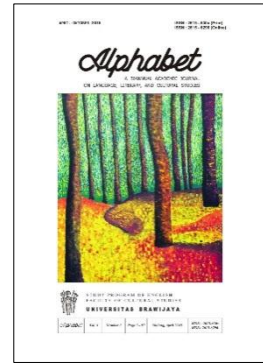


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# Mormonism as the Form of Exceptionalism in American Frontier

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## Abstract

Frontier is a movement beyond the patronage of cultural life expression occurred in the Western America during the colonial period to the early twentieth century. The frontier periods evolved romance and violence that resulted in an exceptionalism, a special term in the life of religious denomination in America. It was particularly when visions of paradise overwhelmed the 19<sup>th</sup> century America in the time of the emergence of Mormonism. This study focuses on how Mormonism represents the exceptionalism in the frontier experience. This study corresponds to one of Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics that emphasizes on the interpretation as the primary method to validate one's sense of historical moments and cultural contexts. The findings reveal two major things: first, Mormon peoples and their religious practices in the Old West can be considered as a distinctive religious revival to the historical model of the frontier. Second, Mormonism cannot be generalized as Christianity or as one of the Christian denominations. Instead, Mormon religious philosophy and practices mark the existence of exceptionalism in the frontier experience.

## Keywords:

mormonism, exceptionalism, frontier, hermeneutics, frontier

Mormonism was a set of doctrines, practices, and cultures that emerged in West America in the earliest movement in 1830 under certain circumstances. It was during American religious revival era, which was marked by Christian spiritual phenomenon and the emergence of sectarian religious movements. The historical setting of Mormonism would probe issues that centered on the cultural background of the new spiritual leader and his followers and circumstances around the socio religious setting, from which the new prophetship come up. However, during the movements, the establishment of the prophet's leadership and ideas, which were adopted and transformed by Mormonism underwent resistance or rejection.

Within the religious historical context in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century America, the emergence of Mormonism was considered a rebellion against the religious orthodoxy of the mid-nineteenth century. Mormonism was provoked by the idea and spirit of restoration movement in Western

frontier, which concerned with the division among Christian sects in that region. Mormonism shared the same belief with the American religious Restorationists in the need to *restore* the *true Church* of Jesus Christ, but certain factors made them unique.

If it is traced back to the early years of 19<sup>th</sup> century America, the phenomenon of rapid change in demography and modernization acted as the motive force in the widespread of religious revitalization in American culture (Finseth, 1995). This reveals that Mormonism, which was different from the rest of the religious sects, highlights the exceptionalism in American culture.

Interpretative and comparative approaches to the subject matter are required to see how Mormonism represents the exceptionalism in the frontier experience. In this case, the subject matter refers to religious expressions that include the theoretical and societal dimension

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(Miller and Seltser, 1992). The theoretical dimension covers the beliefs or doctrines, while the societal dimension works to see how the doctrines shape the cultural values of the believers' lives. Finally, the comparative approach is applied to see the position of Mormonism as the sub stre within the dominant Protestantism that later show its exceptional characteristics.

### MORMON AND MYSTICISM

The early history of Mormonism shows the mystical side of American people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where the collective experience of mysticism belonged to certain groups of people. The belief in the mystical values was shown through the use of specific terms like *divination*, *sorcery*, *interpreting omens*, *witchcraft*, *casting spells*, *medium of spirits*, and consulting with the dead. The terms were applied and used in the early emergence of Mormonism and became the outstanding characteristics of its Church (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1992, p. 230).

In terms of Christianity, the mysticism the early European Americans brought from their *old world* (England and other parts of Europe) during their migration to America, provided the people both spiritual advantages and material profane. Some accounts identified that until the 1830s, the early European Americans that believed in the *wonders of the invisible world* –the belief of buried wealth, lost mines and supernatural and treasure hunting –as *the early republic's supernatural economy*. Herald found that they considered the use of such divining media, e.g. rods and seer stones, as *honorable and profitable employment* in such various ways, including locating buried treasure, underground water, to find lost items, to locate mineral mines, as part of religious or magic rituals, or to communicate with spirits or angels (in Jessee, 2002).

This mysticism –in a more profane sense– went hand in hand with European mythology. McGee (2001, p. 42) stated that early European Americans believed that the treasures that are protected by magic spells or guarded by preternatural beings had been secreted in the earth by ancient inhabitants of the continent—by Spanish explorers, by pirates, or even by the dwarves

of European mythology. McGee (2001) also noted that treasure hunting that influenced probably hundreds of thousands of Europeans and thousands of early European Americans used Bible passages, prayers, hymns and incantations, ritual swords, magical items, and animal sacrifices in the rituals.

J. G. Fraser found that “the sacred and supernatural among the early European American were the portraits of what is called as *sympathetic magic*” (in Pals, 1996, pp. 28-34). That means that religion is bounded to the concept of nature; the sacred, magical objects and rites would serve as the symbols of the *anima* (the spirit within) the people worship. According to Nottingham (1954, p. 11), “These individuals' experience of the sacred and the supernatural were shared and strengthened by the communal experiences through practicing ritual”. This *process* would be well-matched with the concept of individualism in the religious group. Pals (1996) maintained that in the first instance, the religious group is always viewed as the collection of individuals who happen to share the same beliefs.

The ideas of the sacredness of matters and the existence of supernatural beings would be the basic form of religious consciences that is used in a rural life. The idea of mysticism in a rural life is usually associated with their being close to nature. The idea of going back to the concept of man's sacred relationship with nature is in line with the early Mormons' basic religious philosophy of mystical experiences. The experience of mystical and magical outlook and practices was an escape from the empirical world to the imaginary one. It was when people make their efforts to meet the needs for the profane as well as to solve the unanswered questions of the logical thinking about what beyond rationality is.

The Mormon's emphasis on the mystical practices that was profane marked the change of attitude from the religious conformity of Western Christian tradition to the Eastern mystical tradition. It would be likely a daring revival of the Eastern mystical ideas of *spirits vision fanaticism*, in terms of understanding what is supposed to be the *mysteries* of the *old tradition* of

Christian faith. Christianity might have been the early Mormon *formal religion*, but their spiritual lives were restricted more by their belief in folk religions. This was common in the urban state like New York of the time, were *lawless* existence – religiously speaking on the Western frontier. Nottingham (1954, p. 175) stated that “the instability would provide fertile soil for the growth new religions”.

The ideas of mysticism in Mormonism makes this *-ism* distinctive from the rest of other American thoughts in Romantic Intellectual Era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although both have the common idea of referring to a conscious awareness of an internal divinity, and of the universal divinity in the world and people around. The early history of Mormonism represents mysticism (man, nature, and magic) in American Romantic Intellectual Era in a different way, since it never went far from the spirituality, but profane purposes at the end. Mysticism serves as a vehicle for the concept of man’s effort in dealing with his earthly needs that represent collective *consciousness* or *awareness* of American people towards their myth and image of man and his effort.

### MORMON INTERPRETATION ON GODHOOD, MANHOOD, AND WORLDLINESS

Mormon religious languages disclose –what Geertz (1993) called– symbolism forms that abandon the analysis for the platonic shadow of a mentalistic world and wander in a haze of cognition, affection, and connotation. Mormonism centers on a belief in the efficacy of individual revelation and individual knowledge to seek the secret of the Divine. It emphasizes on the knowledge that makes itself close to Gnosticism in Greek philosophy, in which the idea of God and Man is melted through the medium of intelligence or knowledge. Intelligence or knowledge are perceived as the One in the eternal world and the ultimate One laid behind all experiences, in which all distinctions between thought and reality is overcome. It is the One that is known by profound, inner, and

philosophic contemplation (*mystical* experience). Mormon theoretical dimension of having intimate and arguably influential associations with distant legacies of Gnosticism and Hermetic traditions intertwined in the Renaissance and was nurtured through the reformativ religious aspirations of three subsequent centuries (Owens, 1994)

First, the epistemological research begins with Mormon conceptualization of the ontology (*What Being/ being is*). What comes first concerning the conceptualization of ontology is the religious language used – statements and claims made about the nature of God – in which Mormonism emphasizes merely on the literal meanings. For example, the claim that Bible is also one of Mormon scriptural writings. This religion presupposes the Biblical words ‘such as *Father in God our Father* and *Son in Jesus the Son of God* in their literal meanings as *Father* and *Son* in a physical sense – Ones with flesh and bones, and experience biological and cultural process. However, Judeo Christianity (e.g. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and mainstream Protestant) accepts these words in special senses –the figurative meanings. The word *Father* represents the symbol of familial relation that is rooted in Jewish culture – showing the close relationship between God and the people. The word *Son* in *Son of God* is a metaphor concerning the way the divinity of Jesus Christ in the preexistence as the *Memra* in Hebrew (the eternal Word of God) *was born* from the *Father* (the figurative of God as The Divine Essence). However, *Memra* is not *logos* in the perspective of Hellenistic philosophy that is close to the idea of immanence. (Noor-sena, 2007; Sumali, 2007) Mormonism perceives the terms *Anthropos Theos* referring to Jesus Christ merely in the perspective of Greek philosophy, not in Judaism philosophy.

Another example that shows the Mormon’s prominence literal meaning, can be seen from how this religion interprets the word *Trinity* as *Tritheism* – three entities. This is not exactly the meaning of *Trinity* as the modern Churches inherited from the early Church in the 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, which interprets the *Trinity* in meta-

physic perspective according to Jewish orthodox philosophy of *The Only One God*. As Mormonism emphasizes on the mathematical perspective in West counties, the idea of *Trinity* that this religion perceives it to be a more *logic* is three entities of the Gods, rather than seeing the Divine Essence (the *Father*), the eternal Word of God (the *Son*), and the Spirit of God (the Holy Spirit) as one entity (Noorsena, 2007; Sumali, 2007). Like Gnosticism and Hermeticism, Mormonism places its belief in the proud feeling of Man's affinity with the Gods; thus, the first message of Mormon gospel begins with the God's plurality – God is not understood as One and singular. According to Smith (1977, p. 370), "The Mormon account in *The Pearl of the Great Price* (4:1) and in the teaching of Genesis 1:1, supports the Mormon concept of polytheism.

The earth has three distinctive Gods who rule it; these three Gods are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; thus, Mormonism believes in *tri-theistic*, not *monotheistic* in Christian faith of Trinity. However, later Mormon Church leader added a concept of monotheism in Mormonism. Crowter had stated that "there are numbers of worlds created and the concept of one God relies on the philosophy that for one earth serves as the dwelling place for the children of only one God, and he alone also reigns over his children there as Father and God" (1988, p. 361). In Mormonism, there are a multitude of Gods emanated from the First God, existing one above the other without end; God the Father as the supreme member of the Godhead, and the Son and the Holy Ghost as Gods lower than the Father; this identifies the Mormonism's acceptance to henotheism, the worship of one principal God among many. McConkie found that "In its polytheistic concept – besides stressing on three primary earth Gods: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost –Mormonism also accepts endless additional Gods of other worlds" (1977, pp. 576-577.)

God is an exalted, perfected, and glorified Man of holiness (Moses 6: 57); Gods in Mormonism are physical creatures (Smith, 1977, Doctrine & Covenants, 130: 22). Mormon theology emphasizes the concept of coequality of

matter and spirit (Doctrine & Covenants, 130: 22). Smith had stated that:

It is similar to many primitive and pagan religions, its theosophy teaches that God is an exalted man, a deity "created" (technically, "fashioned") by sexual union of his divine mother and father. It is an entity named God had taken on a dual form as Male and Female; a supernal Father and Mother; in Gods unknowable unity of a dual form, God was sexually active, then, through sexual intercourse, a supernal Father and Mother begot Mormonism biblical God named God the Father. (1977, p. 373)

As Gods have evolved in Godhood from the status of mere men, they have struggled with good and evil and perfected themselves, it cannot logically deny that all the Gods were one imperfect and required salvation (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1992). A juxtaposition of material and spiritual is the fundamental nature of this religion. The ideas in its philosophical world, in one way or another, par the Greek philosophy. It is a religion that is interested in the spiritual reality laying behind the material reality; it copes with beliefs that the material reality is only a world of shadows, a copy of the eternal world of spiritual forms. Human's world is the shadow or copy of eternal world and all united in an *everlasting covenant* over which man presides as the eternal being – godlike.

Mormonism teaches that the essence of man is eternal – and, in fact, divine – and that it was apparently fashioned or formed into spirit bodies through sexual intercourse among Male and Female parental deities (Doctrine & Covenants, 93:29; McMurry in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1992). In Mormonism, God and man are ultimately one species. Following the tradition of the East; man must turn inward to know God. To know God man has but to know himself. By introspective search in his soul, a man comes to a degree of understanding of God, including Deity's character, perfections, and attributes. According to Smith, "If Men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves" (1977, p. 343).

Men are eternal refashioned spirit intelligence having the innate capacity to evolve into godhood (*Gospel Principle*, 1988, p. 9). Men on the earth were the first created as spirit offspring of God and his wife through physical sexual intercourse. Thus, “men are created or fashioned as preexistent spirits and subsequently inhabit the product of human sexual intercourse (a physical body) in order to attempt to gain exaltation of godhood” (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1992, p. 22). The fall of men was ultimately beneficial; predestined by God for the spiritual progress and ultimate welfare of all mankind.

For the sake of the religious language itself, the literal meanings reveal the ideas that the existence of man in the spiritual world as to the same man existing in the material world and *materializing* the Supernatural to adherence to the meaning of man. Therefore, what Mormonism all about concerns more on the Being in a material sense rather than *theos* in a metaphysical sense. This religion starts with the stresses on speaking the contemplative meaning of *Anthropos*. Though its later doctrinal teachings, Mormonism concerns about *separation* between male and female – stressing on sexual category and gender. The foremost idea of this religion places nothing but *anthropos* with his existence at the highest, and as the highest in its literal meaning. If it is said in their doctrine, that *God was once a man*, meaning that man was all about in the very beginning of all things. Therefore, the saying is *man at the highest and as the highest*.

Mormon prominent idea is that Man is not simply a matter of religious language expressing the ontology; however, Man is also all about in its pragmatics – maximizing the meanings of Man. The main function of religious language provides a basis for creating sacred conception about Man in which some values infused through its practical teachings. Virtually, in fulfilling the theological reasons; first, Man who emanates from the Divine bears the responsibility to run the material and spiritual world; second, more than just responsibility that is attached to the nature of Man, is that all the efforts of Man on earth – the obedience to the

Mormon church’ laws of Good Works – will determine the future (reincarnation).

The concept of Good Works in Mormonism places its root in the doctrine of salvation. Indeed, because of the fall, men need salvation; the Mormon concept of salvation teaches that good works – through obeying the Mormon gospel laws – not only canceling the penalty of sin but also giving the fall of man a positive role in fostering spiritual growth and maturity. The Bible teaches that it is faith alone that saves a person, not good works (*John 6: 47; Ephesian 2: 8, 9*). However, in Mormonism, faith and good works are inseparable from what salvation is concerned. In this sense, faith is not ultimately and solely trusts in Christ to save one from sin; it is ultimate trust in oneself, one's personal righteousness and one's good works to save. The concept (Noorsena, 2002) is, all with its physicality of the Divine – thus it is difficult for this religion to understand the Divinity and the Lordship of Christ in Judaism and Christian tradition, nor the role of Eastern philology in bridging terminological contradiction of salvation doctrine (*Soteriology*) among Western Churches.

Considering the fall of men, the concept of justification is bound with conditions of personal merit and righteousness. Justification does not declare one's perfect right before God; it only gives one opportunity to earn righteousness before God. (*Doctrine & Covenants*, 20:21-30) The true salvation in Mormonism is achieved by personal merit and effort with the goal of attaining *exaltation* or godhood in the highest part of a celestial kingdom. In Mormonism, one is saved only after the first meeting the entire numerous requirements outlined for him according to the Mormon Church. If he is successful in fulfilling all these requirements to the end of his life, then he believes he is saved by *grace*. (*Doctrine & Covenants*, 7:37; *Doctrine & Covenants*, 132:12).

McConkie (1977) found that “intelligence and physical labor are examples of the specific requirements necessary to achieve salvation” (p. 318; *Doctrine & Covenants*, 93:36). Mormonism also focuses on seeking after the intelligence for the reincarnation – to become gods

(*Doctrine & Covenants*, 130:18-19). The most prominent concepts of Mormonism are the concept of the Divine of Man, Salvation, and Good Works, which are correlated to each other. In relation to this, Geertz considered “the concepts of religion as a cultural system provides models for and of reality” (1993, p. 93). This means that the concepts of Mormonism on Divine of Man, Salvation, and Good Works give meanings to social and psychological reality. They all, at the same time help the Mormons conceptualize the meanings and shape Mormons’ reality. Those concepts provide Mormons a world view and ethos. To sum up, Mormonism formulates conceptions of a general order of existence, which provide a workable set of ethical criteria and normative guides to govern Mormons’ action.

The concepts consist of certain practical values about the world and an inclination to feel and behave in accordance with those values. Those concepts along with the values provide knowledge that contains meaning and truth. The practical consequences or real effects to the knowledge are actions. Mormonism emphasizes the inseparable sphere between knowledge and action for people to cope with life. Mormons understand the world by adopting the intentional stance and acknowledge both the physical aspect of reality and its meaning and values. Mormonism sees no fundamental difference between practical and theoretical reason, nor any ontological difference between facts and values. Both facts and values have cognitive content, namely (1) knowledge, is what we should believe; (2) values are hypotheses about what is good in action. Mormon ethics is roughly humanist because it sees no ultimate test of morality beyond what matters for us as humans. Good values are those for which Mormons have good reasons.

Practically, such material, moral, intellectual, and familial values are greatly influenced by the people's understanding of the concepts of the Divine of Man, Salvation, and Good Works in Mormonism. The bedrock of Mormon cultural values is Mormon church theology, history, and membership. It is a culture which rooted in

the descendants of the original Mormon pioneers. From the beginning, the values of the concepts the Mormons believe in, establish their religious moods and motivation. According to Geertz (1993, p. 98) “religious moods as the source – reference to the conditions from which people are conceived to believe and religious motivations as a consummation of what *made meaningful* by the moods”. Additionally, moods and motivation are essential to Mormons’ behavior, in the case that their behavior is larger degree is determined by the selection of both of their view of reality and their imaginative reality. This is more than an individual's selection but communal. Here, theology, history, and membership are very important for the process of shaping their myth. It is through a process of a realistic way in the classical philosophy of being. Furthermore, mood, motivation and the process of shaping the myth were very important in such a *lawless* Western frontiers or is termed as *disorder universe* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Thus, in such a wilderness, the Mormons faithfully established their religious beliefs and cultural values based on their daily experiences.

Intelligence or knowledge would be the other keywords for Mormon interpretation of God and Man; the mind and intelligence possessed by is co-equal with God Himself. In regard to their theology of intelligence (knowledge), they function intelligence as a means to seek God’s secrets, to reveal the salvation of God, to be the part of eternal life, to take part in godhood, and to be materially blessed by God. Mormons created their self-image as the smartest people in the world. Mormons give the emphasis on intellectualism that shifts from the idea of a traditional Christian beliefs in God as pure spirit to a belief in God’s corporeality, and it was well suited with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century history of American *anti-intellectualism* (*Journal & Discourse*, 6:163). It was the period where the vast majority of the population led a rural life and was filled with manual labor and agriculture. Therefore, a *bookish* education that was concerned with the classics was seen to be of little value. The American frontiers predominantly valued the *self-reliance* and

*self-made man*, who were nurtured by the society and life experience, over the intellectual whose learning was acquired through books and formal study.

In terms of gender, Mormonism places male superior to female in a rigid paternalistic hierarchy. A male has superiority over female and the female's salvation depends on her husband. The husband would call her into resurrection to begin the eternal marriage where their spirit progeny would continue as numerable as the stars. McConkie (1977, p. 238) noted that "marriage is an everlasting covenant between male and female. The doctrine of the eternal marriage (celestial marriage) for its practical necessity is to produce human bodies (tabernacle) for the habitation of the spirit children through sexual intercourse of the male and female gods." The mankind's preexistence doctrine (*Doctrine & Covenants* chapter 132) was derived from the concept of spirit children without tabernacle; and since there are so many spirit children waiting for their tabernacles, Mormons developed the doctrine of polygamy.

### CONCLUSION

Mormonism is a portrait of the exceptionalism of the Wild West American frontier in which the *-ism* moves beyond the boundaries of the mainstream, and sometimes contains paradoxes. Mormonism represents the frontiers' exceptionalism in term of, both their connection with mysticism as part of the American sub-cultures and particular religious teachings that are paradoxical to the mainstream Christianity. This exceptionalism provides, as stated by Berkhofer (1989, p. 589), "a new context in which the perspective of American culture emphasizes division and opposition". It moves from stressing the homogeneity of the American mind and uniformity of the American character to noting the diversity of the American population and divisiveness of the American experience. Thus, the idea of society as a system of structured inequality receives priority over the concept of culture as the basis for understanding American life.

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