





MORMONS IN THE SECULAR CITY - AN INTRODUCTION Mary L. Bradford and Garth L. Mangum

... Perhaps the best definition of the city in its higher aspects is to say that it is a place designed to offer the widest facilities for significant conversation . . . The dialogue is one of the ultimate expressions of life in the city: the delicate flower of its long vegetative growth . . . -Lewis Mumford

Mormons, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not, have entered the Secular City. This term, coined by Harvey Cox, expresses (in "secular") a "this worldness" - meaning that the work of the world must be done by man himself, and (in "city") all historical and utopian dreams for the model community. Dialogue magazine stands at that intersection between the religious and the secular worlds. It has, since its inception, sought to sort out the issues which thrive on that thin boundary. This special section attempts to focus upon the challenges of urban life, opening up the subject for present thought, for future analysis. It does not propose to dictate to the "Church" as an institution but only to give voice to the urban concern among individual Mormons.

There are now approximately 1,000,000 Mormons living in or near large cities. This figure will spiral in the next several years. And "those who have been drawn into the tradition-demolishing orbit of urban life are never quite the same again."1 Tribe and town mentalities cannot survive in the Secular City, nor can the old fears and superstitions which cluster about them. It is popular to assume that any turning from religious paths to secular ones is

'Harvey Cox, The Secular City (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 46.

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evil per se. When non-Mormon church attendance falls off, it is stylish to cluck the tongue and point to the end of the world. It is at least possible, however, that the weakening of worldly and traditional religions makes possible the emergence of true and restored religion.

Secular tension has produced – even since Kirtland – the "Headquarters Mormon" and the "Periphery Mormon," those living on the edge of the "world out there," and those involved with what Sterling McMurrin has called "an ideal but isolated parochial community."2 Mormons have all along had their own excitements, often of such intensity that other excitements cannot enter. The present world's greatest excitement – the struggle for equal rights and opportunities for men of all races and conditions, both in America and in the underdeveloped nations – does not often penetrate the inner circle. But those living outside the circle, in large cities, are gradually changing and widening their perspectives. What seems to be emerging is a new type - the Urban Mormon, fulfilling in a unique new way the command to be in the world but not of it. This urban man feels, with Cox, that "the ordered, objective, knowable world is not simply 'there' awaiting man's pedestrian efforts to uncover it. Rather, the meaningful ordering of the world itself is a human enterprise, an undertaking which Man assumes as God's partner."3 "Secular" no longer has unpleasant connotations in this context, but affords urban man the same central place in the universe as do Mormon theological aspirations toward potential Godhood.

Not only does the urban Mormon have a positive attitude toward secularism, but he does not share the traditional fear and mistrust of the "Big City." An annual editorial in the *Church News* warns of dangers faced by young people who migrate to the city for summer jobs. Bishops and parents are urged to form a plan of protection. This is all well and good, but the urban Mormon asks, what of those already living in the city (and doing so mainly by choice)?

Though the urban Mormon takes precautions against the dangers and disillusionments of city life, he realizes that the city has long been metaphor for adventure, for opportunity, for many needs of the body and of the spirit.

The historical city can be described in three stages. The first was created when land as the source of wealth turned the city into a kind of parasite living off the surplus. Seats of power, represented at the center by the Temple or the Palace, descended in concentric rings of influence to the outskirts. This stage gave way to industrialism. Muscles were recruited from a low-paid agricultural system, with factories replacing the palace and the temple. Their affluent owners and managers avoided the smoke and noise a carriage ride away. We are now well into the third stage. This is one in which formally developed skills and talents are the primary sources of wealth, with the university as central symbol. However, physical location is no longer crucial, and much city ground has given way to the motor car.

²See Sterling McMurrin, The Negroes Among the Mormons (Salt Lake Chapter NAACP, 1968).

^sCox, op. cit., p. 67.

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In America the factories were manned by immigrants huddling at the gates. But as their children gained knowledge in language and custom, they rose to affluence and moved to the suburbs. The central cities were filled up again with immigrants, but this time immigrants from rural America, who settled in the cheap inner-city housing. Lacking in urban skills, they were often also marked by racial distinctions. They then became trapped in a "white noose" of suburban housing surrounding the inner city and creating the ghetto. This homogenization and segregation leads to many unfamiliar problems. The urban Mormon shares in these.

Mormons have always built cities. They wandered some, like the nomadic Hebrews, but it was forced wandering. They did not carry the Ark with them, but planned to build, planned ahead, built wherever they stopped. They were wide, generous plans, in keeping with wide, generous ideals. "Nauvoo the Beautiful" may seem cliché, but its sturdy buildings are only now taking shape in our minds. When the Mormons finally built their little city in the desert, the Gold Rush did not tempt them. For Mormon leaders were city planners from the start, deeply concerned with the way men live together. They envisioned a complete way of life, embodied not only in their law, but in their actual habitations. Real names meant real places - symbols yes, but material ones. They envisioned real cities of the future and pictured them as places of protection. Now Mormons are feeling with the rest of the world the effects of concentration, living in narrow confines within rising pressures. As a concentrator of brains, wealth, and power the city opens up for Mormons new sources of prestige. In fact, Mormon emphasis upon education may yet vault us from the agrarian to the post-industrial talent society with only modest exposure to the industrial stage.

There are many implications. What is the relevance of the idea of rugged individualism, substituted in this century for the cooperative traditions of the last one, to a society of growing complexity and interdependence? What special traumas will Mormons face as American society seeks to ameliorate the lingering burden of the past? How can expectations of unquestioning obedience be accommodated to rising intellectualism which has been taught to query, to analyze, to challenge? What are the consequences for brotherhood among Mormons who never meet "poor" Mormons in "poor" wards? Some wards are surfeited with able leadership while others find competent staffing well-nigh impossible. All of these trends are part of the urbanizing process and seem to point up a growing need for research, that we may better understand ourselves.

Just as individual Mormons feel the impact, their cities too reflect it. One can see, for instance, in Salt Lake City the advantages of concentration of talent and finance and the growing role of the university side by side with urban sprawl, social and economic segregation, congestion and deterioration of the inner city. The city can claim not one, but two ghettos; air pollution is a growing problem; the city is quartered and sliced by freeways; new commercial buildings dwarf the world-renowned spiritual symbol at its center.

A good question for debate might be whether Mormons should think of

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their church membership as a protective shelter or as a tool for shaping and reshaping their environment. After city riots, many urban Mormons found themselves faced with the "Back to Zion" syndrome. It was argued whether one should return to the place of one's birth (be it Malad or Salt Lake City), whether one should prepare for the big move to Missouri (no doubt creating a Mormon version of "Resurrection City"), or whether one should seek protection by living the good life and "standing in holy places." Big city problems cause many such expansions and contractions.

It may be that the secular tension producing all of these problems may be relieved by a group of mediators now growing up in the Church. This group, composed of faithful Mormons experienced in the mores of the world, will act as bridge between the Utah-oriented leadership of the past and present, and the more cosmopolitan leadership of the future. This group, dynamic and understanding of urban life styles, will combine all the best qualities of Headquarters and Periphery, creating a new world-wide brotherhood.

This section attempts to deal with several of the questions raised above with an eye toward future articles on other topics. Planned for Winter is a study of the causes of city riots and their effects on Mormons, by Royal Shipp; an analysis of civil disobedience and its relation to law and order, by Dallin Oaks; and an interview with Harvey Cox. It is hoped that articles in the future will look into the woman's role in city building, the effects of mass communications and public relations, the big city universities and Mormons who attend them, the impact of the city on missionary work (and vice versa). A future issue will be devoted to international Mormons in cities throughout the world.

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