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MORMONISM

Lynita K. Newswander, Chad B. Newswander, and Lee Trepanier

Though it has resided for over a century at the fringes of America's geography and society, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the LDS Church or "Mormons," because of their belief in the Book of Mormon as a sacred work of scripture) has a rich history closely tied to its land, people, and culture.¹ Founded in 1830 by young farm-boy Joseph Smith, who claimed to have seen heavenly messengers in vision, the religion grew steadily in small numbers until it built up a devout membership (Remini 2002). They gathered together first in New York, later in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, before making the final trek to the Salt Lake Valley. Each time, they were met with challenges from neighbors who were offended by the teachings of the new faith or threatened by the political power of the rapidly growing group (Wicks and Foister 2005). Skirmishes led to official government action against the Mormons: first an extermination order from Governor Lilburn Boggs of Missouri, later military action ("the Mormon War"), and court rulings that ultimately disincorporated the Church and froze its assets (see Arrington and Bitton 1979).

Though the last century has seen many positive changes for the faith, it has remained largely isolated from the American mainstream. This may be credited partially to the fear or distrust of outsiders who do not understand or appreciate what Mormons hold sacred (see Givens 2007). These misgivings and misinterpretations have contributed to a muddled public identity: one which is, on the one hand, staunchly traditional, squeaky clean and lily white, and on the other, secretive and untrustworthy. Such depictions persisted through much of the twentieth century, and characterized the Mormon as from another time and place, an "other" and an outsider.

Recently, Mormonism has been the focus of unprecedented media interest. What some have called "The Mormon Moment" (see Kirn 2011, and accompanying cover photo)—spurred by Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign and an increased public relations effort by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—has resulted in a significant increase in screen time for the religion. This attention comes both from inside and outside of the LDS Church, and spans the gamut of today's media outlets: reality shows and scripted television series, radio, movies, books, and even

Broadway—not to mention blogs, news articles, and network newsmagazines. The coverage is certainly widespread, and as a result, Americans are reshaping a collective image of what Mormonism is and what its influence on their lives should be.

A generation ago, Donny and Marie Osmond were the poster children of traditional values. Complete with matching bellbottoms and “big” hair, they were part of a real-life *Brady Bunch* family and exhibited much of what was synonymous with Mormonism at the time: clean living, big families, the Mountain West, and the white upper-middle class. Today, by contrast, popular attention for the faith comes from a variety of often conflicting images; as more Mormons are represented on “reality” television programs and in other media, the public is introduced to a multidimensional view of the faith that includes members from various backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities, with a wide range of interests. While many of these images go beyond the strict standard of traditional LDS values, the Church has embraced the new aggregate image of itself as a worldwide faith whose people and message are suddenly new and relevant. In an effort to regain control of the image of “Mormons,” the Church has launched a vast public relations campaign that capitalizes on current trends in popular culture to reintroduce the public to the once misunderstood religion.

It isn't that Mormons have not received media attention before. Although their traditional families and conservative culture reflect mainstream values, they have been portrayed as outsiders, anomalies in the American melting pot. For much of the twentieth century, Mormonism was a boutique religion isolated in the Rocky Mountains and largely unfamiliar to the broader population. With official LDS headquarters in Salt Lake City, the culture seemed miles away from the rest of society. This is evident in early depictions of Mormons in the media as strange or peculiar, often innocent and naïve of the cultural values of the “real” world. However, the vision of Mormons in popular culture today has started to distance itself from the stagnant, homogenous image of a very particular and peculiar people to one that is more diverse, ready to accept a variety of styles and systems of belief, and decidedly contemporary. Over the last several decades, the portrayal of Mormons in popular media has mirrored the broader shifting tides of American culture: as widespread values have become more pluralistic, more accepting of breaks from tradition, and more rewarding of well-crafted public personas, the image of Mormons has also changed.

Traditional depictions of an American faith

There was a time during the Cold War period when the simple, one-dimensional depiction of Mormons as honest, family-oriented, white, and wholesome was happily embraced by consumers of American media. Even though this depiction of LDS culture overlooked the nuances and deep traditions of this particular faith (Givens 2007; Bloom 2006), the image sold records and produced successful business careers. For some, the vision of Mormons as innocent is still able to capture the American imagination and media attention. For others, however, that same image seems stagnant, staid, and is associated with classism, sexism, and racism. As popular culture evolves, the image of Mormons projected by popular media—and promoted by

Mormons themselves—has transformed into something new, and no longer beyond the mainstream.

In the beginning, there were the Osmonds ...

The popular personification of these twentieth-century Mormon values began with four brothers, between the ages of nine and three, who started singing as a barber-shop quartet in their hometown of Ogden, Utah, in order to raise funds for their deaf older brothers to serve missions for the LDS Church. This was the humble beginning of the Osmond Brothers (later simply the Osmonds)—Alan, Wayne, Merrill, and Jay, with Donny joining later—a group of clean-cut Mormon boys who made a name for themselves in pop music in the early 1970s with hits like “One Bad Apple” (Billboard’s #1 for 1971; Whitburn 2004: 445). The musical Osmond family found longevity in their success in part by tapping into the public’s collective yearning to maintain traditional family values. As the children grew, their sound changed, as did their ambition. In 1976, the family put most of its efforts into two of the younger family members, who launched their own variety show, *Donny and Marie* (ABC, 1976–79). The siblings were teenagers (18 and 16, respectively), but already had over a decade of experience in the family business of music and entertainment. Together, they were quite a pair; she was “a little bit country,” he was “a little bit rock and roll,” and the combination seemed to be precisely what America was looking for: youth, beauty, and success, with strong family values and a sense of civility. In fact, their public image was so impeccable that after the show was cancelled, Donny felt that he was disadvantaged in his attempts at a solo adult career by the public perception of him as “unhip” and a “boy scout” (Burgess 1999). One professional publicist even suggested that he should intentionally get arrested for drug possession (BBC News 2004).²

What was it about the Osmonds that made them a particular “moment” in American popular culture? First, although entertainment generally and music specifically were pushing new limits of tradition and public decency, the Osmond family—with other big, happy families, like *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–74) and *The Waltons* (CBS, 1971–81)—fit into a definite, persistent niche of simple American values onto which many wanted to hold. The difference was that, in the Osmonds, America had a real-life manifestation of the (perhaps already fading) dream that a family could find success on a large scale while maintaining their love for one another and dedication to their personal values.

Their position was always a precarious one, however, because while the values they upheld remained the same—as Mormons, they did not smoke or drink, they respected their parents and saved themselves for marriage—those of the crowds upon which they relied to sell their records were changing. This period also saw the rise of another side of music notoriety, populated by groups like Led Zeppelin, KISS, the Rolling Stones, and Pink Floyd, which popularized adult themes, lewd behavior, and an altogether new standard for the musical genre. Perhaps, however, this very tension was the key to the period of the Osmonds’ success: in times of swiftly changing societal standards, their image was a happy reminder of a simpler time when a teenager’s worst troubles concerned their hair and bellbottoms.

As the tides of time continue to push culture away from these so-called outmoded values, it only reinforces the unique characteristics that many members of the LDS Church tend to reflect. For example, David Archuleta, Brooke White, and Carmen Rasmusen developed a large fan base from their time on *American Idol* (FOX, 2002–present), thanks in part to their straight-laced sensibility coupled with an image of innocence. Archuleta was said to have a “guileless grin” with the “eyes of Bambi” (Slezak 2008a). Although White was cast as a “wide-eyed nanny” (Slezak 2008b), she was more optimistically characterized by her sense of “vulnerability” (Silvesan 2008). Rasmusen was said to be naïve and have a squeaky-clean image.³ Even though these characteristics were occasionally cast in a negative light, they were also sources of the singers’ popularity. Each of these would-be idols was able to tap into the public’s fascination with a value system that was considered out of step with the times, but was nonetheless appealing.

Another member of the LDS community who captured the national spotlight in recent years is Brigham Young University basketball player, Jimmer Fredette. Professional basketball superstar Kevin Durant called him the “best scorer in the world” (Durant 2011). The phenomenon known as “Jimmermania” hit its zenith in 2011 as his team reached the “Sweet 16” in the NCAA Tournament, and he was named the National Player of the Year. Although his talent pushed him onto the national stage, as it had with Archuleta and others, it was his humility that seemed to separate Jimmer from his peers in the sports world. Instead of focusing on how to highlight his own achievements through high-profile antics, he praised his teammates and allowed his performance to speak for itself. His soft-spokenness and kind demeanor informed by a strong family narrative, including stories of his time spent with his brother, seemed to some to reflect a particular LDS identity.

Business, politics, and the white-collar image

The stereotype of good old-fashioned Mormon values has been popular in American business, as well. Because the LDS Church (like other Protestant communities) is run and administered by lay members rather than specially trained and paid clergy, each member shares a load of the responsibility, meaning that the rigors of church membership can help prepare Mormons for working in a bureaucracy and adapting to business life. Additionally, the rational-legal ideals of hierarchy, rules, specialization, and division of labor have been part of the structure and practice of the faith from the early twentieth century (Bowman 2012; Quinn 1984). This fit is reinforced by Mormon religious values, particularly the standards of clean living, integrity, and hard work. Howard Hughes, notorious billionaire and embodiment of so much of the excess Las Vegas came to exemplify, preferred to surround himself with Mormons (*Time* 1976); he liked that they didn’t drink or smoke, and he felt the need to be surrounded by an inner circle whose advice he could trust. And Hughes was not the only one to capitalize on the benefits that clean living and a strong work ethic bring to the boardroom. Political scientist James Q. Wilson (1993: 102) notes that “there are business executives who prefer Mormons as employees because they believe that Mormons are more honest.” The representation of Mormons as leaders in business and on Wall Street led *Businessweek* magazine to refer to the Mormon

mission (the two years Mormon men are required to serve proselytizing, often in a foreign country) as “God’s MBA” (Winter 2011).

Perhaps the figure who best represented traditional LDS beliefs in business was Stephen R. Covey. He was able to connect LDS and American values by translating his religious ethic into a system of tools for effective leadership. His *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* has sold over fifteen million copies worldwide since it was first published in 1989, and Covey readily admits that Mormonism is central to his seemingly secular work. Seven years before *Seven Habits* hit the shelves, he wrote *The Divine Center*, a religious book for an LDS audience, in which he encouraged others of his faith to “testify of gospel principles” using vocabularies that would resonate with the “experience and frame of mind” of non-Mormons (Covey 2005: 240). In this manner, Covey’s Mormonism was translated into business terms and was readily accepted by an eager public.

He was able to do this by presenting a softer version of capitalism that rested on balance, not excess. Rejecting the strains of casino and predatory capitalism that were the rage of the 1980s economic boom, Covey called for business leaders to be less competitive and more harmonious. According to him, competitive and aggressive business cultures not only eroded character, but created climates that estranged employees from each other and their beliefs. His call for synergy and balance created an indelible mark in the business community. Purpose informed by habits provided the means to achieve a meaningful life. Profits were partially a by-product of achieving a balanced life. Covey was able to mix together church and business in a way that was seamless and attractive.

This is the formula that helped launch Mitt Romney’s business success. He was well educated, successful in his business pursuits, an accomplished public servant, and a devoted spouse and family man. Like Donny and Marie—champions of American popular culture for an earlier generation—Romney was a clean-living, tradition-saving, Book of Mormon-toting representation of his faith. Unfortunately for him, the circumstance surrounding his media attention was different, and voting Americans indicated that while certain attributes may be entertaining in one arena, they are not necessarily desirable in others. Also working against Romney were the changing tides of popular culture, which portrayed twentieth-century Mormon values as backward and regressive in an increasingly progressive society (see Grossman 2012).

In 2012, Romney’s attempt to define himself primarily as a business leader was successful; he became the first Mormon to win the presidential nomination from one of the major American political parties. Building Bain Capital and saving the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics apparently had given him credibility. In particular, the financial rescue of the Winter Olympics gave him the reputation of being willing and able to use his managerial expertise for the common good (Johnson 2007). In a way, Romney represented the ideals of Covey’s multifaceted business leader operating on the principles of character. As a result, these managerial skills informed by a service orientation made him an attractive candidate to help correct the country’s economic downturn.

Yet, Romney had a hard time disclosing his identity completely, especially as it related to his Mormonism. Republican leaders, who worried that anti-Mormon

views were prevalent among the public—and especially among Evangelical Christians, who form a sizable part of the party's base—worked to dispel the religious stigma. In an address before the Republican National Convention in Tampa, for example, former Arkansas Governor and Baptist minister Mike Huckabee declared that he cared “far less” about where Romney went to church than about where he would take the country; and Paul Ryan, the Republican vice-president nominee and Catholic, noted that he and Romney went to “different churches” yet shared the “same moral creed” (Davis 2012).

On the night Romney accepted his party's nomination, there were several heartfelt testimonials from his friends, who spoke directly about the candidate's religious faith and how it formed his moral views. Fellow Mormons Ted and Pat Oparowski and Pam Finlayson spoke of Romney's help and kindness to their families as they dealt with tragedy. Serving time as a bishop and later as a stake president of the LDS Church, Romney oversaw several congregations in a district similar to a Catholic diocese, counseling LDS members on their most personal concerns (such as marriage, parenting, and faith), and working with immigrant converts from other countries. Grant Bennett, a congregational assistant to Romney, told Republican delegates that Romney had “a listening ear and a helping hand,” devoting as many as 20 hours a week as stake president (Zoll 2012).

In his acceptance speech, Romney, however, was more cautious about his faith. He recalled growing up as one of the few Mormons in his Michigan town but portrayed it as any other type of mainstream Christian faith: “We were Mormons and growing up in Michigan; that might seem unusual or out of place but I don't remember it that way. My friends cared more about what sports team we followed than what church we went to.” Romney also referred to his faith when his family moved to Massachusetts: “We had remarkably vibrant and diverse congregants from all walks of life and many who were new to America. We prayed together, our kids played together and we always stood ready to help each other out in different ways” (Romney 2012).

Although Romney never distanced himself from his faith, he also never fully utilized it in a way that could add to his campaign. Instead, he focused on how his business expertise and experience qualified him to be the next president, reinforcing the stereotype of a staunch, white-collar fiscal conservative, leading to a series of problems beginning during the Republican primaries and hitting full stride during the general presidential campaign. Specifically, Romney's opponents were able to characterize him not only as aloof and distant from the people, but also as a representative of the Wall Street breed of vulture capitalists. The accusation of taking advantage of people by destroying small towns through firing people or outsourcing their jobs was an image that was tough to shake. Though many of these qualities are the result of Romney's own fiscally conservative Republicanism and personality quirks, his position as a public Mormon figure resulted in negative associations with the faith as tired, white, and aging (Prince 2012).

Romney did not help his own presentation with a series of gaffes. Most notably, he was caught on video explaining his belief that there were “47% of the people ... who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing,

to you-name-it” (Korte 2012). This message confirmed the predatory capitalist image, one that Romney was unable adequately to counter. He struggled to keep his public image from being considered one-dimensional, old-fashioned, and un-hip. In this instance, however, the clean-cut Donny and Marie image was a negative rather than a positive marker in a culture that was already open to accepting a new, more dynamic vision of Mormonism.

An evolving image

Thanks to the unprecedented contribution and recognition of members of the LDS faith to the core of contemporary popular culture, the definition of Mormonism has expanded into what appears to be a much more inclusive culture (see also Mauss 1994). The traditional representation is not necessarily out of sync, but is now informed and complemented by a newly popularized, broader image of the faith. Ironically, however, this culture appears to be increasingly at odds with the values of Donny and Marie. While Mormons in the media today continue to hold on to some aspect of the clean-cut visage molded over the last several decades, they embody a reality that includes the hip, the unkempt, the controversial, and the contemporary, as well as the traditional. These new images have emerged from “reality” TV, books, movies, TV shows, and a Broadway play.

“Reality” TV and real Mormons

Because Mormons have had the reputation of being innocents who are unversed in the ways of the world, they make for an appealing foil in “reality” TV. All the more appealing is the chance to see individuals break out from the mold and demonstrate a spark of personality—especially when that spark comes into conflict with values traditionally associated with Mormonism. “Reality” shows like *American Idol*, *The Real World* (MTV, 1992–present), *Survivor* (CBS, 2000–present), *America’s Next Top Model* (CW, 2003–present), *The Bachelorette* (ABC, 2003–present), *America’s Biggest Loser* (NBC, 2004–present), *The Rebel Billionaire* (FOX, 2004–5), *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC, 2005–present), *So You Think You Can Dance* (FOX, 2005–present), and others, permit members of the LDS Church not only to represent themselves, but also to shape new, contemporary, and nuanced visions of their faith, enabling the American public to see Mormons as they really are: some good, some bad, some indifferent, and perhaps, in the end, not quite so different from everyone else.

One of the first Mormons to make a name for herself in “reality” television was Julie Stoffer, who appeared on MTV’s *The Real World* in 2000. At the time, Stoffer was a student at BYU, a private school owned by the LDS Church that requires its students to abide by a strict honor code. Growing up, Stoffer had not been allowed to watch MTV at home, but she caught episodes of *The Real World* at a friend’s house, and she saw her audition as an opportunity to experience something new and different. The show’s producers were interested in her strict religious background and the drama it might create on screen were she to represent the traditional wholesome image associated with those of her faith (Larsen 2000). Although Stoffer

did not engage in specifically immoral behavior on the show, the fact that she was rooming with men (participants on *The Real World* live together under one roof) was a breach of her BYU honor code contract. After the show aired, she was suspended from the school; she never appealed the decision.

Like Stoffer, other members of the LDS Church appearing on “reality” TV have capitalized on the appeal of their clean-cut images, even (perhaps especially) when the show encourages them to reach beyond the morality in which they were raised. Aimee, a contestant on *America’s Next Top Model*, made a point of telling the judges early on that she was an “ex-Mormon”; she believed that modeling went against her previous faith (and her mother’s wishes) because she would have to wear “risqué clothing.” Jef Holm, winner of the eighth season of *The Bachelorette*, was “raised Mormon” in a family whose members were still devout in the faith (Carbone 2012). During the show, he displayed a unique appeal—he upheld a wholesome image while also appearing modern and up to date. Although the LDS Church encourages Mormons to marry within the faith, Holm became engaged to *Bachelorette* Emily Maynard (the engagement ended in 2011). Todd Herzog, winner of the fifteenth season of *Survivor*, was an openly gay Mormon who also appeared up to date and able to relate to his surroundings. Although he played the game in a manipulative and cunning fashion, he was able nonetheless to make key connections that earned him the title of sole survivor. By contrast, Dawn Meehan, who was in the twenty-third season, struggled to make connections with younger contestants. Despite this (and a resulting emotional breakdown), the BYU English professor became a maternal figure to the group, adapting and adjusting to her context. Her game was more subtle but less strategic than Herzog’s, and eventually she was voted out.⁴

A broad range of personalities emerges from the Mormon “reality” star contestants, and there is no singular depiction that can capture the nuance that exists within the Mormon community. Some Mormons have been traditional while others have been less so. It is the same with other Mormon public figures, who today more than ever are speaking freely and esoterically about their faith. Joanna Brooks, for example, presents a liberal progressive strain in Mormon thought by picking up on the themes of yearning and change in her book *The Book of Mormon Girl* (2012). As she describes her LDS life experiences, Brooks embraces the heritage of Mormonism reflected in the values of community and charity. While being positive about the service culture of Mormonism, she challenges the beliefs of her church, namely its position on women and homosexual issues. By taking this route, her work is one of clear “unorthodoxy.” In recognizing this, Brooks declares that she is “not an enemy” (2012: 160). She just opposes the doctrine, but supports the traditions and people that flow from it. She does not shy away from this depiction, but celebrates it.

In contrast, Glenn Beck fuses together entertainment and enlightenment to present his particular conservative outlook. Although Beck is a political personality and does not attempt to be a spokesperson for a strain of Mormon thought like Brooks, he does embody aspects of traditional Mormon beliefs and culture with a contemporary twist. His presentation style is irreverent, emotional, and engaging. Like a good Mormon, he is not timid to express his feelings or weep openly in front of an audience when he is passionate about something. He also pushes “outlier” topics such as emergency preparedness in case of societal breakdown—a topic that also

carries a strong influence from one strain of LDS teachings. Beck is not afraid to gin up controversy; his bombastic style, tone, and willingness to push issues partially led to his ouster at *Fox News* (Beck 2009). Despite these antics and personal causes, he advocates a libertarian message that not only resonates with a broad swath of the American public, but has its roots in one current of Mormon thought.⁵

Vampires, polygamy, and a musical: Oh, my!

Perhaps the most popular contemporary representations of Mormons in the media are those with which the LDS Church would rather not be associated.⁶ Edgy movies about teen lust and angst, the modern-day practice of polygamy (which the LDS Church gave up over 120 years ago), and a lewd and crude Broadway musical have done much to keep the faith in the public eye. For her own part, Stephenie Meyer, the author of the *Twilight* series, has projected a mixture of the conventional and the new with her characters. She has not discarded the wholesome image of Donny and Marie, but has revamped and packaged it in a way that is alluring and modern. The ability to encapsulate this tension between traditional values and of-the-moment culture is partially a reason why the *Twilight* series has become a global phenomenon in print and on screen. In crafting her universe, which is filled with vampires and werewolves, Meyer draws on her beliefs to add depth to her story. According to one writer, this is the “key to understanding her singular talent” (Grossman 2008). She does this by capturing particular Mormon sentiments that are grounded in its historical and religious ethos. The Cullens, the immortal vampire family that serve as the primary characters in the series, exist on the fringe of civilization, always looking from the outside with an understanding that they will never be a part of normal society. Even with their marginal status, they are not traditional vampires marked by debauchery; rather, they are immortal creatures who chiefly celebrate and strive to live a life of self-control. They have renounced their natural proclivities, or in LDS terminology they have rejected the “natural man.” This requires them to live in a paradoxical state; they must be in the world, but not of it.

Meyer explores the characters’ ability to adhere to this standard when the vampire Edward Cullen falls in love with a human. Instead of being repulsed, Bella Swan, the chief protagonist of the story, desires to be a vampire so she can be immortal to experience eternal love. In capturing this young love, Meyer is able to draw on the “erotics of abstinence.” The yearning of sex, love, and sacrifice become driving themes that pull the characters apart and together. Young love must be constrained and channeled in the proper way. The arc of this narrative fits into the broader theology of LDS beliefs of eternal marriage and its conception of the good life. Love grounded in self-discipline, sacrifice, and service represents the embodiment of what it means to live up to a human and heavenly potential. These underlying themes coupled with a feeling of alienation have drawn millions of readers and viewers.

Similarly, Glen A. Larson, the creator of *Battlestar Galactica* (ABC, 1978–79), embedded LDS beliefs in his series, drawing on different theological aspects to develop the main narrative. Most notably, the threat of extermination after a devastating attack pushed survivors to let go of their homeland and to search for a lost land/tribe/planet. Themes of search and discovery amid the backdrop of forced

estrangement allowed the creator to explore issues of what it means to belong while fighting for survival. In addition, Larson also used details of Mormon practices and beliefs—such as the governing structure of the church and eternal marriage—to fill in minor details of his universe, providing the show with greater depth, nuance, and character (Trepanier and Newswander 2012).

The updated version (Syfy, 2003–10) continued to draw on these same themes. However, it overlaid them with a darker reality reflected by a post-9/11 world. Subjects related to searching for a new identity after a devastating attack—what it means to live where war appears to have no end, the difference between terrorism and resistance, the tension between military and civilian relations, and whether one has to become like the enemy in order to ensure victory—posed questions similar to those being raised by the very real “war on terror.” In addressing these contemporary topics, Larson’s overall vision remained intact, even though the issues surrounding how to find a new home became more complex and difficult to answer. Like Meyer, Larson’s theme of alienation, hope, and discovery were partly rooted in an LDS worldview.

It is not only Mormons who have shaped this evolving image of their faith—significant contributions have come from those on the outside, as well. On the one hand, HBO’s fictional Henrickson family might not have appeared too different from the Osmonds: a slew of children, a peaceful Utah setting, and happy parents. But *Big Love* (2006–11) was no *Brady Bunch*. Its central family was polygamist, members of an offshoot of the LDS Church who held on to certain doctrines and beliefs that the mainstream LDS Church no longer practices. Still, the family is described as Mormon, and the LDS Church received much critical attention during the height of the show’s popularity. Reacting to some of the themes depicted in the show, and the outcry of many of its own membership, the LDS Church released an official statement:

The Church has long been concerned about the continued illegal practice of polygamy in some communities, and, in particular about persistent reports of emotional and physical child and wife abuse emanating from them. It will be regrettable if this program, by making polygamy the subject of entertainment, minimizes the seriousness of the problem ... placing the series in Salt Lake City, the international headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is enough to blur the line between the modern Church and the program’s subject matter, and to reinforce old and long-outdated stereotypes. ... *Big Love*, like so much other television programming, is essentially lazy and indulgent entertainment that does nothing for our society and will never nourish great minds.

(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2006)

Responding to this statement, HBO Entertainment president Carolyn Strauss said, “It is interesting how many people are ignorant about the Mormon Church and think that it [the LDS Church] actually does condone polygamy. So in an odd way, the show is sort of beneficial in drawing that distinction” (Wilson 2006). It is a distinction the Church desired to have clearly made—it wanted no association with or publicity related to the project.

Although HBO emphasized the distinction between the Mormons portrayed on the show and members of the LDS Church, it appropriated the theme of the struggles of whether an outside group or belief can be accepted by the in-group. During its last season, the show pushed two similar themes: the redefinition of marriage and the redefinition of who can hold the priesthood. Both of these themes center on Bill Henrickson, husband to three wives. On one front, he champions the cause to normalize polygamous relations by using his elected office as a state senator to introduce a bill that would make polygamy legal. Although fellow polygamists are wary of his attempts to shed light on this practice, his belief—which would be verified by a personal revelation—mobilizes his followers to embrace the challenge of redefinition. On the other front, he actively resists one of his wives' attempts at receiving the priesthood, which traditionally in the LDS Church (and fundamentalist Mormon sects) has been given only to males. Because Bill sees this as a violation of God's law, he is willing to lose his wife in order to uphold his belief. Yet, in his dying moments after being shot by an enraged neighbor, Bill asks one of his wives to exercise her priesthood and give him a blessing. The show concludes suggesting that the source of change and progress is not found in the mainstream, but on the fringe. The final moments of the show also raise questions about the future trajectory of Mormonism—if the group is willing to make certain changes (discontinuing the practice of polygamy, or allowing black men to hold the priesthood), what is to stop it from embracing gay marriage or female clergy?

Similar to *Big Love*, The Learning Channel's *Sister Wives* (2010–present) also promotes the theme of acceptance and normalization of unconventional practices. The family life of Kody Brown, his four wives, and 17 children shows that they not only live in the midst of the broader population, but that they are also like them to a very large extent. Brown and his family are members of a fundamentalist sect, the Apostolic United Brethren, which separated itself from mainstream Mormonism in the late nineteenth century. Still, the correlation in the public mind between mainstream Mormonism and polygamy remains near the surface. The Brown family has received a warm reception from its television audience, but not from state officials in Utah, who investigated the family on charges of bigamy, causing the family to leave the state and relocate to Nevada. Kody and his wives were interviewed by Oprah Winfrey just after the show premiered in 2010, where they described themselves as an average American family with common values (Oprah.com 2010).

Like *Big Love* and *Sister Wives*, another recent media portrayal of Mormons is not “Mormon” at all: *The Book of Mormon* musical (2012), which has enjoyed critical and popular success on Broadway, is actually the creation of *South Park* writers Trey Parker and Matt Stone, with Robert Lopez (who co-wrote *Avenue Q*), none of whom are members of the LDS Church. The play's main characters are two LDS missionaries in Uganda—Elders Price and Cunningham—who are youthful and naïve in their own separate ways. The task of preaching the word of God in a war-torn, poverty-filled, AIDS-stricken village governed by a ruthless warlord saps them of any faith or hope. Price momentarily quits after having his aspirations dashed, while Cunningham stays and adapts his message to make it more palatable to the villagers. This message, one based on fantasy, science fiction, and Mormon theology, is what captures and converts the villagers. Realizing that doctrinal religious commitments are

of limited use, the two missionaries embrace the notion that religious stories and metaphors are what truly serve people. In the play, zealous commitments to a set of codified doctrines that are claimed to be manifestly true are what not only marginalize people of faith like Mormons, but also prevent them from fulfilling their mission of service. Soft commitments to a set of stories that are claimed to be helpful are a way to be accepted and achieve a transcendent purpose.

The new face of Mormonism

Interestingly, *The Book of Mormon* musical—separate as it is from the official faith and doctrine of the LDS—elicited a much different reaction from the Church than *Big Love* did only a few years prior. While the latter inspired a strong media statement refuting the show and emphasizing the Church's stance, the former has been met with a very different attitude. *The Book of Mormon* musical was popular from its early press, and speaking against it would reinforce the twentieth-century image of the LDS Church as stodgy, old-fashioned, and distanced from the times. And so the Public Affairs bureau of the LDS Church went about things in an unprecedented and unexpected way: they capitalized on the fame and launched a large campaign in New York City's Times Square. Billboards, subway ads, and ads on top of taxi cabs all shared images of a new Mormonism—one represented by regular people doing regular things. For example, one ad showed an Asian woman riding a surfboard with the tagline "I am a Mormon" (Kaleem 2011). The result has been an increase in missionary contacts and traffic to the Church's official Web site. As Peggy Fletcher Stack (2011) of the *Salt Lake Tribune* put it: "there's no business like show business—to boost a religion."

Branding Mormonism

This effort is part of a larger campaign to "brand" Mormonism. As Church spokesman Michael Purdy explains: "There's a national conversation going on about Mormonism and we want to be a part of it" (Kaleem 2011). Part of this conversation is getting the message out that the Church is not the stiff, immovable bureaucracy it once was. In so doing, it does not actively distance itself from uncharacteristic portrayals of its faith as it had previously. *The Book of Mormon* musical is not the only example of this shift in behavior, which has also been manifest in other areas. For example, although *Real World* participant Julie Stoffer was kicked out of BYU for sharing living quarters with men, more recent *Survivor* favorite Dawn Meehan was not. In fact, she returned for another season, all while maintaining her status at the university. BYU's more forgiving attitude toward honor code violations by students and faculty in the public eye is indicative of a broader trend of rebranding the faith as one welcoming to members from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, none of whom are perfect.

The LDS Church itself understands the implications of outside forces defining what it means to be Mormon. It has also grappled with internal issues that raise similar questions regarding the shifting Mormon identity. As the LDS Church

continues to grow, it is no longer confined to the Mountain West, but has become a global presence (see Bushman 2008; Ostling and Ostling 2007; Bushman and Bushman 2001). Today, more Mormons live outside the United States than in it. The growing religion can no longer simply be identified by a pioneer stock that was expelled from the borders of the United States in the nineteenth century. As a result of these external and internal forces of change, the Church hired two large advertising agencies to find out what Americans thought of Mormons. Through focus groups, the answers were clear and not very flattering: “secretive,” “cultish,” “sexist,” “controlling,” “pushy,” and “anti-gay” were among the common perceptions (Goodstein 2011).⁷

Brandon Burton, president and general manager of Bonneville Communications (an advertising agency owned by the Church), explains that this revelation required a quick and decisive change of pace in the Church’s public relations campaign (Goodstein 2011). In late 2011, it unveiled its plan to affirmatively present its visions of what it means to be Mormon, and also to counter negative images and stereotypes. Previous advertisements had explained LDS doctrine with the intent to persuade viewers that Mormons are, in fact, Christian, and ended with an invitation to call a toll-free number and order a copy of the Book of Mormon or the Bible. Though there was some success through these efforts, they still had not dispelled some of the negative imagery of the Mormon people as a whole.

Consequently, Burton and his team took a very different approach. Rather than highlighting the Church’s central focus on the traditional family and middle-class American values, the new “I am a Mormon” campaign portrays a vibrant faith with a varied, multicultural membership. To alleviate some of the more negative consequences associated with perceived differences, the campaign highlighted real members of the faith—from world champion surfers to stay-at-home moms—with the message that stereotypical perceptions of Mormons as insular, fundamentalist, or otherwise outside of the norm were far from the truth. The driving theme of the campaign was that members of the Church are diverse and different, but are united by a common belief in certain articles of faith. The practice of the faith as outlined by LDS Church standards provides a common backdrop that defines the faith and allows members to express their individuality and celebrate their own cultural heritage.

The campaign has been touted as “very savvy branding” by others in the advertising business (Riparbelli 2011). “Previous campaigns focused on what we believe, and we also want people to know who we are because of what we believe,” said Purdy. “This is one way to get to know us” (Riparbelli 2011). The message that comes across, according to Kathleen Flake, a religion scholar from Vanderbilt Divinity School, is “We’re like you” (Marrapodi 2011). In other words, Mormons are the people next door—black, white, Hispanic, single parents, large families, loud and quiet. Over a century after Brigham Young gloried in the peculiarity of his people, the message being sent from the LDS Church today is that they aren’t so different, after all.

It may seem an odd approach for a church to have a public relations department as active and expensive as the Mormons’ (estimates are that the “I am a Mormon” campaign alone has cost over \$6 million; see Goodstein 2011). In addition to handling its own image on a corporate level, Church members serve as public affairs

representatives on a local level in communities around the world. The mission of public affairs is just as important to the community as any other duty expected of Mormon members. Specifically, they are expected to “establish key relationships” with opinion leaders, or “those who can affect the public reputation of the Church or who can help or hinder the Church in the achievement of its mission” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints n.d.). The goal is not proselytizing or converting, but building relationships; in other words, creating and maintaining control over an image that will foster better understanding between the LDS Church and the communities wherein its adherents reside.

Experience has proven that the public image of the LDS Church is inextricably tied to its continued growth and success with would-be converts (see Arrington and Bitton 1979). Instructions given to those involved in local public affairs remind individuals of the importance of perception:

Above all, you will be helping influential people who are not of our faith to recognize The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a positive influence in the world and its members as sincere and diligent disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints n.d.)

The LDS Church as an organization, with the help of millions of members around the world who are happy to declare “I am a Mormon,” continues to work to build a reputation through media, personal relationships, and whatever means available.

Conclusion

The change in the public perception of Mormons, driven by both Mormons and non-Mormons alike, is reflective of the change in American society over the past 50 years: from traditional, staid, and white to pluralistic, dynamic, and multi-ethnic (see Mauss 2003). Whether in entertainment, politics, business, or even in the LDS Church’s promotion of itself, the perception of Mormons has evolved along the same pattern as Americans’ perception of themselves as a more culturally diverse society. This transformation in the public’s perception of Mormons therefore should not be surprising, as Mormons have become more integrated and accepted into mainstream American society and culture.

As American society first started to recognize in popular culture its cultural diversity in the late 1960s, Mormons were portrayed as representing traditional, wholesome, and all-American white values, such as shown by the Osmonds. Likewise in business with Stephen Covey and in politics with Mitt Romney, the public perception of Mormons recalls a time of American prosperity, decency, and dominance of the world. However, this portrayal of Mormons as representative of these values is ironic for two reasons. First, the public perception of Mormons as representing these traditional values came at a time when these very values were being displaced by new ones of diversity, pluralism, and secularism. As American society became more conscious of its ethnic and religious diversity, the Osmonds stepped

onto center stage in American music and TV; as American businesses began to lose their global dominance, Stephen Covey's *Effective Habits* shot to the top of the best-selling business book list; and as the Republican Party currently is faced with the challenge of changing electoral demographics, Mitt Romney became their nominee. In each of these cases, Mormons entered and were accepted by mainstream American society as they represented a set of values that were fading in influence and power.

But perhaps even more ironic is that Mormons have, from time to time, served as the public persona for traditional America—a group that previously has been marginalized, persecuted, and perceived as representing quintessentially anti-American values. With a history of exile from upstate New York to the Midwest and eventually to Salt Lake City, Mormons have faced discrimination, oppression, and even the murder of their founder, Joseph Smith, in Carthage, Illinois, at the hands of the American public. From their military confrontation with the US federal government in 1857 to the many rejected applications for statehood (first as Deseret, then as Utah), Mormons traditionally have been viewed with suspicion, if not downright hostility, by Americans. The irony of American culture and society in the past 50 years is that Mormons have often been used to represent these traditional values, a set of values that initially marginalized and persecuted them (see Trepanier and Newswander 2012).

But more recently Mormons also have contributed to the more culturally diverse conversation about American culture. Whether in “reality” TV shows like *Survivor* or musicals such as *The Book of Mormon*, Mormons are depicted as having a diverse set of values reflective of American society itself: some are conservative like Glenn Beck; some are progressive like Joanna Brooks; and others are a combination of both. Perhaps the most telling of this changing perception of Mormons in popular culture is the LDS Church's “I am a Mormon” campaign to show to the American public that its religion is varied, multicultural, and inclusive. Mormons are not a homogenous set of strangers living in the Intermountain West, but one's neighbor, co-worker, and friend.

As American society recognizes and respects more its cultural diversity, Mormons are no longer stigmatized and are allowed to participate in the public conversation about the nature and direction of mainstream American culture. But as Mormons began to participate in this conversation, the American public discovered that Mormons themselves are as diverse as American society, with its own cultural diversity and individuality celebrated before a backdrop of common religious beliefs. No longer just seen as a proxy for traditional American values, Mormons are starting to be viewed as being as diverse as America itself. As American society continues to change, Mormons likewise will, too, being both reflective and contributing to this new understanding of what it means to be an American—and a Mormon—today and in the future.

Notes

- 1 Mormons are those who subscribe to the Book of Mormon, while LDS refers more specifically to those Mormons who subscribe to the authority of the Church of the Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City.

- 2 In the interview, Michael Jackson suggests that Osmond change his name because it is considered too wholesome.
- 3 Rasmusen later appeared on *Fear Factor* (NBC, 2001–12) and wrote a book, *Staying in Tune* (2007), which details the choices she's made to keep her time in the media spotlight consistent with her religious and personal values.
- 4 Other Mormon "reality" TV stars embody more traditional values. For example, *Survivor* participant Neleh Dennis brought the Bible and Book of Mormon as her luxury items, and Ashlee Ashby talked about waking up at five a.m. every weekday morning as a teenager to study doctrine as part of the LDS church-wide seminary program. For more about these participants, see the *Survivor* Web site (www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor/).
- 5 As some see it, Beck's unique style—and consequently his success—come from his affiliation with the LDS Church. For example, many of Beck's core political values, such as an almost worshipful admiration of the American Founders and the Constitution, are deeply seated in LDS theology and did not appear in Beck's public persona until after his conversion in 1999. Furthermore, some argue that Beck's politics are inspired by the prominent Mormon (and staunchly conservative anticommunist) Cleon Skousen, who Beck cites in *The Real America* (2003) and whose work he has promoted on his radio program.
- 6 For example, despite all of its success, Mormon Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* books are not available through Church-owned Deseret Book. In 2009, the bookseller cited "mixed review[s]" as a reason for discontinuing sales of the series. Though the books are still available by special order, the message is startlingly clear: even though Meyer is a Mormon and a BYU graduate, and the novels are bestsellers, the appropriateness of their content is not unquestionable (see Thomas 2010).
- 7 Church public relations efforts began in the 1970s when the two terms most commonly associated with Mormonism were "polygamy" and "racist." The result was the famous "Family: It's all about time" catchphrase (see Boorstein 2011).

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