



John P. Hoffman, *Japanese Saints: Mormons in the Land of the Rising Sun*

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IN *JAPANESE SAINTS: Mormons in the Land of the Rising Sun*, John Hoffman explores the very interesting but little-studied topic of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS, informally known as the Mormon church) in Japan. In the introduction, Hoffman states: “Briefly, this book uses a narrow lens to examine what it is like to be Japanese and a Latter-Day Saint. Set against the historical backdrop of Christianity in Japan and how the LDS Church has fit within this unsteady relationship, and using a conceptual foundation of Japanese identity, commitment, and social structure, we shall explore the lives of some members of a small LDS congregation (branch) located on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido in an attempt to understand what drew them to the church, how it has affected their identities, and how they have reconciled their lives as Japanese people with membership in a foreign faith” (6). In other words, Hoffman frames his study according to the question of whether or not Japanese can accept a distinctly “Western” religion that in many ways appears to be in conflict with fundamental aspects of a putative Japanese identity.

As he himself acknowledges, Hoffman is not a scholar of religion or Japan, but happened upon the topic for this book while living on the northern island of Hokkaido for an unrelated research project. Hoffman conceived of this project after attending the local Mormon branch (a type of congregation) with his family. He later returned to Hokkaido to conduct fieldwork, and this book is primarily based on interviews and surveys he conducted at this particular Hokkaido branch. The book is divided into several sections: in the first section Hoffman provides a historic overview of the development of the Japanese LDS church and introduces the overarching theoretical framework; the second section addresses the process of conversion, participation, and disaffiliation, as well as the day-to-day experiences and challenges experienced by Japanese who convert to the LDS Church; and the last section addresses the experiences of (mostly American) Mormon missionaries in Japan, as well as their reflections on their experiences after they return to the United States.

In the introduction, Hoffman explains the importance of a study of this nature: despite the LDS Church’s rapid growth outside of the United States, there are few academic studies of non-American LDS communities. As a result, despite the church’s growth, little is known about circumstances and reasons for conversion, the nature of church groups, and membership retention and attrition (disaffiliation) outside of

the United States. This is partly due to the fact that the LDS Church, which is highly centralized in nature, restricts access to this type of information, making studies difficult. However, as Hoffman demonstrates, this does not make it impossible to study non-western groups. Further, according to Hoffman, “Japan offers an exceptional social laboratory for observing the LDS Church” because the “distinction between culture and religion, if there is one, becomes especially muddled in Japan” (5).

In Chapter Two, relying primarily on existing secondary literature, Hoffman begins with a brief overview of the history of Japanese religion, followed by an overview of the introduction of Protestantism to Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, and considers possible reasons for why Christian missionaries faced difficulties in gaining converts. He then places the arrival of the first Mormon missionaries within this context. The first LDS missionaries, also referred to in LDS Church history as the Japanese quartet, arrived in 1901. Though Hoffman places them squarely among other Protestant missionaries working in Japan in this period, Protestant missionaries viewed the Mormon missionaries with suspicion, particularly due to the Mormons’ alleged practice of polygamy. Though the LDS Church had ceased to condone this practice—at least officially—in the 1890s, Mormons continued to be accused of practicing polygamy into the turn of the twentieth century, and the members of the “Japanese Quartet” were forced to dedicate most of their first months addressing Protestant charges of heresy instead of directly proselytizing Japanese. While the notorious practice of polygamy proved to be the most publicized stumbling block, according to Hoffman, Mormonism’s inherently western nature proved to be the greatest hurdle for many Japanese in considering conversion, a hurdle which continues to present difficulties for church expansion today.

In Chapter Three, Hoffman presents an “exegesis of identities, including those based on nationality and religion” (7). Specifically, he presents summaries of what might be considered general aspects of Japanese identity and Mormon identity, and suggests that conflict between the two create potential barriers for many Japanese when considering converting to Mormonism. For example, he characterizes “Japanese identity” as consisting of such things as a group-oriented social structure, claims of uniqueness, and the lack of a clear boundary between cultural and religious practices. “Mormon identity” is characterized by a high degree of uniformity, a North American-centered chosen people narrative, exclusive temple rituals, emphasis on the family, and the centrality of the missionary experience—at least among male members—in cementing a sense of belonging and commitment. Despite some overlap between these two identities, according to Hoffman, the centrality of certain “religious” practices and beliefs to Japanese identity—such as Buddhist and Shinto rituals that are considered general Japanese cultural practices—makes it difficult for Japanese to accept a religion whose many prescriptions and proscriptions seem at odds with Japanese identity itself.

The core of this work is contained in Chapters Four through Seven. For these chapters, Hoffman relies on interviews he conducted with members of a branch

in Hokkaido, as well as missionaries who served in this branch. Of the one hundred and thirty (of which seventy were inactive) listed on the branch's membership roster, twenty-two of the twenty-six who regularly attended Sunday services participated in his study (199). The actual interviews were conducted by two Japanese women, neither of whom was Mormon, who Hoffman hired and trained; transcriptions of the interviews were then translated into English. Hoffman focuses on the experiences of Japanese LDS members, from the reasons and circumstances of their conversion, the reactions of their families, their impressions of their wards (congregations) after becoming active members, and why some members choose to leave (disaffiliate) after joining.

The last chapter focuses on the mostly white missionaries who worked in the Hokkaido area who often served as the conduit between potential converts (investigators) and the church. Included are their assumptions about Japan before arriving, as well as the training they received; their perceptions of Japan and the responses of Japanese people they approached while evangelizing; and their reflections—upon their return—of their experiences in Japan.

As Hoffman states in his introduction, the LDS Church in Japan is a fascinating topic, which is why it is so unfortunate that this book does not do the subject justice. One weakness is the way in which Hoffman conducted his fieldwork; his language limitations and unfamiliarity with Japanese culture and history prevented him from interviewing his subjects without the aid of intermediaries, and may have led to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of their responses to his questions.

However, the greatest weakness of this work is in its overall framework. First, Hoffman's representation of the LDS Church's overall impact in Japan is inconsistent. At times, Hoffman acknowledges that the LDS Church has faced difficulties in gaining converts in Japan, and presents the relatively slow growth of the LDS Church in Japan when compared to countries like Korea or the Philippines as a central concern of his study. Further, he places the LDS Church's difficulties within the larger context of Christianity's difficulties in gaining converts (2). However, he also states that the LDS Church in Japan has experienced growth similar to the LDS Church's growth in other nations, and contrasts the LDS Church's growth in Japan with that of other Protestant denominations (2). His insistence that the LDS Church is vibrant and expanding despite "natural" barriers in Japanese culture to conversion is not substantiated by actual data, and is contradicted by his own words.

Ultimately, Hoffman's premise, which assumes a near incompatibility between a putative Japanese identity and a Mormon identity, severely limits the direction of his inquiry. One problem with this type of argument is the assumption that there is something inherent in a putative Japanese identity that is at odds with Western religion. One need only point to the example of Korea, a country with a very similar religious history as Japan, to demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case. More pertinent in this case, however, is the difficulty of how to categorize the LDS Church. Hoffman consistently describes it as a Protestant Christian denomination, and

draws parallels between difficulties faced by other Protestant denominations with those faced by the LDS Church. However, there are certain points of doctrine and practice specific to the LDS Church—which Hoffman himself acknowledges in his overview of Mormon identity—that seem to present a greater challenge. The highly centralized administrative structure makes the indigenization of local churches much more difficult, the constant influx of missionaries, most of whom are from American regions with large Mormon populations, preserves a sense of its foreignness, and the centrality of America in *The Book of Mormon* (as the site of the other gospel of Jesus Christ) all make Mormonism a distinctly American religion in a way that Protestant denominations are not. It is true, as Hoffman states repeatedly, that Christianity has not been absorbed into Japanese culture or society to the degree it has in other Asian countries like South Korea. However, by focusing on the aspects of “Japanese identity” that make Mormonism difficult to accept, Hoffman occasionally reproduces tired characterizations of the place of religion in Japanese culture. It is just as possible that it is due to the “uniqueness” of the LDS Church that Mormonism has faced difficulties in Japan.

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