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THE MORMON FACTOR IN THE ROMNEY PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN: EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

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Labeling and ascription

The presidential campaign of Mitt Romney is an interesting vantage point to test theories of labelling and ascription as applied to Mormons in Europe. According to *ascription* theory, human beings have both an ascribed and an achieved status. The ascribed status is due to factors such as gender, ethnicity, and religion (Stark 2001, 37). Achieved status is due to personal achievements, options, and merit. Obviously, ascribed status cannot be changed, while achieved status change on an almost daily basis. Theoretically, religion is that part of ascribed status which can be voluntarily changed. But this is less easy than it seems. If religion is perceived as an important ascribed status, it will continue to exert its effects even when changed. A follower of Reverend Sun Myung Moon, no matter what else features in his or her life, will be mostly described as “a Moonie”. If he or she changes the religious affiliation, the label “ex-Moonie” will often be used. There is no final escape from ascription.

On the other hand, not all ascription processes are created equal. In some societies ascription governs most of societal activities – the caste system in India being a frequently cited example. Other societies, such as the United States, are proud of offering equal opportunities of gaining an achieved status regardless of the ascribed status. An African American, a woman, a Roman Catholic can aspire to the highest offices in the nation. We all know that the system is not perfect. On the other hand, few would deny that the system of ascription and achievement works somewhat differently in the U.S. than in India, where the leader of the most voted party in the 2004 elections, Sonia Gandhi, had to step out from the position of Prime Minister because she was (nominally) Catholic, and Italian.

Labelling is different from ascription (Cullen and Cullen 1978),

insofar as a label is generally regarded as negative while an ascribed status may be value-free. Being Bulgarian (an ascribed status) is not normally regarded as negative in most countries of the world, which have no quarrels with Bulgaria. Being a Roma (or a “Gypsy”) is dangerously close to a label in contemporary Europe, and being a Jew was a label in Nazi Germany as it is today in certain Moslem countries.

Religion, again, is in a grey area. “Roman Catholic” is certainly not a label in Italy, nor – probably – in contemporary Finland. But it has been, and to some extent may still be, a label in some rural areas of the American South, as it is in Indian or Indonesian villages dominated by different religions and where converts to Catholicism are not necessarily popular.

“Cults”

Starting in the 19th century, labelling in matters religious has been mostly carried out by defining certain unpopular religions as “cults”. In an article I co-wrote with James T. Richardson in 2001 (Richardson and Introvigne 2001), we argued that unpopular religions are re-labeled as “cults” by using a four-stage model.

First, the model claims that some minorities are not really “religions” but something else: “cults”, criminal associations, or political conspiracies. In July 1877 anti-Mormon author John Hanson Beadle (1840–1897) wrote in the *Scribner’s Monthly* that “Americans have but one native religion [Mormonism] and that one is the sole apparent exception to the American rule of universal toleration. ... Of this anomaly two explanations are offered: one, that Americans are not really a tolerant people and that what is called toleration is only such toward our common Protestantism, or more common Christianity; the other, than something peculiar to Mormonism takes it out of the sphere of religion” (Beadle 1877, 391). Beadle’s astute observation effectively blackmailed American readers into concluding that Mormonism was not a religion. In fact, readers were presumably committed both to religious tolerance and to the idea that the U.S. were, by definition, the country of religious liberty. In civilizations where religious liberty is

recognized as a value and constitutionally protected, the only way to discriminate a religious minority is to argue that it is not religious at all.

Second, the model posits that what distinguishes genuine religions from groups falsely claiming their right to the name of religion is something called brainwashing, mental manipulation, or mind control. Anti-Mormon author Maria Ward (probably a pseudonym of Elizabeth Cornelia Woodcock Ferris [1809–1893]), attributed the non-religious character of Mormonism to its systematic use of “a mystical magical influence” capable of depriving followers of “the unrestricted exercise of free will”. This is what “is now popularly known by the name of Mesmerism”. According to Ward, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith (1805–1844) “came to possess the knowledge of that magnetic influence, several years anterior to its general circulation throughout the country” from a “German peddler” (Ward 1855, 230). Since religion is, by rhetorical definition, an exercise of free will, a non-religion may only be joined under some sort of coercion. This hypnotic paradigm used against Mormonism resurfaced – after the Cold War conveniently supplied the metaphor of brainwashing – in the 1970s “cult wars” in the United States and later in Europe.

Third, since brainwashing theories are the object of considerable scholarly criticism, the model requires as a third step discrimination among sources and narratives. “Victims”, i.e. those normally defined by social scientists as “apostates”, are defined as more reliable than scholarly observers. The “victims” are the former members converted into active opponents of the group they have left. Although many such ex-members resent being called “apostates” the term is technical, not derogatory, and has been used for some decades by sociologists (see Bromley 1988; Bromley 1998). Empirical data on the prevalence of apostates among former members are available only for a limited number of religious movements, but uniformly suggest that they are a minority (see Solomon 1982; Lewis 1986; Lewis 1989; Jacobs 1989; Introvigne 1999), perhaps between 10 and 20 per cent. Most former members have mixed feelings about their former affiliations and, at any rate, are not interested in joining a crusade against the

group they have left.

Objections that “apostates” are not necessarily representative are met by the fourth stage of the model. We know that “apostates” are representative of the groups’ membership, or at least former membership, because they are screened and selected by private, reliable watchdog organizations which serve as moral entrepreneurs. Anti-cult organizations, we are told, are more reliable than other observers, including scholars, because the former, unlike the latter, have a “practical” experience and work with “victims”.

In 2001 I and Richardson reconstructed this model with reference to the “cult wars” of the 1990s in Europe. However, the model, if not the language, was already in place in the 19th century.

Mormonism and Labelling

Notwithstanding the moral entrepreneurs of anti-cultism, “cult” by any standard is not an essentialist definition but a socially constructed label. What is a cult in Europe is not necessarily a cult in Utah. Mormonism is a case in point. It was often described as a “cult” in the 19th century, but the label has become much rarer today in the United States. Moral entrepreneurs whose crusade is against “cults”, in fact, come in two brands. In 1993, I proposed a distinction between “anti-cult” and “counter-cult” activists and movements, which has now become commonplace. Of course, “anti-cultist” and “counter-cultist” may in turn be used as labels, but this was not my original intention. Anti-cultists criticize “cults” as *socially* dangerous from a secular perspective, while counter-cultists describe “cults” as *spiritually* dangerous, from a religious perspective. *Anti-Mormonism* certainly does exist. We are confronted with an anti-Mormon work when the author tries to persuade us that the LDS Church is too rich and too powerful to be socially tolerable in the Intermountain West or the U.S. in general. But these works are much rarer than *counter-Mormon* books, videos and Web sites, whose authors insist that becoming a Mormon would jeopardize our eternal life, since Mormons are heretics and not “really” Christian.

Anti-Mormonism was much more prominent in the 19th century, because polygamy and the domination of Utah politics by the LDS Church were regarded as civil rather than purely religious evils. After the demise of polygamy, anti-Mormonism decreased and counter-Mormonism increased. Of course, purely secular arguments are used against “fundamentalist” splinter groups still practicing polygamy, but at least in the U.S. most media are capable of distinguishing them from the mainline LDS Church.

If anti-Mormonism is scarcer than counter-Mormonism, labeling of Mormons should come primarily from the religious and Evangelical media, rather than from the secular and liberal. Although to a large extent this appears to be true, how the Romney campaign influenced the wider picture is the subject matter of Mike Homer’s article.

But that article deals with the United States. In Europe, the fact that the LDS Church had officially abandoned polygamy did not become common knowledge immediately after 1890. This is reflected by countless popular references and novels. As late as 1930, such a prominent French novelist as Georges Simenon (1903–1989) in his short novel *L’œil de l’Utah* (The Eye of Utah: Simenon 1930) presented the Utah Mormons as cheerfully practicing polygamy, although he believed that Joseph Smith had nothing to do with it and this was a peculiar deviation introduced by Brigham Young. The fact of the matter was that there were very few Mormons, if any, in Central and Southern Europe in the 1930s. On the other hand, there were several *million* readers of cheap dime novels such as *Buffalo Bill and the Danite Kidnappers*, written by Prentiss Ingraham (1843–1904) and published in New York in 1902, but whose German, Italian, French and Spanish translations were constantly reprinted up to the 1950s. Neither the American original nor the translations came with a publisher’s note explaining to the crowd of Buffalo Bill fans that polygamy was no longer practiced by the Mormons.

The astonishing news is that to a larger extent the fact that the LDS Church no longer practices polygamy is not generally known in

Central and Southern Europe today. The saga of the Italian version of *Big Love*, the award-winning American TV series on polygamy, is a case in point. Although the original series makes crystal-clear that the LDS Church is strongly opposed to polygamy, the Italian version of the first season failed to translate “LDS Church” into “Chiesa di Gesù Cristo dei Santi degli Ultimi Giorni”, the Church’s name in Italy. Without any apparent reason, the name was translated “Chiesa Riorganizzata di Gesù Cristo dei Santi degli Ultimi Giorni”, or Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Of course a Church with this name no longer exists (the former Reorganized Church is now called Community of Christ). And very few people are supposed to know about the (former) Reorganized Church in Italy. However, some anonymous translator or copy-editor probably thought that a Church preaching against polygamy cannot conceivably be *the* Mormon Church but should be some splinter, “reformed” or “reorganized”, group. The protests of the Italian LDS Church obtained some changes in the (currently running) second season, although they still got the Italian name of the mainline Church (now called “dei Santi dell’Ultimo Giorno” rather than “degli Ultimi Giorni”) wrong. But the Italian Church is fighting a difficult battle, as some data about the Romney campaign will now confirm.

Romney

I have collected coverage of Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign in the first seven months of 2008 (January to July) in fifty Italian daily newspapers and one hundred periodicals having a Web site (or published only on the Web). I have eliminated the articles mentioning Romney only in passing, and have focused on the first 1,000 texts (sorted by relevance) discussing Romney in some details.

Of these, 991 (or 99.1%) mention the Mormon affiliation of Romney. This is a first interesting result. By contrast, out of 100 newspaper or magazine articles selected among Web results in Italian about Hillary Clinton, *not even one* mentions that she is a Methodist. This is a nice example of how ascription works. As we get more close to what at

least some sections of the media brand as “cults” the religious element becomes important, while normally it is not particularly relevant for mainline, secular media. If a citizen who happens to be a follower of Reverend Moon kills his wife, the headline will probably be “Moonie kills his wife”. If in Italy a Roman Catholic, or even a Baptist, kills his wife, the headlines will probably ignore the religion and simply read: “Businessman kills his wife”, or something similar. The case of Romney shows that decades of PR work by the Italian LDS Church, particularly during the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City, did not entirely succeed. Being a Mormon is still regarded as less “normal” than being a Baptist. In Italy you are *defined* by your ascribed Mormonism, while you are not defined by your Baptism or Methodism (and this is not a matter of numbers, since there are fewer Methodists than Mormons in Italy, and roughly as many Baptists). The media will pass on the ascribed membership in the Baptist Church and look for the achieved status of the person concerned, while they would not pass on the ascribed Mormonism.

More surprising are the data about polygamy. 473 articles (or 47.3%) mentioned that Romney’s religion has something to do with polygamy, although 115 (11.5% of the total, and 24.3% of those discussing polygamy in connection with Romney) did some homework, and explained that Romney’s Church is not actually polygamist. However, very few articles are entirely accurate on this point. Most would say that Romney belongs to “a branch” of Mormonism which is non-polygamist, or that polygamy has become “rare”. 173 articles (or 17.3%) made some mention of Warren Jeffs, the events in Texas, and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, not necessarily by that name, and only in roughly half of the instances clearly stating that Romney’s church and Jeffs’ church are two very different entities.

No article between January and July 2008, on the other hand, mentioned the TV serial *Big Love* in connection with Romney. In Italy *Big Love* is aired by Fox Life, a comparatively expensive cable channel. Although it has a devoted following, it is not a household name among the general public. By expanding the time range, I found two articles

mentioning *Big Love* in connection with Romney. One dated back to December 2006 and was from *il Foglio*, a high quality daily newspaper (“Fede privata e scelte pubbliche, lo strano caso di Mitt Romney” 2006: most articles in *il Foglio* are not signed), and the other (Lodolini 2007) was from the February 2007 issue of *Jesus*, a liberal Catholic monthly connected to a magazine (*Famiglia Cristiana*) whose circulation is declining but which probably remains the best sold weekly publication in Italy. Both mentioned the date 1890 and the fact that the LDS proscribe polygamy, but *il Foglio* implied that the prohibition is more formal than real, and *Jesus* regarded those still practicing polygamy as the “traditionalist” (a label easily understood by Catholics, and not complimentary when used by a liberal magazine), even “heretic”, part of Mormonism. It should be noted that these articles came from particularly respected media, and were untypically accurate for the average Italian standards.

A particularly telling result is that 93 articles (or 9.3%) include sentences which are variations of “Mr. Romney has only one wife”. This is of course reminiscent of the often-told story of the Mormon Apostle visiting Italy who, tired of being asked how many wives he had, ended up answering that he had several but was traveling only with one since Europe is so expensive. On a more serious note, it tells us that for a significant number of Italian reporters the word “Mormonism” immediately rings a bell whose sound is “polygamy”.

It is possible that in other Central and Southern European countries the results would be different from Italy. However, by putting together the words “Romney” and “polygamie” (which means “polygamy” in both German and French) on July 24, 2008, I found 62,400 results on Google, while “Romney” and “poligamia” (the Italian word) gave only 1,960 results (while, as mentioned earlier, I collected 473 significant articles about Romney mentioning polygamy in the period January–July 2008). If Google is any evidence, texts in French and German may show similar, if not identical, patterns with respect to those in Italian.

Conclusion

Obviously the attitude of Italian, French or German media has little, if any, influence on American voters (and vice versa: the prevailing hostile attitude of foreign media towards Silvio Berlusconi did little to prevent him from being elected for the third time as Italian Prime Minister in April 2008, with a record number of votes). On the other hand it is sociologically significant for the public image of Mormonism.

It confirms that ascription and labelling are very long processes, and that the fact that most scholars of religion do know the basic facts about Mormons and polygamy does not easily translate into general or media awareness. Ultimately scholarly articles, press releases by the LDS Church, and even *Big Love* (as far as parts of it are not lost in translation) will not change this situation. Only a significant presence of mainline Latter-day Saints in Italian and Central and Southern European social, cultural, and religious life will make the general public familiar with what 21st century Mormonism is really all about. And perhaps persuade the media that it is not that unusual for a male Mormon politician to have only one wife.

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