

A University's Dilemma: B.Y.U. and Blacks

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This article is an attempt to describe, with only limited analysis, the current situation at Brigham Young University with regard to recent allegations of its being a racist institution. Brian Walton, former B.Y.U. Student body President, is currently working on a master's degree in Political Science at B.Y.U.

The practice of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which currently causes the priesthood to be withheld from blacks of African lineage has been the major source of controversy for Brigham Young University in the past two years. The Provo campus, one of the largest private institutions in the nation, is now the home of 25,000 students, 97% of whom are Latter-day Saints. Further, it should be noted that over 99% of the faculty are Latter-day Saints. The perception by some that the University's affiliation with the Mormon Church rendered it a "racist institution" has resulted in demonstrations at nearly every major athletic event to which B.Y.U. teams have travelled in the past years.

It goes without saying that for those in the University community, particularly those who plan on being there only temporarily, the experience of being labelled racist is hardly a comfortable one. For the students it is especially frustrating. Many, if not all, have grown to young adulthood in a time when the Civil Rights Movement in America captured the imagination of many of their generation. Many young Mormons, many of them now B.Y.U. students, were not immune to the feelings of concern and empathy raised by that movement.

The University was at first very slow to react. At the beginning of the 1969-1970 academic year very little was said or done. However, as demonstrations became more frequent, answers to the charges started to be formulated. By December 1969, when President Pitzer of Stanford University announced that his institution was severing relations with B.Y.U., it took only hours for the B.Y.U. Administration to formulate a reply. Dr. Heber Wolsey, Assistant to the President for Communications, emerged as the spokesman in the situation as the University attempted to address itself to this complex question.

Many of the charges were ill-founded. B.Y.U., for example, has no admission policies which preclude people from entering the University because they are black. The Church's doctrine was often distorted in various ways. Outrageous misrepresentations were made by some. It was possible, there-

fore, to win many debates for the University by pointing out the discrepancies in the charges being made. Dr. Wolsey was an able advocate for the University in many questions and situationally his appearances and writings proved helpful. But the protests, in various forms, continued. At Bear Down Gym on the University of Arizona campus nine people were arrested in January 1970 at a basketball game. In February on the Fort Collins campus of Colorado State University violence flared again as demonstrators clashed with police on the playing floor at half-time. One reporter was seriously injured when a piece of angle iron struck his head. A "Molotov Cocktail" was thrown on to the playing floor at the half-time but fortunately did not ignite and explode. At the conclusion of the basketball season, the demonstrations became fewer in number. Most people at the University were relieved but felt that the question would rise again in the fall. For the first time the issue figured in a student body election in April-May of 1970. Although they had similar proposals and presented them in various ways, all candidates for student body president raised the issue. It was generally felt that the story should be told as it "really was" and that the lines of communication should be kept open with students at other schools. After a somewhat stormy election I was elected student body president by 38% of those voting in the final election. Throughout the election, attempts had been made to convince people that communication from student body to student body was possible. The contention was that we were not, as a student body, racist and that this could be communicated.

In June 1970 a meeting of all student body presidents of the Western Athletic Conference (W.A.C.), of which B.Y.U. is a founding member, was held in Salt Lake City. W.A.C. events, of course, were where many of the protests had taken place and continued disruption was feared. The meeting helped in making me aware that other student bodies were likely to suffer much more from the demonstrations, at least in the immediate future, than was my own. The way state legislatures see demonstrations, for example, can in no way be favorable for student bodies. The polarization on campus or where demonstrations had taken place was a real problem for administrations as well as students. For B.Y.U. the original incident might be over when the team left for Provo; however, the effects often lingered for months at the site of the demonstration as courts, disciplinary committee, investigating committees and news media mulled over various facets of what had occurred.

The conference showed how the future course of events might move. It became clear that any charges of B.Y.U. being a racist institution were not going to be made very vigorously. The problem was the doctrine regarding blacks and the priesthood and how that was being perceived. The argument was that the doctrine asserts, or at the very least implies, that the black man is inferior. Black men, therefore, wanted to oppose that doctrine, as did many whites. One effective mode of opposition was to refuse to have anything to do with the Church, or its largest educational institution, B.Y.U.

B.Y.U.'s argument was that the doctrine was not meant to imply inferiority and that the main thrust of the teachings of our Church were concerned with the brotherhood of men and the fatherhood of a God who, as the Book of Mormon points out, "inviteth them all to come unto him and par-

take of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female" (II Nephi 26:33). That same God has also made it known that "... ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another" (Mosiah 23:7).

While it was possible, we argued, to understand how non-Mormons, and especially black people, could think that the doctrine was asserting inferiority, that was not the case. We thought that if this could be communicated we might together move forward to attack real problems. I argued that the black man in America did have fundamental problems to face and that we were not convinced that the Mormon church was one of them. I could see that the emotional issues raised by the perceptions of the doctrine were real, but that if the perceptions could be put more into focus we might find that the issue was not so essential after all.

This was accepted quite well at the academic level. However, it could not help alleviate any of the problems. As long as people perceived the Church as racist, regardless of what any "real" situation might be, they would demonstrate. It was that simple.

In my report to Ernest L. Wilkinson, president of B.Y.U., I wrote, among other things, the following:

I am writing this letter in the plane back to New York and I am getting, over and over, the impression that the problem will only be remedied by direct communication to the students of other campuses and the public at large. Some of the presidents, I felt, really wanted to help. They could not because their hands were metaphorically tied by views of large numbers of their constituents. To be able to change the possibilities we must, if possible, change the opinions of the students of the other campuses. Some would argue that this is not possible. If it is not we had better put on our hard hats and pick up our sticks. I don't want to do that. We must try, and a large portion of my energies will be so directed in the coming year.

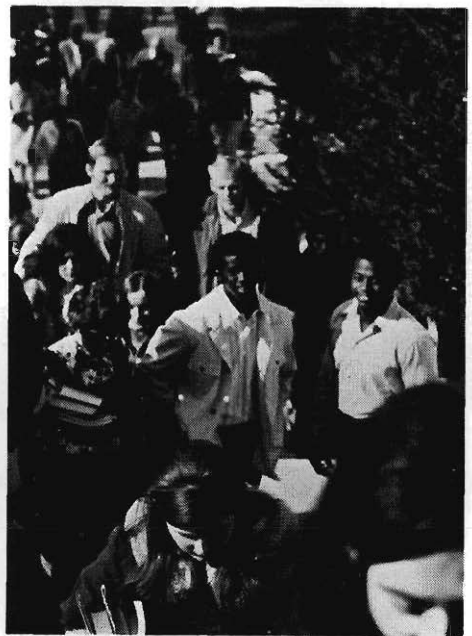
The W.A.C. adopted a unanimous resolution which contained a preamble and three major points. The preamble recognized "individual perception" of the doctrine as the "source of frustration, particularly in so far [sic] as intercollegiate activities are concerned." The three recommendations of the resolution were (1) that a "conscience clause" be provided for athletes so that blacks who did not feel they could compete with B.Y.U. could abstain from so doing, (2) that B.Y.U. and all other W.A.C. schools work toward programs intended to provide greater racial association, and (3) "That the anticipated efforts of B.Y.U. to establish programs (e.g. student exchanges) to facilitate greater communication to be met with whatever assistance possible by the W.A.C. member schools."

During the summer a plan to invite all W.A.C. student body presidents, student newspaper editors and a representative from the Black Student Union or Black Student Alliance on each campus was formulated. Early in the fall semester a letter of invitation was sent. It indicated that a four-day seminar was planned which would allow our visitors to "... see us at home acting in the way we usually act in our everyday affairs." By October 10th, the final date for reply, I had received only two informal replies. The conference was regrettably cancelled. The reasons for the lack of response are still not clear.

At the time we announced the W.A.C. seminar, Bruce Eggers, student body president of the University of Arizona, announced that he would lead a fact-finding mission to B.Y.U. Consisting of three black students, one black administrator, the President of the U. of A. Latter-day Saint Student Association and Eggers himself, the team was on campus for approximately two days. They talked with the Athletic Director, Dr. Wolsey, B.Y.U.'s black athletes and literally hundreds of students in public and private sessions.

The public session was held in the student union. It lasted for two hours and was covered by local and national news media. The microphone was open to anyone from the student body or university community. An estimated 800 people were in attendance, with hundreds more unable to get in. In the two-hour session approximately forty students and three faculty members spoke.

I began the meeting by indicating that B.Y.U. was a part of white America and had all the benefits and disadvantages of the same. If we had racists at the university, and we do, it was a function of those people being from white America, not a function of their being Mormon.



Mr. Eggers said that his reason for being there was to find the facts and he urged students to be honest and open. They were. One young man from Michigan said that B.Y.U. was the most racist place he had ever seen. Another person spoke out against miscegenation. But most of those who spoke evidenced confusion and concern as to why they were being labelled racist. It was evident that most had no intention of taking issue with the doctrine. However, and this was what was very encouraging, student after student expressed feelings of brotherhood and love for the black members of the visiting mission. They indicated very strongly, if not articulately, that their church left them in no doubt as to the fraternity of mankind, and that the priesthood doctrine was one thing, but they regarded all men as brothers in a literal sense.

In private sessions in the afternoon, the visitors apparently had similar experiences. The student body showed a real concern, and although they did not always relate to one another well, it was becoming increasingly apparent that that was a function of social distance rather than racist attitudes.

When the visitors departed they left a copy of the report that they intended to take back to the University of Arizona. Many considered it a breakthrough. It indicated that

The fact-finding committee could find nothing to indicate that Brigham Young University is a racist institution or that there may be any more or less racism present than at any other school. We would conclude, however, that B.Y.U. is an "isolated" institution, whose members simply do not relate to or understand black people. A desire to relate to black members of the fact-finding team was awkwardly expressed in almost over-compensatory fashion. Other testimony also indicated that, having been branded racists, many B.Y.U. students were almost "racist-in-reverse" through the holding of paternalistic, though sincere, attitudes towards blacks.

In some ways the University had, of course, no reason to feel good about being "no more or less" racist than any other school. That is hardly a compliment. It might, however, be true, and that, in paradoxical fashion, was a minor temporary relief.

The week following the visit of the fact-finding team I visited the Tucson campus and spoke with all the major newspapers, television and radio stations in the city. More importantly, I took the opportunity to speak to hundreds of students, the Student Senate, and the Black Student Union about the situation. Dr. Wolsey also spent time on the campus and met with the Black Student Union and the media. On Saturday night B.Y.U. played Arizona in a football game. The United Front Organization (U.F.O.), a group of white radicals, had a small demonstration with about seventy-five people, some of whom were not students at the University. Of approximately fifty signs carried by the demonstrators, only eight mentioned B.Y.U. or the Church specifically. Most were against racism in general, repression, and forced activity fees at the University of Arizona. One Lutheran minister told B.Y.U. observers that without the fact-finding team's report and the visits to the U. of A. campus by Dr. Wolsey and myself the demonstration would have been larger and "very anti-Mormon." The issues at long last seemed to be coming into focus.

It is foolish to think that the problem can be "solved" to the extent that demonstrations will cease. However, it does appear that true representation of the totality of Mormon doctrine can mitigate the severity with which we are judged because of one particular doctrine.

The university community is still analyzing its relationship to black people. The University of Arizona report indicated that, although we were no more or less racist than other institutions, we had seriously erred in not doing more to expose B.Y.U. students to blacks. The report urged a black recruitment program (there are approximately 15 blacks on campus), a black speakers program, and exchange programs with other schools to allow blacks to be on campus for a semester. Several proposals have been made and are being made as to courses of action open to the University to implement the feelings of brotherly love which the University of Arizona team experienced.

There is also a great deal of opposition. At this time there are still a great many things to be ascertained about the practicality of the possibilities. For example, where would the money for the programs come — tithing? voluntary contributions? Would black people want to come to an isolated Mormon community? What would the reactions of L.D.S. parents be? How would L.D.S. students react when 100 places in the University went to non-members while they were excluded? Would the University have the facilities — counseling services for example — to deal with the influx of black people? Would this appear as tokenism and make our problems worse? What would the General Authorities have to say?

Since the visit of the University of Arizona team much has occurred. I have visited several campuses, as has Dr. Wolsey. In spite of much thinking and discussion, there seems to be a lapse on campus in the attention given to this problem. While that may be understandable, it is not at all acceptable. Many have seen the year as successful, in terms of this problem. Certainly the U. of A. experience helped considerably. The report was widely circulated throughout the W.A.C. Strategically the experience was a victory, but I am afraid, only a temporary one.

An "Interaction Team" from the Association of College Unions International came to B.Y.U. to investigate racism charges and produced a report which indicated, among other things that "... it was felt that the concept of the brotherhood of man was both felt and manifested." They recommended no adverse action.

However, I am of the opinion that the most difficult problem will be recurring. It is not a simple matter of the dislike of a doctrine, although that may be the immediate problem. The feelings and attitudes of blacks are, as we all know, the result of an inherited frustration born of hundreds of years of cultural, political, and human subordination. White society is reaping what its ancestors sowed. Mormons, because of the priesthood doctrine, will have to go many extra miles to overcome the heritage of bigotry, which is the lot of most white people, if they are to be spared the problems we have seen in the last few years. There is no indication that the B.Y.U. community really understands that. The level of consciousness is still very low.

"We have a duty to the things . . . we are close to . . . a discipline . . . an art . . . a community. . . . We have another duty . . . to be open and welcoming to all . . . And this double sense of faithfulness to that which is our own, and openness to all that is human, is perhaps one of the attitudes, which more even than reform in education, more than any political gimmickry, will help to see us through one of the most peculiar episodes in man's history."

—Robert Oppenheimer