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Issues of Religious Freedom: Religious Minorities Mormons

A faith tradition that experienced harsh religious persecution from its beginnings in the early 19th century was the Church of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons). Between 1820 and 1840 its founder, Joseph Smith, experienced a series of visions which he later described as of Jesus and God telling him that he was a prophet, empowered by God to restore “the only true and living church.” Led by an angel to a spot near his home in western New York, Smith dug up a set of golden plates on which was engraved strange writing. Translated into English with divine assistance and published as The Book of Mormon, Smith viewed the contents as the new revealed word of God. With a few followers, Smith organized the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. In the mid-1840’s Joseph Smith had a further revelation that it was God’s will to restore the Old Testament practice of polygamy, a husband marrying more than one wife.

In the 1840’s the Mormons attracted many converts. But Mormon beliefs, although Christian, differed and even contradicted beliefs of many other Protestant Americans; thus wherever Mormons congregations formed, non-Mormons became suspicious, fearful, hostile and sometimes violent. Eventually this led to an enormous struggle with the federal government over the relationship between church and state and the Mormon practice of polygamy.

Having fled from New York and then Ohio, Joseph Smith and a majority of the church members joined a colony of Mormons in Missouri in 1837-38. Less than a year later, fears of Mormon bloc voting and a “take over” of the community produced escalating mob violence which led the Missouri governor to issue this order: *“the Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state, if necessary for the public good.”* Source: Constitutional Rights Foundation (www.crf-usa.org) Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders were imprisoned as hostages until the colonists agreed to leave the state. Brigham Young organized an exodus across the Mississippi River to Illinois. An Illinois newspaper, the Argus, wrote about this event on March 16, 1839. *Fellow Citizens and Brethren! Turn not a deaf ear to this cry of the oppressed! The Mormons are outlawed, exiled, robbed--they ask of your justice and your charity that you befriend them. They have suffered these outrages from mob violence;...Law has been trampled down, and liberty of conscience violated, and all rights of citizenship and brotherhood outraged by the house-burnings, field-wastings, insults, whippings, murders, which they have suffered; and in the name of humanity and of heaven, they pray you to utter indignant condemnation merited by such crimes... We say we have no language sufficiently strong for the expression of our shame and abhorrence of her (Missouri’s) conduct. She has written her own character in letters of blood—and stained it by acts of merciless cruelty and brutality that the waters of ages cannot efface (erase).* Source John P. Greene Record of Persecution of Mormons in Missouri 1833-1838 (www.boap.org)

Released from jail by Missouri officials, Joseph Smith again took charge of the Mormon community, which was called Nauvoo meaning “beautiful place.” By the mid-1840’s, swelled by thousands of immigrants from Britain, the result of Brigham Young’s missionary work there,

Nauvoo rivaled Chicago as the largest city in Illinois. At first the Illinois state government had welcomed the Mormons because they brought more taxpayers. The state legislature granted Nauvoo a liberal charter allowing the city its own court system and militia. But by 1844 the residents of Illinois had become increasingly hostile to Nauvoo because of the rapid development of its economic and political power, along with rumors about strange Mormon religious rituals. They particularly resented the Mormon practice of voting in a bloc at the direction of Joseph Smith. Then in 1844 Smith decided to run for president of the United States. This combination of religion and politics further inflamed public opinion. This decision also caused conflict within the Mormon community itself, not all of whom approved of Smith's involvement in politics.

A dissenting newspaper in Nauvoo accused Smith of crowning himself king. In response, he and members of the Council of Fifty, the governing body of Nauvoo consisting of the leaders of the Mormon Church, destroyed the paper's printing press.

Joseph Smith, along with several others, was charged with inciting a riot and jailed by state authorities. The governor sent a state militia to guard Smith against mob violence. But the militia itself became a lynch mob and shot Joseph Smith to death in his jail cell on June 27, 1844. Soon vigilantes, determined to drive the Mormons out of Illinois, began to burn their homes and farms.

This time 16,000 Mormons fled to the Great Salt Lake Valley and formed the State of Deseret. In 1850 the U.S. Congress denied Deseret's application for new statehood but made it a U.S. territory which they named Utah. In 1862 Congress outlawed multiple marriages, and in 1879 the Supreme Court unanimously concluded that the First Amendment did not protect the practice of polygamy [Reynolds v. United States]. Altogether 1000 Mormon men were convicted, fined, and imprisoned for being married to more than one wife.

In 1890 the Mormon Church issued a "Manifesto" calling for the Latter-Day Saints "*to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land.*" This and assurances separating church and state led to the admission of Utah into the Union as the 45th state in 1896. Source: Constitutional Rights Foundation (www.crf-usa.org)

Based on this reading be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Identify the time, place and religious minority experiencing oppression.
2. Why was this group considered out of the religious mainstream?
3. What forms of oppression did this group experience?
4. Why did the religious majority perceive this group to be a threat to society?