

Mormonism: a look into american socioeconomics and religion



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When observing religion in America, it is often noted how it has played a vital role in the shaping of American society and politics. To better understand this topic, it is of great worth to refocus the discussion and examine the inverse. How has American society directly influenced and impacted religious thought and belief? A prime example of this can be found in the purely American religion known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Despite its claims to be impervious to change, the Mormon Church has a well-documented history of revising its foundational doctrines in order to conform to sociopolitical pressure. This can be illustrated by examining Mormonism's very controversial and publicized history on plural marriage, civil rights, and the feminist movement.

The well-spring of Mormonism came during an era of great religious excitement. Following the ratification of the 1st Amendment of the Constitution of the United States in 1791, America experienced a period of revitalized religious fervor that created a surge in religious pluralism. This movement, dubbed the "Second Great Awakening," gained momentum in the early 18th century as the religious market seemed wide open for business and several groups competed for followers and resources. Charles Grandison Finney, the Father of Revivalism, made note of one particularly busy region in western New-York which he called the "burned over district" due to the sheer volume of revival meetings taking place there (Koester 78-80). Caught in the middle of all this zeal was a farm-boy named Joseph Smith. Joseph was raised in a family who attended a wide variety of denominational services. At the age of 14, he wanted to commit to just one

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sect but was confused by all of the conflicting thoughts and opinions shared by each of the many denominations and wanted to know which sect was God's one true church. After much reflection, he came to the conclusion that he should ask God directly which one he should join. One spring morning in 1820, he went alone to pray in the nearby woods and claimed that in response to his prayer, God and his Son Jesus Christ appeared to him and told him to join none of them because all their creeds were an abomination in their sight and that they were all corrupt. Joseph obeyed this charge and received no further heavenly instruction until one night 3 years later after praying to know his standing before God. At this time, Joseph claimed an angel appeared to him and told him that there was an ancient record inscribed on gold plates which chronicles the history of the native people of the Americas, and that he was to help recover, translate and publish them. Following a 6-year period of what Joseph described as preparation and heavenly instruction, the record was finally published in 1830 and became known to the world as the "Book of Mormon." One month later, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was officially established (Hansen 6189-6192).

The primary thrust of Mormonism from the outset was to restore original Christianity, complete with the authorized priesthood authority that was lost to apostasy and corruption throughout the ages. The chosen vessel that was installed to accomplish this goal was the formation of a legal church similar in structure to Christ's New Testament church, which Paul described as "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (King James Version, Eph. 2. 20). Thus, 12

Apostles were ordained with Joseph Smith serving as Church president and chief Apostle. He was esteemed by his followers as a prophet who received direct communion with God much like Abraham or Moses. As the Church progressed, affairs were guided by continual revelation to Joseph. As the number of converts to the new American religion began to swell, members of the communities they gathered in felt threatened and the “saints” as they were referred to, were driven out of place to place by violent persecution. In 1844, both Joseph and his beloved brother Hyrum were martyred by a mob while they were being held in jail. Faced with a succession crisis, the Mormon saints split up with the majority of 70, 000 following Brigham Young west to settle Salt Lake City, Utah where he took the helm as president of the Church and governor of the territory (Yunfeng 4).

The practice of polygamy was one of the most controversial aspects of Mormonism that spurred a great stand-off with the United States Government. Joseph offered little to no explanation on the practice and chose to keep its application limited and secret (Rothera 30). He publicly denounced the practice and denied to having more than one wife. The 101st section of the 1835 edition of their published scriptures labeled polygamy a “... crime of fornication” (Smith 251). Under Brigham Young’s presidency in Utah, the practice of plural wives was made official and public in 1852 (Yunfeng 5). One of the main reasons for this change in direction was to avoid government persecution. In order to be protected under the First Amendment, it was crucial that polygamy be established as a foundational and essential part of their religion (McConkie 348). Following through with this determination, Brigham Young and other leaders frequently taught that

the practice was necessary and that those who did not accept it would be damned (McConkie 266).

The open and mainstream practice of Mormon polygamy caused national upheaval. In 1862, the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act was passed impelling an ongoing legal battle between the Church and the federal government (Yunfeng 5). Brigham Young was not willing to yield to government pressure since it was considered God's command and abandonment would be surrender to the devil (McConkie 412). As planned, the Church fought back, citing that the Act violated their 1st Amendment rights. Confident in this protection, the Church asked George Reynolds to be a test defendant, however to their dismay, he was indicted for Bigamy in 1874. Reynolds appealed to the Supreme Court but in 1878 they ruled that while the government had no right to interfere with personal belief, they could restrain their actions (Yunfeng 5). By this time, Brigham Young had passed away and was succeeded by John Taylor who continued teaching the necessity of polygamy and pushing back against government pressure. In 1882, the Edmunds Act was passed which enforced harsher punishments and the majority of Church leadership was forced into hiding where John Taylor died. The torch was handed to Wilford Woodruff who, in hiding, wrote a letter that was read to the Church citing that if polygamy had to be given up, their entire religion would come apart and so they must defend it to the grave (McConkie 166). The legal battle continued to escalate. Davis v. Beason barred polygamists from participating in the government and the Mormon Church v. United States allowed government confiscation of around \$800,000 of Church property. Faced with this loss and the threat of losing more,

the Church leadership realized that if the Church were to survive in America, polygamy would have to be left behind. A national press release in 1890 named the “ Manifesto” was issued by Church President Wilford Woodruff stating that the practice was no longer being taught publicly and that no plural marriages were being performed. Despite the announcement, polygamy continued in private until an additional manifesto was released by President Joseph F. Smith 14 years later. (Yunfeng 7). The battle was over and from that time until now, the Church denounces polygamy and those found practicing are excommunicated. Within a period of only 5 years, the practice of polygamy went from being absolutely necessary for salvation to an offense worthy of excommunication at best and eternal damnation as worst. These events clearly demonstrate that religious beliefs can and do succumb to existing political and societal pressure.

Another LDS doctrine that was abandoned due to existing political pressure was the lifting of the ban of African American men from priesthood ordination and temple worship. In the context of 18th century America, Mormonism was far more racially tolerant than the rest of the nation with integrated congregations and open opposition to slavery. Joseph Smith welcomed converts of all races and skin color because he believed they ultimately had the same potential for salvation as whites. While he made no official statement regarding black ordination, he was aware of the ordination of Elijah Abel who held a position in Church leadership. After taking control of the Church, Brigham Young reverted to a belief more common with the mainline protestant views of his day (Stuart 795-796). He taught that God placed the curse of black skin upon the seed of Cain and that the “... curse

will remain upon them, and they never can hold the Priesthood” (McConkie 291).

In 1865, the Civil War came to an end along with slavery with the ratification of the 13th amendment. As the Civil Rights movement gained momentum in the 1950's, American society began to swing away from the Church which remained steadfast in its racial position. In 1954, Church Apostle Mark E. Peterson commented on this shift:

The discussion on civil rights, especially over the last 20 years, has drawn some very sharp lines. It has blinded the thinking of some of our own people, I believe. They have allowed their political affiliations to color their thinking to some extent, and then, of course, they have been persuaded by some of the arguments that have been put forth ... We who teach in the Church certainly must have our feet on the ground and not to be led astray by the philosophies of men on this subject (Peterson 1954).

Inevitably, the Church came into the crosshairs of Civil Rights organizations such as the NAACP who attempted to convince the Church to revise their policies, but their meetings were refused. In 1965, the organization launched a campaign to place massive public pressure on the Church. They released a statement condemning the Church's policies and complained that they made no effort to counter widespread discrimination in the state. They also arranged several public protests near Church headquarters in downtown Salt Lake City (Bolen 16). Soon after, African American members from a handful of sports teams started to boycott games competing with Brigham Young University and the president of Stanford University cut off all athletic ties

(Bolen 89). Successive years would see social pressure begin to come from within the Church as well with some devout members openly disagreeing with Church policy. During this same period of time, an unofficial branch of the Church was developing in Nigeria who wrote several letters to Church headquarters demanding recognition and priesthood (Hurlbut 13). On the legal front, *Bob Jones v University* held that the first amendment did not prohibit the IRS from withholding tax exemption status from institutions with practices contrary to public policy. While this case was pending in 1978 it was rumored that the Church was threatened with withholding which would have been a detrimental blow to their finances. Eventually, yet again the Mormon Church was forced to comply with the insurmountable political and social pressure of the day and issued a public statement called “ Official Declaration 2” reversing its ban on priesthood ordination for colored races. Interestingly, the Church made no mention of internal or external pressures, citing only that the policy change came as a revelation from God (Bolen 119-122).

In similar fashion, recent social movements are slowly making progress at evolving longstanding beliefs concerning the role of women in Church leadership positions. One of the most prominent being the “ Ordain Women” movement which as the name suggests, calls for the recognition and ordination of women to the priesthood (“ Mission Statement”). As attention to this small movement grew, a Church spokesman told the Deseret News in 2014 that “ LDS leaders are listening to women and responding” (Walch). Starting in 2014, a new and separate women’s only meeting was instituted in addition to the priesthood only meeting during annual general conferences.

The closing prayer of the main conference was also given by a women for the first time in Church history and in 2015, women began to be included in three major committees that oversee the affairs of the entire Church (Walch). The most recent change with doctrinal implications occurred January 1st 2019 when sweeping changes were made to the temple ceremony that included more gender parity and inclusiveness. The Salt Lake Tribune reports that “ If you ask any faithful feminist what she wanted to change [in the ceremony], these hit the entire checklist. Every single complaint was addressed and fixed in a meaningful way ... This was not a baby step; it was like a leap forward” (Fletcher). So far the changes have been received warmly, as many women complained in the past that many elements were sexist. Moving forward, if institutional sex discrimination ever threatened the Church’s tax exemption status or implicated any serious legal battles, history shows their policy could change.

Mormonism will forever be a part of American history and therefore, its many challenges and struggles for survival help define what it means for citizens of our country to exercise their constitutional right of freedom of religion. A close examination of Mormon history provides a powerful illustration and insight into the impact of social and political influence on American religion. The Church’s legal battle over polygamy shows that the federal government can pass and enforce laws to restrain the actions of a religious organization if those actions are considered detrimental to society. Furthermore, the policy change of African American priesthood ordination and role of women in leadership positions provide great examples of the kind of struggles that present themselves when traditional teachings established in a different time

and place simultaneously attempt to harmonize with contemporary society. This is a struggle that all mainstream religions in America face today and in the future as the ebb and flow of our society directly influences religious thought. As the gulf widens between what a religion has established in the past and what the public deems as acceptable in the present, believers are faced with the choice to either adapt and conform, create a schism and begin anew, or abandon their faith altogether. This in turn creates a great deal of internal conflict as they question whether or not such changes are in conformity with God's will or simply just problems of their own making.

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