

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

MORMONISM

Edited by

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and

TERRYL L. GIVENS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Oxford handbook of Mormonism / edited by
Terry L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow.
pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-19-977836-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Mormon Church. 2. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I. Givens, Terry L, editor.
II. Barlow, Philip L., editor.

BX8635.3.O94 2015

289.3—dc23

2015002338

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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MORMONS IN EUROPE

WILFRIED DECOO

1 MORMONISM BROUGHT TO EUROPE

1.1 Historical Survey

Mormon missionary work started in England in 1837. The emphasis on millennialism, continuing revelation, and “gathering out of Babylon,” met the religious expectations of specific groups. By 1851, the United Kingdom counted 33,000 members, compared to the 12,000 in Utah. In the 1850s, more European countries followed. The response was mixed, with Protestant countries in the north yielding better results than the predominantly Catholic countries of the south. Converts were encouraged to gather to Zion: by 1900, some 91,000 members, mainly British and Scandinavian, had emigrated to the intermountain West.

By the end of the nineteenth century, immigration had slowed down. The church in Utah struggled during the stormy period over polygamy. In 1887, the Edmunds-Tucker Act dissolved the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company, which had helped thousands of European immigrants. After 1890, a policy of accommodation with the United States government led the church to discourage converts to emigrate to Zion. However, missionary work in Europe continued. Countries with a Protestant background kept providing the best ground for conversions. But nearly everywhere the church had to face stiff opposition, fed by anti-Mormon publications. After the First World War, some countries, like Germany and Austria, witnessed noteworthy Mormon expansion. Others struggled. Emigration, in spite of church counsel, continued to drain the branches. At the outbreak of the Second World War, all European missions were closed and local congregations had to survive on their own.

The first decades after the Second World War proved fairly successful. Riding on a wave of pro-American sentiment and using insistent missionary techniques, the church was able to also expand in Catholic countries. However, superficial conversions by

missionaries eager to obtain baptismal numbers also led to massive defections. Still, slow progress allowed for the organization of stakes and the building of temples as the crowning achievement. Since the 1990s, a major characteristic in western Europe has been the conversion of non-Europeans—refugees, temporary workers, and international students, in particular from Africa and Asia. In 2011, about two-thirds of new converts were not born in their country of baptism. It makes most local church units in western Europe multilingual and multicultural.

In the 1970s, the church took careful steps to establish a presence in countries behind the Iron Curtain—specifically Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, and East Germany, where a temple was built in 1985. The crumbling of communist regimes a few years later opened the gates for pioneering missionary work in other post-Soviet countries, with humanitarian and pedagogical projects as vanguards. But after the initial euphoria, the church, as a “foreign” entity, had to face the resurgence of nationalistic feelings and the power of reinstated national churches. Mormonism became viewed as part of a menacing invasion of alien cults. In the following years governments in nearly all of these countries enacted restrictive legislation to impede the spread of nonindigenous religions. Though the church, by carefully acting within the law, is able to function fairly normally in eastern European countries, the economic challenges encourage young members to emigrate to the United States.

In 2011, European membership stood at 486,000, of whom 186,000 (38 percent) reside in the United Kingdom. Sizeable numbers are found in Spain (47,000), Portugal (39,000), Germany (38,000), France (36,000), Italy (24,000), and Russia (21,000). Most other countries count less than 5,000 Mormons. These figures include all those who are on the rolls. The church does not disclose the number of people in attendance. The site www.Cumorah.com, which studies the data critically, reports an average activity rate in Europe of between 25 and 30 percent, meaning there would be about 130,000 active Mormons. It may be less, as the activity rate for the United Kingdom, which counts the largest number of Mormons, is reported at 18 percent. Some countries, like Portugal, are young and saw very rapid growth at first. In 1991, after sixteen years of missionary work, Portugal boasted 31,000 members. But many were “rushed converts” who did not stay. Today’s activity rate is reported at only 12 percent. The situation is comparable in newly opened countries in eastern Europe: the original high activity rate, because it is first measured in small new units, shrinks over the years as the units grow but former converts disappear from activity. Overall for Europe, these data point at stagnation. The average of 9,900 European converts per year over the period 2001–11 barely succeeds in sustaining equilibrium.

1.2 Europe’s Contribution to Mormonism

For obvious reasons the church is considered an American church, but it also has a significant European background that manifests itself in genes, in religious behavior, in culture, and in doctrine.

Genetically, the historic core membership can be traced to a European base. Not only were nearly all early American Mormons of English ancestry, but immigration brought

tens of thousands of European converts to “Zion.” In 1890, two-thirds of Utah’s population consisted of immigrants and their children. New waves of European immigrants followed after each world war. Genetic studies illustrate the ancestry of Utah’s white Mormon residents: 61 percent British, 31 percent Scandinavian, with Swiss and German for most of the remainder.

As to religious behavior, the church originated in an environment imbued with New England Puritan traditions. Though other major traits shaped Mormon identity and beliefs, the Puritan environment affected a significant part: simplicity in worship, the form of the sacrament, fasting and testimony giving, strict observance of Sunday rest, and the dynamics of church governance. These characteristics almost uniformly trace back to English Puritan origins, thus reflecting this local religious lifestyle in parts of England.

Culturally, in its broadest meaning, the “Mormon cultural region” in the American West was fashioned by numerous European immigrants, many of whom were experienced in architecture, engineering, manufacturing, education, or the arts. Most settled in urban areas in Utah where their impact was the most productive. Examples are numerous and well documented. Sometimes members were sent (back) to Europe to study certain disciplines, such as the 1890 “Paris Art Mission.” Surprised visitors often recorded manifestations of an unexpectedly cultured environment to be found in the remote American West. Also, for decades after settling in, despite obvious Americanization, many European immigrants kept their national identities alive through clubs and societies, cultural events, small newspapers, ethnic restaurants, and specialty shops. Even today that heritage lingers on among descendants.

Doctrinally, the Book of Mormon asserts a perspective that intertwines America’s destiny with divinely inspired input from Europe. Chapter 13 of 1 Nephi tells in prophetic mode how a man (Columbus), followed by Gentiles coming “out of captivity” (Europeans liberating themselves from oppression) arrive in the promised land (America). They bring the Bible to remnants of the House of Israel (Indians). This perspective is reinforced by the complex allegory of the olive tree, as described by Jacob, another Book of Mormon prophet: Gentiles, usually interpreted as coming from European nations, play a significant role in establishing the free nation where the gospel could be restored. It is also noteworthy that some of the most significant books on Mormonism, which structured and systematized Mormon theological thought in the early twentieth century, were written by three European immigrants, James E. Talmage, Brigham H. Roberts, and John A. Widtsoe.

2 PERCEPTIONS

The aspect of perceptions shows how various actors shape Mormon identities. Some of these perceptions are not unique to the European setting, but the examples are drawn from Europe.

2.1 Non-Mormon Europeans Perceiving Mormonism

2.1.1 *The Heritage of the First Century*

Since the 1830s, thousands of news reports, religious denunciations, and fiction have spread an overall negative image of Mormonism. News reports followed the trends of their American sources: mockery for the religious claims (which Europeans would see as examples of general American credulity), some sympathy for the plight of the persecuted Saints and their westward trek, and, finally, repugnance for the alleged despotism of church leaders and the “barbaric” practice of polygamy. Religious denunciation came from established churches fighting against Mormon missionary efforts. All this also fed into fiction. Dozens of novels, by popular authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Karl May, Balduin Möllhausen, and Emilio Salgari, mostly drew on the formula of the innocent heroine targeted for a polygamous marriage by one or more Mormon villains and the struggle of Christian heroes to free her. French authors, on the other hand, saw spicy gaiety in Mormon polygamy, as depicted by authors such as Jules Verne, Albert Robida, and Edouard Malortique. Mormon-themed popular trends continued into the twentieth century. British novelist Winifred Graham contributed to anti-Mormon persecution in the United Kingdom with her abduction stories of white female slaves. Her *The Love Story of a Mormon* was adapted to the screen as *Trapped by the Mormons*. Denmark capitalized on the theme with its own silent film, *A Victim of the Mormons*.

Another group of writings is academic, with France at the center. By the mid-nineteenth century, Auguste Comte’s positivism had led to a renewed empirical study of human conduct, including religion. Though mostly agnostics, positivists were not against religion but were eager to prove its strictly human origins. Mormonism thus became a welcome study object as a potential new world religion based on “fraud.” Scholars used as their main source the voluminous analysis of naturalist Jules Rémy (1860), who studied early Mormonism in Utah. In his *Histoire des origines du Christianisme*, Ernest Renan repeatedly refers to Mormon “analogue practices” nineteen centuries later. Eduard Meyer, German historian of early religions, drew the most explicit parallels with early Christianity and Islam in *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen* (1912). The aim was to illustrate the natural genesis of all religions.

2.1.2 *Five Decades of Mainly Positive Perceptions*

From the 1930s up to the 1970s, the church in Europe enjoyed an encouraging period of outsiders’ perceptions. Positive reports started to appear in the press, mainly thanks to the success of athletic and choral groups formed by missionaries. After the Second World War, missions reopened under the pro-American umbrella of liberation and the Marshall Plan. The church’s welfare efforts to help ravaged Europe deserved public praise. The 1950s saw the construction of the first two European temples (in Switzerland and England) and an acclaimed tour of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. In the 1960s, missions enhanced the Mormon image by missionary singing groups and teams playing baseball and basketball. American missionaries were deeply involved in leading the

local units and became cherished friends of convert families. In the 1970s, the mammoth success of the Osmond brothers gave Mormonism a modern, upbeat aura. Still, emigration to the United States continued to appeal to converts. To a certain extent the church itself contributed to ending this era. Stricter mission rules, correlation, and managerial control reduced camaraderie, stifled creativity, and lessened local initiatives. The church in Europe became part of the retrenchment movement which Mauss identified.¹

2.1.3 *Navigating the Anticult Movement*

Since the mid-1990s, the media have created a broad cult scare across most European countries. The tragedies at Jonestown and at Waco, and in the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate groups had prepared this frenzy. The label of "destructive cult" became applied to many small and unfamiliar churches. Anticult associations began to thrive in this media wave. Established churches joined in. Targets became groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, and Mormons. Typically, critics confuse the institutional church with Mormon fundamentalists. Television documentaries on the church find marginal aspects more appealing than mainstream Mormon beliefs. Even for better-informed journalists, the image of the church as a powerful, corporate, conservative bulwark, with its bizarre founding, controversial history, and odd beliefs, is often too tempting not to deride it.

Governments of European countries, on the other hand, have been more tolerant toward the Mormon Church than toward Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology. France, Belgium, and Germany conducted parliamentary investigations on cults, but Mormons were not retained as harmful. As to former communist countries, in the first phase of liberation from communist ideology, the call for democracy implied a genuine openness for pluralism. Next, however, a historically dominant church body, regaining its power, claimed its ancient role of unifying force. Overall, politicians are willing to cooperate with such an influential ally and advance ideological uniformity rather than an unruly diversity. The media found ample ammunition in the Western anticult movements to confirm the peril of foreign religions, which in turn influenced restrictive legislation toward minority churches. Overall, however, the Mormon Church, through its policies of entering a country legally and being upfront in its dealings with authorities, has had relatively few hurdles to overcome. In most European countries the church has therefore been able to obtain a form of legal recognition that is sufficient for its needs. Overall missionary work is freely allowed, with some exceptions, such as in Greece.

2.1.4 *Ignorance*

But perhaps the most dramatic finding about the perception of non-Mormon Europeans is ignorance. A 1993 church study, conducted by the Gallup agency, reveals that 95.8 percent of French people have no or almost no knowledge of Mormonism, in spite of seventy years of missionary work and a continuous Mormon presence in France. Only 5 percent have ever met a Mormon. When confronted with statements about Mormons, responses reveal overall misconceptions or ignorance.² There are no indications that things have changed significantly since then.

2.2 American Mormons Perceiving Mormonism in Europe

Because of their sheer number and impact, the perceptions of Americans are deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness, not only of American Mormons, but of European Mormons as well.

2.2.1 *Exceptionalist Perception: The Blood of Israel in Europe*

From the 1850s on, some church members disseminated a doctrine of ancient lineages, which was already familiar in Protestant circles. Populations around the world are privileged more or less thanks to their descent from biblical figures and tribes. Descendants of the tribe of Ephraim are said to be found among Anglo-Saxons (“British Israelism”) and Scandinavians, a view that was later broadened to other parts of western Europe. This concept could easily permeate Mormon thought, reinforced as it is with the dispersion of Israel as depicted in the Book of Mormon. It also tied in with the assertion that “valiant” souls were to be born in choice times and places, where they would encounter the gospel. In the twentieth century, influential leaders taught this doctrine of literal blood lineage and exceptionalism. However, after the 1978 lifting of the ban forbidding the priesthood ordination of male members of African descent, and in view of the increasing internationalization of the church, official Mormon parlance broadened the concept to a universal relationship of all human beings with the House of Israel. But the perception of “the elect” and “divine destiny” of Europeans in their conversion to Mormonism is still alive as part of motivational discourse.

2.2.2 *Delightful Perception: Strong Members in an Idyllic Europe*

Mormon American sources provide a continual stream of positive information on the church in Europe (and in other parts of the world). Interviewed families tell how their church membership brings blessings and happiness. Leaders testify about success and growth. Historically this upbeat approach stems from a long tradition of self-defense against denigration from outsiders. Usually the publications also emphasize national or ethnic elements. European countries are depicted in the realm of tourist attractions of the old world. For American Mormons this portrayal ties in with the celebrated pioneer heritage of early Mormon converts. It is also a way to emphasize the international character of the church by highlighting cultural diversity. The church promotes this perception also through historical commemorations, where the youth is expected to “celebrate its country’s heritage.” But this kind of paternalistic approach often leads to folklorization and the creation of false authenticity. It is basically alienating, as people are confirmed in their alleged difference. This Mormon American input contributes to a Disneyesque perception of European countries where happy Mormon families also dwell.

2.2.3 *Dismal Perception: Materialistic and Immoral Europe*

The two preceding perceptions of Europe—exceptionalist and delightful—stand in stark contrast to the dismal perception that a number of American Mormons have of

the old continent and the church's future in it. The reality is that the church is not growing as expected and as promised. Comparisons with Mormon growth in Latin America since the 1950s and with Africa since the 1980s reveal that Europe is lagging far behind. Missionaries in Europe can hope to baptize, on average, one to two persons per year. Many of these converts are non-Europeans and most do not remain long in the church. So who is to blame? According to some American Mormons, the guilty party is Europe itself. They blame atheism, cynicism, materialism, nihilism, pornography, homosexuality, public nudity, and prostitution, as the main characteristics of Europe. All this, it is said, draws people's attention away from God and makes it impossible for Mormon missionaries to have success. This dismal perception is fairly widespread among American Mormons, also judging from comments on Mormon blogs. Such negative evaluations are visibly tainted by the anti-Europeanism found among American conservatives, which also influences the views of American Mormons.

The three perceptions I identified stem from different traditions and concerns. American Mormons seem to wrestle with the place to be given to Europe in the worldwide expansion of Mormonism. Increase the efforts? Consolidate units to help them survive? Lower the number of missionaries in favor of more rewarding fields on other continents? Quietly leave the church in Europe in some kind of survival mode?

2.3 European Mormons: Identity and Self-Perception

2.3.1 *The Diverse Profile of European Mormons*

In 2011, the church claimed 486,000 members in Europe, a figure that includes all recorded baptisms. They form a widely divergent palette in terms of motivation, experience, educational and cultural background, commitment, religious perception, and "standing" in the church. Also, mastery of English or not and access to Internet or not lead to vast differences in background knowledge about Mormonism. The high influx of non-European Mormon converts in western Europe is due to the fact that they are more easily reached. Uprooted, in search of a new community, open to a message of hope, and unafraid of missionaries, they more readily accept baptism. They also bring in others from their small social circle. Some become solid members, but many also fall away quickly. The influx of these converts creates peculiar challenges for the local units: taking care of more people in need, facing issues with illegal immigrants, and providing constant translation. Immigrants integrate better if they stay long enough in the country, learn the local language, and have abilities to serve in leadership positions.

2.3.2 *A Minority Reaches the Family Ideal*

Though family unity and happiness are focal points in Mormonism, only a minority of European Mormons seem to reach that ideal. Statistical data are not available, but experience with any branch or ward will confirm that, on the whole, only about one-third to one-half of active members form fairly normal Mormon families. These figures translate into about 10 to 15 percent of the total membership. Family disruption can occur early in

the conversion process if only one member or one part of the family decides to join the church. Converting to another church is, in most European countries, sensed as a major familial and sociocultural betrayal, in particular if the convert joins a so-called cult. The resulting drama is often severe. The ideal that a whole family joins, parents and children, sharing equal conviction, and remaining equally committed over their lifetimes, is a rare occurrence. It still leaves conflicts with grandparents and extended family. Next, in a Mormon family tensions arise when one partner lapses from activity—which is far from uncommon. Another hurdle is divorce, with the conflict over church membership as a factor. It leaves the divorced partner who remains active in the church in an often awkward position. Finally, many older teens or young adults turn away from activity. In Europe, the chances of such an outcome are high because children grow up in a non-Mormon environment, may have very few peers in the church, find partners outside the church, or may simply not want to devote their life to church service as they have seen their parents do. The pictures of large, multigenerational families and of temple weddings that adorn the walls and fireplace mantels in the homes of Utah (great-) grandparents are very rare in European homes.

2.3.3 *The Majority: 350,000 Mormons in the Margin*

“Inactive” members constitute the majority of Mormons in Europe—an estimated 70 to 80 percent of the total membership, which accounts for approximately 350,000 members. That ratio is comparable in other parts of the world outside the United States and Canada, where activity is slightly higher. The church counts these inactives as members and cares for them: retention and reactivation are core terms in church programs.

“Inactive” is a judgmental term. Dedicated Catholics can be called *pious* or *devout*, but others, even if only attending mass for a marriage or a funeral, are not labeled “inactive.” Mormonism, on the other hand, requires a high level of involvement for members “in good standing”: regular attendance, a calling in the organization, and holding a temple recommend, which also checks adherence to the Word of Wisdom and the payment of tithing. The church itself thus draws a line of demarcation which makes inactive members perceived as deficient. In the Mormon intermountain West, the “jack Mormon,” often stemming from pioneer stock, often remains included in the Mormon-ethnic community and may still attend church for a family event. In other parts of the world, the “inactive” member is usually “out.”

For France, Euvrard calculated that roughly 50 percent of new converts lapse from activity within two and a half years of membership.³ For many, disengagement occurs after only after a few months or even weeks. These fleeting converts come typically from “quick baptisms” missionaries perform—often singles, expatriates, loners, including needy or unstable persons, who embrace the attention the missionaries give them. But many of these converts are easily disillusioned as self-centered expectations are not fulfilled. The dimension of required changes in life usually becomes clear only after baptism. Even if the conversion is genuine, the step from the religious discovery, with its spiritual excitement brought by missionaries into their own home, to attending the Mormon ward miles away, with often dreary talks and lessons, inadequately translated

if the language is also a challenge, can be disappointing. For many converts there is also the gap to bridge between two totally different concepts of religion: from experiencing a rather mystical ritual as a bystander during a relatively short liturgical service, as practiced in traditional churches, to the long meetings and extended social interaction in Mormonism. The few Mormon ordinances are sober and restrained. Members have to create their own spirituality instead of receiving it as an exterior impulse, and some simply lack the gift for it. Add to these adjustments the pressure from non-Mormon family and friends or the longing for the convert's formal social life. Although the system requires the involvement of local members to ensure the integration of the new convert, often locals are already overburdened with tasks and the sheer number of problematic converts may prove unfeasible to handle with equal attention.

Another large group of inactives is mature members who become disengaged after years. For the Netherlands, van Beek counts about 40 percent of the inactives in that group.⁴ There are those whose life events lead them away, such as divorce, (re)marriage, or acceptance of their homosexuality, and those who become disenchanted for a variety of reasons. Others fall prey to burnout after years of unselfish service. Though the *Church Handbook of Instructions* states that "members should not be asked to make excessive family sacrifices to serve or to support programs or activities," the needs of struggling units with many inactives often overrule that counsel. Problems with church history or doctrine can also cause defection. As disturbing information from anti-Mormon sources becomes more available, its effect increases. Problems with commandments, such as chastity, Word of Wisdom observance, or the payment of tithing play a role in certain cases, but they are seldom the sole cause of inactivity.

2.3.4 *The Relation with "America": How American Is the Church?*

In their efforts at internationalization, church leaders stress that the church is "not an American church," but a universal one. The correlation movement since the 1960s has tried to make the church "less American" by removing from church publications typical American items (for example, political references, affluent living style, US sports, food, activities, and the like) and by stressing the core message of the gospel. However, the church keeps strong American components—historical-geographical, ideological, and behavioral.

The historical-geographical component refers to the impact of Mormon history and location. Mormon converts everywhere in the world step into that history. Locations like Palmyra, the Sacred Grove, Cumorah, Kirtland, Jackson County, Haun's Mill, Nauvoo, Carthage, Winter Quarters, Martin's Cove, and This Is the Place, become part of their spatial religious consciousness. Even the physical experience of that history in the form of "Mormon historical tours" is offered to members abroad. Mormon tourism in America, with a sense of pilgrimage, is expanding. By restoring historic places as tributes to its past, the church itself is encouraging this tendency. Even as the church is internationalizing with the concept of multiple Zions in foreign countries, a fundamental America-oriented awareness remains part of the faith. In the context of their original culture, members take the countercultural step of converting to a unique "home-grown American religion."

However, the equation of “America” with “the United States” is not evident in this context. For converts abroad, the perception of Mormonism is obviously more at ease with the nineteenth-century tension between the church and the United States, rather than with present-day American patriotism and right-wing allegiance among Mormon US citizens.

Second is the ideological realm—that is, the relation between Mormonism and the “American way of life,” understood here as the opportunities given to each individual for personal development and the pursuit of happiness. It is perceived as part of the American Dream, to which church authorities have proudly referred, especially in the 1960s and 70s, but also up to the 90s. The rhetoric spills over into a sense of superiority and election, against the backdrop of America’s messianic role in the world. It is interwoven with an abhorrence of socialism and communism. This belief in the power of individual talent and hard work to attain prosperity permeates the Mormon message. Most general authorities embody, from their former professions and their personalities, that very message. Members in the international church who are called to leadership positions tend to naturally adopt the same view and rhetoric. But in many countries, this highlighting of personal success runs counter to religious ideologies that revere abnegation and submissiveness. For converts from such realms, the adoption of Mormonism will thus require, at least mentally, a realignment to notions of self-actualization of the individual.

The third area pertains to elements in the behavioral realm. Wherever in the world the church has been established, white middle-class Americans were (and often still are) the organizers and first leaders of church units. Historically, this banner was borne primarily through thousands of missionaries, mainly from America’s West. Next, Mormon American families living abroad, as well as scores of older missionary couples, also infuse local units with their behavioral patterns. Present-day missionaries, called from foreign lands, are immersed in a mission organization in which the interactions are shaped by Americans. Mission presidents, most still from the United States or Americanized, and visiting authorities, American or Americanized, disseminate through their function as role models particular behavioral patterns. Church-produced media contribute to the same dynamic. Typical behaviors include such things as the informality of social contact between genders and between ages; easiness in approaching strangers; the facial demonstration of assertiveness and commitment; the firm and somewhat longer handshake, accompanied by a smile and a direct gaze in the other’s eyes; the “right” way to hug; making eye contact during interviews and meetings; a certain jovial looseness in conducting meetings; the presence and conduct of children during meetings; the advice on how to date at what age; the use of superlatives, extolling others as “wonderful” and “great,” praising each child or youngster as “special”; and the homogenizing effect of dress and grooming standards on behavior. General Relief Society President Julie B. Beck (in the October 2007 Conference) praised Mormon mothers who “bring daughters in clean and ironed dresses with hair brushed to perfection; their sons wear white shirts and ties and have missionary haircuts.” A final element is the corporate, managerial style of doing things. The tendency to call as ward, stake, and regional leaders, and hire as church employees, members who seem most fit, by personality, profession, and dress, to blend in the corporate, managerial style, reinforces such leaders to other members as role models.

Considering the three areas touched upon—historical-geographical, ideological, and behavioral—the church remains “American.” Mormonism, in its expansion to other parts of the world, can thus aptly be called “an American world religion.”⁵

2.3.5 *The Relation with the Home Culture*

2.3.5.1 *Estrangement from the Home Culture*

Mormons in a European country, like members throughout the world, live in a “home culture,” with its distinctive manners and traditions. Though the church encourages involvement with society, the few surveys available for European members contradict this encouragement. According to Euvrard, 80.4 percent of French Mormons say that they are not engaged politically, and only 3 percent are members of a party.⁶ It confirms my own survey among Belgian members.⁷ Many converts disengage from social and political involvement. Some feel their unique religion supplants worldly organizations. Often church participation leaves them no time for other engagements. Indeed, in regions where the church is thinly spread, such as in Europe, travel distances are costly in time to attend meetings and activities, to visit members’ homes, and to travel to a temple. With the addition of family home evening, scripture study, preparation of talks and lessons, and genealogical research, Mormonism shapes a way of life that easily fills the week outside school and work.

Church leaders are concerned about this tension between the exigencies of Mormon life and its feasibility in non-Mormon cultures. In 1980, the church instituted the three-hour Sunday block meeting schedule to reduce travel time and expense, and allow church members more time for home-centered Sabbath activities. The reality is, however, that supplemental meetings, plus one to two hours for travel, do not leave much of the Sabbath. In Europe, Sunday is a traditional day for visits with extended family, for recreation, and for all kinds of public activities and events. Dedicated Mormons have to reduce those familial visits, forfeit rest and leisure, and abandon most public activities and events, all of which tends to widen the gap with non-Mormon family and the rest of society.

Church leaders have often tackled the critical question of achieving balance between Mormon culture and home culture. Answers vary according to focus, compounded by the difficulty of defining “culture.” If the focus is positive and optimistic, the tendency is to include everything about the home culture that is seen as appropriate and good. This inclusive approach stands in contrast with the antagonistic approach of the “culture of the world” as evil. That dichotomy of “us” versus “them” often prevails in the retrenchment rhetoric of talks and lessons. Van Beek concludes that by such an approach the church defines itself as a “counter-church,” which leads to the construction of a polarized identity for the individual member.⁸

2.3.5.2 *What of the Home Culture Can Be Included in Mormon Life?*

I pointed earlier to the American penchant for identifying foreign countries through their exterior distinctiveness in folklore. There is a risk that permissible “cultural

traditions” may be seen only in that realm. But many of these features incorporate a potentially gray zone. Can Mormon children in Finland, costumed as witches and wizards, participate in the beloved yearly trek through their neighborhood (at least as momentous as Halloween to American children), passing out willow twigs in exchange for candy or a few coins? But this activity always happens on a Sunday, thereby raising the issue of Sabbath observance. Can Sinterklaas, a figure dressed as a Catholic bishop, enter a Belgian or Dutch Mormon chapel to distribute the traditional goodies to the children in early December? Or the similar Mikulás in some eastern European countries? Can Mormons on Sunday, inasmuch as time after church permits, attend public activities such as family-oriented festivals and concerts? More delicate is the use of some religious traditions. Can former Anglican, Catholic, or Orthodox believers, who long for the cherished rites of Christmas Eve, organize a Mormon variant in the chapel (and use it for missionary purposes)? Can primary children enter the chapel on Palm Sunday carrying palm branches and singing an appropriate hymn, as is done in many Christian churches? The tendency is to refuse such incursions into Mormon territory, because they do not match predetermined standards of acceptability.

But there may be reasons to be more lenient and to establish helping criteria. For the individual and the family, a number of traditions, in particular for the Christmas and Easter periods, belong to a religious heritage that shapes their fundamental identity within the local community. Proscribing them creates voids that the church does not fill at present. Having church members participate in local traditions can signal an important message to the host society and its leaders. In some European countries the government looks at “foreign” religions with suspicion when they disengage from the surrounding culture by refusing to celebrate traditional feasts. Taking into account the range of cultural diversity often typical of a Mormon branch or ward in Europe with its immigrant converts from various foreign cultures, introducing these people to major traditions of the host society can help them better integrate. Integration of immigrants is high on the agenda of governments. A last argument—in some cases the most important—concerns non-Mormon family members. The conversion of a family member to this “American cult” is, in many countries, sensed by the rest of the family as a betrayal of the deepest cultural heritage. In cult investigations one of the key criteria for classification is the severance with family and society traditions. So there may be value in keeping certain local traditions alive in Mormon units, where non-Mormon family members can feel at ease when invited.

2.3.5.3 *From Minimal Mormonism to Culture-Tailored Mormon Churches?*

A more sweeping approach that some Americans propose is to discard all Americanisms, define only the essence of Mormonism, and let each culture build around it according to their traditions.⁹ The perspective of these American authors is well meant, but problematic for various reasons. What is Mormonism’s most basic expression? What is the American cultural baggage that should be discarded? The church, as mentioned earlier,

also contains undeniable American components. Perhaps we underestimate the value of the connections many members feel with (a portion of) Mormon American ethos. Perhaps we underestimate the sense of worldwide unity that comes from the style of “American” Mormon chapels and temples, where any Mormon can feel “at home” in whatever country. The cultural customization of Mormonism around a “core” in order to develop an idiosyncratic Mormon Church on a national or regional level is easier said than done. When we think that, for example, a Pacific, a Brazilian, or a Dutch Mormonism could emerge, we are probably identifying stereotypical features of those cultures, thus overlooking a myriad of local, social, and individual variations. Moreover, through conversions among immigrants, the church in many countries is already a cultural melting-pot.

However, some local customization within a rigid denominational church is not impossible. Since the 1960s, the Catholic Church has permitted such moderate developments, giving the national or regional leadership more latitude for initiatives and cultural adaptations and allowing local parishes a measure of leeway. Such creativity often injects renewed vitality into the local church. For the Mormon Church, the question of moderate and temporary inclusions of local cultural elements, within clear boundaries, remains a valid topic for exploration and experimentation.

3 THE FUTURE OF MORMONISM IN EUROPE

Despite challenges, Mormonism is implanted in Europe—in some countries with a presence uninterrupted since the 1840s and 1850s. The approximately 200 stakes and districts, some 1,300 meeting places, and a dozen temples, attest to that stable presence, even if the church remains a tiny minority. But how much growth can be realistically expected? Out of 800 million people in Europe, at least several million could be viewed as potential converts. The main problem is that the present missionary system reaches only an infinitesimal fraction of such a demographic and then only coincidentally. To alter this ratio, massive information campaigns and the teaching of large groups at once would be necessary.

If present variables remain the same, there is no reason to believe that the church in Europe will progress any differently than the past few decades. So any discussion about possible progress must propose changes within the church, weighing factors of attractiveness and repulsiveness to suggest different balancings in the realm of economics of religion. Though purely speculative, such analyses have value in their ability to generate discussion in a constant search for improvement. In the 1960s, the prospects of a fast-growing international church prompted the rise of the correlation movement, producing not only a coordinated curriculum that focused on general, noncontroversial doctrines, but also institutional streamlining and stronger management. However, both tendencies—doctrinal softening and institutional strengthening—might be partial causes of low interest in the church and of low

retention. Would a reverse movement—doctrinal strengthening and institutional softening—yield better results? In other words, could Mormonism with a stronger and better-argued affirmation of its distinctive doctrines be more attractive for Europeans? Could it also be more viable if the institution lessened some of its demands?

4 CONCLUSION

A population pyramid of European Mormons shows a wide base with various layers of inactive members of different profiles, accounting for two-thirds to three-quarters of the total. Above them is a thinner layer of active members, some struggling, but all of them an engaged part of the community. Many of them are never married, divorced, or in part-member families. Over time, a number of them shift down to the lower layer. Meanwhile new converts, mostly non-European, trickle in. The tiny top of the pyramid is formed by the highly committed leaders of stakes and wards, always chosen from within strong Mormon families. They mostly set a tone of retrenchment. They do not always understand the challenges of members in the lower layers and seem to be unlikely voices for lenience in their interactions with general authorities. Within this small group at the top, dynasties of “birthright members” slowly emerge—who represent second-, third-, and even fourth-generation church members and who, through intermarriages, replicate the social pattern of similar families in Utah. We can expect that eastern European countries, where the process started more recently, will follow a similar trajectory in the coming decades.

Is there a European Mormon identity that parallels the fairly well-defined Utah Mormon identity? Yes, to the extent that active members are molded into a pattern of full commitment. Yes, to the extent that being a member gives one an ascribed status of “Mormon” in the non-Mormon society, with the sometimes problematic implications of that perception. Yes, to the extent that uniformity is a trademark of the church, meaning that everywhere in the world, Mormons hold church meetings in the same manner, according to a fixed schedule, sing from the same hymnbook, and attend lessons with the same manuals. The *Church Handbook of Instructions* details everything for worldwide application. The top-down structure with training sessions on each level guarantees this application. But, as van Beek points out, most European Mormons are also, or rather, Mormon Europeans, reflecting the wide array of their own social and cultural backgrounds.¹⁰ It means that many active members develop plural identities to successfully navigate in three spheres: the official church realm, a self-defined Mormon sphere, and the surrounding society. At the same time, the church in Europe is fragmented because of the top-down structure and the language barriers. Unlike in the United States, mobility is almost inexistent.

The present set-up allows for survival of the church in Europe thanks to a kernel of dedicated members, the continuation of missionary work, and the rare addition of a temple, but it does not give any indication for substantial growth. Some fairly radical changes could improve the prospects, such as the suggested doctrinal strengthening and institutional softening, but without guarantees and perhaps with some backlashes. However, such changes are unlikely to even be considered, taking into account the conservative and cautionary approach on higher levels.

The critical remarks in this chapter should never overshadow appreciation for the sublime labors of thousands of European Latter-days Saints who, in spite of many challenges, remain faithful and, often for decades, render unending service in many capacities and circumstances. Their service is all the more noteworthy because, compared to well-established wards in the intermountain West, the demands of units with a relatively high proportion of people in financial, social, or psychological need are often staggering. They are complicated by a dearth of experienced leaders and the absence of professional Mormon services. Nevertheless, these dedicated members continue to serve, deserving their name of *Latter-day Saints*.

NOTES

1. Mauss, *Angel and the Beehive*.
2. Euvrard, "Socio-Histoire du Mormonisme en France," 472–76.
3. *Ibid.*, 516.
4. Van Beek, "Mormonism, a Global Counter-Church?"
5. Eliason, *Mormons and Mormonism*.
6. Euvrard, "Socio-Histoire du Mormonisme en France," 459.
7. Decoo, "Mormonism in a European Catholic Country."
8. Van Beek, "Mormonism, a Global Counter-Church?"
9. For example, Sorenson, "Mormon World View and American Culture"; Mauss, "Can There Be a 'Second Harvest'?"
10. Van Beek, "Mormon Europeans Europeans or European Mormons?"

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