

“An American Enterprise”: An Interview with Massimo Introvigne

Note: Massimo Introvigne, a Roman Catholic sociologist of religion, is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), a scholarly organisation that studies New Religious Movements (NRMs). Ronan James Head conducted this interview during the European Mormon Studies Association conference in Turin, Italy, in July 2009. Transcription by Rebecca Head.

Ronan: How did you become interested in New Religious Movements?

Massimo: I am from a Roman Catholic background but started being interested in other religions at a very early age. I think it was by reading novels from authors like Emilio Salgari who talked about the Middle East and Far East. He wrote a couple of Western novels, but most were in Hindu or Muslim settings. Also Kipling. Of course, I now realize that neither of these authors can be taken as good guides about the real East; but at the age of about seven or eight, I didn't understand that they were not reliable sources.

Ronan: Was it unusual for a Catholic Italian to have an interest in other religions at that age?

Massimo: Of course, it wasn't unusual to read the novels of Salgari but what was not so usual was to try to graduate from novels to other sources. At age nine, I started buying weekly installments of an encyclopaedia of world religions by a famous publisher called Rizzoli. It went to six thick volumes. Of course, when I re-read the encyclopaedia now, it seems very primitive. It was published in 1964 when I was nine years old and that was the first time I heard about the Mormons. There was not even a Mormon mission here until '66, but the encyclopedia had a section on Mormons. So I



Massimo Introvigne, standing in the CESNUR library, holds a copy of the first (1966) issue of Dialogue. Photo taken by Ronan J. Head, July 2009, Turin, Italy.

started reading at age nine about Joseph Smith and the temple ceremonies. I remember I was quite impressed.

Ronan: What about your education?

Massimo: I went to study philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome—a Vatican university—then law at the University of Turin. My dissertation—later a book—was on John Rawls, the first written in Italian. That was part of my interest in American society and religion.

Ronan: How did CESNUR come about?

Massimo: In 1987 I met Mike Homer of the Mormon History Association (MHA) at its conference in Oxford. I had heard about the MHA when visiting Salt Lake several years earlier. I think the first time I came to Salt Lake was in the early '80s. I was on my own. I had no contacts with the Italian LDS Church and no contacts with anybody, so I went to visit a member of the local Catholic diocese in Salt Lake, Francis Mannion. He gave me some materials about the MHA. I noticed that it was doing a conference in Europe so I attended with a friend of mine who also shared my interests in minority religions, a Swiss historian called Jean-François Mayer. We both met Mike Homer there. When we thought of new religions, we had in mind the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses as a field of study. I think CESNUR was really me and Mayer in the beginning, then Mike came along, plus Gordon Melton, now at UC Santa Barbara, then Eileen Barker from the London School of Economics. They were all people we had met at Oxford.

Ronan: Did INFORM [Information Network Focus on Religious Movements] exist at this time?

Massimo: It was established the same year in the United Kingdom. It wanted to liaise with families who had lost kids to the Children of God or the Moonies. We wanted to publish books and do conferences, so our purpose was slightly different. Even when we answered phone calls, once we had an office, it was not our main purpose. INFORM has a small library and publishes information sheets. CESNUR has published fifty books in Italian and has a library of 50,000 volumes so it's a different thing. It's much more research-oriented and less family-oriented, even if in practice we sometimes end up doing the same things.

Ronan: You said that from the beginning you were interested in Mormonism. Is there anything particularly that intrigues you about Mormonism?

Massimo: I think it's more intriguing than, say, the Jehovah's Witnesses whose story is not very sexy, even if there are many more Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy than Mormons. But the Jehovah's Witness story is very plain. The Witnesses didn't pick bloody fights or colonize new states. Their story is just one of a successful preacher who had unconventional ideas and whose successor became a successful bureaucrat, developing a worldwide religious organisation. In the history of Jehovah's Witnesses, the most interesting things happen in Europe with the Nazi persecution, but otherwise the story's very plain. Also the doctrines are less original and offer a less peculiar point of view.

Ronan: So Mormonism is sexier?

Massimo: Of course! Polygamy or the Haun's Mill massacre or the colonization of Utah. You don't find this stuff in the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Ronan: Who else interests you?

Massimo: Coming from a background in philosophy in addition to law and sociology, I was quite interested in Christian Science. Christian Science was exciting from a speculative point of view because I was always interested in how Mary Baker Eddy wrote without any professional philosophical background. She basically produced an Americanized version of Hegel. For her followers, she was just a genius. She didn't read or have revelations from God. It's quite amazing that she produced an impressive if idiosyncratic philosophical system. So speculatively, Mary Baker Eddy is quite interesting.

Ronan: You've mentioned Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Christian Scientists. Why do you think these groups tend to be American?

Massimo: There were new religions born in Europe that traveled the other way, like the Swedenborgians. They were also a very interesting group; but the American groups became a worldwide affair basically after World War II because they traveled with the American armies. I mean, they existed before—Mormons existed

in Europe before—but in Italy, the American groups had a boom after World War II.

Ronan: You're also interested in vampires and Pentecostals. Any connection?

Massimo: Yes! Harvey Cox became a friend of mine because of both Pentecostals and vampires. He's a Baptist theologian from Harvard. Cox invited me to deliver one of the famous Templeton lectures on the existence of God, and my title was "God, New Religious Movements, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Anyway, as Cox documented in his book, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), I noted that the Pentecostals are half a billion strong and so deserve some investigation, but they are seldom investigated because they are less sexy than neo-pagan witches. I think it was Rodney Stark who said that if there are fifteen witches dancing around a cauldron, preferably naked, there will probably be a hundred sociologists observing them, but if there are fifty million Jehovah's Witnesses nobody will want to write a book about them. This is changing for the Pentecostals. There are half a billion of them, and there is now a Centre for Pentecostal Studies that is similar to the Mormon History Association. Within the Pentecostal community are second- and third-generation scholars. They used to be very simple folks, a religion of the poor, so they didn't produce scholars. Now, just as they produce entrepreneurs or cabinet ministers in the United States or candidates to the office of U.S. vice president, they also produce academic scholars. So things are changing in terms of Pentecostals.

Ronan: How do you rate in-house Mormon scholarship, and do you have any Mormon scholars that you particularly like?

Massimo: When I started studying new religions, I met Leonard Arrington who was once, of course, a visiting professor at the University of Turin—but that was when I was one year old so I didn't meet him at the time! Arrington impressed me as a very good scholar and a very good Mormon.

Ronan: Do you think Mormonism has anything to contribute to religious studies in general?

Massimo: I think so. I think people need to look at the phenomenon of Mormonism because, even if it is not growing as the Church claims, it still *is* growing. It is still an example of a religion which has grown in remarkable ways.

Ronan: Will people become more or less accepting of New Religious Movements in Europe?

Massimo: It all depends on where in Europe we're talking about. The anti-cult movement is still strong in France because of peculiar French principles on secularism. The anti-cult movement is also strong in Russia because it is fueled by the Russian Orthodox Church. They are worried that Russian identity is being threatened by Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and Catholics and Muslims. Belgium is also anti-NRM—at least in the French-speaking part. Some laws are torpedoed because the Dutch-speaking members of the parliament vote against "anti-cult" proposals. There may be problems in France and Belgium but it's nothing like the problems of religious liberty that groups like the Mormons might experience in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Those problems are much worse.

Ronan: And Italy?

Massimo: Nobody complained when the LDS Church announced that it would construct a temple in Rome. Italy may have a problem with some groups like the Moonies or Children of God. In Italy Scientology was legally recognised as a religion—unlike France or Germany—in '97 after a long legal fight. The Mormons have no trouble whatsoever that I know of. There are a few anti-Mormon books written by Evangelicals or some Catholic activists, but these books don't sell very well.

Ronan: In terms of the relative lack of LDS growth in Italy, is it something specific about Mormonism, or is it religion in general, or NRMs in particular?

Massimo: A poll of Italians after World War II showed that they were ready to experience something different from the Roman Catholic Church. The Mormons made a big mistake by not coming immediately. Those were golden years for making numbers in the tens of thousands, and that's what the Pentecostals, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh-day Adventists did. The Mor-

mons in those golden post-war years simply weren't here. So when they finally came in the mid-1960s, some of the people who might have converted had already converted to other American religions. The young generation after 1968 was mostly Marxist or interested in Eastern religions like hippie-style Hare Krishnas. They were more interested in talking to Americans about Vietnam. In the 1950s, everyone was pro-American. In the 1970s, everyone was anti-American because of the Vietnam War and the student protests in '68. The best time to establish a missionary stronghold in Italy was the late '50s to early '60s, and the Mormons missed this opportunity. The Mormons, for whatever reason, were very slow in recognizing Italy as a great religious market.

People like the Jehovah's Witnesses had the advantage of returnees from America. Italian returnees came from either Chicago or the East Coast, neither of which is a Mormon stronghold. So in many Italian villages, Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Halls or Pentecostal churches were started by Italian-Americans who had converted in the United States, then returned home. They returned with prestige and with money they had made in America. But they weren't returning from Utah and Arizona. They were returning from New York, Boston, and Chicago.

Ronan: So you think the Mormons made a mistake in coming too late to Italy?

Massimo: Yes. Mormons could have been part of the last big wave of conversions right after the war using the American army, but they didn't do this. They should have planned this back in the late '40s and '50s, but they didn't. The Mormon authorities were too concerned with the reaction of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church produced a few booklets against the Mormons in the late '60s, but it didn't react in any major way and not in any legal way. Most of the anti-Mormon stuff is published by Evangelicals who are only 1 percent of the Italian population. They feel more strongly against the Mormons than the Catholics do.

In 2006 when the Mormons celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the mission in Turin, I was asked to speak, as was the state's Member of Parliament. He is a very strong Catholic, but he didn't have any problem with the Mormons. Some priests may write anti-Mormon books, but that's very unimportant. One fac-

tor is the Catholic Church in Utah. It always reports to the Vatican of having an excellent relationship with the LDS Church. Prop 8 has also won Catholic admiration. As I said, when the temple was announced in Rome, I don't know of any Catholic media who said anything against it. Some Evangelicals did protest but they don't count as they're a very small minority. They're not as important as they may be in the United States.

Ronan: What is the future of Mormonism in Europe?

Massimo: I think it all depends. I don't see Mormons making inroads into European culture in the ways that Pentecostals are doing. There are leaders in business and academia who are third- and fourth-generation Pentecostals. You don't see this yet in Italy for the Mormons.

Ronan: The problem is visibility?

Massimo: The LDS leadership is still perceived as being American. Among the Pentecostals, some of the world leaders are from Latin America, although not yet from Europe. The Pentecostals give a better impression of being an international organization. Even the Jehovah's Witnesses have a more diverse leadership. The Catholic Church in the last fifty years did a great job in internationalizing the top leadership. Now, the majority of the equivalent of cabinet ministers in the Vatican are not Italian. The head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is an American from California. The two last popes have not been Italian, and many heads of the departments are not Italian, so the Catholic Church may accurately advertise itself as an international enterprise.

This is not really yet the case for Mormons. They can't pass as anything other than an American enterprise for some time. But I think this is less important than having third- and fourth-generation members who are perceived as leaders. Even the Buddhists in Italy have soccer stars and actors. I guess it's trendier to be a Buddhist. Mormons have failed to produce people in leadership in general society—though this is not true in the United States, of course. That counts for not qualifying as mainline—not having leaders in general society.

Pentecostals have football stars. They're very good at recruiting. The Brazilians came and converted fellow players. There's a Juventus player who preaches every Monday for the Assembly of

God and was converted by a Brazilian fellow player. Even the Seventh-day Adventists have a football star. Not so the Mormons. I think, if Mormons want to be regarded as mainline in Europe, they should produce European business persons and politicians and a few sports and entertainment stars.

I think in the United States the Mormons are regarded as mainline—although the Mitt Romney campaign perhaps makes the point that Mormons are not perceived as 100 percent mainline.

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