THE NOVEMBER 2015 POLICY AND THE LONG HISTORY OF LDS ECCLESIASTICAL EXCLUSION

Benjamin E. Park

The decision by leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to implement a new policy in November 2015 that categorized those who entered into a same-sex marriage as apostates, and restricted salvific ordinances from the children of such unions, came as a shock to many. But such an institutional practice of exclusion had a long history.

Without documents from those who were in the room, we may never know the precise machinations that resulted in the November 5, 2015, policies. The best historical accounts indicate that it was a rushed, and surprisingly truncated, process. The Church's public relations handling certainly signified that the rollout lacked precise orchestration. The entire episode seemed hurried and reactionary. There were immediate instigations rooted in that particular year, the most pressing of which was the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which ruled that the right to marry was protected by both the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. Like many religions in the United States, LDS leadership had to respond to the new legal reality. That context gave the decision a sense of urgency.[1]

But there is a longer history that is, in hindsight, easier to decipher. Ever since forfeiting the public practice of polygamy, the marital

1. See Gregory A. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church: Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences* (University of Utah Press, 2019), 257–68.

institution that set Latter-day Saints apart from mainstream society, as well as losing the political power to control societal activities, Church authorities have sought to use ecclesiastical mechanisms to police proper gender boundaries within the community. This has included disputes with fundamentalists in the 1930s, feminists in the late twentieth century, and LGBTQ Saints in the 2010s. While this broader context does not lessen the immediate sting of each individual moment of exclusion, it does provide meaning and structure for the larger story.

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When J. Reuben Clark joined the LDS First Presidency in 1933, he was confronted with a series of challenges. As a staunch Republican, he was troubled by the incursion of progressive politics within the Mormon corridor, as seen in the overwhelming support Franklin D. Roosevelt received from Utah in the 1932 election. As a skeptic of modernist ideas, he worried about the inroads that secular education had made at Brigham Young University. As a believer in consolidated power, he winced at the autonomous nature of many of the faith's auxiliary organizations. Clark felt there was a reason he had been called to Church leadership at that particular moment, so he immediately set out transforming the institution into what he believed was necessary for the next stage of its development.[2]

Perhaps the most personal of the many threats facing the Church was that posed by Clark's own extended family. John W. Wooley, Clark's uncle, was leading an underground group of polygamists who were committed to preserving what they believed to be the faith's core doctrines. After being excommunicated for being sealed to his final plural wife in 1908, John Wooley and his son, Lorin Wooley, formed a small but growing number of devout faithful who believed the 1890 manifesto

2. See D. Michael Quinn, *Elder Statesman: A Biography of J. Reuben Clark* (Signature Books, 2002).

was, at best, a public relations stunt and, at worst, a miserable disaster. The Wooleys claimed that they had been ordained to a secret priesthood council by LDS President John Taylor in 1886 to preserve the celestial institution in the wake of such cowardice. By the 1920s they were circulating an alleged revelation from Taylor that gave divine sanction to their efforts, and the initiative was initially aided in funding by Nathaniel Baldwin, a successful businessman who had patented an improved version of the headphones. (At least until Baldwin declared bankruptcy in 1924.) For an LDS institution anxious to bury its polygamous past, the presence of these dissenters proved problematic.[3]

After decades of sporadic attempts to root out these polygamists, Clark concluded that it was time to directly address the crisis. He penned a long First Presidency memo in 1933 denouncing those that claimed leaders had solemnized plural unions after 1890, and threatening discipline for those who refused to yield to current teachings. Clark then backed up his words with actions: He coordinated with bishops to implement loyalty oaths, policemen to surveil meetings, prosecutors to bring charges, librarians to destroy books, and even the postmaster to censor mailings. One of those punished by these actions believed that Clark suffered from a "virus" known as "hysteria excommunicatus." In Clark's mind, these actions would root out polygamy's remnants once and for all.[4]

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3. Merrill Singer, "Nathaniel Baldwin, Utah Inventor and Patron of the Fundamentalist Movement," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1979): 42–53; Marianne Watson, "From Nineteenth-Century Mormon Polygamy to Twentieth-Century Mormon Fundamentalism: Three Contemporary Perspectives on John W. and Lorin C. Wooley," in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Fundamentalist Mormon Polygamy from 1890 to the Present*, ed. Newell Bringhurst and Craig Foster (John Whitmer Books, 2013), 144–80.

4. *Truth* (Salt Lake City), July 1939; Quinn, *Elder Statesman*, 244–52; B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 342–43; Cristina Rosetti, "'Hysteria Excommunicatus': Loyalty Oaths, Excommunication, and the Forging of a Mormon Identity," *Journal of Mormon History* 47, no. 3 (2021): 22–43.

This attempt to purge remaining polygamists resulted in a new policy that was included in a Presiding Bishop's Office bulletin issued in April 1935. Under the heading "Children of Excommunicated Members," the instructions stated:

> We advise that the children of men and women who have been excommunicated from the Church because of their having entered into illicit relations under the guise of plural marriage, be not baptized, until they have sufficient understanding to apply intelligently for baptism, and can give assurance that they accept the teachings and doctrines of the Church, and express regret for the opposition manifested by their parents to the rules of the Church. There is no consistency in baptizing a child and having him re-enter a home, the spirit of which is antagonistic to the authorities of the Church, and out of harmony with its principles.[5]

This new policy was then included in the church's handbook in 1940. And while a revision to the handbook in 1960 enabled more leeway for local leaders by stating that children of polygamous families may be baptized if the bishop and stake president feel "the conditions warrant it," the policy has largely stayed in place ever since.[6]

Rather than stamping out the polygamous movement—whose adherents were now referred to as "fundamentalists"—these actions helped to consolidate them into an organized community. No longer allowed to loiter on the margins within LDS congregations, they now formed their own, the number of which multiplied in the ensuing decades. Indeed, LDS leaders continued to be threatened by the fundamentalists' presence and terrified the boundaries between the groups were not firm enough. The policy of exclusion, therefore, continued to

5. *Presiding Bishop's Office Bulletin*, no. 233, April 1935. I appreciate the assistance of Bryan Buchanan in locating this document.

6. *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Handbook*, no. 16 (1940), 118–20; *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Handbook*, no. 18 (1960), 58–59. I appreciate the assistance of Michael Paulos in locating these references.

be invoked as a necessary protection against creeping menaces. It also provided a pattern that could be utilized in the future.[7]

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As the mainstream memory of polygamy faded, and Mormon assimilation into American culture continued apace, the LDS tradition became one of the foremost defenders of what became known as the "traditional family." While always a myth based more in nostalgic and partisan anxieties than in reality, the idea of a working father and stay-at-home mother, a patriarch presiding over domestic tranquility, became wedded to Mormon conceptions of divine gender roles. And when those ideals were challenged in the final three decades of the century, it caused another moment of institutional backlash and hardened boundaries.[8]

The Mormon feminist awakening took place in different communities and adopted divergent tones. Around Boston, a group of self-described housewives resurrected a lost discourse of female equality that they believed was both faithful and feminist; their new periodical, *Exponent II*, was an homage to the Mormon suffragist newspaper, *The Woman's Exponent*. While pledging loyalty to the patriarchal institution, these women asked questions and provoked conversations around entrenched cultural practices and beliefs. Simultaneously, a

7. See Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Kidnapped From that Land: The Government Raids on the Short Creek Polygamists* (University of Utah Press, 1993), 18–39; Rosetti, "'Hysteria Excommunicatus.'" For the general fundamentalist movement, see Brian C. Hales, *Mormon Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations After the Manifesto* (Greg Kofford Books, 2007); Craig L. Foster and Marianne T. Watson, *American Polygamy: A History of Fundamentalist Mormon Faith* (The History Press, 2019).

8. For the broader context, see Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 1992); and Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2020), 36.

more radical brand of feminism, often surrounding Salt Lake City, raised even more scandalous issues, like women's ordination and a female divinity. While the ideas and experiences of Mormon women, even those of the progressive bent, were always far more diverse than commonly assumed, what most of them shared was a dissatisfaction with the contemporary setting.[9]

These provocations, faithful or not, could not go unchallenged. They became especially polarizing in an era when the very definition of "family" became politicized. The growing religious right coalition, which merged conservative social values with the Republican Party, keyed in on traditional gender roles as a pillar for their cultural platform. The LDS Church, long marginalized and attacked by the more numerous evangelicals, now had a chance to form a potent partnership. Further, the same societal currents had been shaping how both movements defined core principles, especially on gender roles. LDS leaders therefore appropriated the wider culture war playbook in confronting enemies, both external and internal. On the public scene, they proved to be a key ally in defeating the Equal Rights Amendment; privately, they lashed out against those feminists who challenged traditional doctrines.[10]

Two decades of escalating conflicts culminated with a series of excommunications of prominent feminists during the 1990s. The final instigation was a 1992 volume edited by theologian Maxine Hanks, *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism*, that directly

9. For general overviews of this period, see Colleen McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 87–130; Sarah M. Patterson, *The September Six and the Struggle for the Soul of Mormonism* (Signature Books, 2023), 83–122; and Katie Ludlow Rich and Heather Sundahl, *Fifty Years of Exponent II* (Signature Books, 2024), 1–60.

10. See Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, & Equal Rights* (Signature Books, 2005); and Neil J. Young, "'The ERA is a Moral Issue': The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 623–44.

threatened patriarchy as the core of the Mormon cosmos. A few months later, LDS apostle Boyd K. Packer declared that the "feminist movement" was a "major invasion" that the Church must root out. Hanks, along with a handful of her colleagues, were cut off from the Church in September 1993; several more were excommunicated by the end of the decade. Key to the ecclesiastical punishment was their classification as "apostates." Then, two years after Hanks's dismissal, LDS leaders issued "The Family: A Proclamation to the World." The document, presented at the faith's general conference, doubled down on a particular vision of the "family" and "gender," and was a direct repudiation of the internal dissension that had been taking place since the 1970s.[11]

The family proclamation was the quasi-scriptural equivalent of the ecclesiastical punishments. Both reaffirmed that only a particular form of marriage, only a distinct set of gender roles, would be accepted within the LDS tradition.

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Even while LDS leaders faced a growing chorus of feminist voices, they were also setting their sights on an as-yet nascent movement that posed a similar threat. Shortly after being called to the Quorum of the Twelve in 1984, Dallin H. Oaks, a former Utah Supreme Court justice and Brigham Young University president, authored an internal memorandum on the "Principles to Govern Possible Public Statement on Legislation Affecting the Rights of Homosexuals." Oaks hoped to build on the success of the Church's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment by targeting "so-called homosexual marriages" as the next institutional priority. The Church, he reasoned, should focus on

11. Claudia Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Praeger, 2006), 160; Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 176–78; Patterson, *September Six*, 149–284.

defending the "traditional family," create safeguards to "protect youth from homosexual proselyting," and work with civic and religious institutions to prevent the legalization of queer unions. "Our marriage laws should not abet national suicide," he concluded.[12]

Oaks's memorandum shaped the LDS Church's institutional approach for the following three decades. The faith and its members became intricately involved in attempts to pass anti-gay marriage legislation in many states. These fights culminated in the Proposition 8 battle that took place in California in 2008 when Mormons were a primary engine behind an amendment to enshrine marriage as between one man and one woman. Notably, these activities were often interdenominational and focused on external opponents; there was no need to crack down on internal boundaries when the sides appeared so clear.

The Supreme Court's ruling to legalize gay marriage nationwide in June 2015 disrupted the US religious landscape. Denominations that had spent decades hoping that they could prevent the legalization of homosexuality were now faced with an entirely changed climate. Most pressing was a fear that, now normalized, homosexuality would become more commonly accepted within their own ranks. An external battle now became an internal crisis. After three decades of following the outline provided by Oaks in staking clear political positions, it was time to once again reaffirm community borders.

It makes sense, then, that Church leaders drew from a longer tradition of exclusion when addressing the new threat. The policies announced on November 5, 2015, concerning children of gay marriages were clearly patterned off those that had been in place for children of

12. Dallin H. Oaks, "Principles to Govern Possible Public Statement on Legislation Affecting Rights of Homosexuals," Aug. 7, 1984, E. Jay Bell Papers, Marriott Library Special Collections, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT. See Prince, *Gay Rights*, 38–43; and Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 143–45. For the connection between fights over the ERA and later opposition to same-sex marriage, see K. Mohrman, "'Same-Sex Marriage?! What Next Polygamy?': Mormonism in US Political Culture," *Mormon Studies Review* 8 (2021): 57–67.

plural marriages since 1935; further, the classification of those in same-sex unions as being in a state of "apostacy" placed them in the same category as polygamists and radical feminists. Queer, plural, and feminist families did not fit the LDS mold and must therefore be cast outside the Church's boundaries; or, rather, the Church's boundaries must be redrawn *around* them, solidifying borders that are far too porous for comfort. The 2015 policy was not a rupture but a recurrence—a reapplication of mechanisms long used to police LDS boundaries in moments of perceived cultural threat. The historical continuity underscores the tension between institutional coherence and the lived diversity of Mormon experience. Whether future challenges will prompt similar retrenchments or a reimagining of belonging remains an open question.

BENJAMIN E. PARK {bpark@shsu.edu} is author or editor of five books, including *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire* (2020) and *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism* (2024).