



The Harbaville Triptych, center panel. Late tenth century. In the upper scene, the enthroned Christ listens to the pleas of John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. Five Apostles, including Peter, Paul, and Andrew, appear in the lower scene.

“Is Mormonism Christian?”

Reflections on a Complicated Question

A noted scholar reflects on the roles that our names for ourselves and others have played in creating distinctive identities and in shaping perceptions of what constitutes a Christian religion.

Jan Shipps

Since I, a staunch member of the First United Methodist Church in Bloomington, Indiana, have been studying the Latter-day Saints for more than thirty years, it is perhaps not surprising that I am frequently asked whether Mormons are Christians and whether Mormonism is Christian. Put to me by journalists, academics, denominational bureaucrats, participants in adult forums in various local Protestant and Catholic churches, active Latter-day Saints, bona fide anti-Mormons, my students, and a variety of other interested persons, the query comes in both forms. But whatever the form, a forthright yes or no answer seems to be expected.

Because many people think the two questions are one and the same, inquirers are often startled when I respond by asking if they wish to know whether *Mormons* are Christians or whether *Mormonism* is Christian. Moreover, since their question, whatever its form, seems so straightforward to so many, inquirers are also surprised—and sometimes impatient—when I attempt to determine the framework within which the question is being asked. Yet before I can formulate a response, I must know both the substance of the question and its context.

The two queries are essentially the same if the inquirer's main concern is *analogical* (Is the LDS Church like the Presbyterian Church, for example, or are Mormons similar to Catholics?), *analytical* (How is Mormonism related to other forms of Christianity?), or *historiographical* (What have historians said about

the connection between Mormonism and Christianity?). But if the framework for the inquiry is more theological and religious than theoretical and academic, these are not simply two versions of the same question. While they are obviously related, quite different theological propositions inhere in them. Inquirers who want to know whether Mormons are Christians signal their assumption that a divine determination is made about individuals on a case-by-case basis. The more usual query—"Is Mormonism Christian?"—presumes a divine economy in which redemption depends on an individual's membership in a *true* or *authentic* "body of Christ."

In order to discover whether an inquiry is more theological and religious than theoretical and academic, or vice versa, I respond to all inquiries about this issue with a series of counterqueries whose answers will allow me to determine what sort of question I have been asked. Does the inquirer wish to know, for example, whether some particular Mormon—say Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Hugh Nibley, or William Dean Russell—is a Christian? Or is it a matter of whether some particular group of Mormons is Christian—say the members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or the Mormon fundamentalists in Colorado City?

Alternatively, is the question a normative one? Am I being asked whether Mormon theology is congruent with Christian theology; whether the institutional structure of the LDS (or RLDS) Church is sufficiently similar to the institutional structure of the Christian church in New Testament times to make it Christian; whether Mormon doctrine is compatible with Christian doctrine; or whether Mormon rituals and worship forms are comparable to Christian rituals and worship forms?

If the inquirer answers yes to any of these questions, I ask for more information about presuppositions that underlie the query: by what standard does the inquirer believe that individuals, organized groups of persons, or institutions are accorded status as Christians? Does one proceed in the Protestant fashion and look to the Bible, assuming that words speak for themselves? Or does one look to authority and tradition, as Catholics do, asking someone who, like the Pope, can speak *ex cathedra*? If not,

how about asking a prophet who can add “thus saith the Lord” to his or her words?

By responding to these queries with such counterqueries, I point to my conviction that definitive answers to normative questions assume the reality of discoverable norms (rules or sets of standards that can be authoritatively established). Within human communities, however, authority always rests on a base of cultural support. In the absence of a single source of authority whose nature is universally respected, I believe that humanity has to struggle along with provisional rules and standards. Thus, I conclude that definitive answers to normative questions are not forthcoming in the sort of pluralistic situation in which the contemporary world finds itself. All my years of study notwithstanding, if the question of whether Mormonism is Christian is a normative one, I do not presume to provide a normative answer.

But if an inquirer’s question is analogical, analytical, or historiographical, that’s different. These are questions I have addressed at length in much of what I have written. For example, the article I wrote for the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* dealt with the historiographical issue. It describes what historians have said about this matter from the middle of the nineteenth century, when Robert Baird erroneously classified Mormonism as a liturgical form of Protestantism—presumably something like Lutheranism—up to the recent renewal of old charges that Mormonism is a non-Christian cult.¹

I also provided my own classification in *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*.² This book begins and ends with analogy. It opens with an observation that, just as the early Christians believed they had found the only proper way to be Jews, so the early followers of the Mormon Prophet believed they had found the only proper way to be Christians. It closes with my conclusion that the Mormonism of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is best understood as a form of corporate Christianity which is related to *traditional* Christianity—that is, the existing Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy—in much the same way that early Christianity was related to Judaism. I did not say the same about the Mormonism of the

Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, since it appears to me that the recent experience of the “Josephites” demonstrates that when it loses zealous emphasis on “the restoration of all things” Mormonism can be classified as an idiosyncratic form of Protestantism.

In saying I am unwilling to provide normative answers when the framework of an inquirer’s question is theological or religious, I do not mean to say I am unwilling to confront this issue in a religious setting. From time to time, I am invited by various church groups to talk about the Mormons. (Since most Protestants have not caught up with recent changes in nomenclature, they nearly always speak of “the Mormons” rather than the Latter-day Saints.) When I accept such invitations, I am confronted with a real challenge—even if the members of the group that extended the invitation have not seen one of the *Godmakers* videos. While those who invite me to talk usually tell me that the Mormons are “really nice people” who “take care of their own” and “have a great choir,” most of them know very little about the Saints’ history (except that they practiced polygamy) and even less about Mormon doctrine or theology.

The task I set for myself in such situations is not merely connecting Mormonism to Christianity—after all, I am talking about a *church of Jesus Christ*. The task also involves showing how this connection “plays out,” on the one hand, in the Mormonism of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints headquartered in Salt Lake City and, on the other hand, in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints headquartered in Independence, Missouri.

In so doing, I sometimes try to clarify the difference with a speculative comparison. In view of its emphasis on the restoration of all things, “Mountain Mormonism” could well be the sort of Christianity that might have developed if the outcome of the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:1–30; Gal. 2:1–10) had favored St. Peter rather than St. Paul, that is, if potential converts to Christianity had been required to first become a part of the “chosen people.” “Missouri Mormonism,” on the other hand, may well signal what Christianity might have been without the conversion of Constantine

and the subsequent integration of religious and political authority. My point is that both are forms of Christianity, yet both differed from the Christianities that existed in 1830—and they still do.

As is well known, the extent of the difference was first manifested in a dramatic manner when the followers of the Mormon Prophet responded to the revelations to “gather” by establishing settlements in Kirtland, Ohio (where they built the first Mormon temple); in Independence, Far West, and elsewhere in Missouri; and in Nauvoo, Illinois.³ The very existence of these Mormon “kingdoms” set the Saints apart. This contrast was spectacularly intensified when a large body of Joseph Smith’s followers fled to the Intermountain West after the Prophet’s murder and there introduced the public practice of plural marriage.

Acceptance of the plural marriage principle, whether one adhered to it or not, became the most obvious testimony that the Saints who followed Brigham Young gave assent to a truly distinctive set of beliefs. It bound together the Saints who went west and provided them with a means of identification that kept them from being confused with members of the many other innovative Christian movements that originated in the United States in the nineteenth century.

For the “Josephites” and many of the other Saints who did not go west, plural marriage became a standard against which the reorganization could define itself. Proving that the practice was not part of Mormonism became important to them as a means of identification, as significant a negative marker for them as it was a positive marker for the “Brighamites.”

But if plural marriage told the LDS, whose church *prescribed* its practice, who *they* were and if it told the RLDS, whose church *proscribed* its practice, who *they* were, in Victorian America plural marriage told everyone else who the Mormons were not: if they practiced polygamy or even believed in its practice, they were not Christians.

The Mormon fundamentalists, who refuse to relinquish the practice of plural marriage, believe that the LDS Church jeopardized its birthright—its exclusive claim, its very *Mormon-ness*—when it surrendered the practice in response to pressures from

the U.S. government. I think they are wrong if they believe that the LDS Church renounced the essence of Mormonism by giving up plural marriage. However, it is possible that this renunciation could prove to have been an early signal pointing to an eventual relinquishing of enough of the LDS Church's distinctiveness to bring it into what some might call the traditional Christian fold. If something like that proves to be the case, I will obviously need to reexamine my interpretation of this movement as one that cannot be fully comprehended in Troeltchian categories.⁴ But that is a matter that will require another book, not just an essay.

What I want to do here is address the matter from another direction. I want to inquire how Mormonism is Christian by asking about the significance and implications of labeling and naming in the world of religion.

Teeming with an almost incredible variety of European immigrants superimposed on a much older Anglo-Dutch Yankee culture, New York City's Lower East Side in the early decades of the twentieth century produced what one might call a childhood *archetype* known as the "Dead End Kid." Familiar to aficionados of gangster movies of the 1930s and 1940s, a youngster of this ilk survived in the bewildering metropolitan milieu by becoming cocky, impudent, resourceful, and extremely suspicious.

No logical connection exists between those B-movie urban urchins and the matter of whether Mormonism is or is not Christian. Yet every time I try to organize my reflections on how the question of whether Mormonism is Christian has been answered across time, remembered snatches of dialogue from the films in which the Dead End Kids appeared keep occurring to me:

ADULT TO SCRUFFY-LOOKING PREADOLESCENT: What's your name, kid?

KID: Who wants ta know? *Or* What's it to ya?

For all that, the Dead End Kids were themselves always asking for the "monikers" of newcomers, a query which is not surprising since names were extremely important in that polyglot neighborhood. As in any polyethnic arena, names established identities,

determined boundaries, and sent encoded messages about how the members of one of these clusters of preadolescent first-generation Americans ought to treat the “new kids on the block” who came from different immigrant stocks.

The same principle holds for religion. Names matter; they matter a lot. For that reason, whenever people I do not know ask me if Mormonism is Christian, a little computer inside my head starts sorting out possibilities. *Who wants to know? What's it to 'em?* Or to put it another way, is there a hidden agenda?

In the past thirty years, certain conservative Christians, charging that Mormonism is not Christian, have established between themselves and the Mormons a sometimes bitter adversarial relationship. During the same period, one finds everywhere within Mormonism—in the *Church News* and the *Ensign*, in the public statements of LDS officials, in Sunday School lessons, and in talks the Saints give in ward sacrament meetings, as well as in private conversations—an escalating emphasis on the suffering of the Savior, the atonement of Christ, personal salvation, and so on. In view of these conflicting convictions about whether Mormonism is Christian, I often get the feeling that I am being asked for my opinion so that the inquirer can use what I say to score points for either the Latter-day Saints or those who oppose them.

And why not? If one looks at LDS history from the perspective of the Saints' perception of themselves and others' perceptions of them, it has always been thus. An agenda has always existed, and it has never been hidden.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith and his followers first appeared on the American religious scene, the situation in the new nation was becoming as religiously diverse as the lower East Side would later be ethnically varied. In this case, however, the newcomers spoke a very familiar language. They came preaching repentance, calling on their hearers to listen to the words of Jesus Christ, and reminding those who had ears to hear that the “Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh” and afterward rose “from the dead that he might bring all men unto him” (see D&C 18:11–12). The Prophet's followers said that by the spirit of prophecy and revelation Jesus had

directed them to establish an ecclesiastical organization headed by Joseph Smith, Jr., who was “called of God and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ” (D&C 20:2). They named their new fellowship the Church of Jesus Christ.

Its name and straightforward proclamation of the uniquely salvific significance of the suffering of Christ notwithstanding, this new ecclesiastical association never became a party to the informal denominational compact that, in the eyes of a majority of American citizens, turned the Christian church in this new nation into a pan-Protestant body. But this was not an instance of membership tacitly sought and implicitly denied. Sufficient reason on both sides kept the church of Jesus Christ that Joseph Smith led from becoming a member of this larger body of Christ.

For one perhaps unfamiliar example of the lack of ecumenical feeling on the Prophet’s part, listen to how Apostle William E. McLellin (whose journals have recently been made available to researchers) described a sermon preached on January 14, 1834:

President Smith preached three hours in Kirt[land] during which he exposed the Methodist Discipline in its black deformity and called upon the Elders in the power of the spirit of God to expose the creeds & confessions of men—His discourse was animated and Pointed against all Creeds of men[.]⁵

Such total refutation of the doctrines of every other Christian body reflects the extent to which the claims of this particular church of Jesus Christ were exclusive. Its members asserted that their church was set apart from all other churches that were called Christian because theirs was the only *restored* church of Jesus Christ that had been on the earth since the days of the “Great Apostasy.” They maintained that their way of being Christian was the only legitimate way to be Christian. In addition, they believed that in becoming members of this restored church they had become as Christian as Christians had been in New Testament times.

Furthermore, these “New Testament Christians” or Latter-day Saints, as they soon called themselves, believed that theirs had to be the only authentic church of Jesus Christ because theirs was the only church in which men who held the restored Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods presided. And it quickly became a tenet

of their faith that men who were not ordained members of these priesthood orders could not legitimately act for God in space and time.

Still, Smith's followers were by no means the only ones during this period whose preaching of the crucified Christ was coupled with exclusive institutional claims. In the same year that Smith's followers established their church of Jesus Christ, another new Christian church was also established in the United States. This church was organized by the adherents of Thomas and Alexander Campbell who called themselves Disciples of Christ. As were the members of the church headed by the Mormon Prophet, the members of this newly "restored" church were also committed to the doctrines and practices found in the New Testament. Members of both churches expected an imminent millennium, and in each case, the members believed that through their church—and only through their church—a "restoration of the ancient order of things" would be accomplished.

Exclusivity, then, was not the claim that formed the barrier that kept the Saints outside the denominational compact; the Book of Mormon was a much more serious stumbling block. By accepting the document as testimony to the truth of gospel claims, the Saints rejected *sola scriptorum*, the Protestant principle of vesting final authority in The Word only as it was manifested in the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, the Saints' church was the only Christian church of substantial size that was headed by a prophet, one who likewise assumed the role of church president and high priest. Thus theirs was a church that (in Weberian terms) made neither *office* nor *tradition* definitive, settling ultimate authority instead on *charisma* adhering in a single individual. This practice was likewise anathema to Protestants in the U.S.

The Saints' obedience to the revelations directing them to "gather" to Zion moved the Saints away from the prevailing Protestant congregational pattern and toward the creation of independent LDS enclaves that could (and sometimes did) function as virtually autonomous political, economic, and cultural units powerful enough to challenge the separation of church and state in the U.S. But the movement's true distinctiveness was not always recognized in the early years, and many observers failed to realize that this new church of Jesus Christ would withstand the

centrifugal pull of Protestant hegemony long enough to become something other than an idiosyncratic Protestant denomination. That it did so is surely related to the Saints' possession of the Book of Mormon, the gathering, the leadership of the Prophet, and all Mormonism's other singular factors including, after 1852, the publicly acknowledged practice of plural marriage.

Another reason—one that might be called “product labeling”—may have helped Mormonism escape the fate that awaited the Campbellites. In claiming the name Christian, the Campbellites found themselves being drawn into the Protestant compact and could only watch as their “true” *church to end all churches* gradually lost so much of its distinctiveness that it turned into yet one more Protestant denomination—or into two if the Christian/Disciple schism is taken into account.

A close reading of Apostle McLellan's journals prompted me to reconsider this labeling matter as Joseph Smith's followers had to work through it in the 1830s. These valuable documents provide firsthand evidence that historians who write about a religious marketplace in the early republic are not simply using an effective metaphor. In the 1830s, an actual religious marketplace existed in towns, villages, and hamlets all across the nation. Preachers of every stripe proclaimed the Christian gospel in the schoolhouses, courthouses, meetinghouses, and even barns that formed the public square of that day. This competition for converts meant that Baptist preachers had to find a way to distinguish themselves from Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministers, Disciples, and similar groups; Methodist circuit riders had to find a way to distinguish themselves from all the other evangelists; and so forth. Since the texts for their sermons were drawn from the same scriptures (the Bible) that all the other preachers used, what to call themselves and their message posed a real problem for Saints on the religious hustings.

Moreover, it was not simply a question of using scriptural texts in common. While Mormon missionaries usually told their listeners about the Book of Mormon and generally directed those who responded to their gospel presentations to “gather to Zion,” the basic LDS message was, at many points, virtually the same message that Protestant ministers were preaching.

Most particularly, according to Richard Bushman, the Mormon message often coincided with that being preached by the new Disciples of Christ.

While he delineates in *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* the obvious difference between the Prophet's followers and this group whose members were confiscating the Christian label by calling their church "the Christian Church," Bushman did not explore the implications of the Disciples' rapid appropriation of this label for either the Disciples or the Saints.⁶ This development seems to me, however, to have been a factor in the development of Mormon distinctiveness and possibly even a factor in Mormonism's survival as a movement whose adherents became a "peculiar people."

Scholars usually report that Smith's followers shortened to "Mormon" the derisive "Mormonite" appellation their opponents had given them. Not so often mentioned, but equally consequential, is their taking Eber D. Howe's scornful naming of the movement in the anti-Mormon work *Mormonism Unveiled* and turning it inside out so that, by 1839, in an epistle from Liberty prison, Joseph Smith himself could proclaim that "truth is 'Mormonism.'"⁷ Adopted by his followers, this distinctive label sent a signal to potential converts that this church was not a Christian church in the usual sense of the term, although the Mormons who were licensed to preach the gospel contended on reasonably equal terms with all the other preachers who were likewise proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

Today, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be sorry that the need to distinguish themselves from the Campbellites forced the early Saints to forego calling themselves Christians, thereby relinquishing the only name that could have provided Mormonism with an unambiguous Christian identity. But from the standpoint of the identity construction critical to the preservation of distinctiveness, the adoption of an alternative label in their early formative stage worked to the Saints' advantage.

While it was Christian, the Mormon gospel was not the same gospel being preached by Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and

representatives of all other existing forms of Christianity. Consequently, those who accepted the gospel, repented, and were baptized under the hands of Mormon missionaries did not simply become Christians. Transported into otherness, they were convinced that they were the Saints that God promised (through revelation to Joseph Smith) to gather out from “among the Gentiles” (D&C 133:12). As such, they understood themselves to have become members of a chosen lineage, a peculiar people. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Prophet’s followers erected a sturdy rhetorical fence between themselves and those who were not part of the group. Naming the *Other*, they denominated as “Gentile” all those who had not yet heard the Mormon gospel and especially those who refused to accept it.⁸ This naming became a primary means of establishing the distinctiveness of the LDS Church.

In light of a contemporary rhetorical shift that seems to be turning *Mormon* into an adjectival modifier used to signify a particular kind of Christian, I may seem to be making too much of the fact that, at a critical juncture in the establishment of their church, the Saints accepted and came to relish Mormon and Mormonism as alternative labels. But there can be little doubt that their embracing the label *Mormon* in lieu of being called Christian contributed to a perception that Mormonism is not Christian.

The Saints’ naming of those who would not hear the LDS message also figured in the conception of Mormons as non-Christian. Writings about Mormonism penned in the nineteenth century by Catholics as well as Protestants reveal that Christians in both those camps were stung by the “Gentile” label. Their understanding was (and is) that the primary purpose of Christ’s life and ministry was extending the gospel to the Gentiles. It therefore seemed to them both strange and ironic that these upstart Saints would use this particular term to imply that Christians who were not Mormons remained outside the gospel bounds, especially as the negative naming was being done by the members of an institution that bore the name of Jesus Christ.⁹

Distinguishing so plainly between themselves and those outside the community was nevertheless useful and perhaps even

necessary during the decades of fortress mentality that characterized what is often called the kingdom period of Mountain Mormonism. While opposition to this flourishing movement was not entirely—or even primarily—grounded in religion, between 1850 and 1890 the Saints had to face intense political and legal harassment which was nearly always explained in religious terms. That they believed all their opponents were Gentiles must have helped them sluff off charges that Mormonism was the very antithesis of Christianity. Considering the source as gentile surely helped them ignore indictments that the Saints were not only unchristian because there were those among the Saints who engaged in the practice of plural marriage, but also un-American because they were all helpless pawns in the hands of tyrants who had turned a United States territory into a theocratic state. In view of such negation of all that they held dear, the Saints' confidence that they were a chosen people and that, as such, they were the only true Christians must have sustained and comforted the LDS community.

The LDS political kingdom and the practice of plural marriage were the most public and hence visible evidences of that part of the "restoration of all things" that rooted Mormonism in the Old Testament as well as the New. When coerced to give up both at the end of the nineteenth century, the LDS Church started what was at first an almost imperceptible transfiguration that would ultimately lift the Christianity that had always been at the base of Mormonism once again to public view. Following the publication of the 1890 Manifesto that renounced the Church's sanction of plural marriage, the Saints started to move away from—or at least to de-emphasize—what I have elsewhere described as the Hebraicism that was appended to Mormon Christianity in Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo. Not, however, until after the mid-twentieth century did the Saints start to give up labeling outsiders—whether Christian or not—as Gentiles.

To this I provide testimony from my own experience. With my husband and son, I spent the 1960–61 academic year in Logan, Utah. I was not treated as a true outlander, perhaps because I became a student at Utah State University. Nevertheless, I was still more or less

constantly made aware of my gentile status—made so, curiously enough, as often by my Protestant coreligionists as by the Saints. In 1972–73, I was elected to the councils of both the Mormon History Association and the (RLDS) John Whitmer Historical Association, and, in each case, I recognized that I was something of a “token Gentile.” (A signal that I was not likewise the token woman came soon after I became a member of the MHA council; when I received a notice of the agenda for the first meeting of the year, it was headed “Dear Brethren.”) Then, although I took no action to alter my *gentile* status, a public announcement of my election to the MHA presidency in 1980 stated that I would be the association’s first *non-Mormon* president. While non-Mormons who study Mormonism sometimes continue to think of themselves—and to speak of themselves—as Gentiles, recent references to people like me nearly always point to our status as *non-Mormons* or *nonmembers*.

This turn away from labeling outsiders as *Other* has coincided with the dramatic turn to which I referred earlier, a turn toward Christian rhetoric and Christian themes, not only in Mormonism’s official presentation of itself to the world, but in Mormon life generally. These shifts can be seen in a close analysis of the LDS missionary lessons since the 1960s, as well as the contents of the *Ensign* since 1971 (when it succeeded the *Improvement Era* as the official LDS Church magazine), and a more perfunctory examination of all sorts of other church publications. But I regard the casual manner in which Mormons are increasingly referring to themselves as Christians as more convincing evidence that Mormons are coming to think of theirs as the Church of Jesus Christ more than they are thinking of it as the Mormon or LDS Church.

I keep a notebook of examples of linguistic signals that shows how rapidly this shift is taking place. The most recent item in it is an account of a recent three-way conversation among a graduate student who is a true-blue birthright Latter-day Saint, the chancellor of our university, and me. I am sensitive to the shift and often anticipate altered LDS rhetoric, but I must admit that I was somewhat surprised to hear my young friend explain that her husband had learned Japanese when he was serving a *Christian* mission in Japan.

This change in how the Saints think of and talk about themselves and how they think of and talk about those who are not Saints suggests to me that, having attained a firm LDS identity during 125 years or so of creating and living within a separate and distinct Mormon culture, the Saints no longer have a sociological need for Gentiles. They do not need an *Other* in order to set themselves apart either rhetorically or categorically. If this reading of what is happening is correct, it would call into question the somewhat cynical notion that is sometimes articulated, even by Latter-day Saints, that the paramount importance of public relations explains the increasing level of the LDS Church's collaboration in ecumenical efforts to relieve distress, hunger, and suffering in the world. The interreligious activities reported in the *Church News* and described by Gerry Pond nearly every week on "News from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" instead signal the self-confidence of a people whose identity is now fixed and steadfast enough that they no longer need to be segregated from other denominations.

Saints, however, are not being universally welcomed into the Judeo-Christian fold. Several reasons may be suggested to account for this attitude. While such ecumenical bodies as the National Conference of Christians and Jews and various inter-church relief organizations are pleased indeed to have a new cooperative partner, some mainstream Protestant denominational bodies seem reluctant to accept a newcomer on equal terms. The reason may be that they are, in sociologist Wade Clark Roof's words, "hemorrhaging members."¹⁰ However, although some are clearly worried about the impact of the success of the LDS missionary program on the size of their congregations, this pragmatic consideration at least among the Methodists is of less importance than the LDS Church's doctrinal insistence that all Christian baptisms are null and void except those performed by properly ordained holders of the LDS priesthood. I expect this reaction is true also for most of mainstream Protestantism as this subject seems to have become a matter of particular touchiness since Vatican II, when the Roman Catholic Church accepted Protestant baptisms as legitimate.

Notwithstanding the recent refusal of the Presbyterians to accredit Mormonism as Christian, many members of the old Protestant “establishment” seem willing to make a place for the Saints in the American religious mosaic. Furthermore, if the signals from Salt Lake City—where the Tabernacle Choir recently gave a concert to celebrate the renovation and rededication of the Cathedral of the Madeleine—are at all indicative of a larger pattern, the same may be said of the nation’s Roman Catholic community. But the same cannot be said for most of those in the amorphous grouping of neo-evangelicals and Protestant fundamentalists who form what is sometimes described as the conservative Christian coalition.

In the latter instance, the matter of “sheep stealing” is extremely important, as are various doctrinal issues. But, to return to my main theme, I believe that neither of these is as potent as the matter of labeling. This time, however, the issue is turned on its head. As the Saints’ need for an *Other* has been steadily diminishing across the past quarter of a century, such a need has been escalating in conservative Christianity. That need is being satisfied by the Latter-day Saints, although they are by no means the only ones serving as negative markers of conservative Christian identity.

For the most part, the Christians in this evangelical-fundamentalist coalition share an emphasis on the critical need for an experiential encounter with Jesus Christ (being “born again”), and they likewise share acceptance of the Bible as “inerrant,” as revealed Word. Moreover, as many of them are members of the independent congregations, organizations like Youth for Christ, and the several denominations which make up the National Association of Evangelicals, the coalition has its own ecumenical organization. Yet the various constituencies in this conservative Christian coalition differ so much among themselves over significant points of doctrine and ritual, as well as the proper form of church organization, that finding a unifying descriptor (one that at once includes and excludes) has turned out to be a formidable task.

To the dismay of members of the mainstream Protestant denominations like mine who have always regarded themselves as evangelical, the *neo-evangelicals* have practically succeeded in taking possession of the evangelical designation. (Some of us are

also bothered because many of these new evangelicals have been trying to take exclusive possession of John Wesley at the same time.) But as all fundamentalists do not describe themselves as evangelicals, nor are all evangelicals fundamentalists, capturing this label has not proved sufficient. As a result, at least some conservative Christians have been engaging, with some success, in a two-pronged effort to take exclusive possession of the *Christian* label.

In its most wide-ranging and sustained attempt to dechristianize those who do not agree with their position on the inerrancy of the scriptures and other “fundamentals,” many conservative Christians condemn the liberal stance of the National Council of Churches (successor to the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America). These Christians make it obvious that they question the “real” or “true” Christianity of members of the historic Protestant denominations who maintain membership in a body so concerned with inclusiveness and the social gospel. More importantly, conservative neo-evangelicals and fundamentalists also characterize as potentially apostate any Christian willing to surrender one whit of Christianity’s exclusive claim. They often place beyond the pale Christians like me who affirm the possibility that, aside from traditional Christianity, other legitimate ways to be religious exist.

According to many conservative Christians, however, the ultimate heresy of liberal Protestantism is not its inclusiveness. The heresy is its tendency to acknowledge the validity of modern scholarship, including the work of scholars who question the historicity of the virgin birth and at least some of the books of the Bible, as well as those who place early Christianity in cultural context and study it as a social movement. No matter what the intensity of the commitment of such people to the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the right wing of the neo-evangelical/fundamentalist coalition describes such Christians as secular humanists and reads them right out of Christianity.

A somewhat different, but equally exclusivist, approach may be seen in modern evangelicalism’s renewed embrace of old charges that America’s indigenous religions (Seventh-day Adventism, Mormonism, Christian Science, and Jehovah’s Witnesses) are

non-Christian *cults*. Such charges were a staple of Protestant journalism in the nineteenth century, when Protestants and Catholics believed that the responsibility to carry the gospel to the *heathens and pagans* included an obligation to carry the gospel to “benighted” Mormons, Adventists, Christian Scientists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The home missionaries, as they were called, who undertook such assignments assumed that it was also their place to warn the members of traditional Christian bodies—and anyone else who would listen—against these new movements.

Even after the Saints renounced the practice of plural marriage and gave up their political kingdom, some efforts were still made to warn Americans about the danger Mormonism posed to the nation. These efforts occurred at the time of the U.S. Senate’s investigation of the right of LDS Apostle Reed Smoot to take his senatorial seat. Otherwise, there was a break in Protestant missions to the Mormons that lasted for almost half a century. But soon after the end of World War II, certain conservative groups renewed the attempt to take the Protestant version of the gospel to participants in all sorts of “new religious movements,” including those that would increasingly be described by evangelicals and fundamentalists as the four “major American cults,”¹¹ the largest of which was Mormonism. Significantly, however, this “mission ministry” did not begin so much as a campaign to warn potential converts away from these “new” movements as it was an effort made by conservative Christians, who were convinced that they were the only ones with access to “true truth,” to share the gospel with those in darkness.

Although the Southern Baptist minister John L. Smith, who publishes the *[Utah] Evangel*, is now as much engaged in trying to keep people from becoming Mormon as he is seeking to induce Latter-day Saints to leave their faith, his early ministry was primarily directed to converting members of the Utah Mormon Church away from Mormonism and into evangelical Protestantism. To a lesser extent, this was true of the ministry of the Reverend Wesley Walters, a Presbyterian clergyman whose reporting of research into the early life of Joseph Smith was as much aimed at convincing LDS believers that Smith was not a prophet as it was aimed at

warning Presbyterians away from Mormonism. Early efforts of Ex-Mormons for Jesus and several other groups of dissident Saints were also directed to Saints whose faith appeared to be wavering. Convincing Saints that they have been deceived seems to have been the primary objective animating Jerald and Sandra Tanner, Mormon converts to Protestant fundamentalism. The Tanners publish the *Salt Lake City Messenger* and have produced and made available for purchase a mass of exposé material designed to prove that Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and LDS leaders from the 1830s forward all had or have clay feet. But because there were other evangelists who mounted similar ministries to Adventists, Christian Scientists, and Jehovah's Witnesses at about the same time, it is clear that the Mormons were by no means the only—or even always the principal—domestic target of conservative Protestantism.

As I read it, this mission started to change in the 1970s for two quite different reasons. First is the set of interrelated elements that precipitated post-Second World War Mormonism out of its intermountain sanctuary, away from the sidelines, and onto the nation's cultural and religious main stage, where it challenged conservative Protestantism on its home turf. A second and more complex reason is related to the creation of the Moral Majority and the sense of danger felt by conservative Christians when they realized that they shared with the Saints a common social and political agenda. This very closeness caused evangelicals and fundamentalists to pull back and led many of those who had theretofore eschewed the anti-Mormon crusade to take strenuous measures to define the Saints as *Other*.

So far as their distinctiveness from mainstream white American culture is concerned, the Saints started to lose their status as peculiar people sometime between 1950 and 1970. Evidence of this shift includes the ubiquitous presence of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir on radio and television and in almost every American home equipped at that time with a sound system and roundtable for playing the "new" LP records; the gradual ascent into the nation's consciousness of an array of attractive, distinctly Mormon personalities from the political, sports, and entertainment scenes

(Ezra Taft Benson, George Romney, Johnny Miller, the Osmonds); integration of “those amazing Mormons”¹² into the idealistic representation of American culture found in middlebrow print media (*Coronet*, *Reader’s Digest*); and the depiction of Mormons—although not always so identified—in a series of low-key radio and television spots that espoused and connected the Saints to American “family values.” Both because the church worked at its image so hard and because the media’s purposes were served by pointing to real-life Leave-It-to-Beaver families (at least in the 1950s), the LDS image was transformed during these two decades from exotic outsider to inordinately wholesome, “squeaky clean” insider.

On the religious scene, the remarkable success of the LDS missionary program in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was news. But so was the success of Adventist missionaries and Jehovah’s Witnesses.¹³ Because the exceptional rate of growth of conservative Christian congregations was likewise newsworthy, it was perhaps inevitable that the heralds of the several movements would seek out the same audiences. Evangelical and fundamentalist missionaries from the United States were as often challenged by Adventists and Witnesses as were Mormons in overseas mission fields, but the Mormons were the ones who appeared to be making the most headway at home. Mormon proselyting was especially successful in suburbia, the field whitest for the harvest, where LDS missionaries contended most directly with conservative Protestantism and where the Saints sometimes seemed to be winning.

Yet neither Mormonism’s increasing visibility and acceptability in the culture nor the news about its fantastic rate of growth was the main source of the perception that Mormonism might really be a threat to American Protestantism. That came with the growing realization that Mormonism was no longer “out there” somewhere. The appearance—apparently sudden and seemingly on every hand—of new LDS meetinghouses, easily identified as Mormon because they were all being built according to standard architectural plans, served as an alarm signaling that Latter-day Saint success was not likely to be a temporary phenomenon.

This emergence of the Saints on the American religious landscape was actually not as precipitous as it looked, for the Saints

had long been present in many areas of the nation. But before the Second World War, local Mormon organizations outside the Intermountain West and California were nearly all associated with the geographical headquarters of regional LDS missions, which, for the most part, were housed in Victorian mansions or other substantial dwellings in residential areas. Although identified by signs as LDS mission headquarters, these structures did not resemble churches and therefore did not advertise the existence of LDS congregations outside Utah. While a number of LDS ward houses had been built in southern California and all along the west coast before 1941 and while several substantial meetinghouses were located in the larger urban areas of the nation, these buildings also did not effectively advertise the presence of LDS congregations, for the structures' architecture was not peculiarly Mormon.

But this situation changed dramatically between 1945 and 1965 as LDS men from the Intermountain West, most of whom were members of the church's lay priesthood, settled with their families in many different areas of the United States. Joining branches of long-time relocated "Mountain Saints" and the rapidly expanding cadre of LDS converts who had never "gathered to Zion," these "Utah Mormons" provided the lay leadership critical to the organization of LDS stakes and wards all across the country. And the formation of these basic congregational units of the church called for the building of meetinghouses on an unprecedented scale.

In what turned out to be a brilliant decision from the standpoint of the maintenance of LDS identity in an altered situation, the brethren at the head of the church decreed that the church's standard building plans would be used for all these LDS structures. Their edict, which appears to have been made on practical and economic grounds, has been much maligned on aesthetic grounds. But in view of the significance of *place* to the Saints, the sagacity of the decision that led the Saints to build structures that gave the impression of the appearance of a new religious "franchise" is evident in retrospect.

The reason this is the case is fairly obvious. Members of virtually all of these newly formed "mission field" stakes and wards

included western Saints who had been born in the church. They had been reared in a Mormon culture as firmly rooted in a sense of place (Zion in the tops of the mountains) as in the sense of unity and order implicit in a world whose structure rests on a coherent “plan of salvation” and a clearly defined system of ecclesiastical hierarchy. In many of these newly organized units, there were also members who were life-long Saints and/or long-time converts who had never moved west but whose religious imagination as well as institutional life revolved around Salt Lake City, Mormonism’s center place.

In addition, the new LDS congregations included substantial and sometimes overwhelming proportions of recent converts; they needed a special place where the “Mormonizing” process could go forward. No matter what their physical location, the neat, utilitarian, multifunctional structures built according to the church’s standard plan were distinctively Mormon places. The very fact that these clearly identifiable LDS structures could be found in town after town and suburb after suburb cultivated among the Saints what might be called a Zionic sense, making the very LDS meetinghouses themselves agents of assimilation and signals that wherever the Saints gather, there Zion is.¹⁴

The Saints were not the only ones who were able to read this signal, however. It was also read by evangelicals and fundamentalists—and by some members of churches in the Protestant mainstream—who surmised that the growth of Mormonism, which they regarded as non-Christian, was endangering Christianity itself. As suggested, their worry was strengthened and clarified—at least it seems to me that it was—in the early 1980s after television evangelist Jerry Falwell moved over from the religious to the political arena and created the Moral Majority, into which he welcomed the Latter-day Saints, whose social and political agenda was perceived to coincide almost precisely with that of conservative (evangelical and fundamentalist) Protestantism.

In recent years, students of culture as well as religion have identified and started intensive study of a cross-cultural phenomenon they describe as “Fundamentalism.” Fundamentalist movements are

characteristic of those cultures in which change, rather than stability, has become the normal condition. Specialists in the study of these movements say that in whatever culture they appear the people who are attracted to them are threatened by the blurring of gender, race, and all the other apparently inborn status distinctions that are emblematic of traditional cultures. As indicated by Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, directors of the massive Fundamentalism Project at the University of Chicago, a critical identifying element of such a fundamentalist movement is not merely its construction of an *Other* which it can stand over and against. An *Other* must be constructed whose properties and attributes are very close to, but not exactly the same as, the properties and attributes of those in the movement. Because the *Other's* primary function is creating clarity where confusion might reign, it cannot be truly foreign.¹⁵

The Reverend Falwell was not wrong when he concluded that many of the Latter-day Saints and the members of the conservative Christian coalition shared similar values, lifestyles, and political preferences. They are for traditional family values, and they stood firmly against the Equal Rights Amendment. They define homosexuality as aberrant and homosexual practices as sinful, they are against abortion—although the LDS position is less rigid and more nuanced—and they oppose the ordination of women. They express their distaste for long hair (on men), short skirts (on women), and rock music. They even share a strong preference for the King James version of the Bible.

What they do not share is a theology and a plan of salvation. This difference is, at base, the reason for the activities of Concerned Christians, Inc., an organization that seeks to accomplish its goals by propagating the messages in the *Godmakers*¹⁶ book and films prepared and distributed by Ed Decker and Dave Hunt. It also explains the accelerated rekindling of anti-Mormonism generated by all the other groups who oppose the Mormons by arguing they are a non-Christian cult. Mainly composed of evangelicals and fundamentalists, these groups are sometimes joined by ex-Mormons, but their ministry is not aimed primarily at the Mormons. It is directed first and foremost to those who are

not Mormon. These groups believe they are “serv[ing] the Christian community” by “exposing and bringing to full knowledge the real doctrines of false prophets and teachers of the Mormon Church.”¹⁷ The purpose of such groups is to equip conservative Christians with information that will allow them to effectively discriminate between “false truth” and “true truth.”

Decker and Hunt’s rabid book and appalling films, which feature cartoon-like renderings of temple ceremonies, have been widely shown and appreciatively received in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of evangelical and fundamentalist congregations. These groups seem grateful to have the *Other* named and classified. Although no means of precisely determining the source of most of the support of these and other anti-Mormon efforts exists and while there is no way to identify the purchasers of the books and pamphlets that purport to reveal the secrets of the “temple cult,” the appeal of works in this genre, including *Secret Ceremonies*, a recent best-selling book by Deborah Laake,¹⁸ is certainly not their artistic merit or reportorial excellence. Rather it is that they touch on the point where Mormonism diverges most dramatically from traditional Christianity, thereby providing evangelical and fundamentalist readers and viewers of video presentations with negative confirmation of their own conservative Christian faith.

I feel certain that the charge that Mormons are members of a non-Christian “temple cult” must be as distressing to Latter-day Saints as the charge that liberal Protestants are secular humanists is disturbing to Methodists like me. But my study of Mormon history has helped me put these charges in perspective: there was a time not long ago when the label “Mormon” was not always enclosed within parentheses when it was used by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. By reminding the members of the LDS Church that they were God’s chosen people, that label enclosed the Saints within communal bounds and signaled that the persons who remained outside were gentile. As an identifying label, “Christian” (even “conservative Christian”) cannot do the work of including only those who ought to be included within the boundaries of the neo-evangelical/fundamentalist coalition nearly so well as the label

“Mormon” once worked to include Saints and only Saints in the LDS community.

Consequently the designations conservative Christians use to exclude those who are not adjudged worthy to be drawn inside their particular Christian circle are less parsimonious than the Saint’s designation of outsiders. They are likewise less charitable and more offensive. And yet it seems to me that when I am described as a secular humanist and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints are described collectively as non-Christian, what is really being said to us all ultimately has less to do with our Christian faith or lack of it than it has to do with the fact that, to those who make such charges, *we are gentile*.

A final personal observation: even though I suppose I can understand why people keep indicting liberal Christianity for its openness, its social activism, and its failure to accept the principle of inerrancy; even though I think I am able to comprehend why it is that the same people or others like them keep trying to tear Mormon Christianity down by endeavoring to prove it not true; and even though I appreciate the positive function of negation and refutation, I regret that such things must come to pass. Because I am certain that winners and losers alike will be drawn within the circle of God’s love someday, I am convinced that the time will come when Christians will no longer need to choose up sides and come out fighting. Meanwhile, when I am asked by one set of Christians whether I think they ought to be warning people away from another set of Christians, I refer to Matthew 13 and the parable of the wheat and the tares:

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. . . . And the servants . . . came and said to [the Lord], . . . do you want us to go and gather them? But he said “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.” (RSV, vv. 27-29)

In the fullness of time, a decision will be made in a higher court as to whether the Holy Catholic Church that evolved from the apostolic church described in the New Testament managed to stay Christian; whether the Protestants, including the Anglicans,

who separated from the Roman church maintained their status as Christians; whether the Methodists who separated from the Anglicans continued to be Christian; and whether the new Christian movements that evolved in the United States in the nineteenth century—Seventh-day Adventism, Mormonism, Christian Science—are authentically Christian. Till then, as one who sees “in a mirror dimly,” I withhold judgment, accounting within the definition of Christian any church, sectarian movement, liberal or conservative coalition, or new religious tradition that gathers persons together in the name of Christ and, in so doing, creates genuine community wherein women and men may—to use Methodist phraseology—take up the Cross and follow Him.

Jan Shipps is Professor of Religious Studies and History at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, and is coeditor of *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. An earlier version of this personal essay was presented at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association in Lamoni, Iowa, in May 1993.

NOTES

¹ Jan Shipps, “Mormonism: An Independent Interpretation,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:937-41.

² Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

³ Ronald D. Dennis, “Gathering,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2:536-37.

⁴ Ernst Troelch, one of the earliest and most influential sociologists of religion, characterized Christian institutions as either churches or sects. See Lawrence A. Young, “Sect,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 3:1291-92.

⁵ William E. McLellin, Journal, January 14, 1834, Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). The McLellin journals will be copublished by *BYU Studies* and the University of Illinois Press in 1994.

⁶ Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 179-88.

⁷ Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834).

⁸ This idea (not the exact words) is expressed in a variety of the sermons printed in the *Journal of Discourses*. It is worked out at some length in my forthcoming article, “Making Saints in the Early Days and the Latter Days,” which will be in *Contemporary Mormonism*, ed. Marie Cornwall Madsen

and Tim Heaton. This work will be published by the University of Illinois Press in 1994.

The idea that those through whose veins the blood of Abraham courses will respond to the LDS gospel while those without “believing blood” will not was once accepted by many Saints—or so I have been told by several Mormons I have interviewed.

⁹ Jan Shipps, “From Satyr to Saint: American Attitudes toward the Mormons, 1860–1960” (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, April 1973), copy in the LDS Church Archives.

¹⁰ Jan Shipps and David Smith, eds., *Taking Stock and Charting Change: Religious Reconfigurations in America since the Sixties* (Privately printed for Robert W. Lynn on the occasion of his retirement from Lilly Endowment, Indianapolis, 1990), 6–12.

¹¹ The Mormons are one of the groups covered in Anthony A. Hokema, *Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1963).

¹² Andrew Hamilton, “Those Amazing Mormons,” *Coronet Magazine*, April 1952, 26–30.

¹³ Although membership statistics are unavailable, most observers believe that instead of gaining members during these years, the number of Christian Scientists started to decline.

¹⁴ Shipps, “Mormonism: An Independent Interpretation” 2:939–41.

¹⁵ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, “Conclusion: An Interim Report on a Hypothetical Family,” in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 842.

¹⁶ Ed Decker and David Hunt, *Godmakers* (Eugene, Oreg.: Harvest House Publishers, 1984).

¹⁷ Quotation is one of the standard justifications often published in the *[Utah] Evangel* edited by John L. Smith.

¹⁸ Deborah Laake, *Secret Ceremonies* (New York: W. Morrow, 1993).