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**Abstract** Because of the religious diversity in the United States, the different religions have struggled to be tolerant of each other, especially at the time when Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Givens examines this situation and suggests five factors that contribute to the success of new religious movements such as Mormonism.

# NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND ORTHODOXY: THE CHALLENGE TO THE RELIGIOUS MAINSTREAM

Terryl L. Givens

## A New Religion

**T**he United States and Australia share an unusual heritage of religious pluralism and diversity. Australia is one of the most religiously heterogeneous countries on earth and has long needed to contend with the management of religious diversity. America was itself founded by Puritans who colonized New England, Catholics who sought refuge in Maryland, Anglicans who settled Virginia, and Quakers who found sanctuary in Pennsylvania. But such diversity could at times provoke tensions and conflict, and this was especially true in nineteenth-century America as a number of new religious movements blossomed across the country, all of them competing for converts and acceptance.

In the midst of this seething cauldron of religious ferment and diversity, Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in upstate New York. Smith emerged from a grove of trees in 1820 as a fourteen-year-old boy claiming a visitation from God the Father and Jesus Christ. Subsequently, he told family and associates that a resurrected prophet/warrior from ancient America named Moroni had made known to him the location of a buried record engraved on plates of gold, from which he published a translation of

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This is a modified version of remarks delivered (and subsequently distributed) during an Asia-Pacific speaking tour in 2004.

the Book of Mormon as new scripture in 1830. He organized his fledgling church a few weeks later.

As the church relocated to Kirtland, Ohio, and then to Missouri, Smith and his teachings were not long in encountering fierce opposition. Even in a climate of great religious variety and experimentation, Mormonism stood out by virtue of a number of unorthodox beliefs and practices. Those differences, together with political and social factors, culminated in the forcible expulsion of church members from the state of Missouri when Governor Lilburn Boggs authorized their removal or extermination. The Haun's Mill massacre soon followed, and the state militia terrorized other settlements before delivering an ultimatum; shortly thereafter the Saints fled to Illinois. There they briefly prospered before conflict and violence erupted again, culminating in the murder of Joseph Smith and his brother and the expulsion of the Saints from the state at the hands of militia and mobs. An exodus west across the plains eventually took them to the relative security of the Salt Lake Valley in the Rocky Mountains, the location of the present-day headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Thus, just a generation or two removed from the U.S. Declaration of Independence, Americans found themselves in the paradoxical situation of needing to reconcile an ideology of religious freedom and tolerance with a *practice* of religious intolerance and persecution.

## Explaining Away the Success of New Religious Movements

### A Different Ethnicity

The popular fiction of the era reveals one way in which this paradox, with its attendant cognitive dissonance, was resolved. In some two hundred novels, short stories, nickel weeklies, and magazine narratives, Mormons appear as the stock villain of the day. And in one version after another, those Mormons are depicted as exotic, oriental, foreign, or otherwise distinctive in language, dress, and appearance. The cumulative effect of this practice was to eliminate all *religious*

*dimensions* of the Mormons and to reconstruct the people as an *ethnic category*.<sup>1</sup>

So successful was this representational strategy that by 1861, in a meeting of the New Orleans Academy of Sciences, Dr. Samuel Cartwright and Professor C. G. Forshey gave an amazing account of their discovery. Relying largely upon an earlier government report, they outlined the physiological features of the new Mormon “racial type”: “This condition is shown by . . . the large proportion of albuminous and gelatinous types of constitution. . . . The yellow, sunken, cadaverous visage; the greenish-colored eye; the thick, protuberant lips; the low forehead; the light, yellowish hair, and the lank, angular person, constitute an appearance so characteristic of the new race . . . as to distinguish them at a glance.”<sup>2</sup>

It would be hard to imagine more convincing evidence of the success achieved by a generation of inventive literary ethnography than such “scientific” assent to a fictively constructed racial category. At the present day, the heritage of this strategy is evident in such an august reference work as the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, which quotes the scholar Thomas O’Dea to the effect that Mormons “represent the clearest example to be found in our national history of the evolution of a native and indigenously developed ethnic minority.”<sup>3</sup>

The social utility of this strategy is clear: purging the body politic of a disturbing racial or ethnic entity is much more conformable to nineteenth-century political ideology than suppressing an expression of religious diversity.

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1. See Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

2. Samuel Cartwright and C. G. Forshey collaborated on this paper, “Hereditary Descent; or, Depravity of the Offspring of Polygamy among the Mormons,” *DeBow’s Review* 30/2 (1861): 209–10, which was presented at the New Orleans Academy of Sciences, 10 December 1860. They quoted portions of a report made by Assistant Surgeon Roberts Barthelow.

3. Dean L. May, “Mormons,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 720.

### Brainwashing and “A Mystical, Magical Influence”

Another representational practice, obvious in the works of fiction from this period, reveals even more about the management of religious diversity. This practice has striking relevance to recent patterns in the way religious orthodoxy resists innovation in general and new religious movements in particular.

A phenomenally popular pseudodocumentary from this era was Maria Ward’s exposé, *Female Life among the Mormons* (1855). Explaining her seduction by the Mormon leader Joseph Smith, one of the hapless victims, the innocent Ellen, complains that “he exerted a mystical magical influence over me—a sort of sorcery that deprived me of the unrestricted exercise of free will.”<sup>4</sup> Though always knowing the sect to be full of absurdities, she marries a Mormon she meets on a stagecoach only days after he first fixes on her “one of his piercing looks. I became immediately sensible of some unaccountable influence drawing my sympathies towards him. In vain I struggled to break the spell. I was like a fluttering bird before the gaze of the serpent-charmer.”<sup>5</sup> Years later, she reveals the secret behind Mormonism’s success to a friend:

“The early Mormon leaders possessed a singular and fascinating power, which they practised on all that came within their influence, by which they pretended to cure diseases and work miracles, and which”—

“Is now popularly known by the name of Mesmerism,” I said, interrupting her.

“Even so,” she answered, “and that mysterious influence, so little known at that time, contributed, in no small degree, to his success, and that of those engaged with him.”

“The mystery of it is, how Smith came to possess the knowledge of that magnetic influence, several years anterior to its general circulation throughout the country.”

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4. Maria Ward, *Female Life among the Mormons: A Narrative of Many Years’ Personal Experience* (New York: Derby, 1855), 65.

5. Ward, *Female Life among the Mormons*, 12.

“That is no mystery to me,” she replied. “Smith obtained his information, and learned all the strokes, and passes, and manipulations, from a German peddler.”<sup>6</sup>

This explanation absolutely saturates the whole genre of nineteenth-century anti-Mormon novels. Hypnotism, mesmerism, the evil eye, irresistible mysterious charisma—or, equally common, brutality, coercion, abduction—but in all cases, the point was the same. No one would ever convert to Mormonism of his or her own free will.<sup>7</sup>

An eerily similar strategy emerged in a very different context in the 1950s as a consequence of publicity generated by American POWs in the Korean War who apparently converted to an anti-American posture and embraced communist ideology. Approximately three thousand Americans were held in captivity by the North Korean and Chinese forces. Of these, eleven converted to communism. Not a large number, but distressing enough to American policymakers that a CIA psychological warfare specialist, Edward Hunter, went to work and successfully legitimized a new psychological concept: brainwashing.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to recognize the emotional or psychological utility that a concept like brainwashing has in this context. The notion allows us to maintain intact our healthy self-appraisal and our esteem for those we love. But it is also important that we recognize the ideological or cultural utility of such a concept. Attributing unacceptable differences to a suppression of the will allows the dominant institutions in society to avoid a whole range of uncomfortable and potentially unsettling questions such as: Why might someone freely choose to reject what we offer? What would this say about deficiencies in our available belief systems? What are alternative ways of defining human purpose? How else could we prioritize our values? Is there a better way of organizing ourselves socially and institutionally?

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6. Ward, *Female Life among the Mormons*, 417.

7. For details, see Givens, “They Ain’t Whites . . . They’re Mormons’: Fictive Responses to the Anxiety of Seduction,” in *Viper on the Hearth*, 121–52.

8. See Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men’s Minds* (New York: Vanguard, 1951).

It is also crucial that we recognize here a familiar pattern since as new religious movements gain influence, there is a virtually identical tendency to rewrite those institutions as coercive institutions. Often, the charge is that dubious, mystical agencies are at work. The 1993 federal confrontation with Branch Davidian “cultist” David Koresh spawned news coverage that referred to his “wizardry,” the “mystic spell” he cast over members, his “magnetism,” and the “victims” who “came under his spell, sexually as well as spiritually.”<sup>9</sup>

This same strategy has more recently been invoked with those sects that now have displaced Mormonism as a threatening “cult,” including the Unification Church and Scientology. Opponents of both groups have charged that coercive persuasion deprives members of any choice in their conversion. The Supreme Court of California, in a case involving the Unification Church (*Molko v. Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity*), went so far as to validate one such allegation that “brainwashing” rendered its members “incapable of exercising their own will.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar 1984 case, a plaintiff alleged that the Unification Church conspired to “take control” over one Charles Meroni through “a form of hypnotic control.” The Supreme Court of New York ruled there was sufficient evidence for the case to go to trial.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to suggest that religious organizations are totally immune from unacceptable attempts to retain their followers nor that coercive techniques are eschewed by all of them. One only need mention the name “Jonestown” to evoke memories of drug-induced obedience to a shady leader. But an indiscriminate and undiscerning application of these claims does a huge disservice to legitimate religious expression.

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9. “Intimidation, Wizardry Marked Tiny Cult’s Rule,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 3 March 1993, A8, as quoted in *Viper on the Hearth*, 154.

10. *Molko v. Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity*, 46 Cal. 3d 1092 (1988).

11. See *Meroni v. Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity*, 125 Misc. 2d 1061 [480 N.Y.S. 2d 706 (1984)].

### An Appeal to the Vulnerable and Impressionable

A less sensationalistic interpretation of the success of new religious movements, but one that similarly hints at a compromised or deficient will as a factor in conversion, is that they appeal to the vulnerable, the impressionable, the poor, and the least educated. Here the evidence may be surprising.

Researchers have found Christian Scientist converts to be more affluent than the mainstream. Unification Church (Moonie) converts in England were “several times more likely than others their age to be university graduates.” Persons who have attended college were “several times as likely to report they were at least somewhat attracted to three eastern religions that, in an American setting, qualify as cult movements.” Overall, 81 percent of members of new religious movements in America have been to college. In sum, the so-called “cult groups” are “the most educated groups—exceeding even Jews and Episcopalians in terms of the percentage of members who have attended college.”<sup>12</sup>

The Mormons may be the most striking case of all. Not only do we now know that they drew their early converts from the more educated classes, but today their members are a striking exception to the secularization hypothesis. In a nutshell, studies show that the better educated Mormons are, the higher the level of their participation in and commitment to their religion.<sup>13</sup>

### An Alternative Explanation

So, the puzzle of what attracts people to new religious movements cannot be solved by recourse to eighteenth- or nineteenth-century appeals to mesmerism and magnetic influences, by slightly updated

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12. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 40, 43.

13. See Howard M. Bahr and Renata Tonks Forste, “Toward a Social Science of Contemporary Mormondom,” in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and Its Members*, ed. James T. Duke (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 157; Gerald Stott, “Effects of College Education on the Religious Involvement of Latter-day Saints,” *BYU Studies* 24/1 (1984): 41–52; Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, “Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity,” *Review of Religious Research* 26/1 (1984): 50–54.

but equally silly Korean War-era mythologies of brainwashing, or by blaming economic or intellectual destitution. As Rodney Stark reminds us, “New religious movements are likely to succeed” only when “conventional religious organizations are [not] effectively serving market demand.”<sup>14</sup>

Using brainwashing or intellectual deficiency as explanations behind conversion to heterodox religions may make mainstream Christians feel better about themselves, but it will not really address the urgent question of what the new religions offer and what the old-line churches lack in terms of appeal. In terms of numbers in Australia, the most recent National Church Life Survey reveals some stark contrasts. From 1996 to 2001, attendance at the nation’s largest denomination, the Catholic Church, declined by 13 percent. The Anglican church, second largest, experienced “significant falls in attendance,” particularly in rural areas. Lutheran, Uniting, and Presbyterian churches also declined.<sup>15</sup> Michael Gilchrist, in summarizing the report, says, “It is now unlikely that the large mainstream denominations . . . will be able to replace the large percentages of attenders who will inevitably be lost . . . in the coming years.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the survey notes, some denominations, including the newer ones, were growing with rates as high as 42 percent. Latter-day Saints, along with Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, showed sustained yearly growth for this same period.

Therefore, it may be timely to inquire what these and other new religious movements offer, *especially in comparison with the mainline churches from which they are drawing their converts*. In simplest terms, it makes most sense to see Australia, like America, as a religious marketplace, offering various denominations as commodities. As Roger

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14. Rodney Stark, “How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model,” in *The Future of New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley and Phillip E. Hammond (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 13, 19.

15. “Media Release 28 February 2004: NCLS releases latest estimates of church attendance,” [www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?docid=2250&track=82083](http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?docid=2250&track=82083) (accessed 8 February 2007).

16. Michael Gilchrist, “National Church Life Survey: Church-Going Declines Further,” *AD2000—A Journal of Religious Opinion*, at [www.ad2000.com.au/articles/2004/apr2004p3\\_1581.html](http://www.ad2000.com.au/articles/2004/apr2004p3_1581.html) (accessed 8 February 2007).

Finke and Rodney Stark describe the problem in a groundbreaking study of religion in America, the decline of the old mainline denominations was caused by their inability to cope with the consequences of religious freedom and the rise of a free-market religious economy.<sup>17</sup>

In what follows, I will enumerate and comment upon several features of new religious movements in general—but of the Church of Jesus of Christ of Latter-day Saints specifically—that explain their particular success in this religious marketplace. I focus on Mormonism both because it appears at present to be the most successful new religious movement and also because it is on a course to seriously contend in coming generations for the title of a new world religion. As Stark says, it may be the first new world faith since Mohammed rode out of the desert.<sup>18</sup> This status is by no means assured, however, and the prediction is by no means a matter of consensus. But the statistical possibility, if not probability, is alone sufficiently remarkable to have attracted considerable attention to the phenomenon.

In regard to religious preferences, Finke and Stark have proposed a number of factors that appear to be shared by the most successful new religious movements. Among other characteristics, these groups (1) demand an unusually high level of sacrifice and commitment, (2) maintain faith in and provide access to the miraculous, (3) impart order and sanity to the human condition, and (4) foster stronger attachments within the group than between new members and their society.<sup>19</sup> Let me review their points one at a time and then add one of my own: the fostering of spiritual fruits that are empirically verifiable, as both subjective experience and quantifiable consequence.

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17. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "Why 'Mainline' Denominations Decline," in *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 235–83.

18. Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26/1 (1984): 18–19.

19. Stark, "How New Religions Succeed," 25; Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 249–51, 275; Rodney Stark, "Mormon Networks of Faith," in *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 62.

## Five Factors in the Success of New Religious Movements

### 1. A Higher Level of Sacrifice and Commitment

The most successful religions are those that “impose significant costs in terms of sacrifice and even stigma.”<sup>20</sup> Finke and Stark elsewhere refer to the necessary “ability to motivate sacrifice.”<sup>21</sup> However, that may be to confuse cause with effect. It is as possible that sacrifice catalyzes commitment, since we love what we suffer for, as it is that sacrifice only follows commitment. It is also the case that great sacrifice is itself a powerful appeal to our higher nature. As a concomitant to things of the greatest value, the possibility of sacrifice beckons like a prelude to a more sublime significance behind life than we have yet known. As Thomas Carlyle noted, with only slight Victorian hyperbole, “difficulty, abnegation, martyrdom, death, are the *allurements* that act on the heart of man. . . . Not by flattering our appetites; no, by awakening the Heroic that slumbers in every heart, can any Religion gain followers.”<sup>22</sup>

This is the most counterintuitive of the apparent keys to success. Let me introduce this point with an anecdote that a Mormon leader once told in one of the Latter-day Saints’ semiannual world conferences:

Two of our missionaries were teaching a fine family, who had expressed a desire to be baptized; and then they suddenly cooled off. The father had learned about tithing, and he cancelled all further meetings with the missionaries.

Two sad elders reported to the branch president, who himself was a recent convert, that he would not have this fine family in his branch. A few days later the branch president persuaded the elders to join him in another visit to the family.

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20. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churaching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 238, emphasis removed.

21. Finke and Starke, *Churaching of America* (1992 ed.), 265.

22. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 70–71, emphasis in original.

“I understand,” he told the father, “that you have decided not to join the Church.”

“That is correct,” the father answered.

“The elders tell me that you are disturbed about tithing.”

“Yes,” said the father. “They had not told us about it; and when I learned of it, I said, ‘Now, that’s too much to ask. Our church has never asked anything like that.’ We think that’s just too much, and we will not join.”

“Did they tell you about fast offering?” the president asked.

“No,” said the man. “What is that?”

“In the Church we fast for two meals each month and give the value of the meals for the help of the poor.”

“They did not tell us that,” the man said.

“Did they mention the building fund?”

“No, what is that?”

“In the Church we all contribute toward building chapels. If you joined the Church, you would want to participate both in labor and with money. Incidentally, we are building a new chapel here,” he told him.

“Strange,” he said, “that they didn’t mention it.”

“Did they explain the welfare program to you?”

“No,” said the father. “What is that?”

“Well, we believe in helping one another. If someone is in need or ill or out of work or in trouble, we are organized to assist, and you would be expected to help.

“Did they also tell you that we have no professional clergy? All of us contribute our time, our talents, our means, and travel—all to help the work. And we’re not paid for it in money.”

“They didn’t tell us any of that,” said the father.

“Well,” said the branch president, “if you are turned away by a little thing like tithing, it is obvious you’re not ready for

this Church. Perhaps you have made the right decision and you should not join.”<sup>23</sup>

The economic price is just one aspect. Converts also learn that all young men are expected to give two years of full-time missionary service without pay; that all members must forswear tea, coffee, alcohol, and tobacco; that they must conform to strict laws of chastity before marriage and fidelity after marriage; that they must, in fact, consecrate all their time, talents, and possessions to what they believe is God’s earthly kingdom. Joseph Smith taught, “Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation.”<sup>24</sup>

I think human beings are increasingly craving something that is worth the investment of their money, their time, and their hearts. As some faiths have diminished their demands on the lives of their adherents over time, their followers have, ironically, responded by seeking other faith groups where more, not less, is required of them. Mainline churches may wish to recall in this context Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s masterful discourse on “cheap grace.”<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Access to the Miraculous

Religions must continue to find room for the miraculous in their faith tradition. I do not think this necessarily means either flamboyant evidence of the divine or charismatic gifts (although this is certainly true of the hugely successful Pentecostalist movement). I do think it means belief in a responsive rather than passive God and an emphatic

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23. Boyd K. Packer, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 177–78; with punctuation and a few words altered slightly from the original in Boyd K. Packer, “Where Much Is Given, Much Is Required,” *Ensign*, November 1974, 88. To continue the story: “A few days later the man appeared at the branch president’s home . . . to schedule the baptism of his family. . . . This happens every day with individuals and entire families attracted by the high standards, not repelled by them” (p. 88).

24. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, comp. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 58.

25. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Costly Grace,” in *The Cost of Discipleship*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 35–47.

assertion of a divine agent behind our nebulous concept of the divine. Let me explain this in terms of the critical theological concept of revelation. To put it simply, Mormonism is founded on the principle of modern, continuing revelation from God.

By “revelation,” Mormons mean something fairly different from what many theologians intend by the term. Catholic scholar Avery Dulles, in his classic study of revelation, indicates that most Christians understand the term to refer to either the Bible “viewed as a collection of inspired and inerrant teachings” or the process by which “God reveals himself . . . in his great deeds.”<sup>26</sup> Alternately, revelation can mean for some theologians an inner experience of the divine. In most cases, the common feature of revelation from a theological point of view is the lack of particular, communicated content. As religious scholar William Abraham summarizes, “revelation in the fully personal sense characteristic of personal agents has been abandoned.”<sup>27</sup>

Mormonism, on the other hand, embraces the position of Stark, who has insisted that, by definition, “a revelation is not an insight or an inspiration. A revelation is a *communication*. . . . A revelation presupposes a divine *being* capable of wishes and intentions.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Mormonism is rooted both historically and theologically in a concept of revelation that is striking in its literalness.

When the fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith returned from his first epiphany in the Sacred Grove, in Palmyra, New York, in which he said he saw the Father and the Son, his summative comment was not a statement about the visitation he experienced, the nature of the God he beheld, or the apostate condition of Christianity that God described. It was, rather, a simple affirmation of the apostle James’s promise that when an individual asks God a question in childlike faith and guilelessness, God may choose to answer with articulate, discernible, unmistakably human words: “I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right . . . and which I should

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26. Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 27.

27. William J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1982), 24.

28. Rodney Stark, “A Theory of Revelations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38/2 (1999): 289.

join,” said the young Joseph Smith. “I was answered that I must join none of them” (Joseph Smith—History 1:18–19).

In this regard, the Book of Mormon has played a most remarkable role. Though you are not likely to find the book listed on the New York Times best-seller list, it probably should be. Well over one hundred million copies of the book are in circulation, making it by far the most widely published and distributed book ever produced by an American. The book came to light under the most extraordinary of circumstances—or claimed circumstances. In a natural follow-up to his first vision, the young Joseph Smith, now seventeen years of age, insisted that an angel of God had directed him to recover a set of gold plates from a hillside in upstate New York, which he did in 1827. Subsequently, Smith produced a text that he said was a translation of those plates, carried out by means of holy instruments called interpreters and later known as the Urim and Thummim.

In addition to its obtrusive status as a physical embodiment of God’s interaction with the human plane, the Book of Mormon embodies in its thematic structure, its numerous textual examples, and its final, concluding instance of readerly invitation the insistent message that revelation is the province of every man. As a consequence, in the world of the Book of Mormon, concepts such as revelation, prayer, inspiration, and mystery will find powerful and substantive redefinition. That may well be the Book of Mormon’s most significant and revolutionary—as well as controversial—contribution to religious thinking. The particularity and specificity, the vividness, the concreteness, and the accessibility of revelatory experience—those realities both underlie and overshadow the narrated history and doctrine that constitute the record. The “knowability” of all truth, the openness of mystery, and the reality of personal revelation find vivid illustration within the record and invite reenactment outside it.

American Quaker poet and reformer John Greenleaf Whittier said Mormonism spoke “a language of hope and promise to weak, weary hearts, tossed and troubled, who have wandered from sect to sect,

seeking in vain for the primal manifestations of the divine power.”<sup>29</sup> For millions of believers, the Book of Mormon has been the vehicle through which they could find their own sacred grove and reenact on a personal scale the epiphany that ushered in a new dispensation.

### 3. Order and Sanity

Sociologists tell us that successful religions impart order and sanity to the human condition. This is a fairly vague attribute. All religions impose some kind of order on the chaos of lived reality. Mormonism certainly does it in a way that breaks from traditional models. It does this in two distinctive and distinguishing ways. First, Mormon thought asserts a pre- and posthistory of humanity that is without Christian parallel. Christians since the days of Augustine have asked the question “Where did I come from?” But, eventually settling on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, they aborted the question or considered it solved.

“We say that God is a self-existent being,” said Joseph Smith. “Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles. . . . The mind or intelligence which man possesses is [coeternal] with God himself. . . . Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. . . . There is no creation about it.”<sup>30</sup>

Smith went on to elaborate a vision of man as an eternal being, dwelling in the presence of God before the world was fashioned. Mortality emerges in this scheme as the second act of a three-act play, an occasion for man to acquire a physical body (which Latter-day Saints see as an indispensable asset, not an unavoidable impediment, to godliness) on the way to a celestial destiny as a godlike being.

Premortality in the presence of God, mortal life as a period of probation and growth, and future, endless self-transformation on the way

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29. J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 191–92, originally quoted from *Howitt’s Journal* in the *Millennial Star* 10 (1848): 302–3.

30. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 352–54.

to godliness constitute the essence of a human spiritual anthropology. Two scholars of religion who recently wrote a history of heaven insist that Mormonism's conception of the afterlife is, in fact, the most highly developed and detailed in the Christian tradition.<sup>31</sup> Certainly this is a cosmology and eschatology of impressive architectural detail.

But there is a second way in which Mormonism, and some other new religious movements as well, provide a sense of order craved by modern seekers. This is related to a belief that inspiration demands assent to the authority it represents. This is where some writers show greatest alarm regarding the new religious movements since whenever the power of the state to impose order and restraint is challenged, whether by individual conscience or by a religious institution, radicalism and anarchy appear to be at the door.

In the case of Mormonism, this conflict had to be resolved before Mormonism could be ultimately accommodated into the American mainstream. And this happened, decisively and definitively, when the church acceded to the logic of *Reynolds v. United States*, wherein it was held that the Constitution's guarantees of freedom of religious opinion did not extend to unfettered freedom of religious practice.

Even so, in a climate of increasingly pointed rhetoric about choice and freedom and individual rights, a religion that upholds a body of men as God's anointed prophets, empowered to pronounce policy, doctrine, and practice with no member input or deliberation or vote strikes many as the essence of a cultic mindset. Mormons, on the other hand, as with many other new religious movement converts, are looking for a religion that emphatically does *not* aspire to imitate secular politics—in its governance or sensibility.

They could be said to share the mindset of famous TV commentator Ted Koppel, when he remarked several years ago that when Moses came down from the Holy Mount, he did not carry a copy of the "Ten Suggestions."<sup>32</sup> In a recent article, Australian Cardinal George Pell

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31. See Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 313–22.

32. Ted Koppel, 1987 commencement address at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

zeroes in on the source of Pope John Paul II's uniquely successful rapport with Catholic youth:

The Holy Father's message to youth has always been the same. He has called them to greatness, spiritual and moral greatness—to follow Christ. Young people know this is a compliment. According to conventional wisdom, the Pope says all the wrong things. . . . He has not instructed his bishops and priests to turn a blind eye to pre-marital sex, to living together before marriage, and does not urge young women always to have the pill with them. Precisely because of this, he has drawn the largest gatherings of youth in all history.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Strong Attachments

Those who join successful new religious movements manage to achieve unusually strong attachments to the new group. Joseph Smith's brother Hyrum once told an audience, "Men's souls conform to the society in which they live, with very few exceptions, and when men come to live with the Mormons, their souls swell as if they were going to stride the planets."<sup>34</sup> Hyrum's language may have been rhetorically excessive, but the fact is, the sense of community and kinship in Mormon society is legendary. With the possible exception of the Amish, no other American religion has so succeeded in welding its members together into cohesive units. In large measure, the persecutions and oppressions they suffered in the nineteenth century were the direct consequence of their physically congregating in accordance with a principle they refer to as "the gathering."

But even as they have become dispersed across the globe, scholars and observers seek for words to adequately convey the intense bonds of loyalty and clannishness that characterize them: "Global tribe," in the words of Joel Kotkin, or "a religion that became a people," according

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33. "Adrift in a world where almost anything goes," *Sunday Telegraph*, 20 June 2004.

34. Hyrum Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:300.

to Harold Bloom.<sup>35</sup> *How* is that cohesiveness attained, and can it ever be emulated in mainstream religions?

“I am satisfied that it will not do for the Lord to make this people popular,” said the ever pugnacious Brigham Young. “Why? Because all hell would want to be in the church. The people must be kept where the finger of scorn can be pointed at them.”<sup>36</sup>

There may be no shortcut to the efficiency with which external opposition welds a people together. This has certainly been true historically, and it is true to a more limited extent today. But I think the explanation for the atypical cohesion of Mormonism is more related to the first topic I addressed—the high price of membership. In addition to the financial investment, Mormons simply spend an unusual amount of their time interacting with other Mormons because their religious and devotional lives do not correlate with a one-hour/once-per-week worship experience. There is no paid clergy, so each member is frequently engaged during the week in serving and ministering to others. They have home teaching and visiting teaching programs, wherein they are required to visit several families and individuals in their homes every month to provide temporal and spiritual support. Their youth activities are held during the week, as are occasional women’s meetings and activities.

In addition, the two years of missionary experience, the stringent health and moral code, and the Book of Mormon collectively provide a unique cultural experience, a unique set of cultural markers, and a unique cultural vocabulary that set Mormonism apart as a distinct cultural entity.

## 5. Emotional Fervor or an Inner Spiritual Experience

At this point, I argue for one more vital feature of religions that succeed in the contemporary world. An early appraisal of the new

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35. Joel Kotkin, *Tribes: How Race, Religion, and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy* (New York: Random House, 1993), 247; Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 83.

36. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:272.

religious movements concluded that “all these movements have in common is an emphasis on emotional fervour and/or inner spiritual ‘experience’. [Newspaper accounts of the growth of Pentecostalism in Australia make the same point.] That is, they all include the premiss that *one comes by authentic values by means of intense experiences rather than by means of rational thought and analysis.*”<sup>37</sup> There is some truth here, but a grave misperception as well. As I mentioned earlier, a very surprising discovery of Stark and his colleagues was that, contrary to public perceptions, converts to the new religious movements are drawn disproportionately from the *more* educated classes and not from the ranks of the socially marginalized.

What this tells us is that the diminishing religious mainstream cannot be explained as a simple inevitability as society modernizes and secularizes. That fact also suggests that “intense experiences” and “rational thought and analysis” are not as oppositional or mutually exclusive as those researchers seem to believe. On the contrary, religious seekers in the present age seem increasingly insistent that religion manifest measurable, empirically verifiable signs of its vitality. And here I am in emphatic disagreement with Stark’s insistence that “new religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that their doctrines are nonempirical.”<sup>38</sup> The Book of Mormon and Restoration history alike are, in mainstream Mormonism as opposed to the Community of Christ, defiantly persistent in their self-exposure to empirical disproof. Perhaps more to the point, the church’s reliance upon the promise of Moroni as the core of its theology of revelation and proselytizing strategy is an all-or-nothing wager on the reliability of experimental faith. What could be more rational than that? Pentecostalism is rooted in the promise that visible manifestations of God’s real presence still occur. The bedrock principle of Mormonism is a conversion experience that asserts a revelation from the Holy

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37. Dick Anthony, Thomas Robbins, and Paul Schwartz, “Contemporary Religious Movements and the Secularisation Premiss,” in *New Religious Movements*, ed. John Coleman and Gregory Baum (New York: Seabury, 1983), 2, emphasis in original.

38. Rodney Stark, “The Basis of Mormon Success,” in Neilson, *Rise of Mormonism*, 119, emphasis removed.

Ghost that is emphatically, in Book of Mormon language, “discernible” and therefore “real” (Alma 32:35).

But there are other, fully rational signs of the efficacy of Mormon belief that can range from a longer life span (8–11 years in the case of Mormonism) or a lower divorce rate (6–7 percent in the case of LDS temple marriages) to a community that actually replicates the cohesiveness and service orientation of first-generation Christianity, or a new scripture that audaciously claims that a living God continues to converse with fourteen-year-old farm-boy prophets.

### Conclusion

Taken in the collective, these five characteristics suggest a stark truth about religious appeal: people want an *alternative* to contemporary directions, not an *embrace* of contemporary directions. The five features—demand for sacrifice, the miraculous, imparting order, multi-layered attachments, and confirmatory spiritual experiences—all hark back to an earlier version of Christianity. The irony here is that it is not what is new, but what is in fact very old, that seems to be the main attraction in town.