

Polygamy and Mormon Identity

O. Kendall White, Jr. and Daryl White

In the nineteenth century, as the Mormons withdrew from American society to establish their own sectarian community, polygamy became a defining characteristic—even the primary symbol of Mormon identity—for both the Latter-day Saints (LDS) and their antagonists. A protracted conflict with the federal government, in which abandoning polygamy became a necessary condition for Utah statehood, ended with capitulation, and the Mormons began the twentieth century with an aggressive campaign of assimilation into American society. At the heart of this “quest for respectability” was a concerted effort to separate Mormonism from polygamy in the public eye and to eradicate the practice among the Latter-day Saints themselves. Polygamy had become a major source of embarrassment as the Saints sought to emphasize values and practices that they shared with other Americans. Having assimilated sufficiently to become a model minority and the fifth largest religious denomination in American society, the Mormons, according to some non-Mormon scholars, are on the verge of becoming the next “new world religion” (Stark; Shipps; Bloom 79–128; Davies, *The Mormon* 241–66; Davies, *Introduction* 245–54). However, “Mormon fundamentalists” (polygamist sects) continue to threaten LDS respectability by reminding people of the link between polygamy and Mormonism. Consequently, contemporary Mormon officials are engaged in a concerted effort to expunge polygamy from Mormonism by marginalizing dissidents, manipulating symbols, and rewriting history. Anticipating a major doctrinal change, we argue that should church leaders be successful, neither the Saints themselves nor the rest of the world will perceive a link between

Mormonism and polygamy in the future. Thus, we will explain the significance of polygamy (plural marriage)¹ for Mormon identity throughout LDS history by examining (1) the origin and institutionalization of plural marriage during the nineteenth century, (2) discontinuation of the practice of plural marriage with the Saints’ assimilation into mainstream America during the twentieth century, (3) the current situation with efforts to eliminate any link between polygamy and Mormonism in both LDS and public consciousness, and (4) anticipation of a major doctrinal change as Mormons redefine themselves during the twenty-first century.

Mormon Polygamy during the Nineteenth Century

Mormonism emerged in America in the 1830s during a period of profound social change. A nascent industrial revolution had begun undermining the social foundations of the agrarian social order. By separating work from the household and relocating it in the factory and office, industrialization destroyed the extended family upon which agricultural societies depend. Children, as economic assets given their work on the farm, soon became economic liabilities, and extended kin, even grandparents, were difficult to relocate given the geographical mobility demanded by factory labor. It was hardly obvious to those displaced from the farm, like Joseph Smith’s family, that the nuclear family of parents and their immediate offspring would become the modal form of kinship in the new industrial order. On the

O. Kendall White, Jr. is the William P. Ames, Jr. Professor in Sociology and Anthropology at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. Daryl White is professor and chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia.

contrary, to contemporaries, it appeared as if the family and community were disintegrating. A few religious figures and social reformers introduced novel forms of family and community. While the Shakers, for instance, responded by embracing celibacy and repudiating marriage, the Oneida perfectionists rejected monogamy and introduced group marriage. In both cases, the community became the new family (Foster 21–122). Aware of these and other communal groups, Joseph Smith's personal experience of economic insecurity, death of siblings, and fragile community structure also reinforced his quest for renewing the kinship and community bonds associated with agrarian societies. However, he soon came to believe that the institutions of family and community required radical restructuring.

Following the formal organization of the church in 1830, Smith began redefining marriage and the family. An 1831 revelation anticipating plural marriage portended new forms of kinship. Though not authorized by Ohio law, in 1835, Smith intentionally performed illegal marriages under "authority of the holy priesthood," and he began questioning the legitimacy of civil marriage and the meaning of adultery (Brooke 212). In 1835, Smith apparently had an extramarital affair with Fannie Alger, who subsequently became one of his plural wives (217). But only after "taking" several plural wives and attempting to convince Emma, his legal wife, that plural marriage was legitimate did Smith produce the written revelation that contemporary Mormons acknowledge in their scriptural canon. This revelation formally announced the new Mormon conception of the ideal family, stipulating procreation as a fundamental objective.²

The "new and everlasting covenant of marriage" elevated the family to a new status. If traditional marriages performed until "death do you part" were legitimate in civil society, this new covenant promised "eternal marriage." Thus, "celestial marriage," originally identified with plural marriage, not only enabled the family to exist forever, but also became a necessary condition for exaltation. As ultimate salvation, exaltation is a form of deification that Mormonism posits as its

fundamental goal. In fact, the revelation threatened anyone who refused to comply with "the principle" of plural or celestial marriage: "For no one can reject this covenant, and be permitted to enter into my glory . . ." (*D&C* 132:4).

A subsequent distinction between celestial and plural marriage linked monogamy to eternal marriage. Thus, monogamous relationships, when formed in terms of this covenant, also have come to be considered eternal. This, along with an inordinate emphasis on fecundity, is the principal legacy of plural marriage for the contemporary Mormon conception of the family. Monogamous families also can exist through eternity.

This new Patriarchal Order of Marriage was legitimated both by Smith's claim of revelation and the polygamy of biblical patriarchs. Having emerged from the "Burned-Over District," a hotbed of the restoration movement, Mormonism proclaimed itself to be the restored gospel. Modern revelation to contemporary prophets and apostles would guide the church during the latter-days. With the eventual "restoration of all things," it followed that plural marriage would appear in the guise of Old Testament patriarchs. As God had sanctioned the multiple wives and concubines of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, primarily to ensure adequate fertility, he expected no less from "modern Israel," his Latter-day Saints. Smith justified his innovations in terms of revelation, biblical precedence, and procreation, but he also used plural marriage to test the loyalty of subordinates, preserve secrecy for his decision-making, create kinship structures with their attendant obligations of affiliation, and reinforce his power and control (Brooke 265–66; Ostling and Ostling 56–70).

Though there is evidence of limited polyandry on the part of Joseph Smith and other leading Mormon officials (Van Wagoner 37–46), the 1843 revelation provided no support for it. Appearing in written form to convince his first wife Emma of the legitimacy of plural marriage, the revelation was known only to a few of Smith's associates. Meanwhile, Mormon leaders continued to deny the practice of plural marriage when responding to critics, but the controversy over whether Smith

and close associates were involved in “spiritual wifery” led to his assassination. The Mormon community split into factions, with some remaining in the Midwest and others following Brigham Young in their westward exodus. Trying to escape the jurisdiction of the United States, they set out to establish Zion—the Kingdom of God—in the “tops of the mountains” where they might practice their religion without fear of persecution or interference from federal or state power. Though the United States had won its war with Mexico, the treaty making the Great Basin part of the United States had not been negotiated. By withdrawing from American society, the Saints believed that they could enjoy the geographical, social, and cultural isolation required to implement their radical social agenda.

In 1852, five years after settling in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young publicly announced the practice of plural marriage, and he designated Apostle Orson Pratt to provide the theological defense of the new doctrine. Linked to the Mormon doctrine of a premortal existence in which spirits anxiously await an opportunity to enter their mortal estate (earthly life) where they obtain physical bodies, this “new order of marriage” would ensure that more of the awaiting spirits could be born to righteous Latter-day Saints and create new patriarchal lineages before the Second Coming of Jesus. Polygamy obviously reinforced fertility, and procreation soon became a major justification for plural marriage (White, “Ideology” 296). Nineteenth-century Mormonism’s answer to sociologist Kimball Young’s question, isn’t one wife enough?, was a resounding No! She simply could not bear sufficient children.

Reflecting a degree of cultural accommodation during this period of isolation and separatism, other justifications for polygamy ironically took on a decidedly Victorian tone. Sounding like some contemporary sociobiologists, Mormon apologists argued that men by nature are polygamous and women monogamous. Moreover, polygamy would ensure that all women in the community had the opportunity for marriage and, God willing, children, thereby eliminating a “class of women” whose single status made them victims

of sexual and economic exploitation. Ideally, plural marriage, which required church approval and typically the consent of existing wives, would eliminate social problems such as prostitution, economic exploitation, and abandoned children (White, “Ideology” 296–97). Assuming Victorian notions of male sexual obsession and female asexuality, this argument cleverly posited the superiority of polygamy over monogamy and men over women.

American society, in the guise of national politics, soon reacted to Mormon polygamy and separatism. In its 1856 convention, the newly formed Republican party identified polygamy, along with slavery, as “twin relics of barbarism.” And President James Buchanan, perhaps in an effort not to be outdone by the Republicans, dispatched federal troops to Utah in 1857 to quell the “Mormon rebellion.” Because the Utah territory had no law prohibiting bigamy, Congress asserted its domain over the territory by enacting the Morrill Bill, which proscribed bigamy in the US Territories. If the Civil War briefly deflected attention from the one relic, polygamy, the post-war period saw renewed national attention. Federal enforcement of “unlawful cohabitation” laws drove key Mormon officials, “polygs,” and “cohabers” into an underground network (Van Wagoner 82–87; Mulder).

Responding to the onslaught of pressure from the federal government, church leaders sponsored a legal challenge to the constitutionality of the Morrill Bill. When the Reynolds case reached the US Supreme Court, the judges ruled in 1879 that the free exercise of religion clause of the First Amendment did not protect the Mormon practice of polygamy. Arguing by analogy, the justices asked, what if the Mormons practiced human sacrifice? Could the state sit by or would it have to intervene? Though no one could deny the right of Mormons to believe in plural marriage, the state was obligated to regulate the practice of polygamy to protect both victims (women and children) and public morality. One of the most significant cases in church-state relations, *Reynolds v. United States*, established the legal distinction between belief and practice. The Constitution

protected the former but not the latter. In effect, the court had adopted a distinctively Protestant conception of religion, defining it not as a way of life, nor by behavior or practice, but simply by ideas or belief. By separating belief from behavior, the court provided the mechanism that Mormons later employed to extricate themselves. Indeed, the Supreme Court articulated a basic strategy for acceptance and assimilation for the reincorporation of Mormons into American society.

Eventually the Saints would abandon the practice of plural marriage while retaining their belief in its doctrinal status. The practice was to be suspended until it would again be permitted by civil law. But the Mormons were not inclined to give in immediately. Utah's territorial status placed the Saints at a distinct disadvantage because territories fell under more direct control of the federal government than did states, and statehood for Utah was now contingent upon the abandonment of polygamy. If integration of the Mormon economy into the national economy and the Mormon denial of the legitimacy of the nation-state were central elements of the conflict, both sides had turned polygamy into the crucial symbolic issue (Arrington 353–79; Hansen 169–71; White, "Mormonism in America" 170–71; White, "Mormon Resistance" 102–03; Flake 27–33). For anti-Mormon forces and the federal government, polygamy was a moral relapse in the otherwise progressive development of modern civilization. For the Mormons, support of plural marriage became the primary test of one's loyalty to the community. To be a polyg or cohab was a badge to be worn with honor (Mulder 136–41).

However, pressures from the federal government simply overwhelmed the Mormons. The appointment of hostile territorial officials and an onslaught of federal legislation disenfranchised women and polygamist men, placed church properties under federal receivership, ensured greater federal control over territorial governments, and threatened to confiscate Mormon temples, the most sacred space for Latter-day Saints (Gordon 220; Hardy 134–37). If Mormon efforts to realize statehood for Utah were driven primarily by the additional control they would gain as a state

rather than a territory, statehood could only be achieved through abandoning plural marriage. In 1890, Mormon president Wilford Woodruff announced the Manifesto proclaiming an end to the practice of plural marriage. Following logic of the US Supreme Court decision, the Manifesto announced the discontinuation of the practice, but it did not repudiate plural marriage, nor its doctrinal status (*D&C Official Declaration 1*).

In a sense, the Manifesto was a desperate act to placate politicians and the public. In fact, some Mormon leaders saw it as a temporary maneuver to attain statehood, after which they would have sufficient power to legalize plural marriage. Others interpreted it in narrow legalistic terms, only applicable to marriages performed within the boundaries of the United States. Consequently, a small cadre of Mormons, with the approval of successive church presidents and apostles, continued polygamy with marriage ceremonies performed at sea and in foreign lands (Quinn 12–13). As in earlier days when Joseph Smith introduced plural marriage, it again became secretive, known only to select top officials in the church and a few families entering the practice. The majority of Latter-day Saints believed that polygamy was no longer permitted and would not be allowed until some time in the distant future.

Polygamy in Twentieth-Century Mormonism

Beyond paving the way for statehood, the Manifesto initiated a profound transformation in Mormon relations with American society. As the formal capitulation to the nation-state, it signaled approval for Latter-day Saints to assimilate into the national society (White, "Mormonism in America" 173–75). The Mormon story during the twentieth century was largely one of official church policies working toward conscious integration into American economic, political, and social structures. For the Saints themselves, it was a century of profound upward social mobility

characterized by national patriotism and cultural integration (O’Dea 258–73; Mauss 21–32). The Manifesto unleashed the Mormon quest for respectability, which necessitated de-emphasizing their polygamous past. The Mormons would become another American success story. It was not long before, as B. Carmon Hardy observes, that “few surpassed the Saints in implementing Progressivism’s model family—monogamous, thrifty, patriarchal, and fecund” (301). Mormonism began shedding its sectarian dreams and pursuing legitimacy as an American church (denomination).

But assimilation did not come easily, nor without costs. A new generation of church leaders adopted an aggressive campaign to rid Mormonism of the taint of polygamy. During hearings to seat Apostle Reed Smoot in the United States Senate in 1904, church officials were caught denying the ongoing practice of plural marriage (Flake 68–81). Embarrassed and attempting to convince Congress of their newly found commitment to abolish polygamy, the Mormon president again pledged to discontinue the practice. Thus, the Second Manifesto, which even he ignored, drove polygamy still further underground, but it also encouraged assimilation because Latter-day Saints generally believed that the official church position favored monogamy (Hardy 244–83). Moreover, in the wake of the Smoot hearings, apostles Mathias Cowley and John W. Taylor resigned their offices. Taylor was formally excommunicated in 1911, and stake presidents (comparable with bishops in dioceses) received instructions to excommunicate any participants or advocates of plural marriage (Hardy 342–44; Van Wagoner 186–90). In a brilliant analysis of the Smoot hearings as a public ritual ending with the reincorporation of the Mormons into the national community, Kathleen Flake, who aptly titled her book *The Politics of American Religious Identity*, argues that Mormons were no longer deviant outsiders but “had become merely odd” and, like the Amish and Orthodox Jews, the Latter-day Saints were now “part of America’s cultural diversity, a reassuring reminder of its [America’s] capacity for religious liberty” (172). With the Saints back in the American fold, the nation cel-

ebrated its ideal of religious freedom. The prodigal son had returned.

Among the new leaders who would play a crucial role in redefining Mormon polygamy, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., a former United States ambassador to Mexico and state department official, was clearly the most significant. No one would represent the Mormon re-entry into American society and obsession with assimilation more than Clark, who joined the First Presidency in 1933. Shocked to discover that plural marriage had not ended with the Manifesto in 1890, he immediately undertook the task of eradicating it. His position paper, which denied claims of a revelation to President John Taylor (Brigham Young’s successor) authorizing select individuals outside ecclesiastical positions to preserve plural marriage, was published by the First Presidency as the “official” church position. The statement, with all of its factual errors, became a catalyst for the coalescence of a number of families into an emergent polygamous subculture (Van Wagoner 195).

The most prominent “fundamentalist” groups, as they are now known among the Latter-day Saints, drew upon Joseph Musser’s long-term publication of *Truth*. Beginning in 1935, this magazine presented accounts of the Taylor revelation, documented post-Manifesto polygamy, analyzed the political expediency underlying the Manifesto, and argued that the authentic Mormon tradition rested with fundamentalists who retain the authority to perform plural marriages. When the church abandoned the “true order of marriage,” it lost its claim to authenticity.

But the growth of Mormon fundamentalism only strengthened the resolve of Clark and other antipolygamy leaders. He began an unrelenting campaign, which persisted for two decades, to eliminate polygamy from both the church and society. Primarily under Clark’s direction, the church began requiring loyalty oaths and excommunicating noncompliant individuals; conducting surveillance on fundamentalists who attended LDS services; passing on information and coordinating efforts with Salt Lake City police, FBI agents, and federal marshals; and convincing postal authorities to block the mailing of *Truth* as

an obscene publication (Van Wagoner 192–97; Hardy 342–43). Several raids of fundamentalist homes occurred in Salt Lake City and other Utah towns, culminating in the infamous siege of Short Creek, Arizona, in 1953 (Van Wagoner 199–208). The public display of heavy-handed techniques shocked the nation. Parents were jailed and children were separated from their mothers. The children, if the policy were successfully pursued, would become wards of the state. With the American public viewing photos and newsreels of crying children ripped out of their mothers' arms and police raiding schools and playgrounds, the *Arizona Republic* (28 July 1953) suggested that if this was "insurrection"—as the governor claimed—then it was one based on "diapers and volleyballs" (qtd. in Van Wagoner 203). Governor Howard Pyle became the butt of jokes and an object of criticism. Arizona voters subsequently rejected his autocratic approach and willful violation of civil rights as he lost his bid for re-election.

Pyle fared better in the Utah newspapers, with praise for trying to eliminate this "cancer" on "our border" that has been "an embarrassment to our people and a smudge on the reputations of our two states." The church-owned *Deseret News* (27 July 1953) hoped that Governor Pyle would succeed with his "pledge to eradicate the illegal practices" carried on in Short Creek before this "cancer" spreads "beyond hope of human repair" (qtd. in Van Wagoner 204). But this was only hope. Not only had the raid failed, but polygamy also was spreading, and the will to employ the public resources required to control unlawful cohabitation had waned. This was the last raid on an American community for polygamy.

Indeed, this became the last prosecution of polygamists until very recently. Both the state and church backed off from aggressive efforts to eradicate polygamy, and internal schisms among fundamentalist groups generated a myriad of communities claiming to be the authentic representatives of Mormonism. We will not detail even the major bodies for a lack of space, but simply note that their numbers have increased significantly, reaching somewhere between thirty and forty thousand people who live in polygamous

relationships (Krakauer 5). Because of their violence, the most extreme fundamentalists became visible to the general public during the 1970s and 1980s. Rival factions attacked one another, assassinating leaders and murdering their followers. Before the 1980s were over, several people lay dead from inter-sect warfare (Krakauer 263–68).

In certain instances, the use of laws regulating polygamy shifted in the direction of polygamists, and litigation challenged the constitutionality of existing statutes. Though litigation generally was unsuccessful, a Utah polygamist recently won the right to adopt the children of his deceased wife, and a Colorado City official, with three wives, retained his office despite a court challenge. His violation of polygamy statutes, according to the court, did not violate public trust. Law enforcement officials said that as long as "polygamists are not breaking other laws, we won't prosecute" (qtd. in House A1).

The Current Situation

As polygamy again raises its "ugly head," Mormons once more confront the issue of assimilation. Contemporary social forces—including aggressive investigative reporting, organization of ex-polygamists into support and protest groups, anxious politicians and law enforcement officials, and a lingering desire for respectability and success as an emergent world religion—conspire to encourage further assimilation. Many of these forces were set in motion when the abuse story of a sixteen-year-old plural wife hit the news in the spring of 1998. She had walked six miles from a "re-education" camp for recalcitrant women and children to a public phone where she called the police. Her father had severely beaten her because she had fled from a seven-month marriage to his brother, her uncle, whom she shared with fourteen other women. A member of the Kingston clan, known as the Davis County Cooperative or Latter-Day Church of Christ, the father was formally charged with child abuse, which he originally denied, but to which he subsequently

pled guilty (Hunt, “Polygamist Guilty” A1). His brother was tried and convicted of incest and unlawful sexual conduct (Hunt, “Polygamist Asks” A1).

This story inspired extensive investigative reporting. A series of articles on polygamist communities began with the Sunday edition of the *Salt Lake Tribune* on June 28, 1998. Highlighting questions of welfare fraud and tax evasion, the articles examined Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Arizona, the former Short Creek community. Both communities led their states in the lowest per capita income, lowest median age, lowest unemployment, lowest amount of federal income tax paid, and highest percent of families living in poverty. Reliance on Medicaid, food stamps, and the WIC program rivaled only western Indian reservations and inner cities throughout the intermountain west (Zoellner, “Polygamy” A1+). Unlike stereotypical communities with high levels of poverty and welfare rolls, ninety-nine percent of the residents are white, unemployment is virtually nonexistent, and “fathers have not abandoned their families” (Mullen A1+). Other articles documented the disparity in the tax burden for local versus state residents regarding school financing (Zoellner, “Schools” A1+), and difficulties addressing child abuse, spouse abuse, and sexual abuse in polygamous communities (House A1+). Most of the attention focused on Hildale and Colorado City, but the specific abuse cases involved the Kingston family, primarily in the Salt Lake City area.

Following the *Salt Lake Tribune*’s series, radio and television programs began covering contemporary polygamy. In February 1999, the *New York Times Magazine* published a lead article on polygamy in Utah, recounting the story of the abuse of John Daniel Kingston’s daughter and the organization of Tapestry of Polygamy (Tapestry), an organization of women who have left polygamous communities. On various occasions in 1998 and 1999, national television, including *Dateline*, *20/20*, the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *Geraldo Rivera*, carried stories on polygamy and featured spokeswomen from Tapestry urging the prosecution of polygamists in Utah. Church pres-

ident Hinckley appeared on the *Larry King Live* television program to deny that contemporary polygamy in Utah had any relationship to Mormonism. The electronic media especially find the story appealing, and their sensationalism is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century magazine and newspaper coverage of Mormon polygamy. Given a capacity to reach mass audiences, today’s media can easily keep the public conscious of the most embarrassing aspect of Mormonism, thereby exerting additional pressure on the church for the repudiation of polygamy and further assimilation into the broader national culture.

We might expect Tapestry to become increasingly important as a source of information for journalists reporting on polygamy among fundamentalist Mormons. Because these women have lived as plural wives, their experience and stories are invaluable. However, they are the discontented, and their perspectives are likely to vary from many within polygamous communities. With media attention legitimating Tapestry as authorities on contemporary polygamy, the marginal status of fundamentalist communities inhibits participants from telling their stories. Even so, some polygamists have appeared with their wives on national television programs, including the *Jerry Springer Show* and *Dateline*, to defend plural marriage. *Jerry Springer*, with the active involvement of the audience in yelling, booing, and clapping, was clearly designed to display the guests as oddities, a contemporary version of the circus freak show. Strong cultural biases against polygamy enable these media events to reinforce a presumed normalcy of monogamy by encouraging overt displays of hostility toward deviants. Moreover, the audience is reminded of the historical link to Mormonism, disclaimers notwithstanding. Apparently there is no escape. Consider, for instance, the national spotlight turned on the abduction of fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Smart from her Salt Lake City home. She was snatched from her bed on June 5, 2002, by a disaffected Mormon who proclaimed his prophetic role as a polygamist. Soon followed the 2003 publication of *Under the Banner of Heaven* by best-selling author Jon Krakauer, detailing murders of a young

mother and her sixteen-month-old daughter by their polygamist brothers-in-law.

In spite of the bad press, a recent development could enhance the position of contemporary polygamists. If the overwhelming majority fear public disclosure and attention, some polygamous wives have formed an organization, Women's Religious Liberties Union (WRLU), to protect their interests through involvement in the political arena. On July 15, 1999, they protested in front of the *Salt Lake Tribune* offices. Arguing that polygamists are unfairly singled out for prosecution under Utah's unlawful cohabitation statute, Mary Potter, from WRLU, observed that bigamy laws are designed to address fraudulent second marriages, while polygamous relationships require the consent of all involved. Following this protest, the Utah chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union announced that it would support the group's challenge to Utah's bigamy law (Burton, "ACLU" A1). Public support, especially among Latter-day Saints, will surely favor Tapestry over WRLU.

Academic experts provide additional knowledge. Anthropological research does not identify the same problems with all Mormon polygamous groups. Janet Bennion's doctoral research, recently published by Oxford University under the title *Women of Principle*, reports little abuse and finds converts to be primarily women marginalized by the LDS church and society. Studying over one thousand people who joined the Allred group (formerly the Apostolic United Brethren Church) from 1953 to 1993, she found seventy percent to be women. Twenty percent of these women were related by blood to other women in the group; fifteen percent were divorced or widowed with children; fifty-four percent were single women between twenty-eight and forty-five; and eleven percent were married upon entering the group (Bennion 5). The Allred group has its largest communities in Pinedale, Montana, and Bluffdale, Utah, and are believed to have approximately ten thousand adherents (Bennion 22, 160 fn. 7). While Bennion describes a community where women enjoy "tight-knit religious and economic solidarity with other women," Brenda Bowman, a

former member of the group, claims that incest and child sexual abuse is prevalent within polygamous families among the Allred group (Burton, "Anthropologist" A1).

Irwin Altman and Joseph Ginat studied the two largest polygamist communities in Utah. They concentrated on interaction within dyadic relationships (a husband and a particular wife) and communal relationships (the simultaneous experience of a husband with all of his wives and wives with their sister-wives). Comparing successful and unsuccessful families, they conclude that many problems derive from inadequate development of norms. Otherwise, problems were like those of monogamous families, and Altman and Ginat did not report the "cultlike" extremes in totalitarian control, spouse and child abuse, and sexual exploitation characteristic of some of the recent news accounts.

Caught in a precarious position, some Utah politicians have vacillated between tacit support for to the explicit rejection of polygamy, while others have found an opportunity to push particular agendas. Then Utah governor Mike Levitt and US Senator Orrin Hatch, both of whom have polygamist ancestors, initially concluded that polygamy might be protected by the free-exercise clause of the First Amendment, a position that each later rescinded (Heilprin A1). While state legislators raised the age of consent for marriage in Utah from fourteen to sixteen, a few county attorneys in 1999 began selective prosecution of polygamists (Burr A1). Tapestry is pushing for more aggressive action, and their most powerful ally may be the Mormon church itself.

It is clearly in the interest of church officials to delineate sharper boundaries between Mormonism and polygamy—in short, to separate polygamy from Mormonism. Today, Mormons would probably identify slavery and polygamy as "twin relics of barbarism," but the Saints have been no more successful in convincing the world to forget about the latter than some in the American South have been with the former. Yet forget they must if Mormonism is to enjoy the respectability that it requires to become a "new world religion."

An Impending Doctrinal Change

Assimilation of the Saints accompanied their refusal to perform plural marriages. Emphasizing values and behaviors they shared with other Americans, their assimilation was so successful that they risk absorption into American society and a loss of their distinctive identity. Though Mauss correctly identifies a retrenchment process with renewed emphasis on distinctive beliefs and practices that reinforce unique elements of Mormon identity, it is worth noting that on polygamy, the most distinctive belief and practice that put Mormons on the fringe of “modern civilization,” there is no retrenchment. Here, the Saints do not merely want to “be in but *not* of the world”; they want to “be in *and* of the world.” While Hardy has documented the transition from the polygamous to the monogamous ideal for the Mormon family, recent trends suggest even further cultural assimilation on sexual matters. Combined General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center between 1972 and 1996 reveal Mormons to be more conservative than the general population on issues of premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexuality, and sex education (“A Peculiar People” June 1998). Moreover, a 1995 National Survey of Family Growth found Mormons to be only slightly less likely to use birth control techniques than the general population, but these differences were far less impressive than the general correspondence to national trends (“A Peculiar People” December 1998). Indeed, the conclusion of another study indicated “very little difference between Mormons and other women in use of specific methods” of birth control (“A Peculiar People” March–April 1999). Perhaps more striking is a change in the new edition of the *General Handbook of Instructions* used by ecclesiastical officials in the management of the church. For the first time, the church relaxed its opposition to birth control, indicating that the “decision of how many children to have and when to have them is extremely intimate and private and should be left between the couple and the Lord.”

Moreover, “sexual relations within marriage are divinely approved not only for procreation but also as a means of expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds between husband and wife” (qtd. in “New Church Handbook” 77), implying a de-emphasis on Mormon pronatalism as a principal legacy of plural marriage.

Perhaps the most intriguing argument about the relationship of polygamy to Mormon assimilation appears in a recent article in the *Stanford Law Review* by Elizabeth Harmer-Dionne. Not only does she argue that *Reynolds v. United States* forged the strategy for Mormon assimilation by separating belief from practice, but she also claims that by not recognizing the relationship between practice and belief, the Supreme Court has inadvertently redefined Mormon belief. In other words, plural marriage was not simply a practice; it was a doctrinal position that was central to Mormon theology. When the court proscribed the practice of plural marriage, it set in motion a process that transformed central Mormon beliefs. From redefining doctrines of the Gathering, Zion, the Kingdom of God, exaltation, and marriage to the current propensity of Mormonism to become increasingly Protestant fundamentalist in its theology (White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy* 89–157), the assimilation process, driven by the belief-practice distinction, has radically changed Mormonism. To Harmer-Dionne, the Mormon example has profound implications for constitutional law. She writes, “If restrictions on religious practice actually change religious beliefs, then the Supreme Court must consider, more seriously than it recently has, the protection accorded those practices” (1300).

Yet some scholars, most notably Harold Bloom, believe that polygamy was not a casualty of the assimilation process. He writes,

No one, least of all in Salt Lake City, will be much inclined to accept a religious critic’s fortellings, but I cheerfully do prophesy that some day, not too far in the twenty-first century, the Mormons will have enough political and financial power to sanction polygamy again. Without it, in some form or

other, the complete vision of Joseph Smith never can be fulfilled. (123)

Bloom may be correct regarding the significance of polygamy for Mormon dreams, but he fails to understand how embarrassing the practice is to contemporary Latter-day Saints who envy the respectability bestowed by assimilation. Today, the Saints are among the least likely to countenance polygamy.

If the restoration of plural marriage is not going to happen, what is the most likely course of action for Mormons? We suspect that the process described by Harmer-Dionne will continue until the church formally repudiates plural marriage. And some Mormon scholars have begun providing the rationale. Eugene England, for instance, claims that monogamy, not polygamy, is the true form of “celestial marriage.” Arguing that plural marriage was divinely inspired as an “Abrahamic test” of obedience and loyalty and to enhance social cohesion and personal commitment during the nineteenth century, it has been “divinely, and permanently, rescinded” (103). Jessie Embry, in her review of Altman and Ginat’s study of polygamy among Mormon fundamentalists, is repulsed by the authors’ identification of their respondents as “Mormon fundamentalists.” “I am offended,” she writes, “because, although the fundamentalists believe they are following Mormon traditions, technically they are not Mormons” (186–87).

Efforts to erase Mormonism’s polygamous past are even more advanced at official levels. The church recently published a 370-page volume on the teachings of Brigham Young for use as a manual by the Relief Society, the women’s auxiliary. At no point does it even acknowledge polygamy. A one-page historical summary, from birth to death, documents Young’s first marriage to Miriam Works, who died the year he converted to Mormonism, and his second to Mary Ann Angel (*Teachings of Presidents* vii), but nowhere does it acknowledge other marriages. Accompanying an etching of Eliza R. Snow is a caption identifying her as “Zion’s poetess” and the first secretary and subsequent president of the Relief Society, but

missing is any reference to her plural marriages to both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (133). Several quotations from Brigham Young on the “new and everlasting covenant of marriage” are edited or selected simply to equate it with celestial marriage as understood by contemporary Mormons. And, in at least one instance, Young’s advice to “let the husband and father instruct his wives and children” appears as “let the husband and father instruct his [wife] and children” (165).³ In the officially published church almanac, a brief section contains a biographical sketch of every church president. Though Emma is identified as Joseph Smith’s wife (no others are mentioned), the text acknowledges no marriage for the next seven presidents, all of whom were polygamists, until President George Albert Smith. From then on, the marriages of all presidents, including those following the death of a wife, are reported (*Deseret News* 60–62; Ostling and Ostling 248). It is as if every president between Joseph Smith and George Albert Smith were celibate, though marriage is a prerequisite for holding the office. It appears that ignoring marriage altogether is preferable to acknowledging plural marriage.

Mormon President Gordon B. Hinckley is adamant. Appearing on the *Larry King Live* show, he informed the nation that polygamy is “behind us,” asserting that “there are no Mormon fundamentalists,” and proceeded to condemn plural marriage:

I condemn it, yes, as a practice, because I think that it is not doctrinal. It is not legal. And this church takes the position that we will abide by the law. “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, magistrates in honoring, obeying, and sustaining the law.” (qtd. in “On the Record” 70–72)

Reiterating his position before the Mormon faithful, he said that there “is no such thing as a ‘Mormon fundamentalist.’ It is a contradiction to use the two words together” (Stack A1). Not only was polygamy illegal, but now it had also become immoral and, perhaps more surprising, “not doctrinal.” Sounding as though he were announcing a new revelation, Hinckley declared, “It is now

against the law of God. Even in countries where civil or religious law allows polygamy, the church teaches that marriages must be monogamous and does not accept into its membership those practicing plural marriage” (Mims and Stack A1).

So, in addition to the embarrassment produced by contemporary polygamists who claim Mormon heritage, the church’s recent success in Africa among some polygamous societies intensifies the pressure to repudiate plural marriage. Because the church’s original retreat was justified in terms of the illegality of plural marriage and legitimated through use of the Supreme Court’s distinction between belief and practice, successful Mormon proselytizing in societies where polygamy is legal creates a special problem. The legality of polygamy would make a limited restoration of plural marriage a distinct possibility. Indeed, the religious symbolism identified with plural marriage could endow existing polygamous marriages with new meaning and prevent the social and family disruption caused by imposing monogamous relations on polygamous societies. But the LDS church is too wedded to monogamy for this to occur, and church officials are not comfortable with the contradiction inherent in their position. The simplest resolution will be a new doctrine.

Occasionally, reporters, church leaders, and even scholars claim that Mormonism “repudiated” polygamy with the 1890 Manifesto, or at least with the Second Manifesto in 1904. Not so! The church never repudiated plural marriage; it simply discontinued the practice. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, all of the Mormon presidents, along with most of the apostles, assumed that the time would come when polygamy would be legalized and the Saints would again live “the Principle.” The 1890 Manifesto, which is part of the scriptural canon, *suspends* the practice but does not *repudiate* the doctrine. Repudiation awaits more than a mere statement that plural marriage is “not doctrinal” and can only be complete when this revelation is dropped from the canon or revised to eliminate references to plural marriage, or when another revelation actually denies its doctrinal status.⁴ The trajectory of Mormon responses to its poly-

gamous past suggests that repudiation will be the likely result.

Conclusion

If the behavior of church officials suggests that they would prefer to deal with polygamy by simply ignoring the past and letting any connection with plural marriage fade from public consciousness, it has become increasingly clear that such a strategy will not work. Too many people claiming to be part of the Mormon tradition, though not part of the LDS church, legitimate their polygamous relationships in terms of Mormon beliefs and practices. No longer wanting to be identified with polygamy, Mormons can be expected to become even more aggressive in differentiating themselves from contemporary polygamists and in the rewriting of their own history to excise polygamy. They may be more cautious in editing offensive portions of the plural marriage revelation (*D&C* 132) and modifying temple marriage rituals that still enable serial polygamy,⁵ but these changes are necessary for a clear repudiation of plural marriage. And repudiation is essential for the construction of a Mormon identity void of polygamy. The continuing quest for respectability and obsession with becoming the next “world religion” demands the creation of a Mormon identity in which polygamy is neither central nor peripheral, but absent altogether.

Notes

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1. Polygamy is a general term meaning multiple spouses, while polygyny refers to a man with more than one wife, and polyandry to a woman with more than one husband. The Mormons called their practice of polygyny “plural marriage,” “celestial marriage,” the “Principle,” the “Patriarchal Order of Marriage,” and the “New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage.” Today, celestial marriage includes monogamous marriages that are performed in a Mormon temple. “Celestial marriage,” “temple marriage,” and “eternal

marriage” are synonyms for sacred marriages exclusively solemnized in Mormon temples for “time and eternity.” Throughout this article, we refer to the Mormon practice of polygyny as either polygamy or plural marriage.

2. *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921), 132. This is part of the official scriptural canon and contains “modern revelations,” primarily to Joseph Smith. It is organized in sections and verses rather than pages. Hereafter, it will be referred to as *D&C*.

3. Perhaps because of all these omissions, additions, and textual changes, there appears to be an inordinate preoccupation with persuading readers of the manual’s historical accuracy. The book “reflects the desire of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to deepen the doctrinal understanding of Church members,” which is obviously the “doctrinal understanding” of current leaders and not that of Brigham Young. Readers are informed about the organization of the text, told that the first section consists of “extracts from Brigham Young’s sermons,” and reminded that “each statement has been referenced, and the original spelling and punctuation have been preserved . . .” While the “original sources are not necessary” and “this book, accompanied by the scriptures, is sufficient for instruction” (*Teachings* v), teachers are advised to “carefully avoid controversy” (vi). It is worth noting that the numerous references to plural marriage in Young’s teaching and life have been expunged, but “the original spelling and punctuation have been preserved.” The latter must surely be to convey a sense of historical accuracy to altered texts.

4. Eliminating section 132 from the *D&C* is unlikely because this is the foundational revelation for the doctrine of eternal marriage, a centerpiece of Mormonism and the basic element of the contemporary Mormon conception of family. Moreover, it is one of the most appealing aspects of Mormonism to outsiders. Because textual changes in the scriptural canon have occurred throughout Mormon history, this technique becomes the most probable way that church officials will formally repudiate plural marriage. Suggestive are recent changes in the Book of Mormon. Added to the title of the Book of Mormon in 1982 was “Another Testament for Jesus Christ” to emphasize that Mormons are Christians. And a passage suggesting that darker-skinned descendants of Book of Mormon peoples would become “white and delightsome” upon embracing the gospel was altered to read “pure and delightsome” in 1985. While the latter reflected changes in Mormon racial consciousness following a revelation admitting black males to the priesthood, both of these changes underscore the contemporary preoccupation with respectability and assimilation—and, we think, anticipate how church officials are likely to address the polygamy crisis.

5. Serial polygamy obtains when the wife in a celestial marriage dies and her husband marries again for eternity, another celestial marriage. He will be married to both women in the hereafter. However, a wife who “married in the temple” (celestial marriage) whose husband dies can only subsequently marry for “time” (until death). In heaven, she will be with her first husband while he will be joined to both wives. Currently, she is in no position to choose which husband with whom she would prefer to spend eternity.

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