

Undie Running on the Line between Church and State

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They were wearing next to nothing. Thongs, boy-shorts, string bikinis. A lacy Victoria's Secret red and black nightgown seemed downright conservative. Pro-gay slogans—"Marriage Equality!" and "Down with Prop 8!"—were plastered on chests, legs, buttocks, cheeks. "Judge not lest ye be judged" read one billboard/lower back, scrawled in what might have been red lipstick. Tattoo ink had rendered many of these mostly twenty- and thirty-something-year-old bodies more permanent canvases.

And they were running. Downhill. The body parts—exposed and (only slightly) unexposed—of the some 3,000 participants of Utah's Undie Run giggled, bounced, sloshed in full view of the few dozen spectators and unsuspecting passersby on the corner of State Street and North Temple in Salt Lake City on September 27, 2011.

I was one of the unsuspecting. So were two of my college friends, Nate and Kevin, who had come to Salt Lake to visit me and play in Utah's great outdoors during my year in Zion as the Mormon Studies Fellow at the University of Utah. After summiting Pfeifferhorn in the morning, that evening we had gone for Mexican food and margaritas at the Salt Lake City institution, the Red Iguana. Returning home on North Temple, we found ourselves caught in a growing line of cars, piling up at the intersection (literal and figurative) of Church and state in Utah—a fuzzier line in this state than in most. The Utah Capitol towered above on our left, the Salt Lake City Temple—the axis mundi of Mormonism—to our right.

At first, when the first few dozen exposed male torsos came sprinting down the hill, Nate, Kevin, and I thought it was just

some small, early fall 5K. But as we inched our way closer, we noticed that this was less a competition than an exhibition. More bodies, less muscled bodies, began passing the corner, running, skipping, and sauntering down the street. The three males in my car—two married, one in a long-term relationship—were silent, mouths agape, enjoying the view and feeling a little guilty about it. After making our way past the scene and up into the Avenues where I was renting a small, sunny, fourth-floor flat in a century-old brick apartment building, we ditched the car and headed back downtown on foot.

Our intentions were noble, we told ourselves: to “investigate” this novel cultural phenomenon. After a few Google searches on our smartphones and after interviewing the event’s slower movers, we found out that what we were witnessing was a “protest” run conducted in the all-but-buff. Starting from a modest Facebook posting in early August, the officially dubbed “Utah Undie Run 2012 Protest against Utah Being So Uptight” grew past the event organizer Nate Porter’s wildest expectations. Porter had hoped that he’d gather a few hundred of his closest friends, united in their frustration with the conservative nature of the state’s political (and religious) environment. After some 15,000 signed up to run, Porter thought he might set a Guinness record for “largest gathering of people wearing only underpants/knickers.”

While records weren’t broken—he couldn’t get the 3,000 or so who did show up to stand in one place long enough for an official count—Porter was successful at creating a cultural sensation. The Undie Run made the news in almost every media outlet in Utah. The *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, and even the UK’s *Daily Mail* picked it up. Perhaps even more significant for the entrepreneurial organizer, the body-focused event served as fantastic free advertising for Porter’s “Huka Bar”—a trendy nightclub in Murray which, according to its website, employs “the hottest collection of bartenders and servers along the Wasatch.” Like hip-hop mogul Jay-Z’s attempt to cash in on the Occupy Protests with his own brand of “Occupy WALL Streetz” T-shirts, Porter seamlessly stitched together social protest and capitalism. Runners painted declarations of “Down with 3.2 Beer!” alongside adverts for “Huka Bar” on their backs, midribs, and backsides.

Be Wary of a Mass of Women in Long Skirts!

The Undie Run was not the only significant gathering of bodies on display that Indian summer evening in and around Salt Lake City's Temple Square. Just two hours before, on our way to the Red Iguana, the boys and I had driven west along North Temple. On Temple Square, we witnessed not an exercise of political rights but a performance of religious modesty. Some thirty thousand women and girls, all dressed in demure skirts and blouses in muted colors, manifested as if summoned by some shofar from all directions and with quiet efficiency entered the LDS Conference Center. Slowing traffic to a crawl as they crossed North Temple and entered into one of the twenty huge Conference Center doors, moms held daughters' hands with one hand and copies of the "Quadruple Combination"—the standard Mormon single-volume scripture set including the LDS version of the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price—in the other.

Watching this pageantry of piety, the boys' eyes grew big with wonder and (frankly) a little fear. "What the hell is this?" Nate asked the Mormon expert *praetendere*, their chauffeur for the evening. But not having grown up LDS or in Utah, I had never witnessed such a huge and orderly gathering of women—and women who all looked the same: slender, white, and conservatively dressed. I offered a tentative guess that it was a gathering of the Relief Society. I tried my best to explain that, while the LDS Church does not allow women to serve in ecclesiastical leadership positions, women do serve in many service roles for the Church and community. "Actually, it's probably the oldest and largest women's philanthropic organization in the world." I parroted the line I'd heard many times from Church members and read in Church publications.

While I asked Kevin to search on his phone for any announcements of Relief Society gatherings, Nate and I made a game of trying to find the few men among the crowds of thousands of faithful women. We found a handful and speculated that they were acting as event coordinators or perhaps, out of chivalry, were walking their wives and daughters to the women-only gathering. Because driving that long Salt Lake City block took more than five min-

utes, this game got old. Nate suggested switching the “I spy” target to finding black women in the crowds; he thought that I, as an aspiring scholar of race and Mormon, might find this variation particularly interesting. While this switch proved to be as fruitful as trying to find men, I spouted out another line of Mormon apologetics: “Actually,” I announced, “most Mormons now live outside the United States and probably there’s a large plurality of people of color in the Church.”

With this speech, as with my soundbite on the Relief Society, as soon as I uttered the words I realized that they sounded a lot like something that could come out of the LDS PR office. For some reason, even perhaps more frequently than many of my Mormon friends, I am wont to give the company line about the Church when talking to the non-initiated. I feel a need to combat stereotypes. I need to dispel mischaracterizations that even my well-educated friends have about the Church. (*Thanks*, Jon Krakauer and *Big Love*.) After all, with a few noted exceptions (Jan Shippo, Sally Barringer Gordon, and Laurie Maffly-Kipp), non-Mormon scholarship has traditionally been “sectarian”; it is intent on exposing the supposed Mormon crimes against theology, or women, or African Americans, or reason, or democracy. And often all of the above, at the same time.

Especially when visiting the new, grand LDS Church History Library next to which Nate, Kevin, and I found ourselves parked, waiting for the last wave of Relief Society sisters to cross North Temple, I find myself defending my non-membership status. “I’m not a Mormon, but I grew up with Mormon playmates in Wyoming!” I explain to the missionaries assigned to assist library patrons, friendly but initially suspicious of why I would stake my professional life on studying something which I’m not willing to embrace for time and eternity.

But neither Nate nor Kevin was really listening to my pro-Mormon lectures. They were too busy watching in wonder the mass of (female) humanity moving with such patience and grace toward the ten-acre Conference Center, with its terraces and rooftop garden that might be at home in a Middle Eastern desert or in a Mesoamerican jungle.

“So they’re *all* Mormon?” Nate, not really expecting a serious answer, posed his question more as a statement of awe than an ac-

tual inquiry. We non-Utahans aren't used to seeing so many Mormons all in one place. Everywhere outside of Utah, Mormons are minorities. They have their meetinghouses. A few big cities have temples. Mormons don't typically form ghettos. Instead, while they live "among the gentiles" as our neighbors, cheerful and friendly, they for the most part keep to themselves, choosing to spend most of their free time with other Mormons at Church worship, participating in service, or at LDS social functions. For many Americans, Mormons outside of Utah seem quaint, charming, innocuous, perhaps because almost everywhere, there are not that many of them occupying one space. But what I think shocked us was less the "Mormonness" of seeing this sea of sister Saints than the monolithic nature of the group. This uniformity, especially uniformity due to shared religious commitment, seems out of place and out of time, even in America, the most religious democracy outside of India.

We three liberal, and liberal arts-trained young professionals have grown up in an America where pluralism of religions, races, and ethnicities, not homogeneity, is the norm. This supposed "secular age" is really a pluralistic one. During last year's Arab Spring, scenes of neat lines of Muslim protesters in Tahir Square all performing the *salat* toward Mecca made many Americans—and the State Department—nervous. But the image of a ring of Christian Egyptians forming a human shield to protect their fellow Muslim protesters in prayer comforted us. Salt Lake City, which is majority non-LDS, is almost certainly more pluralistic than Cairo. Catholic cathedrals, Congregational churches, synagogues, and store-front mosques anchor the street corners not occupied by Mormon meetinghouses. But on this night, in Salt Lake's equivalent to Tahir Square, Mormon women en masse show that this city belongs to the Saints.

"Gayest City in America"

Once we headed back downtown to walk among the undie runners, it became clear that the choice of location and timing was intentional; undies and bare skin juxtaposed with modest skirts overlaying sacred underwear. "Uptightness"—the organizers' supposed target of protest—was a thinly veiled euphemism for "Mormon." And the veil came off along with the participants'

clothes: “Separate Church and State” and “I’m a Utahn and I’m *not Mormon!*” were some of the most direct critiques of Utah’s political and religious culture. Others were more tongue in cheek: “Satan Worshipper” read one young woman’s lower back. “Mormon”—with a pentagram replacing the O, read her girlfriend’s motto. At least, I’m guessing it was her girlfriend as the pair made a point of displaying a not-so-sisterly kiss as they celebrated completing their run at Salt Lake City’s outdoor concert venue, the Gallivan Center, where the runners gathered after their trip down State Street.

Downtown Salt Lake, in particular the area around Temple Square, is a contested space. During the semi-annual general conferences in April and October, anti-Mormon protesters occupy 100-square-foot boxes demarcated by bright electric tape on the sidewalks on North and South Temples. Conferencegoers pass the sometimes humorous, often caustic protesters armed with placards denouncing the Church as satanic, as blasphemous, as merely ridiculous. Following California’s successful Prop 8 initiative in 2008, the sidewalks that line Temple Square also attracted pro-gay activists, denouncing the Church and its membership for meddling in American politics and in American bedrooms.

But the national uproar over the Church’s political involvement on gay rights issues became a local controversy in July 2009. Two gay men, Matt Aune and Derek Jones, were arrested for trespassing when they kissed on the Church-owned Main Street pedestrian promenade between North and South Temple Streets. Walking home from a summer concert at the Gallivan Center, the couple stopped for an embrace on what they believed was public property. In fact, in 1999, the Church had purchased the plaza and, with it, bought the rights to regulate behavior and speech in the space. After witnessing what they described as “inappropriate behavior,” LDS security guards quickly detained the couple, handcuffing both, and forcing Jones to the ground. Salt Lake City police officers then responded to the scene and ticketed both for trespassing. Aune and Jones complained to the police that the LDS security force roughed them up after what Aune called a “modest” display of affection; Jones displayed some pretty nasty bruises on his arm

for the *Salt Lake Tribune's* report on the incident. The Church responded by stating that the couple were the provocateurs: according to a Church statement, the two "engaged in passionate kissing, groping, profane and lewd language, and had obviously been using alcohol." Within days, the couple convinced the Salt Lake City prosecutor to drop the charges. Aune and Jones claimed that theirs was an act of ignorance. They did not know that there "is no longer is a public right of way, or accompanying free-speech rights, on the plaza."

If the streets and sidewalks are battlegrounds between the LDS Church and its critics, the latter seem to be winning, at least in the court of public opinion. Jones got a bruised arm after he kissed his boyfriend on Church property in July 2009. The Church got a black eye. Like the response to Prop 8 in November 2008, the state and national press picked up the story of a couple arrested for a kiss. For those ready to see the episode as such, the forced detention of two gay men for what they claim was an innocent and romantic display of affection encapsulated the LDS Church's efforts to police public morality in ways that interfere with the rights of private American citizens. It also emboldened gay activists to take their fight directly to the Church—or at least directly to the Church's property lines. The week after the arrest, several dozen protesters staged a "kiss-in" on the sidewalk on the Main Street promenade—within clear view of the LDS security force who called the police when protestors refused to stage their demonstration elsewhere. This time no arrests were made.

As recently as January 2012, the nation's leading gay magazine, *The Advocate*, named Salt Lake City the "Gayest City in America." Excluding New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, Salt Lake City beat out places like Cambridge, Massachusetts, and San Francisco for its "per capita queerness." For this year's "totally accurate if decidedly subjective criteria," *The Advocate* editors all but admitted that they put their fingers on the scales by pre-selecting categories in which Salt Lake City would finish first. Salt Lake City apparently earned points for having an LGBT bookstore and a nude yoga class, and for sending a representative to the gay men's beauty pageant, the "International Mr. Leather Competition." Leaders of the Salt Lake City gay com-

munity reacted to the award with ironic bemusement. They understood that the recognition honored the home of the “Mormon Tabernacle Choir” not because it was so gay but, as the *Advocate* itself pointed out, because the city is “far less oppressive than it used to be.” The director of the Utah Pride Center in Salt Lake City said, “All humor aside, I think that our city has come a long way. If we were to rate the cities that have made the greatest amount of progress over the last 10 years, I think we certainly would rank among the top.” Like the Undie Run, the *Advocate*’s unorthodox choice of Salt Lake City as the “gayest city in America” was a protest pick, an attempt to “queer” Utah even if the prophets and politicians of Utah refuse to recognize queer as a legitimate modality of human identity and human love.

A Family Fight, an Act of Pluralism

In such rhetorical and legal contests over space, political influence and public policy, one assumes that the belligerents have little in common. That’s what Nate, Kevin, and I thought as we walked toward the Gallivan Center to participate in the festivities at the end of the run. By this time, the Relief Society sisters had been released from their meeting. This meant that packs of overdressed Saints mingled with underdressed sinners on the sidewalks of downtown Salt Lake. At the Gallivan Center, beer (I believe it was stronger than 3.2) was served. Men and women, almost naked, danced to the heavy riffs of the Salt Lake City-based band, Royal Bliss. Boys kissed girls. Boys kissed boys. Girls kissed girls.

A few hours before and a few blocks to the north, Relief Society General President Julie B. Beck, paraphrasing the great nineteenth-century Mormon poetess who had occupied the same office, taught that her community should be “a select society, separate from all the evils of the world, choice, virtuous, and holy.” Herself making a declaration of counter-protest against the demonstrations taking place outside the Conference Center, Beck attested: “As our times become more difficult, the faithful sisters of Relief Society will unite to protect the homes of Zion from the shrill voices of the world and the predatory and provocative influence of the adversary.” Beck’s message to her sister Saints was clear: The devil is on our doorsteps and on our streets. Let this so-

ciety and the Church of which it is a part be, as Beck describes it, “a place of safety, refuge and protection.”

The recently opened LDS-owned megamall occupying four city blocks between Temple Square and the “worldlier” rest of downtown Salt Lake also provides a literal buffer zone between New Jerusalem and Gomorrah directly to its south, with its evils of heavy metal, beer and unsanctioned sex.

But in this idea of creating a place “of refuge, safety, and protection,” the undie runners and Relief Society sisters have common cause, even common ground. The undie runners could have employed much of the same language as Beck; by protesting against “the shrill [Mormon] voices of the world” that labeled them as deviants, the undie runners attempted to create their own refuge, their own space where their acts of love would not be condemned as “predatory and provocative” but human, even divine. The undie runners would not claim theirs was a religious community like the sister Saints meeting in the Conference Center, but they *would* claim that theirs was a moral one, formed out of a commitment to the love ethic similar to the one articulated by a Jewish sage 2000 years ago: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self” (Mark 12:31).

This common ground between the Relief Society and the undie runners leads to a recognition of other connections between the two groups of Utahns. It was likely, if not almost a certainty, that undie runners had mothers and grandmothers at the Relief Society meeting. One could even imagine, earlier that afternoon in a bedroom of some Salt Lake City suburb, two sisters preparing for their respective nights on the town, one sister choosing which long skirt to wear, another choosing which sports bra. Nate, Kevin, and I talked about this potential sisterhood between the two groups as we walked back home after the concert let out. We noticed groups of underdressed girls and women also heading home, shivering in the chilly early fall night air but nevertheless at ease, without any concern of what they might encounter on the dark streets. This couldn’t happen in Nate’s hometown of Minneapolis or Kevin’s hometown of Boston without raising serious concerns about the women’s personal safety.

Ironically, what allows the undie runners to feel safe in their

underwear is the same culture they're protesting. Utah's conservatism provides one of the highest degrees of safety in the country. If Salt Lake City isn't the gayest city in America, it is among the safest. Not unlike the Christians encircling the Muslims at prayer in Tahir Square, the Relief Society sisters form their own prayerful circles around their undie-running sisters and brothers, even as the latter decry the former as oppressing them. The only place such an undie run could happen—an act of pluralism on the streets of Salt Lake City—is in the city the LDS Church dominates and protects.

Acts of pluralism are, by nature, reciprocal. The undie runners do something for the Relief Society sisters, too. By exercising their rights to protest, by guaranteeing the continuation of a free society, the runners protect the Mormon women's rights of free expression and religious liberty. The undie runners descend thus—in blood and in spirit—from the same lineage of Utah protestors as the Relief Society: the late nineteenth-century Mormon women who protested against oppressive and discriminatory laws that criminalized their marriages and their acts of love.

Back in my apartment, Nate, the doctor and mathematician, speculated that simply due to the laws of statistics, there *must* have been at least one woman who participated in both events. A 100 percent separation between such large groups of people—30,000 at the Relief Society meeting, some 3,000 at the Undie Run—was simply impossible. And, after all, many Mormons don't agree with the Church's position on gays' place in society and in the Church. We imagined some Relief Society sister leaving the Conference Center and going to her car to take off her long skirt and modest blouse and apply some pro-gay rights slogan to her now exposed torso. We pictured her jogging down to the Gallivan Center to join some friends for the concert, avoiding the beer but enjoying a libation of Diet Coke. She wouldn't think of her membership in these seemingly disparate communities as a sign of undiagnosed schizophrenia. Instead it would be part of her holistic Mormon identity, an identity that requires that she live by a certain code of piety but also an identity whose history of persecution teaches her the dangers of requiring that others live by this same code.

Even if such a woman didn't exist, we realized that the partici-

pants of these two events were existentially dependent on each other. Long skirts and undies are not the uniforms of opposing armies, one of heaven, the other of hell. They are the insignia of different battalions in the ragtag militia that keeps America's sacred but tenuous peace with pluralism.

Notes

1. Clair Enlow, "LDS Conference Center Welcomes the Faithful," *Architecture Week*, February 7, 2001, http://www.architectureweek.com/2001/0207/design_1-1.html (accessed March 2012).

2. "Anti-Mormon Protesters at the October, 2011 LDS General Conference," *FAIR: Defending Mormonism* (Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research) http://www.fairlds.org/Anti-Mormons/2011_October_General_Conference.html (accessed December 12, 2011).

3. Directly following the passage of Prop 8, some 2,000 protesters marched around Temple Square. Yet rumors in February 2009 that 200,000 pro-gay activists would disrupt the upcoming April general conference proved unfounded. Carol Mikita, "Email Rumor Promising Huge Protests at LDS Conference Unfounded," *KSL-TV*, Salt Lake City, February 26, 2009, <http://www.ksl.com/?nid=148&sid=5707925> (accessed December 12, 2011).

4. Rosemary Winters and Melissa Rogers, "Prosecutor Drops Case against Gay Couple Accused of Trespassing on LDS Property," *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 9, 2009, http://www.sltrib.com/news/ci_12937788 (accessed December 12, 2011).

5. Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Can Mormons Enforce 'No Kissing' on Salt Lake Plaza?" *USA Today*, July 12, 2009, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/religion/post/2009/07/68494186/1> (accessed December 12, 2011).

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7. Valerie Larabee quoted in Rosemary Winters, "Salt Lake City Named America's 'Gayest' Burg," *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 9, 2012, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/53263384-78/lake-salt-lgbt-utah.html.csp> (accessed January 30, 2012).

8. Julie B. Beck, "What I Hope My Granddaughters (and Grandsons) Will Understand about Relief Society," General Relief Society Conference (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), September 24, 2011, <http://lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/what-i-hope-my-granddaughters>

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9. Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Logan: Utah State University, 1997).