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The Logic of Religious Studies and Kathleen Flake

Kathleen Flake's 2009 Arrington lecture gave a sneak preview of research she has been conducting on the topic of plural marriage and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Flake, associate professor of American religious history at Vanderbilt University, brings a unique list of qualifications to her study by combining elements of law, religious studies, ritual, and the skills of an historian. Using these tools Flake explores what she calls the "priestly logic" of plural marriage, seeking to understand not only how 19th century outsiders viewed the peculiar institution, but how practicing Mormons themselves made sense of it. Flake confines her study to the time period of 1852, when Orson Pratt first declared the practice publicly, through 1890 when the first manifesto was issued by the president of the church, ending the practice officially.¹ Flake argues that for all the negative reports of plural marriage—both from outside and within the Church—there were also some who flourished under the practice, or at least found a way to make it personally meaningful. The institution of marriage itself has not been a static practice and Flake recognizes the changing opinion regarding the ideal marriage. By the 1800s the view was shifting; marriages were beginning to be entered based on love rather than economic or other considerations. Polygamy seemed to fly in the face of the Victorian idea of marriage in practically every respect. Drawing on the accounts of sympathetic non-Mormons, Mormon leaders, and Mormon women who participated in the practice Flake described the "priestly logic" of the practice, which involved child

¹ It took time for the wheels to stop turning following the official announcements to cease the practice. there were a few post-manifesto plural marriages solemnized in the LDS Church until around 1910. See D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890-1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Spring 1985).

bearing, family rearing, and kingdom building, all tied together by the ritual act of marriage.

It has been more than a hundred years since the Manifesto officially ended the practice of plural marriage for the LDS Church. Despite this passage of time, plural marriage has remained a large part of the American public's perception of Mormonism generally. This is in large measure the result of the overwhelming role polygamy played in fictional and polemical literature, as well as political debates in the last half of the 19th century, in addition to Mormon splinter groups who continue living the practice. In what follows I will situate Flake's subject of plural marriage within recent official responses the LDS Church has made regarding media scrutiny of plural marriage. I will conclude by noting a few strengths and weaknesses inherent to Flake's described approach in order to help evaluate how religious studies can help us understand not only religion of the past, but the "living" religion in the present.

In a recent address to BYU graduates Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles encouraged members of the LDS Church not to allow the subject of plural marriage to dominate everyday conversations about the Church. "It's now 2009," Ballard stated, "Why are we still talking about it? It was a practice. It ended. We moved on. If people ask you about polygamy, just acknowledge it was once a practice but not now, and that people shouldn't confuse any polygamists with our Church." These comments seemed to be related to recent news coverage of "fundamentalist" LDS groups which still engage in the practice. Ballard said Church members would simply be "reinforcing stereotypes" by wasting their time "trying to justify the practice of polygamy

during the Old Testament times or speculating as to why it was practiced for a time in the 19th century.”²

Why *are* we still talking about it? Ever since Orson Pratt’s 1852 discourse on “Celestial Marriage” which officially publicized the practice they had long been suspected of promulgating, plural marriage has been approached in polemic literature by both religious and secular critics.³ Religionists have typically decried the practice as the fruits of an immoral or depraved false prophet, while the more secular crowd emphasizes the seeming dishonesty and lustful motives of Joseph Smith. The Church itself has continued to distance its public image, which is built around wholesome family values, from “the principle.” In response to news exposure of the FLDS practice of polygamy, including the Warren Jeffs trial and the invasion of the YFZ Ranch in Texas in 2008, the Church has used its publicity arm to affirm it no longer practices plural marriage.⁴ The LDS Public Affairs channel on YouTube quickly posted several videos declaring the Church no longer practices polygamy.⁵ The LDS newsroom website published a package of information and videos for media to use to clarify the Church's role and polygamy today. Included were videos of "Texas Mormons" differentiating them from polygamists seen on television walking down dusty ranch streets wearing floor and wrist-length dresses.⁶ Soon thereafter another statement declared that in order to avoid confusion, the

² M. Russell Ballard, "Engaging Without Being Defensive," speech delivered at the Brigham Young University graduation ceremony on 13 August 2009. See <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/elder-m-russell-ballard-engaging-without-being-defensive>.

³ "Celestial Marriage, A Discourse by Elder Orson Pratt, Delivered in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 29, 1852," *Journal of Discourses* vol. 1, pp. 53-66.

⁴ See Eric Gorski, "Mormons launch campaign to put distance between themselves and polygamists," *USA Today*, 26 June 2008.

⁵ See <http://www.youtube.com/user/LDSPublicAffairs>.

⁶ "Church Seeks to Address Public Confusion Over Texas Polygamy Group," 26 June 2008, <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/church-seeks-to-address-public-confusion-over-texas-polygamy-group>.

name "Mormon" shouldn't be applied to the FLDS.⁷ A new website was launched, mormonsandpolygamy.org, with quick answers to questions about polygamy. The emphasis is on disassociating the Church from current polygamy rather than clarifying polygamy's role for the Church in the past. Joseph Smith is not expressly mentioned as having practiced plural marriage, though it is implied: "The practice began during the lifetime of Joseph Smith," the press statement explains, "...In 1831, [Smith] made a prayerful inquiry about the ancient Old Testament practice of plural marriage. This resulted in the divine instruction to reinstitute the practice as a religious principle."⁸

The common pieces of each statement, video, or press release are that the LDS Church discontinued the practice in 1890, that it differed in many ways from the practice of current groups, that current Mormons face excommunication should they attempt the practice, and that there are over 12 million Mormons around the world not practicing polygamy compared to the small splinter groups who are. The website and press releases fall short in one crucial aspect: they fail to fully address plural marriage in LDS history. As Flake explained in a *USA Today* article discussing the Church's handling of plural marriage media coverage:

The biggest challenge facing the LDS church is not distinguishing their present from the fundamentalist present, but getting people to understand the difference between their past and the current practice of the fundamentalist groups. This initiative, I believe, is their first attempt to do that.⁹

⁷ "Proportion and Perspective on Polygamy Reporting," 10 July 2008, <http://www.newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/commentary/proportion-and-perspective-on-polygamy-reporting>.

⁸ "Polygamy: Latter-day Saints and the Practice of Plural Marriage," no date, <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/background-information/polygamy-latter-day-saints-and-the-practice-of-plural-marriage>.

⁹ See Gorski, *Ibid*.

One way to better differentiate the past from present is to do a better job of clarifying the past. Better historical studies and publications on plural marriage than are currently available would not only alleviate confusion among non-Mormons, but also help Latter-day Saints who are interested in the subject better understand the past practice of plural marriage in their religious heritage.¹⁰ The subject is mentioned—if only barely—in official Church manuals, never as the focus of an entire lesson.¹¹ The publication of an official view detailing the history of the plural marriage and the Church is not likely. However, recent academic efforts regarding aspects of LDS history, including the Mountain Meadows Massacre and the ongoing Joseph Smith Papers Project, are encouraging prospects. Difficult historical subjects have become the purview of scholars as opposed to General Authorities of the Church. Elder Ballard noted the subject of plural marriage—though not the best area for average member speculation—is a legitimate subject for historians and scholars to dissect.¹²

To this end, Kathleen Flake's book *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* explores the "Mormon compromise" wherein the Church disavowed polygamy in the early 20th century. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles lauded the book as the "best thing ever written" on the subject of the transition between the pre- and post-polygamy Church:

¹⁰ Even Latter-day Saints who are aware of Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage still tend to perpetuate erroneous reasons for the practice, including the implication that there were more women than men in the Church or that Mormon widows simply needed help crossing the plains after being expelled from Illinois.

¹¹ For an overview of how each current official teaching manual of the LDS Church treats plural marriage, see Blair Dee Hodges, "Plural Marriage as Discussed in the Church Today," 20 August 2008, LifeOnGoldPlates.com, <http://www.lifeongoldplates.com/2008/08/plural-marriage-as-discussed-in-church.html>.

¹² See Ballard, *ibid.*

I have to say I've been a lifetime student and writer of Mormon legal history, at least. I learned many, many things in her book that I didn't know. She captured it very, very well, and was able to stress also what remained unimpaired by the compromise. Other books have been published, but not in a way that would grab the awareness of the average Mormon.¹³

Flake's general approach certainly grabbed my awareness. Her background in religious studies makes her especially well-suited to tackle the difficult subject and make some sense of it for contemporary readers. Negative approaches to plural marriage have presented the practice by playing on current sexual mores and emphasizing what is seen to be wrong with the practice. By selecting certain problematic examples and relying on contemporary moral expectations the picture can look quite grim. A wholly positive approach might similarly select material from the historical record that paints the rosier possible picture to alleviate uncomfortable feelings. Flake seeks a more nuanced and historically rigorous approach. Her current project on plural marriage is an attempt to uncover the "emotional and priestly logic of plural marriage."¹⁴ Of course, there will be no untainted or "objective" treatment of plural marriage, but Flake explains that her "academic approach tries to understand and explain. It is done out of curiosity and not out

¹³ See "Elder Oaks Interview Transcript from PBS Documentary," LDS.org Newsroom, 20 July 2007, <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/elder-oaks-interview-transcript-from-pbs-documentary>. Other works that might have escaped the attention of the average American Mormon include B. Carmon Hardy *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 1992); *Doing The Works of Abraham: Mormon Polygamy: Its Origin, Practice, and Demise* (Arthur H. Clark Company, 2007), Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Signature Books, 1992), Kathryn Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System 1840-1910*, (University of Illinois Press, 2008). Martha Sonntag Bradley has written a useful bibliographic essay on LDS plural marriage studies. See "Out of the Closet and Into the Fire: The New Mormon Historians Take on Polygamy," in *Excavating Mormon Pasts: The New Historiography of the Last Half Century*, (Kofford Books, 2006), pp. 303-322.

¹⁴ Kathleen Flake, "The Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage," Arrington Mormon History Lecture, 1 October 2009.

of judgment.”¹⁵ Without denying (or directly approaching) the involvement of God, Flake recognizes that religion is not merely something that is believed but is also *lived*. Robert Orsi has noted that religion “is always religion-in-action, religion-in-relationships between people, between the way the world is and the way people imagine or want it to be.”¹⁶ When religion is viewed in this light, different questions must be addressed. Flake’s main concern seems to be to adequately explain what participants in the practice thought they were doing rather than only talking about what we might think of their actions. What did their *religion-in-action*, or their *religion-in-relationship* mean to them? Orsi says such an approach underscores the “interpretive challenge of the study of lived religion,” that is: “to develop the practice of disciplined attention to people’s signs and practices as *they* describe, understand, and use them, in the circumstances of their experiences, and to the structures and conditions within which these signs and practices emerge.”¹⁷ Flake’s lecture leaned heavily on the views of women who participated in plural marriage and others who were able to observe polygamous households first-hand. She pays close attention to the prescribed rituals, as well as the perceptions of those who participated in them, to understand the logic of the practice.

Discovering such logic is much easier said than done, not only because individuals may interpret or experience their religion differently, but because the historical record itself is imperfect and tricky. The researcher must consider the potential for polemic either praising or demeaning the practice. In many realms of historic study the written record has been largely composed by men, skewing the perspective of the

¹⁵ Flake, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Robert A. Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 42, no. 2 (June 2003), pp. 169-174.

¹⁷ Orsi, 172, emphasis mine.

researcher by omitting the views of women. Fortunately for researchers on Mormon plural marriage, many journals and diaries have been preserved. It is apparent that this record is tricky as well, depending on the perspective of any given writer. According to Flake, works by women like Fanny Stenhouse represent the negative polemic. Still, readers “are rightly sympathetic with the plight of those who struggled in polygamy and many studies focus on these elements.”¹⁸ But Flake wishes to move beyond the perspective of Fanny and those who viewed the practice as she did, asking “what about those who made polygamy seem like a source of human flourishing?” Such examples, she notes, “deserve analysis, too.”¹⁹ In approaching the subject this way she is taking women’s perspectives seriously. Susan Starr Sered has argued that in the past, feminist scholarship has typically offered critiques of patricentric societies by focusing on the oppression of women. “Less is known,” she notes, “about the strategies that women have used to circumvent patriarchal institutions, the techniques women have created for making their own lives meaningful within androcentric culture.”²⁰

In order to recognize such strategies the researcher must pay less attention to contemporary views of the practice and give voice to those who actually participated. Or, as Sered notes:

As scholars learn to shift attention from what men and texts say about women to what women say about themselves, new conceptions of human religious experience begin to emerge.²¹

¹⁸ Flake, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Flake, *ibid.*

²⁰ Susan Starr Sered, *Women As Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem*, (Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

²¹ Sered, 141.

Not only will new understandings of the past come into sharper focus, but religious believers will expand their understanding of their own lived religion. Religion is not an abstract body of specific doctrines, but a fundamental part of how humans view themselves in the world. Such an examination of religion carries the risk of making the sacred profane, like dissecting a dead frog on a school desk. But it also carries the possibility of sacralizing the seemingly profane. “Once we begin looking for religion within the profane world rather than outside of it,” Orsi notes, “we begin to discover realms of religiosity that are not limited to those times, people, places, objects, and events that seem extraordinary; we begin to see religion as potentially interwoven with all other aspects of human existence.”²²

This approach should be particularly appealing to Latter-day Saints, whose religion embodies what Terryl Givens calls the “blending and blurring of sacred and secular categories.”²³ This blending was apparently easier and more acceptable for Joseph Smith to execute. Leonard Arrington noted the difficulty of writing religious history for Mormons in words that may resonate with Flake, both of them being committed Mormons:

“The professional in us fights against religious naiveté—believing too much. The religionist in us fights against secular naiveté—believing too little. And if this internal warfare weren’t enough, we have a similar two-front war externally—

²² Sered, 140.

²³ Terryl Givens, “The Paradoxes of Mormon Culture,” *BYU Studies* vol. 46, no. 2 (2007): 191-192. Brigham Young particularly appreciated this blurring: “When I saw Joseph Smith, he took heaven, figuratively speaking, and brought it down to earth; and he took the earth and brought it up, and opened up, in plainness and simplicity, the things of God; and that is the beauty of his mission,” *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: F. D. and S. W. Richards, 1854-1886, 26 vols.), vol. 5, p. 332.

against non-Mormons who think we LDS historians believe too much, and against super-Mormons who think we believe not enough.”²⁴

Much like Arrington, Flake admirably navigates these waters to produce responsible interpretations. Flake’s cautious approach to religious history—her recognition of the “natural” and contextual aspects of religion, her moderate voice, and her attempt to walk the boundary between the purely secular and the purely religious—is a welcome and important addition to Mormon history.²⁵

²⁴ Leonard J. Arrington, “Reflections on the Founding and Purpose of the Mormon History Association, 1965-1983,” *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 101.

²⁵ This description of Flake’s work parallels the description of Leonard J. Arrington’s in Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, James B. Allen, *Mormon History*, (University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 64.

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