more “progressive” identity formations. In fact, according to *Newsweek*, “Despite the sudden proliferation of Mormons in the mainstream, Mormonism itself isn’t any closer to gaining mainstream acceptance.”²⁰

CONCLUSION

Tensions relative to gender equality, sexual identity, and institutional distrust persist and continue to escalate into the twenty-first century. In the end, the history of the LDS church’s public engagement is the story of initial polemics, resulting in marginalization, followed by accommodations and astounding transformations, which, interestingly and significantly, could result in a return to polemics and marginalization, if church orthodoxy and orthopraxy continue immutable.

19 See Reeve, W.P. (2015) *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*. Oxford: UOP.

20 Kern, W. (2011) The Mormon Moment. *Newsweek*, June 5, 2011.