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MORMON MYTHS

America is not only a country rich in cultural diversity; it is rich in religions as well. In fact, one of the three characteristics that distinguish America from the rest of the world is religiosity, the other two being the vast geographical expanse and ethnic diversity. But religiosity could not exist on its own; it must be interdependent on culture and ethnicity.

Key words: religion, cultural values, Mormonism.

Америка богата не только культурным разнообразием, но и религией. На самом деле, одно из трех свойств, отличающих Америку от остального мира - это религиозность, две другие - это широкое географическое пространство и этническое разнообразие. Но религиозность не может существовать сама по себе; она взаимозависима с культурой и этнической принадлежностью.

Ключевые слова: религия, культурные ценности, мормоны.

Americans are a religious people who worship in churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques, but unlike the major religions of America that all originate outside the US, Mormonism, although being Christian, is a uniquely American religion and therefore intertwined with church doctrine, the cultural values of the American people and the thousands of Mormon converts who brought their traditions with them from so many corners of the earth.

Founded in up-state New York in 1830 by the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS Church), generally known as the Mormon Church, could now be called a global religion having now expanded to 176 nations with a membership of over 15 million. Missionaries serving the Mormon Church go on 2-year year missions throughout the world, proselytizing the principles and doctrines of the church in the respective languages, and adding to American cultural diversification through their missionary experiences abroad. I was a Mormon missionary in Finland; I could sing Finnish folk songs and recite verses from the Kalevala, the Finnish oral epic.

But the Mormon Church had a very rocky beginning with oftentimes unbearable hardships. In 1831, the church moved from Western New York to Kirtland, Ohio where despite some serious tensions with the local population, the church flourished for a time. But tensions soon escalated with the settlers of the region and the Saints were driven to a swampland on the banks of the Mississippi River which they converted into Nauvoo, Illinois, the church's new headquarters.

On June 27, 1844, Smith and his brother Hyrum were murdered by a mob in Carthage, Illinois while being held on charges of treason. Brigham Young, a close associate of Joseph Smith then assumed leadership over the church.

For two years after Smith's death, conflicts escalated between Mormons and other Illinois residents. To prevent a possible war, Brigham Young led his followers, known in modern times as the Mormon pioneers, on a trek filled with hardships to Nebraska and then in 1847 to the "Promised Land" and what would later become Salt Lake City in the Utah Territory.

Since then a distinct culture has grown up around "the Joseph Smith story" and The Book of Mormon which became sources of traditions and folklore.

In Nauvoo Joseph Smith had introduced the church to a full accounting of his First Vision, in which two heavenly "personages" (God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ) appeared to him at age 14. The two messengers told Joseph Smith about the golden plates hidden in the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York, which Smith later found with the help of the Angel Moroni, a Book of Mormon deity. Joseph Smith then translated the plates into the Book of Mormon with the aid of the Urim and Thummim, a special instrument used in Biblical times for translating. Regarded by Mormons to be "Another Testament of Jesus Christ", the Book of Mormon describes the religious, political and cultural traditions of two nations Mormons claim existed in ancient Central America, the Nephites and the Lamanites before the coming of Christ to the American continent.

Some LDS scholars claim that the forebears of the Nephites settled somewhere in present-day Central America after departing Jerusalem. However, both the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society have issued statements that they have seen no evidence to support these claims in the Book of Mormon and no secular archeologist or historian has supported their existence.

The Nephites of the Book of Mormon practiced Judaism before the coming of Christ on the American continent, and Christianity after his resurrection until the early 4th century. Throughout the Book of Mormon the term "Nephite" in the religious sense refers to a believer in Jesus Christ.

William A. Wilson, a folklorist at the Brigham Young University in Utah defines Mormon folklore as follows: "we consider folklore to be that part of our culture that we transmit through time (from age to age) and through space (from place to place), not by formal instruction or the written word, but in face-to-face encounters with other people through the process or oral transmission or customary example."

One piece of possible folklore involves the legend of the Three Nephites, a subject of an intensive investigation conducted by William Wilson.

LDS stories of the Three Nephites comprise one of the most striking religious legend cycles in the United States but are distinctly Mormon. These narratives are based on the Book of Mormon account of Christ's granting to three Nephite disciples during his visit to the New World. The Book of Mormon account states: "And they [the Three Nephites] are as the angels of God, and...can show themselves unto whatsoever man it seemeth them good. Therefore, great and marvelous works shall be wrought by them, before the great and coming day [of judgment]."

The number 3 is a very mystical and spiritual number featured in many folktales (three wishes, three guesses, three little pigs, three bears, three billy goats gruff). In Christianity there is the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Plato saw 3 as being symbolic of the triangle, the simplest spatial shape, and considered the world to have been built from triangles. In German folklore a paper triangle with a cross in each corner and a prayer in the middle was thought to act as protection against gout, as

well as protecting a cradle from witches. Three black animals were often sacrificed when attempting to conjure up demons. On the other hand, a three-coloured cat was a protective spirit. In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606–07) there are three witches, and their spell begins, "Thrice the brindled cat hath mewed," reflecting such superstitions. Also, 3 is the dimension of the smallest magic square.

It certainly is the case that the number three has a special significance for Freemasonry, and is said that the Mormon prophet Joseph was a Freemason. This may account for some of the temple ceremonies that take place in the Mormon temples, where one has to knock three times to enter the various kingdoms. Also Beethoven's Fifth Symphony opens with three notes depicting "fate knocking on the door".

As the newly founded Church grew in numbers, an ever-increasing body of stories began circulating among the people, telling of kindly old men, usually thought to be these ancient Nephite disciples, who had appeared to individuals in physical or spiritual distress, helped them solve their problems, and then suddenly disappeared.

Because they span a century and a half of LDS history, these narratives mirror well the changing physical and social environments in which Latter-day Saints or Mormons have met their tests of faith. For example, in pre-World War II agrarian society, the stories told of Nephites guiding pioneer trains to water holes, saving a rancher from a blizzard, providing herbal remedies for illnesses, plowing a farmer's field, or delivering food to starving missionaries. In the contemporary world, the stories tell of Nephites pulling a young man from a lake after a canoeing accident and administering artificial respiration, stopping to fix a widow's furnace, guiding motorists lost in blizzards, comforting a woman who has lost her husband and daughter in an airplane crash, and pulling missionaries from a flaming freeway crash.

Even though the settings of the newer stories have moved from pioneer villages with a country road winding past to urban settings with freeways sounding noisily in the background, some circumstances have remained constant. In the stories, the Three Nephites continue to bless people and, in telling these stories, provide the faithful with a sense of security in an unsure world, persuading them that just as God helped righteous pioneers overcome a hostile physical

world, so will he help the faithful endure the evils of urban society. Taken as a whole, then, the stories continue to provide understanding of the hearts and minds of Latter-day Saints and of the beliefs that move them to action.

Consider the following narrative tied closely to the legend of the Three Nephites:

I am going to tell about an experience that my grandmother had and told my dad. It happened when she was crossing the plains, after coming from England. I believe she was a widow and she had a lot of children. She was alone at the this time with her family – a wheel broke and caused a delay in their progress. It looked for a while as though there was no way to mend the broken wheel. Then all of sudden, out of nowhere, came a man. He offered great assistance and finally, through his help, the wheel was fixed. When she turned around to thank this man he had disappeared – to where, she didn't know. For the land was flat and there was no place he could have gone without her seeing him for quite some time. So she has told my dad, her son, that she thought that this was one of the Three Nephites that came to help her during her trouble on the plains moving west.

Clearly, this is an older story, a story about the pioneer era that many Mormons believe to be the seat of most Mormon folklore.

Stories are often told among the Mormons about Mormon missionaries who experience difficulties and are helped by The Three Nephites.

There are other Mormon stories where people take pleasure from the discomfort of those who oppose them. The pleasure is evident in numerous folk narratives, like this one:

There was a preacher in Yakima, Washington, who hated Mormons and the Mormon Church. Because of his constant efforts the man became well known for his feelings. One Sunday he delivered an unusual fiery speech against the Mormon Church in which he denounced Joseph Smith as a liar and the Book of Mormon as a fraud. In his closing remarks he stated that if everything he said wasn't true the Lord should strike him dead. After the services he walked out of the church and fell dead upon the lawn.

Other legends and folklore connected to the Mormons include the miracle of the gulls, to which a monument was erected on Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

After Brigham Young led the Mormons or Latter-day Saints into what is now Salt Lake City,

Utah, the pioneers had the good fortune of a relatively mild winter. Although late frosts in April and May destroyed some of the crops, the pioneers seemed to be well on their way to self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, swarms of insects appeared in late May.

These insects threatened the livelihood of the Mormon pioneers; stomping on the pests did not dissuade them from entering farms as others would advance.

According to traditional accounts, legions of gulls appeared by June 9, 1848. It is said that these birds, native to the Great Salt Lake, ate mass quantities of crickets, drank some water, regurgitated, and continued eating more crickets over a two-week period. The pioneers saw the gulls' arrival as a miracle. The traditional story is that the seagulls annihilated the insects, ensuring the survival of some 4,000 Mormon pioneers who had traveled to Utah. For this reason, Seagull Monument was erected and the California gull is the state bird of Utah.

Due to the differences in lifestyle promoted by church doctrine and history, a distinct culture has grown up around members of the LDS Church. It is primarily concentrated in the Intermountain West, but as membership of the church spreads around the world, many of its more distinctive practices follow, such as adhering to the Word of Wisdom, a health law or code prohibiting the consumption of tobacco, alcohol, coffee, tea, and illegal drugs.

The culture has created substantial business opportunities for independent LDS media. Such communities include cinema, fiction, websites, and graphical art like photography and paintings. The church also produces six pageants annually depicting various events of the primitive and modern-day church. Its Easter pageant *Jesus the Christ* has been identified as the "largest annual outdoor Easter pageant in the world." The Mormon Tabernacle Choir has received a Grammy Award, two Emmy Awards, two Peabody Awards, and the National Medal of Arts.

Mormonism and Islam have been compared to one another ever since Mormonism was founded in the nineteenth century. For instance, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. was referred to as "the modern Mahomet" by the *New York Herald*, shortly after his murder in June 1844. Mormon-Muslim relations have been historically cordial; recent years have seen increasing dialogue between adherents of the two faiths, and

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cooperation in charitable endeavors, especially in the Middle and Far East.

Among the many similarities are the following:

- A founding prophet who received visits from an angel, leading to revelation of a book of scripture;
- A founding prophet who practiced and preached polygamy;
- A belief that theirs constitutes the one and only completely true religion on the earth today;
- An active interest in proselytizing nonbelievers;
- An emphasis upon family, and the family unit as the foundation for religious life and the transmission of values;
- Insistence that their religion is a complete way of life, meant to directly influence every facet

of existence;

- Emphasis upon charitable giving, and helping the downtrodden;
- Strong emphasis upon chastity, including modesty in dress;
- Belief in fasting during specified periods of time;
- Prohibition of alcoholic beverages, gambling, and homosexual and bisexual practices;
- Strong emphasis upon education, both in the secular and religious arenas;
- Belief that one's marriage can potentially continue into the next life, if one is faithful to the religion; and
- Belief in varying degrees of reward and punishment in the hereafter, depending upon one's performance in this life.