

Place, Time, and Family in Mormonism

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CHRISTIANITY CLAIMS TO BE A UNIVERSAL RELIGION, but in its origins and development it is also a Mediterranean religion, a religion which began among the Jews of Israel at the joining point of the great civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Southern Europe. It then spread throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, to Ethiopia, and in a minor way to the further reaches of South and Central Asia. After the rise of Islam, Christianity became largely confined to Europe, and only escaped the Islamic trap to reach other continents in the fifteenth and subsequent centuries, with the great sea voyages first of the Portuguese and the Spaniards, and later of the British and French, all of whom were in different ways missionary peoples.

Christianity remained in many respects Mediterranean, as can be seen from the Mediterranean foods, bread and wine, which are still at the heart of the communion service, its central ceremony. In one sense this is inevitable, for only bread—a coherent, created, well-shaped object—could represent the body of Christ. The symbolism would be destroyed if, say, a church in Inverness were to substitute the formless mess of the Scotsman's oatmeal porridge for bread in the eternal ceremony. Nonetheless, in Scotland as in Ghana, the use of bread in church—and by extension in the everyday lives of the genteel middle classes—is a mark of Christianity's Mediterranean imperialism, such that its universal truths are still clad in the particular forms of its originating peoples. The modern white, sliced wheaten loaf of the West is a tasteless, nutritionless, costive pap (there must be an irony in the phrase "the best thing since sliced bread") which paternalistic governments seek to rescue with additives,

but it is still the dignified descendant of the bread of the Passover, the bread of the Last Supper, the bread broken and eaten in memory of Christ, the bread of "Give us this day our daily bread," which has become a secular symbol in the slogans of both the liberal free trader and the Bolshevik agitator. Yet it is the original food of only one segment of the peoples of the earth and is alien to the rice of Korea or the potatoes of Peru. It must have seemed strange when it first came as a holy food to the Americas or the Far East, or even to Northern Europe, as the materialization or at least the symbol of God, the sacred in a foreign form.

The late arrival of the message of Christ in countries distant from the Mediterranean, whether Iceland or China, created a problem for new converts whose rebirth as Christians cuts them off from their ancestors. As Christians they were saved by the sacraments and (or) by their faith and the establishing of a personal relationship with Christ. However, their ancestors were excluded from this, and in a country where recent ancestors are loved and distant ones revered, this is a serious severance. Those ancestors who died between the harrowing of hell by Jesus and the time of their descendants' conversion have nowhere to go; no restoration of recent valued family ties is possible, and the converts' lineage is snapped into pre- and post-Christian.

Such an arrangement seems unjust. Why should the Christian message have been rushed to the Romans, Colossians, Corinthians, Ephesians, Hebrews, Thessalonians, and Galatians, but leave the native peoples of America benighted until the arrival nearly fifteen hundred years later of Columbus, and hence, Las Casas? Was the Gospel message so unimportant that it could be withheld for a millennium-and-a-half while many generations of Amerindians went to Hell or to share Limbo with squalling, unbaptised children? Most mainstream Christians see this as a peripheral issue, for Christianity is not a religion of family values or ancestor worship. However, this is not how it was seen by Joseph Smith, who founded his church in one of these formerly peripheral areas and solved the geographical problem with new mythologies and new and extra teachings to be added to those of the Bible.

THE BOOK OF MORMON AS A SOLUTION TO THE GEOGRAPHICAL PROBLEM

In doing so, Joseph Smith was merely extending a principle central to Protestantism since the time of the Reformation. As it had spread throughout Europe and Latin America, the Roman Catholic Church had incorporated many local shrines and wells and holy places, and turned local godlings into saints. However, papal policy was always to concentrate power at the centre in Rome, and thus the Mediterranean flavor of this Latin-speaking church remained. With the Reformation, each nation of Northern Europe broke away from the Roman Catholic Church to

form its own church—Lutheran, Reformed, or Anglican. The dominance of the Mediterranean was broken, and churches which matched the new nation-states' strengthening sense of collective identity were created. There were now new English, Dutch, Danish, Scottish churches, each with its own myth of faith and nation, and with confidence in its own particular mission and destiny. This was the essence of the first stage of the Reformation: new, purely national churches for the northern part of Europe, which later—with national and Protestant expansion by sea—created daughter churches all over the world, from Greenland's icy mountains to Kerala, from Tasmania to Curacao.

In each case, new and distinctively national Christian traditions were eventually created as with, say, the religious traditions of Grundvig or Whitefield, but there were no local prophets, no new messiahs, and no new and inspired scriptures. The emphasis of these waves of Protestantism was on the Bible and nothing but the Bible, on the early primitive—even apostolic—church, and on the inspiration provided by the struggles and suffering of the Jewish people of the Old Testament for those who sought to create a new Jerusalem and a new Zion, not something new altogether. In each case, what was created was a particular national idiom rooted in one aspect of the Bible, as with the largely Anglican national and militant Lord's Day Observance Society's legally enforced Sabbatarianism, which shocked foreigners but shaped British identity.

In America in the nineteenth century there was a second wave (or fourth, if we call Nonconformity and then Methodism the second and third waves) of Protestantism in which, appropriately in the self-styled first new nation, new kinds of denominations arose with new prophets such as Ellen White and Mary Baker Eddy, and with new post-Biblical inspired writings of their own. These religious movements—rooted in the American belief in innovation, progress, and destiny—were as radical and as important as anything that has been seen in the latter part of the twentieth century. The most important of them was Mormonism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The great inspiration of Joseph Smith written down on gold plates resolved the paradox of the transatlantic isolation of the Americas and the consequent ignorance of the Christian message by its peoples. The Book of Mormon *solved the geographical problem*. It provided America with its very own scriptures, sense of Divine concern, presence of Christ, and sacred history in a language reminiscent of the authorized English translation of the Bible. Settlers and Indians alike now had an inspired new scripture which spoke to them in their distinctive New World setting, an entire ocean apart from the Christian heartland. The recent rapid growth of Mormonism has largely taken place in the Western Hemisphere where it offers a special status to those who live there. Mormonism has had a similar impact in what were once the equally remote and newly discovered islands of Polynesia, from Hawaii to the

Maoris of New Zealand, where the Mormons have made many converts. The New Testament departs from the Old Testament in telling us that God cares for each of us as an individual whether Jew or Gentile; Mormonism is the new inheritance of the unchosen peoples, so that all are included. But if all are included, what happens to those too remote to be reached? Do they remain neglected? The Book of Mormon, a book of special geographical provision, provided a solution.

The location of the Mormon scriptures in the New World is not a disadvantage for attempts to gain converts in the Old World; these peoples have some kind of link to the lands of the Bible anyway. The traditional Mormon doctrine that Mormons have a direct connection with biblical Israel through lineage has been criticized recently as a potential hindrance to the current attempts to export Mormonism outside the Western Hemisphere. Yet it is difficult to see why this should be more of a problem than that inherent in all forms of Christianity, which ask their members to identify with events that took place in, and peoples who inhabited, one small part of the world a very long time ago. Surely it is easier to identify with these if the people were your ancestors, or if the events involved your ancestors?

The Mormons had no sooner established themselves in the United States than they sought converts in Europe, beginning in Liverpool and London, because that was where the ships from the United States arrived. During the nineteenth century a steady stream of converts, especially female converts, left Europe for Utah to practise a new religion in a new country. Mormon converts were portrayed by the Mormons' enemies as naive and innocent young girls who had been brainwashed into a new foreign sect which destined them to become the polygamous wives of alien Americans.

MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND BELIEFS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE IN HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY

Family matters were then, from the start, one key source of tension between Mormons on the one hand and mainstream Christians on the other. In order to understand this, it is perhaps best to examine first the ways in which the original Christian ideas on marriage and the family differed from those of other religions. Historically, Christianity was odd in a way that does not directly reflect its geographical origins, namely, in its peculiar attitudes to marriage and the family.

First there was the exaltation of celibacy and sexual asceticism above marriage (Matt. 19:12), which today is especially found in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The exclusively male leaders of both churches, the order of bishops, have, in theory at least, long been expected to refrain from all contact with women, and in the Or-

thodox church are recruited exclusively from the monks. Orthodox priests are allowed to marry rather than to burn with lust (I Cor. 7:9), though only once. Since the thirteenth century, Roman Catholic priests (as well as bishops and monks) have been required to be chaste and celibate. It is the highest and most virtuous way of life for a majority of Christians, in marked contrast to the view of mainstream Muslims and Jews, all of whose adherents—including their religious teachers and scholars—are expected to marry. Judaism has long had a reverent attitude to (an admittedly highly controlled) sex within marriage, with intercourse on the eve of the Sabbath being especially meritorious. The sexless hermits and monastic orders so important in Christian history are peculiar, possibly derived from the traditions of the ascetic Essenes (an exceedingly odd Jewish sect) or from the Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions of South Asia. Yet for many Buddhists a spell as a monk is but a stage in life before marriage and family, and for Hindus the core of the life-course is spent as a caste-bound householder, with only elderly male *sanyasis*—who have dropped out of society—and the members of unstable heterodox sects living an ascetic life, or one apart from their families. Outside Christianity there is nothing to compare with the powerful celibate bishops, priests, and members of highly organized religious orders so respected by the subservient faithful. Only among Christians do celibates rule and enjoy power as well as spiritual prestige. It is an outgrowth of an imperative first seen in the New Testament, which tells the believer to place religious duty above the demands of family and kinship (Matt. 19:10-12; I Cor. 7:32-40), not simply as a means of abandoning attachment to gain enlightenment, but also as a way of life in the community. This way of life later became the ideal and the duty for a bishop in his diocese, a priest in his parish, or a preaching friar. At times (for example, in Spain in the seventeenth century) as much as a tenth of the population must have led a committed celibate existence. Family and family values did not lie at the center of Christian life, however strong they might have been (and upheld by the local church) in many Christian countries.

The second peculiarity of Christianity, indeed something unique to that religion historically, was that it combined strict monogamy with a ban on divorce under any circumstances (I Cor. 7:10). All other world religions at the time allowed polygamy and/or divorce, particularly if the first marriage had not produced a child, and thus a new extension of an old lineage and perhaps a necessary heir. We can see other such limits to the multiplication of marriages in Christianity in the inability of an Orthodox priest to remarry if his wife dies (this is not to bind him to his deceased spouse, but rather as a mark of ascetic piety), and in the inability of an Orthodox lay person to marry more than three times

when thrice-widowed. It was an unwelcome ban to heirless Byzantine emperors with three deceased wives who needed a fourth wife to produce an heir and thus ensure dynastic continuity. For Christianity, marriage was traditionally a limited concession to human weakness for those who lacked the gift of continence and to prevent them burning with lust. It was a concession whose limits could not be extended in the interests either of personal fulfillment or of the needs of a dynasty or lineage; neither a desire for sex nor social pressures for procreation could, in theory at least, prevail over strict Christian monogamy and the Christian doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage. In regard to sex, marriage and the family, Christianity was the odd one out when compared to other religions.

There is a third oddity about Christianity in regard to marriage and the family that stems from the way it tried to resolve a paradox that must have been problematic for most religions. Christianity stresses the full survival of the individual personality after death, including the resurrection of the body, yet it denies there will be any marriage or sexuality in the afterlife. There will be no marrying nor giving in marriage in heaven (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25).

The Sadducees of the New Testament, who unlike the Pharisees did not believe in personal immortality, understood the problem with bodily resurrection, and it is difficult to see why they allowed themselves to be silenced by Jesus. The relevant text reads in full:

The same day the Sadducees came to him, maintaining that there is no resurrection. Their question was this: "Master, Moses said, 'If a man should die childless, his brother shall marry the widow and carry on his brother's family.' Now we know of seven brothers. The first married and died, and as he was without issue his wife was left to his brother. The same thing happened with the second, and the third, and so on with all seven. Last of all the woman died. At the resurrection, then, whose wife will she be, for they had all married her?" Jesus answered: "You are mistaken, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. At the resurrection men and women do not marry; they are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:23-30).

It is fair enough to declare the impossibility of the connection of spiritual bodies in this way (see I Cor. 15: 42-54), but Christ does not fully answer the Sadducees' objection. Leaving sex aside, with which of the men would the wife have been associated?

The annihilation of the body and of the personality for those who believe in reincarnation or in nirvana circumvents this problem, while at the same time offering no kind of coherent continuity in the afterlife whatsoever. A female sweeper who dies and becomes a male Brahmin, or a deer or a black beetle or a Frenchwoman, in the next life is so transmo-

grified as to have suffered total extinction. The apparent revival of such dead souls by the fraudulent practitioners of regression therapy, along with never-happened sex abuse and abduction by little green Martians, only confirms that reincarnation means extinction: no resurrection of the body, no afterlife.

The problem Jesus did not discuss is that the annihilation of time combined with bodily resurrection creates incompatible minglings in the afterlife of relatives who either knew each other at different stages of their previous lives, as with sequential spouses, or those who belonged to very different generations. How can a person be reunited with his or her parents when they are reunited with theirs, and they with theirs, and they with theirs, unto the umpteenth generation, when the ancestors of all who are alive today blend together?

There is a further problem facing virtuous heaven-bound Christians who hope to be reunited after death with previously deceased and much loved relatives: Those relatives may be in Hell. From medieval times there have been tales told of those who abandoned their longing for the deceased once they had received a vision saying he or she was in Hell due to a lack of faith, or good works, or simply from being one of God's capriciously meant-to-be-broken pots, those without wedding clothes excluded from the elect to which their kin belonged. The official view seems to have been that one should not even sympathise with the plight of a dead and damned parent or spouse, for that would be to question the will of God. Indeed, part of the joy of being in Heaven was said to reside in one's duty to rejoice when the sufferings of those in Hell were displayed to those safely in paradise, presumably including the pain of their more sinful loved ones. Hell meant permanent separation from damned kin, and this knowledge must have been especially distressing for those converted to Christianity, but with unbaptised, unbelieving relatives.

The Christian view of salvation, then, is essentially personal and individualistic, and the pilgrim's progress toward it may involve the conscious abandoning of all ties with the closest of relatives. At the core of Christianity lie non-family values. This tension and opposition between the demands of religion and those of family have existed for Christianity since its early days as a New Religious Movement, whose members were told: "You must not think that I (Jesus) have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a son's wife against her mother-in-law; and a man will find his enemies under his own roof. No man is worthy of me who cares more for father or mother than for me; no man is worthy of me who cares more for son or daughter" (Matt. 10:34-38).

It is easy to see why a large portion of a people as devoted to family, kinship, and lineage as the Jews would find such a message upsetting in exactly the same sense as the family of St. Thomas Aquinas, who lost him to religion, or the families of modern "cult-victims," who have hired kidnappers and de-programms to get their children back. Christian individualism must also be an obstacle to the spread of Christianity in countries with a strong tradition of ancestor worship. What is to become of the shrines and tablets of unbaptised ancestors if one converts? Are all ties to be severed?

MORMON SOLUTIONS TO HISTORIC CHRISTIAN PROBLEMS

Mormonism is a derivation from Christianity which seeks to solve these problems by putting the family and family values back at the very center of religion. Mormons are expected to marry, and sex within marriage is exalted. Celibacy is deviant. Even the now-abandoned practice of polygamy could be seen as a way of making marriage universal. It was this practice which most horrified other nineteenth-century Christians about Mormonism, but their horror is significant not so much for what it tells us about the then-contemporary Mormon practice, but for what it tells us about other Christians for whom it was and is *the* great taboo. Jews living in Christian (though not Muslim) countries were in effect forced to abandon the polygamous tradition of the Old Testament lest it become one more excuse for the exercise of vicious anti-Semitism. Muslims settling in Britain can bring plural wives into the country and the marriages are legal, but Muslims already living in Britain cannot have more than one wife. American immigration laws at one time specifically excluded polygamists. Even those liberals who look benignly on homosexual marriages or female-headed households of illegitimate children can be violently prejudiced against polygamy. The proponents of Christian and of liberal ethical colonialism are still trying to export this particular fixed assumption to countries with differing religions and family traditions. It is this that explains the furious Christian persecution of Mormon polygamy in America, which in the end forced mainstream Mormons to abandon it so that there are now only a few breakaway fundamentalist Mormons who practise closet polygamy, and they are still liable to arrest and imprisonment. In an America characterised by very high divorce and illegitimacy rates, promiscuous slums and in some places perverse suburbs, only the strictly moral, code-bound breakaway Mormon schismatics are persecuted.

A belief in the moral validity of polygamy might have become a useful selling point in the nineteenth century, had the Mormons sent missionaries to societies in which polygamy was the norm. However, the practice of polygamy was such an affront to the moral sensibilities of

mainstream Christians that it created insuperable problems of social rejection and political and legal persecution for the Mormon church. It has been hypothesized that a denomination will flourish best if its practices are sufficiently distinctive to give it secure boundaries and a definite identity, but do not impose massive social and other costs on the membership. The cost of polygamy was simply too great.

The increased emphasis on strict adherence to the rules of the Word of Wisdom after the demise of polygamy provided a new means of establishing a distinct identity and boundaries through visible everyday behaviour which did not result in major conflicts. The abstention from alcohol and tobacco also reinforces family life and is an important selling point for those leading a precarious, newly-urban existence in, say, Latin America, who need to break away from the macho culture of the bar, a culture of drinking, smoking, high caffeine consumption, or gambling and whoring. The Mormon patriarchal family and the Word of Wisdom act together to rescue erring—and potentially erring—husbands from this environment, and to concentrate their attention, efforts, and economic resources on their families. Not least among Mormonism's future appeal as a potential world religion are the benefits it offers to women in urbanising and developing countries. Male respectability is of far more help to these women than an ERA.

Far less notice has been taken by outsiders of the Mormons' celestial monogamy. A Mormon sealed marriage is not "till death do us part," but rather for all eternity, with the couple reunited in Heaven after their death. The Mormons' explicit doctrine that the conjugal family survives death as a unit solves a problem Christians do not wish to face (it is better left as a mystery; trust and obey), but the problem has re-occurred in other ways. In the past at least, if a spouse died and the survivor remarried, the second marriage might not have been sealed or celestial, and this was at times a source of concern to both husband and wife in a second and happy marriage, who worried they might be forced to return to their old partners in Heaven. Once again the annihilation of time but not of the body created fears of arbitrary Divine separation. There are dangers as well as benefits in trying to discern God's design for the afterlife.

Lineages, though, are preserved, for Mormons not only baptise their progeny but also their ancestors, and for this purpose the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has collected and computerized the largest collection of genealogical records in the world. The efficacy of the baptism of the dead is a fundamental Mormon doctrine, and such baptisms have been carried out using a living proxy since the founder Joseph Smith first announced the doctrine in 1840. The living and the dead are linked in a sacred and organic covenant. Smith wrote:

For we without them (those who have died) cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. . . . [I]t is necessary. . . . that a whole and complete and perfect union and welding together of dispensations and keys and powers and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam to the present time (D&C 128:17-18).

O death, where is thy sting, O time, thy victory? Baptism of the dead, which draws on an earlier ultra-Protestant sectarian tradition, is a doctrinal version of the heterodox but widespread nineteenth-century spiritualism which comforted familistic Victorian Protestants seeking reunion with lost relatives. Mormons thus center their religion on a cosmic web of family connections stretching backwards and forwards throughout all eternity. Salvation became a matter of kinship, ancestry, and descent. Elijah, the prophet who never died (he went directly to Heaven), had returned "to reconcile fathers to sons and sons to fathers" (Mal. 4:6).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

These distinctive perceptions of the importance of marriage, family, kinship, and lineage give Mormonism the potential to be a new world religion. In much of the world, individuals live not as isolated selves but in close relationships with spouses, parents, and children, and indeed these relationships are extended more broadly to cover wider kin, as well as vertically to embrace ancestors. Mormonism provides a version of Christianity whose precepts concerning sacred and eternal families must be more congenial to such peoples than are traditional Christian ideals of priestly celibacy (a practice not honoured in Latin America or Africa), or a highly individualistic view of salvation which ensures those saved by faith, chosen for the elect, or buoyed up by good works, an entry to a lonely heaven where one's ancestors and one's unconverted relatives will be missing. Better to join the Mormons where the family center holds and things do not fall apart.

Mormonism is set to become a new world religion because it reaches parts other religions cannot reach. By transcending place, it has an appeal to those beyond the Mediterranean world, beyond Europe, and beyond the Old World, whether their ancestors were natives or settlers. The Book of Mormon is a sign that God has not left them and their homelands neglected on the earth's periphery. By emphasizing eternal sacred families, Mormonism offers both the preservation of existing strong patterns of family, kin, and lineage in the afterlife, as well as the healing in this life of disrupted families pulled apart by new patterns of urbanization. The New World's religion may well become a new world religion. It is hardly surprising to find it growing faster than its rivals.