Seeking the Promised Land

Mormons have long had an outsized presence in American culture and politics, but they remain largely unknown to most Americans. Recent years have seen the political prominence of Mormons taken to a new level, thanks to developments including the presidential candidacy of Republican Mitt Romney, the high-profile involvement of Mormons in the campaign for California’s Proposition 8 (anti-gay marriage), and the ascendency of Democrat Harry Reid to the position of Senate Majority Leader. This book provides the most thorough examination ever written of Mormons’ place in the American political landscape – what Mormons are like politically and how non-Mormons respond to Mormon candidates. However, this is a book about more than Mormons. As a religious subculture in a pluralistic society, Mormons are a case study of how a religious group balances distinctiveness and assimilation – a question faced by all faiths.

David E. Campbell is Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame and the founding director of the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy. He is the coauthor (with Robert Putnam) of American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, which received both the 2011 Woodrow Wilson Award from the American Political Science Association and the Wilbur Award from the Religious Communicators Council for the best nonfiction book of 2010. He is also the author of Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life.


J. Quin Monson is Associate Professor of Political Science, former director of the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy, and a Mollie and Karl Butler Young Scholar in Western Studies at the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University. Monson’s research has appeared in journals such as Public Opinion Quarterly, Political Research Quarterly, Political Analysis, Political Behavior, and the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. He is the coeditor of several monographs on congressional and presidential elections and contributes regularly to a blog called Utah Data Points.
The most enduring and illuminating bodies of late-nineteenth-century social theory—by Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others—emphasized the integration of religion, polity, and economy through time and place. Once a staple of classic social theory, however, religion gradually lost the interest of many social scientists during the twentieth century. The recent emergence of phenomena such as Solidarity in Poland; the dissolution of the Soviet empire; various South American, Southern African, and South Asian liberation movements; the Christian Right in the United States; and Al Qaeda have reawakened scholarly interest in religiously based political conflict. At the same time, fundamental questions are once again being asked about the role of religion in stable political regimes, public policies, and constitutional orders. The series Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics produces volumes that study religion and politics by drawing upon classic social theory and more recent social scientific research traditions. Books in the series offer theoretically grounded, comparative, empirical studies that raise “big” questions about a timely subject that has long engaged the best minds in social science.

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Seeking the Promised Land

Mormons and American Politics

DAVID E. CAMPBELL
University of Notre Dame

JOHN C. GREEN
University of Akron

J. QUIN MONSON
Brigham Young University
For Kirsten, Katie, and Soren;
Kate, Anna, Alex, Sadie, and Josephine;
Lynn, Brendan, Darcy, Russell, and Caroline
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Preface

This is a book about Mormons and American politics, a religious community and a subject that frequently elicit strong reactions. Some readers will have a negative perception of Mormons, others will have a positive view, and some will be Mormons themselves. Still others will not have a prior opinion one way or the other and are reading this book out of curiosity (or perhaps because it was assigned in a class). Since our readers will come to this subject with different backgrounds, let us explain ours.

We recognize that it is unusual to highlight authors’ personal, especially religious, backgrounds in a work of empirical social science. But owing to the fervent opinions Mormonism can engender, many readers will undoubtedly wonder about our connections to the faith. Readers who would rather not know our religious perspectives should stop reading this and skip to Chapter 1. Perhaps, upon finishing the book, they can try to guess our religions and then come back to find out whether they are right.

Our team consists of two Mormons and a non-Mormon. J. Quin Monson is LDS and teaches at Brigham Young University, the LDS Church’s flagship university. He grew up in the Mormon heartland of Utah. Mormonism is to his hometown, Provo, what chocolate is to Hershey, Pennsylvania. Furthermore, his extended family has deep roots within Mormonism (although he is not related to LDS Church President Thomas B. Monson). David E. Campbell is also LDS and teaches at the University of Notre Dame. He hails from Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada – a community where Mormons are a relatively small share of the population. His extended family members are a mixture of Mormons and non-Mormons.

In other words, Monson was born, raised, and still lives in the midst of Mormonism’s “Zion.” Campbell, on the other hand, was raised and now lives in what Utah Mormons call the “mission field” (an environment where Mormons are a minority). The genesis of this book dates from when Campbell and Monson were both undergraduates at BYU, majoring in political science and on their way to graduate school. It was in the food court of BYU’s student center that they
hatched a plan to one day write a book on Mormons and politics. Even then they recognized that because of their varying life experiences, they bring different perspectives to their understanding of Mormon culture.

John C. Green provides still another perspective. He is a United Methodist who teaches at the University of Akron, a public university in Ohio. He has long been interested in American religious pluralism, including the fact that it is more often honored in preaching than observance. It is worth noting that the terms “Mormon” and “Methodist” were originally coined by critics, but then proudly adopted by the targets of the criticism.

While our biographies are likely relevant to some readers, we nonetheless hope that attention to our religious backgrounds does not overshadow our professional expertise. As a parallel, we point to the bounty of excellent scholarship on African Americans and politics – some of which is written by black scholars and some of which is not. To those who may worry that Mormon scholars cannot write objectively about Mormons, we paraphrase John F. Kennedy, who famously said that he was not the “Catholic candidate for president but the Democratic Party’s candidate, who happens also to be a Catholic” (1960). Likewise, Monson and Campbell are not Mormon political scientists but political scientists who happen also to be Mormons. To those who are concerned that a non-Mormon cannot understand the intricacies of Mormonism, we note that even though Green is a not a member of the faith, he nonetheless has a deep familiarity with it. He has done many years of “field work” among Mormons, beginning with a childhood spent in Colorado around many Latter-day Saints. As a team, we rely on insider knowledge to detect nuances within Mormon culture while also drawing on an outsider perspective when translating “Mormonisms” to those unfamiliar with that culture.

In writing this book, we have had to decide how much of Mormonism to explain and how to explain it. This is not a book on all things Mormon, but rather an analysis of Mormons’ place in American politics. Accordingly, we have made our choices by keeping our focus on those aspects of the LDS faith and culture that are politically pertinent. Unlike much that is written about Mormonism, our objective is not to be devotional or polemical. We cover some potentially uncomfortable aspects of Mormonism – particularly polygamy and the restrictive racial policies of its past – because they have political relevance. But neither do we dwell on them at the expense of ignoring politically salient aspects of Mormonism that perhaps do not garner as much attention from other sources. At all times, we have stuck to the facts.

In sum, we hope to provide a theoretically grounded, empirically informed examination of Mormons’ place in American politics – with perspectives from both inside and outside the faith.
Acknowledgments

Many of the ideas in this book have been percolating for years, having taken shape in our conversations with each other, as well as with mentors, colleagues, and students. But refining our ideas, collecting the data, and producing the actual manuscript happened rather quickly, thanks to supportive institutions and the assistance of good friends. Financial support for the data collection was jointly supplied by the Francis and Kathleen Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame, the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, and the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University. The political science departments at Notre Dame and BYU also granted leave to David C. Campbell and J. Quin Monson that allowed them to focus on writing.

The series editor, Ken Wald, has been helpful and encouraging throughout the process, offering crucial advice and substantive input every step of the way. We gathered as an author team at Brigham Young University in November 2012 for a small conference with a group of friends and colleagues to review early chapter drafts, for data analysis, and to set a course for the remaining work. We are grateful to Brian Cannon and the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University for funding this conference. We likewise owe a debt of gratitude to Clyde Wilcox, Frances Lee, Chris Karpowitz, Paul Edwards, and Kelly Patterson for their conference participation and careful review at that early stage. They were encouraging while also steering us toward additional analysis and writing that have made the book thorough enough to interest specialists in religion and politics but also informative and accessible to a general audience. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

The original data collection for the book was all done through YouGov. Samantha Luks and Ashley Grosse were especially helpful with their expertise in conducting the Peculiar People Survey and the Mormon Perceptions Study. Available data about Mormons has exploded in recent years, largely because of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. We have especially benefited from...
the “Mormons in America” data and report and the large-scale Religious Landscape survey. At a time when government funding for political science research is drying up, Pew demonstrates the value in public-spirited data collection. The work of David Magleby and Kelly Patterson with the Utah Colleges Exit Poll has provided a tremendous data resource and also sparked an intellectual curiosity for questions about Mormons and politics among their former students (including both Campbell and Monson).

We were aided in our work by a number of student research assistants who faithfully toiled with us on the project. We thank them for their long hours and careful work on what could at times be tedious tasks. They include Zach Smith, Kali Smith, Brian Reed, Madison Daines, and Jordan Stauss at Brigham Young University. In particular, Zach provided tremendous assistance on a variety of data analysis tasks and Brian contributed heavily to the ecological inference analysis of Utah Mormons. Other research assistance was provided by the staff and students at the University of Akron, including Angie Wynar, Michael Kohler, Britney Raies, Ian Schwarber, and Marilyn Johnson, who contributed heavily to the case studies of Mormon presidential candidates, trends in Mormon officer holders, and mentions of Mormon candidates in the New York Times. We are especially grateful to Jonathan Schwartz for the brilliant idea to use the Pew Religious Landscape survey questions about former religious affiliation to compare current and former Mormons. Janet Lykes Bolois deserves praise for her copyediting expertise.

Feedback on early drafts of our work was also provided by the participants in a seminar at the University of Florida and the weekly research workshop of Notre Dame’s Rooney Center. As the manuscript progressed, we also received helpful input on sections of the book from Geoff Layman, Christina Wolbrecht, Robert Millet, Kirsten Campbell, and Lynn Green. Finally, a project like this always requires patience and support from those closest to us, particularly our spouses and children. Our families provide just the right balance of support and distraction to make doing a project like this possible and even pleasant.
PART I

MORMONS AS AN ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GROUP
I

Meet the Mormons

In 1996, *Time* magazine named Stephen R. Covey one of the twenty-five most influential Americans. His best-known book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1990), has long been a staple of bookstores and best-seller lists, having sold more than 25 million copies. Covey built a self-help empire teaching executives how to employ his habits to make an effective business. When he passed away in 2012, his *New York Times* obituary noted that “more than two-thirds of Fortune 500 companies” had sought his advice (D. Martin 2012). Covey also consulted with political leaders, winning praise from Democrats like President Bill Clinton and Republicans like Newt Gingrich. His advice even extended beyond the boardroom to the family room with a follow-up book on creating highly effective families (Covey 1997). With his bipartisan appeal, folksy wisdom, and sunny disposition, Covey was part Norman Vincent Peale, part Dale Carnegie.

Covey was also a Mormon, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Far from merely a peripheral aspect of his life and work, Covey’s Mormonism served as the foundation for his famous seven habits. Fellow Mormon and Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen told the *Economist* that “the seven habits are essentially a secular distillation of Mormon teaching” (*Economist* 2012). Indeed, prior to writing *The Seven Habits*, Covey published a book for a Mormon audience, *The Spiritual Roots of Human Relations* (1970), which employed many of the same concepts.

Covey is only one example among many of how Mormons seemingly stand at the center of American culture – they are the “quintessential Americans,” as columnist George Will put it back in 1979 (cited in R. L. Moore 1986, 43). In

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1 The full name is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For the sake of brevity and variety, we often refer to it here as either the Church (when the context makes our meaning clear) or the LDS Church. Members of the Church are referred to as Mormons, Latter-day Saints, LDS Church members, or, occasionally, Church members. As we use them, these terms are fully interchangeable synonyms.
1959, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir won a Grammy for its recording of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” In the 1970s, Donny and Marie Osmond were America’s sweethearts, with hits on the pop charts and a top-rated television variety show. In 2002, Mormons received very positive press coverage during the Winter Olympics hosted by Salt Lake City, a city founded by Mormons and today the worldwide headquarters for the LDS Church.

Those Olympics were run by Mitt Romney. He was given the job of running the Olympics in the wake of a bribery scandal and financial difficulties that were threatening to tarnish the Games. As head of Bain Capital, Romney had specialized in the art of the turnaround. And turn around the Olympics he did, as they made a profit and were generally thought to be a success (Gold 2012). His business background no doubt made him an attractive choice to take the reins of a troubled Olympics. But given that the games were held in Utah, his religious background certainly mattered too. Like Covey, Romney is a Mormon, with deep family roots in the LDS Church.

Five years later, Mitt Romney was running for president. Given the importance of religion to many American voters, one might think that belonging to the “quintessentially American” church would be a political asset – and especially in the Republican primaries, where conservative values are a boon. Instead, Romney was confronted with suspicion regarding his religion, from both the left and the right. Editorialists argued that voters were “thoroughly justified” in opposing a Mormon presidential candidate on the grounds of his religion (Weisberg 2006; Linker 2006). Romney’s leading opponent in the primaries, former Southern Baptist pastor Mike Huckabee, subtly raised suspicions about his religion (Chafets 2007). Out on the hustings, anti-Mormon sentiment was anything but subtle. For example, many South Carolina voters were sent an unsigned eight-page anti-Mormon diatribe in 2007 (Spencer 2007).

In this context, a Gallup poll found that 28 percent of Americans openly said they would not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate, a number essentially unchanged since 1967 – when Mitt Romney’s father, Michigan governor George Romney, also ran for president. Interestingly, this was roughly the same percentage of Americans who said that they would not vote for a Catholic candidate in 1960, when John F. Kennedy was running for president (Jones 2007).

Given the controversy over his religion, it should not be surprising that in both 2008 and 2012, Romney generally steered clear of discussing it. In today’s religion-soaked presidential campaigns – especially among Republicans – his religious reticence stood out. This is not to say, however, that he ignored the “Mormon question.” In 2007, during his first run for the presidency, Romney sought to address concerns about his Mormonism in a speech delivered in College Station, Texas, evoking memories of a comparable speech delivered by Kennedy during the 1960 presidential campaign, also in Texas. In that speech, Romney walked a fine line. On the one hand, he spoke of his core belief in Jesus, leading to a remarkable statement for someone running for the secular office of the presidency: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of
mankind.” On the other hand, he declined to discuss the “distinctive doctrines”
of his church and instead invoked his belief in a common set of “moral values”
found in nearly all religious traditions (Romney 2007).

In his 2012 campaign, Romney delivered no comparable speech about his
faith, and mostly tried to keep the focus on his business background. To the
extent that his religion was mentioned, it was generally either journalists report-
ing on the millions of dollars he has donated to the LDS Church (Montgomery,
Yang, and Rucker 2012) or friends of Romney describing his time as a lay leader
in his church ministering to members of his congregation (S. Holland 2012).
Through his highlighting of these aspects of Mormonism, Americans unfamiliar
with the faith were introduced to the tight bonds Mormons form with one
another, and the often-extraordinary investment of time and money they make
in their church.

This book is about the seeming paradox of Mormonism in American life, as
revealed by the contrast between Stephen Covey and Mitt Romney. If Mormons
are the quintessential Americans, Covey and Romney could be considered the
quintessential Mormons— or, at least, they are exemplars of how Mormons are
often presented and perceived. Both are toothsome family men who achieved
considerable professional and financial success. Yet whatever similarities they
share, the contrast in their public reception is telling. Covey wrote a book that
has sold 25 million copies by distilling his Mormon beliefs into secular language,
with no antagonism toward the peculiar features of his faith. Romney ran for
president and, despite stressing his faith’s commonalities with other American
religions, faced antagonism over Mormonism’s distinctiveness. Who better
represents the place of Mormons in today’s America: Covey or Romney? Are
the Latter-day Saints a “quintessentially American” faith or a “peculiar people”
set apart?

The paradox is that Mormons are both. Just as light has the properties of both
a particle and a wave, so are Mormons best understood as being simultaneously
in the mainstream and on the fringes of American society. Mormons have a
strong sense of internal solidarity, powering a degree of voluntarism unmatched
by any other religious group in America. They are an optimistic and patriotic
people known for their upright living, family values, good health, and generous
ways. However, the same faith that fosters these all-American virtues also
includes unique beliefs and practices that create external tensions with other
Americans. Many simply consider Mormons to be different and praiseworthy or
odd but innocuous, while others see Mormons as clannish, exotic, or even
heretical—a “peculiar people” in one way or another.

WHY THIS BOOK?

Why a whole book about Mormons and politics? One reason is the lack of
attention Mormons have received from social scientists. In the contemporary
United States, there are as many Mormons as Jews—roughly 2 percent of the
population – and contrary to the stable Jewish population, Mormonism is often described as being among the fastest-growing religions in America. Yet there has been far less research on Mormonism than on Judaism, let alone work that has focused specifically on Mormons and politics.

Size and growth rates alone would admittedly be weak rationales for a book about the politics of any group. There are as many owners of hamsters and guinea pigs in the United States as there are Mormons, and the number of Zumba dancers is growing much more rapidly than the membership rolls of the LDS Church. But neither owners of small rodents nor dance exercise fads occupy the kind of cultural or political niche that Mormons do.

Mormonism’s place in American culture is perhaps best illustrated by the hit Broadway play *The Book of Mormon: The Musical*, written by Trey Parker and Matt Stone of *South Park* fame. Imagine musical theater that spoofs, say, Presbyterianism. Somehow it would lack the same comedic punch. Nor is this the first time that Mormons have been featured in popular culture, as they have appeared in fiction – usually as villains – since the nineteenth century (Givens 1997).

Whatever their portrayal in fiction, in reality Mormons have long walked the halls of power. Many Mormons hold high political office, such as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat) and the long-serving senior senator from Utah, Orrin Hatch (Republican). In Congress, Mormons have consistently been represented in numbers slightly greater than their share of the population. From the 106th (1999–2000) to the 113th (2013–14) Congresses, the proportion of Mormon members has hovered around 3 percent. A number of Mormons have also run for the presidency, a legacy that includes the quixotic campaign of Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith, in 1844. The twentieth century saw the presidential campaigns of George Romney (1968), Mo Udall

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2 While there is no question that the LDS Church is growing, the precise rate of growth is a matter of controversy. According to membership statistics provided by the LDS Church, the Church grew by 30 percent between 1990 and 2008. Using the American Religious Identification Survey, sociologists Rick Phillips and Ryan T. Cragun put the LDS growth rate during that same period at 16 percent. Using other membership statistics reported by the LDS Church, the *Salt Lake Tribune* reports that the LDS growth rate from 2000 to 2010 was 18 percent. The discrepancies result from different methods of counting membership. While the LDS Church reports anyone baptized into the Church as a member, a survey like the ARIS counts only those people who self-identify as Mormon. See *Mormons in the United States 1990–2008* for more details (Phillips and Cragun 2011); also see Stack (2012b).

3 There are, however, a few notable exceptions. They include *Latter-Day Political Views* (Fox 2006); *Mormons in American Politics: From Persecution to Power* (Perry and Cronin 2012); and *LDS in the USA: Mormonism and the Making of American Culture* (Trepanier and Newswander 2012). We acknowledge these authors for being in the vanguard of studying Mormonism’s impact on American politics, and are grateful for their insights.

4 According to Gallup, 2 percent of Americans own a hamster or guinea pig (http://www.gallup.com/poll/23969/americans-their-pets.aspx). For details on the explosive growth of Zumba, see Rusli (2012).
(1976), and Orrin Hatch (2000), while the twenty-first century brought both Jon Huntsman, Jr. (2012) and Mitt Romney (2008, 2012). Romney has come closest to winning the presidency, having received the 2012 Republican nomination but ultimately losing in a tight race to Barack Obama.

Even if Trey Parker and Matt Stone had not written their self-described “atheist’s love note to Mormonism” (Jardin 2011) and Mitt Romney had never run for president, a detailed treatment of Mormons’ place in contemporary American politics would be long overdue. Because Mormon voters are politically distinctive, they warrant an in-depth examination. In being distinctive, they can also inform a theoretical understanding of how religion and politics intersect. The politics of the Mormon rank and file are often shaped by their religion, sometimes in surprising ways. Although Mormons are overwhelmingly Republicans, Harry Reid reminds us of Mormons’ partisan diversity. And notwithstanding that most Mormons are Republicans and self-described conservatives, on some issues their religious beliefs cause them to depart from the canon of conservative thought.

Mormons also challenge the prevailing trend within American religion whereby boundaries between religious communities have blurred and distinctions eroded (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Mormonism draws bright lines around its adherents with a set of distinctive beliefs and practices. Latter-day Saints are an example of what scholars call an “ethno-religious” political group, in which religion and ethnicity forge a strong sense of identity. Irish Catholics, Dutch Calvinists, and German Jews are good examples of ethno-religious groups in the past (Green 2007). Mormons represent a contemporary case of a group whose identity is shaped by their religion in ways that closely resemble an ethnic group, even if the group is not defined as ethnic per se.

Many scholars have argued that ethno-religious tensions have largely been supplanted by a new type of political grouping, in which religious traditionalists and progressives face off in dueling alliances that cut across religious communities. The divisions between conservative and liberal Catholics – and the alliances of these groups with their ideological counterparts among Protestants – are good examples. This development is known by many names: “religious restructuring” (Wuthnow 1990), “culture war politics” (J. D. Hunter 1991), “the new religion gap” (Green 2007), and the “coalition of the religious” (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Mormons challenge this new paradigm in two respects. First, they hold to highly traditional values and yet fit uneasily with other religious traditionalists, especially evangelical Protestants. Second, Mormons offer a unique window into the persistence of ethno-religious groups in a pluralistic society. Mormons are not an archeological discovery, an ancient people isolated on the margins of modern society. Founded in the United States in the nineteenth century, the Latter-day Saints have become a global religion, well adapted to the modern world and yet offering a clear alternative to it. Mormons are a paradigmatic case of a vital religious group that has only slowly found acceptance in the American
social and political mainstream. In this sense, the experience of Mormons may be helpful in understanding the future of other ethno-religious groups in the American religious mosaic, such as Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

WHO ARE THE MORMONS?

A group cannot be studied until it is defined. For our purposes, “Mormon” or its synonym, “Latter-day Saint,” refers to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In this approach, Mormonism is defined much like Catholicism, with both traditions demarcated by membership in one worldwide church. Like Catholicism, Mormonism has also produced a few schismatic groups that identify with the broader tradition, but such groups are dwarfed in size, if not public attention, by a single dominant institution (in the case of Mormons, the Salt Lake City–based LDS Church). And as with Catholicism, history is important to the definition of Mormonism.

As every Mormon child can tell you, Joseph Smith had what Mormons call his “First Vision” in 1820, at the age of fourteen. In this initial theophany, Mormons believe Smith came face-to-face with God and Jesus Christ. This inaugural revelatory experience was followed by a series of other visions and divine visitations. In the ensuing years, an angel revealed to Smith the location of plates, made of gold, containing the record of an ancient Hebraic civilization in the Americas whose progenitors traveled from the Holy Land to the New World in Old Testament times. Smith translated the plates with divine assistance and published the translation as the Book of Mormon (Mormon being the name of a prominent figure within the book). As God’s prophet, Smith formed a church in 1830, initially called the Church of Christ.5

The young church grew, and its members came together and formed tight-knit communities. They were often pejoratively called “Mormonites” or “Mormons.” The latter nickname was accepted by the faith’s early adherents, and it has stuck ever since. Mormonism’s early days brought a grim pattern—a gathering in a particular place, rising tension with the surrounding communities, and then an exodus to gather anew someplace else. In 1837, most Mormons moved from Ohio to Missouri, and then, facing an extermination order issued by Missouri’s governor, moved again across the Mississippi River to Illinois in 1838. Smith named the new gathering place Nauvoo, where he

5 We can only provide a précis of Mormon history here. For more thorough treatments, see:


simultaneously served as mayor, general of the city’s military force, and prophet of the Church.

The Mormons prospered in their “kingdom on the Mississippi” (Flanders 1975), but by 1844 tensions had risen again. Rumors of polygamy among the upper strata of LDS leaders were circulating, having been put into print by a newspaper published by some of the Church’s former officials. In his capacity as mayor of Nauvoo, Smith had the newspaper’s press destroyed, which led to his imprisonment in the county seat of Carthage, Illinois. Joseph was joined in jail by his brother Hyrum and two other prominent Church leaders. On June 27, 1844, a mob stormed the jail with guns blazing. Joseph and Hyrum Smith were shot and killed. Smith’s murder – known to Mormons as the Martyrdom – was a critical juncture for the young Church. In the immediate aftermath of his death, it was not clear if anyone would succeed the charismatic young prophet, and if Mormonism would fade as just another failed utopian experiment of the Second Great Awakening.

Far from fading away, Mormonism carried on under the leadership of Brigham Young. Most – but not all – Mormons accepted Young as Smith’s successor. “Brother Brigham” became the Mormons’ Moses (Arrington 1986). Their troubles did not end with Smith’s murder, and Young made the decision to lead his people on a mass exodus to what they hoped would be their promised land. The Mormons left Nauvoo and immigrated to present-day Utah, which was then part of Mexico. They soon established settlements throughout the Mountain West. For years, a steady stream of Mormon converts, many from Europe, made the arduous trek to “the place which God ... prepared, far away in the West.”

Upon settling in their western enclave, in 1852 LDS leaders openly acknowledged the practice of polygamy, or “plural marriage,” as the Mormons themselves called it. Polygamy was highly controversial and led to decades of conflict between the Mormons and the federal government, including a military expedition, pursuit of Church leaders by federal authorities, a series of federal laws designed to thwart polygamy by targeting the LDS Church and its assets, and, finally, an 1879 Supreme Court decision that polygamy was not a form of free exercise of religion protected by the U.S. Constitution. Polygamy long delayed Utah from becoming a state.

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6 Some Mormons did not recognize Young as their new leader and instead followed others who claimed to be Smith’s successor. The largest of these groups eventually formed the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), initially led by Joseph Smith’s son, Joseph Smith III. Among the RLDS was Emma Smith, Joseph Smith’s first – that is, pre-polygamy – wife and Mormonism’s “founding mother.” Today, the RLDS Church has been renamed the Community of Christ. Headquartered in Missouri, with a membership of approximately 120,000, the Community of Christ bears diminishing resemblance to today’s LDS Church. When we speak of Mormons, we do not mean members of the Community of Christ, or any other offshoot from the dissension following Smith’s death.

7 Lyrics from the Mormon hymn, “Come, Come Ye Saints.”
A watershed in Mormon history came in 1890, when the fourth president of the LDS Church, Wilford Woodruff, announced that the Church would no longer sanction plural marriages. The “Manifesto,” as it came to be called, did not bring polygamy to a screeching halt, but it did apply the brakes. In the immediate wake of the Manifesto, there was ambiguity regarding its full implications. For example, questions remained about the status of preexisting polygamous marriages and whether such marriages could be performed outside the territory of the United States. Notwithstanding these unresolved questions, the polygamy ban was enough for Utah to be granted statehood in 1896, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the polygamy era drew to a close. Any uncertainty about the status of polygamy was resolved in 1905, when two of the Church’s twelve apostles were forced to resign from their ecclesiastical positions after defying the church president’s edict and continuing to officiate at polygamous weddings (Flake 2004).

Just as the death of Joseph Smith caused one critical juncture, the end of polygamy brought another. Some “fundamentalist” sects never accepted the prohibition on polygamy and continue the practice today (Van Wagoner 1989). These fundamentalists are not members of the LDS Church, which treats polygamy as an offense that warrants excommunication. Indeed, as we detail further in Chapter 3, among members of the LDS Church, polygamy meets with greater moral disapproval than premarital sex – which is saying something, given Mormons’ moral conservatism. While the number of polygamists is tiny, they elicit equal parts public fascination and revulsion such that they attract a lot of attention. In recent years, this has included the reality TV show “Sister Wives” and the dramatic series “Big Love.” Recent years have also seen the high-profile prosecution of Warren Jeffs, leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, as his marriage to teenage wives led to a conviction for the sexual assault of minors (Associated Press 2011). These fundamentalist polygamists are not included in our definition of Mormons, because the Church does not accept them as members and they, in turn, do not recognize the authority of the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

WHAT DO MORMONS BELIEVE?

An examination of LDS beliefs brings the Mormon paradox to light – the juxtaposition of being both the “quintessential American church” and a “peculiar people.” To anyone accustomed to Protestantism or Catholicism, attending an LDS sacrament meeting (worship service) would reveal a blend of both the familiar and unfamiliar. The meeting would include many common Christian themes. Mormons believe the Bible to be holy scripture and draw lessons from both the Old and New Testaments. Mormons freely speak of Christ as their Savior, celebrating the nativity at Christmas and the resurrection at Easter. They take communion and sing many hymns found in the songbooks of other churches. But such a visitor would hear much that is unfamiliar – a sampling
might include quotations from the *Book of Mormon* and other uniquely Mormon scripture, references to modern prophets and apostles, or a sermon on the importance of temple rites that are restricted only to devout members of the LDS Church.

This combination of beliefs shared with other Christians and doctrines found exclusively among Latter-day Saints has led to a long-standing dispute over whether Mormons should be considered Christians. Among Mormons themselves, there is no debate. According to a recent survey, 97 percent say they are Christians. In contrast, one-third of the general population says they are not (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012a, 20). While we say more about this debate in Chapter 7, for now we note how it exemplifies the Mormon paradox. No one can dispute that Mormons believe in Christ and describe themselves as Christians. However, neither can anyone dispute that Latter-day Saints have distinctive beliefs and practices, including their theology regarding Christ.

The debate over whether Mormons are Christians thus boils down to whether their distinctiveness from other Christian denominations outweighs the commonalities shared with them, particularly Protestantism. Mormons’ ambivalent place among Christian denominations is illustrated by Mormons’ own ambivalence about the cross. While Mormons use pictures and statues of Christ, their modern iconography does not include the cross—the defining symbol of Christianity. Mormons explain that this practice reflects an emphasis on the life and resurrection of Christ over his death (Hinckley 2005). To members of some denominations, the cross’s absence merely underscores that Mormons are not wholly Christian.

Given that many readers will be unacquainted with the beliefs and practices of the LDS faith, we provide a crash course in Mormonism 101. A full-length exposition of LDS beliefs would require another book, but we offer a précis focused specifically on those distinctive aspects of the LDS faith that have political relevance. For the purposes of our brief introduction to Mormonism, we organize the wide array of LDS beliefs into three essential themes: history, authority, and family.

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8 The story of Mormons’ aversion to the cross illustrates a primary theme of this book: that the LDS Church selectively chooses ways to emphasize Mormonism’s distinctiveness, and that those markers of distinctiveness change over time. While today Mormons avoid the cross as a symbol, with the theological justification that they prefer to emphasize the life rather than death of Jesus, this attitude is a twentieth-century innovation. Prior to that, Mormons regularly used the cross as one among many LDS symbols (Stack 2009).

9 Book-length synopses of Mormon theology include:


*What Do Mormons Believe?* by Rex E. Lee (1992, Deseret Book)
History

Scholars of Mormonism often quip that instead of theology, Mormons have history.\(^{10}\) While this statement is obviously an exaggeration, it speaks to a truth about the LDS faith. To understand Mormonism, one must learn Mormon history, as the foundation of the LDS religion rests on a series of historical events that involve God and other divine emissaries communicating with Joseph Smith (and other early Church leaders). Mormons have no formal catechism but they nonetheless speak of “having a testimony,” meaning that they can say they know that the fundamentals of the faith are true. When Latter-day Saints “bear their testimony” – declare their core convictions, usually in a worship meeting – they often speak of knowing through personal inspiration that key events from both ancient scripture and nineteenth-century Mormon history really happened.

Among these catechism-like fundamentals is the conviction that Joseph Smith literally spoke with a corporeal God and Jesus Christ. This aspect of Mormon history has such significance that the First Vision (always capitalized) is often portrayed in song and art. Many Mormons make a pilgrimage of sorts to visit the vision’s location in upstate New York – known as the “sacred grove” – which today is a historic site operated by the LDS Church. Equally fundamental is a personal spiritual witness that Joseph Smith translated the golden plates into the *Book of Mormon*, and that it contains a genuine record of flesh-and-blood people who traveled from the biblical Holy Land to the Americas. To underscore that the *Book of Mormon* is to be understood as history, not metaphor, the Church annually stages a summer outdoor pageant in that same area of upstate New York with a cast of hundreds dramatizing the events and people described in the *Book of Mormon*.

Similarly, Mormons understand the Old and New Testaments to be a historical record: Moses actually parted the Red Sea and Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. It is not accurate to describe Mormons as biblical literalists, at least not in the sense that they believe the Bible to be inerrant, because they also believe that parts of the Biblical text have become corrupted during a lengthy period of apostasy stretching from the dawn of the Common Era to Joseph Smith. Mormons are better described as scriptural empiricists rather than literalists – scripture describes real people and real events, even if some biblical language has been removed or altered.

Authority

Joseph Smith, Mormons believe, was a prophet chosen by God to restore Christ’s church as it existed in the days of the New Testament. He was given God’s priesthood, which in turn meant that he – and those whom he ordained to

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\(^{10}\) While this witticism is often repeated among the Mormon cognoscenti, we have been unable to determine the original source for it (but not for a lack of trying).
the same priesthood – had the authority to act in God’s name. Smith was not just a prophet in the sense of crying repentance to his people. He was also the leader of his people, complete with an administrative role. Hence, Joseph Smith held the dual roles of “prophet” and “president” of the Church. As prophet, he was authorized to receive revelation from God on behalf of the entire Church. As president, he had ultimate responsibility for the operation of the Church.

Today, Joseph Smith’s successor is colloquially, and affectionately, referred to by Mormons as “the prophet,” although his official title is actually president of the Church. Latter-day Saints believe that as prophet, he receives revelation from God, and thus that there is an “open canon” – not only is the Book of Mormon scripture coequal with the Bible, but so can revelations received by the prophet be canonized as scripture. As president, he sits at the apex of a centrally organized and financed organization with a clear hierarchy and lines of authority. The Church president is the only person with the authority to receive divine direction for the entire Church, although in practice he governs in consultation with both of his two counselors – a troika known as the First Presidency – and the Quorum (council) of the Twelve Apostles. While the Mormon buck stops at the desk of the Church president, the organizational structure is a corporate-style arrangement, with specific areas of responsibility delegated to church-wide, regional, and local leaders.

The collective nature of modern LDS Church governance is important for understanding the exercise of prophetic authority. Even though contemporary Mormons speak (and even sing) of “following the prophet,” in modern practice all public announcements, policy changes, and official interpretations of LDS doctrine are issued in the collective voice of the top echelon of LDS leaders, who are all considered “prophets, seers, and revelators.” Such announcements from the “Brethren,” as they are often called by Church members, come only after consultation, deliberation, and complete consensus – not unlike the cabinet of a Westminster-style Parliament or the magisterium of the Catholic Church. As a result, change can take a long time. But when change comes it is implemented rapidly from the top down, as the lines of authority are clearly defined and the Church leadership speaks with one voice. Mormons do not have a formal doctrine that the prophet or the “Brethren” are infallible, but they do believe, as one past Church president put it, “The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray.” In Chapter 6, we show experimental evidence that Mormons follow their church authorities on political as well as spiritual matters.

To Mormons, “authority” is not limited to the top echelon of Church leaders. The importance of authority extends into every local LDS ward (congregation).

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11 This quotation is found in a book of LDS scripture known as the Doctrine and Covenants. Specifically, it comes from “Excerpts from Three Addresses by President Wilford Woodruff Regarding the Manifesto,” which immediately follow the text of Official Declaration 1 (also known as The Manifesto, the statement officially repealing polygamy).
Each ward is overseen by a bishop, a lay minister who has the same sorts of responsibilities as a pastor, priest, or rabbi. Just as the Church president receives divine inspiration for the whole Church, a bishop has the authority to receive God’s guidance for his ward. Bishops are not elected, nor do they have formal training as clergy. They are “called” to their position by those leaders in the next level up in the hierarchy (a “stake,” roughly comparable to a diocese). This call typically comes without any specific preparation and often without warning. Upon receiving the call—that is, being asked to serve—bishops continue working in their lay occupation, as Mormons have no professional, full-time clergy at the local level. The typical bishop performs his considerable pastoral duties on top of whatever else he does to make a living, whether he is a dentist, schoolteacher, accountant, or so forth.

The concept of authority extends beyond leadership to the rites of the Church, as they can only be performed by those who have been ordained to the LDS priesthood. In one sense, this authority is shared widely, as it includes virtually every active male member of the LDS Church. Fathers usually perform baby blessings, baptisms, and blessings of the sick; teenage boys typically prepare and distribute “the sacrament” (the LDS version of communion).

But while the ranks of the priesthood encompass nearly every active male Mormon, they do not include any women. Thus women are unable to perform rites such as blessings and baptisms. Nor do they serve as bishops or occupy many other ecclesiastical roles. Instead, women serve in the leadership of various sub-organizations within the Church, including the “Relief Society” (women’s auxiliary) and programs for children and teenage girls.

Family

Although history and authority are fundamental to the LDS belief system, the family is its linchpin. Many religions have a high regard for families and speak of family values, but in none does the family have the same theological significance as Mormonism. One cannot understand the contemporary LDS worldview without reference to the faith’s unique doctrinal emphasis on family relationships. To understand the theological importance of family, in turn, requires some explanation of LDS temples. The temple is at the heart of modern Mormonism; the family is at the heart of the temple.

Latter-day Saints believe that family relationships can endure beyond the grave, not just as a vague sympathy-card notion, but as part of a holistic set of beliefs about the nature of God and salvation. The Mormon heaven consists of familial relationships that extend into eternity. However, only those who have been bound together—in LDS parlance, “sealed”—will enjoy these familial relationships.

The term “stake” derives from Isaiah and, apropos of our discussion of the sacred tabernacle, refers to the stakes that hold a tent (Isaiah 34:2) or tabernacle (Isaiah 33:20) in place. Note that all biblical references in this book are to the King James Version.
bonds in the afterlife. To be sealed is an ordinance (or rite, what other faiths would call a sacrament). Sealings take place in LDS temples, which are different than local churches. LDS churches are fairly nondescript, multipurpose buildings open to all and used for everything from Sunday worship to Boy Scout troop meetings to basketball tournaments. Temples, which are generally larger in size, far fewer in number, and often designed as architectural landmarks, are used only for a small set of religious rites, including but not limited to sealings.13

Access to LDS temples is restricted to practicing Mormons who have received a recommend to enter the temples by their local leaders. To receive a temple recommend—a small piece of paper about the size of a driver’s license—Church members are interviewed by first a bishop and then a “stake president” (regional leader).14 In each interview they answer a standardized series of questions about their adherence to the faith, both in belief and behavior. After questions about basic theological beliefs, they are asked whether they affirm the basic historical claims related to the Church’s founding and if they support the Church’s current leaders. Other questions include whether they are honest, pay a full tithe to the Church, follow the Mormon health code, and are sexually chaste (if unmarried) or, if married, completely faithful to their spouse. Temple recommends must be renewed biennially, requiring a fresh set of interviews each time.

This process requires “active” (practicing) Mormons to regularly affirm the fundamentals of their faith, in order to be deemed “worthy” (the LDS term) to have access to the Church’s temples. Note that these interviews reflect the LDS emphasis on both history and authority—the former because Latter-day Saints avow both the reality and significance of the events surrounding the birth of the Church, and the latter because Church members can only be granted access to the temples, and thus the pinnacle of LDS worship, with the assent of their local and regional leaders. Obtaining a temple recommend also reinforces the seriousness with which devout Mormons take the temple experience. LDS sermons often mention the sacrifices that many Mormons have made to worship at a temple, especially Church members who live far from the nearest one. The importance of family fuels this desire to reach a temple.

Sociologically, the emphasis on affirming the fundamentals of the faith in order to gain access to the most sacred of spaces creates a symbolic border around believing Mormons. It reinforces the Mormon sense of otherness from both secular society and other religions, while also differentiating between Mormons who are at the core of the faith versus those on the periphery. Adding to the sense of being “set apart” is the confidential nature of the temple ceremonies. Not only is access to the temple limited, but the Church emphasizes to members that they are

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13 A sealing often constitutes a couple’s wedding or, if they are already married, can be performed as a sort of second wedding, even many years after their initial wedding ceremony. Any children subsequently born to a couple who have been sealed are also considered sealed to the parents. If a married couple already has children, they are sealed to the couple as part of the rite.

14 Those renewing a recommend can meet with one of the bishop’s two counselors (assistants).