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THE RELIGIOUS “OTHER”: REFLECTING UPON MORMON PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract: Latter-day Saints do not regularly speak about other religions, but when they do, they often manifest a spectrum of approaches which mirrors Mormonism’s own tension between exceptionalism and universalism. In this essay I aim to reflect about this very tension in the European context and suggest a few factors which may uniquely influence the perceptive dynamics of other religions among Mormons in Europe.

Introduction

The purpose of this exploratory discussion is to suggest some basic theoretical hypotheses about the Latter-day Saints’ (LDS) general perceptive schema of other religious traditions. Specifically, I aim to outline some key theological foundations for the Mormon view of a “religious other” while also underlining a few social and psychological factors in the lives of individual church members which significantly shape this kind of perception. Unsurprisingly the picture that emerges from this intersection of theological and socio-cultural factors is complex at best; thus, generalizations become increasingly tentative particularly when psychological dynamics are introduced into a general picture which is already heterogeneous. Yet, some general identifiable patterns remain visible and the core of my immediate endeavour involves the exploration and description of these very correlative patterns. At the same time, while I do not build the present exposition around ethnographic data gathered systematically among Mormon populations, my reasoned reflections and predictions are potentially testable at a future time and in specific settings. In the meanwhile it is valuable to engage the topic theoretically and to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses even in the absence of accompanying structured observations, interviews, or surveys.

In this context, I am especially concerned with those factors which uniquely affect the European Saints’ perceptions of other religious

groups.¹ Indeed, in addition to absorbing theological precepts from LDS religious literature and practices, which are internationally standardized, the perceptions of European Mormons are influenced by distinct social forces which differ from those of their non-Western or American counterparts. As I have observed in my personal confessional experience in Italy and in the United Kingdom, a social reality characterized by historically dominant religious institutions which presently function within a wider context of established secularism distinctly highlights the correlative dynamics which I am about to explore. Therefore, my objective is first to outline the core theological platform about the “religious other” which is shared by Mormons of all nationalities and then to explore a few of the cultural and social dynamics which are likely to affect the specific interpretation and appropriation of such theological nucleus by European Saints vis-à-vis church members from the United States or from other parts of the world.

Exceptionalism versus Universalism

Most observers of Mormonism are quick to pinpoint the tradition’s exclusive nature as demonstrated by its history, culture, and theology. Indeed, while historical phenomena underlying LDS exceptionalism and *physical* isolation such as the United Order, the Nauvoo legion, and a Prophet with official political responsibilities are only memories of a century gone by, much remains within the tradition which stresses the need for contemporary Mormons to separate *spiritually* from the world. To be sure, such particularism is not unique to the Latter-day Saints since other Christian and non-Christian traditions possess similar strands, which in some cases go even further when advocating exile or separation, monasticism being the most apparent example. Yet, few other groups of significant size convey to a whole people such a sense of uniqueness or calling as do the Latter-day Saints, who are united in their common religious identity by specific covenants, a shared history, and a sense of divine purpose in such degree as to make

¹ I am aware of the fact that the use of the adjective “European” is highly problematic for its generalizing implications. Undoubtedly, Latter-day Saints’ experiences in different European countries are sufficiently distinct to require individual treatment; yet, there remain a few common factors which justify speaking of a European Mormon experience.

Jewish distinctiveness its closest identifiable parallel.² In this context, some have even questioned the degree to which it is appropriate to understand the label “Mormon” as a mere classification of religious affiliation rather than as a term which refers to an ethnic group in its own right.³

However one chooses to catalogue Mormon identity, what is unquestionable is that both LDS theology and sacred history have usually been articulated in such a way as to emphasize Mormon exceptionalism. Indeed, according to the canonized version of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, Mormonism has its *raison d’être* in its theological separation from other traditions, particularly Christian traditions, since the founding Prophet claimed that when God first spoke to him He categorically condemned other existing denominations. In fact, Joseph reported that when he asked about the church which he should join “I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt.” Therefore, Mormonism was born to provide those salvific blessings which could not be offered by any other existing church. In this unique role the movement quickly grew to become, according to the LDS canon, “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased.”⁴ Needless to say, declarations of this nature attributed to a divine source have not aided Latter-day Saints in building ecumenical bridges with Christian neighbours of various denominations.

At the same time, while being generally unapologetic about their claims of exclusivity, Mormons also highlight that LDS theology has a universalistic side which ultimately softens what has often been perceived as a highly elitist doctrine. To highlight the most prominent theological examples, salvation in Mormonism is ultimately universal,

² Seth Ward, “Introduction,” in *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, ed. by R. Jospe, T. Madsen & S. Ward (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), pp. 11–12. Also see Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 64–66 for warnings against facile comparisons of this kind.

³ A well-known proponent of this “ethnic” emphasis was Thomas O’Dea. See Dean L. May, “Mormons,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. by Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 720.

⁴ Joseph Smith – History 1:19; *Doctrine and Covenants* 1:30.

although stratified in various degrees of glory, and God is the Eternal Father of the whole human family, past, present, and future. Indeed, birth on earth indicates the core general righteousness of each individual being since it implicitly confirms that he/she has accepted the divine plan while living in a pre-mortal spiritual realm of existence. Furthermore, LDS doctrine affirms that all people are endowed with the “Light of Christ” which functions as a guiding conscience that leads to truth and light. Even more specifically, as underlined in a First Presidency statement as well as in the *Book of Mormon*, it is recognized that truth was revealed to such thinkers or religious leaders as Plato, Mohammed, or Confucius and to people of all times and nations.⁵ Ultimately, Mormonism recognizes truth as emerging from various sources and the wise Mormon should absorb and acquire these truths even when they originate outside the tradition. In Brigham Young’s straightforward words: “we believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.”⁶

Therefore, although not universalistic in the most radical sense of the word, LDS theology cannot be viewed simplistically as only exclusive in its claims. Indeed, when placed on a hypothetical spectrum which measures theological exclusivity some theological aspects of Mormonism are adjacent to the universalistic side of the spectrum while others cluster around its very opposite end. In other words, as articulated by Terry Givens in his masterful analysis of Mormon culture, the paradox underlying the coexistence of exceptionalism and universalism, of provincialism and internationalism, or of election with the responsibility to infinitely expand the core of the chosen, is firmly at the root of the Mormon theological discourse and of its cultural manifestations. This contrast is more evident now than it ever was in the more isolated and conflict-ridden decades of the nineteenth century since the later need to negotiate with the wider culture, as Givens explains, meant the following,

⁵ See “Statement of the First Presidency regarding God’s Love for All Mankind,” 15 February 1978. Also see 2 Nephi 29:12 and Alma 29:8.

⁶ *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols., reported by G. D. Watt et al. (Liverpool: F.D and S. W. Richards, et al., 1851–1886; reprint, Salt Lake City: n.p., 1974), vol. 13, p. 335. Although it may be noted that quotes of this nature have often been interpreted as referring to Mormon openness to scientific empirical truth rather than to the truth of other religious doctrines, this very distinction between scientific and religious truth is ultimately foreign to LDS ontology and epistemology.

Mormon identity became more indistinct, and more vulnerable to contamination. The larger world was still a corrupt Babylon, but Joseph’s open eclecticism (“we will claim truth as ours wherever we find it”) meant some borrowings were not only allowed, but mandated. Individually and institutionally, Mormons continue to work through the paradox of an existence that is both Eden and exile, that embraces difference even as it yearns for integration.⁷

Such a paradoxical view is clearly apparent in the present attitude about other religions which is found among members of the Church. On the one hand few topics are as prevalent in LDS lessons and sermons as is missionary work, which involves members’ attempts to communicate their beliefs, experiences, and convictions to their friends and neighbours who do not belong to the Church. Ideally, these encounters culminate in conversions and in the acceptance of the “Mormon truth” but in many and probably most cases they do not. In this evangelizing context some of the Saints struggle to carry out an actual dialogue about religion since they rarely hear about the need to learn about their friends’ religious convictions. Thus, their focus often remains limited to teaching rather than to the exchanging of knowledge and experiences. In addition, some members fail to continue to nurture their friendships with those individuals who have rejected their missionary efforts and in such manner implicitly communicate insincerity and inequality in their approach to the relationship. Finally, although direct negative references to other religious traditions are firmly discouraged, it is not uncommon to hear some Saints criticize other churches in private conversations. Even in public sermons and testimonies vaguely positive statements are often followed by an emphasis on the preposition “but,” which usually precedes affirmations like “they do not have the Spirit” or “they do not have the truth as we do.”

On the other hand, the institutional Church and many individual Saints are often involved in ecumenical groups which are engaged in delivering aid to the community at large or in fighting for moral causes commonly shared by different traditions. There is also no need to highlight the well documented Mormon longing for inclusion in the wider Christian family and the sought-for recognition of the religion’s Christian theological foundations. Furthermore, I have heard both General

⁷ Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: a History of Mormon Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 59.

Authorities and local members make public statements in support of words uttered by such religious leaders as the Pope or the Dalai Lama. Mormons also borrow unapologetically from the theologies and writings of a variety of important religious figures, including occasionally Mother Theresa, Jonathan Edwards, and most frequently and recognizably C.S. Lewis.⁸ Therefore, in current Mormon exegesis the divine condemnation of other denominations, which appears in the First Vision account, does not represent a wholesale censure of membership in another church to be understood as necessarily evil. Indeed, although personal prejudices are present among the Saints as they are among all humans, it is beyond doubt that Mormonism recognizes the good intentions and the positive contributions of faithful members of all different denominations.

I could explore this contrast much further but for my purposes it is sufficient to underline the general presence of this paradoxical stance. In fact, the contrasting forces of exceptionalism and universalism or of “rejection of” versus “fellowship with” other religious perspectives open up LDS theology to wider forms of interpretations and to influences from a variety of socio-psychological factors which would not be as significant if the theological emphasis were to be monolithic in the direction of Mormon particularism. In other words, the perception of this coexistence of emphases is likely to provide enough mental and emotional room for other non-theological factors to play some role of significance in the Saints’ response to other religions. Instead, if the member’s evaluation of Mormonism’s nature, whether consciously or unconsciously, remains firmly focused on its exclusivity it is highly unlikely that any other factor may shift the existing perception in a more universalistic direction. In this particular instance it seems that other socio-psychological factors could only play a role which would strengthen the existing exclusivist perception unless such factors were to acquire levels of cognitive and emotional impact which would bring the whole perceptive structure into crisis and turmoil. Then, aside from these latter cases, the primary factor that usually determines an individual’s attitude towards other religions is that member’s implicit or explicit stance in relation to the spectrum of exceptionalism versus universalism that I have just described.

⁸ Mary Jane Woodger, “The Words of C.S. Lewis as Used by the Leadership of the LDS Church,” <http://www.crlamppost.org/woodger.htm> (accessed July 27, 2009).

Mormon Perceptions and the European Milieu

In Europe the perception of other religious traditions among Latter-day Saints is similarly shaped by individual understandings of Mormonism's nature in relation to this very spectrum. In fact, in my personal experience I have witnessed manifestations of great appreciation and even of "holy envy," to use Krister Stendahl's words, for different denominations' practices and, although only rarely, for some points of their doctrine.⁹ On the other hand, in Sunday School lessons I have occasionally heard scornful comments about other churches and in several instances I have observed stereotyping of both Christian and non-Christian religions. In this context the only major difference I have noticed between the European and the United States church settings is that some members in Italy and in the UK do not seem very hesitant in explicitly identifying other churches when expressing their criticism of the dominant traditions, namely Catholicism and the Church of England. In any case, my present purpose is not to determine whether members of certain nationalities are more prejudiced than others; instead, I want to outline some factors which emerge from the distinct socio-cultural experiences of European Mormons and which are likely to contribute to their perceptive schemata of other religions.

In the first place, it is widely recognized that exposure to religious diversity is a significant factor in determining attitudes towards a different religious group.¹⁰ Yet, at the institutional level it is rare for members to be involved in group projects with adepts of other religious communities; thus, when interactions occur they mostly take place at the level of individual relationships. In this context, as already indicated, the Saints are likely to be somewhat hindered in their social interactions if they fall into an excessively focused missionary mode which obscures true dialogue and exchange. Yet, it is doubtful that Mormons engage in frequent conversations which include the topic of religious beliefs. In fact, conversations of this nature are likely to be rare in Europe since many people appear to have no interest in religious subjects and most practice no religion at all. Such a difficulty is probably greater in Europe than it is in the U.S. where Church attendance and religious observance is not as stigmatized as it is in many European countries. Therefore, if

⁹ "Holy Envy" is the third of Stendahl's *rules for religious understanding*, as presented at a 1985 press conference in Stockholm where he responded to vocal opposition for the building of the LDS temple.

¹⁰ See Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 751-783.

the Saints' experience of religion is compartmentalized, namely limited to their own personal, family and ward meetings, it is most likely that exceptionalism rather than universalism will exert the strongest pull over their perception of other religious persuasions.

On the other hand, European Saints could benefit from some means of exposure to the theologies of other religions which are unique to their situation. For example, educational curricula of many European countries include the subject of religious education with classes beginning in Elementary school which usually spotlight the dominant religion over other Christian and non-Christian denominations.¹¹ Although these courses are not mandatory, a number of Latter-day Saint parents choose to have their children attend them, thus opening a conduit of non-Mormon religious learning which is not available in the United States until College. Furthermore, the history, architecture, and culture of some countries that exhibit a dominant religion are usually so infused with its unique theology that knowledge about its core tenets are bound to reach the whole population to some degree. Thus, when watching the news in Italy it is common to hear a report about the Pope's latest speech or about his most recent encyclical. Moreover, religious holidays extend well beyond Christmas and Easter to include the Immaculate Conception or the Ascension of Mary, and religious festivals and processions, particularly in the south, often involve a whole community. Then, if European Saints desire clarifications about the religious tenets of the dominant church they may usually turn to some friend or to a member of the extended family who is at least a cultural adept of the dominant tradition. In fact, since most European Mormons are converts of recent decades they are unlikely to be surrounded by family members who are exclusively LDS, thus avoiding the kind of insularity which is present where whole generations have been rooted in the Mormon experience.

The degree to which these factors contribute to Mormons' understanding of the dominant religion or to their emphasis on the universalism of Mormonism is of course open to debate. At the same time, given the fact that the majority of LDS members in Europe are converts, it is to be expected that their prior experiences with a different religious denomination, which is usually the dominant one, should have an effect upon their present attitude toward that same religion. In fact, I

¹¹ In this context Ronan Head's analysis is of particular interest. See Ronan Head, "The Experience of Mormon Children in English School-Based Religious Education and Collective Worship," *International Journal of Mormon Studies*, 2 (2009), 197-205.

have noticed from informal observation that those members who claim to have been distant from the dominant religion prior to their conversion to Mormonism often maintain an adversarial attitude towards it. On the other hand, many who have experienced conversion as a transition from one positive religious experience to what they have embraced as the superior light of Mormonism usually maintain a general positive attitude about the denomination of their previous membership. In this context, I can think of two specific examples, i.e. my father and one of my best friends, whose pre-conversion experiences included regular Mass attendance and pervasive interest in religion. Significantly, when I have heard them speak of Catholicism it is usually appreciation and not criticism which lies at the core of the conversation. Yet, I do not believe that the main reason for such ecumenical attitude is the original perception of their conversion as a mere religious upgrade rather than as a radical change, since I know that they both encountered significant opposition following their decision, particularly from Catholic family members. Instead, at the core of their view lies an understanding of Mormonism where the exceptional is somewhat balanced by the universal. In turn, the positive attitude is facilitated by an earlier experience with the religious "other" that is retained in memory as primarily positive.

Therefore, the Mormon convert's relation with the dominant religion is far from being explainable only through simplistic dichotomies of positive or negative pre-conversion experiences. Indeed, the convert's newly acquired identity as a member of the Mormon social group involves present relationships and tensions within a wider society which is usually understood to include if not to be driven by the dominant religion. As Armand Mauss described so well in his *Dialogue* analysis, European Mormons are often quite conscious of their status as a suspicious "American" religious minority that has no government support and which is opposed, stereotyped or at best ignored by the dominant religions of their national realities.¹² Whether Mauss's claim that Latter-day Saints in America have acquired the status of "model minority" is justified in light of recent data about public perceptions of Mormonism in America, it is at least certain that American Mormons are more of a "model minority" in the US milieu than European Saints are in their

¹² Armand L. Mauss, "Seeking a 'Second Harvest': Controlling the Costs of LDS Membership in Europe," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 41, no. 4, pp. 1-54.

social environments.¹³ Therefore, what may be viewed as a need for constant defence driven by a feeling of being besieged, which is already well developed in Mormon collective historical memories, is perhaps even more emphasized in those realities where Mormonism exists as a very small minority and where a dominant church is perceived to manifest an antagonistic approach towards smaller independent religious institutions. Thus, in order to protect their religious identity in a society which barely tolerates them, it is likely that many European Mormons feel pushed towards the retrenchment of their peculiarism.

Of course, when focusing on the status of a religious group vis-à-vis the dominant religion we enter the theoretical realm that includes the definition and trajectory of cult, sect, denomination, and church, which several sociologists, like Robertson, Stark, and Wilson, have examined.¹⁴ Although these classifications involve several complexities that cannot be examined in the present context, what is clear is that the Church does not hold the same level of sociological status in every part of the world. Thus, Mormonism is certainly a “church” in the Western part of the United States but in Europe it is still a “sect,” and in some countries it may even be considered a “cult,” as Armand Mauss has reminded us. However, the much longed-for “status” of church also implies some disadvantages. Generally speaking, the more powerful and widespread is the religious institution, the more frequent and intense will be the attacks against it, both from non-believers and from members of other religious persuasions. Indeed, significant attacks against Catholicism often take place in Italy, against Mormonism in Utah, or against Anglicanism in England. This is a common phenomenon which reflects the unequal balance of power between minorities and majorities of all kinds.

Still, there is more to this equation than the perceived arrogance of the powerful “oppressive” church, particularly in all those nations, including those I have just mentioned, where religious freedom is guaranteed by law and where open persecution does not usually occur. Part

¹³ See Gary Lawrence, *How Americans View Mormonism* (Orange, CA: Parameter Foundation, 2008) and Jennifer Dobner “Gay Marriage Fight, ‘Kiss-Ins’ Smack Mormon Image,” http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090816/ap_on_re_us/us_mormon_church_image (accessed August 26, 2009).

¹⁴ For a review of theories on sectarianism, see Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), pp. 229–271.

of the reason for the dominant church's reception of greater criticism and opposition is undoubtedly rooted in its increased visibility within the specific society in which it operates so vastly and so powerfully. True, when power is associated with visibility the effects of the opposition are usually not very damaging, but what about a smaller religious group, as Mormonism is in Europe, where its social power and influence are almost non-existent? Is greater recognition and visibility necessarily going to increase the security of the Saints' social identity?

The answer to this question is open to some debate when one thinks of the double-edged sword of increased exposure. In this context I remember a comment made by a good Catholic friend who distinguished between the Italian perception of Jehovah's Witnesses and of Mormons in terms of dislike towards the former and of indifference towards the latter.

In fact, at least while serving my full-time mission in Southern Italy in the 1990s, there seemed to be quite a large number of people who demonstrated greater belligerence towards LDS missionaries when mistakenly identifying them with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Whether this is still common or not, the point is that people usually avoided and rejected the Witnesses more firmly than they rejected us. This tendency is probably attributable to various factors but I suppose a primary reason to be centred around the more frequent encounters that people had with the Witnesses' proselytizing efforts. Therefore, in the context of a relationship with a society which is potentially threatening to one's religious identity some may view relative obscurity as preferable to negative recognition. Clearly, the positive exposure for which the Church's Public Relations persistently strive remains the ideal that Mormonism aspires to, but which is still far from being a firm reality, especially in Europe.

Yet, as Terryl Givens reminded us, to be liked and admired as a people has its own dangers particularly if it results from excessive accommodations or from a universalism which obliterates the meaning of one's distinctive religious identity. At present, the Church at large, whether in Europe or in other parts of the world, does not appear to suffer from this particular problem and I do not anticipate it will at any time in the near future. Instead, its challenge is to maintain an ideal level of tension with society at large thus turning conflict into a facilitator of spiritual growth while preventing it from becoming an insurmountable hindrance as was about to occur in late nineteenth-century Utah. In fact, Mormons may understand the need for an "opposition in all things" spoken of in the *Book of Mormon* as including that social resis-

tance from outsiders which often strengthens group identity and commitment, but which may also demolish them if present in excessive amounts. Thus, it is likely that most Mormons will spurn the idea of being “at ease” in the world, a condition associated with apostasy, and will continue instead to identify some forms of spiritual/social threats as necessary in order for the positive and the ideal to be affirmed in the face of the negative and the rejected. In this context, the question remains whether other religious traditions, and especially the dominant religions of Europe, should embody this role of an ever-present threat and opposition.

When examining the statements and attitudes of the highest level of the LDS hierarchy in recent decades the answer is undoubtedly negative. Gone are the days of polemical debates with ministers and pastors, or of public prophetic censure of the Christian creeds which was not uncommon in the earlier days of the Church. Today, when reference is made to other denominations or beliefs, the tone is usually respectful and conciliatory, even while recognizing doctrinal differences and the superiority of the LDS position. Some scriptural statements, such as “the great and abominable church” in the *Book of Mormon*, are often reappraised in Church manuals and commentaries where it is affirmed that the term “church” needs to be interpreted in a much wider sense than the word itself seems to suggest. To be sure, exclusivist claims remain and the outstretched hand is for some not sufficiently extended: Mormonism is still declared to be the one true church even though this statement’s implications for the evaluation of other religions are less rigidly constructed. Indeed, both in Europe and in America there is no sense that the greatest threat to the growth of the Church or to the spiritual well-being of its members originates in other Christian or non-Christian religions. Instead, the danger repeatedly emphasized in authoritative sermons and lessons is primarily the result of hedonistic forces as manifested by sexual immorality, selfishness, violence, the breaking down of the family, or materialism.

In other words, it is the secular world rather than a religious world of whatever other denomination which presently functions as the greatest spiritual danger for the Saints.¹⁵ True, it is this same world that

¹⁵ I am aware of the debate concerning the definition and the existence of “secularization.” See for example Bryan Wilson, ‘Reflections on a many-sided controversy’ in *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. by S. Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), pp. 195–210. What matters in the present context is the LDS perception as manifested in the

gives them the right to practice their religion and to believe freely in what they please, but these are benefits that come at a spiritual cost against which Mormons are constantly reminded to fight with all their efforts. Hence, if the non-religious world now represents a more powerful and effective adversary over the religious world of a different denomination, what does this entail for the way in which Mormons perceive other churches, and particularly the dominant ones? Especially in Europe, where secularization is well-rooted in the social fabric of society, are different religious traditions our new allies as Mormonism strives to convey at least a general message on the importance of faith and of Christian values? My hunch is that most European Mormons would agree, particularly if they are sensitive to the moral dangers of Western secular society, which is an almost inevitable condition if the teachings and writings of Mormon leaders are accepted as truthful. At the same time, a sense of fellowship or alliance with believers of other persuasions against the dangers of the modern world does not always emerge because it is hindered by a variety of possible obstacles, some of which have already been mentioned.

In the first place, as is typical of all humans, Mormons want to feel the hand of fellowship extended towards them in return whether officially by other churches or informally by their members. Yet, this probably does not occur as often or as widely as many members wished. For their part, the Saints maintain an ambiguous relationship towards "practicing" members of other faiths if they want to share their commonalities in mutual friendship while continuing to perceive them as potential converts for their missionary efforts. Yet, I suppose that most Mormons would prefer to neglect their missionary responsibilities rather than to risk the potential burning of bridges if perceived as pushy or intolerant of other beliefs. At the least, they would need to restructure their understanding of "missionary work" by placing greater focus on brotherly friendship rather than on the potential result of conversions.

Parenthetically, and in conclusion, I wonder to what extent the attitude toward the dominant religion in a particular European country is also related to the perception of its accommodation to secular culture. In other words, the dominant church may be perceived more as an accomplice of the threatening secular society if its theology has assimilated secular concepts to such a degree that it has become almost indistinguishable, particularly in matters of morality, from the society in which it

writings and sermons of Mormon General Authorities which is transmitted to the general membership.

exists. In this sense Mormons would naturally feel greater affinity toward a church which shares a similar ethical stance, particularly if unpopular, because it would add a dimension of joint status as part of the moral minority. Thus, given the widespread perception among Mormons in the UK that the Church of England has failed to maintain its moral standards in the face of society's pressures it would seem that English Saints have a lesser reason to feel affinity with their dominant church than would, for example, Italian Mormons, who often explicitly praise the Catholic Church for its unpopular positions on such moral issues as abortion or homosexuality. Attempting to measure attitudes of this kind would certainly involve some challenges in terms of control of third variables, but I think it would still be worthwhile to attempt a study of this kind.

Conclusion

In summary, the LDS European perception of other religions, particularly of dominant Christian churches, is shaped by a variety of factors, which include theological, cultural, sociological, and obviously psychological dynamics. In the first place, a primary determining factor for individual attitudes involves the member's understanding of the nature of Mormonism as characterized by both exceptionalism and universalism in balanced tension. In fact, if all members were to think that "when you have the truth there cannot be any dialogue with other religions," as I once heard an Italian LDS leader state, there would probably be no need to analyze other factors. Yet, in many cases various other elements open or close the conduit of interaction with other denominations and their members. These dynamics involve exposure to the "other" theology or to the religious experiences of its adepts, pre-conversion experiences as members of the "other" denomination, perceptions on the quality of one's status as religious minority in a reality dominated by the "other," and sensitivity to the threat of secularism with the associated drive to want to join forces with other individuals of faith.

In this context the European milieu evinces forces which on the one hand may exert pressure in the direction of exceptionalism (such as when Mormonism is perceived as a powerless religious minority rejected and opposed by society), or on the other in the direction of universalism if the threat of the secular world is perceived as particularly significant and if some exposure to the "other" religion has led one to appreciate its commonalities with the LDS worldview. Yet, whether in Europe or America the challenge for every faithful remains the same,

to exploit the accoutrements of that host culture without suffering contamination or loss of mission and identity in the process. The difficulty in “spoiling the Egyptians” has ever been the same: to turn the plundered riches into temple adornments rather than golden calves.¹⁶

¹⁶ Givens, *People of Paradox*, p. 62.