

A Non-Mormon Religion Professor's Impressions of Mormon Missionaries

The commitment, innocence, and candor of Mormon missionaries impress a Maine professor and his students.

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Most students at our small state university in rural New England have had little exposure to the variety of religious faiths. Many of my students, perhaps 40 percent, claim affiliation with Roman Catholicism, another 30 percent with Protestant denominations, and the remaining students have no affiliation. In each class of thirty to thirty-five, there are always several who have never been inside a church or synagogue. Partly to address this lack of experience with religious movements, I invite representatives of various faiths to address my classes. In the past eight years, we have had presentations by the following Christian faiths: Roman Catholic, all the "main-line" Protestant denominations (represented by ordained women, whenever possible), Latter-day Saint, Seventh-day Adventist, Christian Science, Pentecostal, Unificationist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Quaker, Unitarian, Christian Fundamentalist, Shaker, and The Way. Non-Christian faiths that have been represented are Judaism, Islam, Baha'i, Confucian, Hindu, Zen Buddhism, and Wiccan.

Among these diverse religious movements, locally available representatives most often are middle-aged or older, with the exceptions of foreign students, who may appear to speak about their faith, and of Latter-day Saint missionaries, who are about the same age as most of the students in class. While I might have invited a Mormon bishop or Relief Society president to speak, I have always chosen a set of missionaries primarily because the missionaries represent their faith from a unique position due to their young age.

When I ask the students which of them has had Mormon missionaries knock at their door, usually about 90 percent raise their hands, but very few have ever invited them into their homes or apartments. I then prepare the class for a visit by the missionaries by focusing on two topics: continuity and commitment. The first topic leads us to a discussion of religious tradition, and I attempt to draw attention to the natural resistance that develops against any new religious movement, particularly a faith that claims to have a living prophet and new books of scripture as does The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Students can better understand the persecution endured by the early Mormons if they are aware of the human tendency to cling to traditional beliefs and to view new beliefs with suspicion or even fear.

Our discussion of commitment leads us to realize that most of us are committed, at any given moment, to a movement or idea or line of action, and further, that the amount of time, money, and effort we devote to this commitment indicates the depth of the commitment. The class also comes to accept the notion that, since we do not all share the same goals, what may be important to one person may seem inconsequential, even strange, to another. I ask students to attempt to determine the commitment level of the two missionaries who will visit the class, and to identify specific elements in their presentation that provide clues to this. For example, I suggest that they might wish to ask about the cost of a mission and where the funds come from.

In addition to preparing the class, I attempt to help the missionaries know what to anticipate. Several weeks before the visit, I telephone them to extend the invitation. I make clear that while I am not a Latter-day Saint, I am friendly to the church and admire many of its members and programs. As one might expect, this appears to dispel any anxiety that the invitation might cause, because few of the missionaries have had much college experience and many appear somewhat in awe of the world of higher education. Of the ten or twelve sets of missionaries that I have invited over the years, none has ever been asked to speak to a college class before, but none has refused my invitation. I once encountered a female or "sister" missionary on the phone who quickly assumed I was one of the "elders" playing a practical joke on her. Finally, I persuaded her

that my inquiry was legitimate, and she and her companion made a fine presentation to the class.

The three topics that I suggest they address—and these are the topics I give to representatives of all of the faiths—are the history of the church (in brief), its basic doctrines, and their own personal stories—were they born in the faith, how did they come to accept it spiritually, and what led them to devote so much time to their faith? Answers to the latter two of these three topics, the representatives' personal connections with and commitment to the faith, prove to be the most interesting to class members.

Further preparations of the missionaries for their appearance include my taking them out for a meal prior to their meeting with the class. This setting gives me a way of rewarding their efforts, of becoming better acquainted, and of answering any last-minute questions. Two or three of the missionaries have been bold enough during these relaxed moments to inquire about the state of my own soul. Usually I have actively avoided dealing with such questions during this preclass discussion, but I have not always been successful.

Of all those invited to make a presentation, only one missionary appeared nervous. He was still in the early months of his mission and speaking before an unusually large class—sixty students that semester—may have contributed to his anxiety. If other missionaries were nervous, they did not show it. Afterwards, many admitted that the thought of speaking to so large a group of unfamiliar people not of their faith was intimidating, as their experience before such groups was limited to settings among their own faith with supportive listeners. The factor that appeals most to my students about the LDS missionaries—their being close to the students in age—turns out to be the very factor that brings the most anxiety to the missionaries themselves. Younger audiences, they claim, look up to them, while older audiences appear to admire them for their commitment, manners, neat dress, and courtesy. But their peers, they believe, evaluate them differently, perhaps more harshly, more candidly. One missionary reported that while addressing the class, he was constantly wondering, “What are they thinking? Do they think I’m crazy?”

But the missionaries' anxiety seems to have no grounds, for the students have always been impressed by them, and an instant rapport

appears to arise between them and the class, probably in large measure because of their similar ages. With representatives of other faiths, this rapport is sometimes lacking, perhaps in part because many representatives are as old as the students' own parents and thus implicitly represent parental authority. Furthermore, the missionaries look like college students, at least our more neatly groomed ones. One student's comment is typical: "I didn't expect them to be as 'normal' as they were."

Generally, the missionaries display an innocence and a candor that students (and probably most people) find appealing. An example is the missionary who told the class that on the first night of his mission, when he was far away from home for the first time in his life, he cried himself to sleep. Another, in response to a student asking if he had ever slipped in regard to the Mormon health code, quietly replied, "We have all slipped sometime in our lives." The classes have always responded well to the missionaries' honesty in admitting their ignorance of a particular issue, or in agreeing that perhaps there may be more than one way to view a situation or idea. In contrast, older representatives from other faiths tend to be more dogmatic in their answers, and this firmness often turns students off. Finally, the class members often remark about the seeming genuineness of the "testimonies" that the missionaries bear of their personal conviction regarding matters of their faith.

As for the actual approach that they use in class, generally the missionaries combine a videotape on early church history with an oral presentation by them both, in alternating style as if they were conducting a "cottage meeting" with an "investigator" in someone's home. This appears to work quite well before the class. The only topic with which a few of them have seemed uncomfortable is the role of women in the church. Because our campus is about 70 percent female, many in the class are likely to voice objections when they hear that Mormon women are not allowed to hold the "priesthood" or church authority, and they also might speak out on the size of many Mormon families. One missionary informed the class he was one of fifteen children, at which even I joined in the gasps throughout the room.

Another topic that causes some consternation among students is the idea of various levels of heavenly glory and that only Mormons

in good standing will inherit the highest level. The missionaries seem more at ease holding their ground on this, yet they are usually able to do it without causing further alienation, unlike many other more sectarian, more exclusive faiths. Students have trouble, as might be expected, with several other unique aspects and doctrines of the faith. Among these are the idea of Joseph Smith as a modern-day prophet, the Book of Mormon as legitimate scripture complementing the Bible, and baptism for the dead.

As noted earlier, however, student interest seems to focus on the personal involvement and commitment of the missionaries more than on the various tenets of their faith. Most students cannot fathom why LDS missionaries are willing to do what they do for two years. Said one student, "My general reaction was, what are these two nice young men doing here? Why aren't they home and in college? Why are they here trying to convert people who don't want to be converted?" When I ask the class why so many young Mormons accept calls to serve full-time missions in spite of its high cost—currently about \$350 per month regardless of where the missionary serves throughout the world, an amount provided solely by the missionary and the missionary's family—the more perceptive students reply that what costs us the most is often valued the most and that something that comes easily is seldom regarded highly. This comment seems to suggest that young Mormons, in working at various jobs to earn their share of mission expenses, come to value the mission experience partly because it costs a great deal. Our discussion of this idea frequently leads to our talking about it being more costly to be an active Mormon than to be active in many other faiths, primarily because of the church's requirement of tithing to fund its vigorous building program worldwide, as well as its other expenses.

Another important dimension that I believe underlies my students' amazement at spending a class period with the missionaries, but one that rarely becomes articulated, is that they cannot see themselves being capable of doing what the missionaries are doing. Before them is a young person their own age who is hundreds, often thousands of miles from home and family for two years without the chance for a quick trip home, constantly meeting and talking with strangers, having to speak in public, knock on doors, talk with

people on the streets (in some missions), live twenty-four hours a day with a companion whom he/she has never met before, and be self-disciplined as well as a self-starter. The entire idea must be terrifying to many in the class if they think much about it; surely it would bring out many of their insecurities.

What these students fail to understand is that the LDS Church prepares its missionaries from an early age to accept, even welcome, such a challenge in early adulthood, and this well-organized effort contrasts sharply with the relative lack of such preparation of youth in other churches. Mormon children and youth are invited and encouraged from early childhood to speak before others, to learn the teachings of the faith, to memorize scriptures of importance, and to incorporate the conservative moral values of the faith in their day-to-day lives. Most missionaries have taken four years of “seminary” courses while in high school, meaning they have met for an hour each weekday before, during, or after school to study various books of scripture, thus preparing them with a foundation of gospel knowledge and personal conviction.

Moreover, virtually none of my students have been elevated as young teenagers to the status that the LDS Church gives its youth: at twelve, a boy is given what is believed to be the “royal priesthood” of God, and a girl becomes part of the Young Women program, in which she is taught to demonstrate in her life what is believed to be her divine birthright as a daughter of God. Membership in these groups requires active involvement in the important inner workings of the church and clearly must have a positive effect on the young person’s self-esteem and level of commitment. Finally, the young person accepting a mission call is given intensive training, including (if appropriate) language training, at one of the church’s Missionary Training Centers. Thus, what my students do not fully realize when they first meet the missionaries is that despite their youth, openness, and relative lack of formal gospel training, the missionaries are the products of a long-term grooming process.

In discussing missionary work with older members of the church, I have come to realize that the missionaries we have in New England, while typical of those churchwide in a general sense, are not typical in every sense. For instance, New Englanders, being the

somewhat stubborn Yankees that they are, generally resist efforts to convert them to Mormonism, even though Joseph Smith's roots actually began in upstate Vermont. During two years in the region, a missionary might aid in the conversion of perhaps a dozen or fewer persons. There are other areas of the world that prove even more difficult for such proselytizing, such as the predominantly Roman Catholic countries of France, Spain, and Italy; and proselytizing in Arab countries is not allowed at all. On the other hand, missionary labors are extremely fruitful in many Central and South American countries, in the Philippines, and in the South Pacific, where the number of converts during a two-year mission might be as high as five hundred.

The church has always promoted the active spreading of the gospel, and a few of the earliest missionaries like Wilford Woodruff, Heber C. Kimball, and Parley P. Pratt were responsible for the conversion of literally thousands, mostly in England; but just as the popular evangelist Billy Graham has observed in our own time, the quick convert is usually quick to depart, too. Mormon leaders understand this phenomenon, and they encourage today's missionaries to answer as adequately as possible any concerns and questions that their investigators have, to take their investigators to church meetings at least once prior to their baptism, and to involve them in other dimensions of LDS life. In addition, missionaries are assigned to seek out "less active" members of the faith and to reestablish ties with them, aiming to bring them back into activity.

While the church obviously benefits from the steady influx of new converts (some claim they are "the lifeblood of the church"), the personal growth of the missionary must be of nearly equal value to the church in the long run. I have often reflected that two years as a Mormon missionary is undoubtedly an excellent learning experience. The list of benefits surely is longer than the following, but these occur to me as an outsider: independence from family, self-sufficiency, personal discipline, self-motivation, financial management, practice with interpersonal relationships, development of communication skills, learning to deal with adversity, experience with travel, exposure to different (often foreign) cultures and values, and (for many) the learning of a foreign language.

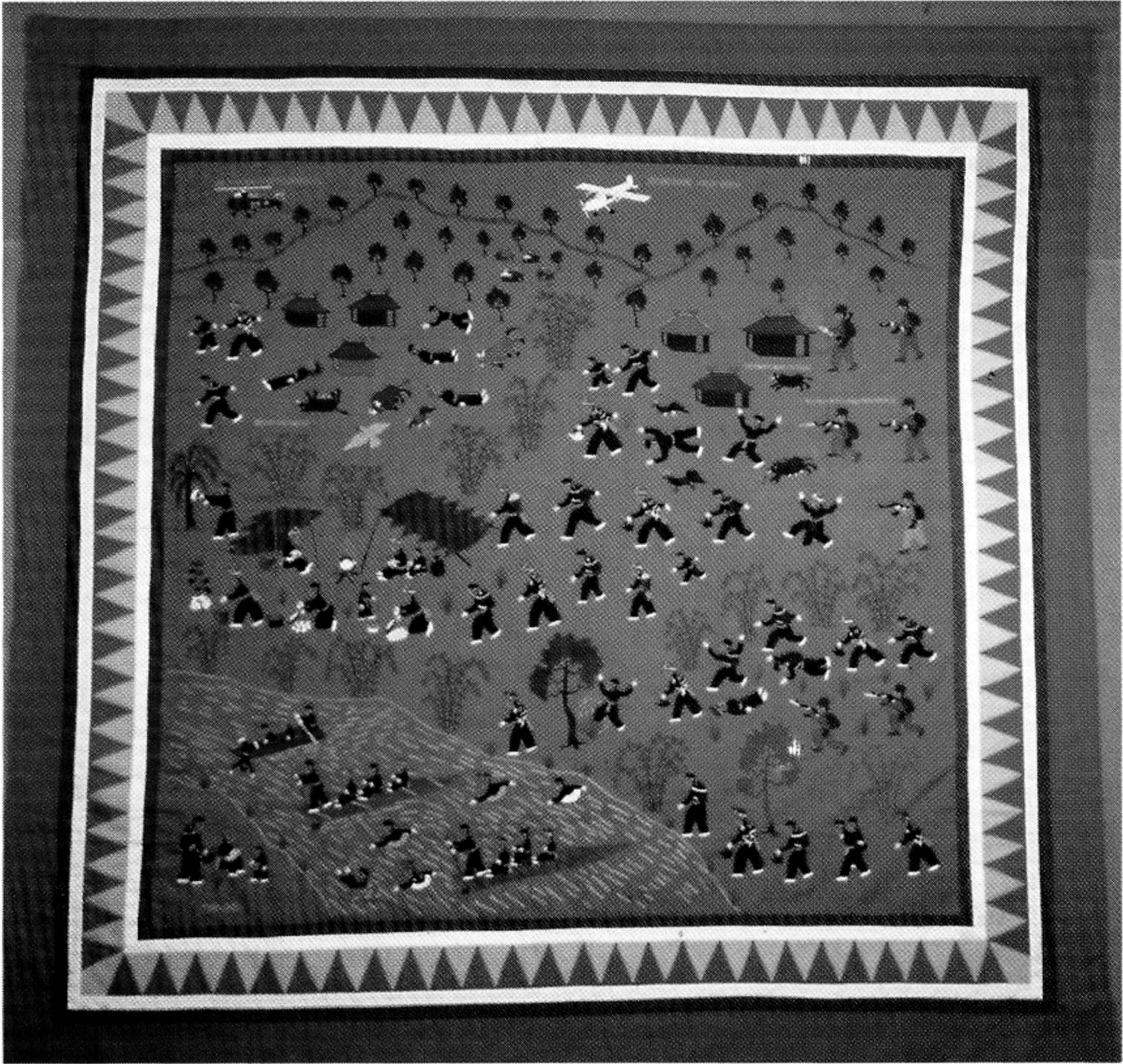
All these benefits are assured, I believe, by providing the missionary with a tightly knit organization and support system that also provides frequent counsel and guidance from a mission president and his spouse, as well as senior missionaries. Granted, a few missionaries never make it through the MTC, a few leave their missions early for reasons other than illness, and some go through the motions only because of pressure from home. But even in such “failures,” the missionaries learn important aspects about life and about themselves. All members, regardless of mission experience, are expected to be “member missionaries,” a concept first enunciated by President David O. McKay in the 1950s, and it is not surprising, therefore, that many returned missionaries continue throughout their lives to invite their friends and acquaintances to investigate their faith.

It is through such lifetime missionaries that I first became interested in the church. In the late 1960s, when my wife was a Brown University graduate student (while I was studying at the Yale Divinity School), her study carrel was next to that of an active Mormon. Both of us were attracted to the genuineness and the calm and friendly manner of our new friend and his family. When he learned of my studying at Yale, he presented me a Book of Mormon. Eventually, my interest in the history of the church was sparked to the point of writing a dissertation at the University of Oxford on the church’s nineteenth-century period in Britain; in the course of my research, I spent some time with President Gordon B. Hinckley, who also impressed me with his warm, courteous spirit. Despite his ever-increasing burdens as a major leader in the church, President Hinckley has found time to respond to subsequent inquires that I have made about church history. He told me once, “The time will come when you and your family will join the Church.” Rather than take offense at his boldness, I felt it was a compliment given in the true spirit of “member missionary” work. Finally, I have a colleague in my department at the university who is a Latter-day Saint. Primarily because of my ongoing interest in the church and my respect for its members, he was the first person whom I looked up when I first arrived on campus. We have been good friends ever since, and he has been especially helpful in answering my questions and in sharing his

experiences with me. Some day I may even follow his oft-repeated suggestion that I read the Book of Mormon from cover to cover.

I recently spoke with a young man who was preparing to leave on his mission. He was nervous, excited, and, after so many years of anticipation, relieved that he was finally going to go. He is the first missionary in his family, and his parents are proud, yet nervous, too. During our conversation, he sometimes had to struggle to articulate his thoughts and feelings; he lacked the polish that the MTC and experience in the mission brings, but that is what I liked best about our discussion. So much of what awaited him, he only dimly perceived; but one thing he was certain of was that he would be a better person for the experience. I am sure that he is right.

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Hmong Picture Cloth, sister of Tong Lor Lee, Thailand, 1984. Thousands of Hmong living in Laos served in a secret CIA army during the Vietnam War. Their specific mission was to rescue downed American airmen behind enemy lines. After the fall of Vietnam and Laos, the Communists used conventional and chemical warfare to retaliate against the Hmong. Many Hmong villages were destroyed, and an estimated one-third of the 350,000 Hmong in Southeast Asia were killed. Tens of thousands of Hmong refugees fled across the Mekong River into Thailand from their mountain-top villages. This picture cloth documents the typical refugee experience. Because so few Hmong spoke English, picture cloths such as this were one of the few ways they could tell the world about the horrors they had personally experienced.

About sixty thousand Hmong eventually made it to America, where many joined the Church. This picture cloth was acquired from Tong Lor Lee, of Kearns, Utah, who in turn had acquired it from her sister, who was still in the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand. The cloth was in the exhibition "Hmong Textiles: An Art Form in Transition" at the Museum of Church History and Art in 1985, where the story and art of many Hmong Latter-day Saints was exhibited. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.