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The Mormons: Looking Forward and Outward

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SUMMARY

The Mormons inhabit a radically different world from the rest of Christendom. Never-the-less, without accepting the work at face value, it is possible to regard the Book of Mormon as the product of an extraordinary and profound act of the religious imagination.

In less than two years from now, the 150th anniversary of the formal organization of the Mormon Church will be observed with carefully choreographed ceremonies telecast from the gigantic Tabernacle in Salt Lake City's historic Temple Square.

Distinctly separate ceremonies will be conducted in the 10,000-seat auditorium in Independence, Missouri, the center-place and headquarters of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS). And in a variety of less well-known places the members of an astonishing array of Mormon splinter sects will commemorate the beginning times of their faith. Though "Come, Come Ye Saints" will ring forth from the mountains and "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning" will well up from the plains in sesquicentennial celebration in the spring of 1980, the birth of Mormonism actually preceded the April 6, 1830, date which marked the creation of the church. The first Latter-day Saints gathered around Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, as the Book of Mormon came into being; the Mormon field has, even now, been "white to the harvest" for a century and a half. For that reason, 1978 is as much a year of jubilee as 1980 will be. This is, therefore, a fit and proper time to make inquiry about the nature of modern Mormonism and then to ask, "Where from here?"

Amazing Growth

Although surveyors of the religious scene have been mentioning the Mormons for almost as long as Mormonism has been in existence, their reports have always placed the Saints outside the mainstream, treating them as a sort of aberrant footnote to the nation's religious life. But if Mormonism continues to grow at its present 5 per cent per annum rate for a few more years, this situation is bound to change. Already there are more Mormons than Presbyterians; by conservative estimates, the LDS church, as the Utah body is often called, will alone have upward of 4.5 million members when its sesquicentennial *Hosanna Shout* rings out. Between 250,000 and 300,000 more Saints can be added when all the Mormon groups are counted in. The sum total suggests that while the Mormons are definitely not moving toward the American religious mainstream, that mainstream could well be moving toward them.

That Mormonism might ever become the national religion seems farfetched. Yet in view of its amazing growth in its first 150 years, it is not without interest to note that an LDS mathematician recently made a half-joking but statistically correct projection that "if Mormonism continues to grow in the United States at its present rate, and if the U.S. population continues to grow at its present rate, then in another 150 years when Mormonism celebrates its tricentennial, all the nation's

citizens will be Mormons."

The perils of ecclesiastical success and the difficulty of predicting the birth rate make questionable the accuracy of that extrapolation. Yet Mormonism has clearly arrived as a religious force -- and not just in the United States. Practically every Saturday the Mormon publication *Church News* reports the organization of new stakes, wards, branches or missions (the basic units of the LDS system) beyond the boundaries of this country. Significant Mormon populations exist in Mexico, in many Central and South American nations, in the South Seas and in Europe. LDS temples nowadays are almost as likely to be built outside as inside the United States. And ever-increasing numbers of converts made in foreign lands by that portion of the church's 25,300-member full-time missionary staff stationed outside the U.S. seem to many Mormons to presage a time when their church will be the church universal.

The New Revelation

Whether such will ever be the case or not, a crucial obstacle which almost certainly would have prevented the LDS church from ever being a universal church was removed on June 9, 1978, when the Lord, it was reported, confirmed "by revelation" to church President Spencer W. Kimball and his counselors "that the long-promised day had come when every faithful worthy man in the church may receive the holy priesthood." Signaling the elimination of the barrier which had kept black men of African descent from holding the LDS priesthood, this revelation was an event of extraordinary importance to Latter-day Saints. It was widely and rapidly reported in the American press and electronic news media where many accounts, elaborating on the official announcement, suggested that the revelation was, in the words of the *New York Times*, "another example of the adaptation of Mormon beliefs to American culture.

Despite the seductive persuasiveness of this interpretation, the June 9 revelation will never be fully understood if it is regarded simply as a pragmatic doctrinal shift ultimately designed to bring Latter-day Saints into congruence with mainstream America. The timing and context, and even the wording of the revelation itself, indicate that the change has to do not with America so much as with the world.

A revelation in Mormondom rarely comes as a bolt from the blue; the process involves asking questions and getting answers. The occasion of questioning has to be considered, and it must be recalled that while questions about priesthood and the black man may have been asked, an answer was not forthcoming in the '60s when the church was under pressure about the matter from without, nor in the early '70s when liberal Latter-day Saints agitated the issue from within. The inspiration which led President Kimball and his counselors to spend many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple pleading long and earnestly for divine guidance did not stem from a messy situation with blacks picketing the church's annual conference in Salt Lake City, but was "the expansion of the work of the Lord over the earth."

Most especially, the black man's having been "cursed as to the priesthood" had made for difficulty as the church expanded in South America. In many cases there, determining who has African ancestry and who has not presents serious problems. If a pragmatic reason for the revelation must be found, it is better found in the fact that on October 30 an LDS temple will be dedicated in Sao Paulo, Brazil -- and making sufficient determination as to which Mormons were racially acceptable to enter the holy place could have proved a horrendous task. Since revelation now has established the doctrine that worthy men of any race can hold the priesthood "with power to exercise its divine authority, and enjoy with [their] loved ones every blessing that flows therefrom, including the blessings of the temple," such difficulty is avoided. At the same time the way is opened for stakes and wards to be organized where adequate local priesthood leadership might have proved a problem heretofore, and the path is cleared so that LDS temples may be built in any place in the world and universally used by all worthy Mormons in the area.

Predicting the impact of the June 9 revelation on the growth pattern of the church would be risky. But the fact that this revelation came in the context of worldwide evangelism rather than domestic politics or American social and cultural circumstances is yet another indication that Mormonism can no longer be regarded as a 19th century religiocultural artifact and dismissed as a footnote to the story of American religion. Mormonism is here to stay. Where did it come from? And more important, how and why is it growing at such a rapid pace?

Telling the Mormon Story

"How much do you know about the Mormon Church? Would you like to know more?" These are the "golden questions" asked every day by thousands of Mormon missionaries, mainly young male members of the Utah-based LDS church. Notwithstanding enough affirmative responses to lead to 167,939 convert baptisms in 1977, the missionary task is not always an easy one. Fresh-faced, clean-cut, neatly dressed, these young people often find a warm welcome in the homes of "golden" families already committed to investigating the Mormon gospel. But in straight-line tracting, the strategy of knocking on every door in a specific area, they are invited to come in only nine out of every 1,000 times. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand the discouragement recently revealed during an impromptu interview by a very young and obviously inexperienced LDS elder. He was homesick, lonely, and quite evidently dismayed at his lack of success. But his principal complaint was the somewhat unexpected lament that "everyone knows the Mormon story already."

Doubtless this pleasant young man soon found someone unacquainted with *Joseph Smith's Testimony*, that ubiquitous missionary tract which contains the official account of the prophet's visions and his discovery of the ancient record chronicling the lives and times, vicissitudes and final destruction of a Hebraic people whose patriarch immigrated to America with his family in 600 BC. But whether he found someone to hear his message or not, it is easy to appreciate the young missionary's fear that everyone already knew the Mormon story. Mormons all together -- RLDS and LDS -- have some 28,000 missionaries in the field worldwide. In addition, the Utah church is actively engaged in spreading the LDS message via official and quasi-official publications, television and radio programs and spot announcements, visitors' center activities, local ward open houses and genealogy classes, and even by using billboards, bumper stickers, and multipaged advertisements in the *Reader's Digest*.

Certainly large numbers of Americans are familiar with the general outlines of Joseph Smith's story. They are not always sensitive to it, however, for knowing the story and comprehending its significance are two very different things. The tale of an unsophisticated farm boy who found some engraved metal plates and used "magic spectacles" to translate therefrom a thousand years of pre-

Columbian American history appears so incredible to many non-Mormons that they simply dismiss the prophet's visions as hallucinations, regard his "golden bible" as a worthless document, and wonder how any intelligent person could ever accept it as true. Serious critics look at the Book of Mormon more closely. Using as evidence its obvious parallels to their 19th century accounts tying the American Indian to Israel's lost tribes, its descriptions of situations, incidents and characters suspiciously like those within Joseph Smith's ken, its echoes of Masonic lore, its Isaiah passages and its bountiful supply of anachronisms, they conclude that the work is not only worthless but a fraud. In either case, efforts to explore the implications of the book's content are missing.

A Usable Past

The book is cast in the form of a historical narrative. Having something of the style and flavor of the Old Testament, it claims to be the story of what happened when God's people came to the Western Hemisphere. It is a history, and it has functioned -- as history tends to function -- as a binding agent, melding disparate individuals together into a single people by giving them a common past. The Book of Mormon provided the Saints with a usable past and a common set of expectations -- in much the same fashion as did the book that was pulled together by the Jews as they sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion. An unorthodox reminder of their Judeo-Christian heritage, Smith's book told them that the Lord's song had been sung on this side of the Atlantic and explained how it might be sung again. Defined as truth by the prophet whose raising up was prophesied therein, the book became true for those who believed, in much the same way as the entire body of Christian Scripture has become true for biblical literalists.

Those persons who have considered Smith's book simply as an ordinary historical account have found much to criticize. Yet critics find it well nigh impossible to discount the way the Book of Mormon, appearing as it did at a time when all America seemed set adrift in a bewildering new world, furnished Jacksonian believers with a reassuring sense of time and place. In that uprooted society it supplied a very real connection with the Ancient of Days, an extremely useful Abrahamic lineage, and a universe of story and metaphor so powerful that it continues to tie together a good portion of the human race, even in this era when

alienation and anomie threaten to predominate. Without accepting the work at face value, it is nevertheless possible to regard the Book of Mormon as the product of an extraordinary and profound act of the religious imagination. It lent legitimacy to Joseph Smith's prophetic career and, by tying America to Israel, gave credence to the claim that in these latter days America is the Promised Land and the Mormons are the Chosen People.

The book's Hebraic influence was intensified in the lives of the Saints by the peculiar form of Christianity instituted with the organization of the LDS church. A primitivist of an unusual kind, Smith harked back to a form of Christianity which repudiated the outcome of the Jerusalem conference described in Acts 15. Adopting a position not unlike that of Saint Peter before a vision taught him not to despise the Gentiles, the prophet held that would-be Christians would first have to choose to be chosen. This meant that before they gained access to God's grace they would have to repent and be baptized into the (Mormon) Church of Christ because old covenants had been done away with when God executed a new, perpetual and exclusive contract with the Latter-day Saints in 1830.

As Christianity was God's gift to his own people, and as the Mormons were that people, so membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints became the new covenant sign. And the work rolled forth, carried forward by Christians completely convinced that they had taken possession of that special relationship to God which had once been the sole property of the Jews.

Asserting that God and Jesus are literally father and son, that Jesus and Jehovah are one and the same, and that even the Holy Spirit is somehow located in time and space, these new Saints clothed the mystical body of Christ with the real flesh of Mormonism and started out to build up Zion, drawing biblical parallels every step of the way. They had such a vivid perception of themselves as God's people that the past and present were joined. Prosaic and matter-of-fact, they made the symbolic so tangible that a direct link was forged between their own day and the days described in Old Testament and New. Mormon theology's emphasis on the family as the redemptive unit, its system of patriarchal blessing in which each individual's membership in the household of Ephraim or Mannaseh or Judah is solemnly intoned; and its "restored" priesthood all worked to strengthen the Hebraic connection.

The process of cultural integration was accelerated as the 19th century progressed. Persecution and kingdom-building pushed and pulled the Saints together, giving them a firm LDS identity. Then shared memories of those early years plus present participation in Mormonism's corporate life completed the transformation. Now Mormons are not simply members of an unusual ecclesiastical corporation. They are a neo-Judaic people so separate and distinct that new converts must undergo a process of assimilation roughly comparable to that which has to take place when immigrants adopt a new and dissimilar nationality.

Today the Mormon world intersects the larger one at a multiplicity of points, and when the two fail to converge the difference in direction is often very subtle. Still, there is no denying that the Mormons inhabit a radically different world from the one outside, and that -- for the most part -- theirs is an orderly world wherein questions have answers and people know who they are and where they stand.

Mormon Fundamentalists

If the 19th century was a time of cultural integration, it was also a time of internal division. The church split apart in the aftermath of the prophet's murder in 1844, and it remains divided today. Sometimes the sheer size and visibility of the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints cause it to be thought of as the "real" Mormon church. But close to 150 other LDS organizations are or have been in existence. While most of these can be described as splinter groups of small membership and minimal importance, there are presently two major exceptions, the new Mormon fundamentalists and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

One of the more visible manifestations of early Mormonism's identification with Old Testament times was the institution of plural marriage (polygamy), which was openly practiced in Utah from 1850 to 1890. In response to terrific outside pressure, the practice was banned by the church in 1890, but continued to be officially condoned until 1907, when it was banned absolutely and made a cause for excommunication. Plural marriage persisted on the underground nevertheless. In the past decade it has reappeared as the major tenet of an undetermined number of LDS fundamentalist sects with a total membership estimated at

somewhere between 3,000 and 20,000.

In accounts of contemporary Mormonism, the new polygamists are often highlighted too much just because they make such good copy, especially when they try to kill each other off. Yet these modern Saints who have elected to live in plural marriage as the most dramatic and satisfying means of demonstrating total commitment to the fullness of the gospel are clearly a part of the picture. As today's influential LDS leaders idealize the monogamous nuclear family and make it the center of the faith, plurality's extended households are a necessary reminder of the enormous extent to which Mormonism deviated from the U.S. norm in the not-too-distant past.

The 'Reorganization'

Much more important than the fundamentalists, the Reorganized Church stands at the opposite end of the Mormon spectrum. Rather than being "more Mormon" than the Utah Mormons, its members so closely resemble their mostly Protestant midwestern neighbors that some Salt Lake Saints claim that the RLDS church is Protestant in everything but name. In this they are mistaken. It is true that in 1972 the RLDS church formally recognized as revelation the basic principle that "there are those who are not of this fold to whom the saving grace of the gospel must go." But the acceptance of a position which much of Protestant Christianity regards as axiomatic does not make the Reorganization a Protestant church. The RLDS membership retains a distinctive Latter Day Saint identity, which should not be surprising since the roots of the RLDS form of Mormonism are to be found in the very beginnings of the Mormon movement.

Mormonism changed dramatically between 1830 and 1844. Starting out as a variant form of New Testament primitivism, it became increasingly Hebraic as time passed. The prophet's charismatic authority kept the church together during his lifetime, but in the years after Smith's death, Saints scattered in all directions. Although many of the Mormons -- perhaps a majority, but no one knows for sure -- accepted the leadership of Brigham Young and the Council of the Twelve and followed them to Utah, many others stayed behind. Remaining true to Mormonism despite a decade-long interruption in the continuity of the prophetic leadership line, many of the Saints who stayed away from Utah were reunited under the

leadership of Joseph Smith III in 1860.

The "Reorganization" pulled together those Saints whose understanding of the Mormon message was more closely tied to traditional Christian primitivism than to the neo-Judaic Christianity of Mormonism's last few years in Nauvoo, Illinois. They refused to accept plural marriage, the idea of the political kingdom, and temple worship, as well as the more esoteric LDS doctrines such as plurality of gods and baptism of the dead. So they re-established the church according to their own gospel interpretation, preserving in Mormonism that strain -- present from the beginning -- which saw the church first as the Church of Christ and after that as the Church of Latter Day Saints. Although the demise of polygamy and the political kingdom removed two of the most potent symbols of division between the RLDS group and the Utah Mormons, no ecclesiastical rapprochement has occurred. None is really expected since members of the two churches have apparently irreconcilable conceptions of what Mormonism means.

An ecumenical movement has arisen among LDS historians, however. During the past decade the Mormon History Association and the John Whitmer Historical Association have been established. Their meetings are occasions when professional historians from both traditions associate freely, sharing with each other information about the past. Despite an easy camaraderie and close fellowship which minimize faith commitments, it is nevertheless increasingly obvious that the two groups are taking separate approaches to their history-writing tasks. Whereas Utah Mormon scholars are making a close examination of the past in order to uncover and integrate every possible bit of existing information so that the official picture can be completed and clarified, RLDS scholars are looking at that same past with an eye to discovering not so much particular truths as universal ones.

Impelled by a need to find the roots of their form of Mormonism, leading historians of the Reorganization have embarked on an exercise in higher criticism, subjecting to close scrutiny Joseph Smith's story and Mormon scripture as well as the two official versions of church history. While the long-range outcome of this activity is hard to predict, what seems to be happening for these Saints is a reversal of the 19th century process whereby the metaphorical was translated into literal terms. The RLDS church has always maintained the now clearly

unrealistic position that the prophet was not involved in plural marriage and that the Mormon religion was somehow drastically changed after Smith's death by Brigham Young and the Mormons who went to Utah. If the admittedly risky enterprise of taking the real stuff of the Mormon past and finding in it a meaningful body of symbolic truth is a success, a firmer foundation for the church could be the result.

Meanwhile, most RLDS activity goes on virtually oblivious of this intellectual and spiritual ferment. Plans are afoot to build a "temple school" for the training of new church leaders, but no major expansion of the church is presently contemplated even though, with a current membership of 213,399, the Reorganization is larger than it has ever been. The growth rate, the meaningful statistic in making future plans, is down now to slightly less than per cent per year, and it seems likely that the RLDS church will continue as a modest but important ecclesiastical establishment, providing Latter Day Saints with an alternative to Utah Mormonism.

Mainstream Mormonism

Conventional Christianity paid little attention to Mormonism as long as LDS proselytizing was done mainly by pairs of young missionaries sent out from Salt Lake City. But now that large numbers of local Mormons are joining the "happiness is Mormonism" chorus, the churches are beginning to show some concern. A few are reacting by underwriting the publication of slightly modernized versions of early anti-Mormon tracts, but most Christians are simply asking questions, trying to find out exactly what -- in the name of Jesus Christ -- is really going on.

Multiple and sometimes contradictory answers often confuse the questioners. More than anything else, it helps to know that the Latter-day Saints are journeying toward a destination totally different from that posited by more traditional Christian doctrines. It is also crucially important to recognize that their journey is going forward along a road which closely parallels the road not taken by Saint Paul and the first century Christians. As a result, Mormonism cannot be neatly placed in any one of the Catholic-Protestant-Reform categories or along the liberal-conservative-fundamentalist continuum developed to deal with the diversity of normative Christianity.

As its official name implies, the Mormon Church sees itself as a Christian body. At the same time, it is an elaborate priesthood organization which is similar in some respects to Masonic priesthood organizations. It is also an ecclesiastical domain with an administrative structure so intricate that a much-involved Latter-day Saint once predicted that, on the morrow of his death, he will have to confront a flow chart with arrows drawn in to indicate the lines of administrative authority in the celestial kingdom. But Mormonism is more than all that. It is a peculiar people with a distinctive mind-set and behavior pattern. And it is a collection of stakes being strengthened to support the tent of Zion.

A change in emphasis has occurred in Mormonism during the past few decades. Now the family unit rather than the priesthood quorum is the most important organization in the church, and support for families is the central thrust of today's church program. The local ward (parish) is a community of families; ward activities, standardized throughout the nation, are planned to engender family solidarity. Home teaching and church welfare programs provide mutual support. Genealogy serves to tie in the family from past time, and stress on the eternal marriage covenant takes the family into the distant future. Temple ordinances then sanctify family relationships so that the entire Mormon experience can be said to uphold the integrity of the LDS family. Because the missionary message is also built on what the church can do for families, conversion is often a family affair, and every LDS ward seems to be filled with new families being "fellowshipped" into Mormonism.

Uneasiness and Confidence

Because Mormonism is dynamic and changing, it will never be possible to say with certainty that "in Zion all is well." Yet things seem to be going along with remarkable equanimity just now, even with the gospel being spread around the world and growth becoming the normal condition. Stretched to the limits of its capacity, the administrative machinery is constantly undergoing alteration in order to keep the general authorities close to the Saints. The president of the church is respected as a hard worker as well as prophet, seer and revelator, and his counselors manage to work together as an effective administration. All in all, the general situation of the church can be described as gratifying from the Mormon point of view.

Some Saints worry that individuals are being shunted aside or left out in the rush to idealize the Mormon family. Others worry that the church is encouraging early and/or ill-advised marriages and fear that the rigidity of LDS sex and age roles may inhibit the flexibility which life in the modern world demands. Supporters of ERA are upset by the church stand against ratification, while some who oppose ratification are nonetheless not happy to see the church acting as an adjunct to Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum in this matter. Although thrilled that the priesthood is no longer denied to black men, LDS liberals tend to feel uncomfortable as the leaders of the church articulate generally conservative positions. There is a current of uneasiness, especially among Mormon academics, about what will happen if and when Ezra Taft Benson becomes church president and carries his right-wing political views into office with him. Intellectuals in the church are bothered by the drift toward rigid orthodoxy in the spheres of both behavior and belief. For various reasons, a good many Saints feel constrained by the church's standardized program. And practically all of them are weary with much attendance at Mormon meetings.

But the importance of these concerns for the future pales almost to insignificance beside the grave problems the church will have to face as it continues to grow and develop into a truly international body. Notwithstanding the rosy picture of a world filled with Mormons which is being projected by the *Church News* and the official *Ensign*, the power of the LDS gospel to sustain communities of Saints throughout the world without requiring them to adopt peculiarly American attitudes and stereotyped life styles has not yet been fully proven. The essence of Mormonism awaits distillation, and while that long and painful procedure is under way, the church will have to exercise enough control over its growth to allow time for each new LDS cohort to complete the acculturation process and to begin to establish what being a Latter-day Saint really means before the next cohort arrives. Otherwise the peculiar Mormon identity will dissipate, and, as have other Christian churches, this one will divide.

For all that, however, Utah's form of Mormonism is anticipating the future with confidence as its 150th anniversary approaches; 1978 has been designated a special year of missions. Neither looking backward in the fundamentalist fashion, nor inward in the manner of the Reorganization, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is looking forward and outward with a view to telling all the

people in the world about their opportunity to live out their lives inside the covenant beneath the tent of Zion.

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