



The Politics of Schism. The Origins of Dissent in Mormonism

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Abstract

Throughout nearly two ages of its history, and especially in the 19th century, Mormonism has experienced numerous cases of dissent and schism. Analysis of their sources reveals that, among a number of doctrinal, ritual, organisational and other issues, the single most important cause of schism was conflicts over authority. These power struggles are explained – within a theoretical framework derived from the theory of social exchange – as balancing operations intended to improve the actors' position in unequal exchange relations: to be able to obtain the valuable religious goods at a lower price (i.e. less or no submission).

Key words: Mormonism, schism, political power, theory of social exchange

Słowa kluczowe: mormonizm, schizma, władza polityczna, teoria wymiany społecznej

Although Mormonism has been mainly associated, both in scholarly literature and among the general public, with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) – by far its largest and fastest growing organisation – it is, in fact, a broader religious phenomenon which has given rise to more than a hundred religious groups of various sizes and lifespans, all subscribing to the legacy (or parts thereof) of Joseph Smith, the religion's founding prophet. The circumstances in which these groups emerged and the reasons why they chose to dissociate from the main body of the Church varied, and no uniform explanation of all these schisms is therefore possible. Some refused to accept parts of Nauvoo period theology, with its elaborate temple rituals and polygamy, some disagreed with the Quorum of the Twelve's decision to move west after Smith's death, and still others did not want or could not make the move, for a variety of economic, social and personal reasons. It is nonetheless possible to identify the single most important factor which figured prominently in most instances of schism within Mormonism. This factor was political: the *power struggle* within the

Church, present already in early Mormonism, but unfolding with particular force in the aftermath of Smith's assassination in 1844, during the ensuing succession crisis.

To explain "Mormon fissiparousness" as a political phenomenon, a theoretical framework derived from the theory of social exchange is developed. It is then applied to selected cases of schism within Mormonism in the 19th century, when this tendency was most pronounced. Finally, an attempt is made to demonstrate that doctrinal differences – the standard explanation of a schism – were not of decisive importance as sources of dissent, even though they might have been invoked as *ex post* justifications.¹ Most of the cases under analysis seem to vindicate these assertions, although to varying degrees. This analysis will, to some extent, neglect other factors, which is an inescapable consequence of adopting a particular theoretical perspective – in this case that of political science.

1. Theoretical framework

Theories of social exchange interpret social relations as transactions involving various, not necessarily tangible, goods (assets, rewards). These goods may include those of an economic (money, material goods, services), social (status, prestige, advice), and personal (affection, trust) nature. Power is usually conceptualised as a relation emerging from unequal conditions of exchange. When A provides B with certain rewards and B is unable to return rewards of roughly equal value, he or she has to respond with a submission to maintain the provision of these valuable rewards.² The "value" of goods exchanged in such social transactions is, of course, relative to the needs and preferences of the actors involved, and cannot be set objectively.

This very general formulation of the origin of power relations can be usefully applied to religious power, i.e. power based on religious legitimation. In this case, the goods supplied are of a religious or magical nature (god's blessing, healing and other powers and the promise of eternal salvation – the ultimate reward many religions have to offer), and are administered by religious functionaries (priests, prophets, shamans, sorcerers etc.). Since these rewards are of such immense value to true believers that, almost by definition, they cannot be adequately rewarded, securing their constant supply requires submission to these religious specialists, i.e. entering into a power relation.

To utilise this framework to explain the development of a schism, let us first consider the conditions of stability of a power relation in general. In order to weaken their subordination or to shake it off completely, the ruled (the "B" side of the power relation) have certain theoretical possibilities at their disposal. They can: a) respond with goods of comparable value, thus turning the power relation into an equal exchange situation; b) take over the goods by force, thus switching sides of the power relation; c) find alternative suppliers of the same goods, perhaps offering them at

¹ D. Jorgensen, *Dissent and Schism in the Early Church: Explaining Mormon Fissiparousness*, "Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought" 1995, vol. 28, no. 3, p. 36.

² P. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, New York 1964, Chapter V.

a better price (less submission); or d) limit their demand for the goods in question or renounce them completely, thus reducing or eliminating the need to submit to the power holder's wishes.³ The power of A over B is stable to the extent that A can successfully meet these challenges, i.e. block these avenues of liberation from his or her control.

When applying this conception of stability to the instances of religious power, we immediately find that option (a) is void: no reward can balance the promise of salvation or similar reward administered by religious functionaries, in the eyes of true believers. The takeover of the rewards (b) may mean, in this case, taking control, including by force, of the sacred places and rituals performed there, the key positions of religious power (ecclesiastical leaders, high priests, oracles etc.), sacred texts with the privilege of their interpretation and so on. The renunciation of the rewards (d), on the other hand, in religious terms equals "disenchantment of the world," secularisation and, more generally, the dwindling importance of religion in people's lives, with the accompanying slackening of religious leaders' hold on their subjects.⁴

For our purposes, however, the critical situation is the remaining course of action (c), namely seeking alternative suppliers of the desirable goods. Here, without questioning the ultimate importance of the religious rewards or trying to take them over forcibly, a dissatisfied group of believers may seek new revelation, fresh interpretation of the existing tradition (though often clothed as a return to the roots), new ritual forms etc. In social terms, this results in a schism – a formation of a new community of believers. This community may be more or less heterodoxical from the point of view of the mother tradition, but it is certainly distinct politically, that is in terms of organisation and leadership. The schism can be socially and politically empowering for a significant proportion of the dissenters by creating new positions of authority and making them more available (if only by a better ratio of the number of members to the number of holders of such positions, in comparison to the large mother church), allowing more innovations etc. Thus it can be viewed as a rational way out of the perceived powerlessness of many religious social relations.⁵

2. The early period

The early years of Mormonism (roughly the first decade from the establishment of the Church of Christ by Joseph Smith in 1830) was a period of institutionalisation of the movement, its transition from a charismatic sect founded on a series of revelations claimed by Smith and accepted as genuine by his followers to a hierarchical Church. While the community was moving from New York to Ohio, then Missouri

³ These solutions are inspired by R. Emerson's "balancing operations;" see his *Power-Dependence Relations*, "American Sociological Review" 1962, vol. 27, pp. 35–37; compare also P. Blau, *op.cit.*

⁴ For a fuller discussion of this model see M. Potz, *Religious Doctrine as a Factor of Stability of Political Systems. A Study of two North American Theocracies*, "Politics and Religion" 2013, vol. VII, no. 2, pp. 417–419.

⁵ Notwithstanding the significant risk of failure inherent in any such endeavour.

and finally to Nauvoo, Illinois, individual and collegial priesthood organs were created and their spheres of competence were delimited. As an illustration of this initial state of authority flux, Joseph Smith established the offices of assistant president and associate president in addition to First Presidency counsellors, with unclear relations between these posts. The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, created merely as a missionary body in 1835, had assumed the position of highest authority by the time of the prophet's death in 1844.

Against this background, it is no surprise that the early apostasies and schisms in the Church were often the consequence of conflicts over authority. Since Joseph Smith's leadership rested on his personal charisma, he made constant efforts to assert it by revelations and to gradually eliminate alternative sources of power. Many prominent leaders of early Mormonism, including the three *Book of Mormon* witnesses – Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris and David Whitmer – fell victim to this monopolisation of charismatic authority.

Whitmer and Cowdery, members and elders of the church from the very beginning, were first chastised by Smith in September 1830 for accepting as genuine messages received by another Mormon, Hiram Page, through a peep stone.⁶ This was one of the first indications that Smith had begun to regard the prophetic gift, initially widespread among the early converts, to be his personal domain. Whitmer and Cowdery yielded and were elevated to top leadership positions, but they, together with a few other prominent leaders, came into conflict with Smith again in 1838, in the wake of his financial misdealing with a quasi-banking institution in Kirtland, Ohio. They protested Smith's "endeavouring to unite ecclesiastical with civil authority and force men under a pretense of incurring the displeasure of heaven to use their earthly substance contrary to their own interest and privilege."⁷ Both Cowdery and Whitmer were excommunicated later that year, but while the former had never advanced any leadership claims, the latter agreed to head a schismatic Church of Christ, organised in 1847 by another dissenter, William McLellin. After its failure, he made his last attempt to reorganise the authentic Church of Christ only in 1876. Throughout his life Whitmer remained a critic of both Joseph Smith, whom he regarded as a fallen prophet from the late 1830s (although he never questioned the genuineness of the *Book of Mormon* and Smith's first revelations), and the majoritarian Utah Church. Whitmer rested his claim to authority on what his followers regarded as his ordination to be Smith's successor in 1834, which allegedly occurred during his nomination to the Missouri presidency of the Church.⁸

⁶ The condemnation of Page's visions as inspired by Satan was announced by Smith as a revelation (*Doctrine and Covenants*, 28: 11, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/28.11?lang=eng#10> [accessed: 28 October 2015]).

⁷ H.M. Marquardt, *David Whitmer: His Evolving Beliefs and Recollections*, [in:] *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism*, N. Bringhurst, J. Hammer (eds.), Independence 2007, p. 48.

⁸ D.M. Quinn, *The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844*, "Brigham Young University Studies" 1976, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 187.

3. The succession crisis and its aftermath

On 27 June 1844 Joseph Smith was lynched by an anti-Mormon mob in Carthage jail in Illinois, where he was awaiting court proceedings. Even though he seemed to have anticipated such an end (he was fearful and unwilling to let himself in when served a warrant), the prophet failed to clearly indicate his successor or establish a procedure for his selection. This led to a protracted succession crisis, in the course of which the struggle for power, coupled with the great westward migration of the Saints, resulted in a series of schisms and apostasies, both mass and individual, which seriously disrupted the relative unity of Mormonism. The final outcome – the consolidation and prosperity of the Utah branch led by Brigham Young – was by no means obvious at that time.

In his seminal study, D. Michael Quinn identified as many as eight different succession scenarios that could, more or less plausibly, be substantiated by some utterances or decisions of the deceased leader. While two of them were based on personal designation of a successor by Joseph Smith or being related to him (hereditary principle), the other six were linked to functions in various institutions of the Church, such as the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the First Presidency, the First Patriarch, the Associate President, the Council of Fifty or even high priesthood councils.⁹ Not all of these possible claims could be pursued equally forcibly during the critical period of 1844–45, but they all surfaced at some point as viable options. Therefore, Danny Jorgensen is only partly right when he says that “By limiting charisma to himself (exclusively, at least for official purposes) and linking it to a more clearly defined organisational hierarchy, the Mormon prophet thereby reduced the available means whereby rivals could claim authority for legitimating separation.”¹⁰ Such institutionalisation did indeed serve to contain the original charisma which, as we could see, caused schisms in the formative period, but, at the same time, it sowed the seeds of later discord. The growth of Church organisation and the multiplication of individual and collective priesthood bodies (offices, councils, quorums), without completing the accompanying process of delimiting the spheres of their competence and their hierarchy – increased, not reduced, the number of possible loci of authority from which to claim legitimacy in the ensuing succession struggle. They later served as condensation nuclei for many of the numerous schismatic movements that appeared in Mormonism.

To summarise the situation, when Joseph Smith was murdered, he had named no successor, and there was no established succession procedure, no clear precedence among the competing Church institutions, and no agreement as to the mode of making this choice. Should it be charismatic, perhaps confirmed by acclamation by the believers? But the development of the Church organisation worked to discredit the universal charisma. Or traditional? But no tradition existed during the first change of leadership in the history of the Church.

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ D. Jorgensen, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

3.1. Sidney Rigdon versus the Apostles

The main struggle for power was waged between Sidney Rigdon and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, presided over by Brigham Young. When word of Smith's assassination spread, they all rushed to Nauvoo, the headquarters of the Church, to press their cases. Rigdon's claim rested on his position as the last remaining member (after the death of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum) of the First Presidency. Against this, Brigham Young argued that the Presidency had been dissolved with the death of the Prophet and the Apostles Quorum was now the senior institution. Significantly, none of them sought to replace Smith directly, especially in his unique prophetic capacity: Rigdon merely claimed the position of the "guardian" of the Church, while the Apostles wanted to steer it safely through the transition period pending the reorganisation of the First Presidency. Whatever their intentions, the conflict was not to be resolved by arguments only. During the meeting of all Church members held in August 1844, both challengers addressed the congregation in emotional speeches. Many listeners later reported that Brigham Young bore a strange resemblance, in his voice and posture, to the deceased Prophet.¹¹ This charismatic experience probably contributed to the gathering's nearly universal acceptance of Young's leadership.

Sidney Rigdon, unwilling to subordinate to the Apostles, was soon excommunicated, and in 1845 created his own organisation – the Church of Christ. Although this sect dissolved after two years, Rigdon continued teaching, and in 1868 organised a small group of his followers into the Children of Zion. The sect survived Rigdon's death in 1876 by only a few years. Both organisations copied, to some extent, the structure of the LDS church, with the Quorum of Twelve Apostles at their head, but with the novel addition of female priesthood among the Children of Zion. Doctrinally, Rigdon generally repudiated the practice of polygamy (although he, too, introduced it briefly in late 1846), which corrupted Joseph Smith and made him a "fallen prophet," and kept producing violent, apocalyptic prophecies.¹²

Once rid of Rigdon, the Apostles managed to counter other threats to their leadership, too. They refused to accept the claims of Smith's family for the succession of one of his sons. They also neutralised William Marks, the president of the Nauvoo high council and a high-ranking member of the Council of Fifty and the Anointed Quorum, where he was supreme in seniority to all the Apostles, including Brigham Young. Too passive to successfully champion his case, Marks was dropped from his positions of authority and, although never formally excommunicated, he parted with the Brighamite church. He supported various alternative Mormon organisations, including Rigdon's and Strang's, finally settling in the RLDS Church as the First Presidency counsellor.¹³

¹¹ L.J. Arrington, *Brigham Young. American Moses*, Urbana and Chicago 1986, pp. 113–115.

¹² D.M. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy. Origins of Power*, Salt Lake City 1994, pp. 182–184.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 184–185.

3.2. Strangites

Of all the claimants to succession, save perhaps for Sidney Rigdon, James Jesse Strang represents the clearest example of conflict over authority. His claim rested purely on personal charisma, not any position within the Church hierarchy. It could not have been otherwise, given that he converted to Mormonism only four months before Joseph Smith's death. Ordained a priest by the prophet himself, Strang was sent to Wisconsin to explore the prospects for the Saints' relocation. When the news of Smith's assassination reached him, Strang refused to acknowledge the authority of Brigham Young and the Twelve, resolving to gather as many believers as possible under his own leadership. As soon as the summer of 1844 he produced a letter, allegedly from Joseph Smith, in which the Prophet designated him as a successor, referring to a message from God that "...to him [Strang] shall the gathering of the people be, for he shall plant a stake of Zion in Wisconsin, and I will establish it."¹⁴ Although the letter is now regarded by most scholars as a plain forgery and was denounced as such by the majoritarian Brighamite Church, many Mormons, including prominent ones such as the apostles William Smith and John Page, *Book of Mormon* witness David Whitmer and Nauvoo stake president William Marks, accepted it as genuine. Eventually Strang's colony, which soon moved from Voree, Wisconsin to Beaver Island on Lake Michigan, reached a peak of some 2000 members.¹⁵

In 1845 Strang, instructed by a revelation he had received from an angel and assisted by a committee of witnesses, dug out golden plates bearing inscriptions in an unknown oriental language. He then translated them using *urim* and *thummim*, gem stones from the breastplate of high priests of Israel. The content of the plates naturally vindicated Strang's appointment and confirmed his mission.

All of this, of course, looks like déjà vu to anyone familiar with the story of the "translation" of the *Book of Mormon*. The similarity of the two stories certainly did not go unnoticed by believers, either. But it did not make Strang's claim any less credible. What to an outside observer may seem like outright religious "plagiarism," to a believer, on the contrary, provides authenticating evidence for the leader's prophetic claims. If God chose to communicate with Joseph Smith in this manner, why would He not speak to the Prophet's successor in the same way? In the words of Lawrence Foster, "Strang showed an extraordinary knowledge of Mormon beliefs and an almost uncanny sensitivity to Mormon thought patterns."¹⁶

The mode of revelation was not the only similarity with the mainstream, Joseph Smith's Mormonism. Strangite theology did not differ significantly; it heeded the Mormon idea of the gathering and finally embraced polygamy, despite initial strong opposition towards it. Strang's principal innovations were of a political nature: he

¹⁴ *Letter of Appointment from Joseph Smith*, http://www.mormonbeliefs.com/Strang_The_Prophet.htm#Letter%20of%20Appointment%20from%20Joseph%20Smith [accessed: 29 October 2015].

¹⁵ R. Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island. The Life and Assassination of James Jessie Strang*, Urbana and Chicago 1988, p. 245.

¹⁶ L. Foster, *Women, Family and Utopia. Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community and the Mormons*, Syracuse NY 1991, p. 171.

developed Smith's idea of an earthly theocratic kingdom of God, designed its social and political organisation,¹⁷ and even had himself crowned the king thereof. All this indicates that authority, rather than doctrinal issues, was the main source of contention and dissent. As a newcomer to the faith and situated low in the priestly hierarchy, Strang definitely found himself in an unequal exchange relation. Unable to secure the control of crucial religious resources by legitimate institutional means (i.e. by advancing in the Church hierarchy), at least in the foreseeable future, he embarked on the only path available to him: a schism based on charismatic appeal. The same logic applies to his aforementioned prominent followers, who were all at this point either excommunicated, in conflict with Brigham Young or otherwise not in good standing in the main body of the Church. For them, too, joining the schism was the way to improve their position in power relations – an alternative to submission to the now successful Apostolic leadership.

Ultimately, the endeavour proved short-lived. Strang was assassinated in 1856 by two of his followers, and the majority of the colony soon scattered. The sect continues to this day, with a small (if unspecified) number of members surviving.¹⁸

3.3. Cutler and Wight

Alpheus Cutler's break from Utah Mormonism was a gradual process that started around 1848 and culminated in the establishment of his Church of Jesus Christ in 1853. It cannot be described as a direct consequence of the succession crisis, although the schism developed among the turmoil of the transition period that followed it.

While never an Apostle, Cutler held many important positions in the Church in Nauvoo. He was a high-ranking member of both the Council of Fifty and the Quorum of the Anointed, and a close associate of Joseph Smith. He initially, after some hesitation, endorsed the succession of the Twelve, and in December 1847 acknowledged the reconstructed First Presidency with Brigham Young as Church president. After leaving Nauvoo, Cutler was entrusted with the function of high council president of Winter Quarters, a temporary Mormon village in Nebraska on the way to Utah, and later presided over another Mormon settlement, that of Silver Creek in Iowa.¹⁹

His special assignment, however, was a mission to the Indians (called Lamanites in the Mormon parlance), with whom Mormon leaders hoped to establish friendly relations. Cutler regarded this as his sole responsibility, entrusted to him by Joseph Smith and later confirmed by Brigham Young. When Orson Hyde, the president of the Quorum of the Apostles, arrived to become the head of the Iowa High Council, the conflict began to surface. Hyde became irritated with Cutler's and his congregation's excessive independence, while the Silver Creek Mormons demurred against his high-handed attitude and his intrusion into what they perceived as Father Cutler's

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 171–172.

¹⁸ See: The Original Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, www.strangite.org (the webpage of the Strangite Mormons, accessed: 18 June 2016).

¹⁹ D. Jorgensen, *Conflict in the Camps of Israel: The 1853 Cutlerite Schism*, "Journal of Mormon History" 1995, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 29–30.

– as he was referred to – sphere of competence. The conflict might also have been fuelled by divergent visions of the Mormon theocracy: Cutler seemed to attach priority to the Kingdom of God on Earth in relation to the LDS Church itself,²⁰ and thus saw his authority as a Council of Fifty member as second to none of the Apostles (who ranked lower in the Council and in the Anointed Quorum, as well). Finally, after failing on numerous occasions to answer before the Iowa High Council and refusing to move to Salt Lake City, as Brigham Young had requested, he was excommunicated in April 1851.²¹

Cutler remained with his followers in Iowa and rebaptised them in 1853 into the Church of Jesus Christ.²² The sect reached a peak of some 500 members a few years later, and then gradually declined following the founder's death. The group ultimately repudiated polygamy (even though many members were already plurally married), but otherwise retained most of the doctrinal and ritual heritage of Nauvoo Mormonism. They also had a similar priesthood structure, although with a novel distinction between secular and ecclesiastical authorities, and encouraged communal living.

While the Cutlerite schism developed in time and is not easily attributable to any single cause, it was “a product of conflict over goals, beliefs, and especially power within the westward bound Camps of Israel.”²³ The authority conflict seemed to precede doctrinal and other differences invoked to justify it. As Danny Jorgensen further observes, “Cutler's seemingly peculiar teachings and claims to leadership emerged gradually largely to distinguish themselves from the ‘Brighamites’,”²⁴ something of an ex-post explanation of the proud and independent Cutler's unwillingness to submit to the power of the Apostles.

Similar in many respects was the story of Lyman Wight, an apostle and a Council of Fifty member. In 1844 Wight was commissioned by Joseph Smith to explore the possibilities for the relocation of the Church to Texas. Having established Mormon colonies there, Wight refused to reunite with the Brighamite Church in Utah, treating his Texas mission as a lifelong obligation until his death in 1858. The refusal to recognise the authority of the Twelve Apostles and obey the command to move to Utah incurred Wight's excommunication in 1848. Yet the character of his splinter organisation, the Church of Christ, remained very much within the mainstream Mormon tradition. It was based on similar priesthood structure, recognised all the cult practices, including temple rituals performed in a temple built in Zodiac, Texas (endowments, baptism for the death, eternal sealing etc.) and, unlike many other schismatic groups, even accepted polygamy.²⁵ What Wight could not accept was the

²⁰ D.M. Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 204.

²¹ D. Jorgensen, *Conflict in the Camps of Israel*, p. 55.

²² He refused, however, to be rebaptised himself, believing it would have broken the line of succession from the deceased Prophet. See S. Shields, *The Latter Day Saint Movement: A Study in Survival*, [in:] *When Prophets Die. The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements*, T. Miller (ed.), Albany 1991, p. 71.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

²⁵ M.C. Johnson, *Polygamy on the Pedernales: Lyman Wight's Mormon Villages in Antebellum Texas, 1845–1858*, Logan 2006, pp. 124–160.

succession of Brigham Young and his authority over him. Both Cutler and Wight, holding authority positions received from Joseph Smith, seemingly preferred their roles of dealers of religious goods, even for relatively small communities, to returning to the elevated, but still subordinate posts within the Utah Church.²⁶

3.4. RLDS

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) was one of the latest, but also most successful – second only to the LDS Church in Utah – groups that emerged as a consequence of the post-1844 succession controversy. Succession within Joseph Smith’s family was among the viable options in Nauvoo. Naturally, it was promoted by Emma Smith, the prophet’s widow, but failed in confrontation with Brigham Young’s claims, partly for lack of a suitable candidate (Hyrum, Joseph’s popular brother, was assassinated along with him). The idea was revived a decade later through the efforts of Jason Briggs and Zenos Gurney, two Mormon elders. In 1852 they established a New Organisation among Saints who did not go West, and in 1860 they managed to convince Joseph Smith III, the prophet’s son, to become its president.²⁷ Smith’s claim to authority rested on a blessing that he had allegedly received from his father as a child, in spring 1844, prophesying his future leadership,²⁸ as well as on one of the prophet’s revelations.²⁹ The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, as the group renamed itself, moved its headquarters to Independence, Missouri, a place that Joseph Smith had designated as the New Jerusalem, the spot of the future second coming of Christ.³⁰

Theologically, the RLDS Church rejected all the doctrinal and ritual innovations of the Nauvoo period (polytheism, temple endowments, baptism for the dead “by proxy” etc.), but was especially vehemently opposed to polygamy. They go to the

²⁶ Compare the similar conclusions made by Danny Jorgensen in *Dissent and Schism*, pp. 35–36. He notes that while ideological differences “may account for why some Mormons, particularly those in dissent before Smith’s death, did not join Young’s group, it does not explain why some of those who disagreed over these issues continued West or why some of those who had much more in common with the ideology and practices of Young’s organization, such as the Cutlerites, Wightites, and Millerites, subsequently dropped out of the movement.”

²⁷ R.J. Addams, *The Church of Christ (Temple Lot) and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: 130 Years of Crossroads and Controversies*, “Journal of Mormon History” 2010, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 60–61.

²⁸ J. Riess, C. Bigelow, *Mormonism for Dummies*, Indianapolis 2005, p. 200. R.J. Addams, *op.cit.*, mentions January 1844 as the date of this designation or blessing, while D.M. Quinn, *Mormon Succession Crisis*, talks about 1843 in this context (pp. 26–28).

²⁹ *Doctrine and Covenants*, 124: 58: “I say unto my servant Joseph: *In thee and in thy seed shall the kindred of the earth be blessed,*” <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/124?lang=eng> [accessed: 5 October 2015].

³⁰ Independence remains a centre of the Church’s activity, although the Temple Lot itself – the very location of the temple envisaged by Smith – is owned by the Church of Christ (Temple Lot), another Mormon splinter group founded by, among others, Granville Hedrick in the early 1850s. In 1891–1896 the RLDS was trying to reclaim the property by presenting itself as a rightful successor of Joseph Smith’s Church, but ultimately lost the case (known as the Temple Lot case) in the federal courts. See R.J. Addams, *op.cit.*, pp. 76–80.

lengths of denying that Joseph Smith actually practised polygamy himself, blaming the introduction of the practice on Brigham Young (which is clearly historically incorrect).³¹ Another major point of contention has been the principle of hereditary succession, which remained in force in RLDS until 1996: all Church presidents before that date were direct descendants of Joseph Smith,³² while in the LDS the most senior member of the Twelve Apostles Quorum automatically assumes this office. Thus, while Brigham Young never denied the sons of Joseph Smith a place among the leadership of the Utah Church, he maintained that they would have to qualify on the basis of the apostolic succession procedures, and not because of their lineal descent from the prophet.³³ This controversy had political import, and might have frustrated efforts at rapprochement between the two largest Mormon denominations long after the LDS ceased practising polygamy.³⁴

4. The Utah period

The main body of Mormons, severely decimated by both dissensions and the hardships of the Westward trek, had finally settled Utah under the leadership of Brigham Young, the head of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and, from 1847, of the reorganised First Presidency. Firmly institutionalised, the LDS Church developed from then on without significant perturbations, until the culmination of the conflict over polygamy in the late 19th century. This does not mean, however, that it was completely free from schism. The two most important challenges to the LDS authority were the Morrisite and Godbeite affairs.

4.1. Morrisites

The Morrisite schism represents one of the most dramatic incidents of dissent in 19th-century Mormonism. It was led by Joseph Morris, an English convert who, a few years after moving to America, around 1859, began to announce his revelations. In one of them, directed to Brigham Young, the Almighty demanded “that you call my servant Joseph [Morris] up to the head of my Church.”³⁵ Unable to draw the attention of the Church leaders, and much less to secure any position of authority for himself, Morris succeeded in converting a number of Mormons, including some leaders, in

³¹ See e.g. F. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, New York 1995, esp. Chapter XXIV, for abundant evidence of Joseph Smith’s polygamy, including the list of his plural wives.

³² J. Riess, C. Bigelow, *op.cit.*, p. 211.

³³ D.M. Quinn, *Mormon Succession Crisis*, p. 29.

³⁴ Today the RLDS church, renamed Community of Christ in 2000, has around 200,000–250,000 members around the world. Doctrinally, it evolves towards generalised Protestantism by adopting the Trinity dogma, dropping some peculiarly Mormon rituals and ordaining women (since 1984), thus distancing itself somewhat from its Mormon roots. See www.cofchrist.org.

³⁵ D.L. Bigler, *Forgotten Kingdom. The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847–1896*, Logan 1998, p. 210.

the Weber area of Utah. It was here in April 1861 that the prophet, at this point already excommunicated from the LDS Church, established what he regarded the true Mormon Church – the Church of the Firstborn – and the group moved to an abandoned settlement, Kingston Fort.

As a consequence of Morris's millennial revelations, recorded in a lengthy scripture called *The Spirit Prevails*,³⁶ the colony lived with the expectation of an imminent Parousia. They held all their property in common and cared little about growing crops, apparently even destroying some of them as the evidence of their faith.³⁷ Morris was a strong charismatic leader who did not tolerate dissent: three members of the group who tried to leave the settlement with their possessions were caught and imprisoned.

When the Morrisite Church reached five hundred baptised members and another five hundred or so sympathisers, the LDS hierarchy began to perceive it as a substantial threat to their authority, and resolved, now that the federal troops were finally removed from the Utah territory,³⁸ to take decisive action. In June 1862, a unit of the Nauvoo Legion, the Mormon militia, acting on an arrest warrant for Morris and a few of his associates issued by a federal judge, surrounded Kingston Fort. The sect, reassured by new revelations from their leader, put up a fight. After a three-day siege the group finally gave in. Morris and a few other persons were killed, reportedly after they had surrendered, and dozens of Morrisites were imprisoned.³⁹ The remaining followers scattered to the neighbouring states and territories.

As further evidence that, from the point of view of the LDS leadership, Morris was primarily a challenger for power, his dead body went on public display in Salt Lake City with the insignia of power he had used in his theocratic commune: a tin crown and a large sceptre.⁴⁰ The competitive supplier of religious goods had been eliminated and his pretences mocked and repudiated.

4.2. Godbeites

Variouly referred to as The New Movement or the Godbeites (from the name of William Godbe), this movement was initiated by a group of Mormon intellectuals (Elias Harrison, Edward Tullidge) and entrepreneurs (Godbe, Henry Lawrence). Nominally remaining orthodox members of the LDS Church, they had gradually embraced some of the fashionable religious ideas of the era, such as universalism and spiritualism. They grew dissatisfied with what they regarded as the overt exclusiveness and intellectual limitations of Mormonism and its increasingly uninspired nature, with the

³⁶ T. O'Dea, *The Mormons*, Chicago and London 1957, p. 105.

³⁷ K. Godfrey, *The Morrisites*, [in:] *Utah History Encyclopedia*, A.K. Powell (ed.), Salt Lake City 1994, http://www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/m/MORRISITES.html [accessed: 3 October 2015].

³⁸ They were stationed there in the aftermath of the so-called Utah War of 1857, the expedition of the US Army to Utah.

³⁹ D. Bigler, *op.cit.*, pp. 213–214.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

rank-and-file members blindly subordinated to the higher echelons of the priestly hierarchy. Instead, they experimented with spiritualism, took part in séances and received communications from the spirit world.⁴¹

Ostensibly, the controversy revolved around economic matters. The Godbeites, in a series of magazines they published independently of the Church, questioned the wisdom of the Church's autarchic economic policy with its stress on agriculture and limited manufacturing. In these areas, they argued, Utah could not compete with other regions of the United States, while its real potential lay in minerals, which Brigham Young refused to exploit. This, however, was only the surface of a deeper problem. The Mormon civilisation of the 19th century was built on the idea of Zion – a theocratic kingdom of God on earth – which integrated in a tightly knit whole religious, social, political and economic concerns under the leadership of the priesthood. There was no contending the economic policy (or any other policy, for that matter) of the Church without placing in question this entire theocratic project with the priestly and prophetic authority standing behind it. As Leonard Arrington observed, "Mormon economic policy, in 1869 and immediately thereafter, was devoted almost fanatically to the preservation of the tightly-reined independent theocratic commonwealth [...] the church's economic program was shown to be a matter of dogma, and not a purely secular concern."⁴² Nothing was purely secular in the religious culture of 19th-century Mormonism.

Thus the controversy was ultimately deemed to find a political expression. During the trial before the Salt Lake High Council in October 1869, the dissenters demanded "the right of, respectfully but freely, discussing all measures upon which we are called to act." In response, they were told that to openly differ with the priesthood constituted apostasy, and that a person asserting the right to differ with Brigham Young "might as well ask the question whether a man had the right to differ honestly with the Almighty."⁴³ The main Godbeite leaders were promptly excommunicated or left the LDS Church themselves, a consequence they had been fully anticipating. The organisation they went on to establish, the Church of Zion, was relatively short-lived (a decade or so) and failed to attract a considerable following. Nonetheless, schism was the only viable option for a group obtaining their religious rewards (unsatisfactory, at that) at too high a price of total submission to, and intellectual dependence on, the Church authorities.

⁴¹ R. Walker, *The Commencement of the Godbeite Protest: Another View*, "Utah Historical Quarterly" 1974, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 227–233.

⁴² L. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom. An Economic History of Latter-day Saints*, Cambridge, MA 1958, p. 244.

⁴³ *An Appeal to the People*, "Utah Magazine" 1869, no. 3, October 30, pp. 406–412, quoted in R. Walker, *op.cit.*, p. 241 and D. Bigler, *op.cit.*, pp. 267–268. This statement is reported by the dissenters, but it is perfectly consistent with the mentality of the Mormon leaders and the position of the President of the Church as the inspired Prophet of God.

5. Conclusion

We have presented the history of dissent in Mormonism as, predominantly, a series of conflicts over authority that led, at various junctions in the movement’s history, to numerous schisms. To verify this perspective, let us look at some of these splinter groups’ attitude to the main, constitutive features of Mormonism, in order to determine to what extent they differed, in these non-political respects, from the largest Mormon Church, led by Brigham Young to Utah (LDS). The factors to consider will be: the doctrine (acceptance of the *Book of Mormon* and further revelations of Joseph Smith, as well as the unique Mormon eschatology and latter-day millennialism); church organisation (priesthood structure etc.); social organisation (for or against communal lifestyle); and Nauvoo period innovations, primarily polygamy.

Table 1. *Doctrinal, ritual, organisational and moral convergence within the Mormon movement*

Feature	LDS	Whitmer	Rigdon	Strang	Cutler	Wight	RLDS	Morris	Godbe
Doctrine	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+/-	+/-
Church organisation	+	+	+/-	+/-	+	+	+	+	-
Social organisation	+/-	-	+	+/-	+/-	+	+/-	+	-
Polygamy	+	-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+	-	-	-

In *doctrine*, “+” means the acceptance of the *Book of Mormon*, other revelations of Joseph Smith, Mormon eschatology and latter-day millennialism.

In *church organisation*, “+” means a theocratic priesthood and leadership structure based on pre-1844 patterns.

In *social organisation*, “+” means communal way of life, with at least some shared property etc.

In *polygamy*, “+” means the acceptance of doctrine and practice of polygamy.

In all cases, “+/-” means the changing, shaky or uncertain position of a group with regard to a particular feature.

As is evident from the above table, nearly all Mormon sects under consideration shared basic doctrinal tenets of the movement and the organisation of the Church based on the hierarchical priesthood structure developed by Joseph Smith. Furthermore, most of them adopted a similar form of social organisation, with more or less pronounced elements of communal economy. Only polygamy proved a more divisive issue: the groups’ stance toward it varied from acceptance (LDS, Wightites), initial practising and later rejection (Cutlerites, Rigdonites), and initial rejection and later espousing (Strangites), to total rejection (the remaining groups).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The issue of polygamy was also a source of major conflict within Mormonism in the 20th century, when fundamentalists who refused to accept the 1890 “Manifesto” renouncing the practice opted to split from the LDS Church.

Considerable convergence between the analysed Mormon groups on most of these counts (except for the New Movement – Godbeites) suggests that political motives – the unwillingness to yield to the authority of Joseph Smith in the early period, and especially of Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Apostles after 1844 – are of significant, if not decisive, importance in explaining the propensity to schism within Mormonism. In terms of social exchange theory, it was not the nature or content of religious goods that prompted some members to leave the mother Church, but the exceedingly high cost of obtaining these goods (too much submission). While this type of explanation is obviously not equally valid for all cases of dissent, it provides a fertile framework for studying schism within the Latter-Day movement.

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