

# Thoughts on Mormonism in Latin America

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OVER THE LAST QUARTER CENTURY, the Church has experienced tremendous growth in Latin America and elsewhere in the so-called Third World, a relatively sudden surge that has received little scholarly attention (Grover n.d.). In the following essay, I do not develop any formal argument regarding Church growth in Latin America based on exhaustive research; nor do I take the opposite strategy of thoroughly examining some specific aspect of Mormon emergence in these nations. Instead, I have written a “thought” piece suggesting possibilities for further study. And while I draw on my research on Mormonism and Protestantism, here I focus on conceptual issues, such as the general images, ideas, and understandings that form our intellectual tool kit for understanding the Church abroad (Knowlton 1980a, 1980b, 1982, 1988, 1989a, 1989b).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has gained a surprisingly high profile in much of Latin America—witness the increasing guerrilla attacks on Church property and personnel. In Chile, the country with the highest incidence of Mormon chapel bombings, Church membership constitutes a greater relative percentage of the population than it does in the United States (2 percent as opposed to 1.7 percent, 1990 figures). Furthermore, despite increased missionary

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*The author wishes to thank the Fulbright Commission, which financed his stay in Argentina; the Inter-American Foundation, which financed his M.A. research on topics related to this work; and Richard N. Adams and the Institute of Latin American Studies, the University of Texas at Austin, for grants financing his Ph.D. research related to these issues.*

efforts in Asia and Africa, Latin America, as a whole, comprises the largest Mormon population outside the United States—27 percent of total Church membership in 1990. In contrast, the United States had 56 percent (*Deseret News Church Almanac* 1991). When one considers these figures in light of the ever-increasing Church growth rate, even in the face of terrorist resistance, it becomes evident that Latin American membership may soon constitute almost half of the total Church population. Thus, it is increasingly important for Latter-day Saints to understand both the social situation of Mormonism and the phenomenon of Mormon growth in Latin American society.<sup>1</sup>

As I write, I live in Argentina, a country whose once-promising economy has fallen prey to the world-wide financial crisis. The Church has built a strong base here. Third-generation natives now comprise a significant portion of the vital and visible LDS population. They have developed a sense of religious and historical pride, are involved in writing the history of the Church in Argentina, and engage in oral history research. To them, Church growth has resulted from a combination of their individual and collective struggles, the work of foreign missionaries, and a substantial outpouring of the Spirit.

Other Argentines, however, hold less positive views of Mormon growth. For example, I recently delivered a series of lectures in the city of San Juan. Among other things, I discussed the emergence of “new” religions in Bolivia, and the topic of Mormons frequently arose. A number of students and faculty explained that the Church had appeared quite suddenly in their town, beginning with a “massive invasion” of young, blond Americans traveling in pairs. With amazing rapidity and an apparently tremendous infusion of capital, these newcomers built a “huge,” “lavish” chapel. Although these people were impressed with the Church’s missionary, financial, and political power, as evidenced by this building project, they were also deeply suspicious, wondering why the Mormons had expended so many resources just to come to San Juan. Did this expansion fit into some

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<sup>1</sup>                      LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

	1960	1970	1980	1990
<b>Total</b>	22,503	160,355	519,626	1,949,400
<b>Percentage of total Church membership</b>	1.3	5.5	11.2	26.7

(Includes Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela.)

Source: 1990/91 *Deseret News Church Almanac*.

larger geopolitical strategy? Was the Mormon incursion just another example of U.S. political and economic imperialism (Knowlton 1989b)?

The San Juaninos' attitudes reflect a common concern for much of Latin America. After years of foreign manipulation and multinational corporate exploitation — involvements which often precipitate short-term economic booms at the expense of long-term prosperity — the indigenous populations have become understandably suspicious of foreigners' motives. Bolivian scholars and social critics describe this conflict in terms of "external enemies" and their "internal allies" (see Arguedas 1967; Francovich 1979; Klein 1982). They view much of Bolivian history as an attempt by foreigners to exploit the country's resources for selfish ends, leaving it perpetually impoverished. It should surprise no one that Bolivians would also apply this same paradigm to the LDS Church.

In order to fully appreciate this fear, we must understand the traditional role religion has played throughout Latin America. Religion is not, as we experience it, a circumscribed institution which attends strictly to spiritual affairs, leaving secular, particularly political and economic, matters to the government or the private sector.<sup>2</sup> Rather, religion has historically been inextricably intertwined with both the government and the economy. The civil wars of the last century often hinged upon what role, if any, "The Church" (the Catholic Church) should take in national affairs. Ironically, this same conflict lies at the heart of popular struggles currently facing many Latin American societies — provision of education and social services, liberalization of the economy, abortion, the death penalty, class inequalities, indigenous population rights, and guerrilla movements. Although the Catholic Church is fragmented and is itself the object of internal strife, it still exercises enough political power to defy the religious separatism imported from the United States. Moreover, many Latin Americans regard "The Church" as simply another means by which foreign powers attempt to control their society. It is simultaneously the guarantor of national identity, the manifestation of national complexity, and an

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<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Habermas, a noted German social theorist, writes about the historical differentiation between the public and private sectors in modern society, a process which develops differently in Latin America than in the United States (in McCarthy 1982). The U.S. has a rich literature on the place of religion in national life (see, for example, Bellah 1967 Bellah et al 1985). Latin America has less. We need studies comparing the historical development of religion in terms of the wider societies for both regions of the American continent. Octavio Paz, the Nobel prize winning Mexican poet and social critic, inevitably marks the way with his penetrating analyses of Mexican and U.S. societies (1985a, 1985b).

example of foreign interference.<sup>3</sup>

The Mormon Church, whether it wishes to or not, finds itself defined in terms of the same place religion occupies generally within Latin American societies. Although it comes trailing clouds of North American society and culture, upon arrival it enters a social geography which constrains and, to some degree, probably transforms it. No longer does its presence signify simple spiritual concerns, those regarding the relative "truth" or "falsity" of individual beliefs. Natives perceive it as an imperialist presence involving relationships between foreign powers and coopted nationals who, for one reason or another, desire to restructure society in ways benefiting themselves at the expense of everyone else.

Despite the fact that many Latin Americans adopt specific religions primarily for ideological reasons, matters of belief, or ideology, are partially defined by the larger society or by previous experience. For example, an Argentine anthropologist researching Judaism in her native country related to me the story of an ultra-orthodox Sephardic rabbi who was born and raised in Brazil, trained in Israel, and who subconsciously expanded Jewish practice to include Afro-Brazilian spiritualism. It is likely that Latin American Church members will similarly reconfigure Mormonism to reflect both their native culture and their society. Although some scholars discuss the syncretic aspects of these "new" religions on Latin American society, most focus primarily on their political or sociological impact—the damage or benefit they have for the various national structures and institutions—than on matters of belief.

The empirical facts regarding the claims of both our Argentine members and the students from San Juan could make for hours of intense scholarly discussion. Both outlooks are necessarily reductive and partial. It would be faulty social science to wholly subscribe to either. Instead, we should locate them firmly within their social contexts and accept them as the emic, internal, subjective perspectives they are. In response to the Mexican version of the "external enemy" thesis, for example, the Mexican scholar Jean Pierre Bastian describes Protestantism in terms that apply equally to the common perception of Mormonism:

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most important social movements today in Latin America stems from the Catholic church—liberation theology. Although it is widely contested within church discussions its importance illustrates the continuing, albeit contested, role of the church in the continent's affairs. See Bruneau 1980, 1982; Bruneau, Mooney and Gabriel 1985; Lancaster 1988; Lernoux 1982, 1989; Levine 1985, 1986; Mainwaring 1984 for works on Catholicism in Latin America.

The proliferation of Protestant sects in Mexico during the last few years has called the attention of various investigators. The phenomenon has been too quickly judged (and not studied) as the vanguard and instrument of an imperialist conspiracy against Mexico. . . . The kinds of analysis that might be legitimate in the case of the Summer Institute of Linguistics as a religious transnational, are completely wrong when extended to the totality of Protestant sects in Mexico. *The diffusion of these sects is due to factors endogenous to Mexican society* and not to an inferred conspiracy of North American imperialism. (1985, 177, emphasis and translation mine)

Nor, I might add, can we attribute religious conversion and Church growth exclusively to the movement of the Spirit with no consideration to the social factors motivating these individuals, factors with which their religious and political institutions are inevitably intertwined. In order to more fully understand the LDS emergence in Latin America, we need a series of monographs relating this growth to "factors endogenous to" these societies, but which also consider the dynamics of Mormonism's North American origins.

Bastian's assertion should be particularly relevant for those studying LDS expansion in Latin America. The rapid growth of Mormonism developed as part of a broader social process wherein non-Catholic groups have moved from being numerically and socially marginal to positions of significant demographic and social power. For example, during the last Peruvian elections, evangelical groups provided a critical organizational base for the successful dark-horse candidacy of the current president, Alberto Fujimori. Latin American Mormon spread cannot be understood except as part of this complex and important shift (Martin 1990; Stoll 1990).

Five dynamics which explain Protestant expansion are especially relevant to any discussion of Mormonism's growing popularity. First, Protestantism has traditionally associated itself with conflicts over education and social-service provision—whether the state or the Catholic church should provide them and whether they should be religious or secular (Boots 1971; Hamilton 1962; O'Shaughnessy 1990; Wagner 1970). As a result, Latin Americans have continually connected Protestantism with these and other aspects of socioeconomic development.<sup>4</sup> These peoples place similar pressure on the Church to

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<sup>4</sup> Since Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, there has been a huge and often confused debate about the role of Protestantism in economic change. The growth of liberal capitalism, a cash economy, and sudden urbanization with its explosive informal sector, are undoubtedly related to the same factors that militate for the growth of Mormonism and other religious groups. Exactly how they are related remains to be thoroughly explored. See Muratorio 1980 for an exploration of Weber, Protestantism, and economic change among Ecuadorian peasants; and Willems 1967 for a discussion of the relationship of Protestantism to specific socio-economic sectors.

provide these same fundamental social services. In Bolivia the Church pioneered literacy campaigns, organized Church schools, almost began a health clinic and colonization project in the tropical lowlands, and currently funds other development projects throughout the country. In fact, I was informed that one of the Bolivian government's conditions for granting the Church official recognition required it to provide this type of assistance.

The ongoing discussion for and against liberation theology, with its advocacy of preferential treatment for the poor and its emphasis on social change through improved living conditions, further intensifies the development pressures that these governments bring to bear on the Church—it cannot remain neutral.<sup>5</sup> Its efforts to either aid development or avoid it will be soundly criticized in terms of a polemic and a history in which it has marginally participated, and to which it does not feel that it belongs.

The second dynamic relative to Mormon growth involves the widespread politicization of religion throughout Latin America. At the end of the nineteenth century, liberals allowed Protestantism to flourish in order to strengthen their political position against Conservatives. Governments have often played the so-called "Protestant card" in their efforts to preempt what they perceive as the frequently leftist bent of the Catholic church. In Central America, this conflict has been brutal and bloody. Latin American governments have viewed Protestants, particularly fundamentalists and Mormons, as conservative and have officially encouraged them as part of their efforts to undercut the rebels challenging their authority.

The Church's role in these struggles, whether overt or incidental, remains unclear, particularly when one considers local LDS leaders' political positions, positions which undoubtedly taint both their religious and civic commitments. This ambiguity raises significant questions concerning the differing opinions that these nations hold towards Mormonism. Why have the different governments variously allowed,

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<sup>5</sup> Liberation theology argues, among other things, for a restructuring of the Church's position in society so that it no longer supports the social status quo but takes a "preferential option for the poor." This theological and practical movement has spread throughout the world (even to Utah) in both Catholic and non-Catholic circles. If nothing else, it has thoroughly revitalized religion. In the United States, this movement has often been misunderstood as being primarily Marxist in orientation (see for example Michael Novack's polemics). This corresponds more to North American (and some Latin American) demonology rather than to an adequate exploration of this important religious movement. For information see Berryman 1984, 1987; Lancaster 1988; and Lernoux 1982 and 1989.

encouraged, or impeded the spread of Mormonism in their countries? What political connections were formed between Church leaders and national politicians? What impact, if any, has the number of U.S. Mormons occupying diplomatic, military, and CIA positions in Latin America had on Church growth? How have Latin American members holding military and governmental positions influenced the Church's growth and standing in their respective societies? In Bolivia, for example, leftist president J. J. Torres planned to have the Church expelled from the country, along with the Peace Corps. When Colonel Hugo Banzer Suarez, known to be a friend of the Church, deposed Torres in a coup, President Kimball is reported to have been pleased, calling Banzer "the best president Bolivia has had."<sup>6</sup> One wonders what political contacts and discussions were behind these events.

A social-science study of Latin American Mormonism, then, must question how the Church figures into the political calculations of various national and international elites and what impact this has on Church growth generally and on the political position Mormons hold in these countries. We should further examine the LDS process of choosing Church leaders and how their personal political actions affect the broader Church membership. The many rumors concerning LDS leaders' political activities tacitly intermingling church and state, which one hears while crossing the continent, must be disentangled from fact since, true or false, they inevitably condition the growth of Mormonism in these countries.

A third dynamic concerns the structural components of the "new" religions, particularly those which retain elements of congregationalism emphasizing lay leadership and local control. Some scholars argue that the Protestant and neo-Catholic penchant for teaching organizational and leadership skills has inadvertently contributed to the formation of both radical and reactionary groups (see Levine 1985). In fact, the various positions these religions represent, liberal or conservative, may be the critical factors influencing adherents' decisions as to the groups with which they will affiliate themselves. Once the organizational structures are in place, we should not be surprised to find individuals exploiting them for purposes that are not necessarily in accordance with the plans of church leaders.

For example, in one Aymara-speaking community in Bolivia, the Mormon branch organization also functions as the *de facto* government for one segment of the broader community (Knowlton 1982). Similarly, the Methodists faced a serious schism when their Aymara pas-

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication from members present at his public address.

tors and congregations became the instigators and protectors of an ethnic revitalization movement against both the Spanish-speaking church and the society at large.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the very leadership and organizational skills people learn in their respective churches may unwittingly connect their denominations to social events far removed from their stated religious objectives. Furthermore, outside groups often try to manipulate these congregations for their own partisan ends. This reportedly took place in Central America where individual governments used the Mormons and other religious sects to "control" the lower classes.

Bastian's depiction of the Summer Institute of Linguistics as a religious transnational radically different from other Protestant groups forces us to note the similarities between the Church and other multinational corporations (Aaby and Hvalkof 1981; Stoll 1982). Like the multinationals, it has significant financial and property holdings, having built numerous chapels, hired employees, and involved itself in the gathering and transferring of merchandise and funds both within and out of the country. In addition to political arrangements, Church leaders cultivate economic relationships with businesses and business leaders who benefit materially from the Church's presence. We need to explore the ways these social networks condition LDS activities and growth in given countries. Moreover, our analysis should probe the economic as well as institutional structure of the Church without ignoring the conflicts that inevitably arise between these forms and its ostensible spiritual aims.

In many countries, LDS ecclesiastical leaders are also Church employees, most often employed by the Presiding Bishopric's office. This means that, in effect, the Church creates a form of professional clergy; the hope or expectation of Church employment fulfills an important spiritual function for Latin members. Testimonies run the risk of becoming dependent on employment and on the continued maintenance of the bureaucracy. In fact, this sort of spiritual nepotism could lead to nascent corruption, especially if the Church bureaucracy follows regional cultural norms. Gossip is rife within local Church circles about just such cases.

As a result, we must see the Church in Latin America as more than simply a spiritual organization to bring about the salvation of humankind. Its economic and organizational structure, within the Latin American context, must also be taken into account. Probing the transfers of funds and information and the professional castes that benefit from the organization, we find tensions and issues beneath the surface

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<sup>7</sup> The Methodist scholar and pastor Jorge Panteliz made this point in a public lecture on the history of Protestantism in Bolivia (La Paz, Bolivia, July 1985).



calm. The Church may appear to be the same everywhere; yet fundamental differences and conflicts are inevitable. And those conflicts reveal the Church's deep organizational structure, uncovered by superficialities, in action (Turner 1974).

Mormonism is a power structure in dynamic tension, seeking its own maintenance and expansion (see Adams 1975, 1981). This fact is not necessarily incompatible with the idea of spiritual leadership. But understanding it as a power structure helps us understand some of the difficulties resulting from growth.

For example, members of the Aymara congregations of Bolivia feel that leadership positions should rotate annually and that branch leaders should be selected by the congregants. Church officials have been at a loss to understand this point of view, in conflict with Mormon tradition (Knowlton 1980b and 1982). Tension has been inevitable. In one case, Aymara members threatened to abandon the Church if changes weren't made. A compromise allowed the Church to continue but with a substantial loss of members. Church officials may have had spiritual reasons for resisting change, but the situation can only be understood and resolved by acknowledging the role of power and authority in the community and the mission (see Albo 1972, 1975, 1977, 1984).

Issues of power and authority within a local social context often affect the Church. In Huacuyo, Bolivia, for example, Church growth was connected to residents' conflicts with the governmental/religious center in nearby Copacabana. They sought different connections with national power bases, hoping to further their community's and their families' development (Knowlton 1982). For example, the Church helped the members of Huacuyo in their conflicts with the provincial elite in Copacabana by giving them direct connections with national governmental and economic agencies. Although the people of Huacuyo express their testimonies in standard terms, they also clearly state that the Church's economic assistance and its help in empowering them vis-à-vis local elites were fundamental components of their decision to join and remain in the Church.

A fourth dynamic involves culture and class. Mormon proselyting, like that of other denominations, tends to be selective, seeking out converts of certain cultural and class origins. We do not really offer the gospel to everyone, despite our intentions to do so. Though social factors predispose people to conversion, the cultural canons of the missionaries and mission leaders also come into play. As a missionary in Bolivia from 1974-76, I was actively encouraged to convert "leaders." Work among the poorer, more "Indian" Bolivians was thus deemphasized. We focused on middle-class and upper-middle-class men: their education and cultural traditions fit them easily into the Mormon con-

cept of leader and gave them the leadership qualities necessary in the Church's bureaucratic system. Missionaries were also strongly discouraged from working with Quechua-speaking villagers, who constituted 35 percent of the nation's population, unless they came to the city.

When a Church draws its members from one social sector, conflicts and tensions among members limit conversions from other social sectors (Hamilton 1962; Nordyke 1982). The students in San Juan told me that the Church has a *facho* image: in Argentine usage that can mean middle class, although elsewhere it also means "right wing." This is a rather accurate description, it seems to me, of the cultural norm and of the social pretensions and desires of many, if not most, Latter-day Saints on the continent. The Church is different from groups that direct their attention to the poor, whose worship reflects the experience and culture of the poor. Even in poorer Latter-day Saint congregations, I have heard dreams of upward mobility and a distinctly middle-class message.

Cultural differences, as well as social differences, can be the root of conflict and misunderstanding. Every Latin American society is socially and ethnically plural, and wide cultural gulfs separate one region from another. At one point, Church leaders called an Argentine to be the mission president in Bolivia. Because the cultural norms guiding his behavior were foreign and often insulting to Bolivian members, they disliked him. Even within Bolivia, the gap between an upper-middle-class, Spanish-speaking leader and the rural Indian-speaking congregations can be filled with misunderstandings.

The fifth dynamic is the role of belief and creeds in religion. Like many Protestants, Latter-day Saints tend to define themselves in terms of their beliefs. Beliefs stand as emblems that distinguish us from other groups and form the ostensible focus of missionary work. Nevertheless, this kind of belief is a relatively new concept in much of Latin America (Knowlton 1988). Protestantism has spread there simultaneously with political groups, who also identify themselves by their beliefs and their ideologies of nationalism and individualism. These have been built out of the religion of the masses, which focuses on quasi-magical practices and festivities.

How has Mormonism fit into this religious and social frame? Is Mormonism contributing to the growth of individualism, and hence to the fragmentation of society? How important are Mormon beliefs in the context of our religious practices? How do Mormons separate or integrate their Mormonism with other aspects of their life? What among Mormon beliefs do Latin Americans select as they reconstruct Mormonism to make it meaningful to them? How does Mormonism relate to popular, folk religion? Is our ideology really the most important

thing we have to offer? How do Latin American Mormons understand belief and faith and their relationship to deity, society, and salvation?

To answer these difficult questions, we must approach Latin American Mormonism on its own terms, rather than from the perspective of Anglo-American, Wasatch-front Mormonism. Because Latin Americans generally use the rituals and words within the Church that we have taught them, it is easy to assume that they attach the same meaning to them. This is not necessarily the case. For example, an Aymara Indian may say "ñay křitwa,"—I believe—based on the loan word "Křiyiña" from the Spanish "creer." Yet because the word and concept of belief does not exist in the Aymara language, this expression may simply mean, "I am a Protestant/Mormon," rather than saying anything about a mental relationship with religion (Knowlton 1988, viii). When we explore the internal dynamics of Mormonism in Latin America, we must be sensitive to the subtleties of syncretism and reformulation in the Latin American social context.

In summary, the Church in Latin America is part of a complex social movement that goes beyond the limited dynamics of the Church, as we commonly understand it. The Church missionary program has been tremendously successful; in many countries Mormonism is second only to Catholicism in numbers. Its important presence within Latin American society has not gone without notice among local scholars. In Jujuy, Argentina, I met an Argentine anthropologist who is studying a Mormon congregation. In San Juan, the sociology department has formed a study group to investigate Mormons as well as other sects springing up there. In Bolivia, and in other countries, the Catholic church is financing sociological studies of the "problem of the sects," and they consider Mormonism a part. Mormon scholars should be involved as well, exchanging insider and outsider perspectives, working toward an adequate understanding of the Church's growth and its role in struggling Latin societies.

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