

Mormonism and the Fold

by Scott Kenney

Mormons have long held ambivalent views of other churches and their adherents. In times of conflict and persecution, or when they felt the need to justify their ways, Mormons have sometimes condemned and often ridiculed the beliefs and practices of others. Joseph Smith reported that "all their creeds were an abomination" in God's sight, their "professors were all corrupt," and they drew near to God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. to Parley Pratt "so-called Christianity" was "the mystery of iniquity, the great whore of all the earth. It has brought the whole earth under a lasting curse . . . in consequence of which the earth is destined to be burned, and few men left."⁶ John Taylor scoffed at non-Mormon religious thought: "I consider that if ever I lost any time in my life, it was while studying the Christian theology. Sectarian theology is the greatest tom-foolery in the world."² And Brigham Young concurred: "I could put on paper all the knowledge of salvation that all the religious sects possess, and put that paper into a snuff-box, and never miss the room it occupied."³

Yet by the turn of the century what little knowledge the "sectarians" might have possessed was seen as a threat. Fearing the inroads of liberal Protestant theology and "higher criticism" of the Bible, Church school administrators banned all non-Mormon books as texts in religion classes, even though Mormon books on the Bible were virtually non-existent. As late as 1958 modern Biblical scholars were categorically denounced as "men without faith, without revelation, without the gift of the Holy Ghost, without a knowledge of the plan of salvation," whose conclusions are based "on speculative evolution, on speculative archeological deductions, and on pure imagination."⁴ More recently young Mormons studying religion at universities are often asked with dismay: "Why on earth would you want to do that when you have *the Gospel* right here?"

On the other hand, even Mormon arrogance has limitations: God did not totally absent himself from European Christendom, for there was Columbus, and the Reformers. Carefully selected excerpts from their writings are quoted daily in our visitor centers. And of course the signers of the Declaration of Independence and framers of the Constitution were inspired, even

though some doubted the divinity of Jesus Christ. Naturally, since most early Mormons were converted from other churches, some truth was acknowledged to exist there: "I have heard Elders preach," said Brigham Young "that there was not a sectarian priest—not a man living upon the earth, or that had lived upon it . . . from the time the Priesthood was taken from the earth until Joseph Smith came, but what went straight to hell fire when he died. . . . This is a mistaken idea. There is only one thing which the people lack on this point, in order that their traditions and former education may do them good, and that is to know how to sever the good from the bad."⁵ Because he knew how to sever the good from the bad, John Taylor was able to be ecumenical: "I was going to say I am not a Universalist, but I am, and I am also a Presbyterian, and a Roman Catholic, and a Methodist, in short, I believe in every true principle that is imbibed by any person or sect, and reject the false. . . . The Catholics have many pieces of truth; so have the Protestants, the Mahometans, and Heathens. . . . I will take out the truth and leave the error."⁶

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non-Mormons without sacrificing
doctrines or values.

Shortly after the turn of the century, as Mormons began to enter the mainstream of American life, Church leaders discovered that the amount of truth contained in other churches had increased: "The theology of the world has changed since the introduction of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," reported B. H. Roberts. "You can find no minister today to voice from his pulpit the doctrine of infant damnation. You can get no minister today to deny the possibility of continued revelation from God. . . . These modifications in the Christian world's theology . . . have been due chiefly to the truths God revealed through Joseph Smith the prophet; and thousands of eloquent tongues and pens have been employed teaching these truths which have led to the correction of many errors in religion, without knowing the origin of their doctrine."⁷

Recognizing that among modern Biblical scholars were many honest Christians whose years of study might benefit Latter-day Saints, the Church educational system in the mid-1930s sponsored several lectures by prominent scholars from the Chicago Divinity School for seminary and institute teachers. Subsequently, the Church encouraged several of its teachers to further their education at Chicago Divinity School and financially subsidized several who later became prominent in Church education.⁸ Within the last five years, approximately three dozen LDS students have enrolled in graduate religious studies programs at major universities and divinity schools.⁹

"I am a Presbyterian, and a Roman Catholic, and a Methodist . . ."

—John Taylor

There is much of a religious nature Latter-day Saints can learn from non-Mormons. Exercising the discernment suggested by Brigham Young, important insights can be gleaned without compromising Mormon doctrines or sacrificing values. Because Mormons have traditionally remained aloof from other denominations, present opportunities are great. In the near future we may be motivated as much by necessity as by opportunity, for the increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds of Mormons abroad, and the rapidity of change in a pluralistic America may bring home the need for and value of ecumenical exchange and understanding.

"Wo be unto him that sayeth: We have received, and we need no more! . . . Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea . . . and I bring forth my word unto . . . all the nations of the earth? Know ye not that . . . I remember one nation like another?"¹⁰ This warning of Nephi is usually applied by Mormons to "Gentiles" who refuse to accept modern revelation, but it is equally applicable to Mormons who ignore religious experience outside their own tradition. Such religious exclusiveness runs contrary to the idea that *all* of God's children come into mortality with the light of Christ and that their life experience has spiritual significance beyond "getting a physical body."

In Doctrine and Covenants 35:3-6 we have the example of Sidney Rigdon, who *before* he embraced Mormonism "was sent forth, even as John, to prepare the way before me . . . and thou knewest it not. Thou didst baptize by water unto repentance." Before he had even heard of Mormonism, Sidney's baptisms were apparently as valid in God's sight as John the Baptist's.

If, in fact, God remembers one nation like unto another," we might reasonably expect to find many

Sidney Rigdons in the world, implementing a divine plan for diverse groups, nations and races. When the day comes that all will have "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all,"¹¹ we may be better able to appreciate others' experiences in context, and thereby better understand our own peculiar place in the divine purpose.

At the April 1902 General Conference, B. H. Roberts remarked, "I contemplated some of the movements that are taking place outside of the lines of our Church membership. I called to mind the promise of the Lord that He would bring to pass His great purposes among all the nations of the earth. And while the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is given a prominent part in this great drama of the last days, it is not the only force nor the only means that the Lord has employed to bring to pass those things of which His prophets in ancient times have testified."

To assist those interested in overcoming our "Mormon myopia," *Sunstone* proposes a series of brief articles dealing with theological, historical, and social issues which bear on Christian concerns, from a non-Mormon religious perspective. The first in this series (below), discusses the presidential address of Raymond E. Brown at the convention of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in conjunction with the American Schools of Oriental Research and the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco, December 28-31, 1977. Father Brown's lecture "'Other Sheep Not of this Fold': The Johannine Perspective on Diversity in Christianity in the Later First Century," is considered in connection with twentieth century Mormon attitudes toward the diversity of religious experience. In the next issue, this column will deal with "liberation theology" and the response of Catholic and Protestant churches to the human problems of third world countries. Each essay will be followed by a capsulized update of recent events in religion. The series will continue or end as reader interest warrants. Your comments and submissions are welcome.

NOTES

1. *Journal of Discourses* 3:41.

JD 5:240.

2. *JD* 5:240.

3. *JD* 5:343.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, pp. 353, 354.

5. *JD* 3:204.

6. *JD* 1:1-5.

7. B. H. Roberts, April 1903 *Conference Report*, p. 14. See also the October 1904 Conference addresses of John W. Taylor, Reed Smoot, Hyrum M. Smith and B. H. Roberts. For a recent revival of this view see Truman G. Madsen, "Are Christians Mormon?" *BYU Studies*, Autumn 1974.

8. See Russell B. Swensen, "Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School," *Dialogue*, Spring 1973.

9. A feature article on these students is projected for the next issue of *Sunstone*.

10. 2 Nephi 28:27; 29:7.

11. Ephesians 4:4-6.