

The Conversion of LDS Missionaries to other Cultures and Societies as observed in France and in Haiti

By Carter CHARLES¹

LDS Missionaries: all Americans?

Before anything, I wish to make a few remarks on what I mean by “LDS missionaries.” When Professor Bernadette Rigal-Cellard conducted a study about seven years ago on how French Latter-day Saints perceived themselves and their Church,² her respondents objected to her observation that the LDS Church was a typical American one. The overall majority of French LDS argue that Mormonism has become a global, universal religion that has more members abroad than in the United States. Of course, these arguments completely dismiss the Church’s founding history, its high ranking leadership, and everything else that make Americans proud of it now. One may always point to the presence of non-U.S citizens like Europeans Charles Didier (Belgium), Dieter F. Uchtdorf (Germany) as well as others from Latin America in the Church’s Quorums of Seventies and Apostles as a sign that it is becoming more and more multinational.³ In general, those non-U.S citizens have been with and around Americans ever since their baptism. Most of the new leaders from Latin America had been working as educational coordinators for the Church before being called to ecclesiastical positions. Moreover, when they are assigned somewhere outside of the U.S, say Brazil as is now the case for Charles Didier, they go to oversee the implementation of Church policies designed by a body composed largely of Americans. Thus one may also wonder to what extent those non-U.S men are representative of cultural diversity in the Church’s hierarchy.

The younger missionaries are like the Charles Didiers and Dieter Uchtdorfs of the Church’s hierarchy; they are emissaries of an American-based and American-led religion and as such are considered Americans. Whether they are citizens of Belgium or Germany, Guatemala or Italy does not make any difference to non-LDS. For instance, in 1997, I heard Haitians calling the native missionaries, their very fellow citizens, “Americans” because they were with Americans or

¹ Special thanks to J. Craig Merrell, president of the Toulouse France Mission and to his missionaries, and to the French LDS who kindly answered my questions.

² Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, “Être Français dans une Église d’origine américaine: les mormons de France” in *Mutations Transatlantiques des religions*, Pessac : PUB, 2000. This French version is also available at http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/rigal_cellard_bernadette/Mormons_de_France/Mormons_de_France.html. A summary of the English version, “Inculturation of Mormonism in France” is available at <http://www.cesnur.org/2002/slc/rigal.htm>.

³ As of April 2007, out of the Church’s 105 General Authorities, only 18 are not Americans. Of that number, 5 are from Europe (Germany, Belgium and England), 1 is from the Philippines, 1 from Japan, 1 from South Korea and the other 9 are from the Latin America. <http://www.desnews.com/confer/leaders/leaders.htm>.

simply because they belong to the LDS Church. A former missionary reported to professor Rigal-Cellard that in spite of the fact that the Church had seven French missionaries serving with the American ones in La Réunion, “people perceived more and more its American characteristics” (BRC, 300). And this is not only in Haiti or La Réunion; pretty much everywhere, when you say “Mormons” or Latter-day Saints,” people think “Americans.” During the Joseph Smith bicentennial in 2005, at the Library of Congress, Robert V. Remini argued that this easily identified Americanism of the LDS Church explains its success abroad.⁴

For all the above reasons, while I do not ignore the fact that some of the LDS missionaries are not Americans by citizenship, when I say “LDS missionaries” in this paper, I refer in the first place to those from the United States; and by extension to all those who stand as the Church’s emissaries whatever the country they may be from.

If you are a very patriotic American who watch Fox News you probably didn’t appreciate my title’s first implication that American missionaries become French. Well, rest assured; I use the word “conversion,” interchangeably with the words “enculturation” and “acculturation” because they convey the idea of influences leading to change or acceptance of a set of new values that may be religious, cultural or both. Of course, in its religious context, the word “conversion” means turning completely away from one’s former life, but I certainly don’t use it to imply that LDS missionaries reject their home countries.

Cultural influences: the inevitable part of LDS missions

While some people join Mormonism because it is American, others, among whom some Latter-day Saints, resent this American influence from which the Church cannot part. A Mexican stake president denounces the Church’s “imperialism in art,” arguing that its paintings portraying what the Indians must have been like according to the Book of Mormon have Anglo-Saxon features and that they “show such an enormous ignorance of culture that they are offensive.”⁵ France does not play the same role in the Church’s canon as Central America does; thus, French people are spared this sort of imperialism.

Still, my point here is not so much about LDS converts as it is about the LDS missionaries. I would like to consider the enculturation or conversion to a new culture from their perspective

⁴ See Remini’s answer to Richard L. Bushman in “The Worlds of Joseph Smith” at <http://lds.org/library/display/0,4945,510-1-3067-1,00.html>; accessed May 9, 2007.

⁵ Lamond Tullis, quoted in Jeffrey C. Fox, p. 147. This quarrel stems from the Church’s long-standing belief that American Indians are descents of the Lamanites, a people spoken of in the Book of Mormon.

and show that cultural conversion in a global Church is not a one-way process. Unless one infers that LDS missionaries are totally immune to other cultures or programmed as robots, the very fact of them interacting with peoples of other cultures and living in other countries makes it possible for them also to go through a cultural conversion. In my attempt to show the existence of such a conversion, I will answer the following questions:

1. When and how can missionaries' cultural conversion be observed?
2. What about the endurance of such conversion once the missionaries go home?
3. What do the missionaries, the Church that they represent and their home country have to gain from such a conversion?
4. And, to conclude, a question that French people may be the most interested in, what does it profit France to welcome those missionaries?

When and how a missionary's the conversion take place?

a. Becoming aware of the world: "a Slam of Culture Shock"

The process of cultural conversion for LDS missionaries begins more precisely when they receive their mission calls to serve say in the Toulouse France Mission. After the excitement of being called by God's living prophet, the newly called missionaries usually rush to a map trying to answer their own question: "Where in the world is that place?"

Some of the missionaries that I have interviewed for this paper told me that they had studied some French in high school and therefore knew exactly where France was and had a little idea of what to expect. For many of them, coming to France was like "a dream come true." An Elder⁶ from California told me how excited he was when he learned that he was coming to France. He knew that he would find what he had tasted in California – French pastries. "...That was my goal," he said, "right when I got to my blue ville,⁷ I went to the pastry store. I loved it, I love pastry still." It was a dream come true for another Elder who had always wanted to come to France, to see the country where his own father had been a missionary. He wanted to speak that foreign language that his father spoke at times at home.

Speaking on conversion to the LDS Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, now the Church's

⁶ **Elder**: refers to a young missionary in the LDS Church; although the word may be used in other contexts to refer to ecclesiastical position or seniority.

⁷ **Blue ville**: missionary language mixing French and English. The phrase comes from the French word "bleu" used for young military recruits. A "blue ville" is the city where a missionary begins his service in France.

President, declared in 1987 that

“It is not an easy thing to make the transition incident to joining this Church. It means cutting old ties... leaving friends. It may mean setting aside cherished beliefs. It may require a change of habits and a suppression of appetites. In so many cases it means loneliness and even fear of the unknown.”⁸

Like the LDS new converts, the missionaries’ dream can at times turn to nightmares when they realize the habits they have to set aside, and the cultural change they have to go through once in France. When questioned about the culture, a missionary told me how being in France was like “a slam of culture shock.” His comment becomes more meaningful when you know that in spite of the Church’s effort to diversify its missionary force, most of them are still from the United States and Canada, particularly from areas where there are large numbers of LDS (Utah, California; Alberta, Canada). During their first weeks in France, missionaries from those areas have to adapt to a completely new environment and geography. Instead of one or more LDS chapels at virtually every five to fifteen minutes drive (Utah), they discover a Roman Catholic Church that stands more as a historical monument than as a place of worship.

Some missionaries told me how they felt at a loss because France has no Wal-Mart—there is Carrefour but it’s just not the same, and the products are so different—no Taco Bell and few other American fast-foods... It seemed to one Elder, brand new in France, that “the bakeries take the place where all the fast-food restaurants would have been in America.” Two other missionaries complained that they couldn’t find “spicy foods” in France, “things that make you sweat when you eat them.” For such missionaries, the construction of more and more McDonalds and KFCs with drive thrus is a sign that “France is catching up.” However, if you ask French alter-globalist José Bové he’ll most likely tell you that it’s a sign that “France is going down.”

Before anyone thinks that I’m trying to portray Americans as tasteless people, we need to keep in mind that those missionaries that I have just referred to are young men who’ve just left college and in many cases are cordon bleus at cooking ramen noodles just as French young adults are for cooking canned cassoulet.

Paradoxically, in a poor country like Haiti, the cultural shock for the missionaries is reduced at certain levels. Why? For virtually everyone in Haiti, hope is in and comes from the United States. For many, it is still the country of success; the U.S is the future because in many cases, daily substance or getting an education depends largely on monthly cash wired by friends or relatives who have made it to the land of the rich. As a consequence most Haitians turn to that country, sometimes risking their lives, to escape poverty. This question of education leads me to

⁸ Gordon B. Hinckley, “There Must Be Messengers,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1987, p. 5

talk also about Haiti's elite and the country's economic dependence on the U.S. A readily visible aspect of that dependence is the number of American vehicles, particularly large SUVs, driving in the country's capital. A less visible part would be the number of American brands in a number of stores in Haiti. When I was there in 1997, I noticed that the missionaries simply had to walk into certain stores in Pétion-Ville or Delmas to find Root Beers, Mountain Dews and other American "stuffs" that they can hardly find in France.

Now, one may wonder if there are that many Americans in Haiti to justify American stores. The answer is of course no. The justification has to be found with Haiti's elite which values products from the U.S as a sign of social accomplishment. And, of course, this positive view of America goes down the social ladder; having something from the U.S, be it a first name as is the case for me, is valued.⁹ Thus, joining the Church in Haiti is seen as a social and economic privilege; spirituality only comes second.

Among the few who admitted to have joined the Church for social and economic reasons, I remember hearing a man during a priesthood meeting testifying that he had joined because Mormonism was from America and that churches from America gave money and welfare. The Church also brings them closer to fulfilling their dreams of migrating to the United States. Unlike French people who have a good quality of life, many Haitians hope to find in the missionaries or the Church a sponsor to obtain a visa.¹⁰ I have observed a similar tendency in people joining the LDS Church for social reasons in the former British colony called Guiana, in South America. Because they are already an American oriented people, Haitians are ready to accept whatever Americanism goes with Mormonism. The cultural conversion on their part is consequently much more significant than it is on the LDS missionaries' who can still find "stuffs" from home in spite of the country's poverty.

Still, the above does not mean that the LDS Church does not take into consideration the cultures of the places where it sends missionaries. As explained below, the LDS Church does require its missionaries to comply with a number of rules so as to be the best guests possible in a given country.

⁹ My father chose to name me Carter because Jimmy Carter was the U.S. president when I was born. For a French speaking country and former French colony, one will find many other American first names like mine in Haiti.

¹⁰ Normally, anyone in need can turn to an LDS Bishop for welfare at any time. In Haiti, because he knew that people would show interests in the Church only for social reasons, the mission president that I knew (Harold Bodon) limited the Church's welfare there only to people who had been in the Church for at least six months. Missionaries were instructed not to talk about how life was much better in the US and not to ask their parents to sponsor people to obtain visas.

b. The Language Emphasis

Because language is part of a country's reality, being able to speak a country's language is part and parcel of a missionary's cultural conversion. Before going to a country, missionaries are taught the basics of their missions' history and language in one of the Church's seventeen Missionary Training Centers (MTC). Although the Church claims that it teaches approximately 50 languages at the Provo (Utah) MTC, "with a teaching staff composed largely of former missionaries... using state-of-the-art language training technology,"¹¹ the language training does not aim at making language experts out of the missionaries. It is only designed to make their linguistic immersion go as smoothly as possible. Most of those that I have interviewed told me that once in France, they realized that it was dishonest self-congratulation to say that they could speak French. A sister missionary told me that she had to come to the fact that she only spoke "American French" because "accents here are so distinguished." "I knew the words", she said, "but I couldn't pronounce them and didn't understand when people spoke them." Thinking that children were the best clients to practice his French on, a former missionary recalled how a five year-old had made fun of his French in 1998; he was speaking in French to the boy who replied: "Je ne comprends pas ton anglais" (I don't understand your English).

Sometimes it takes the missionaries up to two months to be able to really understand what they are told. But no missionary wants to fail his mission; there is socially too much at stake. Thus LDS missionaries don't want to give up on learning the language; they're "just stubborn about the language," to use a sister missionary's phrase. Although the Church's General Authorities maintain the contrary, this determination to succeed can be explained by the fact that for young LDS a mission is a sort of "rite of passage".¹² Many of them simply follow in the footsteps of a parent, grand-parent and thereby uphold a faithful tradition. While the MTC's main

¹¹ Quoted from <http://www.mtc.byu.edu/about.htm>; accessed May 7, 2007.

¹² It is true that having been a missionary does not confer any ecclesiastical, religious privilege in that the Church's instructions do not officially "set aside" positions for former missionaries, or "exclude" those who have not served missions from Church responsibilities. However, what I want to argue here is that it is culturally binding on young LDS males to serve missions; they are born and raised with the hope that they will go on missions. One may be assured that the young man whose parents are active in the Church and who chooses not to go on a mission will, at least for a time, be considered a failure. Likewise, a healthy missionary who decides to quit his mission is sure to bring suspicion and eventually "dishonor" on himself and family. In her Master's thesis, Sophie-Hélène Trigeaud rightly talks about the fact that a young man who is not "honorably released" from his mission may "become *persona non grata*" when he returns home (Trigeaud, 91). Even if such comment is not voiced, expectations are so high and one-sided that he will be made to feel that way. A mission is socially so important that most faithful LDS young women are categorical about it: they will not marry a young man who has not been a valiant, honorable missionary. A consequence of this is that in strong LDS areas, former missionaries are very successful in getting the best dates. While LDS author Claudia L. Bushman does not talk about "rite of passage" *per se*, she acknowledges that a mission "is a turning point in Mormon youth... Many will come home as adults" (C. Bushman, 61).

priority is to train in proselyting skills, the two instances that I have just mentioned illustrate how much more frustrating it could have been for the missionaries without any language preparation at all.

Respecting and Valuing other Cultures

Besides their nine weeks training, the Church provides the missionaries with material to continue learning their mission's language while in the field. It also emphasizes that they learn the culture and history where they serve. They are instructed to "visit such places as museums, art galleries, historical sites...and cultural centers." They are also cautioned to

"...remember that as a guest [in a foreign country], you should respect the customs, traditions...and cultures of those among whom you are serving... Refrain from making or writing negative or offensive comments about local political or cultural circumstances."¹³

Missionaries are even given instructions about local dishes. The Church's Toulouse France Mission for instance saw fit to inform prospective missionaries that

[T]he French are known for their wide variety of cheeses, and wine, as well as various other things such as snails, frogs' legs, and a couple other things that may turn people's stomachs. The majority of the French population can really cook up a storm. These people aren't a Betty Crocker generation with pre-fabricated mixes lining their shelves. They know how to work with the basics, and make some dang good stuff. *You have to try everything*, except for the stuff that goes against the [W]ord of [W]isdom, or else they will be very offended. They know that you're a foreigner, so they'll want you to try the different cheeses, and other stuff, so *even though the food may have some less than desirable attributes, it tastes really good. So don't worry about eating with the French people...*¹⁴

I'm not sure that a true born French person would be offended in seeing an LDS missionary drinking some good French wine; certainly not in Bordeaux with its long-standing and famous wine tradition. In fact, French people would rather have a drink with the missionaries than listen to their message.

Now, the injunction to respect other cultures and to value them may at times be forgotten by a minority of missionaries in quest of "fun" and because of immaturity. We need to keep in mind that although they've been raised in best ways LDS parents know how to, not all the young LDS missionaries differ from their non-religious peers. In fact, it would even be abnormal that none of them show that they sometimes want to or simply throw away their suit and ties and "breathe;" that is, evacuate the stress that accompanies the high demands that are placed upon them. But generally speaking, LDS missionaries understand that the success of their missions and

¹³The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Missionary handbook*, Utah: Salt Lake City 1990, p. 22, 28-29. This handbook is actually a booklet of missionary rules; although a new edition has been put out in 2006, missionaries told me that it contain similar instructions to that of 1990.

¹⁴ Source: <http://www.francetoulousemission.com/life.asp>, accessed May 7, 2007; my italics.

the future of the LDS Church in a given place are linked to the value they place on other cultures. And they work hard to prove to themselves, their parents back home and to their leaders that they understand the principle of respect.

Understanding others and doing as they do

Understanding the characteristics of a country, its history and the way its people operate make it possible for missionaries to adapt their proselyting activities. For instance, while most people open their doors to the missionaries in Haiti because they are Americans, the missionaries also know that they should not venture in the streets of historical cities such as Cap Haitien, Port-au-Prince, and Gonaives on May 18, the day Haitians celebrate their independence from a colonizing power; or on November 2 when Haitians celebrate the dead. When Christmas comes around, while back home people are prone to listen to a religious message or a carol, in France missionaries know that people won't bother listening to them; they therefore ask to visit Church members.

As the missionaries mature in their missions and as they immerse themselves into France's reality, they give up on looking for American "stuff" in order to appreciate what France can offer them. It is only then that they realize that there are in France "all sorts of weird stuff..." they had never even thought about. An Elder told me how he grew to love the way raw salads are used in France. He recalled how someone had made what French people would call a simple salad with tomatoes, mozzarella and vinegar: "best thing I've ever eaten," said the Elder, "So good. I hated tomatoes in my life and after I ate that... Wow, I'm converted to tomato." Like that Elder who grew to love tomatoes, many other missionaries told me how they didn't like salads and raw vegetables before their missions, and how they grew to like them in France.

A sister missionary among my interviewees did not use the word "converted" as the Elder that I have just mentioned, however, as she explained to me how she tried to be French—watching how people do, befriending them, trying to love what they do and trying to do the same—I realized that she was describing the exact acculturation process that missionaries go through. As they try to be French, LDS missionaries even come to appreciate what they once considered outdated: the centuries-old stained glasses, the paintings and the well-carved statues in the stone-made churches become "must sees;" the small four-seat French Renault Clio becomes a vehicle that is useful, comfortable and easy to maneuver.

This gradual cultural conversion is in many ways similar to that of new converts to Mormonism. They try to be LDS doing as longtime members do. On first contact with the Church, potential converts may find Mormonism a peculiar sort of religion but as they get to know the Church, they tend to appreciate its basic values such as its emphasis on family togetherness. People who eventually become converted might even find justifications for doctrines that they might have resented earlier. A case in point is the role of the United States in the Church's doctrine. For a non-member, this role may be interpreted as nothing less than a confirmation that Mormonism is the archetypical American religion. However, should the same person join the Church, it is very likely that he/she will begin to find all sorts of reasons to rationalize the belief.¹⁵

As the months pass by, the missionaries also come to understand the characteristics of French society, among which certain subtleties such as: people don't like to talk about work after work, they are often on vacation, they don't like to talk about their emotions, preferring the question "what do you *think* about...?" to the question "how do you *feel* about...?", and in any case are suspicious of religions. Fay Morgan, a former student of Professor Rigal-Cellard and a Mormon who has left the Church, elaborated on this particular characteristic of French people towards religion; she wrote in her master's thesis that

"we are more prone to believe in our own efforts, logic and reason, our human, scientific and modern economy and social systems, things we can control and understand, than in God's invisible hand [; a hand] so invisible in our society that many of us believe [He] does not exist at all."

Morgan also emphasized the weight of history in French people's religious attitude;¹⁶ a fact that the France Toulouse Mission President seemed to be well aware of as it appeared from my interview with him. He told me that when his missionaries arrive in France, he spends at least a day teaching them about French culture and history, showing them how to play "pétanque" and how they should immerse in the culture. When I asked him about the reason behind such an emphasis, he told me that it is because, first, "it helps build relationships of trust with people," a process that is common to most missions, in order to make first and most importantly enduring

¹⁵ Seven years after professor Rigal-Cellard's study, I asked some French LDS what they thought about the affirmation that "Mormonism is the quintessential American religion." Out of 13 answers, 11 still believe the statement is not founded and argued that the Church has more members abroad than in the US—implying that if the statement was true when the Church had most of its membership there, it is no longer the case. This makes membership the only criteria to define the origins of Mormonism and its values. They also said that only misinformed people say such things—ignoring that those who make such statements are mostly scholars both within and without Mormonism, people who know this religion as they surely know how to lead a spoon to their mouths with closed eyes. I believe that it is true and I think it is partly true. Jeffrey C. Fox (p. 134) writes about an LDS convert who recounts how he came to change his mind about that doctrine.

¹⁶ Faye Morgan, *The Missionary Work of the Mormons with Particular Emphasis on the French Mission*, Master's thesis, 1998; p. 47, 54.

contact with potential converts. Secondly, he told me that the Church's missionaries adapt to French culture to fight the idea that they are here to make Americans out of the French people.

Understanding the characteristics of the French people that I have mentioned above may lead LDS missionaries to the same conclusions as the famous French LDS pioneer, Louis Bertrand, who wrote in the mid-nineteenth century that "nothing is to be hoped from the unfaithful French."¹⁷ However, their faith and their doctrine make it possible for them to continue to hope that changes may occur in the next life. No one doubts that this Elder who served in Corsica will someday perform a baptism by proxy for this family who became the kindest he'd ever met, who fed him their best meals, who write to him on every special occasions but who just don't want to be baptized, as he told me.

Knowing, understanding and respecting the values, history and cultures of the host country become in and of themselves proselytizing tools. The main intent of the instructions the missionaries receive regarding a country's culture and history is to make sure that they are not disrespectful of what may seem "strange" according to their American standards, and to protect the Church's image abroad. Since the Church's interest is to make converts, speaking the language and adapting to French culture make it possible for them to get their message across and therefore multiply the number of potential converts. This emphasis on cultural immersion and on speaking the language also shows that the Church does take part in its missionaries' cultural conversion and that it values other cultures. In fact, I have even identified a case in which one may conclude that the Church valued cultural conversion beyond the fact of making converts. That was in the 1960s with Ezra Taft Benson's third mission to Europe.

Before being sent to Europe, Benson had been Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture from 1953 to 1961, a period during which he is considered to have become "increasingly vitriolic in his warnings about the dangers of communism" and socialism and to have made political alliances with a right-wing group, the John Birch Society.¹⁸ Benson had indeed been quite actively engaged in red-baiting and his third immersion into European culture was a sort of "purgatory" and political exile. Europeans may not appreciate the idea of "purgatory" being used to refer to their culture, but Church leaders who were wary of Benson's anti-communism and anti-socialism really expected the stay in Europe to purge Benson of his extreme political ideas; "...by the time he returns [from Europe] I hope he will get all of the political notions out of his system," wrote

¹⁷ Quoted in Rigal-Cellard. See also Bertrand's *Mémoire d'un Mormon* here: <http://www.lafeuilledolivier.com/memoires.html>; accessed May 11, 2007.

¹⁸ Gottlieb, 75; Quinn, 67, 78.

Joseph Fielding Smith, then the Church's president.¹⁹ However, Benson's political ideas began to wane only in the 1980s when he became president of the Church.

Understandably globalism had something to do with Benson's change. While he resisted the effects of cultural immersion, one can hardly see how he could have reconciled personal political ideas with the position that he held, namely that of prophet and president of a Church that has members in countries such as France that favor socialism. Benson's case is also an example of conflict between personal political ideas and cultural immersion that I will further discuss in the following part of this paper.

A lasting influence after the mission? For whom?

a. For the Missionaries

Most former LDS missionaries or returned missionaries (RM), consider that their missions were a positive and lasting experience. Over the years some RMs may have slid away from the Church and sometimes may even become anti-Mormons. In spite of their hatred toward the Church, in a discussion on [exmormon.org](http://www.exmormon.org), 21 out of 31 RMs see their missions as an opening on to the world because they got to learn a language, "acquired such a strong taste for other peoples, cultures, and worldviews," developed great passions for travels, etc. One RM even declared that he "fell in love with the European culture."²⁰ When I asked another RM some twenty years after his mission about the most lasting influence from his two years serving in France, after naming some cities that CNN anchors would probably have difficulty placing on a map, he recalled:

"Some of the things I think that I found out is that I really love dairy products like cheese, yogurt. I did not know that before I came here; because I never had really well-made, good product... For me it is amazing, it was an amazing difference of quality as far as dairy products goes... The thing that I learned from the French people is that 'food, enjoy food.' It's not just something that allows you to get through the day. It's something to be enjoyed. And I really saw that from the French people, how they would shop before each meal, how everything was fresh. My favorite food I've ever had in the world I had in France."

The same RM told me how he developed a greater appreciation for France after his mission when he learned through genealogy that one of his ancestors came from Nice. It then became clear to him that it was no coincidence that he ended up serving most of his 24 months in France like his brother whereas he, my interviewee, was called to serve in Switzerland. He explained how he feels totally connected to France, "there is a sense inside of me that feels welcomed, that feels like it's part of me; France is dear to my heart," said he.

¹⁹ Joseph Fielding Smith to Ralph R. Harding, quoted in Quinn, p. 78.

²⁰ Source: <http://www.exmormon.org/mormon/mormon003.htm>, accessed May 8, 2007.

Still, this declaration of love is not heard from all those who have served in France. Indeed, while some missionaries try to be French, some never feel that they belong here and go home with a very negative image of France. Among such few, one may rightly put Mitt Romney, the LDS candidate for the Republican nomination for the 2008 U.S presidential election. Romney spent more than two years in France; he even served in this city of Bordeaux. Based on that experience, one would expect that he would be more considerate of France's reality than Fox News anchors; unfortunately, recent events seem to show the contrary.

Last February, American newspapers unveiled what they called Romney's political plan to defeat Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party; the plan: give in to the national sport of pounding on France and Europe. According to the plan, France and Europe are a threat to American values: the European Union wants to "drag America down to Europe's standards," and "That's where Hillary and Dems would take us. Hillary = France." Romney's all but France position planned bumper stickers with the motto "First, not France."²¹

Romney's plan is reminiscent of the controversies raised by Ezra Taft Benson in the 1960s; he then submitted to a Scottish LDS the idea that if socialism was the same as communism, all that was left to Britain was the Tories' conservatism (Quinn, 74). Needless to say that unveiling the plan did not make things easy for Romney. I exchanged emails with a BYU associate professor who served here with Romney. He argued that the plan is not a significant strategic blueprint in Romney's campaign as journalists put it. He further predicted that "there will be absolutely no printing of bumper stickers that say, 'First, not France!'" because he knows from personal experience that "Romney is much too smart to do anything of that sort." Of course he is smart. Ever since the plan was unveiled, the whole strategy has either been to downplay the idea that Romney hates France, or to use his aides as scapegoats, doubting that Romney ever knew anything about it before it was leaked to the press.²² For the French LDS apologetic website Idumea, Romney "likes France and its people but not the system."²³

It is possible for a missionary to like the people and not necessarily the system. I have interviewed missionaries who think French people have too much vacation and do not work enough. However, diplomatic relations between France and the United States have been rather cold since the disagreement over the war in Iraq. When you are a presidential candidate, have

²¹ Source: http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/02/27/document_shows_romneys_strategies/?page=3, accessed May 8, 2007. A free registration may be necessary.

²² Source: <http://www.mymannitt.com/mitt-romney/2007/02/note-to-boston-globe-my-dog-wrote-that.asp>; accessed May 21, 2007.

²³ Source: <http://www.idumea.org/Medias/Articles/Romney.htm>, accessed May 7, 2007.

lived in France like Romney, what you say has a lot of implications. Keep in mind that Republicans criticized John Kerry in 2004 for being too French. Romney's negative view of France is not likely to help Fox News audience develop greater "taste for other peoples, cultures, and worldviews" neither will it help the LDS Church in France.

Some of Romney's critics, young LDS Democrats—there are still some in Mormondom—flatly object to his position on France:

"When a community opens its doors to you and lets you in when it doesn't have to, a measure of appreciation towards that community is appropriate. Romney does not need to go around drinking wine and driving a Citroen, or even that he has to agree with any particular political position popular in France. He does, however, have a responsibility to treat France with respect, since he was allowed into their country. Since he has so much experience with France he knows that they aren't a true threat to the United States, a fact that seems to be tacitly acknowledged in the use of the term "bogeyman."²⁴

For the young Democrats, the reprint of the Gordon B. Hinckley's 1983 message about a mission was a timely rebuttal to Romney. Hinckley then said that

"No one can sell the English short in my mind because I labored with them, I lived with them, I was in their homes at their firesides, I learned to know their hearts, and I learned to love them... There's something wrong if a missionary doesn't come back with a great love for the people among whom he labored."

Hinckley is a man who does know the world. Besides the fact that he had been a missionary in the British Isles, he has lived for eleven years in Asia;²⁵ his older brother died in France during World War I. His talk may indeed have been republished to imply that "no one should sell France short to Americans' minds." It may also be seen as a way for the Church to take some distance with one of its members' political views.

Although Romney's views may have been heard of or read by millions of Americans, it is not representative of all LDS RMs; it stands more as an exception. But in terms of study, it also helps illustrate the complexity of conversion whether it is cultural or religious: people retain the ultimate possibility of resisting and of standing out from the mass if they so choose.

b. For the Church and the United States

The cultural conversion brought in by the mission experience does not only serve missionaries. Return missionaries are very valuable to the Church. While missionaries can be seen as vessels of Americanism, former LDS missionaries are among those who make it possible

²⁴ Source: <http://mormonsagainstromney.blogspot.com/>, accessed May 7, 2007. Bogeyman: monster or trickster which instills fear.

²⁵ Gordon B. Hinckley, "Gifts to Bring Home From the Mission Field," *Liahona*, Mar 2007, 22–24. http://lds.org/portal/site/LDSOrg/menuitem.b12f9d18fae655bb69095bd3e44916a0/?vgnextoid=f318118dd536c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=7b690158c25e0110VgnVCM100000176f620a___&hideNav=1, accessed May 8, 2007.

for Americans to have a broader, deeper understanding of other peoples, languages and cultures. The Church's massive involvement in the Olympics in 2002 was also meant to show through its former missionaries that it is not some isolated intermountain community with unusual beliefs but a "mainstream" religion that is well opened on to the world. Former missionaries also represent the Church's recruitment pool for mission presidents, older men who preside over missionary work. Out of the eight mission presidents or mission president councilors that I have met between Haiti and France, seven had been missionaries in France and spoke French.

Because they speak different languages and know other cultures, observers of Mormonism have shown that professional opportunities have been opened to former LDS missionaries. In *The Mormon Conspiracy*, Charles L. Wood denounces that this experience abroad is the cause of "large numbers of [Mormon men] having been hired by the federal Central Intelligence Agency" and the FBI.²⁶ Many LDS RMs are indeed hired by federal institutions where language skills are required. A former mission president of my acquaintance had a very important position at the American embassy in Haiti; this partly because he had been a missionary in France and spoke French. However, Wood's burning desire to revive the late nineteenth century theory that Mormonism was conspiring to control the United States makes him overlook the fact that the Church's missionaries are valuable to the United States rather than being a threat.

Beside the fact of being a useful reserve of linguistic skills, they are ambassadors for their country; they make it possible for non-Americans "to see the United States with much less chauvinism than if they knew it only through the media" (BRC, 302). They can now be considered as public relations agents whereas in the mid-nineteenth century they used to be labeled immigration agents. Former LDS missionaries are not only valuable to their country as they work for federal services; many former missionaries have successful careers in private sectors that operate both in the United States and abroad. In both cases, it is a positive return on investment; for the United States at large and the Church in particular.

c. For France?

With all of those advantages going to former missionaries, the Church and their home country, one wonders if the host country, France in our case, has anything to gain from the LDS missionaries' cultural immersion. Although all of the LDS missionaries will not find that they have a French ancestor, because of their stay in a country, they all have something that connects

²⁶ Wood, p. 105. See also Gottlieb and Wiley, p. 89.

them to it: friends, places that have become meaningful to them because of a particular monument, the landscape, a way of life, etc. All those things will probably make them want to come back as tourists. They will probably want to continue to learn French. As one of the former missionaries I have exchanged emails with and a couple I've met in the Church's Talence Ward²⁷, some will come back to study at Sciences Po (college of Poli-Sci) in Paris or for internship on European cooperation in governmental administrations in Bordeaux. They will talk to fellow Americans about the best foods they have had here and even try to cook them. Their children may want to be missionaries in France because they would have heard a parent speaking French or talking about Avignon, Montpellier, Biarritz, Annemasse, and other cities. Their presence in France makes it possible for students—like Sophie-Hélène Trigeaud—who cannot afford to travel to the United States to stay in France and yet make realistic sociological studies and thereby satisfy France's constant quest for knowledge. A few years ago, one could also point to the fact that the missionaries offered free English classes. Of course they were not qualified teachers but they represented an opportunity for those who wanted to practice their English and improve their accents. And I can assure you that French people need that.

Finally, I would like to suggest a point in which both the United States and France have something to gain thanks to the missionaries' cultural conversion: I have cross-cultural marriages in mind. While the Church strictly forbids dating while on a mission, those who cross the cultural line as well as the Atlantic to marry can probably be seen as the epitome of cultural conversion. Such marriages are more common between French people and Americans than between Haitians and Americans; but in both cases they are evidence of acceptance and respect for each other's culture and ultimately, they represent a significant change in LDS attitude towards ethnicity. Indeed, while the Church does not necessarily speak in favor of or against intermarriages nowadays, in the past, it used to urge its members to marry not only within the faith, obviously for religious reasons, but also within their own cultures.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is a fact that LDS missionaries are everywhere perceived as "Americans" actively engaged in the Church's global spread. The problem with this perception is that it dismisses many other facts such as the Church's effort in diversifying its missionary force and its hierarchy and otherwise its interests in other cultures. The "vessels of Americanism" do not go home with

²⁷ **Ward:** a unit that comprise between 100 and 450 members.

empty minds and suitcases. They return home with souvenirs, a new language, and in general a greater awareness of other cultures, peoples and values. While some may end up leaving the LDS Church, a great majority will continue to represent living bridges of understanding and tolerance between their home country and the world. The perception that the Church is inherently American may also be interpreted as evidence that it has not gone far enough in its globalizing process.

Over its 177 years in existence, the LDS Church has shown that it is not opposed or incompatible to changes. In the 1970s, it made public declarations in order to open its priesthood to Blacks. It has modified more than once the content of its temple rituals to make them more accessible to a modern membership, taking away some Masonic similarities that have become obsolete. Through its missionaries, the Church also opens up on to the world; it has called local Seventies in order to take into account local needs and to bring part of the decision making process closer to the members. Since those changes are done “over the years,” we can conclude that “change” is only a matter of time with the Church. However, the question remains of how far and how fast it yet has to go in its diversifying efforts and in taking into consideration other cultures. Its current president, Gordon B. Hinckley, is nearing 97 years old and may pass away at any time, leaving its highest position, the First Presidency, vacant. With this in mind, one may wonder whether there will be any significant changes in Church’s hierarchy beyond the fact of calling local Seventies.

Moreover, the Church’s commissioner of Education, John K. Carmack has made known his wishes that general conferences be held abroad instead of in Salt Lake City, which would be not only a geographical but a big cultural shift in Church events. But will we see such change in the near future? Finally, if changes there are, one may wonder if they will be any effective in helping the Church fight the way it is perceived and face the religious competition that accompanies globalization. Those questions are among the many that call for careful study of Mormonism, its missionaries and its leaders before we can accurately answer them.

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