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Clayton Christensen, Joseph Smith, Jr., and Disruptive Innovation

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A post on the blog of the University Librarian, Sacred Heart University:

<http://sacredheartuniversity.typepad.com/universitylibrarian/2018/01/clayton-christensen-joseph-smith-jr-and-disruptive-innovation.html>

Abstract: Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation has been popularly successful but faced increasing scrutiny in past years. Christensen is a Latter-day Saint, and the career of Joseph Smith, Jr. and his ideas form a powerful backdrop for Christen's theory. Smith's role as an innovator, the "disruption" of Mormon proclamation, and the America that received or rejected his message all form an enduring, cultural matrix that later facilitated the popularization of "disruptive innovation" as an idea. Uncritical embrace of the popular theory, especially in higher education, implies acceptance of a cultural assumptions and suggest that the theory is less useful than has been claimed. This essay is a reflection on history and experience, not a theoretical quid-pro-quo, or take-down.

Something always struck me as oddly familiar and decidedly off-key about Christensen's confident claims that innovation would explosively disrupt American higher education. A previous boss dismissed my views as the reflex of one in a dying profession (librarianship).

I never accepted her cynical critique; neither could I put my finger on why I still disagreed strongly. Then a new insight came to me while teaching a historical survey course on American Religion about the idea's interesting and problematic deep structure. My insight sprang from some familiarity both with the discourse of innovation in higher education, and 19th-century American religion, two widely known but widely separated fields. What I have found will, I hope, give pause to thoughtful educational and academic leaders. Uncritical embrace of "disruptive innovation" might implicate them in religious and cultural commitments that should give them pause, especially if they lead faith-affiliated organizations.

The first backstory: Christensen first introduced disruptive innovation in 1995 in an article aimed at corporate managers rather than researchers. In 1997 he expanded his ideas in *The Innovators Dilemma* which caught on in 2000s with managers, business writers, and consultants in a big way, with the aura supplied by Harvard Business School. Since 2011 he has predicted that as many as half of American colleges and universities would close or go bankrupt in fifteen years (so in 2021-2026). He is still at it: in April 2017 [he maintained his claim](#) when speaking to Salesforce.org's Higher Education Summit. "I might bet that it takes nine years rather than ten." Sometimes he's been wrong (about the iPhone, for example), but he does not vacillate.

Disruptive innovation has become big business, popularized not only by Christensen ([who has come to regret losing control of the term](#)), but by a host of management

consultants, pundits, and experts. Among librarians, [David Lewis](#) applied Christensen's ideas in 2004, expanded into a book in 2016 that has been on the whole well-received by those in my "dying profession." Predictable pushback came in 2014 from another Harvard professor (of history, [Jill Lepore](#)), and a [detailed reexamination in the MIT Sloan Management Review](#), and others. Christensen in turn [defended his ideas](#) and reformulated some of them in 2015, on the 20th anniversary of his initial publication. Three years later, if the concept has lost some valence or he's just wrong about higher education, why rehash this now and for the umpteenth time?

That's where the second backstory becomes relevant. Christensen (of old Latter-day Saint stock) is not just coincidentally Mormon; [that identity is central to his person](#) and that background to his work.

When I teach my historical survey of American Religion, in due course we come to the so-called Second Great Awakening in the first half of the 19th century. Scholars give special attention to the "[Burnt-Over District](#)" of western New York, home of many potent religious and political ideas associated with "Whig Evangelicalism": abolition, temperance, the rights of women, and reforms of public health, education, prisons, orphanages, etc. The District fostered not only mainstream Christian restorationist and evangelical movements (such as Disciples of Christ, ("Campbellites"), Methodists and Baptists), but also countless Millennialist, New-Thought, and Spiritualist communes, Shakers, Millerites (early Seventh-Day Adventists) -and Joseph Smith Jr.'s Latter Day Saints.

Smith resists casual dismissal: was he truly a prophet of the living God (the mainstream Mormon view)? -a womanizing fraud (the view of many of his contemporaries, and critics since)? -a self-deluded prophet who eventually bought into own fabrications and could not extricate himself (a sort of early David Koresh)? -or some kind of mystic or psychic with unusual access to otherworldly regions and the subconscious (a sort of frontier, raw-edged Francis of Assisi)?

Smith promulgated the enormous *Book of Mormon* ([Skousen's critical first edition](#) is 789 pages). [He claimed](#) an angel guided him to find ancient plates in a hill near Palmyra, New York, which he translated from unknown languages with the help of seer stones and a hat, and dictated on-the-fly to his wife Emma Hale Smith and others, all in 65 days. Even if he made it up, or shared authorship, or plagiarized part, it is an amazing performative achievement. A densely layered anthology of documents, speakers, and authors, the text can be regarded (if not as Scripture) as an early forerunner of "magical realism." All this from 20-something farm hand with a little primary education.

Smith was truly a "rough stone rolling" whom generations of Mormons have never managed to smooth. "No man knows my history," [he is reported to have said](#); "I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. . . . If I had not experienced what I have, I would not

have believed it myself." His innovative edginess strongly contrasts with earnest, family-oriented, upbeat, corporate image of contemporary Mormons.

"Innovative" -there's that word. In matters of religion, innovation is not always a positive idea. Smith's most famous innovations were the origins of the Book of Mormon, and the "new and everlasting covenant" (revelation) of both *eternal* marriage, and the principle of *plural* marriage. The last innovation directly challenged 19th century American ideas about the family, and occasioned a furious opposition of a scale rarely seen in American history (excepting racism). Latter Day Saints were opposed in Ohio, persecuted in Missouri (the Governor ordered extermination); Smith was murdered in 1844 in Illinois by a lynch mob acting out congeries of fears.

The subsequent succession crisis would have led to fatal splintering were it not for Brigham Young. A considerable majority of Mormons followed his leadership from Illinois in the Great Trek to Salt Lake City (1846-1848); Young's organization both preserved and transformed the Latter-day Saints; they lost their prophet but [gained a hyphen](#). The founder's innovations would have perished without Young's tenacity, sheer longevity (died 1877) and "courageous leadership" or "iron-fisted rule," depending your point of view.

These two long backstories are essential for understanding both the meteoric rise of "disruptive innovation" and its recently waning appeal as an explanatory theory in light of qualms about its accuracy.

Joseph Smith, Jr., can be seen as an exemplary disruptive innovator.

"Disruption' describes a process whereby a smaller company with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established incumbent businesses." While incumbents focus upon improving their product or service (especially on behalf of their most profitable customers), they tend to ignore less profitable market sectors, or exceed their needs. Entrants seek out those ignored market segments and can gain customers by providing more suitable products or services, frequently simpler and at lower cost. Incumbents can fail to respond in kind while entrants "move upmarket," improve their offerings, maintain their advantages and early success, and eventually drive out or acquire incumbents when their formerly most profitable customers shift purchases to the entrants. ([Christensen, 2015](#)).

Since Christensen has complained that terms have become "sloppy" and undermine his theory's usefulness, I have taken care to paraphrase his core idea with some care, and to present Mormon history even-handedly. My central claim is that Smith's role as an innovator, the "disruption" of Mormon proclamation, and the America that received or rejected his message all form an enduring, cultural matrix that later facilitated the popularization of "disruptive innovation" as an idea. Christensen's religion did not *cause* him to create his theory, but did contribute a framework that *fostered* its

reception, as well as its swift extension beyond its first cases in manufacturing disc drives, construction implements, and other tangibles.

Christensen's commitment to his Church is [beyond question](#); the intellectual, doctrinal traditions of his faith powerfully molded his character and thinking, by his own admission. By all accounts he is a charming and sincere man, and would never have smuggled his religion into his professional thinking; he is an honest and forthright broker. This essay is a reflection on history and experience, not a theoretical quid-pro-quo, or take-down.

Smith's movement "came to market" at a critical time in American religious history. The Constitutional de-coupling of religious institutions from the state apparatus was one of the primary innovations of the new nation. The new "open market" meant that incumbent legally established, financially supported Christian churches had to compete for adherents and support. Such competition that challenged their previous role as assumed arbiters of social legitimacy. If you have a wide field of religious choices, you could also choose "none of the above." National anxieties about declining status of established forms of Christianity in large part fueled the striking resurgence of Christian groups loosely termed "evangelical."

A significant portion of those evangelical groups can be described as "restorationist," appealing to a New Testament proclamation of God's restitution of all things. This was taken to mean a return to the "primitive church," a re-pristinization of Christianity - taking it back to the putative purity of the founders. This led to a proliferation of religious bodies, almost all of which inherited the binary certitude from earlier centuries that each was "correct" and hence others were necessarily "incorrect." Each group warranted its appeals in the lost purity of the first Christians. For many groups, the path back to purity had been cleared by curbing the incumbent religious churches by disestablishment, and they hoped that clearance would level their status.

Since the religious marketplace of early 19th-century America had only recently been opened, doctrinal disputes that now seem arcane often paralleled heated social and culture divisions. Smith's own family mirrored the national situation; his grandfather was a Universalist (that all humans could receive God's corrective grace; they *opposed* evangelicals); his mother has been identified as Presbyterian (officially, she would have believed that God's eternal decree predestined some to eternal blessedness and foreordained others to eternal damnation; Presbyterians tended to be *allied with* evangelicals). Joseph Jr. may have caught a "spark of (evangelical) Methodism" at local rural revival meetings. His maternal grandfather and parents experienced visions and voices; like many farmers they used divining rods to find water and looked for buried treasure, a kind of folk magic. They believed in prophecy and vision, tended towards skepticism about "organized religion," and were receptive to new religious ideas. He is reported to have [told his mother](#), "I can take my Bible, and go into the woods, and learn

more in two hours, than you can learn at meeting in two years, if you should go all the time."

In the religious marketplace in western New York, Smith's family were typical of a market segment often ignored by the more well-established groups who appealed to more prosperous farmers, townspeople, and entrepreneurs (see Johnson's [*Shopkeepers Millennium*](#)). Smith's family, on the other hand, were downwardly mobile recent arrivals from Vermont without a network of support, a consequence both of poor decisions and environmental strains such as the "Year without a Summer" (1816). They typify the impoverished, rural working class on the inner edge of the frontier, a down-market segment less promising to more prominent groups, for whom the competitive religious marketplace was particularly nettlesome.

The 14-year-old Joseph [was confused](#) by the "cry and tumult" of Presbyterians vs. Baptist vs. Methodist, all using "both reason and sophistry," to "establish their own tenets and disprove all others." He asked, "What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know?" In other words, his market segment saw that ecclesiastical competition compromised the integrity of all parties. Reading a biblical text that directed him to ask God, he went into the woods (again!) and reported he experienced a dramatic theophany: the "Personage" answered "that I must join none of them," their "creeds were an abomination" and adherents "were all corrupt." His take-away: he realized "at a very early period of my life, that I was destined to prove a disturber and annoyer." Joseph's subsequent innovations certainly disturbed and annoyed other groups.

Care must be taken, however, in simply equating Joseph's social location with a commercial market position, because the religious "marketplace" differs in important ways from commerce: product differentiation, lock-in, and brand loyalty.

The religious "product" is not a commodity, but a sense of living affiliation with a group that makes doctrinal, moral, and behavioral claims in such a way that simultaneous affiliation with more than one group is either prohibited or discouraged. The ultimate outcome, some kind of eternal blessedness, in principle excludes other ultimate outcomes. Today many children in "mixed" families can feel religious differences strongly (and opt for "none"). For example, an individual cannot be a Catholic in good standing and simultaneously an evangelical Baptist in good standing -their claims and ideas simply conflict too much; if both present in the same family, some accommodation must be reached. Joseph Smith Jr. found such exclusive "product differentiation" troublesome.

Adherents' "market lock in" is high: one might radically change one's affiliation once or twice in a lifetime, but more often is unusual and perhaps suspect, and "conversion" can exact high social costs. The religious fervor of New York's Burned Over district in

Joseph Smith, Jr.'s time left religious organizations in flux, so that conversion costs were often much less than before or after. All early Latter Day Saints nevertheless had to make a clear decision that departed from their inherited religious affiliations.

A religious group's "brand loyalty" involves a constellation of commitments; socialist Fundamentalists and alt-right Episcopalians are vanishingly rare (for example). The brand loyalty of early Latter Day Saints evolved from 1830 to 1844, becoming progressively stronger both in positive response to Joseph Smith Jr.'s continuing revelations, and defensive response to violent persecution. For example, early Saints' constellation of commitments was ambivalent towards slavery; initially as Northerners early adherents opposed it; then revelations and teachings evolved to allow some slaveholders to join in Missouri (a slave state). After Smith's murder, his son Joseph Smith III and widow Emma Hale Smith repudiated both slavery and plural marriage in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Missouri, the "minority" successor group. By contrast, Brigham Young's larger "majority" successor not only retained plural marriage but attempted to legalize slavery in the Utah Territory. Since Republicans, starting in 1854, sought to abolish "twin relics of barbarism," slavery and polygamy (a jab at Young's group), it is unclear whether that commitment arose from core convictions or defensive resistance.

"Disruptive innovation" in the religious marketplace has to be treated carefully, because of not only the special nature of the religious market place, but also rigorous examination of the idea of "disruptive innovation:" it does not mean just any disruption.

Whatever the sources of Joseph Smith Jr.'s ideas, he led a movement that "gain[ed] customers (i.e., adherents) by providing more suitable, often simpler products or services, frequently at a lower cost." (Latter-day Saints have never had professional clergy; their commitment to mutual assistance is exemplary.) Market incumbents (more organized and better financed competing groups) were slow to respond in kind, and as Smith's group moved "upmarket," it maintained its "advantages and early success" - high rates of "lock-in," group cohesion, and brand loyalty. Smith's group, however, never quite succeeded in driving the "incumbents" out of the market or even acquiring most of their former customers. Their sense of urgency lost its edge.

Why are the Latter-day Saints "latter-day"? This code phrase refers above all to a shared set of cultural and religious assumptions and commitments in early 19th-century America. "Millennialism" was the belief that the coming of the Kingdom of God (promised in the Bible) was imminent and that America, with its special covenant of religious liberty, would be central to its arrival. Millennialism came in two distinct forms with opposite answers to the question, "Will Christ return before or after the promised millennium (1000 years) of peace?" Pre-millennialists emphasized the troubles (tribulations) that would both *precede* and signal Christ's return to reign for 1000 years before the Last Judgement. Post-millennialists proclaimed that Christ would return and the Last Judgement occur *after* the millennium of peace, culminating in his return; their

task was to make the world ready for the Kingdom of God. Both expect the Kingdom very soon: we are all living in the biblical "latter days."

This recondite disagreement has important implications. Post-millennialists were all about social reforms that would make the United States so like the Kingdom of God that American society would usher in the millennium. Pre-millennialists emphasized that Christ would only come after dramatically increasing tribulations. Things getting worse and worse were a sign of his approach –hence they disfavored social reforms as a distraction from the real work of preparation for evil times. (Historical aside: the War of the Secession largely discredited post-millennialism, which morphed into the program of social reforms in the Progressive era. Pre-millennialism evolved into [dispensational Christian fundamentalism](#), combining expectation of tribulation with a believe in the factual, literal inneracy of the Bible.)

Latter-day Saints' enduring post-millennialism shows, among other ways, in their boundless optimism. The familiar, earnest young missionaries (think *The Book of Mormon*, the Broadway show) are a token of the continuing commitment of the Latter-day Saints to usher in the latter days, although they expect them less imminently. Millennialism is common coin no longer. Despite the popularity of the "Left Behind" series of books and movies, only a small minority of survivalists or "preppers" appeal to Biblical warrants for their expectations of imminent tribulations (disaster).

Detached from Christianity, expectations of imminent disaster and rebirth went rogue in American culture long ago. The Silicon Valley today, for example, is home to many who expect a "singularity" in which the artificial intelligence outstrips human intelligence and introduces profound changes to civilization as a whole –another sort of secular millennium in which technology has replaced a Messiah as the anointed power. Popular movies and books have made dystopia a cultural cliché. (What's the disaster this time? Nuclear war, apes, viruses, climate change, or the abrupt disappearance of millions?). How many jokes about "voting in the last American election" (double entendre) play on similar fears?

"Disruptive innovation's" popularity exploded in the 1990s and 2000s exactly because of the numerous hopes and fears raised by the advent of the Internet and its devices and social media. Josh Linkner warned, "disrupt or be disrupted," ([The Road to Reinvention](#), 2014) and that binary choice spoke in apocalyptic tones to incumbent mass media, libraries, bookstores, journalists, travel agents, financial consultants, university presidents, and anyone else who deals in "information" as a commodity. Such urgent warnings shout to established corporations, "The end is near: you can't innovate fast enough; you're not even the right people to do it." Incumbent organizations were counted out simply because of their incumbency: MOOCs would [inevitably disrupt](#) brick-and-mortar educational institutions, now denigrated because of their mere physicality.

The popular version of "disruptive innovation" played dystopian fears of the collapse of the known "incumbent" corporations and rise of an economy of perpetual disruption -Schumpeter's [capitalist creative destruction](#) now recast as "disruptive innovation" with a brutalist, binary emphasis: disrupt or be disrupted. The archetype "creative disruptor" is the technological whiz-kid (I nominate the Mark, "Zuck Almighty") whose revelatory "Book of Faces" and continuing revelations of a "new and everlasting platform" will usher in a thousand-year era of effortless, limitless, and unfailingly upbeat social confabulation. Except when many kinds of terrorists, Russian autocrats, vaccine deniers, and deranged stalkers confabulate as well.

What does this have to do with Clayton Christensen? Well, both a little and a lot. He cannot deny [his own popularization of his ideas](#) through his books, media appearances, securities fund (the short-lived Disruptive Growth Fund, launched in 2000 at just the wrong time), and army of students, friends, and defenders such as [Thomas Thurston in TechCrunch](#). He lost control of "disruptive innovation" as a term of art precisely because of its appeal to those who make a living from in-your-face, counterintuitive claims. Lepore identified circular reasoning in the popular idea of creative disruption ("If an established company doesn't disrupt, it will fail, and if it fails it must be because it didn't disrupt"). This logical circle may or may not characterize highly-disciplined case studies of Christensen's theory, but certainly rings true to the endless popular iterations.

Whether Christensen's theory holds up almost does not matter to "disruptive innovation" as a popular idea. By analogy, in Smith's America, as [Terryl Givens](#) has noted, what mattered about the Book of Mormon was not its teachings or particular message. "It was the mere presence of the Book of Mormon itself as an object that . . . served as concrete evidence that God had opened the heavens again." In that era all manner of revelations appeared: the Shakers' [Holy, Sacred, and Divine Roll and Book](#), the visionary experiences of [Ellen G. White](#) (one of the originators of the Seventh-Day Adventists), and the visions of [rival claimnants of Smith's prophetic mantel](#) among the Latter Day Saints after his death. [Kathleen Flake has noted](#), "Henry Ford wanted a car in every home. Joseph Smith was the Henry Ford of revelation. He wanted every home to have one, and the revelation he had in mind was the revelation he'd had, which was seeing God." The heavens, once opened, proved harder to close.

The popular idea "creative disruption" has attached itself, meme-like, to a lot of second- and third-rate scams. Business theory has fewer brightly defined disciplinary boundaries than physics. [King's and Baatartogtokh's](#) conclusion that the theory has limited predictive power does not render Christensen's ideas useless, but does suggest that "disruptive innovation" will not be the "one theory to rule them all," and with the profits or prophets bind them.

Joseph Smith Jr. claimed that the encounter he had with the Holy in the woods warned him not to join any of the (Protestant) groups in his vicinity, whose creeds were all

"corrupt" and "an abomination." Christian restorationists called the very early Christian movement in the short times reflected in the New Testament texts "the primitive church," and regarded all subsequent developments as not merely wrong, but apostate: those knew the truth but deliberately denied it. Joseph Smith, Jr.'s saw his new revelation as a [giant delete key](#) on all of Christian history, Orthodox Eastern, Catholic, and Protestant. All of it had to go.

In a similar manner, popular "disruptive innovation" connotes the passing destruction of all that is wrong with sclerotic corporate capitalism, and the restoration of the pure, "invisible hand" of the marketplace that allegedly guided early capitalists. This popular view resonates with a great deal of cultural, political libertarianism, that giant corporations and government bureaucracy are apostasy betraying the true faith handed down from the founders (either Jesus or Adam Smith, as you wish). "Move fast and break things," [advised the Zuck](#); what can be disrupted should be disrupted. Including, it would now seem, democracy wherever it might be found.

Disciplined use of the theory of "disruptive innovation" in carefully defined circumstances provides explanatory clarity but its predictive power is in fact more of a hope than an established fact, [despite the protests](#) of Christensen's defenders. This means that it is one theory among other theories: Michael Porter's [theory of competitive advantages](#) and multifactorial analyses will likely work equally well in other carefully-defined situations. Similarly, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has found ways of regarding other religious groups positively (even Evangelicals, often the most hostile), and has moved on from the language of "apostasy." Originally intending to hit that giant delete key, subsequent Latter-day Saints have found a way to live as active readers of their particular texts in the midst of many other readers of many other texts. This has relevance on the ground. Given the official LDS teachings regarding divorce and homosexuality, some LDS families have found informal means to include and tolerate differences within their members, coming to resemble the family life Joseph Smith Jr. knew as a boy. (Others have continued to shun their "apostates.")

Unlike Smith, Christensen never intended to promulgate a "unified field theory" of religion or business development. He is not *completely* responsible for losing control of his theory as a popular idea. The close of his 20-year, [2015 re-evaluation](#), "We still have a lot to learn" acknowledges that "disruption theory does not, and never will, explain everything about innovation specifically or business success generally."

Christensen's modesty still did not inhibit him from doubling down on his claim that half of American colleges and universities would close by 2025.) Allowing his claim relative rather than revelatory validity dispels the apocalyptic fears of barbarians at the gates. His primary analogy in [The Innovative University](#) (2011) is "changing the DNA of American Higher Education from the Inside Out," (the subtitle). He claims that all American colleges and universities other than a branch of Brigham Young University in Idaho share the DNA of Harvard: all these institutions want to become, apparently,

Research-1 universities if given money and the chance. What does that really mean, and is that really true? Such a simple analogy does grave injustice to community colleges (vital economic links for countless communities and immigrants), specialized schools such as [Maine Maritime Academy](#), or even an elite liberal arts college such as [DePauw University](#). The popular view that higher education has changed and can change little, is flat wrong: ask [any productive historian](#) of higher education. Change and innovation (whether disruptive or other) will not appear equally and everywhere overnight. The higher education sector is not (thank heavens) the Silicon Valley, or McKinsey & Co.

Yet all is not well: the economic model underpinning American higher education is likely unsustainable in the coming decades for many reasons. Higher education also forms a huge social and financial investment that unlikely to dissipate. Distance education, information technology, changing social expectations, shifting demographics will all play a role in whether particular colleges and universities can continue to be viable. Disciplined use of the theory of "disruptive innovation" will likely hold some, but is unlikely to hold *all* explanatory and predictive keys. The truth is out there but it will be much more complex.

The striking persistence of the popular "disruptive innovation" in senior management circles (typified by the Salesforce.com higher education event) reveals not only persistent fears and enduring threats, but short attention spans devoted to keeping up with the swift pace of too many events. I suspect that popular "disruptive innovative" functions in a manner more affiliative than explanatory: "if you don't get it, you're not one of us. -- You think Jill Lepore, or King and Baartatogtokh, might be right, eh? Let's see how long you last in the C-Suite" (--especially if you can pronounce the latter's name).

"Disruptive innovation" elicits fears useful for those who want to shake up certain professions in health, law, librarianship, and the professoriate, but by now its been over-used. At librarians' meetings (ALA, ACRL) I have developed the habit of responding to the expression, "disruptive innovation" with the question, "what are you selling?" Fear sells "solutions;" its potency as a means of marketing continues nearly unrivaled. No one ever sold an expensive library services platform with the phrase, "this won't solve all your problems." Since 1985 I have sat through many presentations that predicted the closure of libraries within ten years - Christensen's remark "I might bet that it takes nine years rather than ten" would find a new audience. We who are about to be disrupted salute you, Prophet.

Nevertheless: printed books, asking questions, research assistance, and personal relationships with library instructors endure. They were warned, but they persisted. It is past time to find a more accurate analysis and predictive theory of the future of libraries and higher education. - *Gavin Ferriby*