

MORMON DISSENT IN THE AGE OF FRACTURE

Benjamin E. Park

When fifteen hundred progressive Mormons attended Sunstone Symposium in August 1992, they did so in protest. The symposium had become a center point in the growing battle between Latter-day Saint leaders and activists, especially as Church authorities grew increasingly outspoken in denouncing what Dallin Oaks called “alternative voices.” Ecclesiastical officials had issued a “Statement on Symposia” after Sunstone’s 1991 conference that condemned gatherings in which speakers explicitly criticized the faith. Members were warned by local leaders not to present at future Sunstone events, and Brigham Young University professors were forbidden to even attend. But instead of dampening participation, the statement escalated the activists’ resolve.¹

This year-long tension climaxed with a presentation by Lavina Fielding Anderson. A literary scholar who had previously edited Church magazines, Anderson had recently co-founded the Mormon Alliance, an organization dedicated to documenting ecclesiastical and spiritual abuse within the institution. Her presentation, which balanced faithful devotion with unflinching calls for justice, meticulously detailed dozens of actions taken by local and general leaders intended to suppress free thought and critical scholarship. The accusations

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Alternate Voices,” Apr. 1989, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1989/04/alternate-voices?lang=eng>; Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Despite Church Warnings, 1,500 Attended Sunstone Symposium,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 15, 1992; “Statement on Symposia,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1991.

consummated with a bombshell: Anderson alleged the existence of a secretive committee that constituted “an internal espionage system that creates and maintains secret files on members of the church.”²

Eugene England, a prominent BYU professor who defied university administrators’ orders by attending the Sunstone meeting, stood up and declared, with his finger violently stabbing the air, “I accuse that committee of undermining our Church.” An Associated Press reporter who witnessed the spectacle ran the story, prompting an immediate and uproarious media firestorm.³

The crisis, of course, eventually led to six disciplinary hearings in September 1993. Much has been written on the many contentious, and often tragic, steps that resulted in the excommunications and disfellowships of around a dozen activists during the 1990s. What often gets overlooked, however, is the broader historical context that in many ways served as the launching pad for the crisis. America, just like her homegrown religion, was engulfed in division over culture wars that were birthed in the 1970s, heightened in the 1980s, and then meted out various judgements in the 1990s, often about the issue of gender. As is often the case, Mormonism’s most crucial moments held up a mirror to what was happening in society around them.

The post–World War II economic boom that catapulted many white Americans to material success inaugurated a brief era of national progress and solidarity. In the political realm, most leaders from both parties embraced what is now referred to as the “liberal consensus,” a general agreement that the federal government should be strong enough to support a country of like-minded citizens united in a common cause.

2. Lavina Fielding Anderson, “The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 1 (1993): 62.

3. Terryl Givens, *Stretching the Heavens: The Life of Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 227–29; Peter Steinfels, “Religion Notes,” *New York Times*, Aug. 22, 1992.

Few groups experienced as much benefit during these mid-century decades as the Latter-day Saints, who witnessed immense growth both in the United States and abroad. The “fog” that had been “hanging over” the nation for generations, remarked President David O. McKay when he attended President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s inauguration in 1953, had now vanished, dispersed by the “sunshine” of the new era. The country seemed destined to finally reach its potential as a harmonious Christian nation.⁴

That tenuous boon proved fragile and short-lived. The civil rights movement in the 1960s drove the first wedges into the homogenous façade, but the 1970s proved the real beginning for the nation’s culture wars. Debates over abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and homosexuality divided Americans into opposing factions, which gave rise to a new generation of unending social conflict. Paul Weyrich, founder of the conservative Heritage Foundation, captured the meaning of this new battle. “It is a war of ideology, it’s a war of ideas, and it’s a war about our way of life,” Weyrich explained. “And it has to be fought with the same intensity, I think, and dedication as you would fight in a shooting war.” The newly formed religious right quickly became a dominant movement for conservative retrenchment. The era’s chasm became so clear that historians have come to describe it as an Age of Fracture.⁵

It was during this period that the field of history also became a battleground. Bicentennial celebrations of American independence in 1976 sparked numerous debates over the nation’s identity, particularly how the past related to the present. Evangelicals were especially

4. David O. McKay diary, Jan. 19, 1953, in *Confidence Amid Change: The Presidential Diaries of David O. McKay, 1951–1970*, edited by Harvard Heath (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2019), 50–51. For this era in general, see Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate American Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

5. Richard A. Viguerie, *The New Right: We’re Ready to Lead* (Falls Church, Va.: Viguerie, 1981), 55; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

keen on rejecting secular stories that did not prioritize God's guiding hand throughout the country's two centuries. Peter Marshall and David Manuel's *The Light and the Glory*, published in 1977, dismissed secular scholarship in favor of spiritual hagiography and became a national bestseller. When Latter-day Saint apostle Boyd K. Packer instructed teachers a few years later to demonstrate God's hand "in every hour and in every moment of the existence of the Church, from its beginning until now," he was echoing a broader trend.⁶

The timing of this new battle was particularly ironic for the Mormon tradition, as it revolved around a concept that became central to the faith: the "traditional" family. Saints were first pulled into the fight through their opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, through which they earned their credibility as reliable cultural warriors. But earning a place with the religious right required strong coordination on two fronts. First, the Church had to prove its ability to deliver on key social issues, including political topics crucial to the moral majority. Second, Church leaders had to shore up the theological and historical disputes that threatened their correlated message and exaggerated their ideological distance from contemporary evangelicals. Both initiatives, which were tethered to contested notions of gender, involved choosing a side in the partisan battle then fracturing America.⁷

The ensuing history wars between Mormon academics and Latter-day Saint leaders must be understood in this context. From the perspective of Salt Lake City, scholars were undercutting the narratives

6. Boyd Packer, "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 259–69. For the evangelical context, see Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 74–83.

7. See Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 167–78.

necessary for social assimilation amid the culture wars. D. Michael Quinn's 1985 article on post-manifesto polygamy, for instance, demolished the traditional tale that the Church forfeited polygamy in 1890 with a clean swipe. That the essay appeared during a time of growing fundamentalist conversions, and concomitant media attention, only emphasized the challenge for publicity-conscious leaders. But the real threat came from Mormon women whose feminist scholarship raised questions concerning ordination, healing blessings, and Heavenly Mother. Though disputes over historical narratives had been plentiful since the beginnings of Leonard Arrington's "Camelot" in the early 1970s, threats of actual discipline became much more earnest once the scholarly discourse focused on the family.⁸

The culmination of this new feminist scholarship was Maxine Hanks's edited volume *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, which appeared in late 1992, mere months after the contentious Sunstone symposium. The edited book included chapters on a broad range of topics that critiqued the Church's patriarchal traditions and beliefs. "Feminism has always existed in Mormonism," Hanks declared, arguing that the faith's future depended on restoring fundamental doctrines of gender equality. A few months later, in early 1993, Lavina Fielding Anderson published her extensive article on ecclesiastical abuse in *Dialogue*. "We must speak up," she insisted, because "if we silence ourselves or allow others to silence us, we will deny the

8. D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 9–105; Nadine Hansen, "Women and Priesthood," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1981): 48–57; Linda King Newell, "A Gift Given, a Gift Taken: Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick among Mormon Women," *Sunstone* 6, no. 4 (1981): 16–25; Margaret Toscano, "The Missing Rib: The Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion," *Sunstone* 10, no. 7 (1985): 16–22.

validity of our experience.” Mormonism’s patriarchal structure was under siege.⁹

The gendered and cultural context of these developments shed meaning on the next steps. After a decade of fighting the battle over gender, Church leaders, led by Packer, were no longer willing to exhibit patience. It was time to root out the three “major invasion[s]” that had infiltrated the Church, Packer declared in May 1993: “the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement[, and] the so-called scholars or intellectuals.” That these issues of gender and scholarship, threats to the faith’s now-central doctrine of “traditional family,” were now intertwined was a blueprint borrowed from contemporary America. These were the prominent stakes for the culture wars. Packer then met with local ecclesiastical leaders to orchestrate an intellectual purge. Several of those disciplined that fateful September, as well as several punished in the following years, had contributed to Hanks’s volume; nearly all of them had written on topics related to gender.¹⁰

The scars of September Six continued to fester. In the wake of 1993, Church leaders shifted almost immediately to their next battleground: homosexuality. The family proclamation, issued in 1995, served as a bridge from the era of conflict over women’s rights to the fight against same-sex unions. It both mentions traditional gender roles and defines marriage as between a man and a woman. Yet once Gordon B. Hinckley became prophet that same year, the Church adapted to the new reality concerning media relations and softened their stance on coordinated disciplines. Leaders did not want a repeat of the national headlines that swept the United States in September 1993.

9. Maxine Hanks, “Introduction,” in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xi; Anderson, “LDS Intellectual Community,” 61.

10. Boyd K. Packer, “All-Church Coordinating Council Meeting,” May 18, 1993; Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), 160.

That does not mean that the boundaries are any less defined, however. Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland's recent admonition to Brigham Young University faculty to expend more "musket fire" in defense of the Church's position on gay marriage, as well as the general retrenchment taking place in the Church's education system, is a reminder of the perils that still exist when Saints choose to write about gender and sexuality. The Latter-day Saint Church still has a firm coalition of allies. The groups who make up the modern religious right are similarly fighting against LGBTQ acceptance, women's equality, social reform, racial justice, and secular truths. The same cultural forces that led to the September Six have become so entrenched that we are still living in the world that the Age of Fracture created, and likely will be for some time.¹¹

11. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University" (university conference address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Aug. 23, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/the-second-half-second-century-brigham-young-university/>); Tamarra Kemsley, "BYU-I Instructors Fired for Failing 'Ecclesiastical Clearance,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Nov. 28, 2022.

BENJAMIN E. PARK {@BenjaminEPark} is an associate professor of history at Sam Houston State University and co-editor of *Mormon Studies Review*. His books include *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (Liveright, 2020), *A Companion to American Religious History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), and *DNA Mormon: Perspectives on the Legacy of Historian D. Michael Quinn* (Signature Books, 2022). His next book, *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism*, will appear with Liveright in January 2024.