

*The Next Mormons:
How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*
By Jana Riess

New York: Oxford University Press, 2019

Reviewed by Stephen Cranney

The Next Mormons is a mixed-methods work (that is, it includes both representative statistics as well as interviews) on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of millennial members of The Church of the Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the United States. Written by well-known religious journalist Jana Riess, with assistance from Benjamin Knoll, a political science academic, the book is built around the results of their Next Mormons Survey. On the whole, the book is an enjoyable read, reflecting Riess's skill as a journalist. The book was clearly written to be accessible, with little reference to major theories in the field of sociology or religion.

Generally, large, national social science surveys pick up, at most, a handful of Latter-day Saint respondents, making any kind of rigorous analysis of issues particular to Latter-day Saints difficult. Media outlets and others will occasionally perform one-off surveys that gather Latter-day Saint responses to specific (often political) issues, but generally social scientists, the media, and the public are flying in the dark when it comes to finding representative numbers about Latter-day Saint attitudes and beliefs. Furthermore, the few surveys that do have large numbers of Latter-day Saints (such as the American Religious Identification Survey or the Pew Religious Landscape Surveys) are generic religion surveys, so questions do not reflect concerns, language, or concepts specific to Latter-day Saints.

Enter the Next Mormons Survey. Riess and Knoll are to be commended for their landmark survey and study that fill the need for a large, representative Latter-day Saint sample. Latter-day Saints who spend much of their religious life with a particular group of Church members—whether that group be a predominantly conservative, white ward in central Utah or an online, more heterodox, left-leaning crowd—can

develop skewed perceptions about the Latter-day Saint experience in America, even if we know intellectually that our personal experiences may not be representative of all Latter-day Saints. Representative surveys can be great course corrections for the thousands of little assumptions we all have. For example, I was surprised at Riess's finding that most former members still retain a belief in God (215), running contrary to my anecdotal experiences with atheist ex-Latter-day Saints online, and at her finding that there were more single men in the Church than single women, also running contrary to my experience of living in an area on the East Coast with a plethora of single Latter-day Saint women (76). Readers would do well to compare their own conceptions and views about the Church in the United States against the numbers presented in *The Next Mormons*.

However, the nonquantitative portion should not be implicitly taken as representative. As mentioned above, the book is divided into a survey portion, which was used to derive the numerical data, and a portion containing first-person accounts from interviews conducted by Riess. This latter focuses disproportionately on the minority of experiences within the Church. Riess does mention that "these oral history interviews are *not* representative of Mormons or former Mormons as a whole" and that she purposefully oversampled some subgroups "so that no one person's experiences would represent an entire minority group" (246). For example, she highlights a convert who is the child of same-sex parents and struggles with the Church's heteronormative position on sexuality. Back-of-the-envelope calculations using the latest Census Bureau data indicate that only about six out of a thousand coupled households with children are same-sex.¹ Add single parents to that, as well as the fact that children of same-sex couples are probably much less likely to convert, and it is not unlikely that about one out of a thousand converts are from same-sex parent households. The book also highlights interviews with two transgender individuals, though most surveys show the prevalence of transgender identification at well under 1 percent.

Now, it is completely fine to highlight atypical cases since they are often the most interesting and because the individuals they highlight are just as important as any other Church member. However, readers

1. "Characteristics of Same-Sex Couple Households: 2005 to Present," United States Census Bureau, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/same-sex-couples/ssc-house-characteristics.html>.

should be careful not to project these experiences onto the Church body as a whole, or even a significant portion of it, since many of these are niche cases. One could think of many other interesting, atypical individuals—for example, converts raised by polygamous parents—who would have also been fascinating to interview, but there is only so much space. These qualitative cases were drawn using Riess’s own connections; the stories are salient to conversations in today’s society and are similar to those one would encounter in the more liberal spaces of the Latter-day Saint blogosphere (in which Riess is fairly active). These points, however, do not necessarily justify prioritizing the experiences presented in the book over other unique experiences.

Turning from the more narrative parts of the book, I identified two major technical issues in the study. One is the constant conflation of age, period, and cohort effects (despite occasional disclaimers; see, for example, pp. 17 and 54). “Age effects” are patterns between age groups. For example, fifteen-year-olds generally have less education than thirty-year-olds simply because they are younger. “Cohort effects” are patterns between cohorts. For example, people who were children during the Great Depression might have certain attitudes toward frugality because their formative development occurred during a time of economic scarcity. Finally, “period effects” are effects arising from specific time periods. For example, people in 2019 are going to have different social and political attitudes than people in 1950. Disentangling these different effects is technically difficult and requires a survey with multiple data points. Without this longitudinal data, it is impossible to know whether any differences between millennials and older generations are due to shifting attitudes across time or simply because they are younger.

Even though this survey was not a longitudinal survey, which uses multiple data points over a period of time, the book implies trends—in part through trend-language (even in the title, *The Next Mormons*)—and interprets findings through the lenses of how thinking has changed across time. Given the data, however, other conclusions could be made that are entirely different from the ones Riess makes. Indeed, using the exact same data, charts, and graphs, another author could conclude not that millennial Latter-day Saints are more liberal than previous generations, as Riess purports, but that Latter-day Saints start out more liberal and become more conservative as they age. Without any talk about period trends one way or another, this alternate conclusion would be as justified as the current book’s perspective that emphasizes shifting views across generations.

Looming large in this book is the conventional wisdom that younger, liberal generations means a more liberal future for the Church. This attitude is an old one, stretching back into the 1970s and beyond, and yet here we are in 2019 with Donald Trump as the U.S. president. There is a good deal to say about the problematic demographic assumptions inherent in Riess's view—for instance, this assumption does not take into account higher fertility among conservatives and that people become more conservative as they age. For every case where we have seen societal shifts across time (for example, attitudes toward gays), there are other issues that have not shifted (for example, attitudes toward abortion), and the latest cohort-component projections suggest that the political landscape will be split for the foreseeable future.² Suffice it to say, this assumption is not as warranted as many implicitly think.

Attached to this assumption is the idea that the Church has to drift in line with modern patterns to accommodate millennials or risk an exodus of young people who see the Church as out-of-step. Riess doesn't actually beat this drum as hard as some would. For the most part, she is sufficiently nuanced about the matter. The notion, however, is implied enough throughout the book and occupies a prominent enough place in the concluding thoughts, suggesting that many millennials will become "collateral damage" (235) if the Church does not change, that it is worth briefly discussing here. There is no empirical support for the idea that shifting on hot-button social issues will help retain younger generations, because the religious institutions that have done so are the ones that have shown the most dramatic declines across time.³

Furthermore, the Church's devotion to a more conservative "configuration of the nuclear family" (235) is undoubtedly largely responsible

2. Eric Kaufmann, Anne Goujon, and Vegard Skirbekk, "American Political Affiliation, 2003–43: A Cohort Component Projection," *Population Studies* 66, no. 1 (2012): 53–67.

3. Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde, "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 2 (2001): 468–500; Vegard Skirbekk, Eric Kaufmann, and Anne Goujon, "Secularism, Fundamentalism, or Catholicism? The Religious Composition of the United States to 2043," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 293–310. For more recent data, see the more liberal mainline Protestant trends relative to the evangelical and Catholic trends from the GSS, as reported in Thomas B. Edsall, "On Paper, the Election Is the Democrats' to Lose," *New York Times*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/opinion/is-trump-good-for-trump.html>.

for the higher fertility of members, which acts as a major contributor to Church growth in the United States. Thus, an emphasis on family and children likely contributes to long-term growth of the Church. This is not to say the concerns of those who do not fit into this particular “brand” of families are not real and should not be addressed, but the benefits of a family emphasis to individuals and the Church as a whole should also not be overlooked. Those who choose not to have children may not be attracted to the Church, but they also won’t be creating and rearing the next generation as much as the people who build their life around obtaining the partnered, multiple-children archetype emphasized by the Church.

Another nontechnical limitation of the study is its American-centric nature. Throughout the book she conflates the “the Church” with “the Church in the United States of America.” She acknowledges that her study focuses on the Church America, and given the prominence of the United States in the governance and culture of the Church, this occasional conflation is for the most part forgivable. However, it does have implications for her hypothesis that future Church membership may become more liberal on certain issues, since Church, like many other religious institutions, will almost certainly become more diverse, drawing on more members and leaders in developing countries as participation in organized religion declines in the developed world. This newfound diversity has implications for ideational shifts within the Church, because it is less likely that leadership will be drawn from highly educated, developed countries that have traditionally served as the source of Church leadership.

The first millennial president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sustained in about fifty to sixty years (yes, that’s about how long it will take for millennials to reach the highest leadership positions in the Church, where the big-picture decisions are made), could very well be an African for whom the American themes discussed in this book are irrelevant to the formation of his religious worldview. We may not know exactly which issues different groups will find relevant in the future, but like individuals from outside the United States today, future Church leaders from other countries will likely have concerns that differ from those in the United States. (As an analogous example, around the time the book was released, the more liberal-leaning United Methodist Church, largely led by its African contingent, voted against solemnizing same-sex unions.)

It is always easy to criticize a study for not having enough data points or for not being more comprehensive, but I do not want my technical

critiques here to obscure the marvelous work Riess has accomplished with this survey. Yes, it would have been great if had she done a global survey across multiple time points to track trends, but to my knowledge Riess does not have access to the millions and millions of dollars it would take to pull off such a survey, so it is incredible that she was able to crowdfund a survey of this scope and magnitude. Plus, it would have made for much more boring reading to just report the numbers, but readers should be constantly aware of the various ways one could interpret her nonlongitudinal findings.

The second major technical issue was more preventable and easily so. Nearly all of the book is based on comparisons-of-means (that is, comparing the means of different groups), which come quick and fast. However, Riess rarely discusses statistical significance or variation. Occasionally she will raise the issue of sample size, but it is as if she is not aware that there is a test that can give you a clear yes-or-no, is-there-a-relationship answer. Based on her articles that she has written using the data from this book, either she or Knoll is technically capable of performing such analyses, which made it all the more confusing why they did not do formal statistical tests throughout.

Furthermore, it appeared in some cases that she mentioned a difference as if it was relevant when it was in all likelihood a statistical tie. For example, on page 4 she indicates that millennial Latter-day Saints who still identified as members of the Church were slightly different than the baseline, but it is clear from the confidence intervals (margins of error) reported in footnote 8 that the difference is not statistically significant. Another example is the counterintuitive finding that black members are six percentage points more likely to see the priesthood/temple ban as divinely inspired (121); she acknowledges that for this statistic, the margin of error could be high, but without clearly indicating the significance level of this difference (or the confidence intervals), it is hard to know if this is a real difference or just statistical noise. Comparisons like this form the bread and butter of the book, but they are not statistically tested. Throughout my reading, I was constantly second-guessing whether the group-by-group orderings and comparisons were significant or not. Discussion of significance was perhaps removed to make the book more readable, but testing significance is the bone, not fat, of any quantitative work, and a gentle introduction to significance would have been welcome to better ground the comparative statements.

Hopefully, after Riess is finished using the dataset for her own publications (I, for one, look forward to her planned book on former members

of the Church, which she has mentioned elsewhere), she will send the data to a public repository like ICPSR to allow future scholars to use the primary data. This is a work of not only social science but also history. For example, as the book was in production, the section on gender and the temple became less immediately relevant (due to the annoying tendency of social phenomena to shift under the feet of researchers). However, that section of the book stands on its own as an important historical record. Whereas in the past historians had to read through the lines of all-too-scarce journals and other primary sources to divine the attitudes in a particular period, thanks to Riess future historians have a treasure trove. It would be as if an archivist uncovered a large-N survey on Latter-day Saint attitudes about polygamy during the Nauvoo period. In a time when Latter-day Saint studies is being covered in a myriad of fields and new Church history books are being published by the dozens every year, the social science of the subject—which is arguably more relevant to the day-to-day lived experience of Latter-day Saints than the history—has remained surprisingly fallow in comparison. Here Riess has taken a large and substantive step into this field.

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