

“A GREAT MORAL HERITAGE”: THE CREATION OF A MORMON
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as Mormons, function in the United States in a special way. Their collective identity seems to rely on a paradox. The Mormons appear to be on the margins of American society, operating as outsiders, while at the same time they exemplify model American citizens, and their religion seems utterly dependent on its American origins. By analyzing the environment in which Joseph Smith Jr. founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and how the Mormon identity was formed, I hope to explain how important this paradox was to the success of the Church.

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CHAPTER 1
THE PARADOX

“The Mormon people teach the American religion.”

- Leo Tolstoy, as quoted by Andrew Dickson White, 1900

During modern presidential campaigns, each candidate’s professed religion is examined by the voters to determine what the potential President of the United States believes and how that may affect his/her decisions if elected. The topic of one candidate’s religion in particular was of interest to the media in the 2008 primary elections, that of former governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney. Stories appeared in popular news media outlets describing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints¹, which Romney has been a lifelong member of, as well as possible effects his being Mormon could have on his presidential hopes. Romney attempted to set the record straight about his personal beliefs in a speech entitled “Faith in America,” in which he recalled the candidacy of John F Kennedy Jr. who faced similar scrutiny over his Catholic faith. “Almost 50 years ago another candidate from Massachusetts explained that he was an American running for President, not a Catholic running for President. Like him, I am an American running for President. I do not define my candidacy by my religion. A person should not be elected because of his faith nor should he be rejected because of his faith.”²

Rather than spend his time defending and explaining the Church itself, Romney borrowed similar strategies which Kennedy used in two speeches he gave leading up to the 1960 election. Both men turned the tables and instead of

¹ From here forth LDS

² “Faith In America,” given December 6, 2007 at the George Bush Presidential Library.

talking about their own religions, they talked about the place of religion in America. Like Kennedy, Romney reassured potential voters that no Church authority would influence his presidency, and that he would overrule his personal beliefs for the good of the American people if needed. More importantly, he appealed to a shared "political religion" in which the adherents believe in the patriotic values every politician hopes to portray. "Perhaps the most important question to ask a person of faith who seeks a political office is this: does he share these American values: the equality of human kind, the obligation to serve one another, and a steadfast commitment to liberty?" This shared sense of "Americanness" he claimed is enhanced by his Mormon faith. Romney evoked the image of "the great moral inheritance we hold in common" which he then tied to the LDS church; "these American values, this great moral heritage, is shared and lived in my religion as it is in yours." He even recalled America's early struggles with religious freedom by comparing Brigham Young leading the Mormons into Utah with the exile of Anne Hutchinson and banishment of Roger Williams.

In a speech titled "The Religion Issue in American Politics" given in 1960, Kennedy declared, "I happen to believe I can serve my nation as President- and I also happen to have been born a Catholic."³ Kennedy claimed that he "happens" to have been born Catholic, implying he could have just as easily been born something else. He had not chosen this religion for himself, it was given to him. While saying that he refused to distance himself from his LDS faith as some had

³ "The Religion Issue in American Politics," given April 21, 1960 at the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Washington D.C.

recommended, Romney subtly did so by making a claim similar to Kennedy's. He stated, "My faith is the faith of my fathers; I will be true to them and to my beliefs." By recalling his ancestry in the LDS church, he was also implying that he is a Mormon by accident of birth. Even though Romney claimed his religion should not have an effect on whether or not he was elected president, he did his best to show that being a Mormon had made him the loyal, patriotic American capable of holding the office he turned out to be.

Over 150 years before Mitt Romney entered the 2008 race for the Republican presidential nomination, another Mormon began his own campaign for President of the United States. Only time will tell whether Romney will be remembered in history as the first Mormon president but as for his predecessor, he has many other titles which have solidified his place in American history: seer, translator, founder, prophet, among others. Although he probably had no chance of realizing his presidential dreams, Joseph Smith Jr.'s place in politics was directly related to the same sense of "Americanness" that Romney hoped his audience would identify with. Seen as a group of religious outsiders since their founding, the LDS church is also paradoxically considered an exceedingly "American" religion. How did Joseph Smith manage to insert such American values into his new movement, while simultaneously drawing attention to how the rest of the country alienated the group and drove them from state to state? The early Saints seemed to have had a love/ hate relationship with the United State, sticking up for its ideals while running from its citizens and rebelling against its government. Romney recognized both aspects of his church in his speech,

recalling both Americas “great moral heritage” and the perceived persecution which eventually lead the Saints to separate themselves from the greater American population entirely. The LDS church “has been described by many as a fraudulent and loony sect, and by almost as many others as a quintessentially American religious creation” (Moore 1986, 21). How this cognitive dissonance in the minds of Americans arose is what I will examine.

I hope to prove Joseph Smith could have only been successful in the time and place he was born. When considering that the LDS church is on its way to becoming the next major world religion, its age becomes very important. Joseph Smith's influence extends beyond his church's history and is still strongly felt today because he lived less than 200 years ago. Some Saints, including Romney, can trace their religion through their family back to the first generation of Mormons. A combination of the American identity still forming only 50 years after the Revolution combined with the fluid religious spirit comprised of traditional folk magic and millennial Christianity prevalent in early 19th- century United States produced Smith's developmental environment.

The collective identity of Smith and his followers as Americans proved to be the blueprint for the Mormon identity which would be created during the formation of the Church. This identity coupled with the magic world view Smith held created a new religious movement which would never have come to be if the factors had not been the way they were. Members in a group must identify with the others in some way if the group is to survive. The creation of a Mormon identity in the years after the founding of the church has had a great effect on the

church's ability to survive. Even though by modern standards the LDS Church has seemed like an unusual religion, has always been alienated, and although they are now having remarkable growth outside the US, the LDS Church is an unmistakably American born and raised religion. It could have only happened here.

CHAPTER 2

THE SETTING

There was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion... The whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people...

- Joseph Smith Jr, *History of the Church*, 1838

Joseph Smith's formative years, in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, greatly influenced the church he would form at the age of twenty-four in 1830. Joseph Smith was presented a unique environment in which the conditions necessary for his Church to not only begin but be a success all fell into place. The son of a farmer, it was as if Smith was offered a fertile land for him to plant a seed which had no chance of sprouting anywhere else. He seized the opportunity and watched his church grow. Perhaps Smith would say that God created this environment for him so that His true church could be reestablished. Whether divine intervention or pure luck, Smith was surrounded by Americans who were perfectly conditioned to become the first Mormons.

Smith was born only twenty years after the end of the American Revolution, while the American experiment was still getting underway. Every society has a collective identity which binds the group together, and once formed, it is passed down the generations until it seems natural. The example of the struggle for an American identity is a reminder that identity is not self-generated and innate but something that is created to ensure the survival of the people as a whole. Patriotism gripped the citizens of what was now the United States of America while they were still trying to figure out just what being "an American"

meant. Separated from the centuries old histories of European countries, they were now a people with a history only a few generations old still trying to form a collective identity of their own. Religion held a special place in the formation of this identity. For early Americans, the memory of the religious oppression experienced in Europe was still fresh in their minds and the hope for religious tolerance was strong in their hearts.

American religious historian James A. Morone places much of the formation of the American identity on the Puritans. The extent to which this theory pertains to Americans in general may be debated, but when considering the American identity Joseph Smith must have understood, visible in the church he founded, Morone's exploration of a Puritan legacy is significant. Morone sees a common thread throughout American history which he traces back to its Puritan roots. He claims, "Americans have no enduring sense of pure blood or culture (despite endless efforts to assert one).... Without a stable cultural archetype to determine who belongs, Americans measure one another by a vaguely delineated, highly moralistic code of conduct" (Morone 2003, 13). Morality becomes the standard in which one can be called "American" or not. The United States has a long history, starting with John Winthrop's City on the Hill, of considering itself "a community of model citizens" which Morone claims "continues to denote the American 'us' against an immoral, un- American 'them'" (Morone 2003, 9).

Morone locates a difference in the identity of the Puritans while they were in England, and then once they reached the New World. As a persecuted group in Europe, the sense of being an "other" was created by society at large. However,

once they escaped to their own land, there was no state church to alienate, and in so doing define, them. Morone explains that the Puritans (and later Americans) began to construct their identity in their new home through the same method originally used against them. In England, they were the persecuted “other,” but in America, they became the majority, the “us” compared to “other” groups which at their discretion became “them.” By claiming certain moral behaviors to be “American” and others not, they were able to distinguish themselves against others who did not belong. “The saints constructed their ‘us’ against a vivid series of immoral ‘them’: heretics, Indians, witches. Each enemy clarified the Puritan identity” (Morone 2003, 33). This theory of American identity is very helpful when attempting to understand Mormon identity. It is evident that Joseph Smith was influenced by the American identity being contiguously created in this way. As will be discussed later, it would have a profound effect on his group.

Beyond the Puritan legacy Morone speaks of, Val D. Rust has identified a trend in the genealogy of many early Mormon converts. Rust has researched the families of the earliest Mormon converts and discovered that most had generations old roots in America. “Almost all the progenitors of the 583 early LDS converts for whom genealogical records have been found to date can be traced back to the earliest days of America’s colonial period; these ancestors originated in England and Scotland and migrated to New England; the birthplace of almost all the first ancestors born in America was New England” (Rust 2004, 20). Rust concludes that “those who converted to the LDS church in the first years after it was established possessed a shared historical background and a

radical spiritual orientation, cultivated and honed from the beginnings of colonial New England” (Rust 2004, 20). Those fifth and sixth generation American settlers that would become Mormons were steeped in the religious experimentation which founded America, and it prepared them to take a chance on a new religious movement.

In his work *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, only five years after Joseph Smith founded his church, Alexis de Tocqueville offered insights on religion in America still relevant today. Although actual church attendance was low, Tocqueville observed, “I have seen no country in which Christianity is clothed with fewer forms, figures, and observances than in the United States; or where it presents more distinct, simple and general notions to the mind. Although the Christians of America are divided into a multitude of sects, they all look upon their religion in the same light” (Tocqueville 1984, 154). Tocqueville recognized the relationship between how Americans viewed their religion and their country. He also described patriotism as “in itself a kind of religion” (Tocqueville 1984, 102).

R. Laurence Moore gives an overview of texts written in the budding field of American religious history in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in his work *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*. These religious historians generally wrote a similar theme; that even though Christian denominations were splintered, a wider church of evangelical Protestantism would be the dominant, but freely chosen, “state” church of America. A concept of Providence is evident in their work. Moore explains that “the theme that

America's religious destiny was, despite appearances, to end schism, not to multiply it" (Moore 1986, 12).

Although attendance numbers at religious meetings and revivals have ebbed and flowed throughout America's short history, it has remained "a nation with the soul of a church."⁴ Interest in religion was high during the period historians have called the Second Great Awakening, even if most did not belong to a particular church. Many believed in some form of Christianity but were religious seekers, drifting from revival to revival. In trying to explain the religious climate of Joseph Smith's time Jan Shipps explains "religion in nineteenth century- America was like a collage made up of a huge number of diverse materials put together in a pattern that made sense to the artist but that still appeared to many observers to be a jumble and little more" (Shipps 1987, 51). Families and individuals created their own private religions.

Along with the influence of various Christian sects, a strong belief in the occult pervaded the spiritual senses of Americans at this time. John L. Brooke, author of *The Refiners Fire: the Making of Mormon Cosmology*, claims that a revival of interest in the hermetic occult took place in eighteenth century America, while at the same time Christian sects focused on restorationism and millenarian zeal. He states that "this connection may be termed a field of hermetic purity, informed by powerful and sincere spiritual seeking" (Brooke 1994, 103-104). This environment had a strong effect on the experiences of the Smith family as young Joseph grew up.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton

Recognizing the relationship between religion and magic is of utmost importance when trying to understand the existing socioreligious context of Joseph Smith's time and his foundation of the LDS Church. The influence of magic on the church is still visible today and often considered negatively. However, without what LDS scholar D. Michael Quinn terms the “magic world view” that Smith and his contemporaries held, the Church would never have come to be. In *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss explains a dependent relationship between religion and magic:

For, although it can, in a sense, be said that religion consists in a *humanization of natural laws* and magic in a *naturalization of human actions*- the treatment of certain human actions *as if* they were an integral part of physical determinism- these are not alternatives or stages in an evolution. The anthropomorphism of nature (of which religion consists) and the physiomorphism of man (by which we have defined magic) constitute two components which are always given and vary only in proportion. As we noticed earlier, each implies the other. There is no religion without magic any more than there is magic without at least a trace of religion. (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 221)

To define what I mean by the magic world view, and specifically how it relates to Mormonism, I will be borrowing from Quinn’s extensive work on the subject, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Quinn gives examples of modern definitions for “magic” and he also quotes a definition from an 1820 essay, which both reflects the modern, and provides a definition for the time period in which Joseph Smith was coming of age. “[Magic] may generally be described as supposing the existence & agency of certain excessive undefinable powers, or extending the range of those powers with which we are acquainted to a height beyond the limits which experience authorizes” (Quinn 1998, xxii). In

comparing magic and religion, Quinn states that “both religion and magic involve supernatural coercion, intricate rituals, and efforts to understand the otherworldly and ineffable” (Quinn 1998, xxvi).

Quinn then describes four other characteristics he feels complete the description of the magic world view. First, is an animistic worldview, in which there is no distinction living and non- living things, everything has a soul. Second, nothing is a symbol. “Special words, signs, numbers, and ‘inanimate’ objects are in themselves powerful, even when they also represent something else.” Third, every event has causation; therefore nothing that occurs is random or coincidental. Finally, the magic world view is perceived as rational and is “emotionally satisfying” for those who operate in it (Quinn 1998, xxiv).

This fourth characteristic of the magic world view that Quinn lays out, may for our purposes be the most important, especially when people are attempting to understand today how the magic world view relates to past events. Not only did those who held a magic world view find it spiritually and emotionally satisfying, it also made rational sense to them. They saw it at work in the world around them and intellectually accepted it. Many current views deem belief in magic “backward” and it conjures an image of lower class, uneducated believers, but social class and literacy did not affect belief in folk religion and magic in the 19th century (Quinn 1998, xv). The influence of magic can be seen in the spiritualist trend which swept the intellectual landscape of America during that time.

The magic world view was a significant factor in the early life of Joseph Smith Jr. The Smiths seem to be a prime case study in the interaction between millennial Christianity and magic. It seems clear that Joseph Sr.'s spiritual seeking had a profound effect on the son who, although was he and his wife's third, was his namesake. Joseph Jr. took after his father in remaining unattached to any institutional form of Christianity. The Smith family had various denominational leanings at different points, however never comfortably settled into any group until Joseph Jr. gave them a spiritual home.

The Smith family moved often, more than once the result of being financially taken advantage of, and Joseph Sr. was never able to gain the financial security his growing family needed. In his teens Joseph Jr., Joseph Sr. and Lucy's fifth child (out of eleven, of them nine would live past infancy), took up treasure divining as an additional way to bring home income. This fact is often used against the future prophet's legitimacy; however, treasure seeking was much more normal than it would be considered today. Brooke even explains that it may be admirable when its illegal counterpart, counterfeiting, is taken into consideration.

The treasure divining that exploded after the Revolution seems to have been a spiritual defense against the temptation to engage in counterfeit trade.... Diviners clearly had the opportunity to take the plunge into counterfeiting, yet they chose an occult way to wealth. However much in vain- and perhaps silly- divining would not harm the community and required an intense belief in the sympathy of the natural and supernatural. (Brooke 1994, 127)

Treasure divining could be done in various ways. Once he began to build a reputation as a treasure seeker in his community, Joseph Smith used a method utilizing a "peep stone" or seer stone which allowed the diviner to see where

treasure was located. Records kept during this time vary about specifics, but Smith was apparently contracted a number of times for his perceived skills. The Smiths were struggling to survive, so along with helping on his father's farm, young Joseph did what he could to help the family financially. Later, he would help them in the spiritual quest that stretched back for generations.

CHAPTER 3

THE STORY

You don't know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history... I don't blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I would not have believed it myself.

- Joseph Smith Jr, King Follett Discourse, April 7, 1844

Any historian knows that there is a gap between what actually happened at a given moment in time, and what history recalls happened. Though most take care to ensure that gap is as small as possible, it is always there, as there is always some measure of interpretation necessary in writing. However, when the writer in question is not an impartial observer, but calls himself the Prophet of the church who's history he is compiling for future generations of his flock, questions about historical accuracy can range from the devout that believe no difference between the stories exist, and those that think he fabricated it to suit his intentions. This can be seen as a problem for using a source legitimately; yet, for my purposes, I do not believe it matters. What matters to this study is how Joseph Smith organized his church, so what he said happened in the process trumps what may have actually happened. It is not my place to decide whether God, Jesus, angels or anyone else visited Smith. Smith said that they did, and people believed him, and that is what counts. For this reason, I will use Smith's accounts, as written in his *History of the Church* not only because they became the orthodox viewpoint, but more importantly they are what got people to join the Church. Without Smith's perceived experiences, there would have been no history to write.

Smith opens the first chapter of his history by explaining his purpose.

Owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil- disposed and designing persons... I have been induced to write this history, to disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth into possession of the facts, as they have transpired, in religion both to myself and the Church, in so far as I have such facts in my possession. (Smith 1978, 1)

Smith begins his history with an event that is often told today as the beginning of the LDS church, Smith's First Vision, which is said to have taken place in 1820.⁵ It is interesting to note, that from all of the accounts from friends and neighbors of the Smiths, none mention hearing of this vision. Many neighbors remembered young Joseph and gave reports about him, his money- digging, and his finding the gold plates, but only his mother's history corroborates hearing the story about his having had this vision.

According to Smith's official account, when he was 15 his mother, brothers Hyrum and Samuel and sister Sophronia joined the Presbyterian Church. Smith states that "During this time of great excitement, my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness" (Smith 1978, 3). He longed to join a church, but was unsure which one, as each would claim the others to be false and how he could be certain the church he joined would be the right one (Smith 1978, 3). His answer came, it would seem, straight from God when he read James 1:5. "If any of you lack wisdom; let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him" (Smith 1978, 4). Smith states that "never did any passage of Scripture come with more power to the heart of man

⁵ Joseph gives the date of this vision as being in 1820, the year he turned 14. However, he states during the story of the vision it took place when he was 15. Smith is recalling this history many years later, which is probably the reason for the discrepancy.

than this did at this time to mine" (Smith 1978, 4). It is clear that this passage remained important for Smith, as continuing revelation has always held a special place in the LDS church. Smith learned to ask God in times of uncertainty, and according to his history and documented revelations, God always answered.

Smith went out into the woods, "and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God" (Smith 1978, 5). He describes the appearance of a pillar of light which descended upon him. In it, he saw "two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air." He proceeded to ask them which of the Christian churches were right, and which he should join. "I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in His sight" (Smith 1978, 6). We are able, and it seems expected, to assume the personages are God and Jesus, as one pointed to the other and said "This is my Beloved Son, hear him," (Smith 1978, 5) and by virtue of the fact Smith went to inquire of God and considers his questions answered after this experience, but Smith never actually names them.

Thanks to Smith's written history, the First Vision becomes the beginning of Smith's path to prophethood; however, at the beginning of his mission it was of much less significance. Most early followers heard the story of the Book of Mormon first, and it would seem that the importance of Smith's First Vision became significant in hindsight. Quinn explains that visions of God were not out of the ordinary during Joseph's time. His research shows that "devout claims of seeing God were quite common, particularly by adolescents" and that there were

many stories about young people seeing the Father and Son published around that time (Quinn 1998, 15). Thanks to the magic world view of the time, the miraculous discovery of the Book of Mormon was a bigger deal than a religious vision which many claimed to have. Most converts heard the story of the Book of Mormon first, and then the First Vision as corroboration that Smith was called by God.

After telling of his First Vision, Smith glosses over the next three years of his life, which both Smith's contemporary critics and those today note as the time Smith began divining for treasure. He claims that "having been forbidden to join any of the religious sects of the day, and being of very tender years... I was left to all kinds of temptations" (Smith 1978, 6). It seems as though he admits he transgressed but it was not really his fault since he did not have religious guidance, so he cannot fully be blamed for his actions during this period.

On the night of September 21st, 1823, Joseph set out to ask God's forgiveness "for all my sins and follies." Quinn presents that Smith picked this night specifically to seek out God again, as it was the autumnal equinox. Astrological guides and almanacs described what nights there could be expected to be more spiritual activity. Quinn states that "published guides specified the hour and day of Joseph Smith's 1823 prayer 'to commune with some kind of messenger' was ideal for the invocation of spirits" (Quinn 1998, 144). Smith was answered again by the appearance of a floating personage engulfed in light. The personage identified himself as Moroni, and told Joseph that God had a plan for him (Smith 1978, 11). "He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold

plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent... He also said that the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it” (Smith 1978, 12). Along with the plates were two stones, the Urim and Thummim, which were to be used to translate the book. Joseph was told that he would be the one to rediscover and translate the plates, and was given instructions that he should not show the plates to anyone once he had them in his possession. While Moroni was explaining all this, Joseph had a vision of the place where he would find the plates, “so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it” (Smith 1978, 13). Joseph claimed Moroni appeared to him three times that night, each time reiterating what he had said before.

The following day, in which Smith set out to find the spot he had seen in a vision the night before, was also of special significance for one who held the magic world view. Quinn claims that “Astrological guides specified that this was a day ‘good to find out treasures hid’ and ‘conduceth to the finding of treasures’” (Quinn 1998, 145). Whether coincidence or luck, this day would provide the greatest treasure hid Joseph would ever find. Astrology was not the only magic resource Smith used in finding the Book of Mormon. It seems that Joseph used three different seer stones as a diviner but that his favorite was a brown stone he found when digging a well for a Mr. Chase, the spot of which had been shown to him by using another stone. Quinn explains that “both Mormon and non- Mormon sources agreed that Joseph Jr. used his brown treasure- seeking stone to discover the gold plates” (Quinn 1998, 145). He has documented this by compiling many statements in which people claim Smith used the stone he found in Chases well.

Although Smith found the plates in 1823, he would not be allowed to take possession of them until four years later. He chronicles that he visited the spot each year on September 22nd and was visited by Moroni who gave him further instructions but did not allow him to take the plates until 1827.

Smith claims that after he finally brought the plates home, members of his community attempted to steal them, prompting him to move with his wife, Emma to Harmony, Pennsylvania. A wealthy farmer in Smiths hometown of Palmyra, New York, named Martin Harris, took an early interest in Smiths find and gave him money for the trip. In April 1828, Harris traveled to Harmony to help Smith record the translated Book of Mormon. Smith used the Urim and Thummim, which were attached to a breastplate, to translate and read aloud what he saw. A sheet separated him from Harris, as no one but Joseph was to see the plates themselves, while Harris wrote what Smith translated.

Joseph recounts in his history that by June 14th, he and Harris had a 116 page manuscript. Harris had been requesting that Smith allow him to take the translation home to show some members of his family. According the Lucy Mack Smith's account, Harris' wife Lucy had become suspicious Joseph was attempting to swindle her husband, and Harris wanted to prove that he was helping Smith do God's work. Smith explains that he repeatedly asked God for permission to give the work to Harris, and "after much solicitation, I again inquired of the Lord, and permission was granted him to have the writings on certain conditions" (Smith 1978, 21). While Harris was at home, the manuscript went missing, possibly stolen and hidden by Lucy Harris. Joseph received a revelation from God that

since whoever held the manuscript could change it to discredit him he would not be allowed to translate from the same plates again. He would now translate the plates of Nephi, which gave a more detailed description of the same events he and Harris had originally translated (Smith 1978, 26).

As could be expected, Smith's reliance on Harris diminished, and without a scribe the translation process slowed almost to a stop, with Emma filling in occasionally. Smith began to translate again in April of 1829, this time with the help of Oliver Cowdry, a houseguest of his father's who took a quick interest in the book. Smith began working with Cowdry the day after they met, and he would remain Smith's scribe and second in command in the early years of the church. Working quickly, the men finished the translation by the end of the summer and the Book of Mormon was published the following year.

CHAPTER 4

THE REACTION

The Book of Mormon was the catapult that flung Joseph Smith to a place in the sun. But it could not be responsible for his survival there. The book lives today because of the prophet, not he because of the book.

- Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 1945

There is no doubt that this statement from Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith is in part correct, but only when the whole history of the LDS church is taken into account. Although it could be argued Smith's influence, once in his "place in the sun," had more of an effect on the growth of the church, one cannot disregard the "catapult" itself. Many scholars, including Jan Shipps, have argued that the importance of the Book of Mormon itself has been replaced in history by the story of Joseph Smith. The two are inextricably linked of course, but for the purposes of this study, how the first Mormon converts came to believe and join this new faith needs more attention. And for many religious seekers of Smith's time, it was the "golden bible" that fascinated and drew them in, not just the man holding it. It was these early hearers who allowed Smith to take his place in history, and their journeys which lead them to the Church are just as important as Joseph's. The first reactions to the Book of Mormon set the stage for subsequent conversions and the spread of the Church.

This is not to say, though, that any 19th century 20-something New Yorker could have created what Smith did with just the Book of Mormon as a starting point. An early influential leader of the church, Parley P. Pratt described that Smith "interested and edified, while, at the same time, he amused and entertained his audience; and none listened to him that were ever weary with his

discourse.”⁶ Smith and the Book have a mutually dependent relationship: he could not have made it without the book, and the book could not have lasted, as Brodie said, without him. Shipps explains that

Smith was a significant figure, but something more than the magnetic force of his personality explains the Mormon movement and the organization of the church that would become the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That those who gathered around the prophet had a leader who, they were certain, had prophetic gift was important. But they were seekers; they wanted certainty and evidence of truth. (Shipps 2000, 51)

Smith’s very first audience, for everything from his visions to his recovery of the plates, was his family, especially his parents Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith. They gave him his religious foundation, based on their own beliefs in the tie between Christianity and folk occult traditions. Shipps stresses just how important their reaction was to Smith’s development. Smith’s family did not just believe him when he recounted his vision of Moroni and the promise of the plates; they offered him unquestioning support and welcomed God’s interest in their religious struggle. Joseph Jr. was never doubted to have seen God and his messengers, so he may have never second guessed himself. He went forward knowing he could not only not ostracize himself from the most important people in his life but would actually be bringing home the religious answers his family had been seeking for generations (Shipps 1987, 9).

The next groups who began to read and believe the Book of Mormon were members of Smith's community. Smith had told friends and acquaintances that he was searching for a “gold Bible” a messenger from God had promised would be

⁶ From Pratt’s posthumously published autobiography. As quoted in *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

revealed to him, and word traveled once he found it. Smith's treasure seeking and use of “peep-stones” in his adolescence and early adulthood is often viewed as a liability by both church historians and non- Mormon scholars today. However, we have very different opinions of those types of activities in our society than those who were hearing Smith’s story in the late 1820's. Because he had a history of treasure seeking, he was actually more believable to people who accepted that as possible. He had some credibility in his community before the Book of Mormon, so when he told them he found it using his methods they already believed in, he was more credible, and the book was more likely to be real, than if he had been someone with no divination history at all (Shipps 1987, 11).

To be blunt, today many feel the story sounds ridiculous, and people try to use it as a weapon against LDS members but as already discussed, while our times may be their own, we do not share the same magic world view that Smith’s peers did. To discount the credibility of this story appeals to our modern understanding of common sense, that Smith provided no evidence that his story was true. However, by his times standards, Smith's evidence was what made him so believable when he told his story. As Moore says, “the intellectual plausibility of Mormonism needs to be stressed much more strongly than many accounts have done” (Moore 1986, 40). Although no one saw the plates, Smith's first converts could hold a concrete book in their hand that came from a source they accepted as legitimate (treasure seeking). It may seem unusual by today’s standards of what can be considered as evidence but “many Americans of that period, in part because of popular enthusiasm for science, were ready to listen to any claim that

appealed to something that could be interpreted as empirical evidence” (Moore 1986, 40). In their mind, the Book of Mormon did not require empirical evidence; it *was* the evidence. Rather than just claim that he had visions, Smith could offer an object, which once translated the people could read, which was made accessible to them by methods they considered legitimate. As Shipps states the Book of Mormon “provided Smith's credentials” (Shipps 2000, 33).

Much work has been done covering the period of time in America called the Second Great Awakening, and recounting the constant revivals of the area where Smith spent much of his early life, New York’s “burned over district.” Although many Americans did not belong to a specific denomination, they were familiar with basic, millennial Protestantism as it was constantly blowing through their towns. Smith’s small group that would eventually grow into the LDS church “was one version of a millennial idea that appeared in many guises in the period between 1830 and 1850” (Moore 1986, 39). It was vaguely familiar, yet offered authority and structure that was hard to find as revivals moved into town just to leave again.

The LDS Church also incorporated the folk magic traditions that many were reconciling with their own personal version of Christianity. When these seekers had previously joined a Christian denomination, they brought their occult beliefs with them in some way. Smith negated the need to figure out how their old beliefs could be reconciled with the new as they were already included. As Brooke claims “a mass of evidence suggests that the various manifestations of a popular hermeticism- Freemasonry, divining, and counterfeiting- played an

important role in shaping the cultural experience of future Mormons” (Brooke 1994, 144). Smith’s recounting of his first vision even gave them a clear reason for their spiritual drifting; God Himself had said none of the churches thus far established were right. It was not a far stretch to deduce that that was a good reason to not have joined one so far. Those who could not settle down were right all along, as they were just waiting for God’s true church to be reestablished in America, even if they did not know it.

The Book of Mormon was also appealing to those citizens who believed in American exceptionalism. Richard L. Bushman explains that "the Book of Mormon can be read as a nationalist text” (Bushman 2007, 101). The history of the Americas recounted in the text stretched back hundreds of years, and it gave the United States a sacred history to those who believed it. “Embedding America in the Bible necessarily hallowed the nation,” and enforced the strong tie between “American values” and “Mormon values.” God’s church was now also being established in America and it would be the final gathering place for the faithful.

Of course, not all reaction to Smith’s claims was positive. Tales of persecution have been with Smith from the beginning, from the time he was put on trial for his money-digging exploits by a family member of a former client who thought Smith was a fraud, to his fellow diviners who tried to steal the golden plates from him considering them treasure and wanting their share. Although many of Smith’s peers held similar religious views, that does not mean no one had doubts about a guy who claimed he dug up an ancient text which completely settled the religious upheaval of the time and restored the true

Christian church. The idea of God finally setting Christianity straight sounded nice to his would- be followers, but according to him, God Himself said all of the existing forms of Christianity were wrong. That did not sit well with other Christian leaders of the time. Martin Marty describes how another prominent religious leader, Alexander Campbell "dismissed this book of his rivals with a charge that while it supposedly came from the past, it debated 'every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years.' All too conveniently it decided the controversies of infant baptism, the Trinity, the government and freemasonry" (Marty 1984, 201). Campbell was an early opponent of the church, especially after the conversion of Sidney Rigdon, who took his congregation with him when he left the Campbellites to join the Mormons.

Whether positive or negative, almost from the beginning in the United States "most everyone who wrote about Joseph Smith's church... asserted that Mormons were not like other Americans" (Moore 1986, 27). Up to this point, many effects of his surroundings worked out to Smith's advantage as he launched his new faith. However, there must have been more going on with the greater population, or else Smith and his followers could have ended up as much smaller, more localized group barely remembered through the years. After the church was established, it needed a way to both expand and deal with being considered an "other." To hear Smith tell the story himself, as in his Church History, one gets a sense of a seriously alienated and persecuted budding group which continued to struggle against the odds. However, a fundamental question arises, why would

such reviled and persecuted group continue to rapidly missionize and gain converts?

One of the tasks Smith claimed his life would hold after his first vision would be to restore the true Christian church. However, Moore explains that “a fundamental contradiction pervaded Smith’s career... His professed aim was to restore the universal church. Yet, throughout his career, he constantly searched for new way to distinguish his church from every other church” (Moore 1986, 36). In his book, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, Moore explores American religious groups which share the label of being "outsiders" and the interdependent relationship between their identities and the American people. The question of why one would join a persecuted church is often asked of all the groups he discusses.

People who join new religious groups generally bear, or think that they bear, marks of social or cultural disadvantage...They came to their new religion, which guaranteed them a life that provoked opposition, already thinking of themselves as outsiders. What Mormonism had to provide, if its appeal was to be successful, was a meaningful content for that outsider role. Mormonism... gave its converts an identity that worked. (Moore 1986, 41)

It is this appeal, that of being an outsider who belongs somewhere, an alternate identity to just feeling like an other, that proved indispensable for Smith once he figured out how it worked.

CHAPTER 5

IDENTITY

Behold, it is my will, that all they who call on my name, and worship me according to mine everlasting gospel, should gather together... And all they who suffer persecution for my name, and endure in faith, though they are called to lay down their lives for my sake yet shall they partake of all this glory.

- Revelation to Joseph Smith Jr, Doctrine and Covenants 101:22 & 35, December 16 1833

In April 1830, Joseph Smith formally founded the Community of Christ, which would later be called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although a religious group had been forming around Smith for the previous few years since he discovered and translated the Book -of Mormon, the actually founding of a new religious movement marked a key shift in the lives of Smith and his followers. Smith's role shifted from translating the word of God as a seer to directly relaying His messages as the prophet and leader of His reestablished church. The earliest believers of the Book of Mormon were Christian seekers who held an additional book to be sacred along with the Bible but as this group grew, they began to form a people. They became their own religion, and Smith needed to define what being a member of his Church meant.

Smith laid out the basic religious principles of his Church in a creed called the Articles of Faith in 1842. Comprised of 13 statements which all members find to be true, they lay out a beginners understanding of what a "Mormon" is, at least, what they believe. Standing alone, they cover similar topics as other Christian groups at the time, and distinguish specific beliefs including adult baptism, the continued availability of spiritual gifts and belief that along with the Bible the Book of Mormon is the word of God. They do not generally reflect a very

divergent form of Christianity from what most Americans were used to, even if some beliefs were not shared. If only this evidence were to be taken into account, one would never guess that the LDS church had as many assimilation problems as it seemed to for almost 100 years. But of course, who a religious group is cannot solely be evaluated by what it believes.

It would seem that whether a group, religious or otherwise, is considered to be an "other" or "outsider," the mainstream they are segregated from would have agreed upon the standard that put them there. In the United States, it is not determined by our government who is an accepted religion and who is not, or by a state church, so if a religious tradition is generally agreed upon as being "outsider," what has put it there? Joseph Smith's church did not theologically start out as very radical. His visions were in the realm of possibility and the idea of another testament to Jesus Christ being found on American soil was fascinating to many. Perhaps then, the church itself was not the sole cause of its own eventual "outsider" status but those who would come together to form it.

It is hard to draw a line between where a group of Mormons end and the LDS church begins, especially in the early years, however, both are responsible for the church and members identification as "other" to the rest of America. The church, while theologically not too far from the mainstream, offered an entire text which was completely unlike anything that had been published before. As for the Mormons, as previously discussed, people who are attracted to new religious movements already feel as though they do not belong.

Rather than consider the history of the LDS church as the break off of another Christian sect, Jan Shipps compares its formation to that of early Christianity once it began to become a religion of its own as opposed to a sect of Judaism. Mormons consider themselves Christians, and do share common beliefs, however, this has lead to many other Christian groups to view their different doctrines and beliefs, for example exaltation and that men may become gods in eternal life, heretical.⁷ Therefore, thinking of the LDS church as a new religious tradition proves much more useful in understanding how it has developed such a separate faith system and identity (Shipps 1987, ix-x).

Shipps has recognized that the history told in the Book of Mormon had serious implications for the Mormons. "As the Christian story is neither simply a reinterpretation nor continuation of the Hebraic- Judaic story, so the Mormon story departs significantly from the story of Abraham and the histories of Israel and Christianity as those stories are understood by Christians and Jews" (Shipps 1987, 46). The histories which are rooted in ancient Judaism and Christianity became completely useless to the Mormons.

According to the Book of Mormon, two groups of ancient Israelites came from Jerusalem to the Americas. The first, led by Jared, (the group became known as the Jaredites) came at the time of the Tower of Babel (Ether 1 and 6) and the second led by Lehi, left right before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 589 BCE (1 Nephi 18). Christ visited the inhabitants of the Americas after the Resurrection, and established a church among the descendents of Lehi known as

⁷ For instance, the belief that "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become," attributed to former Church president, Lorenzo Snow.

the Nephites (3 Nephi 11-28), but the group was eventually wiped out by another group descendant of Lehi, the Lamanites (Mormon 6). Since the stories of the Book of Mormon draw an alternate history than that of Judaism and Christianity the Mormons needed to reexamine their place. Like the American Revolutionaries, they became a people who were starting over. The reality of this separate history essentially lead to an identity crisis for the Mormons. Shipps explains that “standing on the threshold of a new age, the first Mormons were, then, suspended between an unusable past, and an incertain future, returned as it were to a primordial state” (Shipps 1987, 52).

This sense of separation from the former shared past of other Christians seriously contributed to the feeling of being outsiders for the Mormons. Not only were they joining a brand new Church, but now they were essentially wiping away their history. From an early point Smith also encouraged missionizing outside of the US. Joseph himself went on missions to Canada beginning in 1833 (Smith 1978, Vol. 1, Chapter 30) and an extensive British missionary effort was begun in 1841 (Smith 1978, Vol. 2, Chapter 35). Some of the new Mormons actually were outsiders, having immigrated to the United States after being converted. The church gave them a home once they arrived, but they, like the American- born Mormons, needed a new identity to situate their lives around. Each Mormon, for one reason or another, felt they did not belong until they joined the LDS. The feeling of belonging kept the group together, and the group needed to continue to identify with one another.

In order to establish themselves as a distinctive group, according to Moore, the “Mormons had to invent an identity for themselves and that required them to maintain certain fictions of cultural apartness” (Moore 1986, 32). The Mormon identity Smith cultivated is very similar to that which we have previously discussed as the American identity. Moore claims that “(Mormon) identity rested on a highly schizophrenic set of relations with the American experiment” (Moore 1986, 26). Led by Smith, the Mormons needed to nurture the identity of being outsiders to ensure that they would stick together.

Although Smith may not have been consciously creating what would become the Mormon identity, he most certainly shaped the discourse that led to its formation. The paradox that was first visible in Smith's dialogue has remained with the Church throughout its history. Smith acted as though the Mormons should not be considered outsiders and that they just wanted to belong. However, actions speak louder than words, and his leadership showed that fitting in with the rest of the country was not what the Church was meant to do. Joseph said that the rest of the country was alienating them, when they were really alienating themselves.

Since being considered an “outsider” group actually helped the young LDS, the reality that there was not much difference between the Mormons and other Americans may have stunted its growth. Therefore, the church needed to foster this sense that the Mormons were different anytime it was not apparent. Basically, “Mormons were different because they said they were different and because their claims, frequently advanced in the most obnoxious way possible,

prompted others to agree and treat them as such” (Moore 1986, 31). This, then, is the key to unlocking the Mormon identity paradox. Mormons can regard themselves as good Americans while not being like other Americans, because they have convinced themselves and the outside world that it is so (Moore 1986, 45).

By exacerbating the differences between themselves and other Americans, early Mormons were able to distinguish when they were continuing to be "othered" by the rest of the country. From the beginning, Smith told his followers of the persecution that was thrust upon him once he accepted his religious calling. In his written history, every hardship becomes "persecution." After his first vision, Smith claims that “professors of religion” and “men of high standards” all began to persecute him (Smith 1978, 7). He even explains that he and his wife Emma eloped because “owing to my continuing to assert that I had seen a vision, persecution still followed me, and my wife’s fathers family were very much opposed to our being married” (Smith 1978, 17). Every other source describes that Emma’s father, Isaac Hale, was against the marriage because he disapproved of Smith’s money- digging profession as it had gotten him arrested in 1826, and charged with being a “disorderly person,” and he feared that Smith would not be able to provide for his daughter. Writing ten years later, after the formation of his church, Smith turns this fatherly concern into religious repression.

Smith made sure that every future Mormon knew that though this was the true Church, it would come at the price of stigmatization, isolation and possibly violent oppression. This feeling of separation proved crucial for the church.

Moore explains that, “religious groups that have founded their identities on a strong sense of being outsiders have been an indispensably dynamic force in American religious history” (Moore 1986, 21). The Mormon identity was dependent on persecution, and other Americans spent 100 years giving them exactly what they needed.

CHAPTER 6

THE MORMONS AFTER JOSEPH

Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it... He lived great, and he died great in the eyes of God and his people; and like most of the Lord's anointed in ancient times, has sealed his mission and his works with his own blood...

- John Taylor, Doctrine and Covenants 135:3, 1844

Although even until today the LDS church considers its history as riddled with one bitter persecution after another, one pivotal event solidified the mindset of victimhood for the LDS church more so than any other. On June 27, 1844, Joseph Smith Jr. was killed in a mob at the jailhouse in Carthage, Illinois, where he had been arrested several days prior. The martyrdom of the prophet was not comparable to anything the Saints had endured prior, but it seems that Joseph understood it was a very real possibility. With such growing resistance, perhaps that his life would have such a violent end did not come as much of a surprise. Expected or not, it seems he did what he could to ensure that the Saints were able to survive after his death.

Moore explains that “although one may confidently state that Smith did not plan his death, he knowingly courted it and did not forget to prepare his followers for it” (Moore 1986, 37). This is clear from his correspondence from Carthage. In a letter to his wife, dated June 26th, he wrote “Dear Emma, I am very much resigned to my lot, knowing I am justified, and have done the best that could be done” (Wicks and Foister 2005, 167). In his memoirs, Joseph’s lawyer says that on the same day Smith told him “I want you to go and prepare my

people, for I will never live to see another sun. They have determined to murder me, and I never expect to see you again” (Wicks and Foister 2005, 170).

Joseph and his brother Hyrum had been arrested for inciting a riot and for treason against the state of Illinois after Joseph organized his militia, the Nauvoo Legion, and declared martial law, the summation of a heated dispute with a group of excommunicated members. While being held at Carthage jail with two other church elders, John Taylor and Willard Richards, the building was surrounded by 200 members of Carthage and Warsaw Illinois militiamen. Some assembled to ensure the Nauvoo legion did not attempt to break the Smiths out of jail, but some came with the specific purpose of making sure Joseph Smith did not live to see the next day. Members of the mob entered the jail, went to the second floor room that contained the four men and began to fire.

Taylor was also shot but recovered and wrote an account of the incident which would become Doctrine and Covenants 135, part of LDS scripture. Taylor describes that “Joseph leaped from the window, and was shot dead in the attempt, exclaiming ‘Oh Lord my God!’” (135:1). In examining the political connections between Smiths presidential campaign and his murder, which they consider an assassination, Robert S. Wicks and Fred R. Foister note that Smith's exclamation makes up “the first four words of the Masonic plea for help” (Wicks and Foister 2005, 178). Smith was a Master Mason and perhaps hoped this last ditch effort could save him, as he was unsure of who exactly his attackers were. Sources vary as to whether Smith was dead before he hit the ground 15 feet below, but four men surrounded his body and fired at him again.

Taylor seems to have taken quick control of the story as one of the only two living Mormon witnesses. Also in D&C 135, he claims that when Joseph surrendered himself to the jail a few days prior, he said “I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I SHALL DIE INNOCENT, AND IT SHALL YET BE SAID OF ME- HE WAS MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD” (135:4). That the prophet was ready to be killed for the faith, the latest of so many persecutions, cemented that the Mormons were a part of something worth dying for. As Martin E. Marty wrote “the Mormons were given the greatest boon a struggling movement can want, a martyr” (Marty 1984, 204). Although the church was devastated, Moore also explains that because Smith prepared his followers for his death “the Nauvoo Mormons were mentally prepared to follow any leader who could reinforce their sense of distinctiveness” (Moore 1986, 38). Smith never taught his flock he would live forever, so they were aware that someday the church would need to be led by someone else.

It can be argued that had Smith really thought his time was running out, he should have described a process of succession for the leadership of the church. It seems that Joseph planned for his brother Hyrum to be his successor, which can be considered another indication that Joseph felt he would die of unnatural causes, as Hyrum was five years older. The crisis which ensued over who would take over leadership of the church and what their title and role would be threatened to tear the church apart. Eventually, the President of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young, was sustained as the President of the Church in 1847.

Under the leadership of Young, the Saints would embark on a journey that they likened to the Biblical Exodus. According to Marty, prior to his death “Smith had written that he and his people should seek to ‘secure a resting place in the mountains, or some uninhabited region, where we can enjoy the liberty of conscience guaranteed to us by the Constitution of our country’” (Marty 1984, 204). In settling in the Great Salt Lake region, the Mormons were not trying to leave the United States, they wanted to separate themselves from the rest of the country. For years their neighbors in multiple states had been telling them to get out, and they finally did. President Millard Fillmore appointed Young as the governor of the territory of Utah, and the Saints attempted to gain statehood as early as 1849.

Shipps points out that this separation did not help relations between the Mormon and non- Mormon world, as after they moved to Utah, most contact between the groups ceased. The Saints fostered the legacy of being run out of their home while non- Mormons only had what they heard and read to inform them, which usually came in the form of exposés of a strange religious group (Shipps 1987, 79). Hostility between the two groups festered and finally reached a turning point in 1857 after what would come to be called the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

As a group of migrants from Missouri and Arkansas were making their way across Mormon territory in September of 1857, rumors abounded in nearby communities about their intentions. The Mormons considered the possibility that some were involved in the recent murder of one of Joseph Smiths earliest

followers, Parley Pratt in Arkansas in May of that year and that those from Missouri participated in the expulsion of the Mormons in 1838. As the group was camped at Mountain Meadows, members of the Mormon militia of nearby communities joined Paiute Native Americans to attack them on September 7th. Fighting ensued for the following days until September 11th, when members of the Mormon militia approached the camp and promised to lead them to safety if they would abandon their campsite and arms. On a signal the Mormons then shot and killed all members of the group except children they considered too young to remember the event.

After the end of the American Civil War, prosecution began for one member of the Mormon militia, John D. Lee. Lee's trial attracted national news coverage and in 1877 he was found guilty and executed. It could never be proved what, if any, role Young played in the events, as his claims that he did not know about the massacre until after it occurred could not be refuted. News outlets still insinuated that the entire Church was involved in the massacre, and it enhanced the image of a volatile group of religious misfits that did not belong with the rest of the country.

After Lee's execution, most national attention to the Mormons focused on Utah's continued attempts to gain statehood. The national government had multiple problems with the way Utah was run. The church dominated Utah's politics and economy. Jeffery C. Fox details that the church needed to divest many of its interests in Utah before it could become a state (Fox 2006, 33). Although at times it has seemed the Mormons opposed the US government, what

they were actually against was how they perceived the government was treating them. Quite often the government was on the other side of the persecution of the Saints according to Joseph. Smith had run into disputes with government officials including Missouri governor Lilburn Bogg, who issued an executive order to drive the Mormons out of his state as well as the governor of Illinois, Thomas Ford, who visited Smith at Carthage jail and many consider to have been complicit in his murder. Smith also taught, however, that the Constitution of the United States was a divine document, and the Saints wanted their home to be a state. Regardless of how certain members of the government treated them, idealistically the United States government was still considered by the Mormons to be the best government until God set up his kingdom on Earth.

Of course, there was also always the issue of polygamy, a practice first introduced by Smith which was a major moral transgression in American society. Although they did not feel they should have to give it up as a matter of their constitutionally protected religious liberty, in 1890 church president Wilford Woodruff officially disavowed the practice. This opened the door for Utah's statehood in 1896; nevertheless, the stigma of polygamy remained attached to the Mormons in the eyes of other Americans.

After the end of the Second World War, how the American public began to view the LDS church and its members began to shift. Many Mormons who fought in the war did not return to Utah, thus beginning the Mormon Diaspora. Mormon families became neighbors to the non- Mormon world, and friendly ones at that. Jan Shipps places a great deal of emphasis on the emerging technology of

the time as helping in Mormon assimilation in the eyes of America. The famous Tabernacle choir could now be recorded and listened to all over the country, and traveling to Salt Lake City became easier (Shipps 1987, 99).

While these factors helped in familiarizing America with who Mormons really were, as opposed to the strange, polygamous cult members they had long thought them to be, once again the climate of the country proved of utmost importance as it was when Joseph founded the church. During this period, Mormons went beyond just being accepted as Americans, but became the model of what good Americans are. They seemed to encompass the American identity even though they had been stigmatized first 100 years of their existence.

If we accept Morone's theory that Americans have constructed their identity through a changing moral code, it is to be expected the social upheaval of the country during the 1960s would have a profound effect on what being "American" meant. The Church had abandoned the greatest moral discrepancy between Mormons and the rest of America, polygamy, generations before, and now there was little to distinguish them from "normal" Americans. In addition, the American identity was disintegrating across the country, but as the Mormons became a more visible and familiar group, they seemed to embody what America thought it was losing. The Mormons seemed to remain in the idyllic all American 1950s while the rest of the country fell into the sex and drug crazed 1960s. Shipps claims "I am convinced that it was the dramatic discrepancy between clean-cut Mormons and scruffy hippies that completed the transformation of the Mormon image from the quasi- foreign, somewhat alien likeness that it had in the

nineteenth century to the more than 100 percent super-American portrait of the late sixties and early seventies (Shipps 1987, 100).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail

- Revelation to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdry, Doctrine and Covenants 6:34, April, 1829

Mitt Romney's reliance on his family history in the LDS movement cannot strictly be seen as a political maneuver to get around an uncommon religion. It may seem strange in a land of religious freedom to rest on the fact that he was born into a religious tradition when we assume he could have left it to join another. However, the identity the first generations of Mormons developed in still ingrained in the minds of present day Saints. Romney has another link to Joseph Smith beyond their shared political aspirations. Mitt can trace his family tree back to the beginning of the church, and to the previously mentioned leader Parley Pratt, his great- great- grandfather. The sense of Mormon identity is so strong, some consider it more akin to an ethnic group. In fact, the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* recognized Mormons as an ethnic group (Fox 2006, 5). When considered this way, it becomes clearer to see how it is much more complex than just joining another religious group to leave the Mormon Church.

Much has changed in the perception of Mormons in the United States, however the sense that they are still not like other Americans remains. Whether they are immoral others or super- Americans does not matter, just that there is a difference between them and other Americans. "The Mormons have retained the main quality of sect- like behavior, which is insistence on a difference that *matters* between themselves and everyone else" (Moore 1986, 44). This

difference is of utmost importance when recognizing how the church developed. Moore provides the alternate example of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or RLDS, though the church changed its name in 2001 to the Community of Christ). Joseph Smith III was thought by some to be the legitimate successor to lead the church, however at the time of his father's death he was only 11. In 1860 he "reorganized" the church in Illinois where his family, headed by Joseph's first wife Emma stayed when the rest of the Church left for Utah, and officially broke away from the main church lead by Brigham Young.

The RLDS was formed of Mormons who had stayed behind when most of the Church left for Utah. Therefore, it was in a very different position with how it needed to interact with the non- Mormon world. They based the church on the Book of Mormon, but they did not continue to hold the same victim mentality Smith had originally embedded. Even though they were trying to get along, as opposed to creating difference, to survive, they have just barely done so. Even though it is the second largest Latter- day Saint movement, it claims to have only 250,000 members, compared to mainstream LDS membership approached 14 million worldwide.⁸

The morals that Morone describes as the composition of the American identity are upheld and exemplified by the LDS, making them picture perfect Americans. We define our identity as Americans by adhering to a moral code. Smith took this same concept and applied it to his church. Many of the morals overlap with those which are considered American, such as self- discipline,

⁸ The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter- day Saints (FLDS) is probably better known in the United States than the RLDS due to recent news coverage, however, it is much smaller with an estimated 10,000 members.

patriotism and a strong work ethic. Even standards Americans may not adhere to, for instance LDS dietary restrictions, are still seen as virtuous as they typify temperance. Rust comments that “(The LDS) moral code of loyalty, trustworthiness, obedience, discipline, cheerfulness, thriftiness, and cleanliness reads like the Boy Scout Law” (Rust 2004, 1). Therefore, in being a good Mormon, one is by default a good American.

The comparison between the LDS and RLDS churches exemplifies how delicate the future for Joseph Smith’s movement as a whole was. There were a great number of factors which had they gone slightly differently, the church may never have survived until today. The collective identity Smith shaped for his followers in their environment seemed to create cognitive dissonance in the minds of non- Mormons. However, the appearance that Mormons were not like other Americans was true; and the dissonance is resolved when considering what distinguished them. They were better than anyone else at being American. As a whole they continue to epitomize “Americanness” and live out the “great moral inheritance” Romney’s listeners so easily recognized. Whatever this “Americanness” is, they exemplify it. That is how they are able to seem so American while not being like other Americans; they do the best job of showing what Americans are. By creating this ideal American group, Smith was able to keep his movement from becoming just a footnote in American religious history.

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