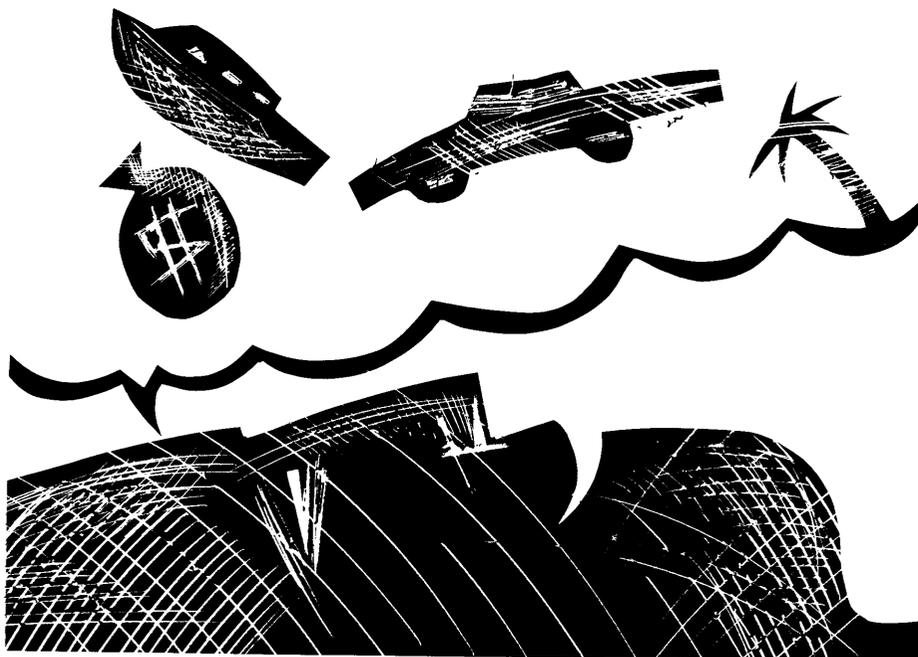

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

David H. Bailey

MEDIOCRITY, MATERIALISM, AND MORMONISM



MEDIOCRITY

ONE BANE OF modern American society is the increasing tendency to be content with mediocre levels of performance and achievement in a wide range of endeavors. This trend is particularly noticeable in the academic arena, as evidenced by declining scores on achievement tests, increasing high school dropout rates, and a rising tendency for both institutions and students to restrict education to minimal, utilitarian, watered-down course work, seriously compromising the ideal of academic excellence.

Five years ago a national commission released the stinging report "A Nation at Risk"

DAVID H. BAILEY is a computer scientist at NASA Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California.

which concluded that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future."¹ Although much effort has been made to reverse this trend in the intervening years, progress has been disappointing. For example, in a recent study comparing U.S. elementary and secondary school students with those of other countries, the performance of the U.S. students in mathematics ranked eighteenth out of the twenty countries studied.² In another study of basic geographic knowledge, eighteen to twenty-four-year-old Americans ranked last out of the nine nations studied.³ Similar discouraging results have been reported in other fields, such as economics and foreign languages.

Although all fields have suffered to some extent, science and engineering have been

particularly hard hit. One manifestation of this problem is the sharp decline of students entering these fields in recent years. For example, the number of freshmen university students entering fields of engineering has dropped 25 percent since 1982. The number of freshmen selecting computer science has dropped a precipitous 64 percent since 1982.⁴

The decline is particularly pronounced at the masters and doctorate levels. It appears that American students are opting to seek employment immediately upon graduating with a bachelor's degree. One consequence is that universities are turning more and more to the large pool of qualified foreign students, particularly for graduate programs. In some fields, such as computer engineering, over 50 percent of the recent Ph.D. graduates of U.S. universities are foreign nationals. A related consequence is that many U.S. high-technology research centers are becoming highly dependent on foreign scientists.⁵

One reason that the declines in the fields of science and engineering are so significant is that most of these fields have experienced strong demand for new graduates at all levels. Thus it clearly cannot be argued that these trends are driven by job market forces. Rather, a fundamental shift of values is taking place in U.S. society.

Some of the other results of Alexander Astin's freshman study shed light on this shift of values. When asked in 1977 which objectives they consider to be essential or very important in life, 59 percent of university freshmen listed "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." By fall 1987, this number had dropped to only 39 percent. The number selecting "making a theoretical contribution to science" and "writing original works of literature" also have declined. The principal item in this category showing significant increase was the desire to "be very well off financially" (note the word *very*), which was selected by 76 percent in 1987, up from only 58 percent in 1977.⁶

MATERIALISM

IT is ironic that materialism is on the rise in the U.S. at a time when it should be obvious to everyone that we are not as wealthy as we once were, and that the upcoming generation will be hard-pressed to achieve the same level of material wealth as their parents. This trend is evidently related with the rise of mediocrity. Since Americans no longer take much pride in the excellence of their skills and knowledge, many may be turning to the pursuit of material wealth in a pathetic

attempt to fill the vacuum.

Some clarification is in order here. In criticizing materialism, I do not wish to imply that possessing wealth by itself is evil. Indeed, many of those fortunate enough to be unusually wealthy have done much good with this wealth. Further, I do not object to such persons living in a manner that is commensurate with their wealth, within limits. What I mean by materialism is the pervasive trend in U.S. society for persons of all income levels to consume extravagantly, frequently beyond their means, to equate status in society with the level of material wealth, and to consider the acquisition of material wealth as the highest priority. This trend is manifest in many ways, from the rising popularity of luxury sports cars to the transformation of the tedious chore of shopping into a favored recreational pastime.

Particularly serious is the extent to which the current high level of material consumption is financed by staggering amounts of public and private debt. Indeed, consumer debt is at an all-time high, and the consumer savings rate is near an all-time low. The U.S. national debt should also be mentioned—the result of chronic federal spending beyond the level at which the public is willing to be taxed. The national debt now totals nearly three trillion dollars, or about \$12,000 for every man, woman, and child in the country. More than half of this amount has accrued during the last six years.

Some suggest that these embarrassing economic statistics are the result of incompetent national leadership, and that if only the right president were elected, or if only the right formula of economic stimulus were applied, then all problems would vanish. If we are looking for someone to blame for spendthrift habits, we only need to look to ourselves. After all, it is we who have elected and re-elected politicians who promise increased spending and decreased taxes. It is we who have slavishly followed the direction of Madison Avenue to consume extravagantly. It is we who have borrowed to spend now instead of saving for the future. And it is we who have defined one's standing in society in terms of material wealth.

THE MORMON SUBCULTURE

IN his book *Rocky Mountain Empire*, Samuel W. Taylor concludes his historical overview of the modern LDS church with a chapter entitled "Latter-day Profits." He described how in the aftermath of the polygamy ordeal, the Church abandoned several

of its distinctive practices, not just polygamy but also its communitarian economic system. He then argues that the Church, in its struggle to gain respectability, elevated public commerce and capitalism to the level of desirable ideals and then beat the government at its own game—making money.⁷ Whether or not one agrees with Taylor's conclusions, it is certainly true that the Church's emphasis on wealth, both institutionally and individually, has come before the public eye in recent years.⁸ Especially distressing are the instances in which Mormons have publicly flaunted their wealth or have become involved in unethical financial dealings.

Utah has a reputation in financial circles as the American investment fraud capital. It is true that in some cases naive Mormons have placed their trust in unscrupulous investment purveyors who were not LDS. However, even in such cases it must be acknowledged that the desire on the part of the investors to make a quick "killing" was an important factor. And there are many other cases where both the perpetrators and victims were "good" Mormons.

It is clear that the younger generation of Mormonism is picking up the values of the older generation. J. R. Kearl, the dean of Honors and General Education at BYU, has lamented "It's pretty clear that we have a student body who come here only for job training. They're bright, they're capable, but they're not interested in liberal arts. I visit high schools in an effort to help recruit good students: 'Tell me about your dreams and aspirations and hopes.' It's always 'money and a job.' None of them dream of becoming educated people."⁹

It is true that Mormonism, more than most other faiths, has emphasized the need for temporal well-being and has recognized that building the kingdom of God requires substantial resources. Additionally, with the pervasive influence of materialism permeating the larger society, it is perhaps inevitable that Mormons would follow the same trend. Nevertheless, the present emphasis on material prosperity in the LDS church is puzzling in light of scriptures, both ancient and modern, in which its members profess belief (see 1 Timothy 6:10, 2 Nephi 9:30, Mormon 8:37).

While many people recognize that the Church is increasingly preoccupied with wealth, many point to its high levels of achievement in education and in academic professions. For example, in one study Utah ranked first among the fifty states in the percentage of the population over twenty-five

with a high school diploma, and first in the percentage of the population with between one and three years of college.¹⁰ In Hardy's 1974 study of the social origin of American scientists and scholars, Utah ranked third among the fifty states in production of physical scientists, first in biological scientists, first in social scientists, and first in all fields combined.¹¹ These statistics are based on a weighted percentage of the number of baccalaureate graduates who go on to receive a doctorate in the specified field.

However, there are some dark clouds gathering behind these complimentary statistics. For example, while a high percentage of Utah students complete high school, their performance on college entrance examinations is not outstanding and indicates a disturbing downward trend. In 1972, the composite ACT score for Utah was 19.7, ranking the state fourteenth out of the twenty-eight states where the ACT is administered. But by 1982, Utah's composite score had dropped to 18.4 placing the state seventeenth.¹²

Hardy's statistics on the production of scholars are somewhat dated and reflect the values prevailing in the Mormon culture more than twenty years ago. In 1988 Hardy updated his study to include data from 1972 to 1981, and there is good news and bad news for the Mormon culture. The good news is that Utah still ranks second in all fields combined. The bad news is that this represents a sharp drop from the previous study, where Utah greatly outdistanced all other states (with a rating of 52.5 as compared with 40.4 for second-place Iowa).¹³ The apparent trend is that Utah's excellent showing is rapidly slipping, and when future statistics are collected, Utah will likely no longer be a leader.

Data from Astin's survey of university freshmen is available for BYU for the years 1971, 1980, 1985, and 1986.¹⁴ This data generally parallels the above-mentioned national trends in major selections, and it provides valuable insight into the changes of values among BYU students. The percentage of BYU freshmen who chose "achieving in performing arts" as essential or very important dropped from 27 percent to 21 percent in the period from 1971 to 1986. Similarly, the percentage who selected "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" dropped from 80 percent in 1971 to only 55 percent in 1986. But the percentage who selected "being very well off financially" increased from 37 percent to 62 percent in this time period.

Many in the Church claim that these trends originate with the Church leadership—for instance, the fact that the Church hier-

archy largely consists of wealthy businessmen. I disagree. If we are looking for someone to blame for the trends of mediocrity and materialism in the Church, perhaps we should look inward. After all, it is *we* who, like society in general, have apparently lowered the priority of academic excellence. It is *we* who have striven to match our neighbor's level of material consumption, even if it requires heavy indebtedness. It is *we* who have become infatuated with the possibility of quick profits on speculative investments. And it is *we* who evidently have conveyed these values to the youth.

For example, how often do perfectly intelligent, even college-educated Mormons sit through superficial, elementary Church lessons without complaint? If many of us are frustrated with the boring content of these lessons, why don't more of us accept the invitation, which is given in all recent lesson manuals, to express our feelings to the LDS curriculum department? While it may be true that these manuals must be kept fairly basic in order to accommodate the throngs of newly baptized members, if enough long-time members insisted on some advanced supplementary material for use in established areas of the Church, it probably would be provided. At the very least, greater latitude might be given to instructors to present advanced material of their own selection. One reason that manuals are filled with simplistic, mind-numbing lessons has to be that most members, even well-educated ones, actually prefer this type of material. Most members evidently have no desire to learn anything new, and instead wish only to be comforted by the soothing repetition of familiar catechism. "Wo be unto him that shall say: We have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough!" (2 Nephi 28:29).

We also have to ask ourselves whether well-meaning attempts to always be positive in complimenting speakers, performers, and the like may be perpetuating mediocrity in the Church. Young people, in particular, quickly get the message that extraordinary efforts to produce high-quality talks or musical performances are praised just as much as half-hearted efforts. As a result, few of these young performers ever get the benefit of the sort of detailed criticism that would enable them to polish their skills to high levels of excellence.

In a similar vein, some may argue that the current trend of anti-intellectualism in the Church is the result of critical comments made by certain General Authorities. While it is doubtless true that such statements have

had a negative effect, the main body of the Church, including many fairly well-educated members, prefers to believe that "all is well in Zion." Most members evidently prefer to believe that literal interpretations of a few scriptures, together with some stock quotes from certain General Authorities, provide all the answers to life's questions. This eliminates the need to confront difficult issues, and thus makes life simple and comfortable—the essence of mediocrity.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

EARLY in the history of the Church, Orson Pratt traveled to Europe and, with his able pen fearlessly attacked the decadence of the established Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican sects. He called upon the citizens of these countries to cast off these "corrupted" religions, and to come out of Babylon to a new Zion. A few independent thinkers heeded these teachings and they formed the core of a prodigious harvest of converts.¹⁵ Perhaps the same approach will work in the United States. Maybe it is time for the American missionary effort to stop exclusively appealing to the "lowest common denominator," and instead to start appealing to those few diligent seekers of truth, excellence, and righteousness, who may be willing to cast off the decadence of the established religion (i.e., the U.S. popular culture) in favor of a better society.

However, an appeal based on examples of excellence and material temperance will fall on deaf ears if the LDS society does not have its own house in order. To the extent that the Mormon culture follows the national trend of mediocrity, it loses its moral authority to lead the nation in a rededication to excellence. To the extent that the Mormon culture becomes identified with the pursuit of material prosperity, it will be tainted with the stain of materialism. In addition, if the LDS society continues to be preoccupied with temporal, material, or financial concerns, then the LDS church may ultimately lose its universality. In the words of Alexis de Tocqueville:

As long as a religion is sustained by those feelings, propensities and passions which are found to occur under the same forms at all periods of history, it may defy the efforts of time; or at least it can be destroyed only by another religion. But when religion clings to the interests of the world, it becomes almost as fragile a thing as the powers of the earth.¹⁶



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 2. Ezra Bowen, "Bad News About Math," *Time* 130 (26 January 1987):65.
 3. "A Lost Generation," *Time* 130 (8 August 1988): 19.

4. Alexander W. Austin, et al. *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1977*. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, 1977. Similar publications for 1968-1988.

5. "Foreign Dependency: Silicon Valley Relying on Immigrant Engineers," *San Jose Mercury News* (15 May 1988): 1A.

6. Astin.

7. Samuel W. Taylor, *Rocky Mountain Empire*, (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

8. John Heinerman and Anson Shupe, *The Mormon Corporate Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

9. "Brigham Young University: Five Views," *BYU Today* 41 (April 1987): 46-54.

10. Thomas K. Martin, Tim B. Heaton, and Stephen J. Bahr, *Utah in Demographic Perspective* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), pp. 198, 199.

11. Kenneth Hardy, "Social Origins of American Scientists and Scholars," *Science* 185 (1974): 497-506.

12. Martin, et al., pp. 198, 199.

13. Kenneth Hardy, Personal communication, data in author's possession, 1988.

14. H. Bruce Higley, "A Summary of Surveys Administered to BYU Freshmen through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program." Office of Institutional Studies, BYU, June 1988.

15. Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985).

16. Alexis de Tocqueville, "Principal Causes Which Render Religion Powerful in America" (1835), in Fred Krinsky, ed., *The Politics of Religion in America*, (Beverly Hills: Glencoe, 1968). The author acknowledges Heinerman and Shupe for this reference.

THE ELECT

That sparkle in his eyes
 made my bosom burn.
 With his newly-baptized smile
 immersing the room,
 my nephew stands at the pulpit,
 microphone to his forehead.
 Like a Vienna Choir boy,
 he confirms that God
 had heard his prayers, had
 saved his hamster's life,
 as if such miracles happen
 only once in six million.

—TIMOTHY LIU

THE UNTOLD STORY

Blood is not enough. I need more
 understanding than the living
 water down your wrist, your
 face cracked open with a smile
 on the sink. Your last thought still
 lingers in the air like the steam
 from a hot bath, which dissipates
 when the door is opened, when
 the water is drained. The mortician
 shook my hand and sat me next
 to your shrink who led the silence
 in the circle. There were so many
 stories I had to tell you, but now
 I see you said it all—I left you
 for the paramedics, only to find
 your voice rising in my throat.

—TIMOTHY LIU