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Pulling toward Zion: Mormonism in Its Global Dimensions

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This keynote address was delivered on October 25, 2019 at the annual conference of the Mormon Social Science Association, held in St. Louis in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. The Vernon Lecture is the MSSA's biennial keynote in memory of Glenn M. Vernon, a sociologist at the University of Utah and founder of the MSSA.

How global is the Mormon tradition? And, as a corollary question, we might ask, "How American is Mormonism? Clearly, one way to answer these questions is historical: from what ideas and communities did the tradition first emerge? But there are other possible ways to characterize it. We might discuss whether a religion has an unchanging essence, and if so, to what is it attached? Is it theology? Is it demography? Is it architecture, sacraments, or literature? And ultimately, does it matter what we call it? This morning I will invite us to discuss the multiple ways that we can discuss its global dimensions by focusing on the notion of Zion—first, as it was developed in relationship to a developing American nation, and second, as it has been figured in other parts of the world. I'll be drawing on an extended example from New Zealand, a site in which the ideal of Zion has taken significantly different turns.

Let's start with Mormonism's relationship to American national identity. Born in the religious ferment of the early national period, Mormons have never aligned themselves with the U.S. state-building project or the federal government in quite the same way that other religious groups have. We've seen this in recent years played out in polling data and media spectacle: Mormons, for example, are staunchly Republican in many respects but also pro-immigration and occasionally environmentalists; Mitt Romney, in his earlier life as the

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governor of Massachusetts, advocated comprehensive healthcare. The fierce anti-federalism of Ammon Bundy and his fellow protesters also has origins in a distinctive set of memories, experiences, and valuations of personhood and land rooted in Mormon worldviews.

In its early decades, the Church was accused by detractors of being anti-democratic, heretical, and un-American. Throughout the nineteenth century, as the church waged its battle against the U.S. government over the practice of plural marriage, Mormons were likened to Muslims, despots, slaveholders, or Roman Catholics—in other words, they were figured as manifesting the antithesis of "American" values. For their part, church members castigated other Americans for their sinfulness and celebrated their own "peculiarity" as a virtuous mark of Christian resistance.

Yet they were also loyal to America—in a distinctive way. In August 1877 Wilford Woodruff (later to be named church president) was visited by the spirits of the dead. He wrote in his journal that over the course of two nights, the signers of the Declaration of Independence and fifty other "eminent men" questioned him about why he had not yet performed baptisms for them in the new St. George temple, where Woodruff presided. Months earlier Brigham Young, prophet and leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, assigned Woodruff to administer a new series of ordinances on behalf of the dead, including baptisms, sealings, plural marriages, and adoptions—all with the intention of allowing deceased persons who had not experienced the blessings of the Mormon restoration in this lifetime to be united with loved ones and choose salvation in the life to come. So, Woodruff got busy. Over the following week, he and his colleagues performed the necessary rites for the founding fathers, John Wesley, Christopher Columbus, and a number of U.S. presidents. Woodruff recalled this sacred series of events at an LDS General Conference meeting in 1898: "Those men who laid the foundation of this American government and signed the Declaration of Independence were the best spirits the God of heaven could find on the face of the earth. They were choice spirits, not wicked men. General Washington and all the men that labored for the purpose were inspired of the Lord."

An outsider might well have wondered at the timing of this set of events, coming as they did in the midst of escalating battles between the U.S. government and the Mormons over the practice of plural marriage. Yet it suggests the complicated relationship that this religious movement held to the nation that the Mormons had once fled but which had pursued and incorporated

them. Framed by an understanding of history, scripture, and geography that embraced American chosenness but rejected dominant Protestant iterations, the Mormon assent to national identity rubbed up against emerging political and social patterns at many junctures. Nineteenth-century Mormons were nationalists in defiance of the federal government, and patriots whose religious beliefs placed them at odds with other conceptions of national unity and purpose. They represented, in this sense, an alternative nationalism, one that was eventually forced into practical compliance but that has never completely released its hold on Mormon communal sensibilities.

From the beginnings of the movement, Mormon ideas about the sacrality of the American landscape, the chosen role of Native Americans in divine history, and the future promise for the building up of the holy city of Zion on the American continent figured largely in Latter-day Saint consciousness. Although the Book of Mormon itself contained no direct reference to "America," the early Saints commonly interpreted the narrative as referring to the arrival of Israelites in the New World. Joseph Smith later received a revelation placing the Garden of Eden in western Missouri, and another that located the rebuilt temple in nearby Jackson County. Moreover, despite the persecution encountered by Mormons in these regions, Smith and other church leaders continued to pledge loyalty to the legitimacy of the U.S. government and tied an understanding of providence to its founding. In an 1833 revelation, Smith addressed the violence taking place in Clay County, Missouri, with a call for his followers to petition for redress. Speaking for God, he declared that "for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood" (D&C 101:80). Sarah Gordon observes that Smith was intimately involved with the U.S. legal system, becoming enmeshed in over 200 lawsuits in his lifetime, presiding over courts and local government in Nauvoo, Illinois, and even running for the presidency of the United States himself when he determined that it might be the only way to obtain a hearing for Mormon grievances (Gordon, 2002).

That reverence for the nation, and the Mormon willingness to make full use of governmental processes, was never divorced from a keen awareness of America's national inadequacies and acknowledgment of the federal failure to protect a minority religious community. Theological critiques peppered the missionary rhetoric of the Saints for decades, as they traveled to far-flung places excoriating the moral failings of "Babylon," their term for other Christian groups that often slid into condemnation of all other Americans.

Mormon loyalty to the nation was also further complicated by a communal ideal of Zion, a term deployed consistently by church leaders and lay members alike. Zion had and has many meanings within the LDS community. In April 1829, Joseph Smith, Jr., and his colleague Oliver Cowdery received a revelation that was later codified as Section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants, one of four canonical LDS scriptures: "behold, I say unto you, keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion." In subsequent decades, the notion of "bringing forth and establishing" Zion preoccupied the Saints as they were forced westward. That elastic concept bore many meanings over time and in different ways: Zion sometimes referred to a collective, utopian ideal; sometimes to a unified people. It also denoted a geographic site, first in Missouri, then in Utah. And the Saints took the idea of "building Zion" as more than metaphor: it was also, as we shall see, a fully material construction zone. But Zion was—and is—also a metaphor, signifying a large tent with many dispersed stakes. Most recently, perhaps, it has denoted an internalized orientation to individual and communal striving. All of these images were and still are used to characterize the concept at the heart of Mormon fidelity.

These dreams of Zion alongside an oblique loyalty to the U.S. government have issued in a complex and sometimes contradictory set of political entanglements. Smith's successor Brigham Young vigorously pursued the possibility of establishing a separate nation, the state of Deseret, throughout his lifetime, because of his belief that the United States had corrupted the intentions of its founders and would be overthrown. Parley Pratt, perhaps the first systematizer of Mormon thought, articulated the distinctive set of loyalties and values that characterized Mormon nationalism in a Fourth of July address in 1853. After valorizing the founding fathers and the Constitution, he parsed the difference between governmental principles and their (imperfect) execution: "If that Constitution be carried out by a just and wise administration, it is calculated to benefit not only all the people that are born under its particular jurisdiction, but all the people of the earth" (Pratt, 1853).

As one of the first Mormons to break the news publicly about the doctrine of plural marriage, Pratt felt with full force the power of the state to act "unwisely." He had been imprisoned in 1838, along with other church leaders, after Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs issued an extermination order on the Mormons, a move that clearly contradicted LDS understandings of the First Amendment. Yet his Fourth of July speech also advocated territorial expansion in the name of the nation. He spoke admirably of the mineral and agricultural

resources of Spanish America, noting that neighboring countries were "comparatively unoccupied" and, further, that they were in thrall to "priestcraft." Like his Protestant compatriots, Pratt boasted of American railroads, industries, schools, steam, and liberty of the press. He even predicted that eventually the rest of the world would be overwhelmed and would "bow to the superior greatness" of this country.

This stance of defiant and proud American disloyalty changed quickly after 1890, when the LDS Church publicly declared that it had renounced polygamy (a promise that was not fulfilled until after 1907). Almost immediately thereafter, Mormons began an aggressive effort to assimilate, and to claim the status of American patriots. Many writers—both inside and outside the Church—have characterized this transition as a relatively straightforward movement from isolation to accommodation, from a Mormon community able to set its own religious, political, and economic course to a group that had to learn to negotiate in American society as just one more religious denomination. And its most visible by-product, the eventual cessation of polygamy by members of the LDS Church, certainly reinforces the idea that Mormons were becoming one among many American churches. In exchange, leaders thereafter emphasized individual moral practices: tithing, and the keeping of health codes (no tobacco, no alcohol) became the new markers of "Mormonness." In other words, Mormons exchanged a communal code for a personal ascetic code.

This story is true only in a very narrow sense, and only if one focuses exclusively on the primacy of personal choice and individual agency that have become hallmarks of Mormon teachings. It conveys the impression that ordinary Mormons, encouraged by their leadership, simply decided to start observing new behaviors to mark themselves as distinctive. In this way, they could still be different from other Americans, but different in a way that was similar to the ways that other religious groups expressed their difference: through food, dress, and individual giving of resources.

This focus on individual piety and practice obscures the politics and institutional dimensions of this transition. It shortchanges the extent to which Mormon citizenship came with particular promises and perils for those outside the church as well as those inside. It also obscures the enduring significance of Zion as ideal and lived reality. Instead, it is more clarifying to see the Mormon entry into American public life in the twentieth century as a carefully orchestrated dance, a performance figured as an intricate set of actions

and reactions, with each side constantly shifting its movements to consider the other's latest gesture. Even this metaphor doesn't precisely capture the negotiations taking place, since Mormons were dancing with multiple partners simultaneously, appealing in varying degrees to liberal religious reformers, the media, educators, and even evangelicals. Mormonism as a collective religious expression may have resolved one major issue by obeying the laws of the land. But individual church members, and the LDS Church as an institution, still had to figure out how to become part of the body politic, how to function simultaneously as Mormons and as American citizens.

The ideal of Zion has emerged even more forcefully, and also more problematically, in international contexts in the twentieth century, as the LDS Church has spread its influence and its message abroad. It is not simply an American church; it is also a universal religious movement with ambitions to disseminate the gospel throughout the world. After 1945, the Church increasingly reached out internationally to evangelize among non-European "others," including Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and, in the late twentieth century, Africans and African Americans. In doing so the LDS Church has moved away from the principle of "gathering Zion" in a geographic site, and toward the notion of planting stakes of the "tent of Zion." This metaphor, taken from Isaiah 54:2, focuses on enlarging and strengthening the entire tent (understood to be the whole earth), rather than concentrating sacred power in one place. The recent small temple building project of the church has prompted (as of 2019) the construction of over 160 temples worldwide, so that members not living close to Utah can participate more easily in the blessings of temple ordinances. The Church now sends out 65,000 missionaries a year who are trained in fifteen missionary training centers, serve in 407 mission stations, and distribute church materials in 188 languages (including the recently released LDS edition of the Spanish Bible). LDS leaders currently claim over sixteen million members, of which 9.3 million live in North America; 4 million in South America; 494,000 in Europe; 620,000 in Africa; 1.2 million in Asia; and 562,000 in Oceania (Newsroom, 2019).

Incorporating an increasingly international membership into what has come to be seen by many as the quintessential American religious tradition is not an easy feat, especially when the leadership of the church is overwhelmingly Euro-American. In my remaining time I want to focus attention on one case study that illustrates the particular issues of affiliation that have arisen outside the U.S., but which are also intimately related to American Mormon conceptions of purpose and loyalty.

Ra Puriri is a fifth-generation member of the LDS Church in New Zealand. Like many other Maori in that country, his family joined the church after the arrival of Mormon missionaries in the 1880s. The Saints, of course, were not the first pakeha (the term often used for non-Maori or "white" New Zealanders) to set their sights on the island: British imperial agents, merchants, and Christian missionaries of all sorts had established a substantial presence by 1840, when the islands were officially incorporated into the British Empire under the Treaty of Waitangi. But wars between settlers and indigenous inhabitants in the 1860s and 1870s had soured the Maori toward the promises of their colonizers. Maori Anglican converts, in particular, felt abandoned by missionaries and swindled by land confiscations, a sentiment summed up in a frequently repeated refrain: "You taught us to look up to heaven and stole the land from under our feet" (Lineham, 2006). The arrival of Mormon missionaries who were independent of the British state apparatus and, in some respects, quite critical of their own oppression under the United States government, was greeted by many Maori as a renewal of a purer Christian piety. It is estimated that, in the face of these political upheavals, perhaps 80% to 90% of the Maori (including some native Anglican clergy) joined the LDS Church (Lineham, 2006). The movement offered, through conversion, both a spiritual and a cultural salvation in the face of certain cultural extinction.

For Ra Puriri and his kin, their identity as Saints became inextricably connected to their endurance as an *iwi* (the Maori word most often translated as nation or tribe). The Mormon focus on membership of Pacific peoples in the House of Israel, a concept introduced by the Anglicans, was further elaborated in LDS cosmology. Early church prophets and interpreters figured contemporary human beings as descendants of these biblical (and Book of Mormon) peoples and reasoned that different groups would have different roles to play in the unfolding of sacred history. That logic—of mapping scripturally based differences onto contemporary cultural and racial variation—endured through the 1960s and was especially salient for indigenous new world inhabitants or "Lamanites." By the mid-twentieth century, the term Lamanites was used frequently to refer not just to indigenous North Americans, but also to Pacific Islanders and South Americans. All were presumed to be (potential) members of the chosen class of people to whom the Book of Mormon was directed. As one Maori church member recalls, "The fact that Mormonism saw my ancestry and weaved it into its theology offered me a sense of place and even confidence that no one else could."

The notion of Zion also entered the *iwi* as a construction site. In the late 1940s, the Church decided to build a school, the Church College of New Zealand or CCNZ, for Maori Mormons because they were still, by and large, excluded from the British public educational system. Puriri's family, along with hundreds of other church members (and some non-affiliated Maori), volunteered as "labour missionaries" to undertake construction of the college and the temple that soon rose outside of Hamilton, in an area that subsequently came to be known as Temple View. One of his grandfathers worked in the factory that made the cinderblocks used to build the college. Puriri's father worked on the plumbing crew, and his mother in the construction office. Uncles and cousins worked as electricians, carpenters, and block layers. Church-owned housing around the temple further added to the sustenance of the Mormon Maori community, linking the Zion of the *iwi* to the sacred site of the temple grounds. Meshweyla Macdonald, a graduate of CCNZ, also recounted her grandfather's work as a labour missionary: "He was not a member of the church but believed in the vision of building something significant that was specifically targeted toward growing and developing Maori youth and he wanted to contribute. He went on to join the church and send all but two of his children to Church College. My father met my mother at Church College" (Dark, 2017). Temple View currently is home to approximately 1200 residents, including a large number of multi-generational inhabitants.

Even as this new stake of Zion was taking shape, political events back in the U.S. were shifting religious priorities within the LDS hierarchy. By the mid-twentieth century, Mormons had been accepted in the corridors of power as consummate insiders. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir was dubbed by American presidents as "America's Choir," and the patriotic narrative of westering migrants had been cemented in the popular imagination as a consummate American tale. Communal history was measured in handcarts, prairie skirts, and a determined self-sufficiency. Even today, visitors to the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City are treated to an abundance of artifacts of those nineteenth-century pioneering beginnings. Moreover, believers understand the American West, originally designated as the theocratic state of Deseret, as a sacred space, the place in which Zion would be built. For decades after the founding of the church, leaders encouraged members scattered abroad to gather with the Saints in Zion in order to build the kingdom of God. That early church body was predominantly Anglo-American in origin, sharing commonalities of language, dress, and religious practice nurtured through

the 1870s by a steady migration of Europeans to the Wasatch Range. Perhaps nothing cemented the new "all-American" image of the church as did the appointment of the resolutely anti-Communist church leader Ezra Taft Benson as President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Secretary of Agriculture in 1948.

As affiliations in the U.S. shifted, so, too, did efforts by church leaders to standardize the Mormon image abroad and upgrade areas surrounding temple grounds, including those in New Zealand. Similar struggles to "gentrify" areas around temples have also affected Laie, Hawaii; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and even Ogden, Utah, in recent years. The rationale from the church hierarchy is that the approach to these sites is also sacred ground and should be cleared of undesirable sights—and people. The modest Maori settlement surrounding the New Zealand temple did not fit their image of an appropriately worshipful space—and the college was, by the 1970s, bleeding money. Thus, when church officials in Salt Lake City, faced with a changing economic and political climate, began to speak of shutting down the CCNZ and razing the buildings, they were met with the wrath of the Mormon *iwi*, including that of Ra Puriri. Puriri and other alumni and local residents in Temple View were distressed by the rationale offered by American church leaders that the workmanship of the original buildings was "shoddy" and could not be rehabilitated. Deeply offended by what they took as an insult to their family members, Puriri and others have been on a mission to save the church college buildings and block the planned eviction of families from church-owned structures. Although the CCNZ closed down in 2009, the past decade has witnessed ongoing debate over the future of the site.

More than simply a real estate battle—or, more accurately, in addition to its significance as a real estate battle, since the materiality of the Zion ideal cannot be discounted[1]—the conflict over CCNZ is a lesson in the meaning of loyalty to Zion in a church no longer defined exclusively by U.S. national ideals. On his website devoted to criticism of the planned redevelopment, Ra Puriri declares an alternative set of affiliations. He is still a church member, and considers himself a sympathetic, insider critic, but his condemnation juxtaposes church bureaucracy and its associated American mores to another set of ideals. In fall 2015, Puriri traveled from New Zealand to Utah to voice

[1] There is much more to be said here about the economics of the church. Ra Puriri is quite critical of church finances and the uses of tithing. As Gina Colvin has also pointed out, the fact that the prophet and president of the church is both an ecclesiastical leader and the president of a corporation means that spiritual and financial roles are easily conflated. What kind of authority is being invoked in any given situation? A corporate or a prophetic role? (Colvin, 2014).

his dissent in the LDS General Conference to the transformation of Temple View. In Meshweyla Macdonald's words, the proposed development looked like nothing more than "a modern suburb in Utah" (Dark 2017). Puriri notes that the volunteer labor of his family members was mobilized by a school motto that enjoined workers to "Build for Eternity," and the sad irony is not lost on him. He now connects his battle not just to a purer, less corporate and de-Americanized Mormonism, but to his own nationalist ideals. "The request to demolish these historic structures is far more than simply granting permission to remove brick walls, windows, roofs and other materials from the site. These materials are a metaphor for ideals and principles that underpin the very democracy that is New Zealand," he explains on his website. He concludes his exposition with the first stanza of one of the two national anthems of New Zealand: "God of nations at thy feet in the bonds of love we meet, here our voices we entreat God defend our free land." In short order, the cause of Zion has thereby been linked to New Zealand national ideals.

The anthropologist Ann Stoler has noted that "colonialism" is a term that is often used quite carelessly; it tends to frame all cultural interactions in terms of their relation to state power (Stoler 1997). But it obscures the fact that religious enterprises sometimes distinguished themselves quite consciously from national power. The Mormon case is even more entangled: early Mormons did both. They valorized America but held fast to their own notion of a theocratic Zion, one that existed in multiple registers. As the movement spread abroad, and as the relationship of the LDS Church to the U.S. government shifted dramatically, ideals of Zion multiplied, creating new political and spiritual possibilities. For Mormon leaders, the sanctification of the area around Temple View is seen as a way to preserve sacred space, to provide the blessings of Zion to Mormons in New Zealand. The corporate developers of Temple View describe their goal to "protect the sanctity and environment of the Hamilton New Zealand temple and to re-purpose the previous school property in a way that complements and enhances the long-term family life and the economic vitality of the Temple View community." (Newsroom Blog, 2013). Maori Mormon dissenters might agree with this statement, but would frame their loyalties in terms of memory, identity, and *iwi*. One Maori member articulates it this way:

> What is the most important thing in
> this world?
> I say to you,

it is People.
it is People.
it is People (Parker, 2010).

At the same time, one encounters the loyalties of Maori Mormons such as Rangi Parker, a woman now in her seventies who has worked with the Church to build the Pacifika collections in the newly established Pacific Church History Museum—a building that occupies some of the real estate once taken up by the CCNZ. She too, grew up in Temple View and values what it has provided to the Maori community. But for Parker, the LDS Church saved her Maori traditions from certain extinction in the face of British control. Mormon missionaries were the only ones who valued and helped preserve her heritage, she notes. Parker has spent much of the last three decades traveling to the U.S. to retrieve Maori items given to earlier missionaries: beads, a Maori feather cloak, everyday tools and carved weapons all returned with her as *taonga*, or "treasures" that sacralize indigenous ways of life. She also collected dozens of photographs taken by missionaries, including pictures of her own family from the 1930s that she had never seen before, and she retained excerpts of writings from early missionaries who described the building of the CCNZ and temple by Maori laborers. Unlike Ra Puriri, Rangi Parker's loyalties associate the preservation of the *iwi* with the institutional Church, and she is grateful to see the ongoing efforts of the leadership to valorize her efforts.

This story has yet to be fully resolved. The building projects continue at Temple View, although the Church has backpedaled since 2013 and is working to win over the confidence of Maori members. Still, members have been evicted, many houses have been razed, and more are going up to be sold on the open market. Members of the Mormon *iwi* are in sharp disagreement over what the future should hold. The museum, which opened in 2017, provides state-of-the-art archival space and exhibits relating the history of Mormonism around the South Pacific, with special emphasis placed on the historic importance of the CCNZ. As the museum website explains:

> Museum guests are greeted by an exuberant celebration of the Church College of New Zealand (CCNZ). For over 50 years, CCNZ was one of New Zealand's premier coeducational boarding schools, educating thousands of youth from New Zealand and the South Pacific. Our exhibit invites former students to stroll down memory lane while giving others a glimpse into what campus life was like. From the school's iconic basketball jump circle to the pulpit from which Church leaders spoke, the essence of CCNZ is now on display ("Our Exhibits," n.d.).

For Ra Puriri, Meshweyla Macdonald, and others, the "essence" of the CCNZ lies elsewhere. It is unclear what kind of Mormons they will be. Like the early Utah pioneers, these Maori Mormons set the terms of their affiliations in ways that both honor and confound competing collective understandings. Zion, that early global vision enunciated by U.S.-based Mormons, also draws from a belief in Zion linked to a distinctive Maori history. Implemented first as a gathering concept, the ideal of Zion provides both a focal point, and, as we have seen, a source of tension, of accommodation, and of the enunciation of related but distinctive collective understandings. The term "gospel culture," so frequently invoked by Utah leaders to indicate the unity of Mormon strivings, seems a flat and inadequate term to describe this variegated reality. One of the challenges of a global church is to reconcile the longings for peoplehood and for physical space that have captured the hearts, minds, and bodies of a worldwide Zion.

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