NEWSLETTER

COMMITTEE ON MORMON SOCIETY AND CULTURE

No. 2, 1976

P.O. Box 7258, Univ. Sta.
Provo, UT 84602

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The Sociology of Mormonism. A Textbook
Glenn M. Vernon (Sociology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 84112) has written Sociology of Mormonism; A Preliminary Analysis. First prepared for classroom use at the U. of U. for Summer 1975, a March 1976 revision has subsequently been made available. The cost is $7.00, the cost of duplication. It contains some 279 pages.

As the initial Note points out, the material included remains not well worked out literarily and not fully documented nor indexed. Still, as the only systematic treatment of the subject extant, it proves valuable. Mainly it is a summation of the literature of sociology and related fields concerning aspects of Mormon life. The author's longtime favorite theoretical frame-work, symbolic interactionism, is played quite heavily in the introductory chapter, but it is not intruded into the substantive chapters to color the whole one shade. Even if one considers the column only as a summary of the literature, it is of extreme worth.

Chapter headings are: Sociology of Mormonism; Aspects of Mormon Religiosity; Mormon Symbols; The Mormon Supernatural Realm; Value Systems and Related Behavior; Self Definitions, Conversion and De-Conversion; Sect to Denomination Transition; Leadership; Some Religious and Political Interrelationships; Education; Mormonism and Science; Mental Health of. Mormons; Deviant Behavior among Mormons; Some Economic Aspects of Mormonism; Social Stratification and Mormonism; Minorities and Mormons; Mormon Marriage Patterns; Sexual Behavior and Mormonism; Biology and Mormonism; Health, Illness and Death; Time Definitions; Space Definitions; Joy and Play; Familiar Mormonism.

The volume is scientific, in the sense that it aims to examine the behavior of Mormons and of the Church as an organization rather than to treat any questions of the truth value of Mormon theology or other nonobservables.

Study of an Arizona Community
Robert Sayers (P.O. Box 3533, Tucson, Arizona 85722) has undertaken a study for his anthropology dissertation at the U. of Arizona on "cumulative alterations in the social structure of a predominantly Mormon village in east-central Arizona." He will be focusing on behavioral boundaries (rules governing the context and timing of out-group social encounters) that surround "the target group," over the development period from 1875 to

1976. Following theories of Barth and Loomis, he will be looking for changes in Mormon culture and society resulting from increased interaction between members and non-members. Changes will, he hypothesizes, be visible in the physical layout of the traditional village, in the structure of various social institutions, and in the social radius of the Mormon local community. He will also consider alterations in Mormon self-awareness over the 100 year period.

Anyone able to assist Sayers, particularly in obtaining grants to cover his research costs, are invited to contact him.

New Church History Volume

James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, both of the Church Historical Department, recently issued The Story of the Latter-day Saints. This was prepared in collaboration with the Historical Department and published by Deseret Book Co. Leonard Arrington's foreward notes that the volume is anticipated to replace Essentials of Church History as the primary one-volume work on the Church.

The book is divided into five parts: Laying the Foundations of Zion, 1820-1839; New Directions, 1839-1856; Defending the Kingdom, 1857-1896; A New Era, 1897-1938; and The Gospel in All Nations, 1939-1976. Laid over the historical continuity is substantial detail about aspects of Mormon life not treated at all in the older histories. Of course the scale of materials demanding some treatment requires that no single topic get much attention, yet the overview provided is of much value.

Particularly noteworthy for the serious student is the bibliographical section in which discussions introduce the literature used, under the headings General Works, Biography and Autobiography, Collected Works, and Bibliographies and Historiography. Then a separate discussion presents the documentation for each of the twenty-one chapters. The bibliographical section is over 60 pages long. A great many uses are made of oral history interviews, unpublished studies, the archives of the Church, etc. A twenty-two page index is provided, including such unlikely entries as AYUDA, Denmark-welfare plan in, stenographic missionaries, and "public image."

Toward a Characterization of "Mormon Personality," by John L. Sorenson.

(The first version—of this paper was distributed to students in a BYU class in Winter 1974 semester. The present version is slightly more advanced literarily but still to be considered tentative.)

A large literature has arisen over the the last century which describes aspects of the life of peoples in terms of "national character" or "social character." Not all observers agree on the value of such an approach, yet many scholars find these treatments indeed summarize something valuable, even though abundant qualifications need to be appended to them. This paper holds that Mormons (meaning predominantly Deseret Mormons--those

adherents to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints living in the heartland centered on Salt Lake City) may usefully be viewed as sharing "suppositions, attitudes, and definitions" which are "normally unconscious in the day-to-day activities of members" of the community but which rise "abruptly to self-consciousness in confrontations of individuals across community boundaries." (Don Martindale, "Preface," in an issue entitled National Character in the Perspective of the Social Science; The Annals, Vol. 370 (March 1967), ix.)

In the following discussion elements describing social character are not carefully distinguished from elements more aptly describing "culture" or "social structure." Each of these three formulations is, after all, an abstraction derived from the observables of the life of a people. While social character is phrased in terms of "typical" individuals, individuals can be construed also as constituting a social body with patterned regularities in their interactions or bearing a tradition consisting of values and other symbols. The ultimate referents, in the behavior, of a set of observable persons, arc the same regardless of how we construe these several abstractions from them.

This characterization makes no claim to being exhaustive. Nor are the elements weighted systematically; that would require some kind of empirical study not attempted. The characterization has been influenced at some points by the existing (slim) literature on Mormon behavior, but that influence has not been very explicitly focussed.

The Mormon is always learning. Life is for learning, for growth, for experience. There is always more to learn. Divine knowledge is far greater than human knowledge can possibly be, but it is important to continue trying to learn more, despite our human limitations. Learning in the abstract, how-ever, is not so admirable as learning for utility. In fact the best learning is that which can, somewhat, assist the Church and kingdom. But in practice going to school (making the effort) is really more important than any particular learned while in school.

The universe is to be faced and dealt with actively and creatively. The goals of this activity should be legitimated by proper objectives, it is true, but activity as such is essential. (Note the jokes about the Mormons air conditioning hell and holding meetings.) God himself, the model, is active and continually creative. Terms like advancement, conquering the desert, building up the kingdom, doing, getting an education, etc. pervade LDS discourse. To be passive, "acted upon," or a victim of circumstances is undesirable and frequently taken as a sign of moral weakness. Note, for example, Mormon opposition to the "welfare state," the missionary aim of conversion (not just neutrality or even friendship), and the view of alcoholism and addiction as the result of moral weakness.

Relaxation is difficult if not impossible for a Mormon. He must get on with changing, growing, being active. Doing nothing seems weak and unworthy. The Mormon ethic differs from the Protestant ethic in the source of its drive, which is not an attempt to prove salvation on already gained but the demand always to be striving for advancement when the goal is never fixed. Failure to achieve and to keep up the pace is particularly damning

under these circumstances. Meetings for the sake of meeting and padded missionary statistics are only two manifestations of response to such stress. The sifting is vigorous, meanwhile. Those who don't "make it" in mission work; for example, or who divorce (in the face of tremendous emphasis on eternal marriage and the successful family), or who cannot carry a heavy leadership load successfully, are made to feel of lessened worth. The pressures to move on, succeed, do one's quota, "support" this or that "activity," are intense. No wonder "becoming inactive" is such a damning phrase to the Mormon.

Becoming is highly valued, being is not. The latter condition implies fixity and stability, the antithesis of activity. A gourmet who is Mormon is relatively unlikely; enjoyment of food for its own sake, as sheer experience, defies instrumentality and proves too absolute. (Few Mormons try to enjoy good literature, for similar reasons; literature is seen, rather, as a test, something to be overcome, not enjoyed.) In Relief Society superficial instruction in cooking fine food could be tolerated, perhaps, but probably it would be phrased as learning a desirable instrumentality to benefit one's family. So too with sports; sheer enjoyment at an aesthetic or kinaesthetic level is rare. Sports are to teach character or to provide an occasion for family socializing or for image. Likewise in the case of sex; sexual aspects of marriage are (in theory) ignored. Instrumentality is nearly all. Sexual aspects of polygamy are denied vigorously or at least go unacknowledged. Sex, like sports, food, or other earthly experiences, are viewed as always "for" something beyond themselves.

Even health and sickness, birth and death, tend to be viewed a becoming and so seen in utility terms. A life is worth rescuing, even miraculously, from accident or disease if the life is to be "used for" something there-after, but never merely for the sake of living. Likewise one is not born into this life accidentally but for a purpose. (Antipathy to abortion obviously is strengthened by this view.) Note also that baptism, seen in other dispensations of the gospel as a dramatic personal transformation to a new being, is seen by most LDS as primarily a sign of becoming a member of the Church, just one step in a sequence which goes right on (receiving the Aaronic priesthood, "advancement," receiving the Melchizedek priesthood, going on a mission, marrying in the temple, etc.) Priesthood orgination too is generally phrased in instrumental terms (despite some discomfort with the idea): one is ordained to serve, grow, advance, not to "be" a priesthood "holder."

Mobility, both social and geographical, is characteristic. The Church has elaborate insitutions to take account of it. This manifestation has been with us since the restoration. Brigham Young noted, proudly, how many houses he had built and abandoned. The Utah War and polygamy persecutions ("on the underground") further pressed mobility into fact. Of course missionary service has always emphasized geographical picking up and moving on. Even within one's mission the transfer seems to be obligatory at frequent intervals without regard to work being interrupted thereby. (The classic folksong about "Cottonwood" by the pioneer sent to settle "Dixie" draws some of its poignancy from the fact that every good Mormon knows the painful consequence of similar mobility.)

The departure of Deseret's young to obtain formal education parallels and compounds the movement of the missionaries. Demands of employment further shift the Mormon about; often many times. (Perhaps the slight bitter taste experienced by some Mormons who end their mobility with a final move back to Utah, in the last decade or so, stems from their "settling down" contrary to the cultural and character expectation with which they. have been reared.) Leone's comments on Church architecture (Dialogue, 1973) emphasized the function of uniform structures in accommodating the mobile. Uniform lesson schedules were introduced Church-wide also to meet the need for movement. The record system, now computerized, further shows the mobile norm. (Incidentally, the one unquestioned reason for being released from a Church job is "moving away". It is simply never questioned whether one should move away. One's release might be questioned in the case even of ill health or pregnancy, but geographical mobility remains an inviolable right, apparently.) Meanwhile social mobility derives in part from geographical movement but also from the growth/change/becoming/ education factors. By "succeeding" through a sequence of moves made possible by "activity" and "advancement" the Mormon validates the concept of progress while enhancing the Church's image.

Growth, learning and advancement might have led to heavier emphasis on "doing your own thing" or the like. It has not because it has always been disciplined by obedience. One's freedom is always constrained by the necessity to obey those in authority. One has the theoretical freedom to make up one's own mind or even to disobey, but odedience is considered the superior response. One obeys even when the reasons are not understood. Freedom is bounded; one must not challenge authority, at least not explicitly and overtly. (The statement, "It's easier to repent than to get permission," tells something important about how to act successfully in this area.) It is important to read cues to know how the balance between freedom and obedience can be made safely. A successful person in Church terms is one who knows where that sensitive balance is to be struck.

Ultimately there is only one absolute for Mormons. That is the will of God expressed through the authorities at the head of the Church. Individual moral conscience is not an absolute (note in that regard the implicit general disapproval of conscientious objection and suicide). Theoretically, the individual has the privilege of personal revelation which could, it appears, contradict the will of the Church authorities, but in practice Mormons are expected to put aside their personal convictions, at least in ultimate cases, to be obedient to the leaders. This expectation of following the leaders leads to their statements being considered as absolute guides. A great deal of psychic energy and concern are invested in trying to distinguish when one is obliged to obey and when one has leeway.

This concern not to go against legitimate ecclesiastical authority also leads to relativistic consequences, since the Church's position does change adaptively with the times. A prime historical example is the matter of polygamy. At one time complete adherence to this doctrine or practice was of cardinal importance to the member, and his or her salvation was interpreted in many cases as dependent upon belief in and practice of "the principle." Today, rather, to use that argument leads to excommunication, because it constitutes a challenge to current authority. Moreover, to be psychically safe (and also thoroughly

American) Mormons have purged every social and psychological vestige of polygamy from their consciousness. I have seen BYU coeds virtually become physically ill upon being confronted with the idea of a girl's becoming a polygamous mate, at complete variance with the one-and-only romantic love concept now prevailing. Thus, the Saints have reversed positions on the form of marriage (but not on the principle of authority), while but few recognize the relativistic significance of such changes in practice for the absolutism they feel comfortable with.

Greys are uncomfortable; black or, white is desired (another reason why the ambiguity of complex literature or art is avoided). The scriptures are used, normally, in absolute form, as proof texts rather than as material to be addressed inductively. (The reader will recognize that Richard Poll's dichotomy of Liahonas/iron-rodders coincides with the tension between this highly authority conscious and the more open sort of Mormon.) Proving things is, then, a desirable activity. We try to prove the Book of Mormon is true, that the Pope or the leader of the Reorganized LDS are bogus authorities, that we are ourselves active (statistics and publicity), that the gospel leads to health and happiness, etc. The same desire for clarity on the issues--for firm answers--often leads to superficiality in addressing issues, hence we tend to favor neat answers. (So the support for J. Bracken Lee, for example.) But the same desire for simplicity and clearcut answers is equally manifest in the Mormon's normal handling of complex gospel issues and of the subtleties of history. We cannot stand Governor Boggs as a puzzle; he must be a villain. (See my comments on the gullibility of the LDS, in the Spring 1976 issue of BYU Studies, page 432.) The relative geographical isolation of Deseret from centers of sophistication makes it easy to continue this kind of superficiality and premature closure without challenge.

A tendency to be carried away by rumor and fantasy is anchored in the substitution of authority for knowledge, plus the obedience factor, plus uncriticality in choosing authorities. The folklore of the Mormons is laced with this factor. It is related too to the common acceptance of authoritarian and conspiracy-keyed politics. Health faddism too makes sense to people with these tendencies. Pseudo-scholarship on many topics has long had ready acceptance. On the other hand critical reviews are never found in Church publishing and in fact are considered in bad taste. A major strand in anti-intellectualism in the Church stems from opposition to and fear of the essentially critical stance inherent in the role of the intellectual. Partly as a result all academics associated with the Church are somewhat suspect, even when they are nominally loyal.

The emphasis on authority and obedience accords with a desire for order. Despite certain counterforces in favor of individualism, the normal hope of the LDS person is for predictability and order. The apparent anarchy implicit in intellectual life on the one hand or hip or bohemian living on the other is most discomforting. The threat of having to be genuinely independent, to take a stand which may be in conflict with someone elses (even in a Sunday School class), to be one's own person, is disturbing. In the face of such indeterminism, a common refuge is to seek an interview with "the brethren," to find a book containing "the answers," or to come across one decisive scriptural passage which

seems to solve the dilemma. It is not surprising then that LDS Education emphasized the lecture method and the canned rather than the exploratory curriculum. Thus "becoming" and "advancement" is controlled within bearable limits.

Superficiality is noted in many aspects of LDS life. The fear to challenge authority precludes BYU students, for example from seriously challenging faculty members or textbooks, with the result that their education is often extremely superficial. Furthermore, the experience of mobility and the anticipation that it will continue leads to a tentativeness and lack of depth. Very few have friends in a fundamental sense, only acquaintances of varying degree. It is enough in the Church context to appear comparatively faithful and competent. Few Mormons are competent genealogists, or scriptorians, or missionaries, or administrators, or perhaps parents. It seems really to be enough to have made an effort and perhaps to avow the aim of continual improvement or becoming. This all leads to a jack-of-all-trades syndrome. One must be prepared to be some of everything, since one cannot predict one's future roles. All receive a smattering of "teacher development" or of "leadership training," but one is not permitted to stick to one's last, even in the humble callings. Even parenting is subject to training, whether one has children or not. Single persons are urged to hold "family" home evening. The resulting stew may be nourishing, but it is not tasty.

The combination of the superficial and the advancement or becoming ideas sometimes results in change for change's sake. The ability to change the freedom from unchangeable positions is of course adaptive in many ways, but a heavy price is paid in some cases as a profusion of programs, roles or techniques are tried out. This sort of invention of alternatives is probably a necessity to protect the Saints against the potential of rigidity inherent in their absolutist tendency.

Pragmatism is as important as in America at large. That is good which works to fulfill valued objectives. This special expression of relativism and activism was of course reinforced in pioneer times, but is ingrained now beyond that experience. If advertising and salesmanship prove useful to Church purposes, they will be tried in missionary work. If computers and psychiatry are advantageous in some demonstrable way, try them. Good lies not in the thing, but in the objective. (I have previously commented on the notable succession of the Gold Rush instruction of the leaders in Salt Lake City that none of the Saints should go seek gold in California, followed in a year by a mission in which some were called to go dig gold, for the good of the Church.) War, for example, is neither good nor bad in itself. It depends on what war, for what purpose, and at what price. Military service is good or bad depending upon the effects it has on the Church and its people. If ROTC proves helpful at BYU, it is promoted. Were it to prove detrimental on balance, it would be dropped, and then proved worth dropping! When the principle of consecration proved unworkable given the mechanisms employed with it, it was pragmatically inactivated. The plural marriage case reinforces our view of the pragmatic nature of Mormons. Now, in the individualistic American social setting, the "new and everlasting covenant" pragmatically becomes "temple marriage" in which "eternal love" binds "eternal sweethearts" together, and even sex is eternalized, since something must be done

with it.

Mormons strain toward autonomy. The Church has always aimed at and intended to attain independence from all other social groups. After the problems of the late 1800s, the ideal had to be reduced in salience for awhile, but it remains significant. The Church remains aloof from other social elements, whether churches, associations or governments. It is felt desirable to have its own artists, scholars, communication media, education system, economy and so on, even though in some cases these remain embryonic for the present. Food storage and the welfare plan are clearly related to the autonomy desire. Ideally the individual too should be autonomous or at least independent, but paradoxically the prior demand for an autonomous Church body have required obedience to authority of "the brethren" which robs the individual of the ideal independence.

The potential autonomy of the individual (in godhood at least) is still an active factor, however. Just as the Church, to move toward its own autonomy, is seen as needing all the functional equivalents of a society, so an individual should be whole, complete. Emphasis on the rounded whole person is stressed in practice. A relationship obviously exists between this position and the superficiality mentioned earlier. The single person above normal marriage age
is held at arm's length socially because of his or her apparent deviance or lack. The childless couple likewise is inhibited from fully functioning in the LDS context. The illiterate on the one hand and the egghead on the other are equally intolerable if these are dominating features of their makeup. The wholly committed artist cannot be a good Mormon, for that would mean that he had substituted another absolute for the will of God revealed to the authorities. The wholly-committed scholar, or athlete, is in a similar bind. But the high achiever's problem can be compensated for if other aspects of his or her life are visible. Thus when a person is accomplished in a special field, quick apology is made for him in the Church context by citing other facets of his life. (At an art show of LDS professionals' work last year at BYU, the labels, interestingly, listed each artist's marital status and number of children, almost as if to say, "This art may not be great, but consider the rest of the artist's life.") Even within the Church setting, the genealogical nut or the doctrinal specialist is viewed with some caution. Overspecialization in the face of the bias to autonomy and whole-personness will not do.

Latter-day Saints are anxious to present a good image, both inside and outside their group. Mormons appear as law-abiding, educated (but not egghead), patriotic citizens. The image of righteousness is in some ways even more important than the fact itself. It is not that they intend to be hypocritical in this regard so much as that they wish the image so much that they may be carried away. Note such phenomena as unread Church books in home libraries, accepting assignments but not fulfilling them, sending the young on missions or to BYU without their being committed, etc. Image manipulation is conscious in some cases but virtually universal in any case. The Osmonds, Johnny Miller, and other publicized people are "Mormon entertainers" or a "Mormon golfer," even though it is not clear that the Mormon status has anything to do with the reason for public notice. (Yet Mormons were displeased and irritated when Richard McCoy became "the Mormon

highjacker!")

Aggression is discouraged internally, that is within the Church or its constituent social groupings, yet there is ambivalence. Gossip occurs but is discouraged formally. Physical attacks are few, ideally, although playful hitting (among the young) and verbal "cutting down" are quite common. Factionalism in some wards is endemic. Rivalry in sports and recreation competition sometimes becomes intense. (I consider the hunting and gun concern primarily a western U.S. rather than LDS phenomenon.) Nevertheless only modest amounts of aggression are manifest internally. On the other hand out groups are valid targets. Dissident or disloyal elements in the Church are legitimately attacked verbally and emotionally. Favorite targets have been those (usually distant) elements of society which espouse causes considered antithetical to Church positions ("hippies," "communists," false and hypocritical ministers, teachers who destroy the faith of the young, etc.).

As against Mormons, all others are felt to form a residual category. Mormons do not really think about RLDS anymore, let alone Catholics; they ignore them. Utah non-Mormons are not persecuted, simply ignored. The Jews are ignored too, in effect. The best Jew is really the Mormon convert who used to be a Jew. The stubborn Zionist and the unconverted "Lamanite" are of a single kind--both targets of mild interest but not to be taken seriously unless they convert. All organizations and movements are judged by whether they aid Church aims. (Internally this criterion reinforces the active vs. inactive distinction.) If Lyndon Johnson or Gerald Ford invite the Church president to meet with them, this is "good." Martin Van Buren was "bad." Each showed whose side he was on. The Reader's Digest owes its reputation among LDS as much to their pleasant handling in that periodical as to expectable middle class bias; they're for us. An artist or poet (e.g. Longfellow) thought to have said or done something foreshadowing or supporting Church aims is considered a good artist or poet. All others are ignorable. Most art is thus ignorable. But people like Col. Kane, Cecil B. DeMille, Lowell Thomas and Pau' Harvey are commendable and distinguishable from the great mass of undifferentiated others--the non-Mormons. Besides, "the world" we "know" to be on the brink of apocalypse from which only the Mormons will survive in viable form. A touch of grim-faced enjoyment at the prospect may also be detected in many Saints, reminiscent of what early Missouri might have produced. Thus LDS image consciousness and non-Mormon evils combined lead us to a possibly exaggerated contrast, in our eyes, one result of which is naivete about the rest of the world.

Surely the characterization attempted is not the whole, balanced story. It may have some value. It needs correction, documentation and balancing. It needs consideration in the light of American "national character." A great deal of overlap occurs between what is Mormon and what American, but significant differences remain and need clarifying. I invite other hands to try.