

Among the Mormons

A Survey of Current Literature

Edited by Ralph W. Hansen

*Politics is perhaps the only profession for
which no preparation is thought necessary.*

Robert Louis Stevenson

As is all too evident from the newspapers, we are again approaching that quadrennial time when nominations for the office of President will be made by American political parties. Forty years ago the Democratic Party selected as its candidate New York Governor Alfred E. Smith, who in the ensuing campaign suffered humiliation because of his religious beliefs. Religious bigotry—especially anti-Catholicism—has been a part of the American political scene for over a century. John F. Kennedy won a close election in 1960, thus broaching the barrier to major office for Catholics, but during Kennedy's campaign America's bigots unleashed a vitriolic attack on the Catholic Church and, of course, the man who wanted to be President of the "land of the free."

Mormons are certainly not strangers to the agonies of religious intolerance, as their early history will attest. After the practice of polygamy was suspended in 1890 and Utah was admitted to statehood in 1896, a slow change came about in the relations between Mormons and Gentiles. This change is particularly evident in America's magazines, where, in contrast with sixty years ago, a remarkably small number of unfavorable articles about the Church have appeared in recent years.

Will the honeymoon last? Of course, no one knows the answer, but there is evidence that change is occurring. The catalyst is Michigan's Governor George Romney, a practicing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From recent evidence it seems likely that the closer Romney approaches the nomination, the more scurrilous will be the printed anti-Mormon attacks, and should he win the nomination, we can reasonably expect a virtual flood of irresponsible pamphlets, broadsides, and articles.

Of course, Romney has been good press for quite some time, and during this

past year magazine articles about him have been reasonable in that they did not attack his religious beliefs, but rather reported them with a minimum of editorial comment. The signs of change appear in an article by Warren Boroson, "George Romney: Man and Mormon," which appeared in the May-June, 1967, issue of *Fact*. *Fact* is published by Ralph Ginzburg, whose claim to fame is in the realm of publishing material that has gotten him into trouble with the law and may well land him in jail. The magazine is nationally distributed and carries advertisements similar to those in the underground newspapers hawked in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco and other hippie centers of this country: "Fat Semi-Attached Married Woman, whose husband can't cut the mustard," and "Mature Male . . . [who] seeks a lady of passion." In short, this is a publication where everything goes—except responsibility.

Having discredited *Fact* for most readers, I hasten to add that it makes little difference who publishes this kind of literature or how vile it appears. Mormons should be aware of it and read it because it will have an increasingly wide distribution among their friends throughout the nation as the campaign intensifies. It is also a chastening demonstration of how an ill-intentioned person can make Mormons look positively absurd by selecting a few items of the folk theology (and a few of Brigham Young's more ribald and ephemeral comments) and calling the result "Mormonism." (The same technique, of course, would be devastating to any group ideology, from Catholicism to Ginzburg's own "avant-garde" hedonism.)

Boroson criticizes the Church for not preparing its adherents to think for themselves, and quotes William J. Whalen's *The Latter-day Saints in the Modern World* (which he depends on heavily as "the best book on the Mormons") to the effect that Mormons are not concerned with the affairs of this world. "For Mormons," says Whalen, "to present the Mormon answer to the profound problems which concern Christian and secular scholars . . . the threat of nuclear annihilation, . . . the role of the city, psychoanalysis—is to expect too much." "Still another of Romney's failings," writes Boroson, "is his tendency to be dictatorial"—ergo, "Mormonism is a dictatorial religion." Finally, Boroson accuses Romney (by quoting another writer) of having a "horse-opera sense of morality, which early divides the world into good guys and bad guys."

The next act in our real-life drama is a new magazine called *Avant-Garde*, which has not been published as this is written. Potential subscribers are being enticed in national advertising with a sex motif and a listing of articles to appear in the first issue, among which is one entitled "George Romney's Bizarre Religious Beliefs." *Avant-Garde* calls itself the "voice of the Turned-On Generation."

Book reviews are not often gristy enough to warrant commentary in a bibliographical essay of this nature, but Christopher Lasch has an excellent and erudite essay on contemporary Mormonism in the January 26, 1967, issue of *The New York Review of Books* (Lasch is reviewing three recent works on Mormonism: Turner's *The Mormon Establishment*, Mullen's *The Latter-day Saints*, and Flanders's *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*). Mormons, says Lasch, were originally the dispossessed, but "from posing a challenge to the American way of

life, Mormonism has become a defense of its most reactionary aspects." Obviously well-read in Mormon history and sociology, Lasch pontificates on an additional array of Mormon related topics:

On Mormon influence: "It is not as a religious force that Mormonism now makes itself felt." Mormonism "makes itself felt precisely in the degree to which the Mormon influence has ceased to be distinguishable from any other vested interest."

On polygamy: Lasch takes the view that women among the Mormons have always held a distinguished position, a view opposite to Turner, whom Lasch criticizes for interpreting polygamy as a demonstration that women were held in low esteem in the Mormon culture.

On politics: "The political prominence of Mormons and Catholics testifies not to the growing power of those religions, but to their assimilation into American society."

On Mullen: "The best that can be said is that it is no worse than the books Mormons write about themselves. . . ."

On Mormon history: ". . . the truth about the Mormons—at least about their history—contains nothing particularly scandalous. The absence of falsehoods [in Mullen], however, does not necessarily add up to historical truth."

On Flanders: "In the history of Anglo-American society, the Mormons are so clearly a pathological symptom that a historian could not address himself to the Mormons, it would seem, without asking himself what kind of society could have produced them." Flanders did not.

On the future of Mormonism: "The ultimate fate of American minorities is to become tourist attractions . . . but the tourist boom means . . . the same thing . . . whenever the past has been piously 'restored,' roped off, and put on display—not the vitality, but the decadence of a way of life."

Speaking of decadence, a potential rival (dare we say collaborator?) of *Dialogue* has been resurrected from the grave. Ten years ago this writer served with a small group of men at BYU who gave birth to *Brigham Young University Studies*. At the organizational meetings there was opposition to the venture. One brother expressed the belief that a learned journal could never succeed at BYU, and therefore should not be attempted. Attempted it was, and for a brief period there was some hope that something worthwhile had been created, but over the last few years the *Studies* almost fulfilled the prophecy of its detractors. We learned from the *Church News* of September 9, 1967, that the *Studies* was being "revitalized" to gear the magazine to "serious LDS readers everywhere and . . . not just for BYU scholars" and received the first copy just as this was off to press. Welcome *Brigham Young University Studies*! We look forward to reviewing your articles in this column next year.

PERIODICAL ARTICLES OF MORMON INTEREST

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"Archeology Reveals Mormon History," *History News* (March, 1967), 53-54.

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German writers of the nineteenth century on the subject of Mormonism and Utah.
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Diary of John D. Lee with the Mormon Battalion.
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