5. The Private is Public in Reality Shows about Religion

What do a reality show about a polygamist Mormon family produced by a private television channel and a reality show about Mormon missionaries produced by a religious institution have in common? The answer: a great deal. Both productions depict practicing Mormons and they also share the reality television (RTV) format, with its distinct aesthetic conventions, production framing, and reading modes. In *The District* (US 2007–13) The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) provides instruction in the training of missionaries; *Sister Wives* (US 2010–19) is produced by Discovery Inc., a US American company that specializes in real-life entertainment, for the US TV network TLC, where it is shown to entertain. The distinction between the two is not, however, clear cut. *The District* aims not only to teach its audience but also to entertain, and the polygamous family in *Sister Wives* uses the show to defend and teach about their polygamous lifestyle, seeking greater acceptance and perhaps eventually legal status.[339]

The current chapter explores the interface between religion and reality television and demonstrates how the boundaries between the private and public spheres of religion are blurred. To show how the public and private interact, it addresses the shows' different reading modes in relation to how they address their audiences. *The District* instructs its audience in missionary work by applying an entertaining mode. By contrast, *Sister Wives* entertains its audience with instruction about a religious lifestyle, that of a polygamist family. In so doing both RTV shows communicate religious issues that link the private with the public.

339 Maura Strassberg has discussed the legal situation of the polygamous family portrayed in *Sister Wives*. The five adults brought their case to court on the grounds that Utah's criminalization of polygamy was unconstitutional. See Maura Strassberg, "Scrutinizing Polygamy: Utah's Brown v. British Columbia's Reference Re: Section 293," in *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: Perspectives on Marital Possibilities*, ed. Ronald C. Den Otter (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 167–203.

5.1. Image cultivation

How can we define the relationship between reality television and religion and how might it be characterized? What role does religion play in this type of documentary media and how does the RTV style shape and communicate religion? Picking up on the definition given in part I, religion is understood here as a specific form of communication often dealing with human contingency. The term religion is also closely connected to its agents and to how they understand the concept.[340] They give meaning to religious symbols, practices, and narratives, with those practices including media practices that are embraced by the term "mediatization".[341]

The semio-pragmatic approach applied here considers how religious actors interact with the media and thereby define their own meaning and, vice versa, how media professionals depict religion and its practices in light of their own perspectives. These interactions have in common the variety of ways they communicate about religion, be it from a perspective that is inside, outside, or a mixture of both. Religious communication is influenced by the institutions involved, so in this instance not just by the church but also by a private television channel. The institutional framing, whether church or television network, influences how religious representations are expressed and how they interact with the communication spaces of production, circulation/distribution, and consumption. In these spaces, a diversity of social actors, religious and non-religious, actively shape the meaning-making processes of religious representations and practices.

RTV as documentary media

In this study, RTV is understood as a specific type of documentary media that is defined by a characteristic audio-visual style in the space of representation, by particular production and distribution processes, and by its intended audiences and reading modes in the space of consumption. Stylistically, RTV is conceptualized as an (almost) unscripted show with "ordi-

340 See chapter part I, chapter 2.

341 Hjarvard, "Three Forms of Mediatized Religion. Changing the Public Face of Religion"; Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change.".

nary" people in the sense of "non-elite".[342] The producers claim to be entering into a private sphere, where they observe people through the camera lens. But the everyday life they record has to be more captivating and more spectacular than the lives of the viewers. Why would they watch something on TV that might take place in their own everyday lives? In the space of representation RTV therefore seeks to depict a combination of entertainment and "the self-conscious discourse of the real" as Laurie Oulette and Susan Murray point out. They describe RTV as

> an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real. This coupling … is what has made reality TV an important generic forum for a range of institutional and cultural developments that include the merger of marketing and "real life" entertainment, the convergence of new technologies with programs and their promotion, and an acknowledgement of the manufactured artifice that coexists with truth claims.[343]

Truth claims only work if the audience agrees to believe that what they are seeing is genuine. Therefore RTV must convince the viewer that what is depicted really happened in the space of production. These "real" events are further combined with an entertaining mode. One can argue that RTV mediates the everyday lives of common people to divert viewers from their own everyday lives. The potential paradox in this approach is dissolved when we recognize that it is easier to be disgusted or fascinated by other people's lives than to engage our own lives. Watching the struggles and joys of others may distance viewers from their own burdens.

Thus RTV spaces of communication combine strong references to the "real" with an entertaining mode. In the space of production and distribution, RTV performs as a commercial genre, seeking to acquire potential customers and be able to sell advertisement time and product placements.[344] The space of representation is focused on presenting the real as spectacularly as possible, to keep the audience, potential consumers of the advertised products, watching. The relationship between audience and the

342 Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (London, New York: Wallflower, 2005), 154/155.

343 Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

344 June Deery, "Reality TV as Advertainment," *Popular Communication* 2, no. 1 (March 2004): 1–20.

depiction of the real places a levy on the social actors and may result in their exploitation.[345] RTV productions profit from personal dramas involving the social actors, who may feel forced to reveal as much as possible. The pressure to express themselves can lead to competition for attention among the social actors that encourages them to expose their individual goals and personal interests.

These conditions provide viewers with spectacle, which can include intimate moments, with immediacy, and with a promise to present "social, psychological, political and historical truths and to depict the rhythms and structures of everyday life with the least recourse possible to dramatisation and artifice."[346] Participants in reality shows earn money by selling the right to represent their private lives and as a result their lives become public. The media institutions, in this instance television channels, then in turn sell commercial time. Yet what if the viewer simply changes channel while the commercials are shown and fails to return? The show has to offer something that keeps the viewer tuned in during breaks for advertisements. When it needs to compete with other media suppliers, RTV must adopt the rules of the market.

RTV between private and public

RTV meanders between private and public spaces, almost dissolving their borders. In its spaces of communication RTV even challenges the right to privacy and autonomy. Whether privacy and autonomy are respected depends on the interactions between the spaces of production and representation. While it might be argued that potential social agents are free to decide whether to participate and what to reveal, the situation is more complex. What of the involvement of children – frequent participants in RTV shows about polygamy – who are not able to give permission on their own behalf? As Michel Foucault has demonstrated, relations between human beings always involve power. There are dependencies between producers and social actors.[347] The exercise of such power defines the production and representation processes, but ruler and subject also maintain each other

345 Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 4.
346 Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV*, 2005, 3.
347 Michel Foucault, *Sexualität und Wahrheit*, [Versch. Aufl.], Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 93–95.

and thereby sustain the power network.[348] For the media scholar Swantje Lingenberg, the central question concerns who draws the boundaries between the private and the public and whether individuals can maintain their autonomy within their private sphere or are defined by economic and political rules.[349] German media scholar Friedrich Krotz's work on the Internet allows us to recognize that rather than concentrate on the extent of the privacy or publicity RTV facilitates, we might look at how the boundary that manifests in the social and cultural sphere is drawn between the private and the public. That boundary cannot be defined solely by the media, in this instance by RTV.[350]

Krotz explores three discourses about the public and the private.[351] First, with reference to Jürgen Habermas he defines the political dimension of the public, where power can be controlled. Democracy exists only in the public sphere and privacy is an individual human right. Secondly, the medial dimension addresses the need for publicity, which may run counter to, or even override, the rights of the individual because the media are less concerned with a single human being and more concerned with their target audience. And, finally, the third approach emphasized by Krotz requires the media to be assessed not in relation to their role in democratic processes but rather according to their practices, which make evident that the media, including RTV, have purposes beyond providing publicity for democratic processes.

RTV productions must be financially successful; to be financially successful they need to preserve their audience; to preserve their audience they need to keep their viewers entertained. Krotz highlights that the lives filmed by the camera are not the private lives of the participants. The social actors stage themselves and their lives, enabling a spotlight to be shone on intimate and private moments.[352] This blurring of the public and private has telling implications for the depiction of religion in reality shows.

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348 Fritz et al., *Sichtbare Religion*, 122–126.

349 Swantje Lingenberg, "Öffentlich(keit) und Privat(heit)," in *Handbuch Cultural Studies und Medienanalyse*, ed. Andreas Hepp et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2015), 177.

350 Friedrich Krotz, "Die Veränderung von Privatheit und Öffentlichkeit in der heutigen Gesellschaft," *Merz: Medien + Erziehung. Zeitschrift für Medienpädagogik* 8/09, no. 53 (2009): 2/3.

351 Krotz, 4–8.

352 Krotz, 7.

Religion in the public sphere of the media

In recent years the positioning of religion in the tension between private and public has been much debated. The application of these dichotomic terms in the study of media and religion has been marked and has borne fruit. Traditional religious practice now competes in parts of Europe and North America in particular with leisure-time activities.[353] The authors of a socio-empirical study in Switzerland have concluded that with leisure time traditionally located in the private sphere, religion has become a rival for that time within that market.[354] Additionally, with increasing secularization, the presence of traditional religion in the public sphere is diminishing.[355] Political debates surrounding religious symbols in the public sphere confirm a tendency particularly marked in Europe for traditional religious identity markers to be exhibited only in private and not in public: thus, for example, in 2009 the Minaret Initiative in Switzerland achieved a ban on the construction of minarets.[356] In Denmark, Belgium, Germany, France, part of Switzerland (Ticino), and the Netherlands the wearing of the full face veil is prohibited.[357] Legal restrictions are often aimed at Muslim clothing that traditionally covers the female body, including the face.[358] Other debates have questioned whether public servants should be allowed to wear a head scarf, if crucifixes should be displayed in public buildings (in Bavaria),[359] or if schoolboys should be permitted to refuse to shake the

353 Chapter 1.1 discusses this aspect further.

354 Stolz et al., *Religion und Spiritualität in der Ich-Gesellschaft*. See detailed discussion in the chapter "Religious lifestyles in the media" in part I.

355 Wim Hofstee and Arje Van der Koij, "Introduction," in *Religion beyond Its Private Role in Modern Society*, ed. Wim Hofstee and Arje Van der Koij, vol. 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–14.

356 Fritz et al., *Sichtbare Religion*, 1/2.

357 Radhika Sanghani, "Burka Bans: The Countries Where Muslim Women Can't Wear Veils," *The Telegraph*, July 8, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/burka-bans-the-countries-where-muslim-women-cant-wear-veils/.

358 Reyhan Şahin, "Symbol of Isalm, of Emancipation, or of Oppression? Various meanings of Muslim Head Coverings in Germany," *Journal jüdisches Museum Berlin*, no. 16 (2017): 47–54.

359 Kate Connolly, "Bavarians Wary of New Law Requiring Crosses in All Public Buildings," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2018, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/31/bavarians-wary-of-new-law-requiring-crosses-in-all-public-buildings.

hand of a female teacher for religious reasons.[360] These recent debates around religious symbols in the public sphere were intensely covered by the media.

Some prominent academics contend that religion is returning[361] or has never left or deem secularization to be a European special case.[362] Linda Woodhead has adopted a middle way in this debate, noting that the tension between the private and the public is integral, for "spirituality – like a great deal of religion – therefore has both public and personal aspects. These aspects are analytically separable but not distinct, and should not be pulled apart as sharply as the public/private binary would have us to do."[363] The private – or according to Woodhead "personal" – and the public are intermingled in the religious realm and are therefore useful categories on a systematic level only. We can, however, deploy these concepts as analytical tools as we explore the interface between reality shows and religion.

RTV as interface between the private and public sphere of religion

Why should we be concerned to know whether religion must be considered private or public and how those roles might be changing? The distinction between these two spheres has long been formative for scholarly research about religion, and, as we shall see, scholars need not fear that this defining rationale is about to disappear. As discussed there are different opinions about the private and the public sphere of religion but the authors mainly agree that there is something going on between these realms. And it makes sense to look at specific cases to work out this complex relationship. The binary terms are on several levels interwoven in the RTV and the analysis of this fabric provides rich insights into a relevant dimensions of religion.

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360 "Swiss Parliament Will Not Enforce Handshakes in School," SWI swissinfo.ch, accessed February 8, 2019, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/religion-in-the-classroom_swiss-parliament-will-not-enforce-handshakes-in-school/43549838.

361 Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism."

362 Casanova, "Eurozentristischer Säkularismus und die Herausforderung der Globalisierung," 33–37.

363 Linda Woodhead, "New Forms of Public Religion: Spirituality in Global Civil Society," in *Religion beyond Its Private Role in Modern Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 49.

The media have a central role to play in the debates about religion in the public and the private spheres. As we have seen (chap. 2, part I), newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet all participate in the diffusion of religion in the public sphere. For Jürgen Habermas their participation is characteristic of a post-secular society where religion is involved in meaning- and decision-making processes.[364] As a type of documentary media, reality shows that engage religion contribute in a particular way, relocating religion from the private to the public sphere. The staged images of religion in the private sphere that are broadcast on RTV are circulated back into the private sphere through the space of consumption. In this case RTV functions as a multifaceted interface: individual and private actions become public and public actions become private. If reality shows are not actually depicting private religion, as Krotz argues, but rather religion staged as private, the complexity of the interface is intensified. The distinction does not disappear, as philosopher of law Bart C. Labuschagne contends,[365] but the media define their own rules in the spaces of production, representation, circulation/distribution and consumption and these rules are relevant for the perception of religion.

Using a single form of documentary media, *The District* and *Sister Wives* depict very different Mormon experiences. Those different lives enable a multilayered investigation of the private and public dimensions of religion. Both polygamous Mormons and members of the LDS Church are depicted in private spaces, where they defend their lifestyle, their religious institution, or even the nature of their family unit. This chapter will now explore how RTV shapes religion and how religion shapes RTV, first through discussion of the spaces of communication and then through a close reading of a number of central sequences.

364 Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in der Öffentlichkeit der 'postsäkularen' Gesellschaft," in *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II. Aufsätze und Repliken*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 313.

365 Bart C. Labuschagne, Wim Hofstee, and Arje Van der Koij, "Religion and Politics in Post-Secular Society: Beyond the Public / Private Divide," in *Religion beyond Its Private Role in Modern Society* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013), 27.

5.2. Entertainingly instructing the audience in The District

In October 2012 the *Deseret News*, a Salt Lake City-based newspaper, ran the headline "LDS missionaries are stars of new reality TV series."[366] The wording was accurate in capturing the nature of the show – the spotlight is turned on missionaries and their work (fig. 39). But the show also actively supports the work of mission, potentially motivating young Mormons to go on mission or encouraging a friendly response from non-Mormons visited by missionaries. The missionaries who later became "stars" of *The District 2* (US 2012/13) had originally been filmed for an instructional video made in 2009 in San Diego/CA to prepare missionaries for service. The show is collaboratively produced by BYUtv and the LDS Church's Missionary Department. Established in 2000, BYUtv is a satellite TV station of Brigham Young University (BYU). By 2004 its programming was reaching an audience of 26 million and 15 years later more than 53 million US households.[367] The webpage for the series announces the show as follows: "These video segments show real missionaries, members, and investigators in non-scripted, unrehearsed, actual missionary situations."[368]

The production history tells us something of the interplay between RTV and religion. During three months in 2007, a film crew recorded four male and two female missionaries at the Mormon mission in San Antonio, TX. The film footage was edited and used as training material, supplementary to the standard mission curriculum of the mission book *Preach my Gospel*, which had been recently introduced, in 2004.[369] This footage later became *The District 1*. Church leaders had seen the video as a way to help missionaries implement the new approach to mission outlined in *Preach my Gospel*, for example in relation to their daily schedule:

366 Jamshid Ghazi Askar, "LDS Missionaries Are Stars of New Reality TV Series," DeseretNews.com, October 12, 2012, https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865564309/LDS-missionaries-are-stars-of-new-reality-TV-series.html.

367 BYUtv Giving. "What We Do."

368 "The District," accessed February 8, 2019, https://www.mormonchannel.org/watch/collection/the-district.

369 Intellectual Reserve, Salt Lake City/UT, US 2004. The book has been translated into 42 languages.

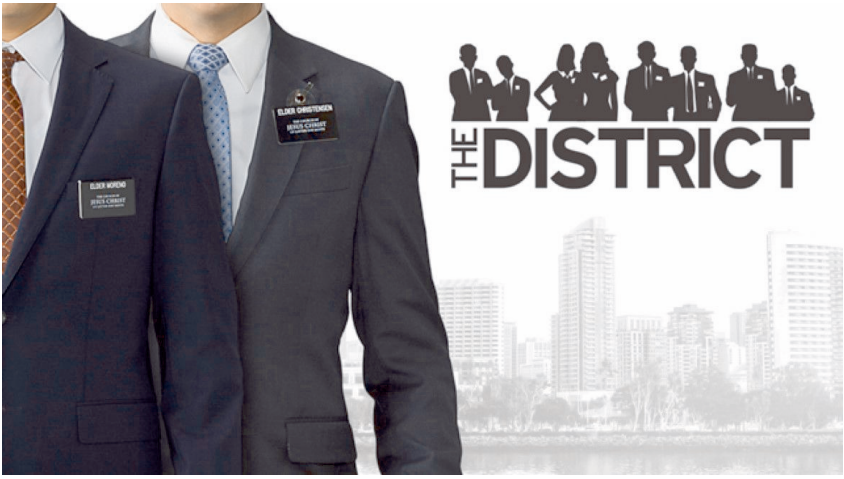

Fig. 39 A poster for the reality show The District 2 shows two business suits, an identify marker for Mormon missionaries.

Missionary Daily Schedule

6:30 a.m.	Arise, pray, exercise (30 minutes), and prepare for the day.
7:30 a.m.	Breakfast.
8:00 a.m.	Personal study: *The Book of Mormon*, other scriptures, doctrines of the missionary lessons, and other chapters from Preach My Gospel, the Missionary Handbook, and the Missionary Health Guide.
9:00 a.m.	Companion study: share what you have learned during personal study, prepare to teach, practice teaching, study chapters from *Preach My Gospel*, confirm plans for the day.
10:00 a.m.	Begin proselyting. Missionaries learning a language study that language for an additional 30 to 60 minutes, including planning language learning activities to use during the day. Missionaries may take an hour for lunch and additional study, and an hour for dinner at times during the day that fit best with their proselyting. Normally dinner should be finished no later than 6:00 p.m.

9:00 p.m.	Return to living quarters (unless teaching a lesson; then return by 9:30) and plan the next day's activities (30 minutes). Write in journal, prepare for bed, pray.
10:30 p.m.	Retire to bed.[370]

Criticism of *The District 1* noted that the footage seemed too perfect; the reality of tough missionary work was lacking.[371] More flaws would give a greater sense of the reality. The next version would also contextualize the missionaries, who through self-reflection present their stories on-screen in black and white, with personal material such as photos of their family and from their childhoods included. They were also allowed to talk about more intimate and emotional topics during interviews.

The District 2 was filmed in San Diego/CA with six male and two female missionaries. Now BYUtv creative director Scott Swofford, the former media director at the Missionary Department responsible for the production of training videos and for initiating the *I'm a Mormon* campaign, proposed the material be used for a reality show.[372] For the second season more time was invested in preparing the missionaries. The filming itself was more elaborate and took five times longer.

The videos of *The District 2*, with the title *8 Stories*, are permanently shown at the theatre of the LDS Church visitor center in Salt Lake City (UT), located in the temple district. Behind three dark glass doors three monitors, on which the show is screened, are visible from the outside (fig. 40). To the left and right of the doors eight posters present the protagonists in oversized and illuminated posters, where they are posed as upright role models for the perfect missionary (fig. 41). Inside the theater the eight young people are again present on huge images displayed on the wall, but now they, or at least the men, are dressed in casual clothing. The male members of the group wear jeans and a checkered shirt; the women are wearing prudish Mormon-missionary-conforming blouses (fig. 42). The elegant theater in which *8 Stories* is presented is indicative of how important the mission is for the LDS Church. The investment is not surprising: today members of the LDS Church are more likely to be converts than cradle Mormons.[373]

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370 Preach My Gospel, 2004, viii.

371 Bridget Kreis, "'The District': Where Are They Now?," *Third Hour* (blog), March 16, 2015, https://thirdhour.org/blog/hasten/district-now/.

372 The campaign is discussed in detail in part II, chapter 1.

373 Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, 136. See also chapter 3.4 for more details.

Fig. 40/ Fig. 41/ Fig. 42 The show is prominently presented at the Temple Square North Visitors' Center in Salt Lake City/UT (Images: Marie-Therese Mäder, US 2015).

The two series can be streamed online or watched on two DVDs, which include further instructional material. The DVDs have different titles that suggest their purposes: "Demonstrating Principles of Planning, Finding, and Working with Members" (*The District 1*) and "Demonstrating Principles of Teaching" (*The District 2*).[374] Each DVD case contains two DVDs, with the series' episodes on disc one and the training segments on disc two. The space of consumption of this LDS Church reality show demonstrates how a single product can be used for different purposes. The production tapped *The District*'s full potential, for it is used to instruct future missionaries, to explain to their parents and families to what it means for their sons and daughters to be sent on mission, and to inform non-Mormons who might encounter missionaries in the street or on their doorstep.

374 The DVD is produced by the LDS Church and officially distributed by Intellectual Reserve (US 2007, 2010), a non-profit corporation owned by the corporation of the president of the church.

Communication strategies of *The District 1* and *The District 2*

In additional to the different social actors, there are obvious stylistic differences between the two seasons. *The District 1* works with more instructional means and is therefore less entertaining than *The District 2*. For example, *The District 2* introduces the social actors with their names and each episode has its own title, whereas *The District 1* prosaically calls its three episodes simply *Planning*. The narrative of *The District 1* also focusses less on the missionaries and their personalities and more on the processes of mission work; a shift in emphasis sees the former more central in *The District 2*. This shift is replicated with the deployment of an entertainment mode and other specific stylistic elements of (reality-) shows: each episode of *The District 2*, for example, begins with recurring opening titles and each finishes with a "cliff hanger", intended to rouse curiosity about the next episode.

Both seasons, we should note, explicitly but in somewhat different ways refer to the documentary media genre. Season 1 of the *District 1* starts with a title on a black background accompanied by suspenseful electronic music that simulates the rhythm of a heartbeat. The male voice-over comments: "What you are about to see is real and unscripted." Then the series' title is superimposed and the voice resumes: "The missionaries, investigators, and members in this program are not actors." In the first episodes of *The District 1* the title is still visible as two missionaries are filmed from behind as they walk through the streets (fig. 43). It is night. Suddenly one missionary sees some passers-by and starts to run, saying: "Huh, there is a man, let's go talk to him" (00:00:16–00:00:19).

Although in both seasons each episode provides a short summary of the previous episode, *The District 2* follows a new path in introducing its narrative.[375] The episodes in the later series open with the theme music and scenes from sunny San Diego, longshots of the beach, surfers under a blue sky, skaters in the street and a typical white Mormon temple. Then the voice-over explains (00:00:08–00:00:15): "San Diego, California. This is our home for eighteen months to two years." Short scenes from the series follow, with

375 The discussion refers to the six episodes of *The District 2* that are available on the webpage "The District." Accessed March 1, 2019. https://www.mormonchannel.org/watch/collection/the-district. The episodes can be downloaded in different sizes, indicative of the church's desire to ensure the episodes can be widely dispersed. Surprisingly, the downloaded files for epodes 1–3 differ from the embedded sources. They are longer and contain partly different footage.

Fig. 43 The District 1 introduces its protagonists proselytizing in the streets in a suspenseful nighttime atmosphere (The District 1, Planning, 00:00:09).

the missionaries commenting on their experiences. The commentary continues – "This is the story of eight missionaries who are called to serve" – as the eight missionaries are introduced visually with a split-screen of a close-up on one side and a single shot on the other side (fig. 44–51).

"What you are about to see is real and unscripted. The missionaries, investigators, and members in this program are not actors. This is the story of *The District*."[376] The opening credits, accompanied by uplifting piano music, include scenes from different episodes and finish with the title of the show on a black background. The commentary announces: "Last time on the district" and then earlier events are summarized to refresh the audience's memory (00:01:19–00:01:55). The ending of each episode adopts a similar model, this time providing glimpses of the next episode. The audiovisual devices applied to the opening and ending of each episode of *The District 2* correspond with conventional RTV narration. To this point, the narration of *The District 2* has addressed the audience in an entertaining reading mode, with an instructional mode not yet apparent.

376 *The District 2*, 00:00:34–00:01:18.

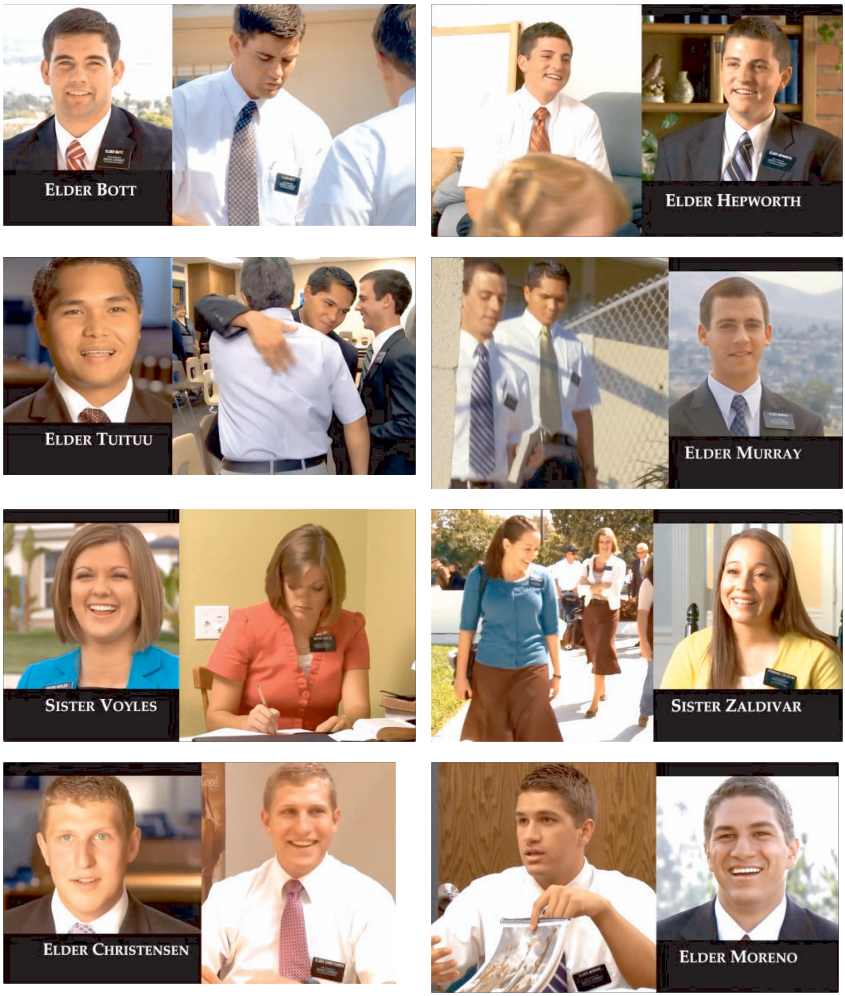

Fig. 44/ Fig. 45/ Fig. 46/ Fig. 47/ Fig. 48/ Fig. 49/ Fig. 50/ Fig. 51 The social actors are introduced with a split screen that presents them in portrait on one side and at work on the other side (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:00:27–00:00:34).

Success stories

One particular characteristic of the episodes is not typical of RTV style: the dialogue, in part unscripted, is conspicuously standardized to follow the missionary guide *Preach my Gospel*. Although the scenes are pronounced to be unscripted, for several weeks in advance, the missionaries had been prepared for the shooting, alongside the basic missionary training with which each mission begins. The missionaries' behavior is therefore not entirely spontaneous and seems somewhat rehearsed.

Turning Point, the sequence from episode 7 to which we will now turn and which tackles the missionaries' work and successful proselytization and contains reflection by the missionaries, addresses as already mentioned three consumption spaces. First, it is intended for future missionaries, who are instructed in how to proselytize. Secondly, it helps their family members and friends understand what they experience during the 18–24 months of their absence. And thirdly, candidates for baptism, "investigators" as they are known, are informed about the process of conversion. The term "investigators" is intended to convey that the work of learning about the church is done by the potential converts, who are to establish for themselves the truth of the church's teachings. The episode has an emotional arch that shows doubts and frustrations on both sides, by missionaries and possible converts, but reaches a happy ending (00:20:37–00:24:14), at least for two missionaries and their convert. The narrative is built around a Jynx, a candidate who is not easily persuaded and whose stubborn unwillingness to accept everything the missionaries say is charming and winning. The close reading that follows here considers the reading modes of the narration and how it connects to the public and private dimensions of religion.

Proselytizing in private

A short visual insert of a red rose marks the beginning of a new sequence, with Jynx and the missionaries in a private space, her living room. Jynx is obviously not thrilled to hear that Mormons do not drink coffee. Elder Moreno tries to find the right words to make the rules clear without being too overbearing or too strict. The camera is very close to Jynx (fig.52), showing her surprise and indignation as she reacts to the idea that she might stop drinking coffee.

Fig. 52 "Coffee!?" Jinx finds it hard to grasp that as a Mormon she would have to give up drinking coffee (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:20:41).

Fig. 53 Elder Moreno leads the conversation while Elder Christensen listens attentively and supports his colleague with his presence (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:20:43).

The two elders, Moreno and Christensen, are filmed in a medium close shot. The scene applies the reverse-shot principle, with the camera located in the middle of this private conversation space, filming the social actors from the front as they talk and listen to each other. The scene gives the impression that the camera, or viewer, is participating in this private conversation. When Elder Moreno seeks to explain why Jynx should give up coffee, the camera moves closer. The elder is now in focus, challenged to explain the rules (fig. 53): "Why do you think the Lord would want us to stay away from these types of things?" (00:20:43–00:20:46).

Jynx' hesitation is emotional and inscribed in her facial expressions. She defends her reluctance to stop drinking coffee and beer, surprised and also somewhat indignant at the suggestion: "I can understand harmful or addictive substances and illegal drugs and tobacco. But I love my beer and I like my coffee every morning." She laughs at the absurdity of the rule. At first the viewer may assume she is arguing with a single person, but a two shot reveals two people are sitting across from here – Elders always proselytize in pairs. Later we see that four people are in fact present: a two shot shows her friend Joan sitting next to her on the sofa (fig. 54). Joan is herself a Mormon and supports the missionaries' arguments about living according to the rules of health of the "Word of Wisdom".[377]

377 "Word of Wisdom" is part of the scriptural canon of the LDS Church. It includes instruction on what should be eaten and drunk and prohibits the use of tobacco and drugs. These rules are based on revelations by Joseph Smith and are part of Mormon teachings. See section 89 in Orson Pratt and Church of Jesus

Fig. 54 Joan proposes to Jynx that she should start by giving up just one thing (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:21:27).

Elder Moreno proceeds with his instruction, with Jynx so far making no commitments (00:21:00–00:21:44): "You are getting a confirmation that it's true, it would have to come through experience and maybe living it to try to find out if this really is inspired from God." Jynx is shown in a close-up. Elder Moreno proceeds: "Just like if you wanna find out Joseph Smith was a prophet you have to read *The Book of Mormon*. Likewise, we invite you ..." The two elders are again shown, with Elder Moreno continuing, "… to see the fruits of living the Word of Wisdom." A two-shot of Joan and Jynx follows and Moreno continues off-screen: "Will you live the Word of Wisdom so that you can prepare yourself for baptism?" Jynx is surprised: "You mean start now?" Moreno affirms: "Uh huh." Now Joan intervenes: "Pick one thing, one thing." Jynx answers with obvious hesitation: "Ok, I give up tobacco." Now everybody is laughing. But Joan and Elder Moreno don't give up. Joan adds: "That you do!" Again the group laughs. Moreno presses further; he wants a commitment: "No, just live the commandment now." The first part of the conversation ends with a joke when Jynx answers that she will give up "illegal drugs" which she obviously doesn't consume. After a cut Jynx is shown in an interview situation; she is holding a copy of *The Book of Mormon* and reflecting "on the sofa" on

Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (LaVergne/TN: Kessinger, 2009).

Fig. 55 Brother Hunt, a LDS Church member, is supervising the discussion. He is in the middle of the frame, sitting in the highest position (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:21:58).

her possible conversion to Mormonism. Framed in a medium close-up, she talks to an invisible interviewee who appears to be at a 45 degree angle from the camera. Her pronouncements now seem less trenchant and direct (00:21:47–00:21:58): "My big concern was all these little rules. Maybe when I read this I will see that God says in here that all these D&A [deals and allowances] are necessary."

Finally, in a medium long shot we see all five of the social actors who are participating in this conversation. Church member Brother Hunt is centrally positioned in the shot, with Jynx and her friend on his right and the two elders on his left. His position in the middle of the space acknowledges his privilege, as a supervisor in the LDS Church (fig. 55).

Elder Moreno persists: "So will you commit to the Word of Wisdom?" Jynx remains stubborn: "Ok, I won't drink beer." Joan is laughing, and Jynx continues: "But I have to keep my coffee going this week." The camera zooms in to Jynx as she makes this pronouncement; she too is now laughing. In a close-up Elder Moreno says insistently: "Ok, and next time when we meet will you give up coffee?" Jynx is not persuaded and will not make any promises. She looks Moreno in the eye and says (fig. 56): "We will see." The camera returns to Moreno after a cut and the audience see a certain disappointment in his facial expression as he answers with a curt

"ok", and nods disappointedly (fig. 57). Jynx' resistance obviously challenges Moreno; at the same time her reaction is relatable.

Fig. 56 Asked to agree to stop drinking coffee at their next meeting, Jynx looks Moreno in the eyes and declares: "We will see." (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:22:15).

Fig. 57 Moreno's disappointment at Jynx' resistance is obvious (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:22:19).

Fig. 58 Evidently Jynx does not like the rules she would have to follow as a baptized member of the LDS Church (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:22:26).

Apparently Jynx does not agree with all the rules she will have to abide by: "It's just that I have so few vices and that little cup of coffee in the morning." She nods almost sadly. Joan tries to cheer her up (fig. 58): "But you can..." She is quickly interrupted by Jynx' comment: "That isn't nice!"

Baptism in public

The episode finishes with a successful conversion story: the baptism of Eric (00:22:29–00:24:07). This, the narration proposes, is the outcome awaiting Jynx. Eric has refrained from cigarettes, alcohol, and coffee in order to become a member of the church, as he mentions in the interview at the end of the episode. The sequence comes after that with Jynx and takes place in a public space, within the church at the baptismal font.[378] Off-camera Eric explains his decision to convert. Mormon priests bless him, a rite that follows the baptism. The whole sequence is accompanied by uplifting guitar music (00:22:35–00:24:05). Eric proceeds with his story off-screen: "I wasn't drinking anymore, I wasn't smoking. And it gives me more energy and I try to think of good things rather than thinking of bad things that happened to me because a while back I'm kind of like full of anger and hate every time, but now I kind of let go." We hear the priest say "Amen" (fig. 59), and Eric replies "Amen." After the second "Amen" a black is superimposed and the title *The District* fades in.

Fig. 59 The camera is very close on Eric during the blessing rite (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:24:05).

378 Baptisms are public events in the LDS Church, to which non-Mormons are welcome. They differ from rites such as the sealing ceremony of couples (marriage) or the baptisms for the dead. They take place in the temple to which only Mormons officially recommended by the bishop have access.

The end sequence provides detailed information about how a Mormon baptism is performed. It is also an opportunity for Elder Murray and Elder Tuituu to speak about persistence. They describe the process of proselytizing during an interview that continues in the voice-over during the baptism. Eric, wearing the white baptism garment, and Murray are posing for pictures in front of the baptismal font. Elder Murray slaps Eric on the back and talks to him. Elder Tuituu comments: "This man has a strong desire to follow Christ and makes sure that he is in his life and he is willing to trust God and willing to follow him. But even though it can than result … " Elder Tuituu stops briefly and proceeds again when the baptism group is shown, with the priest, Elders Murray and Tiutuu, and Eric: "My companion and I were able to see a result for him. We knew what might be ahead of him. We were so excited."

The whole baptism is depicted largely as instruction. First the rite is rehearsed outside the pool, where the priest explains to the person to be baptized what exactly he will do in the font (fig. 60). After a group picture with the Elders, the priest and the baptism candidate Eric (fig. 61), the actual baptism inside the pool follows (fig. 62), filmed with an underwater camera (fig. 63). The audience enters virtually into the baptism font and observes the rite closely, able to witness the moment when the priest and the newly born Mormon shake hands in the pool right after the act of immersion (fig. 64). Before the next part of the rite starts, the missionaries congratulate and hug Eric (fig. 65). They are very proud of the baptism, and the perspective provided by the camera seems to suggest that they are congratulating themselves on this achievement: when Elder Tuituu hugs Eric, Eric is visible only from the back.

During this rite of passage, Murray comments, mostly in the voice-over, on his experiences during missionary work. In the course of the interview in the baptism sequence he is shown in close-up in two short cutaways as he comments (00:23:13–00:23:47): "But I've followed that prompting to go just a little bit more and it came. And so now I have a testimony that whenever you do all that you can, Murray, to bring about the good, to have success, it will happen, it may not happen in your timetable or the way you want it to do. But it always happens and I know that." During the blessing rite the voice of the priest is audible in the sound bridge (fig. 66): "We lay hands upon your head and confirm you a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

The episode ends with a baptism and the blessing of the community by the priests, as is also the case at the end of the seven other episodes. The structural analogy highlights that the efforts of the missionaries are always

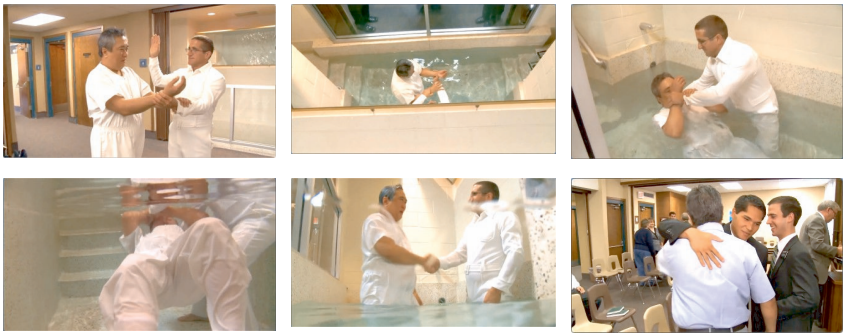

Fig. 60/ Fig. 61/ Fig. 62/ Fig. 63/ Fig. 64/ Fig. 65 The performance of a baptism is instructional for both missionaries and potential candidates for baptism (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:22:42/ 00:22:56/ 00:23:06/ 00:23:08/ 00:23:12/ 00:23:23).

Fig. 66 Eric is now a member of the LDS Church and receives a blessing. He is accepted into the community surrounded by Mormon priests, who welcome him and care about him, the scene suggests (The District 2, Turning Point, 00:24:01).

rewarded by God, evident in baptisms that result from the missionaries' persistence.

Reading modes of proselytizing in private to be baptized in public

The close reading of the two sequences reveals how the public and private dimensions structure the narration and its communication spaces. It also shows how an informational mode is combined with an entertaining mode. The first sequence takes place in Jynx' private home, a private space, where the missionaries are invited to proselytize. Elder Moreno intervenes in her private preferences related to eating and drinking; Jynx reacts with indignation. His instructions are felt by Jynx as intrusions into what is private. The audience are not only invited to observe the conversation, but the use of the shot-reverse-shot rule also locates them at the heart of Jynx' living room, where they experience these delicate and personal interactions. Jynx' attitude is transparent and therefore remarkably readable. The private decision to become a Mormon becomes a public event, a shift that is reinforced when the image reveals the presence of a supervisor from the church.

The second sequence, depicting the baptism, takes place in a public space. Baptisms are carried out in the church, to which everybody has access, Mormon and non-Mormon alike. The filming of Eric's baptism carries an informational mode for future converts, missionaries, and non-Mormons. The missionaries' statements are intended to encourage other elders and sisters to persist, even though finding candidates for conversion is not an easy task. The narrative attributes the responsibility for a successful mission to the missionaries, as a product of their abilities and efforts. Many aspects of the mission are left out of this reality series: we do not see, for example, self-critical reflection on whether proselytizing is always justified, nor does anyone asks more deeply about responsibility in relation to a candidate who is in a personally difficult situation but is given hope in the form of a potential conversion. In a few instances we see no-longer active members brought back to the church, but the show's ultimate goal is to portray baptisms that provide evidence of a successful mission.

The District also is an opportunity for the LDS Church and its Missionary Department to define their own narrative about missionaries and their service. Here they frame a response to critical and often damaging representations of the LDS Church mission. The RTV format is applied in the interests of the church, to establish and communicate a positive image. The young and likable social actors are used for exactly these purposes. We do not know if they will profit in the long term from their participation in the series. We can expect that they will be seen positively by other church

members and that their church-based networks will be strengthened. But we cannot know, for example, of any personal consequences.

The implications for social actors who reveal their private lives through participation in the public space of the reality show are particularly profound in the case of polygamous families. The religious institution is less relevant in these shows than in *The District*. The focus is on the social actors' private lives within their own homes and on legal issues related to their lifestyle, as we shall now explore.

5.3. *Instructively entertaining the audience in Sister Wives*

Reality-shows love polygamy. The depicted families usually consist of a single husband, several wives, and an impressive number of children and sometimes grandchildren. The show *Three Wives, One Husband* (Channel 4, UK 2017) is about three polygamous families living in houses built into a rock in the Utah desert. The families look very contemporary and in many ways not unlike other families – except that several wives are married to one husband and they live largely secluded from other communities. In the RTV show *#Seekingsisterwife* (TLC, 2018) the search for another wife is the focus of the narration. *Polygamy, USA* (National Geographic, US 2013) shows a whole community living a polygamous lifestyle in the secluded Centennial Park community, where cameras were permitted to record their daily lives for the first time in 2012.[379] *My 5 Wives* (TLC, US 2013–2016) was a less successful RTV show and was canceled after two seasons, perhaps because the show is very similar to *Sister Wives*, which is produced by the same channel.[380] The latter more successful show has run for 14 seasons so far and depicts the lives of the Brown family, with one husband, four wives, 18 children and at the moment two grandchildren. It has been aired in the United States since 2010 and in German-speaking European countries since 2014, with the title *Alle meine Frauen*. At the beginning of the show the Browns live in Utah, but during the first season they flee from Utah to Las Vegas, fearful of the legal repercussions of their polygamy.[381]

379 Chapters 7 and 7.1 discuss this series in more detail.
380 Wives married to a single husband in a polygamist setting are called sister wives.
381 Kelly O. White, "The Sister Wives: Has Incest and Sexual Assault Become the New Reality? The United States District Court for the District of Utah Grants

In almost all these shows the social actors self-identify as Mormons, although they are affiliated with different churches.[382] These shows have had a marked influence on public perceptions of polygamy, as Jane Bennion has recorded: "Because of shows such as *Big Love*[383] and *Sister Wives*, polygamy has become part of prime-time culture, no longer relegated to the hidden cultish confines of southern border towns and western desert wastelands."[384] While such shows about polygamy focus on the family unit, they also revolve around religion, as I will demonstrate in the case of *Sister Wives*.

Here are the Browns

The Brown family – husband Kody, his four wives, Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn, and their 18 children – are members of the Apostolic United Brethren, a fundamentalist church within the grouping that identify as Latter-day Saints.[385] During the course of the show, the family's younger generation gradually leaves home for college and the numerous family members are less often all together. They do reunite for weddings, however, and four weddings have been depicted so far (fig. 67).

Polygamists the Holy Grail," *Creighton Law Review* 48, no. 3 (June 2015): 681–708.

382 In ✂*Seekingsisterwife* depicts a family that is not religiously motivated to live in a polygamous family setting.

383 *Big Love* is an acclaimed fiction series produced by HBO (2006–2011) about one husband and his three wives.

384 Janet Bennion, *Women of Principle : Female Networking in Contemporary Mormon Polygyny* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1998), 129–142. The anthropologist Bennion lived for two years in a polygamist group undertaking field work. Her research focusses on the strong female network within this grouping.

385 J. Gordon Melton, ed., "Polygamy-Practicing," in *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8th ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2009), 646–51.

Fig. 67 A family portrait taken at the wedding of Kody and Christine's daughter Aspyn in 2018. The series portrays several weddings very prominently, including Kody Brown's marriage to his fourth wife, Robyn (Image: https://www.tlcme.com/shows/sister-wives/photo-galleries/sister-wives-daughter-aspyn-browns-wedding-photos, accessed March 17, 2019).

The series communicates a religious worldview in combination with theological ideas as presented by the Brown family and shaped by RTV style. Even though RTV is per definition an unscripted show format, it exhibits a standardized audiovisual language with editing key to conveying a consistent but also entertaining narration. For example, the repetition of takes within the narration of *Sister Wives* highlights situations or stresses specific statements by the social actors. The soundtrack often emotionalizes the narrative as happens in mainstream fiction shows. The sofa discussions are another repeated element of RTV, with different combinations of family members reflecting about past and future events while sitting on the sofa. The individual branches do not participate in family sofa sessions; rather these occurrences involve the wives, with or without Kody and in different combination, and on some occasions solely the teenagers in the family. The youngest children usually appear in the final episode(s) of each season, which carry the recurring title *Sister Wives Tell All*. Only in the four episodes that each focus on a single wife – *Meri Behind the Scenes*, *Robyn Behind the Scenes* (Sister Wives, season 8, special episodes), *All about Janelle* and *All about Christine* (*Sister Wives*, season 9, episodes 4 and 6, US 2015) – are the wives interviewed on their own.

All the adults in the family have a Mormon background: Kody and Janelle were formerly members of the LDS Church; Meri, Christine, and

Robyn were raised in Mormon polygamist families. Over the course of 14 seasons and nine years, the Brown family starts several new lives, with new jobs, schools, and housing. The audience watches them going on holiday, struggling with relationships, meeting friends and the extended family, attending church services, expanding their businesses, building houses, and having more children. We see the adults as parents and watch the children graduate from high school or start college. We follow the engagements of daughters Maddy, Mykelti, and Aspyn, including their marriage festivities, and the coming out of Meri and Kody's only child, Mariah, as a lesbian. During the recurring interviews on the sofa, the five adults and from time to time also their children talk about events that have been emotionally challenging. The family members also reflect on their religious worldview, among other topics, and its impact on their lives.

The representation of the Browns' religious worldview is conspicuously connected to gender roles within the family.[386] There are several reasons for this focus. First, as the name of the show, *Sister Wives*, suggests, the relations between the wives are at the core of the narrative. Secondly, the polygamous lifestyle is key to the cosmology of the church to which the Browns belong, which is, thirdly, theologically based on a clearly heteronormative gender division. The gender-studies scholar Brenda R. Weber poses a challenging question in wondering "if the very shows that are the most ridiculous in their gender imperatives…,"[387] like for example *Sister Wives*, "…actually provide the most provocative and, often, progressive models for thinking about the workings of pleasure, power, and oppression in a twenty-first century that is governed by the image?"[388] We might well assume that in a polygamist setting, here with one husband and four wives, the gender roles specify a subjugated position for the women. But as I will demonstrate, the differentiation of labor amongst the family members allows not only variety across gender roles within the Brown family but also multiple positions for female viewers, which might in turn encourage the latter to question their own position within their private rela-

386 Myev Rees calls the interpretation of religion in *Sister Wives* a "Protestant Project" (114), as the family rejects the established LDS Church and seeks religious freedom. See Myev Rees, "Sister Wives. The Protestantization of Mormon Polygamy," in *Religion and Reality TV: Faith in Late Capitalism*, ed. Mara Einstein, Diane Winston, and Katherine Madden (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 107–120.

387 Weber, "Trash Talk: Gender as an Analytic on Reality Television," 10.

388 Weber, 10.

tionships. The husband in these depictions is almost entirely restricted to the traditional role of the head of the family.

The interactions between the public and private realms in *Sister Wives* are a key component of the relationship between RTV and religion. We will see how the spaces of communication and its reading modes address the private sphere through the depiction of binary gender relations and how the religious worldview and the theology of AUB can be deployed for public justification of the polygamous lifestyle. Additionally, however, we shall explore how the TLC reality show questions these religiously justified binary gender roles in the public spaces of circulation and consumption.

Binary gender roles in *Sister Wives*' four spaces of communication

At first sight *Sister Wives* appears to be based on a patriarchal and heteronormative value system in the space of representation, for how else can polygamy be understood? Weber describes the attitude underlying the show:

> *Sister Wives* … relies on a homo/heteronormative logic in valorizing the idea that consenting adults can form whatever form of families they choose, as long as those families seem different rather than "weird". (On *Sister Wives*, this means that four wives can have a separate sexual relationships with one man, but they cannot sleep with one another or altogether).[389]

Referring to its space of consumption, TLC notes on its German-language website that the target audience comprises women aged between 20 and 49. The Prime Media network demographic for 2014 confirms that the primary US audience was aged between 25–54 and 75% female and that TLC is the most-watched cable network for female viewers on Friday nights.[390] Furthermore the channel is ranked as a top five cable network for female

389 Brenda R. Weber, ed., *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality & Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 28.

390 "TLC," Comcast Spotlight, January 26, 2010, https://comcastspotlight.com/content/tlc; "TLC Rings in Records Ratings for 2018; A Top Three Cable Network for Women – Discovery, Inc.," accessed June 13, 2019, https://corporate.discovery.com/discovery-newsroom/tlc-rings-in-record-ratings-for-2018-a-top-three-cable-network-for-women/.

viewers on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays. These numbers suggest that the channel is indeed reaching its target audience.[391]

Weber's exploration of gender in the space of consumption recognizes that RTV is gendered not only in light of the female social actors who appear on screen but also in being defined as lowbrow culture produced for a female audience:

> It is not just the producer (the female author / the television producer) or the product (the novel / Reality TV) itself that is gendered and, through this gendering, coded as subordinate and less valuable; it is the very way value itself is referenced.[392]

While RTV is indeed associated with certain gendered values, *Sister Wives* contests those connotations with its dislocation of the traditional ties between sex and gender, a reality that is in line with argumentation by Jackey Stacey in her thoughtful chapter "A Certain Refusal of Difference: Feminism and Film Theory", written in 1989.[393] In considering the relations between representation and audience, Stacey stated that biological essentialism underlies feminist film theory and contended that "we need to separate gender identification from sexuality, too often conflated in the name of sexual difference."[394] As soon as we separate gender from sexuality new reading possibilities for *Sisters Wives* open up. Thus the non-sexual relationships between the wives have a validity that parallels the sexual relationships between each wife and Kody. Courtney Bailey even attributes a "slippery and contradictory quality of queerness"[395] to the show, arguing that *Sister Wives* questions the simple heteronormative gender narrative by performing repeated heterosexuality.

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391 The audience demographic in Germany is quite similar, although TLC is not yet as successful as in the US. The channel has been present in German-speaking European countries only since 2014, making its success still remarkable.

392 Weber, "Trash Talk: Gender as an Analytic on Reality Television," 15.

393 Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, vol. 2, Media and Society Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 41–56.

394 Jackie Stacey, "Desperately Seeking Difference: Jackie Stacey Considers Desire Between Women in Narrative Cinema," in *Reading Images*, ed. Julia Thomas (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2001), 53.

395 Bailey, Courtney. "Love Multiplied: Sister Wives, Polygamy, and Queering Heterosexuality." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 38–57.

> The show accomplishes this queering of heterosexuality most obviously by highlighting continuities between the experiences of polygamists and the experiences of LGBT individuals in a heteronormative world. In less obvious ways, the show also queers gender and sexual norms by validating an alternative vision of civic intimacy based on public advocacy, female homosociality and non-normative bodies.[396]

Female "homosociality" is part not only of the everyday life of the family but also of their religious worldview, for the relationships between the sister wives are theologically legitimized. How then does their religious worldview influence the binary gender roles in *Sister Wives* and how might the private and public spaces of religion add to the dynamic of "deconstructing sexual normativity beyond just heteronormativity"? To answer these questions let us first look at the religious context.

Polygamist Family Brown and the Apostolic United Brethren (AUB)

The Apostolic United Brethren (AUB), the religious community to which the Brown family belongs, is a splitter group of the FLDS[397] founded by Lorin C. Woolley in 1912. When Joseph White Musser, later the first AUB prophet, joined the FLDS he compiled and published various accounts of the 1886 revelation about plural marriage and about denying blacks admission to the priesthood by referring to descendants of Cain. The AUB believes that the LDS Church has no claim on Joseph Smith Jr., Brigham Young and John Taylor, among others, as leaders because it has rejected their teachings. In 1954 Joseph White Musser, after suffering a stroke, he appointed two new members, Margarito Bautista and Rulon C. Allred, to guide the community. The Apostolic United Brethren, which finally split

396 Bailey, Courtney. "Love Multiplied: Sister Wives, Polygamy, and Queering Heterosexuality." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 41.

397 The most prominent example of the FLDS in Colorado is the group around Warren Jeffs, prophet of the largest polygamist community, known also as United Order Effort. Jeffs was convicted on two counts of being an accomplice to rape, a result of his arranging the marriage of an unwilling 14-year-old female. He was sentenced to life in prison plus twenty years. Although he is imprisoned, the community continues to treat him as their leader and prophet. For more detail see Cardell K. Jacobson and Lara Burton, "Prologue: The Incident at Eldorado, Texas Cardell K. Jacobson and Lara Burton," in *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues*, ed. Cardell K. Jacobson and Lara Burton (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xvii–xxvi.

from the FLDS, is therefore often referred to as the "Allred Group". Under Allred's leadership membership of the group grew. With approximately 10,000 members, the AUB, informally also known as The Work, The Priesthood or The Group, is now the largest polygamist group in the US; its headquarters are in Bluffdale (UT).[398] It essentially follows the principles, doctrines, and theology of the LDS Church as they were prior to the denunciation of polygamy 1890. [399] The AUB therefore rejects most of the revelations of the LDS Church from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[400]

In general AUB members are more progressive than other FLDS groups.[401] For example, they make it possible for teenage girls to decline to marry and require the wives in plural marriages to be treated equally. According to extensive field research undertaken by Jane Bennion in the 1990s, AUB members also maintain a more progressive gender model, specifically in terms of the intensive cooperation between wives. Bennion recorded, "I had expected to find rampant child sexual molestations and beaten and cloistered women […]. Instead I found feminism, female autonomy, and widespread sharing."[402] Bennion even described the husband's position within the family structure of AUB members as weak and as much less relevant in daily life, with the husband performing essentially as a visitor to the core family.

The organization of daily life within such polygamous units appeared to Bennion to be particularly supportive of women: "This matrifocal network provided these women with shared childcare that enabled them to pursue an education or a career outside the community. It offered them relief in companionship and solidarity when they were abandoned by their hus-

398 Janet Bennion, "History, Culture, and Variability of Mormon Schismatic Groups," in *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues*, ed. Cardell Jacobson and Lara Burton (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 104.

399 Hammarberg, *The Mormon Quest for Glory*, 256.

400 The LDS Church, the biggest Mormon group, officially ceased practicing polygamy in order that Utah might be admitted into the Union in 1896. See Melton, "Polygamy-Practicing."

401 Janet Bennion, "Progressive Polygamy in Western United States," in *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: Perspectives on Marital Possibilities*, ed. Ronald C. Den Otter (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 28–36.

402 Janet Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism*, Brandeis Series on Gender, Culture, Religion, and Law (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 56.

bands."[403] To a certain degree the RTV show *Sister Wives* portrays just such matrifocal network, justified in this instance by a religious doctrine, with a variety of roles performed by women within both the private and public spheres. Sister wives Robyn, Christine, Janelle, and Meri split the diverse responsibilities of family organization and employment in various constellations as they stay at home, continue their education, or support the family financially by working outside the home.

The following discussion looks at Mormon doctrines addressing gender to which the narrative of *Sister Wives* explicitly refers. It also considers how the show's gender concepts question, reverse, or transcend the divide between the public and private realms of religion by steering different reading modes.

AUB theology reloaded in "Sister Wives"

Only 30%–40% of Mormon fundamentalists practice polygamy.[404] Even though the AUB believes that polygamy is a requirement for exaltation, it also permits monogamy and grants woman the right to denounce a partner. Four core beliefs define AUB theology and its religious practice: plural marriage, which is also called "celestial marriage", the Adam-God doctrine, the Law of Sarah, and the doctrine of consecration. These beliefs are expressed in different ways during the show, with plural marriage referenced most conspicuously. Polygamist groups like AUB justify plural marriage with reference to the Old Testament. Their prime model is Abraham, who because his marriage to Sarah remained childless had sexual relations with Hagar, which resulted in the birth of his son Ishmael (Genesis 16). Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11, 3). Reference is also made to other male figures of the Old Testament, including Moses and Jacob, having several wives.

The Adam-God doctrine and the Law of Sarah

The two principles of the Adam-God doctrine and the Law of Sarah are crucial to all Mormon fundamentalists and influence their everyday religious practices with a connection to the afterlife. All Mormons consider

403 Bennion, 57.
404 Bennion, 112.

themselves not only as Adam and Eve's descendants but also, figuratively and conceptually, this couple. The Adam and Eve concept is significant to the endowment ceremony in the temple.[405] Mormons believe that Adam became a god after his earthly life with Eve and their children. The Adam-God doctrine authorizes every man to build his own kingdom on earth and teaches them how to become gods on earth. One of their duties is to establish an extended family during their lifetime and follow Mormon doctrines, whereby they will finally become gods. Worthy men will be kings and all of their family members will become gods in the afterlife if they lived a righteous life.[406]

The Law of Sarah regulates the process that leads from monogamy to polygyny.[407] A woman who is her husband's first wife can decide whether she will accept her husband having an additional wife or wives. Her husband must first ask her; ideally, indeed, she will choose the second wife herself. If she approves the marriage, it will take place, but even if she disapproves, the Law of Abraham[408] still allows her husband to take another wife. The marriage ceremony, in which the wives are linked together for eternity, is carried out in reference to the Law of Sarah. Bennion has summarized the impact of the law:

> Through this eternal bond, women are encouraged to work together economically, socially, and spiritually and, in some rare cases, sexually (that is, in scheduling the rotation of their husband's nightly visits). These bonds are sometimes enhanced when women court other women as future co-wives. They are crucial during the prolonged absences of their husbands and create a strong interdependence that forces women to learn a large repertoire of domestic and mechanical skills such as dry-walling, fishing, plowing, and herding cattle. Few monogamous women experience this same, intense, training.[409]

At various points the show *Sister Wives* negotiates the women's own expectations that they will be open towards and accepting of Robyn, their hus-

405 Latter-day Saints conduct a series of rites called "temple endowment" when visiting a temple.

406 Valerie M. Hudson, "Mormon Doctrine on Gender," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 352–357.

407 Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 58.

408 "Some fundamentalists refer to plural marriage using this term. This law gives men the right to take additional wives, as Abraham did." See Bennion, 324.

409 Bennion, 98/99.

band's new wife. The divide between, on one hand their belief that through her acceptance they improve as human beings, with exaltation as their aim, and, on the other hand, the reality of their emotional struggle, is experienced by each wife differently. In the course of the seasons, all three sister wives, Meri, Christine and Janelle, explicitly admit their jealousy towards the new wife Robyn. In describing the show's impact, Christine records, "the hardest thing to see is Kody's affection with other wives."[410] Kody's fourth marriage with Robyn is thus challenging for all the wives, despite Kody's affirming that they are all marrying Robyn (season 1, episode 7, *Four Wives and Counting*). The wedding pictures inserted in the final credits appear to confirm this statement: Robyn does not wear a white dress in the pictures – she did wear it at the ceremony – so that she does not stand out from the other wives in the family portrait (fig. 68). Their dresses are differently cut, but they are all made from the same fabric, which is chocolate brown and purple in color. We learn during the show that Meri, Kody's first wife, requested that Robyn wears a dress similar to that of the other wives in the family portraits.

In the wedding pictures, all the biological families are grouped together (fig. 69–72) – a rare event during the show – with all the women wearing similar dresses. Only in the picture of the four wives Robyn is wearing a traditional, and distinctive, white bridal dress, symbolizing her marriage to the three sister wives (fig. 73).

The gender hierarchies are also conspicuously represented in the family portrait in which Kody is located in the middle of the upper row, with his first and fourth wives seated below him and his second and third wives on each side of them (fig. 68). The four eldest daughters Aspyn, Mariah, Maddy, and Mykelti, stand alongside their father, two on his left and two on his right, suggesting his centrality to them, and thereby also his control. A traditional picture of the wedding couple, so of Robyn and Kody, is missing.

410 *Four Wives and counting* (*Sister Wives*, season 1, episode 7, US 2010).

Fig. 68 The separation between female and male family members and family hierarchies are conspicuously staged (Sister Wives, Four Wives and Counting, 00:20:32).

Fig. 69/ Fig. 70/ Fig. 71/ Fig. 72 The four biological families are grouped together. Robyn (fig. 72) brings three children into the family from a former marriage. The wives, including the bride, and some of the children are all wearing dresses of the same chocolate-brown and purple fabric (Sister Wives, Four Wives and Counting, 00:20:30–00:20:50).

Fig. 73 The sister wives Janelle, Meri, Robyn, and Christine (f.l.t.r.) gather for a picture with Robyn at the wedding. It is the only picture in which she is wearing a white wedding dress (Sister Wives, Four Wives and Counting, 00:20:55).

The positive emotions which connote Kody and Robyn's wedding day, fostering the sensationalism of a polygamist marriage, form a rather exceptional narrative in this show. Solidarity between all the wives is rarely depicted and their cooperation is not emphasized. While amicable moments do occur, as between Meri and Robyn in the beginning of the series,[411] the focus is more often on the struggles, jealousies, and sacrifices each wife needs to pursue in order to receive the greater good of being a sister wife. One reason for this depiction is probably that cooperation and harmony elicit a less sensational reading mode; tensions and struggles tend to be more entertaining.

Reading modes of the private and public in the wedding sequence

The interplay between the private and the public in the culmination represented by the wedding is striking. The depiction of the event enhances

411 After the birth of Robyn and Kody's first child, Solomon, Robyn proposed to Meri, who suffers with reduced fertility, that she could act as Meri's surrogate (*Sister Wives*, *Sisters' Special Delivery*, season 3, episode 12).

both the entertaining and spectacular reading modes. Kody's fourth marriage, to Robyn, is also the Brown family's "coming out", in Kody's words. The idea is repeatedly cut in during the episode, intensifying its spectacular mode. It is also emphasized that this is the first polygamist wedding to be shown on television (although the audience witnesses little of the wedding ceremony itself).

According to the show's narrative, the wedding episode serves to officially present the Brown family as polygamists in public for the first time. Of course, from its beginning this first series has been a kind of coming out. Even though the events took place in the past, by applying the documentary reading mode the show allows its viewers to believe that everything is happening in the moment. This temporal divide between real and filmic time is an ongoing dilemma, but it is particularly significant for the wedding sequence and its presence in the public sphere. The wedding has a double public presence: as a public event in the past and as a public event mediated by the show's broadcast. Indeed, the wedding has brought a new twist to the private and public divide, for much of the narrative of the show until this point has been crafted by the Browns' everyday life in the private sphere of their own homes. But the wedding takes place first within the semi-public space formed by the presence of invited guests and then is made fully public through its transmission on TLC. Some parts of the wedding remained private, however, elements such as the sealing ceremony, at which only "worthy" Mormons can be present. Elements of the wedding reception, attended by invited guests, were approved, however, for inclusion in the show.[412]

Four narrative strategies shape the wedding sequence and are applied throughout the season, generating different reading modes: (1) flashbacks, with scenes from earlier episodes, (2) the sofa section, during which the social actors reflect on the events that are depicted, (3) photos of the socials actors' lives before the show, (4) the actual event. These narrative strategies principally communicate two modes: informational and emotional. Thus, in the informational mode, photos from Kody's other three marriages are shown, commented upon by the relevant wife. They describe comparatively their weddings and relationships with Kody and how they joined the family (00:16:38-00:17:20). Meri's wedding involved a big party, whereas

412 The sealing ceremony traditionally takes place in a temple, to which only worthy members have access. The Brown family probably conducted the marriage rite for time and eternity at home. See more about the "celestial marriage" in Hammarberg, *The Mormon Quest for Glory*, 256–259.

Janelle's and Christine's weddings were very simple. Janelle wore a black dress, as the viewer sees in a photo. She explains that her wedding was so small because most of her family and friends refused to attend – she has lost touch with most of her family members and friends because they were "appalled" at her decision to marry a Mormon polygamist. As they sit on the sofa, the adults discuss the meaning of marriage in a polygamous context and why the spiritual element will not be depicted as part of the show – it is deemed "sacred".

The wedding reception sequence applies an emotional reading mode, evoked by the interactions between the adults, which surely catch the viewers' attention. One unstated question drives this reading: how do the other wives deal with the idea that their husband will be spending the night with his beautiful new wife, with whom he will likely have sexual intercourse. Sister wives Meri, Janelle, and Christine discuss their ambivalent feelings about their husband's new wife in depth as they sit on the sofa. Another emotional moment comes when the first three wives and their children leave the reception. Kody says goodbye to each of his other wives before leaving with his bride, claiming a private moment with each of them. He tells each wife that he loves her and will miss her.

Sitting on the sofa and with tears in her eyes, Robyn stresses that it was wonderful that Meri included her in her leave taking from Kody. These scenes with each wife highlight that Kody is required to treat all his wives equally. He seeks to demonstrate that he cares about them and is in a loving relationship with each of them. While the wedding acknowledges the multiple relationships within the family, it also unites the large family not only emotionally but also visually. This family unity is expressed in an extreme longshot of the party from a high angle (fig. 74), as if someone is looking down on them. Or, in Christine words (00:17:43–00:17:46), "It's a blessing, an absolute blessing! And that's what the reception was."

Fig. 74 The core Brown family and some guests are dancing together. The long-shot from a high angle accentuates their unity and its religious dimension, as if someone is watching over them from above (Sister Wives, Four Wives and Counting, 00:17:50).

The reception sequence includes additional emotion-inducing features. The dancing guests are shown in slow motion, including Kody as he dances with each wife, accompanied by emotional diegetic and extra-diegetic music. Inserts of flowers and of the almost-full moon emphasize the atmospheric surroundings. The RTV style emotionalizes the polygamist marriage and thereby communicates the Brown family's coming out in a romantic and bonding atmosphere for themselves, their guests, and also for the audience, applying an emotional reading mode that encourage the viewers to tune in again for the coming second season. The decision to "come out", a term originally used by homosexuals about first speaking of their sexual orientation in public, will have real-life consequences for the family. In the next season the family moves to Nevada, fleeing potential legal prosecution for polygamy.[413]

413 Strassberg, "Scrutinizing Polygamy."

The doctrine of consecration

The doctrine of consecration is another polygamist principle that shapes the show's narrative. Bennion explains: "Some fundamentalist groups ask or require members to consecrate, or give, money and legal ownership of property to church leaders."[414] The law of consecration supports the idea of a voluntary communalism, and in the case of AUB, the United Order controls and redistributes the wealth. The practice is an expression of the equality of members. Male and female members have different stewardships, the tasks undertaken to earn money for the community. New members are often asked to consecrate their property and assets as a sign that they are worthy members.

The Brown family, which functions as the smallest community unit, applies the doctrine of consecration. All income and expenses are administered within a single family budget. The financing of the four houses built for the four wives in a cul-de-sac in Las Vegas is undertaken communally. When the financing of the houses proves difficult, the adults discuss whether Meri, who has only one child, who is almost old enough to leave for college, really needs such a big house; in the end, however, they all accept that they will have houses that are the same size.[415]

The communal principle is also applied in terms of family needs and organization. Some adults contribute in a private space, while some earn in a public space. Thus, Janelle works fulltime; Christine has always been a stay-at-home mom, home schooling the children and running the household; Meri works part-time; Robyn is the driving force behind the online store *My Sisterwife's Closet*, which sells jewelry, clothes, and accessories among other items. Season six revolves in particular around discussion of how to launch *My Sisterwife's Closet*, how to ensure its success, and who will be responsible for it.[416] The references to this online store strongly define the show's public dimension, as a point of contact with anyone who can go online and is ready to shop.

In season 11 another shared business is introduced: Meri plans to open a bed-and-breakfast in a house that once belonged to her great grandmother.

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414 Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 323.

415 Financing the house is at the center of the narration in seasons 5 and 6 of *Sister Wives* (TLC, US 2012/14). In the same seasons *My Sister Wife's Closet* is also discussed (intensely in season 6, episodes 1 and 2).

416 "My Sister Wife's Closet," My Sisterwife's Closet, accessed March 19, 2019, https://mysisterwifescloset.com/.

She looks not only for financial support from the sister wives and Kody but also for their permission, although she is legally divorced from Kody and could decide by herself to start a new business.[417] In following the law of consecration, she needs the agreement of the adults, in particular of her "spiritual" husband, as head of the family. The show included the story about the new business in January 2019, with the three other sister wives depicted supporting Meri's idea but Kody seeming reluctant. However, according to its webpage, the bed-and-breakfast Lizzie's Heritage Inn had been owned by Meri and the Brown family since 2017.[418] The temporal discrepancy between representation and actual event in the space of production challenges the illusion of realness. The depiction could be read as a "making-of" account of a new business, portrayed in effect in flashback, a perspective that holds entertaining qualities even if the outcome is already known. Lizzie's Heritage Inn might also profit from its owner's celebrity, with fans perhaps eager to stay overnight in hope of meeting Meri in person.

To sum up: the show's communication spaces of production, representation, circulation/distribution, and consumption both affirm the traditional binary gender concept of male and female and promote female agency within the public and private spheres. They embrace a religious worldview that is communicated primarily in two reading modes: the emotional and the informational, mediated through RTV culture, as we shall now see.

The gendered and mediated religious worldview of *Sister Wives*

Religion is largely absent from the production spaces, contained only within the private family sphere. The RTV format of the TLC channel provides an institutional and public framing for the Brown family's religious affiliations. The AUB church as an institution is completely absent; only the LDS Church is discussed from time to time, for example when Maddy's LDS Church membership is denied or when the Brown family meets friends who are LDS Church members. Additionally, the patriarchal struc-

417 As the first couple to marry, Meri and Kody were married legally. Kody's marriages to Janelle, his second wife, and Christine, his third wife, are spiritual only. He divorced Meri in order to marry his fourth wife, Robin, legally, which enabled him to adopt her three children from an earlier marriage. See *Sister Wives* season 8, episode 7 *Divorce* (TLC, US 2015).

418 "Lizzie's Heritage Inn," Lizzie's Heritage Inn, accessed March 20, 2019, https://lizziesheritageinn.com/.

ture of AUB theology is not entirely in alignment with the gender concept of the show. As we have just seen, with its matrifocal network and homosocial gender concept the show is about women and is intended for a mostly female audience. The male dominance of the religious worldview is challenged by the overwhelming presence of female social actors on screen and the female target audience.[419]

In the space of representation, for purposes of entertainment the show establishes a tension between male and female positions within the private space of the family. Although Kody is ruler of his family kingdom on earth, the relations between the adults transcend the binary gender roles of heteronormativity, reaching towards homosociality. The show often puts Kody at the center of the narration: thus, for example, he always sits in the middle of the sofa with his wives around him and he frequently closes a scene, topic, or sequence with concluding comments. Yet his wives obviously spend more time with each other than with their husband. And even though the AUB church, founded on LDS Church theology, is a male-dominated community, female social actors Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn are the main organizers of the family. They care about the weddings, choose the wedding dresses,[420] cook the meals, coordinate family vacations, and organize the family's relocation to new houses. Kody often performs only as the voice of the family: thus he makes announcements during family gatherings, of a pregnancy, for example, or of the four-house project. The wives also bond on a symbolic level. Meri, Janelle, and Christine make Robyn the gift of a ring called "the Brown sister wife ring", which exclusively connects the wives. The festivities at Robyn and Kody's wedding reception include all four wives, and almost equally, with the only difference that Robyn wears a white dress during the party.

In the space of consumption, the family uses the show to fight for legal rights and public acceptance of their polygamist lifestyle. Indirectly the AUB church appears to be a female-dominated private religion, an image that mirrors the show's predominantly female audience. We see the family mostly in the private sphere, traditionally gendered as female. This private sphere becomes public when claiming religious freedom. By going public with their religious lifestyle, all the Brown adults ask for tolerance, acceptance, and legal status as a family. And finally, the RTV show *Sister Wives*

419 "TLC"; "FAQ," tlc.de, accessed March 21, 2019, https://www.tlc.de/info/faqs.

420 Kody finally and secretly decides the choice of dress with Robyn. The other wives are very vocal about Kody's transgression, leading to extensive discussion during the show.

and its gender concept compete with the public image of the main LDS Church, which claims the title "Latter-day Saints" for its members alone.[421] Compared to the performance of gender binaries by the Brown family, the LDS Church seems compliant, conservative, and backward.

5.4. Religion linking the private and the public sphere

As we have seen, both *The District* and *Sister Wives* blur the boundaries between the public and private spheres and both apply an entertaining and instructional reading mode, if in different ways. This interface between the private and the public is connected to the shows' reference to the historical world or "truths". Both shows have specific goals strongly connected to religious worldviews. How these RTV shows use their spaces of communication to specific ends will be discussed in the following by comparing how each production space interacts with the religious institution to which the social actors are affiliated.

The LDS Church, producer of *The District*, is officially in the foreground of that show from the start. As we have seen, the show was initially intended for the education of future missionaries, but when the producers became aware of its entertaining qualities, they decided to air it on television and thus bring it to a wider public. The instructional mode had been applied to the private space of the church's education purposes; the entertaining qualities related to its broader public presence. Implicitly the show's purpose was public from the start, as the education of missionaries is intended to enable them to address people in public spaces to arouse their interest in the church. The presentation of the RTV product to the broader public was a different strategy, but it was related to the first, as also a means to win understanding for the church, and for its missionary endeavor. *The District* thus refurbished the LDS Church image through its portrayal of happy and successful missionaries on two levels: attracting missionaries to the church and attracting sympathy for existing missionaries, and by extension for their church. The success of the show in the space of consumption can be then based both on having more young people go on mission in the public sphere and on having more people view the LDS institution in a positive light, and perhaps even become members, through watching the show in a private space.

421 "Style Guide — The Name of the Church," www.mormonnewsroom.org, April 9, 2010, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/style-guide?lang=eng.

Sister Wives' entertaining mode is necessarily prominent because TLC is a private TV channel that sells advertising time. The price of the advertisements is determined by viewer and household numbers, as potential consumers of the products advertised. That economic concern is initially prominent in the production. In the first episodes the religious affiliation of the polygamous family is kept private. Although members of the AUB church, the Brown family are interested neither in proselytizing nor in selling their church. The religious institution remained in the background, as a private matter. But in the course of the first season, the reference to their religion slowly changes. When Kody Brown marries his fourth wife, Robyn, the family's religious lifestyle becomes public, both in the historical world depicted by the show and in the present when the show is broadcast. Two principal reasons determine this shift. First, the private-public tension and within it the legal, social, psychological and religious dimensions make the show very attractive. The family was invited onto other shows and was discussed in the media, which generated more viewers to be entertained and added to viewer figures.

The Brown family have a second, more personal reason for approving the public depiction of their polygamy. In 2010 the adult Browns brought Utah's criminalization of polygamy to the United States District Court for the District of Utah, claiming that it was unconstitutional. The state was declared to be "failing to submit any admissible evidence on the social harms of polygamy and largely failing to substantively oppose the constitutional claims."[422] In 2016 the court vacated the district court decision as moot once the Browns moved to Nevada and also in light of the Utah county attorney's "adoption of the policy limiting bigamy prosecutions to cases involving fraud, minors, or abuse."[423] The Brown case informally resulted in the decriminalization of polygamy in Utah, which is of public interest and opened up the possibility that the Brown family might move back to Utah, where the headquarters of the AUB are located. Going public with their lifestyle and claiming before the court that this lifestyle was not criminal connected private and public interests, with other polygamist families in the state of Utah also benefitting.

Although the court decision is not widely discussed during the show, the adults mention on occasion that the law does treat plural families unfairly.[424] The Browns use their celebrity status to publicity related ends.

422 Strassberg, "Scrutinizing Polygamy," 168.
423 Strassberg, 168.
424 See season 9, *Tell All*, part 2.

The success of the show is a win-win situation for both sides, the social actors and the television network. Viewer are eager to see the private lives of a polygamist family fighting for legal acceptance, and at the same time by revealing something of their private lives, the protagonists can win the audience's sympathies for a polygamist family life. The family profits not just financially but potentially also in terms of its social and legal acceptability. Their own business, like Robyn's online shop, Meri's bed-and-breakfast, and Janelle's work as a real estate agent, gain a boost from their participation in the show, in additional to the payment received from TLC for each episode (a sum that has never been made public). One might say the Browns sell a version of their private lives to drive their public business. In this private-public divide, religion connects actual events with legal, political, economic, and social "discourses of the real", to return to Murray and Ouellette's terminology.[425]

The interface between the private and the public in the two RTV shows refers in different ways to religion. It demonstrates that reality shows not only draw on but also shape events by applying reading modes, in these instances entertaining and instructional modes. The mediatization of religion can be an asset for the institutions involved, be they churches or television networks. The economic value of the shows, expressed in viewer figures, is indicative of the number of potential new church members or consumers of advertised products. The parallels between the shows are conspicuous.

RTV shows are a commercial genre that commodifies not only its social actors but also, in these instances, religion.

425 Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 5.