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Defending the Family, Defending the Faith: An Analysis of The Family: A Proclamation to the World, Religious Identity, and the Politics of Same-Sex Marriage in a Mormon Community

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ABSTRACT
In this article, we apply Peter Berger’s theory of religion as a social construct to learn how The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon Church) advances a heteronormative view of family relationships in the United States using a document titled The Family: A Proclamation to the World. Furthermore, applying cultural studies theory, we examine how believing Mormons negotiate the tension that arises when their secular values compete with those expressed by Church leaders. We argue that, although the Proclamation addresses a number of issues, the Church offers a closed text that emphasizes war narratives in which same-sex marriage is portrayed as a threat to LDS identity and the heteronormative family. This closed text is further legitimized by emphasis on the authority of Church leaders as oracles of God. The study participants largely accept the dominant narrative, and those who reject it, do so with some trepidation.

KEYWORDS
Mormon; religion; civil rights; encoding/decoding model; social construction

Even in our own society … the roles pertaining to [sexuality, the family, and marriage] are effectively maintained by religious legitimations. The contingent formations of a particular historical society, the particular institutions produced out of the polymorphic and pliant material of human sexuality, are legitimated in terms of divine commandment, “natural law,” and sacrament. (Peter Berger, sociologist, 1967)
The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God’s commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife. (Gordon B. Hinckley, Mormon Prophet, 1995)

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Introduction

It is well known that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (a.k.a. the Mormon Church) played a major role in the successful passage of California’s Proposition 8 in 2008. Protect Marriage, a political action group opposed to same-sex marriage, estimated that Mormons contributed over half of the $40 million raised to support the amendment and represented between 80% and 90% of the early canvassing volunteers (McKinley & Johnson, 2008). In its filing report to the California Secretary of State, the Church estimated its in-kind donations to the Protect Marriage coalition at $189,903.58 (Newsroom, 2009). However, the Church’s involvement in the same-sex marriage debate predates Proposition 8 by more than a decade. The document used to justify the Church’s position—with both the world and the Church’s own members—is The Family: A Proclamation to the World, introduced by Church President Gordon B. Hinckley on September 23, 1995, at a meeting of the General Relief Society, the Church’s women’s auxiliary (Hinckley, 1995). This one-page document addresses a number of issues regarding marriage, gender, and familial relationships. The most politically controversial element of this Proclamation is its insistence that marriage “between a man and a woman is ordained of God.” In that same year, Utah became the first state to amend its marriage laws prohibiting recognition of same-sex marriages (Eskridge, 2002).

In addition to its stance on same-sex marriage, the Proclamation also addresses gender roles and obligations for mothers and fathers. The father’s duty, among others, is to preside over his wife and family, while the mother’s duty is to nurture her children. However, it also states that “fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners,” positing gender equality under patriarchal rule. Much of the document, however, offers rather commonly accepted advice: that parents should love and care for their children, that fidelity is vital to healthy marriages, that physical or sexual abuse is abhorrent, and that “[s]uccessful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.”

For many Mormons, the Proclamation is not only a statement “about” Latter-day Saint (LDS) beliefs, but it is also an affirmation of the religion’s prophetic nature. Despite the Proclamation’s status as “divine” revelation, its timing and subsequent use suggest it was also designed for political purposes: to establish legally and authoritatively the LDS Church’s opposition to same-sex marriage. In sum, the Proclamation “functions” in three spheres. In the civic or political sphere of a pluralistic society, it serves as a policy statement of the LDS Church against same-sex marriage. Within the institutional church, it functions as instruction on the ideal family and gender roles. Finally, in the private sphere of Latter-day Saints’ lived experience, it can function as a statement that affirms the authority and teachings of LDS leaders and as a practical guideline for members’ personal family
practices. The three circles of discourse are, of course, porous, each potentially influencing the others.

How does the institutional church represent the Proclamation to its members? How do practicing Mormon families make sense of it? In this article, we address these questions with an analysis of how the Proclamation is discursively constructed by both Church leadership and followers. We argue that although the Proclamation itself is a somewhat open text regarding ideal family settings, the official discourse of the Church creates a much narrower reading that emphasizes a moral obligation for Latter-day Saints to oppose same-sex marriage while affirming the ecclesiastical authority of Church leaders. We further argue that most members accept the dominant reading and those who resist it do so with some trepidation.

Grounding our analysis of the Proclamation is Peter Berger’s (1967) notion of religion as a social construct. To this concept we add cultural studies theory (primarily drawn from Stuart Hall), examining the meaning-making practices of individuals who bring their varied subjectivities to their readings of dominant cultural texts. We do this in an effort to understand how religion might be socially constructed through official discourse, yet challenged or interpreted by individuals to align with their own worldviews. We begin with the literature regarding religion as a social construct and its role in the formation of identity, followed by a discussion of Mormon practices and beliefs about power and legitimacy. This will serve to guide the research questions.

**Religious discourse and identity**

Berger (1967) argues that society and human identity are created through a dialectical relationship: Humans create society, even as society creates human identity. Or, as Clifford Geertz (1973) puts it, cultures are suspended in webs of meaning that they themselves have spun. This “world-building” (p. 7) activity, as Berger calls it, is maintained by “plausibility structures” generated discursively by communities of shared beliefs and values. As Berger (1967) writes, “the subjective reality of the world hangs on the thin thread of conversation” (p. 17).

Historically, religion has played a significant role in legitimizing social reality. Religion posits that the social structure of the earthly sphere is patterned upon a cosmic social structure that has always existed (Berger, 1967, p. 32). In other words, what is done here in this world is a microcosm of what is done in the heavens. Berger extends this concept to the notion of family, marriage, human sexuality, and gender roles in the construction of religion and identity. The role of “father” is ascribed not only to the institutionalized role of a family member, but is, according to Berger, legitimated by references to the cosmological. Fathers “create” life and exercise “paternal authority” just as the gods create and govern the universe. Hence, the role becomes “endowed with a quality of immortality” (Berger, 1967, p. 38).
Additionally, Berger argues that a person’s “innermost being is considered to be the fact of his [or her] belonging to the collectivity—the clan, the tribe, the nation,” (p. 60) which results in the individual merging his or her own identification and feelings with the larger tribe. The tribe’s happiness or misfortune becomes the individual’s happiness or misfortune. This form of tribalism is especially relevant within the structure of religious institutions that highlight unity and order.

Religious plausibility structures are vulnerable in a pluralistic society, where they compete with other ideas (Bellah, 1970; Berger, 1967; Parsons, 1960). Therefore, one’s religious worldview is constantly negotiated, constantly in tension, and constantly evolving. Furthermore, studies show that the authoritative role of religious institutions is giving way to more personalized notions of religiosity in the pluralist American culture (Cornwall, Albrecht, Cunningham, & Pitcher, 1986; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1988). Mormons are not exempt from this tension. One study (Gross & Byrnes) published in 2005 found that although 70% of Utahans were Mormon, 61.4% of the state’s residents rejected the idea of legalizing same-sex marriage. The authors surmised that although the Church “as an institution persecutes homosexuality,” there appeared a “split between official leadership and religious laity” over the issues of GLBTQ rights (Gross & Byrnes, 2005, p. 63). However, these scholars were unaware of the possible role of the LDS Proclamation at the time, incorrectly observing that “nowhere in the popular literature” was there a “Church position rejecting homosexuality on primarily religious grounds” (p. 5). Further evidence of tensions between attitudes about GLBTQ issues and religiosity among Mormons was made evident in a 2014 Pew study that shows a 12-point increase between 2007 and 2014 (from 24% to 36%) of Mormons agreeing that “homosexuality should be accepted by society” (PewResearchCenter, 2015).

To compete in this marketplace of ideas, religious organizations have adopted numerous strategies to remain meaningful or relevant amid competing ideas. Some faith-affirmation practices incorporate using material artifacts (such as art or sacred objects) (McDannell, 1995; Schlinker, 1971; Williams, 1980), frequent references to authority (such as sacred texts or ecclesiastical leaders) (Barker, 2005; Chavez, 1994; Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011), or emphasis on identity (language of “belonging” to the tribe) (Ammerman, 2007). All three of these approaches, we will show, are manifest in discourse about the Proclamation. Moreover, this last strategy (“tribalism”) is particularly important within institutional Mormonism wherein members can be disciplined by their leaders for adopting and promoting ideas that are viewed as inconsistent with Church teachings.²

The literature examining the idea of interpretive communities and diverse readings of cultural texts offers some insight as to how LDS families might resolve tension when faced with competing plausibility structures. This approach arose in the 1960s when intellectuals from the Birmingham Center tried to understand how television audiences were able to resist the dominant political messages in the media (Hall, 1975; Hobson, 1980). Their research, and that of subsequent scholars,
suggests that dominant mediated narratives may be resisted or reinterpreted by audiences within the parameters of their lived experience (Fish, 1980; Fiske, 1987a, 1987b; Lindlof, Coyle, & Grodin, 1998; Morley, 1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1992). In his encoding/decoding model, Hall (1980) lists three approaches individuals bring to their reading of media texts: (1) the preferred position, (2) a negotiated reading, or (3) an oppositional reading. Most viewers apply “negotiated” readings, which “accord the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to local conditions” (Hall, 1980, pp. 137–138).

Although these early studies focused on economics and politics (ideology) as variables that influenced how people decoded mediated texts, subsequent research has extended this idea to include personal religiosity as one of those subjectivities that influences the decoding process. For example, Warren (2001) discovered divergent responses among Southern Baptist parents who had been asked by church leaders to boycott Disney after its theme parks promoted “Gay Days.” Some Baptists rejected their leaders, viewing Disney as a mere commercial enterprise, while others felt betrayed by Disney in part because they had previously constituted the brand as “pro-family.” Valenti and Stout (1996) found that Mormons in the 1990s exhibited diverse patterns of media consumption despite institutional pleas to curtail television use. Stout, Scott, and Martin (1996) further demonstrated that calls by LDS leadership to resist R-rated movies also met varied levels of acceptance among Church members—especially for those who wished to view films with social merit such as Schindler’s List. Some members saw the film as another “worldly” movie due to its rating, while others emphasized the elasticity of the Church’s stance against R-rated movies, noting that the institutional standards were just “guidelines” that need not always be followed.

_Mormon discourse as authority_

Since the institutional Church wields a significant amount of influence over its members, Mormonism provides a particularly relevant case study of the role that authority and discourse play in the legitimization and maintenance of religious world views. The Church’s authority is premised on a theological claim that it is the only “true and living” church on the earth. 3 Contemporary Mormonism emphasizes a hierarchical “priesthood” authority in which leaders hold “priesthood keys” that empower them to lead and express God’s will to the general membership of the Church from the president of the Church who is seen as a “living prophet who is authorized to proclaim God’s will” (Shepherd & Shepherd, 1984, p. 30). Because of the Church’s emphasis on priesthood leadership, ideological belief systems are typically drawn from either the statements or writings of these leaders. As noted by Shepherd and Shepherd (1984), “it would be difficult to propose a modern religion in which the rhetoric of religious leaders plays a more significant role than in Mormonism” (p. 30). This role is enhanced by the Church’s practice of
conducting semiannual General Conference sessions in which ecclesiastical leaders (“General Authorities” including the Church’s prophet and other men occupying the highest echelons of LDS authority) give sermons (“talks”) that are broadcast, printed, and distributed to members of the Church throughout the world. These meetings, Shepherd and Shepherd (1984) further wrote, “invariably function to reinforce belief in modern revelation and hence belief in the religious authority of the Church and its leaders” (pp. 30–31). Additionally, since the correlation movement of the 1960s, the Church’s instructional curriculum and resources have largely been “centralized and standardized” with emphasis on “obedience to current authority” (Mauss, 1989).

Research questions

The Proclamation occupies space within three potential plausibility structures: as sacred text, as a legal/political statement against same sex-marriage, and as a guideline for personal familial relationships. How is it coded and decoded within LDS discourse and these plausibility structures? Guiding our analysis are the following research questions:

1. What is the dominant discourse of Church leaders about the Proclamation’s message and authority? Does that discourse emphasize the openness of the document, or does it tend to close the reading to a specific purpose/function?

2. How do Church members respond to the preferred reading of the text? Do they accept, reject, or negotiate their way through it?

Procedures

In order to understand the encoding and decoding practices of the LDS Church regarding the Proclamation, we examine the institutional discourse about the Proclamation and compare what we find with the comments drawn from purposeful interviews of a select group of faithful LDS couples. The analysis of the Church’s discourse about the Proclamation to Church members is patterned after Stuart Hall’s (1975) introduction to Paper Voices. We examine Conference talks, teaching material, and other ancillary material that are distributed internationally to Church members through both official and unofficial channels and categorize the messages according to the research questions guiding the analysis. Initially, we searched the terms proclamation, family, and marriage on the LDS semiannual General Conference portion of corpus.byu.edu. This search engine lists any instance of terms used in LDS Conference sessions with some minor context and details regarding the speaker and session in which the terms were used. Additionally, we searched and catalogued all references to the Proclamation on the Church’s official website (LDS.org). This second search produced references to the Proclamation in the Church’s instructional material directed at members and local leaders (lesson manuals, magazines, training manuals, religious course books, etc.). The material gathered from these searches was then reviewed
and categorized within the parameters of the research questions and the three spheres in which the Proclamation operates.

To understand how Church members make sense of this document, we interviewed 18 LDS members (nine married couples) living in Utah Valley who were selected based on their knowledge and commitment to the LDS church and their connections with other faithful Mormons. Initially, two couples volunteered via a third-party request by the researchers, and the remainder were chosen through snowball sampling—a procedure in which interview participants recommend people they know.

The interviews, which lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each, were conducted with the couples in their homes (with their children absent). The interview questions were framed as a “conversation with purpose” (Kahn & Cannell, 1957) to elicit the cognitive structures guiding the participants’ comments (Spradley, 1979). Interviews began with open-ended questions about participants’ familiarity with the Proclamation, which led to narrower inquiries addressing their notions of its political, theological, and material impact on their everyday lives. The interview questions addressed the Proclamation’s history, purpose, message, and function in their lived experience. The interviews ended with demographic questions regarding age, years married, number of children, frequency of church attendance, and a Likert-scale question addressing their perception of the divine authority of Church leaders when speaking at General Conference.

Once the interviews were recorded and transcribed, we applied a textual analysis of the transcripts in an effort to elicit the core ideas, concepts, themes, and emotive stories (Spradley, 1979) embedded in their comments. Rather than simply counting words, this approach seeks patterns of discourse and prominent themes or conflicts in participants’ conversations that suggest how the discursive practices of these individuals are constitutive of their lived realities—creating as well as reflecting their social world (Sampson, 1993). This method is premised on the idea that people’s views are “locked together, not by causal relations but by conventions, shared rules, storylines, and narratives” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. xii).

The interviews were conducted only in Utah Valley to minimize impact of outside cultural practices that may influence the participants’ discourse about the Proclamation. We also believe that such an approach allows us to enter the world-building conversations of a small, socially constructed community of believers. Thus, these participants in no way represent a “sample” of the larger LDS population. Rather, for the purposes of this study, they are the population under investigation. Participants were recruited from the Utah Valley because of the strong presence of the LDS Church in this region and the participants’ close proximity to other Mormons.

This analysis recognizes that plausibility structures grounding the Proclamation within LDS discourse can be both complementary and contradictory and that they can, as is the case with other worldviews, occupy the realities of
individuals despite their contradictory nature. This study also recognizes, as noted by Clifford Geertz (1973), that cultures do not hold still for their portraits. Hence, the thoughts we have captured in this analysis represent a moment in time in the lives of our study participants, but this in no way suggests that these Mormons are stagnant in their beliefs.

**Results**

The Church’s discourse about the Proclamation generates a relatively narrow text that claims the Proclamation is divinely inspired and that it functions as a warning against a perceived attack on the Church and heteronormative families. Furthermore, General Conference talks and other correlated material frequently use warfare narratives that pit LDS believers against Satan in a fight against the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The study participants were diverse in many of their demographic characteristics (age, race, social status, family size, length of church membership). Most fell into the 35 to 44 age category, and two couples were in biracial marriages. We found no clear pattern suggesting that any specific demographic characteristics were predictive of their approach toward the faith and the understanding of the Proclamation. All of the participants reported that they attend LDS Church meetings weekly, and all claimed, at least to some degree, that Church leaders present the will of God when speaking in their official capacity at General Conference.

These couples applied varied readings and practices regarding the Proclamation and gender roles—most of which were consistent with the Church’s narrative. However, when pressed to discuss social issues or elements of the Proclamation that did not match their own experience, some of the participants, upon reflection, offered resistant readings of this document.

Church members who accepted the dominant discourse about the Proclamation were most likely to view this document as evidence of the divine authority of Church leaders. Furthermore, they frequently integrated into their discussion political language that emphasizes conflict and power—framing the family as an institution under attack. Those members who challenged the dominant reading of the Proclamation were less inclined to integrate politics into their discussion, emphasizing instead the Proclamation’s limitations or those elements of the document that are largely unchallenged in the public sphere (e.g., it’s wrong to abuse one’s spouse and children; love is an important component of a good marriage).

**Discussion**

**RQ 1: The institutional discourse about the Proclamation**

The official discourse about the Proclamation elevates it to the status of “revelation” or even “scripture.” Additionally, the Church’s narrative about the
Proclamation’s purpose emphasizes its value as a divine call to defend “traditional marriage” from secularism (i.e., divorce, cohabitation, and same-sex marriage). The more pedestrian elements of the Proclamation and its political history are largely ignored in LDS talks and correlated material.

The Proclamation appears to achieve an unprecedented status as revelation within official Mormon discourse. Three factors contribute to its prominence: references to the Proclamation in General Authorities’ addresses, its inclusion in Church curricula and manuals, and its design as an object of material culture.

The Proclamation on the Family has been mentioned in LDS General Conference over 200 times since it was announced in 1995. To put that into context, a similarly designed document that carries the signature of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, entitled “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” has been mentioned only 20 times since its release at the beginning of the new millennium on January 1, 2000. This practice not only overtly affirms the message about the Proclamation that is articulated by LDS speakers, but it also latently places this manuscript within the discourse of other sacred texts cited frequently during such occasions—rendering it a de facto sacred text.

When President Hinckley (1995) first introduced the Proclamation, he called it “a declaration and reaffirmation of standards, doctrines, and practices relative to the family which the prophets, seers, and revelators of this church have repeatedly stated throughout its history.” In referring to it since then, Church leaders have often used language that reaffirms and reinforces its revelatory status, calling it “an important message from modern prophets” (Hales, 1996), “inspired of the Lord” (Scott, 1996), or “modern-day revelation” (Hansen, 1998). “Listen to the voice of current and past prophets,” stated Elder Richard G. Scott (1996), “Their declarations are inspired.” Ten years after its release, one Church authority (Ballard, 2005) called it “a prophetic document not only because it was issued by prophets but because it was ahead of its time.” After the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision (Obergefell v. Hodges 2015) legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the nation, the LDS Church issued a letter (2015) that was to be read in Church meetings worldwide, maintaining its stance that only heterosexual marriages will be sanctioned by the Church and “invit[ing] all to review and understand the doctrine [emphasis added] contained in ‘The Family: A Proclamation to the World.’”

In speaking of the Proclamation, Church leaders frequently employ war metaphors to emphasize that the family is under attack. These statements reflect a latent “cosmic” view in which Latter-day Saints are poised to defend an eternal order against chaos. Satan is “waging war on the family,” stated one leader (Robbins, 1998). Another cautioned, “the family is the main target of evil’s attack and must therefore be the main point of our protection and defense… When evil wants to strike out and disrupt the essence of God’s work, it attacks the family” (Ballard, 2003). Yet another (Nelson, 2010) proclaimed that, “While the family is under attack throughout the world, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints proclaims, promotes, and protects the truth that the family is central to the Creator’s
plan for the eternal destiny of His children.” Since “Satan’s aggression against the family is so prevalent,” another leader (Ballard, 2005) declared, “parents must do all they can to fortify and defend their families.” Also, a member of the Relief Society general presidency (Oscarson, 2015) warned women that “The Lord needs us to be brave, steadfast, and immovable warriors who will defend His plan and teach the upcoming generations.”

These LDS sermons reference the Proclamation in context of the taken-for-granted discourse among conservative Americans regarding a growing culture war between secular society and people of faith. Hence, it defines the “attack” on the family as driven by same-sex marriage, cohabitation, and divorce and excludes more progressive narratives regarding other threats to family stability such as economic hardship (unemployment, low wages, medical costs, bankruptcy), lack of social support systems for working parents (such as day care or socialized medicine), or even depression, suicide, or war.

Not only is the Proclamation frequently referenced by Church leaders at worldwide broadcast General Conferences, but it is now thoroughly integrated into Church curricula and literature. It can be found in the Family Home Evening Resource Guidebook, Family Guidebook, Duty to God (for young men), Daughters of My Kingdom (for young women), Duties and Blessings of Priesthood (for adult men), The LDS Woman (for Relief Society), Marriage and Family Relations, Eternal Marriage Student Manual (Church education material for college and high school students), and Preach My Gospel (for missionaries). Significantly, in the Preach My Gospel manual, which is a tool for training missionaries, the Proclamation is listed in boxes labeled “Scripture Study,” thus equating the Proclamation with scripture.

It is further validated as authoritative within the realm of LDS material culture. Soon after it was announced, the Church Public Affairs department requested that it be available in both 11” x 17” and 8” x 12” printed formats. The Church Education System made the first request to have it framed (V. Edwards, personal communication, April 29, 2011). Framed copies of the Proclamation were distributed to world political leaders soon after its publication, and Church members are often given framed copies on their wedding day.

The Proclamation has become so central to institutional Mormonism that a course is offered at Church-owned Brigham Young University’s School of Family Life entitled “Strengthening Marriage and Family: Proclamation Principles and Scholarship.” The textbook for the class is Strengthening Our Families: An In-Depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family, compiled by David C. Dollahite. Another sign of its prominence is the recent publication of The Proclamation on the Family Made Easy: The Word of the Lord on More Than 30 Current Issues by David J. Ridges, a popular religion instructor. The publisher’s (Ridges, 2013) advertising of the book refers to the Proclamation as “one of the most priceless revelations of the Lord,” and also compares it to the canonized revelations of LDS founding prophet Joseph Smith.
Together, these findings leave no doubt that the Proclamation is largely constructed as a sacred text of cosmological import that mirrors the divine order of the universe: a heteronormative family structure in which the Divine Father is mirrored in the ritual practices and family structure of Church members. When constructed in such a manner, any political opposition to its tenets is, hence, perceived as destabilizing to the natural order of the universe and originating from enemies of the Divine.

**RQ 2: Members’ decoding practices of the Proclamation**

Most of the study participants largely accepted the dominant narrative about the Proclamation—they view the Proclamation as scripture or revelation from God. For these individuals, we noted a pattern of discourse highlighting political us-versus-them narratives in which they saw family and the LDS Church as players in a culture war between right and wrong—the latter primarily coming from the GLBTQ community or feminists.

Those who saw the Proclamation as divinely appointed described it during the interview as “scripture,” “inspired,” “revealed by prophets,” “truth,” “an anchor,” “a warning from God,” “doctrine,” and “prophetic.” When discussing its function or role in their lives, the participants frequently used words and phrases that denote war or conflict such as “attacks,” “defend,” “reinforce,” “women attacking homemakers,” “fiery darts of the world,” “the adversary,” “fight gets tough,” “defending God’s laws,” “a kind of armor,” “the coming conflict,” “attack on the family,” “marriage under attack,” and “feminist attacks.” For these participants, not only is the Proclamation of divine origin, but its source—the Church—is in a moral war pitting the GLBTQ community and feminists against the will of God. This narrative mirrors much of the political dialogue of Church leaders’ talks that argue that the recent trend toward legalization of same-sex-marriage threatens the rights of the Church and its members (see, e.g., Oaks, 2011).

Despite these seemingly dogmatic views, these believers varied in how they perceived the Proclamation as a legitimization of their faith. Some believe it is divinely inspired because it came from God’s oracles and divinely appointed leaders on the earth (i.e., the Institution validates the Proclamation). The second approach reverses this logic—emphasizing instead that the Proclamation is proof that Church leaders are divinely inspired because they foresaw the subsequent political upheaval around the same-sex marriage question (i.e., the Proclamation validates the Institution). Sometimes both approaches are evident in the comments of participants.

In part, the emphasis on the divine origin of the Proclamation is premised on LDS teachings that Church leaders themselves are divinely appointed as prophets, seers, and revelators. For example, one participant, William, said, “I believe that our prophet was called of God and that this came forward as doctrine, and I would classify it as revelation, in its purest sense. I think that eventually it will be part of
the scriptures.” Isla similarly felt that although the Proclamation was not “canonized” by the Church, she saw it as scripture:

I definitely consider it to be something just as reliable as the Book of Mormon or the scriptures. So I guess for me it would be scripture. Um, it was presented by a prophet and his two counselors, which for me is just the same as something being in the Bible. So for me, yeah, it’s scripture.

This pattern of equating the Proclamation with scripture because of its source was common among those who were most inclined to accept its claims as absolute. These individuals applied a literalist perspective of the power of scripture and the interaction of their leaders with God:

I think it is on the level of scripture. I mean, the Church teaches that scriptures are not just what’s in the standard works, but it’s what our modern day prophets speak to us as far as, you know, at general conference. (Alex)
I just always knew it came from inspiration—from God. (Trisha)
There is power in this Proclamation and whether people believe it or not, it is the word of God that came through his inspired prophets. (Alison)
I consider it scripture and revelation. (Jana)
To me it’s doctrine. Um, well, it says in the Doctrine and Covenants that what proceeds out of the mouth of [God’s] servants is scripture and doctrine. (Joseph)

Another reading of the Proclamation emphasizes the document as evidence of the divine calling of Church leaders. Some see recent political trends toward recognizing GLBTQ and women’s rights in the United States as proof that Church leaders were prescient when releasing the Proclamation in 1995. In other words, rather than seeing the Proclamation as a political tool used by the Church to oppose same-sex marriage when it was first released, these Mormons express belief that it proves that their Church leaders have prophetic powers:

I also believe that it was a heading off of some conflict that was coming. And I think that our prophets have foresight and are prophetic and whether they knew yet clearly what was coming or just were directed because it was coming … I really believe that one could argue that the Lord knew that the family and the concept of marriage would be [pause], would come under attack, that’s the phrase we often hear. And if the Lord knew that was going to happen, then there was some good timing to prompt the Brethren to release that statement when they did. (Kevin)
I think as a seer, a prophet, seer and revelator, who we consider Gordon B. Hinckley to be, he could see down the road the attack that was going to take place and kind of the disintegration and redefinition of the family…. And so I think he was gearing the members of the Church up to be able to reinforce their mind on this doctrine and also to, uh, enable us to defend it like we are having to defend it today (Jana)
I think it was prophetic…. I mean there was the ERA movement and same-sex marriage. (Maria)

Clearly, these “attack” metaphors center on the belief that the Church has been under siege by the GLBTQ community and its allies and that the Church leaders’ foreknowledge of this attack necessitated the release of the Proclamation. This
notion that the leaders were prescient about a future same-sex marriage political fight when they released the Proclamation in 1995 indicates that these participants are unaware that the Church was already embroiled in a lawsuit in Hawaii when the Proclamation was released (and that the ERA movement was largely a product of the 1970s). This lack of insight regarding the timeline between the release of the Proclamation and the then ongoing legal battle between the Church and proponents of same-sex marriage is not surprising given the Church’s silence about this issue over the years.

Furthermore, some of these participants’ comments illustrate how shifts in their own subjectivities over the course of many years have changed their perception of the primary message and purpose of the Proclamation. In other words, the sacred canopy moved as cultural issues changed. For some, the Proclamation’s message shifted from its earlier emphasis on heteronormative gender roles (with domestic duties assigned to the wife and paid work responsibilities delegated to the husband) to subsequent emphasis on its stance against same-sex marriage in particular. For example, Joseph expressed that when the Proclamation was first released, he felt it was “not a big deal” because it merely mirrored what he already believed about his and his wife’s family responsibilities. But after discussing the current movement legalizing same-sex marriage, he said, “then 10, 12, 14, 15 years later, I am like, OK, I know now why the Proclamation was made.” Katherine made a similar point, saying, “I remember thinking, well, this isn’t anything new. It’s just stuff we all know, but over the past 10 or 15 years, I can definitely see why it was necessary and why it was such a big deal at the time.” Alex felt that in 1995 Church leaders knew “there was going to be issues in the world 20 years [later]” that required them to specify that marriage is “between a man and a woman,” and Trent referenced a 2013 district court ruling that struck down a ban on same-sex unions in Utah as proof that the Proclamation was divinely inspired and prophetic.

Those who accepted the Proclamation as authoritative and divine typically expressed a belief that accepting the tenets of this document is a measure of one’s commitment to the Church. Trisha spoke of “a few” practicing Church members “who maybe have a gay member of their family who kind of teeter” in their belief that it is divinely inspired. Isla felt that “every Church member would claim to uphold the Proclamation because it is a really important part of our religion,” and Alice wondered if some of her high school friends would still accept the Proclamation given the “paths” they had taken “away from” the Church. Together, these comments illustrate that this document is central to one’s identity as a believing Mormon.

A more nuanced (and occasionally contradictory) perspective was evident in the comments of those Latter-day Saints who felt torn between their secular ideas about civil rights, gender identity, and same-sex marriage in particular vis-à-vis the dominant LDS narrative. Isla expressed it this way:

I do feel that it causes division because some people would say that certain things are more important. They will say “Oh, I support the Proclamation on the Family,” but they
Joseph and his wife Jana recognized that perhaps geography could influence how Church members read the Proclamation:

Joseph: In [Washington] DC back in our old ward9, that Proclamation on the family is a real lightning rod. I mean, we would have that as a [Sunday school] lesson once or twice a year, and we could barely get through the second or third paragraph before …

Jana: [interrupting] We couldn’t get beyond “gender is an essential characteristic.”

Joseph: Yes, gender; then all heck would break loose. I mean it was—whoever had to teach that lesson that day, it was not a good day. But being here in Utah where we live now … I mean even in [Utah Valley], 99.9% of the people in the class think it’s great and it’s an easy lesson.

In sum, these study participants usually accepted the dominant discourse of the Church that the Proclamation is divinely inspired. The Proclamation’s authoritative status is reinforced by the institutional discourse about Church leaders being prophets, and often participants saw the Proclamation’s “prescience” about attacks on the family as reinforcing the institutional discourse that the leaders are prophetic. Finally, members who fully accepted the dominant discourse typically employed the Church’s narrative regarding the perceived threats to families.

Unlike the Latter-day Saints who accepted the preferred readings both “about” the Proclamation (as scripture and revelation) and “of” the Proclamation (that gender roles are absolute and eternal, and that traditional heterosexual marriage is necessary), some of the participants presented a more complex reading of these two narratives—especially when dealing with the question of gender roles and same-sex marriage. Unlike their conservative counterparts (or selves, as the case may be), these individuals expressed some cognitive dissonance over their desire to remain faithful to their leaders while at the same time struggling with secular or cultural views opposed to the Church’s position on same-sex marriage. This was especially true for those members who had GLBTQ relatives or close friends.

While these members are deeply committed to their faith, a few referred to themselves as “liberal” Mormons because they did not see the Proclamation, at least with regard to the same-sex-marriage question, in the same way they perceived that other Mormons do. Furthermore, their framing of the Proclamation was generally more temperate than that of their peers who accepted the dominant institutional discourse. For these “liberal” believers, the Proclamation was discussed as “a good guide,” “not a rule,” “a choice,” “not scripture,” “lacking woman’s input,” “not in [the scriptures],” or “politically motivated.”

This illustrates the discursive strategy of attempting to remain attached to the tribe (the Church) while resisting those elements of the public narrative they feel are inconsistent with their secular views. Ken and his wife Kira both felt that the Proclamation does not rise to the status of scripture. However, Ken seemed to
struggle more with the question of where to place it in the context of other Church edicts. This struggle is evident as they come to terms about its authoritative role for LDS members:

Kira: I don’t see the Proclamation as scripture. I think there’s pretty set boundaries on how the Church determines what scripture and doctrine is. I see it for what it is. It’s a declaration—the Church’s stance on our beliefs about how we define the family…. Um, it’s kind of a basic outline.

Ken: If I were to summarize it, it’s the Church’s stance on, um, maybe emphasizing the importance of families within the Church.

Kira: The Church did revise its scriptures recently, um, and I think had they put the Proclamation in the new revised version of scripture, it would have made it scripture. So to me that speaks to the fact that there is acknowledgment [among the leaders] that it’s not scripture.

Moreover, rather than seeing the Proclamation as a prophetic vision of the future GLBTQ war against the Church, this couple saw it as a politically motivated document that is too exclusive in its language:

Kira: I think the thing that bothers me a little bit, I mean there’s some underlying political issues that bother me. One is that the women leadership was not consulted in the construction of the Proclamation when women are central players in the family. So that bothers me. And the other thing that bothers me a little bit is that the Proclamation did come out at the height of gay rights and gay marriage rights in Hawaii and the Church pushing against that. It almost seemed like it was, like the timing of that document was a way for the Church to say, “these issues are coming up, LGBT issues are coming up, this is where we stand in case you are wondering” right? So, you know, I don’t feel like it’s just straight-up pure revelation so much as drawing from scripture, drawing from what past prophets have said, um, and then, um, maybe a little revelation too, and kind of mixing it all together with a little bit of a political agenda. I don’t think it’s straight up. It’s a little bit more complex.

Interviewer: So there were other influences than strictly revelation?
Kira: I think so. Yeah.
Interviewer: [turning to Ken] How do you feel about that?
Ken: [heavy sigh] Um, at the time I was probably 14, so I was fairly young. But when it first came out I remember seeing it and thinking, “Yeah, that makes sense.” But as I’ve gotten older—it’s not that I’ve become jaded. It’s just that I’ve had maybe some life experiences with people that, um, maybe don’t fit into that definition of a family. And so, I think a family can be more than what the Proclamation maybe says. Does that make sense?

Kira: The other thing I was going to say about the structure of the family is that it seems to talk about men being provider [sic] and women being nurturers. I think that idea can be a little bit limiting in the way that Mormon families operate on a day-to-day basis…. So I feel like that part is a little bit dated or a little bit rigid…. I love that the Church focuses on family. I just think it’s, um, it’s beautiful and moving to me that it’s such an emphasis. I just wish that arms were open a little bit wider to people and communities of people who for one reason or another just can’t fit that definition.

Kira’s comments demonstrate a strategy of validating her resistance to the Church’s position on same-sex marriage while maintaining her connection to the
tribe. Her point that the Proclamation’s origin is suspect and that its stance on traditional gender roles is dated, overly rigid, and sometimes unworkable, gives greater credulity to the suggestion that perhaps its take on same-sex marriage might also be provisional rather than absolute.

We also discovered tension arising between spouses over the politics of same-sex marriage. When we spoke with a young newlywed couple, Ivan and Isla, both said they were committed to the Church and believed the Proclamation was inspired. But while Isla referred to it as prophetic revelation and scripture (and also used conflict terms regarding GLBTQ issues), her husband Ivan seemed less comfortable entering the political fray. Isla felt a moral and civic duty to oppose same-sex marriage in the public sphere. However, Ivan demarcated his family and religious life from his duties in the public sphere, saying:

I think the situation is becoming grayer now. People are not sure. Like the Proclamation says [marriage is] between man and woman. But there are people in the Church who still follow but at the same time they are like, not like—like she [pointing to wife] is against gay marriage…. I’m not like that. I would look at my family and if my family’s doing what’s right. What others do is not my problem. I look only to my family.

In our conversation with Neal and Natalie, we discovered that the role of their beliefs in the public versus private sphere was a source of tension between them and for each of them individually:

Natalie: Well a lot of people feel like it was a very prophetic thing … I mean, I don’t know, maybe if I had more faith I would see it like that…. I don’t know if I share that view …
Neal [interrupting]: I think it was inspired …
Natalie: … I think children need a mother and father, but even that, there’s so many conflicting studies about that.
Neal: Yeah, like I have gay friends, I have gay employees, I don’t … it doesn’t bother me.
Natalie: [to Neal] But you made it sound like when you talked about the Proclamation that you thought that marriage was about a man and a woman!
Neal: [to Natalie] OK so there’s a difference, though, it doesn’t bother me, I don’t feel threatened by it. I still feel [pause] I’m tolerant of it.
Interviewer: So you wouldn’t be out there with protest signs for either side?
Neal: Right, I mean, these people love each other like I love my wife, it’s just me personally. Yeah, I don’t agree with that lifestyle, but at the same time, I’m “live and let live.” It doesn’t threaten me.
Natalie: I think there’s a lot more things that are more threatening to family structure than [same-sex marriage] … and that’s not just because of homosexuality; it’s divorce and abuse, and people living together, and all of that kind of stuff.

This particular exchange demonstrates that one strategy used to maintain two competing plausibility structures is to distinguish the private-religious realm from the civic/public sphere. This enables these individuals to identify as believing Latter-day Saints (who sustain their leaders) while rejecting institutional narratives equating proponents of same-sex marriage with the powers of darkness or the devil (“live and let live”). Furthermore, these Church members can continue to affirm
the Proclamation’s validation of heteronormative values by emphasizing its contribution to their own family unit. This tactic is also expressed by Daniel: “My closest friend is gay and my kids know that. We even went to his wedding…. When we talk about it, I tell them that the Proclamation is great for us—for our family—but it doesn’t apply to everyone.”

**Conclusion**

Peter Berger (1967) argues that the process of secularization presents a major threat to religious worldviews. Where the plausibility structures of the religious worldview are “massive and durable,” the religious worldview is taken for granted. However, as these plausibility structures are eroded by exposure to competing ideas arising in secular and political culture, the religious worldview requires greater emphasis to remain plausible. “What was previously taken for granted as self-evident reality may now only be reached by a deliberate effort, an act of ‘faith,’ which by definition will have to overcome doubts that keep on lurking in the background” (Berger, 1967, p. 150).

In this study we gain some insight into the construction and maintenance of plausibility structures among Latter-day Saints over the course of only a few decades. The Proclamation is an example of a clash between the “taken-for-granted” plausibility structures regarding gender and sexuality among Latter-day Saints and secular arguments that challenge them. We see further evidence in this study that when the taken-for-granted Mormon discourse regarding the traditional family was challenged in the broader sphere, Church leaders doubled down on the claims regarding the divine authority of Church leaders and official edicts.

Berger tells us that most plausibility structures are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated through the discursive practices of humans. Here we learn of a number of ways in which the potentiality of negotiated readings might be limited by appeals to the taken-for-granted assumptions of religious followers. The Proclamation is a textbook example of how a man-made object becomes normalized, standardized, and eventually sacralized among Latter-day Saints despite secular tensions pulling in another direction. This process begins within a plausibility structure that emphasizes the authoritative discourse of Church leaders, is subsequently standardized through both official discourse and material culture, and becomes normalized in the private sphere for LDS believers who display the Proclamation in their own homes.

When heteronormative views of marriage were challenged by legal and political arguments to prohibit same-sex marriage bans in the United States, LDS leaders created this document intended to support their legal claims and to give them standing in court. Of course, this process did not occur in a vacuum. When LDS leaders speak or make pronouncements at General Conference, especially in a signed and published format, they do so with a taken-for-granted understanding among Latter-day Saints that the admonitions of Church leaders are divinely
inspired. Lacking a detailed explanation as to the origins and process of Proclamation making itself (the “sausage making,” so to speak), LDS believers were given little space to challenge the claim that it was mandated by God. To challenge the origin of a document signed by the Church’s highest priesthood leaders is to challenge the legitimacy not only of the Proclamation, but of the religion itself and to risk being ejected from the tribe. No doubt, this creates tension—something that is evident in some of the comments and reasoning of the study participants who sometimes rejected some of the origin myths about the Proclamation, while still maintaining a connection to the idea that, typically, the edicts of the Church’s leaders are authoritative, at least when perceived as “doctrine.”

The document’s plausibility is further enhanced by its now ubiquitous presence in LDS culture and sacred discourse. Its ever-presence and significance as a material artifact makes it more taken-for-granted as believing Mormons in this community would be hard pressed to enter homes or Church-sponsored events without coming across a copy or reference to the Proclamation. Furthermore, by occupying space as a material artifact in their homes, the document is further objectivized as divine revelation, while the story of its real origin slips further into obscurity.

Notes

1. Proposition 8 was a ballot initiative, and a California state constitutional amendment, passed in the November 2008 elections, which says that “only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.”
2. Discipline can include being denied access to temple worship, being prohibited from participating in Church meetings, being banned from the communion (sacrament) ritual, or even excommunication.
3. The Church’s prophet-founder, Joseph Smith, wrote (and subsequently canonized as scripture in the church) that this new organization was “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth,” in the Doctrine and Covenants 1:30.
4. The Relief Society is the general women’s organization of the LDS Church.
5. The organization of adult men.
6. The adult women’s organization.
7. The LDS scriptures are an open canon that may be changed as leaders receive new “revelation” for the Church.
8. All participants’ names have been changed to maintain anonymity.
9. A ward is a local congregation of LDS church members.
10. The term “man-made” is intentional here, as no women were part of the process of creating this document.

References


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