

One Community's Reaction to *The Godmakers*

Donald Alvin Eagle

It is important at the outset to define the National Conference of Christians and Jews. We are a nation-wide, nonprofit, educational agency established some fifty-six years ago. Our purpose was stated by our founders in these words: "The corporation exists to promote justice, amity, understanding and cooperation among Christians and Jews and to analyze, moderate and strive to eliminate intergroup prejudices which disfigure and distort religious, business, social and political relations."

Our membership is composed of individuals of every race and creed, both men and women, clergy and laity, who subscribe to this purpose. They do not represent any group officially but serve out of their personal convictions.

Our genesis was the concern of a group of distinguished American civic leaders for the virulent religious bigotry displayed during the 1928 national election campaign. The NCCJ was established to conduct nation-wide educational efforts designed to reduce and eliminate such bigotry and to make it possible for all citizens, without regard to creed, race, and sex to participate in civic, social and business life free from any impediment based on their personal religious beliefs or ethnic origin.

Being a purely voluntary association, the NCCJ has no power nor any desire to coerce any group or person. We do, however, seek through dialogue and structured discussion to arrive at accommodations which may be accepted by groups or individuals who find themselves embroiled in civic or religious disputation and thus advance civility, peace and harmony within the community.

The Godmakers first came to our attention in Arizona in March 1983 as the result of an editorial which appeared on page B-1 of the *Mesa Tribune*. Executive Editor Max Jennings reported attending a showing of the film before some 1500 people at Centennial Hall, sponsored by a group known as Concerned Christians. Their stated purpose was "to reach out in love to those lost in Mormonism."

Jennings commented:

If what I saw Tuesday night is love, I must have had the wrong Sunday School lessons back in that dusty west Texas Methodist Church of my childhood.

I didn't hear anyone reaching out in love Tuesday night. I heard people reaching out in hatred of another's right to believe what he wants. I heard people saying that Mormons are terribly wrong for holding the religious beliefs they do, and that as many people as possible must be warned against the terrible Mormonism which destroys families and lives.

After the *Mesa Tribune* article appeared, one of the members of the NCCJ Board in Phoenix, a Roman Catholic businessman, telephoned my office to apprise me of the story and to urge that the NCCJ become involved.

Our first response was to issue a public statement to the Mesa press condemning religious bigotry and urging upon the citizenry, "tolerance, respect and good will toward those of differing religious belief and custom." We also

telephoned several area clergy asking them to issue public statements. Some pastors did write such letters. Subsequently, the NCCJ received a letter from a pastor accusing us of attempting to deny religious freedom and freedom of speech. He defended the group which had shown the film saying: "They see the Mormon people caught in a false religion and bound for hell. Because of their love they are willing to take a stand for what they believe is right and true in order that Mormon people may find Jesus Christ as their personal saviour."

However, a group of citizens which included a rabbi, a priest, and a minister, requested an audience with the Arizona Regional NCCJ Board to express their concerns. They shared Max Jennings's view that "the activities of the Concerned Christian group had the capability of dividing a community" such as Mesa. They asked the NCCJ to study the situation and recommend a course of action. An ad hoc committee was named composed of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, blacks, whites, Hispanics, males, females, clergy, and laity.¹

Through several meetings the group sought to define its mission and to establish limits on what we should attempt to do. Eventually, we requested the leaders of Concerned Christians to meet with us, to show us *The Godmakers* film, to answer our questions, and to discuss how we could arrive at mutual understanding. Seventeen persons from the NCCJ and four from Concerned Christians met for nearly three hours.

No real understanding developed from this meeting, but it became readily apparent that the ad hoc committee needed to hear from an informed Mormon leader to better evaluate what we had seen and heard. Accordingly, Dr. Truman G. Madsen, Richard L. Evans Professor of Christian Understanding at Brigham Young University, was invited to address the NCCJ Board on 1 November 1983.

Madsen discussed Mormon belief, the content of *The Godmakers* film, and the relationship of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with other churches and religions. It was an open meeting, reported in the *Arizona Republic*, 12 Nov. 1983, p. G-1-2. Key points in Madsen's remarks were:

If we want to know what a church believes, we should go to that source and not accept what outsiders and opponents say it believes.

In any dialogue we have an obligation to accurately present the opposition's position. This is very difficult even when you try to do it with great honesty. What are the chances of accuracy when you are trying to do just the opposite?"

Of *The Godmakers*, Madsen commented: "In the film, converts become victims, sacred commitments become highly secret ceremonies for the elite few, repentance becomes brainwashing, deep commitment becomes obsession, a church becomes a cult."

To those engaged in presenting the film, Madsen said: "If you are against the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, then be against it for the right

¹ Critics have subsequently charged that this committee was dominated by Mormons. For the record, it consisted of four Protestants, three Catholics, seven Jews, one Greek Orthodox, and two Mormons.

reasons. Don't create a monster and then represent it as the true Mormon church."

In the deliberations of the NCCJ ad hoc committee, we were deeply sensitive to the religious freedom expressed in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The NCCJ operates with sincere conviction that no body of government, nor any private group of influence, should violate the spirit of the Bill of Rights.

We recognized that Concerned Christians had every legal right to carry on their activities and to show their film to whomever they wished, no matter how the NCCJ or anyone else felt about it. One of the unique things about America is that religious groups may espouse any beliefs they wish about their own church, or about any other group — including calling into question the truth of another church's doctrines, liturgical customs, or the character of the proponents of that religion.

But a careful distinction must be made between our legal right to so act and the morality and wisdom of doing so. The NCCJ believes that we must use our freedom responsibly and that it must be exercised with self-restraint, fairness, and good judgment, and in a spirit of tolerance for the convictions and feelings of others. History is filled with tragic lessons when religious authoritarians, imbued with a sense of their own infallibility, have set out to "convert" nonbelievers, to "correct" those holding "erroneous" beliefs, and to bring the heretical to orthodoxy. How easily persuasion can give way to all manner of coercive methods, whether legal, psychological, or forceful. We need to learn from the wisdom of the Koran which says, "There shall be no compulsion in religion."

On 5 December 1983, the NCCJ ad hoc committee addressed a letter to the Concerned Christians of Mesa, Inc., expressing the reactions of the group of seventeen who had viewed *The Godmakers* film. The letter made these points:

1. We recognized that personalized proselytizing activities are a common practice among numerous religious groups, and that they are a natural expression of our religious freedom.

2. We questioned the wisdom of mass public meetings which had as their primary intent attacking Mormon beliefs or the beliefs, sacred books, or leadership of any other faith. We warned of the danger to community harmony if such activities continued and an acrimonious public controversy developed. We respectfully requested Concerned Christians to voluntarily reconsider their use of such programs.

3. Of *The Godmakers*, the ad hoc committee made these statements:

- The film does not fairly portray the Mormon Church, Mormon history, or Mormon belief. It makes extensive use of half-truths, faulty generalizations, sensationalism, and is not reflective of the true spirit of Mormon faith.

- We find particularly offensive the emphasis that Mormonism is some sort of subversive plot — a danger to the community, a threat to the institution of marriage, and destructive to the mental health of teenagers.

- We are of the opinion that the film relies heavily on appeals to fear, prejudice and unworthy human emotions.
- We believe that continued use of *The Godmakers* poses a genuine danger to the climate of harmony and good will between neighbors of differing religious faith.
- It is basically an unfair and untruthful presentation of what Mormons believe and practice.

The leader of the Concerned Christians group responded that they were "very disillusioned and disappointed" with the letter from NCCJ's ad hoc committee. He made thirteen specific responses in a footnoted analysis of our letter. These examples fairly illustrate the feelings and attitudes of Concerned Christians.

Restraint, fairness, good judgement and a spirit of consideration for others *is* what we are doing by presenting the hidden side of Mormonism.

We are not attacking people, but we are attacking doctrines.

You are correct that our activities are harmful; but to the Mormon churches proselytizing program and that's why they are upset by what we are doing.

Again, you stated that we are lying in our presentations. Why don't you name these lies or unfair portrayals of the LDS Church, or its history or beliefs. There is no way this committee can do that. First of all, the Mormon can't tell you because he has taken an oath that he can't reveal anything or [he will] jeopardize his life.

Mormonism *is* a subversive plot and a danger to the community. (*Italics in original.*)

In March 1984, the NCCJ Board held its regular meeting. Each member had been previously supplied by mail with both the letter of the ad hoc committee and the Concerned Christians' response. The board unanimously supported the position taken by its ad hoc committee. However, there was considerable debate on the most responsible way to make the board's view known. There was no desire to give Concerned Christians additional publicity; and we were advised by the publisher of a major newspaper that if we issued a press release, as a matter of policy, his reporters must give equal space to the response of the other side.

Ultimately, the NCCJ Board decided that an advisory letter detailing its findings should be sent to the bishops and executives of the religious denominations headquartered in Arizona and that they be requested to share any relevant portion of our statement with their constituencies. The advisory letter was mailed in mid-March 1984 to twenty-one members of "The Association of Bishops and Executives" list provided by the Arizona Ecumenical Council. Subsequently, the statement was published by the national program office of the NCCJ and sent to all seventy-five regional offices for their information and as a guide for dealing with religious controversy.

Against this narrative backdrop, it is important to make several comments. In a free society such as ours, proselytizing, public evangelistic campaigns, and conversionary efforts are the unquestioned right of every religious group. But are there not some operational ground rules which ought to be considered and self-imposed, especially in the light of the pluralistic nature of

modern American society? Is there not also a responsibility to avoid unnecessary public religious controversy?

When missionizing is done, it should be based on the positive virtues and merits of the adherent's faith. Scrupulous efforts should be made not to denigrate the sacred beliefs, institutions, literature, or historic personages of another religious group. Be honest. Don't deliberately distort or misrepresent what any other group believes in order to advance your own cause. History should be treated objectively and without revisionism. Stereotypes and unfair caricatures of others should never be employed.

We concede the right of any group to claim that it has an absolute corner on all religious truth. But aren't there some considerations which such "true believers" should weigh before they enter the public arena to debate others? What will be the effect on community peace and harmony when contending groups holding opposing absolutes meet and clash? Is the triumph of one's own point of view so imperative that the feelings and beliefs of others can be totally disregarded? To me, there is a proper place for humility when anyone represents himself/herself as "speaking for God." The wise statement from Isaiah springs into my mind: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways, my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Surely this scriptural admonition applies both to the brightest intellect among us and to the most literal, fervant believer! For myself, I doubt that any human interpretor of the Almighty has a monopoly on truth.

We also assert the right of people to be left alone. There are simply those people who do not wish to be the recipients of even the most well-intentioned proselytizing efforts and we ought to respect and accept that. In my work, I learn frequently of Jews who face a steady stream of efforts to "win them to Christ": Mailings sent to their homes. Telephone calls. Radio programs aimed specifically at them. Repeated visits by determined callers. Such attention is not welcomed by most Jews no matter the professed affection, love, or good intentions of the would-be evangelist. I am not alone in suggesting that this sort of activity demonstrates not only a kind of contempt for Jews and their relationship to God but also an affinity for perpetrating "spiritual genocide" on the Jewish people.

Mormons should understand this. Since the issuance of our rather cautious, unemotional statement about *The Godmakers*, my office has received many communications. A typical letter from a "missionary to the Mormons" states: "I happen to care about the Mormons too much *to allow them* to go on in their deception. They need to be saved." (*Italics mine.*) The language suggests religious paternalism at the least or spiritual dictatorship at the worst, and I find either extremely objectionable. I find far more acceptable the idea that every person has an inherent right to work out his/her own relationship with God. I doubt the validity of conversions made by compulsion, however subtle, however gross.

Part of our heritage is the right to be wrong — in the eyes of other fallible humans — in matters of religious conviction, and not to be harassed because of it. For it is to God alone that we must answer, not to finite human minds.

The right to be left alone exists even if one is totally convinced of the falsity of another faith. I receive word almost daily of the pain felt by Roman Catholics who see many campaigns directed against their church. At present, blatant attacks are being made which blame them for every tragedy of human history, ranging from the assassination of Lincoln to the Holocaust of the 1940s. Leaflets, posters, and newspapers question their patriotism and make slanderous remarks about the current Pope and other prominent clergy. To me, this kind of behavior is intolerable — even from those who reject Catholicism!

The progression from negative attitudes through verbal assault to physical violence is real. In my own community, I witnessed beleaguered Moslems seeking to build a mosque. They were reviled. Bullets were fired into their homes. A pipe-bomb was placed in a mail-box of a believer. I am grateful that the majority within the religious community stood in solidarity with their neighbors of Islamic faith, condemning these attacks. The mosque is complete and is now a showplace for faith.

But this is not new to Mormons. Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton have written: "Theirs is the story of a religious minority, generally unpopular and often harassed — a group that some scholars think was the most persecuted religious community in early America. The intergroup friction between the Mormons and their neighbors tells something about American society and the limits of religious tolerance" (1979, introduction). Surely, in modern America, *the times call for a new relationship of respect* among the religious groups which now live in our land.

I find especially helpful these statements of your Prophet Joseph Smith in July 1843:

It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul — civil and religious liberty to the whole of the human race. Love of liberty was diffused into my soul by my grandfathers while they dandled me on their knees; and shall I want friends? No. . . . If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them that my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by way of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way. (HC 5:498–99)

I can live with that. In fact, we all can.

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