

The Wake of a Media Crisis: Guilt by Association or Innocence by Proclamation?

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ON 4 JANUARY 1990, police following a tip dug a family of five from a common grave in a barn in Kirtland, Ohio. Dennis and Cheryl Avery and their three young daughters, hands, feet, and faces bound with duct tape, had been shot at close range with a .45-caliber pistol. In the days that followed, police learned that the Averys had, in fact, been executed by members of a religious commune to which they had belonged. Commune members viewed the murders as a required sacrifice for the purpose of “purifying” the group. God, they claimed, had commanded the slaughter through divine revelation to their leader, Jeffrey Don Lundgren. Lundgren, according to press reports, was somehow connected to the Mormon Church.

The arrest and eventual trials of the thirteen commune members implicated in the murders was front page news in northeastern Ohio for two solid weeks and then resurfaced intermittently for almost two years as indicted commune members came variously to trial. Jeffrey Lundgren’s lawyers eventually attempted to obtain a change of venue, arguing that because of extensive media coverage in and around Lake County, he could not possibly obtain a fair trial there. Of 201 Lake County residents questioned in a survey commissioned by Lundgren’s defense team, all 201 had heard of Lundgren, and fully 70 percent wanted him executed. The methodology and validity of the survey were later challenged by a prosecution expert; as a result, local television, radio, and newspaper representatives were subpoenaed to document the amount of publicity given the Lundgren case. As of 10 August

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1990, a total of 1,786 news accounts of the case had been published, including 492 television reports, 944 radio broadcasts, and 350 newspaper stories. It is of concern to Latter-day Saints living in Ohio that a fair number of these stories linked Jeffrey Lungren and his activities in some way to the Mormon Church.

The first sketchy news reports indicated that Lungren had formerly been a Mormon and that the lives of local Mormon leaders had been threatened. In fact, he had been a member of the RLDS Church and at one time a tour guide at the Kirtland Temple. Eventually, however, he broke off on his own to become the self-proclaimed founder and prophet of a new religious commune. Discipline was stringent. Church members who broke away to follow him “did,” according to one account, “what he told them to do. Two families could not even talk without him being there. He took the money. He did all the shopping. He decided when they could shower and what jobs people had to do” (*Plain Dealer*, 6 Jan. 1990, 9-A).

Lundgren was preparing his followers through blind discipline, paramilitary exercises, and ritual murder for a trek into the wilderness which was supposed to lead them to salvation, prosperity, eternal life, and the second coming of Christ. After slaying the Averys, he led his commune off into one of the most remote regions of the East. They moved to an area deep in the depressed and thinly populated coal-mining country of West Virginia, where Lundgren decided to take one of his followers, a married woman with children, as a polygamous wife and led the group there on a religious quest for the “mystical sword of Laban” (*Plain Dealer*, 8 Jan. 1990, 1-A).

The initial formal confusion between the LDS and the RLDS churches was cleared up almost immediately and has not been a problem since. However, for reasons that really aren’t very surprising, reporters in search of related feature material, especially staff writers for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, encountered Mormon culture and Mormon doctrine. They asked—along with everyone else—how such horrible murders could happen and wondered if there wasn’t something in Mormon doctrine or practices that encouraged members to follow a leader without question and to execute any “commandment” he might issue. Was there something in the Book of Mormon itself that encouraged or condoned ritual violence?

Former cult members remembered Lungren often quoting 1 Nephi 4:13: “It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.” It seemed that the five members of the Avery family, killed in a cleansing ritual, had apparently become victims of some twisted application of that passage of scripture. The *Plain Dealer* quoted this and other scriptural texts in which the sword

of Laban figured prominently. In a feature article on the slayings on 13 January, Michael Norman and John S. Long described the doctrine of blood atonement as taught by Brigham Young, and that article was followed on 25 and 26 January by a long, two-part series on the cult phenomenon in general and on cults with roots in Mormonism in particular. Another article set forth RLDS claims that their doctrine, theology, liturgy, and history were far more “mainline” than those of the “Utah Church.”

In researching these stories, Michael Norman ran across my husband, Neal Chandler, whose book *Benediction* had recently been published. A review by a staff writer for the Associated Press had been released to the AP wire. Neal, who was willing enough to talk with him, found Norman very well prepared for the interview. He was aware of the Lafferty and LeBaron cases and had spoken with Sandra Tanner in Salt Lake City and with Jan Shipps in Bloomington, Indiana. In addition to blood atonement, he was aware of the gestures that, at that time, still accompanied oaths and covenants in the temple ceremony, and he even asked if there weren't a teaching in the Church that when the leaders had spoken, the thinking had been done.

Neal did what he could to stem the tide, reminding Norman that Lungren, as a former member of the RLDS Church, had no historical allegiance to Brigham Young and that ours is a church that has always championed education and the free exercise of individual agency. While most of what he said never actually appeared in print, the resulting article was, we felt, relatively balanced with no outrageous assertions or major inaccuracies except that Church membership was pegged at 3.5 million instead of the 7 million the Church claimed in 1989. The story itself ran on the front page where related stories had run for over two weeks. The inside page spread included a picture of Neal, looking thoughtful and concerned, with the following caption: “Mormon author . . . has come to dread the reports of cults with ties to Mormonism because of the misunderstanding they generate about his faith.” Unfortunately, that picture was juxtaposed with one of Ervil LeBaron, looking depraved and demented, with a caption referring to his conviction in the 1977 shooting death of Utah polygamist leader Rulon Allred. But you can't blame a reporter for what's in the files.

Our rather sanguine attitude was not shared by local Church members who were dismayed at the suggestion of any association at all between mainline Mormonism and the actions of radical excommunicants of another, although related, church. Missionary referrals, we were later told, dropped dramatically, and convert baptisms, never statistically impressive in the Kirtland Stake, were running half of what might normally be expected. Interestingly, as preoccupied with

the situation as members were, it was never discussed in church from the pulpit or in quorum meetings throughout the four or five area stakes until 2 February, when President Zane Lee broke the silence at a Kirtland Stake leadership conference and addressed the issue directly. He expressed the concern of the stake leadership about false and misleading newspaper stories. Stake leaders had, he said, contacted Jack Anderson, who was now serving the Church in an official capacity as advisor on media relations. They had also contacted Church Public Relations director, Don LeFevre, in Salt Lake City for advice. They had also contacted the *Plain Dealer* to voice their displeasure. Church members were to be comforted, these were trying times, but the gospel was true. Members were to refer all requests from the media to a newly appointed stake public communications director. A “media offensive” was also announced, which would include a number of special activities to which the media would be invited and a special *Plain Dealer* supplement which would feature the family of Cory Snyder, right fielder for the Cleveland Indians and a member of the Cleveland Stake. Stake leaders hoped this approach would help recoup what they felt had surely been lost over the incident, and perhaps mitigate—or at least balance—whatever poor publicity was yet to come.

The following morning, fast meetings were held throughout the stake, and members in several wards referred to the situation in some way in testimonies. One sister in my ward proclaimed these to be the last days and said it had been prophecied that latter-day persecution would begin in Kirtland (she did not cite references). This was “It,” she said. We were on the cutting edge of Armageddon.

Now, I have recounted all of this, not because I am particularly interested in cults or even in media perceptions of cults and Mormonism, but because I am interested in Mormons, and in their reactions to public scrutiny. It would clearly be an understatement to assert that the Church has, since its inception, had intermittent public relations problems. Indeed, much of the nineteenth-century persecutions either originated with or were aggravated by attacks in local newspapers. A historian could probably also show how that persecution was, at times, exacerbated by official and member overreaction to media attacks. What I would like to do is choose two national media crises that have occurred within my own adult lifetime and examine how those crises have affected us institutionally and personally. I think there are lessons to be drawn for the Kirtland unpleasantness.

The crises to which I refer (and by “crises” I mean those situations which received widespread, prolonged, and negative attention) are the boycott of BYU athletic teams in 1970 by many schools in the Western Athletic Conference and the resulting charges that Church theology

and policies promoted racism; and, second, the excommunication of political activist Sonia Johnson in 1979 coupled with the visible and official Mormon lobbying against the Equal Rights Amendment and the resulting charges that ours was a patriarchally repressive church. You may be able to recall other situations to add to this list—perhaps local issues that affected smaller groups of Church members but that perhaps affected them all the more dramatically because they were close by—just as the Kirtland killings have affected us in north-eastern Ohio.

When we are being attacked, for whatever reason, the most elemental, most natural, and widespread reaction is, of course, to defend ourselves. Sometimes this defensiveness is accompanied by bewilderment: How can people say such things about us when we are such nice people? We are God-fearing, upright individuals who spend our lives doing genealogy and compassionate service and going to meetings. Why can't they leave us alone? Why don't they ever print the *good* news about us? Defensiveness sometimes takes the form of anger—even outrage. I spoke with a leader in the Kirtland Stake who expressed this point of view: Newspaper reporters ought to know better. They are professional journalists, and they should be aware of the Church as a worldwide presence that couldn't possibly have ties to anything that happened out there in that barn. Newspaper publishers are greedy. They just want to sell papers. They don't care if they're being fair or whom they hurt. It's all filthy lucre. Stake leaders were also resentful that they had not been contacted for comment when these stories were prepared. They complained that reporters had spoken only to non-Mormons or to excommunicated Mormons. (I don't know into which of these two categories they placed my husband.)

Our good friend Keith Norman was upset. He wrote a reasoned and, I thought, persuasive six-page letter to the editor of the *Plain Dealer* pointing out that Mormons hadn't exactly invented violence and suggesting that it might be as profitable to blame the Catholics who, after all, conducted the Inquisition or even the Jews, who perpetuated the violent stories in the Old Testament. His letter was returned with thanks and apologies that there had not been space available. There must have been many other letters written and submitted, but one of the few that were published is, I think, instructive:

I am a native-born Clevelander. I have earned a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's degree in U.S. history, teaching certificates in social studies and in learning disabilities, and I am working on a second masters degree in education.

I did the majority of my coursework at Cleveland State University. Because of a high grade-point average, I was awarded a graduate internship. All this, in

spite of the fact that I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

I work for Cuyahoga Community College where I develop and implement special education/training programs for our inner-city youth. I also teach history at the Western Campus of CCC. In addition, I own and operate a successful private tutoring agency. All this, in spite of my activities as an active member of the Mormon Church.

After going on to assert (without documentation of any kind) that Mormons have the highest per capita income in the state (a statistical profile that could not possibly have included my ward) and that our Church has more doctors, more lawyers, and more Cleveland Indians than anyone else in the area, the writer denies all charges unequivocally. Mormons are peace loving. They do not, never have, never would, never could teach or subscribe to anything like a doctrine of blood atonement. And the temple ceremony is completely peaceful. To suggest otherwise is total sacrilege. While this gentleman, whom I do not know—the address given is outside my stake—may be commended for putting on the “whole armor” of God, for not being ashamed of his church and for being willing to leap to its defense, there are problems with his printed protestation. Many members, and I suspect many more non-members, were offended by the self-congratulation and the condescension in his letter. Moreover, there are serious problems with accuracy—first, in the financial profile he presented, but more important, in the denials he sets forth.

It does not take a great deal of historical research to unearth disturbing references to or proclamations of blood atonement. Indeed, such pronouncements are far more easily explained in the context of the times by the tribulations and the temperaments of the men who delivered them than they are disavowed. And, as secret and as sacred as we like to think the temple ceremony is, it is remarkably easy to obtain a fairly accurate description of what goes on behind those walls. The penalty oaths, only recently removed from the ceremony, were still in place at the time these articles were written, and were, in fact, what remained of oaths of vengeance that were once a part of the temple endowment and that were, in fact, echoed in many of our latter-day hymns until the most recent revision of the hymnal. To deny that such ever existed doesn't change the facts.

Particularly Mormon is a defensive posture that recalls the persecutions of earlier days: This is the work of Satan. Newspaper and television reporters (possibly unwittingly, but nonetheless in all actuality) have become tools of the devil. This whole atrocity was concocted solely to keep the work of the kingdom from rolling forth.

Well, maybe. But these are serious charges, and before we lay satanic discipleship at the feet of a journalist who may, in fact, simply be doing his or her job gathering available information and trying to meet a deadline, we need to consider a few things. Perhaps some of us feel a little cheated at having missed the major persecutions of a century ago. Perhaps we feel a kind of survivor's guilt about escaping the tarrings and featherings, the Haun's Mill Massacre, the expulsion from Nauvoo, and the trek across the plains. We feel deeply indebted to those who have gone before and have a nagging insecurity about ourselves. How would we have fared in the face of such trials? Perhaps we have a need for latter-day trials of our own. Perhaps we devise early morning seminary, or roadshows, or ward building committees, for example, so we can rise to the occasion and learn what the trek across the plains taught the pioneers. And we comfort ourselves with predictions of trials in the Last Days. And so, we are always watching and waiting. And often finding persecution where none was intended.

To legitimately lay claim to persecution, I think we would have to first show malice aforethought—that a given reporter or publisher or producer is actually trying to defame us in some way, to destroy our missionary program, to run us out of town. While there are groups that have dedicated themselves to producing anti-Mormon literature for the public, there are also plenty of journalists who report on Church activities because that is what they've been assigned to do. They have no deeper, no particularly ulterior, motives. The other circumstance that would suggest genuine persecution is the singling out of our Church for this treatment. A cursory look at the stories that get printed about virtually any church you can name belies that assertion. Just as we don't often see banner headlines that proclaim: "Compassionate Service Hours up by 50 percent in Shaker Heights Ward" or "Fathers Included in Merrie Miss New Beginnings Program," neither do we see well-positioned stories on bingo revenues in the local Catholic parish or read about a bumper crop of Bar Mitzvahs this year in a nearby synagogue. These happenings are of interest to local congregations, and they may be reported in local church newsletters, but they do not make news! What does make news is seldom complimentary to *any* denomination. I have read, in the last several months, articles on the "graying of Christian Science" that suggest that this religious movement is losing its young people. I have read of a number of Catholic priests charged with molesting young boys (all that celibacy seems unhealthy). Do such articles indicate that the religious denominations in question are being persecuted? I hardly think so. And we would, I think, dismiss charges to that effect as pure paranoia. It seems perfectly logical to us to look for answers and explanations in the Koran if

something happens in the Arab world that we don't understand, but no one thinks of that as persecution. It is simply an attempt to shed some light on a perplexing issue. But, somehow, when it's Mormons in the news, when the Book of Mormon is involved, we apply a different standard.

Two years ago, Lou Chandler, a public relations director by profession, who has also served as public communications director in her stake in Philadelphia and who also happens to be my sister-in-law, suggested in a Washington, D.C. Sunstone Symposium a more productive response to institutional criticism. Difficulties occur, she said, when there is dissonance between what is perceived by a given audience and the image an institution is trying to project. She explained that one primary task of a public relations department is to assess public perceptions, determine if those perceptions are in accord with the image that is desired, and then figure out what to do about changing those perceptions if they are not. Interestingly, she illustrated her premise with the rather widely held, but totally erroneous perception that the Mormon Church is, itself, a cult. She had encountered this perception quite by chance in a private conversation and had spent some time reading up on cults. Every book she found on the subject mentioned the Church at least in passing. Many devoted considerable space to the assertion that the Mormon Church is one of the major cults in America.

As she continued her research, she learned that cultologists or whatever such experts call themselves have more or less agreed upon fourteen characteristics that generally typify cults, and she spent considerable time matching up public perceptions of the Mormon Church with those characteristics. And she found plenty of dissonance. Just one example: The first five items on the list have to do with control—mind control, control of time, of personal property, and so on. Lou cited a number of references most of us would recognize to support the assertion that Mormons believe in something called free agency. Indeed, Mormons consider free agency to be central to their theology. Free agency is to die for. There was a war fought in heaven over free agency. Casualties were high. And yet, when questioned about the issue, the vast majority of those she contacted outside the Church didn't have that perception at all. They perceived the Mormon Church as incredibly controlling—as an institution that very definitely limited the agency of its members. Her methods were admittedly far from statistically reliable, yet her findings are not very surprising and could very likely be corroborated in a more tightly structured survey.

So here we have what appears to be a public relations problem: theological commitment to a principle and a public perception of just

the opposite. The task at hand, clearly, is to find a way to correct that misperception. Just as clearly, we can't do very much about correcting misperceptions if we don't know what people think of us. Perhaps the place to start is to listen to what outsiders say. Or possibly to read what they write about us. And if we can listen and read with some degree of objectivity, we can help deal with the misperceptions that will inevitably occur with an institution as large and as complex as the Church has become.

Interestingly, when Lou performed an in-house survey, asking some Mormons she knew about *their* perceptions of the free agency issue, her findings were similar to what she had found in her nonmember group. Many avowed and card-carrying Mormons she talked to perceived that their own church limited, in many ways, their own individual free agency. When even devout Mormons share in a "misperception," perhaps the problem is more than one of perceptual dissonance. Is it perhaps true that many Mormons feel entirely free to do exactly what they are told?

This leads, of course, to the possibility that while we are examining an issue for perceptual dissonance, the perceptions will be found to be valid, and the problem elsewhere. I hope it is not presumptuous to suggest that in the past two decades, negative press has sometimes served to show us problems that do merit our attention. During the seventies, for example, it became increasingly difficult for Church members to respond individually and institutionally to charges of racism. We were, in fact, practicing a kind of spiritual apartheid that troubled many of us.

The changes in institutional and individual response to this issue have been nothing short of phenomenal for those of us who remember what it was like before, and I can't help wondering if the timing of these changes hasn't been affected by the very negative image we found ourselves projecting prior to the announcement on 8 June 1978 that all worthy male members of the Church could now hold the priesthood. That this change would one day come we had all been assured, but my generation of missionaries speaking face to face with General Authorities in the temple were told "not in my lifetime, young man—or yours," and were further counseled to "avoid the seed of Cain" in their proselytizing efforts. The issue was one of interest, but not of great concern to most Church members, and it wasn't until later that we began to hear more equivocal and more hopeful answers to questions about the priesthood and temple ordinances for black members of the Church.

For a period of time, the pressure from outside the Church was constant and was intensified by publications within the LDS commu-

nity questioning the theological foundations of the policy and calling for a change. Perhaps that 1978 announcement was not a direct response to such media-generated pressure, perhaps the timetable had simply always been misunderstood, but the public relations crisis surely had an impact. It demanded that we examine thoughtfully a situation that was in need of change. Whether we like to admit it or not, it pointed the way to repentance.

Our response to various women's issues has not been as dramatic—at least not on an institutional level—but changes are beginning to occur. Special women's conferences, a garden full of statues glorifying women's roles may be thought of as mere window dressing, but they do represent an acknowledgment that women's issues exist.

Speaking only from my own experience, I can say that it is a great deal easier to be an active Latter-day Saint woman now than it was fifteen or even ten years ago—especially for those of us who are a bit off the beaten track. The track to which I am referring is, of course, that eternal round that leads from the kitchen to Relief Society to Primary and pretty much back to the kitchen without passing Go to collect a pay check or stopping off anywhere along the way to drop off a child for day care. When I left my daughter, now a high school sophomore, at the age of five weeks, to go back to the classroom, I had either the scorn or the maudlin sympathy of virtually every sister in my ward. Relief Society met in the daytime, and I was necessarily excluded from activity or association with the main body of the ward sisterhood.

Now, well over half the women in our ward work outside their homes, and those who don't are likely to be caring for the children of those who do. There is an attitude of mutual support that is as refreshing as it was unaccustomed in the 1970s. I am fully aware that Ezra Taft Benson has spoken out against the economic decisions many families are making today and has urged young mothers to stay at home with their children whatever the cost, but this is one time when the prophet has spoken and the debate has only begun—at least in my stake. In March 1991 the *Ensign* ran a four-page article on child care. More and more we are seeing and hearing Church leaders urge young women to take education seriously and to prepare themselves for the economic realities of the future. More attention is being paid, in meaningful ways, I hope, to single, widowed, and divorced women, and more efforts are being made to include a variety of lifestyles within our very family-oriented church. It seems to me that men are more reluctant to voice dictatorial or chauvinistic views (if they still harbor such) than they once were—I haven't found myself and women like me the subject of a diatribe from the pulpit for quite a while. There is much

that remains to be done, and I'm sure more in some wards and stakes than in others, but we have made a start.

Again I suggest that all the attention generated by the ERA issue and by Sonia Johnson's excommunication forced Church members in family groups and in Relief Societies and quorum meetings throughout the Church to take a hard look at the real status of the average Mormon woman in the Church—either that or stand proudly convicted of media charges.

Now we face yet another barrage of criticism. This time the issues seem to be that the Mormon theology and the Mormon Church somehow create automatons—people who are trained to act without thinking on the say-so of anyone they accept as a religious authority over them, and then that our theology and culture somehow encourage or condone violent acts if they are undertaken for a higher purpose. While we are defending ourselves against such charges, we may want to ask ourselves a few questions on the off-chance that some changes are due.

How do we understand the principle of obedience? What do we mean by words like “sustain” and “support”? How as teachers and leaders do we teach that principle to our children and to other Church members? What degree of individual responsibility do we allow for ourselves and others when it comes to “following the brethren”? And what about violence? Are we troubled by the numerous acts of violence we can witness daily on television? Are we more concerned about an “R” movie rating because it is likely to indicate explicit sexual content than because the movie may have scenes of explicit violence? How do we present stories with violent overtones from the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon to our children or to classes we may teach? How do we feel about them ourselves? How glib is our justification of the shedding of blood? How do we feel about pacifists? (Two of my friends who considered themselves conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War were nearly hounded from the Church during the 1970s by ward members who equated Mormonism with unquestioning patriotism. I have often wondered how representative their experience was.) How do we deal with war and military service generally in our conversations with others? Do we ever think past the familiar platitudes of patriotism? There are other questions to be raised, but these suggest a place to start.

In the final analysis, the Church will be judged far more by who we, as individual Church members are, and by what we do in our places of work and in the community than by anything that our friends and associates read in the paper. As long as we have confidence in ourselves, in our restored gospel, in our testimonies, in our community of believers, it is unbecoming for us to become overly defensive when

we are criticized. We can do more for the Church we love by listening and learning. It goes without saying, I hope, that we need to be well informed as citizens of the kingdom of God and as citizens of the world at large. We need to be aware of what is going on, and we need to know our own history. In the long run, we may be able to do more to enhance the image of Latter-day Saints by simply living decent and generous lives than by anything we say.

This premise bears out in small, unobtrusive, individual ways, and I think it would work on a larger scale as well. On Monday, 30 April 1990, the *Plain Dealer* reported that three thousand Mormons had gathered the previous day in the opulent State Theater in Playhouse Square to extol the values of the Christian family. Featured speakers had included Cory Snyder of the Cleveland Indians; Steve Young, quarterback for the San Francisco '49ers; and Sharlene Wells Hawkes, former Miss America—all Latter-day Saints and proud of it. I'm told that activities like these do bring results—that inquiries soar and the missionaries get very busy for a period of time after a telecast or a conference such as this. Perhaps. I'm pragmatic enough not to want to argue with success, but I also can't help wondering if we could generate as much publicity by actually *doing* something besides grandstanding. Take a look at the activity schedule of almost any Catholic parish or Protestant church, and you will see public service activities of all kinds scheduled throughout the week—day care, rummage sales, support groups of all kinds, musical rehearsals, and more. Our buildings sit almost vacant nearly six days of most weeks.

Last spring it was announced in local newspapers and on the radio that two Clevelanders were in need of bone marrow transplants and that a satisfactory match had not been found within their families or among donors then registered. The public was invited to donate blood samples to be typed and catalogued for these and other patients with similar needs. This massive public screening was held at Park Synagogue. During one afternoon, over two thousand people stood in line and hung around for nearly an hour each filling out forms and leaving blood samples. The Red Cross did the actual work of drawing and typing blood, but the Reformed Jewish congregation provided their building. I doubt they were looking for converts, but they certainly found friends—and a spot on the evening news and in the morning paper. Why, I wondered, and the question cuts two uncomfortable ways; why didn't we think of that?