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**A Divine Inequality: Contextualizing Gender and Authority in
Contemporary Mormon Feminism**

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A Divine Inequality: Contextualizing Gender and Authority in Contemporary Mormon Feminism

This project traces the decline of authority for Mormon women coupled with the rise of defined gender roles within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in order to contextualize contemporary Mormon feminism. Using a radical feminist analysis, this project will explore how contemporary Mormon women relate to their early Mormon sisters and the ways in which the culture and doctrine of Mormonism often converge, lending itself to a unique feminist perspective. This project will argue that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, as currently practiced, is not just inherently patriarchal, but un-egalitarian, and that contemporary Mormon feminism seeks to open a discussion to address this imbalance and, ultimately, correct it.

Mormon Women, Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Priesthood, Feminism, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

Mormonism is a comparatively new religion. It seemed to spring from nothing in the 1800s and spread across the globe like the biblical flood. Despite numerous setbacks in its early years, including the assassination of its founder, a dangerous trek to Utah and a legislative war with the United States government, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints flourished (Butler 7). What began as 6 people in a log cabin in upstate New York is now a global religion with 15 million members, 29,014 congregations and 177 different languages (“Facts and Statistics”).

It could be said that Mormonism grew so quickly in such a short period of time because it offered a compelling theology that other religions did not. From its inception, Mormonism taught that relationships fostered on earth could literally last forever, and that every person has the potential to become like their Heavenly Parents, literally like Gods. Arguably, it taught very American ideals around potential and the right to happiness. However, perhaps what makes the Church stand out most substantially from other Christian denominations is its capacity to adapt through the mechanism of modern-day revelation, what I call its “liveness,” giving Church policies and doctrine a legitimate form of evolution not typically present in other Christian religions. Despite patriarchal and limiting notions of women in current Church policies, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has within it a unique and expanding group of Mormon feminists that embrace this liveness as a means to pressure the Church toward deeper egalitarianism in the face of male-centric traditions.

While the secular world has largely moved towards more egalitarian views and practices when it comes to women, the contemporary feminist movement within the LDS (Mormon) Church demonstrates a movement that largely looks to the past to define its mission. Despite the practice of polygamy, Mormon women were allotted unusual autonomy and authority in the early days of the Church; however, that autonomy and authority began to dissipate (despite increasing proclamations regarding women's equality to men), as women's organizations and instruction manuals once overseen by women became directed by men via priesthood authority. Where Mormon women were once empowered to use the priesthood to bless the sick and preside over their own organizations, they are now left to defer to an exclusively male priesthood authority and are expected to adhere to specified gender roles. Those within the Church that oppose this contemporary policy, Mormon feminists, constitute a distinct kind of retroactive feminism, a feminism that looks largely to the past instead of the future to find their values, their goals and their place. These feminists focus on topics of sexuality, Mother in Heaven, and the exercise of the priesthood in order to contrast the recent, conservative moves with a more autonomous past.

Using a radical feminist analysis, this project will explore the historical context for Mormon feminism, how contemporary Mormon women relate to their early Mormon sisters, and the ways in which the culture and doctrine of Mormonism often converge, lending itself to a unique feminist perspective. This project will argue that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is not just

inherently patriarchal, but un-egalitarian, and that contemporary Mormon feminism seeks to open a discussion to address this imbalance and, ultimately, correct it.

The Beginnings of Mormonism: Christ's Re-emerging Religion

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was officially organized on April 6, 1830, by its founder and prophet, Joseph Smith (Bushman, Richard 143-145). He didn't believe that he was starting a new religion; his intention was to "restore the true religion of the Bible" to the earth. Smith was and is considered to be not only a spiritual leader, but a prophet, much like Moses in the Old Testament (Bushman, Claudia 11-12). Just as Moses recorded his revelations to make the first five books of the Bible, Smith compiled the revelations he received from God in a book called the *Doctrine and Covenants*, which Mormons use as scripture alongside the Bible. In addition to the *Doctrine and Covenants*, Smith translated "through the power of God," ancient writings that became known as the *Book of Mormon*. Both the *Book of Mormon* and the *Doctrine and Covenants* are used in congruence with the Old and New Testaments at church meetings, by Church leaders and members, and are considered to be the word of God.

Before the Church's organization, Smith testified of receiving the "keys" of the priesthood, meaning the authority to act in God's name, which had previously been lost on the earth. In LDS theology, this authority was necessary to re-establish the "correct" Church on earth, or the Church as Christ had intended it to be. This priesthood allowed them to perform baptisms and offer blessings through the "laying on of hands" (Porter). The priesthood is necessary to hold a leadership

position in the Church, to preside over organizations and to offer blessings, whether to bless the sick, call someone to a new position in the Church, or to perform ordinances¹. This priesthood authority and privilege is currently offered exclusively to worthy boys and men, at least 12-years-old, within the Church. Mormon women are presided over by men in all their callings, including as presidents of female organizations, are told not to offer blessings through the “laying on of hands,” and must utilize the priesthood directed (and male dominated) curriculum, not just written by men but citing male authorities throughout.

Historically, this hasn’t always been the case.

The History of Mormon Feminism: “A Peculiar People”

Historically, Mormon women did not necessarily ascribe to feminism, though their beliefs may have aligned with many of the beliefs of contemporary feminists’. It is argued that Mormon feminism began with Emma Smith, wife of the prophet Joseph Smith, when she was elected and ordained² as president of the Relief Society, an exclusively female organization that worked in parallel with the male priesthood to care for members of the Church and the community, and provide service where

¹ “In the Church, an ordinance is a sacred, formal act performed by the authority of the priesthood. Some ordinances are essential to our exaltation. These ordinances are called saving ordinances. They include baptism, confirmation, ordination to the Melchizedek Priesthood, the temple endowment, and the marriage sealing. With each of these ordinances, we enter into solemn covenants with the Lord” (“The Church of Jesus Christ”)

² To ordain someone to a calling is “to appoint or confer authority or office. To use authority in the Lord’s Church, a person must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority” (“The Church of Jesus Christ”).

needed (Newell 106-118). The Relief Society was not, as it became later, an auxiliary to the priesthood but a partner organization.

In the early Church, Mormon women took on a wide range of professions, from merchants and politicians to scholars and educators, professions that women since have been discouraged from pursuing since “mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (Hinckley). In fact, Utah had a higher percentage of female doctors and midwives than any other U.S. state or territory at the turn of the 19th century, and was one of the first states to give women the right to vote, almost fifty years before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. Mormon women joined with feminists across the nation, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, to fight for women’s rights, particularly the right to vote. (Hanks xiii).

Though many Mormon women at that time were part of polygamous families, which were inherently patriarchal and arguably misogynistic, they had outlets to practice certain forms of autonomy and authority in ways that other patriarchal religions of the time did not offer. Women of the Church in the 19th century practiced female prophecy, gave priesthood blessings, administered and anointed the sick, and were taught a radical doctrine of the existence of a female Goddess known as “Mother in Heaven,” the wife and eternal companion of Heavenly Father and the mother of all earthly children (Wilcox 3-17). The Church’s policies and practices supporting these forms of female power started to diminish in the early 1900s. As the practice of polygamy was officially discontinued by Church leadership,

more traditional gender roles were articulated and reinforced, arguably as a way to re-appropriate the male dominance that was lost when polygamy ended.

At the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, Mormon women were outperforming men in nearly every area of Church activity. Joseph F. Smith, an authority of the Church at the time, said, “The priesthood quorum...have become lax in their work and let loose their hold. While the auxiliary organizations have taken the right of way, the priesthood quorums stand by looking on awe-struck” (Hanks xiv). In reaction to this “laxness,” Harold B. Lee of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles led a meeting during which he asked his counselors to conduct “an exhaustive, prayerful study and consideration” of all programs and curriculum “so that the Church might reap the maximum harvest from the devotion of the faith, intelligence, skill and knowledge of our various Auxiliary Organizations and Priesthood Committees” (“An Era”). That “exhaustive, prayerful study” led to the concept of the Priesthood Correlation Program, which would put all Church programs, documents, curriculum and organizations under male, priesthood direction (Hanks xv). The Priesthood³ (i.e. male leadership) soon directed the content of lessons for the Relief Society and Children’s organization, directed the writing and publishing of the Relief Society Magazine, and forbade the use of female priesthood and the worship of Heavenly Mother.

In the 1960s, The Priesthood Correlation Program began its final push to place women under a male-directed structure by putting all Relief Society funds,

³ While the literal definition of priesthood is the authority to act in God’s name, the term priesthood is also used within the Church to refer to the men that hold the priesthood.

operations and curriculum under priesthood direction (Hanks xvii). This, coupled with the increasing expectations put on women to adhere to defined and limited roles, led Mormon women to create organizations outside of the Church directive such as the Exponent II magazine, the Womens' Research Institute, Mormons for ERA, and other organizations that still exist today. This is arguably when contemporary Mormon feminism was born.

Male church leaders responded with unprecedented emphasis on the nuclear family and patriarchal authority. The Relief Society Magazine (under priesthood direction) admonished Mormon women to remain at home during World War II while praising non-Mormon women who worked in the defense industries or enlisted in the ranks (Evans 57). In 1987, Ezra Taft Benson "effectively ordered women out of the workplace" (Evans 57) in his talk titled "To the Fathers in Israel" in which he defined the roles of the men by saying, "In the beginning, Adam, not Eve, was instructed to earn the bread by the sweat of his brow." He went on to emphasize the "importance of mothers staying home to nurture, care for, and train their children in the principles of righteousness" (Benson).

In addition, The Church openly opposed the popular Equal Rights Amendment in 1972, organizing and funding efforts to defeat it, which ultimately resulted in the excommunication of the Mormons for ERA president, Sonia Johnson, in 1979 (Hanks xviii). Johnson was an outspoken radical feminist as well as Mormon and spoke out against the Church's position on the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1979, Johnson delivered a critical speech titled "Patriarchal Panic: Sexual Politics in the Mormon Church" at the American Psychological Association in which she

suggested that the lobbying efforts the Church was employing to defeat the ERA were illegal and that the leadership of the Church was using members of the Church as their henchmen to defeat the amendment (Sillitoe 38). Johnson was immediately issued an excommunication letter claiming she was hindering the worldwide missionary program, damaging internal Mormon social programs and teaching false doctrine (39). The Church then issued a statement regarding the ERA in 1980 saying, "Our Creator has especially suited fathers and mothers, through physical and emotional differences, to fulfill their own particular parental responsibilities. Legislation that could blur those roles gives cause for concern" (Kimball). Johnson's excommunication and the excommunication of many Mormon feminists in the 1990s led to a sharp decline in the amount of Mormon women speaking up about their position in the Church. The resurgence, now referred to as "Second Wave" Mormon feminism (Hanks xv), didn't pick back up until the internet made it possible to start voicing concerns anonymously.

In addition to the deepening acceptance of feminist ideals across the United States and even in the Church, the LGBTQ movement was gaining momentum, specifically with potential legislation in California that the Church wanted to prevent from passing. Since the Church at the time (and today) didn't condone homosexual acts or relationships, the growing popularity of the movement caused religious tension. The leadership of the Church began to view these movements as detrimental to the integrity of the Family and sought to find a comprehensive way to reify the Church's position on such matters. Thus, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" was born. It was as much a political statement as a statement to Church

membership. It was the crowning conservative move toward restricted gender ideals.

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World”

The family has always played a pivotal role in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The centrality of this focus on the family can be traced to the days of Joseph Smith and a doctrine that is articulated in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, “And verily, verily I say unto you, that whatsoever you seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever you bind on earth, in my name by my word, saith the lord, it shall be eternally bound in the heavens (270),” meaning that marriages and families that were consecrated on this earth by God would continue on in the after-life and those family members that had been lost would remain part of their family after death. Because of this eternal nature of families, the participation in and situating of families on earth took on profound significance.

Until 1995, the definition of the family had never been officially codified or given doctrinal status, although gender roles and family structure ideals had been preached since the Church’s inception, first with polygamy as the high order, then monogamy with husbands as providers and women as nurturers. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was delivered by Gordon B. Hinckley in his first year as prophet at the 1995 General Relief Society meeting, a meeting attended exclusively by women with the exception of male Church leadership. The Proclamation has come to function as the first comprehensive definition of the family as defined by

God, stressing the importance of families and defining acceptable relationships and gender roles.

President Hinckley began his introduction of the Proclamation by voicing his uneasiness regarding the “serious problems confronting the dear sisters.” He explained,

With so much sophistry that is passed off as truth, with so much deception concerning standards and values, with so much allurements and enticement to take on the slow stain of the world, we have felt to warn and to forewarn.

This “forewarning,” as the Proclamation makes clear, applies most heavily to the increasing aberration from divinely inspired gender roles within the family, and only secondly to the increasing acceptance of homosexuality and premarital sex.

It starts:

We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.

While the proclamation doesn’t use the word “only” (between a man and a woman), it makes clear that other forms of marriage are not ordained of God. This is made obvious when considering that same sex couples are excluded from participating in temple marriages⁴. It goes on to explain that all human beings, both male and female, are created in the image of God and that each is a “spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents” reinforcing the centrality of the family within the Church: even all humans on earth are essentially part of a family, God’s family.

⁴ A temple marriage differs from a secular marriage in that it defines the marriage as lasting through eternity as opposed to “til death.” The ordination performed for marriage in the temple is called a sealing and is essential for salvation.

The way in which the Proclamation uses the word gender illustrates that gender is not a construct of culture but rather a pre-determined creation of God. "...Each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual...identity and purpose." This determination has been reinforced by Church leadership since the Church's founding in 1830 but was made more prominent in the 20th century. This emphasis on gender roles has been interpreted to mean that a person's conduct is not an "isolated response to one's spirituality, but will be judged in the context of one's sex and perceived differently if one is male or female" (Elisothe). An example of this can be seen in the role of the priesthood. If a young boy desires to someday hold the priesthood, it is seen as a good thing because it is part of a man's role to hold the keys of the priesthood and to administer blessings. If a young girl desires the same thing, it is seen as a bad thing because it differs from God's expectations of women and is often characterized as an example of greed and a desire for power. This rhetoric is actually more contemporary and only came after Joseph Smith's death, since during his lifetime and beyond, women were permitted to administer the priesthood.

When Joseph Smith organized the original Relief Society, he announced his intention to confer priesthood on women. He told the Relief Society on March 30, 1842 that "the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood" and that he was "going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch's day-as in Paul's Day." However, since the prophet's death, those words have been printed to say "the *Church* should move according to the ancient Priesthood," removing the Relief Society from the blessings of the Priesthood" (Quinn 365). Later that same year,

Smith said, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God, and this society shall rejoice, and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time...” with “key” referring to the keys of the priesthood, to act in God’s name (Quinn 366). This is significant because the “keys” of the priesthood are that which enable priesthood holders to organize and direct the Church, something women are excluded from doing.

The Proclamation then goes on to assign specific roles to each gender within the family stating that,

By divine design, fathers are to preside⁵ over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.

These roles are indoctrinated into Mormon children early on. The Primary is an organization in the Church that provides Sunday school and music time for children in the Church aged four to eleven. The music curriculum for the Primary in 2014 included a song titled, “The Family is of God,” which uses its second and third verses to reiterate what has been said in the Proclamation. It says, “A father’s place is to preside, provide, to love and teach the gospel to his children,” and is followed by the third verse, which says, “A mother’s purpose is to care, prepare, to nurture and to strengthen all her children” (Neeley). As stated explicitly by Hinckley in the Proclamation and reinforced by this Primary song, these roles are designed by God, not by man. And yet, it’s possible to trace them back to a particular cultural moment in which they were the norm. The Proclamation’s definition of the woman’s role

⁵ Someone is presiding when he is the highest priesthood-holding member within a group. A father presides over his family, the bishop presides over his congregation and the prophet presides over the entire Church.

comes from the 19th-century Victorian ideal of womanhood, which reflected women as “angels of the hearth” that stayed within their sphere as wives and mothers that purveyed the home so men could come home to comfort (Elisotherl). Ironically, Mormon women of the 19th century generally rejected this ideal and in addition to raising children, participated in government, publishing and even manual labor outside the home.

The Proclamation also reinforces the Mormon-held belief that marriage itself is, ultimately, essential for achieving exaltation⁶, which adds “wife” to the list of women’s expectations and “husband” to the list of men’s. The Proclamation states, “Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God,” meaning that ordinances, such as baptism and marriage, are essential to obtaining glory in heaven. This is explained in the *Doctrine and Covenants*:

Therefore, when they are out of the world they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are appointed angels in heaven, which angels are ministering servants, to minister for those who are worthy of a far more, and an exceeding, and an eternal weight of glory (286).

This is to say that those who don’t enter into the covenant of marriage on this earth don’t receive the extent of exaltation as those that do, and instead, administer as angels instead of Gods. This was rephrased in 2008 by Russell M. Nelson of the Twelve Apostles when he said, “In God’s eternal plan, salvation is an individual matter; exaltation is a family matter,” implying that the full benefits of life after

⁶ According to LDS.org, exaltation is “eternal life, the kind of life God lives. He lives in great glory.” Achieving exaltation is the highest goal of members of the Church (“The Church of Jesus Christ”).

death are only available to those that are part of families, families that match the divine order⁷ (Nelson).

While it is assumed among most members that there are exceptions to certain teachings based on circumstance, the only line within the Proclamation that addresses “adaptation” follows the definition of gender roles within the family and concludes, “disability, death or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. Extended families should lend support when needed,” implying (because of its inclusion of “death” and “disability”) that only extreme circumstances merit an acceptable exception to the expectation of wives at home as mothers and husbands in the workforce, providing for their families.

When the Proclamation was referenced in 2010 by Boyd K. Packer, a member of The Twelve Apostles (though referenced many times between 1995 and 2010), Packer addressed members watching General Conference by saying that “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was a revelation from God, similar to the scriptures, and should be treated as such. However, when the transcript of his talk was released in print and online, it referred to the Proclamation as a “guide,” not a revelation (Packer). The disagreement on the Proclamation’s status as a revelation or as a guide continues to polarize certain members of the Church. This polarization goes beyond feminists and non-feminists and enters into more complex faith positions. The Proclamation, along with other leadership talks and documents, are taken by most members as doctrine, and understood as the words directly from God. Yet, positions on certain issues such as modesty and appropriate marital sex

⁷ Despite these teachings, it is a common belief in the Church that those who don’t marry on this earth will have a chance to marry and have children in the after-life.

have shown to vary from leader to leader and demonstrate contradictions and shifts within the theology. It is for this reason that Mormon feminists critique not just the culture, but many of the stated doctrines of the Church.

Radical Feminism in the Mormon Context

Mormonism has always closely embraced patriarchy. In the early days of the Church, patriarchy was upheld through the practice of polygamy. During this time, despite the assumed misogyny that must be involved when one man takes multiple wives, Mormon women had more authority and autonomy within the Church and within their families. Once polygamy ended, patriarchy found a new outlet and was reinforced through the hyper defining of gender and gender roles, as seen in the Proclamation. These forms of patriarchy, polygamy and defining gender roles, can be viewed as forms of male oppression, something radical feminism seeks to fight against.

Radical feminism emerged in America in the late 1960s, early 1970s primarily in New York and Boston as a political activist movement aimed at ending the oppression women received under a culture of patriarchy (Donovan 139). This era of feminism inspired action based on the belief that it was male-domination that was at the root of women's oppression and that women should put their primary energies into combating their oppressors: men (Donovan 149). Roxanne Dunbar, a strong voice of the movement in 1968 and author of "Female Liberation as a Basis for Social Revolution," argued that women's grievances were not "petty or personal, but rather constitute[d] a widespread, deeply rooted social disease" (49). Dunbar

believed that the only way women could really combat their oppressors was to take a stand against what she described as the “social disease” that was patriarchy, implying that the oppression wasn’t rooted in any theological issue but a social one. This differs from the popular rhetoric of many Church officials and documents, which hold gender differences and even patriarchy as divinely appointed characteristics. Dunbar goes on to explain that women *are* different from men not because of a biological disposition, but because of “the consciousness of the oppressed” (53). In other words, women have “maternal traits” not because they are necessarily born with them but because they have been taught those traits through a long history of patriarchy.

Shulamith Firestone, another strong feminist voice of that era that helped form the New York Radical Feminists, similarly asserted that women’s oppression was rooted primarily in psychological factors. In her manifesto titled “The Politics of the Ego” she wrote, “...man establishes his manhood in direct proportion to his ability to have his ego override woman’s, and derives his strength and self-esteem through this process” (124). In other words, the oppression of women and the naturalization of gender norms are simply ploys to boost the male ego.

Radical feminist theory became further articulated through a text that appeared in 1970 called *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet (Donovan 142). She argued that patriarchy is an ideology that has been ingrained in men and women. She said:

When one group rules another, the relationship between the two is political. When such an arrangement is carried out over a longer period of time it develops an ideology (feudalism, racism, etc.). All historical civilizations are patriarchies: their ideology is male supremacy (111).

Millet went on to explain that patriarchy, as maintained through the power upheld by the government, is supported through consent or, alternatively, by violence.

Conditioning to an ideology amounts to the former [consent]. But there may be a resort to the latter [violence] at any moment when consent is withdrawn – rape, attack, sequestration, beatings, murder. Sexual politics obtains consent through the “socialization” of both sexes to patriarchal policies (111).

Millet’s theory here draws from that of Antonio Gramsci who asserts that the state maintains its rule primarily through ideological hegemony and only alternatively through force. This idea of consent, and the views of Firestone and Dunbar, in many ways, can be applied to the structure and culture of the Church.

Many contemporary Mormon feminists take a similar view to that of Dunbar, Firestone and Millet, that the situation of patriarchy is an ideology that has been reinforced by culture. Similar to Dunbar’s assertion that women are different because of the “consciousness of the oppressed,” Mormon feminists may say that the assumption of these traits and their “naturalness” isn’t necessarily rooted in a divine plan (as The Proclamation and Church leaders constantly express) but in culture as the product of naturalization. Firestone argued that this naturalization occurs as a way to boost the male ego, which can be seen in Church history when the Priesthood Correlation Program was conceived as a reaction to women outperforming men in the Church. While Mormonism embraces certain alternatives that don’t exist in other patriarchal religions such as the acknowledgement of Mother in Heaven and an early history of empowering women’s rights, Mormonism is no exception to Millet’s observation that “All historical civilizations are patriarchies” (Millet 111). Mormonism was founded by a man who worshipped a male God and was succeeded

by a continuous line of men. Mormon women in the 1800s were able to hold the priesthood and give blessings, command their own organizations and manage their own publications, but they were still, ultimately, led by the prophet, a man. And while Mother in Heaven is a radical doctrine in Christianity, the presence of Mother in Heaven is still a silent, invisible one, which arguably is used to reinforce women's oppression. That situation, according to Millett, would create an ideology of oppression, an ideology that led to the loss of priesthood authority for women. This ideology is reinforced in the Church primarily through hegemony by means of sermons, curriculums and organizations brought forth by Church leadership. The Church only alternatively uses force when necessary by excommunicating members who vocally oppose the existing policies.

Where the Church's practice of patriarchy differs from Gramsci's class view of government is in the belief of most Church members that patriarchy is more than an ideology derived from a history of social constructs and a band-aid to the male ego, patriarchy is a divinely situated truth. Members of the Church don't see themselves as giving consent to the leadership of the Church, but rather to God and his divine plan, even through the existing hierarchies. However, Feminism, particularly Mormon feminism, is usually looking for a truer, better form of belief, pointing out certain false traditions that have been related to God. Mormon feminists, therefore, often lean toward Millett's theory in believing that the patriarchal religion and hierarchical system they belong to is the way it is as a result of culture and reinforcement rather than divine inspiration.

Where Mormon feminists may differ from Millett is in her aversion to the institution of family. The family plays a pivotal role in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as seen in the Proclamation. Much like Marxists see the family as essential to the ideological “reproduction” of capitalism (Donovan 143), Millett sees the family as the main source of patriarchal indoctrination. To her, it socializes “the young...into patriarchal ideology’s prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status” (Millett 35), as demonstrated by the Primary song “The Family is of God.” While Mormon feminists may agree that indoctrination occurs within the family (as well as the Church), they wouldn’t necessarily argue for the destruction of the family like some radical feminists do. Most of the Church’s predominant feminists are wives and mothers and find potential for using the institution of the family as a place to create change. Not only do they *not* reject the family, they uphold it as a place where new power for women can be created and found. They, along with the majority of the Church population, intend to be with their families forever and consider them to be a significant part of eternity.

Contemporary Mormon Feminism: Wearing Pants to Church

Mormon feminism, as a contemporary movement, exists because, in many ways, Mormonism still clings to a 19th century view of patriarchy, a view that was, as has been demonstrated, less present in Mormon culture during the 19th century than it is now. After reviewing past and present Mormon feminist writings, it’s clear that Mormon feminism is diverse and takes on many levels, but the main consensus seems to be the belief that women should play a larger role in the organization and

structure of the Church, whether by being eligible for callings currently unavailable to them (such as Sunday School President or Counselor in the Bishopric) or for the even more progressive feminists, the reintroduction of the priesthood keys for women. The most popular topics in Mormon feminist magazines and blogs discuss “double standard” issues in the Church--specifically the Church’s current rhetoric on modesty--the silence of Mother in Heaven, and the dilemma of authority being equated with male by means of the priesthood.

In the most recent issue of the Exponent II magazine, Dr. Jennifer Finlayson-Fife, a marriage therapist, life-long Mormon, mother, wife and feminist, described her take on the current rhetoric of modesty as “toxic” for both men and women. She said, “While many would argue that modesty protects women from sexual objectification and devaluation, I suggest the rhetoric on modesty does precisely the opposite” (11). According to LDS.org, “Modesty is an attitude of propriety and decency in dress, grooming, language and behavior. If we are modest, we do not draw undue attention to ourselves. Instead, we seek to “glorify God in [our] body, and in [our] spirit” (“The Church of Jesus Christ”). This definition of modesty, the idea of “not drawing undue attention” to oneself, very well could and should apply to everyone within the Church. However, the term modesty has been appropriated within the Church to apply to women, specifically in terms of how they dress. The *For the Strength of Youth*, a standards manual given to every youth in the Church once they turn 12, directly addresses modesty by saying,

Immodest clothing is any clothing that is tight, sheer, or revealing in any other manner. Young women should avoid short shorts and short skirts, shirts that do not cover the stomach, and clothing that does not cover the

shoulders or is low-cut in the front or the back. Young men should also maintain modesty in their appearance (7).

This passage dictates all the things women should avoid wearing in order to stay modest, while the advice for men is vaguely to “maintain modesty in their appearance.” Men are given the freedom of interpretation, their modesty isn’t defined. The current rhetoric of the Church, and something many Mormon feminists are trying to change, is the way in which Mormon girls are taught about modesty as a way of being responsible for men’s sexual decisions. Women are taught that men naturally have less control of their sexual thoughts and urges and, therefore, women are supposed to act as the gatekeepers of men’s thoughts and actions by covering their bodies.

In 2005, Elder Dallin H. Oaks delivered a talk on pornography and addressed the women by saying, “if you dress immodestly [...] you are becoming pornography to some of the men who see you” (Oaks, “Pornography”). This cultural belief was demonstrated at Brigham Young University, a school run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, when a female student shared a picture of herself on social media in a dress, sweater, leggings and boots, attached to a note that she received from a stranger while sitting in the school library. The note said,

You may want to consider that what you’re wearing has a negative effect on men (and women) around you. Many people come to this university because they feel safe, morally as well as physically, here. They expect others to abide by the Honor Code⁸ that we all agreed on. Please consider your commitment to the Honor Code (which you agreed to) when dressing each day. Thank you (Wimmer).

⁸ Upon attending Brigham Young University (BYU), students agree to an ‘Honor Code,’ which requires honesty, soberness, modesty, clean language and chastity, among other things (“Church Educational System”).

This example showcases the rhetoric that “women-with their lesser institutional status-are constructed, at least in part, as both the problem and the solution to men’s sexual self-control” (Finlayson-Fife 11).

As part of her dissertation research, which focused on the sexual expectations of Mormon men and women, Finlayson-Fife found that most Mormon women reported feeling more responsible than men for defining and defending the limits of any pre-marital physical encounter. They also reported “feeling responsible for and shamed by unwanted physical engagement, as well as conflicted about how to fend off such advances while at the same time being kind and deferential” (12). Women felt that they were responsible for guarding men’s feelings and at the same time, in charge of stopping any “unworthy” sexual action. She depicted this phenomenon by saying,

Women are constructed as the sober drivers in heterosexual relationships, the ones best equipped to keep men’s pressing sexuality under control by keeping his hands off the wheel and his foot off the accelerator-while keeping her own sexuality locked in the trunk (11).

Because of this mentality, most Mormon women interpreted a man’s pre-marital sexual behavior as less connected to his value than their own.

The discussions around modesty and chastity are directly connected in the Church. A lesson from *The Latter-day Saint Woman* discusses modesty by saying,

We are responsible for the effect our dress standards have on others [...] It is especially important that we teach young girls not to wear clothes that would encourage young men to have improper thoughts [...] Modesty can help us keep our chastity (“Chastity and Modesty” 60-65).

Finlayson-Fife, as well as other vocal Mormon feminists, argues that this definition of modesty, as related to chastity, clearly demonstrates the patriarchy that exists in

the Church. She goes on, “The notion that a woman is either “modest” or “immodest” is another iteration of the whore/Madonna split so typical in patriarchal societies. A woman is either asexual and good or sexual and bad” (Finlayson-Fife 12). Men in the Church are certainly expected to live up to this same ideal (not engaging in sexual relationships before marriage). They are expected to remain chaste until they are married, as women are. However, the culture that surrounds these teachings of modesty and sexuality have led many women in the Church to feel more responsible and conflicted when such transgressions occur. This is a double standard that Mormon feminists are working to dismantle.

Additionally, Mormon feminists are trying to find a voice for their only divine role model, Mother in Heaven, and make sense of her absence in Church doctrine when the family is supposedly central to the gospel. Margaret Toscano, a former Mormon⁹ and feminist, brought up the topic with an essay titled, “Heavenly Motherhood: Silence, Disturbance, and Consolidation.” In it, she discusses the hypocrisy that exists within the Church’s current rhetoric around the importance of the family and the divine role of women as mothers. She says,

Motherhood is defined in Church discourse in such a way that it becomes the sum total of a woman’s identity. She is to be a mother first [...] all other aspects of a woman’s personhood, all of her talents and desires, are to be subordinate to that one role.

By bringing up the importance of the motherhood role for women in the Church, she is acknowledging that Heavenly Mother should be “as vital for our spiritual and temporal salvation as is the male God.” And, yet, Heavenly Mother is never talked

⁹ Margaret Toscano was excommunicated from the Church in 2000 on the charge of “apostasy” after a local leader asked her to stop talking about women’s issues and the history of the Church (“Interview”).

about in the Church, which Toscano argues is not only a way of diminishing her importance but a way of teaching women how to behave. In 2011, Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave a talk titled, “Women are Incredible!” in which he said, “Wives are equal to their husbands. Marriage requires a full partnership” (Cook). And yet, Heavenly Mother, supposedly a full partner to Heavenly Father, is silent.

According to Toscano,

The deafening silence of leaders on the topic of the Heavenly Mother amounts to an unofficial prohibition. And the absence of the Divine Mother reflects the value Church leaders place on women themselves and the Church’s reductive view of what motherhood means. Like the Heavenly Mother, Mormon women should be silent, hidden from public view, and have no part in governance.

The popular Church rhetoric for this silence is that Heavenly Mother is too sacred and that her name should not be tarnished. However, Toscano and other Mormon feminists argue that not speaking about Mother in Heaven doesn’t promote sacredness nor respect; rather, it causes the erasure of her as anything other than the subordinate parent she is currently represented as in Mormon discourse. The majority of references of her by Church leadership come before the 1960s, before the final implementation of the Priesthood Correlation Program. Since that time, most references of her have been in the form of “Heavenly Parents” not “Heavenly Mother” (Toscano). Herein lies a contradiction. Women in the Church, as well as men, are taught to be like their Heavenly Parents. However, the only Heavenly Parent that is visible is Heavenly Father, and since women are taught that they are inherently different from men, they must be inherently different from Heavenly Father. Without the visible role model that men have, Mormon feminists ask what

they're supposed to strive toward and who their role model is as a way of spurring conversation and change in the discourse about Mother in Heaven.

Finally, possibly the most prominent issue for contemporary Mormon feminists today is the issue of the priesthood. It's been demonstrated that women historically were able to partake in ritualistic aspects of the priesthood that are no longer available to them. Joseph Smith turned the keys of the priesthood over to them when they first formed the Relief Society and they were invited by the leadership to perform priesthood blessings on children and the sick (Quinn 365-366). Additionally, Paulsen and Pulido in their recent research project titled, "A Mother There: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Heavenly Mother," found that there is substantial evidence within Church doctrine that Heavenly Mother was a "co-creator" and "co-framer" of the Plan of Salvation¹⁰, a role that would have required her to hold the priesthood with her husband, Heavenly Father.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Twelve Apostles addressed this topic head on in the 2014 General Conference knowing that this was a growing issue among members. He began his talk by saying, "Priesthood keys direct women as well as men, and priesthood ordinances and priesthood authority pertain to women as well as men" (Oaks, "The Keys"). Oaks is saying that everyone, including women, get the benefits of the priesthood but only men get to exercise it. Thus, women are passengers in a car that only men can drive. Oaks goes on to say, "The First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve, who preside over the Church, are

¹⁰ The Plan of Salvation "comprises all of the laws, ordinances, principles, and doctrines required to complete our mortal journey and progress to a state of exaltation enjoyed by our Father in Heaven" (Gerrard).

empowered to make many decisions affecting Church policies and procedures.”

Here he is referring to the liveness of the Church discussed earlier, the ability of the leadership to change certain policies of the Church. He continues, “But even though these presiding authorities hold and exercise all of the keys delegated to men in this dispensation, they are not free to alter the divinely decreed pattern that only men will hold offices in the priesthood.” Mormon feminists would disagree with Oaks’ statement that the current policy that allows only men to exercise the keys of the priesthood, only men as drivers and women as passengers, is a “divinely decreed pattern.”

Many men and women that share this belief are part of an organization called Ordain Women that “aspires to create a space for Mormons to articulate issues of gender inequality they may be hesitant to raise alone” (ordainwomen.org). Other Mormon feminists, both male and female, have found ways to voice their position on gender equality within the Church such as posting on blogs, participating in podcast discussions and writing books, but Ordain Women organizes physical exercises, demonstrations and protests (though these are arguably peaceful demonstrations) to make sure their plight is seen and heard by the larger public of the Church membership and leadership as well as the world. Their mission:

The fundamental tenets of Mormonism support gender equality: God is male and female, father and mother, and all of us can progress to be like them someday. Priesthood, we are taught, is essential to this process. Ordain Women believes women must be ordained in order for our faith to reflect the equity and expansiveness of these teachings ([Mission ordainwomen.org](http://Mission.ordainwomen.org)).

In April of 2014, this group organized a demonstration to protest the fact that women aren’t allowed to attend the Priesthood Session of General Conference. At

every general conference, there is a Saturday night Priesthood Session that all men 12 and up, whether they hold the priesthood or not, are encouraged to attend. The talks given at this conference are streamed online and made available in print, but women are not allowed to physically attend the event. Each participant of this demonstration, mostly women, stood in line at the door of the conference center where the Priesthood Conference was taking place, the same womanless conference where Elder Oaks delivered his address on women and the priesthood (cited above). One by one, each asked to be let into the conference. One by one, each was turned away. This time, instead of a man turning them away, which had been typical of past demonstrations, a woman was appointed to meet them at the door. Many participants described this woman and their reception at the conference center as a “step in the right direction” compared to years prior (L, Katie). One participant described the experience by saying,

The calm peaceful expression of our desire for greater gender equality in the Church seemed to have been met graciously and hospitably [...] Though it was clear that this didn’t represent any sort of willingness on the part of the Church leaders to change or even consider a change to existing priesthood policies, there was a sense of camaraderie [...] I felt as though the message conveyed was, “No, we don’t agree with you, but you are still our brothers and sisters in Christ” (L., Katie).

While the woman that greeted them at the door was described as being gracious and respectful, not all members of the Church shared her enthusiasm. The Salt Lake Tribune shared an “LDS Church statement” that said, “While not all the protesters were members of the church, such divisive actions are not the kind of behavior that is expected from Latter-day Saints” (Moulton). One Mormon feminist interpreted this statement, as well as other statements by authorities, as purposefully causing a

divide between members of the Church. By saying that “such actions are not the kind of behavior that is expected from *Latter-day Saints*,” this statement is describing these protestors, in a way, as not “Latter-day Saints,” or not Mormons. At least not *real* Mormons.

This divide can be seen on social media sites. When you do a search of the #ordainwomen hash tag on Twitter or browse comments on Facebook, you’ll find, in addition to supportive comments from members of the organization, shaming and accusing posts to participants, including:

“Pantsuit wearing women: If you want to be Hillary then go for it, but remember there’s a reason Bill still wanted Monica. #ordainwomen” (Tanner).

“You absolutely cannot have a testimony of the church and its leaders when you think you know better than they do. You really should be ashamed of yourselves, but even that is difficult to do when you are ‘past feeling’ (quoted in L. Katie).

“Women are amazing. Inherent value WITHOUT needing the #priesthood. #OrdainWomen is a sad sad cause” (Oakley).

“Members in the #LDS Church do not gain position by seeking it. #OrdainWomen is, therefore, an apostate group” (Herlin).

“Apostasy is no new thing to have happened: what you are staging and carrying-on is no different than any apostate group that has ever rose up and left the church. If you do not agree with the doctrine, LEAVE” (quoted in L. Katie).

One Mormon feminist featured on “Mormon Feminist Housewives” reacted to this feedback by sharing the prophet Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, which says,

And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you [...] And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness [...] That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another (*Holy Bible* 1453).

She used this passage of scripture to argue that these Mormon feminists are just as much a part of the Church as all the other members and that they are just as necessary to the “body” of the Church as any other member. Additionally, every member of the Church (and the body) is meant to care for one another, “that there should be no schism in the body.” Ironically, this same scripture was used by President Harold B. Lee in 1960 to defend the implementation of the Priesthood Correlation Program. He said, “Each organization was to have its specific function, and it was not to usurp the field of the other, which would be like the eye saying to the hand, ‘I have no need of thee’” (*An Era*).

Beyond the articles in Exponent II magazine and the irregular protests conducted by Ordain Women, contemporary Mormon feminists and those that are simply exploring their faith, find ways to vocalize their questions and communicate with their sisters and like-minded Mormons. The blog “Feminist Mormon Housewives” that was mentioned earlier features new posts from different guest contributors every week with topics ranging from parenting to Church callings to women receiving the priesthood. In fact, it was this blog, and blogs like it, that led to organizations like Ordain Women, because it gave Mormon women a place to come together and talk about their struggles. Similarly, podcasts like Mormon Matters and Mormon Stories feature stories on a full range of Church doctrines such as priesthood leadership, forgiveness, the sacrament and Church history, but are also inclusive of Mormon feminist ideals and other ideas that may differ from the popular rhetoric of the Church. Mormon feminists are also getting together in Facebook groups and organizing their own organizations and retreats. The most

recent Midwest Pilgrims conference in Rockford, Illinois featured talks on the Feminine Divine, Mormon women as healers, the power of meditation and raising resilient girls, and featured time for group singing and prayer.

While these conversations may be frowned upon by many leaders and members of the Church, one Mormon feminist shared her joy of the future by saying, “The days of fear are over [...] We’re not going to be kicked out. We have nothing to fear anymore” (L., Katie), a luxury that many women referenced in this paper did not have. Maxine Hanks, Margaret Toscano, Sonia Johnson and other academics were excommunicated for their participation in discussions around Church history, women’s roles and Heavenly Mother.

Conclusion

The liveness of the Church, or modern-day revelation, has impacted members of the Church in many positive ways. It led the Church to discontinue its practice of polygamy in the early 1900s to save those practicing plural marriage from nation-wide persecution and federal imprisonment. In 1978, thanks to modern-day revelation, the Church lifted its previous restriction on black men from receiving the right to exercise the priesthood (“Race and the Priesthood”). This liveness has allowed the Church the capacity to be a living, breathing, growing religion. However, it has also, arguably, changed the Church and the Mormon lifestyle in ways that have been viewed by some as not so positive. As one example, this project has demonstrated the loss of female autonomy in the name of the divine, a male divine. The fact that Mormon feminism in many ways looks to the past to find

its strength and direction shows a certain progression through regression in the Church. Mormon feminism is trying to influence the Church to, once again, use that liveness progressively to reposition women within the structure of the Church such that they believe God (including Heavenly Father *and* Mother) intended.

Christianity and Mormonism teach concepts that challenge misogyny, such as the concepts of egalitarianism in God's eyes, men and women as Gods, and divine potential and progression. This is the basis, in addition to practices and teachings of the past--the notion of ongoing revelation, the fact that God "has yet to reveal many things" (Smith, "The Articles"), and the idea of false traditions--that Mormon feminism draws from to challenge the current male-centric policies of the Church.

I have been Mormon since birth and as such, Mormonism is a big part of my identity. Though I've never smoked a cigarette, had a beer, or even tried a sip of coffee, Mormonism has offered me many things: the teaching that God wants me to be happy, that my family matters and my relationships will be with me forever, and that I have divine potential to be like my Heavenly Parents--all teachings that have taught me to aim high and to fulfill my ambitions as a woman.

As I've thought about my experiences growing up in the Church, considered the history of the Church, and more importantly, consider the future of the Church, I've come to the conclusion that Mormon feminism is beyond anything else, a desire to be a woman. A desire to be recognized first and foremost as a daughter of God. Mormon feminism is a journey for many Mormon women to make sense of God and to make sense of their desire to keep His commandments. Mormon feminists are striving to reach their divine potential. They don't profess to have all the answers,

they're looking for answers by asking all the right questions, just like Joseph Smith did when he was 14-years-old and prayed to know which church to join.

I believe the harshest thing anyone could say to a Mormon feminist as they are reflecting on their faith and making this journey is, "If you disagree, leave," and I've seen it many times. It comes from a place of ignorance, a place that lacks compassion. A place that doesn't understand the mission of Jesus Christ and Christianity as a site for community, acceptance, questioning, learning and becoming better. Mormon feminists don't claim to have all the answers. They don't want to leave the church that has taught them that they have divine potential. They are trying to achieve that divine potential, trying to become like the Heavenly Mother they imagine as someone who is a "fierce defender of the weak and the outcast" (Toscano), the co-creator of the Plan of Salvation, and the full and equal partner of Heavenly Father. As a woman that is trying to truly know my Mother in Heaven, understand my position as a daughter of God, and make sense of a culture that values me based on a different system than my father, husband, and 4-year-old nephew, I am a Mormon feminist.

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