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Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1970), pp. 279–282.

Published by: BYU Studies

Abstract: No Abstract Available.



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Laurence M. Yorgason

Mormon historical scholarship has not yet provided answers to some questions regarding Mormonism's origins. It is not yet fully known, for example, who (in terms of social and economic backgrounds) joined the Mormon Church in the early years of its existence. Although a partially valid response would cite the names and backgrounds of a few prominent people among whom the leaders would be found, it seems clear that little data is at hand informing us of the cross section of Church members from which came the rank and file strength of the Mormon Church. Such information would give us clues regarding the real appeal of the Mormon message to prospective converts.¹ Such information would also give us a more accurate picture of the environmental pressures and influences on Joseph Smith and other Church leaders responsible for formulating, interpreting and implementing Church doctrines and practices. Further, the organizational trends and doctrinal developments of the Church might be seen in sharper focus in the light of increased understanding of its environment.²

The most thorough efforts to date to overcome this information gap have come from George S. Ellsworth in his doctrinal dissertation, "A History of Mormon Missions in the United States and Canada, 1830–1860," in which two chapters (Chapters 13 and 14) are devoted to discussions concerning the social backgrounds of early Mormons, together with a more detailed study of the specific backgrounds of twenty-six leaders of the Church. He points out that although this study is no thorough cross-sectional analysis, the "conclusions are not untypical and . . . the generalizations . . . might be made to apply, without serious error, to the general body of the Mormon people."³ In his summary statements regarding this subject, Ellsworth concludes that the Mormons came from mostly rural areas, and were typical representatives of those areas, whether they were "free thinkers, religious non-affiliates, earnest seekers after an ideal faith, or regular church members."⁴ He is careful to point out that "Mormonism is not to be associated with frontier revivalism."⁵

Ellsworth's conclusions concur generally with assertions made on this latter point by Whitney R. Cross in his chapter on the Mormons in his book, *The Burned-Over District, The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic*

Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850 [p. 150 especially]. Such conclusions were generally considered to have considerably mitigated the theory that prospective Mormon converts were “emotion-starved frontiersmen,” and that the Mormon phenomenon was actually one of the many and varied responses to the religious needs of the frontiersmen of the day.⁶

Mario DePillis, assistant professor of history at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, in the article previously referred to (footnote 2) has correctly pointed out that more aspects of the problem of understanding Mormon origins need to be illuminated. He asserts, for example, that traditional thinking needs to be revised (especially in consideration of Cross’s theses), and that certain “frontier” conditions could exist almost anywhere, that these conditions usually consisted in social, economic and/or political upheavals resulting in social dislocation in the minds of inhabitants of those regions. After an all too brief review and analysis of the backgrounds of a few early converts, and an analysis of data regarding areas of successful Mormon missionary efforts (data supplied by Ellsworth), DePillis makes the following conclusions:

It is simply the thesis of this article that the origin (1827–1844) of what can be called “Mormonism” was related to the disorientation of values associated with migration to and within the backwoods areas of the United States. Typically, these areas were newly settled, rural locales, and might be loosely called “frontier” areas whether or not they contained more than six persons per square mile.⁷

In a study by the present writer initiated to test some of the above assertions (along with other objectives), the need has become apparent that further and more specific information on the social and geographical backgrounds of early Mormon converts would prove invaluable in the efforts of historians to understand Mormon origins. With this in mind, the writer has made an attempt to provide such information in a thesis entitled, “The Social and Geographical Origins of Early Mormon Converts, 1830–1845.” Items of information regarding the backgrounds of some 280 converts from that period have been gathered and described. These items include the religious inclinations of each convert before conversion to Mormonism, his baptism place and date, the location of his birthplace, the places his parents moved and where he was raised, the religious inclinations of his parents and their economic and/or social status. The sizes and ages of the above-mentioned localities are also included. A chapter is included giving information and analysis on all the significant leaders of the period, contrasting such information with the backgrounds of all other members considered. In addition, a comprehensive map is used to demonstrate the localities from which all the converts came. Finally, tables were included to facilitate comparison of data in concluding analyses.

On the basis of the foregoing data some detailed conclusions have been made. It seems clear, for example, that the larger part (about 75 percent) of the converts were inhabitants of rural areas (rural being defined as 2,500 or less in habitants), and that most were born in the east (New England, New York), with comparatively few either born or converted in the south. In these areas most received a "common school" education (three years or less); few received an extended education, and fewer still were illiterate.

Most of the converts (the average age of the converts was about thirty) had belonged to other churches, although a significant number had chosen to belong to no church (about 31 percent). The previous religious affiliations of these converts reveal that about half the converts belonged to churches which used the revival as part of their worship and proselyting procedures (the following were typical of this: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Disciples of Christ [Campbellites]). And of those who did belong to the more revivalistically oriented churches, some were members in name only because of their distaste for revivals. Most of the converts belonged to the religions of their parents, but there was an increase of the rejection of extant churches from parents of converts to converts (17 percent to 31 percent).

Mormonism did not attract the highly urbanized, those sophisticated in business, politics or religion. The wealthy did not flock to its message, neither did the very poor nor the transients of society. In short, the Mormon converts from the period under consideration seldom came from society's highest or lowest levels, neither economically, socially, religiously nor geographically. They were, since becoming Mormons, often called extremists, but the items in their background considered here seem to suggest that Mormonism had its roots in the average and unobtrusive segments of society.

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1. See Mario S. De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1966), pp. 68–88 for an example of an attempt to arrive at answers to this question essentially without the assistance of such information.

2. De Pillis has also attempted to find answers to these problems in his article, "The Social Sources of Mormonism," *Church History*, Vol. 37 (May 1968), pp. 50–79, but again without the aid of sufficient information to justify his conclusions.

3. George S. Ellsworth, "A History of Mormon Missions in the United States and Canada. 1830–1860" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Berkeley, the University of California, 1951), p. 340.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 341–42.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

6. For an example of this theory see Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), pp. 534–539.

7. De Pillis, *Church History*, p. 79.