

A Commentary on Late Twentieth-Century Mormon Culture¹ **by Marcus Helvécio T. A. Martins**

Today I will share a few insights that hopefully will stimulate a fruitful debate on possible ideas on how to handle cross-cultural differences within worldwide mormonism.

First, I want to specify that what we call "mormonism" has become more than just the worldwide religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Today it also incorporates a culture that has a folklore, art forms, and lifestyles that seem to be not too far from ones of mainstream American Christianity (Mauss, 1994). Since the LDS Church has a strong worldwide missionary focus, in essence the challenge of this era has become how to separate the religious dimension of mormonism from the cultural dimension.

One solution seems to be suggested in the following passage of the Book of Mormon:

"And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. ... There were no ... Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God."²

These verses contain two significant notions: the first is the fact that the Nephite-Lamanites had all things in common. That brings to mind the Law of Consecration and Stewardship, which was based not on a distribution of goods in equal amounts, but on an equal opportunity to receive goods in amounts adjusted to the receivers' circumstances, needs and fair wants³. The second notion resides in the idea that they were united no longer by ethnicity, but by the pure religion that had been taught with power by Christ himself. In other words, they had a focus on the pure gospel and on divine spiritual gifts, not on cultural traditions.

It is because of the concept of a distribution of goods adapted to specific circumstances that we, as a church, don't need to extend a Wasatch-front style of life and level of comfort to all Latter-day Saints everywhere. As I have mentioned in the past, I argue that it should not be the business of the Church to engage in purely material or temporal conversions (Martins, 1995). It is true that in order to carry out the mortal part of the plan of salvation we need temples, chapels, and offices. However, it doesn't matter whether the temples are magnificent⁴, or the chapels

¹ This is an edited and expanded version of brief remarks presented as part of a roundtable discussion at the Sixth Annual International Society Conference, sponsored by Brigham Young University's David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, August 21, 1995

² Book of Mormon, 4 Nephi 1:3,17

³ Doctrine and Covenants 51:3; 56:17

⁴ This should not be interpreted as a criticism on the architecture of the existing temples. The idea is that in order to provide temples at reasonable distances to all Latter-day Saints throughout the world--especially in large developing nations--smaller and less ornate (but still beautiful, as they need to be) temples will likely become the norm. Thus, even future temples in the United States might have to conform to this probable standard, so that resources may be allocated wisely worldwide.

splendid, or the office buildings sophisticated. The American obsession with material comfort, aesthetics, and electronic gadgetry (Stewart & Bennett, 1991) is not essential to anyone's eternal salvation.

What we should be focusing, then, is on the second notion, or on the pure gospel preached with power. And that gospel was restored to this earth through Joseph Smith Jr. But by saying this I must also acknowledge another obstacle that we have to deal with, a form of reductionism, if you will, in the cultural dimension of mormonism.

Some time ago I had the opportunity to visit some of the LDS Church's historic sites in upstate New York. When I visited the Sacred Grove, where the Father and the Son appeared to the young Joseph, I felt uneasy. Instead of feeling happy or excited about being there, I was puzzled. A few days after my return to Utah I finally realized that my uneasiness was based on the fact that I had been on the long-forgotten heart of mormonism. It struck me that all that is true and heavenly in mormonism revolve around an event that happened in that dusty, humid, and bug-infested grove.

At least since the beginning of this century, though, the cultural dimension of mormonism has had its focus shifted from the grove to the handcart, or the great migration west. Idealized and romanticized portrayals of Brigham Young replaced Joseph Smith as the embodiment of practical mormonism. The handcart became the symbol of this expanding religion, replacing the Sacred Grove. Industry, cooperativism, farming, and mining became the most visible parts of the daily religion (Shipps, 1985). The transmission of values and cultural mores across generations successfully included the temporal--or cultural--dimension of mormonism, but it seems to have failed to include much of the spiritual dimension, (Mauss, 1994) with the result that, today, most of the accounts of spiritual manifestations seem to carry the suggestion that they were solely a consequence of the early Pioneers' faith and works, and not a natural consequence of what took place in the Sacred Grove (Martins, forthcoming).

The sacrifice of the early pioneers was based on the testimony of the divinity of the mission of Joseph Smith Jr. Based on many conversations and observations in the past five years, it seems to me that today the testimonies of many Latter-day Saints seem to be mostly based on the sacrifice of the early pioneers.

Isn't there a place for Joseph Smith Jr. in cultural mormonism? Will he always be remembered as only a martyr, and not as prophet, seer, and revelator? Will he always be remembered in second place--after somebody else? If foreign visitors would walk our streets and try to get a glimpse of the history of mormonism through the local architecture and monuments, these visitors might very well conclude that Brigham Young was the prophet of the restoration, instead of Joseph Smith. There was not one major building named after Joseph Smith in Salt Lake City, the Mormon Mecca, until 1993, or 149 years after Joseph's death. There is no church-sponsored Joseph Smith University, and at Brigham Young University, the first Joseph Smith building was dedicated in 1941, almost 100 years after the martyrdom.

Joseph doesn't seem to be alive in the minds of modern Latter-day Saints, but it seems that he is mostly--if not always--remembered as the eternal martyr: always arrested, always

beaten, always dying. In our characteristic appetite for celebrations, we remembered the sesquicentennial of Joseph's martyrdom with a satellite broadcast. I don't recall what events marked the sesquicentennial of the First Vision, or of the Visions of the Kingdoms of Glory and Perdition (Doctrine and Covenants section 76), or of the King Follett Sermon. We have gone to great lengths to dig up every account out of early church members' journals that may shed further light and provide more minute details on the living conditions and lifestyle of the early saints. But I don't think we have spent enough of our time and resources to try to provide further light and details on the message, visions, insights, and prophecies of Joseph Smith, who still stands at the head of this dispensation.

In Joseph Smith's teachings there are answers to questions yet to be asked. He was a prophet who saw and understood much more about our future and about the eternal worlds than he ever taught publicly. He once shared the following insight, which he must certainly have developed based on his experience:

" ... the things that are written are only hints of things which existed in the prophet's mind, which are not written concerning eternal glory. ... I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them.⁵"

Several years later, Elder John Taylor said the following:

" ... Joseph Smith ... felt himself shut up in a nutshell, there was no power of expansion, it was difficult for him to reveal and communicate the things of God, because there was no place to receive them. What he had to communicate was so much more comprehensive, enlightened and dignified than that which the people generally knew and comprehended, it was difficult for him to speak, in every move he made, and so it is to the present time.⁶"

I believe that Joseph Smith Jr. has the answer to much of the concern we have today regarding mormonism in a worldwide setting. In fact, I see the Sacred Grove, taken as a symbol, as not merely accommodating of other cultures, but also as a natural refiner of all that is good, beautiful, praiseworthy, and divine in those cultures, irrespective of their specific origin. The handcart, in contrast, is repressive, and it compels those who pull it to a heavy yoke that is anti-natural, burdensome, and debilitating, which yoke today may no longer lead to salvation, either of a temporal or a spiritual nature (Martins, forthcoming). In other words, the handcart provokes the amputation of non-Utahn cultures, and their consequent replacement with prostheses that, as consequence of being foreign, become not only lifeless but also infertile.

The problem with which we should be concerned from now on is over what elements under our control will foster the successful outcome of the mortal part of the plan of salvation.

⁵ Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.304 - May 21, 1843

⁶ Journal of Discourses, 10:148 - April 6, 1863

Some of these elements certainly are: prophecy, not architectural opulence; visions, not just erudition; doctrines, not complicated organizational programs; covenants, not folk beliefs or incomprehensible psycho-babble; miracles, not pageantry laden with special-effects; charity, not multi-level marketing schemes; eternal Gods, not provincial, mortal, pasteurized pseudo-heroes or pop idols.

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