The Church and the Community: Personal Reflections on Mormon Intellectual Life

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BOUNDARIES DELINEATING THE DEGREE of inclusion in and exclusion from both institutional and cultural Mormonism are defined, negotiated, and redefined through the interaction of the church, community, and its intellectuals. This essay, based primarily on personal experience and reflection, examines the relationship between Mormon social organization and intellectual life. I believe my own experience has made it impossible for me to be included in the church. Further delineation between the church and the community, a distinction fostered primarily by intellectuals, enables me to conceive of myself as a cultural Mormon while also providing a social context in which I can feel at home. This was not always so, and one of my purposes is to discuss the renegotiation of these boundaries, arguing that a distinction between the church and the community is not only analytically useful but is increasingly becoming a pronounced feature of social reality in Mormondom.

CONFRONTING THE INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARY

At this point I will describe two personal encounters with Mormon ecclesiastical authority in which the boundaries limiting intellectual diversity became apparent to me. Both followed a successful Mormon mission and occurred as I attended college. Since I had hoped to become a teacher in the LDS educational system, I emphasized religion and philosophy in my studies at the University of Utah. Well integrated into both the church and the university, I was excited about my new religious and

intellectual life. My relatively recent discovery of a liberal Mormon sub-
culture made this a period of both expanding intellectual horizons and
intense identification with Mormonism.

The first experience occurred in priesthood meeting. During a New
Testament lesson I asked the instructor and fellow elders how they inter-
preted Jesus' admonition to the rich man to sell all that he had and give it
to the poor. Was this text to be understood literally? Did it simply mean
that we ought to be concerned about the poor? Or did it only apply to the
rich man? My attempt to obtain the wisdom of others in formulating my
own moral position came to an abrupt halt when a visiting stake high
councilman insisted that "if the Lord wanted us to sell all that we have
and give it to the *church*, then President Henry D. Moyle," whom he iden-
tified as a millionaire, "would have done so." My apparent impropriety
in suggesting that the issue was the poor, not the church—that if the two
were synonymous when Jesus spoke they certainly were not today—and
my distraction of the instructor, preventing him from easily moving to his
following point, led the high councilman to stop the discussion. Assum-
ing that this was simply an abortive attempt to obtain insight about our
obligations toward the poor, I left priesthood meeting disappointed but
not surprised. I certainly expected nothing beyond what had occurred
that Sunday.

My brother and I were late for priesthood meeting the following Sun-
day. As we stood at the door, deciding whether to enter or wait until Sun-
day school, we noticed a different rhythm from typical Mormon speech.
In fact, someone was reading a prepared text. Upon hearing my name,
we joined our brethren. The quorum president read about dissent during
the previous meeting, informing us that "delving into the mysteries" was
unacceptable and sustaining the authorities of the church was essential. I
stated that though my question remained unanswered I never had any
intention of derailing the instructor's lesson, but I was perplexed about
the question of sustaining the authorities of the church. What had I said
or asked that implied failure to sustain church authorities? What did sus-
taining the authorities entail? Did it require uncritical obedience, acquies-
cence to hierarchy, or did it permit loyal opposition?

Putting our academic studies on hold, two of my brothers and I un-
dertook an aggressive perusal of Mormon history and theology on the
matter of sustaining authorities. We did derail the course of priesthood
lessons for the next three weeks, and the quorum was divided over the
meaning of sustaining church authorities. I asked the instructor, a child-
hood friend, to allow me to join him should he be called in by the bishop
or stake president, but he adroitly moved the priesthood sessions back on
course as we left this issue behind.

Six weeks passed, and we assumed the debate, if not resolved, had

been abandoned. Then, with six stake high councilmen gracing our meeting, I assumed that the quorum presidency was being reorganized. However, the lesson ended ten minutes early, and the quorum president turned the meeting over to a high councilman who, upon lecturing us about the evils of dissent, led the instructor from the room to the stake president's office. My attempt to join him failed, and he was removed from his position after being asked if he "sustained the general authorities or, like Kendall, believed them to be in a state of apostasy."

The second experience transpired a year later. I was teaching the college-age Sunday school class. Again the New Testament was the subject, and the manual carefully framed the discussions and questions. Since it castigated biblical scholars, "higher" and "lower" critics, I asked class members if they were aware of biblical criticism. None had heard of either higher or lower criticism, but everyone chose to spend the next four weeks examining examples of each, the historical responses of Mormon authorities, and implications of such biblical scholarship for the Mormon posture toward the bible. I was asked by class members to identify my own views at the conclusion of our inquiry.

Upon entering the room for our final session, I found twelve to fifteen people instead of the normal three to six. Four or five of the new faces were people whom I did not recall having seen before, and some of the others were associated with the Stake Sunday School Board. Initially, I chose not to discuss my views, since understanding them depended upon the previous four weeks, but I nonetheless found myself doing so.

A class that normally lasted thirty to forty minutes continued for a couple of hours, with several people testifying to the truthfulness of the gospel and demanding that I do the same. When the session ended, a member of the Sunday school board escorted me to the stake president's office where his first counsellor offered me a position on the stake board with the responsibility of visiting other classes to guarantee that teachers had strong testimonies of the gospel. I was to ensure that others possessed the very quality I presumably lacked. When I indicated that I wanted to continue teaching the class, they assigned a newly returned missionary to accompany me, and three weeks later concluded that only one teacher was necessary. That was the last position I held in the church.

INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE

Two criteria for ensuring institutional loyalty and maintaining social control emerge from these experiences—the necessity of sustaining the authorities of the church and the requirement for a personal testimony of the truthfulness of the restored gospel. Since an authentic testimony recognizes the church as the institutional guardian of religious doctrine and

acknowledges its sacramental role, a testimony reproduces the hierarchical structure of the church in the consciousness of adherents and reinforces the principle of sustaining the authorities. In fact, a typical testimony acknowledges the president of the church as prophet, seer, and revelator and identifies Mormon apostles with the same authority, power, and position attributed to their ancient counterparts. Consequently, a testimony of the gospel and the principle of sustaining the authorities of the church combine to enhance institutional control and ensure personal loyalty.

Failure to sustain church authorities can be costly. Uncomfortable questions not only imply that one does not sustain church leaders and thereby lead to censure, but sustaining church authorities is required for an individual to enter the Mormon temple, receive his or her personal endowments, form an eternal family, advance in the priesthood, and for men hold ecclesiastical office. Virtually all of the cases with which I am familiar, where individuals have appeared before church courts for political dissent or expressing controversial ideas, include formal charges of failure to sustain church leaders.

Moreover, the ambiguity characterizing the sustaining principle often is used by local officials to strengthen institutional control. My own arguments in priesthood meeting for Mormonism's ideal polity as either a theocratic democracy or a democratic theocracy, depending on which principle is granted higher priority, fell on deaf ears as stake and ward officials insisted on purely autocratic solutions. Preoccupied with immediate concerns, including the ritualistic flow of the lesson manual, and apparently unaware of Mormon history, they dismissed implications of historical examples of democratic applications of the sustaining principle and insisted that no discussion of this matter, or disagreement with church officials on others, would be tolerated in the future. Having equated disagreement with disloyalty, they reaffirmed Mormonism's most extreme reading of the sustaining principle and its relationship to intellectual dissent—i.e., the 1945 Ward Teacher's message that "when our leaders speak, the thinking has been done."[1]

If sustaining the authorities is a mechanism of institutional control, then a personal testimony may be conceptualized as a means of cognitive control. As an affirmation of basic Mormon assumptions and governing principles, the personal testimony links the self to the institution by locating the individual within the institutional structure. Proclaiming that one knows that God exists, that Jesus is the Christ, that Joseph Smith was the prophet through whom the gospel was restored, and that the current

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1. "Sustaining the General Authorities," *Ward Teachers' Message* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, June 1945).

president of the church is the prophet, seer, and revelator who governs with twelve apostles called by God is a personal, typically public, confession of one's subordination to church hierarchy. Having "borne," if I may be permitted a little Utahnese, such a testimony, individuals are placed in a precarious position. They have privileged the judgment of church officials over their own, and their testimony may come back to haunt them should they confront church authority.

It was this confession that was required of me when I was removed from teaching the Sunday school class. Had I acknowledged the superior judgment of church officials, including perhaps the author of the manual, over that of "higher" and "lower" critics of the New Testament, then I could have retained my position. In fact, one of the stake board members reassured me that my testimony was required to prevent others in the class from drawing inappropriate conclusions based on my limited presentation of biblical scholarship. Clearly, the issue was not the "limited presentation" but the fact that I "bore" no testimony to dilute or negate implications of biblical criticism. While employing language of the intellect, the testimony is a confession of faith. Its purpose, at least in this context, is to negate or deny knowledge, to put an end to discussion, and to limit intellectual curiosity. It clearly takes precedence over knowledge. As a ritual conclusion to my unacceptable departure from the manual and inappropriate discussion of biblical criticism, my testimony would have provided closure by reassuring fellow class members that biblical scholars constituted no threat to our privileged knowledge. Without that testimony, however, ambiguity reigned and I could not be permitted to teach the class.

These two encounters with the boundaries of institutional Mormonism combined in my rejection of the church's racial policy, and its sexual morality (especially the pronatalism), economic values, typical political positions, and theology convinced me that I did not belong. No longer could I consent to two fundamental principles of the church. I could neither sustain church authorities nor claim a testimony of the restored gospel which precluded authentic participation at the institutional level. With the exception of occasional correspondence with Mormon officials, a lingering intellectual and political interest in Mormon affairs, and some nostalgic musings, the church and I parted company, each going separate ways, with neither, I suspect, having any serious regrets.

THE MORMON COMMUNITY AND ITS BOUNDARIES

Institutional Mormonism, the formally organized church, is not the Mormon community. The latter, which has expanded considerably since my priesthood and Sunday school days in the mid-1960s, now includes a

wide range of unofficial organizations sponsoring Mormon cultural and intellectual life. The liberal Mormon subculture, which I discovered during my youth, was a loosely organized network of underground discussion groups circulating papers and debating ideas. I still recall my elation upon learning about the anticipated publication of *Dialogue* and our subsequent speculation regarding its chances for success. Today, as *Dialogue* approaches its thirtieth anniversary it shares the spotlight with *Sunstone,* the *Journal of Mormon History, Exponent II,* and other publications. During the past year an invitation arrived to subscribe to a new Mormon journal, *The Wasatch Review International,* devoted exclusively to Mormon literary pursuits. Moreover, a number of Mormon academic associations sponsor annual symposia devoted to Mormon theology, history, literature, practice, and society. While the Mormon History Association increasingly enjoys the respect of other American historians, the Society for the Sociological Study of Mormon Life recently established ties with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion enabling cosponsored sessions devoted to the analysis of Mormonism at the latter's annual meetings. However, these associations primarily reach narrow academic audiences.

Certainly the most popular among Latter-day Saints and apparently the most threatening to ecclesiastical officials, at least currently, are the Sunstone symposia. Occurring several times a year and held at various locations throughout the country, they attract thousands of people interested in Mormonism. Despite ecclesiastical admonitions not to listen to "alternate voices" in 1989, efforts to intimidate participants in 1990, an official warning to church members to avoid such symposia in 1991, and the disclosure of a special committee that maintains dossiers on dissenting intellectuals in 1992, participation levels at Sunstone conferences remain high.[2] Even the recent controversy surrounding academic freedom at Brigham Young University, the failure of BYU to renew the contracts of professors Cecilia Farr and David Knowlton, and the excommunication and disfellowshipping of Mormon intellectuals following the 1993 symposium,[3] though clearly disturbing, do not portend the demise of Mormon intellectual life. In fact, they can be interpreted as evidence of a

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2. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Despite Church Warnings, 1,500 Attend Sunstone Symposium," *Salt Lake Tribune,* 15 Aug. 1992. For documentation of the intimidation of intellectuals by church officials, including those following Sunstone symposia through 1992, see Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 7-64.

3. Anderson, who was also excommunicated for publishing the above article (n2), reflects on her experience in "Freedom of Conscience: A Personal Statement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Winter 1993): 196-202. For details on the disciplinary action taken against her and five other Mormon authors, including reactions from the Mormon community, see "Six Intellectuals Disciplined for Apostasy," *Sunstone* (Nov. 1993): 65-73, and "Disciplinary Actions Generate More Heat," *Sunstone* (Dec. 1993): 67-68, also 68-71.

vibrant intellectual subculture among contemporary Mormons.

Obviously, I believe that the Mormon community is not coterminous with the Mormon church. The community is larger than the church, and its boundaries are expanding. While the community includes the church, I believe that the church has lost control of the community and no longer can dictate or define Mormon culture. That the church remains the most powerful force within the Mormon community may be beyond dispute, but it lacks the power, though perhaps not the will, to set the agenda and define the parameters of Mormon intellectual life. For today the Mormon community attracts a diverse population of intellectuals, is increasingly well organized, and may enjoy significant popular support. Discussion groups like those prevalent during earlier times still exist, but, unlike the past, their participants enjoy access to a fine array of publications and symposia to aid in their intellectual quest. It is this context that empowers intellectuals to become an increasingly important force in shaping Mormon culture and defining the Mormon community.

Recent responses of Mormon officials to the Sunstone symposia and attempts to intimidate participating intellectuals are, in my judgment, a concerted effort to reestablish the church's hegemony over the Mormon community. While any ensuing confrontation between church authorities and Mormon intellectuals is likely to cause considerable personal suffering and institutional embarrassment, as illustrated by recent events, it is too late for church authorities to regain control over Mormon intellectual life and thereby limit the boundaries of the Mormon community to the Mormon church. Mormon intellectuals simply enjoy too much autonomy and are too well organized; and Mormon ecclesiastical officials are too preoccupied with the church's image and an ongoing quest for respectability to assume the costs of such a confrontation.

The emergence of a robust Mormon community with considerable autonomy poses important implications for the recent debate over Mormon ethnicity and the relationship of people like me to Mormonism. For it is the community, not the institution, that provides the basis for defining individuals as a people. Most of Mormon history finds the church and community largely coterminous, with institutional affiliation providing the foundation for the Mormon social order and the convert's new Mormon identity. This new identity, as the argument for a Mormon ethnicity presupposes, assumed precedence over previous national and racial identities, as being Mormon became the most salient feature in the self-definition of the individual. European converts sang songs defining their native lands as Babylon as they set out to create Zion in the tops of the mountains. No collective referent was more significant in defining the self than one's new identity as Mormon. As long as the church and the community were coterminous, Mormon ethnicity depended upon insti-

tutional participation.

Mario De Pillis's recent article—"The Persistence of Mormon Community into the 1990s"—is an insightful analysis of Mormon community at the institutional level.[4] Based on premises similar to those above, De Pillis argues that during the nineteenth century, Mormon community— both as a sense of peoplehood and primary relations—depended on location or place. The doctrine of the Gathering required the migration of converts from their native lands to Zion, a specific place, to build a holy city in preparation for Jesus' return. Boundaries separating the Saints from others defined both Mormon identity and community. With their re-entry into the American mainstream during the twentieth century, Mormons abandoned the Gathering and redefined Zion as a state of mind or "the pure in heart." With converts remaining in their native lands, the church entered an era of expansive growth. However, the internationalization of Mormonism posed new problems. How could a burgeoning bureaucracy maintain the community and identity characteristic of nineteenth-century Mormonism?

The answer, for De Pillis, is found in the social organization of the Mormon ward. As the local congregation, a ward's geographical boundaries, unlike the Catholic parish, are determined by the size of the congregation and the presence of sufficient talent to perform the requisite tasks. As wards grow to points where face-to-face interaction becomes difficult, or when they shrink to points where they cannot sustain various church programs, they divide into two wards or two wards merge into one, requiring the redefining of geographical boundaries. Instead of geography defining the size of the congregation, the size of the congregation defines geographical boundaries. Consequently, Mormonism preserves community by maintaining the critical mass necessary for a ward to function while limiting its size to facilitate primary social relations. As Mormonism approaches the twenty-first century, this system of wards enables the church to export Mormon identity and maintain community in diverse societies throughout the world. Though this is a significant contribution, De Pillis has defined Mormon community too narrowly. Identifying it with institutional Mormonism, he neglects those sources of Mormon culture emerging outside the church and their role in creating a broader Mormon community.

Today the church and community are not synonymous. Consequently, people may define themselves as Mormon without participation in institutional Mormonism. It is possible for someone like me, who cannot be an active participant in the church, to define myself, should I de-

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4. Mario S. De Pillis, "The Persistence of Mormon Community into the 1990s," *Sunstone* (Oct. 1991): 28-49.

sire, as a cultural Mormon. Since I am not theologically Mormon nor willing to abide by Mormon religious practice, I cannot participate in institutional Mormonism. Because of my theological position, I would confront sharper institutional boundaries today than I did during the 1960s. For I am agnostic with theistic or atheistic propensities, depending perhaps on what I had for breakfast, stories in the morning newspaper, or fear of the election of another Republican presidency. Consequently, I would not expect institutional Mormonism to welcome me into its fold. Though I may be critical of specific boundaries established by the church, I recognize that the vitality of institutions depends, at least in part, on their delineation of boundaries. The Mormon church cannot define its boundaries loosely enough to incorporate people like me and remain the Mormon church. Nor would I expect it to do so.

I do feel at home, on the other hand, in the Mormon community. This membership requires neither a testimony of the restored gospel nor that I sustain authorities of the church. Indeed, it does not even demand that I be a theist. In fact, I am not sure that it requires that I be LDS. For the Mormon intellectual community has introduced me to active participants who have been excommunicated from the church, RLDS scholars, and some non-Mormon Mormon-buffs who seem to feel as much at home as the active participants from Brigham Young University and the Mormon intelligentsia. Today the boundaries of the Mormon community are fluid, amorphous, and consequently terrifying to those controlling institutional Mormonism.

CONCLUSION

I have proposed the distinction between institutional Mormonism and the Mormon community for both descriptive and analytical purposes. While institutional Mormonism refers to the formal organization of the church, the Mormon community constitutes a much broader base of unofficial organizations and distinctively Mormon subcultures. These reflect the interests of Mormons with diverse institutional bonds. My brief description of the Mormon community, with boundaries defined by its intellectual subculture, illustrated the contrast between institutional Mormonism and the Mormon community. As this changing social reality alters options available to Latter-day Saints, it transforms the character of Mormonism itself.

The analytical value of this distinction rests on the insight it provides for interpreting and understanding the relationship of people like me to Mormonism, the light it may shed on the debate over Mormon ethnicity, and its implications for an explanation of the current conflict between church officials and Mormon intellectuals.