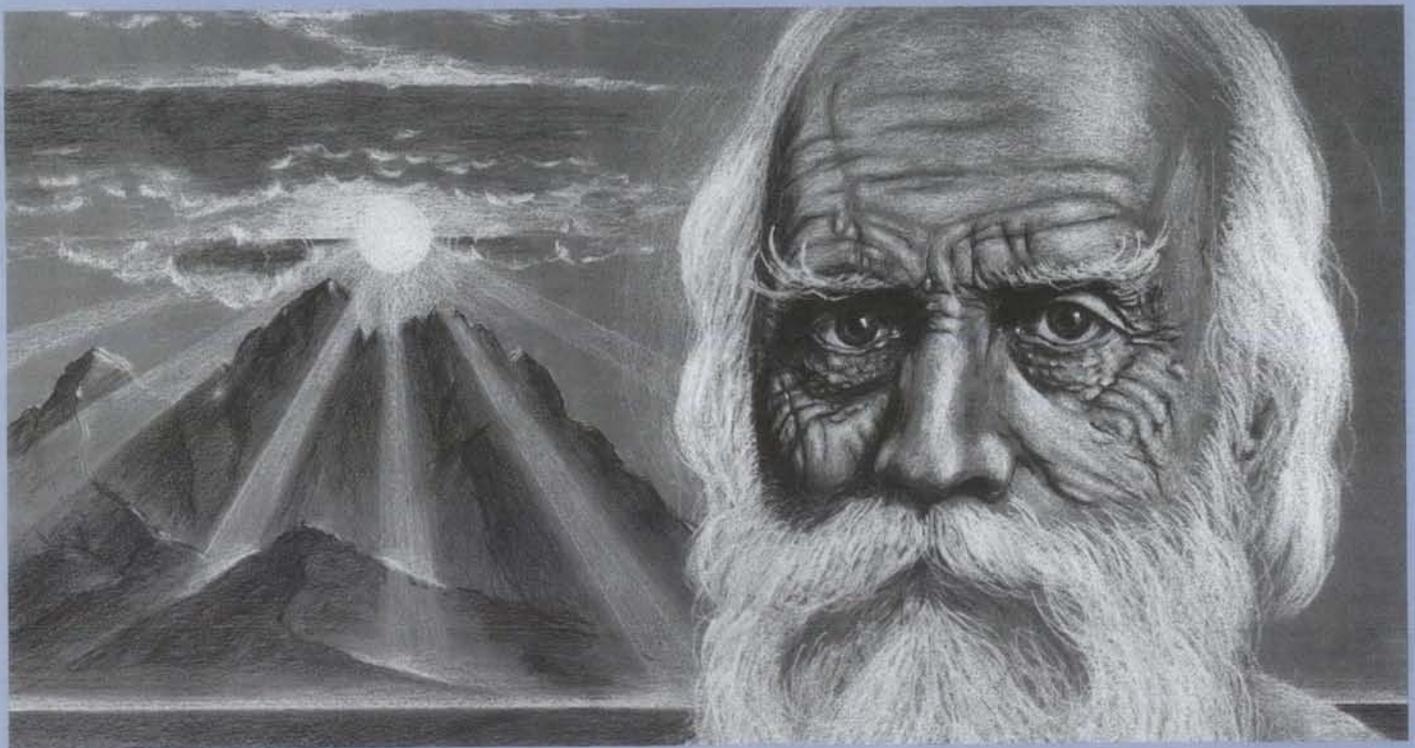


PRIESTHOOD PHILOSOPHY



In his personality, Joseph Smith possessed two attributes of mind. The one made him responsive to the changing processes of his environment, to the novel ideas about man, his physical, moral, and spiritual nature; the other was an interest in old ideas and social traditions stimulated by reading the Bible, the Old Testament in particular. The one caused his youthful imagination to look into the future to predict coming events; the other led him to turn to the remote past, its history, mythology, traditions, institutions—magnifying the ideas of all the patriarchs, priests, and prophets of the Ancient Hebrews. Out of the one he developed the dynamic and creative spirit of the prophet; out of the other, the conservative and the authoritative qualities of the priest. These two directions of his interests and imagination, conflicting and

contradictory as they were, did not disturb him. He had within himself the vision of the prophet and the wisdom and authority of the high-priest. As prophet, he was revelator, a writer of new scripture. As a high-priest he was the authoritative interpreter of the scripture, and president of his Church.

These two facets of his personality and thinking have become deeply embedded in the institutions of the Church and in the mind of his people. The tension between these two principles (the prophetic and the priestly), the dynamic and the conservative, the inspiration toward the new and the stabilizing and the authoritative power of the old, constitutes the problem of twentieth century Mormonism. Herewith lies its strength as also its limitations and its frustrations.

Through the period of the 500 years before Christ, rituals and religious ceremonies surpassed in emphasis that of the prophetic. That period of religious "thought and feeling" was introduced by Ezekiel and its religious culture is known as Judaism. It is of special importance in the study of the priestly philosophy of Mormonism because of similarities in doctrines. Ezekiel and Joseph Smith placed rituals and morals side by side and of equal spiritual value. This was in clear opposition to the teachings of the higher prophets and of Jesus. It was a dangerous precedent for the Mormons no less than for the Ancient Jews. Through the five hundred years B.C. the ceremonial and the priestly

Dr. Ephraim E. Erickson, prominent University of Utah professor of philosophy, developed early the ability to analyze and examine the stress inherent in Mormon theology and doctrine. Serving for a number of years during the 1930s on the Mutual Improvement Association General Board, his remarks bear an authenticity born of personal experience and deeply felt involvement. This essay is Erickson's address, "Priesthood and Philosophy," delivered before the Utah Academy of Arts and Sciences and later published in the Utah Academy Proceedings, Vol. 34 (1948-49); the address in its entirety is reprinted in this issue of Sunstone.

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philosophy gained ascendance over that of the prophetic, until even the greatest of the prophets were as voices from the wilderness.

In Mormonism today, although the ethical (the prophetic aspects of its religion) has some voice, the "priestly school of thought" is dominant and so stresses ritual that morality would appear to be relatively unimportant. In fact, ethics is sometimes referred to as "merely ethics."

Joseph Smith, like Ezekiel, was a curious mixture of the priestly and the prophetic. Both men may well be called "priest in the prophet's mantle." As prophets, each initiated a new religious movement, and as priests each gave his religion a stabilizing ritual, and fixed institutions and doctrines. Each established a social order in which "holiness" became attached to all its phases, its priestly functions, its ceremonials, and places of worship. "Zion building" and "temple building" were great objectives of the "ancient" as well as of the "modern Prophet." Joseph Smith said that he was a "high priest, like unto Moses," and yet he must have learned more from Ezekiel. Certainly, we know more about Ezekiel and his time than we do of the prehistoric Moses.

Ezekiel, the ancient prophet and priest, speaking for his God, said: "On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into the land that I had searched out for them, land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands." (Ezekiel, 20:6)

Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, said: "We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes. That Zion will be built upon this (American) continent. . ." (Tenth Article of Faith)

His was not an ideal of a heavenly order as pictured by some Christians, but an ideal order to be established on earth as was the case with the Jewish priests.

And I hold forth and deign to give unto you greater riches, even a land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey, upon which there shall be no curse when the Lord cometh:

And I will give it to you for a land of your inheritance if you seek with all your heart.

And this shall be my covenant with you, ye shall have it for the land of your inheritance, and for the inheritance of your children forever, while the earth shall stand, and ye shall possess it again in eternity, no more to pass away. (D. & C. 38:18-20)

The two prophetic-priests expressed in common another great ideal principle.

Ezekiel writes: "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." (Ezekiel 18:20)

Joseph Smith in the Second Article of Faith declares: "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression."

Priesthood as Philosophy

Our interest here is not in titles that men may carry in the order of priestly authority, nor in the office one may hold in an ecclesiastical system. We are concerned with priesthood as a philosophy of life and of religion, and particularly as it is distinguished from the prophetic which is also here regarded as a philosophy. A man may be called a high priest and yet have neither the wisdom nor strength of that high office. He may be called prophet and yet have none of the appropriate mental qualities. Incidentally, it may be admitted also that the name philosopher does not make a man philosophical. Clothes do not make the man; nor titles make a thinker.

But we must be on our guard. To speak of priesthood as a philosophy may annoy the prophets in Mormonism, and outrage its high priests. And it may, I fear, likewise trouble the local philosophers.

In recent years the leaders in Mormonism have written many books, a few of which are prophetic and prospective in tone, but the many are priestly and retrospective. The standards of truth as well as of righteousness are deeply rooted in the traditions of ancient scripture. In the present decade two books of paramount significance for our purpose are *Gospel Ideals* by President David O. McKay and *Man, His Origin and Destiny* by President Joseph Fielding Smith of the Council of the Twelve. The one is written in the prophetic, the other in the priestly spirit and philosophy. The one points toward the future and emphasizes the ideals that should govern the people in matters of education, social welfare, and moral conduct, and in their missionary activities at home and abroad. The other stresses points of doctrine, right beliefs, correct rituals, obedience to the laws of God as essential to salvation. President McKay makes use of the New Testament and particularly the teachings of Christ; but he draws also from literature of many sources, including the writings of Emerson and William James, as well as from the standard works of the Church. Especially he uses those of ethical character. President Joseph Fielding Smith makes use of the material of the Old Testament and such material of the New Testament as treats theological doctrine and rituals. In the interpretation of the scripture, ancient and "modern," and in definition of orthodox ideas, God's commandments, he is priest, par excellence. His standard of truth is "the whole truth," no "half truth," his conception of righteousness is the "keeping of God's commandments," including all the required rituals. Interpretation and evaluation of any of these are not for man but for God, through the higher order of the priesthood.

The priestly philosophy of Mormonism presents an invitation to a form of knowledge that is supposedly more dependable, certainly less difficult, and more enjoyable than the slow and laborious efforts of science and philosophy. We are taught through the priesthood that, since there can be no conflict between truth revealed from

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heaven and truth revealed through the research of man, we should be humble and prayerful and accept the truth revealed directly—truth that requires no mediating theories that change from time to time, but that, on the contrary, is eternally true. (Smith, Joseph Fielding, *Man, His Origin and Destiny*, p. 1). Read the scripture and follow the instruction of men high in the priesthood and the greatest truths of God, of the origin of the world, and man's life and destiny are reliably obtained. If the Old Testament is unclear on some of these great issues we need only read the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, or the Pearl of Great Price. If there are problems that still remain, we may with confidence wait for new revelations that will come through God's servants.

Law and the Priesthood

To be a good man, according to the priestly philosophy, means to keep God's commandments, all of them, without distinction or attempt at evaluation. This position has been clearly and authoritatively expressed by President J. Reuben Clark, Jr.

We may not choose the particular thing that we like and ignore everything else, nor submerge nor subdue it. . . . We may not, I repeat, say to ourselves, nor to one another, that this is the important thing or that is the important thing, the others being non-essential or unessential. We have no right to draw distinctions and differences among the commandments of God. . . I do not read anywhere that the Lord has given to us, individually, the right to say which is the most important. We should seek to keep all of the commandments. I repeat in the language of today, the Gospel is 'one package.' (Annual Conference, April 1955, pp. 10-11)

President Stephen L. Richards endorses the stand taken by President Clark that the "power and blessing" of the Holy Priesthood which we bear depend upon the "keeping of all the commandments, . . . not a few" but then adds: "I look upon the priesthood as an instrumentality of service" to one's family and to his fellowmen. And "the more it is used the more potent it becomes within the service of the Lord who ministers under the power of the Holy Priesthood." (Ibid., p. 12).

President Clark and President Richards were trained in law and tend strongly toward the legalistic interpretation of religion, a philosophy not unlike that of the Ancient Jewish priestly point of view. Unlike the prophetic spirit, that is spontaneous and creative, the priestly philosophy leaves little room for freedom of choice or for the individual's own judgment and evaluation. One either obeys the commandment of God (the law) or disobeys it. This is simple and practical from the standpoint of the judge administering the law, and for the man who holds the higher priesthood and speaks for God; but for one who

lives in America in the twentieth century and believes sincerely that he himself has a responsibility, not only in observing the law but in the evaluation of the law—for him, it is undemocratic and non-American, as a philosophy of ethics.

Because of the long history and extensive use of the terms "priestly" and "prophetic," they have become ambiguous, and a brief clarification of their meanings at this stage may be essential. I am using them in the contrasting sense. For instance:

1. Both the priest and the prophet have religious functions; but the one conserves the acquired social values, while the other advances higher ideals and modifies existing institutions in the light of new conditions.

2. The priests are concerned with rituals and beliefs, the prophets with moral living and with ethical principles.

3. The priests turn to the past for religious and moral authority. The prophet thinks in terms of the present and of future possibilities. For the one the Lord has spoken, for the other the Lord is speaking.

4. With the priests, unity and conformity are the major concerns. With the prophets, it is personal initiative and social reconstruction.

5. The priests are intolerant toward those scientists and philosophers whose thinking and generalizations appear to disturb the established institutions and beliefs. The prophets are concerned with the intellectual processes only as they effect moral living and ethical ideals.

6. Human conduct is judged right or wrong by the priest in terms of the law and the sacred books. The prophet does this also but is especially concerned with the effect of ideas and conduct on human beings. "The Sabbath is for man, not man for the Sabbath."

7. The priests are concerned with their own group and with the peculiar doctrine of the Church. The prophet will stress the universals in morals and religious faith.

8. The priest reads only the sacred scripture. The prophet finds the will of God expressed by the great poets, the educators, and the philosophers.

Religious traditions deserve attention only in so far as they influence our culture, favorably or unfavorably. If they as rudiments of thought or standards of behavior advance clear thinking and better social and personal conduct, they may well be regarded as sacred and carefully conserved. But if they stand in the way of intellectual and moral advancement they should be critically examined. And here is one of the major functions of philosophy.

Those who believe that philosophy as a critical process of thought has a role to play in our civilization will readily recognize its function in connection with the priestly traditions in our religious community. The way in which these traditions affect our religious and moral thinking is all too obvious, but why they do is not so easy to understand. Each would justify a lengthy treatment but here we need merely state them as propositions that deserve study.

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1. Sacred books, which presume to provide the most reliable information about man, his nature, his origin, and the world in which he lives, and which are presumed to have been written more than two thousand years ago in a manner which gives them an authority and finality that shuts out all criticism as irreverent—such books stand in the way of progressive change morally no less than intellectually. Why do they continue their hold upon men's minds? I submit one answer: because, in the religious community in which we live, it is morally right to believe, and morally wrong to doubt.

2. In the priestly philosophy of Mormonism as of Ancient Judaism, rituals and morals are regarded of equal importance, with the effect that rituals and ceremonies tend to become ends in themselves, rather than means to moral and social purposes. Why does this take place? My answer, again briefly and probably dogmatically: rituals and ceremonies are psychologically more attractive, more God-like, not so commonplace as "mere ethics."

3. Moral laws are regarded as legalistic commandments rather than as ethical principles, which are creations of reflective thought. The priestly emphasis on the virtues of obedience and humility may be responsible for this limitation of the ethical thinking.

4. The eschatological and the apocalyptic interpretation of the physical and historical, the final ending of all things, and the faith in miracles has tended to discourage scientific effort and confuse common sense. This type of thinking continues probably because it requires less study and scientific devotion.

5. Narrow and exclusive attitude toward one's own group and an unsympathetic attitude toward outside groups. This, I suspect, is an emotional holdover from the days of intense conflict with non-Mormon groups in Missouri and Illinois.

Making the priestly philosophy available for objective and critical examination encounters many difficulties. There is the difficulty of obtaining not only a perspective that will include the ancient Jewish traditions and the new interpretations added by the priestly leadership in Mormonism, but also one that will include all religious concepts with their traditional background, and the religious concepts growing out of the scientific spirit in contemporary life. Even such basic terms as prophet, priesthood, revelation, commandment, carry diverse meaning making it necessary to pause in our discussion for "station identification"—to make sure whether one is talking to a priest or a prophet; whether the source of the revelation is from the God of Heaven or the God of the moral conscience; whether the "commandment" comes from without or from within.

These are not mere academic inquiries. They concern

the clarity or confusion in thought about the values of life, the moral and the religious. For example, let us take the term "faith" which is constantly employed in priestly philosophy and the term "intellectual integrity" employed in the treatment of proper behavior in scientific and philosophic discussion and inquiry. In the realm where the priesthood dominates, a good man is a man of faith, who humbly and uncritically accepts the fundamental beliefs of his Church. Feeling may be the better judge of truth and error, than is reason. In the realm of scientific inquiry, such an approach to any vital problem is not only misleading and dangerous, but for this very reason is, in spirit, morally wrong. Faith, as well as all other priestly concepts, must be redefined in the light of the realistic temper of today and in terms of future realistic possibilities. Without such precaution, communication between the priest and the philosopher breaks down and criticism on an objective basis becomes meaningless.

Briefly then to treat objectively the priestly philosophy requires criticism and exposure of its meaning and limitations in the light of the age and culture in which it serves to influence thought and behavior. The priestly culture has served as a stabilizing factor, conserving values and maintaining a unity of purpose in community life. Because it was not intellectually critical, the priestly philosophy tends to overemphasize non-moral matters to the neglect of the moral, the past to the neglect of the present and future. This called forth the criticism of the more spiritual and creative thinking and idealizing of the prophets. Working together, these two agencies developed and conserved for our modern life a great heritage. The Mormon community has accepted and elaborated the priestly institutions and traditions but appears to have neglected the critical and creative contributions of the higher prophets. The priestly spirit appears to have swallowed so much of the Ancient beliefs and philosophies that it has little or no stomach for such ideas as the "historical sense," "the genetic development," of moral ideals, the "evolution of man" and of social institutions, all of which concepts are essential to the American way of life of the twentieth century. The Mormon community has priests by the hundreds of thousands, but few prophets; and with few exceptions, their prophets have been more priestly in their philosophy than prophetic. It needs more prophets of the kind that can and are willing to employ the modern tools of thought and to employ ethical standards that are adequate to the age of science and democracy. Such prophets will not underestimate the spiritual contributions of the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries B.C., nor will they disregard the priestly conception of religion that developed during and after the Exile, with its loyalty, courage, and devotion to its people and institutions.