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# Mormon Feminism: Not an Oxymormon

Alexa Himonas  
ahimonas@pugetsound.edu

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# **Mormon Feminism: Not an Oxymoron**

Alexa Himonas  
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Advisor: Greta Austin

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you first and foremost to all of my grandparents, without whose hard work, sacrifice, love and vast support I would not be able to be studying my passion. Thank you to my Nana and Yiayia for being incredible examples of people I would love to become.

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### Mormon Feminism: Not an Oxymoron

When I chose the title of this project, I thought it was a clever way to respond to the question many people asked me when they heard I was studying Mormon feminism: “Isn’t that an oxymoron?”<sup>1</sup> But I had no idea how often I would hear this question as I studied, or how often others heard it. In “Border Crossings,” an essay by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich about navigating her feminist and Mormon identity, she answers this question similarly by saying, “I am not an oxyMormon. I am a Mormon. And a feminist.”<sup>2</sup>

Although surprising to many people, Mormon feminism has a long, rich history. From an LDS standpoint, Eve could be considered a feminist, as she is praised for being smart and courageous enough to eat the forbidden fruit necessary for human progression.<sup>3</sup> Emma Hale Smith, the first wife of Joseph Smith, fought against polygamy even as her husband practiced it.<sup>4</sup> Martha Hughes Cannon was a Mormon and the first woman elected to United States Congress. She ran against her husband.<sup>5</sup> Countless blogs, Facebook groups, podcasts, and books are

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<sup>1</sup> Mormon is actually an umbrella term, which can refer to the Community of Christ (formerly known as the Reform LDS Church), the Fundamentalist LDS Church, or the LDS Church. However, feminist members of the LDS Church have created Facebook groups, blogs, and podcasts referring to themselves as Mormon (Mormon Feminist Housewives, Young Mormon Feminists, Mormon Women of Color), so I will do the same. (“Lindsay Hansen Park’s Year of Polygamy,” interview with John Dehlin, Mormon Stories Podcast, July 12, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Border Crossings,” *Dialogue: A Journal for Mormon Thought* 27, (Summer 1994): 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jolene Edmunds Rockwood, “The Redemption of Eve,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, (Chicago: Illini Books, 1992) 3-36.

<sup>4</sup> Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2nd ed. (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press).

<sup>5</sup> “Martha Hughes Cannon: First female senator in U.S.,” *Utah State Capitol Visitor Services*, November 7, 2012, <http://utahcapitolvisitorservices.blogspot.com/2012/11/martha-hughes-cannon-first-female-state.html>.

devoted to Mormon feminism. If Mormon feminism is an impossibility, the Mormon feminists are not aware of that.

Admittedly, the idea of this oxymoronic relationship comes from somewhere. In an infamous speech, Boyd K. Packer, a former LDS Church leader, stated “feminists, gays, and intellectuals” were the three great enemies of the Church.<sup>6</sup> It is widely accepted that the Equal Rights Amendment would have passed if the LDS Church had not opposed it.<sup>7</sup> Kate Kelly, founder of Ordain Women, a group seeking ordination to the LDS priesthood, was excommunicated in June of 2014.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these events explain why people believe Mormons can’t be feminists, but in coming to this conclusion, people ignore groups such as “Mormons for the ERA” that worked tirelessly on behalf of the amendment. They ignore the 600-plus profiles on the website Ordain Women, all supporting female ordination. They ignore the feminists within the church who gave leaders cause to fear them in the first place.

Mormon feminism is messy. But it does exist. In order to make a complex space for Mormon feminists, a large part of my thesis focuses on agency. Hopefully this avoids the common portrayal of Mormon feminists as, in the words of Joanna Brooks, “voiceless victims of our own faith.”<sup>9</sup> Through online distribution of a survey regarding Mormon feminism, I received over 1000 responses. In analyzing these responses, I felt Mormon feminists were often using a single idea to both sustain LDS Church teachings and challenge them at the same time. This is very similar to a theory proposed by Amy Hoyt in her essay titled “Agency” in the book *Mormon*

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<sup>6</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Mormon Leader Boyd K. Packer dies—a man of wit, known for tough talk,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, July 3 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Chelsea Shields, “Mormons and the Equal Rights Amendment,” presentation given at the annual Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, August 1, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, “A year after her Mormon excommunication, where do Kate Kelly and the Ordain Women movement stand?” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, June 23, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Joanna Brooks, review of *Mormon Women Have Their Say* edited by Claudia Bushman and Caroline Kline, *Mormon Women Have Their Say*, 2013, Greg Kofford Books.

*Women Have Their Say*, in which she presents ways LDS women (the target of her theory) act that uphold and subvert LDS Church teachings. I expanded on her theory by firstly studying only Mormon feminists, then the diversity of Mormon feminist thought brought to light by this theory, and finally by including beliefs as a form of agency, as opposed to just actions. In this expansion I concluded: Mormon feminists act and think in ways that support and subvert traditions of the LDS Church at the same time. This reflects not only diversity between individual Mormon feminists, but between different types of Mormon *feminisms*, some of which seek change within the current framework of the LDS Church, and others that would require a foundational reconstruction of the LDS Church.

### **Historiography**

While some scholars agree with much of the general public that Mormon feminism is an oxymoron,<sup>10</sup> more recent scholarship has begun to challenge this idea. A more complex view of this movement argues that “the diverse beliefs of Mormon feminists are not a point or set of points on a line between two opposing ideals.”<sup>11</sup>

In a large part of academic work on Mormon feminism, however, it is treated as a monolith, in which there is only one form of feminism possible. In “Reproducing Patriarchy and Erasing Feminism: The Selective Construction of History within the Mormon Community,” by Jennifer Huss Basquiat, Basquiat refers to Mormon feminism in the singular.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Lori Beaman lumps all Mormon feminists into one group, determining, “Mormon Feminists... see no

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Reproducing Patriarchy and Erasing Feminism: The Selective Construction of History within the Mormon Community,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 104:2 (2001): 6.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Finnigan, Nancy Ross, and Kari Waters, “What Are Mormon Feminists Trying to do? Mormon Feminist Theory,” (paper presented at the annual Mormon History Association Conference, Provo, Utah, June 5 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Basquiat, pg. 6.

reason to maintain a rhetoric of an ideal, and indeed do not support the narrow prescription of gender roles.”<sup>13</sup> In some cases, she argues, “Mormon feminists reject the doctrine outright.”<sup>14</sup> Basquiat offers a contrasting conclusion that “these feminists are not challenging the totality of Mormonism, they are, after all, *Mormon* feminists.”<sup>15</sup> In treating Mormon feminism as monolithic, these two scholars arrived at two completely different conclusions, highlighting the problem with this simplistic treatment of Mormon feminism.

Possibly these differing conclusions were reached due to methodologies in which the researchers were the ones to identify Mormon feminists and did not let the people they spoke to self-identify as Mormon feminists. This study attempted to avoid that situation by analyzing only the beliefs of self-identifying Mormon feminists. Examining the beliefs solely from this population allowed for a greater examination of the diversity within this specific movement.

Supporting the assertion that Mormonism and feminism are not at odds, Caroline Kline writes in “The Mormon Conception of Women’s Nature and Role: A Feminist Analysis” that Mormon feminism is not only possible, but there are many beliefs in the LDS Church that could potentially support feminism. However, Kline only discusses where feminists might find a connection to feminism and Mormonism. She does not discuss how exactly Mormon feminists actually do this. She gives several examples of Mormon theology that leave room for feminist interpretation. For example, in the LDS Church, Eve is considered “brave, insightful, and necessary to God’s plan.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Kline points out the LDS Church does not have a

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<sup>13</sup> Lori G. Beaman, “Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter Day Saints Church,” *Sociology of Religion*. 62 (2001): 74.

<sup>14</sup> Beaman, pg. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Basquait, pg. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Kline, “The Mormon Conception of Women’s Nature and Role: A Feminist Analysis,” *Feminist Theology*. 22:2 (2014): 191.



concept of original sin, and women are not placed in more lowly bodily categories than men. However, Kline also criticizes the way women are treated in the LDS Church, but suggests that because the LDS Church is a “living church”<sup>17</sup> in which new doctrine may continue to be revealed in the present day,<sup>18</sup> there may be many future opportunities for feminists to see changes in the Church. This study builds upon the work of these scholars by pointing out not only where LDS feminist theology might exist, as done previously, but by examining where Mormon feminists commonly find these interpretations.

Recognizing the lack of scholarship regarding the diversity within Mormon feminism, and the lack of scholarship studying actual Mormon feminists, Nancy Ross and Jessica Finnigan designed a study to gain a more complex view of Mormon feminism. They distributed an online survey about practices, activism, and some beliefs of Mormon feminists and had 1,862 respondents.<sup>19</sup> They identified eleven Facebook groups devoted to Mormon feminism, and multiple blogs and podcasts,<sup>20</sup> all of which contained “a slightly different take on Mormon feminism.”<sup>21</sup> The number of their respondents and different groups they found associated with Mormon feminism indicate that, far from being a monolith, Mormon feminists are a diverse and complicated group. Acknowledging the lack of reliable scholarship regarding Mormon feminism, Ross and Finnigan began their study of 2013 with the purpose of presenting their limited

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<sup>17</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, “The Only True and Living Church,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed December 16, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/youth/article/only-true-living-church?lang=eng.html>.

<sup>18</sup> This idea is central to the fabric of the LDS Church. Twice a year Church leaders gather and broadcast speeches giving guidance to members that is considered divine revelation. The president of the Church and other Church leaders are considered prophets, seers, and revelators (Prophets, <https://www.lds.org/topics/prophets?lang=eng>).

<sup>19</sup> Jessica Finnigan and Nancy Ross, “‘I’m a Mormon Feminist’: How Social Media Revitalized and Enlarged a Movement,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 9:12 (2013): 11.

<sup>20</sup> Finnigan and Ross, “I’m a Mormon Feminist,” pg. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 9.

interpretation.<sup>22</sup> In their paper of 2015 “What Are Mormon Feminists Trying to Do? Mormon Feminist Theory,” Finnigan, Ross, and Waters interpreted their data further and produced what they call “Mormon feminist theory.” In this theory, they reject the dichotomy between religion and feminism and instead argue that Mormon women are more adaptable to change and conflict because of their marginalized position in the LDS Church. Mormon feminists are practicing what they call “negotiation theory” by putting life experiences into the context of Church teachings, just as all Mormon women do, but they are coming to different conclusions than those who do not identify as feminists.<sup>23</sup>

In *Mormon Women Have their Say* Amy Hoyt presents a different theory that can be used to examine Mormon feminism, though she created it based on her work with Mormon women in general. This theory is presented in her essay “Agency,” and states that Mormon women act in ways that can challenge and support the LDS Church at the same time. Her argument builds off the theory of agency suggested by Saba Mahmood in *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.<sup>24</sup> This theory challenges the idea that agency only occurs when actions are used to fight systems, and agency is not used when actions align with traditions or customs. Mahmood’s purpose is “detaching the concept of agency from the trope of resistance.”<sup>25</sup> For Mahmood, agency is not solely expressed by disobeying and challenging religious tenants, agency should not be thought of simply as, “a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a

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<sup>22</sup> “Episode 76: Who Are Mormon Feminists?” Interview with Lindsay Hansen Park, *Feminist Mormon Housewives Podcasts*, August 19, 2013, <http://feministmormonhousewivespodcast.org/?s=76&submit=Go>.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Ross, Jessica Finnigan, Keri Waters, “What Are Mormon Feminists Trying to do? Mormon Feminist Theory” (paper presented at the annual Mormon History Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, May 4-7, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Mahmood, pg. 188.

modality of action.”<sup>26</sup> This modality of action means that agency can also be supportive of religious or cultural norms. While Hoyt agrees with Mahmood that agency can be used for and against norms, she expands on Mahmood’s theory by proposing a theory she calls “simultaneous agency.” In this theory, Hoyt suggests actions can both support and resist norms: “agency often includes a fluid engagement within a spectrum of behaviors, including resistance and maintenance of norms, which fall between the poles of autonomy and limited freedom.”<sup>27</sup> She argues that, unless agency is conceived of in this more complicated way, it will be “stuck within another dualistic theoretical construction,”<sup>28</sup> where actions were traditionally thought of in the dualistic framework either subverting norms and exercising agency, or following norms and remaining in oppression. Mahmood presents another dualistic construction in which actions are either supportive or destructive of institutions, but never both. Hoyt criticizes Mahmood because, “for [Mahmood] agency is *either* used to uphold norms *or* agency is used to detract from religious and social constructs.”<sup>29</sup> For Hoyt, “behaviors that range from resisting norms to upholding norms”<sup>30</sup> can and often do occur at the same time, even within the same action. Hoyt’s theory of simultaneous agency is evident in my study of Mormon feminism.

To integrate the study of Mormon feminism not only into the world of Mormon studies but of feminist studies in general, I used the definitions of feminism presented in Rosemarie Tong’s book *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* to describe some aspects of Mormon feminism.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, I used Tong’s discussion of liberal feminism as working for

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pg. 157.

<sup>27</sup> Amy Hoyt, “Agency,” in *Mormon Women Have Their Say*, ed. Claudia Bushman and Caroline Kline (Salt Lake City: Greg Koffrod Books, 2013), 198.

<sup>28</sup> Hoyt, pg. 198.

<sup>29</sup> Hoyt, pg. 198.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pg. 199.

<sup>31</sup> Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 4th ed, (Charlotte, North Carolina: Westview Press, 2014), 2.

change within existing structures, and radical feminism as requiring a restructured system and working for change outside of that system. While no type of Mormon feminism completely fits all aspects of these categories, these categories are often helpful in analyzing certain aspects of Mormon feminism. These categories also help to explain some of the diversity in Mormon feminism, not only by stating that Mormon feminist thought differs from person to person, but by demonstrating that when put into conversation with larger discussions about feminism, Mormon feminism is still complex and multifaceted.

### **Methodology**

To examine the current diversity within Mormon feminism, I created an online survey that contained 52 questions about demographics, background in the LDS Church, and commonly discussed feminist issues within the LDS faith.<sup>32</sup> Survey and interview questions were created by studying questions asked in an online survey designed by Finnigan and Ross, survey questions listed in Sally K. Gallagher's *Evangelical Identity & Gendered Family Life*, and by studying issues discussed on the "Mormon Stories" podcast, "Young Mormon Feminist" blog and podcast, and "Feminist Mormon Housewives" blog and podcast. Surveys were distributed to participants online and were found through snowball sampling and this researcher's social network. This does not represent a random sample of Mormon feminists, but a sample that was reached through friends of varying belief and activity levels, people who were willing to discuss Mormon feminism, and people who were active online. While surveys were distributed to people with differing levels of activity in the LDS Church, some people were likely to draw in more respondents than others, leading to more people of that person's activity level taking the survey. The survey was open from May 26 to July 26 and received 1,269 responses. Thirty-nine

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<sup>32</sup> See Appendix A for survey questions, see Appendix B for consent for survey participants.

responses were taken out because participants said they did not identify as feminists, leaving 1,230 responses. Due to the length and qualitative nature of the survey, the number of respondents diminished with each question, leaving questions with somewhere between 460 and 800 responses.

Though one survey question asked about participants' activity levels in the LDS Church, I considered everyone who took my survey to be Mormon. As with most traditions, Mormonism is an ever-evolving conversation with fluid boundaries that cannot be defined by one particular group of members. Saying Mormon feminists subvert the norms of the LDS Church is not an unproblematic statement, Mormon feminists make up some of the norms of the LDS Church. For the purposes of this paper, however, in my discussion of LDS doctrine and practice and its interactions with Mormon feminism, I am discussing the doctrine and practice of the institutional Church, defined by leaders and through official LDS Church publications.

My study and the study done by Ross and Finnigan seem to be the only studies designed with the purpose of specifically studying actual Mormon feminists, as opposed to studying Mormon women in general (like Hoyt's study), or studying the theoretical possibilities of Mormon feminism (like Kline). This study differs from that of Ross and Finnigan and is unique in its method of specifically studying Mormon feminism. While Ross and Finnigan studied the Mormon feminist community, they did not ask participants if they identified as feminists.<sup>33</sup> All participants in my study responded to the survey question "Do you identify as a feminist?" with some type of affirmation. Though this method excludes some Mormons with beliefs most would consider representative of some kind of feminism, I felt it was the best way to specifically study Mormon feminism without making blanket statements about what constitutes feminism.

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<sup>33</sup> Data collected by Nancy Ross and Jessica Finnigan, sent to author in email, accessed July 9, 2015.

Similarly to the Ross and Finnigan study, I also studied blog posts. Blog posts tagged with “feminism” from “Mormon Feminist Housewives,” “The Exponent II,” and “Zelophehad’s Daughters,” which are the most widely read blogs by the Mormon feminist community<sup>34</sup> were analyzed. “Young Mormon Feminist” blog posts were also studied because this blog is aimed specifically toward a younger audience and deals explicitly with Mormon feminism. I also analyzed Mormon feminist podcasts and important Mormon feminist writings. Podcasts from Mormon Feminist Housewives, Young Mormon feminists, and Mormon Stories were studied. The studied Mormon feminist writings were: *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* edited by Maxine Hanks, *Strangers in Paradox* by Paul and Margaret Toscano, and “Mother Wove the Morning” by Carol Lynn Pearson. Other works, like *The Book of Mormon Girl*, by Joanna Brooks, and *Women at Church*, by Nylan McBaine, are more recently published books on Mormon feminism and were also studied. These writings were selected for study because they were among the most cited in blogs, podcasts, and other writings on Mormon feminism. The diverse resources analyzed in this study provide a picture of the complex and multi-faceted movement of Mormon feminism. This study also differs from Ross and Finnigan in its search for diversity of Mormon feminism. Demographically, we asked many of the same questions, however, most of their questions then focused on activism within the Mormon feminist community, while mine focused on the thoughts and beliefs behind those actions.

Though the framework in this study builds off the framework proposed by Amy Hoyt, it is applied to a different demographic. Hoyt studied women who considered themselves to be Mormon, I only studied people who identified themselves as Mormon and feminists (15% of which were men). Though I had a more narrowly defined pool of participants than Hoyt, I

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<sup>34</sup> Ross and Finnigan, “I’m a Mormon Feminist: How Social Media Revitalized a Movement,” pg. 9.

expand on her theory in two ways. In discussing agency, Hoyt does not make a clear distinction between thought and action, and her explanations of her theory focus on the actions of Mormon women. I argue simultaneous agency should be thought of as occurring in both thoughts and actions, as opposed to just actions. Hoyt also uses her framework to explain her data, and while I use it in a similar way, I also use it to explore some of its implications for diversity in Mormon feminism, which Hoyt does not do.

Using previous studies and Hoyt's framework, I argue Mormon feminists exhibit simultaneously agency by challenging and upholding the doctrine and practices of the LDS Church. Examining these behaviors reveals a great deal of diversity, not only between individual Mormon feminists, but between different categories of feminism, displaying feminisms with aspects of both liberal and radical feminism in them.

To demonstrate this thesis, I will structure the argument as follows: first by studying stories from Mormon feminist women of color, I will examine some of the difficulties that occur when using theories of agency, showing that the agency does not exist as something fully separate from cultural and other influences. Then I will discuss the use of simultaneous agency for Mormon feminists that feel feminism was a result of their faith. Next I will discuss the Mormon feminist issues of priesthood ordination and strict gender roles, both of which reveal much more radical feminism when viewed through the framework of simultaneous agency. After that I will discuss the Mormon feminist issue of Heavenly Mother, which provides a very different picture of Mormon feminism than previous examples by showing a doctrine a majority of Mormon feminists are in favor of that could be seen as promoting gender essentialism.

## Overview of Data

I asked many of the same demographic questions as Ross and Finnigan. The Ross and Finnigan study found that, of those they surveyed, 19% identified as male. This is similar to what I found, as 15% of my respondents identified as male. Almost all other respondents identified as female, though my question, “What is your gender?” was left open, and two respondents identified as genderqueer and one person identified as male to female transgender. A majority of my respondents (64.29%) were between 18 and 39, a similar but slightly lower percentage than the 79% of respondents Ross and Finnigan found age 40 or younger.

Both studies also demonstrate a Mormon feminist population that is predominately white, 93% in my study, 91% in the Ross and Finnigan study. The second highest racial/ethnic population were those who identified as biracial (2%). I also had Black, Latino/a/Hispanic/Chicano/a, Pacific Islander, Native America, and Asian participants, all of whom represented less than 1.5% of respondents. Of my respondents 93% are living inside the U.S., similar to the 95% found by Ross and Finnigan. Overall, my participants were very highly educated, 77% had completed college or a degree beyond college. Seventy-three percent of my respondents were married in the LDS temple, a sign of orthopraxy that requires the recommendation of a local Church leader. This is lower than the 91% found by Ross and Finnigan, but still a clear majority overall. A large majority of my respondents (85.10%) were baptized at age 8 indicating they were raised LDS, as this is the age most children raised in the LDS Church are baptized. This is also very similar to the 87% of people baptized at eight that Ross and Finnigan found. Reflecting an even deeper familial connection to the LDS Church, 88% of my respondents said their parents were baptized in the LDS Church.



Establishing a level of belief and activity in the LDS Church for participants of my survey was difficult. As with definitions of feminism, I allowed people to define their own activity levels. Fifty-two percent of respondents identified themselves as somewhat active. Though they made up a very small percentage (1.5%) of Mormon feminists, there was a very interesting group of people that identified as “active not believing” members of the LDS Church. Fifteen people categorized themselves this way, which highlights the importance of expanding theories of agency to include thought as well as action.

Specifically regarding Mormon feminist beliefs, I only asked one question similar to Ross and Finnigan. My question was, “Do you believe women should get the priesthood?” While Ross and Finnigan asked, “In this life or the next, do you believe LDS women will be ordained to the priesthood?”<sup>35</sup> My question purposefully asked whether or not women “should” be ordained, potentially implying for some more of a direct challenge to the authority of the LDS Church than the question of “will” women be ordained. Despite this difference, my results on this question were still similar to the results of Ross and Finnigan. Of my respondents, 64% said yes, women should be ordained to the priesthood, 12% said they believe women already have the priesthood, and 10% said women should not be ordained. For Ross and Finnigan, 59% said they believed women would be ordained in this life or the next, and 26% said they believed women already had the priesthood. Only 16% said women would never be ordained. While these questions and answers to them are very complex, overall it seems a majority of Mormon feminists want and believe they will eventually receive priesthood ordination.

When asked how they defined feminism, a large majority of respondents (67%) used equality in their definition of feminism in some way, either by saying that feminism was general

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<sup>35</sup> Data collected by Nancy Ross and Jessica Finnigan, sent to author in email, accessed July 9, 2015.

gender equality or defining it as equality of rights or opportunities for men and women. Only 13% defined feminism as something specific to women, without mentioning equality at all. When asked if they saw a connection to feminism and their faith, 37% said yes. A significant population (20%) felt the LDS Church was anti-feminism or that feminism took them away from the LDS Church. Twenty-three percent of respondents said they saw no connection to feminism and Mormonism. The three biggest connections people mentioned were: The doctrine of a Heavenly Mother (13%), that women and men are equally loved/worthy in the LDS Church (11%), and that women and men both have equal or divine potential (5%).

When asked, “Do you believe the doctrine of the LDS Church treats men and women equally?” 74% said no, 17% said yes. The biggest reasons respondents answered no were problems with the temple (19%), both with the ceremony and the policy allowing men to get sealed multiple times and women only once,<sup>36</sup> and exclusion of women to priesthood or implications of this exclusion (21%). When asked “Do you believe the culture of the LDS Church treats men and women equally?” 86% said no. Only 6.2% said yes. Exclusion to the priesthood and implications of this where a common reason for saying no (15%) in this question as well. Other themes in respondents’ answers about inequality of the doctrine were seen in comments about prescribed gender and family roles (12%) and the differing budgets and activities for the young men and women’s programs (5%).

When asked “Do you believe that gender is an essential characteristic of individual identity?” 25% said no, 53% said yes in some way, though not as the Church states. Only 12%

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<sup>36</sup> In the LDS Church, couples are sealed in an LDS temple “for all time and eternity” indicating this marriage bond will last beyond death. If there is a divorce or a partner dies, men may be sealed again to another women without breaking the previous sealing, allowing them to be sealed to multiple women at the same time. A woman must break her previous sealing in order to be sealed to more than one person in her lifetime. (Roger Merrill, “Q&A: Questions and Answers,” December 1975, <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1975/12/qa-questions-and-answers?lang=eng>.)

said the essential characters separating genders matched those characteristics described by the LDS Church. When asked, “What are your thoughts on “The Family: A Proclamation to the World?” 60% of respondents had a somewhat negative or extremely negative view of the document, 13% had a positive association.

When asked, “Do you believe there should be less, the same, or more focus on Heavenly Mother in LDS doctrine/theology. Most believed there should be more of a focus (65%) and 7% felt the focus should be the same. Only 1% felt there should be less of a focus.

When asked what the most important thing to change for women in the church 25% of people said women should be ordained to the priesthood, and 26% said women should get more access to leadership or authority positions. Six women said the most important thing women should do was leave the LDS Church.

### **Feminist Women of Color and Culture’s Influence on Agency**

In discussing theories of agency, it is important to note that Mahmood and Hoyt’s theories do not necessarily recognize each person as a fully independent and autonomous person, who can be completely separated from cultural influences. Hoyt suggests that “theories of agency must take into consideration the influence that the self—both conscious and subconscious—has on one’s actions, as well as the limits that are imposed upon the self (usually by the self) within the communities in which these subjects are embedded.”<sup>37</sup> Examining Mormon feminists of color is a particularly good way to expand on the idea that agency is not taking place in a vacuum. Although 93% of my survey respondents were Caucasian, implying a very small minority of Mormon feminists are people of color, Mormon feminists of color are very active in the Mormon feminist community, and active in making sure their voices

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<sup>37</sup> Hoyt, pg. 198.

specifically as women of color in the feminist community are heard. The website “FEMWOC: Feminist Mormon Women of Color” is specifically for, by, and about Mormon feminist women of color. This site was created from an important critique of Mormon feminism by Mormon feminists of color, which is that Mormon feminism is repeating a long history of feminism that cuts out the voices of other minority groups in favor of white, straight, upper middle class cisgender females.<sup>38 39</sup> In a Sunstone Symposium presentation in July of 2015, the creators of the FEMWOC website designed a presentation in which site organizers and participants discussed their motivation for the site and their personal experiences. The story of Kalani Tonga, original creator of the site, is an excellent demonstration of the idea that agency is not created or enacted separate of cultural pressures and messages. Tonga spoke of her previous marriage to a well-known gang member and asked, “What led me to a place where I thought, ‘You know what would be an amazing idea? Maybe I should marry a known violent gang member and have his babies and we’ll live happily ever after.’”<sup>40</sup> Tonga, half Swedish and half Polynesian, explained that four separate times she ended a long-term relationship with a different Polynesian man, the man she had previously been dating would marry someone either entirely Polynesian, or someone white, almost immediately after they broke up. These experiences lined up with what she heard at Church, where she was told, “God wants you to marry within your race.”<sup>41 42</sup> For

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<sup>38</sup> Kalani Tonga, “FEMWOC: A Very Brief History of Origin,” *FEMWOC: Feminist Mormon Women of Color Blog*, March 27, 2015, <http://femwoc.com/2015/03/27/femwoc-a-very-brief-history-of-origin/>.

<sup>39</sup> “Mormonism, Liberation Theology, and Womanism: A conversation with Fatimeh Salleh and Janan Graham Russell” interview with Gina Colvin, “A Thoughtful Faith Podcast,” August 24, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Kalani Tonga, “FEMWOC: Women of Color Crash the Bloggernacle Party,” paper presented at the annual Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 31, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> This is still a lesson given in some LDS Wards. Kirsty Money, on the board of Ordain Women, recounts on Mormon Stories Podcast and on Ordain Women Podcast being taught that in 2015. After she spoke about this message being racist and LDS Church leaders being incorrect for teaching it, she was called in for discipline with her Bishop. (“Episode 1, Kristy Money’s discipline,” *Ordain Women*

her former partners who married someone white, a message of white superiority and the “white and delightsome”<sup>43</sup> of this people explained not following the advice to marry within one’s race. This led to her feeling, in her words, “unmarriageable.” When she found someone who felt they were ready to get married, it led to, she says, “one of my more interesting life choices of finding a violent criminal and thinking ‘Well, we could probably make this work.’”<sup>44</sup> The language Tonga uses affirms the concept of agency, she states twice it was her decision to marry her now ex-husband. However, it also demonstrates some of the limits of agency. Though her marriage was her choice, it was influenced by her life experiences and Church messages in a way that cannot be separated from her choice.

Her story also emphasizes what these cultural influences can look like for LDS women of color in the LDS Church. Throughout this paper, it is important to remember that the discussion of agency is not meant to imply culture never plays a role in the choices people make. Choices and beliefs can still be examined and analyzed while recognizing a broader cultural context in reasons for these thoughts and beliefs.

### **Simultaneous Agency and Feminism with Faith**

Viewing the ways Mormon feminists see a connection to their faith demonstrates that Mormon feminists use agency to simultaneously resist and support norms, but it also shows they use this agency in their thoughts as well as their actions. Particularly helpful in applying this theory is an examination of one of my survey questions, “Do you see a connection to feminism

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*Podcast*, June 28 2015). (“548: Kristy Money and the High Price of Mormon Activism” interview with John Dehlin, *Mormon Stories Podcast*, July 6 2015.)

<sup>43</sup> This is a phrase that was found in the Book of Mormon until 1981 when it was changed to “pure and delightsome” (Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Church Removes Racial References in Book of Mormon Headings,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, December 20, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Kalani Tonga, “FEMWOC: Women of Color Crash the Bloggernacle Party,” paper presented at the annual Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 31, 2015.

in your faith?" Thirty-seven percent of respondents said they saw some sort of connection to feminism in Mormonism.

Responses about connecting feminism and Mormonism demonstrate Hoyt's theory of simultaneous agency because of actions they took. In an example of acting to support and resist religious norms, one woman writes, "I feel that I am a strong woman. I brought my boys to church for years after my husband went inactive. I felt that I was justified in giving "priesthood" blessings to my children when needed." This is a good example of simultaneous agency, because priesthood blessings are supposed to only be given by men who hold the priesthood. However, this woman supported the LDS custom of giving blessings and respecting the power of those blessings, yet she choose to subvert those norms by giving them without LDS Church sanctioned authority.

But many responses show that examining the simultaneous agency in the actions of Mormon feminists is not enough. Simultaneous agency can also occur with what people choose to believe or not believe from their faith. One respondent demonstrates this by saying she does see a connection to feminism and Mormonism because, in her words, "I believe I have been 'called' to be a feminist, in the same way some people feel called to do family history." This respondent drew a connection to the LDS idea that certain people are "called by God"<sup>45</sup> to specific positions. However, feminism is not an official LDS Church calling. By seeking her own calling, this woman demonstrates Hoyt's idea that "agency is used to...simultaneously transgress and sustain religious norms,"<sup>46</sup> but she also provides a good example of the kind of agency that

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<sup>45</sup> Hoyt, pg. 204.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pg. 202.

needs to be studied. Her “calling” to feminism could manifest itself in many different ways, and only by examining this internal belief can we see how applicable internal agency really is.

The importance of examining this internal agency is certainly demonstrated in many survey answers, but it is even more apparent when studying the thoughts of Mormon feminist leaders and writers who often see a stronger connection to feminism in Mormonism than average Mormon feminists do. Many people feel there is not just a connection to feminism and Mormonism, but that their feminism or passion for feminism is a direct result of their religious background. As one woman wrote, “Everything I’ve learned about the power I hold as a woman I’ve learned from my faith. My faith is the sustaining force of my feminism. Many general authorities...have spoken of woman’s inherent power.” Five respondents said that God or Jesus was a feminist. Responses such as this were present, but only 4.6% of respondents felt that feminism was a direct result of their faith. However, this theme is much more common within the writings of Mormon feminist exemplars, who often describe their feminist activism as a direct result of their religious teachings. A blog post by Michaela Perinea demonstrates this very clearly when she writes:

As Mormons, we are used to the thought of being a “peculiar people,” and we teach our youngest members to stand against opposition in defense of our, what the world would call ‘strange,’ beliefs. Fighting for what we know is right is what we do as a church. It’s what our prophets and leaders have done. It’s what our founders did. It’s what we’re told to do from childhood. Learn about your faith, pray for your testimony, and defend it with everything you’ve got! It’s no wonder so many of our LDS brothers and sisters, and so many of us as Mormon feminists, are adamant in standing up for our beliefs, especially in the face of opposition. We were bred to do this.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Michaela Peringer, “Navigating the ‘yeah, but’...s against Mormon feminism: A call for civil discourse,” *Young Mormon Feminists Blog*, April 21, 2013, <http://youngmormonfeminists.org/2013/04/21/navigating-the-yeah-but-s-against-mormon-feminism-a-call-for-civil-discourse/>.

Perinea's post provides an example of the way Mormon feminists use some teachings of the LDS Church in a way that exemplifies simultaneous agency. The teachings of the LDS Church regarding fighting for what is right and standing up for oneself despite opposition are used to fight for feminism and often critique LDS Church gender policy and theology. However, the reason for this activism demonstrates just as much agency as a feminist action that follows it. Without examining the internal agency of choosing to accept this particular teaching in order to fight against other teachings, a major piece of the agency in Mormon feminist activism is lost. Kate Kelly, the founder of the group Ordain Women, also provides a good example of my argument. In discussing part of her inspiration for starting this group, Kelly quotes a song she learned as a young child in the LDS Church, which states, "Do what is right and let the consequence follow."<sup>48</sup> Joanna Brooks, another hugely important and influential Mormon feminist, states that her introduction to feminism came at Brigham Young University, where "Mormon women who had studied feminism...finding nothing at its core incompatible with a just and loving God, dared to make it their own."<sup>49</sup> This is an example of simultaneous agency, using an action or belief to both support the norms, in this case, lessons taught by the LDS Church, and subvert them, by challenging the LDS Church on women's issues.

Some survey responses did not see a connection to their faith. Their arguments are encapsulated in one respondent's comment, "My faith and my feminism have always been at odds. I sacrificed my feminist thinking on the altar of faith in order to be more obedient to the teachings of my church regarding gender roles because that's what I believe God wanted me to do."

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<sup>48</sup> Kate Kelly, "Gay Mormons are not the problem. Small-minded religious paradigms are," *The Guardian*, February 6, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/06/gay-mormons-not-the-problem-small-minded-religious-paradigms>.

<sup>49</sup> Joanna Brooks, *Book of Mormon Girl*, (New York: Free Press, 2012) pg. 123.



### Feminisms in Female Ordination

When Hoyt's theory of simultaneous agency is applied to the internal agency of Mormon feminists' arguments for wanting ordination, diversity within Mormon feminism is expanded, resulting in a feminism that looks much more radical than it might have originally appeared.

The issue of women's ordination is particularly important in the LDS Church because of the emphasis the LDS Church puts on the priesthood and the lay ministry of the LDS Church. Although priesthood is essential to Mormon theology and practice, its exact role is complex. At age twelve, all worthy male members of the LDS Church are ordained to the priesthood.<sup>50</sup> Members of the church who have been ordained<sup>51</sup> to the priesthood may give blessings to other members of the Church, and may serve as Bishops and other higher positions in LDS Church leadership. The exclusion of women to the priesthood is of particular importance to LDS feminists because, were it not for this exclusion, it would not be that only a few select women could serve in Church leadership,<sup>52</sup> as in many other Churches, but rather that all women would have the opportunity to progress in Church leadership.

There is a lot of different research about ordaining women, which continues to show diversity within Mormon feminism. A survey on this issue conducted by Ross and Finnigan found that 59% of respondents thought women would receive the priesthood in this life or the next.<sup>53</sup> A similar question in my survey asked, "Do you believe women should receive the

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<sup>50</sup> At this age they are ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood. Most men at a later age are ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood, which is required for most Church leadership positions.

<sup>51</sup> The language around Priesthood is complex. Men are said to be "ordained to the priesthood" or to "have the priesthood" or occasionally to "be the priesthood."

<sup>52</sup> Women can serve in some Church leadership. LDS Church organizations for women and children have female leaders on both the local and higher levels. However, the highest levels of Church governance are still positions that can only be filled by men.

<sup>53</sup> Finnigan and Ross, pg. 8.

priesthood in this life?” My data was similar to Ross and Finnigan’s: 64% of people said they believed women should be ordained. Interestingly, while both the Ross and Finnigan data and my data show Mormon feminists support ordination, they contradict findings about what the members of the Mormon population feel at large.<sup>54</sup> There have been three previous studies of LDS views on women and the priesthood. A Pew Research study, conducted in October of 2013, asked more than 1,000 members of the LDS Church living in the United States, “Should women who are dedicated members of the LDS Church be ordained to the priesthood?” Eight-four percent of U.S. Mormons said no.<sup>55</sup> A group of researchers from the organization Ordain Women found this survey to be incomplete. They created a survey with similar questions and conducted a random sample and a sample collected through the snowball method, called a purposive sample. In the random sample, 9.9% of Mormons supported women’s ordination; in the purposive sample, 8.3% were supportive. However, when asked if they would be supportive of women’s ordination if Church leaders received a revelation approving it, 67.1% said yes in the random sample, 77.1% said yes in the purposive sample.<sup>56</sup> This indicates that Mormon feminists are a small population within the LDS Church, and emphasizes the fact that this study is specifically about Mormon feminists and not Mormon women in general.

Many arguments used for requesting priesthood ordination seem to fit well into a definition of liberal feminism. This is particularly true when examining the organization Ordain Women, which uses “faith affirming strategic action”<sup>57</sup> to advocate for female ordination. This

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<sup>54</sup> Ryan T. Cragun and Michael Nielsen, “Quantitative Analysis of Survey,” in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism* ed. by Gordon Shepard, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Draper: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 306.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Lipka, “Big Majority of Mormons (including women) oppose women in priesthood,” Pew Research Center, October 8, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Ryan T. Cragun and Michael Nielsen, pg. 306.

<sup>57</sup> “Mission Statement,” *Ordain Women: Mormon Women Seeking Equality and Ordination to the Priesthood*, <http://ordainwomen.org/mission/>.

organization, and other women who seek the priesthood outside of this organization, are specifically seeking rights that men already have. This seems to be an example of what Rosemarie Tong defines as liberal feminism, which believes female oppression can be resolved in part by removing, “customary and legal constraints that block women’s entrance to and success in the so-called public world.”<sup>58</sup> Ordain Women founder Kate Kelly stated, “equality is not a feeling...equality can be measured.”<sup>59</sup> This is an example of the liberal feminism in which “gender justice...requires us, first, to make the rules of the game fair.”<sup>60</sup> This type of rational thinking regarding the measuring of rights fits very well in the definition of liberal feminism.

However, when the internal agency behind this reasoning is examined, calling for measured equality is a rejection of Church rhetoric and is actually quite radical. While the assertion that equality can be measured does not seem to be very radical, it opposes the LDS Church’s stance that, “equality is all too often mistaken to mean that if two things are equal, they must be identical to each other.”<sup>61</sup> When radical feminism is defined as a feminism that seeks to “thoroughly transform” systems in place, a statement that equality can be quantified, and in fact, is the same, is a statement that challenges the LDS Church on their entire position regarding the roles of men and women. This statement by the LDS Church demonstrates their argument for a highly gendered theology in which men and women are justly treated differently. By suggesting that equal might mean the same, a core of LDS theology is challenged. Examining Kelly’s statement behind this and the justification for requesting women’s ordination is essential to this

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<sup>58</sup> Tong, pg. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Joanna Brooks, “Equality is Not a Feeling,” *Religion Dispatches*, October 8 2013, <http://religiondispatches.org/equality-is-not-a-feeling/>.

<sup>60</sup> Tong, pg. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Valerie M. Hudson and Richard B. Miller, “Equal Partnership in Marriage,” *The Ensign*, April 2013.

expanded view of Mormon feminism. The action of requesting ordination looks like liberal feminism, but the reasoning behind this request reveals an even more controversial proposal.

The idea of personal revelation is another reason often given for asking for women's ordination. This idea is supportive of Hoyt's theory of agency, and reveals another aspect of this request that is radical. The idea of personal revelation is very important in the LDS Church.<sup>62</sup> This is an idea that, through prayer, any church member can receive answers and guidance directly from God.<sup>63</sup> This is an example of simultaneous agency in which people "used personal revelation to help enact...agency."<sup>64</sup> By doing this, feminists are supporting the Church custom of relying on personal revelation, but that personal revelation is leading them to challenge the LDS Church. Ordain Women also requests that leaders receive personal revelation on the topic, which "challenges a frequently held belief that revelation happens from the top-down."<sup>65</sup> This is not as radical as the idea that equality can be measured, and it is still not seeking to "reform" the system, but to transform it into a Church shaped less from the top down and more from the bottom up.

Not all Mormon feminists are simply advocating for women to be included in a male system. Examining internal agency of some women who desire ordination also makes their feminism appear more radical than liberal when considering that some women, instead of simply requesting a male priesthood, "envision an autonomous, parallel organization which would

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<sup>62</sup> The Gender Issues Survey also demonstrates this, which found members would more likely seek personal revelations for problems first than "obey counsel" (Ryan T. Cragun and Michael Nielsen, pg. 303).

<sup>63</sup> Hoyt, pg. 199-200.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pg. 211.

<sup>65</sup> Aimee Hickman, "Guest Post: The Future of Mormon Feminism," *The Exponent Blog*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.the-exponent.com/guest-post-the-future-of-mormon-feminism/>.

operate independently but share one ultimate cause.”<sup>66</sup> This is feminism that, while still fighting for women to be given the same rights as men, is also fighting for a restructured system that would give women those rights. This is not women being let into a male system, for many it is, as Margaret Toscano calls for, “a transformation of the entire Mormon priesthood system.”<sup>67</sup>

### **Proclamation to the Family and Divine Gender Roles**

Another example of seemingly liberal feminism revealing more radical roots when viewed with a theory of agency can be seen in Mormon feminist reactions to the LDS Church statement delivered in 1995, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (which will be referred to as “The Proclamation”). The Proclamation sets up a very clear gendered theology in the LDS Church. It states:

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose...By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.

These statements regarding gender are often discussed in Mormon feminism. They provide what Janice Allred, a hugely influential Mormon theologian and feminist, refers to as “the most important text for gender theology in the contemporary LDS Church.”<sup>68</sup>

The role of this document in the LDS Church is fascinating in its lack of clarity. When asked their thoughts about The Proclamation, in my survey, many people did not voice opinions

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<sup>66</sup> Aimee Hickman, “The Future of Mormon Feminism.”

<sup>67</sup> Margaret Toscano, “Put on Your Strength, O Daughters of Zion,” in *Women and Authority: Reemerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 424.

<sup>68</sup> Janice Allred, “LDS Gender Theology” in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism* ed. by Gordon Shepard, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Draper: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 82.

but expressed whether or not they believed it to be LDS Church doctrine. The LDS Church is not entirely clear on this issue either. Whatever its status, the importance of this document to the LDS Church cannot be denied. In the semi-annual General Conference, in which LDS Church leaders broadcast talks to members of the Church worldwide, The Proclamation is quoted more than scripture.<sup>69</sup> Many people in their responses gave comments about their intent or lack of intent to hang it in their home, reflecting a common LDS practice of framing The Proclamation and hanging it for display. It is a document that is specific about gender roles, and reactions to this document demonstrated the importance of gender roles and Church statements on the lives of Church members.

Of all the survey questions, responses to this particular question were the most polarized. This helps to highlight the diversity in Mormon feminism, considering these polar responses all came from people who consider themselves Mormon feminists. There was a small but vocal population that claimed The Proclamation was “Perfect,” “revelation from God,” or “inspired by a prophet.” However, there were also people who hated it. One claimed it was “sick twisted garbage that held [me] back from my glorious potential.” While a minority called it revelation or divine inspiration, many people explained that it was not revelation, and were saddened to learn of its origins.<sup>70</sup> Responses also powerfully reflected the importance of this document and the gender roles it prescribes on the lives of church members. One person wrote, “Placed my baby for adoption 17 years ago because of it. I’ve never been so angry as when I found out why it was actually written—to fight gay marriage.” Another wrote, “I hate it. It ruined my life. I was

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<sup>69</sup> Nadine Hansen, “Twenty Years of the Proclamation on the Family,” paper presented at the annual Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 31, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> It is extremely difficult to determine the author of “The Proclamation.” (Nadine Hansen, “Twenty Years of the Proclamation on the Family,” (paper presented at the annual Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 31, 2015)).

planning on being the provider...Then [T]he [P]roclamation came out and made me feel guilty for wanting to work. We followed it and have lived our lives in debt—with my husband trying to be the provider but not being able to and me feeling too guilty to go to work and leave my kids.” These stories show the importance many members feel of sticking to the guidelines assigned in The Proclamation.

A large part of the diversity found in Mormon feminism can be found in the responses to The Proclamation from my two survey participants who identified as genderqueer. These people had the same gender identity, were both in their early twenties, both Mormon, both feminists. About The Proclamation, one wrote, “I don’t agree with it,” and another wrote, “I have a firm testimony of “The Family”... [I] love it. My faith is complex on this issue, but I know my gender questions will be cured in the next life.” While it should not be surprising that these two people have different opinions about a controversial document, it is an important reminder of the diversity that exists within Mormon feminism. It shows two very different opinions of genderqueer Mormon feminists, stereotyped differently by all three of those labels.

The idea that gender is an essential characteristic of identity, and that it is divinely appointed, as are the specific roles of mother and father, suggests that men and women have different life plans assigned to them by God. The concept of God’s plan is essential to LDS Church theology. The language of The Proclamation indicating fathers and mothers have different and specific roles “by divine design” is echoed in other teachings of LDS Church leaders. Teachings by the LDS Church seem to suggest this plan differs in some ways for men and women, as “male and female—each has a divine nature and destiny.”<sup>71</sup> This is not the only place this idea is taught. Heber C. Kimball, a former president of the Church, stated in a 1975

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<sup>71</sup> “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation?lang=eng>.

General Conference, “I sincerely hope that our Latter-day Saint girls and women, and men and boys, will... conform their lives to the beautiful and comprehensive roles the Lord assigned to them.”<sup>72</sup> Considering that gender is eternal and each gender has a “divine destiny,” this seems to imply that God’s plan, so vital to the LDS Church, considered to be the reason people are on earth and what gives their lives meaning, is a gendered plan. So, while “obedience to [God’s] law is liberty,”<sup>73</sup> God’s law includes separate roles for men and women.

However, Mormon feminists are largely rejecting these separate roles. The idea that women and men have “different, but equal roles” was a minor theme in every survey question, yet it never made up more than 3% of the responses to a single question. Interestingly, when asked “Do you believe gender is an essential characteristic of individual identity?” 52.6% of respondents said yes, in one way or another gender was an essential characteristic of individual identity. However, 19.5% of respondents who answered yes also noted that, while gender was essential to identity, gender existed on a spectrum, or should be defined by the individual. Fifteen percent of respondents who said gender was essential indicated they saw this essential characteristic in a different way than the LDS Church. When asked what these characteristics were, 20% of respondents said biology, 17% said the characteristics were defined by the individual, and only 11% gave characteristics of women as nurturers and men as providers, as The Proclamation states. Overall, a slight majority of Mormon feminists think gender is essential to identity, but they also tend to believe this says very little about what gender actually means to that person. This indicates that most Mormon feminists are rejecting the eternal and divinely provided gender roles described by the LDS Church.

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<sup>72</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, “The Lord’s Plan for Men and Women,” talk given at the semi-annual General Conference, Salt Lake City, June 27, 1975.

<sup>73</sup> L. Tom Perry, “Obedience to Law Is Liberty” talk given at the semi-annual General Conference, Salt Lake City, April 2013.



The rejection of divine gender roles as prescribed by the LDS Church indicates more radical than liberal feminism, and again shows the importance of examining agency. Rejection of the meaning of gender roles is more than just a rejection of stereotypes. Similarly to the issue of women's ordination to the LDS priesthood, a challenge to gender roles expressed in my data is more than women attempting to gain the same rights as men in what some might critique as a flawed system. It is revolutionary and radical in the rejection of a divinely appointed role. Similarly to the issue of ordaining women, rejection of gender roles requires a radical rethinking of gender theology, which is central to both LDS Church practice and doctrine. Hoyt finds the women she interviewed (who she notes would not identify as feminists) would act in "subversion of one gendered norm while overall they maintain their deep commitments to the very system that binds them through highly distinctive gender norms."<sup>74</sup> However, the people I surveyed, who all identified themselves as feminists, subvert this gender norm and reject the system that binds them to this norm.

While many Mormon feminists may not want to be thought of as criticizing God or God's plan, their rejection of essential and eternal gender roles is at least a radical challenge to a system described by the doctrine of the LDS Church. Survey data supports that Mormon feminists do have many critiques of LDS Church doctrine. Though many people feel Mormon feminists are incorrect in their frustrations with the LDS Church, that it is the culture of the Church and not the doctrine feminists have problems with, survey data showed 86% of respondents felt the culture of the LDS Church did not treat men and women equally, and 74% felt the doctrine of the LDS Church did not treat men and women equally. The similarity between these numbers indicates many Mormon feminists really do take issue with LDS

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<sup>74</sup> Hoyt, pg. 204.

doctrine. Many people, Mormon feminists and those critiquing Mormon feminism, feel the culture or the people in the Church may be flawed, but the doctrine is perfect. Neylan McBaine, a very moderate Mormon feminist, describes this view in her book *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*. This book offers advice to active LDS members about how to improve the role of women within the LDS Church. She states, "It seems that while we feel confident in our doctrinal belief that men and women have the same worth in the sight of God, we feel uncomfortable doing the cognitive leaps required to claim that men and women are equal in our practice."<sup>75</sup> However, the data from this survey shows that while the average member of the LDS Church might agree with McBaine, the average feminist would not.

### **The Doctrine of Heavenly Mother**

Examining the Mormon feminist discussion on Heavenly Mother, the Mormon female deity, adds to the diverse picture of Mormon feminism by acting as a very different example of feminism than the feminisms discussed above. Unlike other topics, examining this doctrine reveals some support for LDS theology. Support for this concept still displays simultaneous agency, though it does not reveal the same partially radical feminism within liberal feminism as the previous examples do. In some ways, support for Heavenly Mother can be seen as promotion of gender essentialism, furthered by the claim that women need a divine role model. Focus on this belief has the potential to perpetuate ideas about the divine and eternal nature of gender as explained by the LDS Church.

The concept of a female deity is very important to Mormon feminists. However, within the LDS Church, She is rarely discussed. Traditional LDS thinking argues that She is too sacred

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<sup>75</sup> Neylan McBaine, *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*, Salt Lake City, Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 52.

to talk about, and that Heavenly Father (a common name for God) wants to protect Her from the slander His name incurs.<sup>76</sup> Church members have been instructed not to pray to Her.<sup>77</sup> In an extremely short but clear statement of what a prominent Mormon feminist Joanna Brooks calls “the grammar of Mormon feminism,” she states, “all are alike unto God; God is a Mother and a Father; Mormon women matter.”<sup>78</sup> When asked if they saw a connection to feminism in their faith, 12.6% of respondents said they saw a connection because of the belief in a female deity. This was the largest category in which people saw a feminist and faith connection.

The importance of this connection was further demonstrated in the question “Do you think there should be more, less, or the same amount of focus on Heavenly Mother in the LDS Church?” and 64% of respondents stated they wanted more. The most common reason given for wanting more of a focus was that women wanted a role model. This is particularly significant within the LDS Church because an important doctrine claims women and men will eventually be exalted as deities. Stated succinctly by one of the former presidents of the Church, “As God is, man may become.”<sup>79</sup> <sup>80</sup> In her play “Mother Wove the Morning” about the search for the divine feminine throughout history, Carol Lynn Pearson writes, “What is wrong with this picture? One clue—in the words of a Catholic theologian: ‘If God is male, the male is God.’”<sup>81</sup> This idea

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<sup>76</sup> David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “A Mother There,” *BYU Studies Quarterly Journal* 50:1: 73-75. This article goes on to discuss that is attitude is not an official LDS Church teaching, though this is highly debated.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” talk delivered at semi-annual General Conference, October 1991, Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>78</sup> Brooks, *The Book of Mormon Girl*, pg. 124.

<sup>79</sup> “Becoming Like God,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god?lang=eng>.

<sup>80</sup> Some Mormon feminists see great potential in this. When asked if they saw a connection to feminism in Mormonism, 4.6% said they saw a connection in the equal and/or divine potential of men and women. However, the doctrine of exaltation can also be particularly concerning for Mormon feminists, as Heavenly Mother is rarely discussed.

<sup>81</sup> Carol Lynn Pearson, “Mother Wove the Morning” Pearson Publishing, pg. 22.

resonated with survey respondents as well, two of whom used the exact same quote from Mary Daly that Pearson used in her play to describe why more of a focus on Heavenly Mother was necessary in the LDS Church. Along the same lines, one passionate respondent said, “She is the feminine divine that is missing from the lives of so many women. GIVE US SOMETHING TO ASPIRE TO.” This attitude appears in prominent Mormon feminists’ thought as well. In her play, Pearson writes, “Oh, it is hard to be a woman and not have a woman to reach to!”<sup>82</sup>

This request to learn more about Heavenly Mother is a good example of simultaneous agency. This desire supports the doctrine of Heavenly Mother in the LDS Church, and is in favor of the Church expanding upon that doctrine. However, it also puts pressure on Church leaders to discuss a topic often thought of as taboo.

While this is still an example of simultaneous agency, its implications do not challenge the LDS Church in the same way. This is less radical feminism, as it is not challenging the idea behind the entire church, but rather supporting it, and in some ways supporting important gender implications in LDS theology that contradict the implications of rejecting gender roles. Unlike the forms of Mormon feminism previously discussed, the idea of Heavenly Mother supports the LDS Church not only because it supports LDS Church doctrine, but because it supports a doctrine separating roles of the divine male and divine female, it supports the LDS doctrine that gender is essential.

These implications have not gone unrecognized by the Mormon feminist community. Support for Heavenly Mother can be seen as echoing the often criticized language of The Proclamation, which describes gender as eternal. In a presentation titled, “Why I Don’t Need a Heavenly Mother,” Marina Capella and Christian Andersen argued that God should be

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<sup>82</sup> Pearson, pg. 53.

considered as both male and female, and belief in separate deities of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother only promoted gender essentialism.<sup>83</sup> However, in my survey data, there were only two people who shared this opinion and felt there should be less of a focus on Heavenly Mother in the LDS Church. Both these people agreed with Capella and Andersen's arguments, but they represent a small minority within a community that seems to largely favor expanding upon this doctrine.

Mormon feminism, for the most part, seems to think that Mormons do need a Heavenly Mother. Mormon feminist theologians Paul and Margaret Toscano argue, "We see the sexes as necessary opposites of equal dignity and value."<sup>84</sup> Even while most Mormon feminists reject the gender essentialism in The Proclamation, they desire a female role model, a deity more particular to them. Mormon feminists also utilize the thoughts on gender in The Proclamation to argue for more focus on Heavenly Mother. As one respondent said, "I want to know to whom I am supposed to aspire to be. If gender is so essential, then why am I supposed to be like men? (i.e., Heavenly Father and Jesus)."

### **Conclusion**

Mormon feminism is a field that remains largely unexamined. When it is studied, it is often done in a way that does not recognize the complexity of the movement. This study expands on the work of Ross, Finnigan, Waters, and Hoyt, and attempts to study Mormon feminists in a more nuanced way.

Varying beliefs of Mormon feminists that stem from this history and theology can be explored by applying Amy Hoyt's theory of simultaneous agency to Mormon feminism. This

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<sup>83</sup> Marina N. Capella and Christian Anderson, "Why I Don't Need a Heavenly Mother" presented at the annual Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 31, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Margaret and Paul Toscano, "Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology," pg. 7.

theory argues that the use of agency does not necessarily either oppose or support norms, but can do both at the same time. Applying this theory not just to the actions of Mormon feminists, but to their internal decisions and beliefs reveals incredible diversity in a movement that is often considered nonexistent. While some Mormon feminists found Mormonism and feminism incompatible, others, particularly bloggers and writers, exhibited simultaneous agency by explaining that feminism was actually a result of their faith, even though it often led to critiques of certain aspects of that faith.

Simultaneous agency is also demonstrated in the ideas of women's ordination. Requests from the group Ordain Women to receive the priesthood support the LDS Church by using religious themes of personal revelation to challenge the LDS Church and subvert religious norms. This idea not only reflects diversity in personal opinions, but in the kinds of feminism it represents as well. Seemingly a request to enter and promote a system men already have access this method of asking for this ordination would actually require a radical restructuring of LDS gender theology.

The ideas about gender quoted in "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" also reveal a feminism that can radically challenge LDS Church theology, not just about gender, but about God and the Mormon idea of the meaning of life in general, by critiquing the presented divine origins of gender and gender roles.

The doctrine of Heavenly Mother offers a different picture of Mormon feminism than the other examples. Mormon feminists display simultaneous agency here too, by supporting a doctrine of the LDS Church sometimes in subversive ways. This differs from the other kinds of feminisms, however, as the doctrine of Heavenly Mother in many ways exemplifies and perpetuates the idea of gender as a core and essential characteristic of identity.

The world of Mormon feminism is quickly changing. This August, a student at Brigham Young University created an art exhibit with different photos representing LDS teachings from a particular book. Her picture for Heavenly Mother, a completely negative image, was stolen from her exhibit, as was the note explaining the theft. One year after the excommunication of Ordain Women founder Kate Kelly, Mormon women were added to LDS Church councils on some of the highest levels.<sup>85</sup> For many, these changes are not enough. As one respondent pointed out, “[B]and-aids don’t fix bullet holes.”

For other Mormon feminists, however, these changes are indicative of future inclusion, and inclusion they will continue to request. On October 3, 2015, for the third time, Mormon feminists will walk to Temple Square and ask to be admitted to the priesthood session of General Conference, a session only men are allowed to attend in person. This year’s procession to the doors of the priesthood session will include living artwork, in which members reenact times throughout Mormon history that Mormon women acted with priesthood power. Painting a picture of their ancestors and sisters, they will act as Mormons, as feminists, and as everything else they are. Not as oxymorons.

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<sup>85</sup> Tad Walch, “In a significant move, women to join key, leading LDS Church councils,” *Deseret News*, August 18, 2015.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questions

**Feminism in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
Survey Questions**

This study is being conducted by Alexa Himonas, a student of the University of Puget Sound under the supervision of Greta Austin. This study is not meant condemn or condone any practices or doctrines of the LDS Church, but merely to learn more about the Mormon feminist movement. Please add any comments or explanations you feel will help make your answers clear. Please email Alexa Himonas at [ahimonas@pugetsound.edu](mailto:ahimonas@pugetsound.edu) with any questions you have regarding this survey or this study in general.

## Demographics:

2. What is your gender?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your racial/ethnic identification?
5. In what city and state do you currently reside?
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
7. What is your current relationship status?
8. If currently married or ever married, was this marriage sealed in the temple?
9. What is your current occupation?
10. If married, spouse's current occupation?
11. Do you have children, and if so, how many?
12. Were you baptized in the LDS Church?
13. If yes, at what age?
14. Were your parents baptized in the LDS Church?
15. If yes, at what age(s)?
16. Do you have a current LDS Church calling? If yes, please describe.
17. Describe any LDS Church callings you have had over the past five years.

18. In general, how would you describe your current activity in the LDS Church?
  19. Do you think your activity has changed in the past 5 years? If so, how?
  20. How do you define feminism?
  21. Do you identify as a feminist?
  22. Do you see a connection to feminism in your faith? If so please describe.
  23. In the past five years, have you participated in any events or groups you consider representative of feminism in the LDS Church? If yes, please describe.
  24. In the past five years, have you listened to any podcasts you consider representative of feminism in the LDS Church? If yes, please describe.
  25. In the past five years, have you read any books or articles you consider representative of feminism in the LDS Church? If yes, please describe.
  26. What negative effects of feminism, if any, do you see in the church or in your life?
  27. What positive effects of feminism, if any, do you see in the church or in your life?
- Note:** Questions referring to women, men, and families reflect the traditional LDS definition of women and men as cis-gender and families as having a cis-gender heterosexual male and female parent. Please expand or modify these questions in whatever way allows you to fully answer them.
28. Do you believe the doctrine of the LDS Church treats men and women equally? Why or why not?
  29. Do you believe the cultural practices of the LDS Church treat men and women equally? Why or why not?
  30. Do you believe that gender is an essential characteristic of individual identity?
  31. If yes, what are the essential characteristics separating different genders?

32. In what ways, if at all, do you see similarities or differences between men and women evidenced in the life of your church?
33. How do you see these ideas about men and women being worked out in your own life?
34. What are your thoughts on the roles of men and women in families?
35. To what extent do you think women and men have different responsibilities when it comes to raising children?
36. What are your thoughts about the place of women in the paid work force?
37. Would you say that, for women, raising children is more important, equally important, or less important than participating in the paid work force? Why?
38. What are your thoughts on “The Family: A Proclamation to the World”?
39. What are your thoughts on recent Church policy changes regarding women (for example: letting women pray in General Conference, changing the age requirement for sister missionaries)?
40. What do you think of the Church’s current temple sealing policy (where men can get sealed multiple times)?
41. What changes, if any, would you like to see to the Church’s Young Women’s program?
42. In your opinion, how is feminism connected, if at all, to other social movements of the day?
43. What do you think the role of the priesthood is in the LDS Church?
44. Do you believe there is a difference between priesthood power and priesthood authority, and if so, what are those differences?
45. Do you believe women should get the priesthood in this life?
46. In this life or the next do you believe women will get the priesthood?
47. What do you think the role of Heavenly Mother is in LDS theology and/or doctrine?

48. Do you believe there should be less, the same amount, or more of a focus on Heavenly Mother in the LDS Church? Please explain.

49. Do you think that future changes in the LDS Church will be more inclusive of women?

50. What is the most important thing (if anything) you think should change for women in the Church?

51. What else would you like to add to your response that hasn't already been discussed?



## Appendix B: Consent Form

**Feminism in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints  
Consent Form for Survey Participants**

I am a student doing summer research with the University of Puget Sound. This study will examine the changes in the feminist movement within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), as defined by self-identifying feminist members of the LDS Church. The goal is to identify the changes in feminism and how feminism in the LDS Church affects the church as a whole.

You are invited to participate in this study by filling out a survey on your opinions and views of feminism in the LDS Church. The research project is anticipated to continue for ten weeks.

Although you may not benefit directly from participating in this study, you will make a major contribution to the study of feminism in the LDS church. This is a topic very important to a lot of people, and has ramifications for future studies in both feminism and religion.

As this study deals with personal beliefs and experiences, it is possible you may experience minimal psychological discomfort. Please know you are free to decide not to answer any question. You may also stop participating in this study at any time. If you experience any problems with this survey, please contact the investigator and/or research advisor.

Only the primary investigator will view the results of the survey. All results will be anonymous.

Your signature on this form means that you understand the information presented, and that you want to participate in this study. You understand that participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

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Signature of Participant

Contact information for primary investigator Alexa Himonas

Email: [ahimonas@pugetsound.edu](mailto:ahimonas@pugetsound.edu)

Phone: 801-824-2943

Contact information for project supervisor Greta Austin:

Email: [ggaustin@pugetsound.edu](mailto:ggaustin@pugetsound.edu)