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*Roots of Modern Mormonism* Mark P. Leone

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LEONE, MARK P. *Roots of Modern Mormonism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979. 250 pp. \$15.00.

Reviewed by Steven L. Olsen, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology, University of Chicago.

*Roots of Modern Mormonism* is complex and insightful, innovative and challenging . . . and troubling. This attempt to analyze Mormonism from the perspective of cultural ecology is the first major study on Mormonism in a number of years to come from a nationally recognized scholar outside the Church and one of the few studies on Mormonism to employ anthropological field techniques. Dr. Leone applies understanding of the Church gained from temporary residence and study in the Little Colorado River area in south central Arizona to reveal several fundamental characteristics about post-pioneer Mormonism. His basic thesis is that Mormonism is fundamentally dynamic, pragmatic and relativistic and that its successful and radical adaptation to the twentieth century is a function of an essentially individualistic ideology. Examining how tithing, stake conferences, church courts, and testimonies have allowed Mormons to adapt to changing conditions in the world around them, Leone concludes that Mormonism maintains an appearance of authority, stability, and confidence primarily by discouraging the development of professional theologians and historians from among its ranks who would identify contradictions in its doctrines and significant alterations in its practices. As a result, Mormons wear theological and historical blinders to protect themselves from the realization that they have become, not the Kingdom of God as they originally intended, but only one of many religious minorities in the United States. In short, Mormonism's adaptability is a function of its deceptiveness—making the Saints think they are working for God when the Church, in practice, is subject to Mammon.

Before such a critique of Mormonism could be accepted, several elements of the analysis must be clarified or corrected. First of all, in his effort to make a point, Leone commits some glaring errors. Consider, for example, the following: "The nineteenth century regarded Mormonism as the perfect American religion and a microcosm of America" (p. vi); Church leaders in the twentieth century "separated the church as an institution from the welfare of its people" (p. 163); and ". . . most Mormons, especially older ones, can report virtually nothing about the past" (p. 209). These statements fly in the face of some of the most well-documented aspects of Mormon history and culture.

Furthermore, obvious internal contradictions detract from the analysis. On successive pages, Leone declares, "Mormon society does not suffer from the 'old age' problem as much as the rest of the country does," and ". . . Mormon elderly are displaced, like the elderly everywhere" (pp. 178-79). Consider also, "Mormons . . . bestow most of the meaning in their lives within the institutional framework of Mormonism," and "Mormons create their own theology and philosophy in the literal sense. . . . They do their own thinking" (p. 168). Finally, "Whenever Mormons get together, they are invited to talk about all aspects of their faith and church and they do so without a structure which actively prescribes the right answer to any question," and "Sunday School for the children corresponds to the divisions of grade school, with the teacher trying to elicit spontaneous, extemporaneous responses that nonetheless coincide with what the manuals indicate is an appropriate way of answering" (p. 188).

Leone also employs an overabundance of theoretical jargon which often muddles his insights: "Mormon ideas cannot be arranged to create a negative commentary on the events which they classify. Through overlap, on the one hand, and isolation, on the other, the relation between the pieces of the system have been disintegrated; the internal logic that the system once had has been functionally destroyed. Thus, like the past, it has ceased to exist" (p. 192).

Leone's analysis of Mormonism's transformation is more central to his study, and his criticism of the "hierarchical, authoritarian, and fundamentalist" approach to Mormonism is well taken. There is "conceptual looseness" in Mormon theology and "ethical looseness" in Mormon behavior, both having contributed significantly to Mormonism's dynamics. But, to classify Mormon theology and history as essentially "do-it-yourself" is to ignore a great deal of cultural identity and meaning which lie beyond the control of the individual Mormon. Leone shows how the boundaries of orthodoxy, as defined by ecclesiastical courts and temple recommend interviews, have changed throughout Mormon history, but he does not show that these and other institutional boundary markers are weaker than they were in pre-modern Mormonism. One could make the point that these sanctions are actually more significant in the lives of contemporary Mormons than ever before. A "modern religion" in Robert Bellah's terms and an "invisible religion" in Thomas Luckman's is one in which the standards of faithfulness have become individualized and subjective. Mormonism is far from this stage in its growth.

A final concern addresses Leone's fundamental theoretical

framework. An ecological analysis considers culture to be a mechanism for its members to ensure their survival through successful adaptation to a material and temporal setting. Leone states, "The fact that they planned and that the planning netted them survival is the sum of the Mormons' history" (p. 72). Although survival is a need for all cultures, a serious question is raised for those who view Mormonism primarily as a survival technique. Why did the Mormons maintain their "peculiar institutions" to the point of negating their basic survival quest, only to generate an adaptive mechanism less efficient than that of its mother country and accept so enthusiastically the permanent status of a subordinate religious minority in America? To answer this question Leone must attribute irrationality to Mormon behavior, nonsense to its ritual, and deception to its ideology. The limitations of Leone's theoretical framework seriously distort his perspective of Mormonism. Neither Mormonism nor any other culture can be reduced to a struggle for material existence.

*Roots of Modern Mormonism* contains useful and provocative insights, but I cannot recommend it as the landmark study it was expected to be.