



A Response to the PBS Documentary, *The Mormons*

Richard E. Bennett

There are several commendable things to say in defense of Helen Whitney's new PBS documentary entitled *The Mormons*. One is that it may represent how many view "the Mormons" and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—an external perspective and barometer of current American opinion that may be as instructive as it is difficult for some to accept. Many of my friends outside of the Church have told me how much they liked this piece. And, although likely a public relations nightmare for the Church, it may have served as a wake-up call. If Latter-day Saints want to tell their own history more credibly, they must take the more inclusive view of all their history and not merely practice selective memory. If, as has been said, one of the great achievements of the Church in the twentieth century was to live down its nineteenth-century past, in this day of research, the Internet, and mass media attention, we must live up to it and take it in all its ups and downs, divisions and difficulties. That Whitney's presentation touched a sensitive nerve is obvious from the surprisingly frank recent *Church News* article saying that because of the interest generated by Whitney's work, the *Church News* will embark on a "series of occasional articles in which troubling questions and adversarial criticisms against the faith" will be addressed.¹ We can only hope that this will be the case.

These pluses notwithstanding, I believe *The Mormons* missed an opportunity to be fair, balanced, and accurate, particularly in its portrayal of the history of intellectualism, intellectual debate, and dissent within the Church. I have several criticisms. First is the definition of terms. I quote: "To be a Mor-

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mon intellectual means that you are opening up yourself to being called into a Church court.” Really? Just what constitutes a Mormon intellectual anyway, may I ask? Who decides who is one? And how is it that the term “Mormon intellectual” has become an appealing synonym for Mormon dissent? Dissenters are a faction and a fraction of the many gifted Mormon thinkers and writers. As one observer elsewhere put it, the intellectual dissenters are “a rather narrow mutual-admiration society” who feel that “if only the benighted ‘average’ Mormon and the well-meaning but narrow-minded Church authorities would acknowledge the clear intellectual superiority of the experts and freethinkers, then the path to future progress would be open.”²²

I also take exception with the sense of inevitable confrontation and imbalance. Whitney makes intellectual confrontation appear unavoidable, when in fact it has not been so for a great many of us. Are the “Mormons” to be defined intellectually by the few dissidents who have left the Church or by the many other intelligent and highly educated Latter-day Saints who remain confident and committed in their religious views?

A page from Church history may be illustrative. Just as there was minority dissent at the time of Wilford Woodruff’s Manifesto, and some even in high places left the Church, thereby giving rise, as Carmon Hardy has rightly observed, to modern Mormon fundamentalism, so there was majority if not overwhelming acceptance of, and obedience to, the new directive. Why stay focused on the 2 percent to the neglect of the 98 percent? While it is acceptable to study the causes of dissent and the plight of those now out of the Church, it is incumbent that historians highlight the many who followed Woodruff in 1890 and the many others who continue faithful today through modern challenges.

I readily admit that there are areas of ambiguity. In the packaging of the message for a worldwide audience, there is repetition, sameness, and more standardization than some of us would like to see. In the on-going essential effort of Church leaders to “keep the doctrine pure,” some intellectuals may feel left out and ostracized, their deep and meaningful questions not addressed adequately. Church curriculum does not satisfy everyone’s needs, nor is Church “correlation” everyone’s favorite word. Our history need not be “sanitized,” and opportunities must exist for more advanced discussions of difficult issues. The Mormon community cannot afford the closing of the Mormon mind any more than it can tolerate irresponsible criticism.

Another misunderstanding in the documentary is the “them versus us” concept, the gulf between ordinary members and the austere, high-level Church leadership who, as was said, are supposedly keeping files on many of us and are trying to control the message and the members. The truth is, the ordinary members take responsibility for running this Church. A charac-

teristic of Mormonism is that it is constantly rejuvenating itself through the miracle of lay leadership and humble discipleship. Although the public face of the Church may indeed be Gordon B. Hinckley, it is at the local level where men and women on their own time and expense make the everyday decisions that affect us all. To my knowledge, this is a phenomenon not seen in any other church. In my imperfect arithmetic, I count some 340 mission presidents, 2,700 stake presidents, 27,000 bishops and branch presidents, 33,000 high councilors, 90,000 female Relief Society presidents and their counselors, 250,000 youth leaders, and upwards of half a million teachers, all serving at any one time and without remuneration. These callings are constantly in flux and their places rotate so that over just a very few years, literally millions are serving. They do so happily, willingly, humbly, and teachably. They love the Church and recognize the power for good it brings into their lives and the lives of their family members. They do not shun intellectual debate but are too busy making the Church work to worry about it.

Another criticism is perspective, especially in regard to Church discipline. Occasionally there must be discipline, especially when apostasy or fighting against the Church and its teachings is at stake. As a former stake leader, I have presided over several Church disciplinary councils. However, rather than being embarrassing punishments for nonconformity, they are invitations to repentance. The Church has a right to protect itself, its membership, and its teachings; and while we, as local, unpaid, and unprofessional Church leaders may stumble occasionally in our procedures, Church courts are not meant to be “vicious niceties” but opportunities for personal growth and recommitment.

Missing also in the documentary is any mention of our long-established historical tradition of educational excellence that goes as far back as the exodus, the many thousands of Latter-day Saints who pursue higher educational research and debate in the sciences, arts, and social sciences at Brigham Young University and other centers of higher learning around the world. There are probably more Mormons with college degrees per capita than most any other religion. They are not on a collision course with intellectual pursuits; rather, they welcome, encourage, and pursue advanced academic research in a thousand and one fields. The inquiring mind does not surrender itself at the gate of baptism. Conversion does not negate questioning, for it stems from such and encourages it. Indeed, the freedom and encouragement to ask the great questions has ever been a hallmark of Mormonism. It began, after all, with a questioning, young teenage boy. It continued in 1978 with President Spencer W. Kimball’s courageous questioning of past policies on the priesthood. “Ask, and ye shall receive” (D&C 88:63) is as true in 2007 as it was in 1820. The key is to ask in faith, not critiquing negatively but questioning positively.

My one final criticism pertains to the underlying theme of blind or controlled obedience and fanatic, unthinking allegiance to the Church and its principal leaders; that the extreme, if not militant, devotion of Mountain Meadows is still alive in those who, if asked today, would blow themselves up in the cause of missionary service. Missing here is the dominant dimension that most Mormons are “peaceable followers of Christ”: at peace with their faith in God, at peace with their leaders, and at peace with their fellowmen. Are we still to be judged by the wartime hysteria and raw frontier mentality of those disreputable few who disgraced themselves at Mountain Meadows? Must Catholics ever be judged by their terrible inquisitions, Protestants by their medieval pogroms, Christianity by the Crusades, Muslims by their extremist terrorists, or Marines by their My Lai massacre of 1968? The parking lots of modern Church meetinghouses are filled every Sunday and on many weeknights not by constraint but by devotion, not by zealous fanaticism but by quiet faith.

To conclude, I suggest that Mormonism’s rise in growth and influence is not because it shuns or dismisses intellectual discourse or debate but rather because it seeks to engage with them. And as to the writing of Church history, it was said as a blanket statement in the documentary that “when Mormon scholars challenge their church’s official history, they risk serious sanctions.” Perhaps for some, but not for many of us. What constitutes our official history is still being hammered out. As academic editor of *BYU Studies*, I see almost every day evidences of those questioning, probing, analyzing, and expanding the borders of our own understanding.

As for me, I can only say that I have ever been encouraged in my research and writing. Not long ago I published a serious article on, of all topics, temple work and on the beginning of endowments for the dead, and I did so without recrimination or suspicion but with encouragement and support. My experience has led me to conclude that the principles of modern revelation, lay leadership, an amazing adaptability to change, a continuing soft underbelly of practical religion, a recurring optimistic message that man is a literal child of God—these and more are the profound issues that continue to define “the Mormons.” The strength and very identity of the Church from its beginning is written large on the backs and in the wagons, in the fields and in the libraries, and in the homes and in the lives of those Latter-day Saints who have overcome “by study and by faith” (D&C 88:118), by repentance and by covenant, and that quiet desire to know “the truth of all things” (Moro. 10:5).

Notes

1. *Church News*, published by the *Deseret News*, May 12, 2007, 14.
2. Ralph Hancock, "What Is a Mormon Intellectual?" www.mormonmomma.com/mind/intell.html.