IT is a curious fact that the vast literature on Mormonism tends to treat the subject as everything but a religion. Until the twentieth century the issue was so incendiary that non-Mormon publications were usually either polemics written or preached by Protestant ministers or sensational exposés by people who claimed to have penetrated Brigham Young's iron curtain. But if the Woodruff Manifesto made polygamy and thus Mormonism an academic matter for most Americans, succeeding historians were not to profit by the less emotional perspective. Scholars grew indignant over Brigham Young's dictatorship and the criminal docility of a people who could not see the proper line between church and state. Joseph Smith's pretentious visions seemed absurd to an enlightened people. There was a blossoming of analyses proving him an epileptic, a paranoiac, or an imposter. Scholars amassed data proving that The Book of Mormon could not have been written in any other place than Northeastern United States between 1815 and 1835. But most of the energy went into asserting or refuting the Spaulding-Rigdon theory of the origin of the golden plates.
There were some, however, who saw implications beyond the disputes over authorship. Why should the gibberish of a crazy boy send thousands of people trekking off to establish a theocracy beyond the Rocky Mountains? Here, these scholars reasoned, was the perfect example of the inexorable magic of the frontier. Mormonism was a purely American and Western product. "Western New York in the frontier days, interest in Indians, an attempt to give America an ancient heritage; Ohio, Illinois, a Zion in Missouri (mid-America!); religion for the common man, free air and expansive ideas, polygamy—like to do things in a big way. Conceived in a frontier, driven further west by an angry frontier, first settlement and colonization of the western desert—the saga of a westering people, an epic in social history, Manifest Destiny with religion as its rationalization!"

These enthusiasts never suspected that they might be following the old pattern of a new religion consuming another and using it to prove its own doctrines. For the West and the frontier with its free air and expansive confidence was a sort of religion for Americans, and if the Mormons could absorb Columbus and George Washington into the grand scheme of Nephites and Lamanites, the scholarly frontiersmen could take Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and hitch them to Manifest Destiny.

So Mormonism has come down as an interesting phase of American social history, an autochthonous expression of the frontier. If it had any relation to previous religious developments, it was only as a reaction against stern New England Calvinism. Mormonism was not primarily a religion but a social movement.

II

Jan Matthys had a personal revelation that he should lead a sally against the pagans. On April 5, 1534, he led the assault, but Jan apparently did not realize what Joseph Smith (a later Enoch) knew: revelations can also come from the devil. When Jan fell, Johann Bockhold, whom posterity has known as John
of Leyden, became ruler of the saints. On August 31 he was officially proclaimed king of the Chosen and ruler of the world. As head of the Muenster theocracy he instituted polygamy, after citing Biblical precedent and saying there was a surplus of women anyway. He outlawed infant baptism and produced a divinely revealed constitution for Israel. Twelve elders assumed joint worldly and spiritual powers, proclaimed free will, and told the people that Christ's kingdom was earthly. In the earlier Articles of Muenster the Anabaptists had refused to obey any pagan authority and now the day for the destruction of the Godless was approaching. But that year drew to a close and 1535 was a hungry year. On April 4 the Diet met and hurled the imperial armies against the Muenster walls. There was no possibility of retreat to the land of the honey bee.¹

There had been radical outbreaks before, but Muenster was incorporated in the Protestant tradition as a symbol of evil and a slogan for persecution precisely because it was the expression of a tendency latent in Protestantism itself. The early confessions and creeds were important because they checked the centrifugal force inherent in any Biblical or personal religion. One of the fundamental articles of the Westminster Confession, for instance, was number six of Chapter I, which decreed that nothing was ever to be added to Holy Scripture, "by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men." But all the scholarship, logic, and authority of the age could not hold the fires under control. The Reformation made man aware of his sin and responsibility, gave him the Bible to study, and filled his soul with an awareness of history. Then when Renaissance optimism simmered down to groups of farmers and soldiers, combining confident materialism with a Biblical sense of mission, the reaction was bound to be severe. Especially in the English Civil Wars, the combination of these forces produced radical sects like the Quakers, the "Fifth Monarchy" men, and Gerrard Winstanley's Diggers. While differing in

many respects, these movements were all perfectionist and most entertained eschatological hopes for fulfillment in history.2

The New England Puritans were as properly horrified as anyone by the outbreak of these “gangrena” during the Cromwellian period. They had promptly and severely dealt with antinomianism and were not a little disturbed by the new tolerance of the Restoration. But despite their orthodoxy on personal revelation and perfection, they had brought with them certain Anabaptist ideas of polity. The non-separatist Puritans had dropped the conception of a national church and substituted the idea of individual, autonomous churches, composed of visible saints.

Perhaps the single most important fact of early religious history in America is this tendency away from the concept of the national church. The Revolution prevented the possible establishment of the Anglican Church and after a belated enchantment with deism, successive waves of religious enthusiasm only served to split further the existing churches. In early American Puritanism, the inherent conflict of orthodoxy and Anabaptist polity had brought a specious compromise with the Half-Way Covenant, but this in turn contributed to the collapse of Puritan church polity in the eighteenth century. More and more emphasis was placed on inducing conversions en masse, while large segments of the community were excluded from church membership. Thus an increasingly large group of New Englanders, whose ancestors had taken membership for granted, found themselves displaced and uncertain.

By the early nineteenth century a small group along the seashore was adapting religion to conform with trade, business, and a free and genteel life, while the back country smouldered with evangelism and literal Bible-mindedness. During the first quarter of the century, religion was effectively separated from society and politics, and the general trend seemed to be away from orthodox formulations of dogma. Especially among lib-

erals in the East, God was elevated to an inscrutable height. He became a vague but ambient force or power, indifferent and imperturbable. The religious debates revolved around the nature of man, which seemed freer after God’s elevation; but whether Hopkinsians argued that man was impotent or their opponents held that he had a fighting chance, God still remained distant and unaffected.

After assuming this knowable God, the tendency was to stress a divine immanence for man. The prevailing mood emphasized the importance of the present and forgot history, which was considered mostly dark ages anyway. The church, then, was not only separate from the state but was in no way coincident with a community. Theology moved away from history, providence, and revelation, and strove to give man individual freedom and a means to an easy conscience.

But as the canals and turnpikes pierced the Appalachians, a good many farmers and small townfolk found themselves in a dilemma. On the actual frontier, conditions favored friendly interdenominational relations, and religion was accepted as just religion. But Upstate New York in the 1820’s was not a frontier and it experienced a certain amount of denominational competition. Hill people left Litchfield and Berkshire counties and the western ridges of Vermont to farm the rolling Finger Lakes country. They had a deep religious heritage. They had the tradition of strong men like Solomon Stoddard, who had ruled Northampton as an autocrat and had dispensed with such trivia as the Half-Way Covenant. Then there had been the Great Awakening with its emotion and emphasis on conversion. Religion was a main topic of conversation and the literate thought and wrote in Biblical terms. Now, in York State these people were besieged by exhorters and circuit riders, Methodists, Freewill Baptists, and Presbyterians. These divines painted dismal pictures of hell and called for immediate conversion. But which was the right church, the church? The York State population was a mobile one and in every new

community, it seemed, there was a new sect and a new divinity. The people read their Bibles and wondered.

Since no organized force existed to check centrifugal aberrations, it was not surprising that people clustered around self-proclaimed prophets. Little dust devils sucked in a few particles and skittered across western New England and York State, which was the trough of the low pressure area—minute signals of larger storms to come. An ex-British officer led a group in Vermont and Massachusetts in the 1790’s. A little later, Middletown, Vermont, broke out with millennial expectations, direct revelations, and treasure hunting. These were common occurrences among a people who yearned for salvation, a people whose ancestors had bequeathed both a religious passion and an inevitable frustration in a splintered church which had no place for them.

Meanwhile New England money and missionaries crossed the Hudson and concentrated on the area of new economic development. Revivals flared up after the War of 1812, and the evangelists illogically but effectively combined the broken fragments of Edwardean theology, with emphasis on both disinterested benevolence and what approached free will. The Methodists, Universalists, and Campbellites wielded hammer blows against the sterile residue which remained from seventeenth-century Puritanism. With all the barriers, systems, and formulations gone, an emotional continent lay bared for all to exploit. In the autumn of 1821 a young Oneida County lawyer named Charles G. Finney went into the woods where no one could see him and received an ecstatic baptism from the Holy Ghost.

III

... so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person, young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.

4 Cross, The Burned-over District, 38.
5 Cross, The Burned-over District, 22-28.
Thus Joseph Smith remembered the religious tumult in the burnt-over district when he was fourteen.

The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of either reason or sophistry to prove their errors . . . . On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists, in their turn, were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others. In the midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinion, I often said to myself, What is to be done? Who, of all these parties, are right? or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it? and how shall I know it? 6

So in the spring of 1820 Joe Smith retired into the woods in response to James 1:5, but the Holy Ghost who lived in the York State woods in those days was even more familiar with Joe than he was with young Mr. Finney the next year. The fourteen-year old ragamuffin saw both God and Christ.

God, it appeared, could make no more out of the multitudes of sects than could Joseph Smith. He thought that the reign of apostasy had lasted long enough and it was time to reestablish the true Church, with real apostolic succession. Young Smith learned to his amazement that he was to be the custodian of the keys.

The frontier historians say that Mormon theology is mostly absurd and meaningless but can be explained as a Western revolt against Calvinism. The important thing was that free land to the west gave this “insane movement” a chance to expand and members were attracted by economic opportunity. The origins and meaning of Mormonism are not, unfortunately, quite that simple. Upstate New York after 1825 had a booming economy and a maturing culture. With schools, libraries, canals, and taverns, it was no longer a frontier.7 The influences which shaped Mormonism came largely from New England. Even after Zion moved westward, the bulk of new members were recruited in the East. There were tens of thousands of

6 Lucy Smith, History of the Prophet Joseph (Salt Lake, 1902), 74.
7 Fawn Brodie, No Man Knows My History (New York, 1945), 9-10.
conversions in Britain. As for economic opportunity, the Mormons, like their ancestors, saw no cleavage between speculation and providence. The works of Max Weber and R. H. Tawney have cast some doubt on the naïve assumption that religion is merely the hypocritical side of exploitation. Actually, the frontier was the place where Mormonism was nearly extinguished, while the final settlement came a thousand miles beyond the frontier.

That Mormonism was a revolt against something is quite evident. But orthodox Calvinism was hardly a thing to revolt against in 1830, when Unitarians were becoming a settled and conservative element in Boston, when Campbellites and Universalists roamed the Genesee Valley, and when the prevailing mood even in the Plan of Union churches was against intellectual formulations and strict dogma. Rather, it was this rising tide of liberalism and individualism that presented a challenge to dissenting minds. The forgotten fact about Mormonism is that the New England settlers in York State had a tradition which held that a church is something more than a social group, that theology has concerns other than the nature of man.

In the one hundred years before Joseph Smith, intellectuals and scholars had gradually lost control of the main currents of religion. The contemporary feuds in the New England theological schools did not affect Joseph Smith or the farmers and merchants along the expanding Erie Canal. But the ideas of earlier divines had seeped down to the level of mechanics and day laborers. While these doctrines had been distorted and simplified, a movement from the bottom was bound to reflect them. The descendants of farmers from isolated valleys in Vermont and Connecticut instinctively thought of one church, the church, with a definite logical creed and reassuring covenants. Like Joseph Smith’s father, they thought of a church of saints, directly descended from “the ancient order, as established by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and his Apostles.”

8 Smith, History of the Prophet Joseph, 54.
The church of New England tradition was a church at one with society, without any division of temporal and spiritual power.

Though he was an immigrant, Alexander Campbell represented a part of this tendency. He thought of one church, the original pure church of the Apostles. For this reason many disciples were absorbed into Mormonism and this has led to perhaps undue emphasis on Campbell's influence. Campbell was also part of the liberating, free, catholic temper of the times. He was opposed to dogma, was for extreme toleration and separation of church and state, and he was bitterly anti-Mormon. Discussing the intolerant certainties and pretentions of the Latter Day Saints, Campbell wrote:

He decides all of the great controversies—infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement . . . even the question of freemasonry, republican government, and the rights of man.  

Campbell was too much immersed in the Baptist spirit of tolerance to see that deciding all of the great controversies was exactly that function of religion which Mormonism sought to reëstablish.

The Latter Day Saints were as much in revolt against Baptists as they were against Methodists, Presbyterians, Finney's revivals, and Andrew Jackson Davis' spiritualists. Parley Pratt, one of the formulators of Mormon theology, lashed out at the spiritualistic tendency in emotional religion, the tendency to divide the body into two realms and to evoke manifestations "which neither edify nor instruct." If the Mormons were opposed to the separation of man's spiritual nature from his body, they were also against the omnipresent, inscrutable, "Buddhist" God of modern Arminian religions.

9 George B. Arbaugh, Revelation in Mormonism (Chicago, 1932), 54, 14-15.  
10 Alexander Campbell, Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon (Boston, 1832), 13.  
11 Parley Parker Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology (Salt Lake, 1891), 122.  
While Mormon missionaries drew many converts from revival areas, their approach to doctrine was always by argument rather than emotional oratory. Since the revolt originated in the lower strata, the antinomian tendencies of John of Leyden and Anne Hutchinson were apparent in the early years. It was soon realized, however, that the doctrine of continual revelation was explosive and could divide the movement before it was well under way. The extreme mysticism which was necessary for the founding of the church was the very force which nearly brought its downfall. When people like Sydney Roberts, James C. Brewster, Martin Harris, and even Sidney Rigdon began having separate revelations, Joseph warned his people that “the devil can speak in tongues.” He insisted that all revelations come through him, while his own revelations of this period were an attempt to stabilize the centrifugal weaknesses of his religion.

The theology and polity of the Latter Day Saints was a crude attempt on the part of untrained but sincere men to establish a simple and authoritative church, the church they had lost and now yearned for. While they attacked the prevailing religions of the day, the converts of Mormonism were able to retain almost all of the fundamental beliefs they had accepted since childhood. The theology was not against scholarship or a learned ministry. Indeed, it embodied part of the awe and reverence which unschooled Americans have always had for EDUCATION. At Kirtland, Nauvoo, and Deseret the Mormons were quick to establish schools. Joseph Smith and others made at least a pretense to study Hebrew and German, while Orson Pratt wrote treatises on calculus, astronomy, and romantic philosophy.

Of course, Mormon education had to conform to the Mormon world view and eschatology, but this world view in turn

15 Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake, 1921), Sections 42-56.
16 M. R. Werner, *Brigham Young* (New York, 1925), 50.
17 Werner, *Brigham Young*, 79.
gave education a paramount importance. Since the Bible clearly showed that God was a chemist, biologist, ship-builder, horticulturist, architect, and surveyor, Parley Pratt included these arts and sciences in his definition of theology, saying that “all other sciences . . . [are] but branches growing out of this, the root.”  

Joseph Smith, who was practically illiterate, said that man is saved no faster than he gains intelligence. This meant that a man’s station in the eternal celestial hierarchy would depend on the degree of perfectibility he achieved in this life. The Mormons wanted to set up education on their own terms and like the non-Mormon elements in the same culture, they were suspicious of formal, Eastern education. They were not, however, in the tradition of Gilbert Tennent and the later evangelists. Many of the Mormons felt inferior because of their lack of education and even The Book of Mormon apologizes for literary “weaknesses” and stumbling “because of the placing of our words.”  

But Joseph Smith compensated for this inferiority by making a pretense to philological erudition:

We say from the Saxon good; the Dane god; the Goth goda; the German gut; the Dutch goed; the Latin bonus; the Greek kalos; the Hebrew tob; and the Egyptian mo. Hence, with the addition of more, or the contraction mor, we have the word Mormon, which means literally, more good.

IV

The doctrines and beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints can be viewed from a number of perspectives. Since Mormonism is a Biblical religion, taking every word literally, its peculiarities can be interpreted as what happens when all classes of ignorant and superstitious people have freedom to draw their own conclusions from Scripture. Luther had feared such consequences (Muenster was an example), and he strove to separate the Gospel from the Bible itself. In Amer-

18 P. Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology, 2-3.
the various formulations and creeds had been undermined and Mormonism can be seen as the extreme result of the evils of literal-mindedness.

Another factor was the absorption and synthesis of the contemporary cultural and theological debates such as pseudo-Masonic rituals, immersion, and millennialism. But most important, and this fact has been largely ignored, Mormonism was a link in the Puritan tradition, asserting a close and personal God, providential history, predestination, an ideal theocracy, the importance of a Christian calling, and a church of saints. In this same tradition it opposed deism, evangelism, and the Arminianism of Methodists and Unitarians. Finally, the Latter Day Saints represented an outburst of mysticism and superstition, the belief in continued revelation and the perfectibility of man, which was at least a latent facet of American Puritanism.

In nearly all these aspects, the Mormons ran against the main stream of American thought, and the tolerant and free Americans of the frontier found it difficult to be tolerant of such a diabolical unity of evils. This anachronistic residue of seventeenth-century New England just did not understand the meaning of individualism. Mormons voted the way their elders and Apostles told them to vote. As a block they manipulated real estate and formed wildcat banks, which were not unknown on the frontier in the 1830's, but the idea of doing these things collectively was revolting. The Mormons did not seem to know that religion was one thing and politics and economics another.

One of the chief aims of Mormon theology was to redefine the nature of God, to recover the anthropocentric God of their forefathers. The Athanasian Creed was rejected, but not for the liberal Unitarian reasons. The tendency among Boston liberals was to raise and disperse the Father image, until He became an immaterial Force, while the Son was seen as the ideal man, a very, very good man. The Mormons reacted against orthodox Trinitarianism because "it would be difficult to con-
ceive of a greater number of inconsistencies and contradictions expressed in words as few." 21

The Bible said man was created in God's image and it talked of God as having physical attributes and passions. How could such a God be in more places than one at a single instant? The answer was that Protestant churches were not churches at all but stray sects which had lost sight of God and had substituted Eastern, mystical conceptions of "immaterial substance." Such a notion was clearly ambiguous and unscriptural. Ancient philosophers had confused states or conditions of the mind with the mind itself and had then defined mind as an immaterial substance. 22 When this conception was transferred to God, it gave Him a mystical quality and brought magic into religion. But this is really saying:

... that there is a God who does not exist, a God who is composed of nonentity, who is the negative of all existence, who occupies no space, who exists in no time, who is composed of no substance, known or unknown, and who has no powers or properties in common with any thing or being known to exist, or which can possibly be conceived of as existing either in the heavens or on the earth. 23

Thus Mormonism, with astounding temerity, charged "sectarian" Christianity with atheism.

Since the Mormons lowered God to a personal, supervising individual, with body, parts, and passions, He became subject to the eternal laws of truth. But this lowering of God to a substance did not exclude various degrees of substance. Spiritual substance is finer and purer than the substance we deal with on earth. While God's features resemble man's, this does not mean that He is restricted by the same lowly qualities. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, but even these superior qualities do not give Him a mystical cast. For God does not function as the Father alone. The Son and Holy Ghost,
while separate substances, work in harmony with the Father and in their identical purpose lies their unity. Thus they can truly be said to be One. The Holy Ghost is an ambient, spiritual substance which is diffused throughout the universe:

The purest, most refined and subtle of all . . . substances. . . . [but] like all others, is one of the elements of material or physical existence, and therefore subject to the necessary laws which govern all matter. . . . [It] is the grand moving cause of all intelligences and by which they act. . . . It is the controlling agent or executive, which organizes and puts in motion all worlds, and which, by the mandate of the Almighty, or any of His commissioned agents, performs all the mighty wonders, signs, and miracles ever manifested in the name of the Lord. . . .

God's ability to function so efficiently and to take care of so many things at once is thus reconciled with his specific personality. Miracles are not a break in the laws of nature, but are merely orderly workings of the Holy Ghost which man can not comprehend. Christ is not reduced to a man in this Trinity, but becomes God's prime minister and public relations man. "Man is subordinate to Jesus Christ, does nothing in and of himself, but does all things in the name of Christ. . . ." Since Christ holds this same relationship to His Father, man's obedience to the Son is in reality obedience to the Father.

This is an ingenious triumph on the part of York State farmers to reconcile the personal God of the Bible and their heritage with their smattering knowledge of nineteenth-century science. Through the material agency of the Holy Ghost and the unity in purpose of the Trinity, they could accept what little of contemporary science they knew and still believe in a God who could show his finger of flesh and blood, "as the finger of a man. . . ."

Equally absurd as an immaterial God, was the doctrine that the universe was created out of nothing. If we are going to

24 P. Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology, 39-40.
25 P. Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology, 33.
have eternity in one direction, the Mormons said, we must have pre-existence in the other. Out of a chaos of elements, God moulded a temporary environment in which pre-existent spirits, now clothed in fleshly "tabernacles" of a grosser substance, could work out their salvation. Parley Pratt's description of this creation reminds one of Washington Allston's *The Deluge*:

... darkness fled, the veil was lifted, light pierced the gloom, and chaos was made visible... No sound broke on the stillness, save the voice of the moaning winds and of dashing, foaming waters. Again, a voice comes booming over the abyss, and echoing amid the wastes, the mass of matter hears and trembles, and lo! the sea retires, the muddy, shapeless mass lifts its head above the waters. Molehills to mountains grow. Huge islands next appear, and continents at length expand to view, with hill and vale, in one wide, dreary waste, unmeasured and untrodden.27

Into this specially created world eternal spirits are born anew. The destiny of these spirits is determined by the lives they lead in finite existence. Evil in the world gives natural man the chance to choose the good and just, and through faith, baptism, and reception of the Holy Ghost from the hands of those who possess Him, a man can assure himself of future godhood. If one lived and died in an age of darkness, his homeless spirit can only hope that some enlightened descendant will take pity and baptize him in proxy. Then the spirit can escape his lonely exile and take his place among the godly. For man is co-eternal with God, and "as man is God once was: as God is man may become." 28 This conception of the cosmic evolution of spiritual substance enabled later Mormons to claim that Joseph Smith anticipated Darwin.

Every man on earth is a candidate for celestial glory, a glory undiminished by any vague merging with an ethereal being. The saint who achieves the celestial, or highest degree, can contemplate eternal existence as an individual "clothed in the

27 P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 49.
finest robes of linen, pure and white, adorned with precious stones and gold . . . promenading or sitting beneath the evergreen bowers and trees . . . inhaling the healthful breezes, perfumed with odor, wafted from the roses and pinks of paradise.

And if the olfactory sense can function in the celestial sphere, so can the sexual. When thinking in terms of eternity, a man might get rather lonely with a single wife. Since all future relationships are formed in this life, it pays not only to have multiple wives but scores of children to keep one company in the vastness of celestial space. The Mormons had a sense of astronomy.

But if Mormonism contemplated such a luxurious eternity, life on earth was not to be conceived in such terms. Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, the Pratt brothers, and most of the other early leaders came out of a strict New England culture which thought of idleness as one of the most inexcusable of sins. Orson Pratt and Young never tired of condemning idlers and Pratt asserted that they will find themselves “cast out, and entitled to no place among the people of God.”

Men who had spent their boyhood plowing around stones in Berkshire fields attacked missionary work with a zeal seldom paralleled. Parley Pratt preached the word of Moroni from the Chilean Andes to England. His brother Orson even attempted the seemingly impossible task of converting Scotland to Mormonism. The York State farmer spent nine months in Edinburgh and every day climbed the steep and barren slopes of Arthur’s Seat to pray to Zion’s God to warm the stony hearts of the Scots. Moreover, he apparently succeeded in gathering over two hundred converts. The same monism which made mind and body a united substance made religion synonymous with life. The Mormons recaptured part of that Puritan fervor which compelled one to work unceasingly for God.

Many commentators have been confused by the apparent

29 P. Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology, 169.
31 N. B. Lundwall, Introduction to Masterful Discourses, 12.
ambivalence in early Mormon theology toward predestination. Lehi’s speech in *The Book of Mormon* about “God’s eternal purposes” would seem to deny the emphasis on man’s acting for himself and choosing good from evil. Here Mormonism absorbed some of the cultural currents of the times, in trying to give man a certain “natural ability” within God’s total scheme. By 1834 the Presbyterian General Assembly was complaining that New School “errors in doctrine” had seeped from New England into New York State. The Mormons appropriated this emphasis on man’s ability to do what God requires of him, without going to the extreme free will of Methodism. In an attempt to reconcile predestination with the necessity for prayer, Orson Pratt wrote: “Because God knows the nature of music, that is no reason why he may not rejoice in hearing music.”

The seeming liberalism of such doctrines as general atonement can only be interpreted in terms of the Mormon emphasis on Oneness. The Latter Day Saints stood opposed to individualism of any kind, even to the rather dubious individualism of the eternally damned. They never denied that the wicked must undergo epochs of torment, but this must take place within the unified system. The Puritan ancestors of Mormons who were led to hell by false priests can still be saved if their descendants help them. Even in recent times Mormon agents have circulated in New England towns taking microfilm records of ancestors’ births, so that they might be baptized in proxy and saved.

The Mormons allowed no partiality and in a sense were more hard-boiled than the sternest Calvinist. While retaining his particular substance, the individual was subordinate to a social and cosmic unity. All possible stress was placed on order, in an attempt to recover the order and certainty of a former era. The amazing success in fulfilling Joseph Smith’s dream was due to the efficient channeling of all individual effort to do

God's work. The early Mormon communism differed significantly from that of the Shakers, Rappites, and Fourier groups. The United Order of Enoch used communism as a means to an end, and the church did not collapse when it was necessary to modify communism.35

It is a fantastic spectacle. In the era of Jackson, of liberalizing religions, of individualistic society and competitive economics, a movement which represents the antithesis rises, fights its way across a continent, and comes into full fruition. It was more than the appeal of superstition which would make a man say, "If Brother Brigham tells me to do a thing, it is the same as though the Lord told me to do it. This is the course for you and every other Saint to take. . . ."36 The future leader, Wilford Woodruff, could admit that whatever conclusions he might come to in the study of arts and sciences must be abandoned if the prophet of God rejected them.37

The preoccupation of Mormonism with material expansion in this world led many interpreters into thinking of its theology as mere rationalization. They failed to see that a Mormon's calling was conceived only in terms of his salvation and historical role. While most nineteenth-century religions were minimizing man's guilt and the difficulties of salvation, Mormonism advanced the extreme and fanatical doctrine of blood atonement.38 It was an acute awareness of guilt which invoked the necessity of bloodshed for justification. Brotherly love compelled a man to "help" his neighbor atone for his sins. This again was the antinomian undercurrent which the older revelatory religions had feared.

Around 1842 the Mormons began introducing certain pseudo-Masonic rituals. The simple rites of washing and anointing were transformed into a ceremony where a man said, "Brother, having authority, I wash you that you may be clean from the

35 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 106, 141-142.
36 Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses (Liverpool, 1854-1878), 1, 161.
37 Young, Journal of Discourses, v, 83.
38 Werner, Brigham Young, 404 ff.
blood and sins of this generation." 39 Since Mormon naturalism held that every transgression will bring its proportionate punishment, a severe sin came to require more than simple washing. At later times, this doctrine may have meant legal murder. After the persecutions and mobbings given the Saints by the frontier, people began to realize that this blood atonement might have serious implications for the United States. The shadow of John of Leyden and Muenster fell eastward from the Rocky Mountains.

V

In an age of self-congratulation, optimism, and progress, it was the ghost of another era who could write:

Wickedness keeps pace with the hurried revolutions of the age. Gross immorality, drunkenness, debaucheries, adulteries, whoredoms, self-pollutions, sodomy, beastliness, thieving, robbing, murdering, have engulfed the nations in a deathly ocean of filth, and have transformed our world into a sickly, disgusting, loathsome cesspool of corruption, fit for the habitations of devils and unclean spirits. In the midst of all this overwhelming crime, millions of long-faced, hypocritical, heaven-daring priests and clergy will roll up their sanctimonious eyes and insult the great Majesty of heaven, under pretense of thanking him that they live in such a glorious day of Gospel light....40

Yet this is the way Orson Pratt saw the latter days of the great apostasy. He was not surprised by the corruptions, because they were part of the providential plan. But they confirmed his belief in his own mission and enabled him to continue publishing such sentiments in his English Millennial Star.

The Mormon conception of history was quite different from other nineteenth-century theories. Since their personal God presided over the most minute happenings, the ordinary sequences of cause and effect were meaningful only in light of the overall system. In the late spring of 1847 when the Mor-

39 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 279.
40 O. Pratt, Masterful Discourses, 52.
mon emigrants were occupying both sides of the North Platte near the present Casper, Wyoming, God sent miraculous rains which swelled the river so that Gentile wagons jammed up before the crossing. Obviously, God intended His children to profit by the miracle and ferry the Gentiles across for good money. It was all part of the plan.41

Providential history was the dynamo which harnessed the separate energies of York State farmers into a smoothly-running organization, an organization which would build a holy empire west of the Wasatch. For fourteen hundred years the world had slumbered in darkness and illusion, further perpetuated by false priests and prophets. The obvious evidence of the death of the true church was the lack of immersion for remission of sins, the absence of laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the total disappearance of miracles, gifts, and powers of the Holy Ghost.42 True apostolic succession must be restored by “the man or men last holding the keys of such power. . . .” 43 As ministering angels they must return to the world and restore the keys to God’s chosen. So God appeared to Moses after a time of apostasy. So Christ appeared to the Nephites. And when the early church councils perverted the Christian religion in Europe, the last holders of the keys were the gallant and cultured Nephites of America. Their destruction at Cumorah meant that Moroni, son of Mormon, must appear to the leader of the Latter Day Saints and convey the apostolic succession. Thus it was the Catholic and Anglican were usurping sects.

But fourteen hundred years of darkness did not mean that God had been ignoring the destiny of man. God let the United States come into being so that religious liberty would enable the Latter Day Saints to found the Kingdom of God on earth.44 The great discoveries and inventions were God’s way of fertilizing the soil for the coming Millennium. Rapid transportation

and communication meant that regenerate men could be gathered at Zion before the destruction of the ungodly. So another people with a similar outlook, a similar desire for unity and purpose, had seen parliamentary government, the Reformation, and the New World discoveries as a well-planned sequence in preparation for the true church.

Like their forefathers, the Mormons thought of themselves in the role of warners rather than warriors.45 Just as the Puritans could support the Crown from a good distance and work out their model state within an established framework, so the Mormons paid verbal homage to the Constitution. After all, the stream of history was on their side.46

Like the seventeenth-century Puritans, the Mormons saw their political and religious work as the culmination of history. Their model Zion would be the focal point of the globe and the fulfillment of history. Unity would come through example. Both groups worked tirelessly for the inevitable. Both groups built theocracies in the wilderness and hoped to unite the races which had been dispersed from the Tower of Babel. Both felt the necessity of a solid social and economic unity for this purpose.

It would, of course, be an oversimplification to think of the Mormons merely as nineteenth-century Puritans, revolting against the innovations of the age. The Mormons lacked the sense of propriety, the stability of their forefathers. They lacked the sound intellectual leadership and were constantly on the point of splintering, until Brigham Young became president. They went off on a dozen tangents and absorbed a crazy tangle of mysticism and charlatanry from a variety of sources. Leaders drew in ideas at random from local preachers, pseudoscientific books, and “philosophers” like Thomas Dick.47

Yet the converts to Mormonism were usually the descendants of those cast off by the Half-Way Covenant. They were the

45 Therald N. Jensen, *Mormon Theory of Church and State* (Chicago, 1940), 2.
churchgoers who did not belong, the Bible readers who did not understand. The relation between religion and culture had broken down and tradition failed to explain the new civilization. Methodist exhorters and jolly Universalists could not wash away the doubts of soul-searching New England farmers. If Scripture were true, there must be another meaning to history, a more convincing way to escape sin. Since the theologians had failed to understand the problem and quarreled among themselves, since the business leaders were too intent on exploitation to lead, it was up to some farmers to make their own religion, and their own society.

There is something dramatic about the shift between the poles of two centuries. A small band of Englishmen creating a Christian community on the shores of a wilderness—for them, the triumph of the Reformation and the consummation of history. And a York State farmer whose ancestor had marched with Thomas Hooker from Newtowne and had been given land in Saybrook, this farmer climbing to the summit of Arthur’s Seat to pray that the Scots and English be allowed to see the light and be saved.

It was, after all, a seventeenth and not a nineteenth-century phenomenon for a group of mechanics and farmers to make their religion a part of everyday life, to interpret daily happenings in light of their providential mission, to cut a swath two-thirds of the way across a continent, and to colonize successfully an uninhabited desert, a thousand miles from alien civilization, where there were “no friends to welcomne them, nor inns to enterteine or refresh their weatherbeaten bodys, no houses or much less townes to repaire too, to seeke for succoure.” 48

48 William Bradford, History of Plimoth Plantation (Boston, 1898), 94-95.