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# “No Man’s Land”: The Place of Latter-day Saints in the Culture War

Frederick Mark Gedicks

*Recent political developments in the United States find Latter-day Saints in an isolated but distinctive position, aligned with neither the religious right nor the progressive left.*

The First World War featured the Germans stalemated across from the French and British along a six-hundred-mile front that ran from the Belgian coast all the way to Switzerland. Separated at crucial spots by only a few hundred yards, the armies on each side dug elaborate systems of trenches, reinforced by timber and sandbags to protect against artillery fire and ringed by barbed wire to thwart infantry charges.<sup>1</sup>

So effective were those fortifications that for more than two years the opposing lines moved less than ten miles in either direction. Artillery barrages and the newly invented machine gun chewed up the sliver of land separating the armies into “a muddy, . . . impassable desert” devoid of “habitation and vegetation.” The soldiers called this space no man’s land.<sup>2</sup>

The scarred and forbidding middle ground between two warring armies is an apt metaphor for the position of Latter-day Saints in contemporary cultural conflicts. The use of “warfare” as a metaphor for these conflicts was popularized by James Davison Hunter several years ago in his book *Culture Wars*.<sup>3</sup> According to Hunter, current cultural conflicts stem less from denominational differences than from “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding.”<sup>4</sup> On one side are the “orthodox”: cultural traditionalists who are committed to “an external, definable, and transcendent authority,” who represent an “unchangeable measure of value [that] tells us what is good, what is true, how we should live, and who we are.”<sup>5</sup> On the other side are “progressives”: cultural liberals with a libertarian social agenda defined by “a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism.”<sup>6</sup> Their first instinct is not to affirm traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs, like the traditionalists, but to reinterpret them “according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life.”<sup>7</sup>

These cultural attitudes cut across denominational lines.<sup>8</sup> The orthodox wings of different denominations often have more in common politically with each other than they do with their more liberal brothers and

sisters within the faith.<sup>9</sup> The result is the drawing of political battle lines on the basis of cultural attitudes rather than denominational beliefs.

As support for his thesis, Hunter cites, among other evidence, the extent to which Latter-day Saints have been drawn into political cooperation with conservative Christians in recent years.<sup>10</sup> Here Hunter echoes Dean Kelley, who nearly twenty years earlier linked Latter-day Saints with fundamentalist and Evangelical Protestants as examples of the dynamic growth of conservative religion.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, on cultural issues there is little question that Latter-day Saints are closer to the “orthodox” right than the “progressive” left. Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices include a traditional allocation of gender roles within a two-parent family,<sup>12</sup> a moral code that forbids all extra-marital sexual relations,<sup>13</sup> a law of health that prohibits consumption of coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs,<sup>14</sup> and doctrinal declarations that oppose abortion rights<sup>15</sup> and same-sex marriage.<sup>16</sup> Virtually all of these Latter-day Saint attitudes and practices are shared with other conservative Christians.<sup>17</sup> “A moralism that rejects social and individual permissiveness,” concludes one study, “is where Mormons and Conservative Christians stand on common ground.”<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, Hunter’s interpretation of the sources of cultural conflict oversimplifies the political relationship of Latter-day Saints to other conservative Christians, especially conservative Protestants. Notwithstanding their similar cultural attitudes, Latter-day Saints and conservative Christians are divided on at least three important issues. First, Latter-day Saints have a historically shaped consciousness of the precariousness of minority religious status, a consciousness that is *not* generally shared by conservative Christians in the United States. Second, their radically different understanding of Christianity makes Latter-day Saints a target of criticism and attacks by more “orthodox” Christians, especially fundamentalist and Evangelical Protestants. Finally, in contrast to the resurgence of conservative Christian activism in the last two decades, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution has remained largely apolitical since the 1960s. The first two of these differences actually place Latter-day Saints as close to the cultural left as to the cultural right, if not closer, while the last places Latter-day Saints outside of the “culture war” paradigm altogether. All of them suggest that Latter-day Saints should not be uncritically grouped with conservative Christians on cultural issues.

### **Minority Mentality**

The history of violent persecution of their religious forebears is an integral part of contemporary Latter-day Saint identity. Virtually every Latter-day Saint knows the basic story of the Mormon expulsion out of

Missouri, the assassination of Joseph Smith, the crossing of the frozen Mississippi when the Saints were expelled from Illinois, the suffering and death along the prairie during the western migration, and the extreme hardships that accompanied the settlement of Salt Lake Valley. These events are regularly taught as part of the Church's Sunday School and youth education curricula. The Church commemorates them each year on Pioneer Day, which celebrates the arrival of the Mormon pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. Many American Latter-day Saints are descendants of those who suffered and perished for their faith, and the memory of these sacrifices is kept alive in the telling of family stories.<sup>19</sup>

For Latter-day Saints, then, the memory of religious persecution is vivid and strong. It is also unique among American Christians. No other Christian denomination in the United States, not even Roman Catholics, can lay claim to such a recent and violent legacy of persecution at the hands or under the eyes of American government authorities.

Perhaps as a result of their history, Latter-day Saints tend to be significantly more liberal than conservative Christians in their attitudes towards minorities. Latter-day Saints are strongly supportive of broad readings and applications of First Amendment rights, exceeding on many issues support by nearly all other Christian denominations, including Roman Catholics, for the protection of civil liberties of unpopular groups.<sup>20</sup> Studies also show that Latter-day Saints are significantly more religiously tolerant than conservative Protestants (and, ironically, more tolerant of conservative Protestants than such Protestants are of Latter-day Saints).<sup>21</sup> Latter-day Saints are also more tolerant on racial issues than the conservative Protestants in these studies,<sup>22</sup> despite the fact that the Church did not begin ordaining African Americans to its lay priesthood until 1978 (Official Declaration 2). LDS congregations are defined strictly by geographic boundaries and thus include all people of any race who live within that area.

This relative sensitivity to minority rights is especially evident in the level and intensity with which Latter-day Saints support legislative initiatives that enhance protection of the free exercise rights of members of minority religions.<sup>23</sup> These attitudes are grounded deeply in LDS scripture, particularly in Doctrine and Covenants 134.

Although conservative Christians support the free exercise of religion, they often allow commitments to other values to override their commitment to the free exercise of religion for religious minorities. For example, when the Supreme Court held in *Goldman v. Weinberger* that the free exercise clause did not protect an orthodox Jewish officer who wished to wear his yarmulke on duty in violation of Air Force uniform regulations,<sup>24</sup> Latter-day Saints in Congress supported by a two-to-one margin subsequent legislation to overturn the decision.<sup>25</sup> Other conservative Christians were more ambivalent about interfering with military discretion, even to

protect the free exercise of religion: conservative Protestants concentrated in the pro-defense South generally opposed the legislation, and “most of the Senate’s prominent evangelical Protestants” voted against it.<sup>26</sup>

The same pattern emerged with respect to the coalition that lobbied for the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). RFRA was designed to reestablish the protective compelling interest test under the free exercise clause, the test that the Supreme Court had abandoned in 1990 in *Employment Division v. Smith*.<sup>27</sup> The LDS Church was a strong early supporter of RFRA, from the beginning of the lobbying effort to secure its passage through its unsuccessful defense before the Supreme Court in *City of Boerne v. Flores*.<sup>28</sup> The Church made clear that the basis for its support was RFRA’s protection of the free exercise rights of unconventional religious minorities. Testifying before Congress in support of RFRA as an official representative of the LDS Church, Elder Dallin H. Oaks linked the Church’s support of RFRA directly to its history of persecution: “I know of no other major religious group in America,” he declared, “that has endured anything comparable to the officially sanctioned persecution that was imposed upon members of my church by Federal, State, and local government officials.”<sup>29</sup> Elder Oaks continued:

Although my church is now among the five largest churches in America, we were once an obscure and unpopular group whose members repeatedly fell victim to officially sanctioned persecution because of religious beliefs and practices. We have special reason to call for Congress and the courts to reaffirm the principle that religious freedom must not be infringed unless this is clearly required by a compelling governmental interest.<sup>30</sup>

Oaks was emphatic that RFRA was needed precisely to protect the rights of unconventional religious minorities:

I wish to point out that most of the court cases involving Government interference with religious liberty involve religious practices that appear out of the ordinary to many. By their nature, elected officials are unlikely to pass ordinances, statutes or laws that interfere with large, mainstream religions whose adherents possess significant political power at the ballot box. But political power or impact must not be the measure of which religious practices can be forbidden by law. The Bill of Rights protects principles, not constituencies. The worshippers who need its protections are the oppressed minorities, not the influential constituent elements of the majority.<sup>31</sup>

The reaction of conservative Christians to RFRA was somewhat different. While RFRA was pending in the early 1990s, it appeared that the Supreme Court was poised to overrule *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>32</sup> As a result, many conservative Christians, such as Missouri Synod Lutherans and Roman Catholics, refused to support RFRA for fear that it might create a religion-based statutory right to abortion at the very time that the Supreme Court would have eliminated the constitutional basis for abortion rights. The

Roman Catholics ultimately joined the RFRA coalition but only after the *Casey* decision in 1992 made it clear that an abandonment of *Roe* was not forthcoming.<sup>33</sup> Many conservative Protestants were also late in supporting RFRA. Judging from their comments in the wake of RFRA's invalidation, their belated support of RFRA seems to have been motivated less by a desire to protect religious minorities than by political commitments to weakening the power of the federal judiciary and relaxing establishment clause restrictions on government endorsement of religion.<sup>34</sup>

Latter-day Saints rank protecting the free-exercise rights of minority religions higher—perhaps much higher—than conservative Christians. The LDS Church did not allow the risk of creating a statutory abortion right or of encouraging judicial activism to weaken its support for RFRA, although the LDS Church is clearly opposed to abortion and most of its leaders and members are politically conservative. Nor did the Church see RFRA as a means of removing constitutional obstacles that prevent government endorsement of religious practices, in spite of the fact that both the leaders and members of the Church are culturally conservative believers.

Latter-day Saints were once violently persecuted by the Protestant majority in the United States and remain a minority in every American state except Utah. It is no coincidence that they are especially sensitive to the protection of minority religious freedom. Despite their general conservatism on cultural issues, Latter-day Saint attitudes on religious and other minorities are significantly different from those of conservative Christians, as close to the cultural left as to the cultural right.

### **Theological Distinctiveness**

Latter-day Saints and conservative Christians are deeply divided over at least three fundamental theological issues: the nature of God, the primacy of the Bible as scripture, and the relationship of faith and works to salvation.<sup>35</sup> Briefly stated, Latter-day Saints do not believe in the orthodox triune God, as do conservative Protestants (and, indeed, most other Christians).<sup>36</sup> Although Latter-day Saints believe in Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (A of F 1), they believe them to be separate beings united in purpose and not in substance.<sup>37</sup> Nor do Latter-day Saints believe that the human and the divine are eternally different,<sup>38</sup> as do most other Christians.<sup>39</sup> Lorenzo Snow, President of the LDS Church at the turn of the century, taught that “as man now is, God once was: as God now is, man may be.”<sup>40</sup> Latter-day Saints believe that this couplet applies to our Heavenly Father as well as to his Son, Jesus Christ; thus, they maintain that the Father as well as the Son has a tangible, resurrected body<sup>41</sup> and that human beings have the divine potential to become gods themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Latter-day Saints do not restrict the scriptural canon to the Old and New Testaments, as do virtually all other Christians. In addition to the

Bible, Latter-day Saints include the Book of Mormon and two collections of the revelations and writings of Joseph Smith and some of his successor prophets as scriptural works equal in authority to the words of the Bible.<sup>43</sup> Protestants interpret these additions as a rejection of the principle of *sola scriptorum*, which vests “final authority in The Word only as it was manifested in the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>44</sup> Most Christians also dispute that these additions are revelations from God. Some Christians further maintain that the Latter-day Saint additions contradict the Bible,<sup>45</sup> and they object to the LDS claim that its leaders are living prophets, who can authoritatively interpret scripture.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, Latter-day Saints differ dramatically from conservative Christians in their understanding of the experience of being “born again.” This experience, in which one accepts Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior and is thereby “saved,” is central to the religious experience of Evangelical Protestants.<sup>47</sup> For Latter-day Saints, however, while salvation from death is a free gift to all through the Atonement of Christ, salvation from sin is available only through repentance, forgiveness, and “obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (A of F 3). In other words, spiritual rebirth is not sufficient by itself for salvation and exaltation but must be combined with faith and good works.<sup>48</sup>

These disagreements are not merely minor theoretical details. They are the source of intense animosity by conservative Protestant denominations and many of their members toward Latter-day Saints. Sociological data shows that conservative Protestants are substantially less tolerant of Latter-day Saints than they are of any other Christian group. The “social distance” of conservative Protestants from Roman Catholics “is considerably less than that from Mormons, though Catholics constitute the second least desirable group for the Conservatives.”<sup>49</sup>

In fact it was Evangelical Protestants who supplied the strongest political pressure for the antipolygamy laws that nearly destroyed the LDS Church in the late nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> Calls by contemporary conservative Protestants for the reestablishment of the United States as a “Christian Nation” have an unsettling resonance to arguments used by the nineteenth-century Supreme Court to justify dismantling the LDS Church, confiscating its property, and curtailing the civil liberties of its members,<sup>51</sup> especially when conservative Protestants continue to be the source of some of the most vicious attacks on the LDS Church and its beliefs and practices.<sup>52</sup>

These theological disagreements are also the basis for the persistent and frustrating accusation that Latter-day Saints are not Christians. To the extent that this assertion means that Latter-day Saints do not believe in or worship Christ as the only means of overcoming death and sin, it is simply false.<sup>53</sup> Some conservative Protestants misinterpret Latter-day Saint beliefs

as rejecting the divinity of Jesus Christ and diminishing the importance of his sacrifice on the cross and thereby classify the LDS Church as a cult.<sup>54</sup> Latter-day Saints do not contest their theological differences with conservative Protestants, but they resent the way that they are excluded from the Christian mainstream and allocated to the theological fringe with Heaven's Gate and the Branch Davidians. Their cultural conservatism notwithstanding, the theological ground occupied by Latter-day Saints puts them in the conservative Protestant line of fire.

### **Apolitical Methods**

The last difference I will describe between Latter-day Saints and conservative Christians comes from the realm of politics. I will argue that the LDS Church is fundamentally apolitical, although I need to qualify this statement somewhat. First, the LDS Church has long been involved in the state politics of Utah and the surrounding Rocky Mountain states, although somewhat less these days than in the past. My argument about the Church's stance of political neutrality applies mainly to national and international political issues. Second, the contemporary church is far less political than the church of fifty or even twenty-five years ago. My argument focuses on the LDS Church of today.

Even with these qualifications, the apolitical stance of the Church today is sometimes more aspirational than actual and certainly more aspirational than LDS Church leaders sometimes would like. The Church makes a conscious choice to leave local leaders a large amount of discretion in interpreting and applying Church policy; occasionally that discretion is abused. There are doubtless examples of LDS bishops and stake presidents whose actions are inconsistent with the description I will make. I maintain, however, that these stand out as exceptions to a general rule of political neutrality.

With those qualifications understood, one confronts a puzzling curiosity—where *are* the Latter-day Saints in politics? In contrast to literally hundreds of political action groups sponsored by Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, there are no such Latter-day Saint groups. Individual Latter-day Saints are active in groups sponsored by others, especially secular conservative groups like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation. When it comes to distinctly Latter-day Saint political action, however, there is only the Church itself.

It is common for priests, ministers, and rabbis to preach over the pulpit about certain political issues, especially in an election year. Churches and synagogues frequently distribute voter guides in conjunction with worship services and offer their chapels and buildings for candidate speeches and debates and other political meetings. By contrast, the LDS Church instructs its local leaders not to endorse candidates or causes or to

allow any sort of political activity in LDS meetings or buildings,<sup>55</sup> staying well away from the allowable lobbying limits permitted of tax-exempt organizations. Since 1960, Church leaders have taken care not to disclose their preferences in presidential and other elections,<sup>56</sup> a practice that was reiterated in 1988. “We have no candidates for political office,” stated the Church’s First Presidency, “and we do not undertake to tell people how to vote.”<sup>57</sup> When he testified in favor of RFRA, Elder Oaks pointed out how remarkable it was for a General Authority of the LDS Church to take a public stand in favor of a particular piece of legislation.<sup>58</sup>

The LDS Church encourages its members to be active in politics “and to vote for those who will most nearly carry out their views of government and its role”<sup>59</sup> but rarely allows any political activity in the Church’s name. It does take public positions on what it calls “moral issues.” One such public position included opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment in the late 1970s;<sup>60</sup> these days such statements are limited primarily to opposing abortion rights, same-sex marriage, legalized gambling, euthanasia, and the production and distribution of pornography.<sup>61</sup> The Church also takes positions on legislative initiatives, such as RFRA, that affect the ability of the Church or its members to practice the LDS faith. Even when taking a public stand on an issue of morality or the free exercise of religion, however, the Church generally keeps a low profile, often preferring to work through individual Latter-day Saints and non-LDS organizations.

The LDS Church’s narrow and cautious political profile stands in stark contrast to that of the many conservative Christian political action groups. The Christian Coalition, for example, has a detailed and comprehensive political agenda that calls for direct action on a school-prayer amendment to the Constitution, a private school voucher system, balanced budgets, term limits, anti-euthanasia laws, restrictions on the availability of divorce, a nationwide ban on gambling, eliminating various federal departments and agencies, eliminating tax penalties on two-parent families, limiting access to abortion and pornography, privatizing public welfare programs, enacting a parental rights act, rejecting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and creating federal incentives for victim restitution and prisoner work programs.<sup>62</sup> Gary Bauer, president of the conservative Family Research Council with aspirations for the United States presidency, has argued that conservative Christian beliefs should require support for “expanding [NATO], rebuilding the U.S. defense resources, including a missile defense system, and investigating human rights policies of Chinese companies seeking trade with the United States.”<sup>63</sup>

Of all these conservative Christian initiatives, the LDS Church has articulated official policies on only two—opposing abortion and euthanasia—and has taken public positions in support of only two others—opposition to pornography and legalized gambling. It has never taken a position

on the advisability of so central a feature of Christian conservatism as a constitutional amendment to return group prayer to public schools.<sup>64</sup>

The LDS Church's low political profile is the result of a clear understanding among both leaders and members that nothing should stand in the way of their fulfilling the primary mission of the Church—namely, to preach and promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. One group of sociologists has described Latter-day Saints as possessing “an ingrained religious pragmatism which is preoccupied with expansion of the Church as a church through vigorous internal and external proselytizing.”<sup>65</sup> From the standpoint of the Church, political activity risks internal divisions among its members. “The result,” warned President Spencer W. Kimball, “would be to divert the Church from its basic mission of teaching the restored gospel of the Lord to the world.”<sup>66</sup>

The risks of political activity by the Church were evident in its involvement in the Equal Rights Amendment controversy of the late 1970s. The Church formally opposed the ERA, fearing that it would take mothers into the workplace and otherwise undermine the traditional family.<sup>67</sup> The Church's organizational and fundraising efforts were decisive in defeating ratification in several states, but the Church's active opposition to the ERA split the membership.<sup>68</sup> As a young law student at that time, I well remember the animated arguments in the congregations I attended about whether Church leaders were correct to have aligned the Church with anti-ERA forces and whether this precluded members from supporting the amendment or, indeed, required them to oppose it. In late 1979, the LDS Church excommunicated Sonia Johnson, reportedly for opposition to Church leaders, which manifested itself in certain feminist and pro-ERA statements and activities. This excommunication further fueled divisive arguments among members and drew intense and generally uncomplimentary media scrutiny, which presumably was detrimental to missionary work.<sup>69</sup>

The LDS Church's fundamental apoliticality is especially evident outside of the United States. The Church has virtually no public political profile in foreign countries, not even in liberal democracies that guarantee religious freedom, such as Japan, Australia, or the countries of the European Union. Moreover, it never allies itself outside of the United States with agents of revolution or reform, not even in countries saddled with dictatorships or totalitarian regimes.<sup>70</sup> The result in some countries is the embarrassing perception that the Church is aligned with oppressive or reactionary political forces.

What matters most to the LDS Church is not the elimination of political oppression (although it obviously opposes it) but the ability of its missionaries to proselytize and its members to practice the essential elements of the LDS faith and implement the Church's programs as divinely

directed. Acquiescing to the prevailing political order ensures its ability to carry out this mission with the minimum of government interference, though at the cost of eliminating itself and sometimes its members as a source of social and political reform.<sup>71</sup> It is a cost that the Church has long been willing to pay.

For example, prior to the fall of the Iron Curtain, the LDS Church had for many years been interested in gaining institutional recognition and missionary access to the Soviet Union and its client states in Eastern Europe. It had a particular interest in East Germany; proselytizing in the first half of this century had yielded a large number of German converts, many of whom did not emigrate to the United States.<sup>72</sup> When the Soviets partitioned Germany after World War II, thousands of Latter-day Saints were caught behind the Iron Curtain without regular supervision and support of the institutional church.<sup>73</sup>

The strategy undertaken by the Church to gain admission of its missionaries and recognition of the Church in East Germany was a repeated emphasis on the fact that the Church and its members were “good citizens” who represented no threat to the Communist regime.<sup>74</sup> The Church used its apolitical orientation to full advantage, emphasizing that it had no interest in supporting counterrevolution or political reform in East Germany but desired only to proselytize and provide funds and other institutional support so that existing Latter-day Saints in East Germany would have the full range of LDS programs and services available to them.<sup>75</sup> In the mid-1970s, the Church succeeded in obtaining exit visas for East German Latter-day Saints to attend Church conferences in West Germany and the United States<sup>76</sup> by promising that none of them would defect to the West. The East German Saints were instructed that the future activities of the Church in East Germany depended on their returning at the conclusion of the conference. All did.<sup>77</sup>

The Church eventually built an extraordinary relationship with the East German government, receiving permission to send American missionaries and to build a number of buildings,<sup>78</sup> including a temple, thereby enabling the East German Saints to participate in the most sacred aspect of Latter-day Saint worship.<sup>79</sup> In 1988 the Church received government permission not only to send American missionaries into East Germany but to call East Germans on missions for up to two years outside of East Germany—to Argentina, Canada, Chile, Great Britain, and the United States.<sup>80</sup>

The LDS Church has for decades consistently followed this accommodationist policy all over the world. It enjoyed as much growth under rightist dictatorships in South America as it has under the liberal democratic regimes that succeeded them. President Hinckley, during his tour of Africa

in March 1998, issued to the president of Ghana, who came to power in a military coup, the familiar assurance that Latter-day Saints are “good citizens” who obey the law (A of F 12) and represent no threat to the government of their country.<sup>81</sup> In contrast to conservative Christians, who oppose most-favored-nation trading status for China as a lever against its persecution of Christians,<sup>82</sup> the Latter-day Saints are sending English teachers and folk dancers to China at their own expense, to show the Chinese government that they have nothing to fear from us.

Both inside and outside of the United States, the LDS Church strongly encourages obedience to the existing political order, condemning extremism at both ends of the political spectrum. “Let no man break the laws of the land,” states the LDS Doctrine and Covenants, “for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land.”<sup>83</sup> And just in case anyone misunderstands that apoliticism, the scripture continues, “Wherefore, be subject to the powers that be, until he reigns whose right it is to reign, and subdues all enemies under his feet” (D&C 58:22). To be sure, Latter-day Saints are not religiously obligated to uphold evil or unjust laws; LDS scripture elsewhere suggests that Latter-day Saints are not required to sustain governments that do not respect basic human rights.<sup>84</sup> Still, this situation is viewed as an exception releasing individual members from the general rule of obedience to and respect for all laws.<sup>85</sup> Revolutionaries and activists are rare among the Latter-day Saints, and the Church itself rarely deviates from its course of political accommodation in service to its mission of preaching the gospel.

This is not to say that the LDS Church is uninterested in changing society but only that it is generally uninterested in devoting its resources to effecting such change through political activism. For the LDS Church, political change, if it is to come about at all, will occur indirectly, as the result of the world’s gradual embrace of the fullness of the gospel, and the Church is for the most part content to effect that embrace within existing political and governmental structures.

## Conclusions

Latter-day Saints occupy a no man’s land in the culture war. They have little in common with the cultural left beyond a sensitivity to the plight of minorities and are frequently lumped with conservative Christians as targets of criticism by the left. Nevertheless, the conservative Christians that dominate the cultural right are not as sensitive to the situation of religious minorities in general, and they are intolerant of Latter-day Saints in particular. Additionally, conservative Christians are far more invested than Latter-day Saints in using the power of government to alter social and cultural norms so that these norms are more supportive of their religious beliefs.

What difference should all this make? I draw two conclusions. First, the cultural right should not take Latter-day Saint support for granted in the culture war. Latter-day Saints have a fundamentally different normative conception of church-state relations than do conservative Christians. They are generally uninterested in reestablishing a “Christian Nation” through political activism, especially when the activists most interested in that project do not consider Latter-day Saints to be Christians.<sup>86</sup> The sensitivity of Latter-day Saints to the plight of religious and other minorities in the United States also makes them unlikely allies for many items of the conservative Christian agenda and potential allies on these issues with the cultural left.

Second, Latter-day Saints themselves should be wary of uncritically adopting the agenda of the cultural right, even though they share some cultural attitudes with conservative Christians. While life for Latter-day Saints would certainly be easier if society had cultural norms that affirmed our culturally conservative beliefs instead of undermining them, the cultural norms advanced by conservative Christians are not necessarily an improvement on the secular status quo for Latter-day Saints. Secular background assumptions may well be easier for Latter-day Saints to cope with than the dangers that would attend government endorsement of conservative Christian religion, particularly in the public schools. It is far from clear that Latter-day Saint interests are better served by a public morality defined by a majoritarian religious movement little concerned about minority rights, instead of a secular morality which disdains religion as anachronistic and irrelevant but which nevertheless is committed to protecting the rights of religious minorities.

In the end, the discomfiting reality for Latter-day Saints is that they are caught out in the open of the culture war, not welcomed in the trenches of either side. From the standpoint of the left, the sensitivity to minorities that we share with them is simply not enough to overcome the broad range of issues on which our views are unquestionably conservative. That same sensitivity to minorities, along with theological difference and political neutrality, prevents us from becoming allies of the cultural right.

Latter-day Saints occupy the cultural no man’s land between left and right. That place is uncomfortable, inhospitable, and dangerous. Nevertheless, it is where we are, and ironically, it is where we seem to be thriving.

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Frederick Mark Gedicks is Professor of Law, J. Reuben Clark Law School at Brigham Young University. This essay is adapted from a lecture presented April 15, 1998, at Indiana University as part of the Religious Liberty and First Amendment project of the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions.

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1. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., sv. "The Technology of War."
2. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, sv. "The Technology of War."
3. See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
4. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 42.
5. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 44, 46.
6. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 44, 46.
7. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 44–45.
8. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 42, 43.
9. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 47.
10. Hunter notes that Latter-day Saints were among the founding associations forming the conservative Religious Network for Equality for Women in 1976. He groups Latter-day Saints with Evangelical Protestants, charismatic Catholics, and orthodox Jews in their attitudes on abortion and suggests that conservative Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Latter-day Saints are equally concerned about the secularization of America. He also observes that conservative Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Latter-day Saints "generally view the survival of the bourgeois family as essential, not just because it was believed to be established in nature and ordained by God, but because it is believed to foster social harmony." Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 100, 129–30, 145, 181.
11. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
12. Church leaders have taught the following concerning two-parent families and gender roles:

Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. . . . 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. (The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign* 25 [November 1995]: 102 [hereafter cited as "The Family"]).

See also Darwin L. Thomas, "Family Life," Martha Nibley Beck, "Women, Roles of," and Victor L. Brown Jr., "Men, Roles of," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:490, 4:1575–77, 2:888–90.

13. See, for example, "The Family"; Terrance D. Olsen, "Sexuality," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1306–7.
14. See Doctrine and Covenants 89; Joseph Lynn Lyon, "Word of Wisdom," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4:1584–85; Gordon B. Hinckley, "Be Ye Clean," *Ensign* 26 (May 1996): 48.

15. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that abortion is a sinful practice and instructs its members to consider undergoing an abortion only in cases in which the mother's life or health is seriously threatened, the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or the fetus is unlikely to survive birth. See Mary K. Beard, "Abortion," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:7. See also "The Family," which states, "We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God's eternal plan."

16. See Victor L. Brown Jr., "Homosexuality," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:655–56; "The Family," which states, "Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God. . . . Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose. . . . [T]he sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between a man and a woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife."

17. See Merlin B. Brinkerhoff, Jeffery C. Jacob, and Marlene M. Mackie, "Mormonism and the Moral Majority Make Strange Bedfellows? An Exploratory Critique," *Review of Religious Research* 28 (March 1987): 236, 238, 239; Armand L. Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence: The Mormon Reaction to Americanization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (Spring 1998): 41, 42; Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 212, 214.

18. Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie, "Mormonism and the Moral Majority," 246. See also Albert J. Menendez, *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1996), 224. Menendez observes that Latter-day Saints and Southern Baptists constitute the two most politically conservative religious voting blocs in Congress.

19. See Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 13, which states, "For many Latter-day Saints, [the expulsions from New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois] are not yet ancient history. The murders, the rapes and the burnings are still a deeply felt part of our family heritage. Many still cherish the memory of each nineteenth-century outrage committed against their forebears"; *The Religious Freedom Restoration Act: Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, One Hundred Second Congress, Second Session on S. 2969: A Bill to Protect the Free Exercise of Religion*, 102nd Cong. 35 (1993): 30, 40 (statement of Dallin H. Oaks, Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). In his testimony, Elder Oaks noted that some of his ancestors immigrated to America "as refugees from religious persecution in their native lands," that most of them "suffered with the Mormons in their earliest persecutions," and that his third great-grandmother, who was among those expelled from Missouri and Illinois, "died on the plains of Iowa, a martyr to her faith." He also noted that his grandfather's oldest sister was sentenced to three and a half months in the territorial penitentiary for refusing to testify against her husband in a polygamy prosecution (35–36).

20. See Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, 191–95. Although Latter-day Saints are generally more supportive than Roman Catholics of civil liberties for unpopular minorities, they are slightly less supportive than Catholics of civil liberties for homosexuals (192–93).

21. Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie, "Mormonism and the Moral Majority," 240, 242. These authors note, however, that "while Mormons appear to be more tolerant of Conservative Christians than the conservatives are of them, the absolute social distance scores are still high, indicating only a degree of acceptance on the part of Mormons for the Conservative Christians" (242).

22. Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, 197–200; Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence," 39–41. See also LDS Church Home Page, "Myth-Conceptions,"

[http://www.lds.org/en/4\\_Global\\_Media\\_Guide/Myth-Conceptions.html](http://www.lds.org/en/4_Global_Media_Guide/Myth-Conceptions.html), May 20, 1999, which states, "We repudiate efforts to deny to any person his or her inalienable dignity and rights on the abhorrent and tragic theory of the superiority of one race or color over another." Mauss reports that levels of racial tolerance seem to be somewhat less among LDS converts than among those raised in the Church. Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence," 41. See also Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie, "Mormonism and the Moral Majority," 238. The results of their study showed that the statement "It is a sin to discriminate against people because of their ethnicity" failed to differentiate Latter-day Saints from conservative Protestants and other religious groups.

23. See also Gary C. Bryner, "Political Teachings," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1103–4; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 655–57.

24. 475 U.S. 503 (1986).

25. Menendez, *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box*, 235.

26. Menendez, *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box*, 235.

27. 494 U.S. 872 (1990).

28. 117 S.Ct. 2157 (1997).

29. *The Religious Freedom Restoration Act*, statement of Dallin H. Oaks, 30.

30. *The Religious Freedom Restoration Act*, statement of Dallin H. Oaks, 32.

31. *The Religious Freedom Restoration Act*, statement of Dallin H. Oaks, 31.

32. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

33. See *Planned Parenthood of S. E. Penn. v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992).

34. For various articles dealing with arguments for and against RFRA and the political forces behind these arguments, see Phillip E. Johnson, "Afterword," *Nexus: A Journal of Opinion* 2 (fall 1997): 170, 173; Jay Alan Sekulow and John Tuskey, "City of Boerne v. Flores: The Justices Know Best," *Nexus: A Journal of Opinion* 2 (fall 1997): 53; "Supreme Court Strikes Religious Freedom Restoration Act: Amending the Constitution Is the Only Way to Restore America's Religious Liberty Protections," <http://www.cc.org/publications/ccnews/ccnews97.html#rfra>, May 20, 1999; "Christian Coalition Applauds Protection for Religious Freedom in Federal Workplace: Calls for Religious Freedom Everywhere Else, Too," <http://www.cc.org/publications/ccnews/ccnews97.html#fedwork>, May 20, 1999.

35. The depth of these differences may be more apparent than real; conservative Protestants and Latter-day Saints who have attempted genuine conversation about these issues are often surprised by the amount of theological agreement. For example, see Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*

36. See, for example, Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, "A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Portion of the Missouri Synod: Of God," <http://www.lcms.org/belief.asp>, May 13, 1999; "The Baptist Faith and Message—a Statement Adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention," <http://www.utm.edu/martinarea/fbc/bfm/2.html>, May 17, 1999.

37. LDS Home Page, "Core Beliefs and Doctrines—Godhead," [http://www.lds.org/en/4\\_Global\\_Media\\_Guide/Core\\_Beliefs\\_and\\_Doctrines.html](http://www.lds.org/en/4_Global_Media_Guide/Core_Beliefs_and_Doctrines.html), May 13, 1999. Stanley Hauerwas suggested to me that many conservative Protestants are actually so focused on Jesus Christ to the exclusion of the Father and the Holy Ghost that they may be closer on this issue to Latter-day Saints than they are to Roman Catholics and main-line Protestants.

38. See Stephen E. Robinson, "God the Father," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:548–49.

39. See, for example, Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 97, which states, “Evangelicals are determined to preserve the distinction between the Creator and the creation.”

40. Lorenzo Snow quoted in Robinson, “God the Father,” 2:549. Joseph Smith also taught this doctrine. See “The King Follett Discourse,” in Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 342, 345–46. Although this teaching has not, strictly speaking, been canonized, it is “so widely accepted by Latter-day Saints that this technical point has become moot.” Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 85.

41. See Doctrine and Covenants 130:22; Robinson, “God the Father,” 2:548.

42. See Robinson, “God the Father,” 2:549; “The Family”; Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 82, which states, “The soil from which the LDS doctrine of deification grows is the belief that humans are of the divine species and that the scriptural language of divine paternity is not merely figurative.”

43. See W. D. Davies and Truman G. Madsen, “Scripture,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1277; Robert L. Millet and Noel B. Reynolds, eds., *Latter-day Christianity: Ten Basic Issues* (Provo, Utah: FARMS and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 13–23; Article of Faith 8; Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 76.

44. Jan Shipps, “‘Is Mormonism Christian?’ Reflections on a Complicated Question,” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993), 447.

45. Stephen Robinson maintains that any such contradictions are not with the biblical text but with the nontextual creeds through which other Christians read the text. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 59–60.

46. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 76.

47. See Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie, “Mormonism and the Moral Majority,” 238; Shipps, “‘Is Mormonism Christian?’” 454.

48. See Ed. J. Pinegar, “Born of God,” and Alma P. Burton, “Salvation,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:218–19; 3:1256–57. See also Dallin H. Oaks, “Born of God,” *Ensign* 28 (May 1998): 56–57; Millet and Reynolds, *Latter-day Christianity*, 35–39.

49. Brinkerhoff, Jacobs, and Mackie, “Mormonism and the Moral Majority,” 240 (data citations omitted from quotation).

50. See, for example, James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 401–2; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 177–80; John T. Noonan Jr., “The End of Free Exercise?” *DePaul Law Review* 42 (1992): 580.

51. These similarities are illustrated by a comparison of *Late Corp. of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints v. United States*, 136 U.S. 1, 48, 49 (1889) and *Davis v. Beason*, 133 U.S. 333, 341, 345 (1889) with the statements from three recent communications: “Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church Communicator,” <http://38.241.170.2/communicator/junejuly/ralph.htm>, April 6, 1998; James Dobson, “Family News from Dr. James Dobson,” *Focus on the Family Newsletter*, June 1996, 3–4; Summit Ministries, “The Role of the Bible and Christianity in America,” May 20, 1999, [http://www.christiananswers.net/summit/amer\\_her.html#AMER\\_HER\\_L4](http://www.christiananswers.net/summit/amer_her.html#AMER_HER_L4). In *Late Corp. v. United States*, the court ruled that plural marriage is “a crime against the laws, and abhorrent to the sentiments and feelings of the civilized world,” a “barbarous practice . . . contrary to the spirit of Christianity and of the civilization which Christianity has produced in the Western World,” and in *Davis v. Beason* that by threatening monogamous marriage—“the union for life of one man and one woman in the holy estate of matrimony”—“bigamy and polygamy are crimes by the laws of all civilized and Christian countries.” These

arguments are similar to contemporary conservative Christian calls for a "Christian Nation." See, for example, *Coral Ridge Presbyterian Communicator*, which states, "Churches today are obligated to seek to overturn the sinful nature of our land and the world and discover the truth of what our Founding Fathers started—a Christian Nation." See also Dobson, who quotes John Jay: "It is the duty . . . of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers." Dobson also quotes Justice David Brewer: "This is a religious people. This is historically true. From the discovery of this continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation. . . . We find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth. . . . These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation." Compare also the following statement made by Summit Ministries: "When one examines history . . . one cannot avoid the conclusion that America was founded on Christian principles and the assumption that her citizenry would adhere to those same principles."

52. See generally Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence," 60–61.

53. See Robert L. Millet, "Jesus Christ," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:724–26. See also Dallin H. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?" *Ensign* 28 (May 1998): 55.

54. See Shipps, "Is Mormonism Christian?" 455–56, 461–62.

55. See "Political Neutrality and Non-Use of Church Buildings," First Presidency Letter, June 9, 1988, reprinted in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4:1733.

56. See David B. Magleby, "Contemporary American Politics," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1107.

57. "Political Neutrality and Non-Use of Church Buildings," 4:1733.

58. Dallin H. Oaks has said:

As a general rule, our church does not take positions on specific legislative initiatives pending in Congress or State legislatures. Our action in this matter is an exception to this rule. It underscores the importance we attach to this congressional initiative to restore to the free exercise of religion what a divided Supreme Court took away in *Employment Division v. Smith*. (*The Religious Freedom Restoration Act*, statement of Dallin H. Oaks, 30)

59. "Political Neutrality and Non-Use of Church Buildings," 4:1734.

60. See Robert Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, *America's Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 200–10; Magleby, "Contemporary American Politics," 3:1108.

61. See Spencer W. Kimball, "A Report and a Challenge," *Ensign* 6 (November 1976): 6; First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to General Authorities; Regional Representatives; Stake, Mission, and District Presidents; Temple Presidents; Bishops; and Branch Presidents, February 1, 1994; Patty Henetz, "LDS Cash Carries Gay-Marriage Fight: Mormon Church Has Spent \$1.1 Million on Ballot Battles in Hawaii and Alaska," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 26, 1998, A1; "Church Opposes Government Sponsored Gambling," *Ensign* 16 (November 1986): 104; "LDS Council Opposes Oregon Measure," *Deseret News*, October 8, 1994, A8; "First Presidency Calls for Fight against Pornography, Obscenity," *Improvement Era* 69 (April 1966): 264.

62. Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, "Conclusion: The Christian Right in Campaign '96," in *God at the Grass Roots, 1996: The Christian Right in the American Elections*, ed. Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 255, 260; Ralph Reed, *Active Faith* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 192.

63. Jessica Lee, "Religious-Right Leader Sets Foreign Policy Goals," *USA Today*, April 14, 1998, 6A.

64. Robert E. Riggs, "Government-Sponsored Prayer in the Classroom," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (fall 1985): 43–44, 52.

65. Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie, "Mormonism and the Moral Majority," 243.

66. Spencer W. Kimball, (Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982], 407), quoted in Riggs, "Government Sponsored Prayer in the Classroom," 52.

67. See Gottlieb and Wiley, *America's Saints*, 203–4; Magleby, "Contemporary American Politics," 3:1108.

68. Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 659; Gottlieb and Wiley, *America's Saints*, 28, 204–6.

69. Gottlieb and Wiley, *America's Saints*, 27–28, 206–9.

70. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 683–96.

71. See Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie, "Moralism and the Moral Majority," 244.

72. See Thomas S. Monson, *Faith Rewarded: A Personal Account of Prophetic Promises to the East German Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 132; Thomas S. Monson, *The Church in a Changing World* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1989), 4; Garold N. Davis and Norma S. Davis, comps. and trans., *Behind the Iron Curtain* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), ix–xiv.

73. See Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 12; Monson, *Church in a Changing World*, 5.

74. See, for example, Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 60, 133.

75. See Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 53, 84, 113, 126; Monson, *Church in a Changing World*, 11–14.

76. Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 19–20, 49, 83.

77. See Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 26–27.

78. See Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 63, 134–35, 139.

79. Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 70, 72–73, 88; Monson, *Church in a Changing World*, 9–10.

80. See Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 158–59; Monson, *Church in a Changing World*, 12–14.

81. Steve Fidel, "Pres. Hinckley Announces Plans for First W. Africa Temple," *Deseret News*, February 16, 1998, A1.

82. See, for example, "Christian Coalition Opposes MFN for China," <http://www.cc.org/publications/ccnews/ccnews97.html#mfnc>, May 21, 1997; "Christian Coalition to Include MFN Vote in Its 1997 Congressional Scorecard: Family Group Opposes Renewal of MFN for China," <http://www.cc.org/publications/ccnews/ccnews97.html#mfnscore>, June 23, 1997.

83. Doctrine and Covenants 58:21. See also Articles of Faith 12, which states, "We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law."

84. See Doctrine and Covenants 134:5, which states, "We believe that all men are bound to sustain and uphold the respective governments in which they reside, *while protected in their inherent and inalienable rights by the laws of such governments*; and that sedition and rebellion are unbecoming every citizen *thus protected*, and should be punished accordingly" (italics added).

85. See, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 134:1, which states, "We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society."

86. See W. Cole Durham Jr., "Church and State," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:281–82.