

# The September Six: Deployments and Disruptions of the Secular/Religious Binary in Latter-day Saints Rhetoric

By Katrina M. Hermanson

*The September Six excommunications of six Mormon intellectuals from the Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS) continues to be seen by the LDS academic and progressive communities as a turning point in Church history. In the struggle for control over the historical and theological narrative of the Church, both the Latter-day Saints leadership, as well as the intellectual community, intentionally engaged with the concept of “secular,” each group utilizing it to justify their subjective experience of their faith. This article explores how the September Six intellectuals conceived of themselves in relationship to Mormon tradition, official LDS rhetoric surrounding the highly-publicized excommunications, and how the actions of both destabilize the assumedly discrete categories of “secular” and “religious.”*

“I believe that someday all of us who have lived through this month, leaders and members alike, will look back and see it as a time when truth and courage meant very different things to very different but equally honorable people.”

— Lavina Fielding Anderson, member of the September Six, after receiving the decision of excommunication from her stake president<sup>1</sup>

Lavina Fielding Anderson was one of the (in)famous September Six, a group of academics, historians, and feminists excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (colloquially the LDS Church or Mormon Church) in September 1993. This group also included historian and gay church member D. Michael Quinn, writer Paul Toscano, feminist scholars Maxine Hanks and Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, and Book of Isaiah theologian Avraham Gileadi. Their attempts to destabilize, reframe, or add to the history and theology promoted by the Church was interpreted by the more conservative LDS leadership as secular encroachment. LDS leadership anxiety about the secular in the case of apostatic excommunications

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1. Anderson, Lavina Fielding. “The September Six,” in George D. Smith, ed., *Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience: A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue* (Syracuse, NY: Prometheus Books/Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 3-8 .

stems from the prevalence of the secular/religious binary, a framework which is dominant in the discourse about the Mormon Church and Western society at large. Insinuated in the division of secular/religious are the corresponding binaries of reason/belief, anti-Mormon/Mormon, physical fact/divine truth, liberal/religious. Mormon leaders' acceptance of these binaries enables them to assume that intellectuals who offer critiques or contribute to a varied discourse of Mormon history enter into this discourse from a non-believing, wholly secular framework. However, as we can see from the works of dissidents like the September Six, the way these intellectuals conceptualize themselves and their research in relation to the Church and their faith inherently disrupts the binary rhetoric deployed by the Brethren<sup>2</sup> and professional, secular historians alike. The discourse surrounding September Six can serve as a case study for the LDS Church's interactions with secular ideas and the tension and struggle for narrative control that manifests when the boundaries between secular and religious blur.

The September Six were not a cohesive group of individual working to change the church. More accurately, they were grouped together by the Church officials' and the media's discourse surrounding their excommunications. Three of the Six were charged for their feminist values. Lynn Knavel Whitesides, formerly the president of the Mormon Women's Forum, was summoned to a disciplinary council for advocating for women's access to the priesthood and acknowledging the presence of Mother in Heaven. Similarly Maxine Hanks, a historian, was accused of professing feminist lessons and practices that contradicted the official spiritual and political positions of the Church. Paul Toscano, and his wife Margaret Toscano, were both excommunicated for apostasy after speaking out against Church practices limiting academic freedom. Lavina Fielding Anderson, who interestingly was simultaneously editor for the official Church magazine *Ensign* as well as academic publication *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, was excommunicated after publishing a chronology of interactions and conflicts between Church officials and academics, feminists, historians, and activists. D. Michael Quinn is considered one

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2. The Mormon Church's leadership structure consists of several councils of men called the General Authority. The General Authority consists of the First Presidency, the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, the Presidency of the Seventy, the First and Second Quorums of the Seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric. The men within the highest councils, the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, are sometimes referred to as the Brethren. The Mormon Church is unique in that no clergy members, from local bishops to the Church President, undergo seminary training.

of the most important New Mormon historians. After several conflicts concerning publications on Mormon magical folklore and same-sex relationships in the Church Quinn resigned from his position at BYU and accepted his excommunication without even attending his trial. Avraham Gileadi wrote on the apocalypse and the Book of Isaiah and unlike the other intellectuals was excommunicated for purely theological differences; he quietly rejoined the Church just a few years later.

Recent scholarship has disputed the discrete division of secularism and religiosity prevalent in Western imagination as well as the definitions of the terms themselves. Using this scholarship, official LDS publications, and unofficial Mormon intellectual inquiries, I will show that although both Church leadership and lay saints- Mormons who do not hold official capacities in the church- each directly deal with the categorizations of secular and religious, their actions, reactions, and self-conceptualizations prove these categories fundamentally unstable. Non-Mormon imaginings of Mormonism have construed the Church in ways that contradict Mormon self-conceptualizations. For example, Mormonism has historically been considered un-American despite being indigenous to the United States, and the most non-Mormon still disagree whether or not Mormons can identify as Christians. Additionally, Mormonism, as a North American, white-dominated religion, interacts with the processes of globalization and secularization differently than the religious traditions and communities, like Islam and Protestantism, that are at the heart of discussions about secularism. Keeping true to their historical self-identification as “peculiar people,” Mormons are unable to fit nicely into much of the discourse unfolding around secularism and religion in the public sphere.

American secularism is hugely informed by traditional Protestant morality and values.<sup>3</sup> The conflation of Protestant morality with secular cultural standards and law is both an intentional colonial project as well as a product of historical amnesia. In the years of United States history before the emergence of Joseph Smith’s following American Protestants created legislation that reflected their values and over time made ambiguous or unstated the roots of those values. This process can be seen in the history of American anti-sodomy legislation discussed by Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen, as well as the anti-polygamy legislation that

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3. Janet R. Jakobsen, and Ann Pellegrini. *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*. (New York: New York University Press, 2003): 22.

led to the persecution of Mormons in the 1880s. Laws dealing with sexual morality were created by Protestant-led governments and courts not in the name of God or the preservation of religious purity but what they considered to be righteous and universal morality.<sup>4</sup> Moving into the 1900s, the American public moved from discussing sexual morality in terms of God and faith in favor of secular language. The standards themselves largely remained the same until the twentieth century, and in some aspects beyond, but the Protestant roots of these sexual expectations were largely forgotten as they were normalized. Laws regulating sexuality that continued to, and still continue, to shape accepted manifestations of sexual desire inherently favor Protestant sexual norms; specifically heterosexual monogamy expressed through marital union. Pelligrini and Jakobsen understand these laws as a limitation to both sexual and religious minorities in the United States: “Under these circumstances, those who are different will always and only be ‘minorities’ to be ‘tolerated’ within the ‘general’ American public. Dissenting ethical perspectives can be admitted to the public square only on the condition that they overlap in some way with this dominant framework.”<sup>5</sup> The need for Mormons to conform to the dominant Protestant frameworks can be seen as a result occupying the position of dissenter in the socio-religious landscape of the United States. We can also apply these ideas to social paradigms beyond sexuality, such as theology, church structure, and politics. Through this lens we can see assimilation periods in Mormon history, such as the Church’s abandonment of polygamist practices, as attempt to adopt secular, and therefore Protestant, values to further the respectability and inclusion of the Church within American society. To increase their overlap with the dominant framework Mormons expounded upon what they conceived of as theological overlap with Protestant Christianity, even as Protestants themselves vehemently denied theological or cultural similarities.

The birth of the LDS Church is situated at the dawn of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the beginnings of industrialism, Manifest Destiny, and the concept of religious pluralism in the United States. Religious pluralism, and the related concepts of comparative religions, world religions, and

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4. Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 22.

5. *Ibid.* 13.

major religions, are now often understood in terms of their inherent privileging of Christian morality, values, and practices over other religious embodiments. Mormonism itself is often introduced in university religion courses as an emerging or new tradition. By defining Mormon culture and theology as a recent phenomenon, Mormonism is situated as a prime target for secular analysis and critique as well as critique from Christian denominations that perceive themselves as more established thus more valid. Church leaders and laypeople alike often fear this kind of critique has the ability to influence the acceptance of the LDS Church within mainstream American culture; and in certain cases in Mormon history, it has. To certain LDS leaders and lay saints, controlling the historical and contemporary narrative of the Church becomes vital to ensure its existence and strengthen its validity. This includes what counts as Mormon history, what acceptable faith practices are, who gets to practice the faith and where, and other parameters that define the boundaries of Mormon religious life. The September Six excommunications can be seen as a result of LDS anxieties around subjective control, preservation of the Mormon faith, and attempts to construct and separate traditional Mormon ideas and modern secular ones.

### **Subjectivity and Conflict in Latter-day Saint History**

In order to place the September Six within their socio-historical context and illuminate the ways in which the events of 1992 manifested, what follows is a short history of ways that LDS leadership as well as faithful Mormon intellectuals have worked to define themselves, their work, and their faith through struggling for subjectivity. As discussed above, the Mormon faith has often defined itself in opposition to something. Joseph Smith originally founded his following through defining his message in opposition to American Protestant traditions of the time. When forced to conform for survival, and as the language of acceptability changes from Protestant-based to secularly-based, the terms of self-definition necessarily changed. Struggling through a changing political climate in which it has historically been severely prosecuted has manifested in the Church's investment in subjective control; an investment that produces events like the September Six excommunications, amongst others.

The LDS faith has struggled for legitimacy and recognition within the American zeitgeist since its inception in the early 1800s. Just one of the early stigmatizations the Church had to face was American media's moral panic over Mormon blood atonements and polygamy that resulted in the anti-polygamy crusades of the 1800s.<sup>6</sup> Incredibly violent attacks on Mormons, sponsored by the United States government, were justified by their refusal to conform to Protestant Christian monogamous socio-sexual organization, primarily through polygynous marriages. The constant threat of danger led Church authorities to take measures to assimilate into mainstream Christianity. By 1900, the LDS General Authorities denounced polygamy and requested access to the Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World's Fair, claiming status as a valid, universal faith and emphasizing the progressive actions taken in Utah, an incredibly Mormon-dominated area, such as women's suffrage.<sup>7</sup> These positions were vastly different from the landscape of Mormon faith and the Church's official positions and practices just ten years earlier. In the 1930s arose the beginnings of intra-church tension between intellectuals and black members, who were vying for black men's access to priesthood, and church leaders; the conflict led to the emergence of excommunication as a disciplinary measure for apostasy.<sup>8</sup> The policy itself as well as the strife it caused within its membership became another way in which mainstream American delegitimized LDS faith and church structure up until its repeal by the Brethren in the 1980s. After World War II, pro- and anti-Mormon history began to fascinate mainstream America. Beginning with Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, ex-Mormons and critical outsiders with respected academic backgrounds began to attack LDS religious legitimacy through exposing the portions of Church history deemed socially unacceptable or abnormal in Protestant/secular morality, such as the number of Smith's wives and Mormon economic practices.<sup>9</sup> This book is seen as a watershed moment that began the trend of "appropriation of

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6. William O. Nelson, "Anti-Mormon Publications," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, (New York: Macmillan, 1992): 45-52.

7. Smith, "Appropriating the Secular," 173-176.

8. O. Kendall White Jr. and Darly White, "Abandoning an Unpopular Policy: An Analysis of the Decision Granting the Mormon Priesthood to Blacks." *Sociological Analysis* 41, no. 3 (1980): 231-245.

9. Terry Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 211.

Mormon historical investigation by professional academics.”<sup>10</sup> A sudden explosion of writing on Mormonism occurred as a new generation of scholars took to the task of objectivizing and professionalizing Mormon history.

The most influential of these professional historians was Leonard J. Arrington. In 1967, Arrington and other faithful, academically trained historians established the Mormon History Association “with the explicit goal of rendering the faithful study of Mormon history more professionalized.”<sup>11</sup> It was the first Mormon-focused academic inquiry association to be nationally recognized by secular institutions, notably the American History Association.<sup>12</sup> Just a few years later and to the surprise of everyone familiar with operations of the LDS hierarchy, Arrington was made the official Church historian. This decision sparked an explosion of non-Mormon academic interest and engagement with Mormon history, theology, and practice.<sup>13</sup> After the establishment of the Church historical department, Arrington made publically available an unprecedented number of the meticulously kept Church archive documents. During a 1975 interview with official LDS publication *Ensign*, Arrington stated, “Historians seek to help people understand the past dealings of the Lord with his people without deliberately trying to get them to consent to a particular doctrine.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Arrington espoused a continued commitment to the Church through maintaining the importance of faith in history without explicitly promoting one particular interpretation of that faith.

Much of the research conducted by Arrington and his staff were comparative undertakings, looking at how Mormon culture throughout history differed from and related to secular American culture. Bridging the gap between Mormons and non-Mormons seemed to be very important to the office. We can see this sentiment echoed in the statement of purpose of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, founded in 1966, inviting Mormon intellectuals to “examine the relevance of religion to secular life” and “to bring their faith into dialogue with the

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10. Ibid. 212

11. Ibid. 213.

12. Leonard J. Arrington, “Reflections on the Founding and Purpose of the Mormon History Association, 1965-1983.” *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 99.

13. Givens, *People of Paradox*, 213.

14. Leonard J. Arrington, “History Is Then-And Now.” Interview. *Ensign*, July 1975. Accessed March 10, 2016. [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org)

larger stream of Judeo-Christian thought.” The statement ends with a disclaimer of disaffiliation with the LDS Church proper.<sup>15</sup> We can see a familiar desire here, in some ways, to legitimize Mormonism as a culture, heritage, and religion within public discourse. However, it is important to note that this was not entirely an assimilation attempt. The creation of a publication specifically for facilitating dialogue between the Mormon faith and the secular perspective, utilizing secular, academic theoretical models in conjunction with encouragements of personal faith, already shows the permeability between the two categories for those contributing to and reading *Dialogue*.

The conversations of the twentieth<sup>th</sup> century carried with them a knowledge that Mormon faith was peculiarly situated outside of both the secular American culture (often assuming secularism to be areligious) as well as dominant American religious culture, i.e. Protestantism. Many writers from this time in publications like *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, and the *Journal of Mormon History* demonstrate a palpable eagerness to reconcile the early Mormon legacy of oppression, alienation, and persecution with an objective skepticism considered compulsory in secular academic circles.

This brand of synthesis in Mormon intellectualism, called New Mormon History, gained traction. Some of the September Six were New Mormon historians, occupying a unique space that inherently resisted traditional categorization. In 1992, just months before the September Six excommunications, an anthology of essays on conflicts in studying Mormonism’s history surfaced titled *Faithful History*. Although many of the authors in the volume were strongly associated with New Mormon History, several essays harshly critiqued the practice. Melvin T. Smith’s contribution, importantly titled “Faithful History/Secular Religion,” rests on the assertion that “there is value in keeping the information of these two worlds [the secular and the religious] separate while pursuing the truths or insights to be gained from each.”<sup>16</sup> From the title to the primary claims of the article, we can see the hyper-awareness and even protectiveness of the division between secular and

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15. Taken from *Dialogue*’s Mission Statement as printed in Vol. 23, no. 4, Summer 1993. Interestingly, since this time the sentence regarding Judeo-Christian has since been removed and replaced with “... who wish to bring their faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought.”

16. Melvin T. Smith, “Faithful History/Secular Religion” in *Faithful History*, edited by George D. Smith, 141-153. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992): 142.



Mormon values concerning knowledge-production. Smith goes on to warn of the dangers New Mormon historians might face in their attempts to “judge historical data in light of perceived superior facts of truths.” He further warns that pressures to conform from their communities of faith create an environment that is “hardly a climate for objective, effective scholarship.”<sup>17</sup>

In this statement, Smith restates the Protestant-based, modern semiotic ideology that permeates secular thought. This semiotics relies on the separation of internal, subjective beliefs and relationships with the divine from practical, humanist objectives, such as the study of history. Smith is stating that the sign, history, should not be imbued with what it signifies, sacred theological importance. Exposing scrutable human actions, he claims, can neither prove nor disprove God.<sup>18</sup> To be invested in preserving faith or including God in history is to inappropriately make sacred that which is clearly human and mundane. This interpretation of the meaning of the history of Mormonism does not account for Mormon belief in the modern day prophets, the historicity of their holy texts, or the concept of an actively engaged God. Saba Mahmood, in her essay in response to the 2004 Danish cartoon depictions of Mohammad, details how an inability to distinguish between sign and signified in this way leads to a lack of compliance with the Western Protestant-formulated “prior arrangement of what religion should be in the modern world.”<sup>19</sup> As shown throughout the history of Mormon persecution as well as contemporary persecution of Muslims, being declared unsecular and unmodern tangibly affects where, when, and how religion can be practiced within secular communities.

Another essay in this volume by traditional Mormon historian David E. Bohn critiques the ubiquitous concept of objectivity as used by secular and New Mormon historians. Bohn communicates frustration with the valuation of secular versus faithful histories: “the former are portrayed as standing for maturity, understanding, rigor, and truth, while the latter are seen as inevitably naïve, sentimental, one-sided, inaccurate, and mistaken.”<sup>20</sup> Like Smith, Bohn engages with the secular as

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17. Ibid. 143.

18. Ibid. 142.

19. Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” in *Is Critique Secular?* 58-94, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013): 68.

20. David E. Bohn, “Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations” in *Faithful History*, edited by George D. Smith, 227-261. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992): 230.

a decidedly non-religious entity but is very aware of the ways in which standards of secularization constrain and infantilize histories produced through faith. He critiques the assumption “that historians can somehow achieve a detached, neutral state of mind and an objective attitude with regard to the subject matter under investigation.”<sup>21</sup> Even the meaning and intentions of questions posed by historians, he states, change and are inextricably tied to the contemporary context.<sup>22</sup> He concludes that there is no existing vocabulary for meaningful, equal exchange between secular and Mormon historians. He actively denies the validity of networks being established by New Mormon historian for Mormon-secular dialogue, such as publications like *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*. In fact, he claims that “because Mormons believe that God participates in the unfolding of historical events and will eventually bring them to an appropriate end, every attempt to undermine the historical authenticity of the foundational events of the Mormon past constitutes an assault on Latter-day understanding ... Rather they are nothing less than acts of intellectual violence against the believing community.”<sup>23</sup>

The use of the word “violence” here is incredibly important. It works to establish New Mormon historians, despite their professed faith, as enemies of the Church. Unlike the conflicts over cartoon depictions of Mohammad in 2004, the accusation of violence is from one member of the faith to another, and from one intellectual to another. This complicates the usual story of secular-religious fission. Bohn effectively places the attackers outside of the bounds of faith by accusing both secular and New Mormon historians of violence. Here we can clearly see the utilization of the secular as a category, similar to Smith’s use of it, in order to create in- and out-groups and arrange a hierarchy between them. Bohn makes faithful history more righteous and Smith makes secular history more accurate. Bohn’s tactic here reflects rhetoric used in the Brethren’s discourse around New Mormon History and the September Six’s work prior to their excommunications.

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21. Ibid. 231.

22. Ibid. 232.

23. Ibid. 228.

## “Follow the Brethren”<sup>24</sup>

Beginning in the early 1980s, several, though not all, LDS apostles began to reign in the intellectual freedom enjoyed by Mormon and secular religious scholars during Leonard J. Arrington’s time as Church historian. Sociologist of Mormonism Armand L. Mauss calls the period between the late 1970s and the early 1990s a “retrenchment period,” a time in which leaders attempted to reinstate a sense of Mormon identity that felt lost.<sup>25</sup> This specific retrenchment involved a mandatory correlation process<sup>26</sup> that simplified and streamlined Book of Mormon interpretations, a re-emphasis on modern revelation that in turn imbued the Brethren with more power, and an increasing reliance of lay saints on scriptural literalism and inerrancy within their own relationships to their faith.<sup>27</sup> These changes to the social landscape of the Church severely modified intellectual and academic interactions between the LDS authorities and Mormon scholars.

Elder Boyd K. Packer, an incredibly influential member of the Quorum of Twelve, in many ways led the charge against perceived secular intrusion upon Mormon history and theology. At the Church Educational System Religious Educators Symposium in August 1981, Packer delivered a speech tellingly titled “The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect.” In the address, Packer lays out four cautionary guidelines for faithful educators to follow in order to not “lose [their] way in the world of intellectual and scholarly research.”<sup>28</sup> He cautions that “there is no such thing as an accurate, objective history of the Church without consideration

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24. This small piece of advice was repeatedly given by Apostle Boyd K. Packer to his audiences during his time as head of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (high school and university-targeted LDS programs respectively). Instances of this advice is detailed, as much as possible, in: Anderson, Lavina Fieldling. “The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. 26, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 7-64.
  25. Armand L. Mauss, “The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation and Identity: Trends and Developments Since Midcentury” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24, no. 2 (1994): 129-149. 135.
  26. Correlation is the Church-mandated process of simplification brought to realization during the mid-1900s in attempts to reduce and condense Mormon theology. Partially, this was due to increasing missionary activities abroad as well as anxieties about sectarian feelings that had begun to develop within the Church. A simplistic and single reading of the Book of Mormon became uniform through out student handbooks, printings of texts, seminary and institute lectures, and all other LDS publications. The Church largely saw this as a way to compete in the grand landscape of “world religions,” as discussed more by Armand L. Mauss in “The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation and Identity.”
  27. Mauss, “The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation and Identity.” 132.
  28. Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect,” Address, The Fifth Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators Symposium, (Brigham Young University, Provo, August 22, 1981): Accessed on March 11, 2016. [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org)

of the spiritual powers that attend this work,”<sup>29</sup> “there is a temptation for the writer or the teacher ... to tell everything whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not,”<sup>30</sup> and “in an effort to be objective ... a teacher may unwittingly be giving equal time to the adversary.”<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Packer refers to apostates as “bitter” and their scholarship as “disease germs.”<sup>32</sup> The use of a contagion metaphor here shows that, to the more conservative members of the Brethren, intellectual criticism of the Church is a danger to even docile lay saints; it implies that apostasy is something that happens to good Mormons through the ill-meaning actions of the unvirtuous rather than ideas and actions manifested by believers themselves.

Nearly a decade later, and just two months before the September Six excommunications, Packer gave another address, this one to the All-Church Coordinating Council. In it he outlines what he then considered the largest threats to Church stability: “the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement, and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals.”<sup>33</sup> He read aloud several letters, each from faithful members of the Church explicitly asking for help or love from the Brethren. The letters were followed by this statement:

Those who are hurting think they are not understood. They are looking for a champion, an advocate, someone with office and influence from whom they can receive comfort ... When members are hurting, it is so easy to convince ourselves that we are justified, even duty bound, to use the influence of our appointment or our calling to somehow represent them. We then become their advocates — sympathize with their complaints against the Church, and perhaps even soften the commandments to comfort them. Unwittingly we may turn about and face the wrong way. Then the channels of revelation are reversed.<sup>34</sup>

Packer’s statements work to do several things but chief among them are (1) categorize gays, lesbians, feminists, and intellectuals under an umbrella of secular otherness,

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29. Ibid. 2.

30. Ibid. 3.

31. Ibid. 6.

32. Ibid. 7.

33. Boyd K. Packer, “Talk to All-Church Coordinating Council” Address, All-Church Coordinating Council meeting, LDS Church Headquarters, (Salt Lake City, May 23, 1993). Accessed on March 9, 2016. [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org)

34. Ibid.

(2) posit objectivity as possible only through the inclusion of God and the Spirit as told by the modern day prophets, or in other words, through the subjectivity of the Brethren, (3) position secular Others as enemies actively undermining the stability of the Church by attempting to take divinely-given power away from the Brethren, i.e. reversing the channels of revelation.

Imagining the secular, liberal complex as a cohesive, homogenous enemy is a strategic move that we can see employed in other contexts by secularists themselves. Liberalist theories and theorists seek to establish liberal thought as a unified front that values ideas of autonomy, tolerance, self-determination, and freedom. However, as Talal Asad points out, it is “precisely the contradictions and ambiguities in the language of liberalism that make the public debates among self-styled liberals and with their ‘illiberal’ opponents possible.”<sup>35</sup> Packer is attempting to engage with categories of liberal vs. illiberal (read: secular vs. religious) in order to demonstrate opposition. Debate, as Asad states, is made possible through what Packer sees as contradictions in liberal thought. Categorizing certain Church members as secular or liberal in order to engage with them as outsiders to the faith renders their dismissal a cleaner process. The Brethren’s engagement with the secular through pushing out self-proclaimed faithful lay saints by associating them with more liberal ideologies actually contradicts their story of secularism as a cohesive, unified, anti-Mormon entity.

Another important aspect of both Bohn’s and Packer’s statements here is the use of words like “adversary,” “violence,” “bitter,” and “disease germs” to describe dissenters like the September Six and their actions. While the September Six, and other Mormon intellectuals, would not choose these words for themselves and do not imagine themselves as attempting to undermine and destroy the Church they love, the terminology used to describe them reveals the anxieties of the Brethren and some laypeople about subjective control of their faith. Michael Warner discusses in his piece “Tongues Untied” how conservative radical Protestant and Mormon (which he calls “quasi-Protestant”) sects actively identify with and perform minoritarian status and how, despite dismissal from the academic and

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35. Talal Asad, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism” in *Is Critique Secular?* 14-57, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013): 29.

political Left, this comes with very real social stigmatization.<sup>36</sup> In the same way that the September Six do not conceive of themselves as attackers, the Brethren do conceive of themselves as victims of attack.

Further complicating this notion of violence, however, are the simultaneous accusations of the Brethren's violence toward the Mormon intellectual community. Lavina Fielding Anderson, in fact, was excommunicated partially due to her fifty-seven page publication in *Dialogue* titled "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology." Her work documents two decades of Church leaders' interactions with intellectuals. Many of the entries describe censorship, coercion, and what Anderson terms "ecclesiastic abuse" on the part of the Brethren. Anderson stresses that these conflicts "affect people's jobs, church service, personal feelings of esteem and worthiness, social relations with ward and stake members, worship in congregations and temples, feelings of acceptability to God, and even personal spirituality."<sup>37</sup> She goes on: "No story is as simple as heroes-or-villains. Even people who differ sharply can deal with each other respectfully and lovingly. That we so fail to do so is a sign of our humanness, but it is also a marker of the power differential that exists between members and leaders in an organization as hierarchical as the LDS church."<sup>38</sup> In contrast with the quote from Anderson at the beginning of this paper, we can see that prior to her excommunication, she stresses the inadequacies of the Brethren to respectfully address the concerns of the intellectual community. This sentiment was resoundingly echoed by the rest of the September Six, and the larger Mormon intellectual community, in their pre-excommunication works.

In the same issue of *Dialogue*, September Six member Paul Toscano debuted "A Plea to Leadership of the Church: Choose Love not Power." He describes the feelings of betrayal, spiritual unease, and pain as a member of the group that leaders like Packer made to feel like the Other in the Church. He addresses the Brethren with "This is not the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Leaders. It is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The leadership of the church is not the

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36. Michael Warner, "Tongues United," in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Hemming, 223-231, (New York: Continuum, 1997): 230.

37. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (1993): 9.

38. *Ibid.* 8.

church. It is an important part of the church- even an indispensable part. But so are the Saints.”<sup>39</sup> The September Six did not imagine themselves as undermining the integrity of their church, nor did any of them ever publish statements with the intent of defaming Mormon belief; they considered themselves in turn attacked by the very people accusing them of violence.

However, we have to recognize that in many ways, New Mormon historians and the September Six are using liberal, secular language in their plight for academic freedom, subjective control, and self-empowerment. For example, in D. Michael Quinn’s publication “On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath),” he claims that “it is my conviction that God desires everyone to enjoy freedom of inquiry and expression without fear, obstruction, or intimidation.”<sup>40</sup> Maxine Hanks stated in an opinion piece published in a local newspaper a year after her excommunication, “In 1992, I published a book that explores long-ignored aspects of that history and attempts to retrieve the soul of Mormon women’s spiritual life.”<sup>41</sup> To Hanks, and feminist scholar Lynne Kanel Whitesides, inquiries into the history of women in the Church, including theological histories of prayers to a Heavenly Mother, were integral to their Mormon spirituality. As these claims exemplify, their concerns are in some ways based in secular thought and in some ways based in deeply held, subjective spiritual beliefs. The question then is, does using secular language justify the Brethren’s categorization of the September Six as secular apostates? Or does it simply mean, as Bohn points out, that there is no existent language because of the imagined barriers between secular and religious?

Although there were never direct accusations of blasphemy from either the September Six or the Brethren throughout this conflict, Asad’s words on the subject are helpful for sorting through what appears to be a disaster of competing claims, pain, and power struggles: “I want to suggest that we see blasphemy ... not as a discursive device for suppressing free speech but as an indicator of the shape that free speech takes at different times and in different places, reflecting, as it does so,

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39. Paul Toscano, “A Plea to the Leadership of the Church,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (1993): 99.

40. David Michael Quinn, “On Being a Mormon Historian (And Its Aftermath),” in *Faithful History*, edited by George D. Smith, 69-111, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992): 95.

41. Maxine Hanks, “Opinions,” *Los Angeles Times*. July 10, 1994.

different structures of power and subjectivity.”<sup>42</sup> Accusations of abuse, contention, and apostasy can be seen in a similar light. Subjectively, neither the September Six nor Church leadership view themselves as attackers or abusers of the Other. As Anderson stated, “truth and courage meant very different things to very different, but equally honorable people.” However, the September Six, in using the language of liberal, secular academia to justify their inquiries into Mormon history and theology, utilize the privilege of liberal and secular thought within a society that values those ideologies above all else.

This is further complicated by the dissidents’ existence within the more immediate power structure of the LDS hierarchy. As shown through their transnational land ownership, rates of conversion, influence within Utah, and power over the everyday lives of individual laypeople, the Church of Latter-day Saints can no longer be seen solely in terms of the violent persecution of their early members. However, in many ways, this is exactly how they see themselves in relation to the larger social landscape. As I pointed out earlier, secular American culture is vastly defined by Protestant norms and values. How do these larger social changes position a church that increasingly, according to sociologists like Mauss, displays social, cultural, and theological overlap with mainstream values?

Through the course of historical interactions, between both the Church of Latter-day Saints and secular society, and Church leadership and Mormon intellectuals, we can see that binaries regarding the secular are problematized and blurred by the actions and statements of the very people who attempt to uphold their separation. Additionally, we can see that early Mormon history, and especially early Mormon persecution, has deeply influenced how LDS leaders and laypeople interact with non-Mormon Christianity and Protestant-influenced secularism. The September Six themselves disrupt the split between the secular and the religious. More surprisingly, through attempting to deal with secular influences in a way that preserves Mormon identity, Church leaders often engage in the very tenets of Protestant secularism that have historically brought physical and emotional damage to the Church.

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42. Asad, “Free Speech,” 29.



Beyond disrupting the binary of secular/religious, the unique historical and contemporary conflicts between LDS leadership and faithful dissenters complicates the duality of oppressor/oppressed and victim/attacker, something that is too often taken for granted in discussions of privilege and oppression. It seems that the most practical challenge moving forward will be to find new ways to engage with one another while recognizing religious anxieties and feelings of persecution as legitimate as well as protecting individuals from the tangible harm that religious leaders have the potential to inflict. What this means for people of faith on the ground, due to LDS power structures, is largely dependent on the decisions of the Brethren.

Above all, what this essay seeks to prove is how looking at the history of Mormon intellectualism can be helpful to emerging scholarship on religion and the secular. The LDS Church is caught between the privilege of its status as a Christian religion in the West and the stigma arising from mainstream American opposition to its earlier practices. Mormons have been aware for many year of their sometimes painfully unique social position, although their status as an “emerging religion” has driven them under the larger religious studies radar. Their own publications, actions, and interactions are prime examples of how secularism, as well as related topics of globalization, whiteness, and liberalism, have historically complicated and continue to complicate the single story of modernity versus tradition. The September Six excommunications are only the beginning of a much deeper conversation about faith and who-when-where-gets to claim oppressed status in their plight of subjective control of their narrative.

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#### Author Biography

*Katrina M. Hermanson studies Gender and Women's Studies with minors in Religion and History at the University of Arizona. She is also a student leader and graphic designer for the university's LGBTQ+ Resource Center. After graduating in May 2017, she plans on entering a graduate program and expanding her studies into the question of subjectivity through either secular/religious conflict in the Mormon Church or gender and sexual self-definition through the history of the internet.*