

Reviews

Edited by Edward Geary

ARE WE STILL MORMONS?

Klaus J. Hansen

Mormonism in the Twentieth Century. By James B. Allen and Richard O. Cowan. Provo: Extension Publications, Brigham Young University, second ed., 1967. Pp. vi + 162. \$2.00.
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"Are we still Mormons?" Surely most readers will feel that this question cannot be anything but rhetorical, at worst a cheap journalistic trick to attract an audience, or at best a pretext to affirm proudly what all committed Mormons know, that in spite of all the obstacles placed in the path of the gospel of Jesus Christ in modern days — obstacles perhaps worse than persecution — Mormonism has come through with flying colors. And so Professors Allen and Cowan, who have written this little volume primarily for an audience of B.Y.U. and L.D.S. Institute students, answer this potentially uncomfortable question, which in any case they raise only implicitly, with a predictably positive flourish:

In the twentieth century the Church became, in a real sense, world-wide, as its membership spread beyond the isolation of the Intermountain West, and as other historical forces began to affect its program. Social and economic transitions, developments in transportation, dramatic technological advances, and national and international political activities have each played their role in the development of the modern Church. Through it all, however, it has been suggested [by the authors] that the Church has been able to meet the challenges of the changing world, bringing the benefits of modern developments into its programs and at the same time retaining its basic principles — the great and unifying "constants."

Unfortunately, the authors have relegated a precise definition of these constants to the very end of their book, to a quote from an address by J. Reuben Clark to church educators in 1938, in which the "latitude and longi-

tude of the actual location and position of the Church both in this world and in eternity” are essentially defined as belief in the mission and atonement of Christ, and in the first vision and the mission of Joseph Smith — surely a liberal definition for a Church leader who is usually looked upon as a staunch conservative. And lest there be any doubt, the authors have reminded us what this implies, namely “that a definitive stand on many concepts is not considered fundamental to salvation, and a multitude of issues may still be debated within the Church.”

The tone of the book, however, is set by an even more liberal text chosen from President Lorenzo Snow’s New Year’s address of 1901, which in the opinion of the authors “represents the enduring goals of Mormonism which had been among the great unifying forces of the Church in the nineteenth century, and which have continued to guide its growth and activity in the modern age”:

May righteousness increase and iniquity diminish as the years of the century roll on. May justice triumph and corruption be stamped out. And may virtue and chastity and honor prevail, until evil shall be overcome and the earth shall be cleansed from wickedness. Let these sentiments, as the voice of the “Mormons” in the mountains of Utah, go forth to the whole world, and let all people know that our wish and our mission are for the blessings and salvation of the entire human race. May the Twentieth Century prove the happiest as it will be the grandest of all the ages of time, and may God be glorified in the victory that is coming over sin and sorrow and misery and death. Peace be unto you all!

Yet even a careful analysis of these words reveals little that is peculiarly *Mormon*. Without the specific references to “Utah” and “Mormons,” the same address could have been delivered by the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Still, although the sentiments are vague, the authors, almost uncannily, have chosen a marvelously apt quote. Surely, the style of Snow’s speech accurately launched and predicted the style of Mormonism in the twentieth century: the desire to overcome prejudice and persecution by making the appeal of Mormonism more ecumenical; the emphasis on those ideas and ideals which unite us with the mainstream of humanity. Who, if he was a man of good will, could have disagreed with Snow’s sentiments?

And so, in the main, the world has been agreeing with us ever since. One of the most significant underlying factors in the success story that is twentieth-century Mormonism in the eyes of the authors has been the emergence of a positive image for the Church. But such an image, it seems to me, can be a two-edged sword. It is something in which we all naturally take great pride; and yet, ought we not to be wary? Aren’t images, by definition, derived from appearances? The authors themselves admit that the change in image became permanent as the world began to focus on the “*program* [my italics] of the Mormon Church rather than in its theology.” To the mass media Mormonism has become yet another American success story in a society that measures success largely by material standards: Mormons have become eminently

adept at imitating and assimilating American middle-class values; therefore, Mormons are okay.

But I wonder to what degree this acceptance, that has gone far beyond mere toleration, is not merely a subtle indication that Mormonism has lost its identity in the twentieth century — that it is a harmless idiosyncrasy in which otherwise decent folk may be allowed to participate just as some choose to collect stamps and others play the ouija board. And by emphasizing this theme of acceptance, I wonder if the authors have not played into the hands of the critics of Mormonism, such as social historian Christopher Lasch, who argued in *The New York Review of Books* (January 26, 1967) that

It is not as a *religious* force that Mormonism now makes itself felt. It makes itself felt precisely in the degree to which Mormon influence has ceased to be distinguishable from any other vested influence. As long as the Mormons were different from their neighbors, their neighbors hounded them mercilessly. Only when they gave up the chief distinguishing features of their faith did the Latter-day Saints establish themselves as a fixture of the ecclesiastical scene, another tolerated minority.

This is the lesson, if you like, of Mormon history. Lasch's criticism is particularly telling in the light of the book under review, for Allen and Cowan have themselves focused on the "program of the Mormon church rather than in its theology"; they have not exerted themselves in examining Mormonism as a *religious* force in the context of twentieth-century society.

Is it therefore possible that we have identified so completely with our image that it is reflecting back on us, ironically turning us into the kind of religion which the outside world sees in us? If this is true, is it not we who have changed, rather than the image? And if this is so, is not Mr. Lasch legitimately challenging our belief, our unquestioning assumption, that we are still Mormons? If we still are, indeed, I am not so sure that Allen and Cowan have fully demonstrated so either to me or to the more sophisticated Gentiles such as Lasch.

If we are indeed still Mormons, must we not seek our identity beyond the rising membership statistics, the growing success of our Welfare Plan, and even the increasing number of temples, not to speak of the impressive gallery of businessmen, politicians, actors, cabinet members, golf players, astronauts, and educators to whom we point with justifiable pride? Must we not turn to those values which are rooted in our history, even if that history may sometimes be uncomfortable? This raises the question whether or not it is possible for B.Y.U. faculty members to address themselves searchingly to the kinds of historical questions which the Church would prefer to sweep under the rug. If it is possible, surely the authors have not made the effort. Rather, they have chosen to conclude their work with a rather curious (for historians) quote from a sociologist:

Most of all, it is the future which concerns us. The past is gone. We cannot call it back or alter it one iota. For better or worse, "The moving hand has writ, and having writ, moves on." But we do nurse the hope that we can do something about the future. Just as the

founders of the Church turned their faces toward the future rather than focusing them on the past, so the present generation can with profit and adventure turn its face forward.

It is of course obvious even to historians that the past cannot be changed. But what historians do believe is that the past can serve, as Staughton Lynd once put it, "as a source of alternative models of what the future might become." And if the Church, as the authors submit, "is only on the verge of its true greatness," then they should also recall the warning of George Santayana that those who forget the past will be condemned to live it over again.

This admonition leads me to more specific comments on the dilemmas which Mormons face as a result of a failure to come to terms with problems that confront them at their very core. The most fundamental of these is posed by the transformation of the Church from what Ernst Troeltsch would have called a sect to a worldwide church of major dimensions. The historical development of this trend the authors have chronicled admirably, given the limited space available to them. They have, for example, revealed considerable sophistication in their treatment of the transformation of the doctrine of the gathering, showing why, today, it "could be accomplished anywhere in the world."

But they have failed to see the full implications of this change. For it has involved the Church in a paradox, still largely unperceived, because this worldwide movement occurred at a time when the Church has ever more closely allied and identified itself with American nationalism, thus producing a potential conflict of loyalty among an ever-growing number of foreign Mormons, particularly when they are not only encouraged but almost commanded to remain in their native lands, lands whose governments do not always operate in accordance with the broad principles of the western political tradition, especially the American Constitution. In other words, though the Church has become physically more universal, ideologically it has grown more parochial. In the nineteenth century, paradoxically, when the Church was physically more parochial, it was capable of developing a strong cosmopolitan strain beyond its sometimes narrow provincialism through the concept of the political kingdom of God.

This larger vision enabled nineteenth-century Mormons to stand aside from the various nationalistic wars and witness them as fulfillment of prophecy leading to world government. Nevertheless, if Mormons were spared the agony of fighting Mormons, it was of course largely because of the isolation of their kingdom. And with the decline of that kingdom in the twentieth century, Mormons inevitably faced this tragic dilemma, just as their Catholic and Protestant brethren. But when the authors discuss President Joseph F. Smith's attempt to clarify the Church's position on war in April 1917, they fail to get to the heart of the problem:

He reminded the Saints that even in the face of conflict the spirit of the gospel must be maintained. He declared that even in war the people should maintain the spirit of humanity, of love, and of peace-making. He instructed prospective soldiers to remember that they

were ministers of life, not death, and that they should go in the spirit of defending liberties of mankind rather than for the purpose of destroying the enemy.

Since the Church has chosen to interpret every American war as having been in defense of the liberties of mankind, such a position has certainly eased the conscience of *American* Mormons. But does not such a doctrine force Mormons on the other side into a serious moral dilemma, even though the Church has partly solved this problem by opting for the Twelfth Article of Faith as the better part of valor? Was it not such a position that led to the cruel dilemma of those local German Church authorities who finally saw no way out but to excommunicate a loyal Mormon whose death sentence by the Nazis proved that he had violated the Twelfth Article of Faith?

I am not suggesting that the Church can find a detour around this blind alley, unless it chooses to follow the Jehovah's Witnesses, who accepted death in the concentration camps with courage. I am merely suggesting that it is wrong for the authors to imply that the Church can easily solve and in fact has solved the dilemma. It seems to me that as Mormons in the twentieth century we have to accept the fact that the Church simply has no answer or solution to some of the most cruel dilemmas of our time, at least not as long as the Church chooses to operate within the existing social, political, and cultural framework. And to the degree to which the Church is incapable of a solution to these problems, it is irrelevant to them. I think we are simply deceiving ourselves if we do not accept this harsh fact.

The authors have chosen to believe that "the challenge of the modern age is to create an atmosphere in which the student can *comfortably* [my italics] accommodate himself to modern thought and new discovery, and yet maintain the basic fundamentals of faith which have guided the Church to its present status." If that "present status" involves nothing more than adherence to a few peculiar doctrinal abstractions which the world has learned to tolerate in view of our immersion in American middle-class values, I have no quarrel with them. But if it involves recognition of Mormonism as a historical, living reality, then that accommodation, if it can be made at all, can be made only at the cost of considerable sacrifice, both physical and spiritual, as the history of Mormonism in the twentieth century has indeed borne out.

Does this mean, then, that I want the Church to return to the political kingdom of God, to polygamy, and to communitarianism, the "fundamentals" or "constants" insisted upon by all those internal dissenters who want to lead the Church back to its sectarian origins? Emphatically not! I do not believe that we should return to the past or repeat it. But I do believe that only through an understanding of our historical roots will we be able to find our position in the world, that only through an acknowledgment of our past will we be able to establish a priority of values that will help us to discern that which is essential to Mormonism and that which is not. By way of illustration, it seems to me that the equation of Mormonism and American cultural nationalism by our missionaries around the globe simply reveals that they are ignorant of our history. If Mormonism truly wants to become worldwide,

not merely in a physical, parochial sense, it has to relinquish its claim that the gospel of Jesus Christ and the American Way of Life are identical. Perhaps the political kingdom of God represented a somewhat crude attempt to effect this separation. But if the method was perhaps unrefined, the goal was not. Shall we be accused of showing less sophistication than our ancestors?

Furthermore, our excessive identification with American middle-class values has led us to a myopia of staggering proportions *vis-à-vis* some of the most pressing social and moral issues of our time. In a recent *Dialogue* article, those Gentiles who were giving us a bad time on the "Negro Question" were asked to get off our backs because sociological evidence had proved that we are neither more nor less prejudiced than they. Fair enough! But does not this evidence contain a most devastating indictment of Latter-day Saints, namely that on a very fundamental question of Christian ethics their religion is totally irrelevant? Does the total silence of Allen and Cowan on the controversial position of Blacks within the Church imply agreement with this assessment?

Finally, I must admit that although I believe that these are all questions the authors ideally ought to have raised, their failure to do so most likely cannot be attributed to their lack of perception. At least we have substantial evidence that Professor Allen, for one, has revealed a great deal of sophistication on questions of Mormon history elsewhere. The fact that the authors, as members of the Brigham Young University faculty, were required to submit their manuscript to a reading committee may have tempered their desire to deal with the more fundamental but highly controversial issues of Mormonism in the twentieth century. Moreover, the very limited scope of what was after all only intended as a modest Extension Division publication dictated adherence to a chronological and topical outline precluding any large extent of analytical discussion. We must, indeed, be grateful for the valuable data they have assembled for the first time in their pioneering study. But now it must be the task of the historian to interpret these, and as an inevitable result face the challenge of their disturbing implications.

WORSHIP AND MUSIC

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Worship and Music in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. By Verena Ursenbach Hatch. Privately published, 1968. Pp. xv + 287. \$5.95.

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Worship and Music in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be had as a single volume or in two separate bindings. One volume (separately reviewed) includes the first seven chapters of the complete book and deals with the worship service of the Latter-day Saint Church with special emphasis on architectural designs and functions. The balance of the book deals specifically with music in the L.D.S. Church. It is with this section of the book that this review is concerned.