On April 6th, 1917, one Reed Owen Smoot prayed for aid in troubled times. That is hardly original in itself. The scene would thus be unworthy of note if it were not for further specifics. April 6th, 1917, was the day on which the United States declared war on Germany and entered the conflict now known as World War I. The prayer was offered in the US Senate in response to that decision. But just as significant as the setting is the praying subject. Smoot was a Senator from Utah, a Republican, and an Apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), that is a Mormon. To which the average reader likely responds, “of course.” If Smoot was from Utah, he was of course Mormon, of course Republican, and of course willing to perform religiosity in public. This essay does not aim to cut through that chain of assumptions. Rather, my discussion offers an account of how these links have been forged: a development that would have surprised the majority of nineteenth-century Mormons as much as their non-Mormon contemporaries. What could be conservative about open scriptural canon, communitarian utopianism, and non-monogamous marriage? Ultimately, however, Mormon conservatism is grounded in particulars of that theology. It has further been shaped, gradually but thereby durably, through shifting principles of LDS political engagement. Consideration of this process offers a case study in how an initially radical formation can fashion itself into conservatism.

Of Mormons, Moments, and “The Power of Prayer”

In the nearly 150 years since the founding of the Church of Christ as the forerunner to the current Latter-Day Saint organization, multiple time stretches might be nominated as ‘Mormon Moments’ in which the activities of the LDS Church and/or its members became the focus of intensified interest within a larger US-American context. The most recent candidate for ‘Mormon Moment’-status would certainly be 2012. In this year devout Church member Mitt Romney won the Republican presidential nomination and lost the presidential race parallel to the national tour of the Broadway musical Book of Mormon. The hosting of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, operational headquarters of the LDS Church and capital of the still heavily Mormon-populated state of Utah (roughly 60 per cent as of 2014, cf. Canham), ranks as a further twenty-first-century contender. The nineteenth century is yet richer in significant episodes, beginning with the publication of Joe Smith’s “Gold Bible” concurrent with Church founding in 1830 and continuing with the gathering and subsequent expulsion of Mormon settlers from Missouri under threat of “extermination” in 1838 (“Missouri Executive Order 44.”). This was followed by the mass migration to the Salt Lake Valley and environs from 1846 on. Perhaps the most defining moments, however, involved tensions over polygamy—or, more
accurately, polygyny (marriage between one man and multiple women)—as espoused by the LDS Church from 1852 until official discontinuation in 1890. Reckoned one of the “twin relics” of barbarism along with chattel slavery, according to the inaugural “Republican Party Platform of 1856,” “plural marriage” in the Utah territory not only fired the imagination of the sensationalist press. The practice also fretted the fault lines between religious freedom and the rule of law. The Constitution guarantees “free exercise” of religion. But does that protection extend to religious convictions that can be practiced in the bedroom? Even if the national majority rejects such a notion, can a local population choose to sanction such relationships? Popular sovereignty was a problematic enough principle in slavery debates. The doctrine was no less tricky when applied to Utah. How genuinely ‘popular’ can a territorial government headed by a religious leader be? Utah’s first governor was none other than Brigham Young: successor to founder Joseph Smith as President/Prophet of the LDS Church and someone who spoke out for theocracy as a form of government in which “the will and dictation of the Almighty” was recognized and “the kingdom of God circumscribes and comprehends” the municipal (qtd. in Mason 359). Can such a prioritization of the sacred over the secular be democratic? The federal government generally thought ‘no’ and responded with repressive measures. Troops were deployed, Young quasi-deposed, and Utah territory even briefly occupied (1858–1861) in the aftermath of the ‘Utah War’ (1857–1858). More consistently, however, control was reached through legislation. Anti-polygamy measures of the 1880s stripped voting rights, disbanded militias, and ended local control of courts as well as schools. Disincorporation was the most drastic, and effective, measure. The 1890 Supreme Court decision upholding the federal seizure of LDS Church assets essentially forced prophetic disavowal of non-monogamous marriage in the same year. This step restored financial security and future prospects to the Church. It further eased the course to statehood that Utah was granted in 1896. Yet for all the nineteenth-century drama and more recent twenty-first-century media blitz, the most important of all ‘Mormon Moments’ dates from 1904 to 1907. During this time the fitness of LDS Churchman Reed Smoot to serve as a US Senator was subject to intense debate. The multi-year hearings of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate “On the Matter of Protests Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat” constituted an affront, as the investigation questioned the integrity of the election process in Utah. Smoot had been elected with a clear majority by his state’s legislature in the fall of 1903. However, the hearings suggested that at the federal level, anti-Mormon animus and the specter of a still lingering polygamy overrode trust in the democratic process. This is not to claim that hearings were unjustified. As an Apostle, Smoot belonged to the Quorum of the Twelve: the second-highest governing body in the LDS Church and the grouping from which general Church authorities advance, traditionally by seniority, to the status of ultimate Church authority as President/Prophet. Roughly translated into the more familiar organizational idiom of Roman Catholicism: Smoot was akin to a Cardinal on the waiting list to become Pope, with no possibilities for resignation. Barring trespasses worthy of excommunication, only the Grim Reaper retires a Mormon Apostle. The debates in and around the hearings thus recalled
earlier conflicts regarding Utah theocracy, but the question of church-state relations was interrogated differently. The principal question became, as legal and religious studies scholar Kathleen Flake has formulated: “What are the political terms by which diverse religions are brought within America’s constitutional order?” (1). In regards to LDS integration into larger US contexts, answers were found in a series of adjustments. As Flake further argues in her touchstone study, seating Smoot required re-envisioning Mormonism in the more familiar Protestant pattern of denomination: the organization of believers into congregations as opposed to a single overarching organization (cf. 8, 21–22). Such repackaging rendered the Church and its members less threatening and so better suited for integration into political institutions, if not quite yet into the mainstream of organized religion in the US. Accordingly, LDS authorities downplayed distinctive elements of their faith such as ritualized Temple worship as well as the claim of being the singular “Church of Jesus Christ” during the hearings. They further doubled down on previous polygamy disavowal and disengaged themselves from direct political involvement, to shore up the assertion of being a denominational grouping comparable to Methodists or Presbyterians. That was certainly not the common understandings of Mormonism at the time. The attention accorded Smoot and his faith upon his election was substantial, but overwhelmingly negative and animated by the conviction of an absolute incompatibility between the LDS Church and US institutions: religious and political. 3,482 petitions against Smoot’s seating were filed with the Senate in a mere three-month period (Heath 13). The bound transcripts of the consequent hearings number roughly 3,500 pages (K. Flake 5). And this is not to forget that the various charges lodged against Smoot—secret supporter of polygamy, puppet of Salt Lake theocracy, non-Christian cultist, and so on—were amply echoed throughout the popular press.

At the conclusion of this process, and most certainly by the time Smoot left the Senate in 1932, public perceptions had shifted significantly. Suspicions of LDS hierarchies and influence lingered. Yet journalistic accounts increasingly depicted Mormons as “able,” “efficient,” “effective,” and even “inherently good” (Shipps 72). As historian Jan Shipps sums up, the debauched Mormon “Satyr” of the American popular imagination gave way to the LDS “Saint”: a virtuous model citizen in line with Mormon self-understanding (“Saint” is a preferred term of LDS self-reference) (51, cf. also graph on page 70). That is a radical reversal. And it was achieved by the power of prayer. This was Smoot’s firm conviction, preached from the pulpit at the semi-annual LDS Church conference in 1922. “No greater power came to me,” he recalled of the hearings, than from “above” through “constant and earnest prayer” (“General Conference” 101). This is my conviction as well, although not due to the intervening “hand of God” cited by Smoot (101). Overall, it is the absolute ordinariness exemplified by Smoot’s public prayerfulness that served to enact change, not any divine intervention. Smoot’s monogamy certainly aided his cause. But his calm played an equally pivotal role. B. H. Roberts, a lower-ranked but thrice-married Church authority elected to Congress in 1898, had been sent packing after a mere six weeks of investigation. The enquiry into Smoot’s fitness for office lasted far longer. By all accounts, Smoot demonstrated remarkable composure as well as commitment to diplomatic outreach throughout. Thus, in the end the sheer length of the hearings and their
massive popular print accompaniment worked to the advantage of the Senator and the LDS Church. Slowly but surely, Smoot’s stoic consistency chipped away at the opposing position and their condemnations of Mormonism as a secretive, alien, and cultish cartel of economic interests combined with religious despotism. These accusations found expression in caricatures of atavistically hairy and horned ‘satyr’ Mormons in addition to Latter-Day serpents, harems, and, most prominently, the ‘Mormon Octopus.’ The cephalopod trope had been in circulation since at least the 1870s when Brigham Young was portrayed as a multi-tentacled monster. Those opposing Smoot’s seating kept those connections active in the 1900s. At the turn of the century, the image graced educational brochures and the term served as a byword for the Mormon Church as a whole. The octopus allowed for a composite caricaturing of multiple perceived Mormon dangers. The sea creature was a visual sign for cartels as well as conspiracies. Both types of network extend their many “arms” to secure whatever serves their interests with suction-cupped grip. The tentacles of the grasping ‘Mormon Octopus’ could also be sketched as phallic extensions, thus linking the ‘devil fish’ with the ‘devilish’ promiscuity of polygamy: a practice regarded as archaic and alien to US modernity. Lacking a backbone, the octopus appears similarly primitive. Moreover, octopus, squid, and relations do not swim in the American heartland. They have to be fished from the Pacific edge of the nation. And finally, at the turn of the century octopi were not only purportedly difficult to kill. In being “clammy with death, […] a relentless, inexorable glue filled with hatred of what is good,” as one Pastor Charles L. Thomas described the ‘Mormon Octopus’ in a diatribe of 1903; they tended to tickle the gag reflex (459; on the trope generally, see Jeter). Smoot aimed for a different response. His self-presentation on the national stage was the opposite of the behind-closed-doors dealings that the Utah Church and legislature were accused of. Open religious avowal in the form of prayer contrasts sharply with the privacy of Temple rituals that were also subjected to inquiry during the hearings. Smoot expressly denied Temple oaths of “blood vengeance” against US authorities for the mob murder of Joseph Smith (“Testimony” 4). Further, when answering questions about Temple rituals and other faith-specific practices, he tended to avoid LDS terminology. When Smoot spoke to, and later prayed for, the nation, there was no hint of insider speech or symbolisms. The long, lanky, and very buttoned-up Utahan simply called on God, gave thanks for blessings, asked for aid, and ended with “Amen.” This plodding religiosity earned Smoot the nickname “Pontifex Babbitt” in the 1920s (Anderson 177). “Pontifex” references the anti-Catholicism that early mobilizations against Smoot mixed in with anti-Mormonism. “Babbitt,” however, removes all threat from the association. The eponymous protagonist of Sinclair Lewis’s satirical novel of 1922 is the epitome of conventionality: a middle-aged real estate broker and civic club social climber in small town America. When raised to Pontifex/Apostle status, the everyman becomes laughable. Smoot is rendered a caricature, to be sure, but one diametrically opposed to the lewd octopus of anti-Mormon agitprop. Thus, the stuffy ridiculousness of “Pontifex Babbit” smooths the way not only for the greater acceptance of Smoot the politician, but also of the religious community he simultaneously represented. ‘Moment’ designates a time span. It can also refer to a particular stage in a course of events or development. In this second sense, the
‘Mormon Moment’ of the Smoot hearings functions in a manner akin to a window. The episode allows us to see not only a dramatic turnaround in the public percept of Mormonism. The patterns of LDS engagement with US politics that lead up to, but also follow from the hearings become visible as well.

Rules of Engagement: From Nineteenth-Century Tactics to Twentieth-Century Coalitions

Mormonism emerged out of the Second Great Awakening and developed in the experiment-keen landscape of nineteenth-century American religious life. Lines of continuity can be drawn to the salvation-for-all principles of Universalism, as the religion’s eponymous scripture Book of Mormon rejects pre-determination and inherited sin. Assertion of continued revelation further connects Mormonism with the Shaker and Adventist movements. One of the features that made Joseph Smith’s Church of Christ distinctive, however, was its radicalization of revivalism into restoration. Restoration in LDS thinking does not signify simply a return to earlier practices. Rather, new revelation is seen as bringing fuller knowledge so as to reconfigure our concepts of the past, but also the present, future, and existence as a whole. LDS scholar Terryl Givens speaks of a “collapse of sacred distance” in Mormonism, meaning that no absolute divisions exist between the higher sphere of God, on the one hand, and the earthly realm, on the other (294). God in this view is not of another order of being, but rather a being who has progressed into full realization of divine potential. Further, this path of progress is not merely open to all children of God. Such progress is rather understood as the central task of existence. “As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be” is how Lorenzo Snow, a later LDS President/Prophet, formulated this idea in 1840 (qtd. in Givens 103), although the idea enlivened Mormon collective action from the very beginnings of the Church. Nineteenth-century Saints aimed to literally gather themselves as a reconstituted Israel and build up an earthly Kingdom of God: first, principally in communitarian settlements in Ohio and Missouri (1831–1838), subsequently in the model city of Nauvoo, Illinois (1839–1846), and, finally, in the far western region Mormon settlers designated as Deseret: a Book of Mormon word for honey bee. At a distance, this pilgrims’ progress would seem to be towards ever greater separatism and specifically Mormon place making (Deseret materializes the Book of Mormon on Western soil). In actuality, the project of actualizing Zion necessitated a continual interaction with governmental entities and US politics. A key result of these not always so harmonious relations was a pattern of tactical engagement on the part of LDS authorities, arguably beginning with Joseph Smith’s presidential candidacy in 1844. In the context of his Nauvoo campaigning Smith did indeed promote the idea of “theodemocracy” that (quite rightly) raised federal suspicions regarding the later governance of Deseret (Mason 354–58). The bid itself, however, was an attempt to gain a voice in federal-level discussion so as to protect Church members against the states’-rights-enabled violence they had experienced in Missouri and to give weight to Mormon redress petitions (cf. Bushman). The tactics of Nauvoo did not totally disappear upon relocation to the West. Even President/Prophet/Governor Young’s standoff with federal forces
during the ‘Utah War’ was not entirely a separatist rebellion. His threats of burnt earth in response to federal invasion strongly resemble a poker bluff. By the 1890s, however, Utah territory was transitioning into statehood, and the LDS Church was keen on creating more favorable conditions for itself. The solutions chosen by authorities were imminently tactical. That did not necessarily equal an absolutely tidy separation of church and state. Theocracy and polygamy still caused unease among US citizens, but the more immediate stumbling block to Utah democracy in the 1890s was the dominance of a single ‘People’s Party’ in Utah. Church authorities eliminated this concern quite directly by ‘asking’ members to join the two national political parties. To guarantee equality, some congregation leaders literally directed those sitting left of the main chapel aisle to register Republican and those on the right Democrat (Alexander 7). While no evidence exists that Smoot’s candidacy was ‘commanded’ in the manner of pulpit-directed voter registration (Heath 5–6), his politicking was allowed and ultimately deemed advantageous for efforts to represent the interests of the Church and rework its image in national contexts. In this regard, the push to establish Smoot in Washington followed the tactical pattern of Joseph Smith’s presidency bid and nineteenth-century Mormon political engagement overall: an approach that by the turn of the century had been extended to cultural politics as well. After decades of tense isolationism, tourism became a priority. Advertisements lured outsiders to Utah with religious as well as secular attractions such as the Coney Island-style resort Saltair, built and operated by the LDS Church throughout the 1890s (Campbell 48). The state’s achievements were exported as well. In 1893, 250 members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir set off for the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. While the Church itself was excluded from the World’s Parliament of Religions, the choir competition offered itself as an alternative stage upon which Mormonism was able to “exhibit” itself as “culturally advanced” (Neilson 176) as opposed to primitive, promiscuous, and otherwise octopus-like. This reversal was achieved by high musical accomplishment, but also by having the choir costumed (in standard choir robes), arranged on stage (in separate groups of men and women), and also singing in a manner that was not distinguishable from other competing groups (no foreign trills or unfamiliar tunes). For audiences in Chicago and at various venues along their train route, the singing Saints looked ‘like’ any other choir. This familiarity fostered the ‘likeability’ upon which the LDS Church built up its new public image. Mobilizing the powers of similarity and sympathy to remake Mormons into exemplars of the able and even ethical (Shipps 72) is the most important outcome of late nineteenth-century LDS political tactics. It created the preconditions for later twentieth-century coalition politics. More immediately, it provided the playbook for Smoot’s performance of a denomination-‘like’ and thereby more easily ‘likeable’ Mormonism in Washington. At the same time, the strategy encouraged a further tendency whose success arguably works to obscure rather than illuminate Mormonism. Over the course of the 1904–1907 hearings, supporters of Smoot increasingly argued that his fitness for office was demonstrated in his personal behavior. Colloquially spoken, ‘the proof is in the pudding.’ What counts are results; recipes would seem to be irrelevant. Upon closer examination, however, this logic reveals itself to be inadequate. To recall, Smoot’s best defense in the hearings was his patient, calm,
and perpetually diplomatic behavior. His reputation thereafter was secured through industriousness, sobriety, family values, and the like. The sources for many of these oft-lauded Mormon citizen virtues can be traced back to LDS-specific historical experiences and theological principles. Self-sufficiency, for instance, is a quality that primes for success in laissez-faire capitalist systems, although it developed out of nineteenth-century LDS separatism and experiments in communitarian living. Similarly, the emphasis on family and clean living that made Mormons paragons of clean living in the mid-twentieth century follows from the “collapse of sacred distance” in Mormonism (Givens 294). The care of the body is given such importance in the LDS law of health or "Word of Wisdom" (Doctrine and Covenants 89) because the corporeal and spiritual are fundamentally interconnected; spirits are not just housed in bodies, they require physicality to develop, and beings further remain physical in the Mormon afterlife. Even after the elimination of earthly marriage plurality, family is thought of in Mormonism as an extended and eternal network of relationships going far beyond the nuclear unit. Parenting is so privileged in Mormonism because it continues a heavenly pattern of cooperation and progression: that of the Father, but also Heavenly Mother. The belief in Heavenly Parents is hardly common; for most it rates heretical. In contrast, the emphasis on family and valorization of male-female marriage that it engenders has allowed for the creation of some remarkable cross-faith political coalitions. Roman Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Mormons banded together to mobilize against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. Today these same groups unite in support of heterosexual monogamous marriage, which, as Neil J. Young outlines in his important history of this interfaith activism, is understood as both the bedrock not only of “traditional morality,” but also the United States as a “Christian nation” (4). Consensus-troubling specifics such as nineteenth-century LDS advocacy for their own version of ‘non-traditional’ marriage, longer-standing conflicts between the various religious groups, and theological differences are pushed to the sidelines so that shared ‘family values’ agendas can be pushed forward. Mormons who join these groupings are not denying deeper beliefs, nor necessarily forgetting the history or exclusive truth claims of their faith (any more than Catholics or Evangelicals). LDS Church members are, however, arguably responding to the last century’s re-envisioning of their religion just as much as non-Mormons have done. As the term itself signals, public relations first target a larger public. In the case of the United States that means a largely non-LDS population (Mormons make of 1.7 per cent of the adult American population according to recent figures; see Pew, “Portrait”). But those same images reach and inevitably impact LDS audiences. Repetition across media and contexts strengthens the tendency of Mormon-positive outreach to shape internal Mormon self-identification. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Saturday cartoons were interspersed with Homefront commercials: a series of heart-warming, family values-promoting vignettes whose last frame read “A message from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” (cf. Haws 79–86). And that message would have been repeated on Sunday in centrally coordinated curricula for adults, and youth as well in the further weekday religious education programs for high school and college students. Home, parenting, the value of family, and the cultivation of ‘moral’ behaviors such
as modest dress and chastity were, and remain, topics taught on regular rotations for all of the groups. Such repetition is reinforcement as well as directional priming, encouraging church-going Mormons to anchor their identity in practices and values with high consensus potential among other religious groupings. That consensus, in turn, allows for coalitions in which Mormons do not merely work alongside other religionists. All work together within the framework of a Christian conservatism that unites, if only in specific contexts, groups that have normally been divided and mutually hostile to each other into a ‘moral majority.’ A coalitionism that absorbs Mormons, and by extension Mormonism, into a larger Christian fold creates a further anchor for modern US-Mormon identity. When combined with Church curricula and continuing LDS public relations efforts, this identification with the particularly ‘moral,’ ‘family values’ agendas directs members towards a conservatism that easily extends from religious cooperation to the larger context of national political affiliation. And that ultimately means: if you are from Utah, you are fairly likely to be Mormon, pretty surely conservative, and almost certainly Republican, as the Grand Old Party (GOP) has become the home of conservative, ‘moral’ coalitionism. That sequence—Utah, Mormon, conservative, Republican—answers a further question negotiated in and around the Smoot hearings. The significance of the investigation for “America’s constitutional order” is something that the historian and religious studies scholar Flake (and this essay) underscores. However, the significance of the Smoot hearings for the constitution of LDS identity is also worth considering. “How do religious communities change over time and retain a sense of sameness?” (K. Flake 1) is a general formulation of the question that pressed on the LDS religious community with special intensity at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In this period, Utahans had to craft themselves into modern Saints as well as citizens of the United States. Such hybridity blocked complete retrenchment back into LDS monoculture a century ago as much as today. Instead, the aspiration to be ‘Citizen Saints’ has created the need for finding common grounds upon which US-Mormon identities can be built up. These grounds have to be both consistent with Church culture (the “sense of sameness” that K. Flake emphasizes, 1) and also enable Mormons to connect with larger US-American constituencies (the “change over time,” and with time, necessary for a simultaneously American and Mormon identity). Conservative coalition politics and their ‘moral’ majorities within the GOP seem to serve these identity needs for a large number of LDS Citizen Saints. In this case, the proof is to be found not so much in the pudding as in the polling. At the minimum, the findings collected over the last decade by the Pew Research Center are highly suggestive. While Utah alternately voted Democratic and Republican candidates into presidential office for the first part of the twentieth century, the GOP has carried the Mormon-majority state consistently since the late 1960s. This is the same period in which Mormons, Evangelicals, and Catholics gathered together in a new ecumenism of conservative coalitional politics whose effects arguably show themselves in patterns of LDS self-identification. According to data first gathered by Pew in 2007 as part of the US Religious Landscapes project and variously analyzed since, 60 per cent of Mormons self-identify as conservative (“Portrait”). Further responses on abortion, a key issue in the moral coalition politics outlined by Young and a hot-button political topic in
US elections since at least the 1980s, clearly confirm that estimation. 70 per cent of Mormons polled stated that “abortion should be illegal in most or all circumstances” (“Portrait”): a rate 28 per cent above that of the general population and also a stance far more stringent than the official position of the LDS Church, which rejects elective abortion, but acknowledges numerous circumstances in which abortion can be considered. Most interestingly, 65 per cent of Mormons identified as Republican in 2007 (“Portrait”). This figure went up to 78 per cent according to information collected in 2014, thus earning Mormons the designation “most Republican-leaning religious group in the U.S.” (Lipka). The percentages dipped slightly in the next years (down to 69 per cent), but the tendency towards Republican alignment remains (Pew, “Parties”). Those numbers do not necessarily add up to ‘Mormons for Trump,’ though, at least not as neatly as it might initially appear.

Mormons for Trump?

In 2016 Mormons said that they would not cast their vote for Donald J. Trump in the presidential election. In early fall polling a mere 36 per cent of LDS voters identified Trump as their preferred candidate, in spite of percentages around the 70 per cent mark for both Republican affiliation and conservatism (see Riess). Mormons were also told not to vote for Trump: not by prophetic decree, but by way of an exceptionally strongly worded and virtually unprecedented editorial in the Deseret News (which had last aligned itself with national partisan politics when it supported Republican Alf Landon against Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1936). As the name signals, the paper is an enduring remnant of the theodemocratic Mormon kingdom of Deseret, and still Church-owned. Thus, the headline “In our opinion: Donald Trump should resign his candidacy” carries compelling institutional weight for LDS readers. Responding to the infamous Access Hollywood tapes, the editorial draws on the ‘moral’ categories key to the religious coalition politics of the last decades to decry Trump as an adulterer. But the condemnation is extended from improper behavior to essential immorality: “What oozes from the audio is evil. […] And although it speaks volumes about sexual morality, it goes to the heart of all ethical behavior. Trump’s banter belies a willingness to use and discard other humans at will. That characteristic is the essence of a despot” (“In Our Opinion”). But the majority of US Mormons ended up voting for Trump anyway. The Republican candidate ended up garnering 61 per cent of the national LDS vote: a 25 per cent increase from reported pre-election day intentions (see Riess) A closer look at the data reveals a more complex picture. In Utah, for instance, Trump did not achieve a majority, pulling in only 45 per cent in a state that had been deeply and reliably red since the 1960s. Yet, overall, as religious scholar Jana Riess analyzes, the 2016 election decisions of US Mormons provided “a dramatic example of a group that ‘came home’ to their political party and threw support behind its nominee” (Riess). And then that group got on stage to support said nominee as he was sworn in as the 45th President of the United States of America. For many the biggest Mormon-related upset of the last presidential election cycle was not LDS support for Trump at the ballot box, but the performance of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the
Inauguration. One choir member resigned, publicly comparing the decision to perform with “throw[ing] roses for Hitler” (original Facebook post reprinted in Davies). Choir management, in contrast, emphasized the role of the choir in supporting “the peaceful transition of power” (Walch). The latter argument suggests that US Mormons have indeed come to align not only their identities, but also the cultural value and social recognition of Mormonism with US national institutions and continuity. That seems a logical conclusion for a politics of coalition, but, as with voting data, the analysis ignores the specifics that create a more complicated picture. The choir made particular use of the national stage. They opted not to sing their signature patriotic selection: the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Instead “America the Beautiful” was performed. The song extolls the physical beauties and ideals of the United States. Significantly, the patriotic hymn does not assume God’s blessings, but rather asks for divine aid to actualize those ideals: “America! God shed his grace on thee, And crown thy good with brotherhood / God mend thine ev’ry flaw. Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law” (Bates). The performance on the Capitol steps was too brief for a genuine ‘Mormon Moment.’ However, it arguably qualifies as a ‘Mormon Instant’ in which patterns and possibilities flash at least briefly into view. In this case, an opportunity for tactical critique within conservative self-identification suggests itself that Mormon Republicans such as Arizona Senator Jeff Flake have followed up on with pointed and, at times, pointedly LDS critiques of the Trump administration. Flake’s January 2018 condemnation of Trump’s treatment of the press concludes with the final lines of the Mormon hymn “Oh Say, What is Truth?:” It is “the sum of existence, will weather the worst, / eternal, unchanged, evermore” (Jacques qtd. in J. Flake). What would Smoot say to all this? It is hard to second-guess the long dead. However, it is likely that he would bow his head once more: perhaps to pray for help in troubled times (as that can never hurt), but possibly also to give thanks for the transformation of Mormonism’s significance in US political culture from octopus-like threat to democratic resource.

Notes

[1] A note on terminology: While The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has been the official organizational designation since 1838, the abbreviation “LDS” is common as is the colloquial term “Mormon.” In accordance with current usage, I will be using these terms more or less interchangeably throughout this paper.

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Author

MaryAnn Snyder-Körber is Professor of American Cultural Studies at Julius-Maximilians-University Würzburg. She is the author of Das weiblich Erhabene. Sappho bis Baudelaire (2007) and the co-editor of Machine: Bodies, Genders, Technologies with M. Michaela Hampf (2012), a special issue of Amerikastudien/American Studies on Trauma’s Continuum: September 11th Reconsidered with Andrew S. Gross (2011), and The Pathos of Authenticity: American Passions of the Real with Ulla Haselstein and Andrew S. Gross (2010). Her most recent project considers “Modernism in American Centuries” from the angle of the authorship projects of Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Djuna Barnes, and James Baldwin.

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