The Internationalization of American Religions: Mormonism and Mexico

Paul J. Rich, George Mason University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/paulrich/47/
The Internationalization of American Religions: Mormonism and Mexico

Paul Rich

The continuing spread throughout the world of religions which have strong ties to the United States has been much remarked upon, particularly in the case of Protestantism in Latin America, but the subject is still somewhat neglected as far as international relations scholars are concerned. When American hegemony is discussed, usually it is military or economic strength which is at issue, and not the popularity of American religious cults. Even the spread of fastfood emporiums like McDonalds seems to cause more concern. That America exports theology as well as airplanes and Sesame Street is a neglected topic.

Mexico, for example is experiencing considerable
religious turmoil. The attention that implementation of the Constitution of 1917 with its guarantees of religious freedom is getting in Mexico, prompted by Protestant growth, has been long overdue -- but in respects the interest could not have come at a worse time. There are disturbing signs not of devolution of authority but of disintegration of authority. Suspicion of American Protestant missionary activities therefore should be seen in light of scepticism about the future of Mexico. This pessimism is seen in the remarks of one of Mexico's leading intellectuals, Carlos Fuentes, who concedes that"...the pro-Americans in Mexican society do not disguise their hope that Mexico can become a sort of undeclared fifty-first state of the Union."

The thrust of our paper today is that there are two kinds of American religion which are being internationalized. The first category includes essentially American versions or varieties of religious movements which cannot be regarded as American in their origin. Roman Catholicism is a case in point. American Catholics may be the principal financial supporters of the Vatican and even in a time of declining religious vocations are a large source of priests, bothers and nuns. But Catholicism could not be described as having completely fallen under American domination. National varieties of Catholicism are recognized as being widely different, and American Catholicism must compete with Irish, French, Italian and other lobbies which attempt to
influence the worldwide Church.

Similarly, although a number of Hindu groups at least loosely tied to India have become Americanized and then re-exported, bearing evidence of their encounter with Madison Avenue, they remain Eastern in their ethos. Nor would anyone claim that Judaism, despite the enormous importance of American Jewry in supporting Israel and in determining the content of American media, was an American product. Indeed American Jews are often irritated by the nature of Israeli Judaism. So while America has influenced a number of long existant religions, and has been responsible for some changes in their policies and in their missionizing, the situation is somewhat similar to that of the influence that European Catholicism had at one time. Although we are aware that almost all Freemasons would deny it is a religion, we have chosen it as an instance of this first category because we believe it displays many characteristics of a religion and because of its peculiar relationship to the second example we have selected, Mormonism.

Mormonism belongs to a second group of sects which are, to our way of thinking, interesting to internationalists because they originated in the United States and they appear to have doctrines which specifically relate to the importance of the United States in some sort of divine and cosmic world scheme. The United States in these religions is not simply another country, but rather it is at least to an
extent a new Promised Land, a new Israel. The ability of these cults to succeed in countries other than the United States is all the more remarkable because their beliefs are so American and so resistant to becoming naturalized. Thus the growth of these religions outside of the United States would seem to involve the growth of an ideology which has implications for the identity of other countries.

To a degree all religions attempt to nationalize themselves, often in the case of Catholicism by the appearance of the Virgin Mary offering her protection or the canonization of national saints. But certain American religions go beyond that, far beyond that, and give the United States a unique theological role and a special place in God's scheme of things. Religions which fall into this category would include, in varying degrees, Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Black Muslims, and the Unification Church or Moonies. Not all of these movements have a positive view of America; some derive part of their theological strength from demonizing the United States. But all of them are "home grown" and have theological roots in American history. When non-Americans become members of these sects, they enter into American history in a special way.

It is from this second group that we wish to take as an example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, and
commonly referred to as the Mormons. Nothing we would say today is to be taken as criticism by us of an individual's religious belief. It would be unfair to attribute to any single individual the attitudes of a large movement. We all personalize our religious beliefs, and the varieties of Roman Catholicism are good evidence of this and of the fact that generalizations about religious attitudes are extremely dangerous. No one acquainted with contemporary Mexico would simply lump Dominicans and Jesuits in the same category, or claim that members of Opus Dei had the same views as missionary priests working in Chiapas. Protestantism, we all know, come in an amazing number of varieties. Moreover, there is a great deal to praise in the lifestyle of individual Mormons. But, since religions have become major international players, discussion of their implications for the international political scene is fair.

The modern origins of Mormonism, with an emphasis on the word modern because it claims to be a restoration of lost religious practices, date to the appearance of an angel to a New York State farm boy named Joseph Smith. The angel displayed golden plates to Smith which he eventually was allowed to translate and which are the basis for one of the Mormon sacred books, the Book of Mormon. These scriptures were published in 1830. The Mormons believe in contemporary revelation, which is to say that Smith and his successors as presidents of the Church can receive messages from God. (Smith
himself briefly ran for President of the United States in 1844.) So Mormonism is based on a succession of informations communicated to the Mormon leadership, some of which apparently have never been made public.

In addition to local churches, the Mormons maintain temples which are not open to the general public - one of which is in Mexico City - where various secret rituals are performed. In the temples, Mormons are invested with sacred clothing which they wear under the street clothes and given a knowledge of secret names and other esoteria. These secret rituals involve many symbols which appear to be common to Freemasonry and which have given rise to the charge that Mormonism is based on Freemasonry.

A number of prominent early Mormons were Masons: "In 1823, the very yer that the Prophet [Joseph Smith] was reportedly first visted by the Angel, his elder brother Hyrum was initiated into Mount Moriah Lodge, Free and Accepted Masons in Palmyra, New York." In 1826 there were about 500 Masonic lodges with more than 20,000 members in New York State alone.

Whatever the truth of accusations about Smith purloining Masonic lore for his new religion, in certain aspects, Mormonism does appear to be a derivative of Freemasonry, just as the Nation of Islam, Orangeism, the Ku Klux Klan, and other movements also owe much to Masonry. Therefore contrasting the two
movements in Mexico is a useful way to examine the experiences of an American cult when it travels overseas.

Of course the two institutions are as different as they are similar. Masonry is many things and comes in many varieties, and unlike Mormonism it has no one central authority. It is possibly the ultimate spinner of tales and creator of myths, and as such it has a long history of influencing the political process. International relationists ignore it at the risk of not understanding how things "really work". "As I see it," writes Raphael Pati, "myth not only validates or authorizes customs, rites, institutions, beliefs, and so forth, but frequently is directly responsible for creating them." Politics provides plenty of examples of such myth-making, especially of the self-serving kind: "...traditions are commonly relied upon by those who possess the power to achieve an illusion of social consensus. Such people invoke the legitimacy of an artificially constructed past in order to buttress presentist assumptions and the authority of a regime." Whether it be the American President William Henry Harrison with his contrived portrayals as the manly man of the log cabin and hard cider, or President Teddy Roosevelt's constant references to routing the Cubans and the virtues of the outdoor life, political success often seems to hinge on the ability to cultivate larger-than-life images that become rooted in popular culture. National identity too is related to the creation of a popular pantheon of heroes and of
symbols invested with meanings that inspire patriotism. Mormonism and Masonry demonstrate how depending on the environment social movements can contribute or fail to contribute to the creation of such patriotism.

Although the phenomenon has gone largely unresearched, religious and fraternal organizations (which often resemble religions) have played a large part in national myth-making, albeit one often unnoticed. That has been the case in the United States and Mexico, as well as other countries: "...the fruits of an interplay between the study of religions and the discipline of political science themselves show that at certain points the distinction between the fields problematic. The distinction between politics and religion (and there is of course some validity in it) may itself be made too sharp in our culture for ideological reasons."

Unquestionably two of the most influential organizations in this respect have been Mormonism and Freemasonry, both highly successful in creating not only patriotic myths but a popular myth that membership is a key to professional success. (Mormons for example have been extensively recruited by the CIA and they were the coterie around the mysterious billionaire Howard Hughes, the reason in both cases being their allegedly dedication and incorruptibility.)
The need for leaders to have a mysterious source of power, of demonstrably having been anointed and set apart, characterizes both Mormonism and Masonry. The Mormon bishops and other hierarchy are set apart by their place in the ritual just as much as are the Masonic leaders, and in the United States the two leaderships make frequent references to the place of their movements in defending American values and reinforcing American patriotism. The phrase "cherry tree stories" seems apt for describing the growth of these legitimatizing patriotic-macho myths.

Acetates 7, 8, 9

What happens to Mormonism and Freemasonry outside the confines of the United States points up why Mexico and the United States offer an excellent opportunity for comparative research in popular and political culture. Claims are made by both movements about the way in which they have contributed to the basic freedoms and rights of the citizenry or about how being a Mason has helped a leader or reinforced his virtue, or certified to his probity and testified to his sagacity - or even saved him from death on the battlefield or at least protected him from danger at the hands of his enemies. But the Mormons are not able to "Mexicanize" or "Latin Americanize" these claims as successfully as the Masons can.

The Masonic myths are set in the days of King Solomon and ancient Persia, and most Masons do not
claim any historical truth to them. Moreover, the Masons south of the Rio Grande are not obliged to mention the membership of Washington or Franklin and they can and do invoke the spirit of many great Latin Americans who were Masons, ranging from Bolivar to Juárez.

In contrast, the Mormons claim great miracles happening in the nineteenth century, are devoted to the achievements of their leaders such as Smith, and invest America with a Biblical sacredness. A problem for the Mormons is that while many religions keep a healthy distance from contemporary history, preferring to deal with a long ago past which is relatively beyond the reach of modern social science, the Saints get themselves involved in a time frame that modern scholarship can deal with. Therefore the study of the Latter Day Saints and of their mythology requires attention to Durkheim and other social philosophers, whereas Ezekiel and Jeremiah escape relatively unscathed.

Nevertheless, a benign suspension of belief when it comes to reviewing the ceremonies of both groups is helpful because otherwise the influence they exercise is incomprehensible. It may indeed seem "obviously hokey" when "Once in so often you march around your lodge room in the wake of the Grand Exalter of the Holy Mackerel and absorb a certain luster from the glittering insignia..." but that was hardly the view of the members. Mormon views on the plurality of gods, the
existence of a goddess, or other controversial aspects of Mormon belief are not our focus.

We are interested in the influence of American movements when they internationalize. Freemasonry seems to us to resemble the members of the first category of religions which we have postulated, those influenced by America but not originated by America. While Freemasonry and Mormonism came to Mexico rather early, their involvement in Mexico has been different. Starting with Miguel Hidalgo, the Catholic priest and Freemason who led the revolt against Spain in 1810, many prominent Mexicans have been depicted as loyal members of the Masonic Fraternity, the relationship being a symbiotic one in which they have both given and received stature because of membership. In fact, it is true that many Mexican leaders have belonged. As for the reason why the institution became so much a part of Mexico, and without getting deeply into psychological or metaphysical discussions about environment and heredity, it is obvious that Masonic initiation and participation is similar to the dramatic experiences of those converts to Mormonism when they are initiated in the Mormon temples.

How influential these secret rituals are can be debated. The more extravagant claims made for the two movements' influence and the loyalty of their
members do need to be viewed sceptically. But they are not less influential than other social organizations, and so - even without making extravagant claims - they do contribute to identity; they do foster or encourage certain character traits; they push an individual in directions that he might not have otherwise pursued and because of the popular view of their influence they give an individual a certain stature.

A significant difference between the Mormons and the Masons, despite all they share in common, is their ability to recruit those in political authority. So far Mormonism has not been particularly successful in converting the ruling élite in countries such as Mexico, although it has converted many ordinary citizens.

In contrast, the Mexican élite's affiliation (pace, solidarity) with Masonry goes back, as has been mentioned, to the early days of the republic. In Mexico as in America the fraternity's ritual along with its secretive and mysterious history has provided an ideal soil for developing the patois of patriotism. The images of the fathers and founders of the Mexican Republic have gained in stature from Masonic associations, just as did the reputations of leaders in the United States, and Mexican presidents have found it wise to join the order. For example, the 'Mexican Lincoln', Benito Juárez, was Grand Master of the National Grand Lodge which had been established in 1825, and his Masonic allegiance is usually coupled with his patriotic anticlericalism.
The Mormons because of their basic myths are much less adaptable to Mexican nationalism, or for that matter to any other country’s patois other than that of the United States. After all, their great revelation took place on a hill in New York and their theology is closely tied to the destiny of the United States. They believe the American native peoples are descendants of the lost tribes of Isreal and that America enjoyed a Biblical society between 600 BC and 400 AD. They assert that Jesus came to the New World, where among other things he repeated the Sermon on the Mount.

Therefore, as they increase in number in Mexico, in our opinion a certain challenge or tension arises. A Mormon has a different mythology from the average Mexican, whether that Mexican is a Baptist or a Catholic or a Jew. And mythology is important to national solidarity. While the growth of Masonic legends around Juárez is an instance of what we call the cherry tree effect, is true that:

The Juárez myth in Mexico is not the only historical myth in that country; it is one of many and does not stand apart from others. In a country whose culture is extraordinarily well-endowed with myths and is as a consequence defined by them, what people say about Juárez they often say about other historical personalities and about Mexico itself...Study of this myth, as well as any other, can have value as a
means to identify and understand the attitudes, values, and aspirations of Mexicans. Indeed, it and other myths deserve the closest examination, for they both shape and reflect attitudes and can have long-range consequences.

Masonry and Mormonism enforce a version of patriarchal and hierarchal leadership, despite their protestations that they are the protectors of democracy. But Masonry seems more adaptable to the circumstances of individual countries. Still, both leaderships are in respects a modern revival of the magician kings ruling a blessed and sanctified realm favored by the gods. But while one is adaptable to Mexican patriotic mythology, the other is not.

A characteristic then of the American religions overseas, that is to say the religions where America is theologically central to the cult, is that they do not lend themselves very well to the strengthening of another country's national mythology. Masonry to an extent does, although as an international organization it may have agenda which put it at odds with national goals. (Masonic membership should be viewed in the light of the fact that presidents such as Díaz and others in the ruling circle were Catholics of sorts and were Freemasons of sorts. This raises the possibility that they found Freemasonry to be a political counterweight to Catholicism, and thus a way to
maintain their credentials with both sides in the bitter confrontations between church and state - confrontations which in the past, as perhaps now, were so much part of Mexican life. Alice Murray in an unpublished thesis claims that Diaz became a Mason as part of his pax porfiriana, particularly at its applied to his conciliation policy towards the Catholic church, i.e. as a way to reassure the anti-clericals that concessions to the Catholic Church were tempered by Masonic rationalism.

In both the Mexican and American cases Freemasonry and Mormonism have sought to sacralize and authenticate political leadership, and in Masonry,s that has meant its involvement with dubious individuals like Warren Harding as well as with Washington - and in the Mexican case with figures like Díaz as well as Juárez. But while in the two countries Masonry has contributed to the creation of a motherland patriotic epic and benefited from its connection with a version of history that it has helped foster, Mormonism has had to expand in Mexico and elsewhere overseas despite its commitment to America as Zion.

That makes its tremendous growth seem all the more remarkable.

Neither organization is per se a foe of democracy. Seymour Martin Lipset asserts, organizations which are internally undemocratic can help sustain
democracy: "...many internally dictatorial associations operate to protect the interests of their members by checking the encroachments of other groups...institutionalized democracy within private governments is not a necessary condition for democracy in the larger society, and may in fact at times weaken the democratic process of civil society. The various secondary associations independent of the state which Tocqueville saw as necessary conditions of a democratic nation have been in both his day and ours largely one-party oligarchies."

What is undeniable is that, whatever the vices and virtues of Mormons and Masons in a political context, there is a 'something' to the hidden creative world of of the two movements which apparently meets a deep need, a need which exists in many countries and is not satisfied by other movements such as Catholicism. In one case the movement has a close identity with American history and patriotism, and in the other case the movement has strong ties to the United States but has been able to create its own local heroes.

The secrecy surrounding Mormonism and Masonry may be in respects be their most distinctive feature, but despite the difficulties that presents for research they are an expanding part of the international scene and the brief analysis we have presented suggests that a study of their effects is of more than casual
interest. Whether religious movements now growing in many countries have been Americanized but retain something of their cultural autonomy, or have been American from their very beginnings, they are part of what increasingly looks like a post Cold War expansion of American influence not just on rock music but on religion itself.