

MORMONISM'S THIRD CENTURY:
Coping with the Contingencies

(A public lecture delivered under auspices of the Religious Studies Department, Utah State University, 25 March 2015. Prepared here for oral presentation only, so there are no footnotes.)

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In about five more years, Mormonism will enter its third century. Two whole centuries will have passed since young Joseph Smith experienced the theophany which Mormons now call his "First Vision." By now, of course, the church which emerged from his visionary experiences has had many schisms, and even the dominant institution that has endured, namely the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints based in Utah, bears little resemblance to its 19th-century versions, or even to the early 20th-century version. I have devoted much of my academic career to studying the ecclesiastical and doctrinal changes in the Church, especially during the 20th century. Indeed, I have personally lived through nearly half of Mormonism's history myself, so I am an old relic in more ways than one! In my studies, I have found it useful to compare the Mormon case with others in the history of new religious movements, most of which did not survive beyond the first generation or two. Among those which did survive, the Mormon experience has been both similar to and different from these other histories. Mormons are inclined to stress the differences whenever they talk about their Church and people, and understandably so, for the Mormon story is unique and remarkable in many ways.

My focus, however, has been on the similarities between the Mormon religious movement and other religious movements as they grew and developed into stable organizations -- within surrounding social and political

environments where they were not very welcome. Like some of the other movements, Mormonism began with claims of overt divine intervention into human history, and enjoyed an initial period of charismatic enthusiasm; but also, as in those other movements, the charismatic element gradually diminished among the Mormons with the passing of the founding generation. In short, whatever part the divine hand played in its founding, this new religion soon began to develop as a very human organization with essentially the same internal strains and external struggles experienced by other organizations that challenge their host societies. As a social scientist, however, I am interested not only in the historical details of this development, but also in the regularities and recurrent patterns that appear to be common in the histories of new religious movements.

I have written extensively elsewhere about the similarities and differences between the Mormons and other religious movements in these developmental regularities. The basic pattern was actually discovered more than a century ago by social theorists who recognized the typical process that a new religion passes through on the path from a radical new "sect" to an institutionalized and assimilated "church" a few generations later. With the passage of time, the new movement, in an effort to gain greater public acceptance, is gradually domesticated. In the process, both the distinctiveness of the new sect and its missionary zeal are eroded, until eventually it comes to resemble the rest of the religious establishment. In an effort to resist such assimilation, some religious communities have partially reversed course in this process and moved back somewhat toward their more sect-like origins. This reversal, or *retrenchment*, as I call it, was especially conspicuous in Mormon history during the second half of the 20th century, but with the arrival of the new century, there is evidence that the Church is

making “course corrections” that are moving it once again toward greater assimilation with the national religious establishment, at least in the U.S.

Theoretically, the predicament for any distinctive religious community is to maintain an “optimum tension” between its own culture and that of the surrounding host society: With too much tension, the Church invites not only popular disdain but even repression and persecution; but with too little tension – that is, with a message and culture not very distinctive – the Church loses its appeal to potential seekers and eventually gets absorbed into the general religious establishment of the host culture. Thus the ultimate consequence of either too much or too little cultural tension is the loss of the new religion's viability, and indeed its very identity. During the first half of the 20th century, Mormon ecclesiastical culture moved noticeably toward greater assimilation, but then it changed course during the second half to reassert its doctrinal and cultural distinctiveness. In the coming century, as in previous ones, the Church will have to cope with both external and internal pressures as it continues its struggle to maintain the optimum tension on which its future viability depends.

Can history or social science theory provide any template for the Mormon future? Here I find myself of two minds: As an observant Latter-day Saint, I hope that the appropriate “course corrections” will continue to maintain the optimum tension indefinitely, thus maintaining the vitality of the Church during the coming century. On the other hand, as a social scientist, I see signs that the Church is following a familiar trajectory, though perhaps somewhat unevenly, which will lead eventually to fuller assimilation, perhaps in the mode of general American Protestantism or Judaism. To avoid, or even retard, such extensive assimilation, the Church will need a great deal of skill in managing its public image and in resisting

the external influences that will constantly be pressing to "domesticate" the peculiar Mormons. Perhaps new episodes of retrenchment will be required. If so, when and why? Previous experience suggests that, at least for the years immediately ahead, continuing accommodation to outside pressures might be necessary to keep the cultural tension with the world at an optimum level, even in the U. S., to say nothing of elsewhere in the world. But how much accommodation will be too much?

Where external pressures are concerned, the Church will need more than one strategy and perhaps many different tactics. Especially since the administration of President Hinckley, the Church has greatly enhanced its diplomatic relations externally: We can see this in the increased outreach to other religious denominations, including, most recently, the Vatican itself; also in the increased emphasis and resources allocated to the humanitarian programs of the Church; and perhaps most of all in the expansion and professional skill of the LDS Public Affairs Department and the growing involvement of top Church leaders themselves in public relations. All these external initiatives have helped to keep the tension with the rest of the nation in balance with the usual image of the Church as somewhat eccentric and strange, but tolerable. Yet clearly there is some work still to do, for half of the country still does not regard Mormons as Christians, and a fourth holds views about Mormons that are generally negative. Of course, a certain amount of antipathy is inherent in the maintenance of optimum tension, and the Church's current diplomatic efforts bode well for the coming century, so I would like to focus the rest of my observations on internal issues.

Internally, the crucial question for the future is the continuing loyalty of individual Mormons to the LDS Church -- not merely to the Mormon religious tradition and cultural heritage, but to the Church as an institution.

Member loyalty can never be taken for granted in any organization, especially in a voluntary religious or other idealistic community. Historical research indicates that such communities survive and thrive to the extent that they can require or elicit sacrifices and investments of various kinds from their members in the expectation of later benefits. Accordingly, loyalty is ultimately dependent on both short- and long-term cost/benefit assessments made by individual members and families about the efficacy of those sacrifices and investments. These assessments will be based in large part upon an embrace of certain key beliefs, reinforced by gratifying social and family relationships. When those ideological understandings are disrupted by discrepant information and experiences, the reinforcing relationships are weakened, and the cost/benefit assessments can be changed or reversed rather quickly. Various internal organizational developments, over which Church leaders have at least some control, can influence these ongoing cost/benefit assessments by members.

There might be many such internal organizational issues worthy of consideration, but here I would like to deal with four, all of which have serious implications for the cost-benefit assessments of ordinary Latter-day Saints. In the interest of time, I will consider the first three somewhat superficially. Then I will devote the rest of my presentation to a fourth one in particular.

The first is "Correlation," both as a concept and as an ideological movement that arose to centralize and reorganize LDS ecclesiastical experience from the 1960s onward. It was also the vehicle by which much of the retrenchment of recent decades was accomplished. Because its basic idea seems to have appeared as early as the 1920s, author Matthew Bowman finds the inspiration for Correlation in the American Progressive Movement

of that period, but in its full and modern particulars, Correlation seems to have been drawn largely from the contemporary American corporate industrial world. It was intended to help integrate and manage the rapid growth and spread of the Church to various parts of the world outside the U. S., which it has been doing with some success. Social scientists are always intrigued, however, by the unintended consequences of collective action, and Correlation has produced a number of those, as well.

The unintended consequences of Correlation have included (1) a reduction in the power and autonomy of women in the Church, who once controlled the major auxiliaries of Relief Society and the Primary; (2) a consolidated Sunday meeting schedule, which has undercut the importance of Sunday School and greatly weakened ward choirs (i. e., no time to rehearse); (3) an uncomfortable interdependence of the LDS YM program and the BSA, despite the growing obsolescence of Scouting in the modern world; (4) the centralizing and focusing of the pedagogy and social activities of the Church so completely upon the modal membership of the U. S. -- namely those in families -- as to marginalize such other demographic categories as the singles, the elderly, the ethnics, and the intellectually and artistically sophisticated; and (5) the imposition of a culture and practices from the Utah headquarters upon the LDS membership in other countries, such that embracing what is called a "gospel culture" in those countries has the effect of partly isolating the LDS members from their local families and institutions. All of these developments, and others, have created organizational strains. Furthermore, universal access to the internet, which Correlation cannot control, has given the Saints exposure to a great many new and alternative ideas and activities that compete with their participation in correlated Church activities, to say nothing of challenges from the internet

to orthodox teachings. It remains to be seen how much, or in what ways, Correlation can be loosened up or adapted during the coming century so as to ameliorate these and other derivative strains in the worldwide Church.

A second issue with cost-benefit implications is the accumulation during recent decades of a large proportion of the membership which is totally inactive in the Church (now called "less active" in euphemistic Mormonspeak). Though perhaps not yet a majority of American members, the proportion of these ostensible or nominal members definitely is a majority of the LDS membership almost everywhere else -- amounting to 75% or 80% in some countries. These are people whose names appear on LDS Church records as baptized members, but who will not identify themselves as LDS members in surveys -- or even in the periodic census -- of their respective countries. This predicament is the cumulative consequence of decades of proselytizing activity emphasizing baptisms over conversions. Only minimal investment or sacrifice has been required for baptism, and many of the supposedly converted don't keep coming for even the first year. This loss is by no means a natural or inevitable consequence of any large-scale missionary effort, for proselytizing competitors, such as the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, have much higher retention rates than does the LDS Church. Those churches demand more investments and sacrifices from converts before baptism; and then after baptism the converts don't overwhelm the organizational resources. Therefore, they can be adequately nourished and fellowshipped to help maintain favorable cost-benefit assessments for participating in their new religion.

The large inactivity rate in the LDS case has not developed because of a failure of commitment or lack of diligent service on the parts of

missionaries or mission presidents. It is the result simply of a deliberate strategy of condensing as much as possible the time-span required to get an investigator to the baptismal font. The teaching techniques in a series of missionary manuals during recent decades, plus the pressure tactics in the missionaries' own interactions with investigators, are all aimed at foreshortening the proselytizing process. The main failure seems to have occurred in the follow-up system called "fellowshipping," in which ward members are supposed to take responsibility for integrating the new converts and, in effect, finishing the conversion process. This failure, apparent even in the well-ordered wards of North America, has been massive in other countries, where relatively small numbers of active ward members and leaders are charged with fellowshipping far more half-converted newcomers than they can handle. Thus the conversion process is simply never completed for many of those recently baptized. The result in many places is wards of several hundred or a thousand ostensible members, and stakes approaching ten thousand, which cannot be divided because too few men have remained active long enough to be made priesthood leaders for the new wards and stakes that could otherwise be created.

Among the other unintended consequences of this situation are (1) a recurrent strain in relationships between bishops and missionaries, who do not share the same interest in accelerated baptisms; (2) "bishop burnout," in some countries, referring to bishops and other leaders who sometimes seek releases from their callings out of sheer fatigue, and then drop out themselves from any further Church activity; and (3) a reallocation of missionary time from proselytizing new investigators to working with long lists of inactive members in an effort to reconvert them, or to finish the conversion process that had been incomplete at the beginning. Obviously the

Church leaders are well aware of this large surplus of inactive members, for in recent years, they have even had to eliminate stakes, wards and missions to consolidate such leadership talent as remains active, but I have not seen any signs yet of change in the overall missionary strategy that is still producing such large numbers of inactive members as the new century proceeds.

A third concern is the role and status of women in the LDS Church, which has lately been in the news and blogs so much that it needs but little explanation here. Priesthood ordination for women is not the only issue, of course, but it is clearly the most contentious inside and outside the Church. While some feminists are quite strident in supporting ordination, it is difficult to know how important that issue is to mainstream Mormons, male or female. A 2011 Pew survey indicates that among Mormons men are actually slightly more in favor than women are of female ordination, but more than 80% of both sexes claimed to be opposed. Yet a recent survey by a young Mormon scholar finds that half of the women and a third of the men in her sample favored ordination. Beyond ordination, of course, there are many other gender-related issues which have been discussed in a new book by Neylan McBaine, a moderately feminist scholar still on very good terms with the Church. The Church leaders have recently been adopting many of the suggestions from moderate feminists to improve the visibility and status of LDS women, especially in the leadership, and more of these are almost certain to be adopted during the years immediately ahead.

Given the growing acceptance of equality of all kinds as an ideological commitment in American public opinion generally, it is likely that the pressure on the Church from the outside -- if not, indeed, even from the inside -- will eventually require considerably more adjustments in the

tension-level faced by the Church over gender roles as the century progresses. Since there is no explicit doctrinal barrier to female ordination, presumably that could eventually occur before the century has ended. If so, that too might well have unintended consequences, for in other denominations the ordination of women has been accompanied by the acceleration of male departures from the clergy as an occupation. Given that the increased status and prestige of priesthood office is the only social benefit received by LDS men who serve in priesthood roles, and the demands of priesthood service tend to compete with the demands of their secular careers, will LDS men remain so heavily committed to Church activity when they can so easily escape the extra responsibility by deferring to ordained female colleagues? Perhaps only time will tell.

Now we come to the fourth and final issue, which I would like to discuss somewhat more thoroughly here -- perhaps because it is somewhat more personal. I refer to the problem of faith vs. doubt. The problem at the institutional level, as I see it, is this: On the one hand, how can the Church create and maintain a supportive environment in which individual members can struggle with serious doubts without jeopardizing the love and regard of fellow members, or even their Church membership; and, on the other hand, how can the Church maintain boundaries around certain fundamental truth-claims that define the very identity of the LDS religion? How much flexibility in understanding and interpreting Church doctrines and practices can members claim and still feel that they belong? Balancing these competing considerations will be much more important for the future of the LDS Church in the new century than it has been in the past. A few prominent authorities in recent general conferences have seemed to acknowledge that coping with doubt is a common feature of LDS religious

life, one which the Church as an institution, as well as individual believers, must be prepared for. Elder Jeffrey Holland recognized that a mixture of doubt and faith is a common condition even for those who seek most diligently after the divine, so that the real issue is not the degree of one's faith but the integrity of one's commitment to whatever degree of faith he or she has.

Even more pointedly, President Dieter Uchtdorf, in a recent general conference, declared to doubting and disaffected members, ". . . regardless of your circumstances, your personal history, or the strength of your testimony, there is room for you in this Church." He might have been thinking of the one in five Latter-day Saints who reported in a Pew poll that they found it hard to believe in certain traditional LDS doctrines, and that they didn't regard it as essential for a Church member to believe that Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son. But President Uchtdorf specifically included also those who had already dropped out. He recognized the validity of members' doubts about LDS history and doctrines, their trouble with some Church standards, and the feelings of some that they just don't "fit in" (as he put it). He was also quite candid, if still circumspect, in conceding that Church leaders are only human and sometimes have made mistakes. I'm sure that President Uchtdorf and his like-minded colleagues are entirely sincere in expressing such sentiments, but until we get down to specifics, it is not clear just how far Church leaders, and other guardians of orthodoxy, might be willing to go in reaching out to those Saints with serious doubts. The leaders, after all, have the responsibility for declaring what the official doctrines are, and for articulating those which are most fundamental in defining the LDS identity. So just how much latitude might be possible for questioning members to feel that they still "fit in"?

As an example, let's consider the controversies that have emerged about the Book of Mormon -- its authorship, its actual historicity, the implications of DNA research, and on and on. Given all such unresolved questions, how closely must a member's belief about the *Book of Mormon* accord with the traditional orthodox understanding in order to "fit in"? In that connection, I was struck by the latitude seemingly proposed in one of the new topical essays posted recently on *lds.org* about the *Book of Abraham*, a book which has also generated its share of quandaries about origin, authorship, translation, and so on. After considering all the issues with that book, the new official essay concludes with a rather remarkable passage, which I would like to quote here, since I see no reason that it could not apply to the *Book of Mormon*, as well as to the *Book of Abraham* (as I indicate below with the bracketed insertions):

"The veracity and value of the book of Abraham [Mormon] cannot be settled by scholarly debate concerning the book's translation and historicity. The book's status as scripture lies in the eternal truths it teaches and the powerful spirit it conveys. The book of Abraham [Mormon] imparts profound truths about the nature of God, His relationship to us as His children, and the purpose of this mortal life. The truth of the book of Abraham [Mormon] is ultimately found through careful study of its teachings, sincere prayer, and the confirmation of the Spirit."

I find it noteworthy, furthermore, that in the long list of questions that local leaders are instructed to ask in interviews for temple recommends, there are no questions about the Book of Mormon, and only the first four questions even deal with doctrinal beliefs; the remaining dozen are all about basic Christian and LDS standards of behavior. Even the four initial questions on doctrine (deity, the soteriological role of Christ, restoration of the gospel, and contemporary apostolic authority) are posed at an abstract enough level to permit affirmations that are fully honest but might still

encompass quite a variety of specifics (e. g., do you have "faith in," or "testimony of" this or that doctrine). Bishops are instructed, furthermore, to seek simple yes-or-no responses to these questions, not to probe for elaborations on affirmative answers. Of course, how individual Church members might deal with any of their doubts during these interviews, and exactly how an individual interview might play out, will depend on the specific parties to the interview; but the interview itself certainly does not require a probing interrogation about precise and specific creedal commitments. Perhaps that's one reason that two-thirds of American Mormons in a recent Pew poll could claim to have temple recommends.

Please note that I am not advocating that the Church change any of its fundamental doctrines, or that just any variation of those doctrines should be acceptable as the basis for access to the temple, or even expressing my own doctrinal preferences. Simply stated, the issue is this: When President Uchtdorf declares that "there is room" in the Church for people who might no longer share the doctrinal and historical understandings of the most orthodox, is he pointing the direction for a 21st-century Church that is more tolerant of a range of interpretations for key doctrines, rather than the traditional binary division of true-vs.-false? Such a flexible official posture in doctrinal demands will become more important during the coming century, for doctrinal homogeneity among the Latter-day Saints has become increasingly problematic for many reasons. Among these reasons, the most important would be changes in certain demographic traits of the membership, including their geographic dispersion, educational attainment, a decline in the proportion married, and even a degree of ethnic diversity.

Naturally there are many other influences in the social and cultural environment that also affect the attitudes of the Saints toward their own

church and its doctrines. None is more important than the internet, where hostile information about Mormons is endemic, especially on the several websites devoted to whistle-blowing and debunking traditional Mormon truth-claims and historical narratives. Such outside influences, along with the sheer diversity in the daily lives of Mormons, have combined to strain and weaken the bonds of some of them to the LDS Church and heritage. Not only is there a serious and continuing attrition of new converts shortly after baptism (described above), but a certain proportion even of the long-term membership, especially in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, have become discouraged or disillusioned enough to drop out altogether, either in sorrow, or resentment, or perhaps both. Some have formally severed their ties with the Church, but many others remain on Church rolls, despite doubts and disillusionments.

I know of no reliable measure of just how large a proportion such disaffected members might be of the total membership, but 22% of Mormons in a recent Pew survey reported that they found it hard to believe some Church teachings. Whatever the number of departing doubters, it is large enough that a few years ago (on the USU campus), the LDS Church historian declared the number as historic. The magnitude of the defection rate is hard to gauge from internet surveys with snowball samples, but systematic surveys asking American respondents whether or not they identify themselves as Mormons will produce figures that are generally around 50% - 60% of the figures claimed on official Church records. Outside the U. S., the figures would be only about half that many. Yet the qualitative loss might be even more serious than the quantitative one, since the current defection phenomenon appears to involve many who have invested years of activity and resources in the Church, including former

bishops, stake and other local leaders, male and female. Just how far up the ranks this disaffection might reach was indicated a couple of years ago by the public comments of a disillusioned and departing LDS Area Seventy in Sweden.

Dealing with doubt and disillusionment is ultimately an individual responsibility, of course, and from all indications, most of the Saints seem quite satisfied with the ways in which they are managing their own doubts -- if they even have any. Besides, there is actually rather little that the Church, as an institution, can do to counteract the spread of doubt. What the Church can do, and has begun to do only recently, is to make its own historical record as transparent and accurate as possible, without concealing historic events or doctrines that might seem embarrassing. The Church can also insist on the principle of parsimony in what it enforces as official doctrine, and not permit its truth-claims to be exaggerated with accretions from accumulated folklore. After that, belief is up to the individual. It is a matter both of faith and of choice: it is up to each believer simply to choose what he or she will believe, and to construct his or her own satisfactory rationale for those choices. Believers must recognize and accept the reality that Mormonism, like most religious traditions, makes truth-claims about the supernatural, which, by definition, are claims that can be validated only by personal and individual supernatural experiences. In the jargon of science, these truth claims are thus "unfalsifiable" and "non-replicable," meaning that there is no way in which to test these claims empirically, or that any individual believer's spiritual tests can be demonstrated or passed on to others. In this situation, doubt need not destroy faith, but it might require a certain amount of intellectual reconstruction in order to sustain faith.

Maintaining faith and commitment to one's religious community has lately become especially problematic, for we have entered an advanced secular age with little patience among the pundits for religious claims of any kind, least of all for those claims whose origins can be exposed in recent documents, rather than protected by the cloak of impenetrable antiquity. In this environment, some Mormons seem embarrassed and intimidated by the ridicule of non-believers and ex-believers for having chosen to take, on faith, the Church's supernatural claims. Even as a social scientist, I see no reason for such embarrassment. *Choosing to take action on the basis of untestable claims is a perfectly normal human response to uncertainty*, especially when there are powerful incentives to do so. Even traditional American patriotism requires the acceptance of claims that are ultimately supernatural and just as unfalsifiable as religious truth-claims. Take, for example, the dictum that "all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights," . . . etc. How would we test that claim? If it can't be tested, why should anyone believe it? Yet millions do believe it and act on it.

Indeed, the survival of many other institutions, besides the LDS and other churches, requires the acceptance on faith of aspirations and commitments that cannot be tested *a priori* by any individual who embraces them. We see this process occurring each time a person chooses a career, or gets married, or decides to have children, or enters the stock market. In none of these cases can any of us know ahead of time how our choices will turn out, or have any certainty that the happy consequences reported by some others will prove valid for us. In all such routine cases of truly life-altering choices, we are thus proceeding in faith on unfalsifiable premises. The only difference with religious choices is that the outcomes for those choices occur in another world instead of in another decade. Otherwise, the process, and

the unfalsifiability involved, are no different from those involved in our secular life, and need be no more embarrassing.

Nor is it any indictment of religious beliefs to acknowledge that they have simply been passed down as part of a given cultural and social heritage. Sociology has long recognized, as an ontological truism, that all reality is socially constructed. By "ontological" I am referring to the nature of ultimate reality: Is there a truly "objective" reality "out there" somewhere, perhaps in the realm (or mind) of God -- a reality that is truly independent of human perception or understanding? Sociology claims that if there is such a reality, we ordinary humans have no access to it -- at least not with any certainty. For all of us mere mortals, our reality is whatever our cultures and ancestors have said that it is. From that perspective, every ontology originates in the same way, so none can be privileged, *a priori*, over any other one.

What that means operationally is that we are all acting on inherited definitions of reality, and we all tend to resist changes in our definitions until they simply don't work any more. Each of us eventually chooses an ontological framework and set of assumptions to give meaning and purpose to the way in which we live our lives, and for that purpose, I have chosen the LDS framework. I have done so knowing that this framework is the product of social constructions accumulated in the generations ahead of me. Of course, I can operate with more than one ontology at a time, for I also share with the rest of the Euro-American world the ontological and epistemological heritage deriving from the ancient Greeks, which seems to provide the foundation for modern science. All definitions of reality have their blind spots, of course, so it is not only religious believers who must learn to live with ambiguity, often for a very long time. Such, then, is the

kind of "intellectual work" which individual believers must take on in coping with their own doubts and maintaining their faith; but they must want to do that work if it is to be done.

So, in summary, the questions we have been considering are: How great a range is manageable for which doctrines? If the Church is to maintain its doctrinal integrity, how can the limits be enforced? How will the ordinary Saints and local leaders at the grassroots be weaned away from their binary, black/white tendencies in doctrinal interpretations? For it is they, after all, at the grassroots, who will have to "make room" for their questioning brothers and sisters in order for President Uchtdorf's invitation to be realized. So how much room will there be in Third Century Mormonism for varied interpretations and understandings of fundamental doctrines and their traditional meanings? Will responsible scholarship and complete transparency in teaching its doctrines and history continue to be valued and implemented in the Church during the coming century? How will new members be retained and the flow of early drop-outs be stopped? How will the new aspirations of modern Mormon women be accommodated? How will Correlation be adapted to make all of this possible and manageable? Whatever developments occur, how will the LDS leaders maneuver in order to maintain an optimum tension, culturally and politically, with the surrounding world? Stay tuned