

Kathleen Flake. *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle*.
Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004

Reviewed by Todd M. Kerstetter

This book's title does not do justice to its remarkable contents. *BYU Studies* readers will recognize Reed Smoot's name and understand his significance, but too many others, even those well informed about U.S. history, will do little better than to link Senator Smoot with a tariff.¹ Kathleen Flake's excellent monograph illustrates the significance of religion in the Progressive Era and brilliantly puts it into context by linking it to critical themes, including problems with concentration of power and the contested issues of national identity in a time of immigration, imperialism, and reform.

Flake found a fascinating forum to explore these themes in the investigative hearings inspired by Smoot's 1903 election to the U.S. Senate. The hearings, which started in 1904 and ended in 1907, saw senators, prompted by constituents, investigate the appropriateness of seating an Apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Flake skillfully uses these events to show that the so-called Mormon Problem had not been resolved in the 1890s but lingered into the twentieth century. According to Flake, the Smoot hearings prompted the Church to forcefully and truly abandon the practice of plural marriage, thereby becoming a true denominational U.S. citizen. As the Church demonstrated its willingness to abide by social and political norms, the Senate, acting as a proxy for U.S. society, softened its moral crusade against the Church.

Two questions drive Flake's telling of the story. First, "How do religious communities change over time and retain a sense of sameness with their originating vision?" Second, "What are the political terms by which diverse religions are brought within America's constitutional order?" (1). The Smoot hearings reminded the public that the "Mormon Problem" had not been solved. Despite a change in Church policy dating to 1890, some Mormons continued to practice polygamy, and the Church's tolerance seemed to demonstrate recalcitrance. In inspired phrasing, Flake

characterizes the issue as a conflict “between the nation with the soul of a church and the church with the soul of a nation” (7).

The book’s six chapters begin with “The American Idea of a Church.” Flake opens the chapter with Smoot’s election to the U.S. Senate in 1903 and delves into how that episode sparked a vigorous protest from the nation’s Protestant center, representatives of which feared the presence of an ecclesiastical figure in a political body. Flake conducts a brisk tour of religious freedom in the United States through the turn of the twentieth century and shows how the nation’s values conflicted with those of the Latter-day Saints. The nation’s Protestant center saw two critical problems in Mormonism: that it resembled popery and that its structure did not fit the nation’s model for denominationalism, in which church members voluntarily chose their spiritual affiliations. Together these characteristics threatened the nation’s republican values. That such a religious organization would send one of its top leaders to the U.S. Senate seemed like an act of rebellion to Protestants in the East. Facing this situation, President Joseph F. Smith decided to move in a new direction, to heal the rift between the Church and the nation. Despite the opposition, Smith felt that having Smoot in the Senate would be a tool vital to accomplishing that task.

Upon his selection as Utah’s senator, Smoot found himself at the center of this tug-of-war, which Flake details thoroughly in chapter 2, “The Man Who Served Two Masters.” Here Flake sketches Smoot’s biography and sets the stage for the Senate hearing. Although petitions protesting Smoot’s seating in the Senate arrived in Washington even as he did in March 1903, officials followed procedure and seated him. Within forty-eight hours, though, the Senate referred the protests to the Committee on Privileges and Elections, which announced it would hold hearings in February 1904. It became clear in the intervening months that few in the Senate objected to Smoot, but that the committee would use the hearings to investigate the Church. Namely, it would investigate the extent to which polygamy survived and whether a Mormon, be he a senator or a regular citizen, would obey U.S. law when it conflicted with God’s law.

The tension between church and state comes through clearly in chapter 4, “The Common Good.” In December 1904, one witness, a disaffected former Mormon, recounted his memory of a temple rite that included an oath of vengeance against the United States for its role in the death of Joseph Smith. This complicated Smoot’s defense as he would not only have to deal with the polygamy issue, but also with the reawakened notion that Latter-day Saints represented a faction hostile to the United States. The polygamy issue became thornier thanks to evidence that Apostles Matthias F. Cowley and John W. Taylor had taken additional wives after

the 1890 Manifesto and because they defied subpoenas to appear before the Senate. Joseph F. Smith responded to these challenges by restricting marriage practices to prohibit plural marriages and by convincing Cowley and Taylor to resign their posts.

This paved the way for Smoot in Washington, but created a dilemma for Smith and the faithful. Essentially, Smith had to actively rescind the practices of one revelation (regarding plural marriage) without undermining belief in revelation as a distinctive Latter-day Saint characteristic. In a fascinating chapter, “Re-Placing Memory,” Flake argues that Joseph F. Smith and other Church leaders accomplished this delicate balance through two acts. First, they used the centennial celebration of Joseph Smith’s birth to emphasize his most distinctive contributions and to neglect his most controversial actions. Church leaders traveled from Utah to Joseph Smith’s Vermont birthplace and from there to Kirtland, Ohio. The commemorative journey skipped Independence, Missouri, and Nauvoo, Illinois, where Smith’s leadership produced the prototype for theocratic government, anticapitalist economic practices, and plural marriage. According to Flake, this marked a concerted effort to emphasize Latter-day Saint distinctiveness and to begin the process of forgetting beliefs and practices that put the group at odds with the nation. Second, the leadership in 1908 added the 1890 Manifesto to the Doctrine and Covenants under the heading “Official Declaration.” Thus the leadership gave a new title to Church scripture that today might be called politically correct, but that title seemed to some to make the Manifesto subordinate to full revelation.

In the book’s final chapter, “Defining Denominational Citizenship,” Flake covers the investigation’s resolution in 1907 and its significance, but the chapter’s great contribution rests in its discussion of the Smoot episode’s broader significance for U.S. history. The Church changed to behave more like what mainstream U.S. society viewed as an acceptable citizen, and the Senate, after approaching the Smoot affair in the style of a nineteenth-century moral reform, decided to accept the Apostle on procedural grounds in keeping with a more modern notion of a regulatory state. Or, as Flake so nicely puts it, “In sum, it can be said that the Mormon Problem was solved finally because the Mormons had figured out how to act more like an American church, a civil religion; the Senate, less like one” (158).

Flake’s work contributes to understanding how early-twentieth-century politicians sought to increase democracy by regulating concentrated power, represented here by the Church. The book adds depth and nuance to scholarship on Church leadership and doctrine by tracing the transition from pre-Manifesto to post-Manifesto Mormonism into the

twentieth century. Flake shows how doctrine and practice fell into practical application, and how the Church and its members entered another phase of acceptance. Flake deserves high praise for assembling a creative, insightful project supported by thorough, balanced research and for using her legal background to craft a clear discussion of complex events.

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1. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which dramatically increased tax rates on thousands of imported goods, was signed into law in 1930. Economists and historians dispute whether the tariffs contributed to the Great Depression.