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Worthy “Gods” and “Goddesses”

The Meaning of Modesty in the Normalization of Latter-day Saint Gender Roles

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Abstract

Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the rejection of sexualized bodily display has been institutionalized and dogmatized, reflecting a gendered paradigm in which modesty functions as a necessary element in members’ temporal (hetero-) sexual practices, and in broader beliefs about the nature of the afterlife. Through a pervasive bureaucratic communicative model, Latter-day Saints are socialized to internalize and appropriate both Church dogma and Church-sanctioned standards of modesty, normalizing both temporal and eternal gender-based roles. Using LDS primary sources, I demonstrate the ubiquity of institutionalized messages on the body and sexuality, and the relationship of these concepts to LDS cosmology that serves as the institutional justification for the clear demarcation of gender roles and the division of gendered power. Through an emic understanding of the meaning of modesty, I argue that the normalization of modesty and chastity through immersive socialization acts to enforce the patriarchy of not only the temporal Church hierarchy but of Mormon concepts about eternity.

Clothing, Communication, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

We first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in the world we have produced. Alas, there is magic in our self deceptions (Carey: 30).

[1] Across cultures, clothing is communicative as an aesthetic form, divulging conscious and subconscious signals about the body beneath it. The Western world is often portrayed as obsessed with an elusive standard of youthful beauty, reinforced through sexualized

mediated images. But not every individual participates in the beauty obsession, and there are certainly subcultures that repudiate it altogether. While enhancement and display are obvious forms of self-communication, the counter-interpretation of appearance as communication self-consciously steps back from invitations to display, extolling instead virtues of modesty and moderation in appearance. The imagined omission of sexuality from one’s appearance is, then, one appropriation of the tool of appearance to communicate the idealized self.

[2] Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormons), the rejection of sexualized bodily display has been institutionalized and dogmatized. Modesty, practiced in varying degrees in the lives of faithful members, reflects a paradigm in which men and women inhabit distinct spheres of being, and in which the body serves a particular divine purpose unique to the LDS. Modesty, as an expression of chastity, functions as a necessary element in both members’ temporal (hetero-) sexual practices, and in broader Mormon cosmology. Through a pervasive bureaucratic communicative model, Latter-day Saints are effectively socialized from an early age to internalize and appropriate Church vernacular standards of modesty and chastity, which help normalize both temporal and eternal gender-based roles.

Research Design

[3] Within the LDS and other faith communities, belief often mimics theory, shaping believers’ understanding of the meaning of sacred practice. For faithful Mormons, the doctrine and teachings of the Church are often literal, scientific explanations for both natural phenomenon (e.g., physical gender differences) and cultural practice (sartorial messaging). Because of this, in this paper I treat normalizing vernacular discourses as theory enacted in the lives of faithful Mormons. Rather than relying solely on secular academic theorists to understand modesty and gender roles in the LDS context, I rely also on Mormon explanations of what these things mean, an emic representation (following Duffy: 2). Institutionalized messages on the body and the function of sexuality are ubiquitous, and directed to members from an early age. Because concepts of modesty and chastity are intricately linked to Mormon cosmology, which serves as the institutional justification for the clear demarcation of gender roles, I expound the implications of these concepts on the overall structuring of the gendered lives of Mormon adherents, as well as ways in which members appropriate definitions of modesty in the creation of a uniquely Mormon cultural identity.

[4] Why modesty matters to a faithful Mormon is different, of course, from an understanding of the work modesty actually accomplishes. Because Mormons “know why they do what they do, but they do not know what they are doing does” (Bell: 164), I rely on theories of normalization and power to understand the consequences of LDS emphasis on the modest body, demonstrating the essential nature of socialization in modesty to the normalization of a gendered worldview. Using notions from Foucault’s disciplinary framework, I show how LDS authorities appropriate culturally normative discourses on modesty and chastity which socialize members into acceptable appearance standards, which are then internalized and self-policed by faithful Saints. The normalization of modesty and chastity through immersive socialization acts to enforce the patriarchy of not only the temporal Church hierarchy but of Mormon concepts about eternity.

[5] In this paper I do not attempt to distinguish “official” Church doctrine, considered divinely-revealed truth, from teachings and suggestions offered as “counsel” by Church authorities; taken together, I consider these tools of the Church’s immersive socialization of the individual.¹ I am interested in the ways that various strains of prescriptive discourse – from the divinely inspired to the culturally specific – result in the normalization of gender roles. By relying on a mix of official Church documents, the LDS Scriptural canon, speeches by Church authorities, and works by members, I hope to capture the broad range of understanding necessary to appreciate the complexity of regulatory religious messaging. The quotes and phrases employed in this paper are representative of common top-down discourse, demonstrating the ubiquity of these themes and the inevitability of their ensuing internalization by faithful members. Though many quotes have been chosen because of their contribution to the historical development of Mormon thought, most historical quotes were actually located by the author as references in modern publications and speeches; their modern-day repetition reinforces their still-valid normalizing power. Moreover, to avoid including outdated information, these older quotes have been screened through informal discussions with members to ensure that they are resonant and representative in their significance and ubiquity in modern Mormon thought. Some quotes are recent and some are historical; some are directed at single members, some at children, and some at married couples; but all represent a culture of implicit and immersive gender specificity.

[6] As with many faiths, there are areas of LDS belief and practice considered so sacred that many members feel they should not be discussed – particularly rituals which take place in the temple. Many LDS may be offended by discussion of such ceremonies, particularly by a non-member with (necessarily) no firsthand knowledge of the temple. I do not take such concerns lightly. However, an analysis of Mormon modesty and gender roles would be incomplete without including a discussion of temple garments, the foundation for Church teachings on modesty. I attempt to remain sensitive to this issue by offering only information that is well substantiated by Church authorities and active Mormons.

[7] Throughout the paper, I use the term “faithful” to designate Mormons whose beliefs and practices are in agreement with Church teachings – those who accept and live out the teachings of the Church, at least in the areas of bodily deportment discussed in this paper. Of course, this is a convenient category for understanding a more complex reality: individual members’ acceptance of Church teachings varies widely among those who self-identify as “Mormon,” ranging from complete skepticism among cultural, inactive Mormons to full acceptance and literal interpretation among the active and faithful. “Faithful members,” then, are those painted by Church authorities as “ideal” Mormons: those who internalize and accept Church teachings as inerrant truth.

¹ While the President of the Church is considered the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator and is believed to have a direct line of communication from God, his words are not considered to be divinely inspired (or official Church doctrine) unless an official “sustaining” vote is cast. He is considered to be only offering wise counsel when speaking “off the record,” or out of his official capacity of Prophet. Similarly, educational and religious materials endorsed and censored by the Church are regarded as guidelines for righteous living, but that endorsement should not be confused with equating these materials to the divine nature of Scripture. However, Church publications do have an authoritative, omniscient voice and are often endorsed by the Church Presidency, giving them unmistakable authority and normative power in the day-to-day lives of members.

Why Modesty Matters: Gender and the Divine Potential

[8] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a unique American religion, known for many beliefs and practices deemed noxious to a more American Christian sensibility, such as a disavowal of the concept of the Trinity, the (now suspended) practice of polygamy,² and the belief in the ultimate divine potential of mankind. Founded by the young Joseph Smith after a series of supernatural visions in the 1830s, the Church has always been a mysterious one, with many beliefs and practices considered enigmatic or even cult-like by outsiders. Today, Mormons comprise about 1.7% of the United States’ adult population, or over five million people; Church sources estimate more than thirteen million members worldwide (LDS 2009). Mormonism’s appropriation of appearance-as-communication is one way that the LDS both interact with and resist society at large, in ways unique from other modesty-minded Christian denominations because of the centrality of Mormonism’s emphasis on the gendered nature of souls. A Mormon’s heavenly standing is constructed socially in part through dress, and this status marker serves as a form of social control. LDS women, in particular, are socialized to accept their over-determined gender roles as both necessary and ideal, a socialization that hinges on normalized views of the body and sexuality. This manifests through the wearing of specific religious garments but also more broadly through emphasis on modesty and moderation in appearance. Modesty, as an expression of chastity, functions as a necessary element in the complex cosmology that shapes the Mormon worldview.

[9] From early childhood, members begin the process of internalizing ideas of gender difference and ensuing modesty standards. Active Mormons are surrounded by Church teachings and ideals at every turn: the time commitments required of a faithful Saint make the religious social sphere the primary sphere in his or her life,³ creating an arguably insular LDS culture wherein children and converts are gradually and completely oriented to social norms and regulations. At church meetings, LDS doctrine is continually taught and reinforced beginning at 18 months of age (through simplified “nursery” lessons) and continuing through adulthood, using Church-published manuals to organize lessons around pre-approved doctrines or themes. Moreover, through ubiquitous use of media such as Church-sanctioned magazines, books, pamphlets, and videos,⁴ the Church gains a pervasive

² Although polygamy was officially abandoned by the Church in 1890, it remains a vibrant part of LDS belief about the structure of the afterlife and, in part, accounts for the structure of gender relationships in the Church.

³ The faithful Saint is busy nearly all week long, attending weekly Sacrament meetings, Sunday School, Relief Society or Priesthood meetings (for adult women and men, respectively), Young Men’s and Young Women’s meetings (for youth), stake and ward events, and devoting time to individual “callings” (unpaid service work for the Church, typically gender-specific and ranging from janitorial service to bishop of the local ward).

⁴ In the 1960s, Church authorities began a series of concerted efforts to correlate the instructional efforts of the Church worldwide. This bureaucratic censoring group is today known as the Correlation Committee, charged with the production of coherent and integrated publications for the dissemination of doctrinal and social practices of the Church. The Correlation Committee creates and distributes all Church-sponsored and approved educational and spiritual material, including Church magazines, websites, manuals, brochures, and lesson materials for use in Church meetings. Because of the standardization of doctrine and instruction through the Correlation Committee, Church stances and guidelines can be easily identified, even if practices or

presence in the lives of active members, constantly reaffirming the doctrine and standards of the Church in all areas of life, including gender roles and the body.

[10] In the LDS origin story, all humans existed pre-mortally as spiritual beings born of Heavenly Father and his wife, our heavenly mother.⁵ In 1925, the First Presidency taught: “Man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality” (LDS 2002a). As spirit children in the pre-existence, our souls were unambiguously male or female, as “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose” (Hinckley 1995). This doctrine has been incorporated into the standardized lessons for junior primary (ages 4-7): children learn that they lived with “Heavenly Father” and “heavenly mother” in the pre-existence (LDS 1995: 11-15), introducing them at an early age to the idea of a gendered (and definitively hierarchical) heavenly order. Interestingly, in the teaching manual the term “Heavenly Father” is capitalized as a proper name, and “heavenly mother” is not, distinguishing the personal and revered masculine from the vague feminine. This manual, of course, is seen only by the teacher; while children are introduced to the importance of gender in the heavenly realms, the teacher (almost always a woman) is concomitantly receiving a lesson in eternal divine hierarchy.

[11] Because of Mormon beliefs about the nature of deity and the origins of humankind, the LDS Church is particularly focused on the physical being of man – and the relation of that physical being to the nature of existence. In Mormon cosmology, Heavenly Father is the primary deistic being, who was once a mortal man. Although no details are understood about his experience as a man, traditional Mormon theology posits that because of his righteousness he eventually attained his current status as God. In Mormon thought, Heavenly Father has a literal, physical “body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22). Moreover, mankind is created in Heavenly Father’s image, as both our physical bodies and our spirits mirror his (see Moses 2:26-27 in the Pearl of Great Price). Children are taught to value their bodies and to understand them as sacred and divine; one nursery song, for children ages 18 months to three years, establishes this divine connection early on:

I have a special body
Heavenly Father gave to me.
He gave me ears so I might hear
And eyes that I might see . . .
When I think about my body,
The best part of it is

teachings cannot be clearly identified as “doctrinal” or not. The Committee creates and maintains normalizing discourses that reinforce Church beliefs about the importance of the body.

⁵ While not specified in LDS doctrine whether Heavenly Father has one or many wives, many LDS interpret such Scripture as Doctrine and Covenants 132 to indicate that Heavenly Father must be polygamous as that is an essential characteristic of anyone who has achieved the highest level of exaltation (godhood).

That Heavenly Father planned it
To look very much like His (LDS 2008a: 40).

[12] The origin of God is reflected in the purpose of man: through eternal progression, to ultimately become a god himself. In the Church’s infancy, one patriarch of the Church declared in 1840: “As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be” (Snow, cited in Lund). In 1909, officials in the Church’s highest office, the First Presidency,⁶ explained this central teaching:

Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God (LDS 2002a: 30).

[13] In Mormon doctrine, the self is a soul understood as a combination of the individual’s spirit and the overtly corporeal body: “The spirit and the body are the soul of man” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:15). Although humans existed as spirits in the pre-existence, the mortal existence and post-mortal existence (eternity) are both physical realms in which human spirits are joined with bodies, so that the body – perhaps more so than the spirit – is the repository of humankind’s “divine potential,”⁷ a thing “sacred and divine” (Hinckley 1988: 11). Because humanity is created in the image and likeness of God, it is considered a misuse of the divine power of creation to engage in sexual activity of any kind before marriage or outside its holy covenants (see LDS 2008b). Church youth are warned: “In God’s sight, sexual sins are extremely serious because they defile the power God has given us to create life. . . Sexual sins are more serious than any other sins except murder or denying the Holy Ghost” (LDS 2001: 26; see also Alma 39:5). Modesty is seen as a natural manifestation of the virtue of chastity as it is a tool for aiding in the control of lustful desires. In this way, immodesty is treated as a sexual, female sin. Modesty, as a treatment of the physical body, polices acceptable sexuality and ensures proper use of the body’s divine abilities.

[14] Standards for modesty and the meaning of the body are ubiquitous in the lives of faithful members; and modesty, as the loaded (and often gender-differentiating) temporal practice of corporeal covering, is not without its consequences. Although apologists for the Church would argue that the lifestyle concepts of modesty and chastity are equally important for men and women, injunctions to practice modesty are almost exclusively aimed at women and, through cultural normalization, act to (re)enforce the patriarchal hierarchy of not only the Church but of Mormon concepts about eternity.

⁶ The Church’s hierarchy is built on a complex bureaucratic model: At the apex of authority is the President of the Church, considered the oracle of God and the “prophet, seer, and revelator.” Together with two other men he is called the First Presidency. The Quorum of the Twelve is directly below them in power, and the Twelve combined with the First Presidency are all referred to as “apostles.” Faithful members of the church are required to “sustain” each of these men, which ritually signifies their belief that these men have been appointed God’s spokesmen on earth, giving each of them enormous normative authority.

⁷ A common term in LDS discourse, referring to humankind’s ability to achieve godhood in the afterlife.

“The Patriarchal Order”: Marriage and the Normalization of Gender Roles

[15] The LDS belief in the gendered nature of souls is a useful tool in the communication of gender roles during this mortal existence. Women and men are gendered by divine order, an “eternal principle” that accounts for innate differences between the sexes: Men are leaders and providers, the “presiding authority in the family” (LDS 2002b: 56); women are “compassionate, self-sacrificing, [and] loving” (Scott: 3). It has even been argued by (male) Mormon apologists that during the pre-existence, women chose the nurturing role of motherhood over the leadership role of priesthood, the role of the “family heart” over the role of “family head” (Bednarowski: 13).

[16] The concept of gender as an essential part of one’s identity translates to practices of modesty and chastity through an understanding, made both implicit and explicit in LDS teachings, of the centrality of marriage and spousal roles in Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation. At birth, a spirit created by Heavenly Parents is joined with a mortal body created by earthly parents to form the soul: this body acquisition is a necessary step toward eventual godhood. While individuals must have other necessary experiences for their progression, such as choosing to follow righteousness, the primary purpose of mortality is to obtain a God-like body for procreation. In order to procreate righteously, one must marry; thus marriage is strictly necessary for exaltation. A man or woman who is not celestially married⁸ cannot progress toward godhood nor be with his or her family in eternity; but remains single and relegated to a status similar to angels, an inferior position marked by servitude (Doctrine and Covenants 132:15-17). In fact, marriage in the LDS temple is not only a sacrament (much like in the Roman Catholic faith), but one that is *as central* to eternal progression as is baptism. LDS publications reaffirm these priorities, encouraging temple marriage and alienating those who do not comply:

Couples who continue to fail to meet the requirements to qualify for temple marriage, and single members who are of marriageable age and full accountability who are not actively seeking . . . to enter into the covenant of eternal marriage with a worthy companion, are as unwise as if they avoided the covenants of baptism or of the priesthood. It matters not that they may have been endowed or that they regularly attend the temple. . . All of these things are simply preparatory and preliminary to the ordinance of celestial marriage (Larsen: 6)

[17] Within marriage, procreation serves a similar, spiritually vital function. As spiritual children of Heavenly parents, the ability to procreate is taken as evidence of divine lineage. It is the duty of LDS couples to procreate, for in doing so they provide physical bodies (“tabernacles”) for Heavenly Father’s spiritual children. In 1942, the First Presidency explained that the eternal fate of these spirits rests in the hands of married couples:

⁸ Celestial marriage is an LDS sacrament that requires that both parties be worthy LDS members who marry in a temple ceremony. In the ceremony, which is closed to non-Mormons, the parties covenant “for time and eternity,” as opposed to the temporal “till death do us part” of most Western marriage ceremonies. Latter-day Saints believe that only celestial marriages of this sort will be in effect in the afterlife.

It is the duty of every husband and wife to obey the command given to Adam to multiply and replenish the earth, so that the legions of choice spirits waiting for their tabernacles of flesh may come here . . . for without these fleshly tabernacles they cannot progress to their God-planned destiny (quoted in Packer 1993b).

In fact, in 1975, President Spencer W. Kimball explained that in the pre-mortal existence, all humans made a solemn oath “to our Heavenly Father, that if He would send us to the earth and give us bodies and give to us the priceless opportunities that earth life afforded, we would keep our lives clean and would marry in the holy temple and would rear a family and teach them righteousness” (quoted in LDS 2002b: 28).

[18] Women especially are taught from an early age to “plan and prepare for marriage and the bearing and rearing of children” as it is their “divine right and the avenue to the greatest and most supreme happiness” (Kimball 1979). Marriage is central to an LDS woman’s service to God, as “a woman’s greatest mission in life is an honorable and happy marriage with the rearing of an honorable and happy family” (Hinckley 1988). Before marriage, then, a woman must strive to make herself worthy of a godly spouse. After all, “a virtuous returned missionary is attracted to a virtuous young woman – one who has a testimony of Jesus Christ and is committed to a life of purity” (Dalton). Worthiness is a common theme, and to be married in the temple and thus garner all the accompanying blessings (including the potential for eternal progression, the ultimate goal), one must prepare well in advance of the wedding date to qualify. Interested parties must have been a member for at least one year prior to their marriage; and they must submit to a “worthiness interview” with their ward bishop (as well as a separate interview with the bishop’s superior, the stake president) to gain a valid temple recommend, which among other requirements ensures that they have tithed ten percent of their income to the Church, lived the Word of Wisdom,⁹ and followed the law of chastity (on temple worthiness, see Hunter).

[19] Just as in the Foucaultian examination tradition, the Church controls members’ behavior by normalizing certain skills and requiring them to study in order to pass the test. By preparing for at least a year to receive a recommend, members are being tested; in fact, they “are actually seeking permission from the Lord to enter the temple” (LDS 2003: 6), as the ward bishop is seen to be acting on behalf of God himself. The Church emphasizes, “When you obey God’s commandment to be sexually pure, you prepare yourself to make and keep sacred covenants in the temple. You prepare yourself to build a strong marriage and to bring children into the world as part of a loving family” (LDS 2001: 26), a recurrent discourse in the LDS youth magazine *New Era* as well as Young Women’s course materials for girls ages 12-17.

[20] Women are taught to view motherhood as the highest possible womanly achievement, echoing the divine: “Eve and her daughters can become cocreators with God by preparing bodies for his spirit children to occupy on earth and later in eternity.” Although mothering

⁹ The Word of Wisdom is a revelation received by Joseph Smith and recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 89. It is considered a health code and forbids the use of alcohol, hot drinks (coffee and tea), and tobacco, and is widely interpreted today to also include caffeine.

involves admitted “inconvenience, suffering, travail, and sorrow,” a LDS woman should see these “as natural consequences and not as a curse,” (Rasmussen: 17). Indeed, LDS women are admonished to avoid responsibilities outside the home that detract or distract from child-rearing, as “The mother who entrusts her child to the care of others that she may do nonmotherly work, whether for gold, for fame, for civic service should remember that in Proverbs we read, ‘A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame’” (Kimball 1976). But full-time mothering is not treated as a sacrifice, as “motherhood is near to divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by” a woman (quoted in Packer 1993b). Moreover, the blessing of childbearing is not reserved for the mortal realm, as upon achieving the highest level of exaltation, a worthy LDS woman will bear innumerable children. As a consolation to barren LDS women, Brigham Young promised, “You will see the time when you will have millions of children around you. . . Be faithful, and if you are not blest with children in this time, you will be hereafter” (quoted in LDS 2000: 97). But whether or not childbearing is a divine, powerful role is contested; indeed, “heavenly mother” herself occupies a role and identity so vague that the only official teaching concerning her is her status as mother and Heavenly Father’s wife. Her existence is rarely acknowledge and she is never described in LDS doctrine as a goddess, although Heavenly Father is defined as a god and it is the understanding that men and women who are eternally sealed can obtain joint godhood.¹⁰

[21] Modesty, enacted as a means of achieving and maintaining chastity, is the foremost link between obtaining the ideal maternal body during the mortal lifetime and the ideal maternal body in the Celestial Kingdom. In this way, then, the creation of the ideal maternal/spousal body (a covered and desexualized body) through modesty works to create the ideal type/role for women. Young men are instructed to avoid marrying women who do not represent this ideal maternal type:

So many of our own young women sacrifice their God-given endowment of femininity, deep spirituality, and a caring interest in others on the altar of popular, worldly opinion. Young men, let such young women know that you will not seek an eternal companion from those that are overcome by worldly trends (Scott: 5)

[22] While female roles may be constraining, so too may be the role of the male. Young men are routinely admonished, “Your gender was determined in the premortal existence. You were born a male. You must treasure and protect the masculine part of your nature. You must have respectful, protective regard for all women and girls” (Packer 2009). As the leader and protector, men must be strong and brave; pressure to marry young and fully financially support a family is evident. One Church authority cautioned:

We hear of some worthy LDS men in their thirties who are busy accumulating property and enjoying freedom from family responsibilities

¹⁰ This issue is negotiated in various ways by members. In conversation, one young Mormon wife told me she consoles herself with the thought that perhaps on other planets, heavenly mother is the creative and active force and Heavenly Father the nurturing force. Of course, teachings about the immutability of the patriarchal order (in this life and the next) problematize this theory.

without any sense of urgency about marriage. Beware, brethren. You are deficient in a sacred duty (Oaks 1993).

[23] Along with this duty, however, men are bequeathed with power. They are the bearers of priesthood authority, gods among men. The priesthood, for men ages twelve and up, is blatantly described as the repository of earthly power. When sons reach the age of twelve and receive the priesthood, they are automatically imbued with more power and authority than their mothers. In fact, male priesthood holders act as literal ambassadors for Heavenly Father on earth: “Priesthood is the authority and the power which God has granted to men on earth to act for Him. . . . When we exercise priesthood authority properly, we do what *He* would do if He were present” (Packer 1993a). Along with this power, the male is also given great responsibility: ruling (albeit justly) over his wife and family (see Moses 4:22, Pearl of Great Price). President Gordon B. Hinckley taught:

By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners (Hinckley 1995).

[24] In marriage, these gender roles taken together are described as the God-mandated patriarchal order, which “provides for order and a basis for government in the kingdom of God.” The patriarchal order in the family (as well as in the Church hierarchy) is “the Lord’s system of government,” in which the father is the “presiding officer.” The proper wifely role then, is to be a “loving, knowledgeable counselor, helpmate, and partner” (Larsen). This power structure is both temporal and eternal: “The patriarchal order is of divine origin and will continue throughout time and eternity” (Smith, cited in Barlow), as “the Lord has told us that the patriarchal order will be the order of things in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom” (Kofford). And the patriarchal order is vital, too, as “exaltation can be achieved in no other state” (Larsen). That is, not only is celestial marriage necessary for eternal progression; but that marriage must be patriarchal:

Fatherhood is leadership, the most important kind of leadership. It has always been so; it always will be so. Father, with the assistance and counsel and encouragement of your eternal companion, you preside in the home. It is not a matter of whether you are most worthy or best qualified, but it is a matter of [divine] appointment (The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: 16).

[25] Young women are taught early to submit or defer to their future husbands’ authority, with official lessons to that effect beginning at age 12 (see LDS 2002b: 56); young men are similarly taught to prepare at a young age to become the “patriarch” of their own eventual households (see LDS 1993: 78). Husbands and wives are portrayed as joint partners, even “coequals,” as “Men and women have different but equally important responsibilities in the home and the Church” (LDS 2000: 91). It is clear that the male needs the female (and vice versa) for ultimate godhood to be achieved, as only temple-married couples are eligible for eternal progression. Despite this seeming equality, however, the “difference” in roles is one of power: as the repository of divine priesthood authority, men are innately more powerful than women, and a clear hierarchy is delineated: “In the home the presiding authority is

always vested in the father, and in all home affairs and family matters there is no other authority paramount” (Smith, cited in Perry).

[26] Despite her more passive role, women clearly have a form of power: the feminine ability, through sexual beauty, to incite male desire (associated with, of course, the divine power of procreation). Though this is arguably a form of power with real consequences (either aiding in or sullyng a man’s ability to progress spiritually), it is also a burden, placing the responsibility for both female and male purity on the shoulders of the woman. Through an unchaste appearance, a woman can illicit unholy desires in even a worthy young man. In a 2006 *New Era* article, young men and women are given tips for respecting each other on dates. Young women are imbued with power: “As you dress and behave modestly, you can have a great impact on young men. Your modest actions and dress will help them control their thoughts and focus on virtue and that which is wholesome.” Young men, on the other hand, are told to “encourage young women to live the standards of the gospel” with the sole example of a young man who sent a note to his date “telling her how much he appreciated her dressing modestly” (Clark and Clark).

[27] According to an elder of the Church, many women “dress and act immodestly because they are told that is what [men] want.” He advises these men to “communicate how distasteful revealing attire is to you, a worthy young man, and how it stimulates unwanted emotions from what you see against your will” (Scott). This belief in beauty’s power to incite desire leads to a distrust of male self-control – or, more accurately, a shifting of the burden of responsibility for the purity of both men and women to the women themselves. And this is considered fitting, for after all women have been entrusted with this ultimate divine power of (pro)creation, a power situated in sexuality, which requires diligence to protect. Sexual sins are counted among the most damaging; after all, they represent a blatant disregard for the divine power inherent in copulation. Young women are cautioned:

You are not common. You are not ordinary. You are daughters of God. You carry within yourselves the sacred power to create life. It is one of God’s greatest gifts to His precious daughters, and you must safeguard that power by living the standards and remaining virtuous. You must safeguard your power through purity of thought and action (Dalton).

[28] This emphasis on modesty is primarily an expression of institutional allotment of gendered power. The policing of women’s bodies (by their patriarchs but also through self-policing) works to rein in the limited power females may possess, while concomitantly acknowledging and reaffirming that power as such. It is a compromise of sorts, a negotiation where women receive enough clout to prevent them from demanding more. After all, women are told they are parallel to God in their creative powers (no mention is made of necessary male contributions to procreation) and perhaps more powerful in their righteousness than their male counterparts – otherwise, men could control their own thoughts and impulses without the imposed modest treatment of the female form.

Modesty and the Ideal Maternal Body

[29] Church leadership has long recognized the link between clothing and communication: “The way you dress is a reflection of what you are on the inside. Your dress and grooming

send messages about you to others and influence the way you and others act” (LDS 2006). Extremes are eschewed, in both attention-seeking and sexuality.

[30] While some religious groups employ abstract standards when defining acceptable clothing, the foundation for Mormon modesty is actually mapped on the body of faithful adult members. Upon their endowment in the temple, usually for men just before their mission at age 19, and for women just before their marriage,¹¹ worthy members receive special underclothes. In this exclusive ceremony, faithful members are given this sacred set of undergarments, which are pure white and adorned with special religious insignias, and are instructed to wear them continually, day and night, for the rest of their lives. These garments carry specific religious significance:

Scripture and ancient tradition point toward the significance of sacral clothing. . . For Latter-day Saints, among whom there is no professional ministry, men and women from all walks of life share in the callings, responsibilities, and blessings of the priesthood. Their sacred clothing, representing covenants with God, is worn under rather than outside their street clothes (Marshall).

[31] These garments differ in design for men and women: Male garments resemble an undershirt and boxer-style shorts, while women’s garments are less like typical female underwear and instead resemble knee-length, high-waisted bloomers with a cap-sleeved top.¹² The ritual and social significance of these garments in relation to Mormon conceptions of modesty and the body is tantamount. Although temple garments are not described by authorities of the Church as merely a device for policing modesty,¹³ they are to be used as a template for mapping the borders of acceptably modest clothing – especially for women.¹⁴ By placing these garments under rather than outside their street clothes, faithful members literally internalize the teachings of the Church and self-police their own behaviors. In fact, “the wearing of such a garment does not prevent members from dressing in the fashionable clothing generally worn in the nations of the world. Only clothing that is immodest or extreme in style would be incompatible with wearing the garment” (Packer 1982: 18). Moreover, members are instructed to never show the garments to someone who is not “worthy,” or a temple-endowed member, making the garments virtually invisible to non-

¹¹ The endowments are a necessary step in progression toward eternal life. Although single women can receive their endowments without marrying, it is often delayed until at least age 25 as a last resort.

¹² This cursory description is the minimal requirement for understanding my explanation of the garments as a physical map of modesty. By describing the garments in this manner, I attempt to avoid desecrating what is considered sacred to members and instead focus on what is necessary for my analysis.

¹³ More often they are considered a personal, intimate reminder of an individual’s temple covenants, or as a physical or spiritual barrier to protect the wearer from danger. They are often referred to as synonymous with “the armor of God.”

¹⁴ The temple garments may also often have the profound psychological effect of desexualizing the body. Many members take the admonition to wear the garments “night and day” quite literally, removing them only while bathing but not for sexual activity.

members.¹⁵ This silencing, along with directions to avoid discussion of other temple rituals that also center on gender roles, polices members’ discussion of inequities in the Church.

[32] Temple garments can best be understood as a form of sartorial “salient symbol” that “indicates legitimacy or certifies membership” in the upper ranks of Church hierarchy by constituting “the essential elements of uniform which serve as background to [other] indications of legitimacy” (Joseph: 21). One cannot attain the highest levels of the Celestial Kingdom without them; in this way, one’s heavenly status is reflected in his or her earthly status within the Church and in conformity to its rules. The garments serve as “a concrete social practice” of every faithful Member, which acts to “generate and sustain the commitment of members” (Kanter: 75) by easily differentiating between those Mormons who are committed and those who are not. The garments function as the “least symbol necessary” for understanding religious status. As Nathan Joseph notes, “Perhaps the ultimate in symbols is the purely personal reminder to the wearer” (24-25).

[33] But the garments are not always purely personal; they also serve a more ambiguous role of aiding in group surveillance. Although more conscientious Saints may work to conceal the hemlines of their temple garments under their outer clothing, a well-trained eye can almost always detect the presence (or absence) of temple garments. Occasionally referred to among members as the “eternal smile” or “celestial smile,” a visual metaphor referencing the curved outline of the garment’s neckline through a missionary’s thin white dress shirt, garments can also be detected as a thin hemline just above a woman’s knee (especially when she is wearing thin slacks). These semi-hidden garments seem to defeat the purpose of internal policing, but instead serve another useful function: the outline of the garment is a mental heuristic that quickly allows members to immediately classify “others” as “members” or not. More surreptitiously, the outline also serves as a means for social control: other members (within one’s family, perhaps, or at one’s church) can easily determine whether or not one is following this basic sartorial rule, which marks one’s status as a law-abiding member of the group. This, of course, is not the prescribed use of the garment, which is normalized as a religious amulet, a shield of protection for the wearer. Nevertheless, the same garments that seem invisible to non-LDS serve as a status-marker within the community, policing not only modesty but also group conformity.

[34] Because the temple garments are reserved for temple-endowed adults, most Church requirements and recommendations for modesty are directed at adolescents and teens, who have not yet passed through the temple to receive their endowments and who do not have this physical reminder of the importance of modesty. The guidelines described for modesty follow the outlines of the temple garments, as “any member of the Church, whether he or she has been to the temple or not, would in proper spirit want to avoid extreme or revealing fashions” (Packer 1982: 18). Beginning in 1990, the First Presidency continued a campaign to widen the influence of Church teachings through a small topical handbook called *For the Strength of Youth: Fulfilling Our Duty to God*, meant as a framework for righteous living. This booklet, given to all LDS youth, expounds the communicative force of appearance:

¹⁵ One member remembers that as a child, he once found his father’s garment in the laundry and asked his mother what the special insignias represented. She quickly hid the garment and told him that someday, when he was old enough, he would understand.

The way you dress is a reflection of what you are on the inside. Your dress and grooming send messages about you to others and influence the way you and others act. When you are well groomed and modestly dressed, you invite the companionship of the Spirit and can exercise a good influence on those around you (LDS 2001: 14-15).

The guidelines that follow are general yet gendered:

Immodest clothing includes short shorts and skirts, tight clothing, shirts that do not cover the stomach, and other revealing attire. Young women should wear clothing that covers the shoulder and avoid clothing that is low-cut in the front or the back or revealing in any other manner. Young men should also maintain modesty in their appearance. All should avoid extremes in clothing, appearance, and hairstyle. . . Ask yourself, “Would I feel comfortable with my appearance if I were in the Lord’s presence?” (LDS 2001: 15-16).

[35] Members are encouraged to “place themselves squarely within [Church] standards of appearance – not along the thin ice at the edge of the standard, but squarely within” (Oaks 1971). In practice, members’ boundary negotiation reflects social and cultural rules as much as doctrinal proclamations from the Church’s hierarchy. The strength of membership in any idealized community is reinforced by joint avoidance of pressure to conform to cultural norms outside the group. This definition of the group vis-à-vis “the other” revels in exclusion and prejudice as a reinforcement of the group’s righteousness or divine blessing. For Mormons, members are pitted against non-members, whose loose morals would seek to entice the upstanding Mormon. The Mormon self, against which all other standards are measured, is then the axis of the Mormon worldview: The LDS are a self-proclaimed “peculiar people” (a reference to 1 Peter 2:9, and a common refrain among the LDS), for whom “knowledge of our divine identity” means that “everything must be different for us: our dress, our language, our priorities, and our focus. We must not seek guidance from the world” (Dalton). Resistance to this pressure reinforces the historical Mormon identity as persecuted, righteous Saints in a land of sinners, God’s house of Zion living in the land of Babylon.

[36] One major theme in members’ manifestations of modesty is the appropriation of this “otherness” as a socially creative force. Mormons, after all, are the bearers of truth in an otherwise darkened world and should expect to occasionally stand out – or at best, not quite fit in. Mormon women together engage in a joint struggle to attain modesty in a world that uses clothing to sexualize and objectify the female body, and through this struggle are brought together in a cohesive common cause. LDS women struggle to find clothing that is at once fashionable and yet acceptably modest, blurring the line between “otherness” and “normalcy” in an effort to effectively co-exist with Babylon. As Church authorities denounce “worldly styles” and insist “We can create a style of our own” (Kimball 2006: 178-88), online LDS retailers attempt to walk the line between a modest difference and a stylish resemblance to the world’s fashions. One such retailer, headquartered at www.mikarose.com, hopes to provide “modest dresses, without having to sacrifice style.” This tension is expressed in their mission statement: “Our company’s idea evolved when the owners realized how difficult it

was to find modest dresses. . . We are sure you have had similar experiences when looking for a modest dress.” Clothing is a cultural production, identifying – and unifying – the producers and the wearers. Participation in this growing niche market, through selling or buying, contributes to the growing cultural unity among LDS across the world. One LDS woman went as far as to create a high-end quarterly fashion magazine (at www.elizamagazine.com) as “an alternative to the current mainstream media that emphasizes sex and skin,” for women “who want to be stylish, sexy, and engaged in the world while retaining high standards in dress, entertainment, and lifestyle.” While this obvious engagement with worldly fashions seems a far cry from the “peculiar people” refrain of Church authorities, it shows the internalization of Church standards among even the most self-consciously “fashionable” female members.¹⁶

[37] Modesty in the LDS context can be seen as a social heuristic, a means of effectively categorizing another individual’s social and religious standing. Although it is more difficult to determine upon meeting someone if she *is* a faithful member in good standing, it is often possible to discern if she is *not* based on her appearance. This “virtual social identity” is, according to Goffman, an interpretation based on social norms and preconceptions and is often misrepresentative of one’s “actual social identity” (2). When a discrepancy exists between a Mormon’s virtual and actual social identity, when she is found to be lacking in virtues that are expected of her – modesty especially – she is socially stigmatized as unchaste, regardless of whether there is an actual connection between the discrediting behavior of immodesty and sexual behavior. Threat of stigmatization results in cohesive modest behavior from faithful Mormon women and girls.

Interpretation: Modesty and the Enforcement of Patriarchal Norms

[38] In many religious traditions, two competing yet complementary discourses describe the terrain of the body: it is both a sacred temple to be treated as the dwelling place of the Most High and a dangerous and powerful elicitor of the basest human emotions. As the former, it is to be treated with dignity and respect; as the latter, it is to be contained and never trusted. In the LDS paradigm, women’s bodies are especially dangerous in this second sense, as they contain both the power to give life and the power to seduce, diminishing the foolhardy male’s ability to achieve ultimate exaltation. Modesty, then, is a treatment of the body which speaks to both discourses: the sacred parts of the body should be covered, protecting both the wearer and the spectator from potential spiritual and physical harm.

[39] For Mormons (indeed, for all partakers in group realities), how one is taught to look influences what she sees. The group-sanctioned definitions of “modesty” emphasize the parts of the body considered sacred and sexual, so that by defining what is sacred (and thus rightly covered), Mormon modesty acts as a means for policing status in the community. That is, righteous women (and men) will cover their sacred bodies. Because communication through appearance is a common theme, members are socialized into a unified “reading” of

¹⁶ Whether or not male sartorial rules are practically constraining in a vein comparable to women’s might be understood by noting that no such stories of difficulty in dressing or remaining fashionable could be found to parallel the male experience with the female. In fact, the only clothing specifically for LDS males to purchase at these online stores is the obligatory white temple wear, which has its counterpart in women’s wear.

clothing as media: The righteous, the meek, the chaste will cover. The less righteous, the proud, the unchaste will display. For temple-endowed members, the temple garments act as a template for modest hemlines, and a means for social and self-surveillance, for policing of norms.

[40] Modesty enacted on feminine bodies takes on various modes of meaning: for the enactors, modesty enforces patriarchal norms by controlling the little power given to females. But modesty is also appropriated by the women for whom it is proscribed as a tool of resisting cultural and patriarchal objectification. So while chaste Mormon bodies are objectified, they are simultaneously resisting objectification through the very act of putting on temple garments and modest attire. That modesty is necessary because the real power of the female is an idea with controversial repercussions. Is it a copout, a red herring designed to distract LDS women from the institutional biases that force them into submission in all other areas? Are LDS women who comply with institutional dress codes complicit in their own subjugation? Or are faithful LDS women accepting of innate gender differences, happy to acknowledge their own forms of power and determined to use them responsibly through modest dress? Perhaps a detailed ethnographic study of LDS women’s actual practices could provide some clues. Or perhaps it is impossible to sift the institutional framework from cosmological beliefs and lifestyle practices to determine which came first – the idea that gender differences are a divine design, or the institution that benefits from such differences.

[41] Enacting modesty in their daily lives, LDS women become co-creators of normalized gender roles. In her discussion of the Islamization of Iran, Roxanne Varzi explains: “To make people believe in the Islamic republic is to make them physically part of the republic and to make them act out: women wearing hejabs acting Islamic in the public sphere.” If “action creates believers,” as Varzi claims, then women wearing modest clothing and temple garments act out Mormonism in the public/private sphere, with the message of submission “inscribed in one’s actions and on one’s body” (133).

[42] The day-to-day performance of religious identity construction is inscribed on the body of each faithful Latter-day Saint. The body – that carrier of the spirit, that expression of gendered identity – is clothed to reflect the gendered soul. Women especially are subject to this identity-construction: the ubiquity of authoritative and collective messages in a woman’s quotidian reality praises the virtues of modesty and chastity and upholds motherhood as the ultimate divine calling for all women. The public and private spheres of life are conflated, and the family unit is the foremost expression of the order of Christ’s Church: patriarchal, hierarchical, and divinely ordered. Incessant identity messaging, from those with authority to speak in God’s name, serves to create and maintain their status as the only remaining Saints on the earth in these Latter Days: “As they teach their language through sermons, speeches, and writings and enact its stories in their lives, they mold their church into the Church, a living sequel to the Bible” (Harding: xiii).

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