

PROPHECY FAILS AGAIN & AGAIN: THE MORRISITES

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MORMONS AND MORRISITES

. From its inception, the Mormon Church has maintained a firm belief in the principle of continuous divine revelation through its leaders. Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, was recognized as prophet, seer, and revelator, and as President of the Church. All subsequent presidents also held such titles. As revelators, none left a legacy like that of Smith, who produced three large books which are authoritative for Mormons. But Smith's immediate successor, Brigham Young, produced only one brief statement which is included in Mormon scripture. It was Young's lack of prophetic production that precipitated the Morrisite schism.

. Morris, an English convert to Mormonism, believed that Young's lack of revelations and scriptural production proved that he was not a prophet. Morris had several experiences which he thought proved him a prophet. In a series of letters from 1857 to 1861, Morris tried to convince Young that Morris should be appointed prophet, seer, and revelator of the Mormon Church while Young served as President (Earley 1899 11).

. In February 1861, Morris and some followers were excommunicated when they affirmed faith in Morris and rejected Brigham Young (Morris 1886 4). The excommunication spurred Morris to greater activity. In April, 1861 he established the Church of Jesus Christ of the Most High (soon shortened to Morrisite) and baptized those who professed faith in his prophetic calling. Within 6 months there were 425 baptized believers.

. A central Morrisite tenet was that the second advent of Christ was imminent. Following Morris' revelations, they gathered to await the Second Coming at Kington Fort, located about 5 miles south of the site of Ogden, Utah. Here, all things were held in

common. Each convert contributed all of his/her property to the Morrisite Church, receiving only the necessities of life. The Morrisites ceased all missionary work when settled at the Fort. Proselytizing would be unnecessary until after the Second Advent, when the wicked would be destroyed, leaving only the righteous.

. Except for communal living, the Morrisite Church was organized like that of the Mormons. A lay, male priesthood constituted an authoritarian centralized theocracy in which Morris was lawgiver and spokesman for God. He and two counselors made up the Church Presidency, which, with the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, made up the main administrative structure.

. Well before 1861, a civil government had been instituted or imposed on the Mormons in the Utah Territory. But the Morrisites, having withdrawn to their own settlement, disdained civil law. They thought it was dominated and perverted by the Mormons, and could see no need for civil law when God's law was soon to govern all the Earth.

. For practical purposes, once a convert joined the Morrisites, s/he fell directly under the Prophet's power, and had no means of appeal. The act of joining alienated the convert from the Mormons who were the dominant group in the Territory. The civil government existed, but its power was curtailed by the temporary absence of a United States military force, which was recalled for the Civil War. And the territorial governor was temporarily absent due to political quarrels of Mormons and non-Mormons in the territory. The Morrisites lived in a small closed community, surrounded by an unfriendly, and sometimes actively hostile society of Mormons.

. The Morrisites lived in Kington Fort from Spring 1861 to June 1862

during which time, Morris received 250 revelations. They pertained to many subjects, including church and social organization, his personal problems, and those of other members, the villainy of enemies and how to reckon with them, the nature of supernatural beings, daily necessities, apostates, and the Second Advent. Both he and his followers fully accepted his prophetic powers. His published revelations provide a chronological record of events during the 13 months at Fort Kington (Morris 1886). It shows that in that period, over 30 prophecies were unconfirmed or disconfirmed (Zygmunt 1972).

The time of the Second Advent was not revealed until August 1861, for the coming Fall. But in the preceding March, the Morrisites were told not to plant crops, because deliverance would come soon. Morris and his people were anxious about the Advent as winter drew near, and from October through December, most revelations concerned signs and preparations for the deliverance. On December 7, 12, and 13, and 22, revelations said deliverance would come in one or two days. On December 28, the revelation said: "... you may look out for me the day after the vote is taken. I will not disappoint you as I have done ... but if I shall not come on Monday, I shall surely come on Tuesday; that you may depend upon. As I live, I will come and deliver my people either on Monday or on Tuesday" (Morris 1886 337). On December 31, the prophecy was specific and unqualified: "Let my people settle up their accounts today and prepare themselves for a visit from me tomorrow" (Morris 1886 341). New Year's day came, but the Lord did not. Some lost faith, but there was no widespread disaffection.

Since they suffered from shortages of food and fuel, and many had only tents for shelter, one might expect a loss of faith. The people had been promised that the Lord would provide their physical

needs prior to His coming. Their destitute condition was vivid evidence of nonconfirmation of prophecy. But most continued to believe in Morris, and to stay at the Fort.

The time from January to June 1862 was spent coping with physical needs, and preparing for the Second Advent. By prophetic instruction, Morris organized an armed force of 142 men. They had a pageant on May 30, after which the Savior was expected to appear within 2 or 3 days. Again the Advent was postponed, while the majority remained faithful.

A few dissenters left the colony. One especially irked the Morrisites by taking a team of horses and wagon which he had contributed on joining the group. They caught and imprisoned him and two other dissenters at the Fort. Through the influence of friends and relatives on the outside, legal writs were issued for the release of the prisoners, and for the arrest of Morris. When the attempt to serve the writs failed, the territorial deputy marshal was empowered to lead a posse of 300 well-armed men to serve the writ. When Morris ignored the surrender order, the posse opened fire with cannon. The Morrisites returned the fire with small arms, and the 3-day "Morrisite war" was on. Casualties resulted on both sides, including Morris, who was killed during the surrender proceedings on June 12, 1862 (Young 1890; Anderson & Halford 1974; Halford 1972).

The Morrisite men who had borne arms were arrested and tried in a Federal court the following March. Several were sentenced to prison, but the newly-appointed non-Mormon governor pardoned them 3 days after the trial. A few months later, most of the Morrisites moved from Utah, under protection of the United States Army. Groups settled in California, Idaho, and Nevada. Eventually groups of Morrisites were located in several western states, and the church became permanently factioned.

. Several followers of Morris contended for the leadership after his death (Anderson 1976). Two claimed to be prophets, but the group never regained the unity or the numbers which were gained at Kington Fort. But they retained their identity, and the Church, as an organization, functioned into the 1940's. It is notable that faith in Morris' prophetic calling and a sense of group loyalty could persist more than 80 years despite dozens of prophecy failures.

. The Morrisite case demonstrates the operation of social-structural, demographic, interactional, and environmental variables.

SOCIAL-STRUCTURAL VARIABLES

Power Structure Both the Mormons and the Morrisites had centralized authoritarian leadership which encompassed every aspect of their members' lives. The Mormons had a virtual theocracy until Brigham Young was deposed as Governor of the Territory in 1858. In 1862, the absence of Federal troops and the lack of a territorial governor came close to restoring that condition. The acting Governor was a Mormon and the Federal judge who issued writs against Morris and his lieutenants was regarded as sympathetic toward the Mormons.

. The only military force in Utah then was the Navoo Legion, first organized as a Mormon army, and commissioned in April 1862 by President Lincoln as territorial militia to protect mail and telegraph lines.

"The call (to guard the mail and telegraph lines) came to Brigham Young. Church leaders accepted this as a call from President Lincoln, and .. the call was sent not to the acting Governor, .. but to the head of the Church (which) .. was tantamount to his recognizing that Utah's Navoo Legion was, in fact, an army of the church." (Anderson 1966 216). This newly authorized militia formed the core of the posse that attacked the Morrisites.

. The internal power structure of the Morrisite Church effectively

controlled the members. Those who might have withdrawn were restrained by 4 factors. 1) Members were forbidden to take any property with them on leaving. 2) All apostates were threatened with violent death by faithful Morrisites, though such threats were apparently never carried out. 3) Morrisites believed that Mormons were instructed by their leaders not to associate with Morrisite apostates. 4) Many Morrisites were recent European immigrants with few outside contacts. Once identified as Morrisites and committed to the movement, they had no real alternative but to stay. The low rate of Morrisite defection even in the face of many failures of prophecy could have been due to internal power structures.

Authority Structures The basis of both Mormon and Morrisite faith was the belief that their leaders were prophets of God who truly spoke in His behalf. Both groups could use fanatical and extreme measures to reach ends represented by Divine Will. The living presence of these prophets made it possible for them to interpret daily events and make plans of action which had supernatural approval. Joseph Morris was more active than Brigham Young in producing scripture. However, the discourses and advices of Young were generally accepted as the word of God by Mormons.

. Both the Mormons and the Morrisites relied on charismatic authority, which produced a deadlock between them. It was the intrusion of the rational-legal authority structure, with the issue of writs and the formation of a posse, which broke the deadlock. Morris' defiance of the territorial marshal and the writ proved his undoing. This seems a victory of rational-legal authority over charismatic authority.

Religious Institutional Dominance

. Both the Mormons and the Morrisites were dominated by their religious beliefs. To the Mormons, the Morrisite movement was seen as a serious threat. The options available and the outcome of

prophecy nonfulfillment for the Morrisites could have been different if the surrounding population had been occupied with more worldly pursuits. The emergence of an esoteric millennial sect in Mormondom today might be seen as bothersome but not as a threat.

Group Cohesiveness Both Mormons and Morrisites were highly cohesive groups. The trials and persecutions of the Mormons had purged them of weak and non-committed members. The Morrisite faith, communal living, and threats from the outside had effectively welded them together. If the Mormons had been less cohesive, the Morrisites would likely have had more options when their prophecies went unfulfilled. The cohesiveness of both the millennial group and the surrounding Mormon society must be taken into account.

Communication Channels

. The means of communication and the means of influencing public opinion in Utah in 1862 were largely limited to word-of-mouth, handwritten letters, pamphlets, books, and newspapers. The Morrisites had only word-of-mouth and handwritten means of communication. The Mormons, on the other hand, had an effective publishing system, and controlled the only newspaper in the area, the Deseret News. With this, they could label the Morrisites as bandits and effectively mobilize public opinion against them. Joseph Morris' direct verbal communications were certainly effective among his followers in Kington Fort, but his lack of press denied him the ability to communicate the Morrisite viewpoint much farther.

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Sex Composition The exact impact of demographic factors on the Morrisite case is hard to determine because much of the data are incomplete. However, the 90 men who ultimately defended the Morrisites during the "war" were significantly hampered by the 300 women and children in the Fort. The Mormon militia had no such problem.

Ethnic Group Composition

. The Morrisites were mixed ethnically, but a large portion of them were Scandinavians who understood little English (Young 1890 282). One elderly Scandinavian woman was shot and killed after the surrender because she apparently failed to comprehend a command issued by the posse leader (Eardley 1899 29).

Education Level

. Most of the Morrisites were probably literate, though Morris took pride in emphasizing his own lack of formal education. He appealed to his followers in much the same way as Joseph Smith did earlier. Both the Mormons and the Morrisites believed in an anthropomorphic God, a literal resurrection, and a literal interpretation of the scriptures. Their lack of educational sophistication probably contributed to their willingness to accept Morris as a prophet.

Population Density

. The low level of population density in Utah was an important factor in the development of the Morrisite movement. The Morrisites could rather easily obtain a gathering place for several hundred people which also provided adequate pasture for their cattle and horses. Mormon harassment of this livestock was one of the precipitating factors in the conflict. Certainly the lack of a dense population surrounding Kington Fort made the armed attack by the posse a feasible tactic. The low population density of the Great Basin in Utah isolated the Morrisites, cut them off from contact with non-hostile people, and greatly hindered defection or escape.

INTERACTIONAL VARIABLES

Intragroup Interaction Patterns

. Among the Morrisites, interaction was personal and direct. But there was a formal structure of status in the leadership hierarchy which formalized many interaction patterns among the leaders and with the followers. One dilemma which was never fully resolved was an egalitarian and democratic economic structure juxtaposed

against an authoritarian and formalized religious structure. This created some personal conflicts when authoritarian leaders would use religious status to legitimate secular demands. The best commonly-held horses, vehicles, clothes, arms, and food often went to those in higher leader positions. A few Morrisites resented this, expressed open dissatisfaction, or attempted to defect (Eardley 1889 22; Morris 1886 474).

. The dissension that did occur was never allowed to become divisive for the group. An on-the-scene charismatic prophet, and especially one as prolific as Morris in receiving revelations served to minimize dissension. Yet the greatest potential source of dissent was prophecy nonfulfillment. In addition to receiving explanatory revelations which detailed why a prophecy did not come to pass, Morris also used other means to maintain in-group solidarity: 1) daily public testimony sharing, and 2) public ritual.

. The most noteworthy example of public ritual was a grand pageant called the Foreshadowing which was performed on May 30, 1862. It was based on the principle that coming events cast their shadows before them, as the coming of Christ must be foreshadowed. It might be seen as a fanatic, almost desperate effort to bolster the faith and constructively channel the believer's energy. Preparations had been elaborate, as every minute detail had been revealed to Morris. By now, many predictions of Christ's coming had failed. Nevertheless, his followers were still eager to believe that this time the Second Advent would be realized. They expected that within a few days after the Fore-shadowing, Christ would appear with the armies of Heaven to destroy His enemies and lift His people to their rightful place of eminence in the World. Within two weeks, Morris himself was dead.

Intergroup Interaction Patterns

. All of the Morrisites were former Mormons. The apostasy of several hundred followers was more

than an embarrassment to the Mormons. It was a real threat. Contributing to the ill feeling was the fact that the Morrisites did not leave the area. They remained nearby to compete for more followers, most of whom would come from the ranks of the Mormons. Relations were bound to be hostile and leaders of both groups were outspoken in remarks against the other group. Many of Morris' revelations served only to condemn the Mormons. The Morrisites, as former Mormons, were openly hostile to the parent group. And the Mormons, on their part, could not ignore a schism of this magnitude.

ENVIRONMENTAL VARIABLES

. The significance of the relation between physical environment and social behavior has been neglected in the sociological literature. Certainly, the climate, the season of the year, and the proximity of antagonistic groups contributed to the outcome of the Morrisite movement. The rural, sparsely populated macro environment which was geographically far removed from a neutral or sympathetic society greatly restricted the Morrisite options. Kington Fort was bounded on the east and north by rugged mountains with few passes, on the west by Great Salt Lake, and hundreds of miles of desert. Salt Lake City, the Mormon stronghold, lay only 35 miles to the south. Thus, the Morrisites were isolated and stranded.

. The physical situation within Kington Fort was also problematic. Shelter was limited to a few log houses, covered wagon boxes, and tents. Poor quarters were of concern to Morris. He had received revelations explaining that physical inconvenience and suffering was part of their test of faith. But faith and endurance would be fully rewarded when they triumphed over the Mormons and entered their soon-to-be abandoned houses in Salt Lake City. In December 1861, when the coming of the Lord had been delayed and the weather had turned unseasonably cold, the same

explanation was given. The severe climate, inclement weather, and poor shelter were the sources of much privation and suffering of the Morrisites. But Morris turned these liabilities into assets. He appealed to the people's faith and assured them that they would be amply gratified even though such gratification must be temporarily deferred. The theme of deferred gratification is central to all millennial movements. When it is carefully managed, and likened with conditions which cannot be readily improved, it provides a remarkable source of motivation.

The weather was certainly a factor in the battle at Kington Fort. The battle extended over 3 days, but actual gunfire was exchanged only on the first and third days. The battle was suspended on the second day on account of rain. Had the rain continued, it could have stopped the fighting. The weather is recognized as a potent influence in collective behavior situations, and particularly in civil disturbances.

CONCLUSION

The literature on millennial movements suggests a number of explanations on what people do when prophecy is disconfirmed. Festinger and his colleagues (1956) suggest that there are 4 modes of adjustment to disconfirmation: 1) denial; 2) rationalization; 3) proselyting; and 4) disaffection. Others disagree on proselyting, and emphasize in-group support and reaffirmation of faith as the key modes of adjustment (Hardyk & Braden 1962).

Analysis of the Morrisite case suggests that public reaffirmation is an especially important mechanism through which support for the belief system may be maintained, even in the face of repeated non-confirmation. This public reaffirmation can take a number of forms, including 1) proselyting for external affirmation; 2) testimony sharing, for internal affirmation; and 3) public ritual and ceremony. Depending on the circumstances, all or any of these may be used by

a millennial group faced with non-confirmation of prophecy. Morrisites saw no reason to proselyte, but they did use testimony sharing and public ceremony. Both served to maintain in-group solidarity and to reduce doubt and skepticism even while experiencing repeated prophecy failure.

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