

A Reorganized Church Perspective

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THERE WAS A TIME when one could identify a sort of “mainline” religious configuration in the United States. Edwin Gaustad defined its characteristics thus:

Mainstream refers to the older, culturally established, comfortably familiar denominations—those with a history that could be studied, with a liturgy that could be recognized, with a ministry that could be welcomed and trusted to pray on public occasions without giving offense. The mainstream in general could be relied on to keep proselyting zeal under control and sectarian pride in check, at least most of the time. (1990, 242)

Within that defined mainstream, Gaustad then identified the eight most prominent American denominations of the 1890s: Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, and Congregational.

Gaustad’s description of mainstream religion in the 1890s excluded Mormonism altogether. His analysis of the twentieth-century religious scene in America, however, included Mormonism in the “mainstream,” based on two developments in Mormon culture. The first was the numerical growth and rapid spread of its population across the face of the continent and the globe. The other, which had made possible that expansion, was a cluster of four related changes which removed many of the features of original Mormonism which were characteristic of sectarian communal groups.

The first of these changes was Mormonism’s survival of the loss of its initial charismatic leadership. Next was its transformation of a desert wasteland into a fruitful habitat, with all the strength and ingenuity which that implied. A third was the surprising way in which, being forced as a precondition of statehood to abandon polygamy, Mormonism championed traditional monogamous family loyalties. Finally, Mormonism also enthusiastically embraced cultural national values, even to the extent of passionate patriotism. Gaustad notes that having achieved mainline status by the operation of all these factors, Mormonism did not lapse into “lassitude and complacency but to an increas-

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ingly fervent missionary enterprise abroad as well as at home" (1990, 246).

Gaustad's analysis, it seems to me, describes surface developments but leaves us with unresolved conflict. If mainline religion consists of the large, culturally established denominations, how then can he place the Mormons in that setting? Mormonism still has far more—and more essential—traits in common with sects than with denominations. For, as I see it, Mormonism is even yet an intricate blend of counter-cultural sectarianism, despite its having embraced to varying degrees a few notable surface traits of denominationalism. In my view, numerical growth, geographical expansion, differentiation, adaptability, and espousal of national values are not enough to usher an otherwise authoritarian* sect into this nation's religious mainstream. That is, if this nation does indeed have a religious mainstream any more.

Let us, for the moment, assume that it does. Alma Blair's 1979 article summarizes the classic distinctions between a denomination and a sect. By those categories, Mormonism, even with all its sociological deviations, falls in the sectarian mode, despite Mormon development since the 1890s. Blair's article notes that members of a sect feel they possess a unique body of truth derived from special access to God. They allow strict behavioral codes to be imposed on them, with harsh penalties attached to disobedience. Ministerial education is relatively unimportant, beyond the most elementary requirements. Sect members engage in a fervent proselytizing regimen. They show little interest in organizational administrative structures and functions. For sectarians, the quest for sound doctrine is over, because they feel they already possess sufficient true doctrine for their exclusive mission. The worship rituals of the sect are much more spontaneous than they are elaborate and planned in detail. Members of a sect come from mostly the lower economic class. Finally, the sect conceives of itself as existing over and against the world it is commissioned to convert. Blair notes that as a sect gradually de-emphasizes and ultimately abandons these nine criteria, it eventually takes on the character of a denomination (Blair 1979, 23, 25). Measured by this yardstick, modern Mormonism yet remains largely at the periphery of the arena occupied by the so-called mainline religious denominations.

From my perspective within the Reorganized Church, I submit, however, that while the criteria posed by Gaustad in his definition of "mainstream religion" may have applied to the 1890s, the cultural and social transformations of the past century pose enormous difficulties when we try to identify such a mainline concept as operational in the 1990s. The American religious world of the 1890s was still in large measure absolutistic. Ours is far more pluralistic and relativistic.

As I attempt to determine the extent to which the RLDS variety of Mormonism can be thought of as part of America's mainline religious establishment, my assessment is, frankly, that the very word "mainline" implies far more homogeneity than our national religious scene demonstrates. The melting pot has refused to melt. The religious picture is one of an amorphous mass of sometimes contending, largely indifferent, and yet frequently cooperating denominations and sectarian establishments. Each seems intent on furthering its own aims, identity, and sphere of influence. Each is preoccupied with maintaining itself as an institution.

The RLDS church began in the 1850s as a dissenting sect of Mormonism. The earliest RLDS documents show a strident anxiety to displace all forms of Mormonism with its own one true manifestation of the Latter Day Saint communal genius. In a nutshell, the RLDS position was that polygamy was wrong and lineal descent in church presidency was right. On the force of this two-pronged argument, RLDSism was born and spent its first several decades trying to reclaim Mormons to their proper relationship to the gospel. To these two propositions was appended a third, which became the umbrella for RLDS evangelism and pastoral efforts: the whole law of the gospel and the church was to be found in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants.

So it was that the Reorganization took form in the spirit and purpose of an authoritarian sect. Out of the mainstream, fishing mainly in the Mormon net, the earliest RLDS missionaries sought to reclaim the old-time Saints to the fold. But they also (and increasingly) fished in the nets of so-called mainline religions. When they did so, the RLDS elders found themselves being constantly mistaken for LDS polygamous Mormons and summarily rejected for that presumed identity. This state of affairs galvanized the RLDS church into action. They would deliberately seek to be identified with mainline American religion, while at the same time trying to be known as the true Mormon religion. This was to become, for RLDSism, the tightest of tight-rope walking they ever could have imagined.

On the one hand, while trying to win Mormon converts, RLDS missionaries first felt the need to denounce Utah Mormonism as an aberration. Mormons regarded RLDS missionaries who set forth these views as offending apostates from the true Nauvoo faith of Joseph Smith, Jr. On the other hand, while trying to win non-Mormons (Protestants), RLDS ministers felt impelled to show from scripture and quality of church life that they had much more in common with "mainline religion" than with Utah Mormonism. This became confusing for prospective converts when at the same time these RLDS mis-

sionaries felt the need to show that they were “true Mormons,” yet in ways radically different from the common perception of what it meant to be Mormon. This state of affairs put the RLDS church between a rock and an even harder rock!

The crux of the dilemma was pastoral and internal as much as it was missionary, or external. At the heart of the matter was the impossible goal of trying to become acceptable to both Mormons and mainline American religion. A smoldering ongoing debate finally erupted into a brightly burning turmoil over these boundary issues within RLDSism in the 1870s and 1880s. The four critical questions were:

1. What is the gospel?
2. Which gospel principles and propositions must an RLDS member and representative believe and promulgate, so as to be considered faithful to God and the church?
3. In what ways are the scriptures of the church to be normative as standards of belief, church doctrine, and personal conduct?
4. To what extent are all the teachings and revelations of Joseph Smith, Jr., and his successors in the RLDS prophetic office to be embraced and implemented by RLDS church and its individual members?

At the risk of oversimplification, I hold that throughout the history of the Reorganized Church, its top leaders have been trying—often unsuccessfully—to address and resolve those questions. Often the issue has centered in the working relationship between the membership and the prophetic office. As the RLDS church has struggled to define and embody the implications of that relationship, the church leadership itself has, especially in the most recent four decades, moved slowly away from authoritarian sectarianism and towards denominationalism. With varying degrees of success, the leaders have been able to bring the members along with them, and the church now stands at the brink of genuine engagement with the larger religious and cultural worlds.

Although, as I have suggested, mainline denominations are less homogenous than in the 1890s, the RLDS trend towards denominationalism can be seen in the following developments:

1. The expansion of the concept of Zion from a remnant, gathered in a specific place—Jackson County, Missouri—to await the coming of Jesus, to a worldwide emphasis. Zion is seen increasingly as the principle of leaven in every culture, transforming human life, social structures, and systems by obedience to gospel principles.
2. The humanization of church history, so that history can be used for self-understanding and awareness, rather than for justifying the church’s existence and place in the world.

3. Theological ferment, placing before church members new perspectives by which they can appreciate their priceless heritage of theology and belief in the context of other Christian and world religions.

4. Relativization of what formerly was an exclusivistic authoritarian stance. In short, RLDS leaders no longer emphasize the former claim to being the one true church. The church is defined increasingly as the worldwide Body of Believers, as was set forth by Joseph Smith, Jr., in the Doctrine and Covenants as all those who repent and come unto God (10:67; RLDS 3:16). By this definition, the church is wider than any one sect or denomination, broader than even the Christian faith. Indeed it encompasses every member of the whole human family who, on whatever terms, senses his or her dependence on God.

5. Viewing scripture as human records of divine revelation. As such, scriptures have not been transmitted inerrantly, yet they contain within them, at many points, inspiration capable of eliciting redemptive and compassionate human response and transformation.

These five developmental shifts, plus others that could be mentioned, have brought both clarity and confusion to the RLDS church since the 1950s. The schismatic strains begun in the early 1960s have accelerated as thousands of members have resolutely refused to follow the theological direction of church leaders.

The two most volatile issues over which church schism has occurred most recently have been the ordination of women (authorized in 1984 by revelation), and the building of the temple in Independence, Missouri¹ (construction now in process, completion scheduled for 1993). The conflicts over these matters, however, rest in the more than a century-old struggle which preceded the five developmental shifts outlined above.

The RLDS church, however, is beginning to emerge from recent stresses to a new threshold of involvement with the world. Specific actions taken at recent world conferences have committed the church to more creative engagement with worldwide environmental issues. Recent prophetic instruction has challenged the church, in concert with other religious and cultural organizations, to bring the ministry of love and compassion to human need wherever that need exists. Finally, the current temple project has the potential of challenging the RLDS church, despite its small numbers, to make a lasting mark on the pursuit of peace and reconciliation, at every level of human experience, from personal to global.

¹ RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, sections 149, 149A, 150, and 156 form the immediate revelatory ground and authority for these issues.