

# REFLECTIONS ON A LIFETIME WITH THE RACE ISSUE

By Armand L. Mauss

**T**HIS YEAR WE ARE COMMEMORATING THE twenty-fifth anniversary of the revelation extending the priesthood to “all worthy males” irrespective of race or ethnicity. My personal encounter with the race issue, however, goes back to my childhood in the old Oakland Ward of California. In that ward lived an elderly black couple named Graves, who regularly attended sacrament meeting but (as far as I can remember) had no other part in Church activities. Everyone in the ward seemed to treat them with cordial distance, and periodically Brother Graves would bear his fervent testimony on Fast Sunday. I could never get a clear understanding from my parents about what (besides color) made them “different,” given their obvious faithfulness. It was just something no one talked about, but I could sense their marginality. They died while I was still a child, and I recall feeling a little sad that I had not known them better.

When I was a teenager in the same ward, a white family joined the Church with a boy about my age (named Richard) and a very beautiful older sister. Before the boy could be given the Aaronic Priesthood, a discovery was somehow made that the family might have had a remote black ancestor—seemingly unbelievable at the time, given the fair hair and blue eyes common in the family. This discovery nevertheless had a long-term effect on the children, for Richard was never able to share priesthood activities with the rest of the boys in the ward, serve a mission when the rest of us did so, or aspire to a temple marriage. Despite what I recall as a warm and genuine social acceptance of Richard by all of us in the local LDS youth network, he gradually drifted away from the Church as that network dispersed into adult life and could no longer give him the social support that had kept him in the Church as a teenager.

His sister, meanwhile, went away to college and attracted the romantic attention of a young man from a prominent LDS family. The discovery of her questionable ancestry presented a serious obstacle to a temple marriage, of course, until the family of her intended husband was mobilized to press the First Presidency of the Church for a resolution of the genealogical ambiguity. That



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resolution was forthcoming when the Presidency decided that the benefit of the doubt should go to the parties involved. In due course, the young couple was married in the temple, but the resolution came too late to benefit Richard.

My own wife Ruth grew up in a family stigmatized by the LDS residents of her small Idaho town because her father's aunt in Utah had earlier eloped with a black musician named Tanner in preference to accepting an arranged polygamous marriage. Before Ruth's parents could be married, the intended bride (Ruth's mother) felt the need to seek reassurance from the local bishop that the family into which she was to marry was not under any divine curse because of the aunt's black husband. Ruth's family eventually moved to eastern Idaho where the siblings and their paternal cousins periodically encountered a certain amount of social distance because of rumors about black relatives. Because of the rumors, some of the town's youth were forbidden by their parents from dating members of this family.

I pass on these personal anecdotes only to illustrate how widespread was the damage caused by the traditional doctrines and policies toward blacks. Although our black members were primarily the ones who suffered in ways that most of us can barely imagine, it is worth noting that even our white membership was not untouched by the traditional racist doctrines and policies.<sup>1</sup>

**W**HILE MY EXPERIENCES with LDS racism thus go back nearly an entire lifetime, I consider 2003 as the fortieth “anniversary” (not the twenty-fifth) of my engagement in the study of this struggle. It was in November 1963 that I was asked to address the “race issue” in a sacrament meeting of the Walnut Creek Ward (California East Bay Area). The assignment was made, believe it or not, by the local stake president, and it led to several subsequent assignments to speak on the same topic in other Bay Area LDS meetings.<sup>2</sup> My stake president knew I was surveying Latter-day Saints in neighboring stakes through a mailed questionnaire focusing largely (but not exclusively) on questions about racial beliefs and attitudes, both religious and civil.<sup>3</sup> This was also the month after President Hugh B. Brown, in the October General Conference, had announced to the world that the LDS Church had no doctrines intended to justify racial discrimination and called for full racial equality in the nation.<sup>4</sup>

The intellectual and religious cross-currents for me were es-

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pecially powerful in those days. During my previous several years in bishoprics, I had devoted much of my time to church work, especially on weekends, and my intense association with the Saints in my stake had exposed me to the entire range of anguished LDS opinion over doctrines and policies about “the Negroes” (as they were then called). During the rest of the week, however, I was doing graduate work at U.C. Berkeley and teaching in local schools among colleagues who frequently called me to account for Mormonism’s retrograde ideas. Outside the Church, I seemed increasingly to be perceived as an entrenched defender of an unfashionable religion, but inside as a potentially dangerous critic of the “Brethren,” at least by some.<sup>5</sup>

For anyone who did not live through that period of LDS history, it is probably difficult to understand the intensity of the collective LDS feeling, inside and outside Utah, for “circling the wagons” against outside critics. By 1978, when President Kimball announced the new revelation on priesthood, that sense of siege was already starting to dissipate, and the rest of the country had largely turned its attention away from the obstinate Mormons to other national crises. Therefore, I was as surprised as anyone when the new revelation was announced, believing at first that it was just a happy rumor.

It seems clear in retrospect, however, that if Church leaders were not going to be pushed by political pressure to abandon an unpopular racial restriction, they nevertheless saw the need for a greatly improved public relations posture and for reaching out to the black community in Utah, both LDS and non-LDS.<sup>6</sup> To its enormous credit, the small black LDS membership there took one of the first steps. In the fall of 1971, a delegation of faithful black brethren, led by Ruffin Bridgeforth, approached the First Presidency with the proposal that a special black branch be established in Salt Lake City as a means of gathering together the increasingly scattered and alienated black Saints in Utah. The proposal was welcomed, and three apostles were delegated to oversee the affairs of the new Genesis Group. This group would meet on the first Sunday evening of each month to supplement (not replace) the participation of the black Saints in their regular wards and stakes. Genesis was therefore not a segregated branch but rather a fellowship group to draw together people in a similar predicament for mutual spiritual and social support. This is not the place for an account of the history of the Genesis Group, but in my view, its founding members are among the true heroes of this difficult period, who demonstrated their gospel commitments and loyalty in a situation where they were still largely unwelcome in a white church and often scorned by the black community outside the Church.<sup>7</sup>

Of course there were other black heroes of this period, many of them living far from Utah. I think, for example, of the Saints in Brazil, many of whom were black but poured their time, energy, and resources into building a temple there without any assurance that they would ever participate in its ordinances.<sup>8</sup> There can be little doubt that their faithfulness greatly increased the growing crisis of conscience that led President Kimball and his colleagues to seek the revelation of 1978.<sup>9</sup> I think too of the faithful would-be Saints of West

Africa who learned about the Church through sheer serendipity in the 1950s and 1960s and petitioned LDS leaders repeatedly and unsuccessfully for missionaries to come and teach them. They had to endure not only LDS ambivalence but political interference and civil strife in their own countries before their prayers and petitions were finally answered.<sup>10</sup>

When the revelation changing the priesthood policy was announced in June 1978, it caught most of us by surprise because political pressure on the Church had been easing off for several years, and President Kimball’s two predecessors had long been on record as strongly opposing any such change. Perhaps we should have paid more attention to the signs of change appearing during the first years of President Kimball’s administration, such as the 1975 announcement that a temple would be built in Brazil. Yet unanimity among the leaders about a new racial policy came only

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gradually, and when the eventual policy change finally came, it was actually played down in the Church media: It did not rate front-page treatment in any official Church publications. Indeed, the *Church News* (week ending 17 June 1978) buried the story on the inside pages, and the front page highlighted instead an Air Force marching band and some early admonitions by President Kimball and others about racial intermarriage! It seemed almost as though the new revelation was receiving only grudging editorial acceptance at the *Church News*.<sup>11</sup>

Since that time, many general and local Church leaders, along with the Public Affairs Department, have championed important initiatives toward building bridges between black Americans and the institutional Church. Some of these initiatives have focused mainly on black LDS members, such as the tenth anniversary celebration of the revelation, held at BYU in 1988; Church support for black LDS publications, such as *Ebony Rose* and *UpLift*; enhanced support and sponsorship for a revived Genesis Group; and the launching of a series of bi-monthly “firesides” for black members and investigators in southern California.<sup>12</sup> Many other official initiatives have sought to enhance the public image and good will for the Church in the black American population more generally. These have often taken the form of providing resources for family history research, as well as logistical support for celebrations and commemorations during Black History Month each February, and some humanitarian efforts (e.g. during the 1992 riots in south central Los Angeles).<sup>13</sup> In recognition of various LDS initiatives, national African American organizations have responded by honoring both President Hinckley and Darius Gray, the current president of the Genesis Group. At the institutional level, therefore, some noteworthy mutual outreach has occurred between the Latter-day Saints and the black American community.<sup>14</sup>

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It is at the grassroots level, however, where the racist residue of the past remains most strongly entrenched. In LDS classes and conversations, a question sometimes arises about the erstwhile denial of the priesthood to black members. Such a question is often raised by new black members themselves, who often discover that historic anomaly only *after* having joined the Church. Many, perhaps most, LDS members and leaders will answer this question with a response like “We don’t know, but that’s all in the past.” This kind of response, if not very satisfactory, is at least fairly benign and, for most members, probably the most accurate. All too often, however, the grassroots response from a member or teacher or leader is to resort to the folklore of the past with an explanation something like, “Well, black people, you know, are descendants of Cain and were therefore under a curse. However, that curse was removed by revelation in 1978 so that even the descendants of Cain can now receive the priesthood.” I have encountered that “explanation” periodically in LDS gatherings ever since 1978 and as recently as 1999. The late Eugene England found it common among his BYU students well into the 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine the impact of that “explanation” on most black members and investigators. The strongest black members, exemplified by such dear old souls as Ruffin Bridgeforth and Cleeretta Smiley (both of whom joined the Church even before 1978), have managed to deal with this racist residue by simply dismissing it from the beginning as false doctrine that would not be permitted to encumber their own faith and testimonies.<sup>16</sup> Many other black converts, however, especially the younger ones, will continue to be deeply offended by this residue until it is officially repudiated. Meanwhile, this lingering folklore will continue to play a part in the slow growth and poor retention rate of the Church among blacks in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> There may be a growing realization among Church leaders about the need for such a repudiation, but the popular writings of venerable departed leaders in support of earlier racist notions are still widely read among the Saints. Perhaps the time has come to “retire” those writings from circulation with the same official determination once displayed in retiring the early explanations in defense of plural marriage.<sup>18</sup> ☞

### NOTES

1. The profound suffering of black members throughout LDS history is poignantly illustrated in the candid trilogy recently published by Margaret Blair Young and Darius A. Gray, *Standing on the Promises* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 2000–03), historical novels tied closely to documented historical facts.

2. While the sacrament meeting talk was critical of certain scriptural interpretations common among the Latter-day Saints, my remarks seem in retrospect to have been quite cautious—too cautious, indeed, for another brother in the same ward, who had spoken on the same topic in an earlier sacrament meeting, suspected that I had been assigned to “answer” him. Such was not, however, my charge from the stake president. Nevertheless, I came to believe that the other brother’s understanding was more complete and compelling than my own, and I benefitted by some of his thoughts in my later publications on the subject. Incidentally, he was later made bishop of the ward.

3. In those good old “pre-Correlation days,” trusted researchers (at least those outside Utah) could actually expect to get cooperation and current ward lists from local leaders without the need for permission from Church headquarters. That was

obviously a different era! Out of that research, I eventually published “Mormonism and Secular Attitudes toward Negroes,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 9, no. 2 (1966): 91–99.

4. For details on this announcement, and events leading up to it, see Sterling M. McMurrin, “A Note on the 1963 Civil Rights Statement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 2 (1979): 60–63. Of course, in those days, the position of the Church was that internal policies related to race were its own business and were totally unrelated to the national civil rights controversy—a claim never accepted by critics inside or outside the Church.

5. Indeed, when I left Berkeley and Walnut Creek in 1967 for a two-year stint on the faculty of Utah State University, I was transformed by the Logan Saints from a reactionary conservative into a flaming liberal without having changed a single idea of my own! My first *Dialogue* article on the subject of race, published while I was there, criticized the conventional LDS scriptural interpretations and myths about blacks while calling on civil rights activists to leave the Church alone to work out its own race policies. See “Mormonism and the Negro: Faith, Folklore, and Civil Rights,” *Dialogue* 2, no. 4 (1967): 19–39.

6. Many of these initiatives are reviewed in my “The Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban against Blacks in the Mormon Church,” *Dialogue* 14, no. 3 (1981): 10–45, especially 20–26. Jan Shippis refers to the organization and mission of the first LDS professional public relations program in the early 1970s (see her “Surveying the Mormon Image since 1960,” *SUNSTONE* (April 2001): 58–72).

7. For more on the founding and development of the Genesis Group, see Jessie L. Embry, “Separate but Equal? Black Branches, Genesis Groups, or Integrated Wards,” *Dialogue* 23, no. 1 (1990): 11–37; Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 23–24, and *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 235, 259–61. Bridgeforth was made the first president of the new group. The three apostles appointed to oversee the group were Elders Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, and Boyd K. Packer. In more recent years, the Genesis Group, now led by Darius Gray, includes in its ministry and membership a number of whites and many families of mixed race. It has a regular monthly attendance of 150 to 200 members, with all of the usual “auxiliaries” of a ward.

8. On this story, see Mark L. Grover, “The Mormon Priesthood Revelation and the São Paulo Brazil Temple,” *Dialogue* 23, no. 1 (1990): 39–53.

9. The late apostle LeGrand Richards was among those who pointed specifically to the faithfulness of the Brazilian members as an influence on the thinking of the General Authorities. See Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 30–31 and note 118.

10. See James B. Allen, “Would-be Saints: West Africa before the 1978 Priesthood Revelation,” *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 207–47.

11. A follow-up story appeared in the *Church News* six months later (week ending 6 Jan. 1979, 15).

12. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 245–61.

13. *Ibid.* 245–48.

14. See stories on President Hinckley’s appearance at and award from the NAACP (Western Region One) in John L. Hart, “Fathers Needed as Pillars of Strength,” *Church News*, week ending 2 May 1998, 3; and in “News of the Church,” *Ensign* (July 1988): 74. The story on Darius Gray’s recent award from the Salt Lake City chapter of the NAACP can be found in the *Deseret News*, 14–15 Jan. 2003, A–1 and A–16.

15. England is quoted in Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Church Leaders Haven’t Discussed Racial Issue,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 May 1998, A–1. See also the Stack article, “‘Black Curse’ Is Problematic LDS Legacy,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 6 June 1998, C–1.

16. Bridgeforth took such a posture in interviews I conducted with him on 2 June 1981 and on 23 May 1985, especially the latter. I heard Smiley characterize the traditional LDS teachings about blacks as “damnable heresies” during a panel discussion at the 1998 conference of the Mormon History Association in Washington, D.C. (quoted also in Bill Broadway, “Black Mormons Resist Apology Talk,” *Washington Post*, 30 1998, B–9).

17. I reviewed this predicament and its various implications in *All Abraham’s Children*, 241–45 and 252–64.

18. See the account of an abortive effort made by a mid-level General Authority to get an official repudiation of the traditional racial folklore: Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 103–05.