

## Mormons and Romans and Gays (Oh My!)

George Q. Cannon (1827–1901), an early religious leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and U.S. senator, was an avid defender of polygamy. In sermons given in Utah in 1869 and 1879, he alluded to Augustus' *Leges Juliae* as historical examples of government interference in marriage and compared it to the United States' persecution of Mormon polygamy. He identified Rome as the source of twin perversions of God's law of marriage: heterosexual monogamy and homosexuality. Later he recorded a fellow senator's remark of how the government's persecution of Mormon polygamists was like Rome's persecution of early Christians. This presents a history where Mormons were on the fringes of sexual acceptability (polygamy) and moved towards the very center Cannon spurned (heterosexual monogamy). It complicates our understanding of oppressor and oppressed in religion and sexuality, and what role metaphorical "Rome" plays in mediating these conflicts.

As Marilyn Skinner has noted, both advocates and detractors of LGBT ethics have drawn on Classics as historical and moral precedent. Yet here we see the opposite, where Cannon's rhetoric positions Mormons as outside the controlling and corrupted influence of the United States as Rome. Today, by contrast, the Latter-day Saint church exerts its own regulatory powers over individuals: for example, Brigham Young University's honor code imposes strict control over the sexual lives of its students and employees. Mormonism is in part the story of a people who gave up a queer identity in order to conform to a larger and threatening culture. But as they centered monogamy in their theology and persecuted sexual deviance within their own community (be it polygamous or homosexual) as the price of acceptance, they now once again find themselves on the outskirts of moral acceptability as the sexual ethics of the larger United

States changes to accept LGBT individuals.

A similar interplay between government, institution, and individuals, as outlined in Susan Okin's deliberations on multiculturalism, has occurred at the intersection of CAMWS, BYU, and individual LGBT people and practitioners of religion. LGBT classicists protested BYU hosting CAMWS because of BYU's restriction and treatment of LGBT students and employees. Like Cannon, both the religious and the queer groups position themselves in the minority position oppressed by institutional "Rome." This paper examines the nuances and rhetoric of this contemporary conflict through the historical lens of Cannon's discourses. Opposing "Rome" is a claim to moral authority, as both sides of this conflict view themselves as the oppressed minority in search of justice. Rather than argue for one position or the other, I instead seek to complicate such rhetoric in an ever-shifting multicultural environment.

#### Bibliography

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