

Mormonism Becomes a Mainline Religion: The Challenges

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Viewing Mormonism as Mainline

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APPLYING THE TERM “mainline,” or “mainstream,” or “oldline” religion to Mormonism may raise a few eyebrows. After all, doesn’t “mainline” refer to the older, once dominant Protestant religions? Moreover, the term “mainline” lacks precision. How can it possibly serve as a meaningful category of analysis?¹

There is some validity to this objection. Craig Dykstra, a vice-president of the Lilly Foundation (which has been financing scholarly studies of the decline of “mainline” or “mainstream” religions), went so far as to name the specific denominations that are now in the sorry state of being mainline. They are in a sorry state because they have been declining in membership and commitment since the 1960s. (Certainly not true of Mormonism.) With decline has come a loss of power and influence.

After noting the unprecedented diversity of contemporary religious life in the United States and the rich pluralism now evident in every major city in the United States, Dykstra pointed out in January 1990 that matters seemed far different just a few years ago. “Through the 1950s,” he wrote,

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¹ The only adequate overview of the term “mainline” may be found under “Mainline Churches,” in Daniel G. Reid, coordinating editor, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990).

a cluster of Protestant denominations still wielded a cultural and social authority that gave them establishment status. The so-called "mainstream" of American Protestantism included a limited cluster of denominations: Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, as well as the United Methodist, American Baptist, certain Lutheran and Reformed Churches, and the Disciples of Christ. . . . But the former establishment no longer reigns. What was "main" stream is now one stream alongside many others—with significant consequences for American culture as a whole and for these churches. (1990, i)

Dykstra is right on target, but his emphasis on Protestantism is somewhat narrow. He certainly would think it silly even to mention the word Mormonism in the same breath as Episcopalianism, and he may not even regard the Latter-day Saints as Christian. Others like Martin Marty (1973, 1976) and William R. Hutchison (1989) tend to choose this narrower path, having in mind the old traditional churches that once ran the country: Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, and Episcopalianism. Back in 1972 Deane M. Kelley, whose influential book *Why the Conservative Churches Are Growing* started the mainline debate, included even Reform Jews and Unitarian-Universalists. Moreover, sociologists, who have given currency to the term "mainline religion," believe that Catholicism ought to count as mainline. Clearly, like many other debated terms, mainline is problematic.

Perhaps it is unfair to argue for a more inclusive list. Still, the shorter lists seem somewhat unhistorical to me. A narrow list does not accurately reflect the revolutionary changes in American religious life during the twentieth century, when three other groups have become an accepted part of that life: Catholics, Jews, and, as I now believe, Mormons.² And like the "Protestant establishment" (a term now favored by Hutchison), both Catholics and Jews have shared in the Protestant decline in membership and influence. I believe that during the last ten or twenty years Mormonism has taken on some of the characteristics of the mainline, even if, in dramatic contrast with the mainline, it enjoys explosive growth. Probably it is this very growth that has helped move Mormonism closer to the older, traditional churches.

But before turning to my argument for mentioning Mormonism in the same breath as the Protestant mainline, I would like to point out that a leading study, *American Mainline Religion* by Wade Clark Roof

² Scholars who consider Mormonism an entirely new religious tradition *as well as* a mainline American religion face intriguing problems of terminology and logic. I shall not confront these problems here. There is evidence that historians are trying to push aside "mainline" in favor of the term "establishment Protestantism," by which they mean the people who used to "run America." See William R. Hutchison, ed., *The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (N.Y.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), viii-x and the introduction, "Protestantism as Establishment."

and William McKinney, offers a broader definition of mainline than do Dykstra, Marty, and others. Roof and McKinney include even Jews and Catholics—and possibly the Mormons—in their concept of mainline. Mainline religion, they state, is “admittedly a vague, somewhat value-laden designation, yet it focuses attention on the religious and cultural center. By mainline (or mainstream) we mean the dominant, culturally established faiths held by the majority of Americans” (1987, 6).

But here is the crucial part of their definition, the part that perhaps justifies a redefinition of the place of Mormonism in American culture: “For much of American history mainline religion meant simply white Protestant, but as the boundaries of pluralism expanded mainline religion had come to mean more. Many groups—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, white and non-white—that *command the loyalties of large numbers of persons and help shape the normative faith and outlook of the populace lay claim to being in the mainline*” (1987, 6, emphasis added).

Where do the Mormons fit into this scenario? Roof and McKinney list four “other faiths” that have, they feel, a “greater distance from mainstream culture,” but which they feel compelled to mention: Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and Unitarian-Universalists. The authors dispatch these four groups in one page. Perhaps because it is easier to exclude smaller groups, they arbitrarily give the 1987 Mormon church membership as three million, just about half the true figure of six million (1987, 97–98).

A reasonable definition of “mainline,” one based in part on Roof-McKinney, allows the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I think, to take its place among the mainline groups. It shares five basic elements or characteristics of mainline:

1. *Relatively high socio-economic class*

Between 1945 and the 1980s, the educational level and income of two groups, Catholics and Mormons, rose rapidly: from the bottom of three groups of denominations to the middle group. Presently the Mormons stand at the top of the middle group, very close to the Roof-McKinney definition of “mainstream culture,” “power,” and “life style.” The highest group of the three includes (in the order of their degree of accommodation to mainline culture): Unitarian-Universalists, Jews, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and United Church of Christ. For want of a digit or two in salary, the Mormons would undoubtedly be counted in the top group.

2. *Access to social, economic, and cultural power (Roof and McKinney, 1987, 7)*

Admiration for Mormon defense of family values, including opposition to abortion, is widespread. Economic power is also evident. Leading high-tech companies like Word Perfect, Novell, and Dayna Corporation are Mormon in their directorship or employees or both. Mormon C.E.O.s (chief executive officers) run perhaps a dozen Fortune 500 companies. The Church holds tens of millions of dollars worth of property in basic industries. It holds properties through the Zion Securities holding company and ZCMI (Zion's Cooperative and Mercantile Institution) and also runs agricultural enterprises in sugar beets (dismantled in the 1980s), oranges, cattle, sugar cane, and other large-scale food commodities. These holdings are so large that anti-Mormon critics regularly "expose" them as evidence of a frightening Mormon conspiracy to take over the United States—or at least the western half.

The Church's cultural power cannot be denied. Among other things, it sponsors and promotes Polynesian culture on the Pacific Rim through BYU-Hawaii and exerts influence through BYU campuses in the U.S. and Mexico. Though specific figures are not available, average Mormon educational levels (graduate and undergraduate) are very high.

3. The international Church

Since the 1930s, Mormonism has become a strongly international church. Far from being the latest novelty in Mormon history, this development comports perfectly with the Church's long-held claim to being a universal faith. Though Roof and McKinney do not list international activity as a trait of mainline religion, it seems an indispensable part of the definition. By contrast, sects and nonmainline religions are more culture bound, less transportable across national boundaries. For example, Shinto, so closely bound to Japanese culture, will never reach the mainline proportions of Buddhism in Asia, simply because Shinto is too closely bound to Japanese self-definition, while the world religion of Buddhism continues to expand not only on the Pacific Rim but also in North America. Within Japan, Shinto, whose priests consecrate the emperor, is very mainline.

It is all too easy to think of Mormonism as a narrow American religion, a kind of culture-bound American Shinto, replete with the old Protestant ethic, the American folklore regarding the Native Americans, the doctrine of Negro inferiority (repudiated since 1978), the penchant for businesslike organization, and so on. The mid-twentieth-century world has been an Americanizing world, and Mormonism has been part of that newly emerging world-historical development. The world has never been more ready to welcome this "American" religion. American historical theorists like Carl Becker and Franklin Levan Baumer did not invent the notion of timing and climate of opinion; it

goes back at least to Hippolyte Taine's *l'homme [or la race], le moment, le milieu*. Non-Mormon intellectuals must accept the successful exportation of Mormonism as one of the ironies that give meaning to history. As for the Mormons, they are happy to accept worldwide diffusion as manifestly the work of God.

The definition of mainline rightly includes the element of "widespread visibility and prominence." The rapidly internationalizing Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is quickly achieving a level of recognition, especially in Latin America, West Africa, and the Pacific Rim, that is comparable to the prominence of two other universal religions: Judaism and Catholicism. The Mormon presence in Northern Europe has been snowballing, despite the two-thousand-year headstart of orthodox Christianity and Judaism. Explosive growth in Latin America—it is now second only to Roman Catholicism in numbers of baptized adherents—has made the Church a political issue, resulting by the 1980s in the assassination of several Mormon missionaries. The assassinations of Catholic clergy are only slightly more frequent. In accordance with their newly established universal status, the Mormons have chosen Jerusalem itself as the site of their most prominent and prestigious Institute of Religion.

Non-Mormon scholars have turned to Mormonism with a seriousness that would have been undreamed of only ten years ago. Columbia is offering a history seminar on Mormonism. At Yale the noted critic Harold Bloom is writing a book on Mormonism, and in a November 1990 lecture at the University of Utah, Bloom held an audience of almost 1,500 spellbound with a provocative analysis of Mormonism that included statements like this: "The religion-making genius of Joseph Smith, profoundly American, uniquely restored the Bible's sense of the theomorphic" (in Clark 1991, 59). Mormonism is no longer just a topic in a divinity school course on sects and cults. The Church has achieved widespread visibility and prominence—and acceptance.

4. Growth of bureaucracy

Between 1950 and 1990 the Church bureaucracy grew from fewer than 500 employees in a small collection of nineteenth-century buildings in downtown Salt Lake City to almost 2,000, most of them working out of a skyscraper that dominates the city skyline. The growth of the bureaucracy reflected the explosive increase in Church membership during the forty years before 1990. When churches become well established, they develop impressive bureaucracies.

One difficulty with bureaucracy is communication. Bureaucrats have a hard time keeping in touch with their clients. Mormon church bureaucracy is better than most, but it still faces unprecedented prob-

lems: communicating with a membership that has suddenly doubled, dealing with a proliferation of new languages spoken by converts, and reaching members diffused throughout the globe, members who no longer “gather unto Zion” in America. How can the Church bureaucracy possibly communicate Church news and doctrinal discussions on an international scale?

The Church’s response to these problems has been impressive. Back in the 1940s, the media enterprises of the Church (television, radio, publishing) were comparatively trivial. By 1990 the Church had established ten international magazines from Hong Kong to Czechoslovakia. The two generations after World War II saw at least a tripling of output of the print media and many new television and radio enterprises.

Similarly, in the economic area of Church activity, the office for temporal affairs known to the Saints as the Presiding Bishopric has had to administer vast new holdings in agricultural production and other enterprises too complex to mention even in summary. Such expansions in activity in a church with a strong sense of its special identity has required a bureaucracy that may exceed that of the Vatican—if one omits the local government employees (secular) of Vatican City. Any organization with a corporate identity needs a bureaucracy. At times the Mormon Church has had to divest itself of enterprises that put a strain on its very efficient administrative apparatus and that drained energy from its main mission to convert the world. Thus, in 1975 the Church got rid of the fifteen hospitals that it had operated in three western states under the Health Service Corporation. It sold out to the non-Mormon, non-profit Intermountain Health Care, Inc. Symbolically most significant, if not quite so vast as the Presiding Bishopric, is the Church’s Office of Public Information. Mormon visibility in the larger society requires an office of professional spokespersons, because, unlike the Unification Church (Moonies) or other successful and relatively new religious movements, Mormonism has an ongoing relationship with the larger society, and (crucial for Mainline status) the larger society has an ongoing, continuous, and not-unfriendly relationship with Mormonism. Nonmainline groups do not need large public-relations offices. Nor does the larger society reciprocate with a continuous relationship like the serious attention of Ivy League scholars.

Max Weber conceived of bureaucracy as the result of the “routinization” of the power and the appeal of a charismatic leader. Because Weber conceived of bureaucracy rather narrowly as an instrument of political power that tends to take on a life of its own and to perpetuate itself—whatever the current regime—his classic model does

not do justice to nonpolitical bureaucracies like those of religions or of the nonprofit institutions so characteristic of American society. Still he made it clear that bureaucratization is the inevitable fate of any large institution that tries to perpetuate itself. Small sects do not have bureaucracies.³

5. *Acceptance of social environment*

Finally, Mormons, like other American mainline religionists, have, in the phrase of Roof and McKinney, accepted their "social environment, that is, the state, the local community, and its school district, the family, and the marketplace." The authors call these four elements "agencies of divine purpose" in a world that is "still taking shape," (1987, 6). This rhetorical flourish does not help much. If the world is "still taking shape," when will the process end? When the school district has achieved excellence? Clearly each of us has his or her favorite "agency of divine purpose." Accommodation can be theological as well as sociological. From a sectarian or even a piously mainline point of view, any believers who compromise too much with the world risk a betrayal of Christ.

Looking at the "social environment" (i.e., American society) historians would note that, because Roof and McKinney do not consider Mormonism a mainline religion (and probably not Christian), the Latter-day Saints presumably cannot be allowed to help in that "divine shaping of the world." But any objective observer must disagree, for it is clear that the Mormons do accept the five basic institutional arrangements of American society—namely, state, local community, local schools, the family, and capitalistic marketplace—and Mormons do try to shape these institutions. The present-day Latter-day Saints, for example, have no qualms about accepting and trying to improve the nontheocratic state government of Utah. Whether they help move that government in a godly direction is another question. (In 1991 a national newsweekly rated Utah as the best governed state in the Union.) Nowadays the Mormons accept Gentiles of all stripes in their state government. This accommodation to the Gentile world stands in stark contrast with the 1920s, when the local Ku Klux Klan could target the

³ See Weber on the three types of legitimate authority and the use of administrative staff in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. by Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1947), 324–45, 358–63; and on the technical advantages of bureaucratic organization in the collection of essays, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1946), 214–16, 228–30. The work of post-Weberian sociologists like Alvin Gouldner and Peter Blau is more precise and nuanced than that of Weber, but it is good to go to the classic source.

Mormons as secret conspirators and harass them; but by the 1970s the Klan was accepting even Mormons (however few) (Gerlach 1982).⁴

On the federal level, the Mormons, excluded from high elective and appointive office as late as 1932, have become an integral and invisible part of the mainstream. Beginning with Marriner Eccles in the New Deal and extending to Brent Skowcroft in the administration of President George Bush, Mormons have accepted cabinet level positions with all the naturalness of the Adams family accepting the presidency. On the local level, the Saints have become thoroughly immersed in grassroots political culture, committing themselves to share the local public schools with working-class gentiles and people of color. In this they are far more mainline and democratic than other relatively homogeneous mainline groups like white Baptists in the South or white Catholics in Philadelphia.

The Roof-McKinney list has a political slant (state, local, etc.), but cultural evidence of accommodation to mainline religion is even more telling. Surely the revelation of 1978 admitting black men to the priesthood and the 1990 changes in the temple ceremony that excised words expressing female subservience to men represent a dramatic new attunement to the main currents of American religious teaching. It is impossible for a non-member to get an official transcript of these ceremonies, and it is upsetting to Mormons when anyone publically quotes from such sacred, confidential material. But knowledgeable Saints do assert that in the newly revised ceremony church members are no longer enjoined to hold other denominations in suspicion. The elimination of this language goes far beyond trying to be less offensive to non-Mormon Christians; it represents a new and more accepting attitude toward the world, an attitude that is no longer the adversarial

⁴ Leonard J. Moore, a quantitative revisionist historian, has cited the Klan's targeting of the Mormons in the 1920s as evidence that the Klan, when not viewed with ideological prejudice, represented a mainstream, populist, democratic aspect of American culture. The Klan opposed undemocratic dominant powers like the Mormon Church and not just blacks, Jews, Catholics, and Southern Europeans, he argues. Stimulated by his own findings on the membership of the Klan in its 1920s center of power, Indiana, Moore concluded that historians must get beyond mere ideological explanations of the Klan and the diatribes of critics like H. L. Mencken. Moore underplays the southern culture of northern Klan states of Oregon, Colorado and Oregon.

Moore's interpretations seem grossly distorted, but he has apparently done extensive research; and his book, *Citizen Klansmen: the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928*, is forthcoming from the University of North Carolina Press. See Moore's review essay, "Historical Interpretations of the 1920s Klan: the Traditional View and the Populist Revision," *Journal of Social History*, 24 (Winter 1990): 341-57.

we-versus-them, but one that accommodates itself to the religious mainstream.

And no student of the place of Mormonism in modern American culture can overlook the crucial importance of the nuclear family. In the years of polygamy before the Manifesto of 1890, the family was central in Mormon doctrine and daily life. When the Church changed its family structure to conform to the nuclear, monogamous norm of mainline culture, emphasis on the sanctity of the family continued. Indeed, the Mormon teaching that a healthy, loving, spiritual family life is indispensable not only to salvation "beyond the veil" but also to morality and happiness here and now has made the Mormon family an object of universal admiration.

One could continue applying other tests to classify Mormonism as a mainline religion. For example, I have ignored the role of women; I have left out the very important topic of the Mormon relationship to corporate capitalism; I have not examined the question of why, if Mormonism has come to resemble a mainline religion, it has not shared in the mainline's declining membership. But I have said enough, I think, to illustrate the usefulness of this exercise. At the very least, I would argue that, while defending its old communal identity, Mormonism has begun to resemble a mainline religion in everything except a decline in membership. If this be true, then the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can expect to face the usual challenges to well-established religions: mainly the pride that comes with success.

One must not be too literal about using sociological categories. Mormonism has not lost its spiritual dimension. Its intellectuals have not been unaware of the dangers of being too acceptable to the world (American society), and all pious Latter-day Saints believe that their Church must ever remain in tension with the larger society. Still, for all its epistemological difficulties, the concept of "mainline" does help us understand the very recent history of Mormon society. If the threat of peaceful devolution to bland mainline religion did not exist, Mormon insiders like BYU history professor Glen M. Leonard could not pose the question to other Mormon historians in 1990: "Who are we and where are we going?" Nor would the pollster George Gallup, Jr., have been able to conclude in 1989 that the "American population that will emerge in the 1990s will be more Catholic, more non-Western, more Mormon, more unaffiliated, and less Protestant than it is today" (Gallup and Castelli 1989).

Certainly something has changed in the nature of the Mormon relationship to society since 1945. Part of that change is the dramatically lower state of tension with the larger society: a new Mormon status that goes with being mainline.