

# From Sodomy to Sympathy: LDS Elites’ Discursive Construction of Homosexuality Over Time

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*In this article, we examine how leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) discursively constructed homosexuality over the last 50 years. Based on textual analysis of LDS talks, magazines, and other publications, we analyze how LDS elites, responding to shifting historical, cultural, and religious interpretations of sexualities, discursively constructed homosexuality as problematic for (1) society from the 1950s to the 1990s, (2) the family from the 1970s to present, and (3) divinely inspired gender roles from the 1980s to present. Further, we show how LDS elites softened their rhetoric in the 1990s, and in so doing, established a new discursive construction of homosexuality as an ailment requiring sympathetic treatment. Throughout our analysis, we also examine how LDS elites accomplished such discursive work in response to shifting societal and religious attitudes concerning sexual minorities. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding how religious elites discursively construct sexual norms, the reciprocal relationship between sexual and religious discourse and advocacy, and the importance of examining how dominant religious discourses change over time.*

**Keywords:** *homosexuality, Mormonism, social inequalities, religious elites, discursive work, religion and sexuality.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1943, Quakers issued the first official denominational statement concerning the “problem” of homosexuality in American society (Wilcox 2001). Since then, homosexuality has become a prominent issue in American Christianity. Fetner (2008) notes how the religious right rose to power through the strategic depiction of homosexuality as the ultimate threat to America, and in so doing, inadvertently facilitated an explosion of lesbian and gay civil rights activity. In an interesting twist, recent years have witnessed the elaboration of specifically lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)<sup>1</sup> forms of Christian organization and practice (Wilcox 2003) as well as the growth of mainstream Christian organizations that seek to affirm lesbian and gay members (Moon 2004). The question, of course, is how do we make sense of shifting Christian rhetoric about homosexuality. Indeed, exploring recent developments in LGBTQ Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this article we use the acronym LGBTQ to refer to the collective movement advocating for rights for sexual minorities. We do so while recognizing that the earliest incarnation of the movement was primarily focused on the rights of gays (G) and (L) lesbians and only began to include bisexuals (B), transgender people (T), and queer-identified people (Q) at a later date.

practice (Wilcox 2009; Yip 2002), changing American definitions of the family (Powell et al. 2010), and shifting evangelical rhetoric concerning homosexuality (Thomas and Olson 2012) some researchers have suggested Christianity may become a path to liberation for LGBTQ people. On the other hand, others have found that changes in dominant Christian rhetoric have not been accompanied by better treatment of sexual minorities in Christian communities (Barton 2012; Moon 2004). These findings highlight the flexibility of dominant Christian discourses, and raise the question of how they are constructed, reproduced, and maintained. In this article, we consider this question by discussing the ways leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, LDS Church, or Mormons) discursively constructed homosexuality over the past 50 years.

The LDS Church offers an especially intriguing opportunity to examine shifting Christian rhetoric about homosexuality. LDS Church members (Mormons) believe that people exist as disembodied spirits prior to birth; that those spirits continue into eternity after death; and that the period spent on earth is thus a test to determine one's reward in the next life. Mormons believe there are multiple levels of glory or punishment in the next life, which range from the most faithful entering the Celestial Kingdom, maintaining their relationships with other righteous family members, and becoming Gods, or Goddesses, to the most egregious sinners being banished to Outer Darkness. Within this stratified view of eternal experience, the most faithful Mormons are those who form heterosexual relationships that produce biological children, and abstain from all sexual congress beyond the confines of heterosexual marriages. LDS leaders interpret homosexuality within the context of religious doctrines that define heterosexual relationships and reproduction as essential for both bringing disembodied souls into this life and determining one's status—as well as the status of one's family—in the next life. LDS leaders teach that heterosexual marriage and reproduction is literally both eternal and essential. While these elements of LDS doctrine make Mormonism a distinct “brand” of Christianity, the LDS Church also provides an example of responses to homosexuality found within a wide variety of contemporary Christian traditions and engages with politics and the public sphere in ways that are largely identical to those employed by other conservative Christian groups. Similar to, for example, leaders of the religious right (Fetner 2008) and the ex-gay movement (Erzen 2006), LDS leaders have actively opposed LGBTQ civil rights. Recent statements by LDS leaders (see Phillips 2005; Williams 2011) have justified opposition to homosexuality on the grounds of reproductive imperatives and created distinctions between homosexual orientation and practice in much the same way as the Catholic Church (Jordan 2000; Yip 1997) and evangelical publications (Thomas and Olson 2012) have done. Further, Phillips (2005) found that nonheterosexual Mormons, like LGBTQ members of other Christian traditions (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012b; Wolkomir 2006), often face significant conflict when attempting to integrate their seemingly disparate religious and sexual identities. As a result, the evolution of LDS statements concerning homosexuality may provide insight into the discursive strategies employed in other conservative Christian traditions.

We consider whether this is the case by analyzing how LDS elites discursively constructed homosexuality over time. Rather than attempting an exhaustive description of LDS theology, we examine the rhetoric of LDS elites to shed light upon some ways Christian leaders may interpret and define homosexuality in relation to shifting public attitudes about LGBTQ civil rights and religious participation. Following Schwalbe et al. (2000), we recognize that the reproduction of dominant systems of meaning—sexual, religious, or otherwise—relies upon the strategic cooperation of elites. As a result, we use the case of LDS elites' construction of homosexuality over the past 50 years to elucidate some ways religious elites may establish and adjust institutional positions in relation to shifting social norms (see also Foucault 1978).

Our approach seeks to overcome some of the limitations in previous studies concerning Christianity and homosexuality (see Wolkomir 2006). To date, most scholarship concerning the relationship between Christianity and homosexuality has taken one of two paths. On the

one hand, researchers have examined the variety of ways that pastors interpret and respond to homosexuality (Cadge et al. 2012; Cadge and Wildeman 2008; Olson and Cadge 2002), congregations manage debates about homosexuality (Cadge et al. 2008; Moon 2004), heterosexual-but-affirming congregations handle homosexuality (McQueeney 2009; Moon 2004), and LGBTQ Christians manage their sexual and religious identities in LGBTQ (Sumerau 2012a; Sumerau and Schrock 2011) and anti-gay (Pitt 2010) congregations and support groups (Ponticelli 1999; Wolkomir 2006). In so doing, researchers have illuminated the effects of dominant Christian discourses surrounding homosexuality in a wide variety of local settings. Alongside these more micro-oriented studies, researchers employing survey and content analysis methods have found that, for example, Christian beliefs facilitate and justify prejudicial attitudes toward sexual minorities (see, e.g., Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Burdette et al. 2005; Sherkat et al. 2011), Christian publications consistently define homosexuality as something inherently separate from and subordinate to Christianity (Thomas and Olson 2012), and leaders of Christian movements invoke biblical notions of gender, sexuality, and the family to promote anti-LGBTQ legislative agendas and therapies (Barton 2012; Fetner 2008; Robinson and Spivey 2007). These more macro-oriented researchers exposed some far-reaching societal effects of dominant Christian interpretations of homosexuality. Whereas these two types of studies have convincingly demonstrated how institutionalized Christian constructions of homosexuality influence congregations, members of congregations, and individuals who identify as LGBTQ outside of congregations, we know far less about the ways Christian leaders construct, maintain, and adapt these institutional discourses (see also Barton 2012; Moon 2004; Wolkomir 2006). Our examination thus uses the case of LDS leaders to demonstrate some ways institutional discourses concerning the relationship between homosexuality and Christianity emerge and shift over time while maintaining institutional stances oppositional to homosexuality.

### THE LDS CONTEXT: BACKGROUND

Mormonism is an excellent institution for examining the role of elites in framing discourse given the hierarchical structure and status associated with leadership positions in the religion. The LDS Church employs an episcopal-type polity, which is a “top-down” authority structure (Quinn 1992). At the local level, each ward (i.e., congregation) is led by a lay leader called a “bishop,” a position that carries responsibilities akin to those of a Catholic priest or Protestant pastor. Wards are organized into stakes (similar to a Catholic diocese), which are led by another lay leader called a “stake president.” Stakes are organized into areas and are overseen by “area authorities” (typically local individuals who oversee aggregates of stakes). All of these local leaders are supervised by “general authorities.” General authorities in the LDS Church are paid professionals who have authority over the entire church body. Although our analysis does not focus on the efforts of leaders at these levels of the church, it is important to note that these leaders are regularly tasked with interpreting the teachings provided by Mormon elites at higher levels of the church’s structure.

Within the general authorities there are various ranks. The lowest levels are “Seventies” (First and Second Quorums), who can function as “area authorities” or members of the “Presiding Bishopric,” who are responsible for some of the financial affairs of the religion. They may also serve administrative functions at the headquarters of the religion in Salt Lake City, Utah. Above this level are members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency. The members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency are considered modern-day prophets, seers, and revelators. They are responsible for the intellectual and physical property of the religion, direct the activities of the religion, and have final authority in all matters within the religion. Given the hierarchical structure of the religion, decisions made by general authorities supersede those made by local leaders, and their teachings represent the elite or official language of the church on all matters (Quinn 1992).

There is a form of voting that takes place in the religion that is referred to as “common consent” (Quinn 1992). This practice allows members to “vote” on decisions the leaders present to them, but dissent almost never occurs, and even when someone does dissent, that does not prevent the leader from doing what he originally proposed (“he” is used intentionally here; all positions in which decisions are made for others in the LDS Church are held by men, and this facet of the religion (see Bush 2010) reflects the patriarchal patterns of leadership evident throughout the highest levels of contemporary Christianity across traditions).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the leadership of the LDS Church has significant and virtually unchallenged authority in the religion.

As a result of the authority structure, members of the religion pay very close attention to what the leaders tell them. While members are encouraged to consider the messages conveyed by the leadership of the religion, for most Mormons, what the leadership of the religion says is largely regarded as direction from God and is considered to be akin to, though not necessarily equivalent to, gospel. Additionally, the highest levels of leadership in the religion work very hard to present a unified front, which results in near unanimity in messages from elites (Quinn 1997). In short, Mormon elites (i.e., the leaders at the highest levels of the church’s structure) have a significant amount of influence in the religion, which makes Mormonism an excellent institution for examining the construction of elite discourse around homosexuality.

### QUEER THEORY

To better understand how Mormon elites construct homosexuality, we draw upon the conceptual framework of Queer Theory. Emphasizing the importance of remaining sensitive to the emergence of differential meanings over time, Queer theorists seek to unpack the ways meanings become embedded in and servants to interlocking systems of oppression and privilege (Crawley and Broad 2008). As such, Queer theorists examine sexualities as politically organizing principles constructed upon taken-for-granted systems of knowledge that define heterosexuality as natural, normative, and revered as the social ideal (Ingraham 1999). Following Foucault (1978, 1980), social control operates through the ongoing production and institutionalization of dominant discourses (Crawley and Broad 2008). Possessing the status within a given social system to deploy these discourses and encourage conformity from others, elites may exert tremendous control over their followers and, by extension, the people their followers come into contact with in the course of their personal and professional lives. Understanding the reproduction and maintenance of inequalities requires unpacking the “discursive work” elites, like the LDS leaders at the heart of this study, do to construct some things (heterosexuality) as natural and normal and other things (homosexuality) as problematic (see also Butler 1999).

To this end, our analysis focuses on discursive work LDS elites did to make sense of homosexuality over the last 50 years. Specifically, we examine statements about homosexuality made by LDS leaders and accounts published by the LDS church within a historical and cultural context in order to demonstrate the ways these statements shifted from their earliest mentions until the present day. In so doing, we examine how LDS elites shifted their discursive construction of homosexuality in relation to cultural changes occurring in American society since the 1950s while maintaining their opposition to LGBTQ rights and recognition. In conclusion, we discuss some ways the discursive work of LDS elites provides insights into the dynamic relationship between Christian and sexual norms, and the importance of examining the discursive work of religious elites as well as the ways religious discourses change over time.

<sup>2</sup>It is important to note that there are women’s organizations led by women within the church (referred to collectively as “auxiliaries”), but each of these organizations (which do make decisions for individual members) are ultimately dependent upon and accountable to the all-male priesthood leadership.

## METHODS AND ANALYSIS

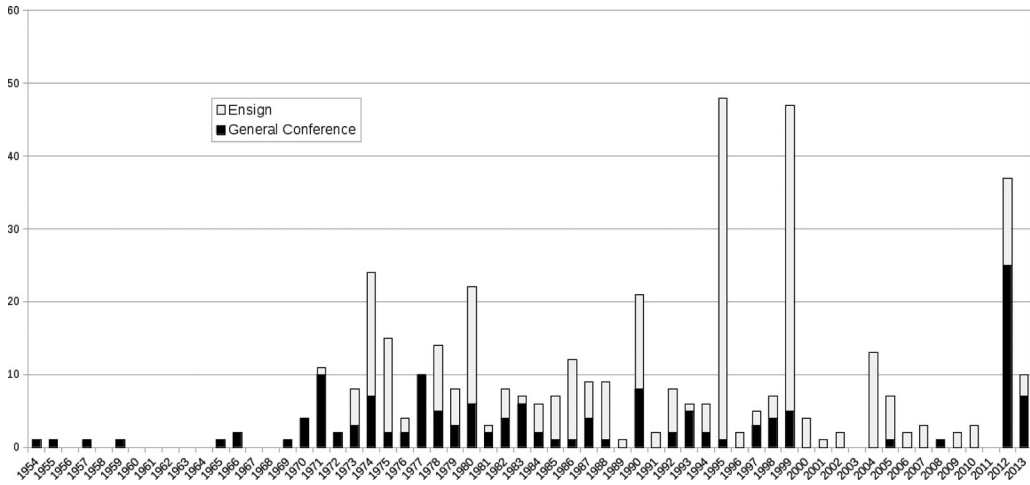
Data for this study derive from content analysis of the official teachings of the LDS Church, which may be found in the speeches by leaders and official church publications. Seeking to gain an understanding of the evolution of LDS discourse concerning homosexuality, we collected archives (most were digital to begin with; some we digitized) of the LDS Church's General Conference talks or sermons (1897–2012) and its monthly publication *Ensign* (1971–2012); both of these sources are publicly available. Importantly, the LDS General Conference is a biannual meeting where members and others gather to receive inspiration and instruction from church leaders. Millions of members watch General Conference, which is broadcast on satellite and over the Internet, and translated live into dozens of languages. Almost all of the talks or sermons at General Conferences are given by general authorities. While attitudes among members vary, it is generally the case that members of the religion consider what the leaders of the religion say at General Conference to be the most authoritative positions of the religion. *Ensign* is the official adult publication of the LDS Church, which generally contains faith-promoting and proselytizing information and materials for members. In 2007, *Ensign* had 850,000 subscribers. It is widely read by active Mormons, many of whom use it as the basis for lessons and messages shared with other members. Since LDS elites hold editorial power over the release of *Ensign*, what is contained therein is considered authoritative. However, LDS general authorities do not write every article in *Ensign*. Thus, discourse in *Ensign* is often considered less authoritative than what is said at General Conference. In the analysis that follows, only those individuals who were *not* general authorities are indicated as such; otherwise, all of the quotes are from talks or articles by general authorities of the LDS Church. By combining these materials, we believe the resulting set of documents represents a comprehensive historical record of dominant LDS discourse (for a similar use of this discourse, see Shepherd and Shepherd 1984).

While we began our study with the entirety of the archives for both the General Conference talks (abbreviated *GC*, from 1897–2012; a total of 9,240 talks) and *Ensign* (from 1971–2012; a total 12,486 articles), we sought to focus our analysis on the subject of homosexuality within the LDS Church. In order to unpack the discursive construction of homosexuality by LDS elites, we utilized a word search software program called *dtSearch*, which indexes text files and allows for rapid searching for specific terms. This process allowed us to identify all the usages of relevant terms: homosexual(s), homosexuality, gay(s), lesbian(s), same-sex, same-sex attraction, same-gender attraction, and same-sex marriage. In an effort to be as exhaustive as possible, we also included searches for the euphemisms: “sin of Sodom” and “crime against nature.” After identifying the relevant archival materials, we sorted out articles and speeches concerning homosexuality and analyzed these qualitatively. This process yielded a final sample of 57 *Ensign* articles (or .4 percent of all *Ensign* articles) and 49 General Conference talks (which is .5 percent of all “GC” talks) concerning homosexuality, which spanned the time period between the 1950s and the 2000s (the first occurrence of one of our terms was in the 1950s; there was no mention of homosexuality prior to that in General Conference). These articles and talks were read in their entirety and form the basis of the analysis below. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the overall number of references to homosexuality in LDS discourse from 1954, when the topic was first raised, to present. Prior to 1971, when the *Ensign* was first published, all references occurred in General Conference talks. Figure 1 distinguishes between whether the search terms occurred in General Conference talks or the *Ensign*.<sup>3</sup>

From this point, our analysis developed in an inductive fashion. After collecting a sample of 106 entries concerning homosexuality, which is roughly equivalent to the 99 entries from

<sup>3</sup>Starting in 1971, all General Conference talks were published in the *Ensign*. We separated out General Conference talks from other *Ensign* articles to create Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Occurrences of the words “homosexual(s),” “gay(s),” or “lesbian(s)” in elite LDS discourse,  
1954–2013



*Christianity Today* Thomas and Olson (2012) utilized to explore historical shifts in evangelical discourse on the topic, we systematically coded the materials in search of both overall themes and chronological adjustments within the data. Drawing on elements of “grounded theory” (Charmaz 2006), we examined the content for recurring patterns, and sorted these into categories. In so doing, we developed themes from the data, and observed that these themes changed over time. As a result, we created categories to capture the following themes in LDS discourse concerning homosexuality over time: (1) problematizing homosexuality for society (1950s–1990s), for the family (1970s–present), and for traditional gender roles (1980s–present), and (2) treating the homosexual problem (1990s–present). Despite these shifts, however, we noted, as we have written elsewhere (see Sumerau and Cragun 2014), that the overall depiction of homosexuality as utterly distinct from and deficient in relation to heterosexuality remained constant (though emphasized in kinder terms over time) throughout the 50 years. Further, our prior analysis noted that while Mormon discourses typically mirror contemporary Christian discourses across traditions, it appears that Mormons actually raised these concerns about “homosexuality” prior to other Christian traditions (e.g., well before the rise of the religious right or the ex-gay movement), and may have thus influenced the discursive work of other Christian elites throughout the last 50 years.

### PROBLEMATIZING HOMOSEXUALITY

In this section, we examine how LDS elites defined homosexuality as a problem in three specific ways—and how their definitions emerged over the course of time. First, we examine how LDS elites defined homosexuality as a problem foretelling the ultimate destruction of American society from the 1950s to the 1990s. Next, we reveal how, beginning in the 1970s and continuing through present time, LDS elites defined homosexuality as a problem that could lead to the destruction of the family. Finally, we show how LDS elites, starting in the 1970s and continuing into the present, defined homosexuality as a contradiction of divinely inspired gender roles. In so doing, we demonstrate how LDS discourses concerning homosexuality shifted in relation to external changes occurring in American society over the last 50 years. While we treat these definitions as analytically distinct, LDS elites often drew upon more than one of these themes in speeches and articles about homosexuality.

## Foretelling the Ultimate Destruction of American Society

While only six references to homosexuality were identified in the discourse prior to 1970, statements defining homosexuality as a signal of impending societal doom were pervasive in LDS discourse throughout the 1970s. In some ways, this development suggests that the earliest treatments of homosexuality by LDS elites may have arisen in response to the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (see Armstrong and Cragge 2006 for a brief summary of this historical period). In fact, as Figure 1 reveals, the only times LDS elites referenced homosexuality in the 1960s coincided with other LGBTQ police altercations in San Francisco and Los Angeles (geographic locations not far from the base of the religion in Salt Lake City). Early LDS treatments of homosexuality defined it as, like riots themselves, a sign of societal destruction.

The first example of this type of discursive work appears in a 1965 General Conference talk that focuses almost exclusively on the emerging mentality, or “new morality,” of the free love movement. Specifically, Mark E. Peterson notes that the push for the decriminalization of homosexuality serves as “one of the greatest evidences of the apostasy of mankind from the teachings of Christ” (Peterson, *GC*, 1965). Occurring merely 3 months after a police raid of a New Year’s ball organized by homosexual and heterosexual allies in San Francisco, this statement exemplifies the construction of homosexuality as a threat to society. In a similar fashion, Victor L. Brown (*GC*, 1970) lamented that more and more people did not see a problem with homosexuality only months after the Stonewall Riots, and blamed the “sale of filth on newsstands” and “broadcasting of it over the airways” for the moral decay of American society.

Other examples of this type of discursive work may be found in statements where LDS elites singled out homosexuality while listing social vices that were leading to the corruption of America. Appearing in the *Ensign* the month after the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from its diagnostic manual, for example, N. Eldon Tanner decried:

Many are in the wilderness because of following the poor example set by leaders in homes and communities. Traffic in this area is most congested and confusing. Pornography, fornication, adultery, and homosexuality are permitted and practiced in the world today to such an extent that we are truly following the ways of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Eldon Tanner, “Why is My Boy Wandering Tonight?” *Ensign*, 1974)

By invoking a biblical story that many Christians believe overtly condemns homosexuality and results in the destruction of a city as a result, Tanner equates permissive attitudes toward homosexuality with the wrath of the creator. Further, this discussion first listed homosexuality (quote not shown) separately before equating it to other practices deemed sinful within the religion, such as “pornography, fornication, [and] adultery.” Similarly, Mark E. Peterson noted:

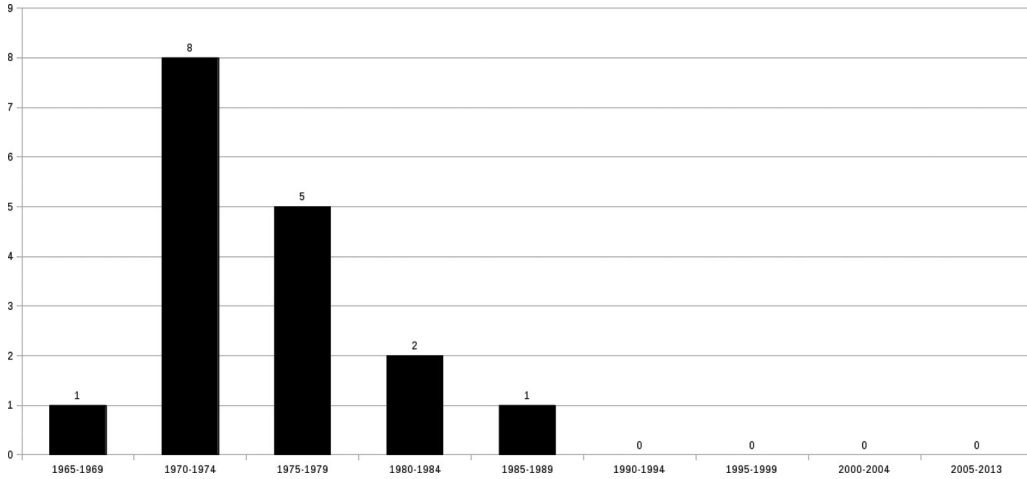
Why should legislatures condone immorality, whether homosexual or otherwise? Why should officers of state condone vice and even protect it? Are they for Christ or against him in this Christian land? Can there be any neutrality with respect to God? Christ says no! (Mark E. Petersen, “O America, America,” *GC*, 1979)

Speaking only months after homosexuality was featured in a positive light on the cover of *Time* magazine and within days of the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, Peterson decried the notion of sexual freedom and expression while positioning homosexuality as a zero-sum game wherein societies must be either for or against Jesus and prepare for the consequences of their decision. Echoing this sentiment, Gordon B. Hinckley stated that others educate the masses according to standards “diametrically opposed to the standards of the Gospel” (Gordon B. Hinckley, “Be Not Deceived,” *Ensign*, 1983).

LDS elites discursive constructions of homosexuality softened over the course of time. The following anecdote from an *Ensign* article published in 1994 reflects this softening:

Figure 2

Frequency of the co-occurrence of the term “homosexuality” and “Sodom and Gomorrah” in elite LDS discourse



The Hawaii Supreme Court recently became the first appellate court in the United States to recognize that homosexual couples may have a legal right to marry. As such pressures build, we will hear growing criticism of the traditional idea that a system based on permanent relationships of kinship and heterosexual marriage is crucial to society’s best interests. Somehow we must remember that a society that tolerates anything will ultimately lose everything. (Bruce C. Hafen, “Planting Promises in the Hearts of Children,” *Ensign*, 1994).

Although framed in kinder language, statements like this ultimately reproduce the same construction of homosexuality as a dangerous element capable of toppling society.

In sum, the earliest discursive work of LDS elites defined homosexuality as a signal of the impending doom of society by reflecting concerns about the erosion of morals, and attempted to motivate LDS members to unite against this evil. Considering that many of these statements drew parallels between homosexuality in America and the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Figure 2 illustrates the trajectory of this discursive work over time, and reveals how these discourses were pervasive in the 1970s. Explicit discursive construction of homosexuality as a destructive force in society tapered off by the 1990s. This may be because the majority of these statements immediately followed early political victories by LGBTQ activists. Facing the emergence of a newly energized movement, LDS elites may have sought to reassert the moral authority of the church through the denigration of homosexuality.

### Destroying the Family

As noted in the previous section, the 1970s witnessed a series of victories for lesbian and gay activists. Alongside these victories, however, activists in the 1970s also faced significant challenges including, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court refusing to hear a case about same-sex marriage rights, which by default made “heterosexual marriage” the law in Minnesota (*Baker v. Nelson* 291 Minn. 310, 191 N.W.2d 185 [1971]) and the emergence of both the religious right (Fetner 2008) and the ex-gay movement (Robinson and Spivey 2007). Although certainly not uniform, one thing these developments shared was the affirmation and promotion of traditional (heterosexual) family values. Within this context, LDS elites drew upon—or possibly originated—“family values” approaches to homosexuality by constructing homosexuality as an attack on the family.



One way that LDS elites discursively constructed homosexuality as an attack on the family involved explicitly stating that it threatened familial arrangements. The following statements from an *Ensign* article by Neal A. Maxwell offer a typical example:

Civilizations as well as souls are at stake. One scholar who studied dozens of civilizations forecast that in “the struggle between nations, those who cling to chastity will, in all likelihood, keep the upper hand”—and a commentator added: “[because] they try to keep intact the family which promiscuity and homosexuality tend to destroy.” (Neal A. Maxwell, “Cleanse Us from All Unrighteousness,” *Ensign*, 1986)

As this illustration reveals, homosexuality was constructed as an enemy established for the destruction of the family. Similarly, an *Ensign* article authored by Victor L. Brown noted:

At the present time, there are wars and rumors of wars. Yet, may I suggest that there is another war currently going on in the world—a war more destructive than any armed conflict—yes, a war between good and evil, between freedom and slavery, between the Savior and Satan. Satan’s legions are many. In their battle to enslave mankind, they use weapons such as selfishness; dishonesty; corruption; sexual impurity, be it adultery, fornication, or homosexuality; pornography; permissiveness; drugs; and many others. I believe Satan’s ultimate goal is to destroy the family, because if he would destroy the family, he will not just have won the battle; he will have won the war. (Victor L. Brown, “Our Youth: Modern Sons of Helaman,” *Ensign*, 1974)

Like the religious right (Fetner 2008) and the ex-gay movement (Robinson and Spivey 2007), these statements—some of which, like the second illustration above, occurred before these movements arose—discursively constructed homosexuality as the natural enemy of the family.

LDS elites also constructed homosexuality as oppositional to the family by citing homosexuality within lists of other actions considered immoral. As the following example reveals, this tactic typically involved defining homosexuality—and other vices—as assaults upon the integrity of the family:

We strive to protect the integrity of the home and the family from the influences of Satan. We are against those things that destroy the home and the family, such as abortion, homosexuality, promiscuity, alcohol, drugs, violence, and unwarranted divorce. (Robert E. Wells, “We Are Christians Because . . .,” *Ensign*, 1994)

According to the biblical passage found in Matthew 24: 6–7, the times of “wars and rumors of wars” the speaker refers to are signs of the end of times, and as a result, his argument postulates homosexuality’s destruction of familial integrity as hastening the end times. Similarly, James E. Faust argues that nonheterosexual relationships violate the familial fabric of God’s plan:

Any alternatives to the legal and loving marriage between a man and a woman are helping to unravel the fabric of human society. I am sure this is pleasing to the devil. The fabric I refer to is the family. These so-called alternative lifestyles must not be accepted as right, because they frustrate God’s commandment for a life giving union of male and female within a legal marriage as stated in Genesis. If practiced by all adults, these lifestyles would mean the end of the human family. (James E. Faust, “Serving the Lord and Resisting the Devil,” *Ensign*, 1995)

Echoing Catholic discourses concerning homosexual relationships (Yip 1997), LDS elites thus constructed homosexuality as a threat to the family by defining seemingly infertile relationships as oppositional to God’s will.

Overall, LDS elites discursively constructed homosexuality as oppositional to the family. Specifically, these discourses defined homosexuality as a significant threat to traditional (heterosexual) definitions of family and kinship. Importantly, these discourses emerged before and during the same time religious right leaders (Fetner 2008) and ex-gay movement leaders (Robinson and Spivey 2007) were emphasizing similar themes in American political debates. In fact, they also reflect the emphasis upon biblical authority Thomas and Olson (2012) noted in their analysis

of *Christianity Today* during the same period. While our analysis reveals that LDS elites still mobilize these discourses to counter the advancement of LGBTQ rights (see also Sumerau and Cragun 2014), it is important to note that American definitions of family (Powell et al. 2010) and sources of moral authority utilized by evangelical elites in *Christianity Today* (Thomas and Olson 2012) have indeed shifted in relation to the expansion of LGBTQ rights, that public attitudes about homosexuality have undergone relatively similar shifts (Loftus 2001), and that LGBTQ movement organizations, like Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays, have adopted similar family values discourses to advocate for sexual equality (Broad et al. 2004).

### **Contradicting Divinely Inspired Gender Roles**

LDS doctrine defines gender as an essential and eternal characteristic possessed by women and men before, during, and following their time on earth (Cragun and Phillips 2012). Men, for example, are constructed as leaders and providers for the religious, financial, and social needs of their wives and children. In a complementary fashion, women are constructed as help mates for their husbands, and charged with the responsibility for home and child production and care. Similar to many other conservative Christian traditions (Bartkowski 2001), LDS doctrine enforces and relies upon the construction of women and men as complementary roles created for the explicit purpose of producing and raising children in God's image. Within this context, LDS elites drew upon institutional constructions of gender to define homosexuality as contradictory to God's plan. This tactic involved constructing homosexuality as a violation of the divinely inspired roles of moral women and men.

Although the discursive elaboration of gender is ubiquitous throughout the LDS archives (see Sumerau and Cragun 2015), LDS elites did not explicitly align these notions with homosexuality until the 1980s. Considering that LDS elites mobilized these thoughts during the 1970s in response to feminist campaigns for the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights (Cragun and Phillips 2012; Williams 2011), it is curious that they were not applied to homosexuality earlier. In fact, the earliest use of this discursive strategy—as well as the only time LDS discourse on homosexuality spiked in the 1980s (see Figure 1)—coincided with the growth of support groups for gay and lesbian Mormons and the establishment of the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ, which promoted both an explicitly lesbian and gay interpretation of Mormonism and the extension of religious leadership to Mormon women (see Phillips 2005 for a brief history). Although LDS elites never explicitly mentioned either of these events in their statements, they began constructing homosexuality as a violation of divinely inspired gender norms immediately following these episodes, and have utilized these discourses as recently as 2014 court filings opposing same-sex marriage (see Sumerau and Cragun 2015).

LDS elites constructed homosexuality as contradictory to God's design by appealing to doctrine requiring people to get married and reproduce in order to bring forth spiritual children in this life and obtain godhood in the next life (The First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1998). Specifically, this tactic involved defining homosexuality as a violation of the gender roles God instilled in all women and men. The following *Ensign* article offers a typical example of this discursive tactic:

We also need to teach our children plainly that homosexuality is a perversion of the Lord's designated roles of men and women. Homosexuality is sexual relations between those of the same sex, whether men or women. When referring to homosexual women, the term lesbian is sometimes used. ("Talking with Your Children About Moral Purity," *Ensign*, 1986; not known if written by a general authority)

As this illustration reveals, homosexuality was constructed as diametrically opposed to God's designated gender roles. Echoing this sentiment, Dallin H. Oaks offered the following explanation in one of the best-known LDS statements on homosexuality: "God created us male and female.

What we call gender was an essential characteristic of our existence prior to our birth” (Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Same Gender Attraction,” *Ensign*, 1995). Like ex-gay leaders (Robinson and Spivey 2007) and many other evangelical Christians (Bartkowski 2001), LDS elites defined gender differences—and by extension gender inequalities—as an integral part of God’s divine plan (see also Sumerau and Cragun 2015).

Alongside statements about inherent, divinely inspired gender roles, LDS elites also constructed masculinities and femininities as ultimately heterosexual characteristics. Following this line of thought, if God created heterosexual women and men, then homosexuality is automatically a contradiction of the divine plan. An *Ensign* article by Gordon B. Hinckley illustrates this point:

We want to help these people, to strengthen them, to assist them with their problems and to help them with their difficulties. But we cannot stand idle if they indulge in immoral activity, if they try to uphold and defend and live in a so-called same-sex marriage situation. To permit such would be to make light of the very serious and sacred foundation of God-sanctioned marriage and its very purpose, the rearing of families. (Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking About Us?” *Ensign*, 1998)

As this illustration reveals, the desire for same-sex relationships was constructed as a difficulty or problem to be overcome as well as a threat to the institutionalization of heterosexual marriages between women and men. As the following example from a more recent *Ensign* article shows, this discursive construction of homosexuality as something inherently flawed and in need of a cure continues to the present day:

First, let’s be absolutely clear on what God wants for each of us. He wants us to have all of the blessings of eternal life. He wants us to become like Him. To help us do that, He has given us a plan. This plan is based on eternal truths and is not altered according to the social trends of the day. At the heart of this plan is the begetting of children. They were commanded to “be fruitful, and multiply”, and they chose to keep that commandment. We are to follow them in marrying and providing physical bodies for Heavenly Father’s spirit children. Obviously, a same gender relationship is inconsistent with this plan. (Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign*, 2007)

Similar to both 1980s LDS discourse concerning the importance of learning how to “best fulfill the role given by the Lord to women” (Joy F. Evans, “Overcoming Challenges Along Life’s Way,” *Ensign*, 1987; not a general authority) and ex-gay movement rhetoric defining homosexuality as the result of misplaced gender socialization (Robinson and Spivey 2007), LDS elites constructed homosexuality as a problematic “condition” that contradicted the plans of the divine. Further, these examples reveal the softening of language concerning homosexuality that we observed in later mobilization of discourses concerning societal destruction. As we detail below, this softer rhetoric simultaneously allows LDS elites to sound respectful while maintaining an institutionalized anti-LGBTQ stance (Sumerau and Cragun 2014).

The combination of these discourses positioned homosexuality as contradictory to God’s divine plan. Specifically, LDS elites linked beliefs concerning inherent gender roles and characteristics with heterosexuality, and in so doing, constructed homosexuality as an automatic other. While these discourses have softened in tone over time, they ultimately reproduce conservative Christian assertions that LGBTQ people are somehow flawed, and thus require intervention, which may involve the adoption of supposedly proper gender roles (see Erzen 2006). As a result, LDS elites constructed homosexuality as problematic by arguing that this “condition” or “problem” would prevent LDS members from becoming moral women and men.

#### TREATING THE “HOMOSEXUAL PROBLEM”

As we have shown, LDS elites’ language concerning homosexual people has shifted over time even though the official position of the church considering homosexual behavior as sinful has

remained constant. Specifically, LDS elites shifted their discursive construction of homosexuality from abject condemnation to sympathetic understanding. While there are hints of this shift in some of the aforementioned constructions of homosexuality as problematic, in this section we examine the emergence of this specific discourse in relation to shifting cultural attitudes concerning homosexuality (see also Loftus 2001 for a statistical portrait of these societal shifts). Rather than, as Thomas and Olson (2012) argue, foreshadowing potential for more positive treatment of sexual minorities within conservative Christian traditions, we demonstrate how LDS elites' discursive shift to sympathetic constructions ultimately reproduced the anti-LGBTQ rhetoric of previous decades by wrapping it in a kinder package (see also Williams 2011 in relation to Mormonism and Bush 2010 for similar tactics in relation to sexism).

Understanding the shift in LDS discourse concerning homosexuality, however, requires remaining sensitive to the socioemotional economy of sympathy in contemporary American society. Following Clark (1987), sympathizing with others sends a dual message whereby those on the receiving end acquire a sign of care, concern, and connectedness while sympathizers affirm their social superiority and moral worth by appearing to be kind, caring, and considerate people. Further, people who receive sympathy are obligated to reciprocate the gift by repaying the giver with gratitude and future submission. As a result, elites may employ sympathy to foster positive impressions of themselves and to claim the services of marginalized groups (see Schwalbe et al. 2000). Rather than signaling a more accepting institutional position on the horizon, LDS elites' construction of homosexuality as a sympathetic cause may thus be interpreted as an attempt to maintain institutional power and heterosexual privilege in the face of expanding societal acceptance of LGBTQ people.

It is important to note, however, that Mormons may interpret their sympathetic discursive shift in many different ways, and gain different benefits or rewards via this shift. Despite this possibility, our focus is on the social consequences of sympathy rhetoric, and therefore outlines the large-scale consequences and possibilities of this shift regardless of Mormon intention (see also Clarke 1987). Following Collins (2005), dominant shifts in discourse often reinstall existing systems of social inequality within a more marketable package due to successful social movement activities by minorities. In the case of African Americans in contemporary society, for example, successful demonstrations against Jim Crow laws facilitated a shift into more sympathetic discourses (instead of overt racism) used to bolster and excuse the continued subordination of racial minorities within a "colorblind" system of racial stratification (Bonilla-Silva 2003). In such a system, softer language gives the impression of societal change while structural subordination of a social group remains in place via new policies, mechanisms, and legal actions (see also Bush 2010; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Williams 2011). Rather than signaling a major shift in Christian interpretations of homosexuality (as predicted by Thomas and Olson), we thus argue that the shift to "sympathetic" and "tolerant" (Collins 2005) discourses represents an attempt by Christian leaders (Mormon or otherwise) to maintain their institutional stances against homosexuality while deflecting claims of overt homophobia in a time when social acceptance of sexual minorities is on the rise (see also Sumerau and Cragun 2014).

Early suggestions of a sympathetic approach to homosexuality emerged while condemnation remained the dominant discourse. The following example from an *Ensign* article in 1978 offers a typical example:

As we take a stand against the evils of the day, such as abortion, homosexuality, immorality, alcohol, drugs, dishonesty, intolerance, etc., can we express our beliefs without clenching our fists, raising our voices, and promoting contention? Can we talk about the beneficial principles of the gospel such as the Word of Wisdom, keeping the Sabbath day holy, maintaining personal purity, and the other truths found in the scriptures without making our listeners defensive? This is not easy, but it can be done . . . This can best be accomplished not only by plowshares rather than by swords, but by appropriate commitment rather than contention. (Marvin J. Ashton, "No Time for Contention," *Ensign*, 1978)

Similar to ex-gay rhetoric emerging at the time (Erzen 2006), LDS elites hinted at shifting their confrontational rhetoric to a discourse of care and concern for homosexuals. Rather than embracing homosexuality, however, this discourse echoed the dominant rhetoric of condemnation of the time by constructing homosexuality as an “evil” to be opposed. As Cragun and Nielsen (2009) suggest, this type of discourse may be seen as an attempt by LDS leaders to maintain both legitimacy in a society experiencing significant advances for LGBTQ people, and its niche appeal to dominant Christian discourses promoting the denunciation of homosexual relationships. In so doing, as Thomas and Olson (2012) suggest, religious leaders may bow to secularization forces (e.g., adjust their rhetoric) by utilizing other symbolic ways of subordinating specific types of people or action (see also Clarke 1987; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Despite these early suggestions concerning a sympathetic approach to homosexuality, LDS elites did not explicitly adopt this discourse until the end of the 1980s. The following illustration from a General Conference speech in 1987 offers a typical example of this shift:

The Lord has proclaimed that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and is intended to be an eternal relationship bonded by trust and fidelity. Latter-day Saints, of all people, should marry with this sacred objective in mind. Marriage should not be viewed as a therapeutic step to solve problems such as homosexual inclinations or practices, which first should clearly be overcome with a firm and fixed determination never to slip to such practices again. Having said this, I desire now to say with emphasis that our concern for the bitter fruit of sin is coupled with Christ like sympathy for its victims, innocent or culpable. We advocate the example of the Lord, who condemned the sin, yet loved the sinner. We should reach out with kindness and comfort to the afflicted, ministering to their needs and assisting them with their problems. We repeat, however, that the way of safety and the road to happiness lie in abstinence before marriage and fidelity following marriage. (Gordon B. Hinckley, “Reverence and Morality,” *GC*, 1987)

As this illustration reveals, LDS elites’ discursive shift involved separating the act (homosexual practice) from the person (homosexual desire). In a similar fashion, the revised official LDS handbook on homosexuality, which was published in 1992, stated:

There is a distinction between immoral thoughts and feelings and participating in either immoral heterosexual or any homosexual behavior. However, such thoughts and feelings, regardless of their causes can and should be overcome and sinful behavior should be eliminated . . . We commend and encourage those who are overcoming inappropriate thoughts and feelings. We plead with those involved in such behavior to forsake it. We love them and pray for them. (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “Understanding and Helping Those Who Have Homosexual Problems,” 1992; authorship not clear, but approved by general authorities)

Rather than shifting their institutional stance on homosexuality, these illustrations reveal that LDS elites promoted an approach wherein LDS members would “hate the sin, but love the sinner.” Importantly, LDS elites’ discursive shift occurred following a similar shift in Catholicism, which took place in 1986 and involved defining homosexual acts as sinful and homosexual inclinations as merely a disordered state (see Yip 1997; for other examples in historical Catholicism, see Jordan 2000; and in evangelical Protestantism, see Thomas and Olson 2012). LDS elites maintained their denunciation of homosexuality in general, but encouraged members to sympathize with the struggles of LGBTQ people. Further, these discourses typically included assertions that nonheterosexual people, like all other members, should recognize their own God-given agency and fight their unsavory urges and desires. As a result, the sympathetic discourse effectually reproduced the condemnation of earlier discourses and theological shifts occurring in other Christian traditions at the time.

In a particularly illustrative example, Dallin H. Oaks outlined this revised approach to homosexuality in a 1995 *Ensign* article. In so doing, he stressed the importance of separating sinful behavior and unwelcome desire by arguing:

We should note that the words homosexual, lesbian, and gay are adjectives to describe particular thoughts, feelings, or behaviors . . . It is wrong to use these words to denote a condition, because this implies that a person is consigned by birth to a circumstance in which he or she has no choice in respect to the critically important matter of sexual behavior. Feelings are another matter. Some kinds of feelings seem to be inborn. Others are traceable to mortal experiences. Still other feelings seem to be acquired from a complex interaction of “nature and nurture.” All of us have some feelings we did not choose, but the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that we still have the power to resist and reform our feelings (as needed) and to assure that they do not lead us to entertain inappropriate thoughts or to engage in sinful behavior. (Dallin H. Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign*, 1995)

Rather than a single entity, Oaks constructed homosexuality as a dual condition wherein people must fight unwanted desires, and members must aid this process by sympathizing with these afflicted souls. Continuing this line of reasoning, however, he argued homosexuals were ultimately accountable to God for what they did and did not do:

We did not choose these personal susceptibilities either, but we do choose and will be accountable for the attitudes, priorities, behavior, and “lifestyle” we engraft upon them . . . We should always distinguish between sinful *acts* and inappropriate *feelings* or potentially dangerous *susceptibilities*. We should reach out lovingly to those who are struggling to resist temptation . . . Sinners, as well as those who are struggling to resist inappropriate feelings, are not people to be cast out but people to be loved and helped. (Dallin H. Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign*, 1995)

Like ex-gay ministry materials (Erzen 2006), Oaks thus defined homosexuals as sinners in need of help to avoid acting upon their immoral desires. Whereas LDS members are encouraged to sympathize with those who struggle with homosexuality, the overall message remains the same as previous decades: homosexuality is problematic and wrong.

In recent years, LDS elites have expanded their sympathetic discourse by publishing stories of LDS members treating the homosexual problem. The following letter published in *Ensign* in 2002 provides a typical example:

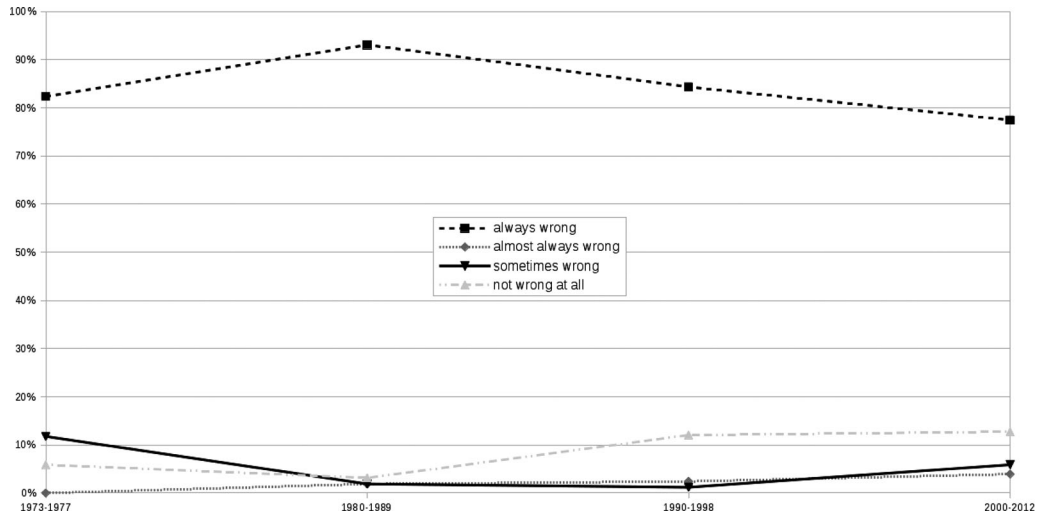
He will be your great encourager if you will only give place in your heart for Him. Do not attach labels to yourself or others who struggle with this problem. We all have temptations, but they do not define who we are. Know that having this particular challenge does not make you an “evil” person. As you commit not to act on these attractions, and as you immerse yourself in righteous thoughts and activities, you can be worthy of all the Lord has to offer. (Name Withheld, “My Battle with Same-Sex Attraction,” *Ensign*, 2002; not a general authority)

Echoing the rhetoric underlying conversion therapies (Wolkomir 2006), this “possibly” homosexual Mormon explains that with the help of sympathetic others nonheterosexuals can become “worthy” of the many blessings Mormons believe await them in the afterlife. Similarly, LDS elites have published stories by people dealing with other homosexuals, and established a website to guide member efforts at homosexual treatment (see Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints n.d.). The following article from a 2009 issue of *Ensign* provides a typical example:

Could it be that it is not only possible but also expedient to have a simultaneous devotion to Jesus Christ and to Leigh, but not to her lifestyle? Could my devotion to one fuel my devotion to the other? I know that the Father of my soul is the Father of Leigh’s soul too. I know that as deeply as He knows me, He knows her, and that as He has prepared a way for my return to Him through repentance, so has He prepared a way for hers . . . I know that my duty as Leigh’s sister is not to condemn her but to love her . . . While I may never know in mortality how to love Leigh in a way that has power to change her involvement in same-sex relationships, I can learn to love her without condoning her lifestyle, and I can reach out to her in a way that she needs. After all, it is the Savior’s role, not mine, to heal her. (Name Withheld, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign*, 2009; not a general authority)

Echoing the statements of LDS elites, these “anonymous” articles thus position homosexuality as an affliction that may be overcome by the love of God and other members of the church. In

Figure 3  
Mormon attitudes toward homosexual sex by decade



so doing, however, they offer homosexuals sympathy on the condition that LGBTQ people will employ all their emotional and psychological resources to try (successful or otherwise) to change (see <http://www.mormonsandgays.org/>). While LDS leaders have backed away from requiring successful change or “curing” of homosexuality, they continue—on the aforementioned website and in their speeches and publications—to privilege those who are able to change, require chastity for those willing but unable to change, and denounce those unwilling to try to change. Rather than signaling acceptance of homosexuality or the potential for better treatment of sexual minorities in the future, this sympathetic discourse symbolically places homosexuals within the service and under the protection of the moral endeavors of heterosexual Mormons.

Overall, recent years have witnessed a shift in LDS elites’ discursive construction of homosexuality that bears some similarities to evangelical and Catholic statements. Rather than denouncing homosexuality outright, LDS elites now construct LGBTQ people as sympathetic casualties of unwelcome desires, and prescribe the love of God and other LDS members as the only potential cure for homosexual affliction. In so doing, they ultimately reproduce the subordination of sexual minorities while maintaining their institutional opposition to LGBTQ rights by constructing homosexuality as worthy of sympathy rather than respect or acceptance (Clark 1987). As a result, the contemporary discursive efforts of LDS elites, while they continue to draw upon their construction of homosexuality as problematic in earlier decades, have shifted toward sympathy and treatment. Whether conceptualized as destructive or sympathetic, LDS elites maintain their construction of homosexuality as inherently immoral.

## CONCLUSION

Like many other Christian leaders, LDS elites have wrestled with homosexuality throughout the last 50 years. Rather than simply drawing upon established institutional discourse, it was their responsibility to craft these discourses for the LDS. While they could have taken this opportunity to craft a more sexually inclusive version of Mormonism, they ultimately chose to resist the changes taking place in mainstream American society, which may have been due to their desire to maintain their conservative niche appeal to more traditional members (Chaves 1997). To this end, they discursively constructed homosexuality as problematic for society, the family, and divinely inspired gender roles while encouraging LDS members to actively oppose LGBTQ rights. This rhetoric appears to have influenced the attitudes of members of the religion, as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3 tracks Mormon attitudes toward homosexuality using General Social Survey data ( $n = 378$ ). A close comparison of Figures 1 and 3 suggests that elite LDS discourse may have increased opposition to homosexuality among Mormons in the 1980s. While the notion of homosexuality heralding the destruction of society fell out of favor over time, LDS elites' discursive constructions of homosexuality as problematic for family and gender roles continue today. To what extent the growing sympathy for homosexuality among LDS leaders has driven the increasing acceptance of homosexuality among lay Mormons as shown in Figure 3 is not clear, as LDS elites may also be responding to shifting views among members. But the connection between shifting rhetoric among elites, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, and the changing attitudes of lay members of the LDS Church is quite clear.

Although LDS elites' discursive construction of homosexuality has shifted in recent years, their institutional opposition to LGBTQ people and advocacy remains firm. LDS elites have drawn a distinction between good people struggling with homosexual desires and fallen sinners engaging in homosexual practices. This discursive shift reproduced rhetoric employed by the ex-gay movement (see, e.g., Erzen 2006; Spivey and Robinson 2007; Wolkomir 2006) to justify conversion therapies and the denial of LGBTQ rights even though LDS elites now stop short of requiring conversion (though they do require that individuals who identify as LGBTQ attempt to change their desires or live a celibate/chaste life). Similarly, their discursive construction of homosexuals as sympathetic victims of unwanted perversions reproduced the moral superiority of heterosexual Christians over deviant others (Warner 1999). Whereas researchers have observed the tendency for LGBTQ groups to moralize their endeavors in hopes of achieving "respectability" (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012b; Warner 1999), these findings suggest that religious elites may also soften their discourses to maintain respectability in relation to societal liberalization of sexual norms (see also Cragun and Nielsen 2009).

These findings add depth to both micro- and macro-oriented research on the impact of institutionalized religious discourses concerning homosexuality upon the lives of religious and LGBTQ people (see, e.g., Sherkat et al. 2011; Sumerau 2012b; Wolkomir 2006) by revealing how religious elites discursively construct homosexuality in specific ways. LDS elites drew upon institutionalized notions of social, familial, and gender norms to construct homosexuality as an assault upon Mormonism. Similar to leaders of the religious right (Fetner 2008) and the ex-gay movement (Robinson and Spivey 2007), they characterized homosexuality as explicitly oppositional to God's design, and encouraged believers to rally against LGBTQ rights. Importantly, they did so before either of these well-known anti-LGBTQ movements emerged in the public sphere, and around the same time evangelical discourse—as represented by *Christianity Today*—began to mention homosexuality as a pressing topic. Whereas researchers have importantly revealed that both heterosexual and LGBTQ Christians draw upon the institutional discourses within their specific religious traditions to make sense of sexual politics (see, e.g., Burdette et al. 2005; Cadge et al. 2012; McQueeney 2009), our analysis suggests institutional discourses emerge and change over time in relation to wider societal shifts and patterns. These findings thus reveal the importance of examining and comparing the discursive construction of homosexuality within and across different religious traditions. While our analysis in combination with that of Thomas and Olson (2012) provides a foundation for this research, it is unknown what variations may be uncovered by exploring the multitude of other religious traditions wrestling with homosexuality over the last 50 years.

These findings also extend previous treatments of religion and sexuality by drawing our attention to the reciprocal nature of religious and sexual discourse in recent history (see also Fetner 2008). Whereas previous studies have shown that religious (Erzen 2006) and LGBTQ (Broad et al. 2004) movements may be forced to shift their tactics in relation to broader societal changes, they have generally left the ways larger social patterns influence dominant religious discourses unexplored (but see Thomas and Olson 2012). LDS elites, however, constructed homosexuality in relation to shifting societal, religious, and LGBTQ attitudes. They shifted their discursive



constructions of homosexuality following both major victories by LGBTQ activists—such as the visible protests of the 1960s and 1970s—and major transformations within other religious institutions—such as shifting notions of homosexuality by Catholic and evangelical elites. These findings thus reveal the importance of addressing the seemingly reciprocal relationship between sexual and religious discursive work and political activism.

These findings also suggest that researchers should be cautious about interpreting shifts in conservative Christian rhetoric about homosexuality. Although it may be tempting to interpret shifting rhetoric as a sign of greater acceptance and recognition of homosexual experience within conservative Christianity, as Thomas and Olson (2012) do in their examination of *Christianity Today*, our analysis reveals some ways that shifting rhetoric may reinforce the subordination of sexual minorities and condemnation of homosexuality within conservative Christian traditions while hiding these oppressive conditions behind a kinder, gentler façade. In fact, Queer theorists have demonstrated that this may often be a rather successful strategy whereby Christian leaders maintain respectability without significantly changing their institutional oppression of sexual minorities (see, e.g., Jordan 2000; Warner 1999; Wilcox 2009). After all, conceptualizing homosexuals as sympathetic victims of immoral forces or as a subcultural element to be tolerated or met in certain situations—as evidenced by Thomas and Olson’s (2012) analysis of *Christianity Today*—reproduces the notion of sexual minorities as social beings separate from, contrary to, and ultimately lesser than heterosexual and Christian others (see also Jordan 2000; Sumerau and Cragun 2014). Whereas these discursive shifts could foretell better things to come, it is equally likely that such depictions will reinforce the subordination of sexual minorities and the supremacy of heterosexual privilege within Christian traditions, voting, and policy proposals.

Regarding the specific case of the LDS Church, the transition we observed in LDS elites’ discourse from depicting homosexuality as “sodomy” to expressing “sympathy” toward homosexuals aligns with Mauss’s (1994) understanding of competing forces within the religion. Mauss (1994) refers to these competing forces as “assimilation” and “retrenchment,” though we prefer “differentiation” for the latter (Cragun and Nielsen 2009). The change in terminology and framing of homosexuals over the last 50 years reflects Mauss’s understanding of assimilation, as the religion softened the rhetoric to align with broader social changes. Yet, the religion has retained a position that differentiates it from more liberal religions by continuing to oppose civil rights for individuals who identify as LGBTQ and requiring LGBTQ members of the religion to remain celibate. Thus, the shift in rhetoric reflects the subtle shifts religions make in assimilating to prevailing cultural norms while simultaneously trying to maintain unique niche appeal (Chaves 1997; Cragun and Nielsen 2009).

Studies of other systems of social inequality demonstrate the practical and theoretical importance of attending to the appearance of—rather than the concrete accomplishment of—social change (see, e.g., Alexander 2012; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Collins 2005). Exploring racial inequalities following the civil rights movement, for example, researchers noted the ways white leaders shifted to kinder, gentler discourses of racial difference (e.g., colorblind racism instead of overt racism) to restore racial inequalities challenged and at times subverted by the civil rights movement. In so doing, social elites rebranded long-standing patterns of racial segregation, discrimination, and disparity through the use of scientific, economic, and philosophical appeals to a postracial world in ways that ultimately reversed most of the progress resulting from the civil rights movement by 2010 (Reskin 2012). Rather than explicit denunciation of racial minorities (e.g., Jim Crow discourses), such tactics relied upon racially neutral discourses that reproduced the “difference,” “otherness,” and “subordinate status” of racial minorities (Collins 2005). Learning from these recent social patterns, researchers might do well to explore ways that religious and political rhetoric concerning sexual minorities represents a similar shift wherein sexual minorities remain different, other, and subordinate to normal citizens, but these discourses are offered in a more neutral or positive way. Similar to the experience of racial minorities, the discursive shift concerning sexual minorities may be more likely to provide theoretical hints to emerging systems

of sexual inequalities rather than, as Thomas and Olson (2012) suggest, signaling better days to come. Our findings thus encourage sociologists of religion to integrate previous findings from inequalities scholarship into their analyses of shifting religious discussions of sexual minorities while remaining sensitive to the ways systems of oppression and privilege may appear to change while continuing to function in various historical, cultural, political, and religious eras (see Collins 2005; Warner 1999).

Building on this theoretical insight, these findings also reveal the necessity of examining dominant religious and sexual discourses within concrete historical and cultural contexts. Whereas previous studies of religious and sexual discourses focus on either specific sexual or religious meaning making within limited time frames or the effects of these meanings upon people's attitudes about religion and sexualities, the case of LDS elites' discursive work reveals some ways religious and sexual meanings may change over time and in relation to unforeseen historical episodes. Further, our analysis echoes Thomas and Olson's (2012) recognition of the flexibility of dominant religious discourses over time, and the ways that religious elites may respond to and influence larger-scale societal debates. Our analysis, in combination with Thomas and Olson's (2012) work, may provide the foundation for critically examining historical processes in the social construction of religious beliefs, teachings, and values while providing two interrelated yet distinct interpretative frameworks for making sense of these processes.

To better understand religious and sexual systems of meaning and inequality, we argue that researchers must analyze the ways religious and sexual elites discursively construct some social phenomena as favorable and others as flawed (Foucault 1978, 1980). Specifically, this will require critically investigating the taken-for-granted systems of meaning embedded within our experience of reality as well as the ways our notions of reality shift over time. Further, it will require examining the ways discursive shifts facilitate or stall social progress or the reproduction of societal patterns of social inequality. As the case of LDS elites reveals, dominant religious discourses do not simply exist within a vacuum removed from the rest of social experience. Rather, people elevated to dominant positions discursively construct institutional notions of proper and inappropriate behavior and belief in relation to patterns of cultural and historical development. As a result, we can only hope to understand the intricacies and influence of "accepted" truths by unraveling and comparing the various ways elites employ their privileged positions to discursively differentiate the normative from the deviant.

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