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## MORMONS & THEIR NEIGHBORS

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# TO SEE OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US

By Noel de Nevers



PATRICK CAMPBELL

**My children are adults now; they all have friends from their Utah childhood, but none has a single close Mormon friend.**

I HAVE LIVED in Utah for twenty-five years. I like it here; I plan to stay. What I will discuss are annoyances for me but which have apparently proven to be obstacles for others.

I am not normally a severe critic of life here. I am often part of the group trying to "sell Utah" to prospective new faculty members for the University of Utah. I can give the "pro Utah" talk on short notice, but my role in this piece is to give the bad news as clearly and plainly as I can.

Most of this talk is based on anecdotal

evidence. Educated people are skeptical of anecdotal evidence; it is not comparable to the results of careful study and controlled tests. However, our most recent U.S. president, who is very popular in Utah, raised the anecdote-as-a-substitute-for-facts to an art form, so I assume anecdotal evidence will be accepted here. In any event, while my points may be exaggerations of Mormonism, and I know there are exceptions, what follows presents the *perceptions* of many non-Mormons in Utah. And perceptions are, in many ways, as real as facts.

### NON-LDS CHILDREN

IT is fairly easy for adults to deal with most of the problems in Utah, but it's harder for children. Over half of the University of Utah faculty is non-LDS; most of my colleagues are non-LDS. Most of my close

friends are faculty members, so I live on a non-Mormon island in the midst of a Mormon sea. But my three children attended Salt Lake public schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Every day they had to leave their non-Mormon island and sink or swim in the Mormon sea.

They all had troubles with the LDS issue. My children had Mormon friends in grammar school, but that ended about the start of junior high when the Mormon children became involved in the lock-step program of their church. LDS children all go to Primary and Boy Scouts together, all have the same lessons at family home evening, and do the same things on Sunday. If some children are not in that program, then they are not part of the group. My children are adults now; they all have friends from childhood, but none has a single close Mormon friend.

Non-Mormon children are exposed to LDS proselyting efforts. Adults can brush these aside easily, but it's harder for children who do not know what we know, and who are eager to please. Any religion where everyone is a missionary is sure to put proselyting pressure on non-member children. That is a serious concern for non-Mormon parents.

My son was deprived of the benefits of Boy Scouts because there were no functioning non-Mormon Boy Scout troops in our neighborhood, and one could hardly put a non-Mormon child in the hands of a Mormon Scout troop. (If you see no problem there, consider putting your son in a Scout troop run by some other highly proselyting religion.) Our girls, on the other hand, had a worthwhile experience in the Girl Scouts because this organization made the conscious decision not to be taken over by the churches.

In high school, my children found that it was much harder for non-Mormons to get into things like pep club than it was for Mormons. If my kids had been the most qualified, then not being Mormons would not have kept them out. But since they were only about as good as the average kid who got in, it did. Adolescence is a hard time for everyone; it's harder if one is part of a disenfranchised and excluded minority.

My daughter's experience in the A Cappella Choir at East High School may illustrate the problem. Our A Cappella Choir is a credit course at a public high school in the United States. It involved singing in public, for which attendance was required, and which affected the students' grades. For the public appearances, a costume had to be selected. The choice was made on the basis that "the boys should buy dark suits, so they

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NOEL DE NEVERS moved from California to Salt Lake City in 1963 to teach chemical engineering at the University of Utah. This paper was presented on a Mormon/Non-Mormon Relations panel at the B. H. Roberts Society in 1989.

can use them on their missions!" Some of the public appearances turned out to be three per Sunday for six to eight weeks in the fall, *all* at LDS ward houses. At these public presentations the sacrament was passed to the choir; those who did not partake were a source of wonder to the majority who saw no conflict in taking communion in a church as part of a class activity in a public high school.

I feel strongly that children should go away from home to college; it is an important part of growing up. When it came time to send our children to college, we had to send them out of Utah. For them the University of Utah would have been a continuation of Wasatch, Bryant, and East schools. Most states have more than one state university or university campus so that if one is across the street from your house, you can send your children to the other. But in Utah all except the University of Utah are almost totally Mormon. Asking my children to go to any of those schools would be like sending them to seminary. In this case a secular college education meant paying out-of-state or private school tuition. When I had three children in college, that hurt a lot.

It was good for them to go away. One came back after graduation and told me, "I don't hate the Mormons anymore!" She found out that other people have as many faults as the Mormons. Two of the three have settled in Salt Lake City, so sending them away to college helped them adjust to life in Utah.

#### ADULT GENTILES

FOR adults, I think the biggest problem is isolation. Mormon neighbors are not unfriendly; they are simply busy. If you ask non-Mormons if they have Mormon friends, most often they report having one. On discussion, however, it becomes clear that this is really a friendly acquaintance. It's rare that Mormons and non-Mormons become close. The demands on Mormons' time make it impossible for them to be friends on the same basis that other people are. If there is not a critical mass of non-Mormons in your neighborhood, then you are not part of it. When there is a neighborhood problem that needs concerted action, that action will be directed through the LDS priesthood quorum and non-members will not be involved.

One anecdote tells a lot. We used to be on the substitute list for a monthly, sociable, low-key bridge group. We played on about the same level as the other members, so we enjoyed it when we were invited. The group eventually died out. The reason was that they

made the mistake of inviting too many LDS neighbors who were in the same ward. Then the casual discussion between hands and over dessert came to center on the ward to the exclusion of the non-Mormons.

At the university we do not see much job discrimination (except for the president's job where, until now, non-Mormons did not need to apply). But off campus one hears of considerable discrimination. Most of it is in the form of the bishop seeing to it that the ward incompetent is kept and/or promoted so he can keep his wife and family fed, even if that deprives a more able and/or hard-working person of the job or promotion. I said this was anecdotal, and these are the anecdotes non-Mormons tell about Mormons.

The attitude toward women in the Mormon church is especially galling. They don't even have any say in who is head of the Relief Society. Women do as men tell them. The Mormon world view sees the only proper role for women as wives and mothers. The Church is intolerant of women who seek other goals. As an example of this intolerance, a Mormon co-worker told a woman friend, "I don't understand why you are working. You have a husband who has a good job. You are taking a job away from some man who has a family to support!" Consider the possibility that one of your daughters may find herself, by choice or by necessity, attempting to make a career in business or the professions and may encounter such an attitude in her boss. The Mormon view that a woman who has an exciting, contributing career is a failure if she is unmarried or is married without children demeans women whose intellectual horizons extend beyond dishes, laundry, and diapers. I understand things are changing, but at present the change is more obvious from the inside than the outside.

Some non-Mormons are offended by the dominant role that the LDS church plays in Utah politics. Any group that comprises 70 percent of a population can do the districting so that all elected officials are members of that group. Currently all of our congressional delegation, the governor, and lieutenant governor are LDS, although the former and current mayors of Salt Lake—where most non-LDS reside—are non-Mormons. The percentage of LDS in the legislature is greater than the percentage in the population. My religion does not keep me from running for public office; lots of other things do (like my inability to remember names). But I know that if I were to run for public office, I would have obstacles to being elected for religious

reasons.

The Mormon birthrate guarantees that Utah will have high tax rates and low funding for education and other public services. This not only affects Mormons who have larger families but the rest of us as well. Last year's bitter political struggle over taxation and the recent struggles in the Utah legislature over tax reduction versus improved funding for education are the logical outcomes of that high birthrate. The Mormon church exacerbates that problem by siphoning off a substantial fraction of their members' income in the form of tithing and other Church costs. Church members who felt the financial squeeze responded emotionally by supporting, at least at first, the attack on taxes. That emotional response was overcome by a major political campaign. The permanent drain on Mormons' income to support their church contributes strongly to the permanent impoverishment of all public sector activities in Utah.

The authoritarian and anti-intellectual mindset of the Church hierarchy, passed down through bishops to members, is a permanent source of conflict. There is no way one can deal as an adult with someone who accepts the dictum that "When the prophet has spoken, the thinking has been done." Its consequences make it hard for educated people to share the life of the mind with Mormons. I have heard a university faculty member, very competent in his field, say, "On important matters, I wait until I hear what the general authorities say, and then I know the truth." It's hard to discuss intellectual matters with such a person.

#### LDS SMUGNESS

THE Mormon belief in their own moral superiority often repels non-Mormons. Here I have three anecdotes. When our children were small, a Mormon acquaintance discovered that we were not providing a religious education for them. She was appalled and asked how we thought they could grow up to be moral people without religion. We explained that we saw no evidence that religious people were more virtuous than non-religious people. Ignoring our answer, she then asked if we would let her take over the religious education of our children. In return, I asked her if she would give the religious education of her children over to us. She found that an outrageous suggestion but did not think that her suggestion had been equally outrageous.

My second anecdote concerns the junior senator from Utah. He was quoted in the

press to the effect that it was proper for a convicted felon to be given a shortened stay in prison because he was a good Church member. I guess he could not countenance the idea that a good Church member could have done the evil things of which that man had been convicted, or at least was less to blame as would be a non-Church member.

My third anecdote concerns Mark Hofmann. He had a Mormon upbringing, completed his mission, and was active in his ward until he was forced to move out of it by imprisonment. After his preliminary hearing, the judge reportedly told people that Hofmann was an atheist. How would Mormons feel if someone who was raised an atheist, and had always publicly spoken in favor of atheism, committed crimes like Hofmann's and after his trial the judge spread the word that he was really a Mormon?

Now that I have said all these things, let me remind you that I plan to continue living here. Since I do not wish to be visited by the Danites, I should end on an upbeat note. Most likely, the reason I was asked to share these views is that in 1970 I wrote and privately distributed a three-page piece titled, "Suggestions to Outsiders Moving to Utah—A Purely Personal View," which concerned some of the themes covered in this paper. In that piece I said, "A sociological and historical examination of Mormon beliefs will help you understand and appreciate some of the things you see around you. Many things which might previously have offended you will now strike you as understandable and perhaps amusing."

When the piece was distributed, my Mormon colleague J. D. Williams chastised me because he thought those words constituted making fun of someone's religion. That was twenty years ago. I do not think he would make the same criticism now; we are both twenty years older. But at the time he and many other Mormons were very sensitive about anyone making fun of any aspect of their religion.

Currently one can buy the wonderful cartoon books by Pat Bagley and Calvin Grondahl which make pointed fun of Mormons and Mormonism. The play *Saturday's Voyeur* lampoons Mormons and draws big crowds, including many Mormons. Periodicals like *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue* regularly print humorous commentary on Mormon beliefs and practices. I consider this a worthwhile development. Being able to laugh at yourself is a sign of maturity. The more Mormons are able to chuckle about the foibles of Mormonism, the less severe the problems I have mentioned will be. We would make real

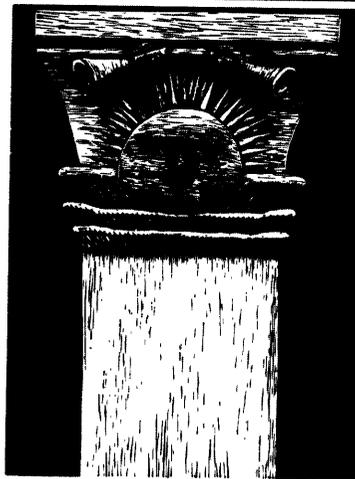
progress if there could be a person in the Church hierarchy who would publicly express a humorous view of Mormonism, one

who could fill the position that has been vacant since the death of J. Golden Kimball in 1938.

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## 1992 SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUM

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### Celebrating Mormon Experience, Scholarship, Issues, and Art 5-8 August 1992, Salt Lake Hilton

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THIS SYMPOSIUM is dedicated to the idea that the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ are better understood and, as a consequence, better lived when they are freely and frankly explored within the society of the Saints. We recognize that the search for things that are, have been, and will be, is a sifting process in which much chaff will have to be inspected and threshed before wheat can be harvested. In sponsoring this symposium, we welcome the honest ponderings of Latter-day Saints and their friends and expect that everyone will approach all issues, no matter how difficult, with intelligence and good will.

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THE SUNSTONE FOUNDATION announces the fourteenth annual Salt Lake Symposium. Proposals are now being accepted for papers, panels, and other sessions. The final selection of program participants will depend on the quality of research, thought, and expression of the finished product. Proposals should deal with a topic that has general relevance to Mormonism or other related religious issues. Topics may include the following areas but are not limited to them:

HISTORY OF RELIGION	CHRISTIAN LIVING	COMPARATIVE STUDIES
MORMON ARTS	ETHICS	ORGANIZATION STUDIES
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION	MORMON HUMOR	DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT
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PROPOSALS for individual papers or panel discussions must be no more than two pages and must include:

1. Title or topic with a one hundred word synopsis of the content of the presentation.
2. Research methods, sources, significance of the study.
3. Biographical paragraph or one-page resume of participant(s).

SEND all proposals and other symposium-related matters to the following address. Include the names of individuals not on the Sunstone mailing list who want to receive registration information and an advance program.

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