

# COMMUNITY OF CHRIST: AN AMERICAN PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY, WITH MORMONISM AS AN OPTION

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Most scholars of Mormonism focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah and currently presided over by Thomas S. Monson. However, according to Massimo Introvigne, a specialist in new religious movements, “six historical branches”<sup>1</sup> of Mormonism developed after the death of the founder, Joseph Smith, in 1844: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints led by Brigham Young; the Reorganized Church/Community of Christ; the Church of Christ (Temple Lot); the Church of Jesus Christ organized around the leadership of William Bickerton (1815–1905); the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that accepted James J. Strang (1813–1856) as prophet and king; and the Church of Jesus Christ that followed the leadership of Alpheus Cutler (1784–1864). I like to refer to these denominations as the “six historical Mormonisms.”<sup>2</sup>

As Mark Lyman Staker has shown, the terms “Mormons,” “Mormonites,” and “Mormonism” originally referred to believers in the Book

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1. Massimo Introvigne, *Les Mormons* (Maredsous: Brepols, 1991), 19–22.

2. Chrystal Vanel, “Des Mormonismes : une étude historique et sociologique d’une fissiparité religieuse américaine, 1830-2013” (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études–Sorbonne, 2013), 23.

of Mormon and their religion.<sup>3</sup> I thus argue that Mormonism exists wherever there is belief in the Book of Mormon, even though many adherents reject the term “Mormonism” to distance themselves from the LDS Church headquartered in Salt Lake City.

The plural term “Mormonisms” may have been used for the first time by Grant Underwood in 1986.<sup>4</sup> Since then, it has been used by sociologist Danny Jorgensen in a 1995 article on Cutlerite Mormonism<sup>5</sup> (following discussion with Jacob Neusner, a scholar of “Judaisms”<sup>6</sup>), by David Howlett in his 2014 book on the Kirtland Temple,<sup>7</sup> and by Christine Elyse Blythe and Christopher Blythe, who are editing a forthcoming book on Mormonisms.<sup>8</sup> My interest in the various denominations claiming Joseph Smith as their founder came after I read Steven L. Shields’s groundbreaking book *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*.<sup>9</sup> I first used the term “Mormonisms” in 2008, while writing my master’s dissertation under the direction of Professor Jean-Paul Willaime, a sociologist of Protestantisms. Taking into account the plurality in Mormonism, I simply pluralized “Mormonism” as my professor pluralized “Protestantism.”

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3. Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 72–73, 87.

4. Grant Underwood, “Re-Visioning Mormon History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (1986): 420.

5. Danny L. Jorgensen, “Conflict in the Camps of Israel: The 1853 Cutlerite Schism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 21, no. 1 (1995): 64.

6. Danny Jorgensen, e-mail message to author, Oct. 5, 2010.

7. David J. Howlett, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

8. Christine Elyse Blythe and Christopher James Blythe, eds., *Mormonisms: A Documentary History, 1844–1860* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, forthcoming).

9. Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, rev. ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 2001).

This paper focuses on the Community of Christ (hereafter referred to as “CoC”), known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints (hereafter referred to as “RLDS Church”) prior to 2001. Headquartered in Independence, Missouri, the CoC has nearly 200,000 members worldwide and is the second largest movement whose roots go back to Joseph Smith. I argue that the CoC today is an American progressive Christianity with Mormonism as an option.

Research on the RLDS Church/CoC has been fruitful, though not as prolific as research on the mainstream LDS Church. Whereas nineteenth-century RLDS history tended to be defensive against other Mormonisms, especially toward the LDS Church,<sup>10</sup> since the 1950s it has opened itself to a more neutral academic approach, with groundbreaking studies such as Robert Flanders’s book on Nauvoo,<sup>11</sup> Roger Launius’s non-hagiographic biography of Joseph Smith III,<sup>12</sup> and the sociological studies of Danny Jorgensen.<sup>13</sup> The work of Richard Howard should also be mentioned, as he was the first professionally trained RLDS Church historian.<sup>14</sup> Mark Scherer succeeded Howard in 1994 and continued until 2016. Scherer’s three volumes on RLDS/CoC stand among the must-read books in Mormon studies because of their clarity and use of archival material, and Scherer’s research on RLDS/CoC globalization

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10. Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church*, rev. ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1955).

11. Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

12. Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

13. Danny L. Jorgensen, “Beyond Modernity: The Future of the Reorganization,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 18 (1998): 4–20.

14. Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, vol 1., *RLDS Beginnings to 1860* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1992); *The Church Through the Years*, vol. 2, *The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860–1992* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1993).

and its most recent history is groundbreaking.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the John Whitmer Historical Association, founded in 1972, publishes historical research on the RLDS/CoC by authors from diverse backgrounds (academics, amateur historians, and institutional historians that some might sometimes consider as apologetics).

This paper is based on historical and sociological research grounded in observations made during several field research trips between 2009 and 2013 in Independence, Kenya, Malawi, Haiti, France, Germany, England, and The Netherlands (while working as a translator for the CoC), the consultation of historical resources (both primary and secondary sources) at the CoC library and archives in Independence, Missouri, as well as a survey distributed to the Colonial Hills congregation (in Blue Springs, Missouri, near the Independence headquarters) on October 12, 2010.

CoC leadership does not seem to consider academic studies to a significant extent. Thus, the works of scholars Roger Launius and Danny Jorgensen on the impact of the liberalization of the RLDS Church on the membership and its decline have been largely disregarded by the RLDS/CoC leadership. This shows that a religious institution does not have to be conservative to be somewhat anti-intellectual (or at least indifferent); a liberal religious institution can be too. In the case of CoC, one might wonder if this is not due to Mormonism's original populist theology. Even though I think religious institutions should benefit from faith-promoting and apologetic history, they should also take advantage of critical studies and observations from social scientists, and I would

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15. Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013); *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization, 1844 to 1946* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013); *The Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946 to 2015* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016).

argue that the CoC's lack of doing so might also partly explain its current decline.

This article intends to show the theological evolution of the RLDS Church/Community of Christ in the larger US religious culture and under the direction of American leadership. The CoC has gone through three stages: first, it became a moderate, apophatic, and respectable Mormonism, then it evolved toward liberal Protestantism following World War II, and today it could be defined as an American progressive Christianity with Mormonism as an option. Because my paper is not apologetic, I want to make it clear that I do not give positive or negative meaning to words such as "liberal," "conservative," "progressive," or "fundamentalist." I use these words as a social scientist, not to judge or as a form of name-calling, but to describe what I observe.

### A Moderate, Apophatic, and Respectable Mormonism in Modern America

Following Joseph Smith's death in 1844, many charismatic leaders claimed the right to succession. But even though most Mormons were attracted by one of the charismatic leaders claiming to be the true successor of the founding prophet, some Mormons remained unconvinced or unsatisfied by those leaders.

Such was the case with Jason Briggs (1821–1899), pastor of the Mormon congregation in Beloit, Wisconsin. The Beloit congregation joined with other congregations and founded the New Organization in June 1852. In 1860, Joseph Smith III (1832–1914), son of the founding prophet, finally accepted the leadership of the New Organization, which became the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS Church) in 1872.

The RLDS Church claimed to be the one true Mormonism, faithful to Joseph Smith and early Mormonism. Thus, it believed in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Early on, the RLDS

Church rejected polygamy, arguing that Joseph Smith never practiced nor taught it, but that the apostate Brigham Young was its innovator. It was also the proud owner of the Kirtland Temple. The RLDS Church's chief argument for being the one true Mormon church was its being led by a descendent of Joseph Smith; thus, Frederick M. Smith (1874–1946) succeeded his father Joseph Smith III as RLDS Church president-prophet in 1860, followed by his brother Israel A. Smith (1876–1958) in 1946.<sup>16</sup>

From its birth in 1860 up to World War II, the RLDS Church could, then, in fact, be described as a moderate, apophatic, and respectable Mormonism in modern America. Historian Alma Blair called the RLDS Church a “moderate Mormonism” in a 1979 article, arguing that it did not endorse the most radical theological innovations of early Mormonism such as the secret temple rituals, the plurality of gods, and the plurality of wives.<sup>17</sup> Methodist theologian W. Paul Jones later argued that the RLDS Church was an “apophatic” denomination that tended to define itself by what it was not: it was “not Mormon” (for fear of confusion with the Utah Mormons) and it was “not Protestant” (considering itself not as a part of the Reformation, but as a restoration of the primitive Christian church).<sup>18</sup> And as a respectable Mormonism in modern America, the RLDS Church did not try very hard to flee away from modernity by building God's kingdom on earth, as sociologist Danny Jorgensen has shown.<sup>19</sup> Even though Church leaders have for a time encouraged the

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16. For the history of the RLDS Church from the succession crisis in 1844 to World War II, see Scherer, *Journey of a People: The Era of the Reorganization*.

17. Alma R. Blair, “Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormonism,” in *The Restoration Movement. Essays in Mormon History*, edited by F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1979), 207–30.

18. W. Paul Jones, “Theological Re-Symbolization of the RLDS Tradition: The Call to a Stage Beyond Demythologizing,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 16 (1996): 4.

19. Jorgensen, “Beyond Modernity,” 7.

“gathering” of Church converts to Independence, Missouri from North America, Europe, Australia, and French Polynesia in Zion, the RLDS Church did not create a separate, politically-organized community, as did followers of Brigham Young in the Rocky Mountains and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints led by James J. Strang on Beaver Island, Michigan. RLDS Mormonism was very much integrated into US society from its inception. As such, it consistently denounced polygamy, as historian Roger Launius has shown, and even collaborated with US officials in its fight against plural marriage in Brigham Young’s Rocky Mountain theocracy.<sup>20</sup>

### The Post-Second World War Internationalization and Liberal Protestantization of the RLDS Church

Three essential aspects define liberal Protestantism: a critical, non-literalist reading of the Bible that began with nineteenth-century higher criticism;<sup>21</sup> a refusal of timeless and universal creeds and dogmas coupled with a desire to adapt theology to its contemporary world;<sup>22</sup> and a positive outlook on humanity and the world.<sup>23</sup>

While sociologists may draw a distinction between liberal Protestantism and fundamentalist/conservative Protestantism,<sup>24</sup> theologians and believers might argue that such a dichotomy does not describe the more complex reality of Protestantisms. Thus, Protestant neo-orthodoxy tends

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20. Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 247–72.

21. André Encrevé, “Libéralisme théologique,” in *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, edited by Pierre Gisel (Paris-Genève: Puf/Labor et Fides, 2006), 763.

22. Laurent Gagnebin and Raphaël Picon, *Le Protestantisme: La foi insoumise* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), 189.

23. Jean-Paul Willaime, *La Précarité protestante: Sociologie du protestantisme contemporain* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1992), 78.

24. Steve Bruce, *A House Divided: Protestantism, Schism, and Secularization* (London: Routledge, 1990), 30–37.

to accept higher criticism while being somewhat faithful to traditional Christian dogmas such as the Trinity and the incarnation.<sup>25</sup> Historian and sociologist David Hollinger distinguishes between ecumenical Protestantism and evangelical Protestantism.<sup>26</sup> Hollinger underlines how American mainline Protestantism's encounter with diversity triggered "the intensity and range of the self-critique carried out by the intellectual leadership of mainstream liberal Protestantism during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s."<sup>27</sup> As part of this self-critique, Methodist missionary Ralph E. Dodge argued in his 1964 book *The Unpopular Missionary* that "missions had been too closely connected to colonialism and had tried to impose on indigenous peoples denominational distinctions that made no sense abroad."<sup>28</sup> The same call to cease imposing "denominational distinctions" abroad was voiced by some RLDS Church leaders after the Second World War, as Matthew Bolton has shown.<sup>29</sup>

Prior to World War II, the RLDS Church had a small presence in only a few countries outside the United States, such as Canada, Australia, French Polynesia, and Great Britain. The RLDS Church was indeed a Midwestern denomination: it had built an auditorium as its headquarters in Independence, Missouri and established Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa. Like other American denominations, the RLDS Church

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25. Peter L. Berger, *L'Impératif hérétique: Les possibilités actuelles du discours religieux* (Paris: Van Dieren, 2005), 88; Robert M. Montgomery, "Liberalism and the Challenge of Neo-orthodoxy," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 15, no. 3 (1947): 139–42.

26. David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), xiii–xiv.

27. *Ibid.*, 23.

28. *Ibid.*, 26.

29. Matthew Bolton, *Apostle of the Poor: The Life and Work of Missionary and Humanitarian Charles D. Neff* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2005), 35–56.



often took root where US military bases were built following the war. Thus, the moderate Midwestern Mormonism established itself in Japan, South Korea, and South America. But as the RLDS Church grew outside of the Mormon promised land, it also progressively lost core aspects of its particular, moderate Mormon identity. Some RLDS apostles, such as Charles Neff (1922–1991) and Clifford Cole (1915–2004), argued that the Reorganized Church's theology was too American and could not be understood across cultures. According to Neff, Japanese people not accustomed to Christianity could not understand the differences between the many Christian denominations, on the one hand, and between the Mormon denominations, on the other. It was difficult for them to grasp that the Reorganized Church was neither Catholic nor Protestant, and not even Utah Mormon. The Apostle concluded that only a simple Christianity, without the particularities of the RLDS branch of Mormonism, must be promoted by the institution during its missionary endeavors. A 1965 survey conducted by the Church leadership among 225 Church employees came to the same conclusion. The institution thus decided to define its objectives and theology more clearly. At the First Presidency's request, apostles wrote a statement on objectives that was presented in the 1966 world conference. The first objective called for a definition of a clear theology that might unite Church members from different cultures. The second objective asked for the adaptation of Church practices to individual cultural practices. The next objective called for a decentralization of Church administration. Finally, the last objective reinterpreted Zion as being the kingdom of God among all nations, and not only in Missouri.<sup>30</sup>

In order to respond to those objectives, especially the first one (definition of a clear theology), Church leaders and employees from the Department of Religious Education decided to gain some academic theological training from Saint Paul School of Theology, a Methodist

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30. Bolton, *Apostle of the Poor*, 48–49.

school, between March and December 1967. Some members from the Department of Religious Education had already received serious academic training in religious studies. For example, Verne Sparks studied at the Union Theological Seminary (New York), a liberal Protestant academic institution where liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) taught.<sup>31</sup>

Following courses at Saint Paul and/or graduating from other Protestant seminaries, RLDS leaders then tended to focus on traditional Christian dogmas and to apply Protestant scholarship and theology to their particular tradition, as one can see in the works of RLDS theologians Harold Schneebeck and Roy Cheville. After gaining a bachelor of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary, Schneebeck taught religion at Graceland College. In his book *The Body of Christ*,<sup>32</sup> Schneebeck presents an ecclesiology that might be considered somewhat Protestant, defining the Church not as an institution but as a community: “the Church is unified, not by institutional structure but by the experience of the presence of Christ’s Spirit in the common life of the fellowship.”<sup>33</sup>

Whereas Joseph Smith defined the Mormon Church as the sole salvific institution, Schneebeck presents the Church as a community of believers. As Schneebeck emphasizes, since this community is founded on the memory of Christ as a servant, its members should also be servants,<sup>34</sup> working for justice and peace.<sup>35</sup> Schneebeck did not consider the RLDS Church to be the only true church, and his theology promotes ecumenism: “Our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ is to work in the world

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31. Richard B. Lancaster, “Religious Education and Change in the Church: 1954–1966,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 118.

32. Harold N. Schneebeck Jr., *The Body of Christ: A Study of the Nature of the Church* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1968).

33. *Ibid.*, 37.

34. *Ibid.*, 38.

35. *Ibid.*, 52.

for its redemption. . . . To effectively attain this goal, we are becoming aware of the need for cooperation with other Christian groups, the necessity of ecumenical cooperation.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, Schneebeck invited the RLDS Church to work toward the betterment of the world alongside “other Christian groups.” This echoes the positive vision of humanity promoted by Protestant liberal theology.

Schneebeck was not the only RLDS educator whose theology seemed to have been influenced by (liberal) Protestant theology. Roy Cheville, a convert to the RLDS faith, got a PhD in religion from the University of Chicago Divinity School and wrote a book published by the RLDS Church entitled *The Field of Theology*.<sup>37</sup> Cheville argues that a “worthful theology must be up to date. It may not cling to the words and concepts of yesterday if these do not speak the language of today.”<sup>38</sup> Cheville here echoes Protestant liberalism and its intent to adapt theology to the contemporary world.

The First Presidency’s foreword to the book *Exploring the Faith*, first published in 1970 to present RLDS beliefs, is a good summary of the liberal Protestantization of the RLDS Church: “In more recent times it has been recognized that a more adequate statement of the beliefs of the church should be developed. Historical and traditional points of view needed to be expanded in view of the contemporary religious experience and scholarship. Recognizing that the understanding of religious experience is always qualified by the human nature of those involved, the church has traditionally avoided creedal statements.”<sup>39</sup> In openly saying that RLDS theology was reviewed in light of the contemporary

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36. *Ibid.*, 82.

37. Roy A. Cheville, *The Field of Theology: An Introductory Study* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1959).

38. *Ibid.*, 19.

39. The First Presidency, “Foreword” to Alan Tyree, ed., *Exploring the Faith: A Series of Studies in the Faith of the Church Prepared by a Committee on Basic Beliefs*, Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1987 [1970], 5

world and that no creedal statements would be presented, the RLDS First Presidency follows the trend of liberal Protestantism, which is adogmatic and adapts itself to the contemporary world.

As the RLDS Church was distancing itself from its Mormon roots and engaging with mainline American Protestantism, some big changes happened. In 1984, president-prophet Wallace B. Smith (great-grandson of Joseph Smith) gave a revelation to the Church, adding to its Doctrine and Covenants and opening the priesthood to women. The most conservative members—who refer to themselves as “Restorationists”—could take no more, and thousands left the RLDS Church or were excluded from it.<sup>40</sup> The liberalization of the Church thus had an impact on its membership. Sociological studies have shown that conservative churches tend to experience membership increases while liberal denominations tend to lose members.<sup>41</sup> In a study published in 1998 in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, George Walton showed the decline experienced by the RLDS Church in terms of membership, financial resources, and numbers of individuals ordained to the priesthood that “point to a loss of about one-half of the active membership in North America in the last fifteen years.”<sup>42</sup> Since 1951, the number of baptisms has been declining in North America (US and Canada): there were an average of 4,877 baptisms between 1951 and 1965; 3,785 between 1966

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40. William Russell, “The Fundamentalist Schism, 1958–Present,” in *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, edited by Roger D. Launius and W. B. “Pat” Spillman (Lamoni, Iowa: Graceland University Press, 1991), 125–51.

41. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1180–211; Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995).

42. George N. Walton, “Sect to Denomination: Counting the Progress of the RLDS Reformation,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 18 (1998): 39.

and 1980; and 2,375 between 1981 and 1995. This membership decrease is not only due to a lack of baptisms, but also to a growing disaffection in North America: the RLDS Church experienced an average of 294 disaffections per year between 1951 and 1965; 335 average per year between 1966 and 1980; and 578 average per year between 1981 and 1995.

The decline of membership in North America has had an impact on the financial resources of the institution as “the general fund went from a regular surplus before 1983 to mostly deficit since.”<sup>43</sup> The diminishing of financial resources seems to have continued until today, as it has led to the sale of historic properties in Missouri to the LDS Church,<sup>44</sup> to the sale of the Book of Mormon printer’s manuscript for 35 million dollars to the LDS Church, and to numerous lay-offs of employees in recent years.

This loss of financial resources and members did not stop the RLDS Church from carrying on with its liberalization. The institution was actually able to carry on more freely with changes, as it was free from its most conservative members. In 1996, Canadian W. Grant McMurray became the first president-prophet of the RLDS Church who is not a descendant of Joseph Smith. Thus, one of the RLDS founding principles and identity markers, hereditary succession to the Church presidency, was given up. Under W. Grant McMurray’s leadership, the RLDS Church became the Community of Christ, thereby somewhat increasing the gap between them and “Latter Day Saintism” (Mormonism). McMurray resigned from the presidency in 1996 and was succeeded by Stephen M. Veazey, who serves today. During Veazey’s presidency, the CoC became part of the National Council of Churches, a US ecumenical Christian organization largely composed of mainline and liberal progressive

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43. *Ibid.*, 45.

44. Jamshid Ghazi Askar, “LDS Church Buys Farmland, Haun’s Mill, Far West, Kirtland property from Community of Christ,” *Deseret News*, May 5, 2012, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865555292/LDS-Church-buys-farmland-Hauns-Mill-Far-West-Kirtland-property-from-Community-of-Christ.html>.

Protestantisms. As the ecumenical CoC was radically departing from exclusivist Mormonism, it was thus also bringing itself nearer toward progressive Protestantism.

### American Progressive Christianity with Mormonism as an Option

American progressive Christianity finds its roots in the social gospel movement that was part of the larger progressive movement.<sup>45</sup> Between 1896 and 1916, the Progressive movement flourished as a reaction to US industrialization and urbanization. Journalists and writers denounced social and economic misery, both rural and urban, often seeing it as a consequence of capitalism.<sup>46</sup> The Progressive ideology had some influence on both the Democratic and Republican parties, and a Progressive Party even shortly appeared in 1912 and 1924.<sup>47</sup> The Progressive ideology also had some influence on American Christianity, through the proclaiming of the social gospel. Finding its roots in the abolitionist movement and in diverse socialist movements, the social gospel movement was motivated by the establishment of the kingdom of God through social reform.<sup>48</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, progressive Christianity reappeared in the US as the “Christian left,” partly in reaction to the conservative Christian right.<sup>49</sup> Progressive Christianity focuses on peace and

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45. Klauspeter Blaser, *Le Christianisme social: Une approche théologique et historique* (Paris: Van Dieeren, 2003), 37–40.

46. Jean-Michel Lacroix, *Histoire des États-Unis* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 317–20.

47. Yves-Vincent Nouailhat, “L’Amérique, Puissance Mondiale, 1897–1929,” in *Histoire des États-Unis*, edited by Bernard Vincent (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 219.

48. Blaser, *Le Christianisme social*, 37–40.

49. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 132–49.

justice issues such as women's rights, ecology, and abolishing poverty. As a particular brand of American Christianity, progressive Christianity is trans-theological and trans-denominational: progressive Christians are present among liberal, neo-orthodox, and evangelical denominations.

In the Community of Christ, progressive Christianity is mostly expressed by neo-orthodox theologians, whereas in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, liberal theologians—such as process theology specialist Bob Mesle<sup>50</sup>—had much more influence. For example, American theologian Tony Chvala-Smith is CoC scripture and theology consultant. A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) and Marquette University (Jesuit), Chvala-Smith is an assistant professor of theology and scripture at the Community of Christ Seminary (at Graceland University's Independence campus). His book *Understanding the Way: Exploring Our Christian Faith* reflects Protestant neo-orthodoxy as it “echoes” the work of theologians like Karl Barth and Daniel Migliore.<sup>51</sup> Reflecting Protestant neo-orthodoxy, Chvala-Smith's theology is very much bound to the Bible:

The church keeps grounded in revelation through the witness of the Bible. Apart from the Bible we would know little of the sacred story and have little access to the knowledge of God. For the church, then, Scripture [with a capital s] is indispensable. . . . We sometimes call the Bible the “canon.” The word comes from a Greek term for a “yardstick.”

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50. A professor of religion at Graceland University, Mesle wrote on process theology. See C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993); *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*, with a concluding chapter from John B. Cobb (West Conshohocken, Pa.: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008). Mesle's theology seemed to have acquired some influence in the RLDS Church as some of his books were published by the institution. See, for example, C. Robert Mesle, *Fire In My Bones: A Study in Faith and Beliefs*, with a foreword by the First Presidency (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1984).

51. Anthony J. Chvala-Smith, *Understanding the Way: Exploring our Christian Faith* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 2011), 14.

To speak of the Bible as canon means that we use these texts to measure how faithfully we are walking in the Way.<sup>52</sup>

Even though Chvala-Smith briefly mentions the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants as scripture<sup>53</sup> (without a capital s), in this passage he only considers the Bible as being the “canon.” The recent “Reliable Tools for Serious Scripture Study”<sup>54</sup> presents a list of scripture resources offered by Tony Chvala-Smith and Charmaine Chvala-Smith in order to facilitate CoC individual and congregational use of scripture. Scriptural resources listed solely focus on the Bible, almost only from an American Protestant perspective. A mainline Protestant use of the Bible seems to be upheld by Chvala-Smith as he insists on the importance of scripture—focusing mostly on the Bible—while refusing the fundamentalist principle of scriptural inerrancy: “The claim that scripture is inerrant (without any kind of error) has never had place in Community of Christ. . . . Sound interpretation therefore requires both scholarship and faith.”<sup>55</sup>

Among the forty-nine CoC respondents to the survey I conducted during my PhD research, eighteen answered that the authority of the Church lies mostly in the Bible and personal revelations or those of other individuals, whereas ten answered that it lies mostly in the Bible and Church leaders. As in Protestantism, individual reading of the Bible seems here to take precedence. Only ten respondents considered the Book of Mormon as one of the two primary sources of authority. To the question “Do you believe in the Bible literally?” forty respondents answered “no,” while only six answered “yes” (three did not answer the question).

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52. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

53. *Ibid.*, 27.

54. “Reliable Tools for Serious Scripture Study,” Community of Christ, accessed Sept. 17, 2017, <https://www.cofchrist.org/some-reliable-tools-for-serious-scripture-study>.

55. *Ibid.*



Community of Christ theology reflects other traditional Protestant dogmas such as the Trinity. It is thus not surprising that forty-seven respondents to the survey answered “yes” to the question “Do you believe in the Trinity?” (one answered “no” and one did not answer).

While CoC progressive Christianity could be considered Protestant due to its emphasis on the Bible (*sola scriptura*), it likewise stresses the importance of grace (*sola gratia*). CoC’s first enduring principle states: “God’s grace, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ, is generous and unconditional.”<sup>56</sup> One respondent to our survey (female, aged 51–70, ordained to the priesthood) mentioned grace as she answered the question “Why are you a member of the Church?”: “I believe in the Grace of God and his acceptance of us all.”

CoC theology is also progressive due to its emphasis on peace and justice. Its Basic Beliefs proclaim the reign of God as “the coming triumph of love, justice, mercy, and peace that one day will embrace all of creation.”<sup>57</sup> In 2010, President Stephen M. Veazey presented to the institution its five “Mission Initiatives,” among which are “Abolish Poverty, End Suffering,” and “Pursue Peace on Earth.” Progressive theology is also reflected in the CoC’s “peace theology” embodied in the Independence Temple, consecrated in 1994. The Independence Temple serves as CoC headquarters and is considered by the institution as a symbol of peace open to all. A ten-minute daily prayer for peace takes place in its sanctuary.

CoC promotes progressive Christianity through various organizations such as the National Council of Churches in the USA (NCC) and Sojourners. The NCC often lobbies in the United States on issues such as war, immigration, gun control, and poverty. On November 17, 2016, the NCC issued a call to the president-elect Donald Trump, stating:

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56. “Enduring Principles,” Community of Christ, accessed Sept. 17, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/enduring-principles>.

57. “Basic Beliefs,” Community of Christ, accessed Jan. 24, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/basic-beliefs>.

“Now is the time for Mr. Trump to cease employing racist, misogynist, and xenophobic rhetoric. Great responsibilities rest on his shoulders.”<sup>58</sup> Sojourners is a progressive Christian organization founded in 1971 by progressive evangelical author and activist Jim Wallis. In a study on the Christian Left, sociologist Charles Hall defines Sojourners’ mission:

Eschatologically, Sojourners envision an ideal world where social structures and institutions will no longer be necessary—a complete destruction of the old order, characteristic of transformative movements. Beyond the apocalyptic rhetoric, however, is a more practical goal of reforming existing political and ecclesiastical structures a characteristic of reformative movements. Sojourners also emphasize the conversion of individuals. The need for spiritual conversion and a personal identification with Jesus are prerequisites for social and political change. This reflects the movement’s evangelical roots.<sup>59</sup>

In 2006, Sojourners issued the document “Covenant for a New America.” Quoting from Old Testament prophetic books, the document calls America to strive for the abolition of poverty, arguing that military conflicts in the world distract the US from real social issues. The Community of Christ signed the document, along with other US progressive denominations and organizations such as Evangelicals for Social Action, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Protestants for the Common Good, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church.

Even though the CoC promotes progressive Christianity through its publications and its mission initiatives, not all members seem to agree with that particular brand of Christianity, and CoC is what Jean-Paul Willaime defines as a “pluralistic church”<sup>60</sup> having yet no official

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58. “A Call to the President-Elect,” National Council of Churches, Nov. 17, 2016, <http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/a-call-to-the-president-elect>.

59. Charles F. Hall, “The Christian Left: Who Are They and How Are They Different from the Christian Right?,” *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 1 (1997): 29.

60. Willaime, *La Précarité protestante*, 114.

creed. Thus, even though CoC top leadership reflects progressive neo-orthodox Protestantism—with emphasis on such traditional Christian dogmas such as the Trinity<sup>61</sup>—other theologies can be found within its membership.

Pluralism is also present in the diverse acceptance of the Book of Mormon among the membership. The CoC First Presidency stated during the 2007 world conference that “belief in the Book for Mormon is not to be used as a test of fellowship or membership in the church.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, the Book of Mormon is only optional in the CoC. Currently, official Church publications barely refer to it. Even though it is used somewhat in congregations of some of the first countries where the RLDS Church was established (US, Canada, French Polynesia), it is almost never mentioned in other countries.

The Book of Mormon tends to not be used by CoC membership and leadership in Africa, Haiti, and South America. As many Community of Christ members and local leaders in those countries consider themselves Evangelical or Pentecostal Protestants, they tend to have a conservative interpretation of the Bible alone. Thus, progressive Protestantism also seems to be optional in the pluralistic Community of Christ. Whereas Communities of Christ in the US, Australia, and Canada mostly support gay marriage and ordination in the name of a theology of peace and justice—following the trend of current American progressive theology—Community of Christ practitioners in South America, Africa, and Haiti tend to strongly oppose it.

How, then, can the institution unite members who are not bound by a common creed, common scriptures, a common ethics, or even a

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61. As stated on the CoC website, “We affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons” (“Basic Beliefs,” Community of Christ, accessed Jan. 23, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/basic-beliefs>).

62. Official Minutes Business Session, Wednesday, Mar. 28, 2007, <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2007/minutes/032807.asp>. (URL no longer active; quoted in Chrystal Vanel, *Des Mormonismes*, 203.)

common history?<sup>63</sup> Like other mainline and liberal Protestantisms and Christianities, the Community of Christ strives at uniting its diverse membership through rituals. Sociologist Steve Bruce writes about how the revival of rituals helps to unify a diverse membership lacking common identity in some parts of ecumenical liberal Christianity:

It is interesting that the rise of liberalism and ecumenism has also been accompanied in places by a revival of interest in liturgy. The last days of the SCM [British and American Student Christian Movement], when its relativistic impulses had to be taken to the logical conclusion of having no restriction of membership, were accompanied by a revived interest in worship. The Wick Court commune, which housed the central office and conference centre, had a small bare room set aside as a chapel, and adorned, I recall, with only a Celtic cross. Two staff members wrote an “Order Book” before going off to join a single-minded religious community (another example of bridge-building defection). For an organization that was almost devoid of shared ideology, there was a considerable interest in shared acts of worship. There was also an interest in reinventing “traditional” forms of worship. There were even “services” with parts in Latin. The value of this renewed interest in archaic, if ersatz, forms of liturgy seems to have been that it allowed participants to avoid recognizing and confronting their lack of consensus. The rediscovery of Celtic Christianity allowed young Protestants and Catholics to overlook the Reformation and to ignore the fact that, if they believed anything at all, they believed different things. Similarly, the avoidance of the vernacular allowed them to evade the problem of stating clearly, in a language they could all understand, what it was they believed. To have faced that would have been to discover that there was little or nothing shared.<sup>64</sup>

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63. The history/memory of the Restoration (beginning with Joseph Smith’s presidency in 1830) and the Reorganization (beginning with Joseph Smith III’s presidency in 1860) are not equally accepted by American members. Whereas leaders and official historians tend to be very critical of their Mormon past (1830–1844), they tend to celebrate the Joseph Smith III legacy (beginning 1860).

64. Steve Bruce, *A House Divided*, 145–47.

Such a phenomenon is observable in the ecumenical Community of Christ. The institution emphasizes the importance of its eight sacraments (baptism, confirmation, communion, laying on of hands for the sick, marriage, blessing of children, ordination, and evangelist blessing). According to CoC apostle emeritus Andrew Bolton, these sacraments are the “international language of the Church” binding its diverse membership through common rituals.<sup>65</sup> As part of mainline/traditional US Christianity, Community of Christ uses a lectionary for its Sunday worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary conceived by US mainline Protestant churches and translated into French and Spanish for non-English-speaking CoC members. Following a current American ecumenical Protestant trend,<sup>66</sup> Community of Christ leaders encourage members to be involved in “ancient spiritual practices” such as the *lectio divina*, the practice of scripture reading, meditation, and prayer.

### An American Identity Despite a Promoted Multiculturalism (Exoticism?)

As records show, CoC membership in the Western world is currently still on the decline.<sup>67</sup> The British Isles Mission Centre counted 1,318 members in 2007 and 1,274 in 2016. The Western Europe Mission Center numbered 864 members in 2009 and 817 in 2016. In the Central USA Mission Center, where the headquarters of the institution are located, membership declined from 15,299 (2009) to 14,608 (2016). Despite these declines in the Western world, global CoC membership has experienced

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65. Andrew Bolton and Jane Gardner, eds, *The Sacraments: Symbol, Meaning and Discipleship* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 2005), 16.

66. Brian D. McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

67. The World Church Recorder sent me membership records for 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2013 (e-mail message to author, Jan. 22, 2013). As I was doing research on the CoC in Haiti, I had access to world membership records as of April 25, 2016 (e-mail message to author, May 16, 2016).

a modest growth: 195,517 members in 2007, 197,069 members in 2012, and 199,097 members in 2016. This growth could partly be explained by the growth the CoC experiences in Africa. Nigeria counted 5,831 CoC members in 2009 and 6,172 in 2016, while Kenya's CoC membership went from 2,948 in 2009 to 3,658 in 2016.

With membership in every continent, today's Community of Christ tends to project a multicultural image of itself. "Unity in Diversity" is one of its mottos. During Community of Christ's world conference, held every three years, delegates from many countries gather in Independence, Missouri for a big multicultural show. During the opening flag ceremony, flags from the various countries where the institution is present are unfurled, often by indigenous people from those countries wearing "traditional" clothing. A Tahitian choir, clothed in colorful traditional Tahitian dresses, sings hymns in the Tahitian language, while people in the assembly (most of them from North America) take pictures.

With almost 200,000 members worldwide and unbound by a common creed (although recent attempts have been made to define its beliefs and practices more systematically), the Community of Christ today is indeed a pluralistic church, the identity of which tends to change from one country to another. That is to say, CoC looks somewhat like a fundamentalist Protestant church in Haiti, while it often looks like a liberal Protestant church in Canada and Australia, as recent debates on homosexuality have shown. In light of such pluralism, *Communities of Christ* may be a much more appropriate name.

But is Community of Christ truly an international church? Are flags, traditional songs, and colorful traditional clothing enough to make a church truly international? Isn't the big multicultural show mere exoticism?

True, there is multiculturalism and pluralism in CoC. As already underlined, multiculturalism is promoted by the institution, which wants to appear as a "world church," an "international church." Cultural/theological pluralism in CoC is also due to a progressive/liberal theol-

ogy, which is non-creedal, and thus admits different theological views. Finally, pluralism is also a result of a lack of centralization, which might be due to a lack of financial resources.<sup>68</sup>

However, despite this pluralism, CoC remains a US denomination. Whereas the institution claims on its website that it has nearly 250,000 members in more than 60 nations,<sup>69</sup> and whereas I have often heard from members and leaders that the majority of the membership is outside of America, official membership numbers show that nearly 60 percent of the almost 200,000 CoC membership is from the United States.<sup>70</sup> Most of the leadership is American-born and/or has US citizenship. True, the Council of Twelve Apostles of the Community of Christ presents some multiculturalism with the presence of apostle Bunda Chibwe (born in Zambia and raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo), apostle Richard James (from Wales), apostle Carlos Enrique Mejia (from Honduras), apostle Mareva Arnaud Tchong (a woman from French Polynesia), and apostle Arthur Smith (from Canada). Thus, five of the twelve apostles are not originally from the US. But the president of the Council of Twelve

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68. Despite an enthusiastic desire to share the faith, the small presence of CoC in the world compared to the more important presence of other American denominations might be due to a fragile missionary program. For example, in 2012, whereas the LDS Church had around three hundred full-time missionaries in France alone, CoC has only around one hundred full-time missionaries worldwide as of 2014. Also, whereas missionaries from various denominations (evangelical, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, LDS) tend to learn the language of the countries they proselytize, CoC missionaries seem to lack language studies before they are sent out.

69. "A Worldwide Church," Community of Christ, accessed Dec. 2, 2016, <https://www.cofchrist.org/a-worldwide-church>.

70. According to the World Church Membership Enrolment Summary, as of April 25, 2016, the "enrolment grand total" is 199,097, with 21,812 members in the Southeast USA Mission Field; 27,919 in the Central USA Mission Field; 22,561 in the Northeast USA Mission Field; 11,268 in the South Central USA Mission Field; 17,665 in the North Central USA Mission Field; 18,111 in the Western USA Mission Field (e-mail message to author, May 16, 2016).

Apostles, Linda Booth, is from Independence, Missouri, and members of the First Presidency and Presiding Bishopric are all from the US.

Official Community of Christ institutional discourse and corporate identity are thus primarily defined and managed in the US by US leaders. The editors in chief of the *Herald*, the official periodical of the Community of Christ, are all Americans. The CoC scripture and theology consultant is American, as well as the whole faculty of Community of Christ Seminary (Graceland University, Independence) who teach CoC leaders from the US but also from Germany and Tahiti (even though cheaper and higher quality education would be available in the lands of Luther and Calvin). All Church historians have been white Americans. In January 2017, US prophet-president Stephen M. Veazey chartered a Church History and Sacred Story team. Whereas the official announcement emphasized that the team was composed of “three world church historians,” all of the team members are white Americans and only one is a female.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the past and the present is still institutionally defined by white Americans, and CoC membership outside the US receive training and literature produced in Independence, Missouri by an American leadership/authorship/teaching staff.

So even though CoC embraces multiculturalism, indigenization is in fact limited. There is indeed cultural diversity, as the institution and its American leadership allow and promote multiculturalism as part of CoC identity. But the product is still defined and managed mostly by white Americans. The delivery of the product from Independence to other places of the world might not be very effective, as CoC has no proactive missionary strategies and no correlation/centralization. Thus, one might see different Communities of Christ from one country to another. But the uniqueness of Community of Christ’s identity and history—its Restoration identity—seems to have not been indigenized

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71. “New Community of Christ Team Includes Three World Church Historians,” Community of Christ, Jan. 13, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/official-announcements>.



outside the US. Whereas in French Polynesia, Protestant Tahitian theology is present in the Maohi Protestant Church and its theologians,<sup>72</sup> no such trend exists in the Tahitian Community of Christ, whose theology depends on what is developed in Independence, Missouri by white US theologians, themselves influenced by the current trends of American progressive Christianity. Communities of Christ around the world are still mainly made in the US.

## Conclusion

*“The only true and living Church upon the face of the whole earth.”*  
(*Doctrine and Covenants 1:5e*)

In 1830, Joseph Smith and his associates established the Church of Christ as the only true church on earth, partly as a reaction to American Protestant pluralism. The RLDS/CoC clearly departed from this exclusivist ecclesiology, as it is today fully part of the ecumenical movement through the NCC. While doing so, it seems that RLDS/CoC might have also melted down some of the specificities unique to its Mormon legacy, and even might have given up some specificities unique to its particular brand of moderate Mormonism.

And yet, whereas this was done partly in order to globalize itself more effectively, the RLDS Church/CoC did not succeed as well as the 15.8 million-member LDS Church, which kept strong unique Mormon identity markers (such as the Book of Mormon and temple worship) while adapting itself to modernity (abandonment of polygamy and of the political kingdom of God after 1890).<sup>73</sup>

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72. Bruno Saura, *Tahiti Mā'ohi: Culture, identité, religion et nationalisme en Polynésie française* (Pirae, French Polynesia: Éditions au vent des îles, 2008), 178–201, 391–402.

73. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

While the LDS Church is not yet a world religion, it is a global denomination that presents itself in all places of the world with the same identity defined in Salt Lake City.<sup>74</sup> Did the CoC meet more success in its pluralization? Whereas the ecumenical Community of Christ left behind its Mormon exclusivist Americanized Christianity, it is still very much an American denomination. Even though the CoC does not promote the Book of Mormon and does not wait for Christ's Second Coming to take place in Independence, Missouri, it follows American theological trends—contemporary progressive Christianity—and its theology is defined in Independence primarily by an all-white, all-American leadership, even though no corporate identity is strictly shared by *Communities* of Christ around the world.

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74. Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 248; Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 221–22.