

# When Our Enemies Are Also Saints: Response to Claudia W. Harris's "Mormons on the Warfront"

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I find Claudia Harris's essay both deeply disturbing and strangely comforting. For me it only strengthens the conviction that war is hell, civil war is a worse hell, and an undeclared civil war is the most frustrating of all political hells. The paper is disturbing because it highlights the terrible cost of this kind of conflict and the frustration of finding Church members on both sides. But it is comforting that Church members are able somehow to let the gospel transcend political differences and create what she calls a "new all-encompassing metacommentary."

This paper has importance far beyond what it tells us about the Church in the Emerald Isle, for it focuses on a certain dreadful reality that has confronted Latter-day Saints at various times throughout their history, even though it has been noticed only in passing by historians. That reality threatens, however, to become a major concern as the Church expands in countries torn by civil strife. What is happening in Ireland may well be only a mild sample of what Church members might experience in many countries during the next few decades.

Harris's paper also causes me to reminisce about my own visit to Northern Ireland just three years ago. I am descended from a Protestant Irishman who was converted to Mormonism and whose first wife (from whom I am not descended) was a converted Catholic Irish girl, so I have a bit of the Catholic-Protestant tendency in my own family. In Belfast, our first night, we found lodging at the home of a wonderful family named Corrigan, who not only treated us courteously and warmly, but also helped direct us to the Mormon church. The next morning before going to church, we drove to the center of town which was practically deserted because it was Sunday. We stopped at the stately old city hall where we took some pictures.

From the time we crossed the border into Northern Ireland we had been apprehensive of any political activity, but up to this point we had seen no evidence at all of any such thing. However, just as we left the city hall, we suddenly saw a few men drive up rapidly, jump out of their jeep-like vehicle, plaster a sign on a nearby building, then drive away in a hurry. We wondered if they were IRA partisans, but we did not go over to read the sign because we noticed military personnel carriers coming down the street. If the first men we saw were part of the IRA, they were wise to get out of there in a hurry, and we, too, thought it wise to be on our way without taking time to read the sign. "How sad," I wrote in my journal, "to see such things in what is such a peaceful-looking setting, and among such friendly, gracious people."

At 10 A.M. we were at the LDS chapel, where we attended sacrament meeting with eighty or ninety Belfast Saints. We enjoyed their meeting. We did not ask about politics; we simply felt it would be inappropriate for strangers to bring up anything that could cause tension.

After church we continued our tour of Northern Ireland and spent the night near Coleraine in a delightful old farm house operated as a bed and breakfast by its owner, a Mrs. King. We gained a perspective of time when we were told that the house had been built 302 years earlier—long before the United States was even thought of. Mrs. King was the most gracious hostess we met on our entire trip, and for breakfast the next morning she served plenty of juice, toast, old-fashioned Irish porridge, and cold cereal (if we wanted it—but who would in a place like this?). She also served eggs, sausage, and kippered herring. Who could ask for more? I mention all this not to make you hungry, but to emphasize how peaceful and at home we were beginning to feel in what we expected might be a tense and threatening environment. Most of the people we met that week seemed almost apolitical; that is, they were willing to talk about the tensions but seemed anxious just to have them over with.

The next day we were in Londonderry, when I suddenly gained a deeper awareness of the tension there. I called it Londonderry, and in Belfast (which is mostly Protestant) that is the right word. As we got closer, however, and finally into the city, I realized we had better start calling it "Derry," for to the Catholics and especially the IRA, the prefix *London* is anathema. The city itself, with its ancient wall, showed all the signs of its long history as well as the signs of modern civil conflict. We stood on a hill inside the walled part of the city and had two young men show us where Catholic Bogside and Protestant Waterside are located. We saw

evidence of the vandalism Harris mentions. We saw slogans and other graffiti on the walls and on the streets, barbed wire in strategic places, and heavily armed policemen and Irish soldiers with dogs patrolling the streets. Hardly five minutes went by without our seeing a well-armed patrol.

We spent a couple of hours walking around Derry, and the two young men (who attached themselves to us because they were anxious to get acquainted with some Americans) told us how dangerous it was for them to go into the Catholic part of town, especially alone and at night. In all, our brief time in Derry was fascinating but emotionally the most difficult of all the time I spent in Great Britain.

But enough of reminiscing; let us move on to other things Harris's paper made me think about.

The Church is not the only one whose people frequently have been caught on opposite political sides. Such a split happens all the time and will no doubt continue to happen until the Millennium arrives. The Mormon experience, however, is of special moment to most of us here, for we have learned that the gospel of Christ is the only remedy for civil conflict, and that by teaching the gospel to the world, we are providing the formula for world peace. Thus people like me get a horrible feeling when we have seen situations where Latter-day Saints would be shooting at Latter-day Saints. As an eighteen-year-old Navy recruit at the end of World War II, I reconciled myself to the possibility that someday I might have to pull the trigger of a gun aimed at someone (something I am no longer sure I could do). I was never sure, however, that I could shoot if I knew the other guy was a Mormon. That's how strongly I felt about brotherhood in the gospel. I also remember hearing the First Presidency of the Church justify the involvement of Latter-day Saints on both sides of the war by assuring us that, in the end, none of us would be held responsible for the killings; the leaders of the aggressor nations would be held responsible and punished for wars. That statement helped, of course, but deep down I also remembered the story of the Ammonites in the Book of Mormon and still had pangs of conscience.

My brooding has gone on ever since, and the more I study the history of any war or see Latter-day Saints involved on both sides of civil strife, the more I am convinced that much of what I was taught as a youth may have been too simplistic. During the American Civil War, for example, many Mormons leaned heavily toward the Southern cause, and Brigham Young himself, in effect, declared a pox on both sides. In this case no Utah Mormons enlisted on either side, but suppose some of the Southern Saints returned to

the South to fight for the Southern cause of states' rights and self-determination, and New England Saints returned to fight for the preservation of the union? I can see how righteous Latter-day Saints, filled with the spirit of the gospel, could take either side. I would be hard pressed to make a moral judgement on who was "right" and who was "wrong" with respect to the political differences that began the shooting.

Modern wars, however, have made the moral problem even more complex. I suspect that most of us are familiar with the dilemma of the German Saints during World War II. On the one hand, they had been taught by Church leaders to honor, obey, and sustain the law, and to support their lawful governments. It was this emphasis, in fact, that preserved the Church during the Hitler regime, as Church members made clear their support for their government and Salt Lake City supported them in it. On the other hand, they read in the Book of Mormon about the need to resist oppression, saw examples of righteous rebels joining together to overthrow unrighteous regimes, and, after America became involved, they read leaflets dropped from American airplanes, perhaps piloted by Mormon pilots. The pamphlets encouraged them to join in underground efforts to overthrow the Nazi government. Helmut Huebener became active in the underground and was eventually both excommunicated by the Church and executed by the Nazis. Who can judge him as morally wrong for acting according to conscience, but who, on the other hand, can judge his fellow Saints as morally wrong for following the dictates of the Articles of Faith?

The question came even closer to my heart a few years ago when I talked with a student at BYU who was from Nicaragua. He was planning to go back, he told me, and he had no doubt that he would be involved in the civil war there. Sadly, I can't even remember which side he was on; the thing that overwhelmed me was his telling me of Latter-day Saints he knew who were on either side of the conflict, and his belief that he would no doubt end up fighting, perhaps even killing, some of them.

But what should the Church do—not just with respect to making utterances on wars or civil conflict, but in supporting any political regime? We all remember how wonderful it was when our leaders promised the Communist regime of Eastern Germany that our people would be loyal citizens, and we were then able to send missionaries in and out of the country and to build a temple there. My good friend Doug Tobler has since reminded me, however, that with the recent overthrow of Communism the very thing that helped us then has hurt us to some degree since, for anyone who seemed

friendly to the former Communist regime has come under some suspicion from those who always opposed it. Such ironies will probably never cease. Neither, however, will the criticism of the Church cease for whatever stand it seems to take as crises arise—for it is easy to find right on any side, and more often neither side is wholly right nor wholly wrong. Whether in Europe, Latin America, Ireland, or elsewhere, we can hope that Church leaders will take positions that enhance the spread of the gospel, but we must recognize that in many ways their hands are tied. The Church today still has such an American image that no matter how we try to avoid it, many people around the world will link the Church with whatever they think of America in general.

These issues also remind me of the two most frustrating sacrament meetings I ever attended. On one occasion our well-meaning bishop invited an extremely right-wing political activist to speak. My politics have generally leaned toward the conservative side, but I have always tried to avoid using the Church for political purposes. In this case I was appalled as the speaker equated the gospel with almost every extremist conservative cause of the day. I disagreed with almost everything he said not just because he was relating the gospel to politics, but also because his politics made little sense to me. The speech was a marvelous lesson, however, in how difficult it is for people to separate the two—especially as I looked around and saw the bishop and other people smiling and nodding their approval. I sat there brooding, trying to figure out a way to leave the choir seats after the meeting without approaching the bishop or the speaker so I could avoid commenting on what was said. Suddenly I heard myself being called upon to give the closing prayer! I gave the shortest prayer I think I have ever given; I thanked the Lord for the gospel and asked that He bless us with the spirit of discernment, so we could learn to separate truth from error! A good friend, a Democrat, knew what I meant and thanked me for the prayer. But the bishop also thanked me for it—in words that indicated he saw something different in it than I intended.

At the other meeting, which came during the Vietnam War, the speaker, an air force pilot recently returned from Vietnam, spent all his time justifying the war. Among his justifications, tragically, was his report of a conversation with a certain General Authority who, he said, helped him resolve his initial hesitation about going over there by telling him that the Lord was in charge, and that this was the way Vietnam would be opened for missionary work! I'm not sure that he was quoting the Church leader correctly, but if anything helped make me antiwar this meeting did, for I just do not believe the Lord works that way! Who really knows what the Lord

is doing in any particular case—or if he is active at all in causing or ending wars? The use and abuse of free agency seems to be a more active force in creating our civil conflicts, and I think it tragic always to impute to God our own political biases. I like, on the other hand, what Abraham Lincoln supposedly said when he was asked if he was not happy that the Lord was on his side in the Civil War. Lincoln replied that he did not really know where the Lord stood, but he only prayed that he was on the Lord's side.

How then should the Church respond to political conflict as it breaks out around the world? Should it tell its members to support their governments no matter what the nature of the regime? Should it openly encourage human and civil rights and therefore seem to be on the side of the dissidents in many parts of the world? Should it simply make no statement at all? The answers to such questions are indeed complex, but the end of Harris's thought-provoking paper raises at least some hope that in the midst of civil strife, Latter-day Saints can find comfort in the gospel, even meet peacefully in their politically divided congregations, and, as she said, "work together for common goals." Those common goals may not be political, but they can be the goals of the gospel. And, without sounding too simplistic, perhaps we can say that simply converting the world to the Church will never bring total peace so long as free agency and differing political views continue to exist. Even if the leaders themselves are well intentioned, their differing views could lead to civil conflict.

But the *gospel* (as taught by the Church but distinguished from the Church as an institution), I firmly believe, brings peace of mind and personal happiness even in the midst of turmoil, hope for a better future both in this life and the next, and a startling new meaning to the words of the Savior: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Perhaps the unity of Church membership can help political enemies in war-torn nations realize that they are still brothers and sisters, that they really want to bless each other, and that their prayers for each other can go beyond politics. That is the hope Harris raises.