

“Among the Mormons”

Kenneth E. Eble

A not altogether sober inquiry into how a secular humanist has managed to live for thirty years in relative peace in Zion.

I

THOREAU WROTE IN THE BEGINNING OF *Walden*, “I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors.” I can roughly paraphrase Thoreau and say, “I have lived some thirty years among the Mormons and have yet to record the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice about how I have managed to do it.”

To echo Thoreau further, I have traveled a good deal outside of Zion, and I have had to explain to those now distant neighbors my mode of life out West. To quote Thoreau exactly: “Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did not feel lonesome, if I was not afraid; and the like.” These were Thoreau’s questions, but I can answer them with equal propriety: “Yes, I have gotten enough to eat, often too much; yes, I did feel lonesome at times; no, I was not afraid, either of being abused or converted.”

People on the outside also asked me different questions than were asked of Thoreau: “How many wives do you have,” for example, and “What kind of place is Bountiful?” There are peculiarities about Utah, and a general remoteness that is probably also true of North Dakota, say, or Arkansas. Thus an Iowa native seeing a Mustang I once owned parked on a small-town street in Iowa, said, “You come all the way from YOU-tuh in that little thing?” But I

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am not here to blame Utah for being remote or to praise it for being Zion. I am here to explore my own habitat, to write my own lesson, to say something, in Thoreau's exact words again, "about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not."

Some few years after I first arrived in Utah — sometime after the last handcart and before the first Winnebago — a young sociologist came to join the university faculty. He left within the first month and wrote an account of his brief experience which appeared in both national and local newspapers. It was, as I remember it, a catalogue of grievances against the stifling effects of Utah's monolithic Mormon culture, and he got, shall I say, the hell out.

I had no such experience, perhaps because I nursed an old underpowered and overloaded truck over Parley's Summit and was too thankful for having arrived at all to complain about what I found when I got here. Then too, coming that way, before modern roadbuilding technology had removed the suspense and surprise, I experienced one of the most spectacular entrances into any city in the United States. Before the freeway, before Summit Park and Jeremy Ranch, way back then, a car traveler could relive the pioneers' experience by simply coming into Salt Lake down Parley's Canyon from the East. The road was stuck down in the bottom of an endlessly winding canyon, a driver forced to endure the children's wild surmises about hamburger stands never to come, to quiet a wife's anxieties about having passed the last motel, and to curb his own impatience with the creeps — probably Utah ones more used to oxcarts than automobiles — crawling down in front of him, finally to have it come to an end, and there, the entire Salt Lake valley spread out to view; at night, even then, a vast expanse of glittering lights; by day, a true and sudden arrival at a longed-for destination. I think the sociologist came from the West Coast, a mistake to have come from, a poor entrance to Salt Lake City, then and now.

Moreover, as his article pointed out, he chose or was guided to the wrong neighborhood, and maybe, being a sociologist, hadn't the faith to conceive of any better one. I don't remember exactly where he lived, briefly, but I suspect he was more closely among the Mormons than I. I remember the real estate man who acquainted me with the facts of real estate in Salt Lake. "It's sort of like the climate," he said. "The higher up you get, the better it is." And like a home owner's income, I might have said, for in time I came to appreciate Salt Lake's physical layout by which one could measure another man's net worth as easily by an altimeter as by a bank statement. "Also," he said, revealing a less beneficent aspect of the city's climate, "you won't get those people, the colored, moving in up here."

I was shocked to hear that word in 1955, as offensive as "darkies," and neither concealing the racism underlying it. But Salt Lake was no different then from many other parts of the country in this respect. Conditions have changed in Zion, as elsewhere, though it may be that Zion had further to go, needing both civil rights legislation and revelation to move toward racial jus-

tice. Just the other morning, I heard a local radio personality describe a city: "small-minded, provincial, parochial, and a little bit bigoted." I thought he was describing Salt Lake in the fifties, but the city was Sauk Center, Minnesota, as Sinclair Lewis described it in the twenties.

II

Here I will interrupt my narrative to make the first of a number of serious, albeit tentative, explorations of aspects of living in Zion. What of provincialism, often equated with prejudice, with which Salt Lake and Utah are still charged? And what of the cosmopolitanism which is becoming ever more evident as urban- and suburban-ization characterize life here?

Prejudice, I think, whether it is racial or sexist or religious, arises in part from a lack of exposure to a diversity of experience. A recent visitor from New York who had driven across the country remarked about how the cities "bleached out" as one drove west. Past Lincoln, Nebraska, he said, he saw no one but whites. Though he is not precisely correct, it is still true that Utah is different in this respect from either coast or the South and Southwest. The population does, at a glance, throw off a startling whiteness to those used to a more mixed population. And that lack of substantial numbers of, and substantially different, minorities may engender a kind of unreflective prejudice as unfortunate in its effects as more ill-intentioned kinds. It is not the entrenched kind which arises from long-held convictions about master and slave or even the explosive kind arising from a minority's threatening the economic well-being of a dominant group. It is rather the kind which pertains when a dominant population group has had little experience with any minority and does not want more. It reflects in subtle ways, like a hesitation to recognize the stature of a Martin Luther King, or an exaggerated respect for blacks who sing or preach or play basketball, or the slow recognition of a native American or Hispanic culture in Zion.

Many years ago, my colleague Bill Mulder delivered another Reynolds lecture in which he talked about European converts coming into Utah. The effects of that continuing migration are still evident and create a kind of European — north European — city where one might not expect to find such. The assimilation of different peoples of this kind is surely a plus for a land-locked, religiously founded community. But religion creates its own prejudices; a literalist, narrow reading of the Bible still stands in the way of acceptance of dark-skinned races. Moreover, Zion still shoulders the white man's burden, the felt necessity to save the heathen which carries that most common of religious prejudice: that there are those who need salvation and there are others destined to provide it. Held as firm convictions, such notions create a sense of superiority among the already saved; the price of equality for others is conversion. Brigham Young University, for example, does much for native Americans and Samoans and, of late, blacks who can pass and catch and run. Yet, I understand, those native Americans are Lamanites, who will become "pure and delightful" only after conversion just as blacks emerged only recently from

the curse of Cain. Still, as more diversity comes into society, and particularly as it gets past racial barriers, I regard it as a good sign. I have come to accept virtue however it may arise, even from religion.

But there is another group which suffers prejudice here that largely rests in religious beliefs. I speak of women, whose full admission into any society is based on the fact that half of human intelligence, compassion, beauty — in short, the strength and potential of that society — is to be found there. I have had it explained that women, like converts, take on their status voluntarily, even joyfully, for the blessings allotted to them in this life and after are more than sufficient to satisfy all but militant feminists. The last time I appeared on this platform was on an all-male panel discussing Solzhenitsyn's Harvard speech. I chided my colleagues on that occasion for being unable to find one woman in all the Salt Lake Valley with enough intelligence or interest or presence or whatever to be a member of that panel. Or perhaps she could be found but had more pressing duties, the time for that discussion being between the supper and bedtime hours. Or perhaps those selecting the panel were still, albeit unconsciously, responding to Brigham Young's pronouncement defending the all-male priesthood: "Women have not the degree of light and knowledge that their husbands have, and they have not the power over their passions" (Warenski 1978, 37).

I am speaking out of gender here. I do not purport to know how women, gentile or Mormon, think, though I think they do. As an English professor, I have probably encountered more women than men in my classes. As regards these young women of Zion, I perceive them as being often intellectually ambitious but not adventuresome, certainly aware of the women's movement, but keeping it at a distance either because it didn't pertain to them or because it would be unwise socially to admit it did. And I must admit to some disappointment in encountering some of my best women students a few years after graduation seemingly burdened by child-bearing domesticity. In short, among some LDS young women I think there is some resistance to recognizing their condition or even that there *is* a condition or that that condition is other than what a benevolent masculine providence should design. Almost all Christian religions have denied church offices — the priesthood, to use a familiar term — to women, but few have given single women an inferior place in the celestial kingdom. And few, I think, have expended as much official rhetoric extolling the glories of womanhood as defined by a religious belief.

Women in Zion, then, face specific and overt prejudice, call it benign or ordained, as you will. "Women, especially," Marilyn Warenski writes, "have feared the burden of their own freedom" (1978, 277). Such an attitude adds to the provinciality still associated with Utah by outsiders. Frances Farley's campaign generated much enthusiasm locally and nationally but I wonder how it was regarded in LDS wards. Christine Durham sets a high standard of professional achievement for women everywhere, but outsiders identify women from Utah more by Sonia Johnson or Marilyn Warenski or Marie Osmond or Sharlene Wells. Mark Twain in *Roughing It* in 1872, took pity on what he saw as "these poor, ungainly, and pathetically 'homely' creatures." He would

be surprised how beautiful they have become in a hundred years. Still, he might leave Salt Lake City now as he did then, "a good deal confused as to what state of things existed there — and sometimes even questioning in my own mind whether a state of things existed there at all or not" (1962, 97, 111).

Zion's provincialism is what I am trying to describe here, as it supports prejudice and minimizes human diversity. The opposing of prejudice seems to me a high responsibility for anyone committed to the ideals of democracy, and democracy itself depends not only on the consent of the governed but on bringing more of the governed into active participation in shaping the society.

Salt Lake City's growth along the Wasatch Front has made it vastly more cosmopolitan than when I first became acquainted with it in 1945, ten years before I took up residence here. Still, what has kept me in Zion is in part its resistance to urbanization. One of my colleagues moved his family here from Los Angeles in the mid-sixties. His children were amazed to find that Salt Lake City had actual boundaries; you could reach the edge of the city. I do not think I would be happy in a city I could not walk around. I remember in the sixties listening to a fellow passenger, during a taxi-cab ride from the airport, ask the driver, "Where's the action?" There wasn't much action, I thought, and took some satisfaction in the driver's difficulty in telling him where it might be. There is probably more action now, though American cities the size of Salt Lake have increasingly buttoned up early in the last twenty years. Though the city is increasingly being swallowed up by its suburbs, the downtown, unlike that core in many cities, has maintained its vitality. Houses will probably not crawl over the Wasatch Range to the east nor fill in the flats to the west and will only inch up and curve around to the north. For those of us who have lived here a long time, Sandy and Murray and West Jordan still seem to be separate small communities even though they are in fact a continuous urban sprawl reaching almost to the Point of the Mountain.

In the most recent of Rand McNally's list of most desirable places to live, Salt Lake City has slipped from 44th to 125th. (The compilers must have heard of or suffered through our temperature inversions of the last two years.) I do not take much stock in such listings, but the values endorsed by the compilers clearly are those of big, big cities. Only two of the ten "best" areas are medium-sized cities whose populations barely qualify them for the list. While I like Salt Lake's small-town atmosphere — where else would you find a "Stars Avenue," named after a now-defunct basketball franchise? — I also like the amenities only big aggregations of population can sustain. It is no small achievement for a city to have, as Salt Lake had when I came, a symphony, a ballet, a choir, and a zoo and, within a few years, a new library and a planetarium and, after that, a new convention center, a symphony hall, an art center, and a skating rink just like Rockefeller Center's. Not to mention more Christmas lights than Solomon in all his glory could have conceived.

I think it is probably anthropologically or sociologically sound to point out that geographic isolation is a benefit as well as a deprivation. Like those cities long ago which were indeed centers of culture arising out of uncultured, even uncivilized, countrysides, Salt Lake has had to create its own culture. Its pres-

ence as a center of a thinly populated but vast area has provided the marketing and distributing activities that can support a diverse artistic culture. That a Maurice Abravanel and Willam Christensen and the late Alvin Gittins, to name three prominent figures in the arts, should spend the greater part of their creative lifetimes here reflects favorably both ways. They graced the community and were in turn venerated by that community. And yet, as Maurice Abravanel has recently reminded us, the arts in Utah must still struggle to maintain themselves, in part because of the provincialism that marks the community.

I am not trying to draw up a balance sheet here. As regards Salt Lake City right now, I fear it is becoming a big city, with all the plusses and minusses thereto appertaining. It will never be a New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. But neither is it an Indianapolis or Toledo or Columbus, Ohio. Of cities I know fairly well it is more like Saint Paul, Minnesota, where the great Catholic cathedral declares its past even as Temple Square declares Salt Lake's. The river provides a setting for Saint Paul somewhat as the mountains more spectacularly do for Salt Lake City. In both downtowns, steel-and-glass high-rise office buildings and condominiums set the present tone. Both cities are eminently livable cities, with good airports to take those who can afford it to larger cities where, presumably, the action is.

III

But now, let me return to my arrival in Zion and say something of its personal fit. As it turned out, I found a house in a mixed neighborhood, and a surprisingly international one at that. On one side, at one time was an English couple, converts to the church, and the wife's grandmother and her large English female collie. The husband and I didn't talk doctrine. Mostly in summer we'd survey the burned spots in my lawn and he'd say, "Well, y'know, 'tishn't my dog." He was succeeded by a Hungarian housepainter, a decorator of great skill, and a refugee who walked out of Hungary across the border just ahead of the Russian occupation of 1956. On the other side of him, a Greek family has lived for many years. Across the street was the assistant chief of police, whose name I'll mention, E. J. Steinfeldt, because he was a good man, who, during his lifetime, was a faithful participant in such university activities as these. His wife, a native of Germany, added to the international flavor of our neighborhood. A university professor moved in across the street some years after I did, a Catholic, I think, for his family seemed to get dressed up and go some place earlier on Sundays even than the Mormons.

At any rate, I think it makes a difference where a person lives in Salt Lake, particularly where one first lives and encounters the peculiar culture at first hand. I should add, my neighborhood was not wholly removed from that culture. Just across the driveway for most of my early residence was a good Mormon family — well, not purely good, for the wife did sometimes sneak coffee-drinking in the mornings after her more orthodox husband had gone to work. They raised a large family, bringing them up in the paths of righteousness, if

not always certain how many were on which paths. At their maximum fruitfulness, there were eight children, the largest family that the Bureau of Reclamation, for which he worked, had ever transported en masse overseas. I heard him summoning his children to supper one evening: "David, Bruce, Jimmy, or whatever your names are," he called.

We were busy raising our own smaller family in these first years, and I came to prize Salt Lake for the commonest of reasons: it was a good place to raise a family. And here, let me pause again to consider another inescapable aspect of living in Zion: the sanctification of the family which Saints may find easier to endure than outsiders. For a young family such as mine, there was little to qualify Salt Lake's blessings. Good schools were close at hand. Vice was kept pretty much at bay. Wholesome influences abounded, as did all manner of outdoor recreational opportunities for children to maim themselves in healthful ways. Perhaps the only complaint I had was that the Boy Scouts seemed to be but a branch of the local ward. (The Girl Scouts had been captured by the Presbyterians in my section of the city.)

I cannot speak of the effects of the intense devotion to family on young people within the Church. I suspect it offers both comfort and security as well as strife and frustration. I am moved by the story told me by a Mormon student of how he and a friend regularly take their respective grandfathers out for an evening. I was to about the same degree dismayed that one of the grandparents refused to go to the movie *Gandhi* because he regarded Gandhi as such a dangerous rascal. I suspect that not every family home evening is just as it is depicted on TV, but in general I sympathize with the local culture's valiant attempts to civilize the young.

As my children grew older, I became aware that Church activities increasingly separated them from Mormon classmates, even though for a winter or two my son's LDS friends enlisted him as a member of the ward basketball team. All observers note the intensely social nature of the Mormon church; the mere presence of activities leaves the Mormon child or adolescent that much less room for other kinds of socializing. For the outsiders, these church activities become barriers to natural friendships. By high school, there is a distinct separation, seldom without prejudice on both sides, that may make many gentile parents wonder about the wisdom of raising their children in Zion. I do not doubt that something of the same effects could be found in cities dominated by other religious majorities or in urban neighborhoods with a dominant single ethnic group. But in this country probably no separation of this kind affects the social life, job opportunities, and marriage prospects of the young as greatly as here.

Thus, there is great pressure on young people, both Mormon and gentile, to leave Zion, though for different reasons. Such rejection of the home town is probably universal and existed when the first teenager complained that there was nothing to do in the cave. If there is anything different about it in Utah, it may be that breaking away is strongly qualified. For young men particularly, going on a mission is the first point of departure and a temporary one from which many return ready to settle down in Zion. This tendency, if there is

such, of young Mormons to return to Zion is a counter force to the diversifying of the culture by an influx of population from the outside which has been a characteristic of the region for many years. In my work as a teacher it is a plus to have students returning from missions who know something of foreign culture, who can read and speak a foreign language. But I am bothered somewhat by the rapid dissipating of what I regard as the beneficial aspects of experience in the larger world. At times I encounter a kind of smugness among returnees that takes the form of having explored the wider world and found it wanting as compared with Zion.

As to those young people who remain in Zion but who are not members of the LDS Church, pressures of a different kind may cause them to want to leave. Early marriages among the LDS friends they may have had increase the sense of separation for those who remain single. For those inclined to marry, religious differences may complicate or diminish marriage prospects. Similarly, job opportunities and advancement in careers may be restricted where so much depends on family and religious ties.

So, I think your Zion and mine must ponder these realities. A recent survey of professionals newly arrived in the state indicates that these matters do not weigh very heavily during their first years here. Half of more than 200 professionals, most within the thirty to forty-four age bracket, said they found Utah a better place to live than their last state. Most of the outsider's images of Utah were positive though the single "major negative in the Utah image was LDS social and religious pressure" (Johnson 1985). This response may become more negative as their families grow older and call into question the general assumption that Utah is "a good place to raise children."

IV

Family life has much to do with politics in Utah. Nothing can destroy a politician's reputation more quickly than violating the image of family rectitude. Family issues are political issues in Utah, and few campaign brochures carry as much information about family and familial activities. It is not precisely true that a non-Mormon cannot win a public office, but it happens infrequently. In my time in the state, I can think of only one non-Mormon holding a high political office. In 1983, according to Gottlieb and Wiley, *America's Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (1984, 82), the state legislature was 90 percent Mormon.

Though it varies from time to time and according to issues involved, politics enters into both church and family life. The mass meetings, for example, have an air of grass-roots democracy about them, but the roots are entwined in the wards. It may be better to have friends and neighbors gather in a front parlor than in a smoke-filled room; but for the outsider, the realities of power are somewhat the same. I must admit that for most of my political life I have ended up voting for the losing candidate, and I would probably have fared little better in a different locality.

The image of Utah, for the rest of the country, has long been one of political conservatism. But I think it fair to say that during my time here it has as

much followed national trends of conservatism/liberalism as it has led them. The culture's emphasis on family corresponds with such issues of the New Right as abortion, pornography, and school prayer, but leaders of the New Right are not Utahns, whatever support they get from our current senators and representatives.

In my own assessment, Utah has been and continues to be remarkable in stimulating civic responsibility that sometimes goes beyond pillage and profit. Even Utah's notorious maverick politicians seem to be motivated by notions — however peculiar — of civic responsibility as they saw it. And I count it my good fortune to have lived under such public servants as Calvin Rampton, Scott Matheson, and Ted Moss and to feel that they represented *me* as much as they did their closer cultural constituency.

I should add a word about the fact that all my life here has been affected by being a member of the university community. It has shielded me, I think, from some of the realities of social and family and political life which I might have experienced were I not a member of that community. Since my travels take me to many other colleges and universities, I am frequently asked what life is like at the University of Utah. Such remarks made by my former colleagues at Columbia University seemed to faintly imply that there must be something wrong with a fellow who stayed out there. I was made to feel like the bad sheep of a British Empire family sent to an outpost in the islands, never to be called back to the home office. My offhand reply, which became a studied one later, was, "Rocks. I like rocks, and Utah has plenty of rocks." In fact, I do like rocks. I can hardly think of anything more satisfying than sitting on a granite boulder as big as a house in Little Cottonwood Canyon and reflecting that it was there before I came and would be there long after. More, rocks don't complain; they just sit there, giving you and themselves no trouble.

Sometimes this question about my life at the university leads to my being asked how much the Church dominated or affected or interfered in university affairs. Frequently the university is confused with BYU and I have had to straighten out some of the uninformed about both geography and theology. To my mind, the university is much like other state universities, maybe permitting more freedom of speech and more freedom from interference than some. I prize the University of Utah and other American public universities because they are democratic institutions albeit engaged in what some faculty covet as privileged and aristocratic activities.

Perhaps I have adjusted to political life in Utah because I am committed to democracy in which one accepts majority decisions yet feels free to speak and act for minority positions. In this respect I may be freer than my LDS friends who chafe against conservative positions of both Church leaders and political brethren (as yet few sistren). As J. D. Williams responded when asked what liberal Mormons most wanted, "Freedom, freedom, freedom" (Gottlieb and Wiley 1984, 253–54). No wonder liberal Mormons are often staunch allies in working toward racial equality. They may recognize their own condition in Martin Luther King's "Free at last. Free at last. Great God Almighty, free at last!"

V

When I first came to Utah, and to some degree ever since, I had certain habits and inclinations which made me welcome in many Mormon gatherings, invited polite inquiries into where my soul might be headed, and even occasioned my being mistaken for one of them. I have wondered if I carried some aura of at least earthly sanctification about me, for I have attracted the attention of the spiritually inclined even as I have offered some resistance to doctrine. But the more obvious signs of my rectitude were that I did not smoke, swore only on great provocation, and drank things mixed with water in tall glasses which could hardly be distinguished from 7-Up. Though I think some suspicious Saints occasionally sniffed the glass, most took those signs of rectitude as indices of possible grace.

A social history might be written about liquor in Utah. Certainly a small section would be devoted to Governor Rampton's spelling out a hundred and some questions that would have to be resolved to arrive at mini-bottle legislation. It would include, I believe, some pondering of the line between opening a bottle and drinking its contents, of the degree to which sin flourishes before or after 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and how much virtue can be protected by hiding liquor behind magazine racks. I do not engage in these speculations today, though they occupied much of the conversation of outlanders when I first came and may, for all I know, occupy as much time now.

But beyond that, almost the sole score I saw building up against the Mormons in my first fifteen years here, was that of having to spend so much time talking about them. Perhaps it takes that long to exhaust the possibilities, or perhaps I go out less, or perhaps all the quaint Mormon customs have disappeared, melded, by now, into the general culture.

In case some of you have not walked the same path as I, I will pass on some of the topics of interest, beyond smoking and drinking, that came up among the outsiders. Ice cream, for example. To some degree, ice cream parlors served Mormons as the neighborhood tavern did the Irish. I would see them staggering out of Snelgrove's on a Friday night and make my own prayers for their safe advent to a cholesterol-free heaven. The ice cream social is a familiar part of my midwest past, but I think it was raised to a higher power in Salt Lake. Passing the ice cream, passing the fudge sauce, passing the strawberries, passing the chopped nuts, passing the marshmallow topping, passing the maraschino cherries, passing the whipped cream, as Walt Whitman might have said, I, a lover of ice cream, and a proclaimer of hot fudge sundaes to the world, seemed to see excess.

Perhaps, as some speculators said ice cream was a substitute for other sins, that of drinking certainly, and probably of sex. Sex is peculiar in Salt Lake City. Obviously, much activity goes on simply measured by the birth rate and the average age of marriage. But at the same time, there seems to be both a fear of the body and a flaunting of it that can be disturbing. Perhaps it is the healthy good looks of both Mormon men and women that create the problem. Physical beauty may be the animating force for much preaching against fornication and much public indignation about what one's neighbors may be watch-

ing or doing. Then, too, there are so many children, all products of the sexual act, however sanctified that act is in marriage, and all bent on finding out about or doing the act themselves. So it has always been and so it must always be, if the species would survive. And yes, I have spent many hours trying to read my own gospels while wondering just what my son or daughter was doing with a stranger of the opposite sex downstairs. It made me thankful for the opening of the refrigerator door, thankful for ice cream.

In comparison with other cities I've been in, Salt Lake City is relatively pure, and its citizens agitate no more to make it more pure than in many cities of similar size. The city ordinance, which took effect 27 February 1985 requires that "sexually explicit material that is harmful to minors must be kept in sealed wrappers. In cases where a publication's cover is considered harmful, it must be hidden by opaque material." That is not a current ordinance of Salt Lake City but of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Big cities on either coast have long ago given themselves over almost wholly to sin, so I will not speak of what can be found there.

What I find peculiar, and at times vexing, is the mixed signals that elders give children in the local culture. If I had to pick something really obscene I think it would be female drill teams, the obscenity inversely (or perversely) proportional to the age of the participant. I have yet to see a fully clothed drill team of any age, indoor or out, and I postulate that a good many proper Mormon matrons sit up late fashioning costumes out of very little whole cloth. I am, I should say, not prudish about these matters, belonging neither to the Keep Cable TV Clean or Get the Trash out of Textbooks committees. But, somehow, bumps and grinds seem ill-suited to seven-year-old girls, not to mention the awful snappings of the neck that only an ambitious chiropractor could view without wincing. I am not condemning these things, only citing an example of a split between dwelling on the awfulness of sins of the flesh and promoting activities that are sexual, albeit healthy and cute, and answer to the universal need of parents to display their children's talents in bizarre ways. Maybe my petulance goes back to my own youth when I was somehow conned into playing the sousaphone, chiefly, I suspect, so adults could say, "How can a little kid like you carry such a big horn?"

But enough of sex. Other customs and habits of the local culture interest me as much. It is not just the dark ZCMI suits that the missionaries wear; it is a certain formal bearing and certain formal expressions that identify a Latter-day Saint. It is an earnestness that goes, I think, with all religions. Once, in a market town on the edge of the great plains in Colombia, South America, I lost my way walking from the city's center to my motel. I had gone well past where the motel should have been, night was descending, and I was on a road that seemed to lead nowhere. Few houses, few people. Out of the gloaming, I saw a man approaching. He was carrying a book; and his dress, his bearing, his seriousness made me know that the book was a Bible. He was a man, I knew, useful to saving my soul, if that were at issue, but helpless in giving me directions toward an earthly destination. He was kind, solicitous, and earnest; and against that awful earnestness, what few words of Spanish I knew vanished

utterly. I backed away, smiling and saying, "Si, Si," as if I understood all the earnest help he was trying to give me. Later, I came upon a tavern where a group of adolescents made such good-natured sport of a lost gringo who couldn't even say "mañana," that I found enough Spanish words to get me back to my motel. My point is that to the outsider, too much civility of dress and manner may be inhibiting.

Speeches, for example, bring out an extra layer of ceremony in Utah. I had never come upon the layer-cake introduction before I arrived here, though it doubtless exists outside the valley. Brother A will introduce Brother B who will make a few remarks about Brother C before introducing Brother D who will actually introduce the speaker. Mormon speeches often contain an unusually large number of stock phrases. Speakers commonly "share with an audience," and "thank my lovely wife" and "wonderful family," and dwell on "thrilling and gratifying experiences" which were "truly" or "thoroughly" enjoyed. Many of these utterances are of a serious nature. Saints bear "grave responsibilities" and must "earnestly seek" or "seek earnestly," giving "serious and prayerful consideration" to "worthy goals" and "stirring challenges." A "prayerful humility" is the right stance for a speaker to take, for speech-making comes not by design but by being a receptive vessel for inspired words. The habit of attaching such words as "special" and "wonderful" and "inspiring" to fairly ordinary experiences may have caused Richard L. Evans to devote one of his "Spoken Words" to the dangers of "Glorifying the Mediocre." A "tendency toward moderate exaggeration," he cautioned, can lead to the "prodigal use of extravagant words. . . . If everything is great, if everything is colossal, if everything is unprecedented, or indispensable . . . language soon takes on the dullness that comes with oversharpening" (1945, 5-6). J. Golden Kimball is unique among Mormon rhetoricians as much for bluntness and freshness of speech as for taming his stock of cuss words to "hell" and "damn" and "for hell's sake."

Invariably, a high tolerance for cant accompanies a reliance on routine formalities of speech. Grace is gained, but candor is lost. Even the heretic will not be burned for his utterances. More likely he will be surfeited with platitudes. So, I have had few spirited arguments with Mormons, and I have experienced some distress at the view that argument seems to be something that should not take place in public. Even private disagreements are met with a kind of smug but unexpressed certainty that the right view will prevail.

I have mentioned earlier the possible struggle for freedom which may be what liberals must make against any conservative authoritarian culture. I suppose the most frequent question I am asked about academic life at the University of Utah is how much freedom is permitted there. I don't think I would have stayed here had I not been able to answer honestly, at all points in my career, "A great deal." Indeed, as an outsider, I may have enjoyed more freedom, for I did not have to think about what improprieties I was committing as did many of my friends who were products of the local culture.

At the precise point of defending academic freedom, the university has a better record than many state universities of my acquaintance. Early in my

career I wrote a book (1962) critical of higher education which received some national attention. A reporter from *Time* called and asked, first off, "Have you been fired yet?" It struck me as an absurd question; and I told him so, partly because the most offensive statement I could remember having written was "College presidents become positive boobies when they contemplate the glories of their athletic programs," and I had not named any specific university president (1962, 74).

Still, the record is not entirely clear. Not long after that in what might be called "the case of the Boy Scouts and the fat ugly nude," the university president appeared before the faculty and almost tearfully explained that he had not ordered the head of the Art Department to remove the painting of an unexotic but unclothed ugly fat woman from the Union display panels. Nevertheless, the painting disappeared along with the panels the building's architect had designed in order that art might have a public rather than private audience. They have not been restored since, though anyone can see paintings, even nudes, if they but go to the appropriate places for such display.

It is a heightened sense of appropriateness that often exercises a power of censorship in Zion, and to some degree that sense limits vigorous expression of many kinds. I have mentioned a drawing back from controversy as a mark of the local culture. It is only fair to add that a habit of not speaking out may develop from the heavy weight that "authority" carries. I think it might even be argued that students here are very good at looking things up but not so good at thinking about them. I think, too, an acceptance of authority may sanction pedantry in scholarship rather than imaginative exploring, though pedantry in academia has no favorite home. Local scholars may be more comfortable in disciplines outside the humanities and social sciences, and local artists more inclined to music and dance than to art and letters.

Books still give trouble. The great volume of literature emanating from the church, like such literature elsewhere, inclines to homilies and moral suasion. Despite this abundance of good reading, some citizens still worry about what will fall into the hands of children. A bill, defeated in the Utah senate in the last legislature, would have made parents subject to prosecution for letting their children be exposed to harmful materials, including books judged to be pornographic. Within the past month, a voluntary, after-school-hours Junior Great Books program came under attack in Davis County. "Most of the stories," an analyst of the program wrote, "seemed to me to present little if any message of positive moral value. On the other hand, several of the stories present a definite negative impact in relation to the moral values as I perceive them to be in our community." The compromise reached in the controversy — to permit the Great Books program to be retained but to develop an alternative reading enrichment program — is the familiar pattern of yielding to community pressure but avoiding outright censorship.

Lip service to freedom of expression may temper censorship; but, mingled with politeness, it can sometimes lead to hypocrisy and sophistry. During the period of student unrest, I was on a panel about the good and bad effects of student protests at the convention of the American Council on Education. I

took the side that collegiate institutions were probably more benefited by student nonconformity than harmed by it. I argued that some American colleges needed more student radicals rather than fewer. Afterward, the then-president of Brigham Young came to the podium, gave me a brotherly handshake, and told me how much he appreciated the wisdom of my words. A later president pronounced that during his presidency dress and grooming standards would be enforced for all BYU students. Visitors to campus, he said, would be expected to conform to local standards but they would not be expected to shave off their beards or—and here he seemed proud to have found an exact legalistic formulation — “exercise other restraints that would cause more than a temporary inconvenience.”

This may have been delivered with humor. I was listening to the speech on the radio so could not tell. I cannot speak of humor that goes on within the inner circle. I expect to some degree it is ethnic, and at times both racist and sexist. Within mixed groups, Mormon humor is probably cautious, as utterance in general is cautious since politeness makes it so. I think, however, Mormons like to have a good time and may have more good times of a familiar nineteenth-century sort than many other Americans, particularly academic Americans as I know them. That is, people relate to one another in Mormon culture. A male can hardly get away from calls to do something fun, like square dancing or playing charades or private theatricals or singing in groups. I am thankful I have been spared much of that, though it accounts for some of the loneliness I acknowledged having experienced.

Still, for some, letting themselves go, even in what I would call innocent pleasures comes a little hard. I was once party to getting a good Mormon youth to go to a movie on Sunday night. I can remember the movie, *American Graffiti*, and the place, far removed from Zion, but most of all how much the young man enjoyed it, probably the more for the sense of wrongdoing that accompanied it. I do not know what his future is, but last I heard he was both successful in a business way and still a pillar of the Church.

On another occasion, a number of us went to Hole-in-the-Rock in southeastern Utah. Hole-in-the-Rock is only thirty miles from a surfaced road, but the last part of the trip is so tortuous that few people go there. We split up the trip into two days, encountering no one on the way; and when we got there, two of us, a graduate student who had done a good bit of field work in Utah history and I, clambered down the cleft in the rock by which the early pioneers reached the Colorado. Five hundred feet or so from the rim, we found ourselves on the shores of Lake Powell, in an utterly clear and sheltered bay, surrounded by nothing but red rock and blue sky. I sat down, took off my boots, and said I was going to take a swim. My companion looked at me with some alarm and said, “But, where, where, where’s your bathing suit?” I didn’t bother to explain; stripped naked, I plunged into the water to hide my body from his possibly offended gaze. He watched for a short time, then took off his boots, his pants and shirt, his socks, and finally his garments, and plunged in. For the next half hour he swam contentedly, like some white and unshriven porpoise, and I have never felt better about endangering a mortal soul’s chances in the hereafter.

VI

By this somewhat indirect route, I find myself moving toward the last topic in this talk: a brief consideration of theology. My acquaintance with Mormon theology is no more than acquaintance, much of it gained from students' responses over the years to my teaching of the history of ideas. University faculty who teach in the humanities vary widely in what they say about the local culture's pressures. Some feel a compulsion to challenge students' religious beliefs just as they challenge other beliefs. Others feel uneasy when talking about such subjects as evolution, for example. Some get in conflicts with students or develop a hostility toward the perceived narrowness of local views. I have taught these subjects almost as long as anyone on the faculty and have, I think, taught them honestly without incurring great student displeasure, parental objections, or calls from the president's office. In part, I think this is because of a politeness and formality I have mentioned, perhaps a deferring to authority, even such as might be shown to a university professor of a nonconformist view. But I would be unfair to generations of students if I did not pay my respects to an openness I associate with youth, the bending of mind and feelings to learning, which exists in abundance among my students, whatever their persuasions.

What resistances I face have been anecdotal. One boy, for example, asked me, during the week or so my class spends on Darwin, if I believed in evolution. I was making a suitable scholarly reply when he interrupted me and said, fiercely, "I believe in it. My seminary teacher says it isn't true, but I believe in it." If that is a notable instance of an independence of mind exerting itself, another anecdote is as telling about the hold of religious fundamentalism. This came from a student during a different year, who came up after the class was over and said he had found it somewhat interesting but was glad that he would be getting back to studying the "truth."

What I know about Mormon truth is what I mainly read in the papers, that is, in the *Ensign*, and letters in the *Tribune* and *Deseret News*, and *DIALOGUE: THE JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT*. Reflections on many of the topics I have been discussing surface there, the most curious being a report of a "Committee on Celestial Demographics" in *DIALOGUE*. What am I, a mere outsider, to make of a heavily footnoted study concluding that a possible surplus of 1.7 billion men over the number of women will pertain in Heaven? "There is little doubt," the article states, "that doing temple work will be the major task facing those alive during the millennium, especially for men." Moreover, "Jews, Nephites, and Christians will constitute a small minority of the heavenly host" (Committee 1984, 86).

Perhaps I have gotten along reasonably well in *this* world because my worries do not extend that far beyond. "One world at a time," as Thoreau during his last illness said to a minister concerned for his standing in eternity. Moreover, I have not been bent on converting anyone, and that seems to announce that no one need be bent on converting me. I think some missionaries came to my door in Salt Lake — fewer in number than the Jehovah's Witnesses — but only one caused me pain. He was not a native Utahn at all but a boyhood friend from my own Iowa home town who had grown up in a stern

Methodist family and had converted to Mormonism in mid-life. I had not seen him for twenty-five years when he showed up one summer on his way from San Francisco and engaged me in conversation as I was mowing the lawn. As we renewed our acquaintance, something else seemed to be foremost on his mind. With some insistence he edged me into my house and began plumbing my interest in recent archaeological discoveries in Mexico. Before I could say Joseph Smith I found myself on the other end of a missionary pitch. I did not throw him off the porch, but I did not offer him lemonade. Since I appeared to be of no other interest to him than a target for conversion, we parted unamiably, he disappointed in my blindness, I puzzled about why religious zeal should so overcome social grace.

Such zeal exists among all religions, and I have encountered no more of it here than I might have elsewhere. If anything bothers me about the LDS theology, it is maybe its too-close familiarity with God. I feel at times shut out, not as someone worshipping a pagan creed, but as one who doesn't carry the right credit cards. But all people have the right to seek their own path to heaven and to conceive of whatever heaven they will. I am not much drawn to certain aspects of Christianity which, despite some recurrent questioning in the letters column of the paper, is surely the larger sect to which Mormonism belongs. Somehow a religion born out of a bloody sacrifice and fastening a cosmic guilt on mankind may be less than attractive on sunny days. I do not much dwell on the guilt of being born, but I can admire the brutal logic of Calvin which denied humans any agency in affecting their salvation. Such a view was too inhuman for humans, and every Christian sect after Calvin softened in one way or another the doctrine of original sin that condemned the most of mankind to a deserved Hell. Most religions went on finding ways for believers to get into a real or imagined Heaven. No wonder insurance companies flourish in formerly Puritan New England and here in Zion. If I were given the choice of worshipping something, I think it would be the sun, though even that, too, occasioned human sacrifices.

There is much sun in Zion, and it is a good place for a generally optimistic religion to flourish. I think that may be part of the attraction Zion has for me, and which, at times, may leave me too comfortable with my own comfort. Within my reading, it is William Dean Howells, who was not a Mormon, who best expressed the American middle class's struggles between comfort and conscience. Writing to Henry James in 1888, he said, "I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meantime, I wear a fur-lined overcoat, and live in all the luxury my money can buy" (Howells 1:417). I must stir myself in Zion to care about how my neighbors are getting on or to seek them out beyond my armchair's ease. A cloud of well-being can settle in here like a January inversion. I have need at times for a more searing sun to expose me to more of the world's dis-ease, a more biting cold to goad me past good will.

It is in the spirit of optimism, however, that I will conclude by saying a word for secular humanism, not such an awful belief as some religious fundamentalists would have us believe. For it is not such a bad thing to be human, and as for being secular I would judge that even in this community the most of people are secular, that is, in the world and going about its affairs, for most of their waking hours. Secular humanism, I know, is viewed by many conservatives as a vague but ominous threat to traditional religious values. A philosophy or point of view that has no church or identifiable clergy is loosely linked with atheism; the atheists, as everyone knows, are bad folks. Such reasoning sets aside the fact that humanism has a long respectable tie with Christianity. It also pays little attention to the possibility that *secular* in secular humanism may be just an adjective persuader, tacked on for effect, like *godless* Communism and *liberal* Democrat, or for that matter, *right-wing* Republican, and *orthodox* religionist. It is the religiously inclined, above all, who might accept a commonplace notion within Christianity that we are all a-theists until and unless God has implanted that sense of his presence in us. A secular humanist, having less certainty about God, may develop more faith in human kind. Human beings must have faith, whether in God or each other or both, for neither the goodness of men and women nor the presence of God steadily manifests itself in incontrovertible ways.

If there is any lesson to be drawn from this excursion — and I am anything if not a pedagogue — it is the lesson which this country, more than any other right now, both encourages our learning and allows room for us to practice. That is the lesson of accommodating to one's fellow humans, and not altogether grudgingly or suspiciously or condescendingly or smugly. It is that accommodation which makes community, and it is for a sense of community that I prize my residence in what in some ways is, an alien land. After thirty years, I am not sure I quite approve of the Mormons, but that does not condition my respect for them nor my ability to live in harmony and satisfaction among them. I cannot honestly say that thirty years ago I intended to stay here. I have ascertained that there is, even here, a length of land to bury me in, though I would rather be placed in a high tree, my bones to bleach in the sun, my spirit to rise with the morning's warming currents of air. When I think about these things at all, I find myself sometimes saying, "Me? Among the Mormons? My hell!"

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