

# The Making of Grave Community Sin

Garth N. Jones

FEW ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN *DIALOGUE* so disturbed my intellectual comfort as Dr. Bradley Walker's three-part series on the deplorable condition of Latin American Saints.<sup>1</sup> For some three decades, I lived off and on in Third World poverty-stricken societies. I have witnessed worlds of Dante-like horrors. Poor people stink with acrid odors of rotting flesh and oozing fecal matter. Small cuts and insect bites readily become festering sores and painful boils. Hair lice can never be adequately controlled. Women groom each others' heads with fine tooth combs and eat the lice. Many of the poor try to be clean, but their practices are unhygienic, with cow urine and dung used to plaster walls and ceilings. Potable water is scarce. Poor people bathe and wash their clothes in canals also used as sewers. Under such unsanitary conditions, insect and rodent populations flourish. Besides incessant torment, these vermin bring terrible diseases. Malaria and cholera are especially prevalent.

Poverty-stricken societies produce children in amazing numbers.

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1. Brad Walker, "Spreading Zion Southward, Part I: Improving Efficiency and Equity in the Allocation of Church Welfare Resources," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 91-110; "Spreading Zion Southward, Part II: Sharing Loaves and Fishes," 36, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 33-47; and "First, Mothers and Children: A Postscript to 'Moving Zion Southward, Parts I and II,'" 36, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 217-24.

Ironically, this is nature's means for survival. Scientific studies reveal that malnutrition (starvation) serves as an aphrodisiac.<sup>2</sup> Women particularly pay a high cost in shorter lives. My studies of the early-1970s population in India showed that, in certain regions, women averaged nine births with five to seven children dying by age five. Eighty-five percent of those women died by age thirty-eight.<sup>3</sup>

Living in but not as part of these societies, I have struggled in prayer to maintain my sense of humanity. Those unfortunate individuals with goiter-swollen necks and faces, deformed and stunted bodies, scattered and limited minds, are really human beings. I coped with the massiveness of this human suffering by building physical and mental walls and maintaining a strong gate-keeping function. I became selectively blind to my terrible environment, seeing only what I wanted to see and suppressing my sense of guilt when I had a full stomach.

I was persistent in my intellectual studies on development and steadfast as a Cold War warrior. I realized that my future, along with that of my country, required that massive poverty be alleviated, if not eradicated. I became skeptical of the small, piecemeal activities such as drilling village water wells, which did not result in increased productivity. Too often the technology, simple as it might be, was abandoned. The wells just deterio-

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2. I first became aware of this phenomenon when I was working for the Rockefeller Population Council in early 1973. Demographers have long known of the correlation between increased fertility and malnutrition. See Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Human Fertility and National Development: A Challenge to Science and Technology* (New York: United Nations, 1971), esp. chap. 3, "Biological and Health Aspects of Fertility and Fertility Control." See also John Bongaarts and Mead Cair, "Demographic Response to Famine," in *Famine*, edited by Kevin M. Cahill (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), chap. 5.

3. In my U.N. studies, I approached abortion in health terms. Poverty-stricken women die young as a consequence of malnutrition and excessive births. Over 50 percent of their children die before age five. If abortion is considered a contraceptive measure and measured by death ratios, it prolongs the lives of both mothers and children. The terrible choice is that some die in order for others to live. Often pushed aside is the fact that birth control is an expensive proposition, beyond the resources of poor women. Their only option is abortion, which too often is performed under deplorable conditions. For these reasons, I accepted abortion as a valid option; but in ethical and religious terms, my research findings were troubling. I was dealing with kill ratios.

rated until they were unusable, and the people returned to the sewer ditches and polluted streams for water.

Sound development required massive socio-economic transformation, with the institution of fundamental legal institutions and a fresh cultural perspective on becoming progress-prone. In other words, progress must be conceived in holistic or macro terms. Tapping human ingenuity was essential. It was not enough to teach a person how to fish. Success in alleviating poverty also required the opportunity to fish, the tools with which to fish, and the social, legal, and economic infrastructure in which fishing can exist as a profitable industry. In spite of what economists write, the critical aspect is not the market, but a culture where individuals can dream and achieve.

My thinking is heavily influenced by the nineteenth-century Mormon experience.<sup>4</sup> Mormons never accepted the notion of the social gospel as exemplified in the mission of the Salvation Army. Building viable communities was the driving force in Mormonism—a force that continues to this day—and not providing social welfare, which is frowned upon. Building viable communities is very much a local matter, and external intervention must be judiciously administered. Machiavelli observed that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.<sup>5</sup> With such study and reflection, I was able to face the poverty-stricken Third World without an undue feeling of guilt and shame because of my affluent blessings.

However, in reading Walker's article, which was almost like an exposé, my emotional security dissolved into intellectual discomfort. What of my personal moral agency regarding these unfortunate Mormons? Those individuals are my brothers and sisters. They are captured in living hells; and if something is not done, soon they will perish. Walker's open-

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4. See Garth N. Jones, "'Acres of Diamonds': Studies of Development Administration and the Mormon Experience," in *Portraits of Human Behavior and Performance: The Human Factor in Development*, edited by Sanyo B.S.K. Adijoboloso (New York: Lanham University Press of America, 2001): 279–80; Garth N. Jones, review of Garth L. Mangum and Bruce N. Blumell, *The Mormon War on Poverty: A History of the LDS Welfare, 1830–1890* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), *Journal of Mormon History* 12 (Spring 1994): 179–83.

5. Paraphrased from Allan Gilbert, trans., *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1965), 1:26.

ing description of "a frail and thin forty-three-year-old mother of twelve . . . dying with tuberculosis" vividly illustrates this point. In his final piece, Walker carefully estimates that more than 100,000 children and 50,000 mothers desperately need medical and related assistance. Within the next five years, most of these individuals will die unless substantial help is given.

How can affluent Mormons in good faith live with this emerging holocaust?

Walker offers constructive proposals to aid these Mormons. Nevertheless, I believe that much more must be done. I become angry when I see the excessive-consumption lifestyle on the Wasatch Front—big houses, motorboats, recreational vehicles, cruise trips, three or more televisions, and so on.

Quite innocently, Mormon missionaries have given to Third World unfortunates the American dream. They have brought hope to otherwise hopeless lives. Let it never become false hope. These new converts must be carefully guided to success, just like those nineteenth-century pioneer settlement companies that went into the wilderness to build their enduring, self-sufficient Zions.

With each poverty-stricken Third World baptism, there comes heavy institutional responsibility, which can only be met with massive individual sacrifice of North American Saints. Using Abraham Lincoln's analogy, the Mormon house divided between the extreme poor and the extreme rich cannot stand. It is not just, for example, that the Church allocates \$500 million dollars to higher education in the United States but only a few hundred thousand dollars to Latin American converts.

Several million Mormons are trapped in corrosive poverty, their promised humanity wasting away. Massive community sin is now in the making. The pain and sorrow of that forty-three-year-old tubercular mother of twelve must not go unnoticed. She is our sister in the faith. By covenant and obedience to the Lord, wagons of plenty must roll out in great numbers in a mighty cause and rescue. The days of "piecemeal" humanitarian assistance are long over. Much more needs to be done. Until then, Dr. Walker has written much that is useful. Action on his proposals should be taken now.