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### Book Review

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*The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism.* Edited by R. Gordon Shepherd, A. Gary Shepherd, and Ryan T. Cragun. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 892 pages. \$219.99 hardcover, \$169 ebook.

Over the past half century, the growth of Christianity in the Global South—in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—has been a dramatic new fact in the history of the faith, and this has been reflected by an outpouring of scholarly books and articles. To date, little of that scholarship has paid much (or any) attention to the experience of the Latter-day Saints. *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism* more than compensates for this neglect, offering as it does a sweeping and ambitious range of essays concerning many crucial aspects of globalization as it affects one particular church.

Today, the LDS Church officially counts some 16.6 million believers worldwide, of whom just 6.7 million, or 40%, live in the US. Nearly seven million live in other nations of the Americas, and growth is marked both in Africa and Asia. As the present book suggests, all those figures need to be read with care, but they offer a good general guide. The same distribution emerges if we look at the temples that are essential for the church's ritual life. In 2019, the number of temples outside the US actually surpassed the figure for the US proper, and the location of buildings planned or under construction means that the disparity will grow steadily over the next decade. In 2020, the Church announced the construction of six new temples. One was in Utah, but all the others were outside the US, respectively in Guatemala, Brazil, Bolivia, and in the Pacific island states of Kiribati and Vanuatu. A church once seen as quintessentially American has gone global, and will be ever more so. Any scholarly

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attempt to discuss “Mormonism” in general, or the Mormon world, that focuses solely on North America would be failing in its duty.

The Handbook comprises 31 essays, divided into five major sections, namely Foundations of a New Religious Tradition; Contemporary Concerns and Issues Facing an International Church; Living Global Mormonism; Mormon Ethnic and Racial Diversity in North America; and Final Concerns and Reflections. The range of coverage is deeply impressive, and the quality of scholarship is excellent throughout. The authors differ widely in their approaches and assumptions, giving the reader a good sense of the conversations that go on in the field of Mormon Studies.

In terms of the subjects addressed, I confess to a personal prejudice, namely that my own background concerns the “Global” and particularly Global South aspects of the issues involved, and a good number of essays here very properly address issues and developments in North America. They explore such significant themes as sexual identity, generational tensions, and ethnic interactions. Not for a second do I mean to disparage those studies if I devote more attention to aspects of global expansion, and especially the section on Living Global Mormonism, which represents over 40% of the text, and over half the contributions. The *Handbook* contains notable studies addressing conditions in Peru, Mexico, Brazil, the Pacific Islands, the Philippines, and West and South Africa, as well in various European societies. Within the bounds of feasibility, this really does live up admirably to the “Global” ambitions of the title.

Although it is invidious to single out themes in such a broad collection, I do stress the issues of adaptation and inculturation that so often arise. All churches have to varying degrees had to cope with global expansion and what we might call a re-balancing of numbers, but the LDS experience is distinctive because the church’s theology and traditions are so firmly bound up with the territory of the United States itself. Also, the highest levels of church leadership, based in Salt Lake City, remain white, male, and American (and commonly elderly).

Around the world, ordinary Mormons are often imagined (and stereotyped) as actual or would-be Americans, with all the advantages and drawbacks such an image brings. Depending on circumstances, that image might encourage affiliation with the church or actual conversion, for people attracted by the appeal of modernity, the West, and of the English language. But the foreign stamp that marks the church might also provoke opposition and resentment. How do these rival forces of push and pull work out in various

societies? When someone converts to the LDS Church, to what exactly do they think they are converting? What are the cultural associations that go with the spiritual message? Those questions surface in several essays here, and the discussions are perceptive. At every turn, we encounter the intersections of culture and faith.

Mormons also stand apart from most denominations in their insistence that congregations worldwide follow norms and worship styles derived from the US—the same musical instruments, the same hymns, the same attitudes to bodily movement during worship. The “one-size-fits-all” approach applies to architecture, and the building of temples as much as individual churches. For many reasons, then, issues of inculturation are acute in the LDS context. As it develops, “Global Mormonism” faces the challenges of other churches, but even more so.

Those questions of culture and Americanization recur throughout the essays. Mormons are desperately sensitive to any hints of syncretism, and reject anything that might be seen as borrowed from older pagan ways. That is a particular issue in Africa, where the lack of inculturation has limited potential LDS growth, but it also affects other societies like the Māoris of New Zealand where cultural pride remains very strong. In other traditions, we would expect such local churches to evolve according to their own particular needs and conditions, but that is not as easy as it might be given the larger LDS framework.

I do not wish to give the impression that these distinctive qualities of Mormonism represent grievous burdens or obstacles, and some aspects have given the church a real advantage. For decades, their missionaries have built effectively on the idea that the Book of Mormon represented a distinctive revelation to the New World, and visual materials show the resurrected Christ preaching to audiences in appropriate settings, using Mesoamerican pyramids as a backdrop. That has a special impact in modern-day Central and South America. In practical terms, the church benefits from the astonishing qualities of its social ministries, and the support offered to members in distress. Also, Mormonism is associated with a rich body of stories and customs that easily lend themselves to local adaptation, and we often read here about Global South congregations trying to evolve their own particular forms of religious life.

Reminiscent of many (or most) other churches is the substantial impact that global growth has on the US, in the form of immigration. What happens in Brazil or the Philippines does not stay in those countries; it travels back to

North America with migrants, who make North American Mormonism ever more diverse. In fact, that figure I gave of North American LDS membership must of course take account of the growing diversity of that community, even or especially in Utah itself. That 40% of Mormons who are based in the US are assuredly not all white or North European in their antecedents, and the white component will shrink further as a relative share as the decades progress. Several chapters in the *Global Handbook* address such themes, as well as exploring the special circumstances of African American and Latinx believers in the US.

The *Palgrave Handbook* thoroughly deserves an audience among academics interested in Mormonism, or Mormon Studies, but I would be sorry if it was limited to that community. The book has a great deal to say to scholars of Global Christianity more broadly defined, and they could profit mightily from reading it.