CHAPTER 20

Mormonism in America
Itinerary to Allegiance from Joseph Smith to Mitt Romney

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Introduction

“A Mormon in the White House?” was a recurrent phrase beginning in 2006 when Mitt Romney, Governor of Massachusetts, and unwavering member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or Mormon Church), announced his presidential ambitions. In many cases, the phrase conveyed a mixture of awe and of fear to think that a Mormon was a serious contender to the White House. It revealed as well what people thought about Romney and his religion: (1) that Mormons were polygamists who blindly obeyed their ecclesiastical leaders; (2) that they were not ‘Protestant Christians’, which therefore precluded them from vying for the highest office in the land; (3) that they rather belonged to the margin of American society, some place where the clock had stopped ticking since the nineteenth century.

The paradox, we shall see, is that Mitt Romney became a presidential candidate because of Mormonism, a religion that has moved across America and which has a culture of engagement with the rest of the nation. That culture has taken many forms over the years. On the other hand, we will see that Romney’s religion has illustrated the encounter of defiance, followed by what Max Weber (1946: 78) calls “legitimate violence” by ‘the State’, and by ‘established’ groups, demanding allegiance and conformity. Hence, beyond Mormonism, this chapter’s aim is also to illustrate American society’s power to marginalise non-conformist religions, to conform, and to eventually integrate them.

Emergence, Independence, and Departures

Mormonism emerged during the second Great Awakening which shook the Eastern part of the United States between 1800 and 1840, a period when churches, many of them merely ‘religious cells’, mushroomed like modern high-tech start-ups, and competed for souls (Appleby 1998; Finke and Stark 2005). Preachers then, like Charles Grandison Finney, went from place to place, preaching in ‘camp-meetings’ and trying desperately to bring ‘sinners’
to conform to God’s will, to be ‘born again’ through baptism, before the End of Times. Mormonism’s future founder, although a teenager around 1820, remembers it was a time of “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion” which “created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, ‘Lo, here!’ and others, ‘Lo, there!’” This shifting religious context seemed to have affected “the whole district of country” as the converts were joining the various Protestant sects (Smith, J. 1948, 1:3). Palmyra, where Smith lived, was wrought up so much by itinerant preachers promising the doom of hellfire that it became known as the ‘Burnt-Over District’ (Cross 1950; West 1957: 14).

Smith’s parents were not regular church-goers but he was nevertheless drawn into the religious upheaval, moving from mere teenage spectator to become an actor on the religious market. He declared to have prayed to know what church to affiliate with and that, in response to his supplication, God and Jesus visited and conversed with him in the spring of 1820. Such a claim could have been dismissed as one more among the many visions heard of in the religiously-torn East at that time (Shipps 1965: 10; Bushman 1988: 59). But Smith’s had to be addressed because he challenged the legitimacy of existing churches affirming to have learned from God himself that they were all wrong, and that he had been called to restore the true Church of Jesus Christ. This bold statement comes as no surprise to scholars of religion: new groups often enter a competing religious market by discrediting those already in place and by shattering whatever consensus may have existed in order to establish their own legitimacy. Accordingly, Smith went on in April 1830 to organise in Upstate New York what is now known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Aside from his ‘First Vision’, in Mormon parlance, Smith announced to have witnessed an avalanche of other divine manifestations before he organised the Church. One such vision led him to break further away from accepted norms by publishing the Book of Mormon, a volume of ancient scripture he claimed to have translated from golden plates handed to him by an angel. The title of the book has been used in a derogatory way since the nineteenth century to identify Smith’s followers. The book’s authenticity is still an object of debate and it has successfully been satirised in an eponymous Broadway musical. But more than could have been imagined, it has rocked Christianity to its core, challenging the belief that the Holy Bible is the only and final word of God.

As with any book claiming to be scripture, the Book of Mormon belongs to and conveys the social and historical concerns of a culture. Jan Shipps (1965: 21) rightly points out that Joseph Smith captures in it a “visionary anthropological account of the American past” with passages which refer to America as “the land of promise” and as “a land which is choice above all other lands”,