

# The Historical Continuity of Mormonism

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## Abstract

This paper examines the tactics used by the Mormon Church throughout its history to convert and indoctrinate populations. As an early example of a fringe religion, a belief system that does not align with major religious institutions, Mormonism has influenced many other similar groups to adopt these tactics in order to indoctrinate members. When Mormonism was first founded by Joseph Smith, he utilized charisma and authoritative leadership as well as nontraditional religious beliefs in order to grow his church. During its western migration towards Utah, Brigham Young's economic leadership and indoctrination through education of the Mormon population allowed for its maintenance and growth. The Mormon church's success in the South Pacific Islands can be attributed to its community service efforts and use of cultural integration into Māori communities. Over the two hundred years it has existed, the Mormon church has used manipulation tactics in order to grow its church. Mormonism represents the potential success that can be gained by smaller, unconventional belief systems and fringe religions and its study allows the understanding of the implications all fringe religions, including violent ones, and their success can have as well as the recognition of potential tactics that may be used by such groups.

## Introduction

Divergence from mainstream religion has been common, and fringe religions, or belief systems that do not align with major religious institutions, are often peaceful and unarmful. Many organizations, however, exploit vulnerable individuals, indoctrinating them into belief systems and groups that can become violent. Moreover, such organizations exhibit remarkable similarities in their formation and expansion patterns across different historical contexts. From a historical perspective, Mormonism serves as a compelling example of the recurring tactics employed by fringe religions to bolster their ranks. From its inception in the 19th century to its migration towards Utah and subsequent overseas missionary endeavors, Mormonism has maintained both prominence and consistency in its approach to growth [1]. Successful fringe religions often follow similar paths of growth, leveraging various tactics to convert and indoctrinate members effectively. The

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enduring presence of the Mormon Church attests to the enduring success of fringe religions and the tactics they employ to foster growth.

### **Birth of Mormonism**

Since its conception, Mormonism has been successful in its recruitment strategies, attributable to its founder: Joseph Smith. Along with his self-positioning as prophet and leader of the Mormon Church, Smith was effective in growing the church and reaching members. Richard Lyman Bushman, a Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University and co-author of *A Firm Foundation*, published by Brigham Young University's Religious Studies Center, argues in his chapter, "Joseph Smith and Power," that Joseph Smith's charisma and his building of church hierarchy were significant to the success of early Mormonism. Bushman further contends that Smith's consolidation of power within the Mormon Church created an environment where dissent was suppressed, thus fostering an environment conducive to growth [2]. Those he converted were convinced of this gift he possessed and that his leadership was legitimate and God-willing. Additionally, Bushman asserts that the leadership Joseph Smith took as head of the Mormon church led to "unchecked power" in his hands which prevented any of his followers from criticizing the movement [2]. By establishing himself as the leader and prophet of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith used his convincing charisma and strong leadership to bring converts and indoctrinate more to his church. Alternatively, Stephen J. Fleming, author of religious studies at Brigham Young University, presents Mormonism's most successful conversion tactic: changing Christian religious dogma to entice potential members. In his article published by the Cambridge University Press, Fleming argues that experimental religion was most successful for the Mormon Church to attract new members. The significance of experimental religious experiences, ones where God's presence was experienced, revolved around its suppression under European Protestantism and the American urge to be freed from European religious restriction [3]. Fleming claims that as opposed to the institution of church leadership, "institutionalized supernaturalism and aggressive proselytizing" were central to the Mormon movement and its appeal [3]. The Mormon Church was incredibly successful in using revised religious dogma at this time, as the church's rise came at a time when many Americans opposed European religion and its restrictions. Smith's dynamic leadership style, coupled with the allure of experiential

spirituality offered by Mormonism, appealed to individuals seeking a departure from traditional religious structures. Moreover, the suppression of dissent within the Mormon Church ensured a cohesive and unified movement, further contributing to its growth and influence.

### **Westward Expansion**

As the Mormons migrated toward Utah, the leadership of Brigham Young proved pivotal in indoctrinating members and expanding the faith westward. August C. Bolino, a Professor Emeritus in Economics and Business at The Catholic University of America asserts in his paper “Brigham Young as Entrepreneur” the significance of Brigham Young and his leadership in the growth of Mormonism. Bolino claims that Brigham Young, as the successor of Joseph Smith, was significant in maintaining the Mormon population while also expanding it. To accommodate for the economic difficulties involved in moving to Utah, Young was “extremely shrewd” and possessed great foresight and management skills, both of which allowed him to “guide his people” [4]. Through his economic prowess and his strong management, Brigham Young exerted considerable influence in the Mormon church’s power growth in its expansion to the West. Frederick S. Buchanan, Ph.D. in History of Education from Ohio State University, builds on Bolino’s argument, highlighting another facet of Brigham Young’s leadership tactics. In his paper, “Education Among the Mormons,” Buchanan describes the religious influence of the Mormon church in the education system of Utah and its use of religious indoctrination to maintain members’ allegiance. Buchanan claimed that schooling under Brigham Young in Utah resembled more of a platform for disseminating religious doctrine than a standard educational institution. This approach was specifically “committed to a Mormon view of the nature of “true” education” [5]. This education was, according to Buchanan, “clearly distinct from education as intellectual inquiry” and was instead intended to share religious doctrine and maintain the membership of Mormons in Utah [5]. The indoctrination of Mormons through the education system was incredibly effective in maintaining the allegiance of the population in Utah and allowing the success of the Church. Despite formidable challenges posed by the Westward expansion, the Mormon church survived and grew under the leadership of Brigham Young. His strategic combination of indoctrination through both leadership and education proved instrumental in sustaining and strength-

ening Mormonism in its new frontier.

### **Missionaries in the South Pacific**

Additionally, the utilization of service and cultural integration in the Mormon colonization of the South Pacific was greatly successful in facilitating the conversion of large populations. R. Lanier Britsch, a history professor at Brigham Young University specializing in the history of missionary work, published “The Expansion of Mormonism in the South Pacific” in *Dialogue*, a research journal focused on Mormon thought. In his paper, Britsch argued that many Pacifica cultures, particularly those with limited non-Indigenous influence, embraced Mormonism through cultural immersion and missionary projects. Britsch emphasizes the effectiveness of service projects, particularly in education and infrastructure development, in fostering cultural acceptance of Mormon missionaries and their teachings. He contends that these initiatives not only contributed to the physical well-being of the local communities but also served as platforms for sharing Mormon theology [6]. Service was largely successful, Britsch argues, in islands where “Polynesians [were] still in command of their lives” [6]. This was particularly significant as Polynesians previously affected by American or British influence were less accepting of new cultural influence, especially of another church. Areas less controlled by these Western influences, however, embraced Mormon beliefs. Grant Underwood, historian of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and professor at the Brigham Young University of Mormon History, continues more specifically with the Māori people. He describes the Māori identity as influenced by Mormon beliefs, religion, and colonization in his paper “Mormonism and the Shaping of Māori Religious Identity.” Missionaries combined proselytization with lax religious dogma to assimilate Māori people into Mormons while preserving indigenous culture to an extent. Underwood argues that Mormon colonization of New Zealand successfully allowed large populations of indigenous Māori to join Mormonism through cultural integration. In New Zealand, Mormons chose to celebrate Māori culture rather than imposing their own. Underwood asserts that “to embrace Mormonism was no capitulation to colonialism” [7]. The fear of becoming culturally “white” was alleviated by the Mormon missionaries’ integration of Indigenous culture into the church religion [7]. As opposed to other colonial influences, specifically religious colonial influences, Mormonism, as a fringe religion, was much more suc-

cessful due to its focus on conversion through flexible doctrinal interpretations. The tactics of service and cultural integration were efficacious as they allowed the Mormon church to differentiate itself as a fringe religion.

## Conclusion

Mormonism serves as an example of a fringe religion that has not only endured but also thrived over time. Its adoption of numerous tactics, such as strong leadership, flexible religious doctrine, indoctrination through education, cultural integration, and service, has effectively allowed Mormonism, as a fringe religion, to obtain and maintain power. The path the Mormon church followed to achieve its influence is representative of past, present, and future fringe religions. Mormonism's use of manipulation tactics functions as evidence of their significance to fringe religions and their success.

## References

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