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## Saints in Sin City: Religion and community building in twentieth century Las Vegas

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SAINTS IN SIN CITY: RELIGION AND COMMUNITY  
BUILDING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LAS VEGAS

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
University of California, Los Angeles  
2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts in History**  
**Department of History**  
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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

**Matthew Russell Davis**

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**August 2010**

## ABSTRACT

### **Saints in Sin City: Religion and Community Building in Twentieth-Century Las Vegas**

by

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Due to an absence of social and religious tradition, Las Vegas provided the perfect setting for Jewish and Mormon faiths to create communities closely linked to their own spiritual doctrine. This thesis traces the evolution of these groups from the turn of the twentieth-century to the present, focusing on issues such as education, geographic location, and business acumen as avenues for personal and spiritual growth. This thesis also considers the relatively small number of religious studies conducted in the American West, and serves as a possible example for future study by using an urban religious framework to synthesize the dearth of western religious information. To be sure, the mythical nature of Las Vegas as “Sin City” colors the spiritual lives of its citizens like no other city in America. Hopefully, this thesis begins to shed light on the vibrant religious culture springing from the area.

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Liz, Grandma Eve, and Aunt Pam: all of you instilled in me a love of history from an early age simply by recounting old stories of our families and our heritage. Your support for me has been unending, and because of all of you, I have been able to pursue avenues in my life I would not have been able to otherwise, your continued backing of my education and life pursuits have meant so much to me.

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This thesis is dedicated to my true mentors, my parents, Russell and Nancy Davis.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose of the Study

This thesis chronicles the development of Jewish and Mormon communities in Las Vegas and provides insight into their evolution from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. This work speaks to more than just the stories of Jewish and Mormon efforts to construct lives of faith in Las Vegas, but also to the role that religion plays in the development of new population areas. What does the building of a synagogue or the creation of a new stake and ward have to say about a specific locale? Can we determine a religious group's sphere of influence based on schools and businesses that cater to and promote that specific faith? Do weaker social infrastructures in a geographic location allow for collaboration and cooperation that might not be possible in the already-developed East? These are just some of the questions that inform this thesis, bearing in mind that the theme of religion in the West is still a largely unexplored topic. Indeed, an aim of this work is to begin an exploration of the myriad ways that religion plays a role in the lives of westerners, and specifically, Las Vegans.

At first glance, the study of a particular religious group in a given area may seem like a fairly narrow and specific pursuit. However, upon further investigation, a number of possible avenues of study begin to appear. As case studies, the histories of such groups can reveal a great deal about the dynamics of community development. Las Vegas provides an excellent arena in which to study religion as a theme in the West, specifically how it acted as a socializing and organizing force in laying much of early Las Vegas' infrastructure. As historian Eugene Moehring has remarked, "Religion was an

integrating force which glued the young community together. On a desert frontier beset by violence, hard drinking, and prostitution, religion provided a measure of social control.”<sup>1</sup> Such moral “frontiers” still exist, and it is important to realize how church leaders attempted to exercise that same social control through means of civic and personal involvement. Religious communities have been a part of Las Vegas from the very beginning, but their role and history have never been static. This thesis will consider the ways in which these communities evolved over time, and how they adapted to the realities of living in “Sin City.”

### Key Concepts and Terms

When the topic is religion, most people feel some modicum of personal knowledge or experience from which they can speak. We generally assume that our religious vocabularies easily transfer to other faiths. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it is necessary to be direct and specific with the terms I choose to use as they relate to religion as a theme generally, and as they pertain to Jews and Mormons specifically. Firstly, the term “church” is a word that everyone is familiar with, yet it needs to be delineated.<sup>2</sup> Usually the term “church” is in reference to a collective of Christians or to an actual place of worship associated with the Christian faith. For the purpose of this thesis, the term “church” will refer to denominations of Protestants, Catholics, and other

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene P. Moehring, *Town Making on the Southern Nevada Frontier: Las Vegas, 1905-1925* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989), 95.

<sup>2</sup> “The American Heritage College Dictionary” defines *Church* as a building for public, especially Christian worship, and often is also referenced as a company of all Christians regarded as a spiritual body. It is important to note that the term “church” can be taken literally, as an edifice of worship or a physical building, but also can be used to describe a collective group of religious adherents. Of equal importance in recognizing the value of the term “church” is its ability to not be cornered into a specific meaning. For instance, the word “Mass” as it pertains to the Catholic faith, has strict parameters to its definition. It is the liturgy and the sacrament of the Eucharist, especially in the Roman Catholic Church. The term “Mass” does not refer to a body of believers in the same way that “church” does, and is not used interchangeably.

Christian groups if mentioned. Additionally, the terms “stake” and “ward” are Mormon organizational terms that need proper delineation so as not to be confused.<sup>3</sup> As the term “Church” is used to describe Christians, the term “Synagogue” is used for Jews, but only when in reference to places of worship, as the term “church” takes on multiple meanings.<sup>4</sup> While it is debatable whether the Mormon faith can be associated with a Christian title, the terms most helpful in describing the locus of Mormon worship is “service” or a “meetinghouse.” Both terms connote religious services and are used widely by Mormons in place of the term “Church.” As it is with many religious groups, there are multiple offshoots and denominations. For this work, only the mainstream denominations are utilized. As it relates to the Jews, only Orthodox and Reformed are treated, and as it pertains to Mormons, only the main LDS group has any presence in Las Vegas.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, an overarching theme of this thesis is my treatment of religion in the West. It should be noted that the term “West” as used in this thesis refers only to the western portion of the United States. Admittedly, the West is hard to define, and people

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<sup>3</sup> “The American Heritage College Dictionary” defines a *Stake* as a Mormon Church territorial division consisting of a group of wards under the jurisdiction of a president. A *Ward* is a subdivision of a Stake, and is governed by a Bishop of the Church.

<sup>4</sup> “The American Heritage College Dictionary” defines *Synagogue* as a place of meeting for worship and religious instruction in the Jewish faith. Again, this term does not conjure up the same vagueness that the term “Church” does. It specifically references a body of Jewish adherents and is narrow in its meaning.

<sup>5</sup> “The American Heritage College Dictionary defines *Orthodox Judaism* as the branch of Judaism that is governed by adherence to the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures) as interpreted in the Talmud (the collection of ancient Rabbinic writings, constituting the basis for much of Jewish law. It also defined as adhering to what is commonly accepted, customary, or traditional. *Reformed Judaism* is defined as the branch of Judaism that seeks to reconcile historical Judaism with modern life and does not require strict observance of traditional religious law and ritual. The Mormon Church is commonly referred to as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The two terms will be used interchangeably and refer to their mainline group, not including any denominational offshoots or sects.

recognize it both as a place and a process.<sup>6</sup> The simplest use of it as a term in this paper is as a geographic location west of the Mississippi river, and associated with a more desert climate as alluded to by historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb.

### Urban Religious Framework and Time Frame

Western historians such as William Deverell and Phillip Goff note the sheer scope and diversity of religion in the West as problematic for any kind of easy synthesis. However, the most sustained examination of western religion and the framework that I will use in this thesis, appears in Ferenc Szasz's work on religion in the modern west. His model of religious and community development will be explained in fuller detail as part of my chapter dealing with the absence of religion in western historiography, but for the purposes of this introduction, suffice it to say that Szasz's model identifies churches as cultural markers of prestige and permanence. In fact, churches (religious groups in general) helped build some of the earliest western parochial schools, hospitals, and colleges, thereby playing a significant part in the development of early town infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> While Szasz's framework applied to the West as one large region, this thesis will take a much more localized approach in its implementation. Rather than evaluate Szasz's model over a number of different geographic locations, an evaluation of Las Vegas will prove that this framework can be used on the local and community level,

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas R. Nickel, "Art, Ideology, and the West." *In A Companion to the American West*, edited by William Deverell, 361. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. Nickel goes on to describe the West as not so much a physical place as a series of abstractions, of overlapping and occasionally conflicting rhetorical constructions, transmitted variously through popular culture. This definition of the West is somewhat theoretical, and needs more attention. The purpose of this thesis is not to figure out a new definition of what the West means, but to simply use it as a geographic point of reference.

<sup>7</sup> Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 18.

while also providing insight into the uniqueness of Las Vegas as a western city in its development and its cooperation between different religious groups.

A more focused implementation of Szasz's model provides the opportunity for a better understanding of how religiously-minded people operate within their own communities, and how that operation is unique to that given location. Rather than view religion as one broad theme, this localized approach reinforces the notion that the relationship between religion and community building, while exhibiting some form of regional uniformity, is largely unique and dependent on its specific geographic realities. Additionally, the usage of a localized approach to Szasz's framework also allows for the treatment of religion and community building by the individual. While Szasz's broad model focused more on the institution, this localized model allows for the individual to play more of a role in the development of communities through religious avenues. Indeed, the study of important figures to Las Vegas such as Moe Dalitz, Parry Thomas, and Ira Earl, for instance, makes room for a richer story to develop regarding the uniqueness of the establishment of religious communities in Las Vegas.

Religious cooperation on the scale in which it happened in Las Vegas was unseen in other western locales such as Salt Lake City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, where most religious groups chose to deal exclusively with people of their same faith. A major component of my work focuses on the impact that places of education, whether it be Jewish Yeshivas, Day schools, and colleges, or Mormon Seminaries, and Institutes of Religion have on their communities. Szasz's model fits well with the idea of communal organization through religious education. Indeed, Las Vegas fits well his model for religion as a socializing force in the beginnings of new towns and neighborhoods.

It must be noted that Szasz's urban religious framework applied to the nineteenth century when much of the West was still being settled. Hopefully, by applying this same model in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, this thesis serves as an extension of that framework, where the creation of churches and schools still signifies an aura of permanence and prestige. Indeed, Las Vegas by the 1990s had already long become a booming metropolis, yet Summerlin, a newly incorporated city on the outskirts of Las Vegas, resembled the new type of community Szasz identified in the nineteenth century as being void of social and cultural infrastructures. The Jewish community figured significantly into the building of Summerlin's community through such entities as Temple Beth Sholom and Touro University. To be sure, this thesis identifies the way in which Szasz's framework can still be utilized in an already settled metropolis, dotted by developing enclaves.

Another important aspect of this thesis is the attention that must be paid to a religious group's change over time. A chronological approach is the most apt way to describe a group's social and cultural progression and its interaction with a surrounding community that is itself changing over time. For instance, the Jewish community in Las Vegas circa 1930, which met in a saloon, will take on a different look as far as their social and cultural manifestations than a present-day congregation which meets at Temple Beth Sholom and has carved out a niche in the Summerlin area. The relationship of urban development to religious community is ever shifting and evolving, and a historical approach to such a relationship must account for change over time.

The account of Mormons has some decade-long gaps indicating a late-nineteenth century period of absence, but their story in Las Vegas actually begins in 1855 with the

building of the Mormon Fort which was to serve as a way-station between Utah and southern California. The timeframe for the Jews in Las Vegas is similar to the Mormons in that there are brief accountings of a Jewish population much in advance of when a fully established community actually appeared. The timeframe for Jews in Las Vegas goes back to roughly 1913, but 1931 is really the beginning point of an emerging Jewish presence. It should be taken into account that these beginning points are not fixed, and pinning down a religious group's existence in a given region is problematic due to the absence of historical material which might say otherwise.

Finally, this thesis hopes to shed light on not just how religion affects community building, but also, how community building affects religion. It is easy to assume that religion is always an active force on people and geographic locations, and while this notion is mostly accurate, this thesis will begin to show how the development of communities is just as powerful a force for affecting and determining the kind of religious manifestation that people might have. To be sure, the existence of absence of kosher restaurants for Jews or Institutes of Religion for Mormons will have profound consequences for the living out of one's faith. Early inhabitants to Las Vegas had to settle for "abridged" versions of their religion while waiting for the proper infrastructures to be put into place that would make true observance a reality. As this thesis will show, the development of these religious communities over time dramatically changed the visibility and influence that these groups had in their communities.

CHAPTER 2  
THE RELIGIOUS CLIMATE OF LAS VEGAS  
AS A PARADIGM FOR RELIGION  
IN THE WEST

Religion is embedded in social norms, in cultural values, and is shaped by its own interaction within any given environment. Indeed, western religion finds its niche in a civil society where free and voluntary associations play a vital role in the workings of community.<sup>1</sup> These free and voluntary associations are what Szasz envisioned as community-building tools religious groups could utilize, whether they be business groups formed based on religious affiliations, community centers, or women's groups. It is important to note that this description may only apply to specific societies, mainly that of European and American origin, as religious practices in the eastern world may have a harder time finding expression where voluntary organizations are curtailed by more oppressive governmental regimes. In western culture, Christianity has at times expressed an impulse to disengage from the secular world, but in a modern democratic society of limited government that expects voluntary associations to step in and provide the social structures of a community, religion has to engage. Based on these conclusions, Jewish and Mormon groups in Las Vegas seemed to have answered the call for civic engagement. Mormons are heavily invested in the political arena, while Jewish backing has proven vital to the industrial and gaming growth of the city and vice versa. In order to grow as a community both in numbers and influence, some religious groups seek a

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 18.



more open and adaptable expression of their faith, and one that appeals to people of different backgrounds and experiences.

In the 1950s in America, an emerging liberal emphasis in mainline Christian churches extolled religious cooperation. It argued that while God works primarily through the spirit, he also needs the help of dedicated men and women (the Church) to achieve his purposes in the world; therefore, an aggressive program of social improvement from all religious faiths was seen as imperative.<sup>2</sup> As theologian David Fergusson notes, “We learn to act morally, not so much by the intuition of general moral principles, but through particular examples and communal instruction in how to comport ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is crucial for the religious and political world alike to find at least common moral ground even if they cannot find common moral theory. As important as it is for political and religious groups to find some “middle ground,” it is equally as important for groups of different faiths to also find areas in which to compromise. Western historians like Ferenc Szasz and Philip Goff noted the possibility of cooperation in western cities not beholden to decades of religious isolationism. The ability of religious groups to cross their own spiritual barriers in order to grow the city and their communities provided much of the early infrastructure of Las Vegas. UNLV’s campus is the result of the Mormon-Jewish collaboration and partnership of Parry Thomas and Jerry Mack, a partnership not likely to have happened in a place like New York City with already defined religious and social parameters. To be sure, religious cooperation was vital to the early growth periods in Las Vegas, especially amongst the town’s elites who realized that cooperation through religious avenues resulted in economic gain. Indeed,

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<sup>2</sup> Gallup & Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape*, 60-61.

<sup>3</sup> David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

that spirit of cooperation, both religiously and economically, continues to enhance the city and its religious communities.

Is organized religion going to be a vital part of society in the future? An initial answer to that question would most likely be in the affirmative, yet the achievement of that goal presents challenges to religious groups and peoples of all faiths. Those who assume religious adherence will remain strong base their argument on the logic of necessity: because people *need* spirituality, churches and gathering places will remain pertinent. However, they fail to recognize growing numbers of people looking outside mainstream faiths to satisfy their spiritual cravings.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, many clergy argue that the breakdown of the community has detrimental consequences for the church, and that the arrival of new immigrants who are not religious further weakens the churches' influence in the community.

Las Vegas faces these same challenges, and it is understood that some of these issues are exacerbated by the specific economic realities of the Strip. Just like any other business, the economic successes and failures of the gaming industry dramatically affect the church, and an influx of immigrants to work in the casinos has far-reaching consequences for religious expression. A spike in church attendance can mean more money in the collection plates while simultaneously changing the ethnic makeup of a group's congregation. These changes impact certain religious groups more than others. Catholics and Protestants deal with dynamic ethnic compositions in their assemblies, and Mormons and Jews to a lesser extent. It is clear that particular congregations are likely to

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 1997), 225.

adopt different strategies depending on their locations, their members, and the available resources.<sup>5</sup>

The ways religious groups in Las Vegas coexist with, handle, and combat vice is in many cases as different and divergent as their spiritual beliefs. Regardless of the morally corrupt reputation that has come to be associated with the city, residents of all different faiths have carved out strong communities within the metropolitan area that cater to the needs of their spiritual brethren and sisters as well as those of other faiths. While the role religion plays in the lives of these people may be similar, expression and outward manifestation is quite different. Based on accumulated research, the Mormons tend to have more of a public expression of their faith, focusing on the eventual conversion of the Las Vegas community, while the Jewish population is more self-contained, choosing to strengthen its own ethnic base rather than appealing to the masses. To be sure, the manifestations of a specific faith has consequences in a community where religious groups rival each other for influence and political control.

Organized religion and the state make uneasy bedfellows at times. Historian, David Marquand notes the difficulty religious groups face with the state today is not because the state is too neutral, or too limited, but that the state is not limited enough.<sup>6</sup> The establishment of a theocracy is not an obvious threat, but apprehension exists over religious competition to control the community by way of its political machine. While Marquand is not referencing one specific religious group, it is understood that depending on the geographic region, a number of different religious groups could assume community control. Influence through politics is the indirect action of churches while

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<sup>5</sup> Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches*, 231.

<sup>6</sup> David Marquand, *Religion and Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 107.

competition for new converts is more direct, yet both types of action hold sway over the matter of which religion's approach gains public acceptance. While religious competition can be potentially divisive, it can also be healthy for the larger community as it provides people with various spiritual options to pursue. As Marquand states, "mass religiosity promotes religious diversity."<sup>7</sup> If used as a framework for the interpretation of a geographic locale's religious climate, it would seem as if Las Vegas satisfies that statement. Regardless of whether one religious group holds more political power in the area, the choice of which religion to choose remains with the people.

The close proximity to Salt Lake City, a large Mormon population in the area, and even a Mormon U.S. Senate Majority Leader are all reasons other religious groups in Las Vegas might feel nervous about one group exerting too much control and power. Leaders from the Catholic and Protestant faiths have both acknowledged Las Vegas' large Mormon population does increase that chance, as many of them are "generational land, and independent business owners."<sup>8</sup> But they are quick to point out areas where their respective religions overlap, and that the common ground that many faiths have can positively influence Las Vegas. Interestingly, one might think that with such a large Mormon and Catholic presence in Las Vegas that the city's mayor would likely come from one of those two faiths. The fact that Mayor Oscar Goodman is Jewish, and quite popular, may indicate a more healthy religious competitiveness in the city than elsewhere.

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<sup>7</sup> Marquand, *Religion and Democracy*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Reverend Bill Shumate, conversation by Author, Henderson NV, Feb. 24, 2009. Rev. Shumate alluded that he had friends in the upper echelons of the Catholic Church that expressed reservations about the size of the Mormon population in Las Vegas. However, he did not specifically name these men.

Although social and cultural expressions of faith will differ depending on which community one might be in, there must be purposeful action and outreach propagated by religious groups. Mark Welchel, director of adult ministries at Central Christian Church had this to say about religion and Las Vegas, keeping in mind that this can apply to many spiritual faiths, “In Las Vegas, people are hungering for church, not because they are searching for God, but because they are disconnected. This is a boomtown. People are new to the area, they have left their families and their roots, there is no tradition here.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, many newcomers to the area are young college students without any familial ties, in need of a connection to some form of community. In an age of increasing secularization, the churches that succeed are those that have a strong evangelical bent and can reach out to the displaced and provide them with some semblance of belonging. Churches in this category usually exact stronger commitments from their members, and can extend much more of a philanthropic hand into the community.<sup>10</sup> However, that exclusivity may come at a cost. As this paper will show, the exclusivity of the Jewish people in Las Vegas has caused them to internalize themselves to seek only improvement within their own cultural sphere. Churches now confront the challenge of acquiring the institutional strength and philanthropic ability that comes from a certain degree of exclusivity, while not allowing that exclusivity to cut them off from their potential influence within their given environment. As Welchel noted, a main goal of the church in Las Vegas is to provide some semblance of community, and the religious doctrine can come later. Each religious group faces different challenges in propagating their theology

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<sup>9</sup> David Littlejohn, *The Real Las Vegas: Life Beyond the Strip* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Faith and Philanthropy in America: Exploring the Role of Religion in America's Voluntary Sector* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 229.

in Las Vegas, and even though they reside in a place where “the devil lives,” a strong and growing religious community is arising out of the desert.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bishop Wesley T. Adams, conversation by Katherine Beal, Henderson, NV, March 1, 1977.  
UNLV Special Collections.

CHAPTER 3  
THE LAMENTABLE MARGINALIZATION OF  
RELIGION IN AMERICAN WESTERN  
HISTORIOGRAPHY

Paul Tillich, an eminent twentieth-century theologian once identified religion in the West as not being limited to churches, ceremonies, or medicines. Rather, western religion “permeated the realms of politics, culture wars, and society.”<sup>1</sup> If religion in the West truly was so permeating a force, then the question arises, why such a lack of studies exploring this theme? Historians have tried to explain the glaring gap that separates the significance of religion in American western history from its relative insignificance in American western historiography. In defense of this apparent lack of research, historians argue that western religion was largely left to religious scholars and clerics, that western historians ignored religion in the West just as religious historians had ignored western history. Others seem to think western historians ignored religion because church historians had already situated it in its proper place. For many church historians, the issue of religion was part of the “frontier” experience that Frederick Jackson Turner proposed, where religion reinvented itself with each new wave of migration westward.<sup>2</sup> But such reasoning does not fully explain the depths to which religion affected the region and its inhabitants, nor the degree to which western inhabitants influenced and re-casted their own version of religious practice. A more thorough explanation is necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferenc M. Szasz & Margaret Szasz, *The Oxford History of the American West: Religion and Spirituality* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 359.

<sup>2</sup> This stems from a discussion, begun by Turner in 1893, where he concluded that “a moving frontier must have had important results on the character of religious organization in the United States.” Dean L. May, *Three Frontiers: Family, land, and Society in the American West, 1850-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 207.

Another possible explanation for the lack of western religious studies conducted by historians may have much to do with the pluralistic nature of religions in the region. Far from being dominated by Catholicism or Protestantism, the West housed a multitude of different faiths, and many of these flowed through denominational lines, making an adequate assessment of religion in the West a difficult task. While coverage of religion as a seminal theme in western studies remains inadequate, it is crucial to note the important work that is starting to be done in the field.

Any examination of western religious studies must include historians like William Warren Sweet, Sydney Ahlstrom, and Edwin Gaustad, who were pioneers in the field and produced seminal works dealing with religious concepts and their social implications. Besides these historians, this thesis will trace the evolution of religious studies over the last few decades, and seek to identify trends and divergences within the field. Authors such as Elliott West, Robert Hine, Frederick Luebke, and Peter Williams identified such issues as race, class, and gender in the West's religious histories that needed much further exploration. While the works of Sweet and Ahlstrom were significant, they largely ignored minorities, non-Protestant groups, and women. Perhaps no other religious historian has had more to say on the topic in recent years, or has offered more compelling suggestions for future study than Ferenc Szasz. Szasz notes that the absence of western religious studies has less to do with *neglect* and more to do with a *failure* to appropriately reassess the role of religion as a way of thinking about western history.<sup>3</sup> Western historians, as they have done for urban history and environmental history, need to place a renewed emphasis on the theme of western religion as a definitive label. While still

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Goff, *A Companion to the American West: Religion and the American West*. Edited by William Deverell, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 287.



undeveloped, the theme of religion in the West demands the scope of attention that other major fields and sub-fields in western history receive.

Most of the aforementioned historians are not “religious” historians. Hopefully as western historians begin to see the dramatic impact of religion on the lives of westerners, the trend will shift towards a much broader and more thorough treatment of religion by scholars specializing in the tools and topics of religious history. Encouragingly, younger historians such as John Marschall and Steven Avella have pursued new avenues of research, focusing on a specific religious group or denomination in a single locale. The interplay between these different groups of western and religious historians is vital to a better understanding how the study of religion in the West has evolved over the years. Adding to this emerging conversation, this essay will propose new possible avenues for research in the field.

The best label for the first group of historians is simply *Turnerian*. For Sweet, Billington, Gaustad, and Ahlstrom, religion in the West came from the East, and played a major role in shaping life on each subsequent frontier.<sup>4</sup> Like Turner, Sweet and his contemporaries saw the story of religion in the West as a triumphal, white male-dominated narrative. However, they depart from Turner by claiming that the East heavily influenced western religion. Turner was adamant in his claims that almost every aspect of a person’s life, including their spiritual beliefs, changed and reinvented themselves on the frontier. Despite Turner’s influence, most of his predecessors envisioned religion pouring into the West as waves from the East.

Regarded by many as the *father* of western religious studies, William Warren Sweet’s extensive work on frontier religion was groundbreaking, and still retains its

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<sup>4</sup> Goff, *A Companion to the American West*, 289-290.

importance today. Culminating with *The Story of Religion in America* in 1931, Sweet wrote extensively on Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians; he actually devoted an entire book to each group. Some of his critics have noted his studies are a bit Protestant-heavy, with not enough attention paid to other major western religious groups such as Roman Catholics.<sup>5</sup> For Sweet, churches were essential in the building of new frontier communities. The first Baptist churches on the frontier were the rude cabins of settlers.<sup>6</sup> Once a few of these churches sprang up, they formed an association thereby helping to knit the community together around the church. For Sweet, the story of religion in the West was a triumphal tale where ministers did so much more than just preach on Sunday. They were farmers, schoolteachers, moderators, and proud members of an uneducated working class.<sup>7</sup> Sweet's emphasis on early church formation and its relation to early town infrastructure continues to be a theme that modern religious historians such as Ferenc Szasz explore. Indeed, Sweet laid the groundwork for much of Szasz' future studies, especially the utilization of schools and universities as a way to promote faith and build communities. While Sweet focused on the individual, Szasz took a more institutional approach.

While not considered a religious historian, Ray Allen Billington, assuming the mantle of Turner, did recognize the role of churches and missions in early frontier communities in his studies. In his much praised work, *The Far Western Frontier: 1830-1860*, Billington notes the building of a chapel in the Willamette Valley came right on the

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<sup>5</sup> Goff, *A Companion to the American West*, 288.

<sup>6</sup> William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 36.

heels of the town's establishment.<sup>8</sup> Instantly, missionaries began to proselytize the area, and the church soon became a religious center of importance in the community. Much of Sweet and Billington's studies posit religion and the church within a somewhat chaotic western environment. For the most part, it is a success story: how religion overcame Native Americans and sinful miners to carve out a niche. The notion of religion depicted by Sweet and Billington would undergo a transformation as many scholars, based on historical accounts, have misunderstood the ways religion acted in the West. As Laurie Maffly-Kipp states, "rather than seeing the West as a distinctive area, many scholars have continued to believe the reports of missionaries and observers that pioneers were irreligious because they did not behave in familiar ways." If much of the American public viewed the West as irreligious because they did not understand its transformation, and historians bought into this interpretation, then it is no wonder that there is a lack of scholarly attention to the topic today. An examination of the vital community-building roles that organized religion fulfilled in early town development will show that religion and religious cooperation in the West was unique, and that it should not be underestimated in the development of frontier society.

As the heir apparent to the work of Sweet, Gaustad, a westerner himself, saw the region as unique in that a religious pluralism existed in the West that the rest of the country would not experience for decades.<sup>9</sup> Departing from Sweet's over-emphasis on Protestantism as a shaping factor, Gaustad also noticed that the diversity experienced in the West led to a distinct religious climate not found in eastern cities such as Boston and

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<sup>8</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Far Western Frontier: 1830-1860* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1956), 81-82.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Gaustad, *The Religious History of America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1966), 181.

Philadelphia. Western men and women could not still think in terms of a “Protestant Empire” or “Christian America.” As Gaustad aptly states, “the vanishing of a recognizable Protestant norm had become, in the West, the norm.”<sup>10</sup> While his seminal work, *The Religious History of America*, remains important today, Gaustad lent his greatest service to the field through his atlases, which charted the dispersion of religious communities in the West. His work drove home just how different the West was from the rest of the nation. Catholics, Mormons, Methodists, Lutherans, and even irreligious people concentrated in large numbers throughout the West. Gaustad’s work helped lay a framework of religious plurality that many historians continue to utilize.

Sydney Ahlstrom’s voluminous work, *A Religious History of the American People*,<sup>11</sup> while not focusing on the West, offers much insight into the role that churches played in their respective locales, such as in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Boston minister, Joseph Tuckerman in 1718 was the minister-at-large to Boston’s poor. Discovering that chapels and preaching were not enough, Tuckerman became one of the country’s first Christian social welfare theorists, and was a forerunner to the Social Gospel.<sup>12</sup> In keeping with Ahlstrom’s general views of eastern influences in the West, he argues churches with socially-minded ministers such as Tuckerman would be emulated by clerics in the West wishing to do the same. This close linkage to the East flies in the face of many western historians who view the West as unique; yet Ahlstrom’s work proves seminal for understanding the social responsibilities required of a church in the wide open settlements of America. Much of Ahlstrom’s pronouncements about churches

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<sup>10</sup> Gaustad, *The Religious History of America*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 737.

in America fit perfectly into Gaustad's argument about the church in the West. He succinctly states, "Churches were not independent forces but complex cultural institutions. The churches functioned with enormous and unrivaled effect as organizing centers, giving direction in a society where very few other institutions were available."<sup>13</sup> Ahlstrom also begins to frame the study of religion around more than just white, protestant males. He notes the narrowness and bigotry that frontier churches exhibited, especially towards Native Americans and Africans, signaling a change in the field that was to be geared more towards minority groups and theories of class.<sup>14</sup>

Elliott West's *The Saloon on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier*, published in 1979, does not focus on western religion. However, this book signaled a trend emerging among western historians, a trend that looked at history from the "bottom up," one that paid close attention to the individuals moving westward and their daily struggles. West realizes the importance of religion and the church in helping to grow a new region. He states that the pealing of the first church bells announced "the advancement of the humanizing influence of Christianity and healthy progress. West blends a kind of triumphalism of the American spirit with a realism that paid attention to the seemingly mundane details of everyday life, making a rich story with which to tell."<sup>15</sup>

A strength of West's works is his ability to show how western religion forced a sort of accommodation that might not be experienced in the East. Perhaps for lack of funds, space, and building material, a temporary alliance between "supposed" rivals, the pastor and barkeeper might strike up. In some instances, the two men might use the same space

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<sup>13</sup> Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 470-471.

<sup>14</sup> Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 471.

<sup>15</sup> Elliott West, *The Saloon on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 134.

for worshipping and drinking as a way to set up early town infrastructure and some semblance of normalcy. In keeping with the notion that religion had to adapt itself to new western ways of life, West astutely notes the goals of ministers to accommodate a new breed of person. A practical minister stated, “To do men good they must be met on their own ground.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, West was one of the first historians to place an emphasis on the importance of religious structures and architecture in the West, noting the appearance of schools and churches to a new town as signs of progressive growth and stability. Ferenc Szasz expounded on these ideas in talking about the parochial school system and colleges in the West marking both progress and religious plurality. For this new crop of historians, such as West, notions of race, class, and gender held great significance, and within that framework, the church received renewed attention as an important cultural institution.

Robert Hine also provided ample commentary on religion and the church within the context of his scholarship on early communities on the western frontier. While Hine’s work covers mainly Protestant groups, he gives much more attention to Roman Catholics than Sweet. In *Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone*, Hine agrees with some of West’s ideas that ministers in the West had to adapt their preaching style to fit a more chaotic and transient environment. Young preachers spoke about local issues such as libraries, parks, and temperance rather than theology.<sup>17</sup> An interesting element of Hine’s work is his sense of realism. While he saw religion as a “bearer of the town’s values,” he also recognized the factionalism that religion in the West engendered. Catholics were never included in Protestant functions, and there was

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<sup>16</sup>West, *The Saloon on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier*, 78.

<sup>17</sup>Robert V. Hine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 145.

denominational friction between Protestant groups. Irish Catholic miners despised Protestant miners, yet the labor union alone brought them together. Departing from the “unifying” picture that past historians had applied to western religion, Hine starts to show the challenges that a religiously pluralistic society dealt with.<sup>18</sup>

Another important aspect of Hine’s work is his attention to Catholics functioning as a mission society to populate western towns. By 1885, 4000 Catholic families migrated to at least 10 frontier settlements. In order for these families to migrate, they had to receive sponsorship from families in the East, and a priest had to travel with the community. These Catholic communities averaged 650 members, and the Catholic society back east gave land and resources to its members to build houses. Hine insightfully shows the power the Catholic Church had in the West by serving as a means of economic integration for its constituents.<sup>19</sup> Hine’s use of Catholic Mission Societies and their work in the West provides a useful framework for understanding western religious developments. The trend of whole communities moving westward, united under a religious banner served as a powerful indicator of how religion shaped specific regions in the West. Identifying with past historians’ emphasis on the role that religion played as a community builder, Hines asserts that “the fellowship of faith remained the most effective embodiment of group ideals, and was the only bond that could unite people.”<sup>20</sup>

The trend of studying the westward migration of entire religious communities continued with the work of Frederick Luebke. In *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, Luebke identifies different German communities in Texas based on religious affiliation. He even

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<sup>18</sup> Hine, *Community on the American Frontier*, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Hine, *Community on the American Frontier*, 186.

<sup>20</sup> Hine, *Community on the American Frontier*, 252.

notes religious cooperation between German Catholics and Protestants, a sort of cross-denominational connection conspicuously missing in most histories of the West. While religious cooperation usually occurred within the same denomination, different religions typically preferred not to mix.<sup>21</sup> Even in Luebke's study, there was a considerable regionalization in the Texas Hill Country where these German groups migrated, with each succeeding valley housing Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and even Agnostics. In addition to his findings on communities, Luebke also notes that church affiliation for many European immigrants was a way of resisting acculturation to American lifestyles and norms. Whereas many past historians saw religion as part of a wholly "westernizing" process, Luebke correctly sees how religion warded off acculturation.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps signaling a new trend in the way religion in the West is approached, Carl Guarneri and David Alvarez' *Religion and Society in the American West* is actually a collection of essays dealing with specific religious groups, education, and regionalism in the West.<sup>23</sup> This style of breaking down religious studies into more manageable pieces is a trend emerging in works by Robert Mathisen, Ferenc Szasz, and Frederick Luebke. If religion in the West is too vast a topic to assess holistically, then these micro-studies may be the answer. While Guarneri and Mathisen see the West as religiously diverse, they pay particularly close attention to the admiration received by Jews for their stable communities and capitalist values. Like other western religions that lacked deeply rooted social anchors, the Jewish community in western towns revolved around their respective synagogues. Jewish men and women insulated their own communities by keeping jobs in

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick Luebke, *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 114.

<sup>22</sup> Luebke, *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> Carl Guarneri & David Alvarez, *Religion and Society in the American West* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987).



the control of fellow Jews.<sup>24</sup> For many different cultural groups in the West, churches were a means of implanting traditional ideas such as representative government, common schools, and an organized religion, which endorsed not only worship, but also morality, industry, and patriotism.<sup>25</sup> Guarneri and Alvarez succeed in showing the different approaches the western church used to help civilize its community. Much of this study echoes the work of Sweet and would influence the future works of Maffly-Kipp and Szasz.

Peter Williams' *America's Religions* was almost a tribute to the style of work produced by Sydney Ahlstrom.<sup>26</sup> Williams, who considered Ahlstrom to be one of the greatest religious historians, reconsidered the idea that one could write a comprehensive study of religious development in America. For Williams, eastern religions and cultures still dominate the religious landscape. As Philip Goff notes, Williams "confines the West to merely the place where largely eastern religious traditions play out their stories, without taking the region seriously as a place in which innovative sacred beliefs and rituals are developed."<sup>27</sup> While his work is exhaustive and brilliantly traces American religious movements from the Puritans to modern Islamic movements, it somewhat undervalues the uniqueness and significance of the West as a place where religion took on a different character than its eastern precursors. One might even say that the study of western religion benefits more when broken down into smaller and more purposeful studies than as part of a large narrative where it is overshadowed.

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<sup>24</sup>Guarneri & Alvarez, *Religion and Society in the American West*, 210-212.

<sup>25</sup> Guarneri & Alvarez, *Religion and Society in the American West*, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Goff, *A Companion to the American West*, 289.

Turning from a larger religious narrative to a specific, regionalized study, the works of Michael Engh pay particular attention to how religion influenced Los Angeles' class structures, migration, and social cooperation within the city. Published in 1992, *Frontier Faiths: Church, Temple, and Synagogue in Los Angeles* symbolized the growing trend in western religious studies, focusing on the social and cultural impact of religion in a region.<sup>28</sup> The years 1846 to 1888 constitute Engh's chronological framework, and he sees those four decades as the period of greatest transition, the time when Los Angeles transitioned from a Mexican pueblo to an Anglo-American city. Early town ministers had to adapt their spiritual message to cater to a largely Hispanic population. Ministers blurred denominational lines in an attempt to draw all people to the church. Protestants, Catholics and Episcopalians established footholds in the city in its early years, cooperating with each other in order to spread their message to the masses.<sup>29</sup> While highlighting the religious cooperation experienced in early Los Angeles, Engh is quick to point out that wide scale collaboration by the different faiths did not last long. In fact, by 1890, Los Angeles resembled a religiously stratified Midwestern city, looking little like its formerly distinctive self.

Engh's work, while showing how religion formed early town infrastructures, also took a close look at the interconnectedness between the evolution and growth of a town and its religious adherents. In the early phases of town growth, the church provided stability and infrastructure, and denominational lines blurred for the sake of cooperation. However, as the town achieves a certain level of stability and permanence, sectarian lines become apparent, with possible detriments to certain social groups. As Engh aptly notes,

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<sup>28</sup> Michael E. Engh, *Frontier Faiths: Church, Temple, and Synagogue in Los Angeles, 1846-1888* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Engh, *Frontier Faiths*, 96-100.

religious toleration was a fragile commodity, susceptible to both shifting demographics and economic prosperity.<sup>30</sup> Historians such as Maffly-Kipp, Szasz, and others continue to evaluate the social and cultural importance religion has on specific regions and people in the West.

Like Engh, much of Laurie Maffly-Kipp's works focus on the uniqueness of California, though she does not limit herself to Los Angeles. For Maffly-Kipp, the stories of the West demanded retelling and refocusing. *In Religion and Society in Frontier California*, Maffly-Kipp lends new insights into the world of the western miner, as well as the impact that religion had on women.<sup>31</sup> She rebels against old scholarly notions that religion was absent in the West, and points to the fact that eastern patterns of religion are not normative for religious developments in the West. Although eastern institutions poured money and resources into converting the West, religious adherence took on a life of its own in the mining camps and brothels on the western frontier.<sup>32</sup> Another important aspect of Maffly-Kipp's work is her attention to the role women played in determining the religious direction of many a western man. She notes that miners often saw their religious destinies as controlled by the women in their lives; without women to guide them, they were merely passive victims, helpless to alter their spiritual fate. "Women were thus the conduits and the gatekeepers of male religiosity," Maffly-Kipp observes.<sup>33</sup> Whereas Engh shed new light on the conversion of different ethnic groups in Los Angeles, including the Chinese, Maffly-Kipp placed a newfound

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<sup>30</sup> Engh, *Frontier Faiths*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California*, 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California*, 159.

importance on the religious role of women in the West, a trend that has now even surpassed her works in depth and scale.

Published in the same year as Maffly-Kipp's *Religion and Society*, Dean May's work *Three Frontiers: Family, Land, and Society in the American West* is yet another example of a study not purposely directed at religion in the West, but which refers to it as a vital force. May notes that, "The church provided one of the most potent instruments for organizing the diverse and fluid population of the new community." He also quotes John Mack Faragher, who concluded that churches were "forces of order" that supported enterprise in the West.<sup>34</sup> While not the focal point of his work, religion plays a large part in May's narrative which shows how different clusters of values distinctively shaped development in three agrarian western settlements.<sup>35</sup> For May, religion was a uniting force that pulled townspeople together as a community. His work fits in nicely with the trend of evaluating religion in terms of a large group of people migrating or adjusting to the West.

In *European Immigrants in the American West*, Luebke pays special attention to large, predominantly Lutheran, Swedish groups migrating to the West.<sup>36</sup> These communities' social organization revolved around churches, and from the beginning, religious tension existed based on the geographic origins in the motherland. Churches were such massive markers of social distinction that Swedish people, despite a shared nationality, would link themselves closer to their religious affiliation than their ethnicity.

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<sup>34</sup> Dean L. May, *Three Frontiers: Family, Land, and Society in the American West, 1850-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 208, quoted from John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 164.

<sup>35</sup> Goff, *A Companion to the American West*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Frederick Luebke, *European Immigrants in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

Resembling Luebke's style of evaluating large migratory groups in terms of settlement patterns and religion, Ferenc Szasz' *Scots in the North American West* evaluates the impact that religion had on Scots emigrating to both western America and Canada.<sup>37</sup> Szasz notes that the church has still not been given its due in the story of the settlement of the West, which is surprising considering it served as a means of preserving ethnic and religious distinctions. Like Luebke's Swedish village heavily identifying with their Lutheran distinctions, Szasz' Scots also arrayed themselves according to their respective Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist doctrines. Szasz notes that in larger, eastern cities, an immigrant community could support bakeries, restaurants, and even newspapers. However, in the vast region of the West, the church had to assume all of these social roles.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Szasz remarks that no institution played a larger part in reinforcing ethnicity in the plains than did the ethnic church. Harkening back to Elliott West and Michael Engh, the ethnic church had to fulfill a multitude of social roles in order to accommodate the needs of its people. This story remains to be adequately told as the main focus of the narrative.

Generally acknowledged to be "the most sustained examination of the topic," Ferenc Szasz' *Religion in the Modern American West* comes the closest to successfully synthesizing western religion.<sup>39</sup> While many other historians have noted the impact and importance of the individual miner, cleric, and settler on religion in the West, Szasz focuses primarily on the impact of the religious community as an institution. Indeed, for Szasz, churches were markers of permanence, prestige, and cultural distinction, and it

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<sup>37</sup> Ferenc Szasz, *Scots in the North American West, 1790-1917* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Szasz, *Scots in the North American West*, 201.

<sup>39</sup> Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West*, 294.

was due to the group as a whole, not just the individual. In addition, churches helped build some of the earliest western parochial schools, hospitals, and colleges, thereby playing a large part in the development of a town's early infrastructures.<sup>40</sup> Instead of focusing on conflict, Szasz highlights the spirit of cooperation that Protestants, Catholics, and Jews exhibited in the West, nurturing progress and tolerance in a region more known for its chaos and lawlessness. Szasz traces his narrative from the establishment of the frontier town, to the building of its infrastructures, noting demographic, cultural, and religious fluctuations along the way. He ends his study in the 1990's, and a West which boasted a large "irreligious" population, perhaps showing that the next religious group that demands study is actually those who claim no religion at all.<sup>41</sup> For the long strides that Szasz' work made, historians such as Philip Goff note the sheer scope of religion in the West as too overwhelming to allow for easy syntheses. In his opinion, neither an institutional nor an individual framework quite captures the entire story, but maybe a mixture of the two. Perhaps the scope is too large and historians should not attempt to encapsulate western religion in its entirety. Additionally, historians such as Engh and Maffly-Kipp have focused their works on specific western regions, signaling a uniqueness to many places within the West. Perhaps specialized, micro-studies are the key to an increased understanding of the topic; some of the most recent works on religion in the West point in that direction.

*Jews in Nevada: A History* by John P. Marschall, and *Sacramento and the Catholic Church* by Steven Avella, both published in 2008, focus on specific cities and

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<sup>40</sup> Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Goff, *A Companion to the American West*, 295.

the people living within their boundaries.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the story of Catholics in Sacramento or Jews in Nevada might resonate with other western locales. If that is the case, then maybe it is these kinds of studies that will help develop a larger framework through which to view western religion. One other work that exemplifies a future method of study is Matthew Sutton's *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, published in 2009. Sutton's work chronicles the life of the founder of the Foursquare denomination, a Protestant strain most similar to the Baptist Church. Sutton's analysis of McPherson tells the fuller story of 1920's Los Angeles and its sweeping revivals, ethnic migrations, and class struggle. Using the life of a key religious figure allows for an extensive discussion of the influence of religion in that specific location. Rather than attempting a study of Protestantism in the West, perhaps a study of the Foursquare movement in Southern California would result in more insights concerning trends in western religion.

Another study that may provide future avenues of exploration in the field is Darren Dochuk's *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*. Within academic fields, this work has already garnered much praise for its attention to "ordinary folk" and the profound impact they had in places like Los Angeles. Like Sutton, Dochuk chooses specific personalities to frame his work around. Iconic figures such as Billy Graham, Barry Goldwater, and President Ronald Reagan help Dochuk demonstrate the force with which religion in the West acted on a regional and national scale, and how these seminal western personalities impacted the lives of everyday people. Charting a future course of study, Dochuk's

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<sup>42</sup> John P. Marschall, *Jews in Nevada: A History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008). Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento and the Catholic Church: Shaping a Capital City* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008).

approach to religion in the West illuminates the kinds of studies the field needs. How did ordinary people who were already extremely religious impact the West, and how did this affect their migratory patterns? Sutton and Dochuk provide glimpses into this newly expanding field of western religious studies.

Religion is vitally significant to the culture, politics, and economics of western places. Therefore, historians need to reflect that importance in their studies. Todd Kerstetter notes that the twentieth-century West fits the “no-dominant-mainstream” interpretation, but leaves room for discussion about the openness for new and variant religious groups not found elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps Kerstetter’s work is even another arena for future study, highlighting the region’s “openness” for variant religions as fostering countercultural, and even illegal actions. Is an overly permissive religious society a dangerous thing?

Regardless of its manifestations, religion in the West is apparent, evident, influential, and demanding more attention. The study of religion in the West is clearly still in its infancy. The social, cultural, and geographical impact of religion in the frontier West is almost too broad to measure, thereby demanding more studies on the topic. Unlike other areas of western history with established methods of study, religious history remains in flux. Historians must recognize that a person’s faith is as motivating a factor, if not more, than economic, social, and cultural influences. Therefore, people’s beliefs or faith in God has impacted the larger cultural, political, and economic landscape of their chosen region, demanding a more comprehensive study, specifically in a western context.

Whether it is an individual study, institutional, geographically specific, or broad, the

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<sup>43</sup> Todd Kerstetter, “*That’s Just the American Way: The Branch Davidian Tragedy and Western Religious History*,” *Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. XXXV (Winter 2004): 454.



study of religion in the West remains undeveloped, but thanks to the work of historians like Szasz, Maffly-Kipp, Williams, and Sweet, that goal might be attainable.

It may appear that the theme of religion in the West has received adequate treatment, and while many historians have provided rich studies of certain aspects, a proper synthesis of the topic remains to be done. More studies akin to the works of Sutton and Dochuk are needed to provide clearer understandings of the way religion has molded to fit the western experience, and these studies need to be done at the micro-study level. A work like John Marschall's "Jews in Nevada" provides incredible insight into those specific areas, but a work concentrating solely on Las Vegas, Reno or Carson City may add the depth that is needed for a fuller understanding of the impact that religion has on a given community. Studies focusing on broad religious themes in the West were a necessary first step, but the field needs more narrow, concentrated works as one realizes how unique each state, city, town, and community can be, and how religious expression changes to fit each locale.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE JEWS IN LAS VEGAS

#### Introduction

Perhaps no other religious group in the West better epitomizes what Earl Pomeroy described as the strength of western church and religious adherence than the Jews. Pomeroy concluded that while church membership and doctrinal observance were lower in the West when compared to their eastern counterparts, churches were nevertheless centers of many westerners' lives in both rural and urban areas, especially but not exclusively where they symbolized ethnic tradition and were its principal vehicle.<sup>1</sup> For Jews in the West, the establishment of a community similar to those in the East remained elusive for many years. In the absence of such communities, synagogues functioned not only as houses of worship, but as cultural distribution centers. Indeed, early Jewish communities in almost the first half of the twentieth century had to settle for makeshift meeting places, kosher meals shipped in from out of town, and a relatively small number of adherents with which to observe their High Holidays.<sup>2</sup> Despite these struggles, the Jewish community in Las Vegas grew and developed into the vibrant and diversified community it is today.

It is important to note that this transformation did not happen over night, and also to understand the change over time that religious communities experience as the religious climate of a city develops alongside city growth. Perhaps this notion is best articulated by one of Las Vegas' earliest Jewish settlers, businessman Adolph Levy, who in 1906 pleaded with townspeople that Las Vegas needed "A high school, a city hall, a park,

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<sup>1</sup> Earl Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 252.

<sup>2</sup> John Marschall, *Jews in Nevada: A History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 166.

library, church and well equipped fire department.”<sup>3</sup> Consistent with his Jewish roots, but also realizing the socializing force that religion had on people, Levy recognized the need for a church as much as any other early city building or group. Levy’s business acumen led him to realize that a church in Las Vegas facilitated stability and progress, notions that would help build his success on an economic and spiritual front. From Adolph Levy to Steve Wynn, Jews in Las Vegas exemplify the influence that business leaders affected by their religious heritage can have in a city that is willing to cater to both. This chapter will trace the development of the Jewish community in Las Vegas from its earliest arrival in the Las Vegas valley up to present times.

### Las Vegas’ Jews in the Early-Twentieth Century

Although Jewish settlers had most likely been traveling through Las Vegas and trading with locals from an earlier period, the first indicator of an actual Jewish presence in the city was the publication of High Holiday observance by the *Las Vegas Age* in 1913.<sup>4</sup> While this editorial notification only applied to roughly five or six families, it is important to note that there was enough of a community to warrant a newspaper article.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the newspaper ran the same notification the next year, in 1914, then ceased to mention anything relating to a Jewish community for the next decade.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the families that composed that initial Jewish group moved on to other locales, or perhaps the city was not attracting new Jewish residents at the rate of keeping their community viable in the public eye. Whatever the reason for the early ebb and flow in the public presence

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<sup>3</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 162.

<sup>4</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 162. Upon further investigation, it appears that this article in the *Las Vegas Age* may have appeared in Michael Green’s “History of Las Vegas Jews Links Past and Present,” which he wrote for the *Jewish Reporter*, March 22, 2002, although he does not directly cite the article.

<sup>5</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 162.

<sup>6</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 163; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census Records, State of Nevada*, 1910.

in the Jewish community, one should note that the economic progress or failures of a city have a direct bearing on the religious growth or decline of a city. The Jewish community in Las Vegas has long been linked to the town's economic prosperity. Without a vibrant economy, an entrepreneur like Adolph Levy would have moved on to a more bustling locale than stay in Las Vegas. Before a permanent Jewish community arose in the 1930s, Jewish populations in Las Vegas remained static at best, and were most likely in decline.<sup>7</sup> The growth of a Jewish population in Las Vegas required economic opportunities, which finally came with the announcement of the construction of Boulder Dam.

Boulder Dam's construction in 1931 started a massive migration of workers and speculators to the area. Las Vegas quickly became an attractive prospect for the energetic Jewish merchant looking to capitalize on the booming population of dam workers. If nothing else, the dam's construction at least guaranteed that Las Vegas would not be some insignificant, desert whistlestop. Growing economic prospects in Las Vegas encouraged Jewish businessman Nate Mack to invest in local Vegas businesses around 1936, as well as buying real estate on a hunch that it would eventually pay off.<sup>8</sup> Mack is widely considered as the founding father of organized Jewry in Las Vegas. In the 1940s, he was one of the first to invest in casino properties with the likes of Sanford Adler, and gangsters, Moe Sedway and Gus Greenbaum. Interestingly, these associations with members who had criminal ties went largely uncriticized by the Jewish community. Indeed, most of these men had strong ties to the synagogues despite their notorious economic ambitions.<sup>9</sup> For many Jews in Las Vegas, business was business, and could be

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<sup>7</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 165.

<sup>9</sup> Marshcall, *Jews in Nevada*, 165; Rabbi Akselrad Conversation.

separated from religion, as long as the money flowed freely from business to the synagogue.

By 1931, roughly 20 Jewish families were gathering in the back of a store to pray and read the Torah, and the *Las Vegas Age* expanded the coverage of the Jewish High Holidays from a tiny blurb to a front-page description of the festivities.<sup>10</sup> For several years the community arranged for a cantor from Los Angeles to conduct the services for the High Holy Days, and for the first few years these services were observed in the home of one of the congregants.<sup>11</sup> Although kosher restaurants were not present in Las Vegas at this time, proper seder meals could be attained in southern California.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, despite the absence of a synagogue, the unavailability of kosher food, and the relatively small number of Jews in town, a small religious community was beginning to take shape - one which would eventually grow into a highly influential group in the decades after 1940.

### Las Vegas' Jews in the Mid-Twentieth Century

According to Charles Salton, one of Las Vegas' earliest Jewish residents, most local Jews had ties to Orthodox Judaism. However in 1940, with the schism of Reform from Reno's Conservative Jewish temple, the possibility of the Jewish faith becoming more diversified in Las Vegas was a reality.<sup>13</sup> In February, 1942, a small group of "younger Jews" from Temple Emanu-El, Reno's first temple, began meeting in the back

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<sup>10</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 166.

<sup>11</sup> A cantor is a Jewish musician trained in the vocal arts who helps lead the congregation in songful prayer.

<sup>12</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 167.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Salton, interviewed by John Marschall, Carson City, May 5, 2005. Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 168.

of a local book store. The group rapidly grew from just a few congregants to dozens of families.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the Conservative movement was at that time the fastest –growing branch of American Judaism, and some congregants who had loose ties to Orthodoxy considered abandoning their old temple.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the split by many Jews in Reno for the Conservative movement empowered similarly-minded Las Vegas Jews to do the same. Nearly all of the early Jewish families in Las Vegas were Orthodox, so without this precedent of schism from Reno it might not have been possible for families from Temple Beth Sholom to break away and form their own congregation.<sup>16</sup> By this time, the Jewish community had grown substantially, and newcomers wanted a more diverse religious community. For many Jews, the orthodox style of living seemed impractical and outdated. Las Vegas was a modern city and needed modern religion. By 1946, the different sects agreed to affiliate under the United Synagogue of Conservative-Reformed Judaism, thereby establishing a new dominant branch of Judaism in the area while also sowing the seeds of dissent between the groups.

In 1943, the Jewish Community Center, the first synagogue to be built in Las Vegas was a clear marker for the growth of the community since its birth four decades earlier. As Ferenc Szasz alluded to in “Religion in the Modern American West,” churches in the West, and in this case synagogues, served as cultural markers of distinction and permanence. Within a generation, Las Vegas Jews had progressed from meeting in the back of stores to having their own synagogue. Not simply a place of worship, the Jewish Community Center served as an outreach program and community-building enterprise. The synagogue symbolized Jewish culture in Las Vegas. Other than

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<sup>14</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 150-152.

<sup>15</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 150-151.

<sup>16</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 168.

servicing as a house of worship, the temple was the only place in Las Vegas where one could buy religious goods and kosher foods. The many uses of the community center epitomizes Szasz's framework of religion cultivating much infrastructure in the West. Indeed, the center served in many capacities, and its Rabbis served not only as spiritual leaders but also as community developers and disseminators of Jewish culture.

As Las Vegas grew, so too did the Jewish community. According to Marschall, the Las Vegas population tripled between 1940 and 1950, yet the Jewish population experienced an even higher rate of growth within their own community during these years.<sup>17</sup> By 1957, the Jewish Community Center had grown to 175 families, and most likely more if one counts non-affiliated members. The size of the Jewish Community Center could no longer accommodate the growing population, so the center's Building Committee purchased a site at 1600 Oakey Blvd. for Temple Beth Sholom. The building was consecrated July 14, 1958.<sup>18</sup> The temple's congregation rose steadily, with over 1,200 people in attendance for High Holiday services in 1958. It is important to note that population growth leads to diversity of thought and practice. While Las Vegas' Jewish population was growing, the beginnings of a schism were evident. Indeed, as historians have noted, religious diversity distinguishes religious groups in the East and West, and Las Vegas' postwar Jewish community reflected these notions of a diverse religious community.

The congregation at Temple Beth Sholom was officially Conservative, but its membership was theologically diverse, exhibiting many characteristics of an orthodox style of Judaism. Regardless of its diversity displayed, the town's Jewish community up

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<sup>17</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 169.

<sup>18</sup> Temple Beth Sholom "About Us: History," <http://www.bethsholomlv.org> (accessed March 28, 2010).

through the 1970s united behind such common causes as support for Israel and the expansion of Judaism in Las Vegas, through avenues such as temple programs, Hillel, and youth programs. However, with the rising population of Las Vegas and the Jewish community, newcomers seem to prefer the “reformed” tradition and wanted their own place of worship. These dissidents eventually established the new congregation Ner Tamid in Henderson.<sup>19</sup> On Friday, June 7, 1974, roughly 35 families from Temple Beth Sholom held the first reformed services in a Baptist Church auditorium. As was the case forty years before for the orthodox and conservative, the newly established reformed community in Las Vegas had to adjust to a lack of infrastructural support. Congregation Ner Tamid had yet to build a temple, and so, it had to meet in another church’s building. This schism of sorts marked a turning point in the Jewish community of Las Vegas. While cohesion and a common purpose helped build the early foundation for Jewish community in Las Vegas, geography and demography began playing a larger role, so that by the 1980s, Jewish newcomers to the area now had multiple choices of where and how to worship, yet adaption and accommodation were still much a part of Jewish life in Las Vegas.

### The Present-Day Jewish Community in Las Vegas

It is a well-known fact that Jewish money helped build some of the earliest Las Vegas casinos. From Moe Sedway, Benjamin Siegel, and Meyer Lanksy in the 1940s to Moe Dalitz and Morris Rosen in the 1950s, to Steve Wynn and Sheldon Adelson today, Jewish money and influence powered Las Vegas’ development into a global resort city.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 192.

<sup>20</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 176.



Casinos such as Caesars Palace, the Desert Inn, the Stardust, the Dunes, and the Sahara all benefitted from large Jewish investments. In addition to casino operators, businessmen such as Murray Wollman and Nathan Adelson were among the Jewish developers of Las Vegas' postwar housing, shopping malls, and hospitals.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, when asked about how the Las Vegas Jews reconciled the community's gangster past with the high ethical standards of their faith, Rabbi Sanford Akselrad answered with no sense of contradiction. Jews today take pride in the city they helped to build, and what a man like Moe Dalitz did to build his fortune was his own business, as long as the donations to the temple kept pouring in. Dalitz's initial gift of \$500,000 to build Temple Ner Tamid makes his sometimes illegal business pursuits easier for many Jews to accept.<sup>22</sup> In fact, his name adorns the school building at Temple Ner Tamid, its social hall, and library. Rabbi Akselrad's reaction prompts questions about how much of an effect Las Vegas exerted on the Jewish community. Has Judaic tradition been sacrificed or transformed to fit the needs of a small community in a city they were responsible for building?

Although Jews played prominent roles in the development of many western cities, they were conspicuously present in building much of the Las Vegas Strip along with community institutions and non-gaming businesses. To be sure, the influence of Jewish gamblers, builders, bankers, lawyers, and civil servants on modern Nevada is unmistakable and enduring.<sup>23</sup> Compared to the other religious groups in Las Vegas, Jews are relatively small in number, totaling 85,000 residents in Las Vegas. But with only 14-15 million Jews worldwide, and about half that number in the United States, Las Vegas

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<sup>21</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Sanford Akselrad, Conversation with Author, Henderson, NV, March 10, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, xiv.

represents one of the larger Jewish communities in the country.<sup>24</sup> One of the major problems the modern Jewish community has always faced in Las Vegas is the city's geography. In eastern cities, Jews are more concentrated and one can often walk to temple, work, and home. For Orthodox Jews, who can only walk a short distance to temple on the Sabbath, Las Vegas is so spread out that forming close-knit communities and neighborhoods was a challenge. Nonetheless, Jews in Las Vegas have carved out notable communities for themselves in Summerlin and Henderson, utilizing places of worship as centers for their communities.

Although small in number compared to Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons, the Jewish community has seen remarkable growth over the last ten years. Las Vegas now has kosher restaurants, two Jewish newspapers, a Jewish college (Touro University), orthodox and reformed schools, a Jewish mayor and congresswoman, and a cadre of rabbis that cater to the town's wedding trade. Even real estate agents are specializing in finding homes for observant Jews within walking distance of their community's synagogue.<sup>25</sup> In short, Las Vegas today hosts a vibrant and diverse Jewish culture, yet not without certain distractions unique to the city.

Howard Baron, a practicing Orthodox Jew recognizes the temptations that living in Las Vegas presents. "To be observant here presents challenges compared to other cities where generation after generation of Jewish families have lived. You have to be a pioneer. Your children can't just show up at youth activities, you have to create the youth group." Despite the tremendous gains of Chabad and the growing Jewish population in Las Vegas, Rabbi Shea Harlig is concerned by the hard-to-miss temptations

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<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Akselrad, Conversation.

<sup>25</sup> Jerry Hirsch, "It's kosher to live in Las Vegas these days," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2003.

that dot most every street in the city. The tawdry strip joints, provocative billboards, the gambling and sex trades on which Vegas was built challenge devout Jews trying to coexist. “There is still a stigma to Las Vegas and all that it is built around.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, one must recognize that the community is still relatively young compared to those in eastern cities. For Jews in Las Vegas, the conscious effort to adjust to the self-indulgent, nihilistic culture of Las Vegas while clinging to their traditions is at times a real moral challenge.

A pressing question for Las Vegas Jews, as well as others worldwide is what about tradition? How do Jews mediate between the claim of contemporaneity and the demands of their vast inheritance of institutions, rituals, myths, and theologies? It is because of that unwillingness to part with, or adapt rituals and tradition that force some Jewish groups, mainly Orthodox Jews, to the margins of society.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, those same traditions prove detrimental to the overall cohesiveness of Jews by exposing the deep fissure in their religious beliefs. According to historian Jack Wertheimer, there is a growing majority of American Jews for whom religion plays a minimal role.<sup>28</sup> These Jews tend to drift towards Reformed Judaism, which historically favors adapting the Jewish faith to the changing culture. For many Reformed Jews, tradition is little more than an heirloom of their culture, not an immovable and immutable obligation that needs to be rigidly observed today. Contrast this group with an increasingly passionate

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<sup>26</sup> Jerry Hirsch, “It’s kosher to live in Las Vegas these days,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2003. It should be noted that different sects of Judaism operate under a different set of rules as it applies to their kosher foods. For many Orthodox Jews in Las Vegas, Rabbi Shea Harlig personally blesses the food and its establishments. For the more conservative and reformed sects, an outside blessing by a rabbi who might not reside in Las Vegas is sufficient.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Neusner, *American Judaism: Adventure in Modernity* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), viii.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (Michigan: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), xvii.

minority, the Orthodox Jews, who have created dynamic programs for religious revival that embrace traditional Judaic practices.<sup>29</sup> According to Marschall, “Jews in Nevada have never been monolithic. They are as diverse politically, socially, religiously, and economically as the rest of the nation. Jews are wealthy and poor, gay and straight, Republican and Democrat, affiliated or not with a synagogue or Jewish organization. They are also as individualistic in their opinions about how to be Jewish as Jacob Rader Marcus’s assessment that there are as many Judaisms as Jews.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, not all groups recognize the legitimacy, integrity, or relevance of the other. But despite these rifts, the complex histories of these different groups blend together to form an overall picture of the Jewish community in Las Vegas.<sup>31</sup>

While different denominations of a faith are nothing new, divisions within Judaism take on a much more significant meaning, as Jewish doctrinal differences completely affect how they live their daily lives. Reformed Judaism began as a mid-nineteenth century movement to adapt Orthodox Judaism to modern times. For instance, it abandoned separate seating of men and women at its services, and has taken a very “feminist” stance towards rabbinical teaching.<sup>32</sup> Early reformers emphasized individual autonomy and lessened the significance of, or even eliminated, such traditional expressions of Orthodox Judaism as keeping kosher, wearing yarmulkes, and conducting services in Hebrew.<sup>33</sup> Reform Jews are committed to the principle of inclusion, not exclusion. Since 1978 the Reform Movement has been reaching out to Jews-by-choice and interfaith families, encouraging them to embrace Judaism. Reform Jews consider

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<sup>29</sup> Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided*, xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 289.

<sup>31</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Wertheimer, *A People Divided*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> John Przbys, “Broad Approach” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 29, 1999.

children to be Jewish if they are the child of a Jewish father or mother, so long as the child is raised as a Jew. Even today, Reformed Judaism continues to adapt its teachings to an ever-changing culture. Reform Jews are committed to the absolute equality of women in all areas of Jewish life, and were the first movement to ordain women rabbis, invest women cantors and elect women presidents of synagogues.<sup>34</sup> They are far more liberal than their Orthodox counterparts, and an example of their growing liberalism is their support of gay rights and same-sex marriage.<sup>35</sup> Of crucial importance is the realization that these two groups, along with dissent from conservative Jews who tend to lean towards reformed but still disagree about teachings, present major challenges within the Judaic faith, especially as it concerns the developing and strengthening of a unified Jewish community.

Orthodox Judaism is the oldest traditional form, which originally required observance of the 613 *mitzvot* (duties and proscriptions identified in the Torah).<sup>36</sup> These laws truly regulate every aspect of Jewish life from maintaining a kosher kitchen to engaging in no work or travel on the Sabbath. A strong sense of community is vital to the Orthodox way of living. Without it, religious practice tends to wane. This has been true of the many Jews who have moved to Las Vegas in the last twenty years did not move out here for religious reasons, but for economic opportunity.<sup>37</sup> A strong, controlling rabbinic presence was something of an eastern institution that never took hold in the West. As a result, the Las Vegas Orthodox community continues to have an

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<sup>34</sup> Union for Reform Judaism, "What is Reform," <http://urj.org/about/reform>. (accessed June 28, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Rabbi Akselrad, Conversation.

<sup>36</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Marschall, xv.

affiliation rate of only seven percent, the lowest in the country.<sup>38</sup> Because of this, Orthodox leaders are trying desperately to strengthen bonds within the community by attempting to embrace more of Las Vegas' larger Jewish communities through joint festivals and yearly celebrations.

In response to the desire by Orthodox Jews to invigorate their religious community in Las Vegas, leaders established a Chabad center in 1990. Chabad is the organizational wing of Lubavitch Hasidism, an international movement designed simply to bring every known Jew back to full observance of traditional Judaism as taught by the Rabbi. Rabbi Harlig's initial job was to establish the city's first Chabad, an effort that proved to be initially divisive.<sup>39</sup> Rabbi Harlig's mere presence was disconcerting to some, as he walked through casinos sporting a long black beard, and traditional black Hasidic hat. For many Jews, he represented radical religious practices that drove them from their communities back home. However, even Rabbi Akselrad conceded that Rabbi Harlig and Chabad of Southern Nevada accomplished far more good for the community than bad.<sup>40</sup> Chabad developed three centers in Las Vegas: downtown, Henderson, and Summerlin. Harlig also assigned more rabbis to UNLV Hillel (Jewish student group) to teach more traditional doctrine and cut back on superfluous social activities that Orthodox Jews in the East might not have approved.

Indeed, adaptation to living in Las Vegas has always been an issue the Jewish population has dealt with from its very beginnings. Polish-born Louis and Kitty Weiner arrived in Las Vegas around 1930 and opened up a clothing store on Fremont Street. Their clientele consisted largely of men and women in the prostitution industry. This

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<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Akselrad, Conversation.

<sup>39</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 245.

<sup>40</sup> Rabbi Akslerad, Conversation.

intersection between religion and business is just one way that Jewish men and women adapted to survive in Las Vegas, but as the Weiner's granddaughter Valerie notes, "That's what put food on the table."<sup>41</sup> In a city without pre-existing community foundations, Jewish families resorted to any means necessary to provide for themselves and their families. Creating some semblance of a Jewish community proved harder for Orthodox Jews who tightly held to clearly designated traditions that prevented them from participating in Sin City's more lucrative businesses.

For the last twelve years, every Friday night in Las Vegas some fifty Orthodox families leave their homes to walk to synagogue for Sabbath services. For some, the walk is around the block, but for others it is three miles. Rabbi Harlig notes that Jews are not allowed to kindle a fire on the Sabbath, and since cars operate on internal combustion engines, burning gas and oil, to drive a car on the Sabbath would be a violation, as is using electricity.<sup>42</sup> Adherence to these rules seems somewhat radical, yet as Rabbi Harlig explains, "We push that it's not enough to be moral and ethical and help others. You also have to be a holy person; you have to follow the rituals to elevate yourself above the animal level. If you only do what's convenient, well now that's how animals live." Despite misgivings that the orthodox way of life was too rigorous and outdated, for many, the intensity of that spirituality was a benefit to those that adhered to its rules.

Take the case of the Knight family, which moved from Desert Shores to a house within walking distance of the Chabad of Southern Nevada. Raised in reformed households, Teri Knight and her husband Bruce sought a more traditional way to express their faith. Slowly, they started to adopt an Orthodox lifestyle by switching to kosher

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<sup>41</sup> Valerie Weiner, interviewed by John Marschall, Carson City, May 5, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Stacy Willis, "More in valley find comfort in Judaism" *Las Vegas Sun*, October 21, 1998.

foods, wearing proper attire, and observing the Sabbath. At that time, they even had to order all their food from Los Angeles, because Las Vegas had no kosher restaurants or grocery stores.<sup>43</sup> Keeping kosher in Las Vegas now is simple, but even ten years ago it was a different story. Although a difficult lifestyle to adapt to, Teri is thankful for deciding to become Orthodox in her beliefs, realizing that it “truly brings you closer to your family unit. You spend a lot more time at home. It gives you a different sense of quality of life.”

Because of its size, Las Vegas’ Jewish community focuses on catering to its own members rather than instituting various outreach programs to other communities, although Rabbi Akselrad has an affinity for 12-step programs and makes those classes available to Jewish and non-Jewish people alike. Lending further weight to the fact that the Jewish community is very self-concerned, Rabbi Harlig promotes another orthodox presence in the city, Young Israel, whose goal is to stem the tide of assimilation, which meant stopping the practice of marrying outside the faith. Speed dating and wine mixers are just two of the events sponsored by the group.

Another challenge facing the Jewish community is displacement. A large portion of Jewish people are retirees from other states. Usually with no familial ties in the area, Jewish senior citizens are immigrating to Las Vegas for the warm climate. Because of the lack of affiliation with the Jewish community, many retirees fail to join a temple and instead end up in the casinos. However, groups like the Jewish Federation of Las Vegas are instituting measures to combat this isolation. Besides various Jewish-sponsored senior and nursing centers spread throughout the valley, the Federation also utilizes its Las Vegas Senior Lifeline. Established in 2003, the program serves nearly 1,100 seniors

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<sup>43</sup> Jerry Hirsch, “It’s kosher to live in Las Vegas these days” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2003.



through a multi-faceted program of services which includes Kosher Meals on Wheels, prescription assistance, and transportation.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the two largest Reformed Jewish temples in Las Vegas, Temple Beth Sholom in Summerlin and Ner Tamid in Henderson frequently sponsor joint events such as a Yiddish cabaret night, as well as observing most of the Jewish holidays together, attempting somehow to reach out to their older members.<sup>45</sup>

### The Impact of Geography and Education on the Jewish Community

Throughout Jewish history it was customary to create a community fund to care for the people. In southern Nevada, the modern embodiment of that tradition is the United Jewish Community/Jewish Federation of Las Vegas and the Center for Philanthropy and Community Development. The Federation prides itself on being the cornerstone and main disseminator of a shared history, traditions, and common values. Its credo states, “We seek to assure Jewish continuity in Las Vegas, Israel, and around the world, by preserving, strengthening, and enhancing Jewish life and transmitting these values to future generations. We are committed to the goal of ‘More Jews...Doing Jewish.’”<sup>46</sup> The Federation over the last forty years has raised nearly 50 million dollars to support Jewish causes in Las Vegas, ranging from Jewish education to elderly care. Indeed, in 2009, the Jewish Federation committed \$250,000 to create Project EZRA, a program to assist those in need with a new beginning through skill development,

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<sup>44</sup> Jewish Federation of Las Vegas, *2009/2010 Directory to Jewish Life in Southern Nevada* (Las Vegas, 2009), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Akselrad, Conversation.

<sup>46</sup> Jewish Federation of Las Vegas, *2009/2010 Directory to Jewish Life in Southern Nevada* (Las Vegas, 2009), 6.

counseling, job placement and financial support.<sup>47</sup> It is of note that temples and synagogues are not the only outlets for the maintenance of the Judaic faith. Religious groups, like the Jews utilize federations and organized groups to also spread religious beliefs about community and philanthropy.

Perhaps more than any other group discussed in this thesis, the Jewish population in Las Vegas is notably concentrated in the northern and southern parts of town. The homogeneity of the ethnic makeup of Las Vegas Jews has led to a conscious effort at “clustering” in specific parts of town. This stands in contrast to most other religious groups that enjoy a wide breadth of ethnicities within their religion. According to Neil Popisch, Director of the Jewish Federation of Las Vegas, out of the roughly 80,000 Jews residing in Las Vegas, 75% live in Summerlin while the remaining 25% live in Henderson/Green Valley.<sup>48</sup> Over the past twenty years the majority of Jewish migrants to the area were retirees from the East, looking for warmer climates. The difficulty with this pattern is that older people lead to low affiliation rates at synagogues where most retired Jews are content to only be somewhat involved in the community. However, over the past few years, the trend of familial migration has steadily risen.<sup>49</sup> Because of this, Jewish families are less inclined to live in older areas of the city, and tend to live in the richer areas of town that can cater specifically to the needs of the religious community.<sup>50</sup>

Summerlin may indeed be a microcosm for the breadth of religious choices that abound in Las Vegas. Indeed, the city boasts the range of spiritual choices it has to offer. On the Summerlin website, one learns that Summerlin is home to “more houses of

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<sup>47</sup> Jewish Federation of Las Vegas, *2009/2010 Directory to Jewish Life in Southern Nevada* (Las Vegas, 2009), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Neil Popisch, Conversation by Author, Henderson, NV, April 19, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Neil Popisch, Conversation.

<sup>50</sup> Popisch Conversation.

worship than any other Las Vegas master-planned community. With nearly a dozen religious faiths represented by even more houses of worship, spiritual diversity is thriving in Summerlin.”<sup>51</sup> It is no mistake that community developers are catering to people of faith, such as Jewish families who are now migrating as familial units instead of isolated retirees. As previously mentioned, the rise in the Jewish population of Las Vegas has led to the establishment of businesses which directly cater to Jewish lifestyles. Large companies such as Albertson’s and Smith’s Food and Drug have “kosher marketplaces” in Henderson and Las Vegas, taking advantage of the growing number of Jewish consumers, even The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf now claims to be fully kosher at most of their Summerlin and Henderson stores.<sup>52</sup> In addition to these large retail outlets, numerous kosher restaurants now exist in Summerlin and Henderson where there were none roughly ten years ago.

While places of business that have a direct connection the Jewish faith are some of the more evident examples of the growing influence that Judaism has on its community, the rise of schools and colleges are another important aspect of community building and influence. Utilizing Szasz’s framework for religious communities in the West, one can see the incredible impact that Jews have in their community. Szasz argued that churches helped build some of the earliest western parochial schools (yeshivas as it applies to Jews), hospitals, and colleges, and in so doing, played a vital role in the development of a town and its community.<sup>53</sup> Admittedly, Szasz’ framework works best in western cities that have a large enough population to support a variety of faiths and

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<sup>51</sup> Summerlin 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, “Worship,” <http://www.summerlin.com/lifestyle> (accessed May 11, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Jewish Federation of Las Vegas, *2009/2010 Directory to Jewish Life in Southern Nevada* (Las Vegas, 2009), 28-29.

<sup>53</sup> Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West*, 18.

educational institutions. Las Vegas is a prime example of what Szasz believed religious groups could accomplish through the utilization of educational outreaches and institutions.

Touro University of Nevada, a Jewish-sponsored independent institution of higher learning and education, is one of many reactionary results of southern Nevada's response to a burgeoning Jewish population in Las Vegas. In July 2003, Touro University Nevada received institutional approval from the Nevada Commission on Postsecondary Education to grant doctorates in Osteopathic Medicine. Almost every year since, the college has added other post-graduate programs to its curriculum, and received full accreditation in 2007. The college has steadily grown since its founding from 78 students to over 1,500. Touro University, in keeping with its mission and relationship to its Jewish sponsorship, prides itself on its Judaic foundation, the values that it represents, and the enrichment of heritage that it brings to the community.<sup>54</sup> All university sponsored events must adhere to kosher structures, which has a great impact on the local businesses that take advantage of the 1,500 students frequenting their establishments.

This phenomenon is a prime example of the ripple effect that religious groups can have in their community. Touro University is the obvious and visible manifestation of a Jewish presence in Henderson, but if one looks at the multiple businesses it affects simply by its presence, a larger picture begins to take shape as to how far-reaching a religious presence can be in a designated area. As mentioned earlier, corporations like Smith's and The Coffee Bean tweak their food and menus to feature kosher items for large Jewish groups like Touro's students and faculty. Even Smith's, a Mormon-owned

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<sup>54</sup> Touro University Nevada. "About Touro University Nevada." <http://tun.touro.edu/about/> (accessed June 2, 2010).

food chain has kosher items for sale in its Summerlin and Henderson stores. The idea of kosher food and coffee bears a direct relationship to the existence of a large Jewish presence. Specifically built as an extension and representation of the Jewish community in Las Vegas, Touro University epitomizes infrastructural growth of a community through educational means. The city of Henderson had serious educational and medical needs that the college has helped to satisfy, while promoting Jewish culture at the same time.

In addition to Touro University, the Jewish community in Las Vegas is dedicated to a number of educational projects which range from the founding of libraries to the disbursement of books which all promote and inspire Jewish life in the home. There are numerous Day schools and Yeshiva schools for both Orthodox and Reformed Jewish children spread throughout the valley, but concentrated in Summerlin and Henderson. Many of the larger synagogues like Ner Tamid and Temple Beth Sholom have their own school to meet the needs of their large congregations. Sheldon and Miriam Adelson formed their own Educational Campus, which is the only pre-K through grade 12 Jewish Day school in Nevada and is a prime example of the commitment to education that some of the leading members of the Jewish community in Las Vegas possess. It should also be mentioned that Hillel, a Jewish college group, operates at UNLV, CSN, and the greater Las Vegas area to provide students with a wide array of programs and opportunities to explore their Jewish identity. In Las Vegas, it is beyond apparent that the Jewish community has thrived by concentrating themselves in specific geographic locations and then utilizing educational institutions, businesses, and organized groups to spread and develop their own traditions and cultures.

## Conclusion

The growth of the Jews in Las Vegas fits the mold of an adaptive and socializing force for early community-building in the West. Early adherents had to make do without key structures of their faith like synagogues, kosher restaurants, and community centers. Despite the absence of communal infrastructures like those in the East, Jews in Las Vegas carved out a niche for themselves through the coalescing of their faith into common goals, such as the building of Jewish community centers, schools, and stores that would serve the people. While an initially smaller population made it easier to be unified in purpose, Las Vegas' growing Jewish population brought on necessary changes and schism that would have a profound impact for the Jewish community today. Following in the footsteps of other western cities, Las Vegas exhibits a plurality of religious choice even within specific religious groupings.

In 1997 there were 18 Jewish congregations in Clark County, and at least half of them were started since 1990.<sup>55</sup> The 2009-2010 resource guide, distributed by the Jewish Federation of Las Vegas lists 19 synagogues in the area, leading one to think that the Jewish population may have slowed.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, the population increases of the last ten years are not even close to what they were in the 1990s, but the diversity of the Jewish community can be seen through these synagogues, which now include orthodox, reformed, conservative, kabbalah, and reconstructionist.<sup>57</sup> The Jewish community in Las Vegas exhibits the kinds of religious plurality that Ferenc Szasz noted as an indicator of

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<sup>55</sup> Joan Whitely, "The Place to Pray," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Sunday, May 11, 1997.

<sup>56</sup> Jewish Federation of Las Vegas, *2009/2010 Directory*, 45-47.

<sup>57</sup> Jewish Federation of Las Vegas, *2009/2010 Directory*, 45-47.

religion in western America. Because of that plurality, the construction of a single, all-encompassing narrative of religion in the West might prove difficult.<sup>58</sup>

The strides that the Jewish community has made in the last 20 years are undeniable, and this is evidenced in a multitude of areas. From the building of large places of worship, to the establishment of numerous kosher restaurants and businesses throughout the valley, to the formation of universities, day schools, yeshivas, and counseling centers, the Jewish presence in Las Vegas has steadily risen. While southern Nevada Jews might never achieve unanimity of common purpose, there is evidence of a renewed commitment to tradition and an acceptance of the overlapping of Jewish values.<sup>59</sup> The Jewish Federation of Las Vegas is one example of the coming together of different Judaic groups. The Federation provides direct support for outreaches such as Temple Beth Shalom's L'Dor V'Dor program for the elderly, while also maintaining support for its own (Reformed) Senior Lifeline outreach program. Indeed, at least once a year, all Jewish groups come together for "Las Vegas' Celebration of Israel's Independence Day" to promote Jewish heritage and traditions. These meetings are usually hosted by the Sheldon Adelson, but in recent years Steve Wynn has also donated money to these proceedings. Needless to say, the Jewish community in Las Vegas has made major strides in the recent past to form a more cohesive network for their people to utilize. Through education and outreach, Jews in Las Vegas increasingly have become a driving force in the greater Las Vegas community.

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<sup>58</sup> Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West*, xii.

<sup>59</sup> Marschall, *Jews in Nevada*, 289.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MORMONS IN LAS VEGAS

#### Introduction

The myth of a city can be so powerful that it almost overshadows actual reality. San Francisco, for example, has come to be known as a “homosexual mecca,” Paris prides itself on being the most romantic city in the world, Los Angeles is often mistaken for Hollywood, and Las Vegas gladly accepts its title as “Sin City.” Whether these monikers are true or even deserved matters little. Cities all over the world benefit from marketing themselves a certain way in order to attract business, and arguably, no other city on earth revels in that “myth of place” more than Las Vegas. While tourists typically view Las Vegas in terms of two or three days of frivolity, the reality is that Las Vegas possesses a strong and growing religious framework.

Representing ten to twelve percent of the total population, Mormonism is firmly entrenched in the Las Vegas community. In 1855, Mormons established an outpost in the valley to serve as a southern extension of their influence, and to convert local Native Americans to their teachings.<sup>1</sup> They envisioned a mission in Las Vegas as a way station between Utah and their new farm colony in San Bernardino, thereby ensuring safer travel between the two points. The Mormon fort was short lived, as Brigham Young called the settlers home after colonizing the area for a year, yet some families opted to stay in the area, continuing the work they started. Ironically, Las Vegas and a religious presence went together long before any casinos, resorts, or tourists arrived.

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<sup>1</sup>James W. Hulse, *The Silver State: Nevada's History Reinterpreted* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 62.



Adhering to principles handed down from Joseph Smith, Mormons aim for unity as a social value, a high ethical character as a religious value, and the elimination of poverty as an economic value.<sup>2</sup> These values set the agenda for Mormons to follow in the expression of both their religion as well as their outward commitment to civic duty and public philanthropy. A major component of the Mormon faith and one that is evident in Las Vegas just as much as anywhere else, is the duty to communally take care of people. Charitable giving turned into a communal responsibility, which would in turn express love for one's fellow man and hopefully win converts to the faith.<sup>3</sup> Early Mormon inhabitants in Las Vegas took this commitment to community so strongly that in some communities, businesses and undertakings welded into a general community cooperative, it was as if the community acted as a large family.<sup>4</sup> "The Mormons set the standard for what church should be in Las Vegas," said Yvonne Jacoby, a minister at the Greater Las Vegas Church of Christ. They are very family-oriented, and have a powerful voice in the greater Las Vegas community.<sup>5</sup>

One of the avenues through which Mormons strengthen their own base and win converts is through their organizational system. Indeed, historian Leonard Arrington noted the primary 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormon settlement pattern was built on cooperation. Each colonizer was to labor primarily for the good of the group, contributing his or her talents and intelligence to help the community survive. This pattern of settlement remains an important aspect of the Mormon faith to this day, and has led to the accumulation of much power and influence in present-day Las Vegas. It is imperative to

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 212-213.

<sup>3</sup> Wuthnow, *Saving America?*, 213.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Arrington, *The Mormons in Nevada* (Las Vegas: Las Vegas Sun Publishing, 1979), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Littlejohn, *The Real Las Vegas*, 169.

trace the early developments of Mormonism in Las Vegas and note whether this group fits in with certain model frameworks of religion in the West.

### Las Vegas' Mormons at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Mormons are historically recognized as the first white settlers to inhabit Las Vegas. The mission was intended not only to sell goods to travelers and provide some amount of protection, but also to convert the local Indians to the Mormon faith. Indeed, Mormon aspirations in the valley were ones of permanence, with little thought given to abandoning the project. However, for a variety of reasons, including a showdown with the U.S. government, the Mormons abandoned the fort in 1857. Nevertheless, their presence in the region remained noticeable. Some thirty years later, Mormon investors were hired to survey land for a future railway line to Los Angeles and came across gold in southern Nevada. This resulted in a new mining company and railroad that would bring people and goods to the area. Despite the abandonment of the fort, the great influence of the Mormon Church and people was demonstrated in the breaking of the wilderness and the preparation of land for the generations to follow, as well as blazing trails for commerce across northern and southern Nevada. The clearing of land and the building of a fort indicate the activities and energies of a united people properly utilized by the Church and its leaders.<sup>6</sup>

The ability to colonize the Las Vegas area and the speed in which they did so are due to certain guiding principles in the Church that are still pertinent for Mormons today. Early Mormons operated under a powerful system of theocracy, which made no

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<sup>6</sup> Leavitt, Francis A. "The Influence of the Mormon People in the Settlement of Clark County" M.A. thesis, University of Nevada, Reno, 1934.

distinction between religious and secular activity.<sup>7</sup> Compliance with the latter spawned from obedience to the former. Mormon members heeded the calls of their elders and pledged themselves to submit wholeheartedly to their designs and remain wherever they might be sent until the wisdom of their superiors thought it advisable to change. For early Mormon settlers, religion played a dominant role in every aspect of their life, a character trait that would have implications for the future of Las Vegas.

In contrast to the Jews who came to Las Vegas in noticeable groups, Mormons trickled down from areas in Utah and northern Nevada, so that by the turn of the century there was already a noticeable presence in Las Vegas. Indeed, Mormon strongholds like Panaca and Bunkerville fed some Mormons to Las Vegas. Ambitious newcomers such as C.C. Ronnow and Newell Leavitt started Clark Forwarding Co., a grocery and dry-goods business. Leavitt, in particular, recognized the absence of an ordered religious community, so he collected a list of Church members and began conducting services out of his home, and when his home could no longer handle the influx of people, the meetings were held in local dance halls.<sup>8</sup> Like early Jews in Las Vegas, the infrastructures of an established Mormon presence were slow to form, so adaptation to surroundings became necessary. This had far-reaching consequences as Mormons began to integrate into the up-and-coming Las Vegas. Their sober lifestyle still set them apart, but notions of individualism, speculation, and inequality became apparent in Mormon life

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the term *theocracy* refers to a government ruled by or subject to religious authority. When this thesis was written in 1934, a reference to Mormons as being a *theocratic* state may have been correct. However, the term theocracy as it is used today does not seem to fit. The term now is somewhat pejorative, and is used mainly in reference to oppressive regimes, such as Iran, as well as others.

<sup>8</sup> Kenric F. Ward, *Saints in Babylon: Mormons and Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library, 2002), 23.

as the Church became and would continue to be a staunch defender of fierce free enterprise in the area.<sup>9</sup>

Las Vegas' first chapel and first ward were built in 1925, and Ira J. Earl was named bishop. Membership stood at roughly 175 people, and the small meetinghouse was built with four classrooms to cater to the growing number of Mormon children. According to Marion Earl's lecture at a "First Ward" reunion in 1977, by 1930, Las Vegas' Mormon membership had grown to 410, with multiple businesses providing free services to the Church.<sup>10</sup> Earl, who started his own wood and coal yard, furnished goods free of charge to all the churches in town. By 1932, construction had begun on a large meetinghouse and recreation center, further promoting the Mormon community in Las Vegas, and as was the case, funds were raised from the congregants at the request of their elders. The price of this meetinghouse was to be \$38,000, a substantial fee given the national depression that was raging.<sup>11</sup> While Mormon members tithe 10% of their income to the Church, the funds raised for this meetinghouse exceeded minimum offerings. The organization and ability of the Mormons to raise the necessary funds speak to the organization and drive of the community in these years.<sup>12</sup>

Around this time, Mormon members began to make their presence felt in civic affairs. If Las Vegas Jews are notable for building many of the city's casinos, clubs, and resorts, Mormons were known for their political activism. Early Mormons like Clark County Commissioner Wendell Bunker, Justice of the Peace Marion Earl, and Las Vegas City Commissioner Reed Whipple all served the city while building up the local Mormon

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<sup>9</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Marion B. Earl, "The History of the Las Vegas First Ward" (lecture, Las Vegas First Ward Reunion, Las Vegas, NV, June 11, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 27-28.

Church. All three were successful businessmen who blurred the lines of civic and religious involvement.<sup>13</sup> Church growth during these years was steady, but it was not until 1954 that Las Vegas Mormons formed their own Stake.

Just as Hoover Dam's construction in the 1930s caused Las Vegas' population to dramatically rise, so too did the post-World War II migration. The Mormon Church grew right along with Las Vegas, forming its second ward in 1940, and counting roughly 800 members. By 1945, Las Vegas' population topped 30,000, and Mormons comprised 10 percent of that total. Just fifteen years earlier they were still meeting in dance halls and private homes, but all that changed as the Las Vegas Strip began to emerge in the early war years.<sup>14</sup> As was their custom, Church members not only paid for their chapels, but helped build them. The credo of communal involvement and self sacrifice continued to be a driving force so that by the mid-1950s, there was not a meetinghouse large enough to accommodate stakewide membership conferences. The Las Vegas Convention Center hosted these events for years after its debut in 1959. Las Vegas became an ideal place for Mormons seeking jobs and an urban lifestyle away from the traditional family farms that dominated Utah because the city hosted a vibrant community for the thousands of transplants who helped swell the valley's population throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, by 1979, Las Vegas was home to 35,000 Mormons, with meetinghouses emerging every few blocks.<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, the Mormon presence in Las Vegas is strong, and where one might think Mormonism and Las Vegas represent opposing forces, the two have actually melded together for the betterment of the city. Although faithful Mormons do not

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<sup>13</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 39.

gamble, as the church officially opposes the practice, the Mormon tradition of civic involvement and business acumen has helped establish the city as a tourist mecca.<sup>16</sup> Take for instance, the J.W. Marriott resort in Summerlin, which leases out its Rampart Casino to a non-Mormon firm. As former Las Vegas city manager and Clark County Director of Public Affairs, LDS-member Ashley Hall observes, “You can raise the question of ‘How can good Mormons be involved indirectly in gaming?’ But to us, business is business. Gaming is not illegal in Nevada.”<sup>17</sup> Banker Parry Thomas, whose wife is a direct descendant of Brigham Young, financed dozens of casinos through his Bank of Las Vegas (later Valley Bank), and at one time even owned the Riviera. When Thomas had to resolve the apparent conflict between his religious principles and his involvement in gambling, he said that as long as gaming was legal in Nevada, then as bankers, they could support any legal entity.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between Parry Thomas, a Mormon, and Jerry Mack, a Jew, perfectly illustrates the sense of cooperation found in the West that would never happen back east. Thomas and Mack had been business partners since 1955 when they purchased 80 acres of land on what was to become Sahara Avenue. Over the years they were a driving force behind much of the development of Las Vegas, and were instrumental in assembling enough land for today’s UNLV campus.<sup>19</sup> The two men were initially introduced through Jerry Mack’s father Nate, an influential Jewish businessman with strong community ties. The weak societal infrastructure of Las Vegas made this kind of cross-religious relationship possible. In an eastern locale with a strong Jewish

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<sup>16</sup> Stacy Willis, “Mormons knit LV’s Fabric” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 7, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Stacy Willis, “Mormons knit LV’s Fabric” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 7, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Stacy Willis, “Mormons knit LV’s Fabric” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 7, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Parry E. Thomas, *Quiet Kingmaker of Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2009), 58.

community this kind of business relationship would never work out.<sup>20</sup> However, in Las Vegas, Jews and Mormons worked together in the building of much of the city. As Berkeley Bunker, the first Mormon Nevadan to hold federal office noted, “Las Vegas has been very kind and good to the Mormon people. We have grown and thrived and lived as good neighbors to the Catholics, Jews and Protestants and all denominations without ever a rift.”<sup>21</sup> To be sure, religious communities in Las Vegas have been able to combine their efforts to promote Las Vegas’ development in ways that might not have been practical in eastern cities where strong traditions and regulations often made interaction between men of different religions difficult. Cooperation of Mormons and Jews in Las Vegas sets this geographic location apart from its eastern counterparts, while also making it a relatively unique city compared to others in the region. This type of community cooperation was much less likely to happen in areas like Los Angeles and Seattle, with strict community distinctions and barriers already in place.

The realities of the gaming and resort industries in Las Vegas allow for Jews and Mormons to operate mutually while attempting to sidestep any problems their faith might pose for their business. While it does not seem that Mormons sacrifice any of their theological beliefs to live and do business in Las Vegas, there is to some extent a *rationalization* used by those involved in the gaming industry.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the message of the Mormon Church rings true through the words of longtime dentist, former Mormon stake president, state senator, and university regent, Raymond Rawson, who

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Wiley & Robert Gottlieb, *Empires of the Sun: The Rise of the New American West* (New York: G.P Putnam’s Sons, 1982), 198-208. The relationship between Thomas and Mack is viewed positively, especially for all the work they did in procuring funds for UNLV’s expansion. However there are accounts, such as this one, that are critical of their business deals. The fact that an anti-Mormon view of Parry Thomas, who is himself a Mormon, shows the delicate line that many walk in Las Vegas when it comes to their spirituality and business initiatives.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> David Foote, Conversation.

asserts that, “Our emphasis on family is paramount. Many people who move to Las Vegas want to move to our neighborhoods because they see the value of our family emphasis. We are a tight-knit community.”<sup>23</sup>

### The Present-Day Mormon Community in Las Vegas

A brief conversation with Peter Christensen provided a glimpse into just how organized the Mormon Church is in Las Vegas and Southern Nevada.<sup>24</sup> Each year, the Church produces a booklet for all its members and for new converts, listing the temples in the area, as well as providing a large list of services, classes, businesses, and support groups that are all church related.<sup>25</sup> Every part of Las Vegas is divided into stakes and then subdivided into wards. Each ward is administered to by a bishop who is responsible for the general well-being and spiritual needs of the people living in his designated ward. In addition to the bishop, there is a first and second counselor, as well as an executive secretary and ward clerk that aid in the overseeing of the ward.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, this proficiency in being present and available within the community aids Mormons in keeping a strong support network for its constituents, as well as being inclusive for newly converted people. Regardless of where one might live in Las Vegas, there is an instant religious community there to provide assistance. Mr. Christensen also alluded to the fact that there are specific age groups that meet within each ward, so if someone is in the eighteen to thirty year old age range, there may be

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<sup>23</sup> Stacy Willis, “Mormons knit LV’s Fabric” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 7, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Christensen, interviewed by Author, Los Angeles, CA (via telephone), April 8, 2009. Mr. Christensen is President of the Nevada Las Vegas Mission, which includes: Anthem, Black Mountain, Central, East, El Dorado, Green Valley, Lake Mead, Logandale, North Las Vegas, Paradise, Sunrise, and Warm Springs.

<sup>25</sup> *The Guide for LDS in Southern Nevada: An Annual Directory for Latter-day Saints in the Greater Las Vegas Area, 2008.*

<sup>26</sup> Southern Nevada LDS Guide 2008, 38-39.



hundreds of fellow, same-aged Mormons within that ward offering friendship and support. To be sure, there is a definite strategy in placing people of similar ages and backgrounds together. The hope is that marriage will result in many of these encounters, thereby strengthening the Mormon base, and further impacting communities where there are multiple Mormon couples. Moreover, in response to the ethnic diversity of Las Vegas, there are now Spanish-speaking stakes and wards.

Besides providing organizational information, the LDS Guide provides Mormons with information about many members' businesses, ranging from legal advice, to roofing, to flowers, to orthodontists. All of this evidence speaks to the highly communal atmosphere that the Mormon Church promotes. Mormons truly do seek to take care of their own, yet seemingly not at the cost of converts. Church populations have steadily risen since 1990, and fluctuation in the stakes has been minimal over the last ten years.<sup>27</sup>

Mormon missionary efforts have long been recognized, and the efforts made in Las Vegas are no different. In 1975 the Las Vegas Mission was established in the hopes of converting larger population groups in the area. Ironically, roughly one hundred years after the founding of the Mormon Fort and the attempt at converting local natives, the goal of religious conversion remained a constant driving force. Since 2002, Las Vegas is home to two missions, and the city ranks among the highest in baptisms in the nation.<sup>28</sup>

Mormons are intent on communicating that they are no longer just a "Utah Church." The Book of Mormon is printed now in 105 languages, there are 126 operating temples, and the Mormon population has grown by hundred of thousands each year since

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<sup>27</sup> Southern Nevada LDS Guide 2008, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 42.

the 1980's.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the LDS Relief Society, a Mormon-founded welfare group is the largest women's organization in the world, numbering over five and a half million people in 170 countries. In North Las Vegas, the society operates outlets which distribute clothes and food to people in the community.<sup>30</sup> Initially, the group established storehouses where surplus produce and clothing could be collected and distributed to needy members, but now they provide material as well as spiritual relief to any community where they reside. Their motto, understandably, is "Charity Never Faileth."<sup>31</sup> The Mormon goal of conversion is one that is continually reinforced within the Church, however, the ability and intensity of conversion, like so many other facets of their faith, starts in the home by building a strong familial unit.

Although large in number, Mormons are still prone to many of the same temptations as any other religious group. Bishops especially recognize the challenges that living in Las Vegas present and realize those temptations upon their congregations more than the laity themselves might even know. Bishop Wesley Adams noted "If you raise them (children) here, and your children come out to be basically normal and good citizens, there's no place on earth that they can go that will be tempted any more than they're been tempted here. Those who can overcome the obstacles Las Vegas poses actually feel stronger for the experience."<sup>32</sup> Not above temptation, even Bishop Adams found that he fell into inactivity after he initially moved to Las Vegas. For roughly a year and a half, he frequented clubs and shows rather than pursuing his faith, and found that this spiritual malaise was consistent with other church leaders. The cultural distractions

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<sup>29</sup> Mr. Hansen, Conversation.

<sup>30</sup> Mr. Hansen, Conversation.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard Arrington, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 341.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop Wesley Adams, Conversation.

that Las Vegas provides are an easy trap to fall into, and church leaders are no less prone to them than others.

Living amongst numerous temptations, Bishop David Foote owns and operates a traditional wedding chapel that specializes in weddings of all faiths and denominations. Upon arriving at his chapel one cannot help but notice that it stands in the shadow of the Stratosphere casino, and shares a property line with an adult pornographic store. Arguably, Las Vegas is one of the few cities in the country where religion and vice collide yet survive next to each other. Despite dressing up as Elvis for weddings, Bishop Foote still refuses to perform commitment ceremonies for same sex couples, and will not perform non-Mormon marriages himself. Bishop Foote recognizes the importance of clinging to the Church's more conservative traditions as a way to ward off the temptations that living in Las Vegas offers.<sup>33</sup> However, temptation comes in all forms, and while Mormons may outwardly oppose gambling and certain other practices promoted by casinos, they also form strong business bonds, linking them with gaming and imparting responsibility for the growth of the casino industry in Las Vegas.

Providing a different interpretation of Sin City's temptations is Bruce Hansen.<sup>34</sup> When the Church asked Hansen to relocate to Las Vegas, he had immediate reservations about what that would mean for his wife and children. Like countless others, all he knew about Las Vegas was the Strip and the town's infamous reputation as "Sin City." Upon arriving, he found that not only was it easier to raise his family in Las Vegas, but that the extreme contrast in lifestyles between the Church and the Strip made it much easier to

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<sup>33</sup> Bishop David Foote, interviewed by Author, Las Vegas, NV, February 25, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Hansen, interviewed by Author, Las Vegas, NV, April 2, 2009. Mr. Hansen serves as an instructor at the LDS Institute of Religion, adjacent to the UNLV campus.

win converts to the faith.<sup>35</sup> In Las Vegas, the difference between sin and religion seemed so much more apparent, that it was easier to live a religious life. Obviously, the huge support network for the Hansen family was a major asset and made the transition much easier. As Bishop Adams mentioned, Mormons place such a high emphasis on the family that most assume if children are raised properly, it is no more likely they will stray in Las Vegas than they would in any other city. Gangs, immorality, and other rough elements exist everywhere, and it is the family's and community's responsibility to counter those influences.

For the past few years, Mr. Hansen has been the LDS Representative for the Las Vegas Interfaith Council, an organization made up of spiritual leaders from a multitude of faiths, who meet regularly to discuss such issues as unfair labor practices, safety measures for the community, and higher standards of living.<sup>36</sup> He has overseen seminars in Las Vegas and Reno, which have dealt with how various religious denominations can come together to strengthen neighborhood bonds while promoting an increased sense of community within the city. For Mormons, before promoting an increased sense of community can take place, the familial unit has to be strong. The strengthening of neighborhood bonds is a natural outgrowth of a strong familial bond, which Mormons basically demand of their congregants. An important way that Mormons emphasize the family is the "Family Home Meeting," which happens every Monday night. Regardless of scheduling, the family clears time to spend with each other in an attempt to strengthen family and religious ties. Mr. Hansen has tried to convince other religious groups to institute similar practices, and has achieved some success in that regard. In addition to

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<sup>35</sup> Mr. Hansen, Conversation.

<sup>36</sup> Mr. Hansen, Conversation.

the Interfaith Council, the Mormon Church also holds a yearly humanity service with Muslim groups in Las Vegas, again in the name of religious unity and community.<sup>37</sup> For Mr. Hansen, principles override location. His religious expression would be identical whether he was in Las Vegas or any other city in the world. However, he is quick to admit that the nature of the Strip and the geographic patterns of the wards present unique situations where religion and vice collide.

### Mormon Impact on Education and Business in Las Vegas

Certain religious groups in Las Vegas utilize their schools and colleges as more outward manifestations and extensions of their faith. Yeshivas for Jews and parochial schools for Catholics explicitly promote their specific faith, and everyone who chooses to attend these schools knows thy type of education they will receive. While Mormons in Las Vegas do not have an affiliated university or various high schools dotting the map, the schools they do have seem to be content with assuming a religious mantle, but not outwardly professing Mormonism. Nevertheless, Mormons through their educational endeavors still have satisfied what historian Ferenc Szasz has called that churches in the West do, that is, build early community infrastructures specifically through schools and education.

It is important to understand the differing educational strategies of certain religious groups in Las Vegas. Whereas Jews and Catholics have their own schools that teach specific religious doctrine, Mormon children and young adults attend a variety of schools but also attend their own LDS-affiliated seminars and institutes. Nevertheless, with an education system that is generally LDS-friendly, Mormons in Las Vegas strongly

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<sup>37</sup> Mr. Hansen, interview.

support local public schools. Actually, the relationship enjoyed between the Mormon seminary program and local high schools illustrates the influence of the Mormon Church on education in the area. When high school sites are designated, LDS leaders work to ensure that a chapel is nearby, usually within walking distance, and in at least one high school, Las Vegas Academy, Mormon students are permitted to attend seminary during the lunch hour.<sup>38</sup> It must also be noted that the Mormon Church is making a strong push for homeschooling. By 2002, roughly 100 families were homeschooling their children due to low test scores at local schools, and the rising proportion of immigrant students in the classroom. Cathy Jackson, a Mormon mother who now runs a homeschooling center for families in the neighborhood was most concerned with the moral and ethical issues presented in public schools. She claimed, “The public schools undermine our belief systems, and give humanist instruction.”<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, Jackson’s curriculum is full of scripture and Mormon Church doctrine. Many families, and especially mothers, like Mrs. Jackson see the growing tide of non-English speaking immigrants as an obstacle to the classroom, and do not want to feel like their children are getting “shortchanged.” academically. Therefore, the homeschooling network serves as a supplement to conventional school coursework.<sup>40</sup> The overwhelming support of the homeschooling network has led some Mormon families to push for the opening of a school to teach church-sponsored education.

American Heritage Academy stands out as one school in the Las Vegas region that could be considered primarily LDS-affiliated. While the school does not specifically claim to be LDS, it is a known fact that roughly 95% of the faculty, administration and

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<sup>38</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 111.

<sup>39</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 112-113.

<sup>40</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 112.

families who attend the school are indeed Mormon. American Heritage is a prime example of community growth around an educational institution. Started in 1995, American Heritage actually grew out of a home school system started by LDS families in the area. Kate Gentry, American Heritage's office manager noted that the school started with roughly 20 students and this fall will enroll nearly 200.<sup>41</sup> Mrs. Gentry also noted that there are families who attend the school that are not Mormon, yet they are in the minority. Rather than be expressly affiliated with the Mormon Church, American Heritage identifies more with the need to bring to light God's influence on American history. Their curriculum is not pro-Mormon as much as it is pro-religion in general. This is yet another example of Mormon willingness to be educated under a religious guise without the need for it to be Mormon education. They are content to use their seminary classes as a needed supplement to secular forms of education from both private and public schools.

In Nevada, LDS children, ages 14-18, attend Seminary every day before regular school hours. In these classes, they receive their religious education in a church-like environment.<sup>42</sup> The main goal of seminary is to provide LDS children with Mormon doctrine and scripture that will hopefully keep them socially involved in the Church through their high school and college years. Upon entering college, Mormons continue their church education through the use of Institutes of Religion. These institutes are located throughout the valley, with the main office on the UNLV campus. These institutes offer classes for students ages 18-30, and are specifically designed for

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<sup>41</sup> Kate Gentry, Interviewed by Author, Las Vegas, NV (via telephone), June 8, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Kent Haddock, Interviewed by Author, Las Vegas, NV (via telephone), June 8, 2010. Mr. Haddock works at the Henderson Institute of Religion, and advises Mr. Ron Strobelt, Director of the Institute, and overseer of American Heritage Academy.

Mormons college students to socialize, learn more about their faith, and potentially meet suitable marriage partners. These institutes are strategically used to strengthen the Mormon base in Las Vegas by enhancing the chances for Mormon unions. Interestingly, institute administrators do not shy away from the fact that eventual marriage is a main purpose of these groups. There are currently five institutes scattered through the region, each geographically located so that no one is more than a short drive away from at least one institute. Kent Haddock, an administrator at the Henderson institute also notes that a main purpose for these “schools” is to train Mormon men for their two year mission commitment by taking a class called “Mission Prep.”<sup>43</sup> From a young age, the Mormon educational system is there as an aid for young adults. It should be mentioned that there are adult religion classes that are offered locally under the direction of the BYU Church Education Adult Program. There are currently three classes offered for the valley: Green Valley Stake, Las Vegas Stake, and Sunrise Stake.<sup>44</sup> While LDS members typically do not attend their own specifically designated schools, the church provides a religious education similar to what might be found in the religious classes of a parochial high school or denominationally run college. Indeed, Mormon-run schooling serves as a “culture factory” where curriculum is controlled and Church values are taught.

The Mormon view of education stems directly from their religious systems of belief. Community involvement, volunteerism, and organization are all tenets of the Mormon faith and directly impact how Mormons think the educational system in Las Vegas should be run. District 28 Assemblyman, and former PTA president, Moises Denis notes the trouble that the educational system would be in if not for the volunteer

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<sup>43</sup> Kent Haddock, conversation.

<sup>44</sup> *LDS Guide in Southern Nevada*, April 2010, 6.



efforts of the Mormons. While not citing specific issues, Denis notes the importance of the Mormon spirit of volunteerism that drives much of the PTA and its organizations. The leadership in Clark County and statewide is dominated by LDS mothers. Denis, a Mormon himself, states, “Due to our Church callings, I think Mormons are better prepared to make an impact.”<sup>45</sup> Whether one agrees with that statement is irrelevant, because the impact of Mormons on the education system in Las Vegas is widespread and notable. Mormons bring a similar sense of intensity of purpose and organization to the business world as they do to education.

Perhaps the most visible way that religious groups affect and influence their communities is through the utilization of business practices that cater to and enhance the visibility, prestige, and wealth of the Church and its members. Indeed, the presence of businesses affiliated with the Mormon faith can have a direct bearing on many facets of the community, such as where Mormon families choose to live, send their children to school, and invest their own resources. Mormons have a long history of economic prosperity in the West. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, one of the most notable Mormon economic institutions, which linked church and business interests, was the commercial firm of ZCMI, Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution.<sup>46</sup> ZCMI, founded in 1868 became one of the country’s first department stores. Mormon businessmen formed the company because many of their individual stores were boycotted by those with misgivings about the Mormon faith and the influence it had in the region. These Mormon businessmen decided it was better to band together and dole out services and goods in bulk so as to achieve a higher profit margin. The Mormons also used ZCMI

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<sup>45</sup> Ward, *Saints in Babylon*, 115.

<sup>46</sup> Earl Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 254.

and boycotted Jewish, Catholic, and apostate Mormon stores circa 1880 in Salt Lake City.<sup>47</sup> This early Mormon business is worth mentioning because it is indicative of a certain mindset that Mormons carry to this day, a mindset that sees economics and religion linked together.

Indeed, Mormons offered a new spiritual mindset as well as new economic opportunities to potential converts. It is also important to note that over time, Mormons began to change their economic mindset from trying to separate from gentile life to realizing that they could thrive in a gentile world while remaining spiritually set apart.<sup>48</sup> As Pomeroy notes, Mormons “mingled in the gentile world,” but kept themselves busy with a variety of church-related activities so as not to have time for ungodly pursuits. To be sure, Mormons have an economic history in the West that is unique from other religious groups. For Mormons, economics was a vital agent in the building of new communities, especially for a people who also had to deal with a newly found religion. This trend started to appear especially after the death of Brigham Young in 1877, and is best exemplified by the founding of the Salt Lake City (SLC) Chamber of Commerce and Cooperative, formed with gentiles. Cooperatives and business associations were the norm for many Mormons in the mid-nineteenth century, and that trend continues to this day.

The *LDS Information Guide* as well as *Desert Saints Magazine* are two prime examples of where people can go for information about the LDS community, both from a business and personal perspective. The LDS Guide offers information on Mormon-run

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew Godfrey, *Religion, Politics, and Sugar :The Mormon Church, the Federal Government, and the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, 1907-1921*. (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>48</sup> J.K. Davies, “The Accommodation of Mormonism and Politico-Economic Reality,” *Dialogue* 3 (spring 1968), 48.

business that cover the entire spectrum. Mormon accountants, attorneys, counselors, landscapers, photographers, and swimming instructors can all be found in the Guide's business listings. Businesses like Cumorah Credit Union utilize these listings to drum up business from a primarily Mormon base. Naturally, Cumorah Credit Union does non-Mormon business, but with a name that references the geographic location where Joseph Smith found the Golden Tablets which he then translated into the Book of Mormon, it is obvious that they specifically cater to a Mormon clientele. Providing financial services that are directly linked to religion is one of the best ways to keep finances and influence centered in the church and the religious community, a practice in which Mormons are adept.

*Desert Saints* magazine, in addition to publishing their directory has also come together with other businesses in the area to form Mormon Business Associates, an LDS networking group for businesses in Southern Nevada and Southern Utah. The group helps build contacts within the LDS community from banking to home-based businesses, and has proved to be an excellent source for integrating LDS strategies in order to tap into those markets.<sup>49</sup> As of now, the site offers 40 business listings ranging from dance classes and voice lessons to banking and chiropractors. Mormon Business Associates is just one example of how motivated the Mormon laity is on strengthening itself through internal means. Another example of this mentality of religion and business being intertwined is Deseret Industries, a church-sponsored organization which provides work, training, and job placement to the unemployed or who are receiving Church welfare assistance. The group also provides clothing and household goods for bishops to

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<sup>49</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Mormon Business Associates. <http://mormonbusinessassociates.com/introduction> (accessed June3, 2010).

distribute in their own wards, as well as to Mormons around the world.<sup>50</sup> While Deseret Industries is a nonprofit group, it is still an example of Mormon commitment to welfare through economic and business-oriented means. The Mormon relationship with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) also melds religion and economics. Based in Irving, Texas, LDS membership in the group totals more than 400,000 boys. While the BSA is not directly linked to the Mormon Church, a heavy participation guarantees the influence of the Church within the organization.<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

Historian, J.K. Davies noted that Mormons were increasingly finding confidence in their ability to “challenge the ways of Babylon in Babylon itself.”<sup>52</sup> Perhaps because of the insinuation of Las Vegas as “Sin City,” the reference to Babylon is even more fitting in this instance. A statement made by Bruce Hansen resonates in the mind when trying to reconcile religion and Las Vegas. He reasons, “It is harder to notice the brilliance of a diamond when shown in a lighted area or with too much sun in the room. Nevertheless, a diamond set against a black background shines all the more brightly. The contrast is great.”<sup>53</sup> To be sure, Mormons have played a major role in Las Vegas’ development from its inception as a mission outpost to its global status today as a tourist capitol. Their contributions to the city’s economic growth cannot be underestimated. Mormon-run businesses such as the Marriott Hotels and Thomas and Mack’s Valley Bank were instrumental in creating much of the infrastructure of the city today.

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<sup>50</sup> *Desert Saints Information Guide*, April 2010, 7.

<sup>51</sup> The Boy Scouts of America. <http://lvacbsa.org/> (accessed July 14, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Earl Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 256.

<sup>53</sup> Mr. Hansen, conversation.

However, most Mormon businessmen, no matter how successful, will still insist that the cornerstone of their faith remains the commitment to family. It is a natural consequence that a religious group that emphasizes family will also exhibit a strong interest in community building. Not only have Mormons historically focused on the strengthening of communities through familial bonds, but also through economic enterprises. Perhaps this is where the LDS Church has been most successful in its ability to combine spiritual and economic forces in its attempt to create a tight-knit community that can aid many. While not as regionally clustered as the Jews, the Mormons have exerted a substantial influence upon Las Vegas as evidenced by their institutes of religion scattered throughout the valley, their business firms, their political influence, and their participation in civic affairs and the urbanization of Las Vegas.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

As historian David Wrobel has noted, “Regional identity is not permanent and unchanging; it is not an expression of attachment to a place that is fixed in time, however, when that myth is continually acted upon, it ends up becoming a very real and tangible force.”<sup>1</sup> For decades, Las Vegas has exploited its moniker “Sin City” and, whether deserved or not, this “maverick” image has proven to be an irresistible lure for generations of tourists from the rest of America. The image of Babylon in the desert is almost biblical, and conjures up certain other myths pervading the region, such as the West’s lack of religious diversity, issues of cooperation between religious groups, the socializing roles that religion plays in emerging urban areas, and the degree to which religion has to mold itself to thrive in a place such as Las Vegas. In an atmosphere already infused with a strong sense of religion, the brilliance of that expression does not stand out as much. Indeed, religious diversity is usually stifled in environments already structured around a particular spiritual mindset or dominant religion akin to old Puritan Massachusetts Bay theocracy in colonial times.

Religious expression has the chance to be dynamic in places that are not already deeply rooted in a particular belief. The abundance of sin, crime, and nihilism that Las Vegas fosters makes it a perfect environment for religion to not only be pervasive but necessary. People of faith in Nevada have never been monolithic; they are as diverse, if not more so, politically, socially, and spiritually as anywhere else in the country.

Members belonging to each group are Republicans, Democrats, gay, straight, wealthy,

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<sup>1</sup> David Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Las Vegas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 194.

and poor. A complete unanimity of thought and purpose will not suddenly appear, nor should people expect it. However, the religious spirit that so many Las Vegas residents adhere to can bridge certain gaps to work together for the larger community's benefit. This idea of religious cooperation is a marker of western religion, and makes Las Vegas somewhat distinct from cities in the East where religious groups like the Jews would never be involved in business dealings with Mormons. Thomas and Mack, most likely, would never have met or even started a business partnership so vital to the development of Las Vegas. There is much reason to believe that Jews and Mormons, as well as other groups, while distinguished by their religious heritage and tradition, can be united by their place of residence and their commitment to improving themselves, and their city through acts of compassion, empathy, and tolerance.

Religion in the West remains a subject in need of more research. As historian Philip Goff noted, the question was quickly becoming how to make sense of the many religious regions within the West. Goff acknowledges the contribution of Ferenc Szasz's urban-religious framework toward understanding the topic, but still believes there is much to be explored. Goff insists that, "The lived religion of millions of believers and practitioners cannot be captured in either the institutional or important individual stories Szasz pieces together-the natural result of a valiant attempt to bring order to chaos, to decipher the symphony in the midst of a cacophony."<sup>2</sup> However, one must question the extent to which Goff claims institutional or individual stories cannot properly portray religion in the West. To be sure, these are exactly the kinds of studies that must be done to fully understand the ways religion and religious groups have built and altered their surroundings. Obviously, a case study of religious groups like the Jews and Mormons is

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<sup>2</sup> Goff, *A Companion to the American West*, 295.

too large in scope to be fully treated in one thesis. But, using Szasz's framework, an individual case study of an eminent religious figure might serve the field even better. The study of a man like Moe Dalitz or Ira Earl can not only provide insights into their lives, but can speak volumes about the religious principles they adhered to, the way they conducted their business, their philanthropy, and their community-building efforts. Perhaps these findings would shed light on the realities of western religion far more than broad studies of whole religious groups.

A goal of this thesis was to focus narrowly enough to expose new areas of community building that religion has influenced, and vice versa. In Las Vegas, early Mormon and Jewish inhabitants created strong religious environments where there were none. Through coordinated efforts, they were able to build religious temples, community centers and meetinghouses. The creation of these structures, in turn, impacted the type of religious expression these groups now have in the valley. While the living out of the Jewish and Mormon faith is still possible in areas void of religious infrastructures, the mere existence of temples, community centers, and meetinghouses greatly impacted the ability of people to properly live out their faith in more visible ways that have much more ramifications for the community. In this way, the establishment of Jewish and Mormon communities impacts their own religions by promoting the group's visibility and possibly attracting more adherents. For instance, the congregation at Ner Tamid grew exponentially in the first few years after the temple was actually built rather than when they were a new off-shoot from Temple Beth Sholom without an actual meeting place. Additionally, the creation of Mormon Institutes of Religion in locales close to schools and colleges undoubtedly had an affect on gaining new adherents who now had a place to



attend, rather than just doctrine to believe in. This thesis has shown how the physical manifestation and creation of religious bastions in the community has just as much an impact on religion itself as does religion on the community.

Another important result of this thesis is the fact that an urban religious framework used as a model in the nineteenth century can still be utilized today. While some of the parameters of the framework need to be changed in order to fit into the idea of Las Vegas as an established metropolis, Szasz's framework can still be used in areas around the city which are still in infant stages of development. While Summerlin and Henderson were ideal examples for the building of religious infrastructures as a way of creating permanence and prestige in the latter half of the twentieth century, perhaps areas like Searchlight, Boulder City, and Pahrump might be areas of future study for the implementation of Szasz's framework. Indeed, while Szasz used his urban religious framework to categorize the West as a region, that same framework can now be used on the local level to show the possible uniqueness of towns in their developmental stages, and how different religious groups have played a part in the creation of those new locales. To be sure, this framework and this thesis have extended the notion that much synthesis is needed in order to understand the theme of religion in the West. Micro-studies, both pertaining to the institution and the individual, is what is needed in order to gain a fuller understanding of how religion and community building both affect each other.

Large surveys of religion in the West like Szasz's have provided us with valuable tools for understanding the important role that communities of faith play in a region's development. However, those sweeping, synthetic studies also obscure the diversity endemic to the American West. This thesis has borrowed a model—arguably the field's

best analytical tool—from one such survey and applies it to Las Vegas. In doing so, it finds that a model which was initially intended to support generalities about western history also has the power to highlight the particularities of place. We have seen here how religious groups contributed to the infrastructures of community in a way that seems to have differed little from other western cities, but we have also seen how the idiosyncrasies of Las Vegas promoted interfaith cooperation and intra-faith introspection in ways specific to Sin City. At the local level, then, such models are both confirmed and complicated, thus enriching our understanding of religion's role in this dynamic American region.

Jewish businessmen created much of the gaming industry that made the city famous, while Mormon leaders helped finance it, and, based on their doctrine of community involvement, became a political and civic force in the area. Like Szasz hypothesized, both groups used education and the city's educational system as extensions of their own religion, building day schools, religious institutions, and colleges as representations for their faith, while also creating a sense of permanence and cultural distinction for the city of Las Vegas. These groups' achievements did not occur overnight, nor were they easy. The geographic isolation of Las Vegas posed challenges for these religious groups, especially the Jews, who came from small, concentrated communities back East. Indeed, the Jewish community of Las Vegas had to import kosher food as well as High Holiday relics to be able to observe their own holidays. Historically, both groups have adapted to the seedier elements of Las Vegas while trying to remain culturally relevant, but at the same time, both groups, inspired by the religious values that comprise their identity, have worked cooperatively with each other and other

religions in the valley to transform the onetime desert whistlestop into a sprawling western metropolis.

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