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## **Esotericism Made Exoteric?**

### **Insider and Outsider Perspectives on the 2006 Mormon Temple Public Open House in Espoo, Finland**

#### **Introduction**

'Finland's Mormons are now campaigning for openness', said a television reporter as he introduced his subject in September 2006 (News 2006). The occasion was a public open house at the new Helsinki Finland temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly known as the Mormon Church.<sup>1</sup> The temple was open for all interested individuals for a period of two and a half weeks at the end of September and the beginning of October, prior to its dedication. During this public open house, a total of about 56,000 visits to the temple were logged. In addition to visits by interested Latter-day Saints, these included dignitaries such as Finland's Prime Minister and opposition leader and more numerous, ordinary Finns who were curious to see what the Mormons had built and what the Mormons believed.

Recent years have seen a boom in Latter-day Saints' temple building. Some scholars speak of Mormonism's 'templization', referring to the increased number of the faith's temples around the world and the increased centrality of temples in Mormon discourse and living (Shipps 2001). There are currently 126 temples operating worldwide with ten more under construction or planned. When the construction of a Mormon temple is completed, the Church usually holds a public open house that becomes a major event for local Latter-day Saints to plan and exe-

1 The terms 'Mormon' and 'Mormonism' more precisely refer to all faith traditions descended from Joseph Smith. In this article, I mostly use them to refer specifically to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the largest branch of the Mormon tradition. I also use in this article the Mormon church's worldwide naming convention for its temples, that is, calling the temple after the large city closest to it. More precisely the Helsinki Finland temple is located in the city of Espoo, part of the capital city region.

cute. Through the increased number of temple construction projects, open houses have been occurring with increased frequency around the world.<sup>2</sup>

Mormon temples are different from regular Mormon Church buildings and are often shrouded in mystery in people's minds. Whereas Latter-day Saints' meeting houses are open for all, and anyone is welcome to participate with Mormons in their Sunday services, the temples and the ceremonies conducted therein are reserved for faithful Latter-day Saints only and are not spoken of to outsiders except in general terms. Open houses at Mormon temples are interesting because during those events, the temple, which is usually an esoteric space, enters a halfway point between the sacred, secret, and hidden on the one hand, and the public and open on the other.

The term esotericism has a multiplicity of definitions. These definitions differ, for example, in how the underlying concepts concerning the relationship of man, the universe, and the divine are weighted and emphasized. One example of esotericism is man's turning inward and undergoing initiation processes in order to gain a deeper knowledge of the divine. Secrecy is not a necessary component of the esoteric, but may be part of it. If esotericism is seen as designating 'teachings or doctrines that are purposely kept secret, generally with a view to distinguish between initiates and non-initiates' (Faivre 2005: 2842), then the Mormon Church's temple tradition can be seen as one example of esotericism. It is esoteric in that both Mormon temples as buildings and the ceremonies conducted in those buildings are reserved only for the initiated.

The public open house of a Mormon temple does not mean that all temple-related matters are discussed and presented freely for a given time period. Rather, the open house necessitates for the Mormons a balance between being open about their religion and the function of their temples on the one hand, and discretion on the other, not speaking too much, or divulging those temple-related details and elements that are considered to be the most sacred. At the same time, however, the open house is publicized widely and the Latter-day Saints welcome visitors with open arms. In other words, it is not organized with a grudging attitude of perhaps having to open the temple for a couple of days just to allay the fears of the public.

2 The number of newly completed temples peaked during the year 2000 and has been in decline since.

The purpose of this article is to discuss two perspectives on Latter-day Saints' temple open houses. First, that of the Latter-day Saints themselves, who are placed in a delicate situation as they present the temple to the public while simultaneously desiring to preserve its esoteric nature. What do they want to accomplish and how do they go about doing it? Second, the perspective of the public, whose reactions exemplify layman views of what it can be like to peek into a sacred and esoteric world foreign to oneself. What kinds of forms can their thoughts take at Mormon temple open houses? The particular case considered here is the autumn 2006 open house at the Helsinki Finland temple.

The source material for the present study consists of my own observations, newspaper and media reports, a sample of comments from feedback cards that people filled in after their tour at the temple, and various internet sites containing people's comments and experiences. From a source-critical point of view, one has to keep in mind that the material is somewhat skewed, as it does not provide a representative sample of all visitors. However, my purpose is not to build an objective image of what a visit 'really' was like; it would, of course, be impossible to do so. Instead, the point is to look at the subjective feelings and thoughts of individuals. Regardless of some limitations, the material gives valuable insights into the kinds of thoughts people had as they visited the new Mormon temple located in the city of Espoo, adjacent to Helsinki.<sup>3</sup>

I will first lay the basic framework for this article by discussing Mormon temples and their function in more detail. After that I will take a look at the perspective from which the Latter-day Saints approached and conducted the open house, followed by a discussion of the varied reactions of the public. I will then conclude with some thoughts on the place and future of Mormon temples.

### **Mormon Temples and Their Esoteric Nature**

Mormonism as a religious movement was founded in 1830, based on the multiple epiphanies of its founder, Joseph Smith, during the 1820s. In the first of these epiphanies during his teenage years, Smith claimed

3 For an analysis of the Helsinki Finland temple open house that approaches the same source material specifically from the viewpoint of socio-cultural otherness, see Östman 2007.

to have seen God the Father and Jesus Christ in a vision. This was followed by revelations that resulted, among other things, in the scriptural *Book of Mormon* (Bushman 2005). Mormonism was seen as a restoration of primitive Christianity and the primitive Christian Church's exclusive authority to act in God's name and to perform salvational religious ceremonies such as baptism. The Church of Christ, as it was first called, was organized in upstate or western New York, known as the 'burned-over district' due to the amount of enthusiastic religious activities and preaching that, figuratively speaking, scorched the area (Cross 1950).

Temples were not a part of original Mormonism, but its temple-related theological concepts developed during Joseph Smith's life. The first Latter-day Saints' temple was built in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836. It was different in function from the Mormon temples of today, because it served as a regular meeting house in addition to being a place for performing special ceremonies that were reserved for faithful Latter-day Saints. These ceremonies have little counterpart in today's church. The Kirtland temple still stands and is now owned by the Community of Christ, the second-largest branch of the Mormon faith tradition.

The prototype for the Mormon temples of today was built in Nauvoo, Illinois, in the 1840s, with construction beginning during Joseph Smith's lifetime. It was also in Nauvoo where temple-related Mormon theology blossomed. Joseph Smith did not witness the integration of the Latter-day Saints' temple concept into being a part of the faith as a whole, as it is today, but most of the ideas related to it were in place in Smith's theology before his death in 1844. The temple was later abandoned as the Mormons were forced to migrate westward.<sup>4</sup> The temple in Salt Lake City, completed in 1893, is still in operation and serves as one of the worldwide symbols of Mormonism (Buerger 1994).

Over the years, Mormon temple building has expanded outside the United States, just as Mormonism itself has expanded to become a more global religion. The first Latter-day Saints' temple in Europe was built in Zollikofen near Bern, Switzerland, in 1955, with another temple closely following in Newchapel, south of London, England, in 1958. The first Scandinavian Mormon temple was built just south of Stockholm in Västerhaninge, completed in 1985, with a second temple constructed in Copenhagen and dedicated for use in 2004. The Helsinki Finland temple,

4 The temple was later burned by arson and destroyed in a storm. It was recently reconstructed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and dedicated for use in 2002 as the Nauvoo Illinois temple.

located in the city of Espoo, thus became the third Mormon temple in the Nordic countries. The temple is used by Finnish, Baltic, Belarusian, and Russian Latter-day Saints.

The basic Mormon religious ceremonies of baptism and confirmation are performed in ordinary church meeting houses. Through these ceremonies a person becomes a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The ceremonies are not esoteric; anyone can attend a baptismal service, for example. Mormon temples, on the other hand, are used for higher religious ceremonies that are open only for insiders who live the teachings of their religion, who in the Church's parlance are 'temple-worthy'.<sup>5</sup> These ceremonies are performed for living Latter-day Saints for their own benefit and by them for and in behalf of deceased persons (Östman 2006).

The temple ceremonies are believed to be necessary for individuals to receive the highest blessings that God has to offer man, in effect eventual deification, or theosis. In order for God's justice to be fulfilled, those who have not been able to take part in these ceremonies during their lives on Earth, are extended the opportunity, in the spirit world after this life, to accept the ceremonies performed for and in their behalf. Since, for example, baptism by correct authority is considered necessary for salvation, it is performed in temples by living Mormons on behalf of deceased persons.

As was mentioned earlier, temples have become increasingly central in Mormon discourse and practice. Temples have also become one of the distinct outward identity markers of the Mormon Church and the Mormon experience. According to the late Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, they

. . . represent the ultimate in our worship. [The] ordinances become the most profound expressions of our theology. . . . There is need occasionally to leave the noise and the tumult of the world and step within the walls of a sacred house of God, there to feel His spirit in an environment of holiness and peace. (Hinckley 1995: 51.)

5 Being worthy to attend a Mormon temple entails, among other things, the payment of tithing, abstaining from coffee, tea, alcohol, and tobacco, treating one's family properly, professing belief in the church leaders' authority, and expressing belief in basic Mormon teachings. See Kimball 1998 for a discussion of how temple admission criteria have developed over time.

A ceremony known as 'the endowment' can be seen as the central ordinance of the temple. It is the initiation of a Latter-day Saint to mature citizenship in the Church, which is seen as the kingdom of God on Earth, or God's modern covenant people of Israel. The endowment ceremony consists of an audiovisual drama depicting the creation of the world, the story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden into the lone and dreary world, and the sending of heavenly messengers to guide Adam and Eve and their posterity back to God through Jesus Christ's atonement and their own obedience to God's commandments. During the ceremony a person makes specific promises to or covenants with God. Special clothing, key words and other symbols are used throughout the ceremony to communicate its theology and purposes to the participants. Those who have participated in the endowment ceremony thereafter at all times wear a special type of underclothing known as 'garments'. They function as reminders of the covenants made with God in the temple and as tokens of spiritual and even physical protection (McDannell 1995: 198–221).

The endowment ceremony in particular is esoteric in that it is not spoken of publicly, and in that its content or symbolism is not officially interpreted by the Church for the membership. Instead, individual Latter-day Saints are encouraged to seek their own inspiration and enlightenment in interpreting symbols and teachings. The endowment ceremony is not discussed in detail even with uninitiated insiders, that is, with Latter-day Saints who have not participated in the higher ceremonies of the temple. As a type of oral canon it carries social significance among those who have participated in the ceremony, with these individuals in practice becoming a type of core group within the Church, those who are 'endowed' (Flake 1998).

The endowment ceremony also involves a Masonic connection. Joseph Smith was initiated into the three degrees of Blue Lodge Freemasonry shortly before he introduced the Mormon ceremony in the spring of 1842. Some of the similarities to Freemasonry have been removed through changes to the endowment ceremony over the years. It seems likely that Joseph Smith saw fit to use some of the Masonic symbolism as teaching devices in communicating his own theology to his followers. However, the Masonic connection has been the subject of some controversy especially among theologically more conservative Latter-day Saints (Homer 1994).

The endowment ceremony contains explicit instructions concerning only a handful of ritual details that are not to be divulged or discussed outside the temple. In practice, however, Latter-day Saint individuals

and Church leaders have tended to extend the silence surrounding the temple to a substantially larger sphere of matters. Public discourse on Mormon temples thus ordinarily employs only the most general of terms. Consequently, especially Protestant Christians have criticized the Latter-day Saints by saying that these kinds of secret ceremonies have no place in Christianity. Latter-day Saints for their part have sought to avoid the pejorative connotations of secrecy by responding that their ceremonies are sacred, not secret. They are meant for all mankind, but one must be prepared in order to participate in them and to understand them. It would seem more consistent, however, to straightforwardly characterize some Latter-day Saint temple ceremonies as secret precisely because they are considered sacred.

### **Insider Perspectives**

With this background in place I will now move on to consider the insider perspective at the public open house of a Mormon temple. Latter-day Saints, with their views on sacred secrecy in mind, are presented with a challenge during such events. How can they present the temple publicly, openly, and intelligently, while at the same time seeking to preserve the temple's esoteric nature and not divulging too much of that which is considered too sacred to speak of publicly?

First and foremost the public open house at the Helsinki Finland temple was seen by the Latter-day Saints as a missionary opportunity. There was also a general hope for greater respect from society, a hope for prejudices to be swept away and for false information to be replaced with correct information. In Finland, where Mormon missionary work has met with very little success over the years, the goal was increased interest in Mormonism and an increased number of individuals who would accept Mormon baptism. The Holy Spirit was hoped to witness to the ontological truth of Mormon teachings and to touch people during their tour of the temple. While this was the ultimate goal, it seems that it was something mostly shared with insiders, not with the external media.

Tours during the public open house were conducted in groups of around ten to twenty people, led by one or two guides (see picture), beginning with a brief introductory video in a visitors' accommodation building adjacent to the temple. This was followed by a guided tour through the temple building proper, with the tour ending in a tent with refreshments and an opportunity to ask further questions and engage in private discussions.



A tour group waiting to enter the Helsinki Finland Mormon temple during its public open house. Photograph by the author.

One of the instructions given to the lay Mormon guides was to speak as little as possible and to let people look around, to feel the Spirit of God touch their hearts and convince them of the importance of what they saw and heard. The overriding purpose of the Latter-day Saints was not to present architectural feats but rather to present the function of the building with brief explanations and to let people gain an interest through what they heard, saw, and felt. In fact, instead of information on architectural details, most of the instructions given to the guides focused on how to best present the message of the Latter-day Saints.

One way to frame the Latter-day Saints' approach is the dictum of 'milk before meat', derived from the New Testament (Hebrews 12:11–14). Guides in the temple were discouraged from making references to veils, altars, or other such furnishings or details that might have appeared strange to the visitors. All of this seems geared towards removing a sense of otherness and presenting the Mormon temple as something natural. The trivialization of the otherness that the temple at a deeper level represents for many Finns can also be seen in some of the comments by Latter-day Saint officials. The temple was presented as a sacred, but also ordinary, building. A Latter-day Saint Public Affairs



official, for example, commented on nationwide television that 'No mysterious rituals are associated with going to the temple, but instead everything is very beautiful, simple, symbolic, and pure. And we would hope that this shroud of mystery can be taken away, and that is why we have this open house.' (Aamu-TV 2006.) As another example, the spokesman for the Mormon Church in Finland said concerning the temple that 'there is nothing secret there. We think there are sacred things there, and now we have the opportunity to show and talk about it to people.' (Päivän Peili 2006.)

It is clear that open house visitors were shown the temple as a building and told about the general ideas behind and content of Mormon temple ceremonies. They were not introduced to their safeguarded ritual aspects, however. Thus it may be questioned to what extent the foregoing characterizations are consistent and to what extent the esoteric actually is made exoteric at Mormon temple open houses. As the Latter-day Saints often strove to minimize feelings of otherness in the temple, did the visitors really gain an understanding of Mormon teachings and temples? Is it morally correct to trivialize the otherness of ceremonies that would often seem strange to outsiders and that sometimes seem strange even to uninitiated insiders as they participate in them for the first time? On the other hand, one can also ask how wise it would be to engage in highly detailed discussions of ceremonies that would require a good framework and grasp of Mormon doctrine to be understood in the first place. Is it thus best to give people 'milk' if they do not understand 'meat' or if they would be repulsed by the 'meat'? Be that as it may, discussions of 'meat' were not available to outsiders, no matter the level of their background knowledge.

On the other hand, one also does well to remember that the question of normality or strangeness is very much a matter of perspective. What is normal to one person is unusual to another, and what seem like mysterious rituals to one person are logical and deeply meaningful sacraments to another. Some feel that Mormons are being deceptive by presenting a standard Christian front and by toning down, or even seemingly denying the existence of doctrines, practices, and rituals that others may find offensive. But then again, some Mormons feel that they present themselves in a way that is honest and that the layman can understand, with more information to come after sincere preparation as a new member of the church.

## Outsider Perspectives

Among Finnish outsiders, Mormonism is often seen as part of 'the other'. Finland is a highly homogeneous country when it comes to religious matters—at least on paper—and Mormonism as a foreign-born religious movement has gathered its share of suspicions and negative opinions. According to the *Gallup Ecclesiastica* poll conducted in 2003, for example, 57 per cent of Finns had a negative opinion of the Mormons, with 8 per cent indicating a fairly positive or very positive opinion (Kääriäinen *et al.* 2005: 79). The *Youth Barometer* 2006 indicated that 40 per cent of Finns aged between 15 and 29 thought negatively of the Mormons, with 10 per cent viewing them positively (Myllyniemi 2006: 79).

Keeping the religious homogeneity of Finland and her citizens' small interest in organized religion in mind, the high number of visitors (about 56,000) to the new Mormon temple can be seen as quite surprising. The church's optimistic-sounding goal of 25,000 to 30,000 visitors was surpassed easily, and comparison was made in the media to the summer's vacation home fair in Koli, northern Finland, which about 38,000 people had visited. Equally surprising is the wide interest towards the temple in various kinds of media outlets. One could read stories of open house visits and descriptions of the Mormon church and its temple in anything from general newspapers and religious papers to special interest student magazines and even magazines on cleaning technology. It seems that the rare chance to peek into a foreign, strange, and esoteric world on 'home turf' was welcomed by the public.

When examining opinions one is struck by their wide variety. Some remarked on what they thought was the 'bling-bling Americanness' (Samsara 2006: 16) of the Mormon temple, or the felt absurdity of some of their experiences, whereas others reported being moved speechless by what they considered the peace, tranquillity, and beauty of the temple (Liahona 2007). Some people felt that the church's attempt to lower the threshold between traditional Christianity and Mormonism was dishonest, 'duplicate ecumenism', as one religious writer put it (Rusama 2006: 2), while others appreciated learning more about the Latter-day Saints and their religious views.

Some of the visitors found the temple to be a strange place. For some the place felt too American, even to the point of having to wonder whether other visitors' teeth were whitened (Harkas 2006: 6). The Americanness could be connected to things such as plastic flowers, deep carpets, and other decorations. One religious person remarked that 'for me it would take some getting used to calm down in the holiest

room that, with regards to its furnishings and style, reminds one of many Yankee hotel lobbies and meeting rooms . . .' (Körttiroomi 2006).

One student felt that the temple was 'an impressive Yankee-style spectacle' whose rooms brought to mind the American television series 'The Bold and the Beautiful' (Alitalo 2006: 4). Another student felt that the entrance to the temple was a secret route to the props of the same television series and considered the quiet moment in a room furnished with a large chandelier and artificial flowers to be absurd (Lindblom 2006: 9).

By contrast, a matter that was mentioned often, especially in feedback card comments, was a feeling of peace and tranquillity. In the comments, peace seems to be related to the temple building itself as a sacred space, not so much to the Mormon teachings attached thereto. Some of the comment cards in this vein read: 'Unbelievably beautiful and peaceful. Light, peace.' 'I was speechless. I will probably come again.' 'An experience and touch of the presence of the Highest.' 'Somehow one calmed down both mentally and physically. The feeling of stress and hurry eased. One could spend large amounts of time there.' 'It was interesting to get acquainted with the temple and its atmosphere, which oozes with peace and love.' 'In the sacred room I got goose flesh. I would have liked to stay for a longer time.' Latter-day Saints would attribute these kinds of feelings to the touch of God's spirit attesting to the ultimate significance of the temple in the divine plan; others may compare them for example to feelings of awe in front of nature.

Some visitors also commented on how the teachings attached to the temple touched them. One person wrote: 'An unbelievable experience. Something of the most beautiful that I have seen. The meaning of baptism and marriage had a deep effect on me.' Another remarked on the room where marriages are solemnized for eternity: 'The sealing room was an unforgettable experience which gave food for thought that perhaps death cannot separate us.' Some visitors would have liked to learn more about Mormonism. One wrote, for example: 'It would have been nice to hear more about details, for example about the baptismal ordinance.' Another hoped for clearer distinctions: 'More could have been said about the Mormon religion, for example how it differs from Lutheranism, etc.' (Liahona 2007.)

It is difficult to say why people's experiences varied so much. No background information is available in most comment makers' cases. In general, comments in the print media were more restrained, while feedback card comments or writings on internet sites were more forthright. The anonymity often related to the latter gives wider latitude and

freedom to describe both negative and positive experiences. In any case it is clear that people were not unanimous in their evaluations. In addition to feelings of interest, awe, and peace that the insiders hoped for, the outsiders also reported feelings of absurdity and of being puzzled. Again, all comments and descriptions were subjective, but nevertheless real to their originators. What is sensed and seen as spiritual by one outsider may be seen as something completely different by another.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The public open house at the Mormon temple in Espoo was a significant event in many respects. For the Latter-day Saints themselves it represented a symbolic coming of age of their church in Finland. It was for them an unprecedented opportunity to make their religion known to fellow Finns who have often been suspicious towards the Mormons. It was also significant in that something that is ordinarily hidden and esoteric became partly public, not through exposé as is often the case but rather through the church's own choosing. The Mormons themselves opened their temple and wanted to explain in a general manner their feelings concerning the temple and what happens there.

In sum it can be said that the public open house was literally an open *house*, not a time of revealing things that cannot be discussed by the Mormons at other times. It is thus pertinent to draw distinctions between which parts of the ordinarily esoteric were and were not made exoteric. The sacred temple structure, a closed space generally used only by insiders, was opened up for public viewing and touring. The deeper ritual and ideological content, however, was just as secret as before and was not discussed openly.

In the future, it would be beneficial to study and compare reactions to public open houses at Latter-day Saints' temples in other countries with a religious profile different from that of Finland. Timing is of the essence in gathering material, as open houses only occur once per temple, before it is dedicated.<sup>6</sup> It would also be instructive to compare public open houses at Mormon temples with similar events organized by other

6 Exceptions to this are some temples where extensive refurbishing projects have been undertaken. Some of those temples, such as the London England temple in 1992, have been opened for the public again before their re-dedication.

religions or societies, especially by those that are esoteric in nature, such as Freemasonry. What was specific to the reaction to Mormon temples and to the ways in which the insiders wanted to present themselves, and what is a more general reaction to peeks into foreign and esoteric worlds or a more general approach to organizing such an event? How common is the impulse to downplay or minimize a feeling of socio-cultural otherness and tension in these kinds of situations, for example?

Much has been said concerning the possible futures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some scholars feel that the church is on its way to becoming a world religion in that it seems to fulfil criteria that sociologists of religion have identified concerning the success of new religious movements (Stark 1984 and 2005). Other observers find that the church is tied too strongly to its original culture of the United States, and that before shedding those cultural attachments it will not be able to flourish significantly in foreign cultures throughout the world (Davies 2000: 241–67 and 2005; McDermott 2005).

At present, however, one thing seems certain. The emphasis on Latter-day Saints' temples in internal Mormon discourse and the number of public open houses held throughout the world puts more focus on Mormon temples as one particular example of esotericism. Mormonism's temple tradition can also be seen as the faith's ultimate identity marker and device of boundary maintenance. It differs from many other forms of esotericism in terms of its scope and purpose and in that it is institutionalized and strictly controlled. At the same time, increasing numbers of individuals come in contact with it at least superficially through their Mormon friends or through public open houses such as the one held in Espoo.

Organized religion seems to be dwindling in many western countries. Will the feelings of peace and tranquillity that outsider visitors feel at events such as Mormon temple open houses spur them to further interest and involvement in organized religion? Or will those feelings be something of a more fleeting character, something that will be looked for elsewhere in the global marketplace of spirituality? Only time will tell, but at least for Latter-day Saint insiders, temples are essential world-view-enlarging components and will in all likelihood continue to play an important role.

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