

Editors' Note

This article was given at the 1979 Sunstone Theological Symposium held in August.

Individually and collectively Mormons must be among the most optimistic and confident people on earth. Begrudgingly they may concede that "the natural man is an enemy to God," but the eternal truth upon which virtually every Mormon will wax eloquent is the Mormon distillate, "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become."

The collective corollary is "As earth is, heaven once was; and as heaven is, earth will become." Heaven on earth is Zion, and Mormons are, if possible, even more confident of Zion, or collective salvation, than they are of their own personal salvation. As enunciated in the 1979-80 Sunday School manual, "At the very beginning of this last dispensation the Lord made it abundantly clear that through the tribulations and calamity that he foresaw and foretold and that we now see coming upon us, there would be a people who, through acceptance and obedience to the gospel, would be able to recognize and resist the powers of evil, build up the promised Zion, and prepare to meet the Christ and be with him in the blessed millennium. And we know further that it is possible for every one of us, who will, to have a place among those people." (Marion G. Romney, October 1966 General Conference, cited in *Doctrine & Covenants and Church History*, 1979, p. 4.)

Those people, of course, are the Latter-day Saints, to whom has been given the responsibility of establishing Zion on earth. As Brigham Young put it:

The Lord has done his share of the work; he has surrounded us with everything with which to build up, beautify and glorify the Zion of the last days, and it is our business to mould these elements to our wants and necessities, according to the knowledge we now have and the wisdom we can obtain from the Heavens through our faithfulness. In this way will the Lord bring

again Zion upon the earth, and in no other.

... There is not one thing wanting in all the works of God's hands to make a Zion upon the earth when the people conclude to make it. We can make a Zion of God on earth at our pleasure, upon the same principle that we can raise a field of wheat, or build and inhabit... What we shall be, depends upon ourselves... When we conclude to make a Zion, we will make it.

(JD 9:282, 23 February 1962.)

The theme of the coming year's Sunday School course is establishing Zion, and as the manual notes, Zion has not yet been fully established on earth. That, it is said, will be realized when Church members conform their lives to the principles of the Gospel as taught by the Church. It will not be the product of any political, economic, or social reforms achieved outside Church direction, for the keys of the Kingdom have been committed to the Church and its Priesthood leadership. Thus, collective, as well as personal salvation is mediated by the Church. As one recent General Conference speaker declared, salvation "comes only through the Church itself as the Lord established it."

It was the Church that was organized for the perfecting of the Saints.

It was the Church that was given for the work of the ministry.

It was the Church that was provided to edify the body of Christ, as Paul explained to the Ephesians.

Therefore it was made clearly manifest that salvation is in the Church, and of the Church, and is obtained only through the Church. (Mark E. Petersen, 8 April 1970.)

Christ having once wrought the infinite and eternal atonement, the Church now assumes the central role in the salvation history of individuals and of the world. And inasmuch as the earthly mediator of salvation seems much more accessible than our heavenly mediator, the Church is often the determinative factor in

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL MORALITY IN A RELIGIOUS CONTEXT: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Mormon Experience

Scott Kenney



Courtesy of Utah State Historical Society

the moral decisions of its members. The Holy Spirit may not always speak with indisputable clarity, and Church pronouncements are often more definitive. Whether it be a question of homosexuality, ERA, liquor by the drink, right to work laws, where to give charitable contributions, what type of literature and art ought to be available—in virtually every field of moral concern, the Church has the answers. Often more answers than there are questions.

And in this age of uncertainty, answers are at a premium, which may help explain the popularity of Mormonism and other conservative churches in our day. The number of converts rises steadily, new stakes are organized weekly, and new missions quarterly. Who knows how many temples are presently planned or under construction? Genealogy, family home evening, sports and entertainment and political celebrities keep Mormonism constantly in the public eye. By most standards, Mormonism is "successful."

But all is not well in Zion. I understand that a recent unpublished survey conducted by the Church revealed that fully half of its baptized members *never* attend Church. Fewer than half of Mormon marriages in the United States, where temples are most available, are performed in a temple. (Arrington & Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 1979, p. 189.) And for all its emphasis on the family, the percentage of temple marriages declines and the Mormon divorce rate rises. (Ibid.)

While it is often claimed that growth is the Church's biggest problem, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the Church has its share of social problems—homosexuality, drug abuse, mental illness, teenage pregnancies, juvenile delinquency, battered spouses, and abused children.

One would be hard pressed to demonstrate that to-

day's Saints are any closer to perfection individually than were the Saints who pushed handcarts across the plains more than a hundred years ago. Or that as a people, we are any closer to the true Zion than were the participants of Zion's Camp or the citizens of the State of Deseret.

Why? If, as Brigham Young asserted, we have been given everything we need to make Zion ourselves, *why*, a hundred and fifty years after the founding of the Church, are we still struggling to prepare a righteous people worthy to receive the Lord?

Traditionally, the response has been to emphasize areas of improvement, encourage members to ever-higher levels of personal behavior, with a gentle reminder that the Lord does things in his own time and his own way. All of which may be right and proper, but still there is something lacking. That something, I believe, is the unwillingness to consider the *human* nature of the Church and deal realistically with the forces inherent in it as a social institution. To say that the Church may be part of the problem is not to deny the divinity of its mission nor the inspiration of its leaders. It is only to recognize that any program, however inspired, will be flawed to the extent that it requires human participation. And, as Brigham Young pointed out, Mormonism requires a great deal of human participation.

Mormons, of course, are not the only Christians oriented towards establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Social Gospel movement cut across denominational boundaries to initiate social welfare programs in the inner cities, organize unions, urge political, economic, and social reform, and in general promote social justice and Christianity. Like Mormons, the social gospelers were optimistic about human nature and the

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ability of humankind to establish a righteous society.

It was not until 1932 that the theological assumptions underlying the Social Gospel optimism (and by inference, the Mormon "Zion") were seriously challenged. In that year Reinhold Niebuhr, former pastor of a church in the slums of Detroit and professor of religion at Union Theological Seminary, published his classic *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

Niebuhr's thesis in a nutshell: Individual human beings are capable of considering the interests of others above their own self-interest. But it is much more difficult, if not impossible, for *groups* of individuals to recognize a good higher than their own. Individuals may sacrifice their own interests for the sake of others, but institutions will always act in their own self-interest, often to the detriment of others.

Niebuhr's observations are astute, his logic compelling: Human beings are finite beings. Their very existence is contingent on forces of nature and history beyond their control. Their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual powers are limited. Yet they do have the ability to transcend themselves. Standing outside themselves, as it were, and viewing their own limitations and ultimate death, human beings become anxious. They do not want to die, do not want to be so restricted in capacity, so selfish in perspective.

Thus, much of human endeavor can be seen as an attempt to deny or overcome the finiteness of the human condition. That impulse takes many forms. At one extreme is the Nietzschean will to power that seeks to endow the self with ultimate importance, good, and power. The self is indulged in amassing vast fortunes, great political or military power, or in the cultivation of personal skills and knowledge. At the other end is the loss of self through identification with some "higher

accomplishment, of pride and self-righteousness secretly seduce the giver. Or the private act becomes public and the fame, honor, and glory corrupt the most generous until "they have no reward."

But these are problems of personal morality with which we are all familiar. It is in the nexus of personal and social morality that Niebuhr makes his most astute observations, and it is at this point that his critique becomes relevant to the Mormon enterprise of building Zion.

Social institutions are formed to serve the needs and interests of their constituents. Labor unions exist to advance the security and welfare of workers. Corporations are formed to promote the financial interests of stockholders. Nations are to protect and advance the welfare of their citizens. Churches fill the spiritual and social needs of their members.

Through coordination of individual effort, social institutions provide far greater resources than are at the disposal of the solitary person. That increase in power, of course, may be used for good or evil purposes. And it is Niebuhr's contention that institutions are much more vulnerable to the temptations of immoral behavior than are individuals.

For in spite of their greater size and strength, institutions, like individuals, are finite and contingent. No institution has all power, wisdom, or goodness, and no institution is immune from attack from without, decay from within, and eventual death. Hence the tendency of institutions, like individuals, to work for ever-increasing power, prestige, and dominion.

However, unlike individuals, institutions lack the power of self-transcendence. It is not the nature of institutions to sacrifice their own interests for the "higher good." What government agency has ever volunteered

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good" such as a political cause, a religious movement, humanitarian enterprise, or artistic creation.

Thus, in the attempt to overcome the limitations of their own finite existence, human beings engage in countless activities ranging from the most selfish and immoral behavior to the highest planes of moral and altruistic life. Niebuhr's concern is not so much with the blatantly immoral renegades as with the moral but flawed human beings who discover, like Paul, that "the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." (Romans 7:19.)

When moral individuals step back and view the world with self-transcending eyes, they see that *good* goes beyond self-interest, in fact often requires the sacrifice of short-term selfish interests for the long-range benefit of others. But when the moral individual leaves the realm of contemplation and engages the actual world, it turns out that the purest motives are often mixed with self-interest. The alms and service given in secret soon become known, and the feelings of ac-

to cut its budget, reduce its staff, or curtail its scope of operations to make government more efficient? What union has asked for less than it thought it could get to help curb inflation? What nation will freely cut back on its own consumption of materials in order to reduce demand and lower the price of commodities so that less developed countries can afford them? Lacking the power or the will to sacrifice its own interests for a greater good, an institution will always act selfishly, often to the detriment of others.

Secondly, institutions are much more susceptible to self-deception than are individuals. The corporate self provides a convenient alter ego behind which the selfish interests of individuals can hide. A President argues that what is good for the President is good for the presidency, is good for the country. Therefore, the good of the country requires destruction of justice. It is much easier for the President to condone his own illegal activities if he can persuade himself they are in the "national interest." A Senator receives campaign contribu-

tions from a foreign government which he knows to be corrupt and a gross violator of human rights. That nation also happens to be anti-communist. Is the Senator's support for the regime motivated by self-interest, national security, or some higher good? The interests of the institution often provide an excuse for otherwise "moral" individuals to feather their own nests.

Finally, the corporate self is vulnerable to attack from within as well as from without. This provides the occasion for the suppression of dissidents and the oppression of minorities. Thus, freedom of expression in the Soviet Union is a privilege which must be subservient to the "higher good" of social stability and national security. In many neighborhoods of this country the rights of a minority to purchase a home must be circumscribed by the "higher good" of neighborhood property values.

To recapitulate: Institutions as moral agents are more prone to immoral behavior than are individuals because lacking the capacity for self-transcendence, they will always seek their own self-interest, often to the detriment of others. Since the institution is perceived by its members as a "higher good," its actions will be more readily excused than similar selfish actions performed by individuals. And when personal and corporate interests coincide, the opportunities for moral self-deception are multiplied.

What application can be made of Niebuhr's critique to the Mormon quest for Zion?

As a missionary, I was once asked to chauffeur the mission president and a visiting General Authority to the airport. En route, the president evidently decided to demonstrate how thoroughly his elders understood the order of the Priesthood. "Elder Kenney, if your mission president asked you to do something you didn't agree with, would you do it?" It made me uncomfortable, but

Church. The president was very emphatic about that." "But I don't belong to the such-and-such group." "Well, that's all right. The Church is not to be implicated in any way."

I checked with friends and discovered that similar calls were being made throughout the valley, and in every case the instructions were the same. Pornography would be stamped out, even if it involved wholesale deception to protect the Church from controversy.

Similarly, many were appalled by the behavior of some LDS women at the Utah IWY convention. In the apparent belief that obstruction and disruption had been instigated by Church leaders, these women engaged in outrageous behavior. Though the International Women's Year posed no threat to them personally, the belief that it was a threat to the Church or some other "higher good" inspired them to extreme measures.

For a time I served as coordinator of activities for the Young Special Interest groups in forty-five stakes in the south end of the Salt Lake Valley. We had several thousand active single women between twenty-five and forty, but only a handful of men. As young couples moved to the suburbs and divorced, the husbands would leave their former wives and children in their homes and move back to the city. Thus, we had a great number of single mothers.

A valley-wide, two-day conference was held for single parents and divorcees, offering seminars and lectures on every aspect of single life, parenting, and remarriage. Well-attended and well-received, this conference was far and away the most significant Church-sponsored event I have ever witnessed for single persons.

Permission was requested to write up the conference to publicize the ideas presented there throughout the

But who best serves the king—those who conform and pile praise on top of adulation? Or those who urge him to put something on?

I knew the expected answer and gave it. "Even if you knew it was wrong? Why?" "Because even if the president was wrong, the Lord would honor his Priesthood and somehow make it turn out for the best."

Fortunately, my mission president never asked me to do anything I thought was wrong. I could not forget that following their Priesthood file leaders, Mormons once helped massacre over a hundred men, women, and children at a place called Mountain Meadows, and I could not repress the feeling that however commendable, obedience to Priesthood authority could not absolve any individual of personal responsibility.

Then one night, three or four years ago, I received a telephone call from my elders' quorum presidency. It was when theaters showing pornographic movies were being picketed in Salt Lake City. "The stake president has given us the assignment of providing eight elders to picket this Tuesday. Can you be there from 7 to 8? The signs will be provided, and if you are asked who you represent, say you are from the such-and-such citizens' group. We are not supposed to say we are from the

country. Down through channels came the negative reply. The Church does not wish to publicize a problem.

Divorce and single parenting are not part of the Church program. The never-married, the homosexuals, the drug-abusers, the mentally disturbed are embarrassments. They are the minorities we wish would just go away.

Recently, my elders' quorum president berated the quorum for its low statistics in home teaching. Perhaps rhetorically, he asked why were we so lax? Perhaps imprudently, I answered. "I think we don't do it because it doesn't work. We are not trained in family counseling. In all my life I have never had a significant experience as a home teacher. And I would be interested to know if anyone else has."¹ There was an uncomfortable silence, then a torrent of defensive reactions. The gist of it amounted to, "If you had the spirit of your calling, you would be a good home teacher and see the benefits of the program."

I felt much like the first boy who cried out, "Look, the King has no clothes."

"Why, of course the King is wearing clothes! And aren't they grand?"

"If you had any sense at all, you would be able to see them."

But who best serves the King—those who conform and pile praise on top of adulation? Those who berate others for their lack of faith? Or those who urge him to put something on?

If we learn anything from the Mormon experience, it is that however divine its mission, however pure its doctrines and inspired its leaders, the Church is a human institution. Like all other human institutions, the Church has a tendency to seek its own self-interest first. Thus, in the name of Zion, the "pure in heart" become the agents, not only the victims, of intolerance, oppression, guilt, and domination. To maintain the "purity" of Zion we ostracize the troubled and cast out the wayward. To protect the image of Zion and ensure its tranquility, we ignore criticism from abroad and suppress challenge from within.

It is as true today as it was in 1839 that "it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, [to] immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion." Not because men and women are inherently and irreversibly selfish, but because it is so easy to use the welfare of the Church, or the establishment of Zion "to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, and our vain ambition." (D&C 121:39,37.)

We revel in self-righteousness, forgetting that strict obedience to the Law brought not salvation, but condemnation to the Pharisees. How much better then will fare our modern Pharisees, by virtue of their mindless obedience to Priesthood authority, if they ignore the purposes for which Priesthood was given?

I am a Mormon. The faith of my fathers is indelibly impressed on my being. I suppose that I am by nature an optimist. I believe in the goodness of human beings. I believe in the ability of the Church to bring individual and collective salvation. I believe that Zion can be established. Not when the number of stakes reaches 1500 or even 5500, but every time an individual is turned from sin and liberated from the burden of guilt; not merely when tithing receipts are doubled or even trebled, but every time the poor and the destitute are offered a seat at the economic banquet table; not merely when members become involved in every single Church program, but every time an individual is given an opportunity and an inspiration to use his or her own peculiar gifts to their fullest potential.

Finally, I believe *not* that Zion will be established when every person on earth is converted to the Church, but *is* established every time a person yields ultimate allegiance to none other than God. It is not the Church, but God we are called to worship; not the Church, but God, that is our end; not the Church, but God, the source of our salvation. On recognition of that, the gates of Zion swing open.

Note

1. I do not contend that *no one* has *ever* had a significant home teaching experience. Obviously, *some* people's lives have been blessed through the program, and no doubt many home teachers are more effective than I. But on the *whole*, it is my belief that the ratio of time and energy expended to positive results is so overwhelming as to justify the conclusion that home teaching is a *basically* ineffective, inefficient, and often counter-productive program.

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