

# *REVELATION: THE COHESIVE ELEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL MORMONISM*

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PRESIDENT SPENCER W. KIMBALL, in his address to the Samoa area conference in 1976, pointed out that he is frequently asked at press conferences about what he thinks is the single "greatest" problem facing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today. "It is rapid growth," responds President Kimball. "It is very difficult to keep up with the growth of the Church in many lands."<sup>1</sup> The president, of course, was referring to problems of organization and logistics resulting from a spectacular increase in membership. The dimensions of the problem of nourishing nascent leadership in newer Mormon communities and of providing religious instructional materials in diverse languages become obvious when we realize that "the membership doubles every fifteen years." To quote Apostle Mark E. Peterson: "Our missionary system has increased from about a dozen men in 1930 to an army of nearly thirty thousand today. Our four million will soon be eight million. Our stakes and missions now exceed thirteen hundred in number in about eighty different nations. We have twelve thousand local congregations in forty-six languages."<sup>2</sup> As Alice found in her wonderland, the Church too has to run hard to provide existing services to ever-increasing numbers. In spite of the marvels of technology at its command, the Church, as President Kimball assessed, is hard-pressed to meet the challenges of today.

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Expansion undoubtedly will bring the Church face to face with a host of other problems. Historically and doctrinally, for instance, the Church has been projected as an American Church and its members have been exhorted to subscribe to the belief that the Lord "had established the constitution of this land by the hands of wise men whom [he] had raised up to this very purpose" (D&C 102:80). As the Church expands beyond traditional boundaries of language and culture, it will have to underplay its doctrinal commitment to its land of origin. There is evidence that a reconstruction of views on this point may be under way. Ezra Taft Benson quotes President Harold B. Lee with approval to say that "no longer might this Church be thought of as a 'Utah Church,' or as an 'American Church.'" <sup>3</sup> Hugh Nibley opines that "the gospel is not culturally conditioned, neither is it nationally conditioned."<sup>4</sup> He seems to feel that the Church was umbilically tied to the United States more or less as a historical necessity because America alone, in the past, had guaranteed unbridled freedom to practice one's religion. Obviously, by implication, the Church is ready to cut its umbilical ties to the United States as other countries begin to practice freedom of religious belief.

There is also a more basic problem facing the Church. Will it be humanly possible for members from other cultures, across diverse language barriers, across hurdles of ingrained rituals and customs, primordial ways of thinking and being to blueprint their beliefs and life in accordance with the plan of salvation which is so alien? If the experience of the Roman Catholic Church in the internationalization of its faith is any indication, the Mormon Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, will become pluralistic. The problem of pluralism may not be amenable to solutions, either wishful or real. The American experience with its native Indians, Blacks and Chicanos proves that assimilation of peoples into another ethnic mold is not easy. Historians have long discarded the melting pot theory to explain the American experience in favor of the stew theory. The newer theory argues that American culture is more like a pot of stew where the components retain their identifiable ethnic and racial individualities. Will the experience of the Mormon Church be otherwise?

Many other problems, both genuine and insistent, may be catalogued in Whitmanesque fashion, but that is not the purpose here. These questions have been raised in order to focus specifically upon another crucial question: Is there anything in Mormonism that will keep the Church from following in the way of the Roman Catholic Church, from becoming pluralistic, from becoming doctrinally fragmented, divisive and schismatic? Alternately, to state the question affirmatively: Is there anything in Mormonism that will keep the Church doctrinally cohesive even as it builds edifices of faith in other lands? What impulses are there in the doctrine, experiences, and structure of the Mormon Church that will continue to sustain a vital and ever-growing church without developing fissiparous tendencies?

The one single element in Mormonism that will serve to unite the Church, as under an umbrella, will be Mormonism's unique concept of revelation and the intimate role it plays in the daily lives of each one of its members, whether the member be a new convert from Korea or a hallowed descendant

of the founder of the Church. Carrying the gospel of the restored church to every clime and culture will exert extraordinary centrifugal pressures that will tend to pluralize the Church were it not for the fact of Mormon belief in the very centrality of revelation as its sole and continuing source of the expression of the divine will and grace. Albeit that Christianity is a revealed religion, Mormonism alone of all Christian churches posits faith in a continuing, ceaseless and endless revelation as a means of God's imminence in history, and makes divine encounters the lifeblood of every single Mormon's religious experience. When, for instance, a convert from Roman Catholicism is admitted to the Mormon Church, the new member, upon baptism and confirmation, is vouchsafed revelation as a gift of the Holy Ghost, a gift that he was expressly forbidden in his former faith.

The distinction between the manner in which the Mormon Church and the Roman Catholic and protestant churches posit their belief in revelation is easy to see. Pointing out the difference between the traditional churches, Richard Niebuhr says: "In Roman Catholicism revelation is always discussed as though it meant a supernatural knowledge about man's supernatural end, while in Protestantism revelation has been commonly set forth as meaning Scriptures or its doctrinal content, such as that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, or that God forgives sin."<sup>5</sup> In contrast and running doctrinally counter to the Catholic and protestant churches, the Mormon Church believes, to quote its ninth article of faith, that God "will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God." If the Mormon Church is a restored church through God's revelation, as it categorically affirms it is, it is all the more so because it restored revelation as a continuing dispensation of God's immutable and otherwise inscrutable will. More important, without regard to any distinction of manner or means, it restored revelation as a divine grace to anyone who would embrace the gospel as it has been revealed in these latter days.

The Mormon belief in the primacy of revelation is so fundamental that, like the woof and warp, it runs through the entire fabric of Mormon faith, providing as it does a skein of cohesiveness that binds the faithful to their unique beliefs as well as to themselves. Revelation, for the Mormons, is not a mere self-disclosure of God but is the product "of the interplay between the divine and human."<sup>6</sup> The scripture promises the faithful: "If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries of peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal" (D&C 42:61). Behind these revelations there is the strong belief that an active god is eagerly participating in helping further the salvation of the saints. It is made abundantly clear that "as well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri River in its decreed course, or to turn it upstream, as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from Heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day saints" (D&C 121:33). The scripture further admonishes those who would believe otherwise: "Wo be unto him that shall say: we have received the word of God and we need no more of the word of God, for we have

enough!" (2 Nephi 28:29). As James Talmage pointed out, if the Roman Catholic Church was founded upon the rock of Peter, the Mormon Church "is founded on the rock of revelation."<sup>7</sup> One need read no further than the articles of faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to realize that revelation is its bedrock. Several of the articles of faith directly deal with revelation. Article four, for instance, promises the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, article five reiterates that promise in the context of the hierarchical authority of the Church, article seven pointedly states the belief of "the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, etc." and, finally, article eight states the canon that the Bible is the word of God.

Not only is revelation a pervasive tenet in Mormonism, but it is also a democratic concept which mitigates against pluralism within the Church. Under it neither peaks exist nor valleys. It holds that revelation is not merely the prerogative of the few, and it imposes no doctrinal constraint on any member because of origin, sex or background. The gift of revelation is conferred in a confirmation rite to every member and the believer retains this grace as long as he's a firm believer and is worthy. This freedom of revelation establishes a direct link between God and the believer, or between the divine subject and the human subject, as John Baillie would phrase it.<sup>8</sup> If at the heart of Christianity is the concept of life as a "probation" during which the believer is in a state of "'permanent revolution' or *metanoia* which does not come to an end in this world, this life, or this time,"<sup>9</sup> then a member of the Mormon Church is guaranteed that right—or rather that grace—to lead the life of a spiritual revolutionary. This accessibility to the divine mind and will is a passport to propel the Mormon to transcend the limitations of his earthly existence, for if revelation is an act of God in history, in space and time, then at the moment of contact with the divine subject, by implication, the human subject is lifted into another sphere of being.

Even as revelation bestows upon the Mormon a unique privilege, it also instills in him values and beliefs that lead to implicit obedience; for, ultimately, the only human response to revelation can be obedience. Revelation cannot be validated by any means or manner except in the consciousness of the believer or, as Karl Jaspers says of revelation: "We can ask no further; we have to obey."<sup>10</sup> It is not an empirically explorable phenomenon either.<sup>11</sup> Neither can it be psychoanalyzed. It operates totally within the context of faith and "precedes all reasoning."<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, even if revelation confers upon the individual a degree of freedom, it in truth ties him more securely to his church. The "price of revelation" is a willing and unstinted obedience to the Church and its prophets and the faith that it preaches, since revelations are within the context of the theology which makes them possible. It binds the member to the Church whether she be a newly baptized Samoan drenched by South Sea rains or the president of the Church who shepherds the faithful. Language and culture may diversify but revelation unifies; it provides that quintessential unity amidst cultural, linguistic and other diversities so recognizably Mormon.

If revelation is the primary means of self-illuminated exercise of free will, it is not the sole agency through which a sense of Mormonness, a sense of belonging to a community that transcends national and cultural barriers is created. The Church, both in its doctrine and in its hierarchical flow chart is singularly equipped to sustain and further that sense of cohesiveness. Doctrinally, for instance, the scope and range of revelation a member can have is hierarchically delimited. Even though revelation is a grace, a gift of the Holy Ghost that makes it possible for the receiver to gain access to the otherwise inaccessible mind and will of God, it is not a license to a mystical existence of boundless scope; nor is it a conduit through which supernatural knowledge could flow endlessly. In fact, the very democratic nature of Mormon theology of revelation requires an imposition of unity and order that are outside the context of obedience that revelation itself imposes. The need for this order becomes imperative if only to protect the member's divine right to revelation.

In keeping with the democratic nature of revelation in Mormonism, the members of the Church can receive revelation "as a testimony of truth and as guidance in spiritual and temporal matters" on countless subjects of earthly and transcendental concerns,<sup>13</sup> but the faithful cannot have revelations outside of what touches them subordinately. In order of hierarchal delimitation, for instance, a bishop has inspiration for his ward, the stake president for his stake, an apostle for his part of the responsibilities of the quorum. In matters of doctrine or matters that touch every single member of the Church, the president of the Church alone can act as "a seer, a revelator, a translator and a prophet, having all the gifts of the Holy Ghost which he bestows upon the head of the Church" (D&C 107:92). The prophet alone "in case of difficulty respecting doctrine or principle, if there is not a sufficiency written to make the case clear to the minds of the council, the president may inquire and obtain the mind of the Lord by revelation" (D&C 102:23). The concept of continuous revelation requires that, through the agency of the prophet, the will and mind of God be obtained not continually, not sporadically, but continuously. And the Mormon concept of revelation posits that if the initial source of all revelations in Christianity were Jesus Christ, the fountainhead of revelations for the restored church is Joseph Smith and continues unbroken through a chain of its successive presidents. To be a Mormon is to subscribe to these two fundamental doctrines. A Mormon cannot amend or modify doctrine because of his gift of the Holy Ghost. Otherwise no two wards in the same stake will steer the same doctrinal course. Instead of spreading the word of God and blessing man, Mormonism would have launched itself on a course of apostasy with each member following his own light, both at home and abroad. It is good to remember that a Mormon is not a Hindu who can exercise his free will without let or hindrance. Mormon theology, like all Christian theologies, is a theology of doctrines, is a theology of affirmation which, by implication, is also a theology of negation. When a Mormon is asked to affirm the prophecy of its church presidents, he is also asked, ipso facto, to affirm that none else can act as a seer, revelator and

prophet. The prophet's worldwide mission is to unify, not divide. He cannot do otherwise.

The president of the Church who, as both the prophet and a powerful symbol of the church he heads, is not restricted, however, to revelations that deal with doctrine alone. As the prophet, who gathers his worldwide flock into his spiritual fold, he can reach the mind of God and seek divine guidance on every aspect of life as it affects the human race here and in the hereafter. But this is only technically so. What is not often realized is that the very democratic concept of revelation restrains the president from coercively enforcing his will on personal matters of choice. He prescribes the doctrine; much else he lets alone. If by hierarchal structuring a believer is proscribed from having revelations for the whole Church, the prophet too, in practice, is restrained from revelations in areas that are solely the prerogative of others.<sup>14</sup> The balance resulting from the sharing of revelatory jurisdictions is preeminently at the heart of the success of the Mormon Church as it has expanded. That which is Caesar's is Caesar's but there is much that is not Caesar's. A Japanese is therefore left alone to be a Japanese, a Peruvian or a Fijian may embrace the restored faith of Jesus Christ without giving up his language and culture. The cohesiveness existing in international Mormonism, it seems, is the cohesiveness of people subscribing to the same faith and is not the regimentation enforced by an iron rod leadership manning the headquarters of the Church in Salt Lake. The cohesiveness of the Mormon community which its Church creates, furthers and holds is very much like the cohesiveness which holds gelatin together; it is resilient, elastic, and mobile. This resilience paradoxically will keep the Mormon Church expanding and unified.

Unfortunately this native resiliency so characteristic of international Mormonism is frequently misperceived and misinterpreted as revealing a lack of internal consistency and as suggestive of its doctrinally pluralistic character. "At the heart of Mormonism," it is charged, "is continuous revision of meaning by the individual believer, a process facilitated by the immediacy and availability of revelation and the freedom to discuss all religious topics."<sup>15</sup> Additionally, it is pointed out, that "at present Mormons possess a do-it-yourself system of personal interpretation which envelops their church's theology, philosophy, and history and which works within the framework of an institution known for its hierarchical organization and authoritarian stance."<sup>16</sup> What is lost sight of in such comments is that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not a traditional church nor are its tenets traditionally Christian. As prophet Joseph Smith pointed out to President Martin Van Buren, the Mormon Church differs significantly from the other traditional churches in one basic respect. To quote: "We differ in the mode of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. We consider that all other considerations [are] contained in the gift of the Holy Ghost."<sup>17</sup> Truly Mormon theology of revelation is unlike either the Catholic or protestant dicta on the subject. Its concept of revelation does not lead to a revision of meaning as it does to an apprehension of the higher level

of truth dictated by the ongoing disclosure of God's mind and will. There is no attempt to mold the Mormon view of revelation, however "unsophisticated," as Sterling McMurrin terms it,<sup>18</sup> to an exact shape, size and definition and fit it to a preconceived notion of scholastic rightness.

Added to this proclivity to see the Mormon Church as another, if quaint, Christian church is the other notion of the Church being exaggeratedly authoritarian and autocratic. It is argued that it is paternalistic of other cultures and that this attitude would inhibit it from taking roots in other lands. There is no denying that the church structure and its organization make for authoritarianism. To argue otherwise would be to bury our heads in the sand. The Church however is fundamentally democratic and individualistic. Its theology of revelation demands it; its practice ensures it. Not even its prophet is a prophet of the Church at all times. As Joseph Smith pointedly records: "This morning, I read German, and visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that 'a prophet is always a prophet'; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."<sup>19</sup> The prophet, however exalted a person, is an individual. Not everything he says is *ex cathedra*.

What are observed as instances of Mormons doing "their own thinking, which is to say that they create their own meanings, in talks that they give in Sacrament Meetings, in the testimony that they give on Fast and Testimony Sunday, in Sunday Schools and Family Home Evenings"<sup>20</sup> in essence are occasions when they share with fellow Mormons their deepest thoughts, inspirations and revelations. These rituals, rites, and symbolic gestures help forge bonds of oneness with other unseen Mormons participating in similar rituals. Mormonism has its rich share of rituals and rites which, as in any other church, has served to unite disparate members from "every nation, kindred, tongue, and people" into a cohesive and dynamic family. Some rites such as the sealing and endowment ceremonies and the rites of baptism for the dead are peculiarly Mormon. Participation in these rituals helps bind one Mormon to another for, ultimately, the purpose of rituals is not only to elaborate and define the meaning of values or abstract doctrines, but also to help internalize these values. Perhaps the one single most significant part of the Mormon religious services which, without apology, binds the member to the brethren is the testimony he renders on fast Sundays.

As Hugh Nibley pinpoints, "If the church has any first foundation it is the unimpeachable *testimony* of the individual."<sup>21</sup> The reasons for the primacy of the testimony are not far to see. Since the source of all religious inspiration is through revelation, it is incumbent that these revelations be openly shared with fellow Mormons. Cynics will argue that the testimony is a device by which the members are made to toe the official line, but this is indeed a cynical view. The nature of Mormon theology on revelation makes it impossible to etch doctrine in rock. This does not mean that interpretations of Mormon doctrines are constantly in a state of flux, but it certainly means that their meanings will evolve to higher levels of truth as those truths become revealed. As Joseph Smith said, in referring to the First Vision, "Many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time."<sup>22</sup> And

certainly there are many more things that the divine revelator has not revealed, since the human race, which is in a state of constant progression, is not ready to receive the total truth. Because of similar reasons, B. H. Roberts found it difficult to define revelation. As Truman Madsen points out, "He was slow to seek a formal, theoretical rationale of revelation, for reasons similar to those of the poet who is slow to develop a set of fixed dogma of the creative process."<sup>23</sup> For the Mormon, revelation is a creative process, a process of constant definition and redefinition, of apprehension and reapprehension of the higher truths. If Mormons are human beings in quest of their own potential divinity, it is crucial that the faithful share their insights, their glimpse into the higher and more abiding order of things. The Mormon community is an organic community, whose members seek to evolve into reembodyed anthropomorphic creations at levels of ultimate existence. Their discovery of truths have not stood frozen since the second century. For the critics to argue that every Mormon is a "definer of meaning before an audience of peers, who a moment or a month later may switch positions with him"<sup>24</sup> is to miss totally the essence of Mormonism. Mormons will be misunderstood and misrepresented as long as critics try to force traditional Christian meanings into the Mormon tenets and doctrines. It is far easier to approach the Mormon gospel through Hinduism than through Roman Catholicism, through the works of Sankara than those of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Another significant aspect of the institution of the testimony is in the fact that it deliberately creates a community of fellow Mormons. Mormon testimony is unlike the Catholic confessional where the individual confesses his sins in the privacy of a confessional. In contrast, Mormon testimony is a celebration of the joy and tears of faith, the rightness of the truth, the blessings of life and the glory of God. It, like the crescendo of classical symphony, rises to a testament of belief. In it, the rituals, the symbols, the tribulation and triumph of a Mormon in quest of a higher truth, the history of his Mormon ancestors and their persecution and his own faith in the inevitability of an eternal Zion all coalesce into a moment of heightened religious experience. At that moment of inspiration, of *revelation*, Mormons all over the world unite in a commonality of shared beliefs and, in turn, the fellowship itself, vaulting hurdles of language and culture, becomes a testament of Mormon oneness. Therein lies the story of Mormon success.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Spencer W. Kimball, "Official Report of the Samoa Area Conference, February 15-18, 1976," (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Mark E. Peterson, "Where Do We Stand?" *Ensign* (May 1980), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>Ezra Taft Benson, "A Marvelous Work And A Wonder," *Ensign* (May 1980), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup>Hugh Nibley, "How Firm A Foundation! What Makes It So," *Dialogue*, 12 (Winter 1979), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 155.



<sup>6</sup>Lorin K. Hansen, "Some Concepts of Divine Revelation," *Sunstone* (January-February 1980), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1942), p. 311.

<sup>8</sup>John Baille, *The Idea of Revelation In Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup>Niebuhr, p. ix.

<sup>10</sup>Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup>Jaspers, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>Jaspers, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup>James E. Faust, "Communion With the Holy Spirit," *Ensign* (May 1980), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup>The recent unease on the part of a segment of the church membership on the question of the ERA is directly due to church leaders taking an active role in politics and thus disturbing the traditional balance between hierarchical and revelatory jurisdictions. As the Church expands globally and veers away from its nationalistic moorings, it will find it increasingly more difficult to "interfere" in areas that deal with a member's personal prerogatives. The checks and balances that are an inherent part of the Mormon theology of revelation will keep the Church effectively democratic in impulse and practice.

<sup>15</sup>Mark P. Leone, *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 171.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>*History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 4:42.

<sup>18</sup>Sterling McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), p. 112.

<sup>19</sup>*History of the Church*, 5:265.

<sup>20</sup>Leone, pp. 168-169.

<sup>21</sup>Nibley, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted by Lewis J. Harmer, *Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), p. 56.

<sup>23</sup>Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), p. 404.

<sup>24</sup>Leone, p. 168.