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Introduction: What Is a Mormon?

> These will be the Mormon Games. And as with Barcelona and
> Sydney, the setting will linger in the collective memory long after
> we have all forgotten who won the ice dancing. If it all goes well,
> it will be Utah's triumph. That means a Mormon triumph.
> —*The Guardian*, 21 January 2002

Founded in 1830 by twenty-four-year-old Vermont native Joseph
Smith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon
Church) has risen from inauspicious beginnings to become a major Amer-
ican religious denomination and a contender to be the next world faith.
Initially distinguished by their belief in living prophets and additional
scriptures including the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saints experienced
a difficult passage from forced exile in Utah to their contemporary posi-
tion of respect and influence in American society. In some ways, the highly
publicized Olympic Games of 2002, dubbed the "Mormon Games" by the
media, signaled a dramatic arrival of sorts. A new respectability and the
double-edged sword of unprecedented media focus were both implicit in
Salt Lake's selection to be the host site, as recognized by the city's ex-
mayor: "The[se] Olympics," said Ted Wilson, "mean the refuge is over."[1]

The 2002 Winter Olympics were the Mormon games in several ways.
Latter-day Saint politician Mitt Romney headed the organizing committee.
The Tabernacle Choir performed four times. Ten to fifteen thousand LDS
members worked as volunteers, almost four thousand of them bilingual
returned missionaries serving as interpreters. One million visitors came to
the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City. Three billion more television viewers
watched awards ceremonies each night taking place in Olympic Medals
Plaza, with the soaring spires of the Salt Lake temple in the background.

Of the many stages in Mormonism's evolution, this was an especially
triumphant milestone. The granite blocks of the solid, stately temple still
embody much that is distinctively Mormon. Built by an impoverished and
exiled people, this Notre Dame of the West had no benefit of an established
economic base, no urban setting from which to draw its laborers, donors,
and appreciative pilgrims. Its fortress-like appearance evokes the memory

of a church long under siege for distinctive religious beliefs and unortho-
dox practices. This enduring symbol of Mormonism is crowded round
with teeming businesses and a towering church headquarters, but looks no
more disposed to yield ground to architectural newcomers than the church
has to the forces of modernity. As if to suggest a symbolic accommodation
between the church and secular society, those gilded spires adorn a temple
that television—and the great American publicity machine—chose to
exploit for its cinematographic beauty and its evocation of Mormon
uprightness and respectability, even if they cannot penetrate the sacred
inner chambers those spires crown.

The Salt Lake temple is one of a series of Mormon symbols: the Mor-
mon Tabernacle Choir and Brigham Young University (BYU) football;
golden plates and the angel Moroni; Joseph's martyrdom at Carthage;
Brigham Young and all those wives. Mormonism is replete with symbols
and trappings that have become American cultural icons. But Mormonism
itself, like any complex cultural phenomenon, is easier to talk about and
around than to penetrate or define adequately. The famous explorer
Richard Burton was the most successful European in history at insinuating
himself into the Arab cultures he studied, and was the first outsider to infil-
trate the forbidden city of Harar in Somaliland, as well as Mecca and Me-
dina. But even the intrepid Burton sensed that "there is in Mormondom, as
in all other exclusive faiths, . . . an inner life into which I cannot flatter
myself or deceive the reader with the idea of my having penetrated."[2]

Few who study Mormonism are satisfied to label it a simple religious
denomination. Mormonism has also been called a culture, a global tribe,
a religious tradition, the next world religion, and even "the clearest exam-
ple to be found in our national history . . . of a native and indigenously
developed ethnic minority."[3] Whether Mormons (or Latter-day Saints or
LDS or Saints) really constitute a distinct ethnic group within American
society may be disputed. But the mere suggestion is itself an indication of
the failure of a term like denomination to characterize the group ade-
quately. Certainly there is a denominational aspect to Mormon identity.
Devout Mormons, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day
Saints, are generally unanimous in assenting to a number of fundamental
truth-claims. They believe in a supreme deity, God the Father. They revere
his son, Jesus Christ, as Savior of the world. But they believe the Father and
Son are separate and distinct corporeal beings, not members of a Trinity as
defined by the church councils of Christian orthodoxy. (They also believe
in the Holy Ghost, as a personage of spirit.) They believe in the Bible as the

word of God ("as far as it is translated correctly"). But they also believe that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, on a par with—or even more reliable than—the Old and New Testaments. They believe in the patriarchs and prophets of old: Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. But they also believe in prophets of the current age or "dispensation": Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Gordon B. Hinckley.

One sociologist has noted that Mormons are like conservative Protestants in their rejection of the "new morality," are close to mainstream Protestants in their educational attainments, resemble Jews in their norms against interfaith marriage, and echo Catholics in their opposition to abortion.[4] In their belief system as a whole, more than one commentator insists they move as far beyond normative Christianity as Christianity did beyond Judaism.

However, defining Mormonism in terms of a common belief structure has two deficiencies. First, as we will see, Mormonism—at least in recent years—has come to encompass elements of shared heritage, social behaviors and attitudes, cultural vocabulary, lifestyle, worldview, and other factors that far transcend mere creedal statements. Second, many persons claim a Mormon identity, even as they reject those truth-claims most fundamental to historical Mormonism. Subscribing to a particular set of beliefs, in other words, appears to be neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for inclusion in the worldwide community of Mormons. This study employs the term persuasively popularized by historian of religion Jan Shipps: Mormonism is neither a cult, nor a denomination, nor Catholic, nor Protestant, she writes, but a new "faith tradition." These words seem the best of those available, because they suggest the rootedness of Mormonism in a set of claims that ask for faithful assent; and indeed, to be a Mormon is still, for the most part, to be convinced of the truthfulness of a set of beliefs that, however they may overlap the creeds of Christianity, include as well a number of highly distinctive and highly unorthodox tenets. This is still the primary thrust of what it means to be a Mormon. At the same time, the movement has grown into a body of many millions, has acquired an identity bordering on ethnicity or cultural autonomy that transcends any set of doctrinal claims, and has shown itself capacious enough to accommodate varying types of affiliation, as the term *tradition* suggests. This is not to say that the LDS Church has acquired a theological laxness tolerant of dissent and heterodoxy. Far from it. It is to say, rather, that some members now feel an affinity to Mormonism, a historical or cultural or affective kinship, that may overshadow

all theological identification, or may exist in the absence of any theological identification at all.

In the nineteenth century, popular representations of Mormonism both reflected and contributed to public perceptions that Mormons were distinctive in very visible, discernible, and generally unflattering ways. Novels and nickel weeklies depicted their speech as peculiar, their dress as odd, and their appearance as foreign, exotic, or most frequently, "oriental." One purportedly scientific report presented in 1861 described the Mormons as a new racial type that had evolved with remarkable rapidity. At the New Orleans Academy of Sciences, the audience heard the particulars:

> This condition is shown by . . . the large proportion of albuminous and gelatinous types of constitution, and by the striking uniformity in facial expression and in physical conformation of the younger portion of the community. . . . there is . . . an expression of countenance and a style of feature, which may be styled the Mormon expression and style; an expression compounded of sensuality, cunning, suspicion, and a smirking self-conceit. The yellow, sunken, cadaverous visage; the greenish-colored eyes; 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.[5]

Other observers tended to agree there was something distinctive about Mormons, but often cast the differences in more generous terms. Charles Dickens visited an emigrant ship at an English dock about to sail for America "in order to see what eight hundred Latter-day Saints were like, and I found them (to the rout and overthrow of all my expectations) . . . a very fine set of people." In fact, he thought them, "in their degree, the pick and flower of England. . . . It would be difficult," he went on, "to find Eight hundred people together anywhere else, and find so much beauty and so much strength and capacity for work among them."[6] At about the same time, Mark Twain recorded his observations upon touring Salt Lake City, which he called "stronghold of the prophets, [and] capitol city of the only absolute monarchy in America":

> We strolled about everywhere through the broad, straight, level streets and enjoyed the pleasant strangeness of a city of 15,000 inhabitants with no loafers perceptible in it, and no visible drunkard or noisy people. A limpid stream rippling and dancing through every street in place of a filthy gutter; block after block of trim dwellings built of frame and sun-

burned brick—a great thriving orchard and garden behind every one of them, apparently, and a grand general air of neatness, repair, thrift and comfort around and about and over the whole.[7]

At the close of the twentieth century, the old stereotypes—or the cultural continuities—sometimes continued to assert themselves. Harold Bloom, for example, maintains with apparent sobriety that "the visitor to Salt Lake City, after just four days, has learned to tell the difference between certain Mormons and most Gentiles at first sight. There is something organized about the expressions on many Mormon faces as they go by in the street."[8]

As we will see, Mormons cooperate fully in the role history and popular perception have assigned them as a highly distinctive people. A history of exile and persecution, belief in their chosenness and in their church's claim to divine origin, unique health codes and temple rites, a self-sustaining welfare system, and a private cultural vocabulary, all conspire to reinforce their own and everyone else's sense that they are a people apart. Gordon B. Hinckley, current prophet and president of the church, has shown a fondness for the words of Peter, believing they serve as both characterization of and challenge to the Latter-day Saints: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9)

Mormonism was once largely confined to white Americans of British or Scandinavian descent centered in Utah; more Mormons worldwide now have Spanish as a native language than English. Even within the United States, it is increasingly inaccurate to refer to Mormonism as a Utah church. True, that state still boasts the highest numbers of Latter-day Saints, but whereas one of every two lived there in 1930,[9] significant numbers are now found scattered broadly across the United States.

With the advantage of sociological analysis, it is now possible to address the question of Mormon distinctiveness in very specific, quantifiable terms. What we discover is that popular perceptions have elements of both truth and error. Mormons as a people do tend to show high levels of religious commitment. They attend church more regularly than Catholics and Protestants, and evangelicals, attending Sunday school twice as often as Baptists and three times as often as Seventh-Day Adventists. They share their faith with others more often than Lutherans and Methodists, and read the Bible as often as members of the most Bible-studious groups—Assemblies of God, Pentecostals, and nondenominational Protestants.[10]

They contribute considerably more money to their church than other church-going Americans.[11] The LDS reputation for a rigorous work and education ethic seem well-founded as well. The Mormon standard of educational attainment is "considerably higher than the national average."[12] Bucking the general rule, the better educated Mormons are, the more likely they are to be religiously committed.[13]

Patterns of family life are even more distinguishing. LDS members in the United States have higher rates of marriage and lower rates of divorce than is true nationally.[14] Compared to members of other religions, Mormons are the most likely to be married to a spouse of their own faith.[15] Large family size in America frequently prompts the assumption that the parents are either Catholic or Mormon and, indeed, Mormon family size is "substantially larger than the national average."[16] But contrary to prevalent notions, this is not a result of either doctrinal or cultural prohibitions against birth control. The practice is not officially discouraged (though it once was), and Mormon mothers use contraception at a rate comparable to the national average.

Mormons are renowned for their wholesome, clean-cut lifestyles—and apparently with good reason. Mormon youth consume tobacco, alcohol, and drugs at rates substantially lower than their peers.[17] And LDS people are considerably less likely to have sexual relations before marriage or outside of marriage; in fact, one study concludes that in the area of sexuality, "findings . . . appear to differentiate LDS people from non-LDS people more than any other set of variables."[18]

The typical role of the woman in Mormon culture is itself a mixture of the expected and the surprising. The church encourages traditional gender roles, teaching that mothers have primary responsibility for child-rearing, while teaching the New Testament principle that it is men's duty to "provide . . . for those of his own house" (1 Tim. 5:8). And indeed, LDS people, in higher numbers than average, favor the man earning the living and disapprove of mothers of small children working and of putting children in daycare. Even so, women work at nearly the same rate as non-Mormons.[19]

Politically, Mormons are generally assumed to be staunch Republicans. And indeed, Utah usually does vote that way. But in 2004, the U.S. Senate majority whip and other prominent members of Congress were LDS Democrats. In addition, studies reveal Mormons to be more open than most Americans to inter-racial association (inter-racial marriage, integrated schooling, and racially mixed neighborhoods), and "among the more 'liberal' of the various denominations in attitudes toward racial justice."[20]

Socioeconomically, Mormons have long had a reputation for industry and thrift. Early stereotypes depicted Mormons as society's castoffs, and Missouri settlers invoked their alleged destitution as one reason for expelling them from their settlements in the 1830s. In actual fact, from their early experiments in communitarian economics to their prodigious feat of carving an empire out of the Utah desert, their industriousness made their territorial name of "Deseret"—a Book of Mormon term meaning honeybee—entirely apt. In contemporary America, their record is respectable but not stupendous. They report slightly higher incomes per household than the average.[21]

In sum, Mormons are a mix of the expected, the surprising, and the ever-evolving. To what extent the distinctness of a Mormon identity is objectively quantifiable, and to what extent it is a product of both self-representation and popular depiction, is a complicated issue. One popular interpretation would have it that Mormonism began as a movement radically at odds with mainstream American culture. The need to assert their uniqueness on a stage crowded with emerging religious sects, to substantiate their claim that Christianity had gone astray and only wholesale restoration would suffice, and to give literal weight, through physical gathering and social peculiarity, to their belief in themselves as a covenant people, all conspired to produce a religious culture that necessitated, enacted, and reified dramatic difference.

But finding protection from mainstream hostility and interference neither in their Missouri enclaves, their city-state of Nauvoo, nor the mountain fastness of Utah, they at last relented and self-consciously began the process of Americanization to achieve acceptance, approval, and statehood. A combination of this strategic campaign and the inescapable forces of modernization and globalization together have produced a religious culture that some would argue not only has reached accommodation with its host culture, but may be its more typical incarnation. "They ain't whites—they're Mormons!" cries a character in a 1914 Jack London novel.[22] By 1989, the hero of Tom Clancy's novel raises no eyebrows in calling the Mormon characters "honest and hardworking, and fiercely loyal," in fact, everything that "America stood for."[23] In the eyes of many observers, it is clear, Mormonism has become "the American religion." But it was a tortuous path that took its adherents there.

Chapter 1 charts the history of the Mormon Church from its organization into the twenty-first century. Because the first three-quarter centuries of

that history were characterized by tensions and conflicts with local populations, state militias, the federal government, and orthodox churches—all to a degree unprecedented in American history—chapter 2 examines the several sources of friction characterizing those first generations. Chapter 3 is devoted to expounding Mormon religious doctrine, reviewing what is typically Christian in LDS theology and what is different and innovative. Smith produced not just one extrabiblical book of scripture, the Book of Mormon, but the core of two others as well, in addition to making substantial emendations to the text of the King James Bible. Chapter 4 considers the origin and content of those additions to the Christian scriptural canon. Subsequent chapters examine Latter-day Saint worship in terms of its three principal loci—home, church, and temple (chapter 5); Mormonism's engagement with political and social issues of the modern day (chapter 6); and the role of the arts and education in Mormon culture (chapter 7). Chapter 8 looks at some of the competing varieties in the Latter-day Saint tradition; and considers the challenges and opportunities faced by Mormonism in the new millennium, as it increases its international presence and provokes predictions of attaining world-faith status.

Notes

1. Cited in *The Economist*, 7 February 2002.

2. Richard Burton, *City of the Saints* (1861; reprint, ed. Fawn M. Brodie, New York: Knopf, 1963), 224.

3. Dean May citing Thomas O'Dea, in "Mormons," in Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 720.

4. James T. Duke, "Cultural Continuity and Tension: A Test of Stark's Theory of Church Growth," in James T. Duke, ed., *Latter-Day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 77–79.

5. The paper by Samuel Cartwright and C. G. Forshey relied upon a report of Roberts Bartholow, assistant surgeon of the U.S. Army. See Surgeon General's Office, *Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States . . . From January, 1855 to January, 1860* (Washington, D.C.: George W. Bowman, 1860), 301–2.

6. Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1861; reprint, New York: Charles Scribner's, 1902), 262–63.

7. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), 71–72.

8. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 116.

9. Tim Heaton, "Vital Statistics," in James T. Duke, ed., *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 109.

10. These comparisons derive from a Barna Research Group poll reported in the *Washington Post,* 9 February 2002.

11. Dean R. Hope and Fenggang Yang, "Determinants of Religious Giving in American Denominations: Data from Two Nationwide Surveys," *Review of Religious Research* 36 (1994): 123–48.

12. Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity," in Duke, *LDS Social Life,* 302.

13. Stan L. Albrecht, "The Consequential Dimension of Mormon Religiosity," in Duke, *LDS Social Life,* 285.

14. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," 124.

15. Twelve percent of Mormons live in a "mixed religion household," according to the *American Religious Identification Survey* (ARIS) conducted in 2001 by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Some results of the survey are available on-line at www.religioustolerance.org/chr_prac2.htm.

16. Tim B. Heaton, Kristen L. Goodman, and Thomas B. Holman, "In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?" in Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 89.

17. Steven Bahr reviews several studies that document, with rare exceptions, lower alcohol and drug use among Mormon youth compared to adolescents from other religions. See his "Religion and Adolescent Drug Use: A Comparison of Mormons and Other Religions," in Cornwall et al., *Contemporary Mormonism,* 122–23.

18. Heaton et al., "In Search," 100.

19. Ibid., 104.

20. Armand Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 252–55.

21. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," 130.

22. Jack London, *Star Rover* (1914; reprint, New York: Arcadia House, 1950), 135.

23. Tom Clancy, *Clear and Present Danger* (New York: Putnam, 1989), 480.