



Social Responsibility and LDS Ethics

How have Mormons responded to the moral dilemmas of modernity?

By Courtney Campbell

Our world is plagued by innumerable complex moral and social dilemmas, including issues in biomedical ethics, world and national hunger, distributive social and economic justice, sexual ethics, the morality of war, and more. These problems often appear intractable, or at least seem to involve too many conflicting moral claims as to

allow for any simple resolution. Some maintain that any church professing allegiance to Christ should address these challenges through a tradition of moral teaching which stresses social responsibility. Others, however, assert that Christian churches should not intervene in societal dilemmas, for to do so would represent an inappropriate intrusion into affairs outside their ecclesiastical domain.

It is important to probe the nature of the response of current leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the moral dilemmas of modernity. Although some LDS authors have addressed specific social and ethical issues, Mormons generally have failed to reflect on and formulate responses to these problems. Indeed, many appear to deem involvement in social concerns entirely unnecessary. As President Hinckley observed in a recent general conference:

There are those who would fracture our strength by leading us in the pursuit of objectives which are not pertinent to the central mission of the Church. We are constantly invited, yes, even strongly urged, to get out and march for this cause or that cause. There are some causes with which we should properly be involved, which are directly related to the Church, its mission, and the well-being of its people. The determination of these must be left to those called to leadership. Such causes will be few, since we must husband our strength for the far greater obligation to pursue a steady course in building the kingdom of God in the earth.¹

The ecclesiastical problem of determining responsibility to society is, of course, not unique to the LDS religious tradition; indeed, the issue has been designated by H. Richard Niebuhr as an "enduring problem" for all Christians and Christian churches. Historically, some religions have chosen to respond with a "strategy of withdrawal," or "separatism."² Withdrawal and separation involve the spoken and lived renunciation of all manifestations of a "secular" or even "Christianized" culture, including particular practices, such as participation in war or government.

To be sure, separatist tendencies operate within the LDS religious tradition which are not totally a function of geographical isolation.³ Nevertheless, the position of the institutional Church toward social responsibility and cultural dilemmas is more frequently one of passivism. While this response of silence does have certain advantages both for the Church and for its members, there are also significant risks implicit in such a strategy, one of these being callousness or complacency toward morally objectionable social practices or institutions. Unlike separatism, which expresses an explicit protest against moral evil and a desire to disassociate the religious community from that evil, a passivist strategy may represent a failure to avoid complicity with evil.

Moreover, this response of passivity, however adequate or inadequate for approaching moral dilemmas from an institutional perspective, is certainly not coincidental. As James Gustafson has pointed out, theology qualifies ethics, and it appears that LDS ethics have been significantly qualified, if not silenced, by certain tenets of LDS theology and culture. Among these are prophetic normativeness, suspicion of rationality, evangelical emphasis, providential appeal, and eschatological emphases.

1. PROPHETIC NORMATIVENESS

Latter-day Saints typically ascribe moral authority to the standard works and the prophetic word of Church leaders, believing that these sources provide definitive answers to many if not most of the ethical questions which plague other Christian moralists. As a result, a number of members assume that "when the prophet speaks, the debate is over," a popular phrase which implies that extended discussion on moral and ethical issues is valueless. The practical consequence of this position is that moral responsibility for difficult choices is surrendered to the Church, relieving the individual conscience of perplexing choices and simplifying the moral life.

While this approach to moral dilemmas has merit, ultimately it must be evaluated as unsatisfactory. Besides circumscribing the moral autonomy of members, recent First Presidency statements (such as those concerning abortion or nuclear weapons) lack consistent and comprehensive moral argumentation and thus are less than compelling. When subjected to ethical evaluation, these pronouncements tend to be more question-provoking than question-settling.

2. SUSPICION OF RATIONALITY

Ethical reflection necessarily requires a pronounced appeal to human rationality. In contrast, the LDS tradition repeatedly emphasizes the nonrational method of individual inspiration to resolve moral dilemmas, appealing to revelation to illuminate the proper course of action in morally unclear situations. This tendency is reinforced by scriptures proscribing faith in the "foolishness" of human reason and by statements of Church leaders to the effect that "the major reason for the world's troubles today is that men . . . seek to solve their problems in their own wisdom."⁴

3. EVANGELICAL EMPHASIS

Concern for social reformation in the LDS church, if expressed at all, is clearly secondary to its historically defined mission of spiritual conversion. Furthermore, this historical understanding is based on the assumption that men and women, religiously renewed and aided by the mediation of the

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Church, will be able to adequately resolve the moral dilemmas and social challenges that confront them, thereby serving as a restraining force on cultural excesses. Thus, an emphasis on spiritual regeneration is seen to some degree as obviating attention to social concerns.

4. PROVIDENTIAL APPEAL

A common response to moral dilemmas among Mormons is to appeal to a belief in the providential direction of history: God's control of history suggests that some moral and social problems will perhaps be resolved as a matter of divine historical design. This belief is apparent in a statement by President Ezra Taft Benson, who, in responding to members' inquiries about the seeming indifference of the Church to problems of moral evil, unwanted cultural intrusions, and governmental excesses, affirmed that Church leaders were not "oblivious" to these problems and that members "should be assured that the Lord will take care of this [increase of evil] in His own time and in His own way."⁵

Unfortunately, the assumption that God will make everything turn out right can encourage complacency toward ethical reflection and neglect for social responsibility. Moreover, as John Bennett has pointed out, disassociation or nonresponsiveness to important moral issues "promises holiness to a limited group at the cost of evasion of one's responsibilities as a member of the larger community. Such holiness is itself illusory, for there is real participation in the sins of the larger community that is overlooked. Christians who withdraw from the world are guilty of sins of omission that involve responsibility for evils not prevented."⁶

5. ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS

The eschatological perspective common to Mormonism that Christ will return to earth in all his glory and that "the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ" suggests that many contemporary moral and social problems cannot be resolved within history. Indeed, it is considered to be part of the divine design that such intractable matters will be settled and justice established when "there shall be time no longer." But while we pray and prepare for the coming of Christ, two-thirds of the world's population suffers from malnutrition, violations of human rights persist in every country on earth, and terrorism and war become increasingly rampant. Even when such occurrences are acknowledged, they are trivialized with the passive observation that "the contrast between the Church and the world will be increasingly marked in the future, which contrast we hope, will cause the Church to be more attractive to those in the world who desire to live according to God's plan."⁷ Such a position of moral condemnation and ethical stupor seems an inadequate if not absolutely callous response to the moral demands of these issues.

While this list is not exhaustive, it does illustrate aspects of Mormon theology which seem to restrict the development of critical ethical reflection and discussion in the LDS tradition. Such obstacles to moral deliberation cannot be dismissed easily as they occupy a position of fundamental importance in the LDS belief system. How then is the Church to maintain fidelity to these fundamental tenets while displaying a more responsible approach to current moral dilemmas confronting our society?

Mormonism, of course, is not the first religious tradition to confront this challenge. Other religious and philosophical traditions have arrived at ethical strategies or contexts to assist individuals and groups in constructive discussion and reflection. While no one of these solutions is completely amenable to Mormonism, an overview of these approaches may provide insights which are relevant to the ethical reflection of Latter-day Saints.

THE CONTEXT OF NATURAL LAW

The concept of natural law has been most frequently advanced by Catholic theologians as well as by Western philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant. In essence, this view suggests that there are fundamental moral principles or rules which have universal validity and are knowable by human reason. For the religious person, a clear advantage of this approach is that it does not necessarily require the abandonment of Christian ethics in favor of a secular standard of morality.

On first glance, there appear to be important parallels between the concept of natural law and elements of Mormon religious thought. For example, the LDS teaching that all individuals are endowed with the "light of Christ" enabling them to know good from evil seems to validate the notion of a universal moral law discernable by every human being. On closer examination, however, a number of difficulties become evident. For instance, most contemporary explications of natural law stress the sufficiency of human rationality, while Latter-day Saints often emphasize the fallibility of reason and the primacy of revelation. Moreover, Joseph Smith's assertion that "whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is,"⁸ (best exemplified in the Book of Mormon account of Nephi slaying Laban) certainly contradicts basic assumptions of the natural law tradition. Thus, while this philosophical approach may have some utility for ethical reflection in the LDS faith, its applicability appears to be limited.

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AN ETHIC OF SOCIAL CONTRAST

Several religious traditions which have drawn a sharp distinction between church and world, as is common in Mormonism, have responded to moral and social concerns through a strategy of social contrast. This strategy emphasizes the *expression of moral values* and is intended to present a “witness” to the world of the establishment of an alternative model for social life. This approach assumes that Christian values must be not only spoken but lived in order to make apparent the contrast between God’s church and a godless culture. Social contrast, then, suggests that the most significant moral and ethical responsibility for the church is to be itself.

But the social contrast ethic involves assumptions that go beyond mere example-setting. Implicit in this approach is the confidence that the religion in question possesses solutions to moral, ethical, and social problems that others outside the religious tradition should be persuaded to adopt. Moreover, the ethics of social contrast expresses an essential pessimism concerning the nature of the world receiving the witness, and the necessity of establishing “high places” of holiness apart from a world that will always be the scene of violence and injustice.⁹

If nothing else, this type of ethical approach is at least implicit in much of the rhetoric of LDS church leaders. Values such as family unity, chaste sexual behavior, self-sufficiency, and ward responsibility for the needy or widowed not only function as religious norms for and in the Church, but have also been explicitly commended as methods of providing examples to the world of appropriate familial relationships, correct sexual norms, and procedures for establishing distributive socioeconomic justice.

Though this context for ethical reflection does appear to be compatible with many aspects of the LDS tradition, the problems inherent in the presumed sufficiency of such a strategy must also be explored. Such an ethic can result in a disturbing neglect of larger problems of justice and social order. Moreover, an ethic of social witness frequently displays a disquieting “us against them” mentality, ignoring the fact that “they” are really part of “us” under one God. There are, then, both virtues and vices involved in an ethic of social contrast.

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THE ETHIC OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

In contrast to defining responsibility to society in terms of social contrast and witness, the social gospel assumes that Christians have a genuine responsibility to make the history of the world turn out right. Thus, the ethical emphasis is placed not on expressing values but on *realizing goals* of social reform and progress. To be sure, the contemporary LDS leadership has maintained that the mission of the Church involves the achievement of certain goals, but these goals could hardly be considered a clarion call for social transformation.¹⁰ While certain key phrases in LDS religious discourse, such as “building the kingdom of God on earth” or “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man,” reflect significant affinities with the social gospel movement, the Church has generally avoided adopting measures associated with this strategy.¹¹

The religious direction to the social gospel is held to come from Christ’s commandment to love our neighbors. Despite well-intentioned goals, this strategy too is not without its problems. Institutions employing a social gospel ethic frequently emphasize the social and leave out the gospel, turning the Christian faith into what C. S. Lewis called “Christianity and water.” A similar assessment has been expressed by Richard Cunningham: “The danger with social Christianity is that in its preoccupation with human concerns, the Church might die a quiet death. Those who have benefited from Christian concern may receive a cup of coffee, a welfare check, a better education, or decent housing—and lose their souls.”¹²

Additionally, a social gospel approach can sometimes incur disunity in an institution because of the diverse nature of moral and social causes requiring attention. For example, the Christian faith has been invoked to promote pacifism in North America and Europe, liberation theology in Latin America, the moral reforms of the American “Moral Majority,” and Marxist causes in other countries of the world. Unfortunately, the strategy of the social gospel provides little help in ranking the importance of two competing moral causes.

Thus, while a social gospel approach manifests a willingness to get involved in the affairs of society and ultimately history, there remain significant risks to this approach that must be recognized in considering whether it presents a viable strategy for ethical reflection and moral involvement. If the ethic of social contrast does not go far enough in fulfilling social responsibility, the social gospel ethic risks going too far, subordinating the essential religious message to the task of making the world turn out right.

AN ETHIC OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

As noted earlier, the LDS church maintains a stance of passivity toward social concerns, a position which has both advantages and disadvantages. By refusing to dictate normative positions on most

issues for its members, the Church places the burden of ethical choices and social involvement on the individual, thereby accentuating the theological tenet of individual agency and responsibility. However, while this approach may encourage individual responsibility, it runs the risk of implying that ethical reflection is unimportant and therefore unnecessary. Furthermore, by failing to provide a context for ethical reflection, such analysis and discussion as does take place may be directionless and result in a divisive polarization of positions held by various members. It therefore seems odd for the institutional Church to encourage member participation in civic and political affairs while itself refusing involvement in any or most social, moral, or ethical causes.¹³

Despite institutional passivity, individual Saints do have a moral obligation of social responsibility. Our devotion to “obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (A of F 12), for example, should not stop us from opposing and seeking in a lawful manner to change unjust legislation. Moreover, the Doctrine and Covenants stresses the significance of individual responsibility: “Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves” (D&C 58:26-29).

A developed ethic of individual responsibility requires more than the expression and exemplification of particular moral values. It also requires a greater sensitivity than is implicit in the attitude that “all is done” regarding social responsibility when eighteen months of a spiritual sabbatical are completed. While these practices are not to be dismissed as superfluous, neither ought they to be considered sufficient. Individual responsibility demands critical reflection on moral and social issues as well as courage and determination to act on those causes which are assessed as “good” in the community dialogue of the LDS tradition.

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NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “He Slumbers Not, nor Sleeps,” *Ensign* 13 (May 1983): 5-8.
2. John C. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946); H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1956).
3. See, for example, Richard Ostling, “Mormonism Enters a New Era,” *Time*, 7 August 1978, pp. 54-56. Other reasonable discussions of the Christ-culture problem may be found in Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen, eds., *Mormonism and American Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972); F. LaMond Tullis, ed., *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978); Klaus J. Hansen, “Mormonism and American Culture: Some Tentative Hypotheses,” in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, ed. Alma R. Blair, Paul M. Edwards, and F. Mark McKiernan (Lawrence, Kans.: Coronado Press, 1973), pp. 1-27.
4. Marion G. Romney, “Unity,” *Ensign* 13 (May 1983): 17-18, italics added.
5. Ezra Taft Benson, “May the Kingdom of God Go Forth,” *Ensign* 8 (May 1978): 32-34.
6. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy*, p. 45.
7. Benson, “Kingdom of God,” pp. 32-34.
8. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1977), p. 256.
9. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy*, pp. 41-46.
10. These goals include (1) teaching the restored gospel to all nations, (2) strengthening the LDS community, and (3) redemption of the dead.
11. It should be noted, however, that for at least a few years some attempt to institute social gospel principles was made through the Church’s Social Advisory Committee. See Thomas G. Alexander, “Between Revivalism and the Social Gospel: The Latter-day Saint Social Advisory Committee, 1916-1922,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 23 (Winter 1983): 19-39.
12. Richard B. Cunningham, *C. S. Lewis: Defender of the Faith* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), p. 123. Although Cunningham appears to convey a negative assessment of Christian responsibility to society, it should be noted that the “dangers” he delineates are a result of a *preoccupation* and not the consequence of a commitment to social morality.
13. This emphasis on individual responsibility and member participation in civic and political matters also seems to be limited to certain cultures; such a strategy seems problematic or even inapplicable to members residing in Managua, San Salvador, Johannesburg, or Warsaw, for example. Members are always encouraged to “obey the laws of the land,” however morally objectionable they may seem, lest particular nations develop an antagonism towards the Church that will hinder its progress.

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