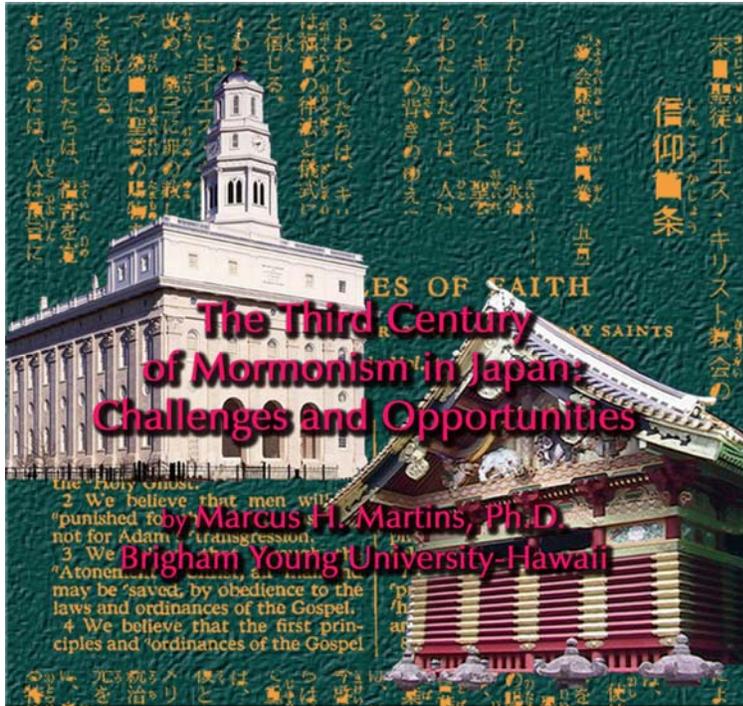


The Third Century of Mormonism in Japan: Challenges and Opportunities¹

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints initiated its activities in Japan in 1901, and after a difficult beginning it re-initiated operations in the country soon after the end of World War II. Today (2005) the Church has about 120,000 members in Japan. As most western religions operating in predominantly non-Christian

countries, the Church of Jesus Christ has also struggled to present its worldview—which is unique even in predominantly Christian countries—to the Japanese people.

Parallel to this search for harmony with its environment, the Church is also facing the effects of globalization forces within its ranks. Significant numbers of immigrants members coming from South America and other regions where the Church has experienced great success in making converts could change the future landscape of the Church in Japan. This essay will discuss some of the challenges and possible opportunities posed by this trend.

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Recent Developments in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints² has undergone many major changes in its policies and practices. Martin Marty (1986) once wrote that Mormons had evolved from being the equivalent of “social pariahs” in the late nineteenth century to almost perfect examples of the “American way of life” by the mid-twentieth century. Armand Mauss (1994) argued that this shift, or the church’s assimilation into the larger American society’s mainstream culture, came at the price of abandoning some of the original features of the religion, which brought a certain ambivalence in relation to some of the church’s core philosophies.

The abolition of polygamy in 1890, the extension of its priesthood to all male members regardless of race in 1978, and the adoption of a combined meeting schedule in 1979, are examples of such far-reaching changes. In the last years of the twentieth century the church underwent several other changes, perhaps not so visible to the general public but still significant enough to indicate the general direction of the Church in the early years of the twenty-first century.

There are concrete indications of a major shift in rhetoric focus: (1) from kingdom-building to citizenship and service; (2) from concealment and silence to openness to the media; (3) from attrition with other religions to acknowledgment of others’ legitimacy and overt attempts to collaborate; (4) from unofficial political conservatism to an open defense of plurality. In this paper I wish to comment briefly on the first three of these changes.

A Focus on Building Citizenship

Perhaps as a response to early persecution in the 19th century and distrust from the

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Henceforth referred to as the “Church of Jesus Christ,” the “LDS Church,” or simply “the Church.”

American government in the beginning of the 20th century, Mormonism had its religious focus shifted from founder Joseph Smith's visions and prophecies about a latter-day kingdom to the establishment of communities of good citizens in the western U.S. and elsewhere. Idealized and romanticized portrayals of Brigham Young replaced Joseph Smith as the embodiment of practical Mormonism. The handcart (which has been adopted as a symbol of the pioneer trek west) became the symbol of this expanding religion, replacing the Sacred Grove (the place where Smith commenced to receive his vision and prophecies in upstate New York). At that point the religion's tenets began to emphasize industry, cooperativism, farming, and mining became the most visible parts of the daily religion (Shipps, 1985). As Jan Shipps (1985) commented, establishing a new life in the West was more than just a departure of the United States into Mexico to attempt to establish the kingdom of God on the earth, or the sacred "Zion," but it was also a journey into a sacred time and space.

But as a visible sign of a change in discourse, during the sesquicentennial celebration of the entrance of the first members of the Church in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, there was a worldwide media event as re-enactments of the first Church pioneers' journey from Nebraska to the Great Salt Lake Valley took place in many parts of the United States and in countries as diverse as Guatemala and the Ukraine. Yet, the message sent via these re-enactments had none of the elements of the original pioneer trek across the plains in 1847—escape from the world, kingdom-building, etc. Instead, the message conveyed in those events was designed to stress the relevant role of the Church and its principles in building a largely-secular-but-still-religious nation.

There seems to be an effort to bring the Church more into the mainstream of the societies in which it is found, and the emphasis seems to be to have Church members become "as-much-a-

good citizen-as-everybody-else.” The new emphasis is not in kingdom building, but in citizenship. Any tensions with outside world are minimized or restricted to specific rituals performed in temples, which are closed to those outside of the faith. In daily affairs, normalcy is the keyword. The implication for church members in other nations is that they too are expected to become as good Mexicans or Germans or Japanese as those outside of the Church.

Unprecedented Openness

Throughout its history, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has had an active relationship with the media in general, although for most of that time the tone of that relationship was rather adversarial. Articles about the Church written in the 19th century more often than not would stress the differences of Church doctrines—particularly polygamy—in relation to traditional religious denominations.

In the latter part of the twentieth century there has been a shift in focus, and media coverage turned to a “friendlier” approach, emphasizing the Church’s “normalcy” vis-à-vis the general population. Recent cover stories in TIME and NEWSWEEK attest to that. The public appearances by Church president Gordon B. Hinckley in programs such as “60 Minutes” and “Larry King Live” constitute an unprecedented pattern in the history of a Church in which presidents rarely spoke to the media so frequently. Here we find one of the most potent examples of change. According to PR officials whom I interviewed, this new habit of having the president of the Church exposed to the general media was not the result of a new strategy for media relations, but rather the result of President Gordon B. Hinckley’s own decision to make himself available. But one wonders whether pressures from media outlets could bring future Church Presidents to make openness and visibility a norm.

The new Church logo—redesigned to make the name “Jesus Christ” more prominent—appears to be part of an effort to shape a new identity, more visibly Christian without abandoning those unique doctrines that are characteristic of Mormonism. Such uses of media also aim to neutralize the debate over the identity of the Church as a Christian denomination.

Embracing Plurality

In the early 90’s literary critic Harold Bloom (1992) conjectured that the two denominations that would have great impact in American society would be the Southern Baptists and the Mormons. In the introduction to his theoretical model for the success of religious denominations, Rodney Stark (1987) defined success as “the degree to which a religious movement is able to dominate one or more societies.” By domination he meant the ability “to influence behavior, culture, and public policy in a society.” Yet, given the pluralistic nature of most national and regional religious landscapes around the world, Stark also acknowledges that complete “domination” by a single religion is only a hypothetical condition.

The argument can be made that in the twenty-first century hardly anywhere in the world there will ever be a monopolistic exercise of influence in society by a single religious denomination. That becomes even clearer as we see representatives of different religious and philosophical ideologies sitting and building coalitions in national congresses, thus eliminating the possibility of dominance by a single group. In such a scenario, no religious denomination would ever fully reach Stark’s hypothetical condition of success.

Therefore, an improved definition of success is required at this point. And this definition would have to deal less with the issue of “domination” and more with “prosperity.” Thus, we should view success as a continuous positive evaluation of the never-ending process of

expansion and refinement of a religious movement on both the organizational and individual levels.

This alternative definition recognizes that numeric growth is not the sole measure of success, but rather that numbers would have to be combined with: (1) an administrative structure responsive to environment changes; (2) a membership dedicated to self-improvement in both spiritual and secular terms but without significant or widespread secularization; and (3) consistency in maintaining these ongoing endeavors over time. Notice that this redefinition suggests that success is not necessarily an idealized state of “dominance” to be reached, but rather the mere existence of a continuous process of improvement and of favorable prospects for the future of that process.

This alternative definition for success also implies that Mormonism would not need to establish any adversarial stance vis-à-vis other religions in order to succeed. For much of its history, the Church maintained exclusivism—i.e. the claim of being the only true or legitimate religion in the eyes of God—as a central claim in its message to the world. However, since the end of the 20th century we see numerous indications of an effort on the part of many Church leaders to de-emphasize the Church’s claim to exclusivism. President Gordon B. Hinckley, for one, has many times suggested to Church members the need to accept others’ claims to respect and legitimacy in plural secular societies. Rather than a doctrinal change, this appears to be a more subtle form of maintaining one’s core beliefs without isolating itself from society. It’s an implementation of the biblical injunction “give unto Caesar.”

Challenges and New Opportunities Posed by Immigration

Parallel to this search for harmony with its national and social environments, the Church is also facing the effect of globalization forces within its ranks. Large-scale immigration movements around the world are bringing both challenges and opportunities to the effort of building stable communities of Latter-day Saints.

Perhaps one of the most important trends in Japan is the decline in birthrates and the ageing of the general population, which has sparked a great deal of discussion about immigration



Brazilian Latter-day Saints in Toyohashi

to South America in the early 1900's. The Brazilian government reports that by 2003 around 280,000 Brazilian citizens were living in Japan. Some of these immigrants are members of the Church of Jesus Christ or have become members while living in Japan, and at the end of 2004 the Church had four of its smaller congregations (“branches”) in different parts of Japan catering exclusively to Brazilians. Yet another 12 Church congregations report significant numbers of Brazilians among their membership. Ten congregations also report significant numbers of Spanish speakers. Numbers of immigrants from all countries are not immediately available, but a number of Church congregations in Japan report the presence of members of other nationalities—including people coming from southeast Asia.

in Japan. We find significant numbers of Brazilians, Peruvians, and Bolivians—descendants of thousands of Japanese citizens who immigrated

The presence of significant numbers of immigrants in countries experiencing long-time strong and stable economies seems to be a characteristic of the international job market in the early 20th century, and an important variable in social welfare in many nations. Considering the amount of money sent to the home countries annually, it seems that this trend should continue for a long while. The Inter-American Development Bank estimated that about 305,000 Latin American adults in Japan send money home on a regular basis, and that in 2005 these foreign workers in Japan were expected to send US\$ 2.2 billion to Brazil, US\$ 365 million to Peru, and US\$ 100 million to other countries in Latin America (Vasconcelos, 2005³).

Since the 1970's Church leaders have fostered among the membership the idea of staying in one's country to help support the growth of the Church. The Church does not sponsor immigration and stresses among those young members who attend one of the Church's universities in the United States the importance of returning to their respective countries after graduation from college or graduate programs.

However, historically this was not always the Church's emphasis. The establishment and strengthening of the Church of Jesus Christ in the United States in the early to mid-19th century required large numbers of immigrants. Due to its violent relationship with the larger American society in the 1840's and 1850's, it could be argued that the Church would have made only small numbers of converts among the American population. It was the effort to proselytize and encourage the immigration of converts primarily from the British Isles and Scandinavia that made Mormonism viable in the U.S. in the 1850's.

Likewise, in years to come the presence of large numbers of immigrants coming from countries where the Church has experienced success could be seen as an opportunity to increase

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This estimate was published in April 2005, soon after the original presentation of this paper.

and later strengthen the Church's base in Japan. As it is usually the case, at first immigrants have to face adverse circumstances in social, cultural, and financial dimensions. But as time goes by these groups tend to slowly assimilate and the second generation often makes progress in becoming fully assimilated.

Anecdotal evidence coming from interviews with a number of Brazilians living in Japan shows that there seems to be a growing number of people who after working for several years in Japan discover that they can no longer re-adapt to life in the home country and these families decide to settle in Japan for good (Tezuka, 2005). The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that 54% of the Latin American adults in Japan have lived there for more than 5 years, and another 25% for more than 10 years (Vasconcelos, 2005). If such trend continues, one can but wonder what the effect might be in the future of the Church in Japan.

One could envision the Church's missionary effort being more focused on immigrant populations from South America and other areas where the Church has experience success. This missionary effort could be supplemented by a 21st century version of the 19th century's Perpetual Immigration Fund. But this time instead of encouraging and financing immigration, the new program could focus on providing much needed "humanitarian services": social networks facilitated by missionary couples, free language training, and employment assistance. Missionaries all over Japan try to find new prospective converts via teaching English to native Japanese. Perhaps they could also teach Japanese to Brazilian, Peruvian, Bolivian, and Filipino immigrants. With the support from the Church's universities members could also learn entrepreneurship to encourage the formation of new businesses which create jobs that hopefully would not impose work on Sundays.

Refocusing the Church's Message in Japan

In the mid-1970's the Church's presence in Brazil led to a rethinking and subsequent reorientation of race relations within Mormonism, which reorientation may have facilitated the extension of priesthood privileges to men of Black African descent. Likewise, the Church's presence in countries like Japan may also lead to a rethinking of the role of culture in the future growth of Mormonism in the 21st century.

One could argue that despite its many years in Japan the Church still has not gained as strong a foothold in the country as some might expect. Many have pointed out cultural barriers as one of the main challenges to the Church's growth in Japan (Numano, 1996; Britsch, forthcoming)

So far, in their general messages and speeches Church authorities have attempted to de-emphasize the role and influence of local cultural traits in daily religious life. Yet observations show that cultural traits can be seen more like the outer skin of one's character, and not a cloak that can be easily set aside at will. One may acknowledge and treat the skin, beautify it with cosmetics, alter its features with plastic surgery, but one cannot discard the skin.

All around one can find indications that centuries ago Japan assimilated and reinterpreted many elements of Chinese culture and religion to educate and inspire its population. Similarly, one might argue that the challenge of taking a Christian church's message to the Japanese people might be more easily accomplished through a "repackaging" of the message in ways similar to those used by ancient Japanese religious leaders.

For example, one might consider that ancient Japanese religions aspired to give people a transcendental experience along the lines of the sacred realm explained by Rudolf Otto (1918). Instead of having young Mormon missionaries trying to proselytize among Japanese using approaches based on Western concerns—the breakup of the family being a chief concern—perhaps

a new approach could be developed based on portraying Mormonism as the fulfillment of the aspirations of a number of ancient Japanese religious philosophers. That approach would necessitate a deeper understanding of the history and philosophy found in Shintō and Japanese Buddhism, as well as an analysis of the connections between those religious worldviews and the doctrines found in Mormonism⁴.

The Possible Role of Japan in 21st Century Mormonism

Keeping in mind the current perspectives and expectations for growth in Asia, it is clear that until the political and economic situation in many Asian countries stabilize, the Church will need some “center of strength” in the region that enjoys sufficient independence or self-determination.

While the People’s Republic of China promises to become a great missionary field in the 21st century, the reality of the political impediments to full exercise of religion—including free and unencumbered proselytizing activities—makes this prospect only a faint expectation for the future. Right now, Hong Kong might not completely fulfill the role of a center of strength until its relationship with Beijing under the “one country two systems” philosophy becomes clear. Taiwan also cannot be the Church’s center of strength because of its unresolved status with the People’s Republic of China. Likewise, South Korea may still await a resolution for its uneasy relationship with North Korea. In the end, Japan is the only major political and economic power in the region that can potentially become the “anchor” for Mormonism in Asia.

⁴ I have been informed that a series of articles on the subject, titled “Nihonminzokuwa Heburaino Seitounari” was published in the official Church magazine in Japanese in 1961 (Seitonomichi, August thru December 1961). I am not versed in Japanese, and so I have not yet evaluated these articles.

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