Mormon Church

Definition: Mormons from Philip's Encyclopedia

Adventist sect, the full name of which is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was established (1830) in Manchester, New York, USA, by Joseph Smith. Believing that they were to found Zion, or a New Jerusalem, Smith and his followers moved west. They tried to settle in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, but were driven out. Joseph Smith was murdered in Illinois in 1844. Brigham Young then rose to leadership, and in 1846-47 took the Mormons to Utah.

Summary Article: Mormonism from Encyclopedia of American Studies

Mormonism is a nickname given to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, founded in the 1820s under the leadership of Joseph Smith, Jr. Those who belong to the church base their faith on both the Bible and the Book of Mormon (1830), prepared by Smith from earlier sacred texts revealed to him through angelic intervention in Palmyra, New York. Mormonism raises essential questions for a definition of America generally and especially for American studies. Precisely because the Americanness of Mormonism has been contested throughout much of its history, by politicians and by other faith communities, Mormonism reveals a great deal about American self-concepts.

Through its history Mormonism alternatingly has been described as the epitome of anti-Amerianness and as quintessentially American. For one hundred years after its founding in 1830, it was portrayed as being far outside the mainstream, even assailed by critics as a cult. Mormonism also is frequently labeled fundamentalist, although on the key issues that define modern fundamentalism in America, especially scriptural inerrancy, it is decidedly opposed, qualifying biblical truths as reliable, for example, only insofar as the texts are translated correctly. In the year 2000 the National Council of Churches noted that with a growth rate of more than 2.25 percent annually, The Church of Jesus Christ was the fastest growing “mainstream” religious body in the United States and Canada, compared, for example, to 0.5 percent growth for the Southern Baptist Convention.

Since The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized in what was later known as the Burned-over district of New York state, it often is simply defined as an American, or as Count Leo Tolstoy described it, even the American, religion. More controversial are attempts at explaining away Mormonism as no more than an echo of the cultural environment of 1830s America. But, apart from their distinct faith, the Mormons became a unique people, a native and indigenously developed American ethnic minority, sharing a religiously based culture and worldview. At the same time Mormonism has been seen as the acme of un-Americanism. In its self-concept as part of the House of Israel, it challenged ideas going back to the earliest pilgrims that America was the new Eden and Promised Land and Protestants were God's new chosen people. On a deeper level it rejected the medieval dogma of supersession, a keystone of anti-Semitism, and affirmed that the Jews have never been rejected by God as a chosen people. As American civil religion developed, it too came to see itself as the bearer of ultimate universal purpose and continuing meaning, something that Mormonism
could not share. And The Church of Jesus Christ is deeply internationalist in its sense of mission, praying for the well-being of soldiers on both sides of World War II, for example. Mormonism is inherently in conflict with the particular claims of secular nationalisms. So both politicians and religionists saw the Latter-day Saints’s self-concept as heretical.

Conflicts clearly began early with the publication of the *Book of Mormon* in Palmyra, New York. Rapid conversions came to the new faith, with its emphasis on a restoration of biblically based or primitive Christianity. It expanded with a culture based on revelation and the Bible running counter to the values of capitalism, rugged individualism, and secularism in Jacksonian America. People did not just convert to a new church or sect but by becoming Mormons rapidly became part of a people, assimilating to a complex sociopolitical and economic counterculture and a new worldview.

Mormonism’s conflicts in the nineteenth century were a paradigmatic case of government opposition to obvious religious differences. But these also were persecutions of an ethnic minority whose entire culture, including their most visible but in many ways less significant marriage and family patterns (“polygamy”), were at odds with the politically dominant majority culture in America.

Mormons' cultural differences made them the target of many of the same persecutions as other ethnic groups who either resisted or were refused assimilation into the cultural mainstream. Pogroms had driven the Latter-day Saints from Missouri and Illinois to Utah long before polygamy became a public issue in 1852. Nowhere were these attacks on the Mormon American minority more succinctly summarized than in the 1838 extermination order of Missouri governor Lilburn Boggs: “the Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state, if necessary, for the public good.” Belief in continuing divine revelation and contemporary prophets, an open canon of scripture, and reliance on lay rather than paid clergy were typical “religious” differences that motivated early conflicts. But the Mormons' biblically-based cooperative economics, including an often explicit anticapitalism and rejection of private property, clashed directly with the mainstream. This Law of Consecration allowed rapid capital accumulation and population expansion through purchase of land. Wherever they settled the Mormons had the potential to rapidly become a local political majority. An early migration into Missouri put most Mormons' antislavery values in direct disaccord with their neighbors. As conflicts arose, block voting sometimes became a mechanism of self-defense for Mormons. And mobbings were the usual response.

A hierarchical church organizational structure, often attacked as a theocracy, instead functioned with substantial local congregational governance, or common consent, by all adult members. While women, including Mormons, in Wyoming territory first gained the right to vote in 1870, in the same year Utah's Mormon, male-controlled territorial legislature extended to women the franchise in politics they had always enjoyed in its congregations. Utah women thus were the first in America to vote in federal territorial elections, continuing to do so until Congress took the vote away from Mormon women and men in the 1880s.

But despite even universal franchise Mormon self-government always was under attack as a theocratic despotism. Nowhere was the specter of theocracy more effectively used by politicians than against the Mormon city of Nauvoo, Illinois, in the 1840s. This city had been given a very liberal charter of government by state politicians seeking Mormon political support, including—like most communities—its own militia. The Illinois state legislature also commissioned Joseph Smith as the militia's commander with the rank of lieutenant-general. If Mormons had reciprocated with unquestioning support of the
majority party, they might never have been driven west. But in 1844, tired of politicians promising but not delivering, Smith mounted a third-party candidacy for president of the United States. Especially pertinent was his platform to sell federal public lands, purchase the freedom of all slaves, and prevent a civil war. Whig party leaders and slaveholders especially abhorred this. All this contributed to a vicious rise in anti-Mormon propaganda, to Smith's assassination, and to the Mormons being driven out of the United States.

The Latter-day Saints's respite from conflict while Utah still was part of Mexico ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848, when they were suddenly dragged back onto the national scene. The Compromise of 1850, engineered by politicians who long had been opposed to Mormonism, denied them statehood and brought them under territorial control with not even the protections they had enjoyed as residents and voters in the states of Missouri and Illinois. In 1852 the church made public the practice of polygamy as part of the restoration of all things biblical. This practice was legal in the territories, and the Mormons believed it also was protected under the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment. It became another cause, albeit a more sensationalistic one, for their enemies and was one basis for a political coalition that became the Republican Party in 1854. That party's electoral platform, eliminating the "twin relics of barbarism: slavery and polygamy," only gave a new rationale and fig leaf of justification for the anti-Mormonism that had thrived for a quarter-century without it. By 1857 an army would be on the march to Utah in what is only now being recognized as the first chapter of the American Civil War. The issues of local government (states' rights) and economic sectionalism (cooperative against capitalist economic regions) were paramount. Settled without bloodshed, the battle lines were nevertheless drawn.

Between 1862, when a Republican Congress passed the first explicitly anti-Mormon legislation in the Morrill Act, and 1890, when Latter-day Saints voted to cease creating new polygamous families, an entire history of church-state law was written in the Congress and the courts. A broad array of precedents was created for federal control of religious practices and beliefs (a nonpolygamist could be denied the right to vote just for affirming or refusing to deny faith in Mormonism), which remains on the books and limits the religious rights of minorities today. After 1904, when Mormon apostle Reed Smoot was seated as a U.S. senator from Utah, a slow, two-way process of accommodation proceeded. Crucial to this was, first, the federal government's having dropped in 1890 its insistence that existing polygamous marriages must be broken up, all but the first wife abandoned, and the latter wives' children bastardized; and second, the acquiescence of Congress to the creation of Utah as a state with a constitution that would maintain the first arrangement. Party politics then came very much into play, as Democrats and Republicans sought to add Utah's citizens to their national vote counts.

At the same time that politics in Utah were "Americanized," as a result of Supreme Court decisions legitimizing government seizure of church properties in the 1880s, the economic system was revolutionized. Cooperative economic institutions were abandoned and private property became the rule, since the alternative was forfeiture to the federal government of all the Mormons had built cooperatively. The conversion of Mormon settlements in Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Idaho away from a communal economy was accelerated by the impact of World War I on rural markets. The self-sufficient cooperative economy, designed by Brigham Young as a conscious alternative to either Northern industrial revolution or Southern agrarian slave-plantation economics, was dissolved by market forces, reducing Utah to one more peripheral area serving the demand of an urban core economy for raw materials. Dependency dragged the Mormon settlements of the Rocky Mountain
basin into depression through much of the 1920s and 1930s.

With a reduction of church-state conflicts generally, Mormons in the twentieth century moved out of the intermountain West in increasing numbers. Spurred by a secular interpretation of the phrase “the glory of God is intelligence,” Mormons became, per capita, a leading population in higher education generally and the sciences in particular. They increasingly moved at the same time into the political arena. While in the nineteenth century rare voices such as Sam Houston of Texas praised Mormon policies in their relations with Native Americans, widespread twentieth-century attention was given to such Latter-day Saint social programs as their welfare system, with its emphasis on self-sufficiency and work.

At the same time that an outward conformity to national values and patterns progressed, Mormons continued to differ from the mainstream on such ideological matters as cooperative irrigation. A substantial proportion of the faithful not only donate a full tithe (ten percent) of their gross income to the church but also contribute substantially more for the support of the poor and needy, in and outside the United States, perpetuating objectives of their communal economic ideals. Young adults are strongly encouraged to spend as much as two years in unpaid, full-time missionary service. The Latter-day Saints also are still voluntarily responsive to hierarchical prophetic guidance. A 1978 revelation mandating the full integration of their priesthood and temples around the world met with almost no opposition. And a prophetic announcement against President Ronald Reagan's ironically named Peacemaker (MX) missile system, based on a previously articulated (1976) condemnation of trust in missile systems for national security as “idolatry,” saw large numbers of Mormons reversing an earlier conservative political stand on defense issues.

After World War II the church reexpanded its overseas missionary efforts and since the 1960s has seen enormous rates of conversion around the world. Along with this, Mormons historically have had higher than average birthrates and continuing conversions in the United States. There are also some losses. Individual Mormon American families reflect the ethnic dimension of their community of faith in varying degrees. Like other religious groups and ethnic minorities, in each generation some assimilation to mass or popular culture occurs. Some who thus “apostatize,” or leave the faith, return later in life. Cultural institutions have been elaborated to accomplish this reintegration of individuals and families back into the community as well as to maintain existing group solidarity and boundaries. New converts are constantly being formally and informally assimilated or fellowshipped into the society by means of the same programs.

In 2001, with almost eleven million members in more than 160 countries, Mormons were recognized as a world religion rather than an American church. Mormon Americans are a minority in the World Church. In the United States Mormons as a group are a special case within the spectrum of multicultural American family patterns. Beginning with the earliest Mormon missionary efforts in Canada in the 1830s, religious converts from all over the world have migrated to the United States and have been socialized into the Mormon community. Thus, in considering Mormon American families in American culture, one often must take into account a double- or multiple-origin pattern and the existence of cultural subgroups. But while each subgroup reflects certain unique ethnic, linguistic, and national origins, all share certain distinctively Mormon ethnic patterns and cultural values. Intermarriages within the larger Mormon American community are common. Mormon Americans today are both a distinctive ethnic group tending toward internal homogeneity and a functioning multicultural society within the larger context of America.
Brigham Young, c.1860-1877. Charles Roscoe Savage, artist. L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Wikimedia Commons.
Two missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2008. Wikimedia Commons.

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