

## Mormon Loneliness

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I have been listening to the comments at today's conference from a particular perspective, what I am calling "Mormon Loneliness." It seems like a perverse starting point for a comment on Mormon intellectual life. No one seems more cheerful about their place in the world than Latter-day Saints. With their friendly God, their encompassing narrative of pre-mortal life and post-mortal families, their welcoming congregations, and their assurance of having the true religion, no group seems better able to encounter life's setbacks and come out smiling than Mormons. Mormons boast that wherever they go in the world they can find a congregation of Latter-day Saints eager to take them in and find them a home.

Yet on second thought, we can also see that Mormons feel insecure about their place in the world, they feel isolated and ill at ease and are not sure exactly where they fit. In fact they are lonely. Mormons are totally preoccupied with their religion and yet feel awkward in speaking about it. Think of Mitt Romney's ironclad resolve to avoid the subject of his faith until circumstances forced him to make a statement that satisfied few. Mormons love their religion but don't know how to talk about it comfortably. They don't know where they stand.

Partly this isolation is self-imposed. The LDS restoration began with a prophet who was not a part of any religion himself and repudiated all the religions around him. Virtually his first religious act was to cut himself off from every other Christian denomination and to claim that his religion alone was the true way. No creeds, no ministers, no dogma

were to be trusted. They all were apostate. That left Mormonism standing alone among the world's faith.

Mormon isolation was also a product of religious intolerance. Mormons were forcibly driven from every community they settled among until eventually they fled the nation and sought refuge in one of the most forbidding sections of the continent where they hoped that they could pursue their religious dreams alone. The concerted opposition the Mormons faced even there instilled a fortress mentality that conceived of the world outside as Babylon. Safety was to be had only by gathering out of the world to Zion. In Utah, Brigham Young's policy was isolation and independence, economically and politically as well as religiously.

This severance meant that Latter-day Saints had no natural context for their religion, no natural allies among the world's religions. On the whole, they bought into the Protestant narrative of Catholic apostasy turned around by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mormons made "apostasy" and even "great apostasy" key words. But instead of religious history ending with the Protestant Reformation, Mormons saw themselves as carrying it to its culmination in the Restoration. Their religion was an extension of the Reformation, an extension that ultimately rejected rather than continued the Protestant story. In Mormon eyes, Luther and Calvin made a noble effort but ultimately failed to restore the true faith. That meant Mormons ended up isolated in their own little pod—the Restoration.

This confusion about where Mormons belong, means that we have no secure relationship to ordinary human history, the kind narrated in history books. Mormons connect to the Bible, to the Christianity of the Book of Acts, to the Revelation of John, to prophets like Isaiah and Malachi, to the primal religion of Genesis and Exodus and to the

temples of David and Solomon. We connect to biblical history but leap over Christian history. Indeed Mormon scholars have made an effort to deny the influence of history on Joseph. They have done everything they could to locate Joseph Smith's writings outside of his environment in order to validate his claim that his revelations came from God. In a sense human history has been the enemy of Mormon belief. But that means Mormon connections to history are attenuated.

Existing outside of time is no longer so comfortable for Latter-day Saints. After the great watershed in Mormon history when plural marriage was given up and Utah was admitted to the Union, Mormons began a long process of wary assimilation. Like my parents and myself, they left the Mormon homeland and now live in every quarter of the globe. Most Latter-day Saints no longer dwell in a Mormon bubble, we have neighbors and fellow workers from the multitudinous religious traditions that flourish in their immediate environment. Sorting out where Mormonism stands now becomes an existential problem. Are my Catholic neighbors apostates, a Mormon has to ask? How do I situate them in God's plan for the earth? If we are the true church, what are they?

Out of such existential perplexities have come the efforts to open formal conversations with other religious traditions. These began with the Mormon-Evangelical dialogues associated with Robert Millet and Richard Mouw, a fruitful exchange that has gone on for decades now. One of the fruits, I believe, is the rehabilitation of the word "grace" in Mormon theology. Mormon usage still varies from Protestant and Catholic understandings, but the word is now frequently heard in Mormon discourse to express the idea of unearned blessings from heaven.

But the Protestant connection has not always gone smoothly. I made an attempt at rapprochement myself at a breakfast of Mormons and evangelicals. I thought these

men of faith would be sympathetic to the idea of self-evident truths, that is, truth that we affirm because it resonates in our souls. Mormons make a lot of confirmation by the Spirit; I thought evangelicals might be hospitable to the same idea. Not so. Fideism, Mark Noll observed, blind faith without reason. From Richard Mouw, I heard a lot about the bones of Jesus. Religious truth he was saying was empirical in the sense of being falsifiable. Trusting the Spirit to find truth would not do. We were not on the same page at all as I had at first thought.

In recent decades the incongruities of the Protestant connection have become ever more evident. Mormonism did not really extend the Protestant trajectory; in many ways, as Kathleen Flake has observed, Mormonism reversed it. Protestantism stressed preaching and diminished the sacraments; it reduced the role of ritual and priesthood in favor of the word and private conversion. That was not Mormonism's trajectory. Just the reverse. Joseph Smith identified the lack of priesthood as one of the failings of Christianity in Joseph Smith's time. From the very beginning, from before the formal organization of the church, an authoritative priesthood was deemed essential. And with it an emphasis on sacraments—especially baptism and bestowal of the Holy Ghost but also the Lord's Supper. Mormonism even went beyond Catholicism in the high ritual in the temple which made available to ordinary Mormons the sacraments held in reserve for the ordination of priests.

I think Mormons would benefit from dialogue with Catholics, largely because it would help us to define ourselves better, just as my encounter with the evangelicals helped me to understand where we differ. I see such an exchange as helping Mormons to write themselves back into Christian history—the history repudiated at the founding. Now that Mormons live in the world rather than in an isolated Zion, we have to figure out

where we stand in relationship to our religious kin—especially to other Christian faiths. We have to identify the continuities and the departures.

Going it alone is hard intellectually. Many times we lack the resources for understanding ourselves. I for one need help with the gold plates, the subject of my current research. How are we to understand this lustrous image that is now purely imaginary and yet endlessly enthralling to Mormons and non-Mormons alike? The plates take their origin in the Book of Mormon where they are situated in an assemblage of sacred objects that accumulated during Lehi's journey to the New World from Jerusalem. Besides the plates on which Lehi's son Nephi recorded the story of the migration, there was the sword of Laban which Nephi used to decapitate Laban a hostile relative who stole all the family's property and tried to kill Nephi and his brothers. Along with the sword were the brass plates Nephi stole from Laban's treasury because they contained the Jewish scriptures, and then the marvelous Liahona with its needle and round ball, pointing the way for the little band to follow.

How are we to understand this eruption into the Lehi story of so many sacred objects? Of course the stone tablets of Moses are the most evident companion piece for the plates. But what about the rest of the collections, now all imaginary, but vivid and active still? How are they to be comprehended?

Here a Mormon scholar needs a broader religious culture in which to place these pieces. So far I have found little help from Protestant history, but there are resources in Catholic tradition in the veneration of relics that materially emblemize a sacred history. The parallels are not perfect, but they are suggestive. They offer if not a home at least brothers and sisters for the gold plates and its fellows.

I think Mormons need similar enrichment for our notions of priesthood and sacraments and work for the dead. I am hoping that conversations with Catholics can help Mormons find a usable past, partly to illuminate the specifics of our religion, but also to mediate our relationships with our fellow Christians. Catholics I believe can help Mormons find their place. We are not searching for a chain of cause and effect that will lead from the deep past to the Mormon present. We don't need to know where we came from—a torturous inquiry that is invariably inconclusive. But we do need to know who we are? Where are the affinities? What are the complexities? Religious conversation, I believe, could lead to significant edification and also, I would hope, for a measure of comradeship.