Why Did the Mormon Church Terminate the Office of the Patriarch of the Church?

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By Steve Benson

"I have always been curious about why they terminated the Office of Patriarch of the Church. Why did they do that?"

Here's an answer:

Over the history of Mormonism, the Office of the Church Patriarch became a problem that was increasingly difficult to control. The reasons were basically two-fold. First, the office had been plagued with sexual scandal during the disastrous and potentially explosive tenure of Joseph F. Smith, the Mormon Church's official gay Patriarch.
Second, the office had also become the center of long, rocky disputes involving factionalized "Mormon Royalty" fighting for dynastic privilege. The ultimate solution was for the Mormon Church to get rid of the Office of the Church Patriarch.

Let's take a look at how the Office of the Church Patriarch came to be, then examine the specific reasons why it later came not to be.

--Problem #1: The Checkered History and Muddled Purpose of the Mormon Church's Office of the Patriarch

Historian D. Michael Quinn, has been instrumental in detailing both the founding and the fate of the Mormon Church's now--dead, Smith bloodline-inherited Office of the Church Patriarch, In his book, "The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power," he provides details of the office of the "Presiding Patriarch . . . as to [its] development," as to the "determination [of its relationship] to the growing Church," and as to its "consequent impact on the expanding role and influences of the hierarchy and the expanding bureaucracy of a large religious organization."

In short, as to how it formed and eventually flopped.

("Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power," by D. Michael Quinn, review by Signature Books, at: http://signaturebooks.com/2010/02/the-mormon-hierarchy-extensions-of-power/)

Quinn is often cited as a go-to source for understanding the perplexing, tumultuous and ill-fated legacy of the Office:

"[One of the] . . . most confusing offices in the early Church [was that] of Patriarch. [The title of 'patriarch' was] even confusing to those who held [that office] and it was not until later in the development of the Church that this confusion was removed. Joseph Smith ordained his father to be the Patriarch of the Church in 1834, and John Young was ordained to be the patriarch of his family shortly afterward. Joseph Smith, Sr. remained Patriarch of the Church until his death in 1840 and was regarded on a par with the First Presidency of the Church. Patriarchal blessings did not receive their prophetic character until the late 1830's.

"Originally, patriarchs were called to give blessings only to those who had no father to perform the blessing. When Hyrum Smith became Presiding Patriarch, he presided over the Twelve Apostles and was considered to be a member of the First Presidency." (Quinn, "The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power," (pp. 46-55)"

("'The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power'--A Review," by Garn LeBaron Jr., 1995, at: http://www.exmormon.org/hierarch.htm)

"[Quinn] . . . dates the inception of the Office of Presiding Patriarch in 1834, a year later than early lists (pp. 46-47), and points out that John Young was ordained a patriarch to his family three months before Joseph Smith, Sr. was ordained Patriarch of the Church, and for almost three years Young was the only other Patriarch of the Church (Quinn, "The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power," pp. 48-51)."

("Reviews: 'The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power,' by B. Carmon Hardy," in "Pacific Historical Review," at: http://signaturebooks.com/2010/08/reviews-the-mormon-hierarchy-origins-of-power/)

Below is a concise and colorful synopsis, based on Quinn's research, of the chaos, competition and corruption that attended the creation of the Office of the Church Patriarch:

"The Patriarch of the Church was, by virtue of his calling, next in line for the Presidency of the Church. When Joe and Hyrum [Smith] died, Hyrum was Patriarc, and Assistant President of the Church. Since the calling of Patriarch was by blood, the next President--and Patriarch--of the Church should have been [Joe's] younger brother Samuel. He died very shortly (within weeks) of Joseph and Hyrum. Circumstantial evidence points to Hosea Stout poisoning Samuel. Hosea was a Brigham supporter. Next in line was Joseph's other brother William, but he was a lazy good-for-nothing that spent most of his missionary time chasing women. Nobody took him seriously.

"In 1835, and again in 1837, Joseph received revelations (never published) that the Quorum of Twelve were to be traveling missionaries. They had no authority within the organized stakes of Zion. Stake presidents had more authority than the Twelve. During the fighting that took place after the martyrdom . . . of Joseph, stake president William Marks should have led the Church. President Marks was an opponent of polygamy and so was shunned by Joseph's inner circle of womanizing, hand-shaking loyalists. William Marks also had no desire to lead the Church as its president. Due to several other factors (polygamy, Second Anointing, Council of 50, etc.), Brigham became President of the Church. A huge number of the Saints left the Church when this happened.

"With Brigham in charge, the Patriarch became secondary to the Twelve and the First Presidency. Joseph's kids had not followed Brigham but Hyrum's family did. Blood continued in the Office of Church Patriarch, but, with the emeritus status of the last Patriarch, along with no Patriarch since, the President of the Church has eliminated all doctrinal challenges to their supremacy.

"If the Church was in the same organizational state that Joseph left it in, the Church would have a First Presidency, along with the Patriarch, presiding over everything. The 12 would be in charge of all missionary work, organizing branches and districts, but having no authority to create stakes or do anything priesthood related within the borders of the stakes.

"When was the last time anybody bore their testimony thanking god for a Living Prophet and Patriarch who lead the Church? Who knows. One thing for certain though, it never will happen and nobody in the present[day Church will know what the Office of Patriarch was meant to be. (Source: D Michael Quinn: 'The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power')."

(posted by "Iron Chancellor," 7 April 2013, at: http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/36576/)

Now for a more detailed look at the issues rocking the Office of the Church Patriarch that eventually brought it down.

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--Problem #2: The Homosexuality of Mormon Church Patriarch, Joseph F. Smith and Its Accompanying Family Feud Fests

The “dirty little secret,” if you will, regarding the Mormon Church's challenge of dealing with high-office homosexuality is described author and former Mormon Latayne C. Scptt:

“. . . [A]ccording to 'Affirmation' (a group of homosexual, lesbian, transgender and bisexual Mormons), . . , LDS history is full of people who have been candidates for 'Affirmation membership,' including . . . [P]atriarch of the Church [Joseph F. Smith[]; former lesbian-lover heads of the Primary [children’s} organization; and a son of Brigham Young, who performed in drag.”

(“The Mormon Mirage: A Former Member Looks at the Mormon Church Today, ” by Latayne C. Scott, [Zondervan, 2009[, at: http://books.google.com/books?id=9zsv58IGj8wC&pg=PT362&lpg=PT362&dq=D.+MIchael+Quinn+office+of+Church+Patriarch&source=bl&ots=Dj0RzemZwW&sig=uE1NAhgUnk6M4NoN1m41nl7UZxc&hl=en&sa=X&ei=34xaVL7MJ6-IigKutoCAAQ&ved=0CCUQ6AEwATgK#v=onepage&q=D.%20MIchael%20Quinn%20office%20of%20Church%20Patriarch&f=false)

At the time that Joseph F. Smith's gay orientation was becoming the subject of a behind-the-scenes whisper campaign (but before the full extent of his homosexuality and related activities caught the attention of the Church's highest leaders), the hereditary/dynastic procedures established for the selection of the Church Patriarch called for Eldred G. Smith (son of the sixth Patriarch of the Church, Hyrum Gibbs Smith), to be appointed to the office. This was to have taken place in 1932, when Eldred's father died.

"Instead, Church President Heber J. Grant left the position open for the next 10 years (although two "acting" Patriarchs where chosen to serve in the Office during that time period, including one who was not a Smith family heir).

To the dismay of some who were aware of Joseph F. Smith's gay bent and behavior, he (Joseph F., who was a distant cousin of Eldred) was eventually tapped out to be Patriarch of the Church. This move also greatly upset Eldred, who felt that he had been robbed of the office which he regarded as justly his. (Ultimately--after the Joseph F. Smith homosexual sex scandal had been put to bed, so to speak--the First Presidency put Eldred in as Church Patriarch).

Following Eldred's retirement and placement on emeritus status in 1979, the Spencer W. Kimball First Presidency dissolved the Office of the Church Patriarch altogether.

The reason for Eldred being put out to pasture--at least as argued by sympathizers with the "Holy Grail" status of Eldred--was that he was seen by Mormon authorities as a "murmurer" and therefore was "once again expendable to the Church."

Apparently the Office of the Church Patriarch was also expendable. Below are relevant elements of the timeline leading to its eventual shutdown:

--"1932

"Eldred Gee Smith should have become Patriarch in 1932, at the death of his father. However, President Heber J. Grant was 'evidently reticent' to have him be the new Patriarch, so the important ecclesiastical office was left vacant for a decade. . . .

--"1942, October 8

"Joseph Fielding Smith was ordained 'Patriarch to the Church' by LDS President Heber J. Grant. When Eldred's distant cousin, Joseph F. Smith, became the Patriarch, Eldred Gee Smith reportedly 'lamented that he had lost the most priceless thing he had hoped for,' becoming the next Patriarch. . . .

--"1947, April 3

"'Voted to sustain…Eldred Smith' as the new Patriarch to the Church. (George Albert Smith Diary)

--"1947, April 6

"(sustained) Eldred Smith as Patriarch to the Church." (GASD)

--"1947, April 10

"[Set apart]. . . .Eldred G. Smith, Patriarch to the Church." (GASD) . . .

--"1979, October 4

"Eldred Gee Smith was placed on emeritus status by the First Presidency and no new Patriarch was called to replace him. At his death, the Office of Patriarch to the Church, which once rivaled that of the President of the Church, will cease to exist."

The Mormon Church-owned “Deseret News” predictably ignored all of this above inconvenient history when it announced the death of Joseph F. Smith’s cousin, fellow Church Patriarch Eldred G. Smith:

“On Oct. 6, 1979, after 32 years as patriarch to the church, Elder Smith was one in a group of nine General Authorities receiving emeritus status. No Patriarch of the Church has been sustained since that time.”

(“Longest-Living LDS General Authority Dies at Age 106,” in “Deseret News,” 5 April 2013, at: http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865577571/Longest-living-LDS-general-authority-dies-at-age-106.html?pg=all)

Various explanations have been offered for (1) the extended vacancy of the Office of the Church Patriarch under the tenure of Heber J. Grant (when Grant tried to get his son-in-law ordained as Patriarch): and (2) the Office's eventual dissolution during the regmine of Spencer W. Kimball:

"From the time Grant was ordained as President of the Church in 1918, through today, the Office of Presiding Patriarch has dwindled in importance and, largely, authority. As Quinn concludes his discussion on the role of the Presiding Patriarch, he adds this statement:

“'Whenever a Patriarch after 1844 tried to magnify his presiding office, the Twelve and First Presidency recoiled in apprehension. However, when individual Patriarchs seemed to lack administrative vigor, the Twelve and First Presidency criticized them for not magnifying their office. Few men could walk such an ecclesiastical tightrope.

"'For various reasons, the First Presidency and Twelve were in conflict with seven out of eight successors of the original Presiding Patriarch, Joseph Smith, Sr. The hierarchy finally resolved the situation on 6 Oct 1979 by making Eldred G. Smith an 'emeritus' General Authority without replacing him. This permanently 'discontinued' the Office of Patriarch to the Church. . . .

"'Vacating [i.e., eliminating] the office in 1979 ended the conflicts. However, according to Brigham Young’s instructions, the 1979 action made the Church vulnerable: 'It was necessary to keep up a full organization of the Church all through time as far as could be. At least the three First Presidenc[ies], Quorum of the Twelve, Seventies and Patriarch over the whole Church . . . so that the Devil could take no advantage of us.' It is beyond the scope of this analysis to assess such metaphysical vulnerability. Administratively, however, the decision to leave the Patriarch’s office vacant after 1979 streamlined the hierarchy and removed a source of nearly constant tension.'"

Sources for the above:

-"Chronology of Events on Patriarch Joseph Fielding Smith’s Homosexuality," Connell O'Donovan, comp., "with the generous assistance of D. Michael Quinn," at: http://www.connellodonovan.com/smith.html

-Vern G. Swanson, "Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism's Sacred Bloodline," under "Legal Heirs According to the Flesh" [2006], p. 353, at: http://books.google.com/booksid=Pa1mMcw6N-NUC&pg=PA353&lpg=PA353&dq=Eldred+Gee+Smith+brother+of+Joseph+Fielding+Smith+Church+patriarch&source=bl&ots=u6hjkrQVuj&sig=Xlyttz027s4H-W4I8EMd3MXdxJOs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=fc5ZVNLMLoK7iQLFjoGgDQ&ved=0CCQQ6AE-wAQ#v=onepage&q=Eldred%20Gee%20Smith%20brother%20of%20Joseph%20Fielding%20Smith%20Church%20patriarch&f=false

-Jim Whithead, "The Mormon Delusuion," vol. 2 second ed. (2010), p. 262, at: ooks.google.com/books?id=H6YYAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA262&lpg=PA262&dq=Eldred+Gee+Smith+brother+of+Joseph+Fielding+Smith+Church+patriarch+D.+Michael+quinn&source=bl&ots=FHrCis_2Y&sig=L5YnoLl76aF0iKQI_KybyHUVyOs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=p9JZVLq5KaiBiwLi9oDIBw&ved=0CCQQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=Eldred%20Gee%20Smith%20brother%20of%20Joseph%20Fielding%20Smith%20Church%20patriarch%20D.%20Michael%20quinn&f=false

-"D&C 59:21: Confess His Hand in All Things," 12 January 2010, at: http://truthmarche.wordpress.com/2010/01/12/dc-5921-confess-his-hand-in-all-things/)

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Mormon author, Doug Gibson, confirms that Joseph F. Smith was, in fact, gay; that his sexual orientation was known (and covered up by) the Mormon Church; and that, eventually, Smith lost his family-fixed Church Patriarch job slot because of it (although none of that was enough to keep the Church from buying his silence by paying him a salary, moving him and his family to Hawaii and arranging for other loyalty-purchasing perks):

“In October 1946, Joseph F. Smith II, LDS Church Patriarch, was released from his calling in LDS General Conference. He had not served for several months, the official reason being that he was ill, confined to his home in Centerville, Utah.

“What wasn’t known publicly was that Smith had been forbidden to give patriarchal blessings since May 1. In fact, after that day, his secretary never saw him again.

"As historian Gary James Bergera recounts in the Winter 2012 issue of the ‘Journal of Mormon History,‘ Smith’s tenure stopped after this course of events: President George Albert Smith received communication from member Lorenzo Dow Browning--a Utah State Tax Commission appraiser and father of a Byram Dow Browning, [age] 20. The father alleged an intimate relationship between Patriarch Smith and his son. He also mentioned that he had spoken with the Patriarch recently, Later, Byram Dow Browning’s uncle, LeGrand Chandler, discussed the issue with the LDS prophet. That prompted a two-and-a-half hour meeting between George Albert Smith and Joseph F. Smith II. Bergera writes, ‘ . . . Joseph F., evidently devastated by the encounter, immediately “left for home’,” (George Albert Smith’s diary).

“We may never know if Joseph F. Smith II had a physical sexual relationship with Byram Browning, who attended the University of Utah, where Smith, a legitimate scholar and accomplished actor, taught speech and drama. There are accounts that claim Joseph F. Smith II had a history of homosexuality that extended as far back as the 1920s. The problem, as Bergera notes, is that many of the sources derive from the family of Eldred G. Smith, who had been passed over as Church Patriarch by Heber G. Grant (yet later replaced him). According to research from historian D. Michael Quinn, members of the Smith family--including the Salt Lake City Police Department’s captain of the anti-vice squad--warned Church President Heber J. Grant of Joseph F. Smith II’s homosexual acts.

“Bergera’s essay makes it pretty clear that the Church Patriarch was attracted to men. Prophet George Albert Smith noted in his diary on July 10, 1946: ‘Jos(eph) (F. Smith) Patriarch case considered. Bad situation. Am heartsick.’

"Apostle, and future prophet, Joseph Fielding Smith, noted in his diary of the same day, “ . . . [M]atters of a most serious nature were presented by the Presidency which brought a shock to me and my Brethren; this was of a nature which I do not feel at liberty or capable of discussion. It is enough for me to say that what was presented was a shock to me of the greatest magnitude . . . .’

"In September of that year, George Albert Smith met with both Byram Downing and Patriarch Joseph F. Smith. Also, there was LDS Apostle Albert E. Bowen. In his diary, George Albert Smith notes: ‘[R]egret that the evidence is not satisfactory.’

“From that account, Bergera writes: ‘Where questions may have lingered in the minds of some the testimony of Byram, who turned 21 in 1946, evidently put an end to speculation.’ The next month Joseph F. Smith II ‘asked to be released’ and was quietly dropped as a General Authority.

"Unlike Richard Lyman--an apostle who earlier in the 1940s had been excommunicated for adultery--the obvious question remains: Why wasn’t Joseph F. Smith II excommunicated?

"Because details of the affair are scarce, we can only guess. Bergera offers several possible reasons, including that the relationship between Joseph F. Smith II and Browning was not overtly sexual, or that Church leaders did not want a highly publicized excommunication so soon after the Lyman case.

"Another possibility from Bergera: ‘[A]t this stage of evolving policy on matters involving sexual behavior in the Church, even if overt sexual conduct had occurred, Joseph F. Smith (II) may have felt that only heterosexual intercourse constituted adultery.’ That position is not as surprising as it may seem today. Bergera offers anecdotes, in the article and in footnotes, that relate incidents of homosexuality among male members that resulted in relatively light ecclesiastical punishments. In one 1951 case, allegations of sexual molestation of boys by an LDS missionary--who was facing criminal charges--were downplayed by his mission president, 'who did not want to magnify the seriousness of his offense. All he did was put his hands on the boys where he should not have.'

“I suspect that Joseph F. Smith II was not excommunicated because, at that May 1 meeting with George Albert Smith, he confessed whatever relationship he had, and must have demonstrated remorse in the ensuing months. His long ‘illness’ may have been, as Bergera opines, a form of depression. I wonder if LDS leaders, reflecting the mores of that era, believed that Joseph F. Smith II, because of his same-sex attraction, was suffering from mental illness. If that’s the case, it’s likely the Patriarch believed it as well. Again, this is only speculation.

“However, Church leaders were extremely helpful to the released Patriarch and his wife, Ruth Pingree Smith. The family moved to Hawaii, where local Church leaders were told that Joseph F. Smith II was not to have Church callings or pray at Church meetings, effectively disfellowshipping him unofficially. Nevertheless, as Bergera recounts, Joseph F. Smith II continued to receive a Church salary long after he was released. The family eventually began to gain its economic footing. Joseph F. Smith II began teaching at the University of Hawaii, and rose to chairman of its speech department. Ruth Pingree Smith became an elementary schoolteacher. Smith remained on good terms with LDS Church President George Albert Smith, visiting with him in 1950. By the late 1950s, then LDS Church President David O. McKay was persuaded by supporters of Smith II to restore Church callings and other activity to the former Patriarch. By the end of 1958, he had been called to the Honolulu LDS stake high council.

“Joseph F. Smith II continued to live in Hawaii. He died in 1964 in Utah after having a heart attack while visiting for his daughter’s wedding. Speakers at his funeral, held at a Church ward next to the University of Utah, included LDS apostles Harold B. Lee and Richard L. Evans. ‘Today,’ writes Bergera, ‘the second-floor lobby at Kingsbury Hall on the University of Utah campus is named the Joseph F. Smith Legacy Gallery.’ I wonder how many active Mormons, merely reading the title, know that it’s not named after the LDS prophet. On display at the gallery, adds Bergera, ‘are the black leather shoes Smith wore in 1933 when he appeared on stage in ‘Death Takes a Holiday.’”

(“Same-Sex Relationship Sent LDS Church Patriarch into Exile [Yet Restored to LDS Stake High Council]," by Doug Gibson, ”Ogden Standard-Examiner,” 17 April 2012, at: http://blogs.standard.net/the-political-surf/2012/04/17/same-sex-relationship-sent-lds-church-patriarch-into-exile/)

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Conclusion: When It Comes to Masking Its Corporate Sins and Muzzling Its Wayward Patriarchs, the Mormon Church Seeks Power Over Truth; It Does Not Speak Truth to Power

In the case of the problem-punctured Office of the Church Patriarch, LDS president Spencer W. Yoda was tasked with its clean-up. He chose to simplify the job by eliminating the job position. May the sanitizing force be with you:

http://www.salamandersociety.com/slamtoons/lookalikes/dead_prophets/070107jj_kimball_yoda_sm.jpg

In the end, LDS Inc.'s High Command decided that the Office of the Church Patriarch--along with those who occupied it by divine right of DNA--were more trouble than they were worth.