

THE SEPTEMBER SIX AND THE LOST GENERATION OF MORMON STUDIES

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I was a high school senior in September 1993, when Lavina Fielding Anderson, Avraham Gileadi, Maxine Hanks, D. Michael Quinn, Paul Toscano, and Lynne Kanavel Whitesides were disfellowshipped or excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While these six people's lives were being upturned via Church discipline, the great drama in my life was spending too much money on the homecoming dance and then sulking that I didn't get asked to the next girls' choice dance. My daily journal from the time, in which I painstakingly documented what I was learning in history, English, or calculus class on any given Tuesday, gives no intimation that I even heard about the excommunications. I was serving on seminary council and faithfully reading B. H. Roberts's *History of the Church* while some of the people whose works about Latter-day Saint history and theology I would read and admire only a few years later were being expelled from the LDS Church, if not necessarily the Mormon community. Despite my ignorance at the time, these events ended up having a profound effect on the trajectory of my life.

I enrolled at Brigham Young University the following year, in fall 1994. No one in my social circles was talking about Mormon history, at least not in any academic sense. I don't recall any of my professors mentioning the September Six during my freshman year. The excommunications didn't really register for me until four years later, during my final year at BYU, when I took a course on Mormon history from David Whittaker, who was the curator of Mormon and Western Americana in the BYU library's special collections. It was my first exposure to

scholarly Mormon history. Professor Whittaker talked about the September Six as the latest chapter in the long and complex relationship between the LDS Church and its intellectuals.

That was the same year I applied to graduate school. I sought advice from several professors about my plan to pursue a PhD in American religious history. No one explicitly encouraged me to become a Mormon historian. Not Professor Whittaker—for whom I worked in special collections, who was one of my mentors, and who clearly thought highly of my abilities and potential. Not Richard Bushman, who was very gracious when I audaciously cold-called him. Maybe it was because they could tell I was interested in the broader American religious experience, not just Mormonism. Maybe it was because they believed—as I do—that it's important for students of Mormon history to also study other things. Or maybe it was because it was 1998, they had lived through 1993, and they were still nervous.

From the perspective of institutional boundary maintenance, the September Six excommunications were a resounding success. The tactic worked, at least in the short to medium term. The show of force did exactly what it was supposed to. It made clear that Church leaders would not tolerate intellectual exploration that they perceived as challenging Church doctrine and what they deemed to be apostolic prerogatives. This wasn't about Church leadership feeling threatened by one individual or drawing the line on one issue, as we later saw in the high-profile excommunications of the 2010s (Kate Kelly and John Dehlin being the most prominent cases). It was a broadside, a frontal assault on the entire independent Mormon intellectual community. The fact that the six recipients of Church discipline were writing about different issues and occupied different positions across the ideological spectrum is precisely what made the excommunications so effective. The not-so-subtle message to the rest of the LDS scholarly community was clear: it could happen to you too.

Part of the mythical power of Church discipline—the way that it intimidates those who are not directly affected by it—is the way that

the decisions of Church leaders, working individually and together, are shrouded behind the veil of bureaucracy. Even three decades later, we don't know all the details about who directed these six cases to go forward all at the same time, or the degree of communication and coordination between General Authorities (which ones exactly?) and the various bishops and stake presidents on the ground. Boyd K. Packer's name frequently comes up, but the cast of characters was no doubt much larger. Their names and roles are largely anonymous, however, because they were acting in institutional roles that left no paper trail (or at least not a publicly available one). It's not really accurate to say that "the Church" excommunicated or disfellowshipped any of these six individuals; most Church members had no knowledge of these disciplinary actions. Though we frequently speak of it as such, "the Church" is not a historical agent. Collectivities (like "the Church") neutralize the individual responsibility of any one person acting on behalf of the whole. Accountability is anonymized and diffused to the point that there is no longer any real accountability to speak of. And that allows collectivities—whether mobs, corporations, governments, or churches—to act with at least a certain amount of impunity.

With all of this in the background, it makes sense that no one encouraged me to pursue a career in Mormon history. They didn't want to cheerlead me into a professional dead end or an antagonistic relationship with Church leadership. In the late 1990s, the prospect of ushering me, an eager and faithful young LDS undergraduate, to a doctoral program to study Mormon history would have seemed tantamount to pushing me out of the trenches and sending me across the demilitarized zone to a doomed fate on the other side. My professors had learned well the lessons of September 1993.

But I hadn't. When I eventually learned about the excommunications, it seemed like ancient history—something that happened, like that homecoming dance, way back when I was in high school. Besides, the late 1990s were halcyon years for Mormons and Mormonism. The Church was the "fastest growing religion in the world"—at least, that's

what we told ourselves, aided by sociologist Rodney Stark's grandiose projections.¹ Anything that happened in 1993 was not just one but two Church presidents ago. The Church was in full Gordon B. Hinckley mode. No dour anti-communist, he. Instead, there he was smiling on national TV, matching Mike Wallace and Larry King stride for stride. What's more, the prophet was encouraging Church members to get all the education we could. Anti-intellectualism was a thing of the past!

As I started graduate school, I had imbibed all of President Hinckley's ebullient optimism. I was living proof of Mormons' newfound standing in the world. The Department of History at the University of Notre Dame was one of the best doctoral programs in the country for religious history, and it had admitted two—*two!*—Latter-day Saints. Yes, we were occasionally objectified, even exoticized; in almost every class session of a seminar we took with a distinguished Catholic historian, he gruffly asked, "What's the Mormon take on that?" But there we were, at the table! If any of my Catholic, evangelical, or secular colleagues and professors ever mentioned the September Six during those heady days, I don't recall.

It was in the mid-2000s that it began to occur to me that perhaps 1993 was not so distant after all. I published my first article in *Dialogue* in the Spring 2004 issue. Two years later, I was invited to join the Dialogue Foundation's board of directors. I wanted to keep all my employment options open, so when I received the board's invitation, I called several people at BYU to ask if adding my name to the *Dialogue* masthead would be a problem were I to apply for a job in Provo. Most of them said that it was a new era—my board affiliation might get raised in an interview, but any concerns could easily be allayed once the interviewer heard me express my heartfelt commitment to the Church. Only one of my former professors cautioned me against joining the board, warning that any formal association with *Dialogue* would undermine

1. See Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (Sept. 1984): 18–27.

an otherwise strong application to teach at BYU. I learned firsthand on two different occasions over the next few years that she was right.

Fortunately, BYU wasn't my only professional option, as I found other good jobs to begin my academic career. Right as I was publishing my first book, *The Mormon Menace*, Claremont Graduate University opened a search for the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies. A chaired professorship in Mormon studies at a secular university was still a novelty. I decided, almost on a lark, to throw my hat in the ring. I knew I had no chance: I was thirty-four years old and had (barely) published one book. Endowed professorships are supposed to go to accomplished mid-career or senior scholars, people in their forties or fifties or sixties who have a long publication record and are recognized as leaders in their respective fields.

The establishment of the Hunter Chair represented an opportunity to pass the torch to the next generation of Mormon studies scholars. But the handoff was a stretch. There was a pool of qualified candidates, but it was much smaller and more academically junior than it should have been. What explains the gap between Mormon history's founding generation and mine? No doubt there are multiple factors, but the fallout from 1993 must rank high on the list. The September Six excommunications resulted in a lost generation of Mormon intellectuals—smart, talented people who should have written books, led scholarly organizations like the Mormon History Association, and shaped both the academic field of Mormon studies and the broader public understanding of the religion.² Latter-day Saints were primarily affected, but non-Latter-day Saint scholars also picked up on the cue that the Church wasn't enthusiastic about open inquiry into its

2. There are many other "lost generations," both in Mormon history (referring to a group of mid-twentieth-century literary authors) and more broadly (most famously, those Europeans who as early adults became disenchanting in the aftermath of World War I). My use of the term is meant to be generic, not necessarily to suggest a connection between this "lost generation" and any other.

past. A few Latter-day Saint intellectuals stuck with it, foremost among them Terryl Givens (interestingly, a literary scholar, not a historian). But there should have been an entire generation of Terryl Givenses.

The Hunter Chair should have gone to a senior scholar. In fact, it had originally, with Richard Bushman coming out of retirement at Columbia University (where he held another endowed professorship) to get the endeavor off the ground. But when Bushman stepped down from the Hunter Chair in 2011, most members of the founding generation of New Mormon History were either at or near retirement age. Furthermore, many of that generation had spent their careers teaching at BYU or working in the Church History Department—neither of which was an especially attractive career profile for a secular university like Claremont. Philip Barlow would have been an excellent choice, but he had recently been hired as the inaugural holder of the Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University. There was another younger member of that generation who had published enough influential scholarship to be a potentially competitive candidate for the job. His name was D. Michael Quinn. Yet the principal donors to the Hunter Chair, who did not control the search but whose generous gifts creating the position afforded them some degree of influence with university administrators, made it clear that they did not consider an excommunicant to be an acceptable candidate for a position named after a Church president.³ September 1993 loomed

3. Of course, Michael Quinn had also worked for the Church Historical Division and taught at Brigham Young University prior to his excommunication. Furthermore, he had not held a full-time faculty position for many years before the Hunter Chair search. Even without taking donors' concerns in mind, then, it is not clear how favorably the search committee would have looked upon his candidacy on purely academic grounds. The fact that all the candidates seriously considered for the Hunter Chair in 2010 were devout Latter-day Saints also underscores the religious insularity of the field at the time. At that point, relatively few non-Latter-day Saints were actively publishing in Mormon history. For more detail about the complex politics behind the establishment of

large over Mormon studies, even at a secular university. The fact that a thirty-four-year-old with one book was hired for an endowed professorship at a highly regarded university can only be regarded as a fluke. The stars aligned in an unpredictable way that worked out splendidly for me, but only after many others had paid the price.

Times change. Things did get better in the early 2000s. The archives started to open up again. The Church History Department started producing and supporting first-rate historical scholarship, most notably the Joseph Smith Papers and the research that culminated in Ronald Walker, Richard Turley, and Glen Leonard's masterpiece *Masacre at Mountain Meadows*. Latter-day Saint intellectuals found new confidence, and more non-Latter-day Saint scholars gravitated to the field. Mormon history has blossomed and expanded into the multidisciplinary field of Mormon studies. Social scientists, theologians, philosophers, literary scholars, scripture scholars, and others are all producing pathbreaking work. We are living in a golden age of Mormon studies. Tellingly, most of the work is being done by people who were either young enough, or started graduate school late enough, to have not been scared away by the events of September 1993.

There are still whispers. Fear remains, even if we try to push it to the back of our minds. I am frequently asked, "Have you ever been called in by a General Authority for something you wrote or said?" The answer is yes, once. We spent a little over an hour together, enjoying a wonderful conversation that I genuinely cherish. He revealed himself to be a deep thinker and compassionate minister of the gospel. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't think of the September Six when I opened the letter and read this leader's "invitation" to meet with him in his office. When friends and colleagues publish or say things that push the envelope, I

the Hunter Chair (and my eventual hiring), see Armand L. Mauss, *Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport: Intellectual Journeys of a Mormon Academic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012), chap. 8.

actively pray they will be met with the same generosity and understanding I experienced.⁴ There are no guarantees.



Some of Joseph Smith's most poignant insights into the human condition came when he languished in Liberty Jail during the winter of 1838–39.⁵ In his masterful prison letter to the Saints, excerpted in Doctrine and Covenants section 121, he reflected on the nature of power in a fallen world. Power may be exercised in various ways. Too often it is used “to exercise control of dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men.” When this is the case, “the Spirit of the Lord is grieved.” In heaven's eyes, the unrepentant wielder of that kind of dominative, manipulative, compulsory power is in a posture of hostility or enmity not only toward other humans but also toward God. Alas, “sad experience” reveals that “almost all men” will “exercise unrighteous dominion” at some point.⁶ They may get what they want—God offers no promise to intervene in such cases—but this is not the order of heaven.

The prophet's key insight comes next. “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained” unless it is predicated on the divine qualities of persuasion, longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, kindness, pure

4. I'm fully aware that my positive encounters with Church leaders, including the one I related here, are conditioned at least in part by the various forms of privilege that I enjoy as a white, Melchizedek Priesthood–holding man with an advanced degree and a certain amount of prominence connected to my professional position and public voice. The power imbalance between Church leaders and myself is thus smaller than it is for most Church members.

5. This section draws from the insights developed more fully in Patrick Q. Mason and J. David Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), chap. 1.

6. Doctrine and Covenants 121:37–39.

knowledge, and most of all “love unfeigned.”⁷ This oft-quoted scripture is usually interpreted with an emphasis on the *ought*. That is to say, we *ought* to be kind and gentle and loving in our relationships with one another. But the statement is more radical than that. This passage is not simply about the way the universe *should* work; it tells us the way the universe *does* work. It is descriptive, in other words, not merely normative. The key words are *can*, *only*, and *maintained*. Certainly, it’s nice when people are nice. But in a world of agentive souls, power and influence can only be maintained over the long term when assent is granted freely. Compulsion, dominion, and manipulation can and do work in the short term. People can be controlled or subdued with the use of intimidation, fear, and violence. But the human soul yearns for freedom and fulfillment. Any form of power based on compulsion rather than persuasion, intimidation rather than invitation, fear rather than love is therefore inherently limited—not just in its ethical value but in its efficacy.

The September 1993 excommunications effectively and tragically cowed a generation of Latter-day Saint intellectuals. When institutions and individuals are threatened by new ideas, there is always a temptation to retrench. The blunt force of Church discipline worked in the short term. Even within a few years, however, its effect had diminished. Why? Because ideas cannot be quelched by fiat. And, more fundamentally, because “no power or influence can or ought to be maintained” by fear, dominion, intimidation, and compulsion. A new generation of intellectuals arose and carried the torch of inquiry forward.

Churches thrive when they count their intellectuals as assets not liabilities, partners not villains. Will intellectuals think unruly thoughts? Yes, because it is the divine nature of the human mind to inquire, to explore, to expand. The pursuit of knowledge resists institutional correlation. If members or leaders of a group encounter thinking they deem

7. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42.

to be dangerous, they are generally served best not by attempting to prevent or squelch that thinking but rather by providing better, more persuasive thinking. Numerous historical examples suggest that the compulsory silencing of ideas deemed “bad” is ultimately more dangerous than the ideas themselves. Churches, like governments, lose their authority precisely when they have no recourse other than mere authority. If Church leaders want to promote or discourage certain ideas, they have ample opportunity to use their power as teachers to persuade the Church membership of their position. Even in a digital age, it is the rare intellectual who can even approach the reach of the general conference pulpit and other modes of official Church communication.

Thirty years later, we can be grateful that the collective excommunications of September 1993 proved to be an exception rather than the rule in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’s ongoing relationship with its intellectuals. We cannot change the past. But hopefully we can learn from and avoid the unnecessary tragedy of future lost generations.

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