The Theology of a Career Convert: Edward Tullidge's Evolving Identities

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When Edward Tullidge arrived in Utah during the late summer of 1861, one of his first actions was to write Brigham Young and state his "earnest desire" to enter the prophet's service. "I care not in what form I am employed, within my capabilities, so that I am set to work by *you,*" he urged. A few months later, either out of worry that his original point wasn't clear or because he wasn't satisfied with the shoemaking job he had been assigned, he made a second, more detailed, plea: "From the time I came into the Church," he wrote, "I fervently desired to live to see the Saints a great nation, and ranking in the first class of civilized society." But witnessing wasn't enough. He continued, "To desire to see this was in me also a desire to help it out. To be numbered among the workers-out of Zion's social and national greatness, became my ambition." Tullidge emphasized his activities of the past decade, especially his service as associate editor for the *Millennial Star,* Mormonism's British periodical. He concluded the letter with a personal—and poignant—admission that next to his "ambition to do the work" was also "an ambition to gain your approbation and acceptance of my labours."[1]

This letter is an important glimpse into several of the competing motivations that drove Tullidge's Mormon experience. First, he desired the church to be a great "nation" that in turn initiated a cultural revolution; second, he desired to be part of that revolution; and third, he desired to gain acknowledgement

for his part in that revolution. These motivations remained constant throughout his fitful engagement with Mormonism. Born in 1829 in England, Tullidge was raised Methodist before converting to Mormonism, backsliding into deism, recommitting to Mormonism, migrating to Utah, taking part in the Godbeite reform movement, returning once again to Mormonism, and briefly affiliating with the RLDS faith before finally rejoining the LDS Church, this time until his death. Importantly, Tullidge narrated, documented, and defended these numerous transitions throughout his life with a broad corpus of writings that included editorials, articles, plays, poems, and books. Indeed, Tullidge can be considered a religious weathervane whose constant shifts indicate the broader currents that tossed him to and fro. While it is tempting to dismiss him as merely lacking strong convictions, it is productive to instead consider the trajectory of his religious beliefs and affiliations as case study in the evolving nature of belief in general, and as a guide to the dynamic religious and political cultures he inhabited in particular.[2]

Belief is rarely stagnant, stolid in the face of changing surroundings. Rather, it is a constant negotiation between complex individuals and equally complex environments. Concrete terms of a religious manifesto barely capture the nebulous status of personal belief or the motivations for personal action. The written and oral construction of religious identities which maintain apparent stability and order develop through a complex process that draws from private beliefs, existing genres, political motives, and cultural expectations in an attempt to create an affirmative and consistent narrative trajectory. As cultural historian Stuart Hall has noted, "Identity is a narrative of the self; it's the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are." It is through this process, he explains, that individuals bring "structure" to their lives, thoughts, and surroundings.[3] The study of this process of identity formation reveals much about personal, cultural, and psychological elements at play within a given historical context, unveiling the raw materials from which individuals construct their worldview.

This paper looks at the question of evolving identities by briefly engaging the evolution of Edward Tullidge's relationship to and understanding of Mormonism. I will offer three snapshots

of Tullidge's public writing career, each taking place in a different context: his expositions of Mormonism's theocracy in England in 1854, his defense of Mormonism's social and organizational reform potential in New York in 1866, and his appeal to religious liberty and separation between Church and State in opposition to Mormonism in Utah in 1869. By comparing these key moments in his life and analyzing the evolution that took place between them, I aim to shed more light not only on Tullidge himself but also the culture he is speaking to and the Mormonism he is speaking from. Tullidge represented a foundational intellectual shift taking place in the second half of the nineteenth century in which universalism and social reform merged into a new political theology that emphasized humanity over dogma.

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Tullidge's religious career was notably circuitous. Shortly after his conversion to Mormonism in 1849, he embarked on a three-year missionary circuit, spending a majority of his time going from town to town without purse or scrip. However, in 1852, Tullidge left the faith. The reasons for his disaffection are unclear; it may have been dismay at the official introduction of polygamy, or perhaps a result of stress related to overzealous missionary labor. Job Smith, who was then serving as president of the Bedfordshire Conference, later recalled that Tullidge "had forsakin his mission and Mormonism, and that he was now a disbeliever in all revealed religion." Tullidge's main concern was the impossibility of obtaining certainty about a "God" who intervened in human existence.[4] Like many in industrial Britain during that period, Tullidge likely believed that the poverty, crimes, and evils rampant in Victorian England could only be explained by deism's coldly absent God.

Another possible response to those social ills, of course, was to make precisely the opposite claim: that humankind, at that moment more than ever, needed the intricate hand of Providence to dictate right belief and action. Tullidge's brief deist interlude was followed by a quick return to Mormonism and the immediate repudiation of his deist convictions. It is not known exactly when he returned to the fold, but the first issue of *Millennial Star* in 1854,

less than two years after his renunciation of the faith, contained Tullidge's strong defense of "Revealed Religion." "Men have fallen into a great error," he declared, "in treating religion as an abstract speculation, and making it evaporate in a few prayers and absurd ceremonies." The true purpose of religion, he explained, was to be intrinsically connected with government and society, a theocracy that is the polar opposite of deism's aloof agnosticism. "A theocracy is the most *natural* system which the mind of man can conceive," he trumpeted, "and instead of wondering that it ever existed, we ought rather to wonder that it is not universal."[5] In another publication three months later, he specifically denounced deist beliefs as "even more infidel and presumptuous than those of the acknowledged unbeliever."[6]

Such a foundational shift in religious belief is striking. And yet we can see important commonalities in Tullidge's understanding of God, and also in the way he understood his position within the world. Both Tullidge the deist and Tullidge the theocrat insisted that a theology espousing a God who was capable but unwilling to intervene was inadequate to the challenge of modernity's cultural ills. He also consistently opposed the widespread Victorian conviction that Christianity validated what was then taking place in Britain.[7] In short, at the heart of Tullidge's agnostic and theocratic views was a frustration with the gulf between modern religion and modern society.

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If Tullidge intended, with his forceful writings, to gain his ecclesiastical leaders' "approbation and acceptance of [his] labours,"[8] he succeeded. Promoted in 1856 to be the associate editor of the *Millennial Star*, he wrote a majority of the paper's editorials and became a leading voice for the British Saints. Emboldened by this new position, he contemplated a literary work about Mormonism with "epic" scope—a piece that would be "three times as extensive and more complicated than any poetic work yet undertaken," including those of Homer and Milton.[9] Within the next decade he migrated to Utah, supported himself through various odd jobs, tentatively ventured into a number of publishing projects, and positioned himself as a spokesman for the faith. Then, in

1866, Tullidge moved to New York City to defend Mormonism to the world.

But these public commitments to Mormonism masked private religious turmoil. The seeds of doubt were planted as early as 1858, when news of Utah's clash with the American government arrived along with rumors of a tragic massacre at Mountain Meadows. (Tullidge later identified national press coverage of these two events as the impetus for backsliding.) His writings for *The Utah Magazine* experimented with what were described as "Protestant heresies"—most likely a reference to his growing universalism.[10] By 1869, he wrote that he possessed "unbelief of eight years," and that he had settled "into a philosophical state of religion, anchoring faith in the Divine Mission of the World, rather than in the mission of any special prophet."[11] Yet he maintained that he "never doubted" the religious genius of Joseph Smith, "though for years I have doubted that spiritual zion has come to dwell in Utah."[12] So when Tullidge moved to New York City in 1866 to defend Mormonism, he was not defending the same Mormonism he had trumpeted in 1854. Having largely abandoned its theological claims, Tullidge now understood the LDS faith as a potential vehicle for social reform, loyal organization, and the introduction of a higher civilization. In doing so, Tullidge was participating in a larger intellectual movement as strikingly similar messages were at that same time being delivered in New York by other social reforms developing progressive political theologies, most notably Octavius Frothingham.

Though Tullidge maintained his triumphant tone when he proclaimed the virtues of Mormonism, his descriptions of it reflected a new outlook. In his first editorial, published in the popular *Galaxy*, Tullidge emphasized that Mormonism had evolved not into "a great church," but "a little nation." The church's growth and success, he explained, "manifest themselves through social and political organizations, and commercial activities." Having lost their "fanatical element" Mormons were now ready to participate in society "in common with other men." Tullidge asserted that Mormonism's theology was of no importance—in one place he stated that it was "the facts that have outgrown out of the movements of the people, not their faith," in another that "polygamy

. . . [and] our very doctrines of theology . . . are but our side issues and phases of specialities"—and he argued that what Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had done was establish an international network of missionaries ready to carry forth civilization to the entire world. "Not in the history of any community," he boasted, "have they their counterpart in this specialty." "Empire-founding," not theological development, was the purpose of the Mormon faith.[13]

Tullidge continued his theme in later editorials,[14] emphasizing the American empire-building impulse embedded within Mormonism's missionary work and insisting that the church—part of "the Republic of America"—was "a unit, religiously, socially, and nationally, even though scattered throughout the whole earth." This interconnected web represented a universal extension of American culture, through "priests" known more for loyalty than belief, with unlimited possibilities for cultural colonization. "Here let me emphasize again," he concluded, "that Mormon missionary movements mean not sermon-making but administration—the government of the most peculiar and wonderful commonwealth that has ever existed since man was made."[15]

Central to Tullidge's understanding of Mormonism during this period was a recasting of Mormonism from a theological kingdom to a secular empire; the descriptor "theocracy" rarely entered his language, having been replaced with "Mormondom," a phrase that downplayed the movement's theological emphasis. Indeed, when Mormonism's religious tenets are mentioned, they are primarily used as an example of the optimism, empowerment, and "unbounded faith" in human potential Mormons gain through their movement's worldview. The purpose of the LDS faith was to gain confidence in their message and earnestness in their purpose. Then, once the foundation for this empire-building system was in place, the cause of social regeneration could finally begin.[16]

This was an important transition period for Tullidge, one in which he abandoned Mormonism's theological claims but still maintained an attachment to its organizing potential. It also hints to the malleability and dynamism of both the Mormon movement and the surrounding culture during the period. Tullidge occu-

pied a middle position between the orthodox persona of a traditional believer—like himself only a decade before—and the disillusioned and bitter identity of ex-members—which he embraced two years later. Tullidge constructed a new religious identity from certain tenets of Mormonism and American culture, contexts that provided tools for the construction of a new religious identity—an identity that may have been unique to him but a construction process that wasn't unique at all. From his faith he took international missiology and loyalty, from American thinkers he borrowed nationalism and societal reform, and from the Anglo-American world he embraced imperialism. This ideological blend, which Tullidge managed to fit into what could still be recognized as a species of Mormonism, demonstrates the extent to which personal identities and religious beliefs can vary by individual, location, and era—an evolutionary process indicative of the Age of Darwin, in which adaptation is not only allowed, but necessary. And Tullidge's evolution was nowhere near complete.

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Tullidge's evolving views would continue to test the boundaries of Mormon belief and affiliation. Tullidge originally planned to remain in New York for "two or three years," but returned to Utah by the end of 1867.[17]Even as he remained committed to the church, which included receiving substantial support from Brigham Young and other leaders during a serious illness, he continued his progression into Universalism.[18] "I hold universalism[,] not a special faith," he wrote in the *Utah Magazine*, a periodical in which he supported Brigham Young during the comparatively calm year of 1868. "I am not fairly orthodox. I know it. I cannot deny this even to myself." But this tenuous balance of loyalty and disbelief was unsettled by the Godbeite revolt.[19]

The origins and progression of the Godbeite movement—in which a number of Salt Lake City's leading business men and intellectuals revolted against Brigham Young's authoritarian approach—have been skillfully documented elsewhere. But for our purposes, it should be noted that Tullidge never quite fit in with the rest of the dissenting group's adherents. Unlike William Godbe or the Stenhouses, Tullidge was not economically at risk from

Brigham Young's practices; if anything, Tullidge was often the beneficiary of the church's incursions into the Utah economy. But his evolving notions of universalism, religious liberties, and social reform led him to question even the organizational structure and institutional loyalty he had praised only two years before. He explained in October 1869 that "the social redemption of mankind is that which commands the special mission of nearly all modern reformers," but noted that "a mere mission of doctrinal theology and fierce religious controversy possess no charm for the broad-minded men of the present age," men who are enticed more to "the practical good for society than the conscienceless spirit of religious fanaticism." When he listed contemporary individuals he considered to be "Apostles of the *social redemption* of the human race," he singled out Robert Owen, not Brigham Young.[20] Once the Godbeites were publicly disciplined, Tullidge publicly renounced his loyalty to Young by proclaiming himself "a believer in republican institutions and not in a *temporal* theocracy."[21]

As he once again reconstructed his relationship to and presentation of Mormonism, Tullidge positioned himself as an anthropologist documenting the evolution of religious communities. "History is the most infallible revelation," he claimed. He argued that the progression of humankind demonstrated the necessity of religious liberty, the relative insignificance of theology, and the tendency toward cosmopolitanism. "The growth of civilization is simply the growth of universality," he argued. "In proportion as nations become universal in their relations one with another, do they throw off the barbaric remains of the primitive ages and come more into harmony with the great Commonwealth of all mankind." Utah's separation from the rest of the world was "unnatural," he argued, because separation stagnates civilization. Whereas he had previously thought of the "Mormon commonwealth" spreading across the globe and destined to encompass the rest of humanity, he now understood that it was Mormonism that must be subsumed into the "commonwealth of humanity."[22]

But this did not mean, at least in Tullidge's mind, that Mormonism would lose its importance; far from it. Even though "we have been cut off the Church," he urged, "we still do believe in that destiny—ay, more than ever believe in it now."[23] He referred

to Godbeitism as "Pure Mormonism," signifying his belief that the transition was still within the Mormon framework.[24] But his Mormonism was not the theocracy he heralded in 1854, nor the social organization he defended in 1866, but a preparatory system that taught people liberality, optimism, and social responsibility. He claimed that he and thousands of others "embraced Mormonism because they believed it to be the broadest and most liberal system, socially and religiously, ever revealed from heaven to man." The "Divine government" they originally proclaimed was not the parochial Deseret but the "*good will* for all mankind—not less general in its applications for human good in every part of the earth."[25] In a way, Tullidge was part of the liberal Christian movement then taking root in America.[26]

Whereas Tullidge in 1866 defended the missionary system as a large network of loyal followers who could be mobilized as an army that would be submissive to centralized power and able to extend that power widely, he now depicted Mormonism's ecclesiastical reach as "one of unlimited free thought, free speech and individual manifestations of gifts and character." It produced a "republican" genius rather than a loyal soldier by tearing down "conservatisms" and pursuing "a progressive course."[27] Mormonism for Tullidge, in this iteration, was a mindset that urged believers to look forward and outward—not a theocracy that brought stability, not an imperialist institution that brought conformity, but a way of viewing the world that encouraged progress and embraced all of humanity. Even if "we have been cut off from a small portion of God's family," he wrote shortly after his excommunication, "now we belong to the whole world...We will no longer be a sect, but a world." As pompous as these sentiments may be, they aptly capture the universality of Tullidge's 1869 Mormon message.[28]

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Of course, that specific message didn't last long. By February of 1870, Tullidge had already become disillusioned with the Godbeite movement and started a casual wandering that lasted two decades, occasionally touching mainstream Mormonism. At his most stable moments, he wrote popular and provocative books

narrating the Mormon story—books that made him famous; at other moments, he rewrote those same books to match his constantly revised beliefs, as when he recast his LDS publication *Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* to be an RLDS anti-polygamy and anti-Brigham Young tract. And though the LDS leadership sometimes tried to be tolerant of Tullidge's vacillation, at other points they grew frustrated. John Taylor accused the enigmatic figure of being duplicitous: "when you are in the East," he wrote, "you are an apostate, because it is expected your book will sell better. . . . Here you are a Saint, because to be a Saint pays better."[29] While such an accusation is not implausible, it likely undervalues the sincerity of Tullidge's spiritual pilgrimage.

Even in the few periods examined in this paper, even when focusing on a few key words that are found in every period engaged, one can see the intellectual evolution that took place within Tullidge's life. Words like "theocracy" and "fanaticism" evolved from being markers of laudable stability to symbols of contempt and barbarity; the definition of "commonwealth" transformed from an attachment to the Mormon kingdom to an embrace of broader humanism; and the significance of "universality" transitioned from the spread of a unified message to a tolerance of religious pluralism. In an important way, Tullidge embodied and anticipated the broader religious transition soon to take place in the progressive era: the continued incorporation of Enlightenment ecumenism into religious thought as America lurched into modernity.[30]

More than describing the growth of a single person, however, this study suggests the mutability of theologies, traditions, and conversions. Mormonism meant something different to Edward Tullidge in different times and in different places, just as it meant something different to many Latter-day Saints reacting to their newly embraced faith and their ever-changing environment. The pliant nature of religious constructs and vocabulary allows a slippery understanding of terms, which in turn necessitates and facilitates a constant and careful reconstruction of religious ideas. Belief is unstable, and it must be treated as such, but it can also reveal profound lessons about not only past individuals, but also the worlds they inhabited and the worlds they imagined.

Notes

1. Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, 1861, Church History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter CHL); Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, November 25, 1864, CHL. I express sincere thanks to Ardis Parshall, who provided transcripts of this and all other Tullidge correspondence used in this article.

2. Works on Tullidge include Ronald W. Walker, "Edward Tullidge: Historian of the Mormon Commonwealth," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (1976), 55–72; Claudia L. Bushman, "Edward Tullidge and the Women of Mormondom," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33 (Fall 2000), 15–26; William F. Lye, "Edward Wheelock Tullidge, Mormons' Rebel Historian," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 28 (January 1960), 57–75; Davis Bitton and Leonard Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 29–40.

3. Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," *Radical America* 23, no. 4 (October–December 1989), 9–20.

4. Job T. Smith Statement, December 4, 1869, CHL. It should be noted that this statement was made in the midst of the Godbeite rebellion, and thus was meant to discredit Tullidge's commitment to Mormonism. But see also "The Diary of Job Smith: A Pioneer of Nauvoo, Illinois and Utah," 29, Job Smith Papers, CHL, which is a more contemporary document and includes much of the same summary.

5. Edward Tullidge, "Revealed Religion," *Millennial Star* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 1854), 3–5 (emphasis in original).

6. Edward Tullidge, "These Things Are No Longer Needed," *Millennial Star* 16, no. 13 (April 1, 1854), 198–200.

7. For the coincidence of Christianity and British nationalism, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, revised edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

8. Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, 1861, CHL; Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, November 25, 1864, CHL.

9. Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, February 19, 1858, CHL.

10. Edward Tullidge, "Leaders in the Mormon Reform Movement," *Phrenological Journal* 53 (July 1871), 31.

11. Edward Tullidge, "The Oracles Speak," *The Utah Magazine* 3 (December 18, 1869), 521.

12. Edward Tullidge, "Joseph Smith and His Work," *The Utah Magazine* 3 (December 18, 1869), 474.

13. Edward Tullidge, "Views of Mormondom, by a Mormon Elder," *The Galaxy* 2 (October 1, 1866), 209–214.

14. Tullidge claimed that his first editorial was so popular the newspaper paid him up front for a second. Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, October 18, 1866, CHL.

15. Edward Tullidge, "The Mormon Commonwealth, by a Mormon Elder," *The Galaxy* 2 (October 15, 1866), 351–364. See also Tullidge, "Brigham Young and Mormonism, by a Mormon Elder," *The Galaxy* 4 (September 1867), 541–549.

16. Tullidge offers his psychological description of Mormon theology in his "The Mormons: History of Their Leading Men," *American Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated* 44, no. 5 (November 1866), 144–151.

17. Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, May 14, 1867, CHL.

18. For Brigham Young urging fellow leaders to support Tullidge in a time of medical and emotional need, see Young to Bishops and Brethren in the Settlements, November 25, 1868, Brigham Young Letterbook, CHL.

19. Edward Tullidge, "Universal Man," *Utah Magazine* 2 (November 21, 1868), 114–115.

20. Edward Tullidge, "Our Social Redemption," *Utah Magazine*, October 23, 1869, 394–395 (emphasis in original).

21. Edward Tullidge to Brigham Young, October 27, 1869, published in *Utah Magazine*, October 30, 1869, 405 (emphasis in original).

22. Edward Tullidge, "Our Family Difficulty," *Utah Magazine*, November 6, 1869, 424–426.

23. Edward Tullidge, "Do We Fear Civilization?" *Utah Magazine*, November 20, 1869, 455.

24. Edward Tullidge, *The Life of Joseph, the Prophet* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1878), 639.

25. Edward Tullidge, "The Schism in Utah," *Utah Magazine*, November 13, 1869, 440.

26. For the growth of liberal religion in America, see Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

27. Tullidge, "The Schism in Utah," 441.

28. Tullidge, "Do We Fear Civilization?" 445.

29. John Taylor to Edward Tullidge, in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), 2:316–317.

30. For the merging of Englightenment thought and religion as the hallmark of America's modernity, see David Hollinger, "After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American

Encounter with Diversity," *Journal of American History* 98 (June 2011), 21–48.