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*Materialism
and the
Making of
American
Culture*

LEE TREPANIER
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LDS in the USA

Mormonism and the Making of American Culture

Lee Trepanier and Lynita K. Newswander

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INTRODUCTION

For Another Thousand Years

The role of Mormonism in America has been simultaneously both exaggerated and undervalued. On the one hand, Mormons are seen with suspicion as part of a secret organization that seeks domination over the United States; on the other hand, they are marginalized and often excluded from national conversations about religion, culture, and politics in America. The fact is that neither account is accurate: Mormons have played a substantial role in the shaping of the social, cultural, political, and religious makeup of the United States, a role that is neither conspiratorial nor marginal and that has not been properly acknowledged in the academy or by the general public. This book is intended to remedy this deficiency. In it we will explore the contributions Mormonism has made to American civilization and to the values that civilization claims to espouse.

When we speak of American civilization, we are attesting to those qualities that make the United States unique as a social, cultural, religious, and political entity. For example, the sociologist

Claude Fischer argues that community (family, church, community, job, and nation), abundance (material wealth, improved health, social opportunities, political freedoms, and self-mastery), and volunteerism (civic engagement) are at the core of the American character. The historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. contends that the right to revolution, federalism, the consent of the governed, equality of women, the melting pot, freedom of worship, public education, voluntary giving, technology, and evolutionary progress are the characteristics of American civilization; while Harvard President Charles Eliot points to peacekeeping, religious tolerance, universal suffrage, the practice of political freedom, the welcoming of newcomers, and the diffusion of material abundance as the cornerstones of the American experience.¹

The role of Mormonism in American civilization has been shaped by, as well as exposed the limits of, some of the values that Americans continue to espouse: religious tolerance, social pluralism, federalism, separation of church and state, the definition and importance of marriage, and Christianity. Mormons have been instrumental in representing and challenging these values in the realms of popular culture, the family, politics, and religion in the United States. As we will see, Mormons have not been completely accepted in mainstream American society. To a certain extent, the pattern of suspicion, accommodation, and eventual acceptance they have experienced is familiar to immigrant groups arriving in the United States; but what makes the Mormon experience unique is that they began within the United States and became outsiders within their own country. That is, the Mormons were forced to flee the United States—to become emigrants—before they became accommodated and accepted.

Before proceeding further, we should begin by defining Mormons and Mormonism. A Mormon is a practitioner of Mormonism, the largest branch of which is The Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). The term itself is derived from the Book of Mormon, a sacred text to the Mormons that they consider to be a supplemental

testament to the Bible. Compiled by the prophet Mormon and his son, Moroni, the last of his Nephite people, and published in 1830 by Joseph Smith, it recounts the tale of a fallen and lost indigenous American nation.² Although initially a derogatory nickname for members of LDS Church, “Mormon” became embraced by its followers. The term itself now not only refers to the religious aspect of these believers but also includes the social and cultural components that are associated with Mormonism.

The Mormons were forced to flee upstate New York to the Midwest and eventually to the West, where they established a theocratic state under the leadership of Brigham Young. As the U.S. federal government expanded its control westward, the Mormons became organized into the territory and later state of Utah, where polygamy, separation of church and state, and federalism became contentious issues between the two parties. The tension between the Mormons and the federal government was such that an actual war, the Mormon War, broke out between the two groups

When the Mormons decided to renounce the practice of polygamy, Utah was adopted as a state. However, they still were not fully accepted into the mainstream culture of the United States. Even today Mormons are often negatively portrayed in popular culture and are exposed to religious prejudice in the realms of politics and religion. This accommodation—but not acceptance—of Mormons raises questions about the faithfulness of the values to which Americans claim to adhere, such as religious tolerance and social pluralism.

In this book, we use the term “Mormons” to describe any believers who accept the Book of Mormon for their religious beliefs, while we use the term “Latter-day Saints” (LDS) to refer specifically to those who submit to the authority of the LDS Church headquartered in Salt Lake City. Besides the LDS Mormons, there exist the Missouri Mormons, who do not recognize the authority of the LDS Church; these include such organizations as the Community of Christ, the Church of Christ, and the Remnant Church

of the Latter Day Saints, as well as the several polygamous practicing Mormon groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ (Bickertonite), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite), and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS).³ Here we focus mostly on the experience of LDS Mormons in America, with some references to the polygamous practicing Mormons as they have received recent attention in the media (for example, Warren Jeffs), and in popular culture (for example, *Big Love*).

Chapter 1 of this book looks at the positive and negative portrayals of Mormons in popular culture, such as in television, movies, and literature. In this chapter we see the limits of the American values of religious tolerance and the acceptance of social pluralism. As a vehicle of social and political socialization, popular culture contributes to American democratic culture and its values, thereby transmitting Americans' reluctant acceptance of Mormons in their society. Although over time Mormons have been increasingly accepted into popular culture, that they are still regarded with suspicion reveals the limits of the values that Americans claim to hold.

Chapter 2 explores the questions of marriage, separation of church and state, and federalism in American civilization. When the Utah Territory applied for statehood, these subjects came to the forefront of the national conversation over the Mormon practice of plural marriage, more commonly known as polygamy, as questions were raised about the proper place of marriage, church-state relations, and the role of the federal government in the internal affairs of a state or territory. Although Mormons eventually renounced polygamy in order to obtain statehood, the role of Mormons in these subjects deserves another look.

Chapter 3 examines the obstacles that Mormon politicians contesting for national office face in having their religion accepted by mainstream voters. Again, this raises questions about the limits of religious tolerance in the United States and demonstrates the importance of religion in national politics. Although there is

no constitutional or legal test about religion for national political office, there is a cultural one, and, because of their religion, Mormons clearly have not passed it. This chapter explores why this is the case.

Chapter 4 examines the theological beliefs of Mormonism and how these beliefs are not accepted by mainstream American Christians. The Book of Mormon, certain views on the afterlife, and the Mormon notion of a personal God are barriers for other Christians in being tolerant of Mormon theology. Mormons' strained relationship with other Christian denominations not only shows the limits of religious tolerance among religious groups themselves, but also points out the importance of Christianity and how it is defined in American civilization. We see that America is still a Christian nation, with Mormons asking about what constitutes the nature and essence of this Christianity.

The last chapter follows the contributions Mormons have made to the American narrative, and at the same time exposes the faults in that narrative. The American narrative, often adopted by immigrants to the United States, is one of the persecuted outsider who becomes eventually accepted socially and culturally as Americans, thereby exemplifying the virtues of religious tolerance, social pluralism, and separation of church and state. The Mormon experience is similar to that of these immigrant groups but also different in that, as noted above, the Mormons had to flee the United States before they became accepted and accommodated.

Because they challenge the values that Americans claim to cherish, Mormons have not been fully accepted socially and culturally in the United States. Thus, Mormons within American civilization simultaneously affirm and question the American narrative of tolerance, pluralism, and Christianity. Having its origins in America and ceding a special place to this country in its theology, Mormonism is, in many ways, the quintessential American religion. However, because some Mormon beliefs and practices challenge the values of American civilization, Mormons are regarded with

suspicion and reservation by the American public. But it is through this very questioning of these core values that both Mormons and Americans define what American civilization is and will become.

This book is not a comprehensive account of Mormonism or a complete account of their contributions to American civilization; rather, it is an introduction for readers who know little about Mormonism and the role it has played in American life. Our thesis is that Mormon culture and the LDS religion embody certain tensions in American culture, and that they can be seen as simultaneously rejecting and reaffirming what are considered to be core American values. The history of the LDS Church and the politics and culture it has inspired are complex and involve not only multiple perspectives but also a considerable amount of criticism and debate. While this book does not ignore the most controversial issues regarding Mormonism and its beliefs and practices, it does not focus on those issues; instead, it is an introduction to major topics and key themes found in Mormon culture and theology. It connects popular culture, American history, politics, and social issues with what we contend is a distinctively American religion.

As an introductory text to the study of Mormonism, this book sits in good company. Richard Bushman's *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction* provides a slightly different perspective on how the religion came about and what its basic theology, doctrines, and practices are. Like our book, it is written primarily for a non-Mormon audience, though it does not share the same focus on American culture and the relationship between the Mormon story and the American story. In that particular vein, our work approaches Harold Bloom's argument in *The American Religion* that Mormonism is a distinctively American religion in both its history and theology. Another complementary text is Armand Mauss's *The Angel and the Beehive*, which offers a critical analysis of Mormon culture as it alternately assimilates with and alienates itself from American culture throughout its history. The arguments in each of these books are foundational to those we make in this work; however, this text

offers a unique focus on Mormonism's symbiotic relation to American culture.

Of course, there are several topics relevant to the study of Mormonism that this book is unable to address comprehensively. Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith: A Rough Stone Rolling*, Fawn Brodie's *Joseph Smith: No Man Knows My History*, Jan Shipp's *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, and the seven-volume *History of the Church*, written by Joseph Smith himself, are excellent resources for more information regarding the history of the LDS Church as both a religion and a social movement. Cultural studies of Mormonism and its position in more contemporary American society include Terryl Givens' *People of Paradox* and *The Viper on the Hearth*.

Other books on Mormonism in America are Richard Ostling and Joan Ostling's *Mormon America* and Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard Bushman's *Mormons in America*. Theological discussions, including the seemingly inexhaustible debate regarding the place of the LDS Church as a Christian religion, are also abundant. Primary among them are Craig Bloomberg and Stephen E. Robinson's *How Wide the Divide?*, Robinson's *Are Mormons Christian?*, and Robert L. Millet's *A Different Jesus?* and *Claiming Christ*. This is not an exhaustive list, but it does provide deeper levels of analysis into important facets of Mormonism that simply are not within the scope of this text.

We hope this book provides a balanced treatment of Mormons within the context of American civilization. Wanting to steer away from vehement apologetics and vitriolic attacks, we seek to acknowledge objectively the accomplishments as well as the misuses of Mormonism. We want to recognize the Mormon contributions that may have gone neglected, and to point out clearly the genuine differences between Mormon and American values. We do a service to neither party if we whitewash either the achievements or failures of both.

Perhaps the desire to be both distinct and American is a constant but ultimately irreconcilable one. In this sense, Mormons

are no different than other ethnic, religious, or racial groups that have come to America with its promise of tolerance, pluralism, and prosperity. Yet today Mormons, because of their unassimilated status, still play their dual role as supporter and critic of the American project. But as Mormons have become more fully integrated into American culture and society, scholarship on Mormonism likewise has followed; and we believe this book continues this endeavor in being fair in its treatment, forthright on the controversies, and fresh in its approach. The answer to whether we completely succeed in this task, like that of whether the Mormons will become fully accepted in America, remains unknown.