

# CAN MORMONS BE WHITE IN AMERICA?

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The emerging field of whiteness studies in the US asks some provocative questions: How do outsiders lay claim to citizenship? How do minorities shed their image as un-American? How do they, in other words, become white, with all the economic, political, and social privileges associated with that status?

The concept of race is elastic, evolving, and a social construction that changes over time. It is not a biological category. Thus, scholars have determined that if white is a color, then white people are also people of color. It also may explain how Japanese-Americans, just seventy years ago evacuated in time of war and interned in camps, might now claim whiteness. Whiteness is not only inheritable, but also achievable. Conceptualize this as a dance, a symbiotic movement where the larger community accepts a minority group only as it adapts to the larger culture.<sup>1</sup>

So, we can ask, despite their image of wholesome Americanism, can Mormons lay claim to full citizenship? Are they white in America? Or do perceptions of Mormons as cultish, unChristian, and authoritarian

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1. On whiteness, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

deny them tolerance, acceptance, and their claims to the privileges of whiteness? What is the role of popular culture in this process? Do Mormons behave in ways that deny them the traditional path that outsiders have taken to become insiders?

Let's think first about the idea of a white race or Caucasian people. In school, we learned that America is a melting pot or a salad bowl—that out of many immigrant nations emerged one people, one nation. Such a concept of whiteness, however, is a mid-twentieth century construct. You would not be surprised that white Americans marked black, brown, yellow, and red peoples as inferior. But, historians are drawn to the intense energy that late-nineteenth-century nativists expended, in response to the massive waves of immigration from Europe, to create a hierarchy of seemingly similar peoples. Americans delineated sharply between Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, Mediterranean, Teutonic, Celtic, Hebrew, and Slavic peoples, among many others. Each was a race with its own physical markers—the outer signs of moral and intellectual character. These signs revealed who was fit for American citizenship and rights and who was not.

Thus, Americans viewed Anglo-Saxons as having a high moral and cultural sense, larger brains, and a gift for constitutional law. The Irish were seen as in a “condition of depravity,” reflected in their low-browed appearance with “black tint of skin” and brutish, even simian behavior. They were submissive to their priests and worshiped them as “demigods.” Along with their “brutal natures,” Italians were seen as weak-minded, cowardly, dark, and lawless. Low receding foreheads, repulsive countenances, and slovenly attire marked their appearance. As they did with the Irish, many observers mediated these claims about Italians and also Poles with reference to the Catholic Church. Inferiority was inseparable from their faith. Benighted immigrants were victims of a papist conspiracy that kept them in ignorance and manipulated their genetic weaknesses for its own purposes. Hebrews with their “chameleonic blood” were believed to be mongrels, greedy, clannish, with an

“animal jaw,” bulging eyes, and “a ravenous appetite for the forbidden fruit.” In the words of sociologist Edward Ross, all of these immigrants were “beaten members of beaten breeds.”<sup>2</sup> Their failure and their threat were hereditary—a factor of birth, “inside the seeds of the breeds.” Marriage with the native-born would bring offspring that degenerate to the basest partner.<sup>3</sup>

According to the research of historian W. Paul Reeve, nineteenth-century Protestants racialized Mormons as well, deeming them unwhite and degenerate. An 1860 US Senate report based upon the observations of Dr. Robert Bartholow, a doctor with the Utah expedition observed: “The yellow, sunken cadaverous visage, the greenish colored eyes, the thick protuberant lips, the low forehead, the light yellowish hair, and the lank, angular person constitutes an appearance so characteristic of the new race . . . as to distinguish them at a glance.”<sup>4</sup> Given to violence, unnatural lust, conspiracy, secrecy, and despotism, they posed a danger to true Americans. In this context, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, perpetrated with Native American confederates, was hardly surprising. Note that Mormons also thought of themselves in racial terms. Polygamy, said Mormon leader George Q. Cannon, gave birth in the Great Basin to a superior “race,” with “the complexion of angels.”<sup>5</sup> Along with Reeve, religious studies scholar Max Mueller’s research suggests that anti-black

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2. Edward Alsworth Ross, *Foundations of Sociology*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 393.

3. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 49, 66, 70; Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 23, 33, 52, 67, 123; Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 28.

4. Quoted in W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15; Reeve, email correspondence with author, Aug. 29, 2011.

5. *Ibid.*, 10.

pronouncements and changes in the LDS Church's official racial policy were a means to distance its members from blacks and claim whiteness.<sup>6</sup>

In 1924, the US Congress passed new immigration legislation that made racial coding law. Quotas were imposed on the unwanted immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe to maintain the racial balance of 1890, the time before it was upset by millions of arrivals at Ellis Island. The new law helped construct a white race in several ways. If curtailing unwanted immigration, it still separated those who were eligible for citizenship from those who had no chance of entering the United States. Japanese, Chinese, and Africans were assigned no quotas and were prohibited from immigrating. The law effectively curtailed immigration from Europe and at the same time sped the whitening of peoples. First-generation immigrants died off, not to be replaced, Little Italies, Little Warsaws, and Little Jerusalems emptied as sons and daughters moved to the suburbs, native languages and old-world ways languished. In the voracious maws of public education and mass media, the second and third generations became American in thought and habit. With citizenship came the vote, and political parties were now attentive to these new constituencies' needs and interests.

Also, enhancing this transformation from races to nationalities to ethnic groups were federal policies in the 1930s and 1940s that discriminated against black Americans while protecting the jobs and homes of white Americans. Labor unions welcomed the immigrants and their children while excluding African-Americans. Residential covenants proscribed eligible neighbors along black-white lines. Recruiters during World War II recognized a collective whiteness by segregating blacks in their own army units and denying them enlistment in the Marines. The Red Cross even segregated black and white blood supplies. The horrors of the Holocaust in Europe and a rejection of Nazi racial theories also

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6. Max Mueller, conversation with author, Aug. 23, 2011. See also, Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

solidified the white race in America. In the 1950s and 1960s, the challenge of a black movement for social, economic, and political equality accelerated the odyssey to white privilege. Race, by the mid-twentieth century, had been recast as color. Ethnicity—differences in culture—defined the members of a now functional white family.<sup>7</sup>

Let us add sociology to history. What processes transformed outsiders into insiders? Sociologists identify acculturation as key to inclusion: minority groups adopting the host society's values, beliefs, and behaviors. Acculturated men and women abandon the old ways to speak English, celebrate national holidays, learn American history, participate in civic activities, accept child-rearing practices, and adapt dress styles. They identify as Americans, an experience that accelerates in the second and third generations. Acculturation facilitates the next step to inclusion: large-scale entrance into primary relationships, including friendships, dating, club and church membership, neighborhoods, and rest homes that allow personal, intimate, and face-to-face contact with the host community members. Assimilation then follows over time—intermarriage replaces endogamy, or marriage within the ethnic or religious group. In the end, broad acculturation and structural and marital assimilation lead to inclusion and a decline in prejudice and discrimination. If the rewards are great, so too is the price. Success dictates a decline in diversity and significance, and even disappearance of the ethnic group.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s, sociologists collected data on eastern communities that indicated that acculturation had occurred in dramatic fashion. At the same time, Americans opted to cocoon themselves in primary groups based far less on nationality and more upon religious affiliation. More than three-fourths of Jews indicated that all or most of their close friends were Jewish. Eighty percent of Catholic parochial

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7. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 157–98.

8. See Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) for a summary of this literature.

school students had either all or two Catholics as their three best friends. For marriage partners, men and women looked to their own church or synagogue. Eighty percent of Protestants, 84 percent of Irish and Polish Catholics, and 94 percent of Jews married within their religious group. Compare this to a 91 percent endogamy rate within nationality groups in 1870 falling to 64 percent in 1940. In light of their studies, sociologists in the 1960s posited a triple melting pot scenario for white Americans. That is, Catholics befriended and married Catholics and Jews befriended and married Jews in concert with economic class. White Protestants behaved similarly with what one scholar called a “consciousness of kind.” African-Americans, meanwhile, remained confined in a segregated pot regardless of religious affiliation. Sociologists predicted the declining significance of religion in determining friendships and marriage partners among white Americans. They cited data that showed generational change with younger Americans more receptive to intermarriage across religious lines and affiliation with host society primary groups.<sup>9</sup>

History charts specifics about the movement of outsiders to the inside. Remember, this is a dance. The minority group acts and reacts, accommodating and acculturating to ease its path. At the same time, the majority measures these actions and reactions and weighs claims to whiteness. In making a case about Mormons, I have selected another religious group that has been cast in even darker colors and denied citizenship for a longer time. What insights can we glean from the experience of Irish, Polish, and Italian Catholics to answer the question: Can Mormons be white in America?

Catholics have been one of the most feared and detested groups in American history. They have suffered prejudice, discrimination, and violence. I will offer a few illustrations of anti-Catholic bigotry and suggest the changing dynamic that brought Catholics in from the cold.

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9. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, 53, 122–23, 179, 214.

The Catholic-Protestant wars are European-born and centuries old. Anti-Catholic prejudice came to America with the first colonists to God's New Israel. Americans excoriated Catholics for their devotion to a false church that preached a "paganistic creed with its worship of the Virgin Mary, dead saints, images, bones, and other relics."<sup>10</sup> More importantly, nativists accused Catholics of placing their allegiance to the pope above their loyalty to the United States. Nativists wove a narrative that depicted a tyrannical pope and a people enslaved to the Catholic Church. Ever ready to expand his power, the "tyrant of the Tiber" had long coveted Protestant America. With Catholic votes, he would elect men to do his bidding. Catholics had no choice but to obey the pope. Enslaved by the secrets they had disclosed in the confessional, they were herded to the polls and voted as commanded. Once the Catholic hierarchy had control of the American government, it would end the separation of church and state, ban the Bible, and destroy the freedoms of speech, press, and religion. The sins of the Catholic Church were not merely political. "Its whole energy," insisted Presbyterian minister Edward Beecher, "has been put forth to corrupt the principles and debauch the morals of mankind. . . . It has deluged the nations with the blood of saints."<sup>11</sup>

Central to the plot was the parish priest. He commanded the pope's foot soldiers and countenanced no dissent. He ordered the marshaling of guns and ammunition and had them ready for revolution in the basement of his church. He administered the parochial school curriculum and promoted its un-American message. And as revealed in exposés by escaped "ex-nuns," he succumbed to the pleasures of the flesh and ordered the offspring of priestly lust strangled and then concealed on church property.

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10. Quoted in Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 125.

11. Edward Beecher, *The Papal Conspiracy Exposed: And Protestantism Defended in the Light of Reason, History, and Scripture* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1855), 411.

Anti-Catholicism has been a recurrent feature in American history. Serious outbreaks of prejudice occurred in the 1850s with the Know-Nothing party, the 1890s with the American Protective Association, and 1920s with the Ku Klux Klan. When New York governor Al Smith campaigned for the presidency in 1928, he faced a firestorm of bigotry, a key factor in his defeat.

In the 1930s and 1940s, during the Great Depression and World War II, anti-Catholicism began to recede. In part, this was related to the acculturation of Catholic ethnic populations. In addition, a series of events and individuals acted to change Protestant opinion about Catholics. Rather than being perceived as enemies within, Catholics gained acceptance as loyal Americans and defenders of the nation's basic values. Key to this also was the transformation of the image of the Catholic priest from an agent of papist intrigue to a benevolent leader in tune with 100 percent Americanism.

In response to a wave of what it considered indecent and immoral motion pictures, Catholic leaders in the early 1930s organized the National Legion of Decency. It asked parishioners to take the pledge and refuse to attend films that glorified crime, menaced the home and youth, and denied country and religion. Hollywood, concerned about declining revenues in hard times, was receptive and inaugurated a rating system that anointed films with a Production Code Administration seal of approval. The Code remained in effect for decades.

Film historian Anthony Smith points to an even more important phenomenon regarding Hollywood that showed "the value of Catholicism for the wider nation."<sup>12</sup> The 1930s and 1940s, he argues, saw a series of commercially and critically successful films that reinterpreted Catholicism to the American public and accelerated Catholic progress

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12. Anthony Burke Smith, *The Look of Catholics: Portrayals in Popular Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 18. See also, Colleen McDannell, ed., *Catholics in the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).



to whiteness. Produced, directed, and populated by Catholic stars, these films ignored the pope and hierarchy of the church. Instead, they championed Catholic heroes who worked hard to shore up community and home, and who battled for social justice in a time of economic crisis and war. In 1938, Spencer Tracy starred as Father Flanagan in *Boys Town*. The film, based on a true story, chronicles the work of Edward J. Flanagan in helping homeless boys regardless of race, creed, or color. Repeatedly, he reminds viewers that there is “no such thing as a bad boy.” The film received critical acclaim and Tracy won an Oscar for his performance. In 1940, James Cagney and Pat O’Brien starred in *The Fighting 69th*, a tale of a traditionally Irish-American unit in World War I. The film focuses on O’Brien as Father Duffy, the regimental chaplain who, as the movie tells viewers, is “the epitome of our national courage” and “a truly great humanitarian.” In the film, Catholics come to the colors and shed their blood in defense of the nation. Tolerance and pluralism are the watchwords, but the Catholic director showed no reluctance in depicting Catholic iconography. All is wrapped in the flag; as Father Duffy reminds the audience, “I’m a soldier as well as a priest.” To drive the point home, the camera scans a cemetery with Irish names on wooden crosses.

The winner of seven Academy Awards in 1944, *Going My Way* continued the process of transforming priests into heroes and Catholics into good citizens. Bing Crosby portrays Father O’Malley of St. Dominic’s Church. We glimpse him first in white collar and straw skimmer with rosary close at hand. He is, to use the parlance of the time, a “regular” guy. He plays stickball with the kids, has a St. Louis Browns sweatshirt, knows the golf course, is kind to the elderly, adores puppies, is a bit of a klutz, and sings. His accent has no trace of the Irish brogue and is Midwestern. He is modern and acculturated. This priest is in soft focus, a man who is gentle, kind, safe, and upbeat. The film shows no reticence about its Catholicism, with Crosby appearing in cassock, singing *Ave Maria*, wearing a crucifix, and displaying Jesus of the Sacred Heart prominently on the wall. In destroying myths, the film even confronts

the specter of the dreaded church basement, long suspected as serving as the Catholic armory. The basement at St. Dominic's is more prosaic than sinister—a storage space for old furniture, with exposed pipes and hanging laundry. Crosby opens this Catholic space for rehearsals of the boys' choir.

John Ford's Cavalry trilogy of *Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and *Rio Grande* deserves attention here. Ford stations stereotypic Irish men in the Army forts during the Indian Wars, guardians who carried the standard and fought for their country. Let us also remember the combat films of World War II. Among the stock characters of the US Army platoon was the wisecracking Italian or Polish or Irish kid from the big city. The Catholics, Americans all, were boys who became men in defense of their country.

The cast of new national Catholics appeared off-screen as well. Father Charles Coughlin, the radio priest, abandoned his program for children to fulminate against communism, socialism, and international bankers, and to support the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt. At the height of his popularity and before beginning an anti-Semitic chant about an international Jewish bankers' conspiracy, his listening audience was estimated at between thirty and forty million people. Joseph McCarthy, the US senator from Wisconsin, made the anticommunism cause his own and enlisted Catholics in the fight against the reds. William F. Buckley founded the *National Review*, which became the intellectual center of American conservatism. He and the magazine's commentators preached in support of traditional morality, a strong national defense, and the institutions of church and family. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen appeared weekly on television during the 1950s in a show called *Life is Worth Living*. For five seasons, dressed in his bishop's robes, he talked to all Americans about motherhood, family, and faith. Here was, in Arthur Smith's words, "Americanism with specifically Catholic accents."<sup>13</sup>

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13. Smith, *The Look of Catholics*, 141.

As Catholic acculturation progressed, the work of these American advocates of Catholic faith and patriotism prepared the ground for John F. Kennedy. Their efforts over twenty years outlined the text of his speech on religion to Protestant ministers during the 1960 presidential campaign. In his address, Kennedy declared his independence of papal authority on policy matters while testifying to his loyalty to the United States. Kennedy confronted well-known Protestant fears, asserted his belief in the separation of church and state, and announced specifically that the national interest and not the Catholic hierarchy would dictate his positions on birth control, divorce, and public funding of parochial schools. He also noted that at the battle of the Alamo there was “no religious test,” that Catholics were among the Texicans who died defending liberty. Even more powerful, he reminded his audience of World War II and the death of his older brother, along with his own combat service in the South Pacific. His message was clear: Catholics had stood with other Americans in crisis and proven their devotion to country.<sup>14</sup>

The Kennedy presidency, and perhaps more importantly his martyrdom, facilitated acceptance of Catholics as white in the wider American society. As individuals and in organizations, they were welcomed into the New Right of the 1970s. Opposition to *Roe v. Wade*, gay rights, and the Equal Rights Amendment gave them common ground with other conservatives in defending the family and traditional gender roles. The immigrant saga of Ellis Island claimed a bootstrap history of independence and community support without federal aid and conditioned their entrance into conservative coalitions. Even the persistently anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan welcomed them into its ranks in the 1970s, a sure sign that Catholics had attained whiteness in America.

Facilitating this acceptance were changes in the pan-ethnic Catholic melting pot. The Catholic Church had long pressed to expand territorial

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14. John F. Kennedy, “Transcript: JFK’s Speech on His Religion, September 12, 1960,” *NPR*, Dec. 5, 2007, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600).

parishes based on area and phrase out national parishes with their own languages and traditions. Closing down these way stations encouraged acculturation and Americanization. Meanwhile, the parochial school system, which reached its high point in the 1960s with more than 13,000 institutions and five million students, went into rapid decline. The easing of anti-Catholic sentiment, the decline in the immigrant population, suburbanization, and rising costs led to the closure of thousands of schools. By the end of the twentieth century, 5,800 schools and three million students had been lost. Acculturation and acceptance into primary groups brought economic and social mobility, and Catholics in large numbers joined corporate boards, university faculties, and medical and law practices. Acceptance also affected rates of intermarriage beyond the nationality and religious group. By the early twenty-first century, almost 40 percent of Catholics married partners outside their faith, a 20 percent increase from the 1950s. In recognition of this new reality, the Catholic Church no longer requires as a precondition to marriage that children be raised in the faith but rather that a spouse's Catholic beliefs be respected. On a related note, Jewish intermarriage rates reached more than 50 percent by the 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

The construction of whiteness is symbiotic. It requires mutual change and action on the part of both the minority and majority. Acculturation is a necessary but not sufficient first step. Catholics crafted new images of themselves that calmed fears and revised perceptions. At least on film and television screens, who but a priest would you call to bust ghosts or wrestle with demonic possession? In combat, Catholics proved their loyalty as Americans. They gave their martyred son John Kennedy as a sacrifice to the nation. In right-wing causes, they made alliances with

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15. Benjamin T. Philips and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Ethnic Capital and Intermarriage: A Case Study of American Jews," *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 4 (2006): 492; Andy Smarick, "Can Catholic Schools be Saved?," *National Affairs*, Spring 2011, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/can-catholic-schools-be-saved>; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White*, 159.

their erstwhile enemies. Meanwhile, Catholic self-segregation and reliance on faith-based primary groups gave way to associations with those outside the ethnic and religious core. Catholics also made peace with pluralism, and the war with Protestants for converts became less intense and divisive.

With the Catholic example as context, let us return to the Mormons and gauge whether they have completed their journey to acceptance and whiteness.

Mormons were more than a racialized group in the nineteenth century. They also confronted a federal government determined to repress what it considered to be a criminal conspiracy to subvert the separation of church and state and an immoral threat that struck at the core of American values. In the 1850s, a military expedition advanced on Utah to bring defiant Mormon leaders to heel. Federal officers waged war on polygamists, with criminal prosecutions spanning decades. Supplementing these measures against Utah, local Protestant vigilantes in the South attacked Mormon missionaries for spreading the word of a false church and luring away the ignorant.

In the 1890s, the LDS Church began a slow surrender, with capitulation completed by World War I. In return for security from attack and a space to survive, the LDS community retreated on polygamy and uprooted its economic and political stakes in the Utah community. Like the defeated Japanese after World War II, the Mormons sought reconciliation and acculturated to the victors' demands. This meant an intense devotion to country as well as a distancing from Mormon communitarian roots.

Insulated and isolated by mountains, deserts, and distance—and with time softening animosities—the image of the Latter-day Saints changed in the American mind. Rather than an outlaw group of cultists, Americans recognized the Mormons as western pioneers and fixed on church teachings that proscribed alcohol, coffee, and tobacco and promoted genealogy. Since the 1890s, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir

has served as a good will ambassador to the nation and eased concerns with its repertoire of traditional Christian and patriotic music. During the Great Depression, the Mormon welfare system drew much attention as a potential solution to the economic crisis. Mormon leader Ezra Taft Benson joined the cabinet of the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s and in the 1960s encouraged Mormons to participate in national conservative groups. Lyndon Johnson not only visited Mormon leaders twice during the 1964 campaign, but also requested that the Tabernacle Choir sing at his inauguration. Utah joined the rest of the nation in 1964 in electing Johnson and rejecting Arizona senator Barry Goldwater's bid for the White House. If the LDS Church raised any controversy, it was the denial of the priesthood to black male members. At a time of racial change and challenge, this was a defiant claim to whiteness. However, as historian J. B. Haws suggests, at the end of the 1960s, the Mormons were "less opposed than obscure."<sup>16</sup> They were simply members of the Christian family of believers.<sup>17</sup>

As Catholics, Protestants, and Jews settled in their pan-ethnic melting pots, so, too, did Mormons. Church callings drew Saints deep into their tribe and absorbed religious, economic, and social energies. Mormon ward houses or congregations became self-contained, all-purpose community centers. In addition to serving as places of worship, they hosted sporting events, dances, socials, playgroups, political meetings, and men's and women's organizations. Mormons in good standing also tithed to

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16. John Ben Haws, "The Meaning of 'Mormon' in the American Mind: Shaping Public Perceptions of Latter-Day Saints, 1968–2008" (PhD diss., University of Utah, 2010), 32–50, 64–66. This work was later published as J. B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

17. See Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000); Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

their church. Such activities do not distinguish Mormons from other religious groups in the 1960s that were similarly inward-looking and tribal. But would Mormons be able to breach the high walls of separation and use their acculturation skills to assimilate?

While other religious groups made peace with pluralism, Mormons continued and would expand their intensive campaign for converts. The LDS Church claimed one million members for the first time in 1947. By 1963, it had two million on its rolls, and in 1971, three million. While many joined the Church in foreign nations, the great majority were Americans. In part, this was the work of an expanding recruiting army that listed 2,132 missionaries in 1947 and by 1965 almost tripled that number. Stressing the important of conversion work to his church, President David O. McKay called all to the war for souls: "every member a missionary."<sup>18</sup> The Mormon offensive would not go unchallenged.

By the end of the 1960s, Mormons had for the most part found acceptance, or at least indifference or ignorance. Perhaps this is why George Romney's brief run for the Republican Party's nomination for president was mostly devoid of prejudice and commotion. Romney, a sixty-year-old former automobile executive, governor of Michigan, and devout member of the LDS Church, declared his candidacy in 1967: "We need leadership that can again elevate religion and morality to their position of paramount importance and thus eliminate growing selfishness, immorality, and materialism."<sup>19</sup> Gallup pollsters asked voters about Romney's Mormonism and determined that 17 percent would oppose him on religious grounds and that 75 percent of Americans had no concerns.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Haws, "Meaning of 'Mormon,'" 41–43, 63–64.

19. Anthony Ripley, "Romney Declares He is in '68 Race," *New York Times*, November 19, 1967, 1, 62.

20. Thomas B. Edsall, "Will Anti-Mormon Sentiment Cost Romney GOP Nomination?," *Huffington Post*, June 7, 2007, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2007/06/07/thomas-b-edsall-will-anti\\_n\\_51232.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2007/06/07/thomas-b-edsall-will-anti_n_51232.html).

Romney believed his greatest hurdle to the presidency was, in his words, “I’m not as well known as I could be.”<sup>21</sup> Others observed that the Michigan governor had to contend with the growing conservative element in the GOP that he had antagonized in 1964 by refusing to support party nominee Barry Goldwater. Some suggested that the ambitious Richard Nixon might be the stumbling block.

Most significantly, however, neither he nor commentators raised his faith as a barrier to the presidency. Even on racial matters, Romney met no resistance, for as governor he had been a civil rights advocate. He captured one-third of the African-American vote in his run for the state house in 1966. Romney was open about his Mormonism. He did not smoke, drink, or campaign on Sundays. Newspapers noted that Romney was a former missionary and had been born in a Mormon settlement in Mexico. The *New York Times* praised him as a model of “personal rectitude” with “innermost religious conviction.”<sup>22</sup> The press focused on his efforts to bring economic recovery to Michigan and his fiscally responsible record as governor. Romney did not have to engage in defensive counter-punching regarding his independence from LDS Church authorities or the tenets of his Christian faith. Polls in April 1967 had him beating Lyndon Johnson by a margin of 54 to 46 percent. When he withdrew from the race because of his “brainwashed” comment about the Vietnam War, the *New York Times* offered the one religious stereotype that I could find: Romney had “confounded those who had thought his Mormon religious background would not permit him to ‘quit’ so soon.”<sup>23</sup>

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21. Ripley, “Romney,” 62.

22. Tom Wicker, “Impact of Romney Move,” *New York Times*, February 29, 1968, 23.

23. Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), 47; Robert Semple, “Romney Decision Urged by Aides,” *New York Times*, February 29, 1968, 17; Wicker, “Impact of Romney Move.”



Soon after, however, the religious and political landscape changed in the United States. The 1970s saw a fourth Great Awakening in American history and a religious upsurge in the public square. Looking for news that God had reentered history and that the prophetic clock had again begun to tick, Evangelical Christians focused on the Jews, God's "time pieces" in the end times. First the birth of Israel in 1948 and then the recapture of Jerusalem in 1967 convinced the faithful that the second coming was at the door. There were other signs of the end times: rising lawlessness and materialism, growing sexual promiscuity, and earthquakes and floods of great intensity. The call went out to spread the Gospel to secure souls and morally reclaim America as God's sword in the world.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, the LDS Church continued to raise its profile and intensify its efforts to be a change agent beyond Utah and the Great Basin. In 1974, the Washington D.C. Temple was opened, with temples in Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, and Chicago following in the 1980s. In the 1990s, President Gordon B. Hinckley appeared several times on national television to explain Mormonism to viewers. He also launched a massive building campaign that more than doubled the number of temples to 120 and saw Mormon membership jump from nine to twelve million. Meanwhile, the LDS missionary effort ballooned, and the church became international in scope.

Evangelicals countered their competitors. They denied the Christianity of Mormons, a theological conflict that first emerged with the founding of the LDS Church. Beyond theology were accusations of sheep-stealing and a struggle for authority in the secular world. The competition has been telling. Political and social activists on the left also mediated perceptions of Mormons and the LDS community for a national audience. Opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and 1980s earned Mormons the wrath of feminists and liberals.

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24. Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 66–104.

The LDS Church's opposition to gay rights has led LGBT proponents to brand it the leading homophobic exponent in the United States.

An LDS Church-commissioned poll recorded that in 1991, 37 percent of Americans ranked Mormons unfavorably while only 18 percent had a similar opinion in 1977. As J. B. Haws writes, "When those who expressed no opinion were removed from the study, the results were even more dramatic: 'Nearly six out of ten people who had an opinion of the Mormon Church said their impression was a negative one.'"<sup>25</sup> Recall that in 1967, only 17 percent of Americans would vote against a qualified Mormon running for president. A poll in December 2006 found that 53 percent of Americans would feel "very uncomfortable or have some reservations" about voting for a presidential candidate who is Mormon.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, Mormon convert Glenn Beck, in parallel to radio priest Father Coughlin, gathered a large following first on radio and then on television. Many who have in the past been most receptive to anti-Mormon claims follow his lead. His populist jeremiads implore supporters of family and church to join gold and guns enthusiasts in an alliance to thwart the New World Order conspiracy. LDS Church member Stephen Covey has won praise and perhaps enhanced stereotypes of a hyper-organized Mormon community in his efforts to keep the world on track with popular books such as *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. On a lighter note, generations of Osmonds sing and dance their way into the hearts of Americans.<sup>27</sup>

Mormons have also frequently been portrayed in the entertainment media. A much-watched 2003 episode of the television cartoon series *South Park* lampooned the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith.

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25. Haws, "Meaning of 'Mormon,'" 337.

26. *Ibid.*, 432–33.

27. Alexander Zaitchik, *Common Nonsense: Glenn Beck and the Triumph of Ignorance* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2010); Mark Lilla, "The Beck of Revolution," *New York Review of Books*, December 9, 2010, 16–20.

Still, the show concluded that even if Mormons are dupes, they are nice people in strong families. Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* appeared in 2005 and six years later had an Amazon.com national bestseller ranking of #1,510. Currently, its ranking is still a respectable #223,763. As the title indicates, Krakauer's Mormons are cultists and polygamists who have a tendency to commit murders. Helen Whitney's 2007 PBS special *The Mormons* was broadcast in primetime for four hours over two nights. Although praised for its more balanced portrayal of the LDS Church and community, inordinate time was still spent on the Mountain Meadows Massacre and polygamy, including footage on outlier Mormon sects. Commercial television focuses on what sells to Americans, and when it comes to Mormonism, polygamy sells. HBO's *Big Love* aired for five seasons beginning in 2006. Set in Utah, *Big Love* offered viewers a peek at the lifestyles of businessman and later state senator Bill Henrickson and his wives, Barb, Nicki, and Margene, as they manage the hurdles of living "The Principle." TLC's reality television series *Sister Wives* introduces audiences to salesman Kody Brown of Lehi, Utah and his wives, Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn, and their sixteen children. The Brown family challenged Utah's anti-polygamy laws and was frequently seen on local and national news programs. TLC's companion reality show, *My Five Wives*, which aired for two seasons, focused on Utah polygamist Brady Williams, his five wives, and their combined twenty-five children. Is it any surprise that poll after poll indicates that for Americans, the description "Mormon" most strongly associates with the word "polygamy"? *South Park*'s creators opened on Broadway with the musical *The Book of Mormon* and won nine Tony Awards. This tale of missionaries in Africa tweaks Mormons about spiritual arrogance, racism, and homophobia. However, many Mormons agree with scholar Richard Bushman and are willing to take this "ribbing" in stride and

ask, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if through this funny and outrageous show we got to know one another better?”<sup>28</sup>

Could Mormon filmmakers, like their Catholic counterparts in the 1930s and 1940s, use the silver screen to counter hostility and project new images to a national audience? More than two dozen Mormon-made films have appeared since 2000, but so far, the opportunity to effect change has been lost. Mormon movies have been inward-looking, self-absorbed, amateurish in writing and production, and too keen to promote faith rather than understanding.

Zion Films produced *God’s Army* (2000), a story about young missionaries in Los Angeles. Earnest and ordinary, these men battle for souls offering a script for conversion and finding many eager for the word. In the genre of a buddy movie, the men learn from the experience, suffer crises, go beyond themselves, and bond with each other. Their faith is strengthened in the process and their testimonies renewed. *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001) recounts the experience of Elder John Groberg in Tonga during the 1950s. Instructed to learn the language and build the kingdom of God, Groberg risks life and limb for his church. He completes his mission with honor, having made a difference here and in the hereafter for those he worked to save. The romantic comedy *The Singles*

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28. “All About Mormons,” *South Park*, Nov. 19, 2003; Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Anchor, 2005); Helen Whitney, *The Mormons*, PBS American Experience and Frontline, Apr. 30 and May 1, 2007; *Big Love*, HBO, 2006–2011; *Sister Wives*, TLC, 2010–present; Jonathan Turley, “One Big, Happy Polygamous Family,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/21/opinion/21turley.html>; Gregory A. Prince, “Nixon Was Wrong: Religion and the Presidency, 1960, 2008, and 2012—An Interview with Shaun A. Casey,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 163; Jared Farmer, “Why *The Book of Mormon* (The Musical) is Awesomely Lame,” *Religion Dispatches*, [www.religiondispatches.org/archives/culture/4743/why](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archives/culture/4743/why); Hal Boyd, “LDS Scholar Richard Lyman Bushman Talks ‘Mormon’ Musical,” *Deseret News*, Aug. 28, 2011, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/700147768/LDS-scholar-Richard-Lyman-Bushman-talks-Mormon-musical.html>.

*Ward* (2002) expects its audience to have insider knowledge: Mormon community words, phrases, and jokes are never deciphered. The plot revolves around a devout and beautiful woman who will not commit to a handsome Mormon man who is unsure of his faith and tempted by the outside world. Once he finds balance, he is worthy and not only gets the girl but finds peace and contentment in church callings. The film offers a series of “didn’t you know he was a church member?” moments with Mormon sports celebrities doing cameo roles. Faith promotion is the theme of two movies that appeared in 2003. *The R.M.* and *The Best Two Years* remind Mormon audiences of how hard it is to be a missionary and how easy it is for young men to lose their spiritual fire. The cause of discontent is often the woman who promised to wait for her missionary’s return but was untrue. These are message films. Like World War II movies, they offer those on the home front a view of battle and advice about loved ones in the service. The comedy *The Home Teachers* (2004) reminds Mormon audiences that home teaching brings about conversion to the truth and a righteousness among the Saints. Like the other Mormon movies, *The Home Teachers* plays to the home crowd and has no patience for outsiders. Only seasoned Mormons could truly appreciate the jokes. Thus, a Mormon viewer who reviewed the film on Netflix’s website wrote: “My husband is a recent convert who didn’t understand the humor. . . . Needless to say, I don’t recommend this one to a non-member or a new member.” Another declared, perhaps more telling of the film’s intent, that the film is “not the best missionary tool or for new converts.”<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to these films, the LDS Church’s official “I Am a Mormon” campaign, posted online and on billboards, shows Mormons as a warm and welcoming people of diversity with different origins and interests. It is too soon to measure the impact of this effort. But, in changing the image of Mormonism, Marlin Jensen observed in 2010: “Over the

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29. Netflix.com, accessed Sept. 26, 2011.

twenty-one years that I have been an LDS Church general authority, I don't know if we have made much headway or not."<sup>30</sup>

These Mormon-made movies can best be understood as mirrors. They reflect a close-knit, tightly integrated, and self-segregating community. Historian W. Paul Reeve wrote: "The hive is very busy with all kinds of commitments on Sunday but also during the week. It creates a natural social network that is focused inward and unintentionally and inadvertently exclusionary by its very nature." There is, as well, he writes, "an underlying mistrust among Mormons regarding 'outsiders' . . . an automatic defensive crouch."<sup>31</sup> According to scholars Robert Putnam and David Campbell, Mormons score very high in "religious homogeneity," that is, they are more likely than other religious groups to have friends, family, and neighbors who are LDS. They concluded: "Mormons have an unusually high strength of religious identity, and share a distinctive culture. . . . They marry each other, live by each other, and associate with each other."<sup>32</sup>

This is especially the case in Utah and the Mormon kingdom of the Great Basin, where LDS members have gathered to the suburbs. Here, Mormon neighborhoods are easily recognizable. In a sea of single, detached family homes are the raised spires of the numerous and identical ward houses. As in the nation of Israel, where the display of the national flag marks safe ground, the steeples headquarter enclaves that offer acceptance and haven. Wards for single people are the proper place

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30. Quoted in Haws, "Meaning of 'Mormon,'" 473.

31. Reeve, email correspondence with author, Aug. 29, 2011

32. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 524–26. When asked about intermarriage rates in the Mormon community, Brigham Young University Professor of Sociology Tim Heaton responded: "It is hard to get good data on this because samples have few Mormons and intermarriage is uncommon. The LDS Church does have data on membership status of couples but they are generally not willing to share" (Tim Heaton, email correspondence with author, Sept. 26, 2011).

to look inward and ensure a suitable match. Here Mormons remain in the world but insulated from it.

Mormon authority, if not always conscious, weighs heavily on those beyond these neighborhoods. For example, nearly every community in Utah is based on a grid that has a Mormon temple or church building as the origin from which all streets radiate and are counted. This not only privileges Mormonism, it makes the points of the compass signs of religious power.

Equally impressive is the omnipresence of Mormonism's beehive symbol. Its origin is the Book of Mormon, which tells of an ancient people who converted swarming honeybees—*deseret*—into a productive hive. According to an article in the *Deseret News*, a Mormon newspaper based in Salt Lake City, “it is a significant representation of the industry, harmony, order, and frugality of the people, and of the sweet results of their toil, union, and intelligent cooperation.”<sup>33</sup> Mormon authorities have described the beehive as a “communal coat of arms,” or a “motto,” or “our emblem.”<sup>34</sup> Then as now, it adorns the state flag, ward houses, public buildings, parade floats, the seals of both the University of Utah and private Brigham Young University, jewelry, quilts, furniture, tombstones, and state highway signs, among many other items. Songs and hymns feature the bees and hive. Utah is the Beehive State. Resonating with this, Salt Lake City's Triple-A minor league baseball team has undergone successive incarnations beginning as the Bees, then the Stingers, the Buzz, and now again the Bees. Curiously, Mormon patriarchs take note of the danger of drones but make

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33. From *Deseret News*, Oct. 11, 1881. See Richard G. Oman, “Beehive Symbol,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 99, available at [http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Beehive\\_Symbol](http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Beehive_Symbol).

34. Quoted in J. Michael Hunter, “The Mormon Hive: A Study of the Bee and Beehive Symbols in Nineteenth Century Mormon Culture” (PhD diss., California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2004), 108.

no mention of queen bees. The hive is a visual reminder of the past and symbolically references expectations today. For Mormons, it reinforces identity and goads individual enterprise with an eye on the collective. For those beyond the LDS Church, such symbols reinforce complaints of overweening cultural and political power and control.

Similarly, LDS missionary efforts fire resentment as a breaching of the religious truce in the United States. Official Mormon missionaries number approximately 70,000 men and women worldwide in 2017. But, as members of a proselytizing religion, Mormons are on the alert for converts. Recent acquaintances and even close friends must be wary that even a hint of interest in Mormonism will initiate a conversion script and an offer of a gift copy of the Book of Mormon. If sincere, Mormonism's truth claims deny the validity of others' religious experiences.<sup>35</sup> In pressing the battle for souls, Mormons play a zero-sum game with tolerance, sometimes a forgotten virtue. Thus, a 2007 Pew Research Center study on the religious landscape in the US found that while 82 percent of Jews, 79 percent of Catholics, and 66 percent of Protestants believe that many religions can lead to an eternal life, fewer than 40 percent of Mormons agree.<sup>36</sup> The response of those outside the Mormon community is clear. Putnam and Campbell suggest that groups that Americans view "coldly" are those with whom they "have little or no personal exposure." On their thermometer, three groups stand out as most unpopular: Mormons, Buddhists, and Muslims. If not specifically measuring whiteness, this focuses on which groups seem somehow alien or even suspect in twenty-first-century America.<sup>37</sup>

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35. Lee Davidson, "Church Unveils 16 New Questions for Prospective Mormon Missionaries to Ensure They Are Ready, Worthy and Able to Serve," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 21, 2017, <http://www.sltrib.com/religion/local/2017/10/20/church-unveils-16-new-questions-for-prospective-mormon-missionaries-to-ensure-they-are-ready-worthy-and-able-to-serve>.

36. Jessica Ravitz, "Most Americans Believe Salvation Achievable in Other Faiths," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 28, 2008, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=9722774&itype=NGPSID>.

37. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 506–09, 534.



Mormons, by the second decade of this new century, have settled in a self-created, pan-ethnic beehive. This enclave exists physically in Utah and the Great Basin and mentally and spiritually in communities around the globe. They are interconnected. They are in their world but not of the world. The Beck, Covey, Hinckley, and Osmond phenomena fueled tolerance and even acceptance for Mormons. So, too, did Mitt Romney's 2008 and 2012 campaigns for US president. But rancor and hostility from beyond their community still affirms many Mormons' choice to gather with their own. A 2011 poll of one thousand Protestant ministers of all denominations revealed that 75 percent disagreed with the statement "I personally believe Mormons to be Christians." Evangelicals were more likely to strongly disagree, but even 50 percent of mainline ministers shared their view. At the same time, liberals decry the LDS Church as authoritarian and reject its stands on abortion, women's rights, and gay marriage. Against the rising tide, Mormons have turned their lives inward, with proselytizing being their most visible gesture to the outside world. Contact across the line is made in secondary relationships—between clients and professionals, students and teachers, customers and merchants. Friends and marriage partners are found within the Mormon tribe. While scoring high on acculturation values and behaviors, Mormons are less inclined to follow the Catholic and Jewish paths to broader primary group involvement, intermarriage, and whiteness.<sup>38</sup>

Whiteness requires a willingness to leave behind the ethnic-religious beehive for broader primary group relationships and intermarriage.

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38. Amy Sullivan, "Does Mitt Romney Have a Prayer with Evangelicals?," *Time*, June 3, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2075677,00.html>; Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "McCain Surges in Polls, But Many Evangelicals Wary," *Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2008/february/106-12.0.html>; Dick Polman, "The American Debate: Romney Still Dogged by Religious Bigotry," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 13, 2011, [http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/dick\\_polman/20111013\\_The\\_American\\_Debate\\_\\_Romney\\_still\\_dogged\\_by\\_religious\\_bigotry.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/dick_polman/20111013_The_American_Debate__Romney_still_dogged_by_religious_bigotry.html).

Religious groups must make peace with pluralism and resist the intense battle for souls. In this journey from the margins to the mainstream, individuals must come to terms not only with what they will gain but also what they will lose. Are Mormons willing to make that journey? Can they cope with the tension between being accepted and white while denying what has been defining and comfortable? Current scholarly observations about integration in mainstream primary groups and rates of intermarriage suggest the distance yet to travel. The continuing press of missionary work raises barriers and provokes animosity. So, too, does Mormon cultural and social authority beyond the local ward. Efforts to cast a non-sectarian image in popular culture remain weak. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, whiteness still eludes America's Mormons.

Yet the timing of Mormon acceptance and whiteness may only be delayed. Important to watch is the behavior of Mormon Millennials. Across denominations, Millennial women and men have proven to be more liberal in their social and political values and less prone to follow authorities. Perhaps their emergence will diminish Mormon cohesiveness and defensiveness while speeding entrance into primary groups beyond the hive.