

effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus (Philip. 2:1-5, The Jerusalem Bible).

Paul's vision is revolutionary. He suggests that we pattern ourselves after a mind that prefers neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, bond nor free, male nor female, black nor white, lifetime member nor convert, American nor Ethiopian, us nor them; he recommends that we model our lives on a life in which principle and practice meshed inseparably; he asks us, above all else, to be *Christian*. The challenge is comprehensive. It should enlist more of us — and waken us all.

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## A Mormon Out of Misunderstanding?

*John Sillito*

MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS AGO I WAS BAPTIZED A MEMBER of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I can't speak for the Church, but I suspect it is safe to say that neither of us has been the same since. It was not a spiritual

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witness that brought me to the waters of baptism. I still haven't finished reading the Book of Mormon and doubt I ever will. I joined the Church instead primarily for intellectual and rational reasons. Additionally, I was drawn to Mormonism's emphasis on family life and influenced by the example of many Latter-day Saints close to me.

LDS theology did not figure prominently in my decision to be baptized. To the extent that it was important, LDS theology, at least as I understood it then, centered on free agency, personal autonomy, and above all a belief that the "glory of God is intelligence," an adage that I interpreted as meaning unfettered intellectual inquiry. Interestingly, those elements of Mormonism that appealed most to me then remain the most attractive to me two decades later.

For several years after I was baptized, I attended meetings, paid tithing, wore garments, and considered myself an active Latter-day Saint. Today I am less active. Getting from there to here was a gradual process, one that concerned secular issues more than spiritual questions. Some time ago, as Karen Moloney and I discussed the similarities and differences of our mutual experiences as converts, we arrived at two questions: Were we hailed or hazed as converts? and, Is there life after conversion? This paper is my response to those questions.

From the beginning, I was influenced greatly by several Mormon writers and thinkers who stressed free agency and personal autonomy. One was Benjamin F. Cummings III, a former BYU professor, philosopher, and linguist. Cummings, my Sunday School teacher in the Liberty Ward, gave me as a young investigator a heavy dose of the free agency and open-mindedness that he later condensed in his book *The Eternal Individual Self* (1968).

Other important influences came through the lives and writings of David O. McKay and Hugh B. Brown. For me, these kind and gentle men exemplified tolerance, respect for diversity, and an open-minded approach to Church life. Much later I encountered the classic article by Richard D. Poll, whose characterization of "Iron Rods and Liahonas" struck a resonant chord, because it extolled these same ideals.

Only some time after my baptism did I realize that what I had not seen in the Church — perhaps purposely — was the conservatism, orthodoxy, and conformity that coexists with those aspects that appeal to me. Had I seen them earlier I might not have been baptized. In many ways, I have spent the last twenty years avoiding one while clinging to the other.

As I recall my early days in the Church, I am reminded of Leon Trotsky's derisive comment that the American socialist leader Norman Thomas called himself a socialist "as a result of a misunderstanding." There must have been some in the early days of my Church tenure who endured my sacrament meeting talks (which were decidedly Protestant but included a healthy dose of Hugh B. Brown quotations) and wondered if I too called myself a Mormon as a result of a misunderstanding.

I was lucky to begin my life as a Latter-day Saint in a ward where the members tolerated me as I tried to figure out my new religious home. There I was hailed and not hazed, for the good people of Liberty Ward welcomed

me. Still, I must admit that converts were a bit of a rarity in that ward — and I suppose it didn't hurt that I had married their former bishop's daughter. But they welcomed me, encouraged me, promoted me, and in many ways overlooked my inexperience. I still think fondly of my days in that ward.

By the time my newness as a convert had worn off and people started expecting more orthodoxy from me, I had discovered *DIALOGUE*. Then *Sunstone* arrived on the scene, and I found, more or less, a community of like-minded individuals.

I also found myself gradually moving away from Church activity. My disenchantment began when I was on active duty in the army. It wasn't that I ran amok once outside the shadows of the temple; I just realized that, while the Church played a part in my life, it was not the only important influence on my thinking. I went to the local ward at Fort Leonard Wood once or twice, but, frankly, I didn't feel that I fit in or that as a part-time basic trainee in a resident ward I was particularly welcomed. Upon returning to Salt Lake, I resumed my church activity but knew that I had turned an important corner. I realized while away that many of the ideas that had attracted me to Mormonism were generally Christian or even Protestant, and not specifically Mormon.

My gradual distancing from the institutional Church increased as I experienced conflict between my political views and those of my adopted faith. Politics has always been an important part of my life, so, for me, that clash has frequently been very difficult and at times painful. A crucial time came when what I see as the Church's improper involvement played a major part in defeating the Equal Rights Amendment. It's hard to imagine now, but initially the ERA was not an issue of faith. By the mid 1970s, when the ERA began to raise questions within the LDS community, I attended a stake conference where the visiting General Authority was Apostle Delbert L. Stapley. I asked him directly: "Is there any reason why I, as a Mormon, cannot support and work for the ERA without being considered as opposing Church policy?" His answer was equally direct: "No, the two are not contradictory."

Despite later Church pronouncements suggesting that Mormons could be both pro-ERA and members in good standing, I don't know of any pro-ERA active Church members who didn't feel that they were continually swimming upstream. Indeed, I know many pro-ERA Mormons who chose to "switch rather than fight" when Church opposition intensified. They had not necessarily changed their minds about the ERA — the cost of opposing Church policy was simply too high.

I also was repelled from the center of Mormonism by the apparent doubt among many Church leaders that Latter-day Saints are smart enough to educate themselves about political and religious questions. Once, when outlining for a friend my frustration with Church leaders who propagated free-agency limiting policies on political issues such as the ERA, civil rights, and Vietnam, I received this response: "But that isn't *the Church*." When such messages come from General Authorities at general conference, or through Church magazines, I replied, then if it isn't the Church's policy, whose is it? And if

such views are simply the personal views of certain Church members, albeit those in the hierarchy, then why do they have the opportunity to express their personal political views when others, like me, encounter suspicion and hostility when we express ours?

More than once I have seen a member stand up in sacrament meeting and give an outrageous right-wing diatribe with no repercussions. Yet a sacrament meeting talk on current issues from a more liberal political perspective results in deafening silence — or worse. I think this unfortunate, for there are important secular issues that need to be discussed and debated openly within an LDS context. The Church would be better off if the concept of dialogue (with a small *and* a capital d) flourished within the institution.

I also believe that people and institutions should conduct their activities honestly and openly, without rancor or fear of reprisal, on the principle that reasonable individuals can reach different conclusions while respecting each other's differences. And I believe people and institutions ought to tell the truth. I have been chagrined at the more than occasional lack of commitment from the Church to such an approach. Once, when I was the elders quorum instructor (for years my eternal church calling), a stake high councilman visited our quorum to mobilize us to picket a local x-rated movie theater. After giving us the details about time, place, and the location where we could pick up pre-made picket signs, he cautioned us to tell anyone who asked that we were part of some grassroots citizens group whose name I cannot now remember.

"Why not be honest," I asked, "and tell anyone interested that we are from this ward?"

"Because it might not be as effective politically if the press or someone realized we had been mobilized through the Church instead of out of personal concern," he answered.

"So we should lie about our motivation and organization in what you have described as an important cause; *one with which the Church completely agrees and sanctions?*"

"No, not lie; just act strategically."

A few years later, when I learned that the Church was busing Relief Society sisters to state legislatures to oppose the ERA, instructing them to deny they were being mobilized by the Church and telling the press that the Church was not in fact undertaking such an effort, it required little effort on my part to believe the Church was acting strategically — and duplicitously.

My disenchantment increased during the years I worked at the Church Historical Department, where I came into frequent contact with a bureaucracy that formulated rules without concern for their implications and was unwilling to consider options. And again many of the attitudes seemed to center on whether people could run their own lives. There seemed to be a feeling that Church employees would take advantage of Church employment by taking too long for lunch or breaks, or leaving work early, and that their actions needed to be closely monitored and regimented.

The first summer I worked at the Historical Department, I had a personally memorable encounter with Church bureaucracy when I tried to file

for military leave to attend National Guard summer camp. I was informed that the Church did not have a military leave policy and that I would have to take my annual leave. I demurred, suggesting that I intended to spend my two weeks' vacation with my family, not with the Guard. In effect I was told my cause was just but there was little they could do for me.

After thinking this over, I wrote a memo outlining my views to L. Tom Perry, who was then chairman of the personnel committee. About two weeks later, the assistant managing director called me into his office and gave me hell for my audacity. How dare I write a letter to a General Authority. How dare I try to tell the Church how to run its military leave policy. After he calmed down, he told me I was lucky; coincidentally, the Church had decided to adopt a military leave policy. "But don't think your memo had anything to do with it," he told me. "The two matters are totally unrelated." Perhaps, but the new policy was almost identical to the suggestions I had offered Elder Perry.

As I think about my experiences as a member of the Church, it seems that perhaps I did join as the result of misunderstanding, though misunderstanding is not necessarily a mistake. While I have never been as active and zealous as some people might expect a convert to be, I have, nevertheless, maintained a commitment to the Church. I remain an interested, albeit less active, participant in the life of the kingdom, and, in my own way, a believer. I feel a part of the recent important currents in LDS history, literature, and thought. I hope that if at time my attitudes toward the Church have been critical, they have not been carping but have stemmed from a desire to ask tough questions that might make Mormonism more responsive and satisfying, both for me and for others. And I believe I have given the Church credit for taking positive actions when that credit was due. In that context, I would suggest a reading of my 1981 essay "Give and Take: The First Presidency Statement on MX."

In his book *Believing*, Eugene Kennedy considers the question of doubt and belief in a religious context and shows how the two are linked. He notes that doubt "cannot help but come into an individual's life when institutional Churches continue to offer interpretations of life that no longer match his [or her] own experience or knowledge" and suggests that doubt is "the cutting edge of belief itself, a profound aspect of human growth" (1974, 69).

Believing becomes more difficult as authority insists on precise requirements about the language, content, or conditions under which believing must be carried out. . . . When these requirements . . . fail to match an individual's unique vision of the world and his own experience, conflict begins to build immediately (p. 16).

Kennedy goes on to suggest that the "searching believer" very often seems to be in conflict with his community and is "pitted against tradition which seems to resist his inquiries as improper" (p. 16). I have often felt pitted against tradition and contemporary policies. But I hope I am a "searching believer" who is, if not comfortably orthodox, at least constructively heterodox. Certainly I realize that I have much to learn from and about Mormonism that will help me become a better person and a more committed Christian. Indeed, my life has been enriched by many devout Saints who have not shared my