

# Testing Stark's Thesis: Is Mormonism the First New World Religion since Islam?

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In 1984, Rodney Stark startled the academic world with a claim that has kept sociologists and religion-watchers scratching their heads ever since. "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons," he predicted, "will soon achieve a worldwide following comparable to that of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and the other dominant world faiths."<sup>1</sup> Stark claimed that Mormonism has grown faster than any other new religion in American history.<sup>2</sup> Between 1840 and 1980, it had averaged a growth rate of 44 percent per decade; in the four decades 1940 through 1980, growth zoomed to an astonishing 53 percent. If it maintained a 30 percent growth rate, Mormons would exceed 60 million by the year 2080; if 50 percent, then 265 million by 2080.<sup>3</sup> "Today," he declared, "they stand on the threshold of becoming the first major faith to appear on earth since the Prophet Mohammed rode out of the desert."<sup>4</sup>

In 1996, twelve years later, Stark reported that his high estimate of projected growth was too low: by 1995 there were one million more Mormons than even a growth rate of 50 percent had predicted. Therefore he was still holding to his earlier projection of 265 million by 2080.<sup>5</sup> In 2001 he was saying the same: "By late in the twenty-first century the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be a major world religion."<sup>6</sup>

In this paper we will test these claims by asking the following questions: Is Mormonism truly a new religion? Is it a world religion? Is it the first since Islam? What are its prospects for continued growth? I should add that when I discuss “Mormonism,” I refer to the largest movement emerging from the life and teachings of Joseph Smith. There are many other smaller groups, such as the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), whose dynamics are different from the movement I am analyzing here.

### Is Mormonism New?

In 1984, Stark insisted that, while Mormons “have retained cultural continuities with Christianity (just as Christianity retained continuities with Judaism and classical paganism), . . . the Mormons are a *new* religion.”<sup>7</sup>

There is some disagreement here. Some Mormon scholars object that most Mormon distinctions can be found in earlier Christian thinkers and practices; some Mormon *believers* believe that the notion of Mormonism as new only feeds old and often-virulent prejudices that Mormonism is essentially unchristian and in fact a cult.

But there is an emerging consensus among both Mormon and non-Mormon scholars, that while Mormonism retains significant and central features of mainstream Christian thought and practice, it nevertheless diverges in ways sufficient to merit its characterization as a “new religious tradition.”<sup>8</sup> Jan Shipps, who “has come to know the Saints better than any previous outside observer,”<sup>9</sup> has famously argued that Mormonism is a departure from the existing Christian tradition as much as early Christianity was a departure from Judaism. It abandoned both Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs about the finality of the New Testament and particularly the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*.<sup>10</sup>

Philip Barlow’s recent study of Latter-day Saint use of the Bible reinforces Shipps’s contention. Like Shipps, he believes Mormonism departs from *sola scriptura*: the new tradition puts limits on biblical authority and rejects the Bible as a sufficient religious guide.<sup>11</sup>

Since the time of Joseph Smith, the Mormon use of scripture has combined a traditional faith in the Bible with more “conservative” elements (like a more than occasional extra dose of literalism), some liberal components (such as Joseph Smith’s Bushnell-like insistence on the limitations of human language), and, at least in an American context, some radical ingredients (an open canon, an oral scripture, the subjugation of biblical assertions to experimental truth or the pronouncements of living authorities).<sup>12</sup>

According to Barlow, Mormon apostle Bruce R. McConkie taught that while the Bible was originally inspired by God, it has since been corrupted and so now contains “only a shadow of the clearer, unmarred revelations Joseph Smith wrote and spoke.” Elder McConkie said, “[Our present Bible] contains a bucket, a small pail, a few draughts, no more than a small stream at most, out of the great ocean of revealed truth that has come to men in *ages more spiritually enlightened* than ours.”<sup>13</sup> McConkie felt the most enlightened age was that of Joseph Smith, who, as Grant Underwood notes, has been given by Mormons the same canonical status as the apostle Paul.<sup>14</sup> Barlow also points out that McConkie’s views often dismayed some Mormon leaders, but over time were thought to be generally orthodox.<sup>15</sup>

There are other significant departures from mainstream Christian thought, such as “the possibility of people evolving into gods,”<sup>16</sup> the bodily nature of God, and “Latter-day Saints’ erasure of unassailable walls of separation between matter and spirit and humans and gods.”<sup>17</sup> For Eric Eliason, these doctrinal differences are possibly “serious enough to make Mormonism ultimately irreconcilable with traditional Christianity.”<sup>18</sup>

Two scholars beg to differ. Terryl Givens, citing Stephen Robinson, uses Stark’s outline of seven marks of orthodox Christian belief and finds that “in all seven cases, Mormon belief is in unambiguous accord with these core beliefs.” Even the Mormon idea of deification is not new, he argues; it is no different from what can be found in Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and Augustine. Givens cites Truman Madsen’s assertion (but without accompanying argument) that Mormon beliefs anticipate thinking held by Bonhoeffer, Hartshorne, and (Avery) Dulles.<sup>19</sup>

Yet at the same time, Givens suggests that Mormonism rejects what Kierkegaard called the “infinite qualitative difference” between the human and the divine: “The [Mormon sense of the] divine, in other words, was not characterized by the radical otherness that [mainstream Christian] religious tradition equated with the sacred. For this reason, [Smith’s] religious innovation was more the naturalizing of the supernatural than the other way around.”<sup>20</sup> For Givens, then, the Mormon sacred is not, after all, the traditional understanding of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Religion is not mystery; God in a sense has been reduced (at least in difference from humanity) and humanity exalted. As Milton Backman puts it, Mormons teach an “anthropomorphic God and theomorphic man.”<sup>21</sup> On the ontological nature of humanity and deity, then, even Givens suggests significant departure.

Christie Davies is another scholar who says Mormonism is not a new religion. Instead, he argues, it “is best regarded . . . as merely a forward position on a Protestant line of advance away from Roman Catholicism and back towards the traditions of the Old Testament.”<sup>22</sup> But Davies adds that if Mormonism maintains an ultra-Protestant concern for abstention from mild drugs of sociability (alcohol for fundamentalist Protestants, caffeine for Mormons), it nevertheless guards a Jewish, “and very non-Christian, mode of defining its boundaries and identity through dietary taboos and an obsession with genealogy and descent.”<sup>23</sup>

If Givens claims too much for the Mormon doctrine of deification (the Greek Fathers never broke down the wall of ontological separation between creature and Creator<sup>24</sup>), he is nonetheless right to emphasize continuities between Mormonism and traditional Christianity.<sup>25</sup> After all, these have often been obscured by religious polemics. Evangelicals in particular need to hear that Mormons teach basically the same moral theology which John Paul II called the “gospel of life”; that they believe in the (original) Bible as the Word of God, Jesus as God the Son and not just the Son of God, Jesus as the only means of salvation, and the substitutionary atonement. They also need to know that Mormon scriptures assert that salvation is not earned by human effort but that Christ took our sins, we take his righteousness, and we are saved by grace through faith.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, however, the newness of this religious tradition cannot be denied. There is, in Barlow's phrase, an "enduring difference."<sup>27</sup> Mormons enlarge the biblical canon, accept new revelation, claim that God the Father had his own father, hold that eternal law is independent of and coeternal with God, deny ontological difference between creature and Creator, and reject *creatio ex nihilo*. In addition, Mormons and traditional Christians differ on whether creatures can share God's "incommunicable" attributes, whether there are non-material beings, and whether there were preexistent spirits coequal with the Father of Jesus Christ.

### Is Mormonism a World Religion?

Before investigating whether Mormonism is the newest world religion, one needs to acknowledge that the term *world religion* is anything but clear. Scholars have been debating its meaning for some decades now. The trouble is that they cannot agree on what it means.

The biggest problem is the word *religion* itself. Many in the West have defined it in terms of belief, especially belief in a supernatural deity. But many in other parts of the world challenge that assumption. Scholars of south Asian religion often observe that Hindus do not agree on any single belief, including belief in a personal god.<sup>28</sup> It is well known that philosophical Hindus reject belief in any personal deity, preferring impersonal nondualism. Theravada Buddhists, probably closest in belief to Gautama Buddha himself, are functional atheists as well. Yet surely we cannot say that these folks are not religious.

Some Western thinkers have defined religion in other ways. Schleiermacher and Tillich, for example, have focused on experience—either the feeling of absolute dependence or the attitude of ultimate concern.<sup>29</sup> Others find the essence of religion in its function. Freud, for example, said religion is based on repression of childhood sexuality and projection of these feelings on a god figure.<sup>30</sup> Durkeim proposed that religion is the way society seeks cohesion.<sup>31</sup>

Even the use of the singular *religion* is problematic, for it assumes an essence that is found in all the religions or even in the different versions of a single "religion," just as basic toothpaste is found in all

the brands thereof. But what is the essence of Hinduism when there is no one thing on which all Hindus agree? Is there a common essence that unites Nigerian Anglicans and the American Episcopalians who consecrated an actively gay bishop? The Nigerians emphatically deny it. They also deny that they share anything religiously essential with their fellow Nigerian Muslims. Nigerian Muslims say the same about Nigerian Christians.

These definitional problems are what have led comparative religionist John Hinnells to say that religion is simply what people do who call themselves religious.<sup>32</sup> If *religion* is slippery, *world religion* is no easier to grasp. Most nontraditional groups prefer the term because its reputation is obviously superior to *sect* or *cult* and suggests broad appeal. Yet it, too, is hard to pin down, and scholars have been unable to reach consensus.

Does *world religion* mean that there are devotees scattered across the world? This alone cannot count, for there are hundreds of religious groups with insignificant numbers that no one would call world religions. Yet some religions that have significant numbers located in many countries are still inaccessible to most. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and Hinduism, for example, are mostly ethnic and endogamous. This is why Douglas Davies, among others, says they are great religions of the world but not world religions.<sup>33</sup>

What then do we mean by *world religion*? A religious group in a variety of countries, accessible to newcomers, and of significant numbers? Even this last feature, which seems the most obvious, is suspect, for many religions cannot be counted easily. In East Asia, for example, millions would call themselves Buddhists. But most of these same people would also call themselves Confucianists and many, especially in China, also Taoists. Most estimates of religious demographics assume religious exclusivism for their surveys of world religions, but these Asian millions are clearly not exclusive in their religious attachments.<sup>34</sup>

These are some of the reasons Hinnells concludes that no label, neither *religion* nor *world religion*, is clear or transparent or perhaps even coherent.<sup>35</sup> Hence more work needs to be done defining what is meant by the terms before we say with any certainty if Mormonism

qualifies. If the number of adherents can be misleading, it is nevertheless the easiest way to measure the size of a religious group. And if it is not the only measure of a world religion—whatever that may be—it is nevertheless an important and useful one. Since membership is the leading criterion Stark uses, we will use it to help us answer the next question.

### Is Mormonism the First New Religion since Islam?

If we use the number of adherents as our primary measure of what we agree to call a world religion, it is impossible to say that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the first new world faith since Islam. Since the seventh century, a number of other new faiths have arisen of comparable or larger size. Each was sufficiently different from its parent religion to merit its moniker as a new tradition.

For example, True Pure Land Buddhism arose in the thirteenth century, inspired by Shinran's Protestant-like theological innovations. In the 2001 edition of David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia*, which is one of the most reliable sources of comparative religious demographics, Mormons number 11 million while True Pure Land Buddhists total 14 million.<sup>36</sup> The twentieth-century new Japanese religion, Soka Gakkai, already outstrips the Mormon Church, 18 million to 11 million. Baha'is, who originated in the nineteenth century, numbered 7.1 million in 2000, while Sufism, which dates its origins to some time between the eighth and tenth centuries, claims a whopping 237 million.<sup>37</sup>

Shipps seems to agree with Stark's claim, but she limits her comparison to new American religious traditions. She proposes that every other new American religion was sectarian, which means that they did not change the mainstream Christian story in fundamental ways. Since Mormonism changed the story fundamentally by opening the canon with a new prophet and new revelation (and recapitulating key events in both Hebrew and early Christian histories in such singular ways that its history itself became a new text), it is a new religious *tradition*.<sup>38</sup>

But what about Jehovah's Witnesses? Did they not change the dominant religious story in fundamental ways? Mormons added

new incarnations to the story, but Jehovah's Witnesses denied the concept of incarnation entirely. Mormons rejected traditional understandings of the origin of God the Son, but the Witnesses denied the *existence* of God the Son. Mormons disavow the Trinity but retain three "personages" of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each fully divine. Witnesses, on the other hand, do not even come close: Jesus is ontologically inferior to the Father, and the Spirit is an impersonal force.<sup>39</sup>

If Mormons qualify as a new tradition because of their changes to the dominant religious story, Jehovah's Witnesses also deserve the label. In terms of numbers, Jehovah's Witnesses are doing even better. Despite starting later (1872 vs. 1830), they have more adherents and are in more countries. Barrett reports that in 2000 there were 11 million Mormons in 116 countries, compared with 13 million Jehovah's Witnesses in 219 countries.<sup>40</sup>

Stark suggests that only Mormons have what it takes to become the next major world faith, listing ten marks of such a community. Careful consideration, however, reveals that the Jehovah's Witnesses also fare well when judged by these same criteria.

1. "Cultural continuity with the conventional faith(s) of the societies in which they seek converts."<sup>41</sup> Stark himself says that Jehovah's Witnesses will have an advantage over the Latter-day Saints in Christian societies because of novelties in Latter-day Saint theology: an infinite number of universes, multiple gods and their wives, and the potential of today's humans to become gods.<sup>42</sup> But the advantage may not be significant, given the Jehovah's Witnesses' discontinuity with modern culture on other scores: their pacifism, discouragement of higher education, and refusal to participate in civic groups or politics.

2. "Nonempirical" doctrines.<sup>43</sup> Here Jehovah's Witnesses are at a disadvantage because of their long history of failed attempts to predict the end of the world.<sup>44</sup> Mormons fare better on this score.

3. A modicum of tension with the surrounding environment: "strict but not too strict."<sup>45</sup> Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are probably comparable here: Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate birthdays or holidays, but they can drink alcohol. Mormons drink



neither coffee nor beer, but they are viewed by “Gentile” Americans as responsible citizens.

4. “Legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective.”<sup>46</sup> This also means opportunity for members to assume authority. Both churches use self-taught laity, not seminary-trained clergy, to lead. Hence every member, at least among males, has the chance to take a leadership position.

5. Volunteer labor, who also evangelize. Both churches are remarkable on this score, with Jehovah’s Witnesses having a slight edge, since they enlist all ages to go door to door, not just the young for two years.

6. High fertility rates. Both churches emphasize the importance of large families, and fertility rates are higher than average in each.<sup>47</sup>

7. Weak competition in a political context of religious freedom. For both Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, there is greater growth in regions where there are higher numbers of the unchurched. Stark has shown that where there is a healthy percentage of those who list their religious affiliation as “none,” new Latter-day Saint membership is higher.<sup>48</sup> The same can be said for Jehovah’s Witnesses in Europe, which has been secularized by the Enlightenment and communism.

8. “Strong internal attachments, while . . . able to maintain and form ties to outsiders.”<sup>49</sup> Both groups seem adept at networking friends on the inside. But Mormons are better at forming ties to outsiders. Jehovah’s Witnesses are less connected to the outside world because they reject a larger number of cultural institutions—not only politics, just war, and higher education, but also blood transfusions and blood products, religious holidays, extracurricular school activities, saluting the flag, and working in hospitals.

9. They “remain sufficiently strict.”<sup>50</sup> Although Jehovah’s Witnesses are more rigorous in terms of lifestyle, both churches maintain more than minimal tension with their surrounding cultures—especially in nations outside the United States where the Latter-day Saint church is perceived as an American religion.

10. Religious education that persuades the young not to defect or seek to eliminate the tension with their culture. Stark points out that since Latter-day Saints are well connected to outsiders and

mainstream American society, “the message to ambitious young Latter-day Saints [is that] successful people are religious people.”<sup>51</sup> Hence they are not unduly tempted to think they need defect in order to find worldly success. This will be more problematic for Jehovah’s Witnesses, who discourage higher education.

All in all, the differences between these two churches on these criteria are not great. The two churches are fairly even for six of the criteria, while Latter-day Saints have the advantage in three and Witnesses in one. This rough parity is evidenced by worldwide growth: the two churches are remarkably close in numbers of adherents, with Witnesses having a slight edge. Because the Witnesses have planted communities in 88 percent more countries and are not as associated theologically with America in this increasingly anti-American world, their prospects for further growth might be a little better.

Taking stock of the argument so far, Mormonism is indeed a new religious tradition, but it cannot be said to be the first new tradition since Islam. Other religious traditions with broad appeal have arisen since the seventh century, not only among non-Christian religious families but even within the American Christian congeries of traditions. The term *world religion* is problematic; there is no scholarly consensus on its meaning. But if we stipulate that it refers to a religious movement of significant numbers and is accessible to a broad number of peoples, then Mormonism takes its place not among the great world religions (all of which dwarf it in size<sup>52</sup>) but among a fair number that may someday reach that status.

### **Is Mormonism “Translatable”?**

The question is, then, will Mormonism grow as Stark suggests? Perhaps we can learn from its parent, apostolic Christianity. According to Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls, the two most notable thinkers in the study of what has come to be called “world Christianity,” the key to Christianity’s growth has been its ability to transcend its Jewish-Palestinian culture and use the language and even concepts of new and different cultures.<sup>53</sup> In a word, the key lay in Christianity’s “translatability.”

Sanneh and Walls have argued that when Christian faith takes the word of Christ into a new culture—which more often than not is animated by a religious vision—it uses the language and almost invariably the concepts of the new culture. In the process, the faith is reshaped and sometimes even expanded by “translating” its message into the vocabulary and concepts of the new culture.

Scholars have noted that this process took place even during biblical periods. In the Old Testament, for example, God used previously existing Mesopotamian religious rituals (sacred torches and censers in initiation and purification rites, and circumcision) to teach new religious concepts to Abraham and his progeny.<sup>54</sup> God also seems to have used Persian religious traditions to teach his people in Babylonian exile new understandings of cosmic warfare and life after death.

In the New Testament, we can see the influence of Hellenistic religion: the Hellenistic *theos* was often understood to be a single godhead behind many names and mythologies or an impersonal One behind all that is. New Testament authors used the word, already invested with the suggestion of the ground and force behind everything that exists, and added a new layer of meaning denoting the epitome and source of personhood. Such “translation” is always risky: while something may be gained, something may also be lost by importing foreign connotations that corrupt the original meaning. The use of the new term “Lord” for Messiah (Christ) in Antioch (Acts 11:20), by unnamed believers from Cyprus and Cyrene speaking to Greeks, ran the risk of reducing Jesus to one more cult divinity alongside Lord Serapis or Lord Osiris. But because the new community was saturated in the Hebrew scriptures, the Greco-Roman *kyrios* was reshaped into a new kind of *kyrios*, recognizably Jewish.<sup>55</sup>

Sanneh has argued recently that translatability was therefore written into the fabric of the apostolic faith. It was not an accident that Christianity was the only world religion transmitted without the language or culture of its founder.<sup>56</sup> Jesus’s followers believed the gospel ought to be translated into other languages and cultures. “There was nothing God wanted to say that could not be said in simple everyday language,” and therefore be translated into other languages and

cultures. All cultures were created equal; no language or culture had privileged access to the divine.<sup>57</sup>

The question then becomes whether, or to what degree, Mormonism is translatable. There are some positive indications that it has several comparative advantages in its translatability. First, as Douglas Davies has contended repeatedly, Mormonism promises the transcendence of death.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Mormonism's transcendence comes "value-added." It goes beyond mainstream Christianity by not only offering some sort of salvation to nearly everyone—even non-Mormons—but also providing detailed descriptions of the afterlife. There are a variety of heavens available and the assurance of being reunited with family and other loved ones. On top of all that, it promises godhood to faithful Mormons. This is attractive to people in some cultures, particularly those in religions such as Theravada or Zen Buddhism that have little or no hope of conscious life after death.

Also, Latter-day Saints are able to tell residents of Latin America and the South Pacific that God did not neglect them. Recent interpretations of the Book of Mormon assert that Jesus's "other sheep" (John 10:16) were people in "ancient America," which is now said to include Central and South America and perhaps Pacific islands.<sup>59</sup> Stark has shown that many Latin American Saints believe they are direct descendants of Abraham through Lehi and that the Book of Mormon is "the authentic history of pre-Columbian times."<sup>60</sup> Hence Christie Davies confidently predicts, "Mormonism is set to become a new world religion because it reaches parts other religions cannot reach."<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, as Armand Mauss has pointed out, Mormonism has an enormous capacity for change. When the Latter-day Saints received poor reception in various times and climes, it changed its doctrine about blacks, Jews, and the identity of the Lamanites. In the process, "a provincial—even tribal—movement was gradually transformed into a universal religion in which lineage of all kinds became essentially irrelevant."<sup>62</sup> As Mormons adopted a greater Christocentric focus in the twentieth century and emphasized the apostle Paul's universalism, they dropped their nineteenth-century belief that Anglo-Saxon and German Mormons had an "inborn propensity,

in their very blood, to recognize the teachings of Christ as delivered by Latter-day Saint missionaries.”<sup>63</sup> This change bore “some apparent relationship to the results of church programs for proselyting and retention in various parts of the world.”<sup>64</sup>

Similar pressures preceded the elimination of the ban on the priesthood for blacks. When the Nigerian government in the early 1960s refused Mormon missionaries because of the church’s ban on black priests, and growth in the Brazilian church necessitated a new temple (which would have been closed to black converts), “President [Spencer W.] Kimball, in an inspiring combination of spiritual and political astuteness, brought his colleagues in the leadership to an acceptance of his own understanding of God’s will in the matter.”<sup>65</sup> The result was the 1978 elimination of the ban on blacks in the priesthood.

Emphasis on Jewish conversion has diminished as Jews have shown themselves “impervious” to the same, and the identity of Lamanites gradually shifted from North to South America “as church growth has bogged down among the Indians of North America and (by contrast) mushroomed in Latin America.”<sup>66</sup>

Since Mormon theology is still in process (Lawrence Young laments “its limited formal theology”<sup>67</sup>), one wonders what would happen if it would continue some recent trends toward mainstream Christian theology.<sup>68</sup> There is some precedent here. In 1997, the World-wide Church of God dropped both its objections to the doctrine of the Trinity and certain Pelagian tendencies and was accepted as a member of the National Association of Evangelicals.<sup>69</sup> Now, Mormon-Evangelical differences are greater than WCOG-Evangelical differences. Nevertheless, one guesses that if Mormonism were to affirm the incommensurability of the human and divine natures,<sup>70</sup> and the eternal deity of the godhead, Mormonism would be more translatable in regions (such as Africa and China) where there is increasing familiarity with historic Christian thought.

Despite these positive possibilities, Mormonism faces a number of obstacles as it seeks to become a world religion. Perhaps the most formidable is its close association with American history and culture. Mormons believe that God’s new prophet was from New York and

that the Millennium will begin in Missouri. When America had a better public image internationally, this may have been a drawing card for Mormon missionaries working abroad. But in recent years, it has become a liability. Growing anti-Americanism will hinder the promotion of a religion that is American not only culturally but theologically. Therefore the question is whether, as Douglas Davies poses it, Mormonism will be able to transcend indigenous culture or remain essentially North American.<sup>71</sup>

As we have already discussed, new understandings of Lamanites have helped Mormon missions in Latin America. But even here, resentment toward the northern superpower may hamper missionary efforts. In Asia and Africa, it will be more difficult. Lamin Sanneh has argued that mainstream Christian translatability has enabled African Christians to feel more African.<sup>72</sup> Will Mormon theology enable them to do the same, when they learn that Christ came to North and South America but not Africa?

This theological and cultural connection to America may help explain the second obstacle, which is what seems to be a low retention rate outside of the United States. In 1994, Lawrence Young observed that outside of the South Pacific, Mormonism was numerically marginal. In all countries except Chile (2.5 percent of the population), the Mormon population was usually significantly under 1 percent. Weekly attendance rates in Latin America and Asia were half of the rates in the United States. Young predicted that most new members outside the States would not be integrated successfully and that Mormonism would remain marginal in those societies.<sup>73</sup> Mauss was similarly pessimistic, noting in 1991 that retention rates for the second generation outside North America ranged “from modest to abysmal.”<sup>74</sup> It is not clear that these problems have been resolved.<sup>75</sup>

Ironically, one of Mormonism’s strengths is now a weakness: its lack of a formal theology.<sup>76</sup> Without a clearly identified set of core beliefs, it is harder for Mormonism to compete in areas with religions that have clear doctrine—mainstream Christianity and Islam, for example. In other words, if Mormonism’s doctrinal fluidity were to work itself out of a job by clarifying its theological core, and particularly in the direction of mainstream Christian theology, it would

become more competitive. But without those sorts of changes, it may be difficult to overcome its cultural embeddedness.

## Conclusion

In summary, Mormonism is indeed a new religious tradition, with significant differences from mainstream Christianity. But it is not the first major faith to have arisen since Islam,<sup>77</sup> and it has not grown faster than any other new American religion. True Pure Land Buddhism, Sokka Gakkai, Baha'i, and Sufism are all religious movements that are of comparable or greater size and have also arisen since the seventh century. Each is an important departure from its religious parent. The Jehovah's Witness tradition, another new American religion, has grown even faster than Mormonism and boasts larger worldwide membership in many more countries. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses are comparable in their fulfillment of ten criteria that Stark proposes are necessary for religious growth.

Hence Mormonism is not among the great world religions (of course, Stark only claimed it is on its way), but it is one of a number of religious communities that are growing. Its potential to rank among the five or six largest religions depends on its translatability, that is, its ability to transcend its American provenance and theological character. It has the advantages of (1) teaching a near-universal salvation with an attractively detailed afterlife, (2) a proven capacity for adaptation, and (3) theological appeal to those who live in the Americas.

But precisely because of this American history and theological structure, its recent growth may start to level off, as its poor retention rates outside the United States suggest is possible. This trend may continue in parts of the world where anti-Americanism is growing and global Christianity's increasing prominence in the Third World is heightening sensitivity to differences with historic Christian beliefs. Unless it can transcend these cultural barriers, and reduce theological dissonance between its doctrines and mainstream Christian understandings of creation and ontology, it may prove difficult to sustain its growth outside the Americas.<sup>78</sup>

## Notes

1. Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 18.
2. Stark, "New World Faith," 19.
3. Stark, "New World Faith," Table 2, 22.
4. Stark, "New World Faith," 19.
5. Rodney Stark, "So Far, So Good: A Brief Assessment of Mormon Membership Projections," *Review of Religious Research* 38, no. 2 (December 1996): 178.
6. Rodney Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success: A Theoretical Application," in *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion*, ed. Eric A. Eliason (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 239.
7. Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," 23. The emphasis is Stark's.
8. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 149.
9. Philip Barlow, "Jan Shipps and the Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies," *Church History* 73, no. 2 (June 2004): 412.
10. Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 331; Shipps, "Is Mormonism Christian? Reflections on a Complicated Question," in *Mormons and Mormonism*, 83; reprinted from *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 439–65.
11. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 220.
12. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 227–28.
13. McConkie, cited in Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 193, emphasis added.
14. Grant Underwood, "Mormons and the Millennial World-View," in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, ed. Douglas J. Davies (New York: Cassell, 1996), 141.
15. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 190.
16. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, "Modern Heaven . . . and a Theology," in *Mormons and Mormonism*, 145.
17. Eliason, "Introduction," in *Mormons and Mormonism*, 10.
18. Eliason, "Introduction," 10.
19. Terryl L. Givens, "'This Great Modern Abomination': Orthodoxy and Heresy in American Religion," in *Mormons and Mormonism*, 101–2. The seven points (the first four of which are regarded as essential) are "existence of a personal God, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authenticity of biblical miracles . . . the existence of the Devil, . . . life beyond death, the virgin birth, and Christ's walking on water."



20. Givens, "This Great Modern Abomination," 116.

21. Milton V. Backman, cited by Terryl Givens, "The Book of Mormon and Religious Epistemology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 3 and 4 (Fall–Winter 2001): 53–65.

22. Christie Davies, "Coffee, Tea and the Ultra Protestant and Jewish Nature of the Boundaries of Mormonism," in *Mormon Identities*, 43.

23. Davies, "Coffee, Tea," 44.

24. Norman Russell's new authoritative study of deification among the Greek Fathers shows that deification language was used "in one of three ways, nominally, analogically, or metaphorically." The first used the word "gods" for human beings simply as a term of honor. The second stretched the nominal by saying that humans can become "sons or gods 'by grace' in relation to Christ who is Son and God 'by nature.'" The metaphorical use takes two approaches, the ethical and realistic. In the ethical, humans attempt "likeness" to God by moral imitation. In the realistic, humans participate in God's being. But the relationship even here is "asymmetrical," bringing together beings of "diverse ontological type"—the opposite of Mormon claims that God and humanity share the same ontology. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–2.

Justin Martyr used Psalms 82:6 ("You are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High") to argue that "all human beings are deemed worthy of becoming gods and of having power to become sons of the Most High" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 124). But he relates deification only to John's statement that "to all who received [Christ], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12). He never developed this statement into a doctrine resembling Mormon deification (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 96–101).

Irenaeus linked Psalms 82:6 not to Johannine "children of God" but to Pauline adoption. His doctrine of deification ("Because of his infinite love he became what we are in order to make us what he is in himself" [*Against Heresies* 5. Preface]) therefore "involves an exchange of properties, not the establishment of an identity of essence. He who was Son of God by nature became a man in order to make us sons by adoption (*Against Heresies* 3.19.1)" (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 106, 108).

Clement's deification is similar. It is "not ontological—human nature per se is not transformed by the Logos—but exemplary. . . . Christians who have attained perfection will be enthroned in glory with the highest grade of the saved, but still on a lower level than Christ. As Butterworth points out, this shows 'how careful Clement is to distinguish between the most exalted men or angels and Christ (1916:161). *The divinity of the perfect is a divinity by title or analogy*' (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 137, 133–34; emphasis added).

Even Origen, who is widely considered to have been more deeply influenced by Hellenistic notions of divinization, maintains this ontological distinction. According to Origen, a “fundamental distinction should be made between that which is immortal, rational, good, etc. of itself and that which merely participates in these attributes, although the term ‘god’ may be predicated equally of both. . . . Although like the Logos they are recipients of divinity, [those made in the image of God] are much further removed from God. The Logos alone abides intimately with God in ceaseless contemplation of the Fatherly depths. . . . Origin maintains that men are virtuous in a contingent sense by participation in a goodness which is self-subsistent” (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 145, 147).

Athanasius, whose exchange formula is most often quoted (“He became human that we might become divine” [*On the Incarnation* 54]), shows most emphatically that Mormon deification is qualitatively different from patristic deification. Athanasius argued that “recipients of adoption and deification have simply received the name of sons and gods; Christ, however, is Son and God ‘by nature and according to essence.’” Athanasius insisted on a “radical division” between the “agenetic” Godhead and the “genetic” created order, the ἀγένητος and the γενητά. “If to be deified by participation must be contrasted with true divinity, then the Logos is certainly not deified.” The Christ is the Father’s “only own and true Son deriving from his essential being.” Hence the participant is essentially different from the participated. In Athanasius’s determination to defeat Arianism, he denied any similarity at all between Christ and those who are participate in Him. In those discussions, he “played down the designation of men as gods.” Hence for Athanasius there was no question of humans ever becoming the same as God. “They are sons and gods only in name” (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 171, 170, 182, 181, 185, 186).

Augustine is little different. In the *City of God* he writes, “It is one thing to be God, another thing to be a partaker of God” (22:30). In *On Nature and Grace* we find the following: “The creature will never become equal with God even if perfect holiness were to be achieved in us. Some think that in the next life we shall be changed into what he is; I am not convinced” (33:37) (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 332). Of course, the fact that Augustine needed to make this clarification suggests that the ontological line between humanity and deity was not clear for some in the church of his day.

25. See Terryl L. Givens, “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude,” in this volume, 63–64.

26. For Mormon understandings of grace, see 2 Nephi 2:3, 5–8; 33:6; Doctrine and Covenants 20:30–31. These understandings nevertheless differ from what one finds in most Protestant circles. For example, most Mormons seem to interpret 2 Nephi 25:23 (“It is by grace that we are saved, after all we

can do”) in semi-Pelagian manner, consistent with the Mormon Third Article of Faith: “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” More charitably, this could be viewed as an Arminian position. For further discussion of evangelical and Latter-day Saint differences on salvation, see Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 143–88.

Latter-day Saint scholars at Brigham Young University have sought to minimize the disparity between Mormon and mainstream Christian soteriologies. Robert L. Millet, for example, has argued that the intent of the 2 Nephi 25 passage is that “above and beyond all we can do, it is by the grace of Christ that we are saved”; see Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 131; Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 69–79, 168–69; Robert L. Millet, *By Grace Are We Saved* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989); see also Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 104–8; and Robinson in Robinson and Blomberg, *How Wide the Divide?* esp. 143–66.

27. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 228.

28. See, for example, Vasudha Narayanan, “The Hindu Tradition,” in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 16.

29. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928); Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

30. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913–14; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1962).

31. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912; repr., New York: Free Press, 1995).

32. John Hinnells, “What Is a World Religion?” unpublished paper author shared with me.

33. Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), 259; see also Douglas J. Davies, “World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints,” in this volume, 255.

34. See, for example, Julia Ching, “East Asian Religions,” in *World Religions*, 348–49.

35. Hinnells, “What Is a World Religion?” 259.

36. David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:5, 7. According to the Latter-day Saint church almanac, total membership in 2004 was 12,207,000; *Deseret Morning News Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2004), 6.

37. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2:5, 7. Each of these religious movements represented significant departures from previous traditions. Shinran's rejection of all "ways of effort" (*jiriki*) was a radical divergence from the Gotama's endorsement of self-effort: "Be ye lamps unto yourselves" (Farewell Address, in Mahaparinibbana Suttanta). Soka Gakkai followed Nichiren in regarding other religions as false and other Buddhist sects as heretical. The Baha'is believe other divine messengers have come since Muhammad and will come in the future, implicitly rejecting traditional Islam's insistence that Muhammad was the "seal" (last) of the prophets. For this and other reasons Islamic authorities have persecuted Baha'is. Although Sufis have comprised large percentages of Muslims, they have often been condemned by "mainstream" Islamic groups for practices such as praying to Muhammad and the saints, and since the eighteenth century have been denounced by the Wahhabiya—now one of the most potent Islamic movements—as foreign to "true" Islam.

38. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 49.

39. For Jehovah's Witnesses beliefs about the Trinity, Jesus and the Spirit, see "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989).

40. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2:664.

41. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success: A Theoretical Application," in *Mormons and Mormonism*, 216.

42. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 225–26.

43. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 221.

44. Joseph F. Zygmunt, "Prophetic Failure and Chiliastic Identity: The Case of Jehovah's Witnesses," *American Journal of Sociology* 75, no. 6 (May 1970): 926–48; M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

45. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 222.

46. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 226.

47. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 234. According to Stark, it has been "carefully documented many times" that Latter-day Saints have larger families.

48. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 234–35. This may not be true in Europe, however, where the Latter-day Saint church has not prospered and is dominated by expatriates.

49. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 236.

50. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 237.

51. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 239.

52. Barrett and Johnson, in *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3, Table 7–1, report Christianity (2 billion), Islam (1.2 billion), Hinduism (811 million), and Buddhism (360 million) as the great world religions, with the Sikhs (23 million) and Jews (14 million) as two notable but ethnic religions.

53. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transition of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996); Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989); and Sanneh, "Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation," in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years*, ed. Philip C. Stine (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1990), 1–23.

54. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from the World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 80–82.

55. Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 34–35.

56. Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 97–98, 120. One might ask how Islam grew so quickly while insisting the Qur'an cannot be translated. Sanneh contends that Islam spread so quickly in its first century because, unlike Christianity in its first three centuries, it was able to harness the powers of the sword and the state.

57. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* 98.

58. See, for example, Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 264; see also Davies, "World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints," 256.

59. "The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles," *Church Almanac*, 20. Many Saints now believe that the central characters in the Book of Mormon lived in Central America; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985).

60. Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success," 218–19.

61. Christie Davies, "Place, Time, and Family in Mormonism," *Dialogue* 34, no. 3 and 4 (Fall–Winter 2001): 18.

62. Armand L. Mauss, "Mormonism's Worldwide Aspirations and Its Changing Conceptions of Race and Lineage," *Dialogue* 34, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2001): 103.

63. Mauss, "Mormonism's Worldwide Aspirations," 109.

64. Mauss, "Mormonism's Worldwide Aspirations," 105.

65. Mauss, "Mormonism's Worldwide Aspirations," 123–24.

66. Mauss, "Mormonism's Worldwide Aspirations," 125.

67. Lawrence A. Young, "Confronting Turbulent Environments: Issues in the Organizational Growth and Globalization of Mormonism," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 61. In 1996 Mauss noted that core Mormon doctrines had not been identified. See Armand L. Mauss, "Identity and Boundary Maintenance: International Prospects for Mormonism at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century," in *Mormon Identities*, 13.

68. For example, theologian Robert L. Millet's efforts to reorient Mormon soteriology toward grace and away from Pelagian conceptions. See note 26.

69. Mark A. Kellner, "Worldwide Church of God Joins NAE," in *Christianity Today* 41, no. 7 (June 16, 1997): 66.

70. This need not conflict with Mormon deification, if the latter were to be redefined in accord with historic Christian understandings. See my discussion of this earlier in note 24 above.

71. Davies, *Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 238; see Davies, "World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints," 11–12.

72. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* 43.

73. Young, *Contemporary Mormonism*, 56–60.

74. Mauss, "Identity and Boundary Maintenance," in *Mormon Identities*, 13.

75. Professor Tim Heaton, a leading scholar of Mormon demographics at Brigham Young University, told me he does not know of any study since that time (mid-1990s) that documents retention rates outside the United States. Phone conversation, April 21, 2005.

76. Nor has there been delineation of "core Mormon doctrines." Mauss, "Identity and Boundary Maintenance," 13.

77. Stark's comparison of Mormonism to Islam suggests more similarity than actually exists. The apparent analogies at first appear remarkable—both traditions suggest the best evidence for their faith is their book of revelation; both claim the Christian scriptures have been corrupted; both founders were prophet-statesmen who set up a religio-political order; both tout their theologies' simplicity as evidence of their superiority to the arcane complexities of traditional Christian theology; and both founders taught and practiced polygamy. But the differences are more significant: Mormons proclaim Jesus as God in the flesh, the Savior of the human race, who was crucified and raised from the dead. Muslims deny each of these propositions.

78. This is particularly true as Christianity has become centered in the southern hemisphere. See Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).