

ARE MORMONS JOINING IN WORLD SUICIDE?

Believers in the gospel should be dissidents against modern world culture. But it is surprising how comfortable most of us feel with the horrors which surround us.

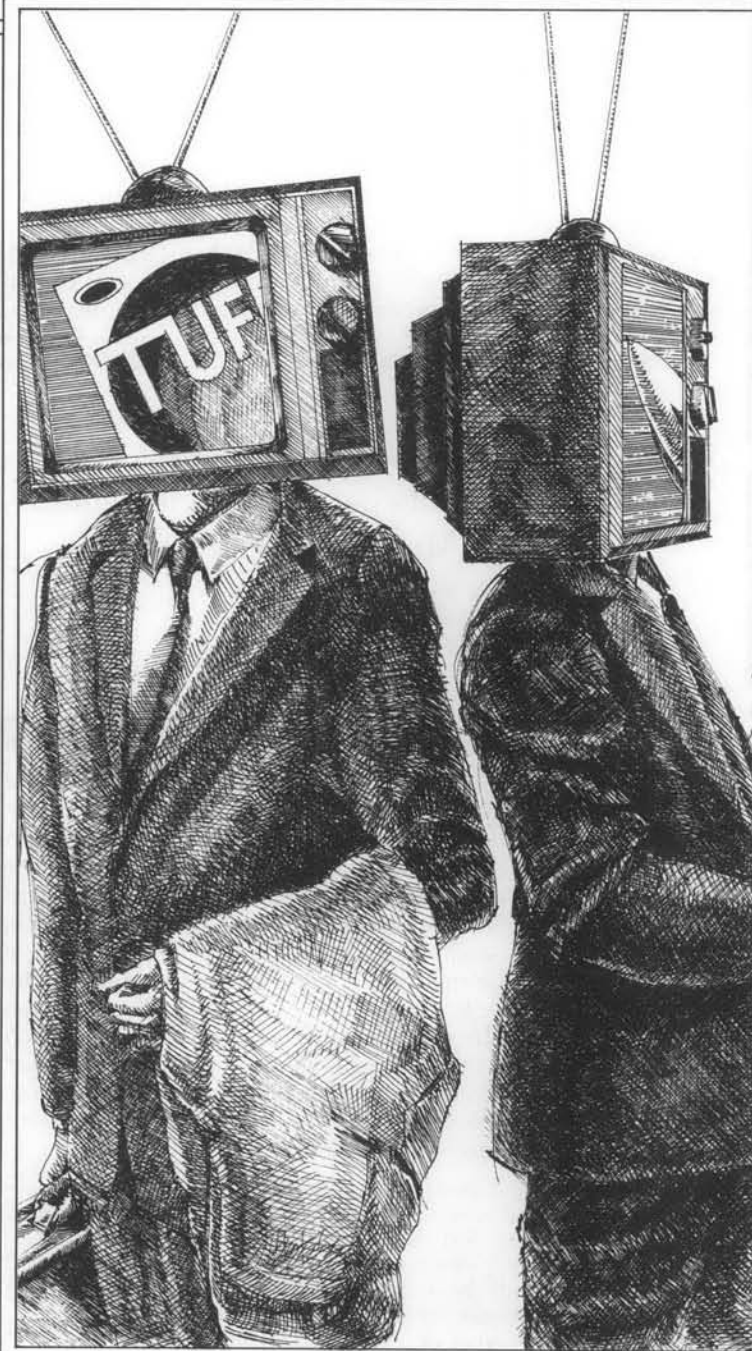
Arthur Henry King

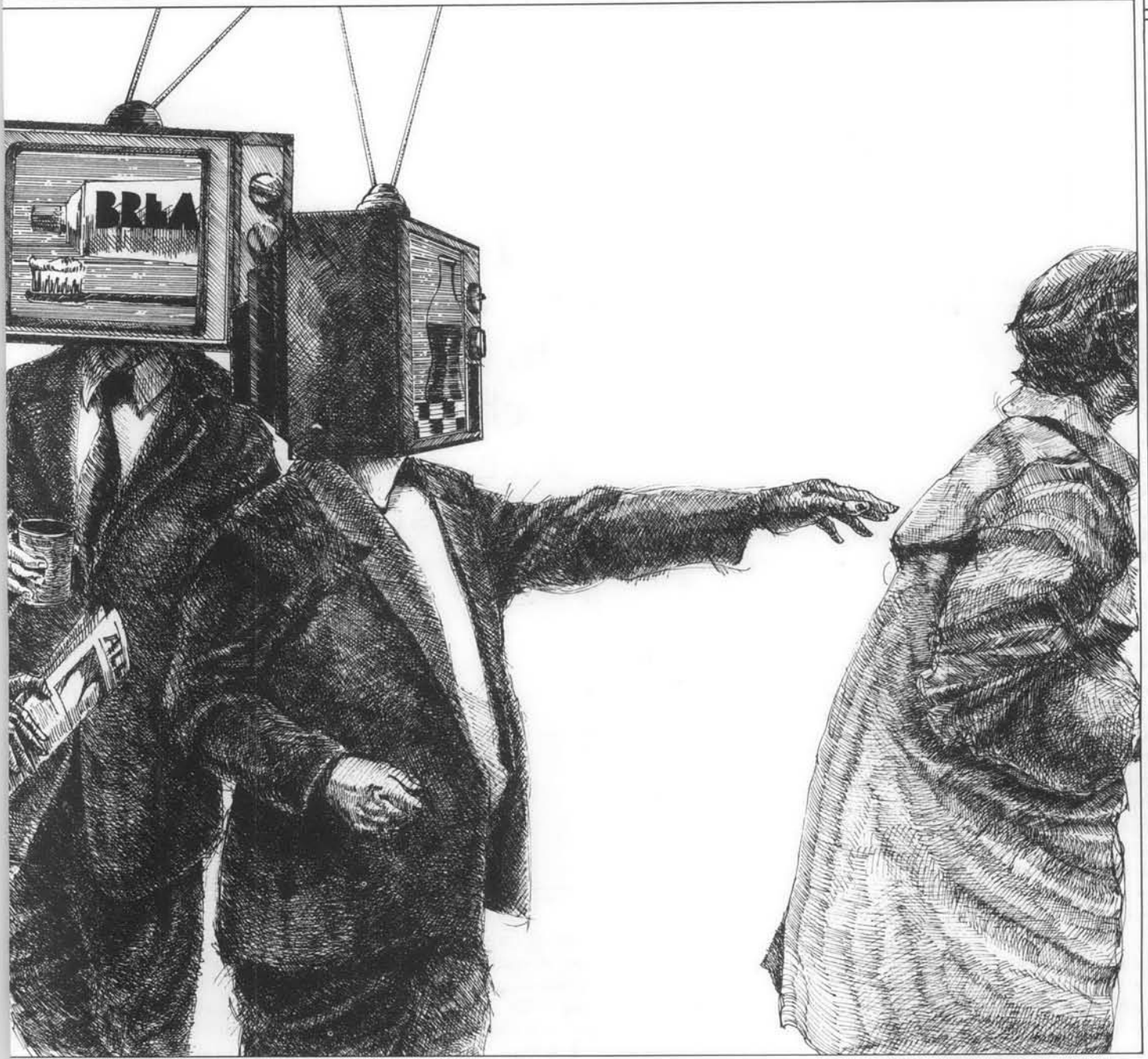
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propose to try and establish a universe of discourse between us by first discussing principles, going on to the Church and the surrounding culture in general, then applying my thoughts to various areas—behaviorism, mass media, advertising, public relations, and the arts—and finishing by applying this to the situation of Church members in but not of, or of as well as in, the surrounding culture.

Here, then, are my two principal assumptions. First, Moses 5:6. "Why dost thou offer up sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him, I know not, save the Lord commanded me." That is the fundamental text in our scriptures about obedience; I assume the relationship of obedience to faith and of faith to obedience is immediate. The primacy of obedience or faith is irrelevant, because they are twins.

The second assumption is one that is behind all





western (and eastern) culture: there is a link between art and morality. I do not pretend that this link is direct; when that is assumed, each tries to overrun the other. But rather art and morality are related indirectly through religion.

Religion, as Kierkegaard reminds us more firmly than anyone else, is prime and morality secondary. The sacrifice of Isaac is an example that religion is deeper and more important than any morality that may emerge from it. Similarly, art is related in its origin and practice to religion throughout history. Through religion, and not in any other way, art and morality can be reconciled.

The channel runs through religion from art to morality and from morality to art. That is seen best in the scriptures, brought home to us in a parable like the prodigal son or, above all, that awkward episode that no gospel wished to contain and that was finally attached to

the end of St. John—the woman taken in adultery.

Once an absolute aesthetic category is introduced, however—and the aesthetic category has little importance before Kant—we get a split between art and morality which results in the development of so-called “good” art as an exclusive occupation, an occupation for those “in the know.” The rest is thought to be bad. And, indeed, that is almost what happens, except that in these conditions all turns out ultimately to be bad. The distinction we have between aestheticism and vulgarity in our modern culture is directly due to the severance between art and morality which, in its turn, is due to the decline of faith and religious practice.

Let me pass on, now, to the Church and the surrounding culture. This is complicated because the immediate surrounding culture is that of the United States. But I don’t mean by “surrounding culture” just

the culture of the United States: I mean what has become world culture, represented by the United States, which is primarily responsible for it. The United States is primarily responsible by means of mass production for the survival of the rest of the world.

What is the nub of the problem of modern culture? The whole world is affected, because Africa, Latin America, and Asia are absorbing this culture, and it has already been established in China, the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union. I go to Moses 1:9-10. "And the presence of God withdrew from Moses, that his glory was not upon Moses; and Moses was left unto himself. And as he was left unto himself, he fell unto the earth." And then Moses' reaction: "Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed."

Self-assertion and Self-esteem

Many in the Church oppose evolutionary theory. Yet some of those who oppose it automatically introduce some of its consequences into their philosophy and practice. The late nineteenth century capitalist development in the United States represents an application—some people might say Satanic—of the principle of the survival of the fittest.

From the point of view of their use of evolutionary theory, capitalism and communism are on the same side. This applies not simply to the United States but to the whole western world and indeed the whole world. Capitalism and communism both have a mechanistic, a materialistic, view. Both premise economic man. Both use mass production. Both produce, as a kind of reaction and yet as a kind of intensification (for the obverse is always part and parcel of the metal, together with the reverse), self-assertion, the assertion of Godless man, individual, or group. The doctrine of the survival of the fittest, and modern capitalism and communism as twin descendants of this doctrine, are not separate from the reaction against them. How could Winston Churchill win the war except by becoming more and more like Hitler as the war went on? How could Hamlet defeat and kill Claudius except by becoming more and more like Claudius as the play goes on? They belong to the same world. They belong, ultimately, to the same spirit. They are uncle and nephew.

Behind self-assertion, then, as a reaction to this mass-production society, is the decline of faith, the emergence of man as hero, which I do not see in the Renaissance, but I do see emerging in the nineteenth century, together with a premium on aggressivity. The United States is the only country I know in which the adjective "aggressive" is used melioratively.

Another dubious phrase, when we think of the Moses quotation, is "self-esteem." We are told by the gospel the search for the self is not one which is undertaken in terms of the self; but outside the self and with others. The self is not self except in relation to others, in the family, and in the community. The self cannot find itself by trying to find itself because the self is not the kind of thing you can take hold of and make. If you try and make a self, the self you've made is not the self you are. And, indeed, I'm extremely dubious about the self one is. I have a debate with my stepdaughter on this subject. She says, "We have to be what we are." And I say, "No, we

cannot be what we are; it's impossible. What we have to do is become what we may." And that becoming is, in turn, something that requires forgetfulness. Self-

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forgetfulness seems to me to be prime, not self-esteem. Forget yourself and you may become yourself. But if you think about becoming yourself, you will not have forgotten yourself and will, therefore, never be yourself, let alone ever become yourself.

United States culture has led the world in the doctrine of success, in the doctrine of individualism. And I say that these two doctrines are profoundly anti-Christian, anti-gospel.

Consider a remark made by the headmaster of the Cathedral School in Lund, Sweden, to his most brilliant pupil, who is now a member of the Swedish Academy (one of the Eighteen): "Don't try to be remarkable in any way." The boy was precocious and affected because he was able. (And how many boys are not precocious and affected when they are able? The ablest, of course, are not. But, then, the ablest don't know they are able. That is one of the greatest points about being able.) "Don't try to be remarkable in any way" is the opposite of the American doctrine of getting ahead, of being successful, of finding oneself; but it is definitely a European and an Asian, as opposed to an American, attitude. And of course, it is going under in Europe and Asia as world culture gradually takes over from European culture. "Don't try to be remarkable in any way." It is a hard

saying, but it does seem to me that the gospel lies profoundly behind it.

Behaviorism

There are other "threats to the Church" from the surrounding culture, threats which I regard as worse than any threats in Ohio, Missouri, or Illinois 140 years ago. The first, in order of philosophical primacy, is behaviorism. Behaviorism I take widely because it seems to me that the behavioristic approach is characteristic not simply of behavioral psychology but also of cognitive psychology, and pretty well all psychology, just as it is also prime for sociology and for economics. Psychology, sociology, and economics are fundamentally statistical. They deal with cases, not people. Cases are not people. The variables are always greater than any social science can contain. Social scientists cannot do useful work unless they remember that the variables are nearly always too many for them, because they are dealing with people and reducing people to cases. They have lost the people. Just as, if you reduce yourself to the case of yourself, you will find that you are not there.

But what am I talking about in practical terms? Take the example of the spread of professional counseling in the Church and at BYU, the infiltration into ecclesiastical responsibility, the jargon that is used. Just as mass production developed in America, so did the jargon of the social sciences. During the war there was an Allied Ministers of Education Conference in London. When the Americans entered the war, they sent sociologists and historians over to join this Allied conference, which afterwards became UNESCO. The style changed, the minutes changed, the whole way of talking about everything changed. And, in spite of efforts to stop the rot, the rot was there. The jargon has remained in international institutions. Now there are many institutions of the United Nations, all using their own kind of jargon and all associated, ultimately, with the jargon of the social sciences initiated in the United States.

One of my difficulties in the Church at the present time is the word "goal." Although I am not opposed to the something hidden behind the word "goal," I strenuously object to the use of the word "goal," because of its psychological background and implications in mechanistic terms. If planning with goals in mind does nothing else, it will tend to occlude the Holy Ghost. Self-esteem (already mentioned) is another one of those things which has come from the same background.

The Fictional and the Real

I was watching a TV program the other morning, and they were telling that a news-film company had handed over two-thirds of their library to UCLA for research use, and they gave one or two excerpts. One of the excerpts was the burning of the Hindenburg airship at LaGuardia Airport (agony, panic, screaming, death). The TV man commented, "A good, dramatic sequence, even in black and white." And what does a photographer do on such an occasion? Is it his duty to continue to photograph? I don't know what I could do on such an occasion except fling myself on my knees and pray to God. What else can be done when you're faced with a situation like that and you are helpless? People were running about like ants. How helpless we can be in such

a situation is a reminder of what Moses said: "Man is nothing."

The same morning on the same program. Remember those children suffering from progeria? They met in Los Angeles and were submitted to the vulgarity of Disneyland (after all, Krushchev had been submitted to it). The comment on the episode was, "It makes a fine story, doesn't it?"

And let me remind you of the photographer who, some twenty years ago in the Congo, came across a group of soldiers who had forty prisoners and bribed the soldiers to shoot the prisoners in order that he might photograph the shooting.

Well, those three episodes put the mass media into focus. The point is this (I've noticed it even more with children than with adults): we cease to make a distinction between fictional events on the screen and the real events on the screen. And in mere self-protection, what we do is not to think of the fictional as real but the real as fictional, so we can harden our hearts. And that is the fundamental problem. What did Lear say? "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" Sisters Goneril and Regan, prominent mass-media reporters in this our time, have ceased to be moved by anything. They just record.

This is a fundamental crux, the real and the fictional on the screen. We protect ourselves from the horror of what the world is really like by equating it merely to the fiction—which is also horrible, but we're all so used to it as fiction that we take it as an amusement. Horror has always been one of the principal amusements of mankind. The fictive horror of the TV replaces the factitious horror of the Colosseum.

I pass by such obvious things as advertising and salesmanship; and the fact that the economy seems to be based on upping prices most of the time in order to sell things at ordinary prices at so-called sales. I pass to a public-relations story. Professor George Allen from the University of Sussex had been some years Cultural Advisor to the British Embassy in Washington—and knew Utah. I took him around Temple Square. He greatly admired the Temple and Tabernacle. He said they were unique. He took many photographs because, as he said, these are superb buildings. Then I took him to the Visitors' Center—the then new one, not the newest one. When he had gone round, he looked at me quizzically and said, "Isn't it strange? The technique behind this is exactly the same as that of Socialist Realism in Russia and the propaganda of the more modern wing of the Roman Catholic Church. I think it must be a matter of public relations."

Public relations, at least in my country, have replaced government, for we are not governed any longer by cabinet ministers; we are governed by their public-relations officers. I've had a good deal to do with public-relations officers in my time. I've had nothing to do with them here in the United States; but I ask you to look in your heart and ask if you don't think that public-relations officers don't also run Congress and the White House. Whatever it be, it is a further removal from reality that consists again in taking the real film as if it were a fictional one, and the fictional one as real.

Art

But the most important of my topics is art. Art affects

everybody. For example, Princess Diana's wedding-dress has a whole art history behind it. Taken by people as it was, it had, nevertheless, significance in many different ways that they might not realize, in the tradition of the royal wedding dresses, but also in the total tradition of dressing and what dressing is for, and so on.

The greatest sin committed by intellectuals in this Church is that of accepting as they are the arts of the surrounding culture. That culture has not got out of the romantic movement at all; it is more deeply in it than ever, and there is more than one reason for that. A major reason is the reaction to the industrial revolution in terms of individual self-assertion.

Art is the main and most profound way in which individual self-assertion has come about since (say) 1770. And that self-assertion is deeply anti-gospel. It most obviously reflects man as hero, and it has produced such odd heroes as Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde. Art, in our time, increasingly represents what it has represented ever since those "Satanic mills," of which Blake speaks, went up; and that is the isolation of the individual. Now our Church is one in which the individual need feel less isolated. But, unfortunately, our increasing insistence on individuality, even in the Church, is taking us towards that isolation. Our emphasis ought rather to be on the family, and, above all, on the multi-generational family, not the two-generation family consequent upon the industrial revolution.

The isolation of the individual leads to a sense of insufficiency in the individual: "Man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed." That leads to various types of despair, and that, in turn, leads to self-pity, cynicism, solipsism, boredom: the prime emotion of most modern art, whether directly or indirectly, is self-pity. Direct enough in Hemingway and in Scott Fitzgerald, less direct in William Faulkner, but, nevertheless, insidiously there in terms not merely of the totality of the plot but in terms of the detail of the character.

I reread recently (I read Faulkner as he came out in the latter twenties and early thirties) at the insistence of an undergraduate, *Absalom, Absalom*, and I found self-pity permeating the organization of the book. One of the things that we have to remember is that self-pity can very well coexist with self-irony. In fact, self-irony is frequently a subtle method of self-pity. So, when Faulkner comes back in his work and says, "Look, this is ironical," the answer is "Yes, but this irony is itself self-pity, just as a permanent ironical attitude is a self-pitying attitude, just as a skeptical or solipsistic attitude is ultimately a self-pitying attitude."

Efforts toward Mormon art are, in my view, ill seen; for I don't know what Mormon art is. I do know that there are Mormon artists and they produce art; but if they aim to produce Mormon art, then they won't succeed in producing art. It's this business of deliberateness again. If you aim at education, then you'll never become educated. If you aim at salvation, you will never be saved. Because these things are indirect, supreme results of doing something else; and the something else is service, is righteousness, is trying to do the right thing at every moment. Trying to do the right thing at every

moment is so important and so difficult a task for most of us that the setting of goals becomes very shadowy.

Mormon art, then, in my view, is a figment. There are Mormon artists, but the trouble about it all is that they tend to take from outside. They may not even be aware how much they take from outside. But they do take fashions from outside, and they just don't like things that aren't in accordance with those fashions. For example, no one pays proper attention to the most important English literature from 1200-1660: the religious literature.

Attacking the Surrounding Culture

What else is there besides self-pity in modern art? Something that runs through the arts. It's there supremely in Picasso; it's there in James Joyce. It's not a word that Mormons like to hear, but it's a most important word. The word is "destruction," the power of art to destroy, and the need to destroy the evil in contemporary culture. Let me give you some examples of what I mean.

Picasso underwent in stages, more profoundly than most men, the experience of the twentieth century. The experience that he was undergoing was the experience of the natural man, who is an enemy to God. Nevertheless, to undergo such an experience, with his ability, meant to portray the *impasse*; and the impossibility of any decent life whatever in a non-religious culture comes out to full expression. Let me remind you of those tender, delicate, mildly ironical pictures of an acrobat's family that were produced just before the first world war, and the impact of the exhibition in London of the work Picasso produced during the German occupation of France. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, came to that exhibit. They spat, they swore, they tried to get at the paintings to destroy them. And the more energetic they were in their reactions, the more successful one knew that Picasso had been. Why? Because he was showing these people what they could not bear to see: what, in ultimate circumstances, the natural man is like. "Guernica," for example, is a superbly organized extreme of human disorganization; and that paradox holds us. It is one of the fundamental documents of our time, just as James Joyce's *Ulysses* is. And we need to see the destructive power of people like Joyce and Picasso and to see how they had, by degrees, to move towards that destruction because they had no alternative in the country in which they lived. The rest was *kitsch*. Even Matisse seems to be *kitsch* compared with Picasso.

I am reminded of an important piece of satire which ought to be an example to us of how we need to attack the surrounding culture. That is Swift's *Modest Proposal*. It was written because children in Ireland were starving. Kill them off. Use them, among other things, for gloves, and so on—something that became real, you remember, in Nazi Germany, not with children, but with Jews and other experimentees, like gypsies, who sometimes get forgotten.

I suggest that we take a lesson from the fundamental satirists like Swift or Aristophanes or Rabelais and see what that means in terms of our contemporary culture. I daren't tell you about the modest proposal that one of my friends has just made, a satire about abortion, because it's too horrific. My own imagination has merely

been of taking fetuses and sending them to restaurants in order to develop fine dishes from them. This is the kind of satire that hits. It needs to. It's the hard hearts that have to be broken. And the disbelief in the existence of the hard hearts is dangerous. What is it that scripture says? "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." And it says "be ye wise as serpents" *first*; because, if we aren't as wise as serpents, we shan't last long as harmless as doves. And Christians are going to last. Some may be martyred: it's not only blacks that can be lynched, but anti-feminists and anti-abortionists. But we shall last: the Church gains strength from martyrs.

The doctrines of success and individualism are profoundly anti-Christian and anti-gospel.

Where Are the Dissidents?

Finally, the question, "Where are the dissidents?" I don't mean the dissidents in the Church, which is a minor matter. I mean those who are dissidents from our modern world culture. For, from my point of view, fascist, communist, and democratic mean the same kind of thing at the same kind of level. There's no ultimate difference between them. They're using the same methods—with different "goals," perhaps—but they're using them in terms of self-interest. Wherever you have a so-called "communist" government, it has established itself as a government of gangsters. Wherever you have a so-called "fascist" government, it has established itself as a government of gangsters. I won't go on to say what happens if you have a "democratic" government; but look at the lobbying, the daily unveiling of corruption, and the infiltration of gangsterdom in "democratic" states. The historian who was in charge of the history department at my old Swedish university of Lund, Professor Lauritz Weibull, a famous man, six-foot three

and slim in proportion, a great admirer of Leonardo, used to say this to his doctorate seminarists when they first came in, "Men, you have hitherto been treated as children; but, from now on, remember that this is a sound principle in history: if anyone gets to a position of power, he's a scoundrel; because the only way to get a position of power is by being a scoundrel." He said, "It doesn't always work, but it works most of the time."

The question is: *who* dissents from the world culture of which we're speaking? The dissidents should be those who believe in the gospel and yet are being constantly undermined by this world culture which they do not recognize as such. We need, in this Church, to forget the minor demurs some have about the way authority is exerted in the Church. We need to think more carefully about our own sins. Why, as students sometimes say, are so many businessmen called to be General Authorities? They are prepared for the task; the intellectuals are not. That is why intellectuals are not called. So what do the intellectuals do except complain about it, which, of course, is what intellectuals always do?

We need, then, concertedly, to understand the nature of the culture surrounding us and to realize that our missionary effort is *one* aspect of what we need to do. There's little need to destroy what I'm talking about inside the Church, the minor, weak, and largely futile efforts Church members make to imitate the evils of the surrounding culture is in its nuclei, not within our own Church. For our own Church is the only hope of the future. We know that by prophecy. We know by faith that the Church of Jesus Christ is the power on earth by which He will save the world.

What is the conclusion of all this? Mormons, in so far as they are committing cultural suicide, are doing so by identifying themselves with the world, which is committing cultural suicide as a whole, as a totality. We need not, in the light of prophecy, be surprised at that. But it is surprising how comfortable most of us feel, forgetting that they are not fiction, with the horrors that are almost daily presented to us on the television screen. The natural man is an enemy to God. Man by himself, if God withdraws, is nothing. Only through Him are we anything at all. Only by Him do we live. Only by Him have we power and property and inheritance and ability and marriage and family and everything that makes life still worth while. We owe everything good to Him. If we remember that, and if we attack the world by missioning but also by showing our own members, first of all, what there is wrong with the surrounding culture instead of letting them slip into it, then we shall be doing our duty.

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This speech was delivered 10 December 1981 as part of the B.H. Roberts lecture series, "Perspectives on Mormon Culture." Dean May, assistant professor of history and director of the Center for Historical Population Studies at the University of Utah, and Keith Engar, dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Utah, responded to the speech.