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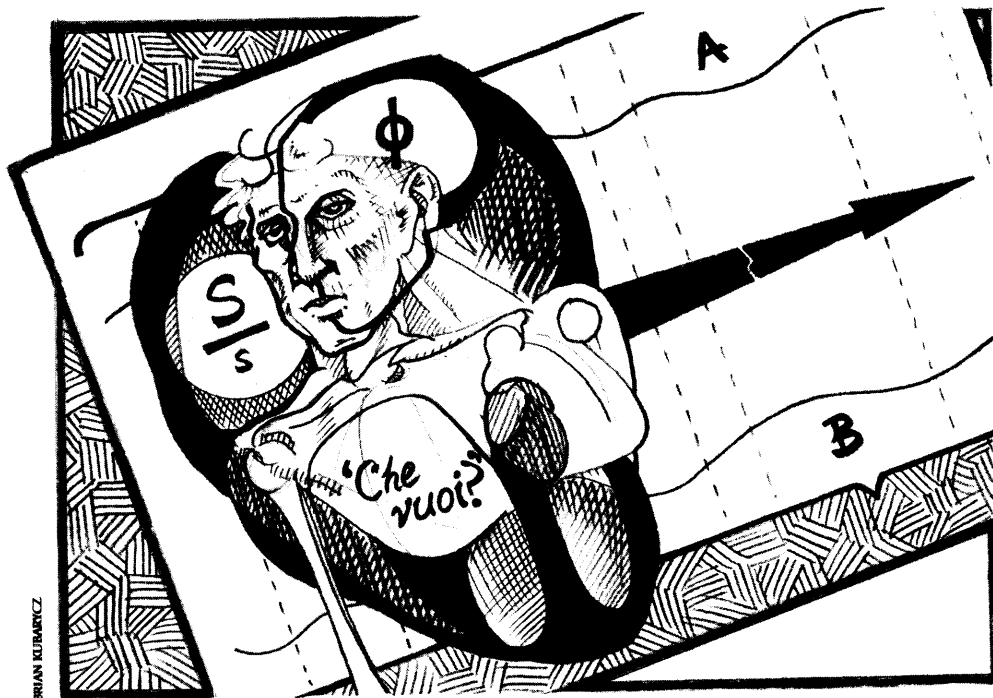
## STRANGERS AND FRIENDS

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# IF YE ARE NOT ONE . . . CONTRADICTIONS OF ORTHODOXY

By David Knowlton



It is difficult to develop the solidarity of oneness without forcing many people from the community

**I**N DARK, DRY, frustrated tones a friend revealed, while we sat in my car under balding sycamores, that he could never accept religion as long as it divides people. His sister had recently returned from Israel where she had adopted a militantly religious Judaism. In her zeal she subtly needled and attacked my friend for his openness, his secularity, his marriage to a gentile. She cruelly appropriated the symbolic high-ground of orthodoxy as the safe house from which to verbally strike her sibling. My friend hurt. His well constructed defenses would have repelled other people's sallies, but his sister's betrayal left a wounded solidarity that may never heal.

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DAVID KNOWLTON is an assistant professor of anthropology at Brigham Young University.

Orthodoxy builds itself from betrayed solidarity. It constructs a closed universe, secure in self-righteous morality, because it claims to serve a higher law than those of earthly, human bonds. Within its ritual and social boundaries, symbolic barriers made firm from feelings of cosmic danger and fears of infernal pollution, orthodoxy builds a tightly committed world focused on some ultimate goal and wary of any external presence. From the inside it seems a warm and loving place of mutual support; but it walls itself with hurt.

Orthodoxy does carry out important functions. It provides people with a stable ritual and social order, requiring little thought or crises of consciousness, something quite rare in our modern world. It also forms the central core which keeps a

group from entirely acculturating. For example, ultra-orthodox Judaism, it can be argued, maintains a base which gives sense to other less closed Jewish movements.

Our Mormon orthodoxy, in its fears of sin, the world, and acculturation, and in its desires to teach, uphold the law, build Zion, and worship all that is good, also wraps itself in a cloak of stinging nettles. It divides families and creates deep wounds of hurt and anguish and suspicion. While attempting to build a righteous, solidary community within, it defies the gospel dictum of loving one another.

In my ward during the early seventies we were taught that no boy could have long hair and be righteous. The hair and clothing were signs of internal states of rebellion, they said. We were to seek good friends who would help us progress in the gospel, who would "uplift" us rather than influence us to rebel against God and society.

Many of us were angered by the silly association between style and righteousness and even more angered by the subtle, progressive ostracization of youths who began to question the illogic of what we were taught.

I strongly remember my horror in the Language Training Mission at the treatment of elders who for one reason or another did not keep all the rules. Young men who wanted to go on missions, who had made sacrifices to be there, were gradually turned into rebels by a system which established a firm line, not unlike that of how many steps one could walk on the Sabbath. Orthodoxy would push and pull at those who, for reasons of personality, culture, and upbringing, were near the line, until they could be situated clearly on one side or the other. Orthodoxy requires order, neat divisions and lines, to protect it from the inherent chaos of cultural and social difference, from the inherent disorder of cultural pluralism, individual experience, and mere ordinary existence.

After I left the LTM, I missed the solidarity, the community that I felt with the other Elders in my district and on my floor. But while I was there I filled my journal with my own struggles to accommodate myself to mission rules and schedules, to mission customs and identity. Often I felt imprisoned and would cry into my pillow at night because of my frustrations. Other times I would sneak away to read a contraband article in *Time* or *Newsweek* in order to maintain my own identity. Fortunately I was never caught.

A Native American elder shared the same

floor with me and was struggling to adapt to the cultural differences and the pressures of the LTM. Neither the institution nor the other elders of his district understood the profound nature of cultural difference and insisted on personalizing every frustration, making them a matter of individual righteousness or spirituality. One day when I was sick, the two of us were studying Spanish together in his room. Suddenly the door burst open and his district leader stormed into the room shouting, "Are you coming? No one but you is putting you out of this district." The elder sat there and went defensively silent. His leader waited for a response; getting none, he turned and yelled, "Do what you want but it is not the way of God!"

The LTM was gradually destroying someone with a different culture in order to enforce what it defined as "the way of God." Those who survive its harsh order go on into the mission field; those who do not return home branded as rebels and failures. While this may be socially necessary, it is a spiritual disaster.

Orthodoxy is particularly dependent on clear frontiers protected by the eternally vigilant watchmen of taboo and fear. Nevertheless, all social groups build boundaries, sometimes low, leafy hedges and other times thick stone walls prickly in their defensiveness. The barriers are necessary to create internal cohesiveness, they enable community. Groups differ in the tightness of their borders and in how they deal with marginal people who do not clearly fit inside or out. They vary in the harshness or compassion with which they separate insider from outsider given social relations that cross their divide.

But there is a contradiction between the gospel's expansive outreach to all humanity, its dreams of a city of Zion encompassing all humankind, and the Church's building a social support against the influences of the "world," against other social groups which might through competing loyalties weaken people's commitment to the ideals of the faith. The one view requires few and highly permeable boundaries while the other needs firmly defended battlements.

Our gospel is composed of many simple but contradictory statements and commands. Jesus tells us to love our fellows even as he loves us, to judge not lest we too be judged, to go the extra mile in service, to forget about social categories, like the good Samaritan, and freely give of ourselves to others. He also condemns the orthodox of his time as "whitened sepulchers," in part

because they built such rigid boundaries of belief and practice to define who the righteous were that "they strained at a gnat and swallowed a camel." Jesus then warns against those who love father or mother more than he, thereby breaking social ties of potential solidarity, warmth, and love. He urges his followers to forsake the world and to form a community of the righteous, thus encouraging them to develop criteria of orthodoxy and membership.

The issue of boundaries is further developed in the Doctrine and Covenants. In part, membership in the community of Zion was to be determined by righteousness; the unrepentant sinner was to be cast out, banished, shunned, excommunicated. How do you continue to love, as per commandment, the ostracized, when the very act of open love defies the imposed separation and challenges the notion of community?

A resolution of the doctrinal contradictions and their social nature requires the most strained of casuistic reasoning. The terms of "love" and "community" must be redefined so that the paradox seems merely ostensible rather than real. Because people require social groups for survival, it is easier to redefine love than to challenge the orthodox community. Thus, we excommunicate out of "love," to encourage repentance, because salvation depends on it. But love is here and now. It depends on current actions of engagement and solidarity, of acceptance and warmth, not the coldly turned shoulder which aloofly and arrogantly proclaims, "it is for your eternal good that I shun you." This is especially so when a determination of righteousness and the indexes of "God's will" depend on social definition rather than any eternal awareness of individual condition.

Every spring along with the flocks of migrating birds and insects, ultra-fundamentalist itinerant preachers visit the University of Texas. They stand on the edge of campus and "witness" to passing students. To grab attention they warn people of their eternal condemnation because they are sinners. As people pass by they yell, "you are liars, thieves, adulterers, whore mongers, homosexuals." By offending them, they hope to cause them to recognize their abject abasement before God, which is required before they can accept God's saving grace and be uplifted. Inevitably a circus results. The entertainment of their harangue and the often irritated arguments the students throw at them attracts a crowd. Eventually someone will yell, "Doesn't God say to love your neighbor? How can you call yourselves

Christian when you preach such hatred?" They respond, "Because we love you we tell you the truth. You are sinners, and we have to witness that to you so you can accept Christ and be saved."

But if one accepts this logic, not unlike that used in Mormonism to justify Church discipline or even members warning one another about their sins, how do we ever distinguish between love and hatred? We enter a domain where words become twisted to mean their opposites, where there is no connection between signifier and signified—all because we need to protect from discussion our category of the orthodox community and its relation with God.

While there is the social and doctrinal necessity of establishing the community of believers, there is also the doctrinal requirement to maintain openness and acceptance of others. Currently we are struggling in our notion of the Church as a society and its ability to accept those who might not believe, but who still feel they belong to the social community of Mormons, or perhaps merely to our families. We are challenged to comprehend the vagaries of gender, which, while ideologically clear cut, are not at all clear in terms of actual individual identities and practices. Our collectivity includes those who break with many ideals of orthodoxy and yet still belong.

The contradictions challenge us. Somehow we need love and tolerance at the same time we build community with its inherent boundaries. One friend was wounded when his LDS friends abandoned him when they found out that his girlfriend was pregnant. The hurt from their ostracization when he needed solidarity, from their imposing order and taboo when he needed compassion and understanding, has made him wary of the truth claims of the Church and has weakened his sense of belonging, although this is his community, too!

It is difficult to develop the solidarity of oneness without forcing many people from the community, thereby defeating the purpose of unity. Yet, somehow we hope to learn to embrace the contradictions and develop a loving, open, and solidary community. Perhaps this is socially impossible, but like the other impossible contradictory command of being perfect, it forces us to stretch. We may never attain it, but we can surely strive for it, making Mormonism a more tolerant and loving society, an orthodoxy that judges not. ☐