

themselves as victims of the patriarchy, but as subjects of empowerment within their own gendered theological worldviews.² Some may experience cognitive dissonance from practicing a religion that does not align with their own views on women's roles. To combat this issue, women often engage in a process known as *cognitive restructuring* through which they reinterpret their religious environment to maintain a sense of self-worth without forsaking their beliefs (Beaman). In other words, they reframe their behaviors to be consistent with their beliefs, and vice versa.

This paper will focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, referred to throughout as the LDS or Mormon church. The Mormon church is a recent Christian sect known for having traditional values and taking conservative positions on issues of sexuality and family matters.³ Mormons preach that men and women are given divine and separate gendered purposes by God. Therefore, women's roles as mothers are equally essential to salvation as men's roles as providers and priesthood holders (Sumerau & Cragun). Women are taught to be kind, pure, and subservient; they are told to support their husbands "in every needful thing," and to obey him as he obeys the Lord (Sumerau & Cragun).⁴ However, the Latter-Day Saints are also one of few religions to believe in a male God as well as a Heavenly Mother.⁵ It would be reductive to say that the Latter-Day Saints are anti-woman, just as it would be to say they are completely

² Hoyt offers the following examples of doctrinal sources of empowerment for LDS women: the existence of a Mother in Heaven, the divine role of mothers in the church, and the doctrine of exaltation (the belief that all people on Earth will become like unto God in the afterlife).

³ Formed in 1830 (Cornwall), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints began as a Christian new religious movement which now considers itself to be its own denomination. However, due to a general consensus by other Christian groups, the Mormons remain an entrenched sect that has branched too far off in its teachings to be considered a Christian denomination (Roberts and Yamane).

⁴ For more on LDS doctrine on gender expectations see Sumerau & Cragun "The Hallmarks of Righteous Women: Gendered Background Expectations in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints."

⁵ While Mormons believe in the existence of a Heavenly Mother, they do not worship her or pray to her. Many scholars have theorized that her symbolic role serves to reinforce the divinity of heterosexual marriage, while others view her as a role model for LDS women, evidence of their valuation within church doctrine (Heeran).

gender-inclusive. As with some other traditionalist religions, there are aspects of the Mormon church that are empowering for women just as there are elements which subordinate them. This paper will present a brief overview of the Church's history to explore its complex relationship with gender and women's roles.

Perhaps one of the more controversial aspects of early Mormonism was the practice of polygyny, or the marriage of one husband to multiple wives.⁶ Joseph Smith taught that plural marriage was a divine commandment that would ensure one's salvation in the afterlife. Polygynous families maintained a Victorian-style household, with the husband at the center providing for his wives and children (Embry, *Effects of Polygamy*).⁷ Despite being a fundamentally patriarchal structure, polygyny offered some women freedom to run their own households independent of their husbands who were often gone for long periods of time (Iverson). While many lived in poverty due to the inherent strain on the husbands' resources, some were able to start at-home businesses, manage their own farmland, or even form joint households with other wives to support one another (Iverson, *Feminist Implications*). The first wife was also given the authority to allow her husband to marry again and in some cases select his next wife for him (Embry, *Effects of Polygamy*). This exercise of power allowed women a sense of control over the emotional toll of plural marriages, and to be active participants in the enactment of religious principle (Embry, *Effects of Polygamy*). As the Church expanded in the West, it was forced to reckon with the United States government, which prohibited polygamy.

⁶ The term "polygamy" is a broad term for having more than one spouse, whereas "polygyny" specifically refers to a marriage with multiple wives. Most scholars use the terms interchangeably when referring to Mormonism.

⁷ For more on polygamous households, see Embry, "Effects of Polygamy on Mormon Women" and Iverson, "Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny."

a subjugated auxiliary within the Church, as it was now being overseen by priesthood leaders rather than operating as its own organization (Cornwall).

As a result of the growth and institutionalization of the Church, women's positions were increasingly devalued. The Church was focused on professional bureaucratization, creating new administrations to manage ever-growing wards and stakes.⁹ Greater emphasis was placed on the role of the patriarchal priesthood, and, because women were no longer being ordained, they had no institutional role other than to support their priesthood-holding leaders (Cornwall).

Mormonism underwent a period of feminization during which there were more active female members than males, making the priesthood a scarcer commodity and increasing Mormon women's dependence on their male counterparts (Cornwall). This dilemma of administrative order contributed to the inflated prioritization of men's roles, leaving women with little institutional influence in church matters.¹⁰ Relief Societies have remained the central sphere for women's religious participation, even in modern-day LDS congregations.

The LDS church is just as vocal about its expectations for men and women now as it was in the beginning. In 1995, then-prophet Gordon B. Hinckley read a statement to the General Relief Society entitled "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," which details the Church's beliefs in the ordinance of marriage between man and woman, as well as the responsibilities of

⁹ For Latter-Day Saints, "wards" refer to local congregations, while "stakes" are conglomerates of several wards in a particular region.

¹⁰ O'Dea's dilemma of administrative order suggests that as an organization grows and bureaucratizes, its rigid structure may alienate individuals who are impeded by the hierarchy (Roberts & Yamane). Policy can create a sort of red tape, preventing religious individuals from seeking the guidance they desire from those higher up in church authority.

has put women in a position where they must actively negotiate their roles in order to maintain consistency between their religious and worldly selves. More recently, Mormon feminists have led movements in direct opposition to the Church's doctrine; they've advocated for women to be allowed to perform temple baptisms while menstruating, for a gender-equal reading of the Book of Mormon, and for women's priesthood ordination (Finnigan & Ross). The Church has resisted many of these changes; however, their recent policy change allowing children of LGBT parents to be baptized suggests that church leaders may become more open to adjusting doctrine based on the pressures of church members and broader society.¹⁵

What does this mean for the future of Mormonism? One might predict two different paths. The Church could maintain its stance on gender traditionalism, causing them to fall behind the progress of society and eventually fade into oblivion. In this case one might see a decline in membership as more members leave the Church, fewer conversions, and a steady shrinking of the Church into an even smaller institution. Alternatively, in coming years the Church may become more comfortable with changing policy and experience new growth as a result. Appealing to the mainstream could lead to the establishment of a Mormon denomination with empowered female leaders carrying it into a new progressive era. It is likely that the Church will struggle to accommodate changing social norms, caught between remaining consistent in their teachings while facing pressure to be more progressive. While the voices of members seeking change are difficult to ignore, they still fall into the minority—most LDS women are content in

¹⁵ When announcing the policy change that would allow the blessing and baptism of children of LGBT parents, President Dallin H. Oaks stated, “[The changes] do not represent a shift in Church doctrine related to marriage or the commandments of God in regard to chastity or morality... We want to reduce the hate and contention so common today” (LDS.org). This policy also changes the way the church treats same-sex marriage, which will no longer be considered apostasy.

Bibliography

- Arrington, Leonard J. "The Economic Role of Pioneer Mormon Women." *Western Humanities Review*. (1955) p. 145.
- Beaman, Lori G. "Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter Day Saints Church." *Sociology of Religion* (2001) 62:1 p. 65-86.
- Embry, Jessie L. "Effects of Polygamy on Mormon Women." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. (1984) 7:3 p. 56-61.
- Embry, Jessie L. "Oral History and Mormon Women Missionaries: The Stories Sound the Same." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. (1998) 19:3 p. 171-188.
- Finnigan, Jessica and Ross, Nancy. "I'm a Mormon Feminist: How Social Media Revitalized and Enlarged a Movement." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*. (2013) 9:12, p. 3-25.
- Heeren, John et al. "The Mormon Concept of Mother in Heaven: A Sociological Account of Its Origins and Development." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. (1984). 23:4 p. 396-411.
- Hinckley, Gordon B. "The Women in Our Lives." Spoken at the October 2004 General Conference.
<https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2004/10/the-women-in-our-lives?lang=eng>
- Hoyt, Amy. "Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women." *Feminist Theology*. (2007) 16:1 p. 89-100.
- Iverson, Joan. "The Mormon Question and Women's History." *The Antipolygamy Controversy in U.S. Women's Movements, 1880-1925*. Garland Publishing, 1997. p. 3-18.
- Iverson, Joan. "Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny." *Feminist Studies*, (1984) 10:3 p. 505-522.

Leamaster, Reid J., Einwohner, Rachel L. "I'm Not Your Stereotypical Mormon Girl: Mormon Women's Gendered Resistance." *Rev Relig Res.* (2018) 60:1 p. 161-181.

Newell, Linda K. "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought.* p. 21-32.

"Policy Changes Announced for Members in Gay Marriages, Children of LGBT Parents." Edited by Sarah Jane Weaver, Church News and Events, 4 Apr. 2019, www.lds.org/church/news/policy-changes-announced-for-members-in-gay-marriages-children-of-lgbt-parents?lang=eng.

Roberts, Keith A. and Yamane, David. *Religion in Sociological Perspective.* 6th ed., Sage Publications, 2016.

Sumerau, Edward J., Cragun, Ryan T. "The Hallmarks of Righteous Women: Gendered Background Expectations in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." *Sociology of Religion* (2015) 76:1 p. 49-71.

"The Family: A Proclamation to the World." The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1995.

Cornwall, Marie. "The Institutional Role of Mormon Women." *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives.* University of Illinois Press, 1994, p. 245-281

Toscano, Margaret M. "Are Boys More Important Than Girls?: The Continuing Conflict of Gender Difference and Equality in Mormonism." *Sunstone*, June 2007.