Introduction: vision, plan and church

A vision, a plan and a church: these are three major elements of Mormonism. The first vision produced a prophet, the plan of salvation a blueprint of doctrine, and the Church an organization through which vision and plan are realized. This threefold basis of the religious movement founded by Joseph Smith is outlined in this introduction alongside the two notions of 'relations' and 'principles' that run throughout this book as interlinked perspectives underlying the Latter-day Saint way of life.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the formal name of the movement popularly called Mormonism, is often abbreviated to LDS or the LDS Church, and members often simply refer to the Church. Its members can, similarly, be called Saints, Latter-day Saints, LDS, or Mormons. When using 'Mormon', this book does so as a simple description of the Church or its members and not in any derogatory sense even though I acknowledge that Saints themselves do not prefer that title. Occasionally, reference will be made to the Utah Church in order to distinguish it from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), whose headquarters is at Independence, Missouri, and which now calls itself the Community of Christ. These name-related issues, associated with changing identities are discussed in chapter 9.

This book focuses on Mormon beliefs, doctrine and opinions in relation to the Church's sacred texts, epics and revelations. Together these primary sources offer a broad tradition of Mormon theology as the means by which Latter-day Saints have approached God and the meaning of life. Secondary streams of opinion come from a small number of books by central church leaders that have gained something of an official status (e.g. Talmage 1915), or have been accepted with appropriate amendment (e.g. McConkie, B. R. 1966), or even with caution (e.g. Roberts, B. H. 1994). Others interpret LDS thought in a more directly personal way (e.g. McMurrin 1959, 1969; White 1987). Still, Mormonism has by no means developed as formal an academic tradition of theology as is present in many other major Christian

denominations. This is largely because it possesses prophetic revelations from the past and a living prophet in the present, both of which constrain the exploratory tendencies of theologians in other churches. What Mormonism has come to possess is a relatively large group of historians who are sometimes thought to substitute for theologians, but that is only partially true.

The account of Mormon belief in the following chapters is not written by a Latter-day Saint and cannot be taken as any form of 'official' doctrinal statement. Its goal is to describe beliefs and practices that many, both within and outside the Church, would regard as important in the history of the movement and in the lives of current members. This book does not argue the truth or falsity of beliefs. Sometimes it presents material from the perspective of any LDS believer convinced that revelations have all come from God, at other times it echoes the critical opinion of those who see them as the product of prophetic imagination and social circumstances. It is only by reflecting both perspectives that those inside and outside this church may gain some sense of what each other believes, and this is especially important since most readers are likely not to be Latter-day Saints. So I begin with what can be regarded today as two pillars of Mormonism – the vision and the plan. Each will be encountered by new converts: the vision offering its own direct appeal to religious experience and the plan opening doors to deeper reflection by dedicated church members.

THE VISION

The vision tells how Joseph Smith, a boy of twelve years of age, began a religious quest for certainty, forgiveness and salvation amidst the Christianly informed culture of New York State. When Joseph was reading his Bible, the Epistle of James spoke powerfully to him: 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God' (James 1: 5). Now fourteen years old, he enters some woods to pray, thereby making prayer foundational for himself as for subsequent generations of LDS seekers. Kneeling there he becomes engaged with evil; 'seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me . . . I could not speak . . . Thick darkness gathered around me . . . it seemed . . . as if I were doomed to sudden destruction' (*JHC* vol. 1, 1: 15). A pillar of light, shining like the sun, descends upon him from over his head and frees him from the oppressive darkness. He now sees two figures, identical in appearance until one identifies the other as his Beloved Son. Recovering himself before this

appearance of the divine Father and Son, Joseph asks the prime question that had set him upon his quest, namely, 'which of all the sects is right, so that I might know which to join?' Forbidden to join any, he is told that all are wrong. In language taken straight from the Bible the divine figure – who is in fact the Heavenly Father – judges contemporary religious adherents as insincere believers. Exhausted after the vision, Joseph recovers, returns home and tells his mother that he now knows that 'Presbyterianism is not true.' Days later he tells a Methodist minister of his vision but is rejected and told that such visions are of the devil. Joseph ponders his relative insignificance, being economically poor and but a teenager and yet one to whom people should pay so much attention.

Then, rather like the Apostle Paul in his conversion drama, Joseph awaits further divine communication but, even so, he feels that his own form of life is not entirely consonant with that of someone to whom God has spoken so directly. Then, in a repentant state, on 21 September 1823 he receives three visionary visits from the angel Moroni, who tells Joseph that he will be a most significant person, that a book written on gold plates will be obtained and translated and that a priesthood will be revealed to him; a 'turning of hearts' of fathers and children will also take place to avoid a calamity of judgement upon the earth. Ideas of getting rich through all this religious activity also come to Joseph's mind, aware as he is of his poverty, but the angel forbids that temptation, directing him to glorify God and build up his kingdom (*HC* 1: 46). Moroni sets his message amidst Old and New Testament texts and the whole atmosphere is one of promise and fulfilment. Joseph is exhausted the following day and collapses, Moroni reappears and encourages Joseph to tell the visions to his father. This he does and is believed. He then goes to the place of the buried book and finds it, but as the time for translation is not right for a further four years, he is to come annually to meet the angel at that spot. Ultimately, he receives the metal plates and is enabled to render them into English, and the book is published in 1830, the same year as the Church is formally established.

THE PLAN

'The plan of salvation', a phrase running throughout LDS belief, provides a prime frame within which Mormon theology is best understood, because it gives relatively little priority to any single doctrine. In theological terms the plan of salvation is a kind of doctrine of doctrines. In terms of the study

of religion it is the overarching myth that embraces all aspects of belief and of ritual, providing them with their ultimate reference point. While specific elements of this plan will be studied in detail in later chapters, the following brief sketch will help to introduce them.

Devised by Heavenly Father, the plan of salvation decreed that the spirit children of heavenly parents should not only exist as spirits in their pre-mortal existence, or first estate, but be given the opportunity to possess a body in which to demonstrate their obedience to God through the exercise of their personal agency on earth in their second estate. Since this would involve temptation and sin, which would alienate them from God, some means was needed to bring them back to him. A Council in heaven considered this possibility and Jesus was chosen as the saviour; Lucifer, the other candidate, rebelled, and there was a war in heaven resulting in Lucifer being cast out along with other disobedient spirits. Then came creation or, more accurately, an organization of pre-existing matter, to form the earth and all other worlds. Adam's and Eve's bodies are also formed from pre-existing material and would have lived in a state of changelessness had not they succumbed to Satan's temptation. Their fall, however, resulted in the positive advantage that they could have children to provide bodies, allowing innumerable pre-existing spirits to take flesh and exercise their own agency. Despite that, there remained as one major negative effect of the fall the plight of spiritual death: the prevention of any future life with God. It is to deal with this that Jesus Christ comes to earth as Saviour and by a divine act of grace atones for the sin of the world; he does this not only on the cross but especially in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he takes the sin of the world upon himself and bleeds at every pore. The outcome of this is the unconditional benefit of resurrection. This gospel message must be heard and accepted and result in baptism and confirmation at the hands of Melchizedek-priesthood holders of the Church. Individual Latter-day Saints now become deeply responsible for their own eternal future and for that of their family and, in this, they should seek the assistance of the Holy Ghost. The unconditional salvation from spiritual death is now replaced by the conditional possibility of exaltation in the celestial kingdom, which is one of three major degrees of glory experienced after death. This should be sought through marriage, parenthood, temple ritual for oneself and for one's own dead relatives and through ethical living. Through specific rites performed in temples married Saints are provided with the means of conquering death and pursuing an eternal existence in which they, themselves become gods.

THE CHURCH OF SALVATION

This composite version of the plan of salvation is not presented in exactly the same way as it might be told by Mormon missionaries. The addition of the terms Melchizedek-priesthood holders, celestial kingdom and degrees of glory make it more obvious that it is a scheme of belief rooted in a particular church, one reckoning itself to be the one true church through which the highest form of salvation – exaltation – is possible. This makes it clear that theology and church belong together and shape each other. Belief affects ritual and ritual affects belief, so this book will pay particular attention to historical events and distinctive individuals who have caused an interplay between the two. Although the following chapters accentuate the more formal elements of Mormon thought, they will avoid the temptation of presenting an overly systematic version of doctrines. This is important in a relatively young church whose doctrine is still in a process of development and change, but it is also important in terms of the way in which individuals live their religious lives. Some early ideas have faded into insignificance in today's church, even though occasional opponents of Mormonism still rehearse them with vigour; others may be in the process of re-establishing themselves in contemporary LDS spirituality.

Contemporary LDS theology combines its original Protestant-like doctrines of atonement, grace, resurrection, repentance, faith, baptism and salvation with its subsequent, distinctive, scheme of priesthood ordination, endowments, merit, baptism for the dead and exaltation. This dual configuration is also evident in the double format of the local-chapel and regional-temple form of church organization. At the outset Mormonism offered salvation from sin and a call to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ; in its transformation it conferred powers for humans to conquer death and become gods in the world to come; today both features are combined through basic missionary work and the subsequent desire to transform converts into temple-active members. Historically speaking, Mormonism promised salvation before it offered exaltation: today both are possible. To its opening rituals of baptism, confirmation and Sacrament Meeting its metamorphosed state added baptism for the dead, marriage for eternity and endowment rites. Initially the Saints congregated in homes, halls, public places and meeting houses familiar to all Protestants, where sermons were preached, prayers offered and hymns sung; later they added temples for their distinctive rites and for fuller expression of developing doctrine. So it is that contemporary Latter-day Saints now gather weekly at

their meeting-houses for congregational purposes and periodically at temples for the work of exaltation of their family group. Mormon religious architecture – with its sharp distinction between numerous local chapels and a regional temple – marks this theological difference between 'salvation' and 'exaltation'. No such distinctions exist in other major Christian traditions: Catholic, Anglican or Lutheran parish churches and cathedrals, for example, are not different in kind from each other and do not reflect any difference in theology or ritual; only by being alert to these differences will clarity be gained between traditional Christian doctrinal schemes and those of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The historical development of LDS doctrine and forms of ritual can, in one sense, be thought of almost as two different styles of religiosity, practically two different churches, existing in a developing and mutual relationship with each other but involving tensions, conflicts and discrepancies as well as coherence and advantage. Accordingly, LDS theology involves what might be viewed as the theologies of two churches: Protestant millenarian Mormonism and symbolic temple Mormonism. Born out of a Protestant concern with forgiveness and God's true word, Mormonism developed into a moral quest for perfection under the influence of a ritualized conquest of death. Jan Shipps has also described a development in LDS belief but preferred to view it in terms of 'three distinct layers': an initial focus on the Book of Mormon and restoration of the priesthoods, a secondary gathering together through a growing sense of self-identity as a kind of latter-day 'Hebrew' people and, finally, a more esoteric church associated with a 'powerful group mystical experience' (Shipps 2000: 296). Despite this the present study will be conducted rather in terms of different elements of Mormonism which exert themselves at different times and places.

RELATIONS AND PRINCIPLES

Earliest Mormonism developed through a strong sense of relationships: some were amongst divine agents, some between divine and human agents, and others between human beings, and they strongly reflected many aspects of the theological world underlying the Book of Mormon. As the Mormon movement grew, it soon developed a philosophical outlook grounded in 'principles' – rules that controlled and governed the universe. One way of interpreting the life and thought of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is in terms of the way 'relations and principles' affect each other at different times and in terms of differing circumstances.

In tracing these trends and evaluating the interpretation given of Mormon thought in this book, it is important for the reader to know that the author is not and never has been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or any other restoration movement. This book is written, very largely, for those who are not Latter-day Saints but who want some understanding of their way of thought. Even so, it is hoped that active Latter-day Saints might also engage with the interpretation of Mormon theology offered here, albeit by one who is not a fellow Saint but who seeks to understand the nature of this world of faith that means so much to those who live by it.

CHAPTER 1

The birth and growth of Mormonism

The Mormon Church was officially founded by six individuals in 1830; by 2002 there were approximately 11 million members. When the first prophet, Joseph Smith Jnr, died in 1844, he had gathered some 26,000 followers and these had grown to some 115,000 when his successor, Brigham Young, died in 1877. The middle and later decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a large part of this growth through migration of converts from Great Britain and Scandinavia. Such emigration largely ceased with the beginning of the twentieth century and growth was relatively slow to 500,000 members by 1919. The Church had increased to 2 million members by 1963; this doubled to 4 million by 1979 and to 8 million by 1991. The quickening growth in the closing decades of the twentieth century was due to rapid expansion in South America, which helped to produce the 11 million or so in the opening years of the twenty-first century. These patterns of growth reflect the changing nature of this church, the early years being a time of 'calling to Zion', gathering converts in America to prepare for Christ's Second Coming. Then followed a steady state when the Saints became consolidated in their North American heartland, especially in Utah. After defending themselves from opposition by the Federal Government on the issue of polygamy, they finally capitulated, officially abandoning the practice in 1890 whilst continuing to emphasize the importance of family life. From the middle of the twentieth century renewed missionary endeavours established the Church across the world, leading some to predict that new levels of growth will make Mormonism the next new world religion after Islam.

One major task of any formal study of a religious tradition is to describe its changing pattern of doctrine and ritual, identifying its dominant features and marking any significant changes in direction that are brought about by events and circumstance. In doing this I will give due attention to both historical and contemporary aspects of the faith while presenting information in a way that compares and contrasts it with elements in Protestant

and Catholic traditions of Christianity. When using this method of comparative theology, I will deal with topics, whether Mormon, Protestant or Catholic, in a way that assumes each to be true, as would theologians within those traditions. This, obviously, means that I will not follow those who might regard Mormonism as some strange and false American cult, where the very word 'cult', and to a lesser degree, the word 'sect', indicates disapproval: even Joseph Smith used 'sect' to describe the numerous religious denominations of his day (*HC* 1: 18). Certainly, that kind of evaluation finds no place in this book.

Comparison of patterns of theology invites the question of what excites religious believers to give their lives to a church and its teachings in the first place. Why are religious ideas important? Is the excitement of the first generation the same as the excitement in later centuries? Would first-century Christians, for example, have been in the least interested in some current Christian debates about the ordination of women or the celibacy of the priesthood? Are many twenty-first-century Christians worried about what food to eat or whether or not boys should be circumcised, as were the Christians in the Acts of the Apostles? To study these things is to enter into the enthusiasm of others and to seek to understand a whole world of meaning in which people come to live and have their being. It is also to appreciate that different teachings have been influential at different periods of a church's life, and this is certainly true for the Latter-day Saints.

BELIEF AND RITUAL: DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came into being 'for the purpose of building up my church and kingdom on the earth, and to prepare my people for the time when I shall dwell with them, which is nigh at hand' (D&C 104: 59). This text from the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) indicates the millenarian nature of early Mormonism and exemplifies the way in which Joseph Smith, as prophet, gave expression to the voice of Jesus Christ. The very title of this source text, the Doctrine and Covenants, is of crucial significance in understanding Mormon theology because it integrates two aspects of religion. On the one hand, it deals with doctrine, the articulated and shaped beliefs of religious devotees, and, on the other, with covenants, the enacted forms of religious commitment. In an overly simplified sense we might say that doctrines deal with belief and covenants with practice. Certainly, as far as Latter-day Saints are concerned, doctrine is an important part of individual religious life just as it is of the historical development of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but

it would remain abstract and uninfluential apart from the Church's ritual, through which believers commit themselves to that doctrine by entering into forms of covenant relationships with God. Covenant is not a neutral term in LDS theology. It is dynamically enlivened through personal ritual experience framed by Mormon history and the architectural arena of Mormon temples. More immediately still, covenants have their consequences within the family, which is itself the springboard for eternity and destiny's fulfilment.

EXCITEMENT

Excitement is one answer to the question of why people give their lives to religion. It is one of the more neglected aspects of religious experience. Excitement stirs group worship in waves of passion, brings teenagers the force of unique identity, sustains the middle aged during years of responsible duty, and to the aged brings memory and hope. Just as falling in love can, for a time, foster an intense sense of being alive, so can the awareness of being in contact with God. Richard van Wagoner cites Joseph Smith's sermon of 14 May 1843 when the prophet tells how 'Excitement has almost become the essence of my life. When that dies away, I feel almost lost.' Wagoner links this with 'the frenzied tempo' of Smith's life in 1843 and with the fact that Smith was 'sealed to at least nine Nauvoo women' in that year (van Wagoner 1994: 299). Such prophetic excitement helps to fuel the charisma which attracts followers; it promises drama in the personal life of believers, as, for example, in the case of Sidney Rigdon, Joseph's early assistant, who came from a Baptist background with an 'exciting sense of discovery, the thought that an ancient treasure of divine truth was just now being brought to light after having been lost for centuries' (van Wagoner 1994: 44). Many converts to today's religious movements are similarly moved by the sense of excitement of being where the divine action is, of being with people who possess an explicit purpose that gives firm shape to their lives. Often this contrasts with the relatively humdrum life of families whose sense of purpose in life is implicit and can relatively easily fall apart if placed under pressure or close scrutiny.

For the early generation of Latter-day Saints the expectation that the end of the world was near fired just such an excitement of faith, motivating arduous migration to the United States from Europe and equally perilous trekking to designated US destinations. Despite no predicted date of the return of Christ, there was a firm expectation, held out by Joseph Smith and after him by Brigham Young and others, that the end would be within