

**J. Edward Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun**  
University of Tampa, U.S.A.

## "How Low Can Humans Plunge!": Facilitating Moral Opposition in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

**Abstract** In this article, we examine how religious leaders teach their followers to protect themselves and others from pornography. Based on archival materials from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, LDS Church, or Mormons), we analyze how LDS leaders, responding to the expansion of pornographic influence over the past 40 years, facilitated moral opposition to pornography by teaching their followers to (1) set moral examples for others, (2) save their women, and (3) protect their children. In so doing, however, LDS leaders, regardless of their intentions, reproduced cultural and religious discourses that facilitate the subordination of women and sexual minorities. Likewise, these discourses suggest strong negative outcomes associated with pornography. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding the facilitation of moral opposition across religious traditions, and the consequences these actions may have for the reproduction or reduction of social inequality.

**Keywords** Mormonism; Religion; Morality; Pornography; Social Inequalities

**J. Edward Sumerau** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at The University of Tampa. His research focuses on historical and interpersonal relationships between sexualities, gender, religion, and health in the lives of sexual and religious minorities. He has published over twenty academic works in numerous professional journals and edited volumes.

**email address:** jsumerau@ut.edu

**Ryan T. Cragun** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at The University of Tampa. His research focuses on Mormonism and the nonreligious and has been published in numerous professional journals. He is also the author of several books.

**email address:** rcragun@ut.edu

Although often at odds with one another, pornography and religion represent two of the most influential social forces in contemporary American society. In the case of pornography, researchers have shown that America has become the largest source of pornography production in the world in the past 40 years, and in recent years, profits from the pornography industry have outpaced both Hollywood offerings and Fortune 500 corporations (see, e.g., Ezzell 2009; Sarracino and Scott 2009; Attwood 2011). Similarly, researchers have found that religious institutions have dramatically influenced a wide variety of policy debates (see, e.g., Rose 2005; Robinson and Spivey 2007; Fetner 2008) and legislative efforts in the past 35 years, and that

roughly 79% of Americans identify as religious (see: Funk and Smith 2012). Considering that religion has historically provided the primary mechanism of societal sexual regulation (see, e.g., Durkheim 1897; Weber 1922; Tiryakian 1981), we know surprisingly little about the lessons religious leaders teach their followers about pornography. How do religious leaders prepare their followers for our "pornified" (Sarracino and Scott 2009) culture?

We examine this question through qualitative content analysis of archival materials from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, LDS Church, or Mormons). Specifically, we analyze how LDS leaders taught their followers to oppose pornography, and in so doing, constructed the "interpretive framework" (Sherkat and Ellison 1997) necessary for religious-based opposition to pornography. In so doing, our analysis extends research on the relationship between pornography and religion by demonstrating some ways religious leaders facilitate moral opposition to perceived social problems. Importantly, it is not our intention to generalize these findings to the larger LDS or religious population. Rather, we use the examples culled from this case study to illuminate teachings religious leaders may use whenever they seek to teach their followers to respond to a specific social problem (also see: Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Additionally, our examination of Mormon teaching about pornography reveals the social construction of specific claims social elites make to influence the behaviors and activities of their followers (see, e.g., Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Bogard 2001; Sumerau and Cragun 2014). Specifically, we demonstrate

how LDS leaders' facilitation of moral opposition to pornography emerged as the result of claims-making activities wherein they defined pornography as automatically problematic, while claiming its presence caused other social and religious ills (also see: Schwalbe et al. 2000). In so doing, our analysis reveals three ways religious leaders may define social objects as inherently immoral, and encourage their followers to emphatically oppose engagement with these objects (also see: Schwalbe et al. 2000; Sumerau and Cragun 2014).

### Religion and Pornography

Religious and pornographic interests have a long-standing relationship in American history (see: Sarracino and Scott [2009] for a review of this record). During the colonial period, for example, Quaker women explored their sexualities by sharing journals and secret codes regarding desire, while Puritan communities, in contrast to the prevalent sexual activity suggested by their birth and marital records, defined sex as dangerous, immoral, and sinful, except within the context of marriage and in the service of procreation. Similarly, the Civil War witnessed—and some argue facilitated—a dramatic expansion of pornography, which was quickly met by moral crusades—most famously concerning the efforts of Anthony Comstock—seeking to outlaw both pornographic composition and distribution. Further, the 1970's evidenced the birth of another expansion of pornography, which quickly became a lightning rod for religious political opposition that continues today. Rather than a simple relationship between two autonomous cultural influences, the interrelation of religion and pornography represents

a long-standing cultural conflict that has dramatically impacted legislative and sexual dynamics at all levels of American social structure.

To better understand this relationship, religious scholars have examined the ways religious people think about pornography. Examining the cognitive structure of conservative Protestant opposition to pornography, for example, Sherkat and Ellison (1997) found that commitment to scriptural inerrancy, despite the lack of scriptural references to pornography specifically, belief in moral absolutes, and believing that immoral individual actions could contaminate large-scale social relations bolstered opposition to pornography. Seeking to further identify the impact such beliefs might have upon religious people, Patterson and Price (2012) found that negative reactions to pornography were worse for people who were more active in religious traditions (also see: Grubbs et al. 2014; Ley, Prause, and Finn 2014). Evaluation studies have found that religious identification and participation significantly influence the way people interpret pornography (see, e.g., Lottes, Weinberg, and Weller 1993; Stack, Wasserman, and Kern 2004; Manning 2006). Whereas these studies importantly reveal the outcomes of religious teaching concerning pornography, we know far less about the teachings themselves.

To understand the teachings themselves, however, we must examine the ways social elites—religious or otherwise—socially construct pornography. Rather than containing some inherent meaning, researchers have long noted that social elites socially construct specific meanings for varied social phenomena by utilizing their authority to claim specific ob-

jects should be seen in certain ways by their followers (see, e.g., Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Bogard 2001). If, for example, survey and evaluative studies consistently show that religious people react negatively to pornography, then one may expect that religious leaders are socially constructing pornography as a negative influence in some way that resonates with their followers (see: Sumerau and Cragun [2014] for a similar finding in relation to homosexuality). As a result, understanding the social construction of pornography for religious people necessarily requires unpacking the claims religious leaders make about pornographic material in order to reveal the socially constructed meanings that lie at the heart of the survey and evaluative results. Rather than exploring how religious people respond to pornography, however, such an endeavor requires asking in what ways religious leaders teach their followers to respond to pornography, as well as other social issues and problems.

Our analysis extends this line of inquiry by examining how religious leaders, operating during institutional meetings and through church-produced literature, facilitate moral opposition to pornography. Specifically, we examine how LDS leaders, responding to the expansion of pornography over the past 40 years, facilitated moral opposition by teaching their followers how to combat pornographic influence. Importantly, our analysis reveals that even though LDS leaders never mentioned pornography before the 1970's, their elaboration of this social problem has remained rather constant throughout the past 40 years. In so doing, we explore some ways religious teachings establish and encourage the "cognitive structures" (Sherkat and Ellison 1997) followers

draw upon in their oppositional endeavors. Before presenting our analysis, we contextualize the efforts of LDS leaders by outlining Mormon sexual beliefs, while paying special attention to the ways these interpretations align with other religions.

### Mormon Sexuality

Similar to other religious traditions (Sherkat and Ellison 1997), Mormon opposition to pornography arises out of the theological foundation of the religion. Mormon doctrine conceptualizes human existence as a series of stages wherein people first exist as disembodied spirits prior to birth, then become reflections of God's will during their time on Earth, and finally ascend to different levels of glory or punishment—ranging from entrance into the Celestial Kingdom for the most faithful to banishment to Outer Darkness for the most egregious sinners. Within this framework, Mormon doctrine asserts that sexual relations within marriage are necessary for bringing disembodied spirits into this world, following divinely-inspired guidelines for living a moral life, and determining one's level of punishment or reward in the afterlife. As a result, Mormons believe that their earthly experience—and thus their ability to abstain from earthly temptations—represents a God-given test of their spiritual worth (see: Ludlow 1992).

Building on this foundation, Mormon doctrine emphasizes chastity outside of marriage and monogamy within it. In educational resources directed towards Mormon youth, for example, LDS leaders stress the importance of abstaining from sexual activity before marriage, and define chastity and

sexual modesty as inherent components of moral selfhood. Echoing many other religious traditions (see, e.g., Peterson and Donnenwerth 1997; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007; Scheitle and Hahn 2011), Mormon doctrine asserts that followers should seek to remain sexually pure in mind and body, and that promiscuity, masturbation, and sexual fantasies are ultimately manifestations of immoral influence. Similar to contemporary religious—especially Christian—advocacy for abstinence (only sexual education programs) (Rose 2005), LDS doctrine thus removes sexual desire and practice from the moral path of unmarried believers.

Mormon doctrine also stresses the importance of heterosexuality. Echoing Religious Right (Fetner 2008), Ex-Gay Ministry (Robinson and Spivey 2007), and conservative Christian (Bartkowski 2001) teachings, Mormon leaders believe that God created women and men as complementary parts, destined to fulfill inherently heterosexual roles. Similarly, Mormon leaders, like many conservative Christian traditions (see, e.g., Wolkomir 2006), define homosexuality as sinful, deviant, and an abomination in the eyes of God (see: Phillips 2005). LDS doctrine thus relies upon limitations regarding appropriate versus inappropriate sexual partnerships. As such, cultural manifestations of alternative sexualities—such as pornography—are deemed to be social problems carrying eternal significance and alarm for "true" Mormons.

Mormon doctrine also defines procreation as commanded by God for all fertile couples. Although Mormon doctrine does not explicitly define sexual behaviors as solely for the purposes of procreation,

LDS leaders consistently refer to sexual relations within the context of familial formation and proper childrearing. Similar to contemporary religious arguments concerning "proper" family values (see: Fetner 2008), LDS leaders construct sexual desire and behavior in relation to God's commands to be fruitful and multiply. Further, Mormon doctrine emphasizes family-centered sexuality by adopting and promoting strong anti-abortion policies in both their churches and the larger social sphere. Like approaches taken by the National Right to Life movement in the United States (Rohlinger 2006) and some Muslim women's advocacy groups in Indonesia (Rinaldo 2008), they thus promote a family-centered conceptualization of sexual morality (also see: Cragun and Phillips 2012).

Although Mormon doctrine rests upon a theological foundation that separates it from other religious traditions, they have, as noted above, approached sexual morality in much the same way as many other contemporary religions. Considering pornographic tendencies towards sexual expansion rather than restraint, LDS leaders, like members of many religions (see, e.g., Sherkat and Ellison 1997; Rinaldo 2008), interpreted pornography as an attack upon their divinely inspired way of life and their established notions of sexual morality. As a result, they regularly discussed pornography in official speeches and publications over the last few decades, while maintaining an almost identical definition of pornography as a dangerous social problem throughout this time. In so doing, they suggested ways pornography could be overcome. In what follows, we examine how LDS leaders facilitated moral opposition to pornography by teaching followers strategies for

combating pornographic influence, which ultimately relied upon these initial claims about ideal Mormon sexual morality.

### Methods and Analysis

In order to better understand how LDS leaders facilitated moral opposition to pornography, we collected archives of the LDS Church's General Conference talks (1897-2012) and its monthly publication—*Ensign* (1971-2012). The LDS General Conference is a bi-annual meeting, where members and others gather to receive instructions and inspiration from Church leaders. *Ensign* is the official adult publication of the LDS Church, which generally contains faith-promoting and proselytizing guidance for members. Since LDS leaders hold editorial power over the release of all official Church documents, the combination of these materials represents a comprehensive record of official LDS teachings about pornography.

In order to specify materials concerning pornography, we utilized a word search program called *dtSearch*, which allowed us to index text files and rapidly search for specific terms. Doing so allowed us to identify all usages of relevant terms, such as "pornography," "porn," and "sexually explicit material" in order to pull the documents wherein LDS leaders discussed these issues. After identifying relevant documents, we sorted out articles and speeches concerning pornography, and set these aside for analysis. This process yielded a final sample of 427 *Ensign* articles and General Conference talks.

Our analysis was developed in an inductive manner. We examined the content for recurring pat-

terns, and noted that LDS leaders discussed specific ways followers could oppose the spread of pornography and protect themselves and others from its influence. Following this observation, we sorted these discussions into categories, and observed that each of these strategies rested upon the claim that pornography was inherently sinful. As a result, we created categories to capture the ways LDS leaders instructed followers to protect against pornography. After examining previous pornographic and religious studies, we came to see these strategies as part of the process whereby they facilitated moral opposition to pornography by instructing followers to (1) set moral examples; (2) save the women; and (3) protect the children.

### The Pornography Problem

LDS leaders sought to facilitate moral opposition to pornography because of the effects they believed pornographic consumption would produce. Drawing upon their long-established notions of non-marital sexuality as indecent and immoral, they often used abstract scriptural references to construct pornography as an abomination unto the Lord. Generally, they followed these definitions with examples of the damage pornography could create in members' families and marriages. A typical example comes from an article delivered by Richard G. Scott:

One of the most damning influences on Earth, one that has caused uncountable grief, suffering, heartache, and destroyed marriages is the onslaught of pornography in all of its vicious, corroding, destructive forms. Whether it be through the printed page, movies, television, obscene lyrics, the telephone, or

on a flickering personal computer screen, pornography is overpoweringly addictive and severely damaging. This potent tool of Lucifer degrades the mind, heart, and the soul of any who use it. ("The Sanctity of Womanhood," *Ensign*, 2000)<sup>1</sup>

For Richard G. Scott and other LDS leaders, pornography represented a satanic trap waiting to drain the moral fiber from God's people. As the current president of the Church, Thomas S. Monson, explained: "When I consider the demons who are twins—even **immodesty** and **immorality**—I should make them triplets and include **pornography**. They all three go together" ("Peace, Be Still," *Ensign*, 2002). Within their own institutional meetings and publications, LDS leaders thus claimed pornographic influence was a serious moral and social problem.

Meanwhile, they were also deeply concerned about the expansion of pornography over the past 40 years. Recognizing this trend, they began, as early as the 1970's, advocating social opposition on the part of their followers. The following excerpt from a Conference talk given in 1976—almost 30 years prior to the previous example—offers a typical illustration:

Pornography abounds, and its ill effects are evident on every side. You know what they are. I will simply say that neither adult nor youth can see or listen to or communicate in pornography without becoming contaminated and endangering the moral fiber of the community. The sex pervert, the rapist, and the thief have become what they are because of what has been fed into their minds, which in turn has prompted

<sup>1</sup> *Ensign* issues are accessible at: <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2015?lang=eng>. Retrieved August 23, 2015.

the deeds they perform. (N. Eldon Tanner, "Ready to Work Long Hours," *Ensign*, 1976)

Rather than simply an example of immoral behavior, LDS leaders claimed pornography was a powerful adversary capable of, as some Christians have noted (Sherkat and Ellison 1997), polluting the moral fiber of society. As Bruce C. Hafen explained 6 years later:

We are almost suffocated by a dense fog of sensuality. Pornography and moral permissiveness are so widespread that there is nothing to compare with it in the last several centuries in any civilized society; not since Rome, not since Sodom and Gomorrah. ("The Gospel and Romantic Love," *Ensign*, 1982)

Interpreting pornography as a stain upon moral existence, LDS leaders feared the depths of sexual corruption that could be reached if it were left unchecked. As a result, they faced a significant religious dilemma, which they ultimately resolved by using their institutional and moral authority to facilitate moral opposition.

### Facilitating Moral Opposition

What follows is an analysis of the ways LDS leaders facilitated moral opposition to pornography by teaching their followers three strategies to use against its spread. First, we examine how they taught followers to set a moral example for others concerning sexual practice. Then, we show how they taught followers to save the women in the Church. In so doing, they argued that pornography sought to corrupt women, and thus women needed to be protected from themselves and temptation. Finally, we

demonstrate how they taught followers to protect the children by closely monitoring their children's behaviors and educating them about proper sexual morals. While we treat these strategies as analytically distinct, LDS leaders often drew upon more than one at a time in the same speeches and publications.

### Setting an Example

LDS leaders were intimately familiar with cultural concerns about pornography. As Marvin J. Ashton explained in 1977:

How does the adversary wage this battle? ... Those who are fighting pornography and obscenity have helped us recognize some of his battle plans. They tell us that a person who becomes involved in obscenity soon acquires distorted views of personal conduct. He becomes unable to relate to others in a normal, healthy way. Like most other habits, an addictive effect begins to take hold of him. A diet of violence or pornography dulls the senses, and future exposures need to be rougher and more extreme. Soon the person is desensitized and is unable to react in a sensitive, caring, responsible manner, especially to those in his own home and family. Good people can become infested with this material and it can have terrifying, destructive consequences ("Rated A," *Ensign*)

Seeking to combat the possible effect of pornography, LDS leaders facilitated moral opposition to pornography by teaching followers to set a moral example for others.

LDS leaders taught followers to set a moral example in their local wards and stakes by modeling godly

values. Explaining the importance of moral leadership at the local level, Gordon B. Hinckley clarified:

[E]ven though the Internet is saturated with sleazy material, you do not have to watch it. You can retreat to the shelter of the gospel and its teaching of cleanliness and virtue and purity of life ... Now I know, my brethren, that most of you are not afflicted with this evil. I ask your pardon for taking your time in dwelling on it. But if you are a stake president or a bishop, a district or branch president, you may very well have to assist those who are affected. May the Lord grant you wisdom, guidance, inspiration, and love for those who so need it. ("A Tragic Evil Among Us," *Ensign*, 2004)

Emphasizing the difficulties people might face, they taught local leaders to provide a positive example and a source of "guidance" and "inspiration" for other members. Echoing long-standing religious notions about the importance of moral role models (see: Weber 1922), LDS leaders asserted that followers could forestall the influence of pornography by setting proper examples for the people they interacted with in their local churches.

LDS leaders also taught followers to oppose pornography by using their own lives to symbolize morality. Generally, these lessons focused on things individual Mormons could do to demonstrate godly sexual values to others. As Gordon B. Hinckley explained:

Your goodness must be as an ensign to your people. Your morals must be impeccable. The wiles of the adversary may be held before you because he knows that if he can destroy you, he can injure an entire ward.

You must be wise with inspired wisdom in all of your relationships lest someone read into your observed actions some taint of moral sin. You cannot succumb to the temptation to read pornographic literature, to see pornographic films, even in the secrecy of your own chamber to view pornographic videotapes. ("To the Bishops of the Church," *Ensign*, 1988)

In the face of pornography, LDS leaders thus emphasized the importance of living moral lives in order to safeguard themselves and those around them from "the wiles of the adversary." Similarly, Robert E. Wells discussed the importance of explaining to others that:

We therefore feel that Christians will control their thoughts and not indulge in anything pornographic or immoral or indecent. We are totally against premarital sex, petting, and improper dating practices. We feel that both parties should come to the marriage altar in unqualified purity, and that virtue, chastity, and faithfulness lead to solid marriages which will last through eternity. ("We Are Christians Because ...," *Ensign*, 1984)

Similar to the emphasis on family values promoted by religious social movement groups (Rohlinger 2006; Fetner 2008), LDS leaders suggested that Christians could signify sexual restraint and control in ways that others could emulate.

LDS leaders also drew attention to things other religious groups were doing well, and suggested that Mormons should become involved in these endeavors or replicate these actions on their own. The following excerpt from an article outlining lessons

one LDS leader learned from a trip to some Muslim countries offers a typical example of this tactic:

Leaders of these Arab countries will not accept any activity that threatens Islam or the faith of the believers. For example, drug and alcohol abuse, pornography, and immodesty are strictly controlled because they are offensive to Muslim beliefs. While laws forbidding these things may seem restrictive to some foreigners, we enjoy the freedoms they provide. We adults do not have to contend with ugly influences, and we can feel confident that our children are not encountering them in their schools. (Joseph B. Platt, "Our Oasis of Faith," *Ensign*, 1988)

Rather than decrying the repressive elements of Sharia law, the speaker praised the moral "freedom" created by the strict control exercised over sexualities in many Muslim lands. Similar to some Muslim women who align with Sharia law in order to craft oppositional stances to pornography and abortion (see: Rinaldo 2008), LDS leaders interpreted sexual repression as a necessary step in the prevention of evil. At other times, they stressed the importance of aligning with other Christian groups fighting similar battles. As N. Eldon Tanner explained:

We love virtue and chastity and decry the immorality and moral decay which is so prevalent in the world today. We align ourselves with all God-fearing people who are striving to save the world from the sins of pornography, abortion, homosexuality, and other deviant sexual behavior. ("A Practical Religion," *Ensign*, 1979)

Foreshadowing—although only by a couple of years—rhetoric deployed by leaders of the Religious

Right to garner support for Christian-based political activism (Fetner 2008), LDS leaders thus suggested Mormons could set an example of religious cooperation in the battle against any and all sexual immorality.

Overall, LDS leaders facilitated moral opposition to pornography by teaching their followers to provide moral examples for the world. In so doing, however, they reproduced stereotypical depictions of pornographic influence and effects, and affirmed religious messages that depict non-heterosexual and non-marital sexualities in a negative light. Similar to leaders of the Religious Right (Rohlinger 2006), some Muslim women in Indonesia (Rinaldo 2008), and many conservative Protestants (Sherkat and Ellison 1997), their efforts ultimately reproduced cultural notions concerning the inherent immorality of pornographic materials.

### Saving the Women

LDS leaders were also well aware of concerns that pornography ultimately degraded and devalued women. Rather than paying attention to both sides of these ongoing debates, however, LDS elites drew upon arguments that pornography was inherently destructive without ever mentioning complementary arguments suggesting that pornography provided women with a path to liberation (see: Ezzell [2009] and Weitzer [2009] for discussions of these ongoing debates). During a talk about women and violence, for example, Richard P. Lindsay noted:

As pornography has become more popular, its content has changed. Much of it now portrays violence, deg-

radation, and humiliation. Common themes include sadism, incest, child molestation, rape, and even murder. This underscores the belief that pornography is both addictive and progressive, leading the viewer to more explicit and deviant material in an attempt to achieve the same soul-destroying "high." The effect pornography has on the viewer is insidious. ("I Have a Question," *Ensign*, 1984)

Seeking to facilitate moral opposition to pornography, LDS leaders thus emphasized the importance of saving women from this evil contaminant.

LDS leaders defined women as passive victims unable to resist earthly temptations. As Gordon B. Hinckley explained:

The young women of this generation not only have tremendous opportunities, but they also face terrible temptations. The pornography merchants cast their filthy lures in the direction of girls, as well as boys. The exploitation of sex has become a marketable commodity employing every vile trick of the advertiser. ("Our Responsibility to Our Young Women," *Ensign*, 1988)

As the title suggests, LDS leaders stated *their* women were in need of protection from pornography, and that women could fall victim to "terrible temptations." While LDS leaders were concerned about the temptations women might face, they also defined women as sources of temptation for men. Specifically, their statements suggested that women were in danger of being *both* tempted by pornographic materials and the objects of others' pornographic desires. In this way, LDS leaders cast women into traditional patriarchal roles of both the helpless vic-

tim in need of protection *and* the dangerous sexual temptation that could rattle the sensibilities of men (Johnson 2005). The following discussion (almost 20 years after the previous one) of dangers young women face provides a typical illustration of this two-fold depiction of Mormon women:

[Y]oung women, please understand that if you dress immodestly, you are magnifying this problem by becoming pornography to some of the men who see you. Please heed these warnings. Let us all improve our personal behavior and redouble our efforts to protect our loved ones and our environment from the onslaught of pornography that threatens our spirituality, our marriages, and our children. (Dallin H. Oaks, "Pornography," *Ensign*, 2005)

Utilizing common rape myths and victim blaming tactics (Ezzell 2000), LDS leaders warned women not to make themselves "pornographic." Rather than encouraging women to express their own sexual agency, these statements constructed Mormon women as potential victims in need of religious protection (also see: Daly 1985). In so doing, they, like anti-reproductive rights activists in recent decades (see: Rohlinger 2006), reproduced the subordination of women by encouraging moral opposition based upon devalued versions of womanhood.

Considering that LDS leaders regularly outlined ways women could become pornographic objects and suffer from sexual temptation, it is curious that there is no similar concern about the victimization of men. If LDS leaders believed that pornography itself was so powerful that women had to be protected from it on multiple levels, then one has to wonder

why they did not appear to believe men needed the same protections. On the other hand, this gendered double standard (Johnson 2005) suggests that pornography might not actually be the real issue here. Patriarchal notions of manhood, for example, rely heavily upon the assumption that males control themselves and exert control over others. By contrast, patriarchal systems define women as social beings in need of male control and protection. One could thus read LDS leaders' emphasis on protecting women (and not men) as an attempt to use the example of pornography to reinforce the subordination of women to men within the Church (see: Johnson 2005).

LDS leaders also facilitated moral opposition to pornography by emphasizing to men the importance of protecting women from worldly temptations. Specifically, this tactic involved stressing the importance of sexual purity for women specifically. Similar to the above observations, the focus on "purity" for women (and not men) reproduces patriarchal systems that locate women's value in their ability to gain and keep a man by offering a sexual "object" that is purely his alone (Johnson 2005). The following excerpt from an article authored by Joseph B. Wirthlin provides an illustrative case:

Rise above the squalor of pornography, obscenity, and filth. Be virtuous and chaste. Uphold your young sisters in the gospel by respecting their budding womanhood and protecting their virtue. Always conduct yourselves according to the commandments of God when you are with them. You want your girlfriends to remain clean and pure. Just as you surely would protect the chastity of your own sister in your fami-

ly, likewise protect the virtue of your sisters in God's family. ("Live in Obedience," *Ensign*, 1994)

Echoing conventional religious teachings concerning sexual purity and women's virtue (Daly 1985), LDS leaders thus encouraged men to protect their women. Further, such statements suggest that women's unsanctioned sexual activity may render them less valuable to the men of the Church, and in so doing, potentially limit men's ability to claim status via the acquisition of "pure" or "godly" wives (also see: Daly 1985). Similarly, N. Eldon Tanner explained the divinely inspired roles of women 20 years earlier:

We hear so much about emancipation, independence, sexual liberation, birth control, abortion, and other insidious propaganda belittling the role of motherhood, all of which is Satan's way of destroying woman, *the home, and the family—the basic unit of society*. Some effective tools include the use of radio, television, and magazines where pornography abounds and where women are being debased and disgracefully used as sex symbols. ("No Greater Honor: The Woman's Role," *Ensign*, 1974)

Echoing conservative Christian depictions of inherent marital and familial gender roles (Bartkowski 2001), LDS leaders suggested pornography was yet another tool Satan would use to destroy moral "women" that submissively accepted their God-given subordination, and lead these women into the immoral realms represented by "liberation" and "independence." Considering the emphasis placed on patriarchal standards of women's sexuality in the previous illustrations, LDS leaders thus used pornography as an example (or interpreted women's

use of and/or participation in it) to bolster women's subordination to men within the Church.

LDS leaders thus facilitated moral opposition to pornography by stressing the detrimental influence these sexually explicit materials could have on women (but not men). Similar to some conservative Protestant (Bartkowski 2001), historically sanctioned Catholic (Daly 1985), Religious Right (Fetner 2008), Ex-Gay Ministry (Robinson and Spivey 2007), and some Islamic (Rinaldo 2008) religious traditions, they accomplished this by removing women's agency, and defining women as potential victims in need of paternal protection from both temptation *and* abuse at the hands of pornography producers. However, they never offered complementary talks concerning the importance of protecting men from pornography, and when they did discuss concerns about men, they never suggested that manhood was the problem or that women should protect their men. Rather, in such cases, they suggested that women (not men) should cover themselves and be protected for the benefit of men. Whereas these teachings allowed them to facilitate moral opposition to pornography, they relied upon depictions of women as inherently subordinate and weak, which ultimately facilitate the ongoing subordination of women (see: Schwalbe et al. 2000) and persistence of patriarchal systems of social control (Johnson 2005).

### Protecting the Children

Considering the familial emphasis evidenced throughout Mormon doctrine, it is not surprising that LDS leaders were acutely aware of the possible

negative effects pornography could have on children. As N. Eldon Tanner explained:

[D]ealers in pornography are accumulating great wealth at the expense of the people and to the detriment of their health. With all the evidence of child pornography, it is deplorable that any parent would allow any child to be so exploited. ("The Debate Is Over," *Ensign*, 1979)

Seeking to mobilize moral opposition and to maintain the Church's emphasis on parenthood, LDS leaders thus taught followers to protect their children from pornography.

LDS elites facilitated moral opposition to pornography by stressing the importance of taking an active role in the lives of kids. In an article explaining the importance of being mindful of the media options children are exposed to, for example, R. Gary Shapiro explained:

Based on this new movie's review as "arguably the best," we might have given our son permission to see it. However, we noticed in a longer review these warnings: "Unfortunately, the sex angle is dealt with here ... in a way that is less than tasteful, and one scene in particular may be enough to steer young ones in another direction, despite the PG rating." This review went on to mention the use of a certain word, "which supposedly nets an automatic PG-13 rating—though this movie is rated PG." It concludes with the warning that "parents should be advised that this isn't particularly a film for young children." Translated into biblical standards, this was an obscene movie. ("Leave the Obscene Unseen," *Ensign*, 1989)

LDS leaders explained that parents could protect their children from immoral influences by examining media offerings in order to ascertain what was and was not suitable. Spencer W. Kimball explained:

There is a link between pornography and the low, sexual drives and perversions. We live in a culture which venerates the orgasm, streaking, trading wives, and similar crazes. How low can humans plunge! We pray with our Lord that we may be kept from being in the world. It is sad that decent people are thrown into a filthy area of mental and spiritual pollution. We call upon all of our people to do all in their power to offset this ugly revolution. It is ridiculous to imply that pornography has no effect. There is a definite relationship to crime. Murder, robbery, rape, prostitution, and commercialized vice are fed on this immorality. Sex statistics seem to reflect a relationship between crime and pornography. It is utterly without redeeming social value. We urge our families to protect their children in every way possible. ("God Will Not Be Mocked," *Ensign*, 1974)

Kimball thus links pornography—in the abstract rather than giving a specific example—to "perversion" and "crime," and in so doing, also vilified healthy sexual activities, such as orgasms and homosexual relationships. Considering that some research has shown emotional and sexual benefits arising from responsible porn consumption (see: Weitzer 2009; Atwood 2011), LDS leaders' teachings relied upon simplifying or ignoring scientific knowledge concerning pornography use and outcomes.

LDS leaders also facilitated moral opposition to pornography by encouraging parents to teach their chil-

dren about sex. Similar to the aforementioned strategy, however, this tactic often relied upon advice concerning the importance of parents in children's lives, drawn from oversimplifications of pornography and sexuality. As Terrance D. Olson explained when discussing the importance of teaching children:

First of all, do not underestimate the power of children to choose the right when they have been properly taught. Although they may be confronted with drugs or pornography as early as elementary school, if they understand the truth about our purpose on Earth, the sacredness of our bodies, and the reality of right and wrong, they need not be traumatized by exposure to such incidents. ("Teaching Morality to Your Children," *Ensign*, 1981)

Echoing the emphasis on parental attention developed by Olson while adding derogatory language exhibited in other statements, Don L. Searle, Jr. explained:

The law can do little at present to deny erotica to the willing seeker, even if he be a juvenile. Filth seems able to find its way even into junior high and grade school youngsters' hands, aided many times by uncaring or, worse yet, conspiring adults. Can parents really expect, considering these influences, to protect their children from the effects of pornography? They can if they help the children develop an internal moral censor to steer them away from smutty material, even in the face of peer pressure. ("The Obscenity Flood: Can It Be Stopped?," *Ensign*, 1971)

In illustrations like this, LDS elites emphasize parental involvement, but couple this involvement

with depictions of sexual phenomena as inherently dirty and sinful. As Richard P. Lindsey explained in response to parental questions about pornographic influence:

I also suggest that we teach our children at an early age and in a positive way about our Father's greatest earthly creation—the human body—and about the sacred gift of procreation. Then, probably sometime after baptism, we should discuss with our children our feelings about pornography. By then, most children are aware it exists. Hopefully, we can short-circuit pornography's potentially destructive impact by dealing with it in a straightforward, sensitive way—in a gospel perspective—before the images overwhelm our children's minds. ("I Have a Question," *Ensign*, 1984)

Echoing America's failed attempts to reduce sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancies, and other unhealthy sexual issues through abstinence-only sexual education programs (see: Rose 2005), LDS leaders emphasized talking to children about sex in ways that ultimately reproduce children's fear and anxiety (also see: Elliott 2012). In so doing, their efforts to protect the children may have inadvertently left their children more vulnerable to negative aspects of sexual experience (Elliott 2012). In either case, their efforts allowed them to facilitate moral opposition by encouraging parents to take an active role in protecting their children from pornography.

In sum, LDS leaders facilitated moral opposition to pornography by encouraging parents to protect their children. In so doing, however, they reproduced simplified—and often misleading—conceptions of sexuality, which often put children at greater risk

for sexual trauma and negative outcomes (see: Rose 2005; Jewkes and Wykes 2012). Further, they accomplished this by amplifying parental fears about the safety of their children, and reproducing cultural notions that define parental efforts—rather than the complexity of social and biological realities children are exposed to—as the ultimate determining factor in children's development (see: Fields 2001). As a result, LDS leaders' facilitation of moral opposition to pornography may have inadvertently exacerbated the problematic influences they initially sought to resist.

## Conclusion

LDS leaders have been deeply concerned with possible negative effects of pornography and the rapid expansion of pornographic material in recent years. At the same time, pornographic celebrations of loosening sexual restraints and non-procreative sexual pleasure threatened institutionalized interpretations of LDS sexual morality. Seeking to resolve these dilemmas, LDS leaders, beginning in the 1970's and continuing into the present, made pornography a central element of their religious teaching, and devoted substantial time to constructing pornography as inherently immoral. In so doing, they facilitated moral opposition to pornography by teaching their followers to set a moral example for others, save the women among them from sexual excess, and protect their children.

While their facilitation of moral opposition allowed them to successfully mobilize followers against pornography, it also reproduced cultural notions concerning sex, gender, and families that facilitate

negative sexual experiences and the subordination of women and sexual minorities. By characterizing women as potential victims in need of paternal protection and all non-marital sexual relations as ultimately immoral, for example, they reproduced conventional religious and sexual teachings used to justify the marginalization of women, sexual minorities, and sexual diversity in many religious and secular contexts (see, e.g., Robinson and Spivey 2007; Fetner 2008; Sumerau 2012). Similarly, their simplification of sexual realities and emphasis on only the possible negative aspects of pornography without consideration for possible benefits of pornographic and sexual exploration reproduced patterns of sexual education and regulation that have led the United States to lead all industrialized nations in teen and other unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual violence, and sexually-related crime (see, e.g., Rose 2005; Jewkes and Wykes 2012). Whereas sexualities and religion researchers have sought to understand why religious groups develop wholly oppositional stances to pornography (Sherkat and Ellison 1997), as well as sexual education programs that could drastically improve sexual satisfaction, safety, and health (Rose 2005), these findings suggest that part of this answer may lie in the ways religious leaders construct and teach their followers about sexual issues.

These findings also support research on the impact of religion on controversial sexual issues (see, e.g., Peterson and Donnerwerth 1997; Rinaldo 2008; Sharp 2009), public policy debates concerning sexualities (see, e.g., Rohlinger 2006; Robinson and Spivey 2007; Scheitle and Hahn 2011), and societal regulations of sexual behavior (see, e.g., Durkheim

1897; Weber 1922; Tiryakian 1981), and extend this research by revealing how religious leaders, regardless of their intentions, draw on their institutional and theological authority to facilitate moral opposition. LDS leaders employed their prominent positions to define pornographic consumption as a dangerous social problem, and provide a set of acceptable strategies followers could adopt to solve this dilemma. Similar to leaders of other conservative Christian groups, such as the Religious Right (Fetner 2008), Ex-Gay Ministries (Robinson and Spivey 2007), and the National Right to Life movement (Rohlinger 2006), they promoted a faith-based definition of moral sexuality, which ultimately elevated the status of some sexual groups and practices at the expense of others. Whereas researchers have generally focused on the outcomes of religious teachings concerning sexuality (see: Sherkat and Ellison 1997), the case of LDS leaders suggests, as Weber (1922) noted, there may be much to learn from the role religious leaders play in creating dominant "cognitive structures" (Sherkat and Ellison 1997) concerning social problems.

While our analysis of LDS leaders' statements concerning pornography may appear unique, as a sensitizing concept (Blumer 1969), "facilitating moral opposition" may shed light on past, present, and future religious reactions to controversial issues. In fact, existing literature provides an implicit glimpse of ways this process may occur across many religious traditions. Research exploring conservative Protestant depictions of homosexuality, for example, reveals that followers of many different traditions have been taught similar lessons about gay and lesbian experience (Wolkomir 2006). Similarly,

research into Religious Right notions of "family values" demonstrates that a small group of religious leaders may mobilize people from a wide variety of different organizational and denominational strands of Christianity by appealing to shared notions of familial morality (Fetner 2008). Echoing these trends, researchers examining Ex-Gay groups found that leaders often relied upon stereotypical depictions of feminism and traditional psychological models to justify movement activity against lesbian, gay, and women's rights groups (Robinson and Spivey 2007). Further, research into contemporary debates within the United Methodist Church found that, depending on which side of the conflict they were on, leaders drew upon either traditional or progressive interpretations of Christian morality to gain support for their positions (see: Moon [2004] for similar dynamics among organizational leaders in other Protestant traditions, also see: Cadge et al. 2012). Although only systematic empirical research on these and other religious controversies can uncover the precise processes whereby religious leaders define the nature of and responses to sexual issues, we believe that facilitating moral opposition is likely a generic social process (Schwalbe et al. 2000) of moral regulation. While future research may reveal important variations in how the process works, we believe that facilitating moral opposition may be examined across diverse religious traditions.

## References

Attwood, Feona. 2011. "The Paradigm Shift: Pornography Research, Sexualization, and Extreme Images." *Sociology Compass* 5:13-22.

To fully understand the "cognitive structures" (Sherkat and Ellison 1997) believers draw upon to make sense of social issues, we must not limit our analysis to outcomes. Rather, we must also examine the ways religious leaders construct and disseminate the shared "ways of thinking" (Sherkat and Ellison 1997) and authoritative claims (Schwalbe et al. 2000) believers rely upon throughout their secular and religious experiences. This will require expanding and integrating our conceptual and methodological toolkits to make sense of both what religious leaders do in the name of morality *and* the outcomes of these actions. While religious leaders—like those at the heart of our analysis—may facilitate moral opposition to any number of social issues, they may also engage in similar processes to provide moral support for other social issues. Unraveling and comparing the variations in religious leaders' teachings, claims, and social constructions of social issues—sexual or otherwise—may provide important insight into the mechanisms of social change.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Alexandra C. H. Nowakowski and Alaina A. B. Mathers for their insightful comments throughout the composition process.

Bartkowski, John. 2001. *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiation in Evangelical Families*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.



Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bogard, Cynthia J. 2001. "Claims-Makers and Context in Early Constructions of Homelessness: A Comparison of New York City and Washington, D.C." *Symbolic Interaction* 24:425-454.

Cadge, Wendy et al. 2012. "Uncertainty in Clergy's Perspectives on Homosexuality: A Research Note." *Review of Religious Research* 3:371-387.

Cragun, Ryan T. and Rick Phillips. 2012. *Could I Vote for a Mormon for President? An Election Year Guide to Mitt Romney's Religion*. Washington, DC: Strange Violin Editions.

Daly, Mary. 1985. *The Church and the Second Sex*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Durkheim, Emile. 1897. *Suicide*. New York: Free Press.

Elliott, Sinikka. 2012. *Not My Kid: What Parents Believe About the Sex Lives of Their Teenagers*. New York: New York University Press.

Ezzell, Matthew B. 2009. "Pornography, Lad Mags, Video Games, and Boys: Reviving the Canary in the Cultural Coal Mine." Pp. 7-32 in *The Sexualization of Childhood*, edited by S. Olfman. Westport: Praeger.

Fetner, Tina. 2008. *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*. Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press.

Fields, Jessica. 2001. "Normal Queers: Straight Parents Respond to Their Children's 'Coming Out.'" *Symbolic Interaction* 24:165-187.

Funk, Cary and Gregory Smith. 2012. *"Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*. Washington, DC: The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Retrieved March 19, 2013 (<http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>).

Grubbs, Joshua B. et al. 2014. "Transgression as Addiction: Religiosity and Moral Disapproval as Predictors of Per-

ceived Addiction to Pornography." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44:125-136.

Gubrium, Jaber F. and James A. Holstein. 2000. "The Self in a World of Going Concerns." *Symbolic Interaction* 23:95-115.

Jewkes, Yvonne and Maggie Wykes. 2012. "Reconstructing the Sexual Abuse of Children: 'Cyber Paeds,' Panic, and Power." *Sexualities* 15:934-952.

Johnson, Allan G. 2005. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Ley, David, Nicole Prause, and Peter Finn. 2014. "The Emperor Has No Clothes: A Review of the 'Pornography Addiction' Model." *Current Sexual Health Reports* 6:94-105.

Lottes, Ilsa, Martin S. Weinberg, and Inge Weller. 1993. "Reactions to Pornography on a College Campus: For or Against?" *Sex Roles* 29:69-89.

Ludlow, Daniel H., (ed.). 1992. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. New York: Macmillan.

Manning, Jill C. 2006. "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Marriage and the Family: A Review of the Research." *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 13:131-165.

Moon, Dawne. 2004. *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Patterson, Richard and Joseph Price. 2012. "Pornography, Religion, and the Happiness Gap: Does Pornography Impact the Actively Religious Differently?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51:79-89.

Petersen, Larry R. and Gregory V. Donnenwerth. 1997. "Secularization and the Influence of Religion on Premarital Sex." *Social Forces* 75:1071-1088.

Phillips, Rick. 2005. *Conservative Christian Identity and Same-Sex Orientation*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Rinaldo, Rachel. 2008. "Envisioning the Nation: Women Activists, Religion, and the Public Sphere in Indonesia." *Social Forces* 86:1781-1804.

Robinson, Christine M. and Sue E. Spivey. 2007. "The Politics of Masculinity and the Ex-Gay Movement." *Gender & Society* 21:650-675.

Rohlinger, Deana A. 2006. "Friend and Foe: Media, Politics, and Tactics in the Abortion War." *Social Problems* 53:537-561.

Rose, Susan. 2005. "Going Too Far? Sex, Sin, and Social Policy." *Social Forces* 84:1207-1232.

Sarracino, Carmine and Kevin M. Scott. 2009. *The Porning of America. The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go From Here*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Scheitle, Christopher P. and Bryanna B. Hahn. 2011. "From the Pews to Policy: Specifying Evangelical Protestantism's Influence on States' Sexual Orientation Policies." *Social Forces* 89:913-933.

Schwalbe, Michael et al. 2000. "Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis." *Social Forces* 79:419-452.

Sharp, Shane. 2009. "Escaping Symbolic Entrapment, Maintaining Social Identities." *Social Problems* 56:267-284.

Sherkat, Darren E. and Christopher G. Ellison. 1997. "The Cognitive Structure of a Moral Crusade: Conservative Protestantism and Opposition to Pornography." *Social Forces* 75:957-980.

Stack, Steven, Ira Wasserman, and Roger Kern. 2004. "Adult Social Bonds and Use of Internet Pornography." *Social Science Quarterly* 85:75-88.

Sumerau, J. Edward. 2012. "'That's What Men Are Supposed To Do': Compensatory Manhood Acts in an LGBT Christian Church." *Gender & Society* 26:461-487.

Sumerau, J. Edward and Ryan T. Cragun. 2014. "'Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do That to Anyone': Oppressive Othering Through Sexual Classification Schemes in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." *Symbolic Interaction* 37:331-353.

Tiryakian, Edward A. 1981. "Sexual Anomie, Social Structure, Societal Change." *Social Forces* 59:1025-1053.

Uecker, Jeremy E., Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret L. Vaaler. 2007. "Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood." *Social Forces* 85:1667-1692.

Weber, Max. 1922. *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Weitzer, Ronald. 2009. "Sociology of Sex Work." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35:213-234.

Wolkomir, Michelle. 2006. *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Sumerau, J. Edward and Ryan T. Cragun. 2016. "'How Low Can Humans Plunge!': Facilitating Moral Opposition in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 12(1):42-59. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)).