

# REVIEWS

*Edited by Davis Bitton*

## **In Good Conscience: Mormonism and Conscientious Objection**

*Orlando E. Delogu*

*War, Conscription, Conscience and Mormonism:* "A collection of diverse materials . . . that seeks to remind its readers that a diversity of opinion [on these subjects] can and does exist among members in good standing of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . ." edited by Gordon C. Thomasson. Santa Barbara, California: Mormon Heritage, 1971; 125 pp., softbound. Available from Mormon Heritage, P.O. Box 15230, Santa Barbara, California 93107, at cost (\$1.25). Orlando Delogu, Professor of Law at the University of Maine, is a member of the national board of the American Civil Liberties Union and the Maine Environmental Improvement Commission.

It is not without some irony that one considers both the format and source of this collection of materials — the almost apologetic tone in which both the collection and so many of its individual pieces present their views and the smallness and certainly unofficial character of the institution (Mormon Heritage) whose voice is raised. One is led to ask in a church of millions which has experienced the persecutions of the past, which knows first-hand the evils of war, which holds forth all of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants as scripture (not just those portions that advocate support for constituted government) and which claims modern revelation, why so few perceive the moral rightness of the positions urged in this volume? Why isn't the substance of this volume found in the proceedings of a recent general conference? Why isn't it the subject of a recent issue of the *Ensign* or the *New Era*? Why aren't those within the Church who are conscientious objectors accorded a full measure of the love of their brethren and the outspoken approval of the general authorities for so courageous an action? Surely these and not those who march off to war are among the "meek" who shall "inherit the earth."

One may even ask, why is there an official church silence with respect to participation in this war which today is so unnecessary, so terrible in its conduct and character, whose enormities and excesses are so great as to be incalculable in terms of human misery — why is there silence? Silence has been interpreted by church member and non-member alike as approval of the national policy and position. It has led to harassment and disapproval (from persons both inside and outside the church) of those comparatively few church members who seek conscientious objector status. More important, at a time when our own young people, indeed when a broad cross-section of the youth of the entire nation, cry out for moral leadership, an end to war, an addressing of national energies to long unmet domestic needs, we seem-

ingly favor and support a militarist national policy which continues both to prepare for and to wage war. Where is our moral leadership?

And we are so caught up in our view that these are the last days, that shortly the Constitution must hang by a thread and we must play our fore-ordained role, and that communism is the bear that must be slain, that many of us fail as individual church members today to live our own doctrines. Isn't it a gospel of love, of mercy, of forgiveness, of peace? And shouldn't we recall that "no man knoweth the hour?" I fear that many within the Church from the highest to the least have aligned themselves too closely with a political ideology and not closely enough with the teachings of Christ, Helaman, Ammon, Nephi, Moroni, Joseph Smith. This not only dims one's perception of the gospel but it dims one's tolerance of viewpoints other than his own. I find this plea for tolerance to be one of the major theses of the authors. And how can it be denied in a church which has experienced so much intolerance and in which free agency is so important a doctrine? But for Mormon conscientious objectors there is today precious little tolerance. If this volume succeeds modestly in even this one regard it will have repaid its sponsors and authors many fold.

As to the volume itself — it is short and comparatively easy and interesting reading. There is some repetition and there are some typographical errors that distract the reader. The scriptural and bibliographical references are ample and useful. It is unfortunate that finances dictated not only the smallness of the print (it is hard on the eyes) but an initial printing of only 500 copies. The materials merit much wider circulation.

As in any collection of materials, some pieces are more forceful and better written than others. Keeler's "A Plea for Tolerance" though short is certainly one of the better articles. Nibley's "Renounce War" is important not so much for what it says (though the arguments made are certainly compelling) but for who is saying it and for the context in which the remarks were originally made. "An Important Message to the Men of B.Y.U." is interesting not only because of the strength of the message but because it apparently took some courage to state anti-war and conscientious-objector views and to adhere to them in the aftermath of events on that campus. The point previously made with respect to intolerance for other's views is certainly and tragically brought home here. The two sections, "Mormons and the Selective Service" and "Two Men's Experiences" will, I'm afraid, be viewed as cookbook pieces showing the do's and don't's of official letter-writing and filing for conscientious-objector status. Because of their brevity and incompleteness I'm certain they were not intended to serve this purpose, but individuals dealing with selective service boards are likely to seize upon the language and approaches presented that worked and avoid approaches that failed without analyzing the reasons for success or failure in the particular case. Thomasson's "In Good Conscience" is the most thorough, particularly in terms of the footnotes, which not only support the main arguments but also direct the reader to a much wider range of related materials. One or two of the selected pieces are either maudlin in tone or not well written, but on balance they do not detract significantly from the volume as a whole.

There does, however, seem to be a fallacy in the few materials which compare the conscientious objector to the person who disobeys what he deems

to be an unjust or an unconstitutional law. (An example of the latter would be those in the church who continued to practice plural marriage after the *Reynolds* decision.) Each may be highly motivated. Each may in fact place higher value on God's law (moral law) than on the laws of men, but the position of the conscientious objector is much stronger than that of the civil disobedient. The objector's position is both doctrinally strong and at present quite legal. The objector is not a law breaker. There is not in his case an irreconcilable conflict between God's law as perceived by the individual and the law of the land. He seeks merely to avail himself of a legal status long recognized in free societies, by the founding fathers of this country, and by the present draft laws. Confusing conscientious objection and civil disobedience is therefore not only misleading but incorrect. What Mr. Thomasson probably intended to point out is that individuals who are wrongfully denied conscientious objector status must become lawbreakers by refusing induction before their legal rights can be vindicated in a court of law. Though this is certainly one of the most onerous provisions of the present draft law it is really an aside to the main theme of this collection — an aside not very fully or accurately developed.

At some point in reading these materials a somewhat larger issue occurred to me. Perhaps the editor and individual authors by virtue of the spirit which is in them and the truths which they perceive have a duty to do more than merely articulate and justify their position to seek a greater degree of accommodation and tolerance from their brethren. Perhaps the editor and authors should summon up a greater boldness. Perhaps less an exposition of a position and more of a call to repentance is in order. After all, where much is given much is expected.

## Courage

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*Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action.* Venture Foundation, 106 East South, Lamoni, Iowa 50140. Vol. 1, Nos. 1 and 2 (September and December, 1970), \$6.00 per year. James Clayton teaches history at the University of Utah.

Robert Flanders, an exceptionally articulate and perceptive insider in RLDS matters, introduced readers of the Autumn, 1970, issue of this journal to the pilot issue of *Dialogue's* RLDS cousin, *Courage*. What follows is an analysis of the first two regular issues of *Courage* by a sympathetic outsider.

The September, 1970, issue of *Courage* contains articles on the personality of Joseph Smith, problems in interpreting the Book of Mormon historically, the need for greater missionary activity, the desirability of intensive involvement in the practical problems of the day, and a discussion by six observers of the RLDS 1970 World Conference. The December issue focuses on Vietnam, women's liberation, whether to baptize polygamous converts in India, sources for studying the life of Joseph Smith III, and the need for divine help in understanding the Book of Mormon.