

Mormonism on the Big Mac Standard

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A FEW YEARS AGO a member of our Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2nd Ward bishopric and his wife made their first journey across the United States. Born and reared in Japan, they were anxious to see the interior as they drove to and from Salt Lake City. During their absence everyone missed their fresh, unladen spirits. When they returned, we were anxious to hear about their trip.

"It was wonderful to experience the church as we traveled from state to state," he said, during the first testimony meeting home. "It was just like McDonald's. Everywhere we went, every Sunday school class we attended was the same." We were amused, more by the innocent frankness of his testimony than by the idea.

As a member of the American diplomatic service, I and my family too have traveled a fair amount, living in five different countries and on both sides of the United States. This migrant-worker life has given us considerable perspectives on the church. Our Japanese brother was not far from the mark. The church's Correlation program, coupled with its extensive translation effort, puts the same message into virtually every Gospel Doctrine class worldwide each week. And that is just the beginning. Meeting schedules follow the same sequences. Ward and stake organizations are planned by template. The *Ensign* is translated into monthly publications internationally. Primary materials, temple ceremonies, accounting procedures, warehouse floorplans, even sacrament meeting formats are prescribed by the book. Measures of worthiness are standardized, whether you are in Finland or South Africa. That is a bit like McDonald's.

In fact, McDonald's is so standardized that some economists, only half-jokingly, use the term "Big Mac standard" to determine if international currencies are distorted in value through either overvalued or undervalued exchange rates. The theory goes like this: A Big Mac

worldwide is exactly the same. It has the same amount of meat; the buns are identical; the sauces and trimmings are prescribed in quantity and quality. Presumably, the same amount of labor goes into making a Big Mac through identical production processes on common machines in similar facilities. So when the price of a Big Mac in different countries is converted into American dollars, it should also be identical if exchange rates are adjusted for differences in price levels. Any deviation from the U.S. price represents a distortion in that particular exchange rate relative to the dollar. Thus the *universal sameness* of Big Macs offers an opportunity to observe *international differences*, which, according to theory, are not supposed to exist.

That notion, as applied to the church Correlation program, suggests some intriguing possibilities. Today's centralized church, situated in the American Intermountain West, works fastidiously to assure that the gospel message *plus* the church organization is the same everywhere. In the LDS environment diversity is not cherished; conformity is the norm; original thinking can be risky. The longer the church is established in a given place, the more this holds true. We all know people who would not even know *how* to deviate from the Mormon standard unless they moved into sin, big time (or thought they were moving into sin, big time).

But traveling from place to place, as my family has for the past twenty years, has led us to discover that, in fact, differences abound in divers corners of Mormondom. In this church of carefully orchestrated similarities and identities we see diversity. This leads us to the basic question of Big Mac analysis: What do we learn if London's Hyde Park Ward differs in various respects from the BYU 44th Ward in Provo, Utah?

My family lived in both wards for four years. My wife was Relief Society president in both; I was in the bishopric in both. We saw the church, inside-out, in both. The Hyde Park Ward had over fifty nationalities represented among its members, and the majority was nonwhite, mostly black. We had wealthy American businessmen and the poorest of the urban poor. In her church calling my wife became something of a social worker, dealing with virtually everything found in a big urban ward, from murder to marriage. During the summers about 80 percent of the congregation were visitors. Needless to say, none of this was true for the BYU 44th.

It was interesting to watch "Utah Mormons" walk into the Hyde Park Ward (directly from the BYU 44th, seemingly) wearing tell-tale signatures. They looked different, and—if they succeeded in seeing between the other visitors—were often surprised by how the local members, people of every color, speaking all sorts of languages, were also different from what they knew.

The bishop of the Hyde Park Ward was a loving English brother from

the Midlands; his lovely wife was black, originally from the West Indies. If some American visitors weren't surprised by this marriage, some South African members would have been. The appearance of bearded bishops in the Hyde Park Stake would have produced similar reactions. In Pretoria Stake men were not called as bishops without first shaving. And in the BYU 44th a bishop with a beard was (and is) a contradiction of terms. In Italy and Greece our branch presidents wore handsome mustaches. And in Finland I was counselor to an outstanding priesthood leader with an attractive beard.

Thus in our standardized church differences and similarities from country to country tell us something about the many different kinds of peoples who now claim membership. They also tell us about persisting Americanisms, and about limitations to the standardization process. Ultimately they tell us a lot about the gospel itself.

These differences caricature the peoples who generate them. Just as it is impossible to suppress a strong personality without destroying it, salient cultural traits inevitably surface among members in spite of the church's standardizing process. In Finland the church hymn book has some old Lutheran favorites which convey LDS-consistent messages. That is emphatically not the case in South Africa, where the stake music director would not let our ward choir sing "What Child Is This?" on the Christmas program because it was not in the LDS hymnal. One church auxiliary leader in Britain taught over the pulpit never to say thank-you to church workers. It would spoil them, she said. In fact, we heard precious few thank-yous in Britain. Finns say thank-you virtually every other word. One stake president in South Africa told bishops they needed to "kick butt" to keep their members in line. Like Brigham Young used to, he explained. In spite of Brigham Young, I suspect that most American Mormons, who may sometimes go to the other extreme, would be offended (as I was) by both his concept and terminology.

Similarly, a number of brethren, including local leaders, in our Pretoria Ward carried guns holstered inside their jackets to church. Our home teacher, an elderly brother, pulled out his weapon one evening to show to our son. He said he shot one kid, who had asked for his wallet, "in the bum" a few months back. My son was both amused and shocked when, at a stake youth conference, his advisor pulled out his pistol one night to scare off some pranksters from another ward. In Finland carrying a concealed firearm to church, or anywhere, would be unthinkable. Many members there feel it sinful even to buy a play gun for their children. In Italy carrying a gun to church would have completely different implications.

It is not that no British member says "thank you"; that all South African stake presidents kick butt; or that their brethren carry guns. But on

the Big Mac standard when everything is planned to be the same, small differences stand out. Like a good cartoonist—except unintentionally—the standardized church picks up distinguishing features, emphasizes them, and highlights them for everyone to see. Some social scientists reject cultural explanations because they side-step analytical exploration. Things cannot be what they are just because they are that way. Whatever the reason, however, distinguishing traits exist among cultures and among culturally-separated Mormons who live according to a standardized, prescribed lifestyle.

These types of differences highlight cultural distinctions which may never be eliminated from the church, even if this were desirable. Interestingly, members often fail to see such traits as “differences,” contending that far from the offspring of diversity, they are part and parcel of the church and gospel. The (American) choir director fumed over being told she could not sing “What Child Is This?” and marched into her South African bishop’s office to protest. The bishop, I understand, was deeply offended that she, or anyone else, would question church authority. On another occasion our bishop personally demonstrated martial arts techniques to Relief Society sisters. Though merely an assumption, I would bet money that a Finnish bishop would take an “unrepentant” priesthood leader who carried his pistol into church to a church disciplinary council. Our Cambridge 2nd Ward Relief Society discussions over whether the Holy Ghost was a woman would be grounds for apostasy in Pretoria, and totally laughable in Italy.

The tendency to assign ecclesiastical authority to cultural “peculiarities” is probably most prevalent among Americans, for the missionaries spreading the gospel worldwide are mainly young Americans. Members outside the United States have long ago been sensitized to this problem, and many tolerantly smile at what they consider Americanisms. They do not have to sing “For the Strength of the Hills” or “They, the Builders of our Nation,” even if such hymns could be found in their hymnals. In Italy everyone, especially the youth, hug and kiss friends, including the opposite sex, upon arriving for sacrament meeting. We never saw this in Springfield, Virginia. On the other hand, American Mormons have no problem with witches and ghosts in a Halloween party in the chapel. When the American branch president organized a Halloween party in Athens—in full costume—many Greeks and other nationalities were shocked until they caught on to the “American spirit” of the occasion. (Some investigators never did grasp the “spirit.”)

Americanisms are not necessarily negative. In fact, I believe that many cultures would do (and have done) well to adopt some of them. We see this every time we travel back to the U.S. to visit my family in Idaho. There, as in many American wards, we have found warm people whose

kindness to strangers stands as an example to everyone. A number of years ago my wife and I moved from Finland back to Orem, Utah, as poor students. Two months later, when my wife brought our newborn twins home from the hospital, ward members, some of whom we had never before met, flooded our house with new and used clothes. That was American, and my Finnish-born wife has never forgotten it.

There are even relatively "fundamental beliefs and practices" which fall out as Americanisms in our Big Mac analysis. For example, American members tend to equate nudity with immorality. Many Europeans do not. Finns, for example, frequent their saunas as a family, in the buff, until their children are old. Church groups have sauna activities which, while not mixed, are nonetheless naked. We once had an Elders' quorum sauna at our home in Finland, and there we were, priesthood brethren, standing around in only our God-givens, laughing, joking, and talking about gospel topics. I never suggested a sauna party in the BYU 44th Ward.

The American church attitude toward political systems is another practice/belief which is more American than not. In the 1960s and 1970s, when many Mormons (particularly in the West) questioned whether you could be both a Democrat and a Mormon, Mormons in parts of Europe were openly socialist (or communist). Elder Ezra Taft Benson's anti-communist sermons were not common fare among such European folk. In long discussions with members who said they were socialists, referring to the statements of church leaders was not an acceptable reference to authority. (Times have changed a lot in Europe since then, and not just for Mormons.)

But it was not just one's political affiliation. The American concept of active (or at least morally active) support for the political process was foreign to many Europeans. As a priesthood instructor in the Milan-West Branch, I once tried to teach a lesson on political responsibility. Five minutes into the manual, the lesson crashed in flames. Italians could not even begin to identify with the concept of political participation and responsibility. "I can't vote communist. The governing party is totally corrupt. So I vote socialist, but they command less than 10 percent of the vote. So where does that leave me?" one brother bellowed. A few years later, by coincidence, I was again visiting the by-now Milan-West *Ward* only to find that the lesson series had made a full rotation, and an Italian instructor was embarking on the same lesson. He made it no farther than I. The same lesson come up in Greece in our branch of a myriad of nationalities, where it fared little better there than in Italy.

INNOCENCE AND SPONTANEITY

Standardization has its obvious benefits: it preserves the integrity of

the program and assures compliance to gospel and church basics, as defined by the center. It makes governing a rapidly growing, international church easier. Conformity is enhanced. And it supposedly prevents having to make too many decisions like Solomon's.

But we found in the not yet fully standardized churches of mid-1970s Italy and early 1990s Greece a freshness and spontaneity we had never experienced before. Members, in their innocence, cared little, or knew little, about the details of Mormon constructs and procedures. Instead, they simply worked hard to employ basics such as love in the best way they understood. Perhaps the most inspiring testimony meeting I ever attended was in Milan. A home teacher stood to tell how he had worked with a young man, a drug user. Next, the boy rose and went to the front in tears. Then a friend, a young woman, joined him, and they both bore their testimonies. That was followed by two other young people who bore testimonies arm in arm, gathering strength from each other. The meeting continued in a totally unorthodox display of emotion and love that would rarely happen in more standardized settings (and might not even happen in Italy today).

In Athens the two counselors in the branch presidency, one from Sri Lanka and the other from Morocco, never wore jackets to church, and not always ties. No one seemed to notice, for their warm spirits said something more meaningful than their attire. I envision that these simple, unaffected traits, which we have seen in infant branches and missions, may be more in tune with what we might have found in the Colesville Branch or the Kirtland congregation in Joseph Smith's day. Bureaucracy has its price.

CULTURAL SIMILARITIES AND THE GOSPEL WE SHARE

Cross-cultural similarities also tell something of the gospel we share. For example, as a Mormon State Department/Foreign Service family—and there aren't many Mormons in the State Department—we found our transition pains eased, and our lives enriched, as we moved into completely new places to find a group of caring “family members” ready to adopt us into our new ward or branch. This assimilation process varied somewhat from place to place, but it happened. And it contrasted significantly with the experience of many of my embassy colleagues. For us, the church provided ready friends, support mechanisms, and deep, spiritually-based interpersonal relationships. If my professional colleagues ever found these structures, it was long after we did. I remember in Milan how the consul general asked me, as a new vice-consul, if I had ever been in a “working family's” home. One of our friends from the branch was a truck driver and former union activist. The consul general was amazed as

I described our experiences with these dear, refined, sophisticated friends. He had been only once to a “working class” home in Milan—his diver’s.

This “family structure” we have found to be spontaneous and universal. No one successfully preaches it over the pulpit. It is a feature which, in my view, characterizes the way in which the gospel pulls people together in the church organization. This inward orientation is also something which may estrange outsiders, who sense being left out of the exclusiveness which permeates Mormon organization.

DIVERSITY ON THE EDGES OF STANDARDIZATION

There are other similarities which emanate naturally from the gospel as outgrowths of the teachings and the spirit the gospel promulgates. But the differences in a church of enforced standardization tell us whether our currency is over- or undervalued.

Whichever way that is, it requires from central church leadership tolerance, patience, and sensitivity, qualities which many central authorities have generally adopted in the internationalization process. While abroad, I have seen little inclination on the church’s part to alter the standardization process to allow for cultural differences. However, when these differences surface on the edge, there has often been a full allowance for the manifestation of differences in the standardization process itself—sometimes even more than I personally would have allowed. In virtually every country in which we have lived, I have more often seen mission presidents or general authorities turn a blind eye to diversity than I have seen local leaders tolerate individuality among their own members. For whatever reason, it appears to be easier for church leaders to tolerate diversity among peoples than individuality among personalities.

Just as McDonald’s cannot do anything about exchange rates, the church finds itself powerless to alter the arena in which cultural identities meet. Indeed, as we are seeing throughout Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and particularly the remnants of Yugoslavia, ethnic diversity runs deep in the souls of all people. Perhaps when the objective is to provide a standardized product to a multicultural audience, turning that blind eye is the only strategy that will succeed.