CHAPTER 31

Summing Up: Problems and Prospects for a Global Church in the Twenty-first Century

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From a small, esoteric group in upstate New York, the Mormon movement has expanded around the world and splintered into numerous well-established religions. While occasionally referencing other religions within the Mormon movement, this chapter will primarily focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is the largest and most international of the Mormon religions. The international expansion of the LDS Church initially took place in fits and starts. As Bartholomew, McDannell, Otterstrom and Plewe, and Stewart detailed in their chapters in this volume, the policy of gathering stunted international growth for much of the first century of the religion (1830–1930), preventing the religion from building a local base of members in the various countries where the leadership sent missionaries. Once converts were encouraged to stay where they were, international growth increased.

The period of rapid growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church)—from the end of World War II until the turn of the twenty-first century—was likely less about how the LDS Church approached proselytizing (i.e., “supply”) and more about the confluence of American appeal and demand. As van Beek, Decoo, and Decoo detail in their chapter, much of the world was enamored with the US following World War II (WWII); the missionaries and message of this very American religion, as Maffly-Kipp argues in her chapter, were quite attractive. The transition to a younger, single, and dedicated missionary force that capitalized on widespread American appeal combined with rapid socioeconomic development around the world that lead to social dislocation created high demand for a religion that offered security.

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and community. As Martinich illustrates in his chapter examining LDS Church growth, the roughly 40 years between 1960 and 2000 were characterized by rapid growth, which forced the leadership to enact a number of changes. The leadership needed to professionalize to manage the growth. Business executives were called into the upper leadership to help with financial oversight and to correlate doctrine, teachings, and the leadership structure—streamlining the religion to help it function like a highly efficient corporation (see the chapters by Garcia and Prince for additional discussion of the corporatization of the LDS Church over time). The LDS Church organization has certainly proven nimble, flexible, collaborative, and socially responsible in dealing with various natural crises in modern times, exemplified by its response to the current global coronavirus pandemic as detailed in Evan’s chapter.

As of early 2020, the LDS Church claimed a membership over 16 million, though scholars are well-aware that those numbers are substantially inflated as they fail to reflect the millions of converts who no longer identify as members. Actual members who self-identify and participate are substantially smaller than the claimed membership. The structure of the religion—from local to regional leaders all the way up to the Church headquarters and the professional staff and general authorities—is now clearly delineated. While the finances of the LDS Church remain opaque and it requires whistle blowers and leaks to discern the wealth and investments of the religion, it is clear that the LDS Church is on sound financial footing and has sufficient wealth to sustain it for decades to come, as Evans and Moffat and Woods argue in their respective chapters in this volume.

As the luster of American greatness has waned in the early twenty-first century, economic development has leveled off, and secularization has accelerated in all of the developed world and much of the still developing world, the LDS Church is arguably in the middle of a pivot in its focus. Managing rapid growth seems to be less of a priority; preventing the hemorrhaging of members is increasingly a serious concern. Academics, minorities, and Indigenous communities around the world have called into question the ethics of globalization, colonial practices, and cultural destruction by hegemonic superpowers, science, corporations, and religions. Additionally, of the 195 countries in existence in 2020, 30 have legalized same-sex marriage and attitudes have shifted in a more accepting direction toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in most of those 30 countries. Awareness and a growing acceptance of transgender individuals is spreading in the developed world, though there is still a long road ahead for the normalization of transgender individuals. Countries are now ranked on gender inequality by the United Nations, raising numerous concerns about the patriarchal structures and doctrines of the LDS Church in the twenty-first century. Millions of people are also leaving religions, growing increasingly disillusioned with antiquated and discriminatory values and practices, with doctrines and beliefs that are no longer credible in the light of modern science and scholarship, and with ecclesiastical dishonesty and abuse.

In the twenty-first century, the leadership of the LDS Church has demonstrated interest in addressing criticisms for its lack of multiculturalism, its continued exclusion of sexual and gender minorities, and its inability to retain...
members and declining growth rates in the face of secularization. Throughout this volume, the various chapters have touched on each of these challenges facing Mormonism generally and the LDS Church specifically. In this concluding chapter, I summarize these challenges and problems the now globalized LDS Church faces in the twenty-first century.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is the presence of or acceptance of varied cultures within a group. For any religion that expands beyond its initial cultural group, questions about how to accommodate different cultures will arise. A clear illustration of this question comes from Acts in the New Testament (see Chaps. 10 and 15), when the early apostles of Jesus, who were all Jews, wrestled with the question of whether Gentiles could become Christians. They had to decide questions like: do Gentiles have to follow kosher laws? And do Gentiles have to get circumcised? The social structure of the LDS Church has made it difficult for the leadership to understand and embrace multiculturalism. The way the religion’s hierarchy is organized and selected almost guarantees that the upper echelon of leadership remains monocultural.

As detailed by Prince in his chapter, the highest decision making bodies in the LDS Church are the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The First Presidency is made up of individuals selected from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, which means the highest level of leadership in the LDS Church is made up exclusively of Apostles. The selection process used by apostles to select new apostles isn’t perfectly clear, but, by examining those who are selected, it seems highly likely that selection is based on some or all of the following criteria: demonstrated past dedication to the religion (e.g., having served in local and regional leadership positions), demonstrated leadership ability, and some degree of expertise in one’s profession. Structurally, what these requirements necessarily result in is the selection of older male individuals as they have to have experience both within the LDS Church and within the world at large. Because of the implicit selection criteria, the odds of a 20-year-old (or even anyone under about 50 years of age) being selected as an apostle are very low. And because the highest leadership positions at every level in the LDS Church are all reserved for men, women are excluded. As a result of the hierarchy’s relatively rigid albeit informal practice for deciding who will become an apostle, the highest levels of leadership of the LDS Church—The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—are virtually guaranteed to be made up of older males (a problematic outcome also addressed by Stewart in his chapter on LDS growth dynamics). That, of course, is the case as of early 2020. The average age of the apostles (counting both the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve) is 76. The two most recently selected apostles, Ulisses Soares and Gerrit Gong, who were sustained in 2018, were 59 and 64 at the time of their ordination, respectively.

The other structural component that contributes to the monocultural nature of the leadership of the LDS Church is how those meeting the above criteria...
are ultimately selected from the pool of qualifying candidates. If selection of apostles was intended to represent the cultural makeup of the religion, with more than half of the membership outside the US, there should be substantial diversity among the apostles—some from Europe, some from Asia, some from Latin America, and some from states other than Utah. But, structurally, apostle selection is a top-down process and not a bottom-up process; it is not a democratic election and there is no way for a lay member of the religion to nominate worthy candidates to become apostles. Selection is based on formal and informal social network ties. Basically, this comes down to who the existing apostles know. A somewhat simplified illustration of this is to examine where the current apostles were born. Of the 15 apostles in early 2020, 13 of the 15 were born in the US; ten were born in Utah. Given the current characteristics of apostles, it is clear that the method for selection draws upon social ties rather than proportionate representation. Given what we know about human social ordering, it is not surprising that existing apostles tend to select apostles who are a lot like themselves.

To summarize, then: all of the apostles are elderly white men. Two thirds of them were born in Utah and just two apostles (13 percent) were born outside the US (Soares in Brazil; Uchtdorf in Czech Republic). The selection process for apostles—which is a manifestation of the social structure of the religion—leads to a shared culture, a monoculture, within the highest echelons of the Church. LDS general authorities generally share the same beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors. Perhaps the selection of two apostles who are not from the US and one apostle who is a racial minority (Gong is Asian American) will start to open up the possibility of broadening the monoculture among ecclesiastical leaders. But, at present, top LDS Church leadership appears to struggle with the idea that there might be more than one way to be a righteous Mormon in good standing with the Church.

The various chapters in this volume illustrate the lack of multiculturalism in the leadership of the LDS Church. McDannell’s chapter shows these challenges quite well, noting that Mormons around the world have generally not been allowed to write their own hymns (a point also addressed by Stewart in his growth dynamics chapter) but, instead, have been forced to sing translated versions of hymns that were written almost exclusively by Mormons of European descent (Allen and Östman note in their chapters there is an initiative to change this that began in 2019). In other words, there is no Ghanaian Mormon hymn book filled with songs that reflect Ghanaian melodies or perspectives on Mormon doctrines or values. There is, as of early 2020, only a Ghanaian translation of the universal Mormon hymn book; Ghanaian Mormons sing songs that reflect the values of white Mormons from the US. McDannell argues quite compellingly that the leadership of the LDS Church has pursued a path of “universalism” over multiculturalism, suggesting that the vision of what it means to be a good Mormon held by the apostles is true for all people of every culture around the world. McDannell illustrates that the leadership of the religion in the nineteenth century held similar views, attributing the declining rates of growth of the religion in Europe not to encouraging converts to
migrate to Utah but rather to the idea that they had “harvested” all of the worthy people in Europe, which retrospectively reads as an implicit condemnation and thoughtless insult to all those who remained in Europe.

Ironically, the LDS Church may have been more multicultural in the nineteenth century than it is in the twenty-first century, as Laurie Maffly-Kipp argues in her chapter. With the rapid influx of mostly European migrants to the body of the Saints (in both Nauvoo and then in Utah), there was widespread intermingling of cultures, languages, and ideas. At the time, Mormonism was widely rejected in the US and was considered un-American, often being grouped with Islam and not considered Christian, in part because of the hierarchical structure of the religion and its embrace of polygamy (see Bennion’s chapter on Mormon fundamentalism). However, with the discontinuation of polygamist practice at the end of the nineteenth century and the eventual adoption and enforcement of specific behavioral practices during the twentieth century (e.g., no drinking alcohol, no swearing, encouraging conservative family values, etc.), the LDS Church came to be seen as quintessentially American. In many respects, it reflected the values and mores of twentieth century America. And, in many respects, it continues to do so in the religion’s efforts to spread internationally. Just as the US government has and continues to push American values throughout the world both explicitly through military and economic means and more subtly through the export of US media, the LDS Church is similarly exporting conservative, white, middle-class American values by encouraging Mormons around the world to worship and behave in essentially the same way Mormons in Utah do (Cooper and Hernandez de Olarte and Stewart discuss this at length in their chapters in this volume). Men and women are encouraged to groom and dress themselves the same way in Fiji as they are in New Guinea, South Africa, South Korea, Russia, and Ecuador, and that blueprint was drawn and packaged in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Leaders of the LDS Church describe the Utah-based, white, middle-class, American culture they advocate not as monoculturalism but as “gospel culture” (see the chapter by Barber on Australia and New Zealand). Laurie Maffly-Kipp notes how “gospel culture” was used as a justification to tear down low-income housing around the New Zealand temple, much of which was built and occupied by less affluent members of the religion. That housing was then replaced by upscale housing sold on the open market. Similar projects have been completed near the Salt Lake City and Ogden temples, as church leaders wanted the immediate areas surrounding the temples to reflect the middle-class values they espouse. In the process, intentionally or not, the message LDS Church leadership is sending is that gospel culture embodies white American middle-class values.

Other examples of LDS Church leaders failing to reflect multiculturalism are examined in almost every chapter in this volume. LDS Church leaders have discouraged lobola or bride wealth, a common practice in South Africa which, if not followed, can lead to cultural rejection (see Kline’s chapter). Barber illustrates similar problems in New Zealand as LDS Church leaders have
discouraged Māori funerary rites (*tangihanga*) and have strongly encouraged Māori members to assimilate to the values of English-speaking New Zealanders.

Palmer and Knowlton illustrate how the leaders of the LDS Church distanced members from the process of creating a holy temple in Arequipa, Peru, insisting that what is important is not the site, not the building, not the architecture, but what happens inside. In the process, as Palmer and Knowlton compellingly illustrate, Peruvian members of the religion have to find ways to make their temple sacred. Palmer and Knowlton argue that the temple construction philosophy of the LDS Church is designed to be a one-size-fits-all package with no attempts to get local input or even local help. In the interests of corporate expediency, cultural customization of the holiest of holy edifices in Mormonism is no longer allowed.

Cooper and Hernandez de Olarte’s chapter on Mexico provides a compelling illustration of how LDS Church monoculturalism can lead to disastrous outcomes, like the Third Convention split that occurred in Mexico when LDS Church leaders refused to select local members to lead the religion. While many of those who left the Church eventually returned, this is a clear illustration of how efforts to impose white, middle-class, American strictures on local cultures and populations can result in serious problems for the LDS Church. Van Beek et al. illustrate how the failure of LDS Church leaders in the US to understand that “religious freedom” is understood very differently in Europe than it is among conservative Christian groups in the US led to serious problems in obtaining visas for missionaries, a problem that could easily have been avoided by consulting with local members. Halford and O’Brien similarly illustrate that LDS Church leaders’ dismissal of the long and serious conflict between England and the Republic of Ireland has resulted in a single administrative unit overseeing both locations and similar missionary policies being employed, policies that are more attuned to England than they are to Ireland.

Allen and Östman also discuss the challenges that the lack of multiculturalism among the leadership impose on members living outside the US culture region. In Scandinavia, members were required for a long time to use Mormon vernacular that clearly set them apart from other Christians (e.g., “ward,” “stake,” “beehive,” etc.; Rainock and Takagi note similar problems with Mormon terminology in Japan in their chapter). Members were discouraged from wearing traditional dress to religious services and instead had to wear the Mormon “uniform” that, again, reflects white middle-class American and corporate values—conservative dresses for women and a white shirt and tie for men. LDS leaders frowned on Scandinavian members celebrating cultural traditions that were linked with Lutheran Christianity, which worked to further marginalize Scandinavian members. As Allen and Östman argue, many of these cultural conflicts could be addressed by Utah Church authorities simply listening to the members and local leaders around the world rather than dictating to them what must happen. Rainock and Takagi frame these cultural conflicts as an issue of “religious capital,” arguing that the substantial amount of religious
capital required to adopt Mormonism comes at considerable cost in Japan, a country with a very different set of cultural norms, values, and beliefs when compared to white, middle-class, teetotaling Mormons in Utah.

Moffatt and Woods suggest in their chapter that the LDS Church has made some progress toward multiculturalism, pointing toward, for instance, the translation of Church materials. However, translating materials into a local language does not make a religion multicultural any more than translating the TV show *Friends* into Arabic makes it suddenly reflect Saudi Arabian values (Prince makes this point clearly in his chapter). Translating Mormon texts into other languages is a first step toward communication, but using translated materials to prescribe “gospel culture” as the norm for Mormons around the world is not multiculturalism.

Whether the leaders of the LDS Church are willing to adjust the religion to cultures around the world (as affirmed by Martins in his chapter on LDS transformations in Brazil) or not, local members of the religion will adjust Mormonism to fit their situation. Thomas Murphy’s chapter on Indigenous Mormons in the US provides keen insights into how this happens and how it is manifest. Some Indigenous American Mormons have syncretized the doctrines and values of the LDS Church. As Murphy summarizes, some Indigenous Mormons tell completely different religious origin stories that counter the colonial narrative offered by Joseph Smith Jr., which remains the standard narrative today—that Native Americans are the “fallen” descendants of righteous believers who must be saved by white Europeans and brought back into Christ’s fold. For these Indigenous groups, Joseph Smith Jr. inverted the “true” narrative—it is not the Europeans who have come to save Indigenous populations but rather Europeans who have corrupted Indigenous teachings and have then tried to force those corrupted ideas onto Indigenous populations. Native American ancestors always had “true” religion and they perceive similarities between the pure and authentic religion of their ancestors and Mormonism, but also see Mormonism as having been corrupted, rejecting the narrative of LDS Church leadership. Barber describes similar instances of syncretism among the Māori who, rather than discontinue their traditional religious practices, have adapted them to accommodate Mormonism. It is unlikely the current leadership of the LDS Church will embrace alternative cosmologies and rituals that differ as radically as those of the Indigenous Americans and the Māori do from LDS colonial narratives, which is why multiculturalism will continue to be a challenge for the LDS Church.

In addition to wrestling with how to adjust Mormonism to cultures around the world, the LDS Church continues to struggle with its racist past and present. The monoculturalism of the Church makes it extremely difficult for both leaders and members to see how a policy change and a denial that the LDS Church taught racist doctrine for close to a century are not enough to help Black members feel like they are part of the religion. As noted in the chapters by Barber, Garcia, Kline, Martins, Williams, and Stevenson, the LDS Church changed its policy on Black members in 1978, allowing them to fully
participate in the religion at that time. Martins and Stevenson both argue that this change was heavily motivated by international expansion and growth—primarily in Brazil and Africa—and not motivated by a desire to accommodate Black individuals in the US. Barber’s discussion of Australian aboriginals and some Polynesians illustrates the complexity of the 1978 policy change. Until 1964, Australian aboriginals were considered “black” by LDS Church leaders, and, as a result, were discouraged from joining the LDS Church. But LDS Church leaders changed their mind in 1964 and Australian aboriginals were suddenly no longer considered “black.” As is widely understood today, this arbitrary declassification of a people of color—Australian aborigines—as not being Black demonstrates that race is a social construction, not a meaningful biological distinction, that is used to discriminate. That LDS leaders could arbitrarily classify and declassify groups as being “black” illustrates how race is an instrument of prejudice.

While some may argue that the 1978 policy change ended racial discrimination in the LDS Church, multiple chapters in this volume indicate that that is not the case. Garcia reports repeated instances of discrimination in wards throughout the US, as does Williams. This has also been shown in other research on the LDS Church. Kline makes it clear that, even though the women who were interviewed in South Africa didn’t focus on racial discrimination, many noticed that none of the apostles or First Presidency were people of color (when the interviews took place, that was the case). The clearest illustration of the consequences of monoculturalism among the LDS Church’s leadership is Williams’ chapter. Much of her chapter focuses on the Black Legacy Conference that takes place annually in Washington, D.C. While the conference provides an opportunity for Black Mormons to gather and support each other, the origins of that conference are informative. It was not organized by the LDS Church. It was organized by frustrated Black members and was allowed to proceed by leaders of the LDS Church, similar to the Genesis Group in Utah. In other words, on issues of race, LDS leaders don’t seem to know how to move forward. They certainly want to distance themselves from the explicitly racist past, but the lack of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity among the general authorities of the religion means that they are following discussions of race, not leading them. As Williams argues, this is a clear example of structural racism.

Stevenson’s chapter on the LDS Church in Ghana and Nigeria problematizes issues of colonialism and racism and provides important nuance for this discussion (as does Cusack’s analysis of Indigenous peoples in her chapter on Canada). As Stevenson argues, the long history of conquest, forced assimilation, and cultural contact between Africa and other parts of the world means that there is no fantasized “pure” African culture. For many Ghanaian and Nigerian members, part of the appeal of the LDS Church is that it reflects middle-class American values (an argument similar to that made by van Beek et al. for Europeans in the twentieth century). Converts to Mormonism in Africa may adopt—wholly or in part—“gospel culture” and assimilate to white, American, middle-class values, but that may be what they want. To argue that
the LDS Church is exclusively a colonial and imperialist institution is also to argue that converts to the religion lack autonomy, which, ironically, is also a colonial argument.

While LDS Church monoculturalism is problematic and has caused challenges for members around the world, Howlett’s chapter on the Community of Christ in the Philippines offers an important counterpoint. As he details, the original foray of what was then the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS) into the Philippines took place under leaders who jettisoned most of the beliefs and practices that made the RLDS distinct. These leaders had embraced indigenization to such an extent that the early converts in the Philippines were told that they didn’t have to change any of their beliefs or practices in order to be members of the religion. More recent leaders in the Philippines have realized that this approach has its own problems and have moved the members and congregations of the Community of Christ in the Philippines toward closer alignment with the Community of Christ in the US while still retaining some of the cultural adaptations that have made the religion work. Howlett’s chapter suggests that unfettered indigenization and multiculturalism is probably not the answer to the LDS Church’s problem with multiculturalism (Rainock and Takagi make a similar argument in their chapter). The solution moving forward is likely a middle path—some cultural adaptation within broadened LDS Church values.

The LDS Church, as a global religion, has a serious challenge before it: how does it adjust to or accommodate the many cultures around the world where people have joined the religion? Other religions (e.g., Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and Catholicism) have faced these challenges in the past and have all found ways to accommodate varied cultures. Can the LDS Church do the same?

**Gender and Sexuality**

The LDS Church is also facing challenges resulting from changes in norms related to gender and sexuality. With growing gender equality around the world, the Church will be pressured to allow cisgender women all the same opportunities as cisgender men and will also be pressured to discontinue its current discrimination against transgender individuals. The LDS Church will also continue to be pressured to change its discriminatory policies and doctrines against lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Pressure on both of these issues will continue to come from both inside and outside the religion.

The LDS Church is not an egalitarian institution; it’s theology and policies discriminate on the basis of sex, gender, and sexuality (as Ross and Finnegan clearly illustrate in their chapter). In order for the LDS Church to be fully egalitarian, women (and all other gender identities as well as non-heterosexual individuals) would need to have the ability to serve in and hold all of the same positions in the religion as do heterosexual men. That would include every position from prophet and apostle to Aaronic Priesthood holder. As of spring 2020, women cannot hold all of the same positions as do men in the LDS Church.
Church; its priesthood organization is explicitly patriarchal, and not egalitarian. As several of the chapters in this volume make clear (see the chapters by Kline and Ross and Finnegan, in particular), arguments that men and women (ignoring other genders and sexes for a moment) are “separate but equal,” or “different but equal,” or “complementary in their equality” in the LDS Church are disingenuous. A simple test of this would be to replace “women” in these comparisons with other groups. Would the LDS Church be egalitarian if Argentinians could not hold all the same positions as Americans? Or if red-haired Saints couldn’t hold all the same positions as members of the religion with blonde hair? And what if Black men could not hold all the same positions as white men? In all of these scenarios, no one would, as of 2020, claim that the religion is “separate but equal.” These would be clear illustrations of discrimination and inequality. Yet, ecclesiastical leaders euphemistically continue to claim that there is no inequality between men and women in the LDS Church because men and women have “complementary” roles.

Patriarchy in the LDS Church clearly exists, but it should also not be overstated. It is the case that the teachings and policies of the LDS Church strongly discourage spousal abuse and, in practice, many Mormons hold views toward gender equality that align with those of their surrounding culture. As noted above, because the leadership of the LDS Church is largely monocultural and that culture is a reflection of middle-class, white American (albeit conservative) values, explicit suggestions that men and women are not equal and that women should be subservient to men have diminished substantially over time. As a result, in some cultures where spousal abuse and more severe inequality between men and women exist, the LDS Church can seem relatively progressive when it comes to gender equality (see the chapters by Kline, Garcia, Cooper and Hernandez de Olarte, and Moffatt and Woods).

Nevertheless, gender discrimination continues in the LDS Church. There has been vocal opposition and activism to change this over the last decade. Intriguingly, research on granting women the priesthood suggests that female members of the religion are less in favor of such a change than are male members of the religion, as noted by Ross and Finnegan in their chapter. This may seem surprising, but recent research on gender and religion suggests that women who are members of conservative religions are strongly supportive of sexist policies. Some women find validation of their desire to stay home and raise children inside conservative religions. Some women are empowered within conservative religions as they are still given a fair amount of control and responsibility. An alternative perspective on why women in conservative religions defend their subordination derives from system justification theory. From this perspective, Mormon women internalize their inferiority and then defend their subordination more vocally than do men in order to align their self-perception with the system of inequality in which they find themselves. Regardless of the explanation, research suggests that many Mormon women justify and defend the patriarchal structure of the religion and even go so far as
to claim that the LDS Church is egalitarian, in spite of their institutionally subordinate positions.

Of course, not all Mormons defend gender discrimination. Many criticize it. Gender inequality factors into the reasons given by many people who leave the LDS Church (exemplified in Cusack’s chapter, wherein she discusses LDS disaffiliation trends in Canada). And many people outside the religion criticize this inequality. Given changing gender norms and dynamics around the world, with many countries now mandating that women must have specified representation in government and growing initiatives to empower women in industry, education, government, non-profits, and even in religion, pressure will continue to mount for the LDS Church to change its policies, practices, and even doctrines regarding the role of women. Given the gendered nature of Mormon doctrine, this will not be an easy task and will likely take decades. But it is a problem facing the increasingly globalized LDS Church that will have to be continuously addressed, likely through small concessions such as those that have occurred in recent years: balancing the funds given to young women’s programs with those given to young men’s programs in wards, including women on committees and councils, and giving women a more prominent position in general conferences and Church publications. These are small steps, but they are all steps toward gender equality, not away from it. Given the internal and external pressure to move toward gender equality, the LDS Church will be forced to continue to move in that direction.

Equality between men and women is a major issue within the LDS Church, but it is just one component of the gender, sex, and sexuality complex. At a very foundational level, the leaders of the LDS Church continue to confuse and conflate gender, sex, and sexual identity. Scientists distinguish between all of these. Sex is primarily biological and refers to the physical makeup of one’s body. Does an individual have exclusively male organs and genitalia, exclusively female organs and genitalia, or a combination of the two? In the first case, they would be categorized as male, in the second, female, and in the third, intersex. There have been times and places historically where intersex individuals were accepted and not forced into a sex binary. In much of the Western world, accepting the possibility that intersex individuals do not have to be forced to undergo surgeries as early as possible to force them into a specific sex is a relatively recent change in medical policy and practice. Thus, there are at least three sexes—male, female, and intersex and which sex someone is assigned to is, at least to some degree, a decision made by medical authorities.

Gender is different and is related to social behavior: how does someone present themselves? To a large extent, gender is an act or something we do—we portray ourselves in a very specific way to tell other people who we are. Of course, how one does their gender is tied to cultural norms, which means wearing skirts in one culture may be masculine or feminine (e.g., Scottish kilts) while it may be exclusively feminine in other cultures. In many cultures, gender is still primarily limited to masculine and feminine acts, creating a gender binary that has often been forced onto a sex binary. In other words, those with male genitalia and sex organs are expected to act in masculine ways; those with
female genitalia and organs are expected to act in feminine ways. However, as of the late twentieth century in most of the developed world, it became clear that “masculine” and “feminine” were social constructs—humans invented these categories and forced actions and behaviors onto them. Once humans become aware of the fact that we created something, it gives us the power to change it. As a result, understandings of gender have changed. There is no reason that gender has to be limited to just two broad categories—masculine and feminine. There are now hundreds of gender identities, including genderqueer, agender, queen, bigender, gender variant, and so on. Some scholars have suggested that a new way to classify gender is to divide individuals into two groups (which, ironically, runs counter to queer theory, but is still a useful intellectual exercise): cisgender and transgender individuals. Cisgender individuals are those whose biological sex and (chosen) gender identity align in traditional masculine/feminine ways. Transgender individuals are those whose biological sex and chosen gender identity do not align in traditional masculine/feminine ways; for example, FtM (female to male), MtF (male to female), agender, or gender fluid individuals, among many others.

Finally, sexual identity refers to whom someone is sexually attracted. People can be attracted primarily to those who are unlike them as regards biological sex (i.e., heterosexual), those like them (i.e., homosexual), both (i.e., bisexual), neither (i.e., asexual), or it may shift over time (e.g., sexually fluid). Thus, to understand gender, sex, and sexual identity, it’s necessary to understand that gender is not sex, sex is not sexual identity, and sexual identity is not gender. These may all be related, but they are also different concepts.

With the above explanation in place, it warrants examining briefly how the leadership of the LDS Church think about these ideas in 2020 (see Vance and Vance’s chapter for how this has changed over time). The LDS Church received a fair amount of media attention when it was announced in spring 2020 that they had modified the handbook used by leaders around the globe to make policy decisions. Included among those changes were some modifications to the language surrounding gender, sex, and sexual identity. For decades, the handbooks referred to transgender individuals only as “transsexuals,” an outdated, pejorative term that groups all transgender individuals together. For the first time, the new Handbook used the term “transgender.” However, it’s clear from the language of the handbook that the leaders remain confused (or are willfully rejecting modern understandings of these concepts). Here is one of the passages from the Handbook regarding whether transgender members can hold the priesthood:

A member who has received elective medical or surgical intervention for the purpose of attempting to transition to the opposite gender of his or her birth sex (“sex reassignment”), or who has socially transitioned to the opposite gender of his or her birth sex, may not receive or exercise the priesthood. Area Presidencies will help local leaders sensitively address individual situations. A male member who experiences gender incongruence, but who does not pursue medical,
surgical, or social transition to the opposite gender of his birth sex and is worthy, may receive and exercise the priesthood.

There are a number of issues with this language in light of modern understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality. To begin with, the passage continues to conflate sex and gender. In some sense, it is beginning to distinguish between these by recognizing that people can “socially” transition to a different gender, but the passage also claims that surgery is used to change someone to the “opposite gender” from their “birth sex.” This language choice is intriguing. Implicit in this passage is the assertion that people simply have a sex at birth, not that sex at birth is assigned, which it is. That sex is assigned means it is more complex than a simple binary classification. The language also includes “opposite,” which implies a binary. Additionally, the passage assumes that a “sex reassignment” surgery transitions someone’s gender but not their sex. In other words, “sex” is innate, while gender can be transitioned. This understanding does not align with modern understandings of sex and gender. Transgender individuals—whether they transition or simply reject gender norms—do not “feel” as though their sex has stayed the same. The very idea behind a sex or gender reassignment or confirmation surgery is to help transgender individuals to align their sex with their gender identity. The LDS Church Handbook is drawing this distinction because the Handbook later uses “sex at birth” as the exclusive means of classifying individuals, as this passage from the Handbook suggests,

Gender is an essential characteristic of Heavenly Father’s plan of happiness. The intended meaning of gender in the family proclamation is biological sex at birth. Some people experience feelings of incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity. As a result, they may identify as transgender. The Church does not take a position on the causes of people identifying themselves as transgender. Most Church participation and some priesthood ordinances are gender neutral. Transgender persons may be baptized and confirmed as outlined in 38.2.3.14. They may also partake of the sacrament and receive priesthood blessings. However, priesthood ordination and temple ordinances are received according to birth sex.

The implication of this passage, as detailed by Vance and Vance in their chapter, is that, regardless of whether someone feels like the sex they were assigned at birth reflects their true sex, and whether or not someone’s biological sex aligns with their gender identity, the LDS Church, like other transphobic organizations, is insistent that an identity that was assigned to these individuals when they were incapable of contesting that identity (as newborns) must be their identity throughout their lives. Thus, an intersex individual who was classified by a doctor as female at birth who later transitions to a masculine gender identity and then gets surgery to align their genitalia more closely with
their identity must, per the 2020 LDS Church Handbook, always be treated as a female because a doctor classified them as such when they were first born.

The LDS Church is, in some ways, locked into this understanding of sex and gender because of its gendered doctrine that asserts that Heavenly Father is male and he has a female wife, Heavenly Mother, and only these two sexes can exist in eternity. Likewise, that Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother are heterosexual is assumed and therefore results in the assumption that no one is actually going to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual in the afterlife. This doctrine suggests that anyone who rejects the gender binary, is dissatisfied with their assigned sex at birth, or who finds someone attractive who they are not supposed to according to Mormon teachings will be changed in the afterlife—obliged to be one of only two sexes, obliged to assume a cisgender identity, and obliged to be sexually straight. Current LDS doctrine on gender, sex, and sexuality is a doctrine of erasure for all those who do not fall neatly into a heterosexual cisgender binary.

Attitudes toward homosexuality have shifted dramatically in the US and in many other countries around the world over the last 40 years, as shown in Fig. 31.1. While acceptance of transgender minorities and bisexual individuals lags behind acceptance of homosexuality, these views are shifting as well, as are attitudes toward polyamory. Just as internal and external pressure will continue to push toward equality between cisgender men and women, similar pressure will continue to mount for the LDS Church to change its policies toward sexual and gender minorities. This pressure has resulted in a clear and demonstrable change in language and tone, as detailed by Vance and Vance in their chapter in this volume. Policies have shifted slightly as well. But the position of the LDS Church toward sexual minorities (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual,

Fig. 31.1 Attitudes toward homosexuality in the US, 1973–2018. (Source: General Social Survey)
and other sexual identities) and transgender individuals remains discriminatory and untenable for most such individuals.

As Vance and Vance detail, only heterosexual individuals are allowed to have intimate relationships; all other individuals are restricted to a life of seclusion, isolation, and loneliness as “being gay” isn’t a sin, but “acting” on non-heterosexual desires is. Likewise, transgender individuals who do not consider themselves the sex they were assigned at birth will be forever forced to identify as the gender that aligns with that sex so long as they remain affiliated with the LDS Church. While limited, there is now some research indicating that LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) individuals who were raised in or joined the LDS Church have much better mental health outcomes when they leave the religion than if they stay and try to integrate their sexual identity with their religious identity. LDS leaders claim that they embrace LGBTQ+ individuals, but their policies are discriminatory and harmful toward all but cisgender heterosexual individuals. As norms, values, and laws toward LGBTQ+ individuals change in the US and around the world, as more and more children raised in the LDS Church identify as LGBTQ+, and more and more members of the religion come into contact with and become more accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, the LDS Church will continue to be pressured to change.

Secularization

At its most basic, secularization theory posits that modernization causes problems for religion; as societies develop, religion becomes less attractive and religions lose their status and authority in society. Comprehensive theories of secularization include growing multiculturalism and increased gender and sexual equality among the many causes of declining religiosity. By discussing them separately, I don’t mean to suggest that they are unrelated to secularization. Both multiculturalism and gender and sexual equality are important manifestations of and contributors to secularization. The causal relationship, of course, is complex and difficult to untangle and won’t be addressed in this chapter. The focus in the last section of this concluding chapter is secularization broadly, and how declining interest in religion is a problem for Mormonism, generally, and the LDS Church, specifically.

While the US is often described as quite religious when compared to other highly developed countries, that characterization is increasingly inaccurate. Scholars knew in the early 1990s that people in the US over-stated their religious attendance; only around 20 percent of Americans attend religious services on a roughly weekly basis. With the end of the Cold War, during which the US was pushed toward developing a religious identity to counter godless communism, the percentage of Americans who identify as having no religious affiliation has increased rapidly. As of 2020, nonreligious Americans make up somewhere between 24 and 28 percent of the US population, a larger share than any single religious denomination. Belief in God remains relatively high, with just over 50 percent saying they know God exists, but just under
50 percent either reject the existence of God/gods, don’t believe God’s existence can be determined, believe in a higher power, or are unsure. Collectively, there has been a decline in religious behavior, religious belonging, and religious belief in the US, which has resulted in a more vocal albeit declining conservative religious minority.49

The US is somewhat behind other developed countries in its path toward secularization. More than 50 percent of the British now report no religious affiliation.50 More than 30 percent of the French are atheists.51 And religious attendance throughout Scandinavia and Northern Europe is in the single digits.52 Similar declines have been observed in other highly developed countries outside of Europe (e.g., Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, etc.). The evidence supporting a decline in interest in or “demand” for religion as societies develop economically is now quite robust.53

The LDS Church did experience a period of rapid expansion and growth following the end of WWII and running through the late 1990s. Much of that growth took place in countries that were experiencing rapid economic development. As prior research has established, the LDS Church grows most rapidly in countries that are developing, but that growth slows dramatically in countries that are highly developed.54 Both Martinich and Stewart, in their chapters in this volume, illustrate this same pattern and show that the LDS Church is basically stagnant in highly developed countries. Rainock and Takagi compellingly illustrate that the only reason why the LDS Church is not actually experiencing a decline in overall members in Japan is because of its active missionary efforts that are recruiting enough people to offset the losses to secularization. van Beek et al. also conclude that the LDS Church is stagnant in The Netherlands and Belgium with virtually no growth and no prospects for growth. Likewise, Allen and Östman assert that the prospects for future growth of the LDS Church in the Nordic countries are very poor. Stewart argues that the prospects for LDS growth in Eastern Europe and Russia are also limited. All of these chapters indicate that the LDS Church has no answer for secularization; once countries have secularized, the LDS Church is forced to fight a rear-guard action, fending off decline and collapse.

The regions of the world that were responsible for the rapid growth from the 1960s to the 1990s—primarily Latin America, but some other countries as well—are now more economically developed and, as a result, growth in many of those countries has slowed substantially. There are only a couple of regions where the LDS Church continues to see rapid growth—Africa and some less developed countries in Asia. Assuming those countries continue to experience economic development, the rapid growth of Mormonism in those countries will probably begin to slow as well.

What challenges, then, do the LDS Church and other Mormon groups face as a result of secularization? More and more people will likely question why they “need” religion. Most of the growth of the nonreligious (i.e., those with no religious affiliation) in the US, Canada, and many other highly developed countries is still due to people leaving religions,55 though the percentage being
raised nonreligious is increasing as well.\textsuperscript{56} There are clear differences in religiosity between generations, suggesting that it is in the transmission of religion from parents to children that a lot of secularization takes place.\textsuperscript{57}

The LDS Church is facing this challenge as well. Already in the 1980s it was clear that those who left the LDS Church were particularly likely to become nonreligious,\textsuperscript{58} a finding confirmed more recently as well.\textsuperscript{59} Recent changes in LDS practices suggest that the leaders of the religion are trying to slow the losses of young people, who are the most likely to leave religion altogether. Reducing the age at which young men and women can serve missions removes or reduces the amount of time between high school graduation and entering the mission field when many of these young people would have attended college and had greater autonomy. Many people take advantage of their greater autonomy during emerging adulthood to leave their parents’ religion.\textsuperscript{60} Organizing wards for young adults is also a tactic the LDS Church has employed to attempt to minimize losses. By encouraging young people to marry quickly, they minimize the risk that young Mormons will have pre-marital sex or choose to cohabit, both of which are associated with a higher likelihood of leaving religion, not because these individuals have “sinned” but because these individuals reject the moral condemnation of traditional and increasingly anachronistic teachings regarding chastity and moral purity.\textsuperscript{61} Encouraging marriage at a young age also increases in-group social network ties, which make it more difficult to leave.\textsuperscript{62} Since the LDS Church does not report the number of people who have resigned their membership or have been excommunicated on an annual basis and also does not report activity levels (though numerous chapters in this volume have provided this information; see, e.g., Cooper and Hernandez de Olarte’s chapter on Mexico), it is difficult to know just how big of a challenge this is for the LDS Church and other Mormon religions (e.g., Community of Christ or the FLDS Church). Even so, given prevailing trends in highly developed countries around the world, losses of young people is a major challenge facing Mormon religions and the LDS Church in the early twenty-first century around the world.

Related to people leaving are the over-stated membership numbers of the LDS Church and the low levels of activity. The LDS Church reports specific member counts in countries around the world annually. However, a number of countries include religious affiliation as a question in their census; census numbers reflect how people actually identify themselves and not the claimed membership of religions. This provides an opportunity to verify the claimed membership of the LDS Church. Unlike the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, the LDS Church does not fare well when comparing their claimed membership to census numbers (see Martinich’s and Stewart’s chapters).\textsuperscript{63} In some countries, only 20 percent of those the LDS Church claims self-identify as members. The concordance between claimed membership and census numbers varies substantially, from a low of about 20 percent to a high of around 60 percent. Even so, census data indicate that the LDS Church’s
claimed total membership of more than 16 million in 2020 is a dramatic over-
statement. The number of people who self-identify as members of the religion
is probably close to half of that number.

The LDS Church defends the over-stated membership by asserting that all
of the people they are claiming were baptized at some point and have not been
excommunicated or resigned their membership. But it also speaks to the prob-
lems the LDS Church has with member retention. While they use different
approaches, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists both regularly
clean their rosters, removing individuals who no longer self-identify as mem-
bers or are not actively engaged with the religion. In contrast, the LDS
Church insists that individuals who haven’t been to religious services in decades
and do not identify as members are still members. This approach reflects the
top-down, hierarchical nature of the religion; the LDS Church continues to
insist that it has the authority to determine who is and is not a member. Yet, the
low levels of self-identified affiliation reflected in censuses illustrate just the
opposite—individual people control their religious identity, not religious orga-
nizations. The LDS Church has a massive retention problem but, at least pub-
licly, continues to emphasize its official membership figures in spite of large
numbers of former members who have left the religion.

Related to the inflated membership numbers are concerns about levels of
activity or involvement with the religion. As various chapters in this volume
have noted, there are large percentages of members of the religion who retain
their LDS identity but who never attend religious services or participate in
religious activities. Leaked data from the LDS Church from the early 2000s
suggests that 70 percent of young single adults in the US and 80 percent of
young single adults outside the US are no longer actively involved in the reli-
gion. Given that younger adults are more likely to be nonreligious, the lack
of involvement with the LDS Church is strongly suggestive that many of these
individuals will eventually leave the religion. As noted, secularization often
occurs in the transmission of religion from parents to children and there are
clear generational gaps in religiosity. Despite efforts to stem the losses of young
people, there is direct and indirect evidence that this is occurring. Young peo-
gle are finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile prejudicial teachings and
discriminatory practices—like those of the LDS Church toward LGBTQ indi-
viduals and women—and fail to see the relevance of Mormonism for their lives
in the modern world. As Knoll and Reiss illustrate in their chapter in this vol-
ume, younger generations of members of the LDS Church are less likely to
accept and follow the teachings of their faith tradition. They are secularizing
and many of them will eventually leave the religion.

Several chapters in this volume also note that, in locations where the LDS
Church is relatively small, the LDS Church (and the Community of Christ) are
structured around families. While missionaries may recruit the occasional new
member, the backbone of the religion in these locations are multi-generational
families who have been members of the religion for decades and provide the
core leadership (see especially chapters by van Beek et al., Rainock and Takagi,
Allen and Östman, and Howlett). In describing these families, many of the authors note that, while there are participation costs to these families like there are for all those involved with Mormonism where it is peculiar, some of those participation costs are offset by the social status these families receive within the smaller community of the LDS Church. In other words, in the “big pond” of broader society, these families are unlikely to be unique; they are “little fish.” But in the “little pond” that is the LDS Church community in that specific location, these families are the “big fish.” Future qualitative research should examine to what extent status within Mormon wards, stakes, branches, or districts functions as an incentive to remain an active Mormon in the face of secularization.

In addition to those who leave the religion, many of those who stay in the religion are going to continue to pressure the religion to change. Three hour Church services have been shortened to two hour services. The manifest reason was to allow for a greater balance between religious instruction at home and during services. But an equally plausible explanation is that members no longer wanted to dedicate three hours of their weekend to religion and it made it challenging to invite non-members to attend services when the invitation required a three hour commitment. Changes to temple practices have also occurred in recent years, reducing some of the explicit patriarchy in the ceremony. These changes were likely the result of agitation among members for greater gender equality. Small changes like these to accommodate an increasingly secular membership are likely to continue.

Another change that is likely resulting from secularization is the widespread critical inquiry into Mormon teachings concerning the history of the religion (Prince and Stewart discuss this issue in their chapters). Scholars who have turned their investigative tools to the history of Mormonism have uncovered a number of facts that the leaders of various Mormon religions long ignored or hoped would not come to light: Joseph Smith Jr.’s use of a peep-stone to seek buried treasure, the marrying of other men’s wives and underage girls when polygyny was first introduced, claimed translations of Egyptian papyri that have been shown to be inaccurate, the killing of over 100 people in a wagon train in Southern Utah by Mormons, among many other issues and concerns. Many of those who have left the religion note these elements of Mormon history as causing them to experience a crisis of faith that eventually led to their exodus out of the religion.

While the LDS Church and other Mormon religions may be able to address concerns about gender and sexual inequality and become more multicultural, the challenge of secularization is an existential threat that, in some parts of the world, has already arrived but is looming on the horizon for the rest of the world. It is ever more difficult to claim to be the one true religion in a world that is increasingly interconnected and where people interact with others of different religions on a daily basis. Growing individualism leads people to turn inward for guidance rather than to elderly patriarchs whose values and ideas are a generation out of date. Religions that remain part of the world,
even if they encourage members to distance themselves from the modern world, will be forced to cope with the juggernaut of secularization, which is reshaping the world as it spreads. So long as the future entails global economic development, it likely will also show a declining interest in Mormonism among increasingly secularized populations.

CONCLUSION

Given the challenges the LDS Church faces in the twenty-first century detailed in this chapter, how do I think they will fare? What are the prospects of this global religion? As Armand Mauss and I have argued, there is a certain utility to maintaining some conflict with the broader society. Religions that perfectly align with prevailing cultural mores have very limited appeal.

Readers can think about it this way: which is the more appealing product: (a) a generic version of a perfume/cologne manufactured and packaged by a local pharmacy, (b) a somewhat more expensive perfume/cologne manufactured by Ralph Lauren or Polo, (c) or a truly luxury perfume/cologne that only the uber wealthy can afford (e.g., Hermès or Baccara at over $1000 per ounce)? If we ignore human psychology and use strict logic, the cheaper generic brand should have greater appeal because it is largely the same scent as the others but much cheaper. But humans are not always rational. Most of us would rather purchase the more expensive items, such as the more costly perfume (or clothes or car or house) because we believe that items that are more costly come with greater benefits. But we are also restricted by how much money we have. As a result, people may want the most expensive perfume/cologne, but they will settle for the medium-priced, name brand perfume/cologne and not buy the generic one. We convince ourselves that there is greater value in products that cost more, whether that is true or not. Of course, there is another option as well—many people may simply conclude that perfume/cologne isn’t necessary at all.

There is reason to believe that the same psychology applies to religions. Religions with close ties to governments, like those in England and Northern Europe should, based strictly on reason and logic, be wildly popular. Their values align with those of most of the population and, for many of them, they receive indirect and direct financial benefits from their respective governments. They are, to continue the example above, generic religions. Yet, attendance and involvement with the established or state-sponsored (or formerly state-sponsored) religions in those countries has declined to almost negligible numbers—fewer than ten percent of people in most of those countries attend religious services on a regular basis and the fastest growing types of ceremonies and rituals for celebrating life events (e.g., weddings and funerals) are secular or Humanist. While a simplistic comparison, these established and (formerly) state-sponsored religions are like generic perfume—there is minimal cost to membership and, therefore, very limited appeal. For those who are attracted to religion, they would rather adhere to a more costly religion because
they believe it is more likely to be worth the cost (i.e., time, money, loss of social status and friendships, etc.). However, the highest cost religions—those that require complete exclusion, self-flagellation, unusual sexual practices, donations of all of one’s wealth to the religion, and so on—are simply too costly for most people. Thus, for many who want religion, the option on which they settle is the medium cost religion. Such religions come with some cost; often the members of such religions feel marginalized by mainstream society, leading to stronger in-group identity. Of course, large percentages of people are opting out of religion altogether, which, in the face of secularization, is an increasingly attractive option. Thus, if we consider religion to be a simplified marketplace, we could argue there are four options: low cost generic religion, medium cost branded religion, extremely high cost exclusive religions, and no religion at all. Assuming people have the freedom to choose their religion (an assumption that does not hold around the world), those who are interested in religion are most likely to choose the medium cost religions as they believe they offer greater rewards than low cost religions and they can afford the costs.

What does this marketplace model mean for the LDS Church in the twenty-first century? The LDS Church is currently besieged on two fronts. Given its headquarters in the US and a small but not insignificant percentage of its members are left-leaning, there is constant clamor for the religion to accommodate to prevailing social norms. Progressive critics of the religion want the religion to give ciswomen and transgender individuals the priesthood and open up all offices in the religion to ciswomen and transgender individuals. Likewise, they want the religion to fully accept and embrace LGBTQ+ individuals with no restrictions on membership. They also want the religion to adjust the policies, practices, and doctrines to accommodate varied cultural practices around the world and to embrace cultural relativity. Finally, they also want laxer requirements for full membership, including allowing people who reject specific practices and doctrines or emphasize others (e.g., worshiping a Heavenly Mother) to be allowed full membership in the religion, from being able to say prayers in sacrament meetings to participating in temple ceremonies. In other words, progressive Mormons and critics of the religion want the LDS Church to move toward prevailing social norms, perhaps not realizing in the process that the religion will become a non-controversial, generic religion with limited appeal to religionists.

On the other side are conservative members and stricter religionists who believe the LDS Church’s accommodations have diminished its appeal. For some of these individuals, the 1978 policy change allowing Blacks full participation in the religion was an objectionable accommodation that led them to leave the religion (see Bennion’s chapter on fundamentalist Mormons). For others, suggesting that homosexuality may have a biological component and therefore warrants sympathy was too controversial to accept. Many are aware of the thousands of polygamist Mormons in the Intermountain West who view the LDS Church’s discontinuation of polygamy and embrace of monogamy as...
a capitulation to prevailing social norms, as detailed by Bennion in this volume. For many of these individuals, the decline in prophecy, the perceived milque-toast doctrinal innovation, and the growing corporatism of the LDS Church suggest that the religion is accommodating modern society too much. These individuals want extremely high cost, world-rejecting religion and may reject the LDS Church because it isn’t costly enough.

In the face of rapid secularization in the US and in developed and developing countries around the world, the leadership of the LDS Church will need to figure out on what path they want the religion to continue. If they assimilate to prevailing cultural values too much, the religion loses its appeal over generic, liberal religions. If they fail to assimilate at all, the religion becomes too costly for those who live in the world and have to be part of it as well, which is likely the majority of the active membership. As I have argued elsewhere, the LDS Church will continue to move in a progressive direction, albeit slowly and in a punctuated fashion. Every time the LDS Church accommodates a prevailing social norm—allowing women to say prayers at general conference, granting that homosexuality likely has a biological component, allowing Blacks to hold the priesthood—these are accommodations that cannot be undone. A counterfactual here will illustrate the point: imagine how members and non-members alike would respond if the LDS Church leadership announced they were rescinding the policy change allowing Blacks to hold the priesthood. The result would be apocalyptic for the religion. Only white supremacists would continue to embrace such a high cost, radical religion. Progressive accommodations, once they occur, shift the religion in a direction that cannot be reversed.

In practical terms, this means the religion will continue to shift toward progressive values. A common refrain among progressive Mormons is that the LDS Church is always about 30 or 40 years behind the times. What they may not realize—whether this is a leader intended outcome or not—is that maintaining an “optimum” level of conflict with prevailing social norms may be in the best interest of the Church’s survival, if not its possibility to flourish, as a twenty-first century global religion. Progressive Mormon agitation for accommodation is, simultaneously, agitation for generic and low cost religion. The LDS Church would lose much of its appeal if it became the Community of Christ.

I’m not a bold enough social scientist to suggest specific dates or a timeline for future accommodations to prevailing social norms, but I believe it is safe to prognosticate that the following changes will occur at some point in the future. The LDS Church will gradually extend its acceptance of LGBTQ individuals into full membership. Women will eventually be ordained to the priesthood and positions in the religion will be opened up to all sexes and genders. The LDS Church will slowly begin to adjust its policies and practices to allow for greater cultural modification around the world (something it is already doing, but very slowly). Finally, at some point the Church’s leadership will also have to concede that people leave the religion because they don’t find the truth claims credible, that the religion doesn’t work for some people, and some
people have lost confidence in the institution itself rather than continuing to insist that those who leave were never fully committed, were offended, or did not want to or couldn’t uphold their religious standards. This last point is a major concession as it would entail an admission by leaders that the LDS Church is but one religious choice among many other valid options, and that there are many paths to being a good person; it would transition the religion from an exclusive, sectarian organization to a more ecumenical one.

In a religious marketplace that includes thousands of options and, an increasingly popular and appealing option of no religion at all, the LDS Church will have to carefully balance its slow accommodation to more egalitarian and progressive values with its desire to remain appealing by requiring some social cost with membership. The direction will be accommodation; it must be accommodation. But it will continue to lag behind society in general by decades in order for Mormons to continue being a “peculiar people.”

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