

Mormonism on Vancouver Island: A Comment

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Robert J. McCue's recent article on the establishment and growth of the Mormon Community on Vancouver Island appears to have other objectives than to examine thoroughly the reasons for the spread of the religion.¹ In a vein characteristic of those who write about a given religion from the inside, Professor McCue outlines in detail the names of the major personalities involved in the early stages and devotes a lot of space to determining whether Brigham Young's idea in 1845 of Vancouver Island as a possible haven could have had anything to do with the numbers of Mormons found here in the late twentieth century.

He stresses two primary reasons for growth: the migration of Mormons from elsewhere and the success of the intensified missionary effort, particularly since the Second World War. He notes as well the difficulties that existed earlier to prevent this religion from gaining a foothold, i.e., strong opposition in Victoria reflected in adverse press comments at the beginning of the present century. At that time, it might be added, Mormonism was probably still best known for polygamy, which the Mormon Church had only officially proscribed in 1890. But, as Clifford has noted, there were other reasons given for rejecting it in Canada, including the equal authority claimed for the Book of Mormon compared to the Bible and the surrender of personal liberty to the priesthood.²

The trouble with McCue's article is that it does not make use of social science. Even if one concedes that the missionary effort was highly important, one is still faced with the question: why do people join? Social scientists in accounting for recruitment in religious movements do not confine their explanations to the actions of those who persuade others to join. They look for propensities or needs in potential converts which push

¹ Robert J. McCue, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and Vancouver Island: the establishment and growth of the Mormon community," *BC Studies* 42 (Summer 1979): 51-64.

² N. K. Clifford, "His dominion: a vision in crisis," in Peter Slater (ed.), *Religion and Culture in Canada* (Canadian Corporation for the Study of Religion, 1977), p. 28.

them towards involvement. Usually these tendencies are related to the classic sociological themes of alienation and anomie. The most common sort of approach is that which stresses relative deprivation, as propounded by Charles Glock,³ for example. According to him new religions emerge and spread by satisfying people's deprivations in such areas as health and psychological and economic well-being. A study of Mormons in an English town reported 37 percent of converts as saying that they joined the movement because of enthusiasm for the way of life it offered, including its promise of "a purpose to living."⁴ A further 19 percent referred to "something lacking in life before, a gap the church promised to fill." Such responses point to some sort of problem with which the religion helps people cope. A Kentucky study indicated that almost 60 percent of Mormon converts reported experiencing problematic situation or life-crises in the two-year period prior to joining and almost 86 percent reported having such experiences during the preceding ten-year period.⁵ Given studies like these one expects to find at least some attempt to raise questions about the sort of people to whom Mormonism appeals and particularly about their life circumstances.

Another question concerns the previous religious affiliations of Mormon converts. It seems that in its earliest years in Canada Mormonism attracted people away from the Wesleyan-Methodist Conference.⁶ In the British study while 30 percent of converts were formerly attached to the Church of England, 37 percent reported no previous religious involvement and the remainder, although willing to express a denominational affiliation, were all religiously inactive.⁷ Have Mormons on Vancouver Island joined because they are disaffected with their previous religious involvement or lack of it? If so, one must again raise the question: why? What attraction does Mormonism offer them?

It has been suggested by leading sociologists that Mormonism has appealed to the uprooted and to new immigrants.⁸ The British study

³ Charles Y. Glock, "The role of deprivation in the origin and evolution of religious groups," in *Religion and Social Conflict*, ed. Robert Lee and Martin E. Marty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 24-36.

⁴ Robert Buckle, "Mormons in Britain: a survey," in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 4, ed. Michael Hill (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 166.

⁵ John Seggar and Phillip Kunz, "Conversion: evaluation of a step-like process for problem-solving," *Review of Religious Research* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1972): 182.

⁶ S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), p. 308.

⁷ Buckle, p. 164.

⁸ Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Bryan R. Wilson, *Religious Sects* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), p. 199.

referred to its attractiveness to "the uprooted people who inhabit new housing estates and new towns."⁹ At the very least, therefore, one would expect in an effort to account for converts on Vancouver Island an examination of the extent to which they were newcomers facing problems of adjusting to a new environment.

Another important aspect is the relative success of the Mormons compared to other minority religious groups. The following data are taken from the most recent Canadian censuses in which a question about religion was asked:

Adherents of Selected Religious Denominations in 1961 and 1971

	<i>British Columbia</i>		<i>Vancouver Island</i>	
	1961	1971	1961	1971
Mormons	6,116	12,675	881	1,980
Jehovah's Witnesses	14,583	42,315	2,217	5,750
Pentecostals	19,998	35,225	2,974	5,050
Adventists	6,320	7,185	724	875
Salvation Army	7,229	11,885	1,119	2,125

It can be seen that although Mormonism more than doubled its followers during the decade, so too did the Jehovah's Witnesses. What then might explain the apparently greater success rate of the latter in comparison to the former? They both engage in intensive missionary work. But studies of Jehovah's Witnesses have noted that they attract adherents with minimal education and low socio-economic status, as indeed do Pentecostal groups. There is reason to assume that converts to Mormonism are higher on both scores, suggesting that a rather different population is available to it. Among twelve leading American denominations the Mormon Church has been shown to have the lowest proportion of upper-class members and a proportion of lower class followers comparable to the Baptist and Roman Catholic groups.¹⁰ A nation-wide sample of Mormons in the U.S.A. showed distinctly middle-class characteristics.¹¹ The Church's emphasis on charitable activity, recreation and educational

⁹ Buckle, p. 160.

¹⁰ Herbert Schneider, *Religion in 20th Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 228. Cited in Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion and Society in Interaction* (N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975), p. 211.

¹¹ J. Kenneth Davies, "The Mormon church: its middle-class propensities," *Review of Religious Research* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1963): 84-95.

pursuits is perhaps further evidence of this. Given the importance of socio-economic status as a factor influencing behaviour of many kinds, one is justified in asking for information on it.

As far as gender goes, the Mormon movement in America has in the past been found to have the highest sex ratio (number of males per 100 females) among religious groups.¹² It would be useful to know if the same prevails today and what bearing it might have on recruitment. In addition, data on age, ethnic or national origin and family situation are called for. The latter two are especially important. The former can be seen in the light of the claim by leading sociologists of religion that Mormonism is a uniquely American phenomenon.¹³ One leading question becomes, then, to what extent are Mormon converts on Vancouver Island American immigrants? Or do the distinctly American features of Mormonism offer a special attraction? Moreover, given this religion's difficulties in fully accepting Blacks into its hierarchy up until June 1978, there might be some point in trying to discover whether this aspect is related in some way to why people join. For example, could those factors which lead to racist attitudes towards Blacks (the Mormons have been very hospitable towards Indians) also lead people towards Mormonism?

As for the matter of family situation, it is clear that one of the strengths of the Mormon movement has been its encouragement of solid family ties. The belief in tracing one's ancestry in order to offer salvation to one's dead forebears has a special appeal to those who are removed from their kinship ties, e.g., immigrants to North America. One needs to ask therefore whether disrupted or unsatisfactory family situations are found among prospective converts.

The point has been made. It is insufficient to maintain that the most important stimulants to Mormon conversions have been increased missionary activity and the growing presence of Mormon believers without considering the psychological and social conditions in which potential converts find themselves. Contact with missionaries has been the initial introduction to Mormonism for many, perhaps most, but that is not to say that such encounters are the main reason for joining. Means are not the same as motives. The Mormon Church's need to feel satisfied with its endeavours must not be confused with the demand for more solid objective accounts of its recruitment processes.

¹² David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution* (N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 396.

¹³ Andrew W. Greeley, *The Denominational Society* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1972), p. 182. Both O'Dea and Wilson have also emphasized this point.