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# Joseph Smith and the Making of a Global Religion

*Jan Shipp*

In regard to the other “worlds” of the first Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith was certainly “in that world *and* of it.” He was clearly in attendance “in his own time;” he attempted to recover past worlds; he was and is present in his own and in the personal worlds of others; and he challenged the theological world of his day.

In the sense that his gospel vision was expansive enough to impel his sending members of the Quorum of the Twelve as missionaries to England and continental Europe—and even sending Orson Hyde to Jerusalem—Joseph Smith put down the foundations for reaching out to the entire world.<sup>1</sup> Yet when he was murdered in 1844, Mormonism essentially remained an indigenous North American faith.<sup>2</sup> Joseph the prophet was not present when Mormonism became what some now describe as a “global religion.”

Smith’s initial prophetic vision had been that the gathering of the Saints would make possible the building of the “New Jerusalem” in Jackson County, Missouri, a place that would have a temple at its center (Doctrine and Covenants 57). After the construction of a temple surrounded by a Mormon kingdom became impossible there, the Saints built a kingdom on the Mississippi and constructed their second temple, this one in the city they called Nauvoo. But events transpired such that this place of habitation, too, had to be abandoned.

Following the splintering of the Mormon movement, which occurred after Smith's death, the largest body of the Saints followed Brigham Young and most of the members of the Quorum of the Twelve to the Intermountain West.<sup>3</sup>

Once settled in the Great Salt Lake Valley, they again became very serious about spreading the gospel to foreign parts. Missionaries were again sent to the British Isles, all through northern Europe, and even to the South Seas. But as Mormonism was still in its gathering phase—living in the “winding-up scene”—the church's missionaries encouraged all those who accepted the gospel message to join the body of the Saints in the Great Basin. Establishing the Perpetual Emigrating Fund and assisting in many other ways, the church helped converts come to the valley in the tops of the mountains. Rather than spreading across the globe, the form of Mormonism whose institutional manifestation is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints centered itself in the Intermountain West, where it became a provincial faith.

Leonard Arrington and many other scholars who have paid close attention to the life of Brigham Young have argued convincingly that as the “Lion of the Lord” presided over the Saints in the intermountain region, he turned his beloved Joseph's prophetic vision into reality.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, he created a kingdom that turned on its head the persecution the Saints had faced as long as they were in the United States. Before they departed the settled United States, they had lived in a land that, despite the separation of church and state, was virtually a Protestant establishment. In the West, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints became the established church. Other religious bodies were “tolerated” in territorial Utah in about the same way that sects were tolerated in the British Empire with its established church at that time. Consequently, for at least a decade, the kingdom was truly a Mormon theocratic state, and, to some of the Saints, the Millennium seemed to be over the next horizon.

When the United States government sent the army to intervene in the kingdom-building process in 1856–1857, Brigham Young directed the church's foreign missionaries to return to their home-base in the Intermountain West. This, however, was only a brief

temporary remission of the missionary effort. Rather than giving up on gathering the Saints, the Saints never lost sight of the injunction found both in the New Testament and in revelations given through Joseph Smith instructing them to “go ye into all the world.” In “whatsoever place ye cannot go ye shall send [missionaries], [so] that the testimony may go from you into all the world unto every creature” (Mark 16:15; Doctrine and Covenants 84:62).

Those who heard the message and responded by converting to the new faith were not only asked to accept a new understanding of what it meant to be Christian, but also to prepare to gather with the Saints in the intermountain region of the United States. The Great Basin became a new place of gathering both for the Saints who had become part of the movement during the lifetime of Joseph Smith and those who responded to the gospel message after his death.

Salt Lake City became the new center of God’s earthly kingdom, and within what subsequently became mountain Mormonism, the geographical trajectory from periphery to center was maintained until the early decades of the twentieth century. Many vibrant Latter-day Saint congregations were established outside the Intermountain West.<sup>5</sup> But until long after the end of World War II, the Mormon world was divided into the “kingdom” in the Intermountain West and Mormonism elsewhere, which was popularly known as “the mission field.”

This faith community’s construction of itself as a truly significant player on the global religious scene really began during the presidency of David O. McKay (1951–1970). His attention to the church’s restructured missionary program; development of an extraordinary building agenda; creation of a correlation program that, in time, would function to ensure that Mormonism would be the same no matter where it materialized, with enough strength and vitality to be organized into wards and stakes; and his circumnavigation of the globe were all essential elements in beginning the transformation of Mormonism from provincial tradition to global religious force.<sup>6</sup> A signal alteration that carried this transformation forward came during the presidency of Spencer W. Kimball when in 1978 a new revelation made priesthood ordination available to all “worthy”

males, thereby universalizing the Mormon message (Doctrine and Covenants Official Declaration 2). And practically the entire ecclesiastical administration of Gordon B. Hinckley (including his many years of service as proto-president) has been devoted to completing the “conversion” that would make the church and its gospel message universal enough to make itself at home in myriad places and many different cultures.

### When and in What Sense “Global”?

The complete history of twentieth-century Mormonism has yet to be written. But armchair observers seem to agree that the growth and geographical expansion of Mormonism is primarily due to the program initiatives and policies of Presidents McKay, Kimball, and Hinckley. If these presidents are responsible for the growth, then why have a session on Joseph Smith and the making of a global religion in this Library of Congress conference on “The Worlds of Joseph Smith?” It is true that the first Mormon prophet said he wanted to take the gospel to the entire world. But other than organizing the “traveling high council” and sending out missionaries to accomplish the gathering of potential Saints scattered throughout the nations, just how much did Joseph Smith do to begin the process of turning Mormonism into a global religion?

If this question is considered in practical and strategic terms, the answer is “not much.” But in getting beyond such a superficial response that treats the query as if it were posed in ordinary common sense terms, Douglas Davies’s paper is of considerable benefit to students of Mormonism. It is helpful first of all because he draws a valuable distinction between *global* religions (understood primarily with regard to the geographical dispersion of various faith communities all across the world) and *world* religions (understood not only in terms of geographical dispersion, but with how fully faith communities are assimilated into the cultures where they are located). In Davies’s typological scheme, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are clearly world religions while Judaism, Sikhism, and perhaps Hinduism—all great religions of the world—probably do not merit classification in the world religion category.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to making distinctions based on geographical dispersion and levels of assimilation, Davies defines a true world religion as one that is ultimately concerned with the conquest of death. But as his discussion of the dynamics of world religions makes clear, he is aware that elements other than theology and ritual help to determine whether a religion is or is not a world religion. Both Davies and Gerald McDermott say that religions that are true world religions do not remain embedded in their own particular geographic places and idiosyncratic cultures. Instead, they become encultured, making themselves genuinely at home in myriad places and many different cultures. On the other hand, those religions that do not fit into the world religion class may also be widely dispersed geographically. But they never become fixed more or less firmly as an integral part of the surrounding host cultures where they are located.<sup>8</sup>

Away from their home cultures, religions in this second category preserve enough of their home cultures to make them always seem somewhat foreign to whatever host culture they encounter. This is what seems to have happened to Mormonism. While it has gone global in the past half-century, it continues to struggle with its Americanness. As one German Saint said in a recent email message to me, “[probably because of correlation, Mormonism’s] message, metaphors, and images are retained without adaptation.” Texts are translated, of course, but this particular “un-gathered” Saint believes that the persistent uniformity of Mormon programs and materials across cultures makes it difficult to use culturally appropriate images in other countries. Perhaps time will remedy this, but until it is remedied, Mormonism is likely to retain a status similar to Judaism—a great religion of the world—but not a religion that belongs in Davies’s world religion category.

For all that, the reference to Mormonism as a global religion compelled Davies to grapple with Rodney Stark’s prediction that Mormonism will be the next great world religion and with his argument that rational choice is the best way to account for the almost exponential growth and geographical expansion of Mormonism that took place between 1930 and the end of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> In referring to the work of this sociologist, whose published work has

had such a high profile among Mormon ecclesiastics, bureaucrats in the church's Public Affairs division, and the Latter-day Saint intellectual community, Davies points out that Stark's analysis primarily rests on church growth as measured in membership numbers. But he does not—as many of his sociologist colleagues are now doing—make reference to the way that the rate of Mormonism's growth has slowed in recent years or to his failure to take membership retention into account.<sup>10</sup>

Instead Davies uses Sir Isaiah Berlin's distinction between "thin" and "thick" forms of information within different disciplines to point to how much Stark's argument rests on single-stranded material (membership statistics) and how even his application of rational choice theory to the Mormon case does not measure up to the creation of a texture constituted of many interwoven strands. Challenging Stark effectively, but less directly than does Gerald McDermott, Davies offers his own understanding of what a world religion is, reiterating his firm distinction between a world religion and a global religion before turning to the question: What is the relationship between Joseph Smith and the making of a global religion?

Because his observations on the latter matter are brought together around the concept of *courage*, Davis rapidly moves into the experiential arena. He credits Joseph Smith with the courage to accept his prophetic call, which Davies connects with the First Vision. He refers as well to how, despite considerable taunting and the cruel behavior directed toward him, Smith was willing to function as a seer and translator, as well as prophet. Throughout this section of his paper, Davies echoes Richard Bushman's argument, describing a prophet who moved forward without fully understanding what was happening to him.<sup>11</sup>

As significant as were the prophet's profound encounters with deity, there is another way to address the matter of the connection between Joseph Smith and the Mormonism of today, a different way of asking what the first Mormon prophet did to prepare the way for this faith community to be what it is two hundred years after his birth.

Before I turn to this method of connecting Joseph Smith to modern Mormonism, I must add to the discussion of typology by

pointing to yet another way of thinking about religious movements. We need to add and define a different term: *religious tradition*. The most expeditious way to capture the meaning of this term is to think chronologically.

New religious movements come into existence when followers coalesce around a charismatic leader. But unless the charisma at their centers is somehow preserved through a process that the eminent theoretical sociologist Max Weber described as the “routinization of charisma,” such movements—sociologists call them cults—do not survive the death or disappearance of their leaders.<sup>12</sup> If the charisma is somehow preserved, religious movements take on the shape of sects, denominations, churches, or much more rarely, religious traditions. While preserving much of existing traditions, new traditions differ from them in fundamental ways. Before they can move on to become either global or world religions, however, they must be firmly grounded in the real world. Only after they are fully realized as new traditions does the question of whether they can or cannot modify and adapt to host cultures come into play.

### **In What Sense “Religion”?**

A little historical aside is probably in order here. Much was changing in Mormonism around the time of its sesquicentennial in 1980. An almost unaccustomed spirit of optimism was infecting Latter-day Saint communities throughout the nation and across the world. What appeared to be an infinite number of missionaries were converting what appeared to be an infinite number of persons to the Mormon faith. Such a rapid rate of church growth suggested to some observers that this faith community had entered what the economic historian W. W. Rostow called the “take-off” stage, after which truly extraordinary membership growth would be a normal condition.<sup>13</sup>

Although church growth and geographical expansion were causing headaches for general authorities and church bureaucrats alike—what a fascinating story all of this is—the future for Mormonism looked brighter than it had for many generations. It was at this point that Rodney Stark, a University of Washington sociologist, began to



pay attention to Mormonism. At the same time, the Mormon intellectual community was experiencing what Davis Bitton has denominated Camelot, a glorious time when the sources of the church's history were open to scholarly appraisal and new communities of inquiry (the Mormon History Association, *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*) were coming into existence, bringing all sorts of Saints, inactive as well as active, mountain Saints and prairie Saints, plus a few interested non-Mormon scholars together to seek answers not only to questions about what happened in the formative years of Mormonism and in the pioneer period, but also questions about Mormonism as religious phenomenon.

One large part of the scholarly community had a ready answer to the question of what Mormonism was/is: it was/is the true Church of Jesus Christ. Another equally significant part of the body of scholars who were studying American religion was not so sure. Was it a sectarian movement—a sect to end all sects as the distinguished scholar of Protestantism, William Clebsch, asked in one of the very first issues of *Dialogue*?<sup>14</sup> Was it “a sect, a mystery cult, a new religion, a church, a people, a nation, or an American subculture” or all of the above, asked “Mr. American Religious History,” the eminent Yale professor Sidney Ahlstrom.<sup>15</sup> Or, as Mario DePillis, another well-known non-Mormon scholar, proposed, along with Will Herberg, was Mormonism simply one more way to be American?<sup>16</sup> Although Stark may not have been as aware of this heated debate as were historians and scholars of religion, in 1984 he weighed in with the news that Mormonism would be the next great world religion.

The very next year, in my first book I argued that Mormonism was a new religious tradition, one that stood apart from Christianity in its Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox forms and was more connected to Christianity's Hebraic roots than existing Christian traditions.<sup>17</sup> Because Stark's proposal was put into print less than six months before my argument appeared in book form, it is not surprising that my argument about what Mormonism is and Stark's prediction about what it might become in the future became confused. Many folks apparently thought that the arguments were one and the same.

For years I have been trying to say that this is not correct and to clarify the difference. Happily, the distinction that Davies makes between how some arguments are made on “thick” and others on “thin” materials spells out the difference in my argument and that of Stark’s much more clearly. Stark’s conclusion that Mormonism will be the next world religion was based on “thin” material, on statistics describing the church’s membership growth and geographical expansion. My argument that Mormonism is a new religious tradition was based on a much “thicker” examination of Mormon materials.

Drawing on the theoretical (not theological) analyses of the eminent religious studies scholar Ninian Smart and the history of religions specialist Mircea Eliade, I set about examining Mormonism in order to determine whether in it I could identify the six dimensions of religion that are found in such existing religious traditions as Christianity and Judaism, as well as religions that—having passed from the scene—are now artifactual religious traditions.<sup>18</sup> These dimensions are the mythological, doctrinal, ritual, social/institutional, ethical, and experiential. Once this agenda was set, the data I had gathered in the previous twenty years of research convinced me that in Mormonism not only do all six dimensions of religion exist; they are also distinctive.

Added to the biblical story, the Book of Mormon enriches the mythological dimension of Mormonism, a dimension that is also augmented by the life stories of those who first believed. Mormon doctrine is distinctive both in its character and in the way it was settled—not through councilor deliberations but by way of revelation. The building of a temple rather than a church in Kirtland and the Prophet’s translation of the Bible and other texts generated the development of a unique configuration of ritual practice as well as a particularly distinctive theology. Mormon social patterns were profoundly affected by the introduction of plural marriage, and although Mormonism’s ecclesiastical manifestations resembled Catholicism and certain forms of Christian primitivism, its priesthood structure and lay clergy made the social/institutional dimension of the Mormon religion exceptional as well. Except for the Word of Wisdom, the ethical dimension of Mormonism is not as atypical

as are all the other dimensions of this religion. (But this is a huge exemption because one of the functions of the Word of Wisdom has always been that it signifies Sainthood.<sup>19</sup>) The gathering and the subsequent creation of a Mormon village lifestyle even in the urban areas of the great intermountain Mormon corridor made the everyday experience of the Saints unique. Finally, that part of the experiential dimension of religion that forged connections between the divine and human realms was so often characterized by the sorts of revelation that Dallin H. Oaks describes in his contribution to this volume, plus the oft-described revelatory response to Moroni 10:4, that the experiential dimension of religion in Mormonism is likewise exceptional. It is both comparable to and different from the experiential dimensions of other religious faiths.

Separating these six dimensions in this manner is artificial. But the way they work together to create a peculiar people with a shared language and symbol system is an indication that Mormonism is more than a cult, sect, denomination, or church. It is a religious tradition, one that was new when it came into being in nineteenth-century America. And here is where one answer to what Joseph Smith had to do with the making of a global religion comes in.

### **Both Charismatic and Practical**

The Mormon prophet was absolutely central to the creation of virtually all of the dimensions of Mormonism, both doctrinal and practical. Whether its source was golden plates or some inspired production process, the Book of Mormon came forth through the agency of Joseph Smith. He was a seer and translator as well as prophet and leader. As one who spoke for God, Smith was likewise the agent through which the revelations that established the church's theology and organization were introduced. The fundamental ritual patterns were also established through prophetic action.

Although the architectural plans of the social and institutional and even the ethical structures that the Saints turned into reality came through prophecy, Joseph Smith was, one might say, the general contractor. His leadership was practical and farsighted as well

as prophetic. Without him, Mormonism—had it lasted—would be something else entirely. While he did not do what he did single-handedly, he was the originator, designer, and engineer responsible for the creation of this new religious tradition.

Even though fairly firmly established, many new religious movements never get beyond the stage of being led by a charismatic leader. The leader's death spells the eventual demise of the movement. That this did not happen in the wake of Joseph Smith's death may well be his greatest contribution to the making of modern Mormonism. Early on, his role as prophet was conflated with his role as ordained priest and as prophet-priest he was likewise the president of the church as well as the president of the high priesthood.<sup>20</sup> This meant that, unlike many other religious systems brought into being by charismatic leaders, Mormonism had three quite separate streams of authority already in place when Smith was murdered.

The organization of the church was complete enough that the mantle of the prophet did not have to fall on a new charismatic leader in order for the movement to survive. Of equal significance, because of this conflation of the roles of prophet and priest, Mormonism was not constrained by the need to wait until some extended "routinization of charisma" was completed for the tradition to get on with the business of carrying the gospel message to the world.

In the end, however, it is critical not to overlook the reality that Joseph Smith was a charismatic figure and that it was through his agency that the heavens were opened and the divine once again spoke in a language that humans could understand. Without the reopening of that conversation, Mormonism would likely be just one more restoration movement that started out, as did the Disciples of Christ, claiming to be the only true Church of Jesus Christ, but all too quickly took its place on the religious landscape as an idiosyncratic Protestant denomination.

Although something of that nature might well be happening in the Community of Christ, there seems little danger that this could happen to the Mormonism of the mountain Saints.<sup>21</sup> But it is too soon to know what is likely to happen to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and Joseph Smith) headquartered in Salt

Lake City. What appears to this “Mormon watcher” at present is that its categorical home is something between a global religion and a great world religion. Somewhat like Judaism, it is fully realized as a religious tradition, but it is one not able to be fully encultured in some parts of the world. Whether it is a proto-world religion, one that will yet lengthen its stride enough to attain world religion status, remains to be seen.

## Notes

1. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 26.

2. Canada was almost as much a part of the Mormonism of Joseph Smith's day as was the United States.

3. A surprising proportion of Smith's followers remained in the Midwest and elsewhere east of the Mississippi River. In addition to the Saints who “reorganized” the church in 1860 under the leadership of Joseph Smith III, Mormon organizations came into existence under the leadership of Sidney Rigdon, James J. Strang, Charles B. Thompson, Alpheus Cutler, and others. In addition, a substantial group of Saints followed Lyman Wight to Texas. See Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration: A History of the Latter-day Saint Movement*, 3rd ed. (Bountiful, Utah: Restoration Research, 1982) and Michael Scott Van Wagenen, *The Texas Republic and the Mormon Kingdom of God* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

4. Leonard Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985); see also Ronald K. Esplin, “The Emergence of Brigham Young and the Twelve to Mormon Leadership, 1830–1841” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1981).

5. Except stakes (dioceses) organized in Canada and Mexico in 1895, most of the stakes outside the United States were organized after 1960.

6. Gregory A. Prince and William Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005).

7. Douglas Davies, “World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints,” in this volume, 255.

8. Davies, “World Religion,” 263.

9. Davies, “World Religion,” 254–55, 257; Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 18–27.

10. Ryan Cragun, “A Re-examination of Stark's LDS Church Growth Projections by Individual Countries;” Rick Phillips, “Rethinking the International

Expansion of Mormonism,” Henri Gooren and Erik Sengers, “Assessing Secularization and Religious Market Approaches to Religion: The Case of Mormon Growth in Europe,” papers presented at the Annual Meeting of the Social Scientific Study of Religion in Kansas City, October 22–24, 2004; David Clark Knowlton, “How Many Members Are There Really? Two Censuses and the Meaning of LDS Membership in Chile and Mexico,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 53–78.

11. Richard Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Many Histories,” in this volume, 12–15; Davies, “World Religion,” 264–65.

12. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 363–86.

13. W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 36–58.

14. William A. Clebsch, “Each Sect the Sect to End All Sects,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 84–89.

15. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 508.

16. Mario S. De Pillis, “Mormonism and the American Way: A Response [to William A. Clebsch],” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 89–97; Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955).

17. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). See especially chapter 3, “History as Text.”

18. Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribner’s, 1983); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Williard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959).

19. “The practice of abstaining from all forms of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea, . . . may outwardly distinguish active Latter-day Saints more than any other practice.” Joseph Lynn Lyon, “Word of Wisdom,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1584. This 1833 revelation was adapted to the “weakest of all Saints” (Doctrine and Covenants 89:3).

20. See Doctrine and Covenants 107:9, 65.

21. The Community of Christ is the new name of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, an ecclesiastical manifestation of Mormonism headquartered in Independence, Missouri.