Constancy amid Change

Latter-day Saint Discourse on Gender and Sexuality

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Few issues are more sensitive and in need of serious study than gender and sexuality. Taylor Petrey's book, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Sexual Difference in Modern Mormonism,*[1] contributes much to that study. The book provides a nuanced view of Church leaders' attempts to understand and teach the nature of gender and sexuality. Petrey shows that Latter-day Saint discourse on these issues has changed substantially, especially since World War II. Petrey has gathered a trove of material for scholars and others who seek to better understand how culture, tradition, and theology have shaped teachings about gender and sexuality. Though there is much to appreciate, we conclude the book presents an incomplete picture of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine. Conclusions could have been strengthened, and at times changed, through consideration of disconfirming evidence.

Petrey's analysis raises important questions. Some include, How should this history be interpreted? What is the relationship between changes in how Church leaders discuss gender and the claim that gender is an essential part of our eternal nature? Are inconsistent teachings on certain aspects of gender and sexuality evidence that gender and sexuality are only social constructs? Does changing discourse indicate that gender and sexuality do not "ontologically exist" (13)?

Petrey's main thesis is that the Church's teachings on gender and sexuality are more queer than people realize. He writes, "While Latter-day Saints have often expressed the values of gender and sexual essentialism, I started to see that this was a rhetorical effort to cover over a different ontology of gender and sexuality" (ix). Petrey's claim is that Church

1. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

discourse suggests an understanding of gender and sexuality open to fluidity and change. The fact that the Church supports certain understandings of sex and gender "with strong ecclesiastical, legal, and cultural norms" demonstrates that "in modern Mormonism, gender is a fluid concept" (15). In a rhetorical question that sums up the argument for the book, he asks, "*If gender is essential and eternal, on what basis could it change?*" (14, emphasis original).

Petrey explicitly bases his analysis on queer theory. Queer theory is "an approach to literary and cultural study that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality."[2] Petrey explains, queer theory "challenges the idea of the natural and self-evident and instead seeks to historicize and question claims about essential and stable identities" (10). He believes that this approach will help "produce the best explanation of Mormon approaches to these topics" (10).

Petrey does not present an argument in favor of queer theory. He simply assumes its legitimacy throughout the book. This is understandable in the context of academic writing to those familiar and often in agreement with queer theory. But such an approach presents a dilemma for lay readers, as well as for scholars with concerns about queer theory. Queer theory makes a host of ontological, epistemological, and moral assumptions. Many of these assumptions are in direct conflict with the way general Church leaders and many members understand their own beliefs.

Petrey's readership will likely not be confined to academics who are well-versed in poststructuralism, critical theory, and queer theory. Nonspecialist LDS readers may not realize how contestable the framing of the book is. The first part of our review is intended to help an educated LDS audience understand the claims that queer theorists may take for granted.

It is not clear that queer theory is necessary to establish many of the historical claims in the book. Though the book begins and ends with theoretical discussions of queer theory, the bulk of the book is descriptive, a kind of "just the facts" narrative that details various aspects of Latter-day Saint history. We will argue that the changes in some of the Church's teachings on sex and gender are often more accurately understood in

2. *Merriam-Webster,* s.v. "queer theory (*n.*)," accessed October 14, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer%20theory#h1. For a more technical definition from the author, see page 10. Queer theory is related to other critical theories. For more information, see James Bohman, "Critical Theory," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/critical-theory.

ways that don't fit within the assumptions of queer theory. For example, queer theorists often assume that changes in narrative about sex or gender demonstrate that these are social constructs. This approach often leads to confirmation of theoretical assumptions rather than convincing evidence that those assumptions are accurate. Competing or complicating historical facts are only occasionally noted and rarely considered (examples provided below). If one accepts the assumptions that guide the selection of historical materials and the analysis in the book, then both the narrative structure and the conclusions seem inevitable.

Therefore, we believe it is necessary to begin this review with a brief evaluation of some aspects of queer theory. We will then engage some of the specific historical claims made in the book. The book often draws conclusions without considering complicating evidence and has a tendency to mistake emphasis for exclusivity in the historical record. This happens, for example, when one aspect of Church teaching is continually reiterated without placing it in dialogue with other currents of Church teaching. As we attempt to show below, the book's account of race, gender, and sexuality omits important historical moments and data. We also note that this review is not an argument for gender essentialism[3] as regularly taught by Church leaders. That would be another project.

Queer Theory

Queer theory is famously resistant to definition; it is the "discipline that refuses to be disciplined."[4] Lengthy scholarly works on queer theory have a hard time identifying exactly what it is that queer theory "wants."[5] Any definition of queer theory would constitute a limitation and thus frustrate a core purpose of the theory: blurring and crossing (or transgressing) boundaries. Be that as it may, in this section we focus on three ideas that we believe can be fairly attributed to queer theory and that are presupposed in the book: genealogy and historicism, antiessentialism, and normative antinormativity. We show some limitations of each.

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3. In gender studies, gender essentialism is "the belief that males and females are born with distinctively different natures, determined biologically rather than culturally," Oxford Reference, s.v. "gender essentialism (*n.*)," accessed October 14, 2022, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095846595. Church leaders reference eternal, not simply biological, differences regularly, as will be discussed below.

4. Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), v.

5. William B. Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

Philosophical Genealogy and Historicism

Near the end of the book, Petrey claims that the "norms that define gender and sexual difference . . . have already proven to be historically contingent" (221–22). Historically contingent in this context means culturally created and defined. It is not clear how the evidence provided leads to this conclusion. The background assumption seems to be that a genealogical approach (one that traces how a given concept or narrative has changed over time) to Latter-day Saint discourse can show that gender (and related concepts) do not "ontologically exist" (13).

It will be useful to pause briefly to discuss the idea of "ontological existence." In a basic sense, ontology deals with the nature of being or reality. To deny that that something "ontologically exists" seems to be a way of saying that it is not "real;" it is simply a social construct without any permanent or eternal reality. In contrast, ontological realism "claims that at least a part of reality is ontologically independent of human minds."[6] Thus, if something ontologically exists, it exists independent of our thoughts, beliefs, or perceptions.

Philosophical genealogy has a complex relationship to the question of whether some things "ontologically exist." Finding its own origins in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche,[7] philosophical genealogy (hereafter, simply "genealogy") embraces the goal of providing an alternative account of the origin of certain beliefs. According to this view, many of the concepts we accept as true or real are simply social constructs without any essential nature. This view claims that if we look closely, we find that the history of many concepts is characterized by contradictions, discontinuities, contingencies, and power struggles. For example, Nietzsche tried to show that values such as humility, compassion, and obedience were not divinely inspired virtues, but rather were weapons that the enslaved Hebrews used to combat their oppressors.

As Michel Foucault (the second most important practitioner of genealogy) writes, if the genealogist "listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence

6. Illka Niiniluoto, "Realism in Ontology," in *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2003), 21–41, https://doi.org/10.1093/0199251614.003.0002.

7. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (1887; New York: Random House, 1967).

was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."[8] Accordingly, in this view genealogy debunks the view that some truths are based in permanent (or eternal) reality. It seeks to show the contingency and therefore relativity of our beliefs.

Is *Tabernacles of Clay* a genealogy in this sense? It would seem that Petrey sees himself as writing in this general methodological approach. In the introduction, he writes of the need to analyze the "modern genealogies of gender and sexuality" (10), and much of the book can be read as an attempt to accomplish this task. Petrey seems to believe that two claims can be drawn from this research: (1) there are no stable and consistent concepts of "gender" or "sexuality" in Latter-day Saint discourse, because teachings on these ideas have been inconsistent and changeable (221); and (2) that "gender" and "sexuality" do "not ontologically exist" (13).

The first claim is the major focus of the book's argument. The second claim is assumed by the author and reinforced throughout. We engage the claim that gender and sexuality do not ontologically exist in this section and the claim about Latter-day Saint discourse in subsequent sections.

We argue that genealogy cannot directly prove (or disprove) the truth or falsity of a claim about ontological reality. At best, it can show that some people's understanding of an issue has changed over time. It can show that some people who believed in something have held inconsistent beliefs about it or perhaps that certain origin stories are inaccurate. But changes in belief or inconsistency on the part of believers do not prove an idea has no ontological existence. A statement can be true even if a person who speaks about it has believed other things in the past or will believe other things in the future. We argue that a change in discourse should not automatically be taken as evidence that an issue is merely a social construct. Such an approach assumes the conclusion before the analysis begins. Not all queer theorists or genealogists make this assumption,[9] but much of the analysis within *Tabernacles of Clay* appears to make just such an assumption.

General Authorities (or other leaders) saying new and different things about gender or sexuality could be evidence for at least four

8. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 78.

9. Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 47–48.

different scenarios, only one of which is considered in the book. First, a descriptive change may be no more than a focus on a different aspect of the same issue. Gender and sexuality are rich and multidimensional categories. Drawing attention to different aspects could simply be a change in emphasis rather than an ontological break with the past. Second, no one—including Church leaders—has a perfect understanding of any issue. We all "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). As understanding deepens and improves, explanations change. Again, that does not necessarily indicate that an issue has no essential or stable identity. Third, descriptions can vary if changed circumstances require novel applications of principles. For example, one can know that tithing means paying "one-tenth of all their interest annually" (D&C 119:4) but not be sure if certain kinds of benefit (for example, a college scholarship, or employer contributions to a retirement account) count as income. In such cases, changes in discourse need not suggest a changed ontology. They could indicate variation in practice and behavior given new circumstances. Fourth, it is possible that changes in discourse are evidence that an idea or concept is socially constructed and lacks any stable identity. This is the approach assumed throughout *Tabernacles of Clay.*

To determine which explanation fits best, the evidence should be evaluated with respect to these (and perhaps other) possible explanations. This rarely happens in *Tabernacles of Clay.* As will be discussed in this review, the conclusions reached could have been strengthened, and in some cases made more accurate, by considering evidence that would support one of the other three scenarios noted above.

Understanding the reasons why changes in discourse are insufficient to disprove ontological reality is crucial. If a changing, even at times a conflicting, narrative is valid evidence that something is only a social construct, then all claims of eternal reality with any history will fail. Consider the nature and reality of each of the following: God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, premortal beings, the Creation, the Fall, the Atonement, faith, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and so forth. How many differing, and at times conflicting, narratives pertain to each? Does inconsistency or even disagreement prove that there is no God? Did Christ not atone for sin because there are several different atonement theories?[10] Does our identity as children of God have no

10. For a detailed summary of different atonement theories, see Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).

ontological reality because of the differing discourse surrounding "intelligence," our premortal life and nature, and so forth?

Such an epistemological approach (that is, a means of knowing truth) would require rejecting any transcendent reality for which any inconsistency of belief exists. Further, a primary focus on changing narratives can cause us to disregard those aspects of an issue that remain constant. Several aspects of core Latter-day Saint doctrines have little to no inconsistency. But a genealogical approach often ignores these aspects of the historical record.

More concerning, the genealogical approach used throughout this book does not identify any standard necessary to show that gender is entirely historically constructed, that it "does not ontologically exist" (13). Again, constancy or the lack thereof cannot prove or disprove truth claims about ontological reality. If eternal truths do exist, our understanding of them will depend on more than an analysis of the historical narrative. It will require something like moral or spiritual insight—our ability to perceive moral or spiritual truths out of the data of our experience.[11]

Further, genealogy alone cannot make a moral claim. A recitation of historical facts can provide material for moral insight to investigate, but it cannot substitute for applied moral judgment. Much genealogical analysis in queer theory (especially since Foucault) has focused on the concept of power. It can be tempting to move directly from *descriptive* accounts of power to *normative* accounts of power, which assert that certain kinds of power relationships (those that involve domination, oppression, and so forth) are morally wrong. But without a moral theory that explains how and why certain kinds of power relationships are morally problematic, descriptions of power relations tell us nothing about what we should or should not do. Nietzsche, of course, was not particularly troubled with many kinds of asymmetrical power relationships; the "herd" of humanity did not strike him as worthy of much respect. Later we discuss normativity and moral truth in more detail, but here we simply flag the point that genealogy alone cannot make a moral claim.

11. For interesting approaches to these issues, see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding,* The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 3, 5th ed. (1957; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (1953; Steubenville, Ohio: Hildebrand Press, 2020).

Antiessentialism

At a deeper level, the issue does not seem to be the methodological approach of genealogy but rather the ontological antiessentialism that undergirds it. Antiessentialism is the view that words and categories do not correspond to some "real" structure of the world. Humans are not capable of discerning the way things really are. Rather, words and categories structure our understanding in a historically contingent way and always in a way that privileges some perspectives over others. Antiessentialism is arguably a (and perhaps *the*) central commitment of queer theory.

Because there are many varieties of essentialism and antiessentialism, we cannot hope to survey this literature in any detail here.[12] However, in this section we briefly engage two related arguments that Petrey references in favor of an antiessentialist interpretation of gender and other constructs: performativity and the structural possibility of transgression. Petrey does not flesh out these arguments, so we draw on the writings of Judith Butler (whom Petrey frequently cites) to elaborate these ideas. These are not the only arguments that could be given in favor of antiessentialism, but they are arguments that Petrey seems to rely upon.

Performativity is the idea that certain speech acts not only communicate meaning but also have the power to change reality. For example, when someone makes a promise, a new obligation is brought into being. The performance of the promise ("I promise . . .") helps constitute the reality of the promise. In an analogous fashion, Butler argues that gender is brought into existence and sustained by repeated actions that constitute the meaning of gender in a particular culture. People perform, or "do," gender. Gender has no reality apart from the gender roles and behaviors that society enforces as culturally acceptable. There is no internal state that gender corresponds to and no natural order it is a part of.[13]

However, it is not clear how performativity destroys the ontological possibility of something like gender (or sex). Other performative actions are partially socially constructed but also tap into a deeper reality. Promising, for example, has a performative element but also corresponds to

12. See, for example, Teresa Robertson Ishii and Philip Atkins, "Essential vs. Accidental Properties," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/essential-accidental/.

13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2002), 185–89.

ontologically real features of human intention and moral commitment. Why couldn't a practice be performative (and hence have socially constructed aspects) and also ontologically exist?

Similarly, Petrey makes the claim (summarizing Butler), that "the structural possibility of transgression against the norm of gender reveals the way that any gender or sexual identity is always contingent—subject to change and failure because it is measured against a norm" (14). In other words, because people can act contrary to gender and sexual norms, the norms must be contingent. But it is never explained how the structural possibility of transgression reveals the contingency of all gender norms (or perhaps all norms?). This would be true only if one assumes that for any characteristic to be essential (that is, have ontological existence), its expression must be incapable of change or variation. But this is a particularly unhelpful assumption to make in the context of human agency. Agency unavoidably deals with ideals and aspirations.

Of course, knowing which aspects of our identity are essential—central to who we are as human persons, children of God—is no simple task.[14]

14. The key question seems to be this: What does it mean for some human trait or characteristic to be "essential"? The basic outlines of a response to this question were elaborated by Aristotle long ago. In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle casts virtue (understood in a certain way) as a human possibility which, though not inevitable, is part of our nature: "Neither by nature, therefore, nor contrary to nature are the virtues present; they are instead present in us who are of such a nature as to receive them, and who are completed through habit." Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 26. In other words, humans are the kinds of beings who are, by nature, capable of virtue, whereas other creatures and objects (for example, rocks) are not capable of virtue. Even more to the point, it is in the nature of humans that they are *completed* by virtue—they become what they truly are when they become virtuous through repeated action. At the same time, humans can (and often do) fail to be virtuous, and human agency influences whether we reach our potential or not. Of course, Aristotle's account will face the same (or perhaps more) difficulties that other accounts of virtue face, but the basic point is that variation need not destroy essence. A certain plasticity seems inherent in the human condition, but this plasticity neither destroys the idea of human nature nor the idea that humans are fulfilled by living up to certain ideals. It is possible to acknowledge the ways our thinking is mediated by language and history and still believe that words refer to something beyond the play of discourse. See Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 119–219. Martha Nussbaum argues that many desirable qualities have the same structure as gender according to Butler: "Come to think of it, justice, understood as a personal virtue, has exactly the structure of gender in the Butlerian analysis: it is not innate or 'natural,' it is produced by repeated performances (or as Aristotle said, we learn it by doing it), it shapes our

A good deal of what was once thought essential with respect to gender has been (thankfully) discarded. But this could mean that (1) there is no reality to our conceptions of gender, and there never could be; or (2) our notions of gender needed to be altered in order to more fully align with reality and thus help us reach our true potential. To repeat, we do not offer an account of gender essentialism in this paper, but the fact that some aspects of sex and gender have been discarded or changed does not mean all notions of sex and gender are historically contingent. Further, the aspects of each that have been consistently taught in Latter-day Saint discourse are never explored in the book or put into dialogue with the discontinuities that are highlighted throughout.

Normative Antinormativity

Another major challenge for queer theory is its general critical posture toward "normativity." At the broadest level, a norm is simply a directive that gives guidance about how people should act—a norm tells you that you *should* or *ought to* do (or be) something. As we have seen, Petrey asserts that the structural possibility of transgression regarding gender and sexuality show that these norms are historically contingent. But this need not follow, and in fact undermines, the normative claims that queer theory relies upon.

Some norms, such as those involving etiquette, are nonmoral, at least most of the time. On the other hand, some norms make a stronger claim. Charles Taylor uses the term "strong evaluation" to refer to determinations of "right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which these can be judged."[15] Generally, questions of morality and justice fit into this category. When someone makes a claim that they have been treated unjustly, they (generally) are appealing to an objective standard; a standard that stands above our preferences and opinions. Let us use the term "moral truth" for these sorts of strong normative claims. Does *Tabernacles of*

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inclinations and forces the repression of some of them. These ritual performances, and their associated repressions, are enforced by arrangements of social power." Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," The New Republic, February 22, 1999, accessed October 12, 2022, https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody.

15. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4.

Clay (and queer theory more generally) have an account of moral truth? The answer seems to be yes, but a "yes" that is significantly compromised by queer theory's general outlook and suspicion of normative standards.

On one hand, there is no doubt that the narrative in the book assumes the existence of moral truth. The selection and framing of materials reveal a moral evaluation that the Church has gotten it wrong in many ways that have been (and continue to be) harmful to its own members and other people. Morally laden terms such as "compulsory heteronormativity," "dehumanizing," "stigmatize," and "marginalize" and attributions of ill-intent such as "a goal of [correlation] was to diminish women's authority in the church in deference to the male priesthood . . . [and to] displace female autonomy" (37) abound in the text. Even though, as we mentioned above, much of the book simply aims to state "the facts," an amoral reading of the book seems inconsistent with the selection and framing of the facts.

Does queer theory have resources to justify these moral judgments? There are reasons to think it does not. Much of queer theory's outlook suggests that constraints, standards, or limitations are inherently oppressive. For example, a recent articulation of queer theory in the social sciences states that "a queer stance necessarily entails the rejection of normativity in any form."[16] This statement seems to be within the mainstream of queer theory; the authors of the article do not offer any qualifications or commentary. However, one wonders how a reasonable (or even an intelligible) moral view could be built on such a foundation. Moral claims are *by definition* normative, and thus the elimination of normativity entails the elimination of morality.[17] One cannot recommend rejecting all norms without accepting the norm that norms ought to be rejected, which of course is inconsistent with what one is recommending.[18] As one of our students once said, "'No rules' is still a rule."

In fairness, some queer thinkers are more self-conscious and careful about their moral claims than others. Butler's more recent writings,

16. Phillip L. Hammack, David M. Frost, and Sam D. Hughes, "Queer Intimacies: A New Paradigm for the Study of Relationship Diversity," *Journal of Sex Research* 56, nos. 4–5 (2019): 559.

17. Richard Burnor and Yvonne Raley, eds., *Ethical Choices: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy with Cases,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–7.

18. "It is one thing to say that we should be humble about our universal norms, and willing to learn from the experience of oppressed people. It is quite another thing to say that we don't need any norms at all." Nussbaum, "Professor of Parody."

for example, include serious attempts to clarify certain moral issues.[19] Still, in our estimation, there is a vast gulf between the moralistic writing of many queer theorists and the actual arguments they give to sustain their moral judgments. Queer theory undermines the argumentative resources that could help recommend it to a sincere seeker of moral truth. It has not escaped normativity, but by making normativity its enemy it has made the search for moral truth (as well as its own moral criticisms) opaque.

Race, Gender, and Sexuality in LDS Discourse

Having reviewed several theoretical and overarching concerns with the book, we now analyze representative examples of how *Tabernacles of Clay* deals with race, gender, and sexuality. We will briefly summarize some of the main findings on each topic. We then show how consideration of complicating evidence and avoiding the conflation of *emphasis* and *exclusivity* could have strengthened the analysis.

It may be helpful to explain the need to address complicating evidence in qualitative or narrative-based studies such as *Tabernacles of Clay.* Though quantitative studies have their own limitations, they have robust tools to guard against drawing conclusions from skewed data or nonrepresentative samples. Qualitative or narrative-based studies have fewer formal ways to control for skewed data or nonrepresentative samples.

One of the primary requirements of rigorous qualitative research to guard against such bias is considering plausible counternarratives or alternative explanations.[20] Academic editors and peer reviewers regularly require researchers to show evidence that they have confronted complicating evidence. They require such complicating evidence to be placed in dialogue with evidence that supports one's thesis. Without this check, inaccurate conclusions can be drawn by not attending to other facts or possible explanations. In *Tabernacles of Clay,* seeking out and directly addressing complicating evidence would have created a more

19. For example, see Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020).

20. Jane F. Gilgun, "The Four Cornerstones of Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Health Research* 16, no. 3 (March 2006): 436–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305285338; Jane F. Gilgun, "Deductive Qualitative Analysis and Family Theory Building," in *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research,* ed. Vern L. Bengtson and others (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2005), 83–84.

complete and balanced picture. This would allow readers to better evaluate the strength of the arguments made and the conclusions drawn.

Race

Petrey draws a direct connection between the Church's racial policies in the nineteenth century and marriage. He argues that the Church's discouragement of interracial marriage was an attempt at maintaining white racial purity (29). In keeping with queer theory, the Church's racial teachings are seen as exercising power and control over marital decisions. Petrey later argues that the Church uses gender and sexuality to replace race when race no longer affords Church leaders leverage to control marriage. "The coexisting conflicts over interracial marriage and gender roles were not historical accidents but intersected on the issue of boundary production and maintenance" (20).

Consideration of Complicating Evidence

Petrey clearly shows an evolution in interracial marriage discourse within the Church. A few nineteenth-century leaders made explicit statements regarding white racial purity. Though rare, at least one early-twentieth-century leader used similar terms. The presence of such statements provides preliminary evidence for the book's argument that the reason for race, gender, and sexual norms was to allow Church leaders to control marriage. The concept of white racial purity would rightly be condemned today. Most Church members would be shocked to realize that some past leaders held such views.

Such sentiments were unfortunately quite commonly held in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Interracial marriage itself was illegal in forty-one out of the fifty states for much of the nineteenth century. Most of those laws continued through much of the twentieth century.[21] But even if common then, most people today would agree that such statements reflect a false view of the value and dignity of Black people and other minorities.

Petrey uses these past statements as evidence that Church leaders sought to maintain white racial purity through exercising power over marriage. However, a more complete investigation of the historical record reveals a more nuanced view. No attempt to comprehend the normative

21. Laura Walker, "Interracial Marriage in the United States (1850–2017)," Towards Data Science, December 12, 2019, https://towardsdatascience.com/interracial-marriage-in-the-united-states-1850-2017-d6dfc3678e07.

or authoritative understanding of any issue in the Church could be complete without seeing how it is addressed in scriptures and general conference talks. A search of general conference addresses from 1851 to 2020 for the words "race," "races," "racial," "racism," "black," "Negro," "Caucasian," and "skin" (almost 2,200 references) failed to produce a single direct reference to maintaining white or any other racial purity.[22] There were problematic race-based statements in general conference that showed the speaker did not believe in the equality of different races.[23] However, none of the general conference statements explicitly advocated for maintaining white or any other kind of racial purity.

Knowing of the several explicitly racist statements by early Church leaders, some of which are listed in *Tabernacles of Clay,* we expected to find many such statements in the more than two thousand references in general conference since 1851. We were surprised at the result. Again, there were a few statements that would be justifiably considered racist by most people today. However, by a margin of well over 20 to 1, the majority of statements from general conference regarding race affirmed the dignity and worth of all people and called upon Church members to do better in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward all races.[24] Some of these statements explicitly condemned the belief in white racial superiority. One example is David O. McKay, who condemned those in the world who were "arrogating to themselves racial superiority."[25]

It might be tempting to believe that the teachings of the latter half of the twentieth century created this largely nonracist teaching record. But

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22. All general conference searches were done using Corpus of LDS General Conference Talks, 1851–2020, https://www.lds-general-conference.org/; Scripture Citation Index, https://scriptures.byu.edu/; and Periodical: Conference Report, https://scripture-tools.net/periodicals/conference-report?lang=eng.

23. It should be noted that some scripture verses indicate that some ancient authors also viewed others through prejudicial lenses, whether because of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, economics, or other factors.

24. Examples often spoke of the oneness of man, that God is the father of all of us, that all are alike (often quoting or paraphrasing 2 Nephi 26:33), that all are called to be saved, that all have equal rights, that all humankind's spiritual nature is that of God's children, and so forth. Several of these statements came from individuals for which we also have record of more racist statements, including Brigham Young (May 1871), Charles Penrose (April 1880), George Q. Cannon (April 1879, October 1880), and Orson F. Whitney (April 1928).

25. David O. McKay, in *One Hundred Fifteenth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1944), 78.

that is not what the actual search found. Statements about racial equality and human dignity were spread throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. It is also true that the few problematic statements were predominately from the nineteenth century. This comprehensive search of every talk in general conference shows the complex nature of racial understanding even in the early days of the Church. Would it be accurate to state that Church leaders held no racist beliefs because the overwhelming majority of their statements about race in general conference were remarkably egalitarian? No—we have sufficient counterexamples to disprove that view. Would it be accurate to claim that Church leaders believed and regularly taught white supremacy and the need to maintain white racial purity since the historical record shows that a few did? No—such a claim is not supported by the overall record. Placing all or even the majority of the focus either way paints an incomplete picture that hides the complex reality on the ground.

Gender and Sexuality

Having documented discourse change regarding race, Petrey now focuses more directly on the central concepts of the book: gender and sexuality. He argues that "gender and sexuality must be analyzed together to produce the best explanation of Mormon approaches to these topics" (10). Four chapters are devoted to arguing that Church leader teachings of "gender and sexual essentialism" are "a rhetorical effort to cover over a different ontology of gender and sexuality" (ix).

These chapters seek to demonstrate that "essentialism [the belief that the categories of male and female are based on eternal identity and that heterosexuality is based in our eternal nature] simply doesn't work as an explanatory theory of human behavior in Mormon teaching. This book challenges the view that modern Mormon leaders have consistently taught gender essentialism as the sole or even primary theory of sexual difference. Appeals to essentialism cover over the fear of sexual and gender fluidity" (14).

As we argued above, the possibility of variation in discourse does not necessarily undermine essentialism. But putting ontological claims to the side, Petrey is right to say that Church leaders regularly spoke of aspects of gender and sexuality that were considered malleable. His claim that appeals to essentialism were an attempt to deny that sexuality or gender are socially constructed is less clearly established. This is especially true since many of the essentialist claims long predate the issues Petrey says they were meant to cover over.

The Patriarchal Order of Marriage

The examination of gender-related topics begins with the "patriarchal order of marriage." Though never explicitly defined in the book, this concept was consistently used to refer to hierarchical domestic relationships entailing a "strict division of gendered labor" (16) between men and women. That definition does not match common usage in the Church from its founding until today. However, using the tools of queer theory, Petrey explores Church leaders' approach to male and female power dynamics politically, economically, and in the family. The transition to a discourse on hierarchical gendered relationships is interpreted as Church leaders' attempts to further exercise control.

The argument is that Church leaders pivoted from race to sexuality and gender in a further attempt to control members' approach to marriage. "The old doctrines [interracial marriage] had to be replaced with something else" (52). Petrey is not always clear about how intentional these changes are.[26] Queer theory's focus on power and control is consistent throughout the book. Petrey demonstrates, accurately for the most part, that Church leader teachings regarding gendered relationships evolved from a male headship model to what he refers to as a "soft egalitarianism" (119). The argument is made that this change resulted from Church leaders' reaction to feminist social pressure, especially regarding the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This fits with the assumptions of queer theory emphasis on power dynamics, which holds that change only happens as external forces apply pressure.

Consideration of Complicating Evidence

Petrey refers to changes in how Church leaders addressed power dynamics in support of one of his primary hypotheses: that change in rhetoric "suggests a theory of gender that does not rest on an essential foundation" (222–23).

Petrey acknowledges that Church leaders have posited gender essentialism as the "primary theory of sexual difference" (14). However, little time is spent examining actual statements from Church leaders on this topic. No serious attempt is made to examine or place these statements

26. Petrey consistently refers to Church leaders creating and exercising new forms of power through their discourse regarding race, gender, and sexuality, but it's not clear whether he believes they are consciously actually exercising agency in these decisions. See pages 52, 60, 65, 101, 174 and 215 for examples.

in dialogue with statements about nonessential aspects of gender. Of the 140 references in the book regarding Church leaders' claims that gender is eternal or essential, we found only two actual statements from Church leaders. One comes from James E. Talmage and is critiqued by the author as inadequate. The other was the family proclamation statement that gender is essential. Additionally, one scholar (Terryl Givens) is quoted as stating that "'gender is eternal' is a 'position that has never varied in Mormon theology'" (8). Without examining the many statements on gender essentialism from Church leaders and placing these in dialogue with teachings that show malleable aspects of gender, it is hard to assess how they relate. How do they contradict or complement each other, and what conclusions can be drawn from the overall record?

The lack of actual statements on the essential nature of gender is understandable if the author is simply showing that Church leaders have spoken about gender and sexuality in nonessentialist ways. Petry does this convincingly. But what does the tension between essentialism and fluidity mean in regard to gender and sexuality in Church discourse? Following queer theory, does this evidence show that there really is no essential nature to gender? Or is it evidence that there are multiple facets of gender and sexuality, some of which may be essential or eternal in nature while others evolve?

To analyze such a question, we would need a more complete portrayal of both essentialist and nonessentialist teachings, which is not provided in the book. It would have been helpful to examine the dozens of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century prophetic statements regarding the essential nature of gender, including the context of each statement. But this is never done.[27] On the other hand, the book quotes dozens of statements regarding changing gender roles. As stated

27. For some representative examples, see Brigham H. Roberts, in *Seventy-fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1904), 14–20, https://archive.org/details/ConferenceReports1900s/page/n753/mode/2up; Orson F. Whitney, in *Ninetieth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1920), 119–24, https://archive.org/details/ConferenceReports1920s/page/n119/mode/2up; James E. Talmage, "The Eternity of Sex," *Young Women's Journal* 25, no. 10 (October 1914): 600–604; James E. Talmage, "The Eternity of Sex," *Millennial Star* 84, no. 34 (August 24, 1922): 539–40; John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1932), 64–65; and the numerous other statements since "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" was given.

above, this approach is insufficient to allow readers to understand how such statements align with, contradict, or build upon more essentialist rhetoric from Church leaders.

Conflation—Exclusivity vs Emphasis

The book seems to import the contemporary meaning of "patriarchy" (a hierarchical system in which men have power over women) and impose it on the historic use of the term "patriarchal order." This is not simply an issue of imprecise terminology but of meaning, as will be explained. We were surprised at this usage, since, at best, it captures only a partial understanding of how the term has been used in the Church.

The terms "patriarchal order" or "patriarchal marriage" were used fifty times in general conference in the nineteenth century. Each referred to the institution of eternal marriage between men and women (often eternal plural marriage), not gender roles.[28] The terms were used thirty-two times in the twentieth century, again with each reference speaking of eternal marriage between men and women and none speaking about gender roles. We then searched "patriarchal" and "father" together and "patriarchal" and "preside" together but again found few references to gender roles.

We wondered if Petrey had found numerous uses of the term in other sources that emphasized male headship teachings, so we looked up each reference to the word "patriarchal" in *Tabernacles of Clay* (102 individual references). We did not find a single reference that was an actual quote from a General Authority using the term "patriarchal order" or "patriarchal marriage" to refer to gender roles. Every occurrence of either term that referenced gender roles was the author's own statement.

Interestingly, though not referenced and not spoken in general conference, there are statements that refer to the patriarchal order as an order where men preside over their families that could have more strongly connected the construct and the label. But as Petrey accurately points out, even that becomes problematic since the term "preside" itself has undergone an evolution in Church discourse from the concept of male headship to what the book refers to as "soft egalitarianism" and what modern Church leaders insist must be a "full and equal partnership."[29]

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28. For a brief review of how the term has been used in the Church, see Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 117–121.

29. M. Russell Ballard, "The Sacred Responsibilities of Parenthood," *Ensign* 36, no. 3 (March 2006): 29. See also Gordon B. Hinckley, "I Believe," *Ensign* 22, no. 8 (August

None of this argues that male headship was never taught in the Church. It was, and not infrequently. And certainly, marriages in the 1800s (the time period with the most mentions of patriarchal marriage) were more hierarchical than modern marriages. Perhaps this was the reason the author chose to define patriarchal marriage in terms of gender roles. But the conceptual conflation of patriarchal order with the modern concept of patriarchy creates more than definitional confusion.

In the Church, the patriarchal order refers to an order of marriage that requires men and women be sealed for eternity leading to the exaltation and perfection of members of both genders. The most official explanation of the concept of patriarchal priesthood is Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4. It states that men and women who do not enter into this "order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]" cannot enter into the highest level of the celestial kingdom. As Cree-L Kofford explains, this "order of the priesthood" is "simply another way of saying 'patriarchal order.' Thus, that portion of section 131 could read: 'And in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into the patriarchal order of the priesthood.' The patriarchal order refers to priesthood government by family organization."[30]

Instead of referencing hierarchical gender roles (which clearly existed), the patriarchal order consistently refers to the necessity of men and women being eternally sealed together to qualify for exaltation. This regular usage actually points to the essential nature of gender as consistently taught in the Church and the need for both male and female genders in the plan of salvation. Putting such statements into dialogue with more malleable aspects of gender could have been used to provide more nuance in interpreting the competing essentialist and nonessentialist aspects of gender in Church discourse.

Regarding hierarchical gender roles, Petrey points out that "LDS officials did not believe that a husband and father's rule over his family was an unchecked authority" (35) This point could have added meaningful nuance to the discussion of changing Church teachings regarding gender roles. Established Church doctrine actually holds out a much more egalitarian approach to gender roles than at times was understood or lived in the Church. Doctrine and Covenants 121 clearly teaches that

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1992): 6; L. Tom Perry, "Fatherhood, an Eternal Calling," *Ensign* 34, no. 5 (May 2004): 71; Henry B. Eyring, "Women and Gospel Learning in the Home," *Ensign* 48, no. 11 (November 2018): 58.

30. Cree-L Kofford, "Marriage in the Lord's Way, Part One," *Ensign* 28, no. 6 (June 1998): 12.

when any man exercises "control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man" and that "no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile" (D&C 121:37, 41–42).

This scripture and its accompanying teaching were used regularly to teach about family relations throughout the majority of the period covered in detail by the book. Spencer W. Kimball memorably taught that if a husband tells his wife, "I hold the priesthood and you've got to do what I say," that husband "should not be honored in his priesthood."[31] Given this doctrinal background from the early days of the Church, it is arguable that the Church's move toward more egalitarian relationships in the latter half of the twentieth century actually brought it more in line with an underlying concept of eternal marriage and more doctrinally sound understanding of gender equality.

It would have been interesting to put such teachings in dialogue with some of the less egalitarian teachings so as to be able to better understand what they meant. Petrey acknowledges a move toward "soft egalitarianism," connecting it to the Church's fight against the ERA in particular and feminism in general. To some extent the timing does line up. However, several statements regarding more egalitarian relationships in marriage are from general leaders that predate the ERA. Those statements seem to simply be based on correct principles rather than being a reaction to social and political events.[32] Looking at these teachings could add nuance and depth to our understanding of these issues. Again, this review is not attempting to claim that this more egalitarian approach to gender relations was fully understood or lived for much of the history of

31. Spencer W. Kimball, quoted in Dallin H. Oaks, "Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church," *Ensign* 35, no. 11 (November 2005): 26.

32. Several of these statements from general conference date to the late 1800s. One later example is the conference address by Joseph F. Merrill in April 1946, where he taught, "A Latter-day Saint marriage is a union of two equal partners, obligated to build a home where mutual love, respect, trust, fidelity, tolerance, patience, and kindness are some of the essential operating factors." Merrill, in *One Hundred Sixteenth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946), 29, https://archive.org/details/ConferenceReports1940s/page/n1793/mode/2up.

the Church. It can take time and growth to develop any aspirational gospel ideal. But that does not make the ideal less real or less representative of the Church's official stance on an issue.

One final challenge to the book's thesis that comes as a result of assuming exclusivity instead of emphasis was that the focus on gendered power dynamic was assumed to result from the failure of race to provide sufficient Church control over sex, gender, and marital issues. But what is never explained is how this could be the case when the concept of male headship—even if conceptualized as benevolent patriarchy—did not begin in the middle of the twentieth century when race ceased to be associated with marriage in any meaningful way. Familial as well as societal roles of men and women were as hierarchical in 1830 as they were in the 1950s. Therefore, how could Church discourse on hierarchical relationships flow from the failure of race to provide sufficient power and control for Church leaders?

Petrey points to a much more likely reason for much of the retrenchment discourse on gendered power dynamics. For the first time in modern history, many women entered the work force in large numbers at this time. Concern over this issue was explicitly spoken of by leaders throughout this period. This would seem to be a much more likely reason than the failure of race to provide Church leaders with control over sex, gender, and marital issues. Of course, the argument could still be made that, regardless of precipitating events, the motive was to allow Church leaders to maintain power and control rather than as a good-faith effort to help families succeed. But reliance on the argument that this was a reaction to race ceasing to be an effective method of control for Church leaders sidetracks a more thorough investigation of what the historical record could tell us about Church leaders' concerns regarding gender roles.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The next step in the evolution of gender and sexuality covered in *Tabernacles of Clay* focuses on Church leaders' alleged attempts to maintain power and control through "the heterosexual order." The argument is that with race and patriarchy ceasing to be effective means of asserting control, "the heterosexual family finally replaced the patriarchal and racially segregated family of previous decades" (17). Petrey argues that leader's efforts to fight against modern feminist movements like the ERA, as well as the societal acceptance of homosexuality, moved the Church from a hierarchical to an egalitarian emphasis on marriage to maintain power and control.

"As church leaders relaxed their teachings on racial difference and gendered hierarchy, they increased their attention to sexual difference as a defining aspect of human identity—especially as it was manifest in sexuality" (52). In the analysis, "these moves were not unrelated but jointly reordered LDS thought about gender and sexuality away from the patriarchal order to the heterosexual order" (16). As he explains, "Doctrines about gender roles, and the worries about gender fluidity, morphed into new concerns and spawned new forms of power. In its most pointed form, homosexuality became the ultimate threat of gender fluidity and its most prevalent expression" (52).

The evolving Church narrative about certain aspects of same-sex attraction is seen as evidence for this thesis. Petrey documents how Church leaders initially spoke of the causes and responses to same-sex attraction largely from a sin perspective. They then took a medical perspective and finally a psychological perspective toward same-sex attraction. The book acknowledges that this evolution largely mirrored the larger societal narrative. Until 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) classified homosexuality as "abnormal and pathological" (75). Using the language of disease and pathology, both medical professionals and lay Church leaders spoke of homosexuality being "cured." This narrative began to fall out of vogue when the APA removed homosexuality from its list of disorders in 1973.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Church leaders regularly used the language and tools of psychology to teach and minister to members regarding same-sex attraction and behaviors. Though Church leaders continued to condemn same-sex sexual behavior as morally wrong, they also employed counselors and provided extensive training for ecclesiastic leaders to create a culture of care and rehabilitation. As Petrey points out, there has been an increasing effort to encourage compassion and kindness both from members to those who experience same-sex attraction and from such individuals toward themselves.

Church leaders became more focused on helping LGBTQ+ individuals know that God loves them, that he has a plan for them, and that they have a place in God's Church and kingdom. Church leaders also have deemphasized causal explanations, whether biological, familial, or psychological. Instead, they focused on encouraging members to approach same-sex attraction within the framework of Church doctrine and principles.

Petrey also outlines the Church's approach to transgender persons, although this topic receives only a few pages in the book. Such limited

coverage is somewhat surprising for what would seem to be a central topic in a book on gender and sexuality. The truth is that there is much less to go on by way of Church discourse, as the author acknowledges. Church leaders have consistently taught that feelings of gender dysphoria, though real, do not change a person's sex—meaning biological sex. But similar to the issue of same-sex attraction, the Church's approach to explaining and ministering to persons who identify as transgender or who experience gender dysphoria is still developing.

Consideration of Complicating Evidence

The picture painted of the evolving narrative regarding same-sex attraction in *Tabernacles of Clay* is largely accurate. It accurately documents the different approaches Church leaders took in their efforts to teach about sexual orientation, same-sex sexual behavior, and how to minister to LGBTQ+ members. This evolving discourse is once again used as evidence that Church leaders approach sexual orientation as a malleable, nonessential construct. Petrey argues that "rather than appealing to an absolute, essential, and eternal form of sexual difference, Mormon leaders in the postwar period actually saw the pre-mortal and post-mortal periods as extensions of the gender fluidity and malleability of the mortal phase of human existence. That is, Mormons in this era were more likely to see sexual difference as the result of intentionally chosen gendered practices than as an unalterable nature of human identity" (40). He further states, "Conservative religious communities, like Mormon leaders, rejected modernist ideas of essentialism and put the fluidity and malleability of identity to use" (55).

What gets lost in the book's discussion is the reality that while Church leaders' narratives regarding the causes of same-sex attraction and the means of teaching members how to live faithfully with same-sex attraction have changed, Church leaders' teachings regarding the role of sexuality in the plan of salvation and the moral and spiritual consequence of same-sex sexual (not simply affectional) behavior are remarkably consistent.[33] Putting the two threads together more consistently would have

33. In an effort to indicate an actual change in the moral and spiritual seriousness of same-sex attraction, Petrey seeks to make the case that the Church did not consider same-sex sexual sin as overly serious by referring to the case of Joseph F. Smith, the presiding patriarch to the Church, who was released from his calling but not excommunicated as a result of purported same-sex sexual behavior, while Richard R. Lyman was excommunicated for adultery (62–63). However, as anyone who has ever presided over

allowed the reader to evaluate how this tension fits into the larger tapestry of Latter-day Saint theology and discourse.[34]

The increased emphasis that experiencing same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria is not cause for condemnation or shame effectively demonstrates evolving Church leader discourse. However, leader discourse has been completely consistent (and insistent) that the only appropriate exercise of our sexual nature occurs in marriage between men and women. From the first reference to same-sex sexual behavior in the Restoration to the most recent general conference, every mention of same-sex sexual behavior has taught that such behavior is contrary to our eternal nature and God's plan for our eternal destiny. No effort is made in the book to explore how this consistency of message provides a counterpoint to the predominant message of the book—that we should understand these constructs through the lens of historicism and antiessentialism. Furthermore, for the Latter-day Saint lay person reading the book who is not only trying to follow the historical development of dialogue but to understand the actual nature of these ideas, providing a more complete picture of Latter-day Saint dialogue would help readers understand what Church leaders have actually taught.

Exclusivity vs. Emphasis

Perhaps the most important question to ask regarding the entire discussion of same-sex attraction in *Tabernacles of Clay* is why that topic is being used as evidence that Church leaders approach gender primarily as a social construct. Though there is growing conflict between some groups within the LGBTQ+ community, up until very recently the meaning of sexual orientation has depended upon the existence of relatively stable gender categories. For example, a gay man was someone who was attracted to *men,* understood as biological males, not just persons who perform stereotypical masculine roles. As longtime gay rights

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a disciplinary council can attest, the outcome of a disciplinary council is determined by far more than one variable and hence is not sufficient grounds to judge the doctrinal severity of the issue at hand.

34. Petrey does bring to the different constructs the fact that Latter-day Saint discourse claims an eternal reality, such as his reference to James E. Talmage's claims that sex (meaning male and female sex) is eternal (42). But such claims are regularly dismissed or problematized. This would not be a problem if the same approach were taken for the more nonessentialist Church leader dialogue that makes up the majority of the book—thus showing the complexity more fully and giving the reader more information with which to analyze the meaning of the discourse.

activist Andrew Sullivan writes, "The core of the traditional gay claim is that there is indeed a very big difference between male and female, that the difference matters, and without it, homosexuality would make no sense at all."[35] So it would seem that sexual orientation, at least as it has been commonly understood, has required the existence of separate categories of men and women, understood as male and female.

Of course, queer theory challenges this premise. Judith Butler famously argues in *Gender Trouble* that sex is just as socially constructed as gender. But even though sexual orientation may challenge aspects of the "heteronormative order," its traditional commitment to the existence of men and women suggests that concepts of male and female are not as dispensable as queer theory imagines. Though perhaps legitimate to combine gender identity and sexual orientation through queer theory to discuss power dynamics, it would seem less appropriate to infer that this shared power dynamic is evidence that they share the same ontological nature.

Conclusion

Tabernacles of Clay is an important book because it deals seriously and substantially with the social history of race, gender roles, and sexual orientation in Latter-day Saint thought and practice. The book invites readers to think more carefully about the evolving discourse Church leaders have shared over its history, especially since the 1950s. By centering his analysis in queer theory, Petrey seeks to highlight ways in which Church leaders demonstrated a belief in a nonessentialist view of gender and sexuality even while continuing to claim both were ontologically essentialist in nature.

Petrey effectively demonstrates that some aspects of Church leaders' teachings on sex and gender evolved. A question that readers (especially Latter-day Saint readers) will likely grapple with is what we can learn through this analysis of dialogue. Are the differences in discussion simply representative of focusing on multifaceted and complex concepts? Are the differences representative of improved understanding? Are the differences simply representations of behavioral aspects that differ based on time, circumstance, and ability? Or do those differences exist because there is no essential nature or ontological identity connected to them?

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35. Andrew Sullivan, "The Nature of Sex," *New York Intelligencer,* February 1, 2019, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/02/andrew-sullivan-the-nature-of-sex.html.

Petrey assumes the latter and interprets all changing discourse accordingly. For his Latter-day Saint readers to determine how to interpret those disparate messages would require a much more complete examination of the evidence with a willingness to allow the totality of the evidence to guide our conclusions.

Ultimately, through an examination of the assumptions of queer theory and a more complete examination of the historical record, we are skeptical that the historical record indicates that gender as understood and communicated by Church leaders is forever liminal and socially constructed. Though there are clearly socially constructed aspects of each subject that have evolved, there are also core aspects of gender and sexuality that have never changed in Church discourse. Petrey acknowledges, "My view is not that there is no essentialist binary in Mormon thought but that the supposedly fixed binary between male and female is not all that there is" (14–15). However, the book goes beyond simply stating that there is more than an essentialist binary. Repeatedly the claim is made that gender in Latter-day Saint thought and discourse is actually not based on an essential foundation.

Though earlier Church leaders often taught hierarchical views of male and female relationships, the emphasis they gave to the ontological reality of male and female gender and its theological role relating to exaltation has never changed. The need for men and women to be sealed together to fulfill our eternal destiny was taught by Joseph Smith and has been reiterated without exception since that time. This is true in every iteration of family life espoused and taught throughout the Church's history. The one thing that each variation had in common was marriage was made up of at least one man and one woman (and sometimes more) sealed together for eternity. Finally, though Church leaders' understanding of the cause of same-sex attraction and the method of ministering to LGBTQ+ members evolved, again the necessity of men and women being sealed together for eternity has never changed and has always been the primary doctrinal reason given for the Church's teachings on sexual orientation.

The consistency regarding core aspects of gender and sexuality does not, by itself, prove that the Church's ontological claims about them are true. The type of evidence that is accessible in a historical study such as this (or in a review of that study) simply does not provide sufficient evidence to prove or disprove such transcendent realities. Nor do consistencies in the historical record negate the fact that Church leaders (and members) have taught and believed different things about several

aspects of gender and sexuality. These differing claims invite us to learn to differentiate between evolving gender roles and the concept of the ontological reality of eternal gender. But the continuities and constancies do call into question the conclusion that gender and sexuality are themselves devoid of constancy and ontological reality in Church teaching.

However, *Tabernacles of Clay* does provide a rich opportunity for serious students to understand that there are socially constructed aspects of gender and sexuality in the Church that are also important to understand. We agree with Petrey that the historical record clearly illustrates that Church dialogue surrounding gender roles and the causes and ministerial approach regarding same-sex attraction has changed over time. In and of itself, this is a valuable contribution and can lead to a more nuanced and healthy approach to understanding the socially constructed aspects of gender and sexuality today. We agree with the author that many past representations of gender roles and sexuality were problematic and that members of the Church should be wary of conflating these socially constructed aspects with the idea of eternal gender. Thus, this book is an important resource for serious students to consider as they seek to understand what conclusions to draw from the various teachings surrounding gender and sexuality in the Church.

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