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Not Before Jesus Comes, If Ever: Mormon Views on When Women Will Receive the Priesthood

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While there has been agitation in recent years among some members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) for women to be ordained to the priesthood, research has established that the leaders of the religion and most members continue to oppose the idea. Drawing on data from an online purposive sample ($n=49,568$), we examine how likely members of the LDS Church are to think that women will be ordained to the priesthood and contrast that likelihood with a similar estimation of when Jesus will return and the leadership of the LDS Church will call on some members to move to Jackson County, Missouri in preparation for the Second Coming. Our results suggest that the Mormons in our sample believe that it is more likely that they will move to Missouri to greet Jesus than that women will receive the priesthood.

There has long been tension within religions over the question of whether women should be ordained (Chaves 1997). In pluralistic countries where religious affiliation is a choice, whether religions allow women to be ordained reflects their positioning in the religious marketplace: conservative religions tend not to allow women to be ordained, in contrast to more progressive religions. Within any given denomination, the specific forces that advocate for the ordination of women vary. The present study examines the views of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) regarding gender, ordination, and power. While some aspects of this study are unique to the LDS Church, we draw on research that extends beyond the scope of a single denomination.

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One framework for understanding religion and gender is offered by Woodhead (2007), who proposes two dimensions to understand religions and their relationship with gender. The first dimension varies from mainstream to marginal religions, in which mainstream religion is an important part of existing power structures, and marginal religion deviates from power structures. The second dimension ranges from confirmatory to challenging the current social order. Crossing these two dimensions results in four quadrants that reflect different relations religion may have with gender in a given context. The first quadrant, *consolidating*, occurs when religion is mainstream and confirms the existing gender order. The *tactical* quadrant describes religion that is intertwined with the existing gender order but seeks to open access to power, a strategy of “change from within.” Third, *questing* conveys change from external forces, when the religion is marginal (not very well-integrated into the power structure) but is used as a means to access gendered power. Finally, *countercultural* refers to religion that is marginal and is used to redistribute power within a gendered society.

This typology is relative to a denomination, congregation, or religion’s social context. For instance, a denomination’s category would vary dramatically based on whether it was located in highly egalitarian metropolitan Sweden or in a community in rural El Salvador where *machismo* and gender inequality are more pervasive (World Economic Forum 2020). A progressive religion that allows women to be ordained and serve in all the same roles as men would be categorized as *countercultural* in El Salvador but *consolidating* in Sweden given the context.

Additionally, a given religion, denomination, or even congregation may demonstrate more than one of these four relations. For example, Woodhead (2007) cites Brasher’s (1998) study of women in conservative megachurches, which revealed that women were more likely to be drawn to them for their small, women-led groups than for the large worship services that people associate with megachurches. The same was true of Griffith’s (1997) study of the Women’s Aglow Fellowship, a charismatic evangelical movement in which women organized prayer and healing groups to meet their needs. These represent, in Woodhead’s framework, a *tactical* change in which women who were relatively disempowered within the religious group formed a parallel organization within that religious group that offered them the ability to “deal with the high costs of their subordination” while the formal power structure remained in place (Woodhead 2007, 574).

Women's access to formal power via priesthood ordination is another context that illustrates the processes Woodhead (2007) describes. Women's ordination carries significant symbolic value, is a subject of conflict within many denominations, and is affected by both extra- and intra-denominational forces (Chaves 1997). The LDS Church provides an interesting example in which to apply Woodhead's framework. Priesthood that aligns with a gender hierarchy is deeply ingrained in Mormon life, practice, and belief, and forms an important part of Latter-day Saint identity (Toscano 2020). As of 2023, the LDS Church does not ordain women to its lay priesthood (Cragun et al. 2016). However, some groups and individuals within the church are actively trying to change the gender order, whether in subtle or radical ways (Shepherd, Anderson, and Shepherd 2015). As a result, the LDS Church, at least in the US context, could be considered either *consolidating* or *tactical* (or both), depending on which element of the religion is under consideration. The all-male upper leadership—the Apostles and First Presidency—continue to advocate for the existing gender order even while some within the religion support changing it. Understanding the priesthood and its history regarding women's roles in the church offers some necessary context for this study.

Mormons believe the priesthood is the power to act in God's name (Keogh 2016), and only those who hold the priesthood are eligible for important leadership roles within the church (Peterson 1992; Hammarberg 2013). Patriarchy is deeply embedded in the structure and ethos of the LDS Church (Kline 2013). Bushman (2020) notes that in 1967 prayers in sacrament services were to be given only by men. Three years later the church placed the women's Relief Society under the budgetary oversight of the male priesthood as part of the church's "correlation" effort, so that women no longer controlled the organization's finances (Hatch 1975). Although the policy regarding prayers in sacrament services was later rescinded (Gardner 1978), norms within LDS culture made clear that the male priesthood remained the center of power. This era also saw increased criticism of the women's liberation movement by LDS leaders. In 1971 LDS apostle Thomas Monson, who later would become president of the church, wrote in the *Ensign*, the church's official monthly magazine, an article titled "The Women's Liberation Movement: Liberation or Deception?" concluding it was the latter.

At this same time, some Mormon women began to assert their independence and agitate for greater attention to the gendered power structure of the religion. For instance, a group of women edited a special issue of *Dialogue: A*

Journal of Mormon Thought that was dedicated to exploring women's issues. That group also established the *Exponent II* newspaper, which continues to explore women's perspectives in the LDS Church.

When the Equal Rights Amendment was proposed again in the 1970s, LDS Church leadership saw a socio-cultural threat and organized "grassroots" opposition to the amendment's ratification in Utah. After the amendment fell short of ratification, apostle Ezra Taft Benson clearly linked the masculine priesthood with obedience to the institutional power structure when he proclaimed that church members should place their trust in "the living prophet and the First Presidency—follow them and be blessed—reject them and suffer" (Benson 1981, in Bushman 2020, 161). Benson and other church leaders continued to promote traditional gender roles, encouraging women to prioritize home over career (Benson 1987), a message reemphasized by Apostle Boyd Packer (1993), who warned listeners not to follow "alternate voices." Shortly after Packer's speech, six high-profile intellectuals were excommunicated, five of whom had spoken in favor of feminism.

Church leaders' concerns about sex roles and gender continue to the present day. Political intervention opposing same-sex marriage efforts in Hawaii in the 1990s and California in 2008 illustrate this (Bushman 2020; Ostler 2021; Petrey 2020). While the Hawaii case was in the news, the church issued "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" in 1995 to further concretize gender roles. This document continues to be cited and has achieved nearly canonical status, although it has not been voted on as the "law of common consent" would require for new scripture (Doctrine and Covenants 26:2).

Although LDS Church leaders have voiced concern through the years about changing the gendered power structure, research addressing such changes in other religious institutions shows positive effects associated with female clergy. Research by Knoll and Bolin (2018) shows that women who grew up in churches with female clergy fare better educationally and show better psychological well-being than women who did not, even after controlling for other factors. They also fare better economically and are more likely to be in professional jobs.

There is little doubt that ordaining women to the priesthood would trigger a seismic change in the culture and polity of Mormonism (White Jr. and White 2002; Chaves 1997). Nevertheless, the prohibition against ordaining women has become controversial in recent years, and activists now lobby the church to change this policy (Shepherd, Anderson, and Shepherd 2015). In

short, despite some members' *tactical* efforts to bargain with the patriarchal order of the LDS Church, the religion remains squarely in the *consolidating* element of Woodhead's typology—it reinforces and reproduces the historically gendered power structure of the US.

The governing church hierarchy has resisted calls to ordain women. Prior research finds that 80 to 90 percent of rank-and-file Mormons also oppose the ordination of women (Campbell, Green, and Monson 2014; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2009). However, these studies do not assess what Mormons think about the likelihood that women will be ordained to the priesthood in the future. Mormons believe in a doctrine of “continuing revelation” and expect church policy to change and evolve (White and White 1980; Mauss 1994). For example, the church once allowed polygamy, but this was abandoned in theory in 1890 and in practice in 1904 (Van Wagoner 1989). The church once prohibited people of African descent from holding the priesthood, but this policy was discontinued in 1978 (Mauss 2003).

Historians and social scientists argue that church policy often changes in response to social pressure (Prince and Wright 2005; Chaves 1997). Mormons believe that these policy changes are directed by God via divine revelations to the church hierarchy (Hammarberg 2013). One study shows that rank-and-file Mormons would support the ordination of women if the governing hierarchy announced that the change had been mandated by God via revelation (Cragun et al. 2016).

In this paper we investigate whether Mormons anticipate a change in the policy prohibiting women from holding the priesthood. We do this with a series of survey questions, and by comparing respondents' perceptions of the likelihood of female ordination with the occurrence of another unlikely event, one that Mormon leaders have prophesied will occur in the future. This comparison highlights the degree to which rank-and-file Mormons expect a change in the priesthood ordination policy.

Divine Revelation and Mormon Theology

Mormons expect revelation from God to trigger some momentous future events (McConkie 1966), some of which would transform the church as thoroughly and dramatically as would ordaining women to the lay priesthood. For example, in the 1830s Mormons built settlements in Jackson County, Missouri. Joseph Smith, the religion's founder, proclaimed that this county—situated near the geographic center of the continent—would be the “center place” of

Zion. He taught that this would be the site of Jesus's return, where Jesus would govern the earth throughout his millennial reign (see Doctrine and Covenants 29:7–11; 42:9; 45:65–75; 57:1–3; and 84:2–3). However, shortly after founding these settlements, the Mormons were expelled (Bowman 2012). Joseph Smith vowed that they would one day return to inhabit the area, and future revelation from God would determine when they would reclaim the land. These events are slated to occur sometime before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the prophecy is canonized in Mormon scripture (Johnson 1992).

Jackson County became less central to the church as the nineteenth century progressed. Shortly after Joseph Smith was murdered by a hostile mob in 1844, the Mormons fled across the Great Plains to escape persecution. In 1847 they founded what would become Salt Lake City (Bowman 2012). The church grew rapidly, and its headquarters and bureaucracy became firmly ensconced in Salt Lake City. Today there are over 1 million self-identified Mormons in Utah, and over 2 million in the other 49 states (Phillips 2018; Phillips et al. 2011; Lawson and Cragun 2012), estimates that are substantially lower than the members claimed by the LDS Church leadership. Thus, a wholesale return to Jackson County presents logistical hurdles that appear insurmountable. For this reason, church leaders have attempted to reframe the prophecy as something limited or metaphorical (Doxey 1979). The church's propensity for buying property and building temples around the globe can be interpreted as a sign that the hierarchy does not expect a revelation on the matter soon. Belief in some sort of literal repatriation to Jackson County persists among some Mormons, but this doctrine is rarely invoked and is now eschatological lore.

Given that a return to Jackson County is deemphasized in modern Mormonism and a revelation mandating such a return would have untold human and financial costs, this eccentric doctrine provides a useful point of comparison with a potential change in the lay priesthood to permit the ordination of women. Ordaining women would fundamentally alter the polity of the church, but the policy could be changed by the prophet at any time with fewer logistical issues and less expense than returning to Jackson County. Do rank-and-file Mormons think that the ordination of women is more or less likely than a mass migration to Jackson County, Missouri?

One theoretical framework that may be useful to understand Latter-day Saints' perspectives on these two issues is construal-level theory, which proposes that people construe (think about) an event or stimulus more abstractly as that event or stimulus becomes more psychologically distant or removed

(Trope and Liberman 2010). A meta-analysis of 106 papers reporting 267 experiments testing construal-level theory found the effect of psychological distance on abstraction to be robust (Soderberg et al. 2015). People think more abstractly about events that may occur in the distant future. Or, to frame it inversely, they think more concretely about events that are likely to occur in the near future. This is because, with more concrete limiting factors present, it is more difficult to think about the event abstractly. Abstract events, in contrast, have fewer concrete limiting factors, so people are better able to imagine them happening.

We can apply this reasoning to the question of women's ordination and the Second Coming of Jesus. While the LDS Church does hold as doctrine that Jesus will return and, at least historically, has espoused the idea that some of the church faithful will be called to move to Missouri for this event, it is likely that church members experience a great deal of psychological distance regarding this prophecy. This is true for several reasons: (a) Christ's return will take place at some unknown point in the future; (b) LDS teachings do not specify which individuals will be called to participate; (c) it is supposed to occur in a location where very few members of the LDS Church currently live—Jackson County, Missouri; and (d) eschatological themes are infrequently addressed by the leadership in General Conference (Shepherd and Shepherd 2015).

Given the psychological distance for this event, it is possible that Latter-day Saints think about a call to move to Jackson County to prepare for the Second Coming with a high level of construal (or very abstractly). In contrast, LDS Church doctrine regarding the role of women in the religion is not abstract at all. It is a lived, daily experience for all members as they can observe: (x) males in leadership positions, (y) males blessing and passing the sacrament, and (z) males being the primary conduits for ascertaining the will of God. The gendered power structure detailed by Woodhead (2007) is “here and now,” which results in a very low level of construal; it is concrete and part of the lived, everyday experience of Latter-day Saints. As a result, we hypothesize that Latter-day Saints will be more likely to think that members of the LDS Church will be called to return to Jackson County, Missouri at some point in the future than they will be to think that women will be allowed to hold the priesthood. The present data allow a comparison of rank-and-file Mormons' thinking regarding these two events.

Methods

Data for this study derive from an online purposive sample of Mormons. Links to the survey were posted in a variety of locations on the Internet, including Facebook Groups, blogs, and forums covering a wide spectrum of Mormonism-related websites, on 16 November 2014. The response was much larger than anticipated, leading us to close the survey early (December 4) rather than keep it up for an entire month as initially planned, with 71,309 completed responses. After data cleaning, elimination of incomplete responses or responses from outside the USA, we were left with a total of 57,432 respondents. However, close to ten thousand respondents were not current members of the LDS Church. Since we are interested only in how members of the LDS Church think about these issues, we restricted the sample to just the 49,568 individuals who reported they identified as LDS and were on the membership roster of the LDS Church. For more information on the study methodology, see Cragun and Nielsen (2015). Participants were asked their age (in categories), level of educational attainment, race/ethnicity, gender, income (in ordered categories), and political views. We also asked participants how active they were in the LDS Church. Descriptive statistics for all these variables are presented in Table 1 on the following page.

Two questions included in the survey are of primary interest for this paper, each with four time variations. The first question asked about the likelihood of Mormon women receiving the priesthood: “How likely is it that some time [within x time period] the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles will receive a revelation allowing women to be ordained to the priesthood?” To gain a sense of how attitudes might shift by time, we varied the text within the brackets with four options: (1) within the next 10 years, (2) within the next 20 years, (3) within the next 50 years, and (4) in the future. Participants were randomly assigned to answer a question with one of the four time periods and only saw that question. Participants were not asked about the likelihood of ordination in any of the other time periods. A total of 48,496 individuals responded to one of the variations of this question.

The second question of interest in the survey asked about gathering to Missouri: “How likely is it that sometime [within x time period] the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles will receive a revelation asking members of the church to gather in Jackson County, Missouri in preparation for Jesus Christ’s return?” Like the first question about gender, the wording in the bracket above used the same variations and participants were randomly

assigned to see just one of the four time options. In order to keep the length of the survey relatively short, not all participants were assigned to see the question about returning to Jackson County, though 22,605 participants were shown this question and answered it (~ 5,000 per condition).

For both questions, the response options included: Less than 1% chance, 1–10%, 10–20%, 20–30%, 30–40%, 40–50%, 50–60%, 60–70%, 70–80%, 80–90%, 90–99%, and more than 99%. To simplify the presentation, we collapsed these options into: less than 1% chance, 1 to 50% chance, and greater than 50% chance.

Table 1

Variable	Category	Percentage	Variable	Category	Percentage
Age			Gender		
	18-25	20.2		Male	27.6
	26-30	22.6		Female	72.2
	31-40	33.5		Other	0.2
	41-50	11.5			
	51-60	7.8	Income		
	61-70	3.5		Less than \$10,000	5.5
	71+	0.9		\$10,001 to \$25,000	9.5
				\$25,001 to \$50,000	19.9
Educational Attainment				\$50,000 to \$75,000	21.6
	Did not finish high school	.2		\$75,001 to \$100,000	18.5
	High school	3.3		\$100,001 to \$250,000	21.2
	Some college	26.6		\$250,001+	3.8
	College graduate	47.4			
	Master's Degree	16.3	Political views		
	PhD	2.5		Very Conservative	7.9
	JD/MD	3.7		Conservative	27.6
				Moderate, but lean conservative	29.2
Race / Ethnicity				Moderate	12.5
	White, non-Hispanic	93.2		Moderate, but lean liberal	11.4
	Black, non-Hispanic	.4		Liberal	5.9
	Hispanic	2.6		Very liberal	1.5
	Asian	.8		Other	3.8
	Native American	.6			
	Pacific Islander	.5	Religious Activity level		
	Other	2.0		Very active	79.0
				Somewhat active	14.5
				Not too active	4.2
				Not at all active	2.2

Omitted, "prefer not to answer" and "don't know" responses are not shown in this table.

Table 2. Percent Chance of Women Being Ordained

	Within 10 Years	Within 20 Years	Within 50 Years	In the Future
Greater than 50%	.5	1.0	1.7	3.0
1% to 50%	21.1	20.0	20.6	22.0
Less than 1%	78.4	78.9	77.6	75.0

Results

To illustrate the results, we provide two tables. Table 2 shows the proportion of members of the LDS Church in our survey who believe women will be allowed to receive the priesthood within the four different time periods. As Table 2 illustrates, there is only a marginal increase in the percentage of Mormons in our study who think that women will be ordained as the time period increases; 0.5% believe there is at least a 50% chance that women will be ordained within the next 10 years, while just 3.0% believe there is at least a 50% chance that women will be ordained in the more distant future.

Table 3 shows the percentages of Mormons in our survey who think that members of the LDS Church will be asked to move to Jackson County, Missouri in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus within different projected time periods. In the 10-year window, the percentage of Mormons in our sample is very similar to the percentages of Mormons who think women will receive the priesthood, with 0.5% indicating that they think there is a greater than 50% chance that this will occur. However, when the question was asked using a 50-year time frame, the percentage of Mormons in our sample who believed there was greater than a 50% chance that Mormons would be asked to move to Missouri increased to 4.1%. Moreover, 41.1% of the Mormons in our survey who were asked whether they thought this would occur at some time in the future believed it would happen.

In addition to comparing the likelihood of ordaining women to the likelihood of LDS leaders calling on members to move to Missouri, we also examined whether estimates of the likelihood of ordaining women varied by demographic characteristics. For all of the following analyses, we report

Table 3. Percent Chance of Returning to Jackson County

	Within 10 Years	Within 20 Years	Within 50 Years	In the Future
Greater than 50%	.5	1.5	4.1	41.1
1% to 50%	25.7	31.3	33.4	19.0
Less than 1%	73.8	67.2	62.5	39.9

Table 4. Percent Chance of Returning to Jackson County by Demographic Characteristics

		Age						
		18-25	26-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71+
Greater than 50%		1.7	2.3	3.9	4.6	2.7	1.9	3.5
1% to 50%		22.8	25.5	23.6	20.7	13.4	12.8	14.1
Less than 1%		78.5	72.2	72.5	74.7	83.9	85.4	82.4
		Education						
		Less than High School	High School	Some College	College Graduate	Master's	PhD	JD/MD
Greater than 50%		0	1.0	1.7	2.7	5.3	9.0	8.3
1% to 50%		20.0	12.3	18.6	22.9	25.7	30.1	33.3
Less than 1%		80	86.8	79.6	74.4	69.0	60.8	58.3
		Political Orientation						
		Very Conservative	Conservative	Lean Conservative	Moderate	Lean Liberal	Liberal	Very Liberal
Greater than 50%		0.9	0.6	2.3	4.4	7.8	12.9	21.3
1% to 50%		10.4	17.0	25.0	28.0	35.4	39.7	30.7
Less than 1%		88.8	82.4	72.7	67.5	56.8	47.4	48.0

here only the results from the “some time in the future” condition. There were minor differences by race/ethnicity ($\chi^2=23.75$, $p=.022$); Non-Hispanic Black individuals were the most likely to think that at some point in the future women would receive the priesthood (13.3% reported a greater than 50% chance), followed by Native American (5.5%), Hispanic (4.0%), and White individuals (2.9%). There were also some differences by income ($\chi^2= 45.88$, $p<.001$). The poorest individuals (less than \$10,000 in income per year) were the least likely to predict women’s ordination occurring at some point in the future (1.6%) while the most affluent (those making more than \$250,000 per year) reported the highest likelihood (5.2%).

There were also differences by age ($\chi^2=99.66$, $p<.001$), though the pattern was unclear. The age group with the smallest percentage reporting a more than 50% chance that women would be ordained in the future was individuals between 18 and 25 (1.7%) while the age group with the largest percentage was those aged from 41 to 50 (4.6%). We found a difference by sex ($\chi^2=40.25$, $p<.001$). A greater proportion of men thought that the likelihood of women being ordained at some point in the future was above 50% (4.4%) than women (2.5%).

We also found a notable difference by educational attainment ($\chi^2= 170.45$, $p<.001$). Higher levels of educational attainment increased the percentage of individuals who believed that women would be ordained at some point in the future; 9% of individuals with PhDs who completed the survey reported that there was a greater than 50% chance of women receiving the priesthood at some point in the future.

The demographic variable most closely related to believing women would be ordained at some point in the future was political views ($\chi^2=632.66$, $p<.001$). Conservative Mormons are much less likely to think that women will ever be ordained to the priesthood than are liberal members of the religion; 21.3% of very liberal Mormons in our sample put the likelihood of women receiving the priesthood at some point in the future at above 50%.

Discussion

The Mormons in our sample were unlikely to believe that the policy preventing women from being ordained to the priesthood would change anytime soon, or even anytime in the distant future. The majority indicated that there was less than a 1% chance that women would ever be ordained to the priesthood while just 3% reported believing that there was a greater than 50% chance. On

the time dimension, it appears as though restricting women from holding the priesthood is, in the minds of the Mormons in our survey, an eternal policy.

We contrasted belief in women being ordained to the priesthood with an arguably low-probability event: Mormons being asked to move to Jackson County, Missouri in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The members of the LDS Church in our survey believed this event was far more likely to occur than women receiving the priesthood, particularly in the more distant future. Just over 41% of respondents reported believing that there was a greater than 50% chance that members of the LDS Church would be called to move to Jackson County, Missouri at some point in the future to prepare for the Second Coming.

That the Latter-day Saints in our sample believed Jesus was more likely to return than they could foresee the possibility of women being ordained—regardless of the time period in question—suggests just how committed they are to traditional gender roles when it comes to priesthood. This strongly supports the idea that gender is an organizing principle in the LDS Church (Sumerau and Cragun 2015), that it is tied to the market niche the LDS Church has chosen to pursue (Chaves 1997), and that a core doctrine of the religion is a gender binary that has divine status (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016).

We believe construal level theory helps explain our findings. The doctrine of returning to Jackson County to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus is psychologically very distant and, as a result, has a high level of construal. It's possible that, when presented with this idea, Latter-day Saints fail to consider the logistical hurdles of such an undertaking: selecting which members will move; having them sell their goods and homes; transporting thousands of people and supplies to Missouri; providing housing and food for those individuals; and so on. Logistically, such an event would be an enormous undertaking. But because Latter-day Saints have a great deal of psychological distance from this event—it will happen at some unspecified time in the future, may not directly affect them, and will take place in a distant location—the event is very abstract. Our data suggest that a sizable proportion of Latter-day Saints see this event as likely to happen at some point in the future, which may very well be the result of the high level of construal and psychological distance they have from the event.

In contrast, the everyday realities of members of the LDS Church are imbued with gendered power dynamics. From local to regional to church-wide leadership, all who have any decision-making authority are male. Men and

women in the LDS Church are currently assigned to very different roles, which all members can see. From passing the sacrament to performing baptisms to blessing children and ordaining members, the exclusion of women from the priesthood is not at all abstract. There is no psychological distance to gendered power dynamics in the LDS Church. It is part of every member's everyday life. The religion has even sacralized gender as part of God's divine plan (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). As a result, members of the LDS Church consider it unlikely that this aspect of the religion can change. Our experiment effectively compared two phenomena of radically different psychological distances. Gendered power dynamics and the ordination of women are proximate and real while being called to Jackson County to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus is distant and abstract. Because the return to Jackson County precipitates the return of Jesus Christ, that is a high-level goal for which individual Latter-day Saints have no responsibility. In contrast, changing the gendered power structure is a goal for which they would have a great deal of responsibility.

While somewhat tangential to the primary thrust of this article, we do find it fascinating that such a large percentage of the Latter-day Saints in our study reported relatively low odds of members of the LDS Church being called to move to Jackson County, Missouri. Just 4.1% of the Mormons in our survey believed that the call to return to Jackson County, Missouri would occur in the next 50 years. This percentage goes up when the time frame stretches to the indefinite future, but this does suggest that a sizable percentage of Mormons do not believe the Second Coming is imminent. It is also possible that many current members of the religion are unaware of this idea or that LDS leaders' attempts to transform this doctrine into a metaphor have been successful (Doxey 1979).

These differences may reflect a shift toward greater reliance upon modern modes of thinking (Bruce 2013) and a general shift toward the assimilation end of the assimilation vs. differentiation spectrum along which religions fluctuate in order to maintain relevance in modern life (Cragun and Nielsen 2009; Mauss 1994). Despite their support for patriarchal gender norms (Kline 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2015), members of the LDS Church may be shifting toward more naturalistic perspectives on how the world works rather than supernaturalistic ones (Riess 2019).

Some of the demographic differences noted in the results warrant discussion here. Black individuals were more likely than others to believe women would receive the priesthood. The idea of priesthood being given to a group

that had once been denied it may be more prescient for Black Latter-day Saints as they were not allowed to hold the priesthood until 1978 (Maus 2003). As a result, changes in policies around who holds priesthood may seem more plausible to Black Latter-day Saints than to other members of the religion.

The trend of secularization that has played out in the US since the 1990s has affected younger people more than older ones, with more than 30% of those under 30 reporting no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2022). Given that tendency, the result for many religions has been a natural sorting effect. Younger people who have stayed in the LDS Church are more likely than those who leave to share the values of the religion (Riess 2019), including as relates to the gendered power structure detailed by Woodhead (2007). This is, in fact, one of the key arguments made by Chaves (1997) in delineating why some religions change their policy on female ordination and others don't—to position themselves in the religious marketplace. As a result, young people who are affiliated with the LDS Church, given the very real possibility of leaving the religion, may be more likely to find support for their values, including their support for a gendered power structure, inside the LDS Church (Avishai 2008; Woodhead 2007). In contrast, the middle-aged individuals in our study who were more likely to believe that women will be ordained in the future may not be in a position to easily extricate themselves from the LDS Church given other considerations, like a devout spouse or kids or a job that could be threatened as a result of leaving.

Similarly, Avishai's (2008) argument regarding why women remain affiliated with conservative religions where they are subordinated and marginalized may help explain the difference we found by sex. It may be the case that women in the LDS Church are similar to women in other conservative religions; female Latter-day Saints may find that the LDS Church's doctrines and policies leading to a gendered power structure validate their life choices and values if, for example, they want to be stay-at-home moms whose husbands will take care of them. Further research should examine whether this is the case. Avishai (2008) and Woodhead (2007) both argue that the certainty of women's roles in conservative religion contrasts with the uncertainty and complexity of women's roles in modern society. As a result, some women prefer the certainty of a subordinate role over that of a more egalitarian role.

There may also be some women who have reinterpreted how priesthood authority works in the LDS Church. Relevant here is Stapley's (2018, 2020) historical study of LDS priesthood. Stapley distinguishes between ecclesiastical

priesthood, which refers to the offices in which one might serve, and cosmological priesthood, which refers to a collective group of church members who are united through their participation in temple rites. Although Emma Smith was ordained to lead the Relief Society in 1842, when Brigham Young later became president of the church, he made clear that female church members were not part of the ecclesiastical priesthood, which also was the priesthood that gained increasing importance in the church (Stapley 2020). As part of this, male priesthood was considered to have “keys” to guide church affairs at all levels of the institution.

Although some advocates in the twenty-first century Ordain Women movement have been excommunicated or have resigned, Stapley notes that Dallin Oaks’s April 2014 General Conference sermon, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” responded to the issue by noting, “We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be?” (Oaks 2014, 51). Stapley considers this a “new priesthood framework” that has been incorporated into female missionaries’ having priesthood authority in performing their work, as well as in church publications. Thus, some women may conclude that they are already using the priesthood and working through it, even if they have not received the priesthood directly. This is similar to Orthodox Jewish women who have found ways to reinterpret their religion’s teachings, transforming elements that seemed to marginalize women into ones that empower women instead (Avishai 2008).

Finally, the relationship between political views and support for the ordination of women to the priesthood is fairly straightforward. Conservative individuals tend to oppose change whereas progressive individuals tend to advocate for change that they believe results in greater equality (Haidt 2013). That conservative Mormons were less likely to believe that women would be ordained in the future than progressive Mormons were is not surprising.

Woodhead’s (2007) framework for understanding religion and gender is useful in considering this study’s results. LDS leaders have positioned the Church in a consolidating role, maintaining the established gender order. The majority of respondents in this study also expect current gender roles to continue in the future. A minority, however, expect women’s ordination and are occupying what Woodhead labels the tactical quadrant, who see increasing access to power as change occurs from within the religion. Those individuals who believe such a change to be more likely, according to construal level theo-

ry (Trope and Liberman 2010), envision more specific changes to achieve that end. Remarks by leaders such as Oaks (2014), suggesting that women already have priesthood authority when they act in their church callings, reframe the issue in a way that allows the institution to maintain its current gender structure while addressing questions regarding women's ordination.

There are some important limitations to our study. The first is that we aren't sure whether all participants were familiar with the belief that Mormons will be asked to return to Jackson County, Missouri, as this has become a somewhat esoteric belief that does not figure prominently in most Sunday School manuals (Doxey 1979). Another limitation of our study is our sample. While our sample is very large, it is not a random sample of Mormons using a known sampling frame. Purposive samples are useful when investigating small groups and their benefits have been repeatedly shown in the scientific literature (Gosling et al. 2004; Kraut et al. 2004). Even so, our sampling method was problematic. As a result, we have tried throughout the article to make it clear that we are not suggesting our results can be generalized to all Latter-day Saints in the US. Instead, we have tried to use language that makes it clear we are talking about the participants in our sample and not about Mormons or members of the LDS Church more generally.

Finally, there is one other minor issue with our questions: the response options were not mutually exclusive. This was a technical oversight in the construction of the survey that we used percentages that overlapped. While we don't think this dramatically altered the results of the survey, this was a problem with our survey design and we recommend that future research into this area not use the same response options.

Conclusion

While not a random, representative sample of members of the LDS Church, our study suggests that many Latter-day Saints believe that women will not receive the priesthood even in the distant future. In contrast, a sizable percentage believe that Jesus will return and the leadership of the LDS Church will call on members to move to Jackson County, Missouri, in preparation for the Second Coming. Contrasting the possible ordination of women with the Second Coming of Jesus illustrates that in the minds of many Latter-day Saints, gender roles are distinct and eternal. Whether ten years from now or the far distant future, many Latter-day Saints believe women are not supposed to have the priesthood.

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