Marking Mormon Difference: How Western Perceptions of Islam Defined the “Mormon Menace”¹

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Abstract: This article argues that inaccurate perceptions of Muslim and Mormon sexual and political deviance merged to help fuel a sustained anti-Mormon campaign in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. The inflammatory rhetoric of slavery and defilement that anti-Mormon writers deployed to equate the violation of the individual female body in plural marriage with the violation of the social body through Mormon treachery and authoritarianism relied largely on anti-Muslim caricatures for both its venom and its meaning. Only when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints embraced a model of the church that fit within the framework of American denominationalism did the Mormon menace begin to recede and anti-Muslim vitriol begin to fade from anti-Mormon discourse. This article further contends that the political compromise that allowed Mormonism to survive—indeed, to flourish within the United States—helped demonstrate the boundaries of religious and political freedom not just for Mormons but for all Americans. In this context, the evolution of polemic literature served to mark significant cultural change.

Keywords: religious intolerance, anti-Mormon rhetoric, denominationalism, freedom of religion

Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, lurid tales of a Mormon menace circulated widely in the United States. Anti-Mormon writers used these highly imaginative narratives to demonstrate the religious and political dangers they believed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints posed to the young republic. Appropriating the style and substance of popular anti-Muslim literature and other polemics, these accounts depicted Mormons as violent and licentious frauds intent on defiling innocent girls, destroying respectable families, and subverting government authority.² The Latter-day Saints presented a serious threat to evangelical Protestant sensibilities, in part because no external features marked Mormon difference.³ Mormon heresy—like the recently converted Mormons themselves—sprang from the fertile ground of evangelical Protestant revivalism, and this uncomfortably close connection made Mormon dissent all the more vile and insidious to its Protestant critics. In the minds of many American evangelicals, Mormon depravity was masked by seductive duplicity as it attacked the nation from within its own borders and through the subversion of its most cherished institutions—marriage, family, and republican government. Anti-Mormon writers insisted that Mormon “sensuality” and “despotism” undermined republican virtue because they violated female purity, marital
fidelity, and individual autonomy. They forcefully argued that Mormonism therefore could not be tolerated within the republic.

This obsession with Mormon “perfidy” should be no surprise. In the mid-nineteenth century, US society was in flux. Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration were transforming traditional social structures and challenging traditional social relationships. Gender roles shifted significantly during this period, and many American Victorians experienced profound anxiety and confusion about the spiritual authority women increasingly assumed in public and private spheres through the cult of domesticity and the moral dangers posed by those women who remained outside its influence. Fears about prostitution, divorce, and general moral decline fuelled interest in anti-Mormon and other polemic writings, and, in turn, these writings helped to confirm the validity of those fears. The unstable nature of this period intensified evangelical Protestant perceptions that Mormon religious and political dissent was a threat to national unity and republican ideals. Remarkably, opponents understood and articulated the dangers posed by this native enemy through appeals to a foreign and exotic Oriental “other.” As thousands of new Mormon converts gathered to build the kingdom of God in their Utah enclave and to exercise their distinctive economic, political, and religious orders in open defiance of Protestant opposition, anti-Mormon writers drew on a rich body of polemic literature describing the sexual immorality and political tyranny of the Muslim world to warn their readers of the inevitable consequences of Mormon depravity. Because gender constructions often function as the site of ambiguity and identity formation in periods of rapid social change, sexual politics soon came to dominate anti-Mormon discourse. Comparisons with the “lascivious” and “despotic” Turk became important tropes in anti-Mormon rhetoric despite (or perhaps because of) Americans’ scant knowledge of or engagement with Muslims as individuals and Islam as a religion. By choosing Islam to articulate the dangers of Mormonism, anti-Mormon writers not only marked Mormon difference but also sought to exaggerate that difference by playing on religious, political, sexual, and racial themes. Connecting Mormonism and Islam allowed anti-Mormon writers to construct an alternate identity for Mormons that denied their white evangelical Protestant heritage and set them apart as a distinct people beyond the pale of full American citizenship.

Within this context, I argue that inaccurate perceptions of Muslim sexual and political deviance were appropriated to animate a sustained anti-Mormon campaign in the United States. The inflammatory rhetoric of slavery and defilement that anti-Mormon writers employed to equate the violation of the individual female body in plural marriage with the violation of the social body through Mormon treachery and authoritarianism relied heavily on anti-Muslim caricatures for both its venom and its meaning (for other sources of anti-Mormon tropes, see Davis 1960, 205–24; Cannon 1961; Bunker and Bitton 1983, 75–86; and Gordon 2002, 11, 33, 70 and 206). Only when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints embraced a model of the church that fit within the framework of American denominationalism did the Mormon menace begin to recede and anti-Muslim vitriol begin to fade from anti-Mormon discourse. Below, I begin by situating this argument within the historiography of anti-Mormon literature in the America. I then analyze the themes of Oriental sensuality and despotism that pervaded anti-Mormon literature in the United States. This literary analysis demonstrates how American evangelicals employed anti-Muslim tropes to combat a Mormon menace that threatened the integrity and unity of their nation. I conclude by examining the denominational turn Mormonism initiated with the 1890 Manifesto and accomplished with the seating of US Senator Reed Smoot in 1907 and its implications for anti-Mormon discourse. The church’s embrace of denominationalism represented the successful resolution of the “Mormon problem” for many Americans. After Mormonism finally ceded to federal authority and accommodated Protestant
sensibilities by abandoning plural marriage, the tone of anti-Mormon literature produced in the United States softened and the anti-Muslim rhetoric—from which so much of its venom had been drawn—faded from anti-Mormon discourse.

Tracing the Muslim-Mormon Connection in Anti-Mormon Literature

Anti-Mormon literature remains largely unexplored by historians. Most scholars addressing these writings have confined themselves to limited studies in the service of larger works on intolerance in American religious history. These close studies have enriched scholarly understandings of Mormonism in particular and American religious history in general through their explorations of identity construction and boundary maintenance. However, more research is needed to trace the connections between discourses of religious intolerance. This paper attempts to interrogate this history by examining the Muslim-Mormon connection in the construction of Mormon heresy in America during the Victorian era.

Themes of subversion figured prominently in these studies. David Brion Davis (1960) offered an early and still convincing interpretation of mainstream hostility toward religious and political difference in “Some Themes of Counter-subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic and Anti-Mormon Literature.” Arguing that anxieties about internal enemies grew wildly in the United States as the dangers of actual foreign invasion by European powers diminished in the early nineteenth century, Davis demonstrated how Americans channelled their fears into a multitude of sensationalized novels. Fact and fantasy blended easily and often in this period. Fictionalized accounts frequently were advertised as memoirs or histories and freely borrowed images of conspiracy and subversion from European sources, shaping them to suit social and political conditions in the United States. This difference mattered, guiding how Americans would construct the identity of the “other” in their own evolving society. “In Europe,” Davis observed, “the idea of subversion implied a threat to the established order— to the king, the church, or the ruling aristocracy—rather than to ideals or a way of life” (205). American republicanism demanded a different sort of traitor because the established order of the Old World had been overturned. In this context, subversive movements “would have to come from the people,” and subversive themes “would be likely to reflect their fears, prejudices, hopes, and perhaps even unconscious desires” (205). In this way, the uncovering of subversion in the United States served an important social and political function by promoting national unity and upholding fragile national ideals.¹

It is not difficult to see how anti-Mormon literature served this purpose in the United States. Constructing the Mormon “other” as an amalgam of monstrosities, anti-Mormon writers revealed much about the cultural dynamics at work in the creation and maintenance of identity. Anti-Mormon fiction fuelled the anti-Mormon crusade waged by evangelical Protestants and the US federal government throughout the nineteenth century. This campaign demonized Mormons, marking them as fundamentally different from their evangelical Protestant opponents. As Terryl Givens (1997) has argued, mainstream Americans attributed a distinct ethnic identity to Mormons through the construction of Mormon heresy that, in many respects, subsumed their religious identity. The appropriation of Oriental imagery and anti-Muslim rhetoric in anti-Mormon discourse contributed significantly to the creation of such an ethnic identity for Mormons. Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt (1968) demonstrated that themes of licentious Turks and sinister secret societies dominated nineteenth-century anti-Mormon writings. Appeals to popular notions about Eastern sexual licence and political despotism cast Mormons as foreign and exotic, creating an over-sexualized and racially ambiguous identity to mark Mormon religious and political difference as un-American. In this way, anti-

¹
Mormon fiction allowed mainstream Americans to legitimize their religious prejudices and to exclude Mormons from full participation in American society (Givens 1997, 119).

The paucity of scholarly works on anti-Muslim polemics in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America has limited attention to the connection between anti-Muslim and anti-Mormon rhetoric. In this period, polemics and entertainment blurred, leaving American readers and theatre-goers with the perception that the Muslim world was “a wicked mix of political tyranny and wild sex” (Allison 1995, 61). The images of unrestrained sexuality and political despotism associated with Turkish sultans and their Eastern harems conveyed powerful messages about proper sexual and political relations. Conflating religious, national, sexual, and racial themes, these polemics cast Muslims as woefully degenerate and therefore as utterly foreign. American writers who employed these tropes cared little whether or not they were historically accurate. Rather, they uncritically adopted and deployed these anti-Muslim images to advance their own political goals. According to their imaginative constructions, the Muslim world’s political repression and sexual degradation helped define American national identity and purpose. The inversion of republican ideals of individual autonomy, female sexual purity, and marital fidelity solidified American notions about proper government and family relations during a period of rapid social change.6

The convenient absence of Muslims from nineteenth-century American society allowed alternate constructions of Muslim identity to flourish as well. Susan Nance (2009) has argued that Americans readily embraced Oriental themes and images as they experimented with the nation’s emerging consumer culture during this period. The eagerness with which white middle-class Americans embraced Oriental identities, however, should not be taken as a sign of their openness to or understanding of Eastern cultures. The very commercialization of Eastern performance suggests that a darker aspect of religious and racial intolerance lies largely unexamined beneath the veneer of white middle-class recreation. Eastern identities could be adopted and performed so readily because they affirmed rather than challenged existing cultural hierarchies for the white middle-class Americans who experimented with them. It seems reasonable to suggest that the power of anti-Muslim and anti-Mormon tropes exists within this ambivalent space, where the images presented both attracted and repelled their intended audiences.7

Appropriating this ambiguous Muslim identity to construct Mormon difference, anti-Mormon writers conflated Muslim and Mormon heresies in the service of a Protestant millennial vision. In the most comprehensive analysis of the Muslim-Mormon connection in the construction of Mormon difference in nineteenth-century America to date, Timothy Marr (2006, 189) forcefully argued that the “reciprocal parallels drawn between Mormonism and Islam clearly served to infidelize both Mormon and Muslim claims” and that these polemic “figures and gestures also globalized the relevance of the nation by connecting its own far western territories and its domestic religious controversies with the planetary horizons and historical sagas of the sacred Near East.” Although Marr overstated the significance American evangelicals placed on Islam in imagining themselves as players in a cosmic drama, there is no doubt that they believed themselves engaged with their Mormon opponents in a battle for spiritual and temporal control over the republic.

This article attempts to tell a portion of this story. Through an examination of anti-Mormon writings from the 1830s to the 1920s, it is possible to distinguish several broad trends in the construction of religious and national identities within the United States.8 This literary and historical analysis reveals much about who mainstream Americans thought they were by aligning themselves together against who they were not—Mormons and Muslims. In a vast body of polemic literature, they frequently marked Mormon difference through unflattering comparisons to Islam. The parallels they drew between Mormon prophets and Turkish
sultans, for example, attempted to discredit both Mormonism and Islam as false religions and unjust political systems. In this way, American evangelicals constructed Mormon heresy and marked Mormon difference as an exotic and dangerous “other.” The shift in how American evangelicals portrayed Mormonism after the Latter-day Saints embraced denominationalism in the early twentieth century is equally revealing. The absence of anti-Muslim tropes in the anti-Mormon writings from this period suggests how Mormons were reincorporated into the American body politic (if not the American cultural mainstream), in part by dropping the Muslim identity they had acquired earlier.9

“Orientalizing” Mormonism in Nineteenth-century America

In 1834, Eber Howe, editor of the *Painesville* (Ohio) *Telegraph*, attacked Mormonism as little more than a variant of Islam in *Mormonism Unvailed* (sic), introducing a theme that would animate anti-Mormon writings for decades. Howe collaborated with Mormon apostate Doctor Philastus Hurlbut to challenge Joseph Smith’s integrity and the authority of the church he founded in 1830. Hurlbut, who had been excommunicated from the church for immorality, collected affidavits from dozens of Smith’s acquaintances charging the Mormon prophet with fortune-telling, treasure hunting, and other disreputable behaviours. The irony that these witnesses implicated themselves in the same immoral activities seems to have gone unacknowledged. Howe published these accounts to support his own detailed denunciations of Mormon heresy in *Mormonism Unvailed*. He charged, for example, that Smith was too ignorant to write the *Book of Mormon* and that Sidney Rigdon, a former Disciples of Christ minister and convert to Mormonism, had plagiarized a manuscript written by Solomon Spaulding to craft this extra-canonical sacred text. Howe then began a lengthy exposition of Mormon doctrinal errors, refuting the *Book of Mormon*’s historical accuracy and ridiculing its spiritual authority in minute detail. Most significantly for this analysis, within his diatribe, Howe offered an early link between the errors of Mormonism and Islam. He compared Smith to “the great prince of deceivers, Mohammad” and argued that Smith’s religious revelations were nothing more than superstitious nonsense (1834, 12).

Although Howe failed to develop his critique beyond what appears to be a superficial parallel between Smith and Muhammad as prophets of new and controversial religious movements, his criticism proved highly influential among later anti-Mormon writers. Mormon apostate John C. Bennett (1842) borrowed heavily from Howe’s book to write *The History of the Saints; or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* and greatly expanded the anti-Muslim rhetoric introduced by Howe. Bennett, perhaps stung by his own excommunication from the church for sexual immorality after his meteoric rise within its ranks at the Mormon city of Nauvoo, Illinois, perpetuated the false claim that the Mormons’ “Gold Bible” had been “concocted” by Spaulding and then stolen by Rigdon (1842, 115 and 122). Significantly, Bennett cited Howe as his source for this revelation and quoted extensively from the newspaper editor’s earlier work. Direct attribution is somewhat unusual in anti-Mormon literature, suggesting that Bennett may have credited Howe for this information to distance himself from the alleged crime. The former mayor of Nauvoo and major general of the Nauvoo Legion (the Mormon militia), Bennett walked a fine line throughout *The History of the Saints*, playing on his insider status to reveal Mormonism’s real and imagined secrets but denying that he ever embraced the church’s teachings. Given the scandal that resulted in his excommunication, many Mormons might have agreed with Bennett’s claim never to have been a true believer.

Bennett, who had been accused of seducing innocent women through appeals to Smith’s prophetic authority and example, leveled similar charges against his former friend in *The
History of the Saints. Building on Howe’s comparison between Mormonism and Islam, Bennett referred to Smith as “the Lord of the Harem” and claimed the Mormon prophet “glutted his brutal lusts to the maximum of his sensual desires” (1842, 226). In one instance, Bennett blended Oriental and Catholic images, calling Smith “the Pontifical Head of the Mormon Harem” (254). Bennett meant for this image of Catholic authoritarianism and Muslim licentiousness to shock his readers. His invention of the “Mormon seraglio” combined the stock tropes of bondage and coercion common within anti-Catholic literature and heightened the fear they inspired by “Orientalizing” the Latter-day Saints to exaggerate Mormon difference. Bennett’s condemnation sought to heighten the anxiety many American evangelicals felt about political subversion and sexual domination within the dark recesses of Catholicism (especially the alleged secret sins of its convents) by incorporating anti-Muslim rhetoric. Misperceptions that Muslims openly practised the deviant behaviours that Catholics allegedly attempted to keep hidden emphasized Mormon depravity and underscored the danger Mormonism posed to the new republic. Through the conceit of the “Mormon seraglio,” the innocent female body became the synecdoche for the national body. Bennett suggested that the Mormon sexual immorality and despotism that threatened the female bodies trapped inside “Mormon harems” could not be contained. Through its very existence, he implied, the church threatened the unity and purity of the national body because it subverted the republican ideals of individual autonomy and civic virtue on which the nation was founded.

Bennett claimed, with some justification, that Mormon sexual politics represented the faith’s “most extraordinary and infamous feature” (1842, 218). The timing of his revelations, however, limited their appeal among his immediate contemporaries. Mormon marriage innovations were not well known in the 1830s and 1840s, and Bennett’s personal infamy and his overwrought delivery likely rendered his testimony suspect. Although Smith initiated the practice of plural marriage sometime before 1836 with his union to Fanny Alger, this distinctive feature of Mormonism remained a secret within Smith’s inner circle for several years. Smith married Louisa Beaman in 1841 and then proceeded to wed some thirty additional women before his death in 1844. Perhaps because these unconventional unions remained largely unknown during this period, many early anti-Mormon works described Mormons as innocent dupes rather than sexual deviants. In The Mormoness, for example, John Russell (1853, 42) criticized Mormonism as a religion of “fatal snares” that trapped its “deluded” victims through its convoluted doctrines. Russell reserved his harshest condemnations for Mormon opponents who interfered with the natural decline of Mormon errors by legitimating Smith and his false revelations through violent persecution. Not only did these misguided evangelicals undercut republican commitments to religious freedom, but Russell insisted they also increased the appeal of Mormon heresy by making martyrs of Smith and his followers (57–58).

Literary interpretations of Mormonism changed radically once the Latter-day Saints publicly acknowledged the practice of plural marriage in 1852. Although the Latter-day Saints looked to the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible and contemporary understandings of health and social reform to justify their marriage innovations, American evangelicals decried polygamy as “open prostitution” and “adultery” (see Hardy and Erickson 2001, 40–61, for Mormon ideas on sex reform and plural marriage). They associated plural marriage with “the indolent and opium-eating Turks and Asiatics” and the harems of Oriental despots, conflating exotic national and racial identities to heighten the heretical nature of Mormon religion (Ferris 1856, 247). By 1855, anti-Muslim themes of sensuality and despotism figured prominently in anti-Mormon literature. At least three widely circulated anti-Mormon novels published in that year offered pointed critiques of plural marriage by casting Mormon prophets as Turkish sultans and equating Mormon homes to Eastern harems. Maria Ward’s Female Life among the
Mormons ventured into this territory somewhat hesitantly, offering a scattering of references to “Turks,” “harems,” and “houris” throughout the text. Aside from the promise that Brigham Young would make one young woman “something like the chief sultana” of his harem if she agreed to marry him, this “memoir” largely avoided sensitive details about such exotic family arrangements (Ward 1855, 218). The concept of “chief sultana” suggests something of the multivalent foreignness that anti-Muslim images within anti-Mormon literature were intended to evoke. For many American evangelicals, references to sultans and sultanas suggested the exotic and immoral sexual practices of Turkish harems and served as potent reminders that these figures had no place within the American context. It should be noted that Ward’s message found an eager audience. Female Life among the Mormons sold 40,000 copies within weeks of its publication and was reprinted multiple times under several different titles, making it one of the most popular anti-Mormon novels of the mid-nineteenth century (Marr 2006, 210).

Ward undoubtedly intended her audience to perceive the Mormon sultans and sultanas she depicted as antithetical to the nation’s republican ideals and social structures. Her portrayal of Mormon sexual and political irregularity, however, is not as fully developed as in other anti-Mormon works. It is possible that actual experience coloured Ward’s attitude toward Mormonism. Some historical evidence suggests that Elizabeth Woodcock Ferris used the name Maria Ward as a pseudonym for some of her anti-Mormon writings. Ferris may have written Female Life among the Mormons after her husband, Benjamin Ferris, clashed with Mormon leaders during his six-month tenure as Utah Territorial Secretary in 1852. Although her true identity is still in question, Ward devoted most of her attention to explaining Mormonism’s appeal in terms of delusion rather than depravity. She stressed themes of trickery and coercion to account for conversion, accusing Mormons of mesmerizing their innocent victims. Ellen, the naive heroine of Ward’s novel, attributed her “seduction” by Smith to his “mystical magical influence over [her]—a sort of sorcery that deprived [her] of the unrestricted exercise of free will” (1855, 38). This conceit allowed Ward to equate the violation of the individual will with the violation of the innocent female body—a concern that would recur again and again in anti-Mormon writings.

Alfreda Bell and Orvilla Belisle carried this conceit even further. Both anti-Mormon writers exploited a wide array of anti-Muslim tropes to forge a rhetoric of sensuality and despotism that would demonstrate the inherent threat Mormonism posed to individuals and the social order. Bell (1855) accused Mormons of forcing innocent women into plural marriage through emotional manipulation and physical violence in Boadicea, the Mormon Wife. Bell’s novel even went so far as to include an illustration of Boadicea and her husband, Hubert, who fell prey to Mormonism and forced his wife into polygamy, embracing under a crescent moon. Although the symbolism of the crescent moon is remarkably subdued for a work in this genre, the rest of the scene makes the connection between Islam and Mormonism more pronounced. Hubert is dressed in a long tunic, pointed Turkish slippers, and what appears to be a loose turban. Boadicea’s garments are more difficult to discern, but her flowing gown also seems more suggestive of exotic Eastern attire than the stiff and unwieldy hoop-skirts fashionable in the United States during the 1850s. This construction of Mormon difference drew on notions of opulent Eastern-style clothing to emphasize the decadence and immorality of the harem in both Turkey and Utah.

Throughout Boadicea, Bell argued that women were not only victimized but also corrupted by polygamy. Her female characters—like those in many other anti-Mormon novels—descended into madness or committed suicide because of their introduction to Mormon depravity. One even became so debased through her exposure to polygamy that she murdered
a rival’s child. In this novel, the violation of the innocent female body represented not only the violation of the individual will but the destruction of its moral capacity. Bell linked much of the corrosiveness of plural marriage to what she labelled the “Mormon creed” that “no woman can enter heaven on her own merits, that is, without a man to take her there!!!!!!!” (1855, 30). Although Bell’s explanation of the doctrine of celestial marriage is woefully incomplete and inaccurate, she drew on widespread perceptions that both Muslims and Mormons asserted the spiritual inferiority of women to men in Boadicea (see, for example, Allison 1995 for Western beliefs that Islam permitted sexual tyranny). Her indignation suggests that prevailing opinions about female moral superiority during the height of the cult of true womanhood in the United States and Great Britain made a detailed refutation of this “Mormon creed” unnecessary.12

Likewise Bell and other anti-Mormon writers, Belisle (1855) also depicted a world of violence and intrigue in The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled. According to her account, the Mormon prophet consciously modelled himself after his Muslim counterpart: “I will yet tread down mine enemies and make me a way over their bodies—and make it from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean one gore of blood; and, as Mohammed, whose motto in treating for peace was the Alkoran or the sword, mine shall be Joseph Smith or the sword!” (257). This inventive quotation drew on deeply rooted fears about Muslim violence and conquest to portray Smith as a grasping and bloodthirsty despot. Through an appeal to the common misperception that Muhammad compelled conversion to Islam through intimidation and violence, Belisle depicted Smith as a potent threat not only to his religious and political opponents but to the very existence of the United States as well.

Although Americans had no direct experience of Muslim aggression in their own land, Belisle’s more educated readers would have recalled the terror the “invading Turk” had inspired in Europe for centuries. They also might have remembered the outrage sparked by the piracy of the Barbary States in their own country two generations earlier, as Muslim rulers captured American sailors and their ships and held them for ransom. These negative associations with the Muslim world, however, paled in comparison to the horror inspired by the traitor within their midst. Many American evangelicals feared Smith as his spiritual and temporal authority grew, and his command of absolute religious, political, and military power in Nauvoo contributed to unflattering comparisons between the Mormon prophet and Muhammad. Smith’s leadership of a Mormon militia, rumors that he had crowned himself king of the kingdom of God in a secret ceremony, and the announcement of his candidacy for president of the United States flouted evangelical Protestant assumptions (rarely followed in practice) about the necessity of separation of church and state and aggravated fears about Mormon religious and political subversion and eventual domination. Belisle’s claim that Smith represented the greater “impostor” because he placed himself above the revelation he proclaimed drew its force from the inherent threat Mormonism posed to the nation.

With this imminent religious and political danger in mind, Belisle explicitly connected the threat polygamy posed to the innocent female body to a threat to the national body. In language that often verged on the pornographic, she described one captive of Brigham Young’s “harem” and her futile attempts to escape:

She was scarcely eighteen years of age, of full rounded form, and complexion that rivaled the peach when ripened by the southern sun, lips of the cherry, and eyes liquid and blue as the heart of a spring violet. Now her long, shining hair was in disorder, her dark lashes drooped over the liquid orbs, and her rounded arms hung listlessly by her side, as the fair young head sunk in despair upon her bosom. Alas! How often she had tried her feeble strength against the bars of the window and bolts of the door, and every time with like success; and with a dead
weight upon her heart, that shut out all thoughts except the one great agony, that she was at
the mercy of her captors, she had ceased to beat her prison bars with her feeble strength.
(1855, 277–78)

Belisle imagined a heroine whose will resisted Mormon perfidy but whose body could not
escape it. Seduced by Mormon duplicity and then held hostage by force, this figure demon-
strated the danger Mormonism posed to both the individual and society. Belisle insisted that
the Mormons had formed “a community which set at naught the laws of God and man, had
made Nauvoo a modern Sodom, which had no parallel, even in Turkey, where women are
bought and sold, not forcibly seized and imprisoned in a harem, and where a Bashaw’s pas-
sions are under more restraint than during the reign of Mormonism at Nauvoo” (351–52). Ac-
cording to Belisle, Mormonism endangered women through the violation of their minds and
bodies in polygamous marriages, but it also endangered the social order through the violation
of the national body. Her outrage that Mormonism could survive and even thrive in “civilized,
Republican America” underscored the fragility of the system she sought to uphold (352). In
her view, toleration of Mormonism and its moral outrages threatened the nation’s millennial
destiny and purpose. If the United States failed to destroy Mormon blasphemy and sacrilege,
Americans were worse than Turkish infidels. They—like the biblical Sodomites, Belisle re-
called—would be doomed to endure God’s wrath for failing to enforce divine laws.

As the federal government waged its anti-polygamy campaign against the Latter-day
Saints, *Puck* ventured into similar territory with the publication of an illustration that drew lib-
erally from the stock tropes of Oriental imagery to skewer Mormonism. This four-part politi-
cal cartoon appeared in February 1884 and carried the caption “A Desperate Attempt to Solve
the Mormon Question.” An imaginative representation of a Mormon “harem” appeared
alongside scenes of a browbeaten husband in a “traditional” marriage, a crowd of men waiting
to obtain “liberally” priced divorces, and the ubiquitous Mormon monstrosity whose tentacles
strangle Uncle Sam, Justice, and other American icons (“Illustration 1,” 1884, 376). Aside
from its inclusion within an anti-Mormon polemic, nothing would distinguish the harem
scene from any other representation of Oriental opulence and sexual licence. In this illustra-
tion, a variety of voluptuous young women attended a sumptuously dressed man wearing an
ornately decorated robe, billowy pantaloons, and a fez. The man lounged atop a large round
Ottoman stool and smoked from a hookah pipe, as his “wives” danced or proffered Turkish
coffee, champagne, and other delicacies. The magazine’s satirical depiction of the “Mormon
problem” demonstrated the success anti-Mormon writers had achieved in their appropriation
of anti-Muslim images to critique the Latter-day Saints and their distinctive marital orders.
Drawing on an already well-established connection between Mormon and Muslim deviance in
popular anti-Mormon discourse, the cartoon deployed these images without explanation to
comment on the nation’s growing impatience with Mormon deviance.

Re-forming the Mormon “Other”
Anti-Mormon rhetoric began to change in the United States as Mormons rejected plural mar-
rriage and worked to become more like an American denomination. The 1890 Manifesto
marked the symbolic demise of plural marriage within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-
day Saints. This document prohibited Mormons from contracting new polygamous marriages,
but it did not dissolve existing plural unions or deny the authority of the revelation that insti-
tuted celestial, or plural, marriage as the central sacrament within Mormon religion. The
church’s promise to abandon its most distinctive and controversial practice appeased the US
federal government and paved the way for Utah’s admission to the union in 1896. However,
the “Mormon problem” endured. Decades of bitter acrimony, mob violence, military intervention, and anti-polygamy legislation (which criminalized the Latter-day Saints’ marriage practices, disincorporated the church and confiscated its property, and exiled more than a thousand of its members to federal prisons or into hiding) could not be forgotten so easily.

Reed Smoot’s election to the US Senate in 1903 sparked a nationwide protest. Fears of Mormon religious and political subversion had been quieted, but not silenced, by the 1890 Manifesto, and Smoot’s election brought these fears and the anti-Mormon vitriol they inspired to the surface once more. As a Mormon apostle and US Senator, Smoot embodied the “Mormon menace” American Protestants most abhorred. They saw in Smoot’s election not only the church’s ambition to wield religious and political power, but also its ability to do so with absolute authority. A broad coalition of Protestant churches and reform organizations banded together to oust Utah’s new senator from office and, in so doing, to protect the nation from the Mormon heresy and subversion they understood him to represent. Smoot’s opponents charged that his ecclesiastical position rendered him unfit to serve because it made him a conspirator in the church’s continued defiance of federal anti-polygamy laws. The Senate initiated a hearing to settle the matter, and its four-year investigation resulted in a radical political compromise that profoundly changed all the parties involved. During the course of the Senate’s investigation, witnesses revealed that the church had not abandoned its distinctive economic, political, and familial orders despite its promises to submit to federal authority and to obey federal law. The Senate hearing demonstrated beyond doubt that the 1890 Manifesto had not ended the practice of plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints.

This revelation made a difficult situation untenable. The church hierarchy recognized that Smoot’s case was in jeopardy and worked to save the apostle’s senate seat and all that it represented to them. For church president Joseph F. Smith, much more was at stake than Smoot’s expulsion from the Senate. The mission—indeed, the very existence—of the church was threatened by the loss of Smoot’s seat. Mormonism’s continued infamy did not simply embarrass or inconvenience the church’s members. It created an “ontological crisis” for the Latter-day Saints: “The L.D.S. Church existed for the purpose of announcing the restoration of divine truth and saving authority” (Flake 2004, 31). Mormonism would not endure if the Latter-day Saints could not spread their message and perform their sacred ordinances. In the end, according to historian Kathleen Flake (2004), politics succeeded where all other interventions had failed. The Senate solved the “Mormon problem” that had plagued the United States for decades through a compromise that required the Latter-day Saints to conform their restored church to American denominationalism. In return for embracing “its definitive values of obedience to law, loyalty to the nation, and creedral tolerance,” Mormons received “the benefit they sought by sending a representative to the Senate, namely, that form of religious citizenship that provided them protection, at home and abroad, for the propagation of their faith” (Flake 2004, 8).

As a result of this radical alteration in Mormonism and its relationship to the federal government, anti-Mormon writings in the United States lost some of their venom. Anti-Mormon sentiment did not disappear, but it morphed and its anti-Muslim overtones receded in the aftermath of the Senate’s political compromise with the church. A series of magazine articles in 1910 and 1911 attempted to revive the fierce public opposition to Mormonism that once flourished among American Protestants. In this “magazine crusade,” McClure’s, Cosmopolitan, Collier’s, and several other periodicals insisted that Mormonism had not changed. McClure’s asserted that Mormons still practised polygamy (Hendrick 1911, 245), and Cosmopolitan depicted Mormonism as a “viper on the hearth” ready to strike against “American homes” (Lewis 1911, 439). In their article, Cosmopolitan’s editors warned that “the fangs of the ‘viper’
have sunk ever deeper and with more subtle and deadly poison into the body politic” (439), but these attacks appeared tame in comparison to the smear campaigns common in the previous generation. The Cosmopolitan article, for example, never appealed to the familiar anti-Muslim tropes that formed the foundation for so many of the earlier anti-Mormon works. Its focus on Mormonism’s economic and political clout bore little resemblance to the lavishly illustrated and sharply pointed denunciations published in Puck and other national magazines at the height of the anti-Mormon campaign during the 1880s. The once-commonplace message that Islam and, by extension, Mormonism mocked true religion through their immoral rituals and “heathen” practices had largely disappeared by the time of the last anti-Mormon magazine crusade. Such admonitions simply had no appreciable effect after the Senate compromise was achieved. Increasingly, mainstream Americans viewed Mormonism as a curiosity or a competitor instead of a danger. It became simply one denomination—albeit a strange one—among many within the American religious market.

Some American writers and artists even felt obligated to craft what they perceived as balanced portrayals of Mormons in their works in the early twentieth century. A Mormon Maid, a silent film produced by Cecil B. DeMille’s Famous Players-Lasky studio in 1917, represented just such an effort. Although this film contained no shortage of anti-Mormon stereotypes, it also depicted some Mormons as decent and even heroic people. Many of the Oriental themes and images employed by anti-Mormon writers since the 1830s were absent from or subverted in this work. The plot revolved around outlandish schemes and outright violence to force the beautiful and innocent heroine into marriage with an evil Mormon leader. However, A Mormon Maid’s ending challenged—or at least complicated—the stock tropes of bondage and coercion in anti-Mormon literature. In this story, the wronged woman owed her salvation from Mormon intrigue and captivity to her honourable Mormon beau. A Mormon Maid therefore marked a significant departure from earlier anti-Mormon works produced in the United States.14

Anti-Mormon rhetoric outside the United States further supports the notion that the political compromise in the United States directly affected critics’ language and vehemence. England offers a particularly illustrative example. Newton Jackson’s diary testified to the vicious written attacks and verbal abuse he faced as a Mormon missionary in Great Britain in 1913. He quoted anti-Mormon sermons preached from Anglican pulpits and published in local newspapers at length, refuting claims that Mormons “haunted English homes” with “their poisonous presence” to convert “girls and young women for purposes which ought to bring these agents under the penal clauses of the White Slave Traffic Bill” (Jackson 1913, 75). Again and again, Jackson denied charges that Mormon missionaries sought converts to fill their “harems” in Utah. He even offered a £200 reward to anyone who could produce credible evidence that Mormons had been involved in any effort to kidnap young British women and spirit them to Utah (80). Jackson also tracked anti-Mormon sentiment in the British theatre during his sojourn in the country. The “horrible” spectacle of a play titled At the Mercy of the Mormons performed at the Liverpool Hippodrome moved him to secure 8,000 tracts to distribute among audience members in the hope of setting the record straight. Only a shipping delay prevented Jackson from arming Liverpool’s theatre-going residents with the church’s version of its history and character to combat what he perceived as theatrical deceit (71).

Not long after Jackson’s tenure as a missionary in Great Britain ended, the anti-Mormon rhetoric of slavery and defilement reached new heights (or depths, as the case may be) in British cinema. Trapped by the Mormons, a 1922 silent film based on Winifred Graham’s novel titled The Love Story of a Mormon, depicted Mormon missionaries as brutal villains who used their mesmeric powers and fake miracles to seduce beautiful young British women into the
captivity of polygamy. In the film version of this story, Isoldi Keene, a nefarious Mormon missionary, stalked the virtuous Nora Prescott as his prey: “Isoldi had caught his bird [Nora] . . . like thousands of other dupes . . . lured from home into the Mormon net.” This image of Nora caught like a bird in a net suggested how the filmmaker imagined that Mormonism dehumanized its victims. Her personal autonomy and individuality were erased, and she became just another poor soul “duped” by the Mormons. Away from the safety of her home, Nora soon found herself trapped in a Mormon “sanctuary” called “Gethsemani” in London, awaiting transport to a Mormon “harem” in Utah. The irony that Nora awaited her fate in a place named after the garden in which Jesus prayed before his Crucifixion would not have escaped this film’s original audience. The melodrama intensified throughout the film, as Nora discovered the woman she believed to be Isoldi’s sister was really his wife, both women were then sentenced to death by a sinister group of Mormon elders after they attempted to escape the degradation of polygamy, and Nora’s former fiancé arrived (with a private detective in tow) to rescue her. Perhaps the most unusual feature of Trapped by the Mormons was its conflation of the Mormon villain with the Gothic vampire.

Heavily influenced by literary trends, anti-Mormon works drew from a variety of popular sources for their inspiration. The blending of exotic and erotic images was not unusual in anti-Mormon literature. In Trapped by the Mormons, Gothic imagery functioned to exaggerate the horror of Mormon sexual depravity much as the conflation of anti-Muslim and anti-Catholic tropes did in earlier anti-Mormon writings. Isoldi appeared as an almost superhuman presence intent on murdering Nora by biting her neck in the film’s final scenes. Casting the Mormon villain as a vampire highlighted the parasitic nature of Mormon religion and suggested that Mormons lost their humanity through adherence to a false doctrine. In Trapped by the Mormons, the Mormon missionary did not simply convert and kidnap women; he actually attempted to feed off the very body of an innocent girl. No anti-Mormon conceit could be clearer: Trapped by the Mormons warned in no uncertain terms that Mormonism intended to drain the lifeblood from Great Britain by attacking its women and destroying its families.

Just a few decades earlier, one can easily imagine how Trapped by the Mormons might have found an eager audience in the United States. By the 1920s, however, American anti-Mormon discourse no longer employed such blatantly erotic Oriental and Gothic themes to articulate anxieties about Mormon sexual and political irregularities, as these fears had been largely alleviated through political compromise. Anti-Mormon images of sexual licence and political despotism failed to resonate within the new American context, in which Mormon families increasingly resembled their Protestant counterparts.

**Conclusion**

Anti-Mormon literature appeared at a time when society was in flux. Under strain from rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, many Americans believed the traditional social structures and the social relationships they nurtured were under assault. Shifting gender norms inspired profound anxiety and confusion among American Victorians, and their concerns about what they perceived as general moral decline fuelled interest in anti-Mormon and other polemic writings. Ironically, Mormonism inspired such anxieties because it sought to overcome them through its restoration of the church. Its innovative marriage practices and hierarchical organizational structure attempted to heal the ruptures in society caused by unrestrained individualism. The Latter-day Saints interpreted the antinomianism inherent in evangelical revivalism and Jacksonian democracy as dangerous (Winn 1989, 5). Mormonism therefore emphasized communal religious and republican values rather than their libertarian
alternatives. Their restorationism represented a pointed critique of mainstream society and threatened to upset the established social order wherever it took root. The anti-Muslim imagery applied to Mormonism helped to define Mormon heresy and mark Mormon difference. By conflating Mormonism and Islam, anti-Mormon writers adopted a rhetorical discourse of sensuality and despotism powerful enough to fuel an American anti-Mormon campaign for decades.

Only once its restorationist zeal was tempered by denominationalism could Mormonism find some measure of acceptance within the United States. One marker of increased toleration is the evolution of anti-Mormon literature. Although anti-Mormon works did not disappear, their tone and content changed in the wake of the church’s denominational turn. The anti-Muslim rhetoric that had animated so much of this literature vanished from anti-Mormon works produced by American authors. Toleration for Mormon religion came more slowly and less fully in Great Britain and other contexts. The unrestrained individualism of the American experiment in religious and political liberty offered the impetus for both the rise of the Mormon reform movement and its transformation. The compromise that allowed Mormonism to survive—indeed, to flourish within the United States—demonstrated the boundaries of religious and political freedom not just for Mormons but for all Americans. In this sense, the political compromise achieved during the Reed Smoot Senate hearing tamed both Mormonism and the American republic by delineating these limits: the nation had decided that a new faith could not validate a new and different social order. Once Mormonism accommodated to American denominationalism, Oriental themes of sensuality and despotism no longer articulated Protestant fears about the church’s place in the nation’s religious landscape. The triumph of the American anti-polygamy campaign contained Mormon religious and political deviance and authorized one vision of a secularized Protestant America for the entire nation. In this context, all faiths (not just Mormonism) were faced with powerful inducements to conform rather than to challenge federal authority by attempting to enact their particular religious visions for the republic.

Notes
1. A version of this paper was presented at the Graduate Student Symposium sponsored by Florida State University’s Department of Religion in February 2010. I would like to thank Adam Gaiser, Amy Koehlinger, and the Journal of Religion and Popular Culture reviewers for comments on earlier versions of this work.
2. Anti-Muslim tropes were by no means the only literary conceits used to construct negative portrayals of Mormons. Rather, anti-Muslim stereotypes function as part of a larger genre of literary works focused on demonizing and over-sexualizing “others” in American society. Native Americans, Catholics, African Americans, Asians, and various other groups have been treated similarly in their own right and in conjunction with Mormonism.
3. For an alternate interpretation, see Wilson 1982, 111–13. Wilson views dietary restrictions articulated in the Word of Wisdom and other Latter-day Saints’ practices as markers of Mormon difference crucial to the creation and maintenance of Latter-day Saints identity. My argument follows historical interpretations that such cultural markers of identity became central to Mormonism only after the church abandoned its distinctive marital orders under federal pressure. See, for example, Shipps 1987, 109–29, for more detail.
4. A rich body of scholarly literature has examined the constellation of false assumptions supporting Western attitudes toward Eastern cultures and the ways these notions have been deployed to marginalize subaltern populations and thereby justify European and American colonial ambitions. For
more detail on postcolonial theory, see, for example, Said 1979; Bhabha 2004; Spivak 1988; and Fanon 1965.

5. For a different comparative treatment of these three movements, see Cannon 1961. Other works that compare anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic literature include Bunker and Bitton 1983, 75–86; and Gordon 2002, 11, 33, 70, and 206. Matthew J. Grow takes a different approach in his analysis of anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic literature, comparing Mormon and Catholic perceptions of one another. See Grow 2004, 139–67.

6. These themes connect anti-Muslim literature to other nativist works of the period. For more information about the trajectory of anti-Catholic literature, for example, see Billington 1938; Higham 1955; Franchot 1994; and Pagliarini, 1999.

7. Homi Bhabha describes this dynamic as “paranoiac identification.” My interpretation follows his theory of cultural hybridity in which the point of identification marks the site of ambivalence and functions as the space for both the subversion and affirmation of cultural boundaries. See, for example, Bhabha 2004, 88.

8. For the purposes of this literary analysis, I examined twenty-three anti-Mormon titles. Most of these works purported to be histories or memoirs, although the majority conformed to the then-popular style of the Gothic novel and often borrowed from the more venerable captivity narrative to relate fictionalized accounts of Mormon social and religious deviance. Anti-Muslim tropes appeared prominently in fifteen of the anti-Mormon works reviewed. Anti-Muslim themes were especially prominent in works published from 1855 to the turn of the twentieth century.

9. My discussion of the shifting nature of identity construction is influenced by the postcolonial theories of Diane Fuss. Blending psychoanalytic and cultural theory, Fuss argues that identity is grounded on slippery and ever-changing identifications that are linked simultaneously to desire and fear and presuppose political formation in their construction. For more detail, see Fuss 1995.

10. Anti-Catholic imagery in anti-Mormon literature has received more scholarly attention than the anti-Muslim tropes discussed in this study. For more details, see Davis 1960, 205–24; Cannon 1961; Bunker and Bitton 1983, 75–86; Gordon 2002, 11, 33, 70, and 206; and Grow 2004, 139–67.

11. Disagreement exists among historians about the number and timing of Smith’s marriages. I follow the count provided in Bushman 2007, 437.

12. Most historians date the emergence of the cult of domesticity, or the cult of true womanhood, to the 1820s. It endured throughout the Victorian era and emphasized the innate piety and purity of white middle-class Protestant women.

13. Smoot’s ecclesiastical position afforded him (and the fifteen other men who held the same office) plenary authority over the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and direct succession to its presidency.


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