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Creating a Feminist Religious Counterpublic: RLDS Feminists and Women's Ordination Advocacy in America, 1970–1985

David Howlett and Nancy Ross

“Sometimes I almost cry at ordination services,” wrote Carolyn Raiser in a 1972 editorial. “I look around the congregation at some of my sisters who have performed all kinds of family ministry and individual counseling, who have deep understandings of Christ’s example of loving service, whose lives testify of loving service. Yet these sisters, because they are women, cannot officially serve in a church which would not exist except for their loving efforts.” Raiser was not alone in making this critique. Over the course of the 1970s, feminists in her denomination created grassroots organizations to combat what Raiser termed “the patriarchal legacy of our culture” that permeated their local congregations.¹ Yet Raiser and her fellow feminists did not belong to one of the many mainline Protestant denominations that were having feminist awakenings in this era. Instead, Raiser and her fellow feminists were part of a Midwestern American Mormon denomination, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS). In the 1970s and early 1980s, RLDS feminists produced an efflorescent religious feminism in their church, particularly around the contentious issue of women’s ordination.

In this essay, we pose a model for understanding this development—counterpublics—and explore how it applies more generally to religious feminists in America during the 1970s.² Counterpublics, among other things, are spheres for social relations constituted by stranger sensibility, the circulation of texts, and egalitarian aims. Crucially, they also offer a critique of dominant publics and provide new language and practices for being public. In what follows, we offer a fuller excursus into the theory of counterpublics, showing how feminist and queer theorists have

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revised earlier theories of publics. Then we narrate the history of 1970s RLDS feminist activism, particularly around women's ordination advocacy. Drawing upon oral history interviews and archival sources, we document how RLDS women created independent publications, grassroots consciousness-raising groups, feminist classes and conferences, political advocacy efforts, and Women-Church-inspired worship to reimagine priesthood within their church. While ordination per se was never advocated by all RLDS feminists (indeed, some had great reservations about any form of authority that might reinscribe patriarchy), all RLDS feminists engaged in conversations about women's exclusion from the RLDS priesthood. We show how counterpublic theory provides explanatory power for linking together direct action events, social movement organizations (SMOs), activist networks, circulating feminist texts, and advocacy for and ambivalence about women's ordination. In doing so, we also consider how social network theory and social movement theory helpfully frames these same elements of RLDS feminism, too.³ Finally, we suggest how a theory of counterpublics illuminates the issue of women's ordination across a broad range of religious groups during the 1970s, focusing particularly on the potential of counterpublic theory to integrate theories of networks and theories of social movements previously used by scholars to understand feminist advocacy for women's ordination in America. First, though, we provide some brief background contextualization of the RLDS Church and, in particular, consider the history of women's ordination advocacy in the RLDS Church before the 1970s, situating this advocacy within a larger history of women's ordination in America.

Women's Authority in the RLDS Church before 1970

In the second half of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, Christian churches, and especially Protestant ones, discussed and implemented expanded roles for women. In doing so, women became missionaries, ran local societies to raise money for congregations, and worked for broader social reform.⁴ These roles created new leadership opportunities for women. Claiming inspiration from the Holy Spirit, some Wesleyan and Holiness churches even ordained women from their founding and many other denominations discussed the possibility of licensing women to preach and of ordaining them.⁵ Emma Smith, first wife of Latter Day Saint founder Joseph Smith, was called to "expound the scriptures" and "exhort the church" in a Latter Day Saint revelation given by her

husband in 1830. Feminist scholar Margaret Toscano argues that Emma Smith was in fact ordained in 1842 and 1843. If so, Smith's ordinations came two decades after the first woman ordained in an American denomination, Clarissa Danforth of the Freewill Baptist Church (1815), and decades before the denominational recognitions of Universalist Olympia Brown (1863) and Unitarian Antoinette Brown Blackwell's (1878) ordinations, the women traditionally ascribed as the "first women" ordained in America.⁶

In the midst of cultural churn over women's roles in organized religion, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or RLDS Church (now called Community of Christ), came into being. Formed in the aftermath of Mormon founder Joseph Smith Jr.'s assassination, the RLDS Church initially claimed that it was Smith's original church. A tenth of the size of the church in Utah led by Brigham Young (commonly known as the LDS Church), the RLDS Church was led for fifty years by Joseph Smith III and counted Emma Smith as one of its faithful members. Young and Smith III's churches were ecclesiastical rivals, despite some of the patent similarities between the two groups. Both the LDS and RLDS churches viewed Joseph Smith Jr.'s "translations" and revelations—the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants—as scripture, and possessed similar ecclesiastical structures and some rituals that made Mormonism unique among other American-based churches. Yet over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, RLDS better conformed to larger American expectations for what a church in a democracy should look like. From its very inception, the RLDS Church rejected the practice of polygamy and theocracy and, in doing so, avoided most of the conflicts with the larger US government faced by the LDS Church in the middle and late nineteenth century.⁷ RLDS even pursued limited ecumenical engagement, sending representatives to the Protestant-dominated World's Parliament of Religions (1893) and applying for membership in the Federal Council of Churches in 1908 (and being rejected out of hand).⁸ Thus, even in the early twentieth century, RLDS, despite their exclusivist sacerdotal claims, attempted to productively engage with liberal-leaning Protestant denominations and created sharp lines of difference between themselves and their LDS cousins.

In the late nineteenth century, charismatic trends in certain American denominations that emphasized spiritual gifts greatly influenced the RLDS church and the piety of its members, even as the charismatic tradition receded within the LDS Church in Utah.⁹ This had practical consequences for women's ordination questions. For example, in breaking with RLDS church tradition, D. S. Mills, a high priest in the RLDS Pacific Slope Mission of California, was

moved by the “by the power of the Holy Spirit” to ordain Emma Burton in 1890.¹⁰ When Bishop E. L. Kelley asked Mills for an explanation, Mills wrote, “What I have said and done in that matter was by the power of the Holy Spirit and I can’t go back on that.”¹¹ An RLDS elder in Colorado who had witnessed this ordination, Thomas W. Smith, responded to this incident in the denominational newspaper *The Saints’ Herald* later that year, indicating that women could not hold priesthood office.¹² In turn, an elderly woman who had lived in Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo, E. G. Hodge, strenuously objected to Smith’s conclusions, and her rebuff was published by *The Saints’ Herald* editors in a subsequent issue.¹³

Amid the publicity surrounding the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted voting rights to white women, writers for *The Saints’ Herald* discussed ongoing ordination debates in other denominations. For example, editor Samuel A. Burgess reflected on the conversation in the Presbyterian Church and observed that RLDS scripture did not prohibit women from ministry, though formal changes in church policy would be needed in order to ordain women.¹⁴ In the 1930s, RLDS president Frederick M. Smith engaged in public conversations about the possibility of an “Order of Dorcas,” similar to the Protestant deaconess movement, though the order was never created. In private, Smith discussed the issue of full women’s ordination with a younger church leader, Garland Tickemyer, indicating that it would happen one day.¹⁵ After this, the issue of women’s ordination, and women’s ordination advocacy, lay largely dormant within the RLDS Church for the next thirty years. Its reemergence went hand in hand with the creation of what we term a *feminist religious counterpublic*.

Publics and Counterpublics

Theories of publics and counterpublics offer a helpful analytic lens for understanding RLDS women’s ordination advocacy and religious feminism more generally in 1970s America. In particular, publics/counterpublics theories afford a language to describe the webs of connection formed between people addressed both as strangers and particular individuals in circulating texts. Queer theorist Michael Warner and feminist scholar Elizabeth Pritchard, drawing upon theories of publics/counterpublics first advanced by Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser, have theorized about publics/counterpublics and applied these theories to religious bodies, too.¹⁶ A brief excursus into public/counterpublic theory, then, reveals its generative possibility for our own topic.

In the 1960s, philosopher Jürgen Habermas first theorized about a *public sphere* that he claimed had emerged in the coffee houses and print media of Enlightenment Europe.¹⁷ According to Habermas, the public sphere was a new social structure constituted by a relation among strangers who saw themselves as addressing each other in discourse and transcending specific identities (race, class, gender, etc.). This made it possible to talk about *public opinion* and generated democratic possibilities.¹⁸ Later theorists critiqued this Habermasian valorization of the public sphere. Such theorists, like Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Elizabeth Pritchard, noted that Habermas's public was not *the* public but simply *a* public. Habermas's public favored people with status, i.e. white, bourgeoisie men. Other publics existed, note these critics, and some (but not all) function as *counterpublics*. Pritchard describes a counterpublic as a discursive community that makes public the identities and issues that Habermas's public insisted should remain private.¹⁹ Counterpublics hold egalitarian goals, "thematize inequalities," and center the experiences of women, the working class, or Black men, among others. In other words, they highlight identities that Habermas's public dismissed out of hand as being too particular and incapable of engaging in rational (disinterested) discourse.²⁰ Counterpublics, then, exist in tension with dominant publics, a relation defined by the counterpublic's particularity and refusal to be disembodied.

Like all discourse publics, counterpublics are self-organizing and engage in the production and dissemination of texts in all their varied forms. Nancy Fraser famously provides a concrete example of what this looks like in culture by describing, if just in passing, "the late-twentieth century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places."²¹ In this counterpublic sphere, 1970s U.S. feminists created a new language "for describing social reality . . . [and] recast [ing] our needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating, the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres."²² Furthermore, counterpublics function as "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment . . . [and] bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics."²³ Thus counterpublics may have transformational effects on dominant publics.

In a friendly amendment to Fraser's formulation, Michael Warner has argued that a counterpublic is more than just "subalterns with a reform program." A counterpublic also "maintains . . . an

awareness of its subordinate status."²⁴ A counterpublic furthermore marks itself off "not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media."²⁵ Drawing sharper distinctions than some theorists, Warner also argues that a counterpublic, as well as any public, "organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church."²⁶ This is neither to say that anything "religious" nor a group associated with a "church" is disqualified from being a counterpublic. Warner himself uses nineteenth-century evangelical preaching and the "Black Evangelical Atlantic" as key examples of counterpublics.²⁷

We find Fraser, Warner, and Pritchard's formulation of a counterpublic/public an exceptionally helpful lens to understand RLDS feminists in the 1970s, especially in regard to their agitation for decision-making power, their public claims of inequalities in the church and society, and their refusal to disown their particularity as women. Such RLDS women were conscious of their subaltern status, sought new language and practices to live out their reformist vision, and, as we will argue, were formed by a much larger social imaginary in the 1970s. These points perhaps are best illustrated by RLDS feminists' multipronged advocacy for (and ambivalence about) women's ordination.

RLDS Feminists and Women's Ordination Advocacy in the 1970s and 1980s

RLDS women faced structural inequities that were both particular to their church and broadly relatable by other American women locked out of pulpit ministry and many career opportunities in denominational institutions. Like many American churches, the RLDS Church in 1970, then numbering some two hundred thousand members, had gendered spheres of ecclesiastical authority. For instance, the church possessed a complex, multitiered priesthood with offices that ranged from deacon to president of the denomination. Unlike most American denominations, most members of the RLDS priesthood at the congregational level lacked any theological training and were unpaid. Church administrators and denominational leaders, though, worked full time for the denomination, and many had attended mainline Protestant seminaries and earned graduate degrees, part and parcel of the church's rapid liberalization after World War II. All of these ordained leaders, paid and unpaid, were men. In contrast, women

could serve as Sunday school instructors or women's leaders in local congregations. A few women worked at the denomination's headquarters as librarians, magazine editors, curriculum writers, and archivists, as well as in the more typical role of secretary. An official church policy dating from 1905, though, iterated that women could not be ordained, and many of the church's full-time and best-paid administrative roles required priesthood. Thus priesthood delimited women's roles in their congregations and in the denomination's bureaucracy, making it a decidedly patriarchal apparatus within the RLDS church. A small cadre of feminists sought to change this, and, even more boldly, change the nature of religious leadership in the denomination.

By the early 1970s, groups of RLDS women across the primarily Anglophone church began to claim the term *feminist* for themselves and identify with the larger "women's liberation movement." In the words of one early activist, Carolyn Raiser, RLDS feminists understood women's liberation within their tradition in terms of a "move away from the authoritarian structure which stifles and strives to rule like a heavy-handed parent and a move toward a freeing structure which encourages people to participate on the basis of talents, abilities, and desires."²⁸ Raiser published these lines in a new independent, leftist RLDS journal, *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action*. She was not alone in doing so. RLDS feminists in print and in small groups began to question women's exclusion from the RLDS priesthood, as well as critiqued the less-than-egalitarian nature of priesthood itself.²⁹ By the mid-1970s, a few liberal RLDS male leaders at the church headquarters in Independence, Missouri, placed a group of emerging RLDS feminists in contact with feminist theologians at the nearby Methodist-affiliated St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri.³⁰ With these connections, RLDS feminists began to read academic theologians like Letty Russell, Judith Plaskow, and Rosemary Radford Ruether and share lists of feminist theological works with each other.³¹ Furthermore, a few RLDS women, like the future feminist theologian and Harvard Divinity School professor Sharon Patton Welch and the future feminist theologian and Candler School of Theology professor Helen Pearson Smith, began to attend mainline Protestant seminaries, thus widening the reach of 1970s feminist theology on RLDS women.³² In sum, as a counterpublic is constituted by a circulation of texts, addressed to particular, embodied individuals and held together by stranger sensibility, RLDS feminists produced such a structure in their church by drawing upon preexisting networks and relationships.

From a very early stage, RLDS feminists distinguished themselves from their LDS feminist cousins; RLDS feminists read feminist theology. LDS feminists, the best known of whom started a publication in Boston during the 1970s, the *Exponent II*, more frequently referenced nineteenth-century Mormon women writers and secular feminists than contemporary ecumenical feminist theologians or biblical interpreters.³³ In doing so, LDS feminists did not have to challenge exclusivist doctrines in their church and its avoidance of ecumenicism. RLDS feminists, in contrast, were part of a more general liberalizing movement in their church that had been challenging exclusivist doctrines and embracing ecumenicism for the past few decades.³⁴ Furthermore, in a church with key (male) denominational leaders who had attended mainline Protestant seminaries, RLDS feminists had fewer limitations on what they could read, quote, and synthesize and still be seen as part of the (liberal) tradition of their church. In short, RLDS feminists could (and did) read both Betty Friedan and Rosemary Radford Ruether.³⁵

Feminist ferment in the RLDS Church culminated in the formation of several grassroots advocacy groups. The most notable and most enduring of these groups was started not by church leaders but by two women in their early twenties, Mary Lou (now Marilu) Goodyear and Joanie Shoemaker. Both had been students at the RLDS-affiliated Graceland College in the early 1970s and had become friends through shared feminist interests. Shoemaker, an out lesbian, and Goodyear, the daughter of two church employees, attended a feminist consciousness raising group on campus organized by some feminist faculty members, the Lamoni Women's Liberation Group. Goodyear and Shoemaker took this experience and sought to expand upon it with a larger RLDS feminist organization.³⁶ In 1975, Goodyear and Shoemaker sent invitations to thirty-five RLDS women from Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, and Colorado to meet at the Missouri home of Goodyear's parents and start a broad-based feminist advocacy organization they called "the Group without a Name," a title redolent with associations of Betty Friedan's feminist classic *The Problem That Has No Name*.³⁷ At their first meeting, the "Group without a Name" discussed a draft of an open letter written by group members to the RLDS Church's "Joint High Council," an ecclesiastical quorum composed of the church's highest leaders. In their opening paragraph, the collective authors wrote:

This letter is written on behalf of all the women in the church who, by virtue of their sex, have been indiscriminately omitted [*sic*] from full participation within the church

structure. We write, not to ask that another study committee, minor appointment, or token slot be filled by one of the many qualified women church members, but that a true revision in structure take place so that no one who is recognized as qualified and willing to perform tasks be overlooked for a biological reason. We call the church into accountability for its stance on the personhood of all souls. God has always desired to work with an individual in *any* manner in which that person is willing and potentially qualified. If the church is truly to become a representative world council, it must not countenance a hierarchy which is exclusively white, male and middle class. In order to truly become a community of believers, women, non-white, poor and rich must be allowed to function in *ALL* phases of church life: pastoral care positions, outreach-growth functions, positions of authority, etc.³⁸

Thus, in their very first meeting, the Group without a Name began to discuss how deep structural changes might be effected within their denomination.

In April 1976, the Group without a Name began calling itself the RLDS Women's Caucus. This followed a common tradition in the 1970s whereby marginalized groups in American denominations began to meet in affinity groups for collective power and action, often calling themselves "caucuses" after political caucuses.³⁹ The RLDS Women's Caucus had met three times by April 1976, including a meeting that coincided with the RLDS World Conference in Independence, Missouri. At that meeting, RLDS feminists from across the United States planned to start affiliate organizations in California, Oregon, Washington, Iowa, Kansas, Florida, and Colorado.⁴⁰ Most of the affiliated chapters across the United States did not materialize in the coming years, and the RLDS Women's Caucus shifted its focus to become a local feminist consciousness-raising group composed of women in the Kansas City area, the metropolitan area with the greatest number of RLDS members in the United States. Nevertheless, during the RLDS Church's biennial World Conferences, the RLDS Women's Caucus would greatly expand in size as it held events at which conference delegates from across the world were invited to attend.

For example, at the 1976 RLDS World Conference, the group asked RLDS officials to announce their group's after-hours gathering, off-site from the conference. This was not an unusual request, as various groups, from ham-radio enthusiasts to medical professionals, held interest group meetings concurrent with the conference, and RLDS officials publicized such events. However, church officials

refused to do so with the Women's Caucus event, perhaps fearing the reaction of conservative delegates who might (and later did) form their own counter events, too. Nonetheless, the Women's Caucus found their own means to publicize their meeting and recruit participants. Women's Caucus members printed fliers on hot-pink paper, emblazoned with the symbols of the UN's Decade of Women (1976–1985), and giving the location of their meeting at a local junior high school. In defiance of the RLDS officials, the Women's Caucus plastered their posters inside the women's bathrooms of the RLDS Auditorium, the headquarters facility that hosted the RLDS World Conference. While it was a small act of resistance, the creative advertising netted dozens of new participants—and angry conservative protesters—at their meeting.⁴¹

Eventually, the women of the RLDS Women's Caucus renamed their group as AWARE, an acronym that stood for "Awake, Worship, Action, Renewal, and Education."⁴² This group would continue meeting monthly well into the late 1990s. Throughout their existence, AWARE women drafted and redrafted statements of purpose for their community, doing so through a consensus-seeking process common among other feminist consciousness-raising groups in the United States. One statement from the early 1980s stated that AWARE was "(1) to be a network of support by sharing our pain, anger, hope, and joy through worship and celebration, . . . (2) to explore theology, our common feminist heritage, and current issues, (3) to raise our consciousness of our own behavior and encourage growth in ourselves, . . . (4) to develop a power base for action on feminist and/or social issues, (5) to create shared leadership and responsibility."⁴³ Another statement from the same era emphasized that the group had "no structural hierarchy" but engaged in a "free-flowing process with shared and changing responsibilities within the group."⁴⁴

AWARE women, numbering no more than thirty to forty in the periods between larger World Conference gatherings, pursued their group process through monthly meetings and yearly retreats. At these women-only gatherings, they circulated and discussed feminist books or short articles (e.g., works by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Anne Wilson Schaef);⁴⁵ shared reading lists on feminist theology cribbed from the syllabi of college courses they had taken or taught (e.g., Sharon Welch's syllabi);⁴⁶ organized to support local women running for public office (e.g., campaigning for Independence mayor Barbara Potts);⁴⁷ created action plans to advocate for equal pay for women who worked for the church;⁴⁸ planned and hosted a conference on women's ordination with a keynote speaker from a mainline Protestant seminary (feminist theologian Peggy Ann

Way),⁴⁹ published a long-running monthly newsletter,⁵⁰ successfully lobbied their denomination for inclusive language in all church documents;⁵¹ campaigned for the Equal Rights Amendment;⁵² and wrote letters expressing their solidarity with Sonia Johnson, a prominent feminist in the LDS Church who had been excommunicated for her activism.⁵³ AWARE women also joined ecumenical organizations like Church Women United, at that time a radically feminist-centric organization;⁵⁴ founded and staffed a shelter for women who had been victims of domestic violence, the first of its kind in their local area;⁵⁵ created women-centered liturgy using inclusive language;⁵⁶ and ran retreats at which they preached and performed sacraments without the sanction of ordination.⁵⁷

Social movement theory could be employed to understand this agitational work engaged by AWARE women. For example, sociologist Mark Chaves points out that, after 1970, women's ordination advocacy moved from the work of elite actors to grassroots actors.⁵⁸ New advocacy groups, classified by Chaves as *social movement organizations* (SMOs), emerged at this grassroots level, too.⁵⁹ These women's ordination SMOs often deployed extrainstitutional tactics, including sit-ins, like the occupation of a conference chamber by two hundred women at the 1992 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, or unauthorized ordinations of women, like the 1974 "irregular ordinations" of the Philadelphia Eleven in the Episcopal Church.⁶⁰ Chaves contrasts the difference in calculus between women in SMOs, whom he typifies as largely composed of women who desire to be ordained but who have little formal standing in denominational organizations, with denominational elites who hold positions in existing denominational structures. According to Chaves, women in SMOs "are risking neither established careers nor long-term standing in the denomination," and, consequently, "they are much more willing to engage in extrainstitutional practices" compared with denominational elites who engage in more institutional practices, like petitioning national governing boards or publishing and distributing pamphlets and books on women's ordination.⁶¹

AWARE at first glance seems to fit Chaves's observations about an SMO, as it engaged in extrainstitutional practices, such as various subversive ritual acts reserved ordinarily for priesthood only. AWARE even conceived of itself, from its very origins, as an SMO. ("We are a social movement!" proclaimed one of its members at its second meeting.⁶²) Yet, unlike the SMOs that Chaves notes, AWARE was not solely composed of grassroots members. In fact, a significant minority of its members were denominational elites. For example, Marjorie "Marge" Troeh, the RLDS Women's

Commissioner, was a prominent member of AWARE, as were the church's archivist, Madelon Brunson; the president of the denomination's college, Barbara Higdon; and Joyce McMurray, the wife of the church's influential denominational secretary and future president, Grant McMurray. The mayor of Independence, Missouri, Barbara Potts, was even a member of AWARE.⁶³ Thus AWARE was an atypical SMO, one that was populated by members endowed with an unusual amount of social capital in their denomination. Yet, if framed by Pritchard's observations about counterpublics, we might well see the phenomenon analyzed by Chaves as simply agitation for decision-making power engaged by members of a counterpublic and thus not artificially separated by two modes of action (institutional/extraintitutional action) or two types of actors (elite/grassroots).

Counterpublic theory provides additional explanatory power for understanding how RLDS feminists, like the women of AWARE, were able to organize in the first place. Counterpublic theorists, like Warner, claim that this is because a counterpublic necessarily possesses what philosopher Charles Taylor calls a "social imaginary," part of the "background" to any "foreground" practice. This background, according to cultural historian Dilip Gaonkar, allows for "the ways and means by which a people make sense of their lives and their practices."⁶⁴ Yet a social imaginary is more than simply a symbolic realm of meaning; it allows people to do things in practice. Taylor provides a useful illustration here. He cites how people engage in the practice of protests. "It requires a social imaginary," quips Taylor, "in which largely unconsciously we know how to do certain things, and call everybody together, and march and so on."⁶⁵ This is the sense, then, in which a counterpublic or a public is also a social imaginary. It is not simply people imagining that they are part of something larger. Instead, a counterpublic is a background social structure that enables foregrounded action. Thus, AWARE women, in doing something as seemingly quotidian as holding meetings to agitate for new changes in their church and society, possessed a certain activist social imaginary.

Warner develops this insight further and adds that a counterpublic is not an identity community per se, such as "a gay community counterposed against a public." Instead, a counterpublic is a background social formation and "come[s] into existence. . . mediated by stranger sociability in various media."⁶⁶ Warner gives an example of this phenomenon: the circulation of gay magazines, addressed to a gay public, one that is both particular (gay) and general (the strangers addressed by the magazine).⁶⁷ His current work extends this line of thinking to nineteenth-century evangelical

preachers organizing “ad hoc assemblies of strangers.”⁶⁸ We might add that the production and distribution of hot-pink feminist posters, plastered to the stalls of women’s restrooms at the 1976 RLDS World Conference, beautifully illustrates Warner’s point about particularity and stranger sensibility.

Across the 1970s, AWARE women and their allies challenged the hierarchical nature of priesthood itself, though they did so with varying ideas about the value of women’s ordination for the church. As early as 1972, Carolyn Raiser summed up the feelings of some RLDS feminists who did not want women’s ordination since for them “priesthood has lost any valid function it may have had and now exists as an authoritarian structure fostering unquestioning, unthinking obedience to the voice of the priesthood as the final authority.”⁶⁹ More typical was the response of RLDS feminists who wanted a transformed, egalitarian priesthood, and, if that goal seemed remote, a church in their present that centered the capabilities of laity for ministry, with priesthood officiating only in sacraments. For instance, in a 1973 interview addressing women’s roles in the RLDS church, the Women’s Commissioner of the RLDS Church, Marge Troeh, cagily demurred directly advocating for women’s ordination, knowing that the RLDS Prophet, W. Wallace Smith, had publicly voiced his opposition to it. However, she stated that the reason ordination had not happened was due to “cultural influences upon the church and out of the patriarchal society from which the church has developed.” She also sounded a note of hope for change, observing, “We have an open canon of Scripture so there is the possibility of further specific direction.”⁷⁰ For the time being, Troeh advocated for more inclusive forms of church polity and worship, regardless of one’s ordination status. When AWARE was organized in 1975, Troeh herself became a faithful participant and one of its greatest boosters in the church’s leadership.

Troeh and other AWARE women received varying levels of support or disapproval from male RLDS leaders. For example, as already noted, RLDS president W. Wallace Smith stated in a 1970 interview in the official church magazine that, “personally, I’m not in favor of extending priesthood authority to women.”⁷¹ W. Wallace Smith had a similarly disapproving view of feminism more generally. Yet Smith’s counselors in the presidency and several apostles supported women’s ordination and what was then referred to as “women’s liberation” more generally. For instance, RLDS Apostle Paul Booth introduced future feminist theologian Sharon Welch to the very idea of feminist theology when she interned for him after she had graduated from Graceland College, the RLDS-sponsored liberal arts college. He lent her his copy of Mary

Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, and it proved to be a transformative text for her.⁷² Thus male leadership who occupied the church's highest positions were divided in their stance toward women's ordination and the women's movement.

While male RLDS leaders jostled with each other over church policies on women's ordination throughout the 1970s, AWARE women gathered in their monthly meetings to enact their own visions for inclusive worship and decentered leadership. AWARE women's services paralleled worship gatherings practiced by Catholic Women-Church Movement advocates in the late 1970s, a movement of "feminist grassroots communities where all members participated as equals, rather than dividing the church into a hierarchy of clergy and laity."⁷³ AWARE women, like Women-Church women, wrote worship liturgies for their meetings using inclusive language, rotated who led such meetings among all participants, and occasionally performed sacrament-like rituals, such as love feasts that resembled but did not fully replicate the RLDS communion ritual.⁷⁴

AWARE's Women-Church-like worship was also reflected in the worship practices of other RLDS feminist groups in this era. By the early 1980s, a handful of regionally diffuse RLDS feminist groups had come into being, including an all-women's congregation in Michigan and a small group in Ohio. The latter was started by an AWARE woman who moved from Kansas City to Columbus, Ohio, and the group, drawn from RLDS women in the Columbus area, adopted and adapted worship materials expressly written by Catholic Women-Church advocates.⁷⁵

As a small network of RLDS feminist groups blossomed, one group organized to focus much more directly on women's ordination. Named CARE (Caring About Real Equality), this group was transnational in its membership and reach. During the 1980 RLDS World Conference, RLDS delegates from Australia and New Zealand proposed that their jurisdictions should be allowed to ordain women, even if other jurisdictions in the church did not do so. Their proposal was tabled by the church's leadership. Consequently, some conference delegates who supported women's ordination attended a mass meeting at a local delegate's home in which they formed CARE. Barbara Howard, a member of AWARE who attended the meeting, volunteered to edit a newsletter for CARE that would highlight "signs of movement toward equality in the church." CARE's membership was scattered across the global RLDS Church and met only once more after their organizational meeting. The group issued only "six or seven newsletters." However, Howard noted that after each newsletter was issued she received letters of support from three of the twelve RLDS apostles and one of

the counselors in the First Presidency (the highest leadership group in the church).⁷⁶

The presence of overlapping RLDS feminist organizations from the 1970s and 1980s like CARE, AWARE, the Lamoni Women's Liberation Group, the all-women congregation in Michigan, and Women-Church-like cell groups suggests we might turn to social network theory to better understand them and how women's ordination advocacy spreads. Sociologist Mark Granovetter's classic 1973 theory of the strength of weak ties is an important reminder that ideas can spread along networks of individuals who are loosely associated.⁷⁷ For example, RLDS feminists Mary Lou Goodyear and Joanie Shoemaker initially invited thirty-five women to join the emergent AWARE group based on a list Goodyear drew up at her mother's kitchen table with the advice of her mother and another RLDS feminist Madelon Brunson. The latter women spent part of their summers traveling to week-long regional RLDS family camps (called "reunions") and taught women's classes as part of their duties on the RLDS Women's Commission. From this experience, they knew women, if only in passing, who might be receptive to joining the new group. At a more individually impactful level, one of our interviewees worked as a senior managing editor for the official RLDS magazine in the 1970s. She related how simply meeting other women editors at large conferences in the 1970s changed her mind about women's ordination. Some of these editors were newly ordained in their mainline Protestant denominations.⁷⁸

Furthermore, social network theory enriches scholars' understanding of the social context of women's ordination advocacy, namely by demonstrating that organizations and individuals often become like the groups or people with whom they interact. In analyzing Mark Chaves's data from his study of women's ordination, sociologist Sean Everton observes that most denominations that ordained women by 1985 had a tie to at least one ecumenical organization.⁷⁹ In the case of the RLDS Church (a group not analyzed by Chaves or Everton), RLDS women in 1979 applied and were admitted as members of Church Women United, a national ecumenical organization that helped women network and organize for women's ordination in the 1970s.⁸⁰ Thus network analysis points to the correlation between participating in (liberal) ecumenical organizations and women's ordination within a denomination.

Sociologist Manuel Castells famously argued that networks have existed for millennia, but the post-1960s world saw the rise of a technologically based network society in which networks themselves became social structures. As summarized by sociologist Siobhan Chandler, Castells claims that a network as a social structure is

“flexible, able to reconfigure itself according to changing environments while keeping goals intact.” The nodes that compose networks “may blink in and out of existence,” but since “the values and/or aims are dispersed through multiple nodes any of which can reproduce its messages, the inclusion or exclusion of any particular node does not disrupt the overall aims and orientation of the entire network giving it stability and durability.”⁸¹ The RLDS feminist network illustrates this last point well. For example, RLDS Women’s Commissioner Marge Troeh was a key feminist leader who publicly supported women’s ordination by the late 1970s. She resigned from denominational leadership in 1982; she felt she had become too polarizing within the church for women’s ordination to succeed in the future.⁸² Yet the RLDS women’s ordination network did not collapse in her absence, but continued expanding to new places and including new groups.

Policy change on women’s ordination finally happened through a somewhat traditional mode of RLDS authority: a revelatory statement presented by the RLDS Church’s then prophet-president, Wallace B. Smith, at the church’s 1984 World Conference. RLDS presidents regularly presented revelatory documents to the church’s biennial legislative assembly for its approval, and, after a typically performative vote with little dissent, these documents would then become part of the church’s open canon of scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants. However, Smith’s document on women’s ordination sparked great internal controversy. After several days of fierce debate among the conference’s delegates, Smith’s revelation was approved; yet it was voted down by 20 percent of the elected delegates, a margin that was ordinarily unthinkable.⁸³

Smith himself had succeeded his more conservative father as the leader of the RLDS church in 1978. Conservatives in the church hoped that Wallace B. Smith would extend his father’s opposition to women’s ordination. However, in the two years before the younger Smith’s ordination, he underwent a period of apprenticeship in which he met with various stakeholders and officials. One of them was RLDS Women’s Commissioner and AWARE member Marge Troeh who gave Smith assigned “homework” after each session—short feminist texts that he was to read and report back to her about them. Smith showed great interest in these materials, too. Smith also happened to be Troeh’s next-door neighbor, and they attended the same local congregation in Independence, widely seen as the most progressive congregation in a town with dozens of RLDS congregations. Nonetheless, Smith, when he took office, sought to control both grassroots conservative groups and progressive

organizations who operated outside of the church's official imprimatur, and this included AWARE. Consequently, many RLDS feminists were surprised by Smith's 1984 revelation.⁸⁴

With the passage of Smith's revelation to ordain women, many RLDS feminists had mixed reactions. AWARE member and church archivist Madelon Brunson wrote that she felt a "sinking feeling of depression" as she contemplated the future. She reflected that she had voted "yes [on Smith's revelation] on behalf of the women who believe this is an answer to the discrimination problem," but also worried that "the structure [of the church] seemed destined to remain the same" and ultimately, "that unless I was willing to accommodate and accept the system, I would never perform the ordinances."⁸⁵ In contrast, feminists like Troeh were delighted. On the day the revelation was passed by the RLDS World Conference, Troeh spent the evening fielding long-distance phone calls from ecumenical friends in Church Women United, all voicing their excitement at the development.⁸⁶ Notwithstanding their divergent responses, RLDS feminists who resonated with Brunson's skepticism of women's ordination or Troeh's enthusiastic support had helped create the general expectation for a more egalitarian model of leadership within their church.

Counterpublic theory helps us make sense of the mixed reactions that some AWARE women had toward women's ordination once it became policy. Michael Warner observes that "when alternative publics are cast as social movements, they acquire agency in relation to the state." In doing so, "they enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse." Warner thinks that such groups "cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public life itself."⁸⁷ Thus, if Warner is correct in this observation, Madelon Brunson's feeling of depression after the crucial 1984 vote on ordination was a well-placed ambivalence. Her feelings about women's ordination were paralleled by other U.S. feminists in religious organizations—from Catholic feminist theologians like Mary Hunt and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who increasingly critiqued all forms of clericism to the ambivalence of many mainline Protestant women ordained in institutions that they recognized were still patriarchal domains.⁸⁸

As these diverse examples gesture toward, the concept of a counterpublic helps us understand not simply RLDS feminists, but also various religious feminists in the United States who advocated for (and debated about) women's ordination in the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, these examples reveal that the counterpublic we are analyzing in this essay was not limited to RLDS women in relation to their church. Every women's ordination advocacy group from this

era, whether Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, or Protestant, drew upon resources particular to their religious traditions.⁸⁹ Yet behind the actions of Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Protestant, and RLDS women's ordination advocates stood a certain social imaginary that enabled their actions in the first place, one we have suggested was formed through the circulation of texts and stranger sensibility.

The effects of this social imaginary may be easier to see than the structure itself. For example, Catholic feminists, Jewish feminists, and Protestant feminists read works by each other, assuming that these works were addressed to them, too, regardless of their affiliation.⁹⁰ Women rabbis, priests, and feminist theologians came together to serve on panels together at conferences and public talks.⁹¹ And feminist theologians like Judith Plaskow famously articulated the "yeah, yeah" experience they had in feminist consciousness-raising groups after listening to the personal experiences of other women in different religious organizations; that is, they came to the realization that they saw in the other's experience some of their own experience, too.⁹² All of these examples could be multiplied many times over.

To summarize, if, as Michael Warner asserts, the condition of being part of a discourse counterpublic is merely "paying attention" to a particular conversation, feminists as members of varied religious communities in the 1970s certainly paid attention to each other on women's ordination.⁹³ RLDS feminists, as we have shown, were part of this counterpublic, too. They did not have Fraser's feminist bookstores, film and video distribution networks, or publishing companies, but instead used the more accessible technologies of newsletters, mailing lists, phone trees, consciousness raising groups, retreats, and shared reading lists.⁹⁴ They practiced faith-filled feminist resistance when they practiced sacrament-like rituals, participated in workshops, and drew up action plans at women-only retreats, places, in Fraser's terms, for "withdrawal and regroupment" as well as "training grounds for agitational activities."⁹⁵ These activities and discourses were part and parcel of a counterpublic that helped create the possibility for women's ordination in the RLDS Church.

Finally, we should note that feminists involved in RLDS women's ordination advocacy were largely white and American, but not exclusively so. As already stated, the Australian and New Zealander delegates to the 1980 RLDS World Conference requested that they be allowed to ordain women in their jurisdictions, and these same feminists helped start the short-lived women's ordination advocacy group, CARE. Within the United States, Black, Indigenous, and Asian American women did not directly participate in feminist

grassroots groups like AWARE (so far as we can ascertain), but many readily supported women's ordination when it became church policy and later were ordained themselves. In a super-majority white American church, white American middle-class feminists predominated in direct-action events, but theirs was not exclusively a white American women's cause. Instead, it was one that traversed lines of race and nationality.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the transnational, transracial support for women's ordination in the RLDS Church by 1984 suggestively points to the breadth of a feminist religious counterpublic, ranging from those who actively paid attention to those who held enough power to distribute its posters.

Conclusion: A Feminist Religious Counterpublic

The concept of a feminist religious counterpublic theorizes how the actions of feminists in churches and synagogues, in both their social movement mobilization and network formation around women's ordination, were enabled in the first place. As we have seen, these feminists inhabited a social imaginary, created through the circulation of feminist theological media and addressed to both particular people and imagined addressees. It is only with these "background" elements in place that foregrounded actions, like direct action events by women's ordination advocates, could even take place. Classic theorists of publics, as well as their counterpublic critics, envisioned something similar to this when they described the creation of publics/counterpublics. As succinctly summarized by Gemma Edwards, Habermas argued that it is "the 'new' movements of the post-1960s era (such as the Women's, Youth, Alternative and Ecology Movements) that form the raw materials of the public sphere."⁹⁷ Taking the side of counterpublic theorists like Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner who critique Habermas for positing the existence of a universal, rational, disinterested public sphere, we modify Habermas's claim and add a causative argument. We observe that social movements and the networks that connect them are the finished products, not elemental materials, of interested, gendered, embodied counterpublics.

In sum, we argue that the concept of a feminist religious counterpublic offers a powerful explanatory lens for scholars of women's ordination movements in late twentieth-century America, whether they study American Zen Buddhist women priests, American women as Reform rabbis, or, as in this study, RLDS women in the priesthood. Furthermore, analysis of a feminist religious counterpublic takes us beyond accounts of individual

denominational histories, denominational families, or social signaling dynamics used by previous scholars of women's ordination in America.⁹⁸ As we have shown, analysis of a counterpublic, as a particular manifestation of a social imaginary, helps us understand the formations of social movements and networks, too. Thus, more broadly, our analysis of RLDS women's ordination advocacy through a counterpublic lens offers religious studies scholars generative possibilities for understanding the social imaginaries that religious activists inhabit and the actions activists undertake.

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Notes

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²⁰Pritchard, "Pilgrimage and Publics," 80.

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³⁴W. B. Pat Spillman, "Adjustment or Apostasy? The Reorganized Church in the Late Twentieth Century," *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no. 2 (1994): 1–15.

³⁵"The Process of Our Feminist Group," Troeh Collection, CCA.

³⁶Marilyn Goodyear, interview by authors, June 30, 2022. Mary Lou Goodyear now spells her name Marilu Goodyear.

³⁷Mary Lou Goodyear and Joanie Shoemaker to Sisters, July 1, 1975, Troeh Collection, CCA.

³⁸Mary Lou Goodyear and Joanie Shoemaker to Sisters, July 1, 1975, Troeh Collection, CCA.

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⁴⁰Mary Lou Goodyear to Friends, April 21, 1976, Troeh Collection, CCA.

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⁴³"AWARE," ca. 1981, Ruth Ann Wood personal collection, shared with the authors.

⁴⁴"The Process of Our Feminist Group," Troeh Collection, CCA, Independence, Missouri.

⁴⁵Suzanne Trewhitt McLaughlin, interview by authors, March 10, 2022; Ruth Ann Wood, interview by authors, April 26, 2022.

⁴⁶"The Process of Our Feminist Group," Troeh Collection, CCA; Sharon Welch, "Supplemental Bibliography," Ruth Ann Wood personal collection.

⁴⁷"Summary of AWARE Goal-Setting Session," November 23, 1981, Ruth Ann Wood personal collection.

⁴⁸Marge Troeh, interview by authors, March 9, 2022.

⁴⁹Mary Lou Goodyear to Friends, April 21, 1976, Marge Troeh Collection, CCA; Barbara Howard and Richard P. Howard, interview by authors, April 26, 2021; Sharon Welch Patton, "A Critique of the Hierarchical Nature of Priesthood," AWARE Conference, March 1977, Marge Troeh Collection, CCA.

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⁵²Marjorie Troeh to Rev. Delores J. Moss, August 20, 1981, RG 30-2, f16, First Presidency Papers, CCA.

⁵³Marjorie Troeh to Sonia Johnson (draft), undated (circa 1979), Marge Troeh Collection, CCA.

⁵⁴Marge Troeh, interview by authors, March 9, 2022.

⁵⁵Ruth Ann Wood interview; Howard and Howard interview.

⁵⁶"Feminine Images of God" AWARE Worship Service, August 9, 1982, Ruth Ann Wood personal collection; "Our Vision—The Bonds of Sisterhood," Conception Abbey AWARE Retreat, November 18, 1984, Ruth Ann Wood personal collection.

⁵⁷Charmaine Chvala-Smith, interview by Naomi Brill, Em Papineau, Raleigh Williams, March 26, 2020; Suzanne Trewhitt McLaughlin, interview by authors, March 10, 2022.

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⁶⁵Calhoun et al., "Modern Social Imaginaries," 191.

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⁸⁰Troeh interview by authors; Caryn E. Neumann, "Enabled by the Holy Spirit: Church Women United and the Development of

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⁸⁴Troeh interview; Goodyear interview.

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⁸⁶Troeh interview.

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⁸⁸Mae Speight, "The Ministerial Reformation: A History of Women and the Mainline, 1920–1980" (Ph D diss., University of Virginia, 2020), 150–51, 220, 247; Radford Ruether, "Should Women Want Womenpriests or Women-Church?" 67.

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⁹¹Speight, "The Ministerial Reformation," 214.

⁹²Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 198–209.

⁹³Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 53.

⁹⁴This noted, AWARE co-founder Joanie Shoemaker started a feminist bookstore in Kansas City only a year after she helped start the RLDS feminist group. Shoemaker's bookstore was not an RLDS feminist bookstore per se, but a feminist bookstore owned by RLDS feminist. Goodyear interview.

⁹⁵Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 68.

⁹⁶For one Black woman, ordination came at the cost of creating tension within her marriage, as her spouse felt that ordination would take her away from her domestic responsibilities. Even so, her father, a longtime elder in the church, wholeheartedly supported her, and she was ordained in the second wave of ordinations in 1986. Similarly, two Diné/Navajo women who lived off reservation related both family and cultural support for women's ordination. Furthermore, in a 2005 interview, a Native American ministries specialist in the church related that two other Diné/Navajo women, ordained and living on the reservation at the time, believed that women's ordination was "more like the white culture's ideas of gender roles changed and finally caught up with what was already traditional for Native peoples and the Navajo specifically." Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue, interview by Clara Brill-Carlat, Zoe House, and Esther Kerns, April 2, 2020; Keith Russell, e-mail to author, February 28, 2005; Fern Thayer, telephone interview by author, April 16, 2005, Iowa City, Iowa; Ann Russell, telephone interview by author, March 28, 2005, Iowa City, Iowa.

⁹⁷Gemma Edwards, "Habermas and Social Movements: What's New?" *Sociological Review* 52, no. 1 (2004): 113.

⁹⁸Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 190–192; Eileen Campbell-Reed, *Anatomy of a Schism: How Clergywomen's Narratives Reinterpret the Fracturing of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2016); Catherine Prelinger, ed., *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Lisa P. Stephenson, "Prophesying Women and Ruling Men: Women's Religious Authority in North American Pentecostalism," *Religions* 2 (2011): 410–26; Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*; Jill Peterfeso, *Womanpriest: Tradition and Transgression in the Contemporary Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020); Frishman, "The Ordination of Women"; Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*; Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd, eds., *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2015); Jenny Wiley Legath, *Sanctified Sisters: A History of the Protestant Deaconesses* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 131–59; Speight, "The Ministerial Reformation."

ABSTRACT *The 1970s witnessed an efflorescence of religious feminism in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, particularly around the issue of women's ordination. We pose a model for understanding this*

development—the formation of publics/counterpublics—and explore how it illuminates our case study. Drawing upon oral history interviews and archival sources, we document how RLDS women created independent publications, grassroots consciousness-raising groups, feminist classes and conferences, and Women-Church-inspired worship to reimagine priesthood within their church. We conclude that the lens of a counterpublic offers a capacious view of our topic, one capable of integrating both social movement theory and network theory. Furthermore, we suggest that the RLDS example featured in this essay is simply a manifestation of a larger late twentieth-century American “feminist religious counterpublic” formed across many religious denominations and groups that held a shared feminist social imaginary.