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Church Response to Jon Krakauer's Under the Banner of Heaven



Some book reviewers and religion writers have asked The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for its reaction to a new book by Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*.

Three responses from the Church are given below. The first is a short response from the Church's Director of Media Relations. The second is a summary by Richard E. Turley, managing director of the Family and Church History Department and an authority on Church history and doctrine. The third is a review by Robert L. Millet, Professor of Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University.

Journalists, including book reviewers, religion writers, radio program hosts and producers are encouraged to contact the Church Public Affairs Office if they have additional questions at mediahelp@ldschurch.org or 801-240-1111. This e-mail address and phone number are for news media only. No calls or e-mails from the general public or Church members, please.

Response from Mike Otterson, director of Media Relations, The Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as shared with the Associated Press. This is his personal reaction, as a convert of 35 years and as someone who has seen the Church in operation around the world, from the smallest branch to the highest levels.

Krakauer's portrayal of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is utterly at odds with what I — and millions like me — have come to know of the Church, its goodness, and the decency of its people. This book is an attempt to tell the story of the so-called fundamentalist or polygamous groups in Utah, and to tie their beliefs to the doctrines and the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The result is a full-frontal assault on the veracity of the modern Church.

This book is not history, and Krakauer is no historian. He is a storyteller who cuts corners to make the story sound good. His basic thesis appears to be that people who are religious are irrational, and that irrational people do strange things. He does a huge disservice to his readers by promulgating old stereotypes. He finds sufficient zealots and extremists in the past 150 years to help him tell his story, and by extrapolation tars every Mormon with the same brush. The exceptions are the rule by his standards. One could be forgiven for concluding that every Latter-day Saint, including your friendly Mormon neighbor, has a tendency to violence. And so Krakauer unwittingly puts himself in the same camp as those who believe every German is a Nazi, every Japanese a fanatic, and every Arab a terrorist.

It is evident from the adulation that Krakauer heaps on three or four historians who are unsympathetic to the Church that they have heavily influenced him. On the other hand, there is such a paucity of quotes attributed to modern Church leaders or ranking members that one wonders who the “dozens of Mormons” were whom Krakauer is supposed to have interviewed for his research.

Krakauer writes a great deal about Joseph Smith, who organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830. Joseph Smith surely disturbed the status quo in religion in his day, and does so even now.

Furthermore, he lived out his days “on stage” for all to observe — some to criticize and some to venerate. He was God’s conduit for bringing back bold doctrines concerning the nature of God, the nature of man, the nature of the human experience, the purpose of life and even the nature of the universe. His legacy is that millions of people today throughout the world accept him as the Prophet of the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Review by Richard E. Turley Jr., managing director of the Family and Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

In the oft-quoted book *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), David Hackett Fischer condemns those who reach generalizations based on insufficient sampling:

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of a scientist who published an astonishing and improbable generalization about the behavior of rats. An incredulous colleague came to his laboratory and politely asked to see the records of the experiments on which the generalization was based. “Here they are,” said the scientist, dragging a notebook from a pile of papers on his desk. And pointing to a cage in the corner, he added, “there’s the rat.” (109)

Anxious to prove his own hypothesis, Jon Krakauer, author of *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), uses the anomalous Lafferty murder case of 1984 to “look at Mormonism’s violent past” and examine “the underbelly of the United States’ most successful homegrown faith” (advance reading copy back cover). Although the book may appeal to gullible persons who rise to such bait like trout to a fly hook, serious readers who want to understand Latter-day Saints and their history need not waste their time on it.

Ostensibly focused on murders committed by brothers who had been

excommunicated from the Church, Krakauer's book is actually a condemnation of religion generally. The agnostic author writes, "I don't know what God is, or what God had in mind when the universe was set in motion. In fact I don't know if God even exists, although I confess that I sometimes find myself praying in times of great fear, or despair, or astonishment at a display of unexpected beauty." He appears to believe God is unknowable in this life. "In the absence of conviction," he says of his failure to find faith, "I've come to terms with the fact that uncertainty is an inescapable corollary of life." He acknowledges sharing with most of humanity a fear of death, a yearning "to comprehend how we got here, and why," and an ache "to know the love of our creator." Yet he believes "we will no doubt feel that ache, most of us, for as long as we happen to be alive." The upshot of his (un)belief system is a theme that permeates his book: "Accepting the essential inscrutability of existence . . . is surely preferable to its opposite: capitulating to the tyranny of intransigent belief," that is, religion (287).

"There is a dark side to religious devotion that is too often ignored or denied," he posits in the prologue. "As a means of motivating people to be cruel and inhumane—as a means of motivating people to be evil, to borrow the vocabulary of the devout—there may in fact be nothing more effective than religion." Referring to the "Islamic fundamentalism" that resulted in the killings of 11 September 2001, he goes on to say that "men have been committing heinous acts in the name of God ever since mankind began believing in deities, and extremists exist within all religions." He finds that "history has not lacked" for Muslims, "Christians, Jews, Sikhs, and even Buddhists who have been motivated by scripture to butcher innocents. Faith-based violence was present long before Osama bin Laden, and it will be with us long after his demise"(xxii).

He admits, "In any human endeavor, some fraction of its practitioners will be motivated to pursue that activity with such concentrated focus and unalloyed passion that it consumes them utterly. One has to look no further than individuals who feel compelled to devote their lives to

becoming concert pianists, say, or climbing Mt. Everest.” Providing no scientific methodology for measuring extremism, he asserts that it “seems to be especially prevalent among those inclined by temperament or upbringing toward religious pursuits.”

This glib assertion leads to the hypothesis for his book: “Faith is the very antithesis of reason, injudiciousness a crucial component of spiritual devotion. And when religious fanaticism supplants ratiocination, all bets are suddenly off. Anything can happen. Absolutely anything. Common sense is no match for the voice of God—as the actions of Dan Lafferty vividly attest” (xxiii). The Lafferty case, the purported subject of the book, becomes merely an illustration of this theory.

To support his case that the “roots of their [the Lafferty brothers’] crime lie deep in the history of an American religion practiced by millions” (advance reading copy front cover), Krakauer presents a decidedly one-sided and negative view of Mormon history.

Referring to Joseph Smith’s well-known 1826 trial, for example, Krakauer asserts that “a disgruntled client filed a legal claim accusing Joseph of being a fraud” (39). This assertion shows Krakauer’s unfamiliarity with basic aspects of the trial in question, as well as his tendency to spin evidence negatively. In actuality, the trial resulted not from “a disgruntled client” but from persecutors who had Joseph hauled into court for being a disorderly person because of his supposed defrauding of his employer, Josiah Stowell. As a modern legal scholar who carefully studied the case has noted, however, Stowell “emphatically denied that he had been deceived or defrauded” (Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith’s 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 30 [spring 1990], 105). As a result, Joseph was found not guilty and discharged (*ibid.*).

Krakauer also stretches the truth in writing about modern Church events. He attended the Hill Cumorah pageant in Palmyra, New York, and portrays it as having “the energy of a Phish concert, but without the drunkenness, outlandish hairdos . . . , or clouds of marijuana smoke”

(47). Without citing a source, he exaggeratingly asserts that “sooner or later most Latter-day Saints make a pilgrimage there” (44). Although the pageant is popular, most Latter-day Saints have never attended it, and most never will.

The author evinces some understanding of the Church’s doctrine and administrative structure, yet make gaffes that signal his generally poor command of the subject matter. For example, he refers to Mark E. Petersen, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as the “LDS President” (53), an obvious error. Krakauer shows his ignorance of the Book of Mormon and the Bible when he refers to Laban as “a scheming, filthy-rich sheep magnate who turns up in the pages of both the *Book of Mormon* and the *Old Testament*” (132). The Old Testament Laban, who is the uncle and father-in-law of the patriarch Jacob and brother to Rebekah, lived many hundreds of years before the Laban of the Book of Mormon.

Krakauer acknowledges that although Joseph Smith “venerated the U.S. Constitution,” he “in both word and deed . . . repeatedly demonstrated that he, himself, had little respect for the religious views of non-Mormons, and was unlikely to respect the constitutional rights of other faiths” (107). Serious scholars of Joseph Smith, however, understand that he generally had very high regard for the rights of others. Speaking to his followers in a Sabbath service near the uncompleted Nauvoo Temple on 9 July 1843, Joseph declared, “If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon I am bold to declare before heaven that I am just as ready to die for a [P]resbyterian[,] a [B]aptist or any other denomination.—It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul, civil and religious liberty” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* [Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 229).

Krakauer also accepts the view that Orrin Porter Rockwell tried to assassinate former Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs after Joseph Smith purportedly prophesied Boggs would die. Then he writes that

“Rockwell had no difficulty eluding arrest. Neither he, nor any other Saint, was ever brought to justice for the deed” (82). Harold Schindler, however, in his critically acclaimed biography of Rockwell, concludes that whether Rockwell shot Boggs “is a matter for conjecture. . . . If Rockwell did fire the fateful shot, it would appear the decision was of his own making” (*Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983], 72–73). Rockwell was arrested on “flimsy testimony,” imprisoned for months and finally brought before a judge, who informed him that the “grand jury had refused to bring an indictment against him” for the original charge but had decided to indict him for trying to escape (see *ibid.*, 75–99).

Because the Mountain Meadows Massacre fits Krakauer’s thesis so well, he gives it generous space, even if he does so again without critically examining the facts for himself. For example, he swallows the trendy view that Brigham Young’s meeting with Indian leaders on 1 September 1857 constituted a death order for the Fancher company because “Brigham explicitly ‘gave’ the Indians all the emigrant cattle on the Old Spanish Trail—i.e., the Fancher’s [sic] prize herd, which the Paiutes had covetously gazed upon when they camped next to the emigrants exactly one week earlier. The prophet’s message to the Indian leaders was clear enough: He wanted them to attack the Fancher wagon train. The morning after the meeting, the Paiutes left the City of the Saints at first light and started riding hard for southern Utah” (179).

Like other writers who want to believe this theory, he misses crucial evidence. Dimick Huntington’s account of his interactions with the Indians (the crux of this argument) suggests that someone—perhaps Brigham Young or perhaps Huntington himself—gave the native Americans the cattle on the road south. But nothing in the historical record particularizes this direction to the Fancher company. Other evidence demonstrates that the Indians in the north were also given the cattle on the road north. In other words, this so-called “smoking gun” that is the lynchpin in recent ballyhooed publications on the massacre amounts to little more than a generalized expression of the Saints’ war

strategy at the time of allowing Indians to take cattle in exchange for their alliance. That is a far cry from ordering the massacre of a train of men, women, and children. Moreover, substantial evidence suggests that the Indians who participated in the famous meeting did *not* participate in the massacre.

Like other recent writers, Krakauer must somehow confront the fact that when Brigham Young learned about a possible attack on the train, he sent a letter ordering the southern Utahns not to meddle with the emigrants. The letter is clear on its face, though some writers, anxious to prove a circumstantial case against Brigham Young, try to make *no* mean *yes* by asserting that the order not to attack the train was really just the opposite. To further undermine the letter, Krakauer asserts: “The actual text of Brigham’s letter remains in some doubt, because the original has disappeared (along with almost every other official document pertaining to the Mountain Meadows massacre). The excerpt quoted above is from a purported draft of the letter that didn’t surface until 1884, when an LDS functionary came upon it in the pages of a ‘Church Letter Book’” (182).

Although the letter was indeed cited in 1884, it did not first surface then, and its “actual text” does not remain “in some doubt.” Most correspondence from Brigham Young was copied immediately after it was produced and before being sent. The copies—equivalents of today’s photocopies—were made by pressing the original inked letters between wetted pages of a bound book of onion skin. The moisture caused fresh ink from the originals to seep into the onion skin, creating mirror images of the letters. A perfect mirror image of Young’s famous letter is right where it should be in Brigham’s 1857 letter press copybook. It is a contemporaneous copy and was available to and used by the prosecution in the trial that led to John D. Lee’s conviction and subsequent execution in the 1870s.

On a more recent topic, Krakauer refers to Mark Hofmann’s famous forgeries of the 1980s and asserts that “more than 400 of these fraudulent

artifacts were purchased by the LDS Church (which believed they were authentic) and then squirreled away in a vault to keep them from the public eye” (xxi). This is a gross exaggeration. Actually, most of the documents acquired from Hofmann were insignificant legal or government documents. Although they were assigned a low cataloging priority because of their unimportance, they were not “squirreled away in a vault” in a deliberate attempt “to keep them from the public eye.” (See Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992].)

Although other examples could be given, these suffice to demonstrate that Krakauer does violence to Mormon history in order to tell his “Story of Violent Faith.” The vast majority of Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century, like today’s Saints, were peace-loving people who wished to practice their religion in a spirit of nonviolence, allowing “all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may” (The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Article 11, first published in 1842).

Review by Robert L. Millet, Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University

Jon Krakauer just may be one of the most well-known writers to address origins and developments within Mormonism. His books *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air* are fascinating studies of human behavior during unusually stressful and even life-threatening situations. He has proven his excellent ability as a storyteller of those few who had the courage, tenacity and near neurotic drive to reach the top of Mount Everest.

In discussing Mormonism, however, Krakauer faces a climb up a different mountain. Despite having grown up in Oregon and having many Latter-day Saint friends and acquaintances, he does not bring the same background, preparation or perspective to his treatment of violence among “Mormon Fundamentalists” that he brought to his mountain-

climbing sagas. While he acknowledges that he is not a historian, his 372-page work is indeed a historical study, and thus Krakauer is out of his element. One does not attempt a meaningful treatment of a phenomenon as complex as Mormonism without the kind of background that would lend itself to a more evenhanded study. On the one hand, *Under the Banner of Heaven* is an intriguing story, a fascinating but depressing account of religion run amuck — of abuse, presumption and religious fanaticism. The story of Ron and Dan Lafferty is a story that should be told, but told in a way that emphasizes repeatedly the vital distinctions between mainline Latter-day Saint believers and those who have gone beyond the mark, been severed from the faith, and violated the standards of both church and state.

Further, it would have been well if the author had set forth clearly his presuppositions at the very first, for presuppositions always determine conclusions. In his “Author’s Remarks” (at the very end of the book) he confesses his own agnosticism and inclination to disbelieve in God (except in serious and life-threatening situations). To state that “faith is the antithesis of reason” (xxiii) is to give us some clue as to how a nonreligious person tends to evaluate a religious people.

The author points out in his note at the end that “the book you’re now reading isn’t the book I set out to write. As originally conceived, it was going to focus on the uneasy, highly-charged relationship between the LDS Church and its past” (334). After wading through the volume, one wonders whether Krakauer would not have been more successful if he had stayed with his first inclination, for in attempting to change tracks midstream the author confuses the reader about what this book really is about. In that regard, the organization of the book leaves much to be desired; the story is complicated enough without jumping back and forth in time between Joseph Smith and Dan Lafferty, between Brigham Young and Ervil LeBaron, between the 19th-century American West and vicious murders in American Fork, Utah, in 1984.

A few simple questions suggest themselves: If one really wants to better

understand present-day Mormonism, why study those who have distorted and perverted the tenets of the faith? Why make repetitive use of the misleading phrase “Mormon Fundamentalists” to describe apostates from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Truly one of the most *fundamental* tenets of the Latter-day Saints is the need to follow the *living* prophet. One Latter-day Saint Church leader observed: “When the Prophet Joseph Smith was martyred, there were many saints who died spiritually with Joseph. And so it was when Brigham Young died. ... We have some today willing to believe someone who is dead and gone and to accept his words as having more authority than the words of a living authority today” (Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places*, Salt Lake City, Deseret, 1974, 153).

While space limitations preclude a correction of every error, in what follows we will address several of the more significant issues that Jon Krakauer raises.

Plural Marriage

Because the practice of plural marriage is so intimately linked to the murders of Brenda and Erica Lafferty, it might be well to speak of this subject at the first. To begin with, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that marriage is more than a civil ordinance. It is, first and foremost, an institution ordained of God. Marriage between one man and one woman is sacred. Further, Latter-day Saints believe that marriage and the family were intended to last forever, to survive death. They teach, therefore, that marriages performed in temples, by the proper authority, are not ended with the death of the marriage partners but rather are for time and all eternity.

During the ministry of Joseph Smith, the founding president and prophet of the Church, and continuing for over 50 years, plural marriage was practiced. The Saints believed that God had commanded them to do so as a part of the restoration of ancient truths and practices from biblical times. Both Abraham and Jacob took additional wives (Genesis 16:1–11; 29:28; 30:4, 9, 26), and there is no indication that God

disapproved of their actions. God did condemn King David's unauthorized relationship with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12) and King Solomon's marriages to foreign women who turned his heart away from the worship of Jehovah (1 Kings 11). It was, in fact, as a result of Joseph Smith's inquiry to God in the early 1830s as to why plural marriage was practiced anciently that the divine instruction to institute the practice in modern times came.

Thus plural marriage was a religious principle, not just a social experiment or a sexual aberration; this is the only valid and reasonable explanation as to why the practice was maintained in spite of decades of opposition and persecution. Latter-day Saints believed that plural marriages, when properly performed by authorized persons, were both legal and acceptable to God. Church leaders then and now are quick to observe, however, that monogamy is the rule and polygamy is the exception. Unauthorized practice of this principle is condemned in the Book of Mormon (Jacob 2:23–30, 34; 3:5), the Doctrine and Covenants (Doctrine and Covenants 132:38–39), the sermons of Joseph Smith himself (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City, Deseret, 1976, 324; cited hereafter as TPJS) and teachings of current Church leaders.

Most all of those who became Latter-day Saints during the 19th century had been associated with other religious societies before their conversion and had been reared in traditional monogamous homes. The idea of having more than one wife came into sharp contrast with all they had been taught and brought up to believe. Therefore plural marriage was at first extremely difficult for many of the Saints to accept. John Taylor, the third president of the Church, remarked that “it was the one of the greatest crosses that ever was taken up by any set of men since the world stood” (*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols., Liverpool, F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86, 11:221; cited hereafter as JD; see also Brigham Young, JD 3:266).

Men and women within a plural marriage family were expected to

demonstrate loyalty and devotion to spouse and to observe the highest standards of fidelity and morality.

Public opposition in the United States to the practice of plural marriage grew during the last quarter of the 19th century. A number of Church officials were incarcerated, and the government threatened to confiscate Church property, including the temples. In the wake of oppressive laws that had been enacted, Latter-day Saints believe that the Lord by revelation withdrew the command to practice plural marriage. President Wilford Woodruff issued what has come to be known as the Manifesto, and a constituent assembly of the Latter-day Saints in general conference accepted it in October 1890. Regarding those who have defied the direction of Church leaders and continue to practice polygamy today, President Gordon B. Hinckley, the current president of the Church, explained: “I wish to state categorically that this Church has nothing whatever to do with those practicing polygamy. They are not members of this Church. Most of them have never been members. ... If any of our members are found to be practicing plural marriage, they are excommunicated, the most serious penalty the Church can impose. ... More than a century ago God clearly revealed ... that the practice of plural marriage should be discontinued, which means that it is now against the law of God” (Conference Report, Oct. 1998, 92; cited hereafter as CR). Latter-day Saints believe in “obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (Articles of Faith 1:12). While they stand firmly against the practice of plural marriage today, they leave in the hands of local magistrates the enforcement of the civil law. In speaking of those who continue the practice, President Hinckley said: “They are in violation of the civil law. They know they are in violation of the law. They are subject to its penalties. The Church, of course, has no jurisdiction whatever in this matter” (CR, Oct. 1998, 92).

Violence in Mormon History

Because Krakauer’s book is focused on religious violence, it is inevitable that he should focus on what has come to be known as “blood

atonement.” Let’s provide a bit of background. The Saints had settled in the Great Basin, they had struggled to survive for a decade, and it seemed to the leaders of the Church that many of the spiritual disciplines that had been allowed to slip during the years of settlement needed to be shored up. During these years the Saints underwent a long-term revival, what has come to be known as the “Mormon Reformation.” Individual members and families were encouraged strongly to observe with exactness the standards of the faith and to return to the obedience they had enjoyed prior to the exodus. In addition, a number of sermons were delivered by Church leaders that clearly had the intention of striking fear into the hearts of the members — both condemning their sins and warning them of the dreadful consequences of sin. Like Jonathan Edwards speaking of “sinners in the hands of an angry God,” such sermons were far more of revival rhetoric than they were reflections of Latter-day Saint doctrine or practice. Many have felt that these sermons contributed unwittingly to a growing spirit of anxiety, tension and fear among the Saints.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 is truly one of the black marks on our history, an event that has spawned ill will, guilt and embarrassment for a century and a half. Krakauer offers much information on factors leading up to the massacre: the fact that Johnston’s army was coming to Utah and that the “Utah War” seemed inevitable; the fact that Latter-day Saint Apostle Parley P. Pratt had recently been brutally assassinated in Arkansas; the fact that some of those who accompanied the Arkansans through the Utah Territory were Missourians who claimed to have had a role in the Hauns Mill Massacre in Missouri in which several Latter-day Saints had been killed by a mob; and the rather incendiary sermons of Church leaders toward those outside the faith who were seeking to disturb the peace. In other words, there was in the air a tension, a stress, a war hysteria that hung over the people — Mormon and non-Mormon alike — like a dark shroud. As a result of these and perhaps other factors that incited the local Latter-day Saint leaders and settlers to react, the massacre occurred and 120 people

died. Whatever the reasons for why the Latter-day Saints chose to act as they did, in reality there is no excuse for what took place. It was an atrocity, both uncivilized and unchristian. The Saints knew better and had been taught to abide by a higher standard.

Krakauer seems to conclude that President Brigham Young had a hand in the massacre — that he knew of the impending disaster and may even have encouraged it. Krakauer relies heavily upon two major sources for his study of the Mountain Meadows Massacre: an older work by Juanita Brooks (*The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1970) and a more recent study by Will Bagley (*The Blood of the Prophets*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2002). Bagley, claiming to be in possession of new and invaluable historical support for his thesis, contends that Brigham Young was fully aware of what was going on in Southern Utah and simply turned his head. Krakauer buys into this old and worn-thin conclusion, oddly enough, for Krakauer seems to be a real fan of Brooks. Brooks was an excellent historian who wasn't personally very fond of Brigham Young but found little evidence to suggest Brigham's direct involvement in the massacre.

One reviewer of Bagley's book remarked: "I think Bagley gives readers the impression that 'holy murder' was almost commonplace in Utah Territory. That impression is false.... Our limited studies seem to indicate that there was no more — and perhaps even less — violence in pioneer Utah than in other Western regions. In view of such evidence, admittedly preliminary, this question arises: If Mormons were inclined to acts of mayhem or murder on a whim, and since church members felt they were surrounded by so many scoundrels why weren't more people killed?" (Review by Paul H. Peterson, in *Brigham Young University Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1 [2003], 163–64).

Personal and Institutional Revelation

Krakauer points out that "Joseph [Smith] taught and encouraged his adherents to receive personal communiqués straight from the Lord. Divine revelation formed the bedrock of the religion" (70). He later notes

what he identifies as “the conundrum that inevitably confronts any prophet who encourages his acolytes to engage in dialogue with God: Sooner or later, God is apt to command an acolyte to disobey the prophet” (168). It just may be that this is the heart and core of the whole matter of the problem with the Laffertys, with Tom Green, with Ervil LeBaron, with Rulon Allred — these men never learned and incorporated the essential principles, the checks and balances, associated with the receipt of revelation.

Joseph Smith taught early in his ministry that God has a system, an order by which he communicates with his children and with his prophets; that to claim to receive revelation which in fact does not come from God, to speak in the name of the Lord when one is not authorized to do so, is essentially to take the name of the Lord God in vain (Doctrine and Covenants 63:62). Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who have studied the tenets of their faith and the principles and doctrines associated therewith have come to know that:

- A person claiming a revelation from God must be acting within the realm of his or her own stewardship. That is, one may receive revelation from God for himself or for those under his charge, but “it is contrary to the economy of God for any member of the Church, or anyone, to receive instruction for those in authority, higher than themselves” (TPJS, 21). In short, the early Saints learned that “revelations of the mind and will of God to the Church, are to come through the [First] Presidency. This is the order of heaven and the power and privilege of this Priesthood. It is also the privilege of any officer in this Church to obtain revelations, so far as relates to his particular calling and duty in the Church” (TPJS, 111).

- A person claiming a revelation from God should be worthy to receive the same. That is, he or she must be living a life that is in keeping with the standards of the Church, must be in good standing before God and God’s people.

- A supposed revelation must be in harmony with the teachings of

scripture, prophets, and the law and order of the Church. If, for example, someone were to come to me and indicate that she had received a revelation to be dishonest in order to improve her financial situation, I would know at once that such a solution, though practical, was not inspired. If a person were to say to me that God had instructed him that the Church should go in a different direction entirely and that he was the one to lead the Church in that direction, I would know that the purported oracle was not of God. What, then, about such unusual scriptural commands as Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac? My suggestion has always been that we as rank-and-file members abide by the rules and leave the exceptions to the called and ordained prophets. A modern apostle, Boyd K. Packer, observed that “there are those who claim authority from some secret ordinations of the past. Even now some claim special revealed authority to lead or to teach the people. ...

“There have been ... too many ordinations and settings apart performed before too many witnesses; there have been too many records kept, too many certificates prepared, and too many pictures published in too many places for any one to be deceived as to who holds proper authority. Claims of special revelation or secret authority from the Lord or from the Brethren are false on the face of them and really utter nonsense!” (CR, Apr. 1985, 43; see also Doctrine and Covenants 42:11).

- The revelation will build one’s faith in Jesus Christ, in the Church and kingdom, and in the constituted authorities of the Church. That is to say, God will not work against himself.

Few people would go astray or join apostate groups if they simply understood the above principles. It is either an unnatural pride or an ignorance of the principles of revelation that allows individuals to step beyond the bounds of propriety and to act in ways that place their membership and their salvation in jeopardy.

Someone might ask: What is to keep the president of your Church from standing up in general conference and announcing some new doctrine or policy that is theologically and practically at odds with the Church’s

present thinking? This is a good question, one that again forces us to look critically at what revelation is, how it comes, and how it is to be evaluated. There are, in fact, two checks that might be mentioned here. Latter-day Saints do not believe there is only one prophet on earth. While the president of the Church is indeed the senior apostle, the prophet, seer, and revelator for the whole Church, and thus his word is the final word, yet at the same time the Latter-day Saints sustain 14 other men as prophets, seers and revelators. The First Presidency (the president of the Church and his two counselors) and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles work as a unified body. In recent years, for example, two major proclamations have been issued, one concerning the importance of the family and one concerning the reality and divinity of Jesus Christ. Both of these were issued to the Church and the world under the signatures of all 15 men. There is great love and unity among these 15 men, but they are each unique and distinct individuals, having varying backgrounds and a myriad of experiences. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that the president of the Church would present anything to the Latter-day Saints by way of doctrine or policy that was out of harmony with scripture, Church standards and the united voice of the First Presidency and the Twelve.

Secondly, the Latter-day Saints do not believe that the strength of the Church lies predominantly in the witness or spiritual depth of the living prophet alone; rather, the strength of the Church lies in the fact that millions throughout the world share the same testimony of God, Christ, the call of Joseph Smith and the revelatory vitality of the living Church today. The Saints have never been encouraged to be blindly obedient but have been instructed that it is an intelligent obedience that leads to strength among the membership. Brigham Young is reported to have said that the greatest fear he had was that the members of the Church would take what he said as the mind and will of God without first praying and obtaining a witness of the same for themselves (JD 6:100; 9:149).

Miscellaneous Issues

There are several minor issues raised by the author that deserve at least brief comment.

1. Krakauer comments that “Mormonism is a patriarchal religion, rooted firmly in the traditions of the Old Testament. Dissent isn’t tolerated” (31). It is true that Latter-day Saints are firm believers in the Old Testament and that families today are organized in a patriarchal manner. But for Latter-day Saints the patriarchal order is a family-centered government, a home where husband and wife counsel together and make decisions in conjunction with the family, not a place where the man rules with an iron scepter in dictatorial fashion. Husbands and fathers are expected to lead their families with love, patience and tenderness, even as Christ leads the Church (Ephesians 5:23). Church leaders have repeatedly warned the men of the Church that any effort to bully or dominate either their wives or their children is a form of unrighteous dominion that may result in censure or disciplinary measures (see Howard W. Hunter, CR, Oct.1994, 68; Gordon B. Hinckley, CR, Oct. 2001, 65; Apr. 2002, 64).

2. As to the matter of dissent, Latter-day Saints are free to feel how they choose to feel about a given doctrine or practice. Individual agency is paramount. The Church has drawn the line, however, between one’s personal dissent and one’s tendency to publish the same widely. Apostasy consists of continuing in the teaching of false doctrines or the voicing of dissent in public forums after having been counseled by Church leaders. There are within the Church ways of dealing with schisms or apostasy, just as there were in New Testament times (1 Corinthians 1:10–13; 11:18-19; Galatians 1:6–8; 1 John 2:18–19). Latter-day Saints are not alone in today’s world when it comes to such matters. Noted Roman Catholic scholars such as Hans Kung and Charles Curran and Evangelical Christian writers such as Clark Pinnock and John Sanders have had firsthand experience with censure following their expression of views at variance with more popular opinions. In short, a person who is dissatisfied with life within Mormonism or uncomfortable with the teachings of the faith is at liberty to ask questions, to discuss the

issues, and even, sadly, to leave the faith as a final resort. Such a person is not, however, permitted to continue to fight the Church, stir discontent and sow discord among the Saints under the cloak of membership.

3. In chapter 7 the author states that one polygamous leader “intended his school of the prophets to be a mechanism for instilling crucial Mormon principles that have been forsaken by the modern LDS Church: plural marriage; the tenet that God and Adam, the first man, were one and the same; and the divinely ordained supremacy of the white race” (83). It could hardly be said that the Adam-God doctrine or the idea that blacks are inferior, are “crucial Mormon principles.” They may be crucial to polygamous groups, but they are in no way crucial to current teachings and beliefs of mainstream Mormonism; they are not a part of our doctrine. As to the first issue, President Spencer W. Kimball stated: “We hope that you who teach in the various organizations ... will always teach the orthodox truth. We warn you against the dissemination of doctrines which are not according to the scriptures and which are alleged to have been taught by some of the General Authorities of past generations. Such, for instance, is the Adam-God theory. We denounce that theory and hope that everyone will be cautioned against this and other kinds of false doctrine” (CR, Oct. 1976, 115).

To be sure, there are instances in which Church leaders of the 19th century made derogatory comments about blacks which, unfortunately, echoed some of the current thinking of the time, but these in no way reflect the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Book of Mormon attests that God invites “all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . and all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33). In our present day the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have stated that all human beings are created in the image of God and that each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of Deity (“The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 23 Sept. 1995, published in *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102).

Krakauer also slips the following into a note: “A horror of miscegenation is something Mormon Fundamentalists have in common with their Mormon brethren: Even after LDS President Spencer W. Kimball’s 1978 revelation reversing the church doctrine that banned blacks from the priesthood, official LDS policy has continued to strongly admonish white saints not to marry blacks” (331, note). I assume he means by “official church policy” the *Church Handbook of Instructions*, which is the guide for all Church leaders on doctrine and practice. There is, in fact, no mention whatsoever in this handbook concerning interracial marriages. In addition, having served as a Church leader for almost 30 years, I can also certify that I have never received official verbal instructions condemning marriages between black and white members.

4. Krakauer writes that Joseph Smith “venerated the U.S. Constitution as a divinely inspired document. ... Yet, in both word and deed, Joseph repeatedly demonstrated that he, himself, had little respect for the religious views of non-Mormons, and was unlikely to respect the constitutional rights of other faiths” (107). This is simply false. While Joseph believed that the movement he had been inspired to set in motion was “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30) — meaning, it contained the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and was led by divine authority — Joseph demonstrated an uncanny tolerance and respect for other churches and even church leaders who had persecuted him. In 1839 he stated that “we ought always to be aware of those prejudices which sometimes so strangely present themselves, and are so congenial to human nature, against our friends, neighbors, and brethren of the world, who choose to differ from us in opinion and in matters of faith. Our religion is between us and our God. Their religion is between them and their God.

“There is a love from God that should be exercised toward those of our faith, who walk uprightly, which is peculiar to itself, but it is without prejudice; it also gives scope to the mind, which enables us to conduct ourselves with greater liberality towards all that are not of our faith, than

what they exercise toward one another. These principles approximate nearer to the mind of God, because [they are] like God, or Godlike” (TPJS, 146–47).

In 1843 he remarked that “if it has been demonstrated that I am willing to die for a ‘Mormon,’ I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves” (TPJS, 313).

Conclusion

One wonders just what the author hoped to accomplish in writing this book. Was it really to help others better understand the Latter-day Saints? to offer a glimpse of a violent and malicious side of Mormonism that few in today’s world know? Was it to study a vicious act of 1984 and to look for root causes? Or was it to demonstrate the author’s major thesis that to practice one’s religion, to be involved seriously in one’s faith, is to act irrationally? (68, 162, 306).

Under the Banner of Heaven suffers from an extremely unhealthy and unworkable overgeneralization. Notice the following statement early in the book: “To comprehend Brian David Mitchell [the kidnapper of Elizabeth Smart] — or to comprehend Dan Lafferty, or Tom Green, or the polygamous inhabitants of Bountiful and Colorado City — *one must first understand the faith these people have in common, a faith that gives shape and purpose to every facet of their lives. And any such understanding must begin with the aforementioned Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*” (53, emphasis added).

This is like asking someone: “Would you like to understand Catholicism today? Then study carefully the atrocities of the Crusades and the horrors of the Inquisition.” Or: “Would you like to gain a better insight into the minds and feelings of German people today? Then read *Mein*

Kampf and become a serious student of Adolph Hitler.” Or: “Would you like a deeper glimpse into the hearts of Lutherans today? Then be certain to study the anti-Semitic writings of Martin Luther.” Or: “Would you care to better understand where Southern Baptists are coming from? Then simply read the many sermons of Baptist preachers in the Civil War who utilized biblical passages to justify the practice of slavery.”

I agree wholeheartedly with Lee Benson of Salt Lake City’s *Deseret News*: “Throughout history,” he wrote, “perfectly respectable religions have been used as the jumping-off spot for hundreds and thousands of people aiming for an orbit outside of what’s right. From Henry VIII when he wanted to marry Anne Boleyn to Osama bin Laden when he wanted to topple the Twin Towers to Cain killing Abel, it is a practice as old as mankind itself. Blaming religions for these unauthorized, self-serving spinoffs is like blaming Philo Farnsworth for MTV” (*Deseret News*, 21 July, 2003).

Latter-day Saints have made a concerted effort in recent decades to be better understood, to break down prejudices and correct misperceptions, in short, to assist persons of other faiths to recognize us as Christian, but different. In the process of doing so, it is inevitable that we should be accused of attempting to slip subtly into the mainstream of Christian religion, of “trending slowly but relentlessly toward the humdrum normality of Middle America” (322). The fact is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no inclination whatsoever toward ecumenism and no desire to compromise one ounce of its doctrine or history in order to court favor among other religionists. “Our membership has grown,” President Gordon B. Hinckley stated. “I believe it has grown in faithfulness. ... Those who observe us say that we are moving into the mainstream of religion. We are not changing. The world’s perception of us is changing. We teach the same doctrine. We have the same organization. We labor to perform the same good works. But the old hatred is disappearing; the old persecution is dying. People are better informed. They are coming to realize what we stand for and what we do” (CR, Oct. 2001, 3–4).

Under the Banner of Heaven is not only a slap in the face of modern Latter-day Saints but also a misrepresentation of religion in general. It is an insult to those “unreasonable” beings out there who rely upon the “murky sectors of the heart and head that prompt most of us to believe in God — and compel an impassioned few, predictably, to carry that irrational belief to its logical end” (xxi). We should not be surprised that an author who begins his work with the statement that “faith is the very antithesis of reason” (xxiii) should thereafter proceed to grossly stereotype and thereby marginalize Mormonism. As Stephen Carter pointed out a decade ago, there is a worrisome trend in our culture “toward treating religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant, a trend supported by a rhetoric that implies there is something wrong with religious devotion. More and more, our culture seems to take the position that believing deeply in the tenets of one’s faith represents a kind of mystical irrationality, something that thoughtful, public-spirited American citizens would do better to avoid” (*The Culture of Disbelief*, New York, Basic Books, 1993, 6–7). In that sense, this book is an unfortunate endeavor, for it fosters unnecessary suspicion and exclusion in a world that desperately needs openness and understanding.



STYLE GUIDE NOTE: When reporting about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, please use the complete name of the Church in the first reference. For more information on the use of the name of the Church, go to our online [Style Guide](#).