

The Reform Movements and the Mormons

Introduction

The Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) are a uniquely American phenomenon. They are not the only religious denomination that has originated on American soil, but they are certainly among the more successful, if not the most successful, of these groups. From only a mere handful of people, the number of Latter-Day Saints has grown to over five million adherents at the beginning of this century with over twelve thousand places of worship in all of its various branches. Mormons form the religious majority or a sizable minority in many Western states and they have a presence throughout the rest of the United States. Missionary activities span six continents. The Mormon church's wealth, while a closely guarded secret, ranges into the billions of dollars.

The origins and early influencing factors on the Mormon Church are certainly of great historical interest. Mintz referred to the aspirations of the Mormons as being a product of their time as they sought to build the Kingdom of God on earth (41). The purpose of this paper will be to demonstrate the Mormons were greatly affected by at least some of the same factors that produced the nineteenth century Reform movements in the United States. Interestingly enough, many of the same trends and events that helped shape the Church of the Latter-Day Saints also lead to its sporadic persecution and general opposition by the Protestant majority in the United States. This rejection by mainstream America resulted in large part from the religious and social beliefs (particularly polygamy) of the Mormons, as well as to their economic and political

power. This paper will review how the Mormon beliefs and society could give rise to this opposition.

Several assumptions need to be stated at this point. Due to time and space constraints, this paper will assume some basic knowledge of Mormon history and theology. It will not discuss this history or theology in any systematic way, other than to use them as necessary to demonstrate points in the argument or deviations from the argument. The terms Mormon, Mormon Church, Church of the Latter-Day Saints, and Saints will all be used interchangeably. Finally, while there are several branches of the Mormon faith, this paper will deal with its most numerous branch except where otherwise indicated.

There were several trends and events that greatly influenced the Mormon Church. Some of these trends were also of great consequence to the Reform movements. Others only impacted the Mormons. One such example is the Second Great Awakening, which was pivotal in the formation of the various Reform movements. While it is beyond dispute the Second Great Awakening changed the way the various mainline Protestant groups viewed themselves and the world they lived in, this paper will show that it was also a major impetus in the origin of the Mormons.

As the Reform movements matured and grew, so did the Mormon Church. This paper will also show the various Reform movements interacted with, or at the very least, gave models to the Mormons to use as their ideology and doctrine developed. The Mormons had intense interaction with American society for several decades before Brigham Young lead them into the Utah desert. Much of this interaction was not

peaceful. Death and violence to the Saints and to “gentiles” (as non-Mormons were known) was often the unfortunate result.

Early Mormon Chronology

The Mormon chronology is a very useful tool to begin the analysis. This timeline can be overlaid on the chronology of the Reform movements in order to detect parallel developments or to note interactions. The Mormon Church was founded by Joseph Smith Jr, hereinafter referred to as Joseph Smith or Smith. He was born in December 1805 into an impoverished New England farm family. The family later migrated into Western New York in search of better land. Although it was open to some debate, Smith apparently received his first vision in 1820. This vision was of God the Father and God the Son. The angel Moroni appeared to Smith in 1823 and revealed the existence of Golden Tablets buried in a nearby Indian mound. After four years, Smith was eventually allowed to retrieve the Golden Tablets by Moroni. They contained the basic tenets of what was to become the Mormon faith but were written in an unknown language. Smith began to translate them in 1827, taking approximately two and one-half years to complete this work. The translated Book of Mormon was finally published in 1830 and was the first exposition of the Mormon faith. Smith founded the Mormon Church in the same year. Several other books were to follow in later years. He initially had a very small following and even his family continued as Presbyterians for a time.

The Importance of Charismatic Leadership

Smith was tarred and feathered in 1832, probably over his approaches to a sixteen-year-old girl. The mob came close to castrating him. This was one of several incidents in his life that demonstrated his charismatic leadership, a quality so vital to

many of the leaders of communitarian and Utopian groups. Shortly after, Smith was able to take the pulpit at a scheduled appearance while still bloodied from the affair. His following only continued to grow as a result.

Another example of his charisma is the testimonials to the Golden Tablets that are contained the Book of Mormon. All eleven witnesses that eventually wrote these testimonials to having seen the Tablets did so after praying with Smith or saying they had seen these Tablets in a vision. Whether they had seen the Golden Tablets or not, it is at least fair to say they sufficiently fell under Smith's influence enough to have seen them in one fashion or another. Although there was a falling out among these followers and Smith, they never recanted their belief in seeing the Tablets. Even after experts at Rutgers and Columbia Universities dismissed the writings on the Tablets as false, the witnesses held to the story. Nevertheless, Smith was able to keep control over the Mormon community due to his natural leadership qualities until his untimely death in 1844.

Bates and Smith characterize his charismatic authority as being "creative, innovative, a personal experience of divine grace (Bates and Smith 14)." They point to this charismatic leadership as both a great strength and a weakness of the Mormons . It attracts many converts, but it often can't stand rigorous biblical scholarship (Bates and Smith 17). Unlike many other Utopian or Communitarian groups, the Mormons were able to institutionalize this charism in their leadership throughout the next century. As a result, their membership has exploded and the Church has been resilient, despite the attacks of many serious religious scholars and of suspicious neighbors.

Religious Factors in the Formation of the Latter-Day Saints

Smith was a young man during the Second Great Awakening, which began in the very early years of the Nineteenth century. While having enormous impact throughout the U.S. this outburst of religious feeling seemed to have a long-term negative impact in Western New York. This area becomes known as the “Burnt Over District”, as waves of revivals swept into and then left the area. Often there was no follow-through after the circuit riding preachers left. This cycle of intense religious fervor followed by periods of much lower religious intensity seemed to alienate many people in the region from the established congregations of the day. Many of the denominations began to split. Fawn Brodie, the authoritative biographer of Smith, notes that there were four splits in the Methodist Church from 1815 to 1830 and at least five splits in the Baptist Church during this time (12). While Smith’s family eventually associated with the Presbyterian Church, they originally had no membership in the established denominations. Throughout his youth, Smith was keenly interested in theological questions. Given this background, it is not surprising Smith’s first question in his vision of God the Father and the Son is what is the true religion. Their answer is that none of the religions are correct, so a new, true religion is needed. The Saints were to be that religion.

Another very strong influence on the development of the Mormon community was Perfectionism. This strain of thinking also had a profound impact on the Reform movements. The Mormon religion is upbeat and optimistic, unlike the Calvinist Protestantism that was losing its grip on the America of that time. Mormons believe in multiple gods and are on the road of eternal progression. This road is the road to godhood. To the Mormons, the God of this world was once an exalted man. As Smith stated: “As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become.” Man strives for

perfection and to achieve this godhood. It is easy to see how this particular view of Perfectionism based on multiple gods could cause the Mormons to be persecuted as anti-Christian. An interesting corollary to the Latter-Day Saint belief in multiple gods is there is no question how evil can exist in this world since the God of this world is not all-powerful. Saints are not faced with the paradox of evil, a problem for traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs. This Perfectionist strain in the Mormons was and still is a very appealing part of their doctrine.

It is also easy to see how some of the other religious threads current at the time were woven together by Smith and the Mormons. Only a few of these will be discussed here. When he preached, Smith used a revivalist style common to this era. Unlike many of the other preachers of the day, Smith also appealed to reason as well. This deviation from the preaching norm was also well received. Restoration of the primitive Church was an important trend in the Protestantism of the era. Smith incorporates this in the Mormon belief structure, as demonstrated in his “Plain and Precious Things” speech. This speech was an attack on Catholicism, which he regarded as an apostasy. Smith was anti-Catholic, which was not uncommon in the United States at the time. Finally, Millennialism also had an important impact on the growth of the Mormons. Many convert to the Mormon faith thinking Smith to be final evidence of the impending Second Coming of Christ.

Factors and Influences Unique to the Latter-Day Saints

While the religious milieu had an extremely important impact on both the Reform movements and the Mormons, it is worth noting Mormon beliefs were also the result of some other very peculiar and very American beliefs. Like many Americans, Smith had a

great interest in the origins of the American Indians. One common theory was they were the Lost Tribes of Israel. No less a personage than Jonathan Edwards, a clergyman influential in the First Great Awakening, held this opinion.

Another common fascination of Americans was with Indian burial mounds. There were eight burial mounds within twelve miles of Smith's early home. It was believed these mounds contained a great deal of treasure. Treasure hunters abounded and Smith was one of them. It was also commonly believed a great battle occurred in pre-history, resulting in mass burials under these mounds.

Smith incorporated both of these legends into the Mormon faith, as well as other distinctly Mormon beliefs. The Saints believe America was inhabited by descendants of Jewish refugees. According to Smith, Christ appeared to teach in the New World after his Resurrection. There was later dissension and a great war ensued, resulting in the followers of Christ being vanquished. Only Moroni and Mormon survived the fierce battles to author the Book of Mormon. There has been no archeological evidence of any of this history but it is of major import to Mormon thinking. Indians were cursed with dark skin like one of the sons of Noah, but they were worthy of being saved since they were in fact from the Tribe of Joseph. In many ways this belief set the Mormons apart from many of their contemporaries. Saints sent missions to the Indians, often stirring up their more suspicious neighbors.

Another peculiar influence was the commonly held belief in the rural areas of the potency of magic and charms. According to Quinn, Smith was a firm believer in witchcraft (28). Although this belief seems inimical to Christianity, Quinn also points out even the Christian Bible seems to condemn some magic but sanctions others (1), such as

Joseph's divination. From 1822 until 1827, Smith was involved in treasure digging. His neighbors later relate stories of the ritual use of magic and midnight processions in an attempt to find buried treasure. After Smith's brother Alvin dies, the body has been disturbed, apparently in some macabre attempt to deride the Smith family treasure seeking occupation. Smith used "Seer Stones" to translate the Golden Tablets and to find treasure. His use of these stones was justified by reference to the Old Testament.

The use of ritual magic was often used to discredit the Mormons. In 1826, Smith was arrested for disorderly conduct associated with his treasure hunting activities, a fact not often discussed by the Mormons. One story from 1827 has Smith being prevented from retrieving the Golden Tablets by a toad that changed into a man and hit him over the head. A more modern example of the attempt to discredit Smith was the "White Salamander" letter. This letter was allegedly written in the 1830's, but was not discovered until the 1980's. The letter purports to have Smith receive the Golden Tablets from a magical white salamander. The Mormon Church was concerned enough to try and buy this letter before it was eventually recognized as a fraud.

An interesting aside to the Mormon story is the influence of Masonry upon the Mormons. While it is common knowledge many of the Founding Fathers were Masons, the influence of Masonry during the first half of the Nineteenth Century in the U.S. is frequently overlooked. Smith was originally anti-Masonic, as indicated by the anti-Masonic strictures in the Book of Mormon. He later developed an interest in the rituals and in the perceived power that Masonry represented in the U.S. He became a Mason in 1842 and many of the secret rituals used in the Mormon Temple were created at this time. For instance, Mormon initiates swear an oath of secrecy and are permitted to witness a

sacred drama like the Masons. Mormon undergarments have the Masonic square and compass on it. Mormonism became in some sense a mystery cult, and it is from this that the Mormon belief in surrogate Baptism is derived. Joseph Smith also incorporated Masonry into the Mormon theology by declaring the Masons to be a remnant of the ancient priesthood that had to be restored.

Smith apparently drew his ideas from many sources, as various other religious and philosophical influences have been detected by scholars in Mormonism, including Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Rosicrucianism. Smith may have been familiar with the Kabbalah and Zohar. Others have claimed Smith was a Universalist, a widely held religious view in the Nineteenth Century. As proof, they point to Smith's belief only the "Sons of Perdition", a limited group, were condemned to hell.

In summary, the major conditions that caused the Mormon faith to begin to coalesce were: (1) The Second Great Awakening and the "Burnt Over District"; (2) The general interest in Indians and Indian burial mounds and (3) a strong local belief in magic. Of these, the Second Great Awakening appears to have had the greatest impact on the Mormons and on the Reform movements as well.

Influence of the Reform Movements on the Mormons

Turning away from the origins and early influences on the Mormons, the various Reform movements of the era also had a great deal of impact on the development of the Mormons. One burning issue of the day for the Mormons, as for the rest of American society, was slavery. Even though he did not hold slaves and predicted their eventual revolt, Joseph Smith was somewhat ambivalent to the abolitionist movement. Underwood notes Smith condemned abolitionists and used the Bible to defend slavery (102). Coates

reports that during his presidential campaign, Smith wished to purchase all slaves with federal money obtained from selling excess land (47). Smith did preach slavery was the result of the biblical curse on Ham. His views on blacks were contained in the later *Book of Abraham*, that was used to deny blacks all form of Mormon offices.

One reason for Smith's ambivalence to the slavery issue was the demographic make-up of the Mormon congregation. Mormons were overwhelmingly from the North and as such did not generally hold slaves. They were usually middle class and often skilled laborers such as mechanics, tradesmen and artisans. Small farmers were also represented in the congregations. The existence of a middle-class is often thought to be antithetical to the existence of slavery, and the organization of Mormon society is one example of this principle.

The composition of the Mormon settlements also had another important outcome. The main Mormon settlement became economically viable, as the skilled labor worked industriously to make the Kingdom of God on earth. Many of the Communitarian and Utopian settlements eventually failed due to the composition of the members and the organizers' somewhat less than scientific economic and social theories. As we have seen the Mormons go on to great success.

Smith attempted to insulate the Latter-Day Saints from the ever more contentious slavery question. He was near the Lovejoy murder scene and saw the growing strife in the country over slavery. He did not wish to have the Mormons participate in the approaching conflict. Unfortunately, this was not to be as the Mormons were driven from Missouri. as they were perceived to be an anti-slavery force in the state. (Another reason was their 1830 mission to the Indians.)

Over time, the Mormon Church did take various anti-black positions. Their theology diminished the spiritual rights of the black people by denying them church offices. Brigham Young allowed black slavery in Utah in 1852 and he also did not allow cross-marriages. This legacy of discrimination against blacks did not end until late in the last century. Blacks were first allowed to participate in the Mormon priesthood in 1978, when a revelation to the head of the Mormon Church made this permissible.

The Health reform movement greatly impacted Mormon doctrine. The interest in health matters apparently started early with the Mormons and crystallized over time. The Church of Latter-Day Saints' interest in health matters continues right up to the present. One of the centers of the natural products industry in the United States is Utah. Legislation the Mormons supported allowed natural products to be regulated as food rather than as drugs. This is of great consequence to the industry as the safety and testing requirements for drugs are far stricter than for foods.

The Mormon beliefs concerning health are called the Word of Wisdom. The interest in health springs from their theology. God possessed a material body. As Miller notes, the Mormons want to perfect the body so it will be like the body of the Heavenly Fathers (Miller 227). There is no artificial division between spirit and body, as often has happened in Christian thinking. Caring for the body is therefore important to a Mormon.

The first instance of this concern for the human body was demonstrated in 1836, when Joseph Smith substituted water for wine at the Communion ceremony. This was not yet a total ban on alcohol, as Smith was known to imbibe. It is said that he asked for some wine when he was in prison the night before his death. The use of tobacco was also considered a problem by Smith and his successors. Cowan relates that Smith would often

encounter a cloud of tobacco haze when he entered the Mormon school to give religious instruction (41). Mormons abolished the use of tobacco, alcohol, caffeine and limited the use of red meats by 1862.

Looking at the dates of the temperance and health reform movements in the United States and contrasting it to the Mormon chronology is of some interest. William Andrus Scott calls for abstinence from tea, coffee, and alcohol in 1839. Walters places the greatest activity of the Temperance movement in the U.S. as occurring in the 1840 and 1850's (139). While one can't conclude the Mormon dietary practices and abstinence for alcohol are the direct result of the Reform movements, it is plausible to assume they did not have at least an indirect impact on Mormon practices as Smith was very aware of the world about him.

The Mormons displayed many of the characteristics of the communitarian reformers. Hans Baer points out Mormonism emphasized cooperation, egalitarianism, and care for the needy (Baer 7). Some of the Communitarian and Utopian groups were geographically close to the Mormon settlements, and it certainly plausible that Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormons, knew of them. Certainly, the Mormons adopted many of their characteristics. Ann Lee and the Shaker community at one point lived only thirty miles from Smith. The Shakers demonstrated clean habits and were an industrious, hard-working people, traits the Mormons also exhibited. (Of course, the Mormons were not celibate as the Shakers were.) Baer states Mormon writings clearly demonstrated they knew the Shaker community (3).

The Mormon society could be considered as exclusivist. However, they were also mission minded. Even today the Mormon Church funds a vast missionary effort into the

far reaches of the globe. This mission activity reflects the positive view Mormons have of the ability for man to perfect himself. Like many of the other Protestant denominations of their time, they lost the Calvinistic view that missionary work did not matter. There also was another, very practical side to the Mormon missionary effort. Joseph Smith encouraged it as a way to gain converts and build the defenders of the often besieged Mormon community.

Over time, the Mormon communities became very successful. This was due to a combination of factors. The most important factor was their theology. They strongly believed in the perfectibility of man. They were a people in pilgrimage, looking to create Mt. Zion on earth. A Mormon society would help accomplish this purpose. They could be likened to the Hebrews wandering in the desert until they found the Promised Land. In this case, under the leadership of Brigham Young, they made their own paradise in the desert.

Another important factor contributing to the Mormon success was their strong sense of cohesion. It was this cohesiveness that scared many of their neighbors. By 1839, there were over fifteen thousand Mormons in Illinois that would organize themselves and vote in the manner they were directed to. They had become a potent political force. Smith became very active in politics, running for President of the United States in order to maximize the influence of the Mormon community. At one-point, Mormon influence in Illinois helped defeat Abraham Lincoln in a local election. The Mormon militia was sizable and extremely well organized, causing great concern to its neighbors.

A third factor was the composition of the society, as noted in the discussion on slavery. Finally, they were blessed with charismatic leadership under Joseph Smith and

Brigham Young. The Mormons were able to institutionalize a method for choosing their Prophet and Revelator, unlike many of the other communitarian groups that eventually collapsed.

The Mormons were famed for their doctrine of plural marriage. This doctrine prevented Utah from becoming a state until the very end of the nineteenth century. Many thought of polygamy as another form of slavery, and it was denounced as such. Abraham Lincoln was personally opposed to polygamy but could not effectively address it while the Civil War was being conducted. By that time, the Mormons had moved to Utah and were remote to the Civil War. They were treated with “benign neglect” until the nation was able to focus on the issue. Violence ensued as the federal government insisted on monogamy in the Utah territory. The Mormon Church eventually had to renounce plural marriage in order to finally achieve statehood. There is evidence of secretly but officially sanctioned plural marriages as late as 1907. Plural marriages are still in existence today as there are an estimated thirty thousand people secretly living in polygamous marriages in the United States.

The Mormon movement itself split over this arrangement but did not fracture in the major way Protestant denominations would over their beliefs. Young’s first wife Emma did not follow Brigham Young westward. A small branch of the Latter-Day Saints developed behind Emma and her son, who denied that Smith was ever polygamous. This has been disputed by others who claimed Emma would select wives for Smith and would guard the bedroom door to prevent intruders from walking in on Smith and his other wives.

While the concept of polygamy is strange to our modern sensibilities, it would not appear to be so to some of the people of the time. Mormons defended polygamy by reference to the Bible. The Biblical Patriarchs had “plural wives”. God did not object to plural marriage in the Old Testament, and so therefore would not now. Of course, this view was rejected by the Protestant mainstream. The doctrine of plural wives also was supported for a practical reason. It increased the number of adherents when the community was under constant threat. By their own choice, The Mormons could never allow themselves to be in the position of the Shakers, which had declining membership over time due in part to its celibacy requirements. The Mormon settlements needed more defenders against the opposition of their neighbors.

Again, looking at the chronology of Mormon polygamous activity and comparing it to similar thinking by other reformers is interesting. Smith began to think about plural marriages as early as 1830. Eventually, he may have married anywhere from thirty-three to eighty-four women. Upon his death in 1844, many of his wives were taken by Brigham Young or Heber Kimball, another major figure in the Mormon movement. There were examples of other insular communities where monogamy was abandoned. Simon Lovett preached Spiritual Wifery circa 1835. John Humphrey Noyes advocated “free love” in the Oneida community. While these had different names, the end result was approximately the same.

Conclusion

The question can be asked what the Reform movements accomplished over time. One possible answer is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is one long-lasting, but unintended result of these movements. Having some of the same antecedents and

incorporating some of the characteristics of several of the other Reform movements, the Mormons have become a unique American religious institution, with great influence even today.

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