Mormons in Brazil

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Introduction

According to the official statistics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, informally known as the Mormon Church, Brazil represents the Church's third-largest population of adherents. However, the population has a number of distinctive features, due to its relationship with Brazilian society and because of changes in the form of the Church's transnationalism.

The Field of Mormon Membership

There is an important difference between the Church's definitions of what constitutes membership and the criteria of a self reported measure, such as a census (Knowlton 2005). The LDS Church currently claims 1,209,974 members in Brazil, while the Brazilian census for 2010 records only 226,509 Brazilians claiming to be Latter-day Saints (IBGE 2012). Both of these numbers are social artefacts which tell us something about the nature of Mormonism in this South American country.

The official Mormon number is a measure of all living Brazilians who have been baptized into the Church, or who have been born to members and then registered with the Church by receiving a ritual blessing after birth. In contrast, the census measures the quantity of people who state that they and their families are members of the faith. As a result, the two numbers establish a field of Mormonism and challenge the simple presentation of membership statistics. On one side there are those who joined the faith, or were born to parents who did so, and on the other there are those who claim a Mormon identity. This wider field is described by Davies as the Church versus the ‘Church within the Church’—the latter being the group of highly active or highly identified

Mormons who tend to stand as representations of the faith (Davies 2000). This field is important for internal Mormon action, corresponding to the range defined by two Latter-day Saint categories: that of ‘active’ membership, through to various degrees of ‘less active.’ Active Mormons are understood to have a special obligation to their less active fellows, which exists in addition to their responsibility to carry out missionary activities to the whole population of Brazil. They are expected to ‘strengthen’ and ‘fellowship’ them.

Further, the difference between the two numbers shows that some five times the census number of Mormons has experienced Mormonism, and at some point they chose to accept a defining Mormon ritual or were born to parents who had done so. This constitutes some 1.2% of the total Brazilian population. It is often surprising to be conversing with someone who you do not think of as Mormon and suddenly, in the context of some other issue, begins to speak of their engagement with Mormonism, perhaps an identity as Mormon even though they never presented themselves as such to census-takers, before shifting to another topic of conversation.

In Brazil, and in Latin American more generally, people may hold multiple religious identities and participate in multiple religious bodies over time and at the same time. However, the implications of this for Mormons in Brazil has not yet been studied. Most work focuses on formal institutional definitions which identify a Mormon with the highly faithful group, despite the Church’s inclusive statistics.

Also, magnitudes of people have become familiar with Mormonism through listening to Mormon missionaries and participating to one degree or another in the life of the LDS Church in Brazil. Though we cannot put a number on this larger population, it is a significant one for defining Brazilian Mormonism and for grasping the impact of Mormon missionizing on Brazil. Having experienced Mormon missionaries and the Church is very common; and whatever the impact of Mormon proselytizing on Brazilians who do not enter the field of Mormonism, these Brazilians have a defining impact on Brazilian Mormons as people who help set a potentially permeable boundary around Mormon membership—one that is often talked about in Mormon worship services.

Mormonism and Cities

Unfortunately, LDS Church statistics for Brazil are not broken down according to demography or sub-national geography. Such information can be gained from the census, although this means basing analysis on just a small portion