

Sustaining a Lay Religion in Modern Society: The Mormon Missionary Experience

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Modern pluralistic societies create the market structure in which new religious movements can compete and grow (Berger, 1969; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). They also create commitment problems for proselyting religions that, like the Mormon Church, impose extensive lay duties on their members. Exclusive group loyalties are made difficult in modern times by a tremendous increase in the number of career opportunities, alternative reference groups, and commitment options available to people; by the complexity of individuals' status and role obligations that impose competing, often conflicting, demands on time and personal resources; and by the emergence of individualism and materialism as predominant social values.

In a pluralistic environment, voluntary associations with relatively minimal membership requirements become the norm, since individuals are generally expected to have a wide variety of social involvements that require a dispersion of their personal commitments. People who persistently devote themselves to narrowly focused group commitments run the risk of being perceived by outsiders as odd or fanatical. In the modern world, volunteer organizations with relatively demanding and exclusive membership requirements, such as the LDS Church, are rare. Such organizations must develop systematic ways to attenuate the influence of competing social commitments and encourage the investment of human capital and member resources into their own programs (Iannaccone, 1988). This is never easy. The wide range of alternative life-styles and career paths available in modern life is compelling, and the twin ethics of individualism and materialism prompt widespread

resistance to attempts at limiting people's options. How does Mormonism manage to function in such an environment?

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To understand Mormonism, one must understand the lay character of the Mormon religion. The centralized administration of the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has evolved into a professional bureaucracy of considerable size and complexity (Gottlieb and Wiley, 1984; Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, 1984a; Heinerman and Shupe, 1985), but the type of religion officially advocated by the LDS Church continues to presuppose an unusually high degree of member commitment and lay participation. In Mormonism lay participation means that members are expected not merely to cultivate certain beliefs and values, impose a religiously defined moral discipline on their lives, and attend religious meetings for group worship but also to staff completely the ecclesiastical structure of local wards and stake organizations. Grass-roots members are required to administer as well as participate in the multitudinous priesthood and auxiliary programs of the LDS Church. Programmed lay activities constitute the essence of the Mormon religious community.

In fact Mormons virtually equate being a Latter-day Saint in good standing with being "active" in church callings, and to be active in church callings means that one routinely accepts and performs religious duties connected to lay statuses within the structure of church organization. In contrast Mormons commonly used the term *inactive* to denote deviance or defection from the faith. This label is attached to those who fail to participate regularly in church programs. The Mormon ideal is for all members not only to be actively situated in the role structure of the church but also to pursue *careers* of lay religious involvement, resulting over time in an extensive repertoire of church assignments and advancements. Within Mormon society the successful lay career is taken as an indicator of the individual's enduring moral character.

Reality, of course, routinely falls short of organizational ideals. In Mormonism, as in all groups, religious or otherwise, great variation exists in the extent to which members are devoted to the ideals of their community or comply with its institutional norms. Mormons vary in their willingness to participate in the lay structure of church organization; individuals wax and wane in their religious commitments; a significant portion of the membership becomes "inactive"; new converts in rapidly growing recruitment areas of Mormon expansion are often woefully unprepared to participate in lay callings;

and defections occur (Mauss, 1969; Albrecht and Bahr, 1983, 1989; Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham, 1988). Nonetheless, contemporary Mormonism has succeeded in mobilizing a degree of lay commitment and participation sufficient to become one of the most thriving and active religions in the modern world (Stark, this volume; Stark, 1984; Shippo, 1985). Growing at a rate that exceeds 50 percent per decade since World War II, LDS world membership has doubled from four million in 1978 to eight million in 1991 (*Church News*, September 7, 1991). Significantly, of every one hundred new members currently being added to the LDS rolls, approximately two-thirds are converts (Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, 1988). What institutional mechanisms have emerged in Mormonism not only to produce this rate of new member growth but also to sustain Mormonism's extensive participation requirements within modern society?

In previous studies we have investigated the commitment functions of the official leaders' rhetoric at general conferences of the LDS Church (Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, 1984, 1986; Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, 1984a, 1984b). Here we focus on the central role played by the Mormon missionary system as an institutional mechanism for structuring commitment and channeling lay religious careers in the LDS Church. Any attempt to understand contemporary Mormonism must recognize the reciprocal connection between organizational requirements of the LDS Church for extensive lay involvement and the willingness of its adherents to invest a sizable fraction of their collective resources into the recruitment, socialization, and maintenance of an unusually large missionary force—approximately 45,000 full-time missionaries as of 1991 (*Church News*, November 2, 1991:4).

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Military analogies have often been used to describe missionary religions and understand their motives and modes of functioning. In certain respects the characteristics of missionary religions like Mormonism resemble those of modern nations engaged in preparation for war, especially when we consider the political imperatives of generating mass patriotism, troop recruitment, and combat morale sufficient for waging large-scale military campaigns.

Modern conventional warfare often requires a radical mobilization of society's resources and personnel (Wright, 1942; Lang, 1972). Enormous sacrifices may be required of the civilian population, which is expected to support the frontline troops and contribute to the war

effort in every way possible. Leaders passionately urge the subordination of personal interests to a transcendent cause. An attitude of self-sacrifice becomes the official norm. The need for solidarity in the struggle leads to stereotyping the virtues and noble objectives of one's own society and the perfidy and evil of the enemy (Shibutani, 1973). Internal dissent is stifled; discipline and orthodoxy are encouraged. Information about the war campaign is controlled by leaders and is selectively positive and optimistic. Propaganda becomes the chief mode of public communication (Lasswell, 1927; Lasswell and Blumenstock, 1939; Daugherty and Janowitz, 1960; Moskos, 1970). Even in their informal conversations people are expected to suppress doubts or misgivings and express support for the government's policies, lest their patriotism be called into question.

Political and military leaders idealize participation in the war effort. Popular heroes emerge in combat, whose deeds are quickly mythologized and whose characters are glorified as embodying the most sacred national values and virtues. A crusade mentality facilitates the recruitment of willing new warriors (Barnet, 1970; Falk and Kim, 1980). Large numbers rush to volunteer, especially the idealistic young. Military training and combat itself may be extolled as ennobling disciplines that mitigate the corruption of purely self-interested pursuits and as experiences that powerfully etch into youthful minds the social values of sacrifice, courage, honor, unity, and discipline (Holtom, 1947).

At the same time, long, taxing campaigns—in which costs are steep, decisive victories few, and ultimate triumph uncertain—lead to morale problems. Dissent increases, popular support erodes, and the possibilities of both civilian and troop demoralization become a major preoccupation of national and military leaders (Shils and Janowitz, 1948; Lang, 1980).

There are, of course, limits to any analogy. Contemporary religious competition and evangelical expansion depend on persuasion and conversion rather than force and differ from warfare in many ways. What is essentially the same, however, is the need for successful missionary religions to mobilize and sustain widespread support for a transcendent cause that requires the concentration of community resources, constant individual sacrifices, and a substantial reduction of commitments to other distracting concerns. Like nations at war, missionary religions must sustain a crusade mentality among their member populations.

The transcendent cause to which the Latter-day Saints are collectively attached is the millennial belief in a divine mandate to build

the Kingdom of God on earth as the culminating episode of human history (O'Dea, 1957; Arrington, 1958; Hansen, 1967; Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, 1984a; Hill, 1989). This belief justifies and inspires the Mormon missionary enterprise. For faithful Latter-day Saints, missionary work is nothing less than a continuous ideological crusade that assumes the inevitable realization of God's designs for humanity through the agency of the LDS Church but also projects the severe testing of his chosen people by powerful oppositional forces. Early Mormon history amply demonstrated the reality of such opposition and provided the origin for contrasting conceptions—good versus evil, sacred versus secular or satanic forces—which are still an important part of missionary rhetoric today.

As long as the LDS Church seriously pursues the evangelization of the world, Mormon officials will undoubtedly continue to insist on strict orthodoxy of belief and practice. From a crusade perspective, moderating established doctrines, liberalizing religious norms, and challenging simplistic versions of church history are diversionary exercises that undermine commitment to the cause. Unanimity is prized in most religions but notably so in missionary religions. Spreading God's word and work on earth requires clear-cut choices between right and wrong alternatives. Criticism and dissent must be suppressed because they often breed moral ambiguity—ambiguity that may weaken member morale and impair the crusade spirit necessary for effective missionary work. Mormon authorities are, in fact, particularly sensitive to the possibility that critical scholarship might erode the faith of Mormon youth, who represent the basic pool from which the church must draw its volunteer missionary force. LDS religious leaders therefore emphasize that religious literature, whether popular or scholarly, must be positive and faith-promoting if it is to be approved by the church for circulation among the membership. In local religious meetings, priesthood and auxiliary class discussions, and even informal gatherings, members customarily suppress whatever religious doubts and misgivings they might have, while expressing support for church policies.

The concern for orthodoxy is magnified in Mormon missionary training and in the new recruits' assigned mission fields (which may be compared with military basic training and battlefield units, respectively). Missionaries are induced to accept direction and follow institutional procedures in preference to exercising their own idiosyncratic judgment. In a word, they become disciplined. The organized supervision of LDS missionary life has increased dramatically in the twentieth century (Cowan, 1984; Bergera, 1988). Mission rules are

numerous and restrictive. Each missionary is regularly interviewed, evaluated, and counseled by mission officials. While learning is expected to occur during the missionary training period and later in the mission field itself, the intent is indoctrination, not reflective, critical inquiry. Church authorities encourage missionaries to read only prescribed manuals containing missionary lesson plans and church procedures and the standard works (or canonical scriptures) of the LDS Church. Ecclesiastical leaders typically regard scripture as sacred texts to be read with awe and faith rather than with a critical eye. Revered church leaders are looked to for authoritative interpretation of the meaning and application of the sacred texts to missionary life.

The task of constantly recruiting and replenishing the ranks of its voluntary missionary force, especially among its youth, and the necessity of this enterprise for sustaining the lay structure of the LDS Church lie at the heart of our thesis and therefore deserve a more extended analysis.

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As previously indicated, Mormon commitment to lay missionary service produces a recruiting situation analogous to that faced by military organizations in modern societies. The normal LDS missionary tour of service for young males is for a period of approximately two years (female missionaries are called to serve for eighteen months). As with military service, this means there is a regular turnover of personnel. New volunteers must be constantly recruited, trained, and allocated to designated areas of service to replace those whose time has expired. Merely to maintain the current contingent of 45,000 full-time missionaries in the field requires the recruitment of over 25,000 LDS missionaries each year. But in fact Mormon officials expect to increase dramatically the number of new recruits responding to calls for missionary service in the years to come, especially from the ranks of the laity living in countries outside the United States. Two decades ago, approximately 500 non-U.S. missionaries were serving missionary assignments for the LDS Church throughout the world (*Church News*, March 23, 1986:3). Today the number of Mormon missionaries serving from countries outside the United States is almost 14,000, or 31 percent of the total missionary force (*Church News*, May 4, 1991).

In peacetime modern professional armies in pluralistic societies must appeal to the rational self-interest of potential recruits. They compete for enlistments in educational and labor markets that offer

the young a wide variety of career choices (Binkin, 1986). Peacetime recruitment appeals therefore emphasize economic, educational, and career-training incentives. In wartime, however, there is typically a dramatic surge in the volunteer rate. Service is solicited and rendered primarily on the basis of duty rather than self-interest; recruitment appeals emphasize patriotism rather than material rewards (Segal and Segal, 1983). In times of war, national glory and honor, or the preservation and promulgation of one's way of life, are the causes for which large numbers of recruits are willing to sacrifice their narrow self-interest, endure hardships, and confront death.

For dedicated missionary religions, especially those that interpret their labors within a millenarian conception of history, there are no peacetime interludes. For them the struggle, the divinely sanctioned cause, always beckons. Great evils always remain to be combated, and there are many more souls to be won before the commencement of the millennium (see Sandeen, 1970). In this sense the Mormon church is in a permanent state of mobilization and must constantly maintain a crusade mentality among its members. Enduring, conscientious lay support—especially willingness to sacrifice for and participate in the LDS missionary system—depends on the church's ability to generate and sustain a strong sense of collective commitment to the sacred cause of expanding God's Kingdom on earth from one generation to the next.

Generational problems for the LDS Church are essentially the same as those facing all institutional religions in modern society. Because of its extensive lay requirements, however, potential generational difficulties are arguably of greater concern for Mormonism (and other, similarly exclusive groups) than for religions with more relaxed member expectations. At any rate, major institutional problems to be confronted include (1) the competing secular influences, pressures, and diversity of enticing alternatives, which disperse individual commitments and weaken traditional loyalties, and (2) the tendency of youth to rebel against parental norms and established authority, especially during times of rapid social change (Feuer, 1969).

That Mormonism in its contemporary social setting loses a certain share of its youth every generation is not at all remarkable. What is remarkable is the extent to which the LDS Church succeeds in capturing and holding young people's loyalties in a pluralistic environment. To a significant extent, it succeeds in channeling the idealism of its youth into lifetime service within the institutional church. Mormonism has thus far been able to institutionalize, as well or better than most contemporary religions, what Lewis Feuer (1969) calls "generational

equilibrium," a relatively stable form of social continuity in which a substantial portion of the young routinely identify with and practice the values of its elders instead of engaging in generational rebellions. Arguably, the single most important cultural practice for maintaining the generational continuity of Mormon society, especially for young males, is the lay system of missionary service.

In our judgment, reference group theory provides the most useful conceptual framework for understanding the process of Mormon missionary induction and the maintenance of generational equilibrium. According to Robert Merton (1968:289), "Reference group theory aims to systematize the determinants and consequences of those processes of evaluation and self-appraisal in which the individual takes the values or standards of other individuals and groups as a comparative frame of reference." Tamatsu Shibutani (1986:113) defines "a reference group" as "that social unit whose culture is used in defining a *succession of situations*" (emphasis added).

The multiplicity of potential reference groups from which individuals can choose different, often conflicting, frames of reference complicates the study and control of social behavior in modern societies. It is precisely groups like the Mormons, which project lifelong careers for their members, that most rigorously attempt to limit and shape reference group selections, particularly those of the young. The institutional task for exclusive religions is to attenuate the influence of other reference groups while making the church the primary reference group for each succeeding generation. The lay religious organization aims to assign a "master status" to one's membership in the church, that is, to establish church membership as the single most important status for defining one's social identity, so the church can assume priority claim on its members' commitment and personal resources. (In Mormonism, this priority claim is symbolically articulated in a temple endowment ceremony as the Law of Consecration, which devoted members covenant to obey for the rest of their lives.) To the degree that the religious institution succeeds in establishing church membership as a master status for individuals, those individuals are likely to be committed, active church participants.

Only in relatively open social systems that provide opportunities for mobility and advancement can achievement-based careers be effectively promoted. The LDS Church provides such a mobility structure for its members (though it is considerably less open to women than men) through its complex lay network of ward, stake, regional, and area organizations, not to mention its elite, expanding hierarchy of "general authorities" (see Cornwall, 1982). It is only in groups with

visible mobility structures that anticipatory socialization—a key variable in reference group theory—functions socially or psychologically. Anticipatory socialization is the learning process in which individuals come to identify with the values and role requirements attached to social statuses they do not currently possess but to which they aspire. The task of the lay church is to channel aspirations toward the acquisition of statuses within its own organizational structure. Attitudinal and behavioral preparation for status shifts is the primary function of anticipatory socialization (Merton, 1968:319).

Much of the religious teaching to which Mormon children are exposed, both in the home and at church, is clearly a form of anticipatory socialization (Cornwall, 1988). Anticipatory socialization is facilitated when groups structure typical career paths for their members, or what Merton calls “status sequences.” A status sequence consists of a succession of statuses occurring over time with sufficient frequency to become socially patterned (Merton, 1968:424). Within Mormonism certain status sequences are normatively prescribed, especially for children and youth through their young adult years (see Shippo, this volume). The anticipation of a missionary call, particularly for males, represents a “turning point” status in the sequence. From an early age, the missionary role is idealized for Mormon youth. Not only is it a prescribed religious duty of LDS parents to encourage their children to prepare for missionary service, but the church itself systematically incorporates missionary preparation into the sequence of age-graded organizations through which LDS children and youth pass as they grow up. Even church-sponsored Boy Scout programs are promoted as good missionary preparation (*Church News*, February 13, 1988:3–6).

Anticipatory socialization of the missionary role intensifies for Mormon males once they are inducted into the lay priesthood structure of the LDS Church at the age of twelve and begin their advancement through the ranks of the Aaronic priesthood. At the age of nineteen they are eligible for induction into the higher Melchizedek order of the priesthood, and at this stage in their advancement they are also eligible for a missionary call. At this point the normative pressure exerted by family, peers, and religious officials to fulfill one's missionary obligations becomes most acute. Many young Mormon males resist these expectations in order to pursue competing secular interests in adult society (*Ensign*, December 1984:66). But for those whose chief role models and reference groups are linked to the church, we may hypothesize that the decision to accept a mission call has already been largely formulated and made through the process of anticipa-

tory socialization. Empirical support for this hypothesis may be inferred from H. Bruce Roghaar's (1991) longitudinal analysis of the family and adolescent religiosity factors most strongly related to Mormon males' serving a mission.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, single women have also been called to serve full-time LDS missions. Until the last two decades, however, only a small fraction of Mormon missionaries in the field were women. In recent years the proportion of young women missionaries has increased to about 20 percent of the total missionary force (LDS Church Missionary Department, 1992). This represents a significant demographic restructuring of the Mormon missionary enterprise, one that parallels the contemporary increase of female recruits into the traditionally male-dominated armed forces. The ambivalence of many Mormon officials toward the increasing number of young women volunteers for missionary service resembles feelings expressed by government and military leaders, many of whom are still struggling to cope with changes in traditional gender-role distinctions in combat organizations (DeFleur and Warner, 1985, 1987). For young Mormon women, conventional marriage and homemaking roles are still idealized as priorities; however, norms are shifting, and there is also an institutional need for women to fill gaps in the rapidly expanding ranks of LDS missionaries proselyting throughout the world. As women increasingly pursue college educations and career training while also volunteering in larger numbers than ever before for missionary assignments, we see expanding cohorts of LDS women with greater worldly experience and training who are willing to postpone marriage and family aspirations until later than has been the Mormon norm.

In what ways, if any, do the personal consequences of the missionary experience differ for young LDS women compared with young men? What might the consequences of a significantly increased rate of female missionary participation be for the institutional structure of the Mormon religion? These are important questions for which there are not reliably established answers. We might surmise that since female missionaries are typically required to work in a capacity subordinate to males, one major consequence of their participation in the missionary system is that their acceptance of a male-dominated priesthood hierarchy is reinforced. But at least for some female missionaries (perhaps an increasing proportion as the rate of female participation increases), missionary assignments may be a liberating experience in which demanding duties outside of marital and family obligations are assumed, self-reliance and organizational skills

are exercised, and self-confidence and a sense of sisterhood are presumably strengthened. Institutional adjustments to the gradual growth of feminist consciousness within the LDS Church, potentially abetted by the missionary experiences of increasing numbers of capable young women, is surely an area of great interest to observers of Mormon development.

We emphasize the "turning point" experience associated with the missionary status for young Mormons in the development of their religious careers. The timing of the missionary transition is crucial because it generally coincides with that period in modern life when youth are poised to make secular career choices. Furthermore, it occurs when youth are most prone to alienation and rebellion against the strictures of adult authority. They are also largely free from the confining, mundane commitments and compromises that inevitably accumulate over the course of conventional adult life. Youth are therefore most energetically free at this juncture in life to seek meaningful causes in response to their youthful idealism (Feuer, 1969; Kenniston, 1969). The missionary cause of the LDS Church simultaneously inspires and channels the idealism of its youth while deflecting youthful alienation and rebellion away from the religious strictures of Mormon society.

The effectiveness of anticipatory socialization varies in individual cases, as we have emphasized. In particular, for many young men who reject missionary assignments, failure to follow the status sequence of Mormon society prescribed for them may signify the slackening of their religious commitment. For some, it may indeed herald their alienation and rebellion against the admonitions of parents and Mormon officials and their outright withdrawal from involvement in church programs. But for the sizable fraction of LDS males who do accept mission calls (approximately one-third of eligible U.S. Mormon males; see *Ensign*, December 1984:66), it means that they will now enter into a fairly lengthy, intensive religious enterprise in which they will more or less suspend all other commitments and narrowly dedicate themselves to church service.

In certain key respects the LDS missionary experience can be understood as a rite of passage for Mormon youth, which prepares many of them to assume adult roles in the religious community (Miller, 1984; Groesbeck, 1986). According to Arnold Van Gennep (1960), the universal elements of cultural rites of passage include three sequential stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. The novice is first symbolically or physically separated from his or her previous statuses in the community; then passes through an intensive

transitional stage (often characterized by a certain amount of hardship, deprivation, and self-mortification) in which esoteric vocabularies, mythologies, attitudes, and behaviors appropriate to the new status must be learned and an acceptable level of skill mastery demonstrated; and finally returns to ordinary society and is incorporated back into the community as a new kind of person, with expanded rights and responsibilities.

This general pattern corresponds to basic elements of the Mormon missionary experience. For reasons of conceptual clarity, however, we prefer to describe the acceptance and performance of the missionary role as a "turning point status" in a culturally defined career sequence and to limit the term *rite of passage* to those ceremonial occasions that formally symbolize significant status shifts in the sequence. There are a cluster of authorizing rites performed for young, novice missionaries that dramatize their passage into the missionary role. These typically include being ordained in the Melchizedek priesthood (for males); receiving a patriarchal blessing (if one has not already been bestowed at an earlier age); being formally interviewed by the local bishop and stake president to determine the candidate's worthiness to serve; being "set apart" as a missionary by the candidate's stake president or some other high-ranking ecclesiastical authority; participating in a farewell testimonial sponsored by the local congregation, at which the novice missionary typically confesses his or her faith in the Mormon church and determination to succeed as a missionary; and, finally, attending an LDS temple to receive the temple endowment and make covenants to obey the Law of Consecration. This series of ceremonial rites of passage functions to commit novices publicly to a missionary identity from which it becomes increasingly difficult to withdraw or abandon should they begin to have doubts about their decision to serve (see Kanter, 1972; Turner and Killian, 1987).

The LDS missionary experience is most fully understood, however, in terms of the status sequence model. Instead of erroneously depicting an abrupt transition that radically dichotomizes past and future religious roles, the career, or status sequence, model accurately highlights the continuity of anticipatory socialization sponsored by the LDS Church. It calls attention to the series of status gradations in church organization that function to prepare age cohorts to aspire to and identify with future religious callings, while minimizing problems of adjustment when status transitions do occur. On the basis of this model, we would hypothesize that those novice missionaries who have undergone the *least* amount of anticipatory socialization

(e.g., relatively new converts to Mormonism)—for whom the transition from their previous statuses to that of missionary is therefore most abrupt—will have the greatest difficulty adjusting to the missionary role.

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Successful advancement through a mission is not just another routine step in the status sequence of the LDS Church. As we have said, it constitutes a major turning point. Like fresh replacement troops in combat, new Mormon missionaries must continue to make learning adjustments to the realities of the field if they are to function effectively. Disappointments and frustrations will compete with faith-promoting, reconfirming experiences. The inevitable idealization of missionary service, resulting from the process of anticipatory socialization, may be contradicted by the reality of various field deprivations and unanticipated difficulties, as well as by the reality of human imperfection and recalcitrance, including the missionary's own. Most Mormon missionaries make the accommodations necessary to perform effectively, but some become disillusioned and demoralized (Bergera, 1988). Whatever the variations in morale might be, the vast majority of Mormon missionaries complete their assignments. Only a few (less than 2 percent) ask to be sent home (LDS Church Public Communications Department, 1988). We hypothesize that as a result of their time and experience in the field, many Mormon missionaries acquire attitudes typical of military combat veterans (see Marshall, 1947; Stouffer et al., 1949). That is, they become more realistic in their conception of the glory of the cause and of the heroism of their own participation. To some degree, the missionary enterprise is deglamorized, yet the ability to carry out one's duties increases. They learn to assimilate themselves in a "missionary culture," seeking recognition and advancement in missionary ranks in much the same way that combat veterans, once assimilated into military life, seek promotions in military rank (see Stouffer et al., 1949; Janowitz, 1960).

Most significantly, missionary veterans in the field learn to orient themselves within the narrow plausibility structure of the mission organization. Every subculture creates plausibility structures (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), which consist of integrated networks of individuals who share common assumptions, understandings, and sources of authority that in turn shape their values and perceptions of reality. Plausibility structures function to inculcate and maintain adherence to a particular belief system, reinforce commitment to

group norms of conduct, unify the ranks in a common cause, and insulate against the often dispiriting antagonism and incredulity of the outside world.

In addition to the plausibility structure, the mobility, or advancement, structure of the Mormon proselyting system gradually develops an individual's capacity to perform the missionary role. Advancement in the mission organization also serves as a preview and, for many Mormon youth, as an induction into the career mobility structure of the Mormon church itself. Once missionaries are assimilated into the routines of missionary life, the mission organization—and hence the LDS Church—becomes their dominant reference group. Over time, one's missionary status typically assumes the parameters of a master status, to which all other obligations are subordinated. The religious socialization of Mormon youth thus actually culminates in the mission field, where commitments to the LDS cause are routinized and identification with the church is secured.

Any voluntary organization must provide adequate incentives for members to participate. Among the most powerful incentives offered by religious organizations are what Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge (1980) call "general compensators": the promises of ultimate salvation from human suffering and of life everlasting. A religion must also offer more immediate rewards, connected to people's everyday lives and self-conceptions. One of the great strengths of the LDS Church is its organizational ability to meet the belonging and participatory needs of large numbers of ordinary people through its complex network of lay offices and group obligations. The LDS Church is based on an organizational system that provides status and recognition for one's performance and advancements. Mormonism could scarcely function without such incentives.

Like most Christian churches, the Mormon church preaches against self-pride, purely personal ambition, and "unrighteous dominion" in religious callings. First and foremost, one is supposed to be devoted to doing God's work, not promoting one's own career in the ranks of church organization. Without career mobility structures, however, it is highly unlikely that lay religions like Mormonism would continue to flourish from one generation to the next. The LDS Church teaches leadership qualities and promotes them as prime values, and promotions to positions of greater ecclesiastical authority constitute a status system. Because women's authority is limited in the LDS Church (women cannot be ordained to the lay Mormon priesthood and therefore are excluded from most positions that form ecclesiastical policy and make doctrinal decisions), the institutional

religious careers of most Mormon women are usually much less visible than those of Mormon men. This also tends to be true in the mission organization. In many respects LDS mission organizations are microcosms of the larger ecclesiastical structure of the Mormon church. This isomorphism functions to reinforce the institutional continuity of Mormon religious life. To what extent, if any, Mormon officials in the future will be willing to alter traditional conceptions of gender-role authority remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, it is in the mission field that many young Mormons—both male and female—become meaningful participants in the authority structure of the LDS Church for the first time. They are given significant responsibilities and are held accountable for their performances. Organizational discipline channels idealistic religious motives. The plaudits of adult ecclesiastical authorities and the esteem of peers stimulate youthful aspirations to attain recognition through mission leadership positions (most of which require priesthood authority and are therefore male-dominated). Analogous in a way to combatants, certain exceptional missionaries may emerge who, in response to the trials of missionary life, demonstrate unusual aptitude and come to personify the organizational ideals of valor, devotion, selflessness, and cool-headed competence under fire. In some cases their deeds may become legendary, and they are celebrated as heroes and exemplars in both the rhetoric of church leaders and the folklore of mission culture (Wilson, 1981). The mythologized exploits of missionary heroes function as idealized standards of success that kindle the passions of ambition and emulation.

Such striving can also become a source of tension and invidiousness, qualities not unknown to competitive corporate organizations in secular life. Competitive mobility systems often generate a residue of resentment and ill will among those who are not promoted or who see the advancements and recognition bestowed on others as unfair and arbitrary relative to their own perceived merits. Mobility aspirations are much more likely to become a source of tension for males than for females in the Mormon system. In spite of (or perhaps even because of) less competitive pressure for leadership positions, young women often become more effective proselytizers than many of their male counterparts (LDS Church Missionary Department, 1988).

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We conclude that the socialization and recruitment of Mormon youth into a disciplined missionary force has a profound effect on

Mormon sectarianism—on sustaining a crusade mentality for advancing the Mormon cause in the modern, secular world. For successful religious movements historically, increasing prosperity and social respectability among succeeding generations have frequently signaled the onset of worldly accommodation and a corresponding loss of sectarian fervor (Niebuhr, 1929; Troeltsch, 1931). The demise of sectarian fervor is not, however, an inevitable consequence. As long as they are expanding through vigorous efforts at recruitment, religious movements are likely to continue cultivating a crusade orientation that keeps them in tension with other groups in society (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985:363–64). Committed missionary religions tend to resist liberalizing their basic precepts and continue to insist on the orthodox conformity of their members. It is when religions diminish or cease their active efforts to convert the world that they most often become susceptible to the pressures of worldly compromise and accommodation.

Clearly the Mormons have prospered in the twentieth century. Just as clearly the LDS Church has modified many of its original beliefs and related religious practices, resulting in a significant reduction of both external social tensions and internal commitment norms for modern members (see Mauss, this volume). Yet every generation of Mormon leaders has continued to stress a variety of sectarian themes in its rhetoric and teachings, especially Mormonism's claim to exclusive possession of ultimate religious truth and its divinely appointed duty to carry this truth to the world in a relatively short span of time (Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, 1984a). Though the LDS Church in modern times has become much more concerned with its image and public relations, it has never wavered from its original commitment to growth through proselyting. Indeed, Mormon leaders eagerly and systematically pursue effective public relations and a favorable corporate image as a means for serving the ultimate ends of missionary recruitment.

Each new generation of Mormon youth has transmitted to it a sense of mission in a sacred cause that is similar to the basic expectation of earlier generations. In what might be conceived of as a kind of "routinization of charisma," new generations of Mormons are typically fired in their zeal not by drastic conversion experiences or persecution but by inculcation in a system of religious service. For U.S. Mormons, middle-class affluence is made compatible with dutiful sacrifice. Many LDS parents plan for the departure of their sons and daughters on missionary assignments with the same sense of prideful necessity they have in sending the children away to college. Upon

completing their missions, the majority of young Mormons return to their religious communities with at least strengthened religious convictions and often greatly increased zeal for committing significant portions of their lives to the service of the LDS Church. This assertion is convincingly supported by the strong positive correlations Roghaar (1991) found between young Mormon men's completion of a mission and subsequent continuation of adult religious commitment in both public and private domains.

It is not coincidental that the great majority of Mormonism's general authorities have commenced their ecclesiastical careers as successful missionaries. The ranks of the LDS bureaucracy, as well as leadership positions at all levels of local church organization, are filled with returned Mormon missionaries. Whatever their socioeconomic or national backgrounds might be, they share in common the organized experience of the missionary crusade. Each new cohort of returned missionaries thus constitutes a revitalizing pool of young adults from which the LDS Church replenishes the ranks of devoted followers and leaders.

Several final caveats are worth emphasizing. The missionary experience is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for continued adult activity in the LDS Church. Many individuals who do not serve LDS missions go on to participate as adults in the lay structure of church organization. At the same time a certain number of returned LDS missionaries (perhaps 10 percent) for a variety of reasons become ambivalent, alienated, or indifferent and abandon their previous religious commitments (Madsen, 1977). The particulars of what transpires subsequent to the missionary experience—the opportunities available in both secular and religious life; the career, educational, and marital choices one makes; the incidence of success and failure in these endeavors relative to one's expectations—have an obviously important impact on the continued shaping of people's religious identities. Such shaping factors vary significantly from one individual to another.

Religious faith and commitment can never be understood adequately as static achievements (Bromley, 1988). Faith and commitment always involve an ongoing process of adjustment and change, which seldom, if ever, can be entirely separated from the reference group comparisons and evaluations that individuals make over the course of their lives. To the extent that reference groups remain relatively constant over time and are mutually supporting, the plausibility of a particular religious tradition is likely to be maintained and individuals' commitments are more likely to hold steady. But to the

extent that important reference groups change or convey conflicting expectations, plausibility structures are questioned and religious commitments may be transformed. The range of alternative reference groups available to individuals creates the social matrix for the reciprocal processes of faith and doubt, commitment and disillusionment, loyalty and defection. The modern LDS Church attempts to negotiate this matrix through rigorous anticipatory socialization of its members for lay religious careers, a process that features the turning point experience of the missionary role.

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