



The Respectability Trap: Saints, Status, and the Cost of Acceptance

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Can believers thrive in a world that disdains their faith? Their strength lies in embracing outsider status.

I live in a college town, where the children of the East Coast elite go to be credentialed and ascend the ranks into high finance, law, and consulting. Hopefully, they will live as comfortably as their parents do. And if their perfectly manicured appearances are any indication, they will. There's a part of town where they walk and where the missionaries go to proselytize. The missionaries encounter many atheists, more than in any other area of the mission—those for whom religion is an odd tribal practice at best, a hindrance to a just world at worst.

Why so many atheists? Partially, they are young and want no submission to any authority, divine or otherwise. But paradoxically, they are atheists because they submit to a different authority, one that has no name. It is the authority of the cultural milieu, dominated by Harvard, Wall Street, Hollywood, etc. These institutions have the power to determine respectability—who is honored and taken seriously, and who is relegated to the periphery of social importance.

Latter-day Saints have long been ranked low in social importance, at least in sociological terms. A survey from [Pew](#) in 2023 showed that among religious groups, Americans had generally negative attitudes towards Muslims, Atheists, and Mormons, with Mormons coming in dead last. (And to think our situation has improved since the 19th century!) These perceptions make it more difficult for the Church to do some of its work—including missionary work. But no matter how much respectability could help the Church, Latter-day Saints must never allow themselves to become too comfortable with respectability. Like power and money, respectability can corrupt, and it can be used for evil just as easily as it can be used for good.

What, then, does it mean to aspire to respectability? I don't mean to sit and pass judgment on everyone, nor to pretend like the decisions are easy. There is real good that can be done with respectability. But it comes at a price. Take academia as an example. Hugh Nibley was onto something when he referred to academics as "clothed in the robes of a false priesthood." When you join this clergy, there is a temptation to play by the same rules as everyone else. To downplay our distinctive beliefs in order to be more palatable to our colleagues. To adopt the perspectives and goals of academia in order to get publications, grants, jobs, and tenure. To accept that truth comes from academic research alone, rather than the whisperings of the Spirit.

Now, to be clear, I am not suggesting that all academic research is worthless. Nor am I suggesting an inevitable conflict between faith and academic success. There are many examples of Latter-day Saints who resist the blandishments of academic respectability

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and succeed as disciple-scholars. What I am suggesting is that the long list of discarded arguments once considered unassailable suggests that mere reason is a fragile thing and academic triumphalism is misplaced. The current academic milieu tends towards secular triumphalism and indulges the conceit that academics must outgrow the ridiculous and childish faith of their youth or remodel it along secular lines.

Most LDS people probably think that more LDS influence in academic circles could help counter secular triumphalism. And maybe it could. But we would also be foolish to imagine that we are not like the secular elite. Given ample control, we, too, would become officious, triumphalist, and dogmatic. Satan would encircle us with his chain because that is the nature of the human heart. After all, don't we all, somewhere in our hearts, want to praise ourselves as the Zoramites did, thanking God for our superiority? Hubris is a natural human tendency. And underlying the desire to be righteous lurks, at times, the desire to be better than others. To be praised, to be respected, and to show forth our superiority. Perhaps this is why Jesus trenchantly asked, "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?" (John 5:44).

LDS people aspire to respectability in other ways. One is by a total embrace of the United States of America, downplaying its flaws and sins, whether that be foreign adventurism abroad or its cult of freedom and equality domestically. We should love our country. But nationalism is often a substitute for religion, not a complement. Or we may seek respectability through money. Too often, money comes with egomania and the desire for more and more. The Book of Mormon is replete with warnings about how wealth leads to pride and spiritual death, and the Epistle of James bluntly states: "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you."

There are real tradeoffs involved with decisions about how to live in the world. But we should recognize one fact: God's people are and will be in the minority. We are commanded to not rely on the arm of flesh but on God. God's people are exilic, cast out, and scattered on the face of the globe. Jesus Christ shows us through His life that the first will be last and the last will be first. When He came, He was not beautiful or rich or powerful. He came to subvert the cult of Caesar and declare liberty to the captive. He did not conform. As he told his disciples, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

We should thus give up on any permanent détente between the City of God and the City of Man. Our religion should not conform to the old joke that religion is fine until it starts interfering with your personal life. Our religion must be resolutely countercultural, though not shrilly countercultural. The idea that Latter-day Saints will finally be given an equal seat at the table, of finally entering the American (and global) mainstream—it ain't happening, nor should we want it. The harder but richer path beckons.

For some, this [harder path](#) will mean renouncing same-sex relationships to follow the law of chastity. For others, it means to raise a large family in a world that prioritizes career success and narcissistic individualism. And others, it means resisting the cult of nationalism and the deification of the nation-state. This list is far from exhaustive; there are more ways to renounce the world, despite the sneers and jeers. We should glory in suffering shame for His name. He never said it was going to be easy, He only said to take up our cross and follow Him.

It's not pleasant to highlight our outsider status, nor is it pleasant to suggest that we shouldn't expect or want improvement. But being an outsider presents great opportunities, despite the burdens. Power and wealth and status are intoxicating, blinding us to uncomfortable truths about ourselves and the world. After all, it is harder for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven than a camel to pass through the needle's eye. By avoiding such earthly pursuits, we can see more clearly. And through seeing share our gifts with the world, including a growing intellectual and artistic tradition that must be separate and against the hallowed idols of modernity.

Even though we may never be mainstream, and even though our missionaries will often stand on the side of the road ignored by many college students, that does not mean our efforts are futile. Despite being rejected many times, every once and a while, the missionaries pique the curiosity of a student walking back from classes. And from that initial meeting, however unlikely and precarious, that student can learn of God and be drawn into the light of the perfect love of Heavenly Parents and their Divine Son.

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About the author

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