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Radical Dispensationalism: Mormonism

American restorationism reached the pinnacle of conception and success in the radical dispensationalism of the Book of Mormon and the Latter-day Saints. Mormonism, as it is often called because of the significance of the Book of Mormon, is a uniquely American religious tradition. It is a new religion because of its radical departure from the theology and practice of eighteen hundred years of Christian history, and because its present institutional history began little more than a hundred and seventy years ago—a brief period in the comparative history of the world’s religions.

The story of Mormonism is a fascinating one. No survey of the shaping of American religious traditions is complete without it, and any attempt to understand American society and culture must come to terms with this distinctively American tradition. Mormonism is a form of restorationism because it is one more attempt to restore a primitive Christianity in an American setting, where the immediate past is considered obsolete and the land sacred. As restorationism it is radical dispensationalism because it proposes a restored Christianity that has little or no connection with the Christianity represented in Protestantism, Anglicanism, and Roman Catholicism. Mormonism is indeed a new dispensation—a new dispensing of the truth of Jesus Christ. It is also dispensationalism because of its view of the history of salvation. According to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) there are distinct periods of history during which God reveals or dispenses the teachings that are necessary for salvation in that time. In this way, human beings do not need to rely upon the past for saving knowledge. God issues a new dispensation. This also means that whenever people neglect the necessary priesthood and keys to salvation, God does not permit the truth to be obscured but confers it upon humanity again. For example, the first dispensation was Adamic, meaning that saving knowledge was first revealed to Adam, considered as a historical personage. Mormon doctrine speaks of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist, the Jaredites, and the Nephites, among others, as having received dispensations of the truth of salvation in their times.

Another aspect of Mormon theory (that is, verbal expression) that is unique is the understanding that the saving knowledge revealed in each dispensation is the gospel. That is to say, the gospel is not confined to the New Testament period, to the times of Jesus of Nazareth and the beginning of the Common Era. The gospel is the plan of salvation, comprised of principles that were made known in preexistence. Here the word *gospel* moves beyond the ordinary conception of it in the rest of Christianity. Traditionally the gospel has been “good news,” the glad tidings of what God demonstrated in the life of Jesus the Christ. Gospel has been generally understood as being supplementary to the Law, that is, the commandments of God. In other words, the good news is that God accepts us even though we fall short of keeping the Law. In Jesus Christ, the Law is fulfilled even though we personally fall short of its fulfillment. In Jesus Christ, God takes on the death that our sinfulness inflicts. That, presumably, is good news—“gospel.”

However, in Mormonism the gospel acquires the character of newly dispensed Law. The gospel becomes a set of truths, principles, sealing practices, and a restored priesthood. The gospel in Mormonism is a system administered by two levels of priesthood—“the gospel is concerned with those particular religious truths *by conformity to which men can sanctify and cleanse their own souls, thus gaining for themselves salvation in the eternal worlds.*” We can know authentic representation of the gospel via the presence of revelations, visions, miracles, signs, apostles, prophets, and “all the gifts of the Spirit.” The gospel had been lost but was restored in the latter days through Joseph Smith, first prophet of the restored church. In him the presence of the gospel again became evident—a gospel lost in the American wilderness almost sixteen hundred years ago.

The restoration of the gospel and of the true Christian church takes place through agents specially chosen by God. Mormonism projects a gospel that is bestowed through a chosen priesthood. Now, of course, Mormonism as a distinctively American religion has no professional clergy, no priesthood dependent for its livelihood upon the support of the people, no process of special education and ordination that sets anyone apart

except by way of conferring upon certain people the “keys” by which they may unlock the secrets of heaven. God holds all of Creation together by the power of God’s own priesthood and delegates to humanity a priesthood through which all things necessary to salvation are administered. “There are, in the Church, two priesthoods,” states a document of Mormon scripture, The Doctrine and Covenants, “namely, the Melchizedek and Aaronic, including Levitical Priesthood.” It is taught that the Melchizedek is the grand head, the comprehensive priesthood of which all other priesthoods are part. Indeed, all authorities or offices in the church are expressions of (or representative of) the Melchizedek Priesthood. The world is to become a kingdom of priests, and to this end the Melchizedek order is directed.

However, in order for the Melchizedek order to take effect, a period of preparation or schooling is necessary; a lesser priesthood is called into being. The Aaronic Priesthood had been restored through Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Through this priesthood the functions of teaching and administration of the restored church are shared. The power of salvation is through the priesthood. Certain sacred ordinances are channels for the gospel. Ordinances are rites and ceremonies, but also laws and commandments. Any male member of the church is eligible to receive the Aaronic Priesthood by “the laying on of hands, by those who are in authority to preach the gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.” Only those already belonging to the priesthood may ordain those who are “called of God, as was Aaron.”⁵ The offices in this priesthood are deacon, teacher, priest, and bishop, in that order of responsibility. A boy who has been baptized and confirmed and is considered “worthy” may be ordained to the office of deacon at age twelve, thereby taking the first step into the Aaronic Priesthood.

The Melchizedek Priesthood consists of the offices of elder, seventy, high priest, patriarch, and apostle. Here the fullness of the priesthood is expressed, although special functions and duties are reserved for each particular office. It is from this priesthood that the senior apostle is chosen as president of the church. The president is also the “Prophet of the Church,” with supreme authority to speak for the Lord for the welfare of the entire church and the salvation of the world. In spite of the detailed definition of doctrine and office that one finds in Mormonism, there is always a certain equivocality. For example, it is frequently said that anyone may be a prophet, for a prophet is a spokesperson chosen by God. Presumably every member of the church may be God’s spokesperson. However, the spokesperson’s prophecy is applicable only to personal circumstance and status in the church. Only the president exercises the *fullness* of prophecy. “We have a prophet living on the earth today. This prophet is the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. He has the right to revelation for the entire Church. He holds the ‘keys of the kingdom,’ meaning that he has the right to control the administration of the ordinances.”

It is very difficult to isolate the verbal expression of Mormonism from the practical expression. More than most other American religions, this tradition emphasizes function and practice. It is a tradition of rites and ceremonies, of undergoing various stages of initiation into a priesthood that is salvation itself. As we have seen, the process of transformation is one of ordinances; that is, the individual is transformed into the being desired by God through participation in certain ritual events that only the Melchizedek Priesthood can administer. “The kingdom” is protected and opened by certain “keys” possessed by some and not by others. The keys are frequently secret but always essential to the process by which we may be transformed into eternal life. As some critics have put it, being a Mormon is like belonging to a Masonic order that holds the key to one’s ultimate destiny at various degrees or levels of one’s pilgrimage.

Another aspect of the verbal expression of Mormonism is the emphasis upon continuing revelation. As we have seen in previous chapters, revelation is special knowledge of divine things. The idea of revelation is necessary because divinity is of another order than humanity. In order to know the divine, the will of the divine must be revealed. Our natural, ordinary reason is able to provide us with ordinary knowledge of the ordinary things of nature. Revelation is the superordinary knowledge of superordinary realities. Throughout the history of traditional Christianity, revelation has been assumed to be the special truth of God’s salvation, delivered once and for all to Israel of old and then to the “New Israel” of the Church of Jesus Christ. This has not meant that God has no more truth to reveal. Rather it means that all subsequent truth for human well-being will be a clarification and interpretation of the original revelation. It is the task of theology and the teaching authority of the church to make the truth of revelation accessible to people in all times and places. The reality of God’s

⁵ In Hebrew tradition Aaron was the brother of Moses. In the book of Exodus it is reported that the Lord says to Moses, “Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests . . . and you shall speak to all who have ability, whom I have endowed with an able mind, that they may make Aaron’s garments to consecrate him for my priesthood” (Exodus 28:1, 3).

salvation can become present to us today, in meaningful and exciting fashion, through the original revelation. No new revelation is essential.

However, the “new American” described by Crèvecoeur did not care for the notion that the past was necessary to the present. And Emerson, when he asked, “Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion of *revelation* to us . . .?” was expressing a dissatisfaction with groping in the past. Instead, he sought “experiences.” Revelation, for Emerson, was an experience, a subjective encounter with the divine. This was a new meaning of revelation, and it was certainly close to the meaning of revelation accepted by Joseph Smith and his Mormon restorationists. To traditional Christianity, revelation was the special knowledge and truth of God’s salvation, offered once and for all. To Transcendentalists and Mormons, revelation was the visitation of new truth or the experience of new insight. The Articles of Faith (Joseph Smith’s summation of the basic doctrines) tell us that “revelation signifies the making known of divine truth by communication from the heavens.” In Mormon understanding, the Lord⁶ appears personally to certain perceptive and chosen persons. He speaks audibly so that the person may *experience* his message through the senses, and he has various other means of direct encounter and communication of whatever truth is necessary for us in our particular circumstances.

Revelation is therefore a continuing and personal affair. To the head of a Mormon household, a revelation may come that is important to the conduct of his family. To the wife, whose role is extremely important even though she is not a member of the priesthood, a revelation may occur that clarifies the truth of the gospel for her special responsibilities. A revelation may come to the stake president, helping him in his spiritual oversight, and the bishop of a ward may be visited with special truth for his own assignments. Only the president of the church, the prophet in the tradition of Joseph Smith, can have the revelations necessary to the welfare and direction of the whole church.

This theory of continuing revelation is closely related to the dispensational view of history, the theology of priesthood, and the Mormon understanding of the gospel. The Lord renews and restores his priesthood in successive historical dispensations. He brings the ordinances of the gospel to light for people in their particular time and circumstance. It therefore stands to reason that revelation cannot be a once-for-all matter of special knowledge. Rather, it becomes a personal message from the Lord, revealing his will for the Saints of the Latter-day and showing the way for the resolution of personal and social problems. The Lord reveals to his prophet, the president of the church, whatever doctrines are important for his people. A revelation that is binding on the members of the church will always be identified as such. That is to say, the Lord makes it evident that a revelation is a revelation. “No one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in the church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun.,” says the Doctrine and Covenants, a book of scriptural authority based upon revelation, “for he receiveth them even as most. . . . For I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed, *until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead*” (emphasis mine).

Revelation authorized the practice of plural marriage during the early days of the restoration of the church in the nineteenth century. Plural marriage was openly taught and directed in practice by the presidency until 1890. At that time President Wilford Woodruff issued a manifesto, based upon revelation, which set aside the command to continue the practice. However, a reading of Isaiah 4 of the Bible is used to indicate that plural marriage will be restored at the time of Christ’s second coming: “And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, ‘We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach’ ” (v. 1*).

In the same manner, it is Mormon belief that the priesthood was not available to blacks in the dispensation until 1978. At that time President Spencer W. Kimball received a revelation directing that all men, regardless of race or color, were eligible to share the ordinances of the gospel and its priesthood.

Mormonism represents a radical departure from traditional Christianity. Because of our religious pluralism, Americans tend to harmonize the diversity of theologies in our midst. A certain ritual piety pervades our public life. We find it necessary for commercial and political reasons to be civil to each other. Often we

⁶ Mormons prefer to speak of “the Lord,” after the presumed practice of ancient Israel, avoiding an overuse of and familiarity with the divine name.

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¹ Seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, “We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes; just let us be called by your name; take away our disgrace.”

hear messages on television beckoning us to deepen our spiritual lives, our faith, “by whatever understanding of God we may have.” Little do we realize that this notion itself advocates a theology, a doctrine of God. In order for this harmonizing to take place, it is necessary to believe, either that there are many gods/Gods, or that there is a God beyond gods/Gods who is patient with our ineptitude. Mormonism’s doctrine of God is not one that harmonizes readily with the God of traditional Christianity. To Mormonism God is a material being. “God himself was once as we are now,” wrote the Prophet Joseph, “and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity.” Not so, says Smith; God dwelt on earth just as Jesus did. God was a man who managed to perfect himself and achieve the same kind of exaltation that is possible for us (“you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves”). God does not create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), but uses eternal elements. God is a creature in his own creation; he is not being as such, or the ground of being.

Everything has bodily existence, including God. Everything is in some sense preexistent, including God. God was a man on the earth just as we are because it is necessary for all preexistent beings to come to earth in order to undergo the process of perfection. “There is no such thing as immaterial matter,” writes Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants. “All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter.” Anyone who has looked at a copy of the Book of Mormon, glanced at other Mormon literature, or been to a visitors’ center associated with a Mormon temple, becomes aware of an unusual form of art. Pictures are highly representational, very literal renderings of preexistence and of events in the history of the saints. This is because even spirit is matter. This also leads to what some critics have called *tritheism*, meaning three Gods. Mormonism makes no attempt to harmonize the notion of the Trinity in traditional Christianity. The latter doctrine maintains that there is one God, known as Father, Son, Holy Spirit—hence a “tri-unity.” To Mormonism the three are separate beings united in purpose and in perfection. The three divine beings represent the different modes and stages in which we also exist. We also are fathers, sons, and spirits, and we are required to achieve harmony and perfection in whatever role we find ourselves, and always in relation to the other two. This is the path to perfection and exaltation as God.

Mormon theology is quite complicated and difficult to understand partly because, as a new and radical dispensation of Christianity, it departs so markedly from our common heritage of understanding. It is impossible to do justice to Mormon tradition in the scope of this volume. We are simply calling attention to certain distinguishing features of this uniquely American religion and must highlight one remaining aspect of the verbal expression. We may ask what it is that is being restored in this form of restorationism. It is not primitive, New Testament Christianity. For one thing, it was assumed that the church of the Christian era had so distorted the Scriptures themselves that further revelation was required in order to provide Joseph Smith with the key to translate a true and inspired version. And so he did. What is being restored in Mormonism is the people Israel, the patriarchal society in which the gospel principles and ordinances were first revealed. It was Israel’s society that first demonstrated the way of special ordinances and laws, which in Mormon understanding make up the gospel. It was in Israel that God revealed the necessity for procreative activity, the primary purpose of which was to make it possible for preexistent beings to be born on earth to begin their initiation into gospel perfection.

Mormonism teaches that salvation is universal because of the mercy of God shown in Jesus Christ. However, there are three different levels on which that salvation is ultimately realized. Again, the teaching is based on the Inspired Version of the Bible, which corrects the losses and distortions of previous translations of holy scriptures. First Corinthians 15:40* of the Inspired Version tells us that there are “celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial, and bodies telestial; but the glory of the celestial, one; and the terrestrial, another; and the telestial, another.” The telestial is the lowest level of God’s merciful provision for all life. The telestial kingdom is reserved for those who live a law of carnality, worldliness, and wickedness. Most of the adults who have ever lived will go to the telestial kingdom. Those people who are lukewarm in their devotion to the gospel ordinances of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will go to the terrestrial kingdom. They will be joined there by just and decent folk who do not accept the gospel and by those who accept the gospel in the

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⁴⁰ There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another.

spirit world after having rejected it on earth. The celestial kingdom is a state of exaltation shared by those who have been faithful to the gospel law. Even this celestial realm has degrees through which the faithful may pass on the way to exaltation in the highest heavens. It is important to note that life on earth *and* life in the spirit world make provision for decision and growth on the way to that perfection in which we become gods.

Many people in early nineteenth-century America were lost in a vast sea of religious chaos. They found themselves historyless and meaningless, adrift and suffering vertigo in a world that was big and promising, but without roots, without a firm foundation. They sought escape; they sought relief from their poverty and hardship by whatever means available, including treasure hunting by seer stones. And they sought a sense of community, of belonging to each other and to the great American landscape. The significance of the Book of Mormon is an unsettled issue in the history of the Latter-day Saints. There is little doubt that it plays an important role in missionary efforts, providing, as it does, a salvation-history that is a profound alternative to the traditional Christian understanding of America, while at the same time answering questions about the origin of the American Indian and the failure of denominational Christianity. Brigham Young, successor to Joseph Smith as prophet and president, is reported to have begun his conversion with the reading of the book. However, he said that he “wished sufficient time to prove all things for myself,” that he wanted to become acquainted with those “who professed to believe that book . . . I watched to see whether good common sense was manifest.”

It would seem that much of the appeal of Mormonism has always been the strength of its community, its disciplined personal and family life, and its lay-priesthood. It is in the context of that common sense appeal that people turn to the book that belongs to this common-sense community and provides a rationale for its existence. The origins of the Book of Mormon remain controversial in the minds of scholars of religion who wish to apply the same principles of literary and historical criticism that have influenced contemporary understanding of the origins of the Bible. At the time of its publication in 1830, the Book of Mormon excited considerable hostility among those who were offended by its presumption to be a “gold bible,” holy scriptures in competition with the Bible. Some considered it “the gibberish of a crazy boy,” originating in the fertile mind of a disturbed youth in nineteenth-century western New York, rather than in ancient America. Whatever the scholarly verdict about its origins may be, it remains an ingenious document central to the idea of radical dispensationalism.

The Book of Mormon became “another testament of Jesus Christ.” It answered puzzling questions for many people. The Book predicted the emergence of a great seer whose name would be Joseph like that of his father and who would be God’s agent in the restoration of Israel. The story deals with a thousand-year period from 600 B.C.E. to 421 C.E. In it we learn of the people of Lehi, a Jew who led some of his family and friends to the promised land of America six hundred years before the birth of Christ. Lehi’s exodus preceded the time of the Babylonian captivity. Lehi was of the house and lineage of Joseph, son of Jacob and heir of the promises to Abraham. Laman and Lemuel were sons of Lehi who could not depart from their wicked ways. They came to be known as Lamanites, the dark-skinned ancestors of the American Indians. Their wars against the more righteous followers of Nephi, another son of Lehi, led to almost total destruction of the Nephites. One of the surviving Nephites was Mormon, who, with his son Moroni, managed to hide the documents containing the great record of the true gospel ordinances. These documents were the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was supposedly translated.

One of the important aspects of the story recorded in the Book of Mormon is the postresurrection appearance of Jesus Christ on the American continent. In this visitation he offers his message to those children of Israel who had not heard him in Palestine. The gospel is thus offered in a new dispensation that will one day lead to a restoration that will gather all of Israel—establishing the house of Joseph in America, the house of Judah in Palestine, and eventually gathering the Lost Tribes to the house of Ephraim in America.

The story is complex but fascinating. The student is encouraged to piece together the details of the account by reading the Book of Mormon. We “believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God,” says the eighth article of faith. This Book is believed by Mormons to present the doctrines of the gospel with greater clarity than the Bible. Many of its writings are presented as a more ancient record than the Bible, having been brought to this continent for safekeeping during the days of destruction and exile in Palestine. The revelation given in this scriptural document provided America with a biblical past heretofore unknown. It answered questions about the origins and conditions of Native Americans and gave America a unique role in the unfolding of salvation history. “This great American nation the Almighty raised up by the power of his omnipotent hand,” wrote president Joseph Fielding Smith, “that it might be possible in the latter days for the

kingdom of God to be established in the earth. If the Lord had not prepared the way by laying the foundations of this glorious nation, it would have been impossible . . . to have laid the foundations for the coming of his great kingdom.” Mormons are engaged in kingdom-building, and America is a chosen land for the restoration of Israel as a people of the gospel.

The practical expressions of Mormon tradition are almost as interesting as their complex theoretical life. However, in the scope of this chapter we shall confine ourselves to a few observations. First of all, much of the ritual life of Mormonism is secret practice. We have already pointed out that Mormonism is itself a religion of following detailed directions. The gospel of Jesus Christ is for Mormons a set of ordinances—living out the behavioral style of patriarchal Israel. The Word of Wisdom is a revelation received by Joseph Smith on February 27, 1833, and contains laws of dietary practice prohibiting tobacco, strong drinks, and hot drinks. For a time this revealed law of health was only modestly regarded. It was not until the church officially gave up the practice of plural marriage that the Word of Wisdom was taken more seriously as a way of distinguishing “restored Israel” from the rest of society. There is so much of Mormon life that is the practical expression of a religion that is a new dispensation, with practices meant to discipline the Latter-day saints as a people set apart.

However, it is probably the temple ordinances that are of greatest significance in an attempt to understand the radical departure from traditional Christianity. Certain gospel practices are so sacred that the Lord has authorized their performance only in temples, which are holy places—houses of the Lord erected by his revelation. Baptism for the dead, along with what are called washings, anointings, endowments, and sealings are performed in the temples according to careful direction. It is assumed that there were temples in all previous dispensations of the gospel, that these temples were the site of these ordinances of exaltation—the marks of the celestial kingdom. Baptism for the dead is an ordinance that permits the entrance into the celestial kingdom of worthy persons who died before being given the opportunity to receive schooling in the ways of gospel principles. Inasmuch as baptism is essential for entrance to the celestial realms, baptism for the dead makes such an inheritance possible. This secret rite of baptism, performed in the temples, is a central feature of Mormon practice. Mormon interest in genealogy is related to baptism for the dead, as well as other vicarious ordinances of salvation.

Much of the practical expression of the religious life of the Latter-day Saints takes place in the family and the local “churches.” The family gives body and nurture to the preexistent spirits waiting for the opportunity to use the gospel ordinances as keys to the celestial kingdom. Families are sacred units, reflective of the patriarchal order of Israel. It is there that the prayer life of the Saints is focused. Prayer is basic conversation with the Lord: “Pray in your families unto the Father, always in my name,” reads 3 Nephi 18:21 (Book of Mormon), “that your wives and your children may be blessed.” Families are eternal, with members continuing in the highest heaven of the celestial world, “where they have *eternal increase*.” Procreation is a continuing and sacred reality.

When the faithful gather as a congregation of the Saints on a Sunday, their worship includes the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. They are thereby following the Lord’s commandment. A priest or elder breaks bread, kneels, blesses it, and passes it to the members. Water is then blessed and distributed. Although the ancient Scriptures refer to the use of wine, a more recent revelation recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants indicates that it does not matter what is eaten or drunk, so long as it is in remembrance of the Lord. In this way, the reception of water instead of wine conforms to the Word of Wisdom, with its admonition against the use of “strong drink,” meaning alcoholic beverage. Worship in the congregation tends to follow a simple and informal pattern. There are readings, prayers, testimonies, addresses (what might be called sermons), and other forms of instruction. However, the tone of these services is in contrast to the special rites that occur in the solemn secrecy of the Mormon temple.

The concept of continuing revelation makes it difficult for a significant theory of scripture to emerge in Mormonism. In practice, this means that the revelations and inspired words of the living prophets (presidents) of the church become scripture. Nevertheless, there are four books with special scriptural authority. They are the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

The social expression of Mormonism rests upon the concept of the new dispensation, the idea of the restored church. Through Joseph Smith, God has restored the true church after centuries of apostasy that followed the ascension of Christ into heaven. According to the Doctrine and Covenants, the church is to be called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Thus began the gathering of Israel from out of all

nations and all parts of the earth. The true measure of society for Mormonism is the ideal family, gathered to keep the gospel ordinances and become members of the celestial kingdom.

In polity, Mormonism again seeks to be a repristination of the apostolic church and the patriarchal society of Israel. Living on this earth as a faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is already a participation in the celestial kingdom. This is especially true when we consider that keeping the gospel ordinances, sharing the priesthood, and receiving the sealings of marriage and family are themselves marks of the perfection of celestial reality.

Mormons maintain that the polity of the church is always the same when God calls a new dispensation of the gospel into being. In other words, whenever the true church is established, whether in Abraham's, Nephi's, or Jesus' time, there are prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. However, in true Mormon fashion since the days of Joseph Smith, there are always provisions for necessary change. In the complex world of these latter days, church organization is itself likely to be intricate and must have those administrative units essential to the promotion of the gospel. Changes in ecclesiastical organization will follow the dictates of revelation. Little that the church does takes place without revelation. Only revelation can provide the dependable solutions to the church's ministry in today's world. Nothing is left to chance; bureaucracy and social ethics (solutions to various social, economic, and political problems) are affairs of revelation.

The First Presidency, a quorum of three presidents belonging to the Melchizedek Priesthood, presides over the whole Church. The Lord selects and the body of the saints "sustains" or affirms the presidency. One of these three serves as president of the Church and is therefore High Priest and Prophet. Upon the death of the president, the First Presidency is dissolved until a new president is chosen. The president is a senior apostle selected from the Council, or Quorum, of the Twelve. Here we observe a theory of apostolic succession at work. It is the apostles who are the earthly manifestations of the authority and power of the church. They are given the keys of the kingdom. Whenever the First Presidency is dissolved, the Council of the Twelve is supreme in governing authority until a new presidency is instituted and sustained.

In keeping with patriarchal practice and the New Testament reference to Jesus' appointment of seventy as missionaries, the Latter-day Saints maintain a Council of Seventy who share the central authority of the Council of Twelve and the First Presidency. However, as Joseph Fielding Smith put it, all is under direction of the president: "There is never at the same time two equal heads in the Church—never. . . . There is always a head in the Church, and if the presidency of the Church is removed by death or other cause, then the next head of the Church is the Twelve Apostles, until a Presidency is again organized."

The church is divided into stakes and missions. The *stake* takes its name from the notion of Zion as a great tent, a tabernacle held firmly in place by stakes. Depending upon such factors as membership in the Church, stakes range widely in geographical area. The Saints are gathered metaphorically in tabernacles. Stakes are divided into smaller units called wards. Members of the church in a ward are the congregation (assembly, gathering) of the Saints. It is on this level that the work of the gospel is conducted under the care of quorums and presidencies.

Although there are many republican principles at work in the constitution of Mormonism, it is fundamentally a hierarchical order in keeping with its notions of patriarchy, apostolic succession, and headship. Today this new American religion must be considered among the major world religions. It is a tradition reporting constant growth at a time when the membership of many of the heirs of sixteenth-century European Christianity is at a standstill. The study of Mormonism is essential to an understanding of America and the changing culture of the early twenty-first century.

Mormonism has been a carefully organized tradition, maintaining a discipline that permits little digression from its doctrinal and ritual standards. However, the tradition does exist in a secular and pluralistic America, and one of the characteristics of religion in America is the need to respond to shifting values and ideas. There have been signs that some Mormons are trying to re-think their tradition in relationship to such issues as the role of women. Feminist concerns are also encouraging the tradition to explore more deeply the concept of the Divine Mother that is hidden in the Mormon idea of the Godhead as involving male and female counterparts. After all, if the family and eternal procreation are paradigmatic to the tradition, then the Godhead must of necessity be centered in a Mother-Father divinity. Needless to say, many of these issues threaten the authority and solidarity of the patriarchal hierarchy in Mormon practice. Many of those who advocate radical departure from traditional authority have been censured or excommunicated. Margaret and Paul Toscano are two such pioneering thinkers. In their book, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon*

Theology, they are bold to write: “For us, Joseph Smith’s teachings, like those of every other prophet, constitute not the final word but a point of departure.”⁷

In this chapter we have explored the traditions of restorationism that have been an important element in American religious history. Restorationism came into its own in the national period of our history. With typical American impatience with history, the advocates of restoration had sought to put an end to divisions, to differences of opinion and theology. By the middle of the nineteenth century it had become evident that the movement had instead contributed several new “denominations” to the diversity of American religion. These were to be traditions not directly linked to the sixteenth-century Reformation. They partook of the spirit of Crèvecoeur’s “American, this new man.” Whether by rationalist assumptions or dependent upon new and continuing revelation, they were most definitely “made in the USA.”

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MORMONS. The popular name for the ‘Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’. They were founded in Manchester, New York, in 1830 by Joseph Smith (1805–44), who claimed to have been given, through a revelation, *The Book of Mormon*. This, together with the Bible and two other works, *Doctrine and covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price*, comprise the Mormon canon of Scripture. In 1843 Smith had another revelation sanctioning polygamy. In 1844 he was killed by a mob in Carthage, Ill., near the Mormon establishment at Nauvoo. Brigham Young (1801–77), an able leader and administrator, succeeded him as President of the Mormons and in 1847 moved their headquarters to Salt Lake Valley in Utah. The practice of polygamy brought them into conflict with the Federal Government until 1890, when Wilford Woodruff, then their President, advised his followers to conform to the law. In 1978 the priesthood was opened to ‘all worthy male members ... without regard for race or color’, thus ending a ban on Blacks from full membership. By 2002 Mormons claimed over 11 million members. Owing to recent expansion in South America, more than half now live outside the *United States of America.

The Mormons accept a modified form of the doctrine of the *Trinity, in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are believed to be three separate Gods united in a common godhead of purpose and perfection. Their teaching has a strong *Adventist element; they hold that Israel will literally be gathered together and the ten tribes restored and that Christ will personally reign over a new earth. They maintain that after His resurrection Christ ministered briefly in America and that Zion will be built in the W. hemisphere. They lay great stress on missionary activity, both in the USA and elsewhere, and each male is expected to devote two years to this work at his own expense. They control considerable resources, since members are expected to devote one tenth of their gross income to the Church. In addition to local churches (called ‘wards’), Mormons build temples (more than 100 by 2002), in which alone various ceremonies can be performed; these include marriages and baptisms for the dead. Mainstream Mormonism continues to condemn the practice of polygamy, but some breakaway groups engage in it, and it is official doctrine that the custom of plural marriage will be restored at the Second Coming. The largest offshoot is the ‘Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints’, which has its headquarters in Independence, Missouri.

The Mormons use the AV of the Bible, with certain retranslations by Smith. *The Book of Mormon* first pub. at Palmyra, NY, 1830; *A Book of Commandments*, comprising revelations to Smith and others, pub. at Independence, Mo., 1833; it was enlarged as *Doctrine and Covenants* (Kirtland, Oh., 1835); *The Pearl of Great Price*, which comprises selections from Smith’s writings, was first pub. in Liverpool, 1851; all these works are available in many edns. The large lit. on the Mormons incl. B. R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, 1958; 2nd edn., 1966); N. F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict 1850–1859* (New Haven, Conn., 1960); J. B. Allen and G. M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1976; 2nd edn. [1992]); L. J. Arrington and D. Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York and London, 1979); R. Gottlieb and P. Wiley, *America’s Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (New York [1984]; repr. San

⁷ Margaret Toscano and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1990), xi. AV *Authorized Version [i.e. King James Version, 1611] of the Bible. edn. edition.

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On Joseph Smith, see Lucy Smith (mother), *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and his Progenitors for many Generations* (Liverpool, 1853); F. McK. Brodie, *No Man Knows my History* (New York, 1945; 2nd edn., 1971; London, 1963); R. L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, Ill., and Chicago [1984]), with bibl.

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id. idem (Lat., the same person).

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