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Nathan B. Oman

William & Mary Law School, nboman@wm.edu

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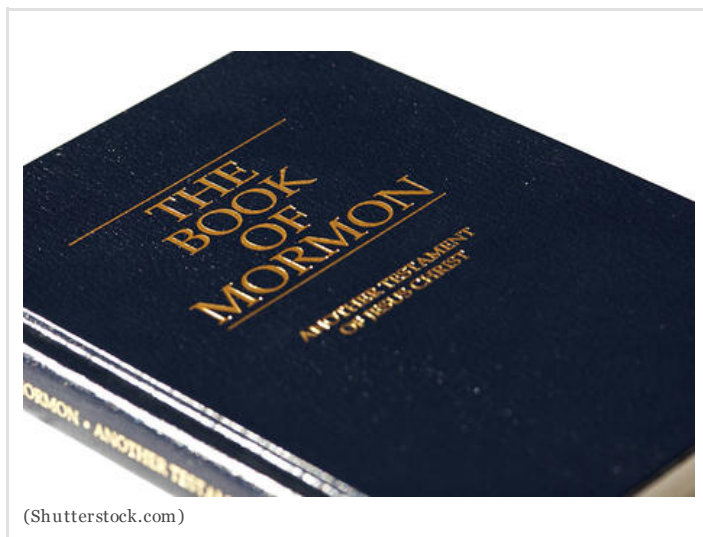
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Race, folklore and Mormon doctrine

By Nathan B. Oman

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By now the notion that we are in the midst of a Mormon moment is cliched, although if Rick Santorum continues to threaten Mitt Romney in the GOP primaries, the public focus on the Latter-day Saints could fade. For the time being, however, my religion is being examined in the public square like never before. It can be an uncomfortable experience.

Consider a recent [Washington Post article](#) on race and Mormonism. Before 1978, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints denied its priesthood, which is normally

extended to all adult males, to black men. In examining the legacy of that ban, the Post interviewed Randy Bott, a religion professor at church-owned Brigham Young University.

Professor Bott went on at great length to explain the pre-1978 ban. He cited the Bible, claiming that the descendants of Cain, who killed his brother, Abel, were black. He stated that "God has always been discriminatory" and compared blacks to a young child prematurely asking for the keys to her father's car. Likewise, some Latter-day Saints continue to repeat the idea that blacks were fence sitters in a pre-mortal war between God and Satan.

Unquestionably, many leaders and rank and file Mormons justified the ban before 1978 in these terms. Some of these ideas, like the Biblical mark of Cain, were an inheritance from the racist theologies of nineteenth-century American Protestantism. Others, like the claim that the spirits of blacks were lukewarm supporters of God before coming to earth, are unique to Mormon thought, although they lack support in Mormon scripture.

As a Latter-day Saint, I find such claims infuriating. It is one thing to explain as a matter of history what some Mormons may have thought in the past. It is a very different thing to offer the same ideas as good Mormon theology in the present. [They aren't.](#)

Prior to 1978, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, the LDS Church's second highest governing council, was the most vocal defender of this kind of racial theology.

Yet just months after the 1978 end of the ban, Elder McConkie told an audience at BYU, "Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young ... or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding."

Likewise, the current leadership of the church has spoken on the need to abandon the racist

teachings that long circulated within Mormonism regarding the ban. Elder Jeffery R. Holland, a current member of the Council of the Twelve, recently said in a public [interview](#) "One clear-cut position is that the folklore must never be perpetuated...I think almost all of (these teachings) were inadequate and/or wrong."

The resuscitation of this folklore by a religion professor at BYU is another public relations headache for Mitt Romney and a [church press department](#) that struggles to accurately present contemporary Mormonism. As a Latter-day Saint, however, I am less concerned by the current news cycle than with the spiritual cost of such teachings to my fellow Mormons.

The Mormon congregations in southeastern Virginia where I live have many black members. Some serve in the highest church leadership positions in our region. Some are struggling adolescents trying to live faithful lives within a permissive popular culture that is often hostile to their efforts. In the words of the New Testament, they are fellow citizens with the saints and part of the household of God.

They most emphatically are not remedial Mormons belonging to some race in need of special preparation before being worthy to become full Latter-day Saints. It is offensive, and spiritually dangerous to suggest otherwise.

Blessedly, the black Mormons I know are members of a church that has decisively abandoned its policy of racial exclusion. We are long past the day when any Latter-day Saint, especially one like Bott, who occupies a position of cultural influence in the community, should perpetuate a speculative and abandoned theology that supported racial exclusion.

The Mormon moment has focused on Mitt Romney. As it happens, however, he is not the only Mormon running for president. He may not even be the Mormon most likely to win in the general election. That prize could go to Yeah Samake, the successful mayor of Ouelesseboungou in Mali, who is running for president of that country. Like Romney, he is a graduate of BYU. Like Romney, he holds the priesthood within Mormonism's lay clergy. Unlike Romney, he is black.

Nathan B. Oman is an associate professor of law at The College of William & Mary in Virginia.
