

REFLECTIONS ON THE RISE OF MORMONISM IN ITALY

From the day in 1850 when Lorenzo Snow stepped out of a carriage onto Italian soil to the day in 2010 when Thomas S. Monson turned a shovel of Italian soil to break ground for a temple, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintained an interest in proselytizing in Italy. At times this was a priority, and at other times it was less pressing. Mormon missionary work in Italy unfolded against a backdrop of historical forces—political upheaval, two world wars, social change, and internal church dynamics—that presented both obstacles and opportunities for growth. After an initial foray in the mid-nineteenth century with limited success, since 1965 the church has managed to establish a small but significant and enduring presence in Italy's public life. This study of the Italian missions suggests a number of trends and patterns that are instructive in understanding the nature, challenges, and outcomes of Mormon expansion in Italy and other international areas. In addition, it offers some insights

into the question of how new religious movements arise, expand, and take root in societies around the world.

Trends and Patterns in Mormon Evangelization and Growth

Historical timing was crucial in determining rates of conversion and in building a foundation for the growth of the LDS Church in Italy. Timing at the local and international levels was propitious during the nineteenth-century mission. Numerous converts were made in the valleys of the Cottian Alps because three positive factors converged: political reforms in the Kingdom of Sardinia, socioreligious ferment and spiritual seeking in the Waldensian community, and renewed evangelical enthusiasm within the Mormon community following the migration westward.

On the other hand, in the twentieth century, Mormon missionaries arrived in Italy after the major “wave” (1945–65) of post-war social dislocation, economic upheaval, and political change that created conditions ideally suited to religious seeking. Other religious minorities—like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Assemblies of God—who maintained a more continuous presence and aggressively proselytized during that twenty-year window of opportunity grew exponentially and are today far more numerous in Italy than the Mormons. While Mormons still benefitted from sociopolitical turmoil during the 1970s, their missionaries missed a golden opportunity (due more to internal factors within the church than external factors in Italy) that could have provided deeper and stronger roots to nurture growth during the second mission.¹

A regular supply of committed, well-organized Mormon missionaries proved essential to the church’s effort to put down roots in Italy. Their presence ensured that new converts would continue to replenish membership rolls which suffered constant losses due to apathy, defection, and emigration.

1. Introvigne stated that the Mormons missed the “last big wave” of proselytizing opportunity in Italy following World War II—the “golden years for making numbers in the tens of thousands” when “everyone was pro-American.” Head, “An American Enterprise.”

Additionally, during both the first and second missions in Italy, “pioneer converts” played a key role in church growth, especially in the early phase of gaining a toehold in the country. Many of these early converts were individuals who followed personal conscience rather than social trends, adhered tenaciously to their unpopular religious choice, and persevered in the face of alienation, ridicule, and loneliness. Their intense, iconoclastic impulse toward spiritual seeking prepared them to resist the forces that typically drive early converts away: social opprobrium, family pressure, and threats from the established religious order. But the tenacity of some of these early converts occasionally created problems *within* the fledgling church once it became more established. Eventually, some pioneer converts became disenchanted and openly critical of the emerging community’s leadership and drifted to the margins of participation or were cut off for insubordination.

Another important element in Mormonism’s growth in Italy was the nature of the church’s core message in both the first and second mission periods. Converts were attracted by teachings that offered clarity and assurance about existential questions and provided a strong sense of purpose and belonging as part of a new religious community. Mormonism’s emphasis on charismatic spiritual experience, personal development through popular participation in communal life, and melding spiritual, physical, and pragmatic dimensions of life also proved conducive to its capacity to compete successfully for a niche in Italy’s religious marketplace.

During each of the two missions in Italy, it was common to hear optimistic predictions about “exploding” or “blossoming” growth to come—followed by more measured, cautious discourse as missionaries and members began to comprehend the complexity and adversity of the context in which they operated. There were in fact some periods of higher conversion rates and more rapid expansion, but, as with other religious communities, there always ensued the sobering and ongoing tasks associated with nurturing real growth: creating unity and shared identity among individuals of widely disparate backgrounds; taking care of the administrative, logistical, and financial demands of church life;

and attending to the emotional, spiritual, and temporal burdens that beset church members each day and lead often to disaffection and disaffiliation. As Neill put it, the euphoria of conversion was always followed by “the long and patient process of trying to make Christians in deed of those who had become Christians in name.”²

Latter-day Saints like to say that “the church is the same wherever you go in the world,” and in fact, standardized rituals, symbols, and teaching curricula have been instrumental in fostering a sense of familiarity and unity across the international church. But close observation at the local level in Italy revealed a more complex reality about church growth. The inner dynamics, social and spiritual rewards, and overall feel of individual congregations varied widely in Italy, depending on factors such as local culture, personal styles of leadership and interaction, chemistry between many personality types, and the generational age of the church unit. And these more subtle diversities undoubtedly exist alongside the obvious unities among LDS congregations in various countries, regions, and cities throughout the world.

Adapting to Change in the Religious Landscape

A central theme in the study of religious life is the pattern of growth and change that an emerging religion experiences as it expands beyond its original setting and encounters new historical, economic, social, and geopolitical forces. Diana Eck has observed that “even the most cursory study of the history of religions” shows that religious traditions are not like stones, rigid and immutable, but more like rivers that are constantly “flowing and changing.”³ History provides abundant evidence that the ability of a nascent religious community to adapt to changing circumstances and to evolve new forms, meanings, and symbols without losing its essential identity is a crucial factor in determining whether it will remain a tradition of limited influence or become one of worldwide, lasting significance.

2. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1990), 66.

3. Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 2.

The growth of Mormonism has reflected such a capacity for accommodation to evolving external and internal forces. In numerous instances during nearly two centuries of evangelization worldwide, the church adapted its teachings, organization, and strategy to address new exigencies. Changes in teaching and policy have included discontinuing the practice of plural marriage and allowing the ordination of all races to the priesthood. The Mormon position on Communism has also softened over time, opening the door to broader opportunities for visibility and growth in the international arena, including Italy. Leaders have implemented organizational adaptations intended to reduce the complexity of church administration and allow for more localized problem solving. These include the appointment of Area Presidencies in various geographic locations staffed in some cases by indigenous leaders; more frequent area conferences and personal visits by General Authorities to increase camaraderie, morale, and understanding of local challenges; reduction of meetings to allow more time for family activities on Sunday; and an ongoing effort to include more local and regional content in church publications in order to create a greater sense of ownership among church members throughout the world.⁴

Since 1965, with more than a half century of missionary outreach in Italy, the church has at times altered its practices to reflect the needs and preferences of indigenous members. For example, the decision to reverse longstanding policy and allow local Italian church leaders (rather than officials from church headquarters) to play a leading role in forming coalitions, determining strategy, and advocating the Mormon cause was a key factor in obtaining full legal recognition from the Italian state in 2012. Other instances of adapting to local culture included the effort to incorporate elements of classical Roman and Renaissance art and architecture in designing the Rome temple in order to reflect both Italian and Mormon heritage, and the modifications that were implemented periodically in the home teaching program to render it more effective in the Italian context.

4. Mauss, "Can There Be a 'Second Harvest'?", 53–54.

The LDS Church's changing approach to interfaith relations also facilitated growth in Italy. Ecumenical and humanitarian outreach, active engagement in local and national civic life, and a noncombative style of proselytism were pivotal factors in the process of gaining greater acceptance and integration of Mormons in Italian civil society. The capacity of the institutional church and its individual local members to establish amicable political, social, and religious relationships led to breakthroughs in achieving community respect and approval from the Italian state, which culminated in formal recognition of the church with the *intesa* and the construction of the temple in Rome.

The church's current approach, emphasizing interfaith dialogue and civic engagement rather than the political isolationism and religious rivalry of the late nineteenth century, emerged in the late twentieth century after decades of "unsettled openness" and rival opinions among church leaders about two competing theological trends in Mormonism—one inclusivist and the other exclusivist in nature.⁵ This doctrinal recalibration encouraging interreligious cooperation and respect set the stage for an evolution in Mormon-Catholic relations, from a traditionally more cautious and competitive stance to one that sought common ground and created partnerships to pursue common interests and objectives.

The manner in which the church's mission strategy and practices evolved over time provides another example of Mormonism's capacity for making course adjustments. During the nineteenth century, missionary outreach was animated by the principle of the gathering of Israel: "sweeping the nations" to find God's elect—the blood of Israel—and emigrating to Utah to help build the ideal society, Zion. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, however, the strategy of gathering

5. See Green, "Gathering and Election: Israelite Descent and Universalism in Mormon Discourse," 195–228. While noting that tension between these two themes still persists to some degree, Green concludes that universalist/inclusivist teachings have gained ascendancy in recent years. For further analysis of Mormonism's evolving stance vis-à-vis other religions, see also Reid L. Neilson, *Early Mormon Missionary Activities in Japan, 1901–1924* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 7–15.

the elect and emigrating to Zion gradually changed to accommodate the concept of “multiple Zions.” As millenarian preoccupation with the end times receded and the need for international strength became more manifest, the principle of the gathering took on a more universal and spiritualized interpretation: it came to mean accepting the restored gospel of Christ but then staying in one’s own homeland to create Zion.

Subsequent changes in mission strategy, organization, and methods reflected this fundamental shift in policy intended to strengthen emerging areas and to buttress a systematic push to establish a worldwide presence. For example, the missionary who labored in Italy during the second mission was, in some ways, quite unlike the missionary who served in Italy a century before. In the 1850s, missionaries were normally older men (average age was thirty-five), married with children, who served without a companion for about thirty months and went to the mission field without pre-mission training, language instruction, or organized gospel lessons.⁶ By the mid-1960s when the Italian Mission reopened, missionaries were generally (with the exception of senior couples) much younger, single, and relatively inexperienced in church administration. They received two months’ training in language, proselytizing, and teaching and carried out their recruitment activities in Italy, always accompanied by a companion. A strong organization provided close supervision by mission leaders, logistical and emotional support, and strict behavioral guidelines. Prescribed lessons and methodologies for finding and teaching investigators underwent constant revision.

In other ways, however, missionaries from these two very different eras shared much in common. Most of them manifested a fervent desire to serve and arrived in their field of labor imbued with optimism and conviction about the rightness and eventual success of the Mormon cause. At the same time, they all, to some degree, experienced feelings of inadequacy and homesickness;

6. Reid L. Neilson, “The Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Mormon Missionary Model,” in *Go Ye into All the World: The Growth and Development of Mormon Missionary Work*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Fred E. Woods (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 75–84.

harbored fear of failure and rejection; and felt discouragement and doubt when opposition was stiff, physical and emotional hardships overwhelming, and converts few and far between.

There were advantages and disadvantages inherent in these changes to missionary strategy. Young missionaries brought energy, buoyant optimism, idealism, and a gift for fostering friendship and social bonds (which many members acknowledged as key to their conversion). The efficacy of this change in strategy was evident in the remarkable international growth of the church beginning in the last half of the twentieth century, which was carried forward largely on the shoulders of nineteen- to twenty-five-year-old men and women. But the missionaries' youthful impetuosity and immaturity also created some issues (e.g., lapses in following the strict mission regimen, exhibiting chauvinistic and judgmental attitudes toward local culture, rushing investigators to baptism to meet mission goals, and lacking experience to act as effective spiritual counselors to adults struggling with complex personal questions and problems) that at times eroded trust with local members and investigators and worked against retention.

In sum, the historical record suggests that the LDS Church's efforts to adapt to various contexts around the world have achieved mixed results. Modifications to doctrine and policy, organizational structure, mission strategy, and interfaith relations have helped pave the way for expansion and integration in diverse countries and cultures, improving the church's global profile. However, our study of the Italian experience also indicates that the process of encountering and adapting to new cultural settings has in some ways proven to be very slow and difficult, creating tensions with members and leaders at the local level and contributing to problems of inactivity and low retention. Challenges to church stability and growth in Italy have included developing and sustaining an effective lay leadership that often experienced burn-out and high turnover due to a complex, time-intensive system of church administration; coordinating efforts between local members and full-time missionaries to promote stronger conversion, socialization, and retention of members; creating a climate of learning, teaching, and discourse that was relevant and responsive

to the diverse, changing needs of church members; and finding the elusive “optimal balance” between the spiritual benefits that attract converts and the sociocultural costs of a high-demand religion that lead converts to drop out in large numbers.

Mormonism's American Image and the Struggle for Integration in Italy

A leitmotif of Latter-day Saint history in Italy has been an ongoing struggle to shed its image as a nineteenth-century American religion—an alien, bizarre fringe group—and to take on a more Italian identity. In the same way that Christianity “was shaped and nurtured in the bosom of the Roman Empire,” Mormonism initially entered the international arena, including Italy, with a “strongly American cast (especially Western American).”⁷

This reality benefitted missionary outreach in providing logistical and financial strength, but it also prolonged the LDS Church's efforts to achieve permanence and parity in Italy. When the Catholic newspaper *L'Armonia* complained in the 1850s that the Piedmontese government's liberal attitude toward the Waldensians (that enabled them to build a temple and publish religious literature) would eventually allow eccentric sects such as the Mormons to enjoy similar privileges, it probably could not have foreseen that it would take the Mormons more than 150 years to become legally positioned on the same level as the Waldensians, Jews, and other mainstream religions. In fact, this achievement did not occur immediately after the LDS Church reentered Italy during the mid-1960s (with an American cast of characters who were directed by the mother church in Salt Lake City); the signing of the intesa came only after another forty years during which the church's membership and leadership gradually became more “Italianized.”

All religions involved in global missionary outreach are products, to one degree or another, of the cultural milieu in which they originated, and they experience tensions in adapting to new

7. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*, 204.

cultural realities and identities. The LDS Church is no exception in this regard. Armand Mauss has noted that while such tensions and adaptations have been common throughout the history of missionizing—whether Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, or Muslim—the “predicaments are relatively new for the Mormons, at least on such a grand scale.” He further observed that, to grow and prosper, Mormonism will need to continue to seek ways to assimilate in local contexts and cultures, “just as it did in North America during the early twentieth century. . . . Only through that process can Mormonism ever reduce the cultural tension in those other cultures enough to acquire a critical mass of membership, to retain succeeding generations, and thus to acquire a normal demographic profile in each locale.”⁸

Looking forward, one benchmark of Mormonism’s image and influence will be the degree to which ordinary Italians come to recognize the presence of influential Mormons worthy of admiration in their country and communities. Introvigne has asserted that producing prominent Mormon citizens in general society—business, politics, academe, sports, and entertainment—and developing leadership which is more internationally diverse is vital to Mormonism’s efforts to be perceived as more “mainline” in Italy and the rest of Europe. The Mormon community has lagged behind other religious minorities in Italy that are also considered “high cost” religions but have been more successful than the Mormons in recruiting and retaining membership: the role of native Italian church members, cultural celebrities, and civic leaders has been a key ingredient in the success of these other minority religious groups.⁹

However, as noted, key factors in incremental improvements to Mormonism’s image in Italy have been the emergence of a core of local experienced church leaders in the past thirty years and the gradual establishment of viable wards and stake congregations led by them. The increasing presence of multigenerational families—

8. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*, 205, 209.

9. Introvigne, Interview with James Toronto; and Head, “An American Enterprise,” 169–70.

the second and third generation of Mormons, children and grandchildren of the first “pioneers” who found Mormon spouses and are raising their children with an Italian Mormon identity—has been a significant development in this regard. As more Mormons have become involved in the economic and civic life of their communities as elected officials, entrepreneurs, educators, and active participants in interfaith, humanitarian, and cultural initiatives, they have helped the church acquire visibility and acceptance. In addition to these social and political activities, the physical profile of Mormonism in Italy’s religious landscape has been enhanced significantly by the construction of chapels in many major Italian cities and a soon-to-be-completed temple and visitors’ center in the capital city, Rome.

A recent study of the internationalization of Mormonism concluded that “from the earliest days of its existence, the church’s administrative structure consisted of a hybrid of revelation-mandated offices and organizations, and experience-mandated accommodations.”¹⁰ Historical records and interview data reveal that the reluctance to grant a greater measure of local autonomy reinforced Mormonism’s American image and weakened conversion and retention rates. Many informants expressed the view that allowing members to have more involvement in shaping aspects of church life that are not fundamental to truth claims—such as style of church administration, frequency of meetings, organization of home teaching, relevance of teaching curriculum, standards for dress and grooming, participation in cultural traditions, and guidelines for Sabbath observance—would increase the sense of community among the members. This would also identify the church as more Italian—having strong local roots—to those encountering it for the first time.

In Italy, there has been a two-part pattern of growth that demonstrates how local Mormon congregations emerge, expand, and begin to integrate into society. In the initial phase—the first generation or two—converts typically face severe costs in attempting

10. Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism*, 139.

to cross frontiers of belief and belonging in pursuit of personal fulfillment. They attempt to embrace a new social network comprising other converts, who are also novices, and full-time missionaries who fill key leadership and teaching roles. Congregational life in this nascent phase of first- and second-generation branches is rough-and-tumble and unpredictable—even chaotic at times. Inactivity and dropout rates are high, as are levels of tension between converts and the surrounding sociocultural milieu.

The church in Italy entered a second phase of maturation and consolidation with the emergence of a committed core of first- and second-generation members and third- and fourth-generation Mormon families who were experienced and numerous enough to begin assuming senior leadership roles in stakes, missions, temples, and public affairs organizations. With increasing Italian (rather than foreign missionary) leadership at both the community and national levels, the establishment of local wards and stakes and the construction of chapels proceeded at a quickened pace. Regular involvement in civic life created a more familiar and favorable public image to outsiders, which facilitated the process of acceptance and integration in society. Italian stakes have yet to enter a third phase—that of church factories—characterized by enduring production, stability, autonomy, and activity levels in the fifth and subsequent generations of evangelism and growth.

Seeking a Place in the Piazza: The Mormon Experience

The history of the Latter-day Saints in Italy provides a good case study for understanding the internationalization of the church and the tensions and transitions inherent in crossing boundaries of faith, culture, language, and geography to forge a new religious identity. This study examines the evangelistic enterprise by which the church attempted “to transport into the heartland of Roman Catholicism a faith that grew out of the American frontier”¹¹ and to establish an enduring presence in Italy. Our central argument,

11. Edward B. Fiske, “Mormon Missionaries Converting Catholics in Italy,” *Arizona Republic*, 4 December 1971, in Christensen, “Italian Mission Presidency,” Christensen Papers.

based on evidence from the Italian case, is that the transformation of Mormonism from a marginalized spiritual movement into a significant religion of international presence has resulted from a complex interplay of historical forces, political imperatives, socio-economic conditions, intrinsic spiritual appeal, internal institutional tensions, capacity for redefinition and adaptation, and individual religious proclivities. This shifting constellation of factors must be taken into account if one wishes to understand the rise, expansion, and impact of the church and of new religious movements in general.

This study illuminates Mormon evangelism and growth and how new religious movements in general struggle to take root and expand. These issues include the motivations and experiences of conversion, the challenges of nurturing and retaining converts, the center-periphery dialogue between the Mormon administrative and cultural heartland in Utah and local Italian units, the tension and dynamism that arises from the attempt to spread an American church with American leaders and missionaries into a different cultural region, the starts and stops of missionary efforts, and the impact of broader historical events on this richly complex process.

This perspective shows the interplay of attitudes, policies, and cultural views in the American, western core of the Mormon movement and similar forces and factors on the ground in Italy. It shows the benefits and costs and the challenges and opportunities that arise from this dialectic and suggests some of the reasons for individual conversion and overall growth in Italy. It also helps explain the relatively slow pace of growth and the limited attraction of Mormonism among Italians. Over the years, Mormon studies have tended to privilege the American perspective and experience in the growth of the church. This study demonstrates that the local, Italian side of the equation is an important ingredient in the expansion of Mormonism onto an international stage.

If all politics is local, it is also true that all religion is local. Drawing accurate conclusions about growth and vitality in any faith community, including Mormonism, requires careful street-level observation more than the bird's-eye view of church

almanacs and annual statistical reports. Progress, when analyzed at the level of individual church units, local members, and other indigenous sources is not a smooth continuum of unstinting growth, unflinching faith, or undeviating progress toward an idealized Zion. Rather, achieving real growth is a complex process that unfolds across a long trajectory of time and effort marked by fits and starts, advances and retreats, times of feast and famine, periods of expansion but also of stagnation and contraction, and even extinction. As Mormon historian Lamond Tullis observed, “Rapid growth creates paradoxical sentiments: hope and despair, motivation and frustration, love and distrust. Dichotomies are part of the challenges Mormons face” as they move forward with “the internationalization of the church and universalizing of the message of Mormonism”—from being a church “of limited local appeal to one of worldwide impact.”¹²

Stephen Neill pointed out an often overlooked but important dimension of human religious experience. Despite formidable obstacles and rivalries, and notwithstanding “political chicanery, personal malevolence, and even bribery and corruption, . . . the [early Christian] Church lived in its humble and faithful members, and in the ceaseless life of prayer and worship,” where the vitality of every religious community resides.¹³ Sometimes lost in studies that focus on the big picture—the historical sweep of political and social trends, evolving mission strategies and practices, notable events, and prominent personalities—is the reality that the growth of religious movements, new or old, centers on the daily life of homes and congregations where individuals quietly practice their faith, raise their families, and serve their fellow converts and citizens in the community. These anonymous believers have been and will continue to be the unsung protagonists of religious history and of the Latter-day Saint experience in the Italian piazza.

12. Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, xiv–xv.

13. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 42.