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Mormonism and the Challenge of the Mainline

Marie Cornwall

IN SOME WAYS, Mormonism looks in 1991 very much mainline. Yet discussing the challenge of this new social status rests on two assumptions: that Mormonism actually is a mainline religion, and that as a mainline religion it faces the same challenges that other mainline religions face. Both assumptions are not totally supported by the facts of Mormonism.

Yet a recent examination of American mainline religion by Wade Roof and William McKinney, sociologists specializing in the study of religion, provides data indicating that Mormons "show a phenomenal shift [in social status]: they have moved from the lowest-ranking reli-

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gious group in the mid-1940s to the top of the middle rank" (1987, 110). This ranking places them ahead of Methodists, Catholics, and Lutherans but still below Jews, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians. The indicators used to establish rank were education, occupational status, and income. My own analysis of survey data collected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) suggests that Mormons (both women and men) rank third in educational status, below Jews and Episcopalians, tied with Presbyterians and United Church of Christ, and more educated than Methodists, Catholics, and Lutherans.

Mormons are mainline by other standards as well. Political conservatism is one. More Republican than either Presbyterians (44 percent) or Episcopalians (41 percent), 51 percent of Mormons in the United States report they are members of the Republican party ("Portrait" 1991). When asked to describe their social class, 48 percent of Mormons report they are in the middle or upper classes. By comparison, only 37 percent of conservative Protestants and 28 percent of Jehovah's Witnesses report upper or middle class membership (Roof and McKinney 1987).

But Mormonism is not mainline according to most other indicators. When describing American mainline religions, Roof and McKinney group Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and Unitarian-Universalists together as "four smaller, but visible groups . . . [which] deserve some mention simply because they are generally well known to Americans, and each in its own way is something of a minority variant of the historic Christian faith" (1987, 97). "Something of a minority variant" does not sound very mainline after all. "Well known" is not as mainline as well respected.

Studies of social distance compare the extent to which various religious groups are "tolerated" by the general population. These studies show that conservative Christians are less accepting of Mormons than are mainline Protestants and suggest that, overall, the general population views Mormons as pretty marginal people (Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie 1987). While Mormons are more tolerated than Moonies and Hare Krishna followers, they are less tolerated than Pentacostals, Baptists, and members of the Church of Christ.

Sociologists have long used the church-sect continuum to describe and categorize religious groups. Sect-like religion is in tension with the society which surrounds it, while church-like religion is not. By definition, mainline churches are not in tension with society. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge suggest that tension can be measured. It is possible to identify empirically where religious groups lie on the church-sect continuum. Using their criteria, Mormonism is very much in tension with society. For example, Stark and Bainbridge argue that mem-

bers of sect-like groups are more likely to believe "the morals in this country are pretty bad and getting worse," to disapprove of gambling, to approve of censorship of movies and books, and to be "concerned with trying to live as sinless a life as possible." Members of sect-like groups are also more likely to believe that "what we do in this life will determine our fate in the hereafter" (1985, 53, table 3.2). Using these criteria, Mormonism would very likely rate as sect-like, in tension with society, and not yet mainline.

Conservative Mormon mores also distinguish the faith as other than mainline. As sociologist Tim Heaton has pointed out, Mormons are more chaste, more married, have more children, and are more chauvinistic than the general population (1989). These attributes help to maintain the Mormon lifestyle as sect-like and marginal.

In addition, Mormonism's tendency to resemble the mainline is a trend for U.S. Mormons only. Mormonism is decidedly sect-like in the international arena. In most countries of the world, Mormonism's tendency towards the middle class and the well-educated is muted, and the sect-like character of Mormonism is consequently more pronounced and distinctive. Even if Mormonism should achieve mainline status in the United States, as defined by education level and social status, it will remain sect-like and marginalized in the international arena for many years to come. Furthermore, Church growth in international areas will mean that a smaller proportion of the membership will live in the United States.

And now for the second question: Does Mormonism face the same challenges as the mainline religions? Not really. One of the greatest challenges facing mainline religions is the loss of their membership. During the seventies, sociologists found that the more conservative churches were growing the fastest and the Protestant mainline was losing its membership (Kelley 1972). While some suggest the trend is changing as baby boomers return to religion to raise their families, Roof and McKinney remain pessimistic. They conclude: "The churches of the Protestant establishment, long in a state of relative decline, will continue to lose ground both in numbers and in social power and influence" (1987, 233).

My own analysis of NORC survey data suggests important denominational differences in the proportion of individuals who change religious affiliation or "drop out" of institutionalized religion altogether. Respondents were asked to report their religious preference at age sixteen and at the time of the survey. Analysis of the data suggests which mainline churches lost the most members: Presbyterians lost 30 percent, the United Church of Christ 36 percent, the Methodists 35 percent, Episcopalians 30 percent, and Lutherans 24 percent. By com-

parison, we found that 16 percent of Mormons, 14 percent of Catholics, and 10 percent of Jews changed affiliation. Further analysis found that 9 percent of Episcopalians, 8 percent of Presbyterians, and 6 percent of Methodists and Lutherans reported they had switched to no religious preference. By comparison, 5 percent of Mormons and Catholics and 3 percent of Jews had switched to no preference.

While many Latter-day Saints do not fully participate in their religion, most still claim Mormonism as their religious preference. And even with membership losses and inactivity, Mormonism's growth is phenomenal. Sociologist Rodney Stark (1984) estimates 265 million members by the year 2080, and current membership information suggests his expectation of 50 percent growth per decade since the 1960s is an acceptable assumption. So while mainline churches are faced with losing their membership, Mormonism continues to grow and to expand into international areas. Some estimate that by the year 2000 only 43 percent of Church members will live in North America, and upwards of 40 percent will live in Latin America.

So what are the challenges facing Mormonism? There are three major issues:

Growth, particularly growth in the international Church

One of the paradoxes of growth for any organization is that while new resources and new energy is necessary for organizational vitality, too much growth can suffocate an organization. It has been too often true that substantial Church growth in a particular area of the world has created tremendous administrative problems. Rapid growth without community strength and solidarity only produces a religious community paralyzed by a lack of resources, leadership, and member commitment. We have seen it happen in the British Isles, in Central and South America, and in Japan.

Bureaucratic and programmatic tendencies

Another paradox of organizational growth is that size produces greater organizational complexity: it multiplies the number of departments and divisions required to handle worldwide expansion (finance, distribution, curriculum, membership, buildings). These departments and divisions, along with branches, wards, missions, stakes, and administrative areas, require management, regulation, and direction. All of these administrative needs are in some way or another an anathema to the charismatic nature of religion and the fundamental needs of community-building and nurturing individuals. The correlation move-

ment which began in earnest in the 1960s continues with us, and the Church faces fundamental questions about how to strengthen and nurture individual members while administrating programs and activities. The problem is fundamentally different from issues faced by mainline religions primarily because of the centralized nature of Mormonism. Centralized control versus local management and administration will continue to be an issue within Mormonism over the next several decades.

Tension from within surrounding issues of change and stability, respectability and distinctiveness, and accommodation to societal trends

Armand Mauss in a 1989 DIALOGUE article has already pointed out Mormonism's ambivalence towards assimilation and accommodation. This ambivalence is a phenomenon typical of new religious movements whose tension with society requires periodic adjustment in order to survive. Movements which maintain too much tension may stagnate; movements which are too accommodating lose their distinctiveness and often their adherents. The phenomenon within Mormonism is somewhat atypical, however, simply because Church members are highly educated (much more so than their conservative Christian neighbors). The problem with an educated membership, according to sociological perspectives, is that education secularizes individuals, and the more educated members of a religious movement typically want their religion to accommodate and be less distinctive. Those religions that are less willing to accommodate generally lose their educated membership.

In the analysis of NORC data described earlier, I found that switching religions was related to educational attainment. For example, among Pentecostals, 31 percent of all respondents changed religions; however, 51 percent of Pentecostals with a college education had changed. Similar patterns are found among conservative Protestants, Southern and Northern Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and Catholics. The more educated respondents were more likely to have changed religions. I find no such phenomenon among Latter-day Saints. College-educated Mormons in the sample were actually slightly less likely to have changed religion than those with less than high school education (but the difference was not statistically significant). Furthermore, I found a positive correlation between several measures of religiosity (e.g., frequency of personal prayer, religious commitment, belief in God and an afterlife) and education among Latter-day Saints. The positive correlation does not show up for any other group. Because Mormonism tends to hold on to its educated members, we must expect that it will also be more likely to accommodate to its host society, at least more so than groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses or conservative Protestants.

Mormonism has generally proved its ability to accommodate. The 1891 Manifesto, the ordination of blacks, the accommodations to growth in the last three decades are all evidence. The Church has also proved its ability to spawn sects—fundamentalist organizations which are unintentionally created out of accommodation efforts.

The next crisis of Mormonism is already upon us. It has been created again by the host society—a society based on individualism, the capitalist enterprise, and the rights of individuals. The Protestant mainline has ordained women for many years. The feminist enterprise continues to raise questions about the ordination of women and the existence of a Mother in Heaven. How much Mormonism accommodates to these new societal pressures remains to be seen, but the experience of the RLDS in ordaining women should teach us something about the schism that will occur if change is too dramatic and too quick.

So perhaps the best advice for Mormonism is to avoid the mainline. While we yearn for respectability, it is our distinctiveness that helps us thrive. While we look church-like and mainstream in the U.S., the charismatic forces upon which religious movements thrive exist at our periphery, where miracles are still expected and still occur.

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