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As the 2015 Parliament of the World’s Religions has just occurred in Salt Lake City, there seems no better time to reflect on Reid L. Neilson’s Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Neilson tells the story of the Mormon Church’s public relations from 1830 until the present day through the pinnacle event of the Chicago World’s Fair and the adjoining World’s Parliament of Religions.

The Parliament took place in Chicago three years after LDS President Woodruff Wilson’s revelation and Manifesto that led to the end of polygamy in the Mormon Church. Neilson writes about polygamy as the issue that created the most controversy for Mormons and about Mormons, whether they were practicing plural marriage or not, and prevented the acceptance of Mormons at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1893. Thus began the Mormon Church’s active stance towards public relations and investment in self-representation.

Exhibiting Mormonism also joins a growing body scholarship and exhibits on that tradition’s use of public relations. Richard Lyman Bushman has talked about the LDS Church’s new paradigm that emphasizes transparency for the twenty-first century. The LDS Church published two essays, “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” and “The Manifesto and the End of Plural Marriage on Church website, lds.org, in 2014. According to Bushman, the church has recognized that, with information about its polygamous past readily available to the public, the Church will be in a better position, with regards to public relations, if they adopt an attitude of transparency.

Neilson served as Managing Director of the Church History Department and now as Assistant Church Historian and Recorder. Under Neilson’s management, the Church History Department curated and made available The Joseph Smith Papers, which detail Smith’s polygamy. Mere weeks before the 2015 Parliament of the World’s Religions, the LDS Church renovated and
re-opened its Church History Museum, just one block north of the Salt Palace Convention Center, where approximately ten thousand people gathered for the Parliament. Changes to the Church History Museum include the addition of a stand-alone multimedia exhibit on nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy. The exhibit is titled “A Test of Faith: The Saints and Plural Marriage,” and includes quotes from seven plural wives and two polygamist men. The selected quotes reveal great faith in God, “a firm desire to keep the commandments of the Lord” in the face of a challenge, or “troublous times”, in Eliza Maria Partridge’s words, a plural wife of Joseph Smith and one of the subjects of Todd Compton’s *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997). Within the exhibit, plural marriage is described as “an Abrahamic trial of faith.”

In *Exhibiting Mormonism*, Neilson demonstrates how the Chicago World’s Fair was a turning point for Mormons as they picked up the new project of re-making themselves for the public. Neilson writes, “While a great deal of ink has been spilt to document the popular representations of Mormonism during the ante- and postbellum periods, much less has been written on how the Latter-day Saints themselves were participants in the construction and contestation of their own image in America” (6). Participation in the Chicago World’s Fair “became the catalyst of Mormonism’s emerging transformation from a nineteenth-century missionary-minded people to a twentieth-century evangelistic and public relations juggernaut” (7). Neilson tracks Mormons’ continued involvement in expositions after the Chicago World’s Fair (San Francisco, Omaha, St. Louis, Portland, Jamestown, Seattle, and San Diego, 1894–1915) (8), supporting the view of the Chicago World’s Fair as a turning point.

In the chapter, “Mormon Matriarchs,” Nielsen addresses the welcoming of LDS women at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, in contrast with their male counterparts: “It seems that most Americans viewed Latter-day Saint women as hapless victims of polygamy, while they believed Mormon men to be the lascivious perpetrators of the alternative marriage system” (76). Andrea Radke-Moss has continued Neilson’s work in the exhibition format, focusing on Emily S. Richards (“Mormonism at the World’s Parliament of Religions of 1893: Making Historical and Contemporary Connections” (with Konden R. Smith and John Sillito), Parliament of the World’s Religions, Salt Lake City, October 15–19, 2015, and “Mormon Monogamy and the Gendered Politics of Women’s Suffrage, 1885-1896,” Annual Meeting of Pacific Northwest American Academy of Religion and Society for Biblical Literature (Marylhurst, Oregon, March 27–29, 2015).

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In addition to work of interest to IJSNR readers, *Exhibiting Mormonism* contributes to the study of American religion. Reid Neilson, addresses the Church’s struggle for recognition and understanding in its own country of origin. Prior to the Chicago World’s Fair, Mormonism, with Catholicism and Masonry, was perceived as a threat to the Protestant American project “in the Age of Jackson” (Grow, in Neilson, 5). Neilson summarizes, “Americans living in the Age of Jackson believed that the trio [of Mormonism, Catholicism, and Masonry] threatened their national ideals, including republicanism and morality” (5).

Mormon activities cast as *un-American* included bloc voting and the inclusion (or “reliance,” in Neilson’s words) of immigrants in the perpetuation of Mormonism (6). Neilson gives the examples of how Mormons affirmed their American-ness, recasting the image of their principles as: *Restoration* versus flawed Reformation, *polygamy* versus unfaithful monogamy, *theocracy* versus majority-rule democracy, and *cooperation* versus unbridled individualism (6). As Neilson demonstrates, The Chicago World’s Fair was a turning point for the Mormon Church in taking control (as much as it was able) of its image, an activity that continues to the present day.

Neilson also discusses the outcome of the Chicago World’s Fair and new public relations activities: “Official church involvement in these cultural celebrations also caused many Americans to readjust their views on Mormonism and its believers. No longer did they routinely mock the Latter-day Saints. Some Americans began to actually admire certain aspects of the church and its adherents, particularly its Mormon Tabernacle Choir and its ongoing contributions to the colonization and growth of the American West” (8).

Reid L. Neilson builds on Lawrence Moore’s *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (1987) in that, emerging in North America, early Mormons still had to convince others and themselves that they were indeed American. Neilson’s findings relate with Paul Reeve’s *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (2015), the subject of a University of Utah Marriott Library special exhibit (September-October, 2015), a history of the racialized, polygamy-focused narratives and representations non-Mormons created to tell the story of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Exhibiting Mormonism* contributes as well to a meeting of performance studies and Mormon studies. I look forward to seeing the saga continue now that Salt Lake City, the heart of Mormondom, has hosted the Parliament of the World’s Religions.

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