

“Seizing Sacred Space”: Women’s Engagement in Early Mormonism

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IN 1818, JUST AFTER THE WAR OF 1812, Zina Baker Huntington, a young wife and mother from Watertown, New York, wrote to her mother:

As to religion, it is a rather a stupid time as to that in this place and neighborhood, but there is attention in places all around here. I have to lament, my own coldness and stupidity, but hope the cause is equally as near and dear to me. If I cannot enjoy some comfort from the holy spirit, I think my enjoyments are faint indeed.¹

This comment is part of a marvelous collection of letters that form what Zina called a “silent conversation” with her mother Dorcas Baker. These letters, written between 1807 and 1827, are filled with the disappointments and trials of Zina’s life, the changing seasons, the births and deaths of her children and loved ones, and her husband’s business. But it is religion—Zina’s preoccupation with matters of the spirit—that colors the pages of these letters. Two years later she wrote:

I would inform you that we feel steadfast in the faith of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We lament that we live no nearer to God and our deity, but my dear friends, we feel heaven honor and heaven bound. . . . I wish we might all be so happy as to all meet in a better world than this. There is little prospect of a reformation in this place.²

1. Zina Baker Huntington to Dorcas Baker, 10 Mar. 1818, Watertown, New York, in Zina Diantha Huntington Young Collection, archives, historical department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter LDS archives).

2. Zina Baker Huntington to Dorcas Baker, 13 Mar. 1820, Watertown, New York.

Zina, like many other early converts to Mormonism, was a child of the Second Great Awakening. "There is a revivals [sic] of religion all around us," Zina would write. "Some places a few drops and other places a plentiful shower. The Lord has visited our family with his good spirit."³

Besides identifying her own religious conversion, Zina gloried in her young daughter's spiritual sensitivity.

Our eldest daughter, Presendia, has experienced the saving change of heart, I believe. She is 11 years of age last September and our little girl, Adaline, she is six last August. She has had remarkable exercises indeed for such a child, but known to God are all our hearts, and we ought to rejoice that we are in his hands.⁴

The fact that Presendia was only eleven years was of no consequence to Zina. It was assumed that young girls were open and receptive to promptings from God.

Zina's narrative is not unique, but one of many detailing the movement of women toward religion during the Second Great Awakening. This essay examines more than 200 such conversion narratives, like Zina Baker Huntington's, from the first two decades of LDS church history. Some are book-length, but most are first-person accounts of a variety of different forms—autobiographies, journal accounts, letters, and other types of narratives. They provide valuable insights into the conversion process, the men and women drawn to Mormonism's message, and the social milieu in which this drama played out.

The revivals Zina described were nothing short of revolutions, revolutions that caused men and women to realign their lives as they tried to find new paths to God. They were religious expressions of change that were sweeping the land during the first few decades of the nineteenth century, years of rapid social upheaval and unpredictable social change.

Religious historian William McLoughlin, in his book *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reforms*, proposes an intriguing paradigm which illuminates the significance of this movement of women toward Mormonism and other revival religions. He argues that America's periods of religious revival from the eighteenth century to the present correspond with periods of moderate but fundamental social ideological reorientation.⁵ In other words, he suggests there is an inextricable connection between economic and institutional change and intellectual and social evolution. Periods of

3. Zina Baker Huntington to Dorcas Baker, 8 June 1822, Watertown, New York.

4. Ibid.

5. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 7.

economic depression or prosperity stimulate change in ideas and relations. The religious disorder of the early nineteenth century mirrored social disorder.

Americans in the throes of social change questioned traditional authority and religious rituals, and sought new ways of invoking the forces of deity. Religious revivals, therefore, played just such a mediating role as they provided individuals with personal and collective religious experience that helped them readjust their lives or reconcile economic, social, intellectual, and religious forces that seemed beyond their control. Revival theologies, like Mormonism, held a sort of magical power: they provided the means with which to deal with some of the changes in their lives at the same time that it claimed to restore a sacred, ancient order.

In a sense, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and other early Mormons were like refugees from the declining farming communities of upstate New York. They hoped to make the world anew, certainly to reform Christianity and familial relations. Their religious activism and that of the women that aligned themselves with them, symbolized a more generalized rejection of traditional ritual. For centuries, men and women had been segregated by gender in their religious worship. Here, at least momentarily, the needs of male religious spokesmen and of women corresponded. They met, but they did not merge. Women's religious enthusiasm reflected the general social fragmentation and movement which women and men experienced together.

WOMEN AND THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

Recent scholarship paints a picture of the Second Great Awakening as a sort of coming out party for women. This was an unorganized, unorchestrated, and diversified movement which fashioned a different face in every place it surfaced. Revivals pulled women out of their houses into the public arena, onto a very public stage, in unprecedented numbers and in unprecedented dimensions. The Second Great Awakening changed the lives of many women, enhanced possibilities for others, and empowered women in a way unheard of in our country's history. Scholars suggest that converts in the Second Great Awakening were predominantly female. Nancy Cott, for one, contends that in terms of sheer numbers alone, women dominated revivals and spiraled church membership.

One revival minister, Ebenezer Porter, estimated a proportion of three females to two male converts.⁶ But once they were converted, whether they

6. Ebenezer Porter, *Letters on Revivals of Religion* (Andover, MA: Revival Association, 1832), 5. Women constituted the majority of New England church members from the middle of the seventeenth century on. See Edmund S. Morgan, "New England

were married or not, most female converts were eager to bring their husbands, brothers, and fathers into their faith.

This all played out against the backdrop of centuries of female passivity in religious settings. Traditionally, Christianity had silenced women. Men dominated ecclesiastical liturgy and ritual and women passively accepted the word and privately reveled in the mysteries of God. But all that changed with the beginning of the nineteenth century, when as one historian puts it, women seized "sacred space"⁷ and intruded on male territory, taking the pulpit to expound their own spiritual experiences and calling others to repentance, speaking in tongues, and exercising other spiritual gifts. Some women prayed publicly, while others stood on street corners and preached to disinterested and disrespectful crowds. Many women dreamed remarkable dreams foretelling the end of an era and the beginning of a great and glorious new time of religious fulfillment. And for a time male religious leaders played on this newfound female power and called on women to join them in the Lord's work to organize in benevolent and missionary societies, to speak and to pray, and to take the lead in moral leadership in their communities.

Therefore, one of the most immediate and direct effects of the Second Great Awakening was that women's engagement in religion became more immediate and expansive. The conversion experience served as a rite of passage through which women became fully absorbed in religious life.

The concept of rites of passage, as delineated by anthropologists such as Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, provides additional insight into this perplexing problem. Gennep describes three specific states of rites of passage. During the first, *separation*, the individual separates from the group and earlier roles in the social structure. The individual then passes through a second phase, *liminality*, when she lives outside the parameters of laws, customs, conventions, and ceremonies. In a sense this creates an enormous sense of freedom. Liminal persons are felt to be outside of social restraints and norms, to embody the limitless power of disorder. The liminal stage is a time when disorder reigns, old rules and traditions are discarded, and the initiate feels reborn into a new order, a new way of being. In the final state of rite of passage—aggregation—society attempts to integrate the liminal person into a new role or social position.⁸

The rite of passage helps to mitigate the disorder of periods of social

Puritanism: Another Approach," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 18 (1961): 236-42; Darrett Rutman, "God's Bridge Falling Down—'Another Approach' to New England Puritanism Assayed," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 19 (1962): 408-21.

7. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Cross and the Pedestal," *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 1986), 129.

8. *Ibid.*, 151.

change by promising stability or restoration of social order. Through formal ritual, forces that seemed to be moving out of control are reigned in and redirected. The rite serves in the socialization process, orienting the individual to new roles and expectations the new order places on her.

METHODOLOGY AND FOCUS: CONVERSION NARRATIVES

Nineteenth-century women wrote conversion stories that mark their religious empowerment. This well-established tradition followed uniform patterns and as a body forms a distinct genre of women's vernacular literature. Although these narratives reflect an outpouring of emotion posited in the language of the heart, they are nevertheless stylized and formulaic. This complicates the task of accessing their validity, for they bear an intricate relationship to the reality of women's lives.

This essay looks at narratives of male and female converts to Mormonism between 1830-45. Content analysis of these texts provides valuable insights into the emotional and religious life of the early church.

The typical nineteenth-century religious conversion narrative followed a predictable outline. Usually it described five phases of conversion experience: (1) The narrative described the individual's life before conversion as a life of sin, or at least as a time when she ignored the question of salvation. (2) This was a period of self-realization when narrators recognized their short-comings and became aware of the need for change. (3) The heart of the conversion came when the individual turned her life over to God. Many described a sense of relief when freed from one's sins. (4) Narrators then described how different their lives were because of conversion in terms of behaviors and attitudes. For example, many replaced their drinking and carousing with group singing and worship. And (5) in this final stage the narratives varied the most. Some described self-doubt when the exhilaration of the earlier stages waned. Others experienced surges of rededication or persecution from those outside the faith.

Despite the fact that each narrative recounts a unique spiritual experience, there are remarkable linguistic and thematic similarities in the accounts as a group. For instance, the issue of submission to God's will frequently figured prominently. Deference to God came naturally to women. Salvation was a metaphor for the relationships women had experienced since childhood. They had always been taught to defer to the authority of the men in their lives, to obey their fathers, to look to them for protection and guidance. Upon marriage, women slipped easily into the same type of relationship with their husbands. In fact, almost all women were identified by their connection to men as daughters, wives, sisters, mothers.

These conversion narratives exhibit remarkable similarity in language.

The rhetoric of conversion was based on a common stock of words, phrases (some biblical), and themes. Moreover, women like Zina Huntington had been immersed in the language of conversion from birth. They heard dialogue on conversion in worship services, prayer meetings, revivals, and in the context of their families. And even though they mastered the language of humility, submission, and dependence, they spoke to new reserves of strength, power, energy, authority, and confidence because of their new understanding of their relationship with God.

Regardless of the details of her story, each telling of conversion seems to have been a cathartic experience. Eliza Jane Pulsipher wrote her conversion story to inform her children about the "darkness and ignorance the world was then in."⁹ Others noted the folly of the frivolous way they were living, dancing, drunkenness, and most importantly failing to take note of spiritual matters.

At age seventeen Abigail Smith Abbott felt ready to grow closer to God. "For some time I experienced great anxiety pertaining to the salvation of my soul." She wrote:

My prayers were answered with a dream. I dreamed that I was on a high, elevated plain which was a beautiful green. Standing alone and at a little distance from me, I saw a large company of people arrayed entirely in white apparel, who seemed to be marching at a slow pace, singing a song that sounded more glorious than any song I had ever heard before. I was filled with rapture and anxiety to learn the song and be associated with them. I did not go to them but learned one verse of the song. I awoke and sung this song and recited it to my friends and told them my dream.¹⁰

For some, like Eliza R. Snow, the relief felt after baptism was an immediate balm to their souls.

In the evening of that day, I realized the baptism of the Spirit as sensibly as I did that of the water in the stream. I had retired to bed, and as I was reflecting on the wonderful events transpiring around me, I felt an indescribable, tangible sensation, if I may so call it, commencing at my head and enveloping my person and passing off at my foot, producing inexpressible happiness. Immediately following, I saw a beautiful candle with an unusual long, bright blaze directly over my feet. I sought to know the interpretation, and received the following, "The lamp of intelligence shall be lighted over your path." I was satisfied.¹¹

9. "Pulsipher Family History Book," 28, LDS archives.

10. "Abigail Smith Abbott," *Our Pioneer Heritage*, ed. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers), 6:198.

11. Eliza Roxcy Snow Smith, "Sketch of My Life," in *Eliza R. Snow, An Immortal:*

Regardless of the comfort conversion brought, for many trouble began after baptism. In the words of Elizabeth Graham MacDonald: "As soon as I rendered obedience to what I had received as the Word and Will of the Lord, persecution commenced."¹²

The journey toward female empowerment formed the centerpiece of the conversion narrative. By focusing on the state of the female soul, the narrative made visible what had earlier been invisible, the process of moral decision making. These narratives helped women map female aspiration and identity at a time when many women became empowered and experienced an increased sense of female selfhood. The fact that conversion was religiously sanctioned particularly legitimated the narrative. Clearly, as would continue to be true for Mormon narrators into the twentieth century, these women counted their spiritual struggles as more interesting and important than the details of their daily lives. Nevertheless, the conversion narrative helped create a language for their lives, a language that revolved around matters of the spirit.

This religious introspection was frequently an act of worship as well as self-analysis. Women readily attributed the good in their lives to God. But, according to one historian, it was "Clear that religion, not writing, was their vocation. But writing was essential to that vocation. Theirs was no mere summary of a day's events but a searching reflection on its significance for their souls."¹³ Here is a trail of a spiritual pilgrimage marked by the hand of providence on every side.

American evangelicalism of the early nineteenth century has been characterized as a religion of the heart rather than a theological system. A crucial ingredient of this "religion of the heart" was of course the prominence of women in nineteenth-century American religious life. It was left to women to feel their way to God. The power of female conversion narratives comes in large measure from this appeal to feeling over intellect. Frequently they reveal struggle, pain, intensity of emotion over concern with theological doctrines.

Conversion was tied to a wider social and cultural setting, and cannot be understood out of that historical context. These narratives helped women to define their societal roles at the same time they essentially subverted many of the foundational assumptions upon which their society was built. It is ironic that as women told their stories they had to be

Selected Writings of Eliza R. Snow (Salt Lake City: Nicholas G. Morgan Foundation, 1957), 1-53.

12. Elizabeth Graham MacDonald, journal, LDS archives.

13. Joanna Bowen Gillespie, "Clear Leadings of Providence," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5 (Summer 1985), 2:216.

anything but submissive, overcome shyness to exhort relatives or strangers, inspire, organize, publish, be dedicated, bold, and courageous.

Conversion helped women put aside the troubles and concerns of this world in anticipation of a better. It was easy for many to renounce this world while looking to another. This helped them adjust to challenging circumstances. Joining the work of kingdom-building gave them a new focus for their lives. "After receiving the Gospel," Elizabeth Whitney wrote, "I . . . determined to devote my life, my energies and all that I possessed, towards sustaining and building up the Kingdom of God upon the earth. My whole heart was in the great work of the last dispensation, and I took no thought of my own individual comfort and ease."¹⁴ After leaving family, and in many cases their homeland, many now placed Mormonism at the center of their lives. The day after Sarah Layton's baptism she confronted her changed situation. "The next day was Sunday, and we all fasted until after sundown. I did not have anything but my new religion, that seemed all I needed. . . . I was not afraid, nor did I care who knew I was a Mormon."¹⁵

While the principle emphasis of this study is female conversion narratives, it is possible to make some tentative conclusions about differences between male and female experiences. The variations are subtle. Male narratives seemed to be more matter of fact, more preoccupied with scripture than intuition, and place less emphasis on a personal relationship with God. Women make frequent reference to being "naturally religious," as if religiosity were an inherent personal characteristic like meekness, mildness, gentleness.¹⁶ Although men and women used much the same rhetoric to describe what had happened to them, employing common images and identical repeated phrases, the language itself meant different things to women than to men. A woman's expectations about the possibilities of her life were so fundamentally dissimilar to those of the men. Even though women's language was in some cases the same, it resounded differently.

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE POPULATION GROUP

A demographic description of female converts to Mormonism is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is possible to characterize the tellers of this group of stories. This is a group of women whose lives were profoundly changed by the effects of social change during the first four

14. Elizabeth Whitney, "A Leaf from an Autobiography," *Women's Exponent* 7 (1 Aug. 1878), 5:51.

15. "Autobiography of Sarah B. Layton," *Women's Exponent*, 1 Sept. 1900, 26.

16. Whitney, 61.

decades of the nineteenth century. Married and unmarried women's work in the pre-Industrial household economy had changed. These were women who either had been displaced or were willing to be displaced. Many had with their families experienced drastic economic dislocation.

As a group they were relatively young; many were what we would call adolescents. In fact, as was true of the Second Great Awakening generally, by contemporary estimates the majority of these women were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, either single or married but without children.¹⁷ Mary Elizabeth Lightner, like Presendia Huntington, was a young girl but was a particularly precocious child in the matter of religion. She was ten years old when her family first encountered Mormon missionaries in Kirtland, Ohio. She attended a meeting where a Book of Mormon was displayed.

I felt such a desire to read it, that I could not refrain from asking him to let me take it home and read it, while he attended meeting. He said it would be too late for me to take it back after meeting, and another thing, he had hardly had time to read a chapter in it himself, and but few of the brethren had even seen it, but I plead so earnestly for it, he finally said, "child, if you will bring this book home before breakfast tomorrow morning, you may take it." He admonished me to be very careful, and see that no harm came to it.¹⁸

Mary brought the book home, showed it to her family, and promptly began to read the "Golden Bible." The next morning she brought the book back to Morley's house and handed it to him. He responded, "I guess you did not read much in it." She showed him how far she had read, and he said, "I don't believe you can tell me one word of it."¹⁹ She recited verbatim the first verse of Nephi. Morley gave her the book and encouraged her to finish it.

The social upheaval of the period was particularly disorienting for young women such as Mary.²⁰ With their mothers, they felt the disruption of traditional domestic usefulness. These women already moved in a world of economic and legal dependency, always defined by their father or husband. Marriage was the primary way an adult woman could provide for herself. Nevertheless, because the social order was changing so rapidly,

17. Bennet Tyler, *New England Revivals* (Boston: Sabbath School Association, 1846), 76, 148, 159, 189.

18. Mary Elizabeth Lightner, journal, in *The Life and Testimony of Mary Elizabeth Lightner* (Salt Lake City: N.B. Lundwall, n.d.), 2-3.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Nancy Cott, "Young Women in Second Great Awakening," *Journal of Family History* 3 (1975): 19.

there was uncertainty about how they would support themselves, when they would be separated from their families, who they would substitute for their families, where they would go. All these questions seemed to create ambiguous prospects for marriage and hence an insecure future.

Conversion played a prominent role in providing young women with ideological tools to stabilize their lives and identities. And Mormonism proved to be a useful agent in helping them claim their own salvation. Equally important, religious events accompanying conversion provided opportunities for public expressions of anxiety, sympathy, and support as well as a ready supply of new friends. Young women experienced a phenomenon not unlike a new birth into an extensive family of sisters and brothers, a family that promised to be more secure than their original families. Patience Loader wrote:

I am thankful I accepted it just at the right time it was a Safe guard to me at a time when I was Young and full af [sic] life and Needed a guardian Angle [sic] around Me in the Midst of the worldly pleasures I was Surrounded with in a Hotel life So much company and pleasure of all Kind belonging to the world and the many invitations I had to join in with them it was no temptation to me I felt Satisfied that I had found the true way to pleasure and happeneys.²¹

According to Cornelia Staker Peterson, her grandfather John Brown spent "six months teaching, preaching, and courting" before he baptized his future wife Elizabeth Crosby.²²

The language of conversion occasionally sounds like that of seduction. "I first met the Mormon Elders at the home of a friend," Mary Brannigan Crandal later remembered. "One of the elders, after conversing for a short time, looked at me and said, 'Miss B. you will yet join the Church. Will you come and hear us preach next Sunday?' I could scarcely answer for a moment, but a spirit came over me which I'll not forget, and I answered, 'Yes, I'll come.'"²³ Others were as swayed by the face or demeanor of the male missionary as by the spirit. "But when I came to see the two Brother Youngs I had a testimony of myself that they were Servants of the Lord for they looked different to me than any other men I ever saw. They carried an expression in their countenance that bespoke men of God."²⁴

In many cases it is difficult to see if the women were undergoing

21. Patience Loader, autobiography, typescript, 29, LDS archives.

22. "Cornelia Staker Peterson," in *Treasures of Pioneer History*, ed. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughter of the Utah Pioneers), 5:215.

23. "Mary Brannigan Crandal," in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, ed. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughter of the Utah Pioneers), 14:296.

24. Mary Noble, journal, LDS archives.

conversion or courtship. As John Dalling introduced Patience Loader to Mormonism, he moved discreetly from the subject of heaven to the "Subject of marriage and let me know that he was without a wife in the world and that he would like to get accompanion [sic] before he returned to Utah."²⁵

As a group these women already had a religious life. Only rarely did they emerge from the ranks of the unchurched. Sarah Studevant Leavitt was preoccupied as a child with the "awful hell I had heard so much about. . . . I had a vision of the damned spirits of hell, so that I was filled with horror more than I was able to bear, but I cried to the Lord day and night until I got an answer of peace and a promise that I should be saved in the Kingdom of God that satisfied me."²⁶ Sarah was a clairvoyant who throughout her life had premonitions and dreams that foretold the changing fortunes of the church. "I had a place that I went every day for secret prayers," she would later write. "My mind would be carried away in prayer so that I knew nothing of what was going on around me. It seemed like a cloud was resting down over my head."²⁷ Overwhelmingly these women were from the middle class, the children of shopkeepers, skilled artisans, and farmers. No matter who one was, or where one came from, the process of conversion to Mormonism was one of empowerment. This was a decision, perhaps the first in her life other than marriage, that a woman both made and could make on her own. The choice to convert was consciously made and was an assertion of strength. Conversion was a sort of initiation into autonomy not yet comprehended. Here women could establish a direct connection to God without the mediation of male ecclesiastical leaders.

Once they converted during these early decades of the church, it was possible for women to play an active role in Mormonism. These narratives focus on the female inner light—dreams, personal revelations of a rich and varied texture, a preference for intuitive or instinctive forms of knowledge and religious experience, glorification of the individual, rejection of communal norms and harsh systems of punishment, all weakening and even denying of the boundaries between this world and the next.

Mormon women's religious enthusiasm was frequently manifested in speaking in tongues, shouting, dancing, or fainting. In a very important way these religious manifestations were a metaphor for the changes these converts experienced. These behaviors mirrored the fundamental values and beliefs of the early church and marked the path they traveled that transformed their lives and the world around them.

25. Loader, 28.

26. "History of Sarah Studevant Leavitt," 3, copied by Juanita Leavitt Pulsipher, LDS archives.

27. *Ibid.*, 3.

Women like Sarah Studevant Leavitt preached Mormonism alongside their male counterparts and exercised spiritual gifts—speaking in tongues and administering to “rebuke diseases.”²⁸ Yet another woman remembered this time of spiritual gifts. According to Drusilla Dorris Hendricks, “The privilege was given to any who desired to speak and some spoke in tongues while others interpreted what they said. Others spoke by the Spirit of God in their own tongue and we all praised God for we had all drunk of that same spirit. We loved one another and met together often and had good meetings and it was now that persecutions began.”²⁹

Elizabeth Whitney received in Kirtland the gift of singing “inspirationally.” “The first Song of Zion ever given in the pure language was sung by me then,” she would later write, “and interpreted by Parley P. Pratt, and written down; of which I have preserved the original copy. . . . The Prophet Joseph promised me that I should never lose this gift if I would be wise in using it; and his words have been verified.”³⁰

Sarah Layton distributed tracts for the missionaries in her village. “We made a round each Sunday evening. We had three miles to the one place and two to the other, but we never missed going summer or winter for years. Sometimes the people would listen to what we had to say and sometimes they would not.”³¹

These narrators felt empowered by millennial zeal. They were now offered a central role in the religious revolution and this changed them and they disregarded virtually every restraint tradition had placed on women’s behavior. Conversion was a rite of passage that in part explains why women would later accept plural marriage. As they discarded the past and took on a more true partnership in the work of God, coupled with the power of religious belief itself, they grabbed at secular visibility and personal power. This resulted in psychological and sociological change. Still, they were not radicals. Nor were they seeking to move outside the parameters of life as they knew it. Self-fulfillment for them was in magnifying their community’s highest ideals, not fighting them and not in pulling away from them but moving toward the center. For it was only there that they experienced a new sense of power—the power of God—and it altered the way they looked at the world, at themselves, and at the people around them.

28. *Ibid.*, 11. See Linda K. Newell, “A Gift Given, A Gift Taken,” *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, eds. Lavina F. Anderson and Maureen Beecher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 111-50.

29. Drusilla Dorris Hendricks, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, ed. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers), 20:248-49.

30. Whitney, 83.

31. Layton, 55.

Nineteenth-century conversion accounts describe women who hoped for more power in their family arrangements but not by losing the significant men in their lives. The radical reorientation of women to men would eventually occur with the principle of a plurality of wives, but conversion narratives clearly indicate that these women believed religion would in fact solidify familial relations rather than put them at risk. The female sense of religious calling, ultimately and supremely, continued to be to live for others. Much of what they did, including communicating these conversion stories, was for the good of others. Many of these women refused to draw boundaries between their public and private lives, between the spiritual and temporal in their worlds. The line between family and community became blurred and less important. Significantly, these women remained for the most part rooted in the conventional world of marriage and motherhood. This continued to be the way they defined themselves.

Social and sexual proprieties did not bind these new Mormon women in the same way they did their contemporaries, and many began to regard themselves as the Lord's agents, forerunners of a new order—a redefined set of moral, religious, and ethical codes or ways of being. I believe this is another key to understanding why so many Mormon women accepted the principle of plurality of wives.³² When women left relatives behind as they gathered to Zion, they were ostracized by fathers and mothers and set adrift; they moved for a time beyond the restraints of moral codes and community norms that had traditionally constrained their behavior.

Conversion was a rite of passage that ushered them into a new state of religious engagement. During the liminal stage Mormon women cried out, spoke in tongues, criticized their former ministers, renounced time-honored social proprieties. At the same time it created a heightened sense of power, self-awareness, and self-actualization. By the beginning of the twentieth century Mormonism had taken on a new social order of patriarchal rule, often constricting this new found power women had experienced. Earlier empowered women found themselves subordinated—a role change that tragically diminished their religious status and their position in society generally.

CONCLUSION

At the height of the emergence of the modern American family, industrialization, and the Second Great Awakening, women briefly experienced revolutionary, even bewildering change. To many the changes

32. During the nineteenth century Mormons called their practice of polygamy the principle of plural marriage. It was also referred to as the principle, living in plurality, or the celestial order.

wrought through widespread religious revolution seemed capable of revolutionizing women's secular as well as sacred roles. But ultimately the changes proved to be fleeting and a new pattern of subordination emerged.

After Mormons reached the Great Basin and commenced the task of physical kingdom-building, they experienced a period of redistribution of power and a redefinition of roles. By the dawn of the twentieth century few women spoke in tongues in public settings, and by the 1930s the church came out definitively against the practice of women giving blessings. The initial period of partnership in kingdom-building ended when the kingdom was secure. And the Mormon male hierarchy joined in with the rest of Victorian America in the first decade of the twentieth century in glorifying the Victorian mother.³³ The cult of true womanhood's four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—rang true in Mormon Utah.

Through this final stage in their rite of passage, that of aggregation, Mormon women moved to a different position in a new social order. As this new social equilibrium evolved, new rituals, patterns, hierarchies, institutional arrangements emerged, and women became not participants but observers of their religious tradition.

When the wave of revival fervor ebbed, Mormon women tempered their public demonstrations of religious enthusiasm and relinquished their hold on sacred space and moved into a position of deference to the male priesthood hierarchy. Finally, in many ways it seems haunting how familiar almost one hundred years later the rhetoric of the cult of true womanhood still is in Mormon Utah. Consider that women have not yet regained the power or at least sense of power they had in the decades of greatest promise in the early church.

33. The cult of domesticity is most completely discussed in Gerda Lerner, "The Cult of Domesticity," Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Its Historical and Social Context* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 372-92.