

**Politics and Society: Anglo-
American Mormons in a
Revolutionary Land**

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Whatever else the September 1972 regional Church conference in Mexico City has demonstrated, it is that a remarkable number for people in Latin America's northern countries are not only hearing the Gospel but are accepting it with considerable enthusiasm. In the 1960–1970 decade, for example, membership in Mexico increased by over 435 percent! The country unquestionably ranks first among all nations and regions on percentage membership growth charts. The increase in other areas of Latin America is not far behind. Indeed, in some regions the response to the Gospel has been nearly as spectacular as in the early days of the British missions. Many of us are now led to conclude that a new day of mass conversions may be near, this time in lands close to the heart of the Book of Mormon. Many signs seem to point that way, including the fact that the prophets have long foretold as much.

As the Church moves to encompass lands and peoples foreign to its center—moving as it has, and increasingly must, across languages, cultures, and political and social boundaries—problems arise. Usually these have less to do with transferring the saving ordinances and principles of the Gospel from one people to another than with developing interpersonal communication and warmth, creating adequate cross-cultural understanding and fostering genuine feelings of equality of brotherhood.

The situation is especially critical when dealing with political and social maxims. Take, as an example, the political rhetoric associated with Marxism, communism, socialism, communalism, or revolution. For most Anglo-American Mormons, the connotations are all negative. Although it is much less certain, the same may be the case among many Latin-American Mormons. Aside from this, however, whatever specific meanings the words may evoke for the North American middle-class Mormon, odds are that they certainly will not produce similar images for his Latin American brother in the Church.

One Anglo-American Mormon stationed with the Agency for International Development in Latin America, for example, argued that Indians or peasants who aggressively pressed for the right to own and work a farming acreage large enough for them to rise above subsistence poverty must be communists. (At the time some peasants were invading huge ranch lands).

At the very least, he thought, they would have to be led by communists. How could Indians all on their own, possibly have aggressive aspirations or the organizational ability to make them known? Yet the Indians replied: “*ownership of land* is what communism is all about, we’re for it.” Some Latin-American Mormons feel the same way. But there we go again. For the two, communism or socialism does not mean the same thing at all. For one group it signifies degradation, for the other it is a name assigned the chance to progress with increased freedom and dignity. Why the differing perceptions?

Anglo-American Mormons successful in cross-cultural contacts tell us: If you want to be something other than a partially bearable curiosity in the eyes of your Latin brother, jump out of the world of your own political rhetoric and into the real one that exists in Latin America. American political clichés, however nice, are often inappropriately applied in the Latin American situation.

Several years ago some U.S. volunteer development workers set up shop near Lake Titicaca (Peru), now an area of immense deprivation once belonging to an empire which had successfully abolished poverty. The descendants of the Incas, now living near the shadows of magnificent ruins built centuries ago by their ancestors, have lost their past identity and grandeur; today they play out their short lives in the most pathetic circumstances one could imagine. The volunteers’ task was to help these Indians improve their living conditions. The Indians, for the most part, were happy with the prospects. But many of the big “white” ranchers of the area, having enjoyed and greatly profited from cheap local Indian labor (customary for centuries), concluded that the volunteers were all communists or revolutionaries who had come to destroy the ranchers’ way of life and to deprive their laborers or peons of the “happiness” they had always enjoyed. Only two of the big ranchers—brothers of German parentage and, incidentally, owners of one of the more prosperous ranches in the region—voiced a contrary opinion. “Unlike many other Mestizos,” one of them told the volunteers, “my brother and I do not think you are communists just because you are working with the Indians.”

In the eyes of some, any person who works for social, political, or economic change, regardless of how Christian his goals and strategies may be, is a communist, a socialist, a revolutionary, a Marxist, a bandit, or a common criminal. One Guatemalan army officer affirmed that young students in his area who had dedicated themselves to bringing their country’s predominantly Indian population into the twentieth century were “criminal communists.” He knew they were because they said they’d be willing to give their lives for the poor. Similar men accused Christ of like sins nineteen hundred and forty years ago. Then when a very “hard-line” Brazilian

official was queried about who the communists and revolutionaries were in his country, he replied: "Anyone who is against the policies we have for Brazil." That country, incidentally, is now governed by a military dictatorship. Unhappy with and unable to control the reform ideas and dissent of some young Brazilians, the officers have decided to place a great many of them in jail, subject them to torture, and, sometimes either force them into exile or execute them. Anglo-American Mormons are frequently heard to congratulate the Brazilian Military for the "stability" and "prosperity" it has brought the country—both of which are true. Who will return the congratulations, however, when the present regime collapses, as eventually it will? Political rhetoric is cheap. It makes few lasting friends and a lot of permanent enemies. Mormons in other lands suffer. So does the message of "Christ and Him Crucified," especially when those who preach it do so at the bedside of a political religion.

Reform-minded activists in Latin America are not always communists, but they certainly do constitute one wing of the new social revolution now shaking old Latin American politicians, land-lords, and capitalists right out of their comfortable chairs. For the most part the new forces are composed of frustrated young men and women, and some of them are Mormons. They have reflected on the sorry economic and social plight of their own lives and most of their countrymen's. They have suffered the rigidity and intransigence of an archaic social structure which perpetuates the misery. They have concluded that some variant of socialism, or Marxism, or communalism, revolution, or anything, will provide a way to correct the problem. Hard-core communists have, of course, been harping on this theme for years. Now their influence is spreading. Political rhetoric is cheap. Under the right conditions it can also be very influential.

Protest rhetoric arises when people perceive their problems to be unbearable. In spite of words of imported troublemakers, however, revolutions occur only when selfish groups assure that the problems which people believe they suffer and about which they protest will remain unresolved. In this regard North America has served the interests of revolution in Latin America, not by aiding the revolutionaries, of course, but by helping to insure the survival of an archaic social structure which Americans themselves would not stand for a minute in their own country. Rhetoric is cheap. Some of it is hurting Latin-American Mormons. Some Anglo-American Mormons as well as communists rhetors are equally guilty.

For the aspiring peasant, awakened Indian, second generation urban slum dweller or university student, much of the talk about the godlessness and the lack of freedom and liberty under non-free enterprise capitalist systems that one hears in the United State frequently makes no sense at all. Particularly is this true among the lower social classes. They and their

forebears have felt the oppression of centuries of existence under brutal “capitalist” conditions which the United States has largely forgotten, if, indeed, it ever knew. Now, as the traditional past reluctantly decays in Latin America and a new, modern world is within sight, the angry young people aspire to participate in it. They demand opportunities to earn bread and butter, to buy and to obtain jobs, and to be reasonably secure in both their life and their property.

The appeal of revolutionary rhetoric and leadership to these people generally is not at the level of theory, or even at the level of future reality. It is at the level of practical issues of the present moment. Political missionaries (who usually come from an emerging middle class) preaching revolutionary ideas strike a harmonious emotional note because they talk about the exploitation the frustrated Indians and peasants daily feel, about the deprivations and indignities they and the slum dwellers and the laborers frequently suffer, and about the life to which they all aspire but which, for them, remains perpetually unrealized. Reflecting on his present state, his aspirations, and the visions opened up by socialist rhetoric, one Latin American peasant affirmed that free enterprise capitalism had been his oppressor not this birthright. It is a different perspective, all right. It may be wrong. But for the peasant it is real.

The Challenge for North American Mormons

It takes a peculiar kind of North American Mormon to relate to the growing number of Saints coming out of these lands. He needs to be more caught up in the Gospel than he is in political clichés and social rhetoric of his own land.

Gospel counsel, along with the ordinances and right associated with it, are applicable across nations, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds. Political and social rhetoric seldom is. Indeed, Latin Americans schooled in the history of the Church frequently remind us that when Christ does establish His Kingdom on earth in its fullness, most undoubtedly it will not be a close cousin to the political, social, and economic “kingdom” of the United States, past or present. At one time Mormons tried to approximate transcendental principles with the “United Order.” It failed in part because of a culturally induced avarice among its nineteenth-century practitioners. Some Latin American villages, lacking that particular cultural ingredient, already practice some of the social, political, and economic principles of the United Order. As they accept the spiritual teachings of the Gospel, it is no wonder that they stand amazed at their teachers who have rejected some of the temporal ones. “We wouldn’t swap you national heritages straight across for anything,” one Mexican Mormon told me recently. “We want

the Gospel, desperately want the Gospel,” he said, “but we don’t want to become too Americanized in the process of getting it.”

While very soon the Church may—without our even asking for it—be happily inundated with peasants, second-generation urban migrants and Indians, we will not find them to be “natural” adherents to the social and political rhetoric of Anglo-American Mormons. Moreover, the new converts may even have some fairly strong feeling against the government of the United States. America has not ingratiated itself with the masses in the so-called Third World. Antipathy toward the United States is not so much to be unexpected, therefore, as it is to be dealt with, compassionately and understandingly.

What does all this mean for prospective missionaries reared in one culture but invited to preach the Gospel in another, particularly at a time when preparations are being made to reap what undoubtedly will be a very substantial spiritual harvest in Latin America and other developing lands? Not everyone in those lands, of course, is going to be reaped, either by the opposition or by ourselves, but to be of maximum service in that operation it seems necessary that in addition to testimony and commitment, we will need to acquire an understanding of—nay, more than an understanding—an empathy for the people there and the conditions under which they live. Most of all we will need to acquire an ability to communicate with people who face an entirely different social, political, and economic world from the one that either we, or, for the most part, our parents have known. The challenge is not the same as learning a foreign language so that clichés can quickly be transferred from the home front to a foreign one. It is a way of thinking, a frame of mind.

When one preaches the Gospel in Latin America, he will find that for our people there its meaning, while not necessarily including North American political and social rhetoric, nevertheless does encompass more than Sunday School classes, social experiences, moral teachings for daily living, and fundamental doctrinal principles. For them the meaning of the Gospel is also rooted to the soil of the national homeland and to the dignity of the whole man as he stands before God. As it is therefore a Gospel of hope rather than one of despair, its implementation in practical everyday living has frequently taken on support dimensions different from our own. In general, a more physically demanding environment facing the Saints in Latin America as well as different cultural preferences have made it so. For example, The Gospel everywhere is the same, but that is not true of the MIA, the Sunday School, or the welfare or social-services programs. These are being tailored to meet the particular needs of diverse peoples.

One thing we have accordingly noticed about many of the Saints in Latin America is that acceptance of the Gospel has motivated them more

than ever before to improve their temporal well-being as well as to strive for spiritual excellence. In both spiritual and temporal areas they have sought guidance from the Church. We might cast a glance back to the experiences of our own nineteenth-century pioneers for lessons to be learned here. Brigham Young set up schools, universities, farms, factories, banks, cooperatives, credit unions, and mining enterprises right along with chapels, tabernacles, and temples. So just as with those forefathers, the Latin-American Saints have taken the hopes and vision which the Gospel has given them and have applied both to temporal as well as to spiritual development, frequently enlisting the help of the Church in both areas. In the United States there is no longer as much need for Church-sponsored temporal enterprises, but the need among many of the Saints in Latin America is as great as it was a hundred years ago among our own pioneer forefathers. Here and in several other industrially advanced nations the Church helps us with our emotional hangups and cholesterol levels. In Latin America the Church's helping hand in temporal concerns is in areas of literacy, nutrition, health, and manpower training.

Thus as both Anglo-American and Latin-America missionaries of the modern day rise to help meet the temporal and spiritual needs of the new Saints, they may find themselves becoming practitioners of Brigham Young's temporal arts as well as his spiritual virtues. In numerous countries our leaders have already begun to establish Church-sponsored schools. Now the call is out for medical missionaries, agricultural technicians, teachers, and so forth. The purpose of the Gospel is not undermined by such endeavors; it is simply made more complete. There is now a chance for those of us who are temporally well off and in need of the Spirit to unite with brothers and sisters who can teach us much that we still need to learn about our spiritual selves. We likewise can extend our hand to help them with temporal concerns. This is an expression of brotherhood, one most completely realized when people from different lands and cultures find acceptance in one another's hearts as well as in their prayers. This may not be what we call socialism, but it is the image that comes to the minds of many Latin Americans when they think about the word. To us Anglo-American Mormons, on the other hand, it is an expression of Christian love.

One striking example of such a relationship was initiated by the BYU 55th Ward in 1972. Spearheaded by the Relief Society, the ward membership donated all the material and over a thousand hours of time to prepare school uniforms for a little bootstrap school in Guatemala where some of our young Saints are only now learning to read and write. Replied Mario Salazar, director of the school among the Cakchiqueles: "I cannot express with words my feelings of gratitude towards you. What you have done is a proof of true brotherhood, of love of Christ. You have made me stronger.

My love for humanity has increased. Our children are very happy. They really like [the uniforms] and we to do too. The sizes are very well calculated and everything else is just perfect.”

Not only must many Latin American Mormons forge a clearing in a spiritual wilderness, but they must also make one in the temporal world by breaking down ancient economic, social, and political traditions so that the Gospel can flourish and grow. There will be resistance from governments and vested interests; there will be persecution. There will also be those of counter value systems, such as communism, who will approach our people and say: “Come, do it our way.” And the temptation will be great because of the clear and articulate focus the counter systems make on those things that block individual progress for believing that all one needs to do to progress is to develop his personal talents and skills; and because that is the way it has always been for us, we are prone to be ignorant of some very real structural and institutional blocks that impinge on the lives of many Latin American Mormons and their fellow countrymen. Because they are not members of favored groups or classes, they do not have our type of freedom to meet the needs of personal development. A counter value system, such as communism, focuses on the removal of those blocks. If we ignore or are ignorant of their existence, we shall hinder or destroy transcultural communication with our Latin-American brothers and sisters. Though there may be nothing we can do directly to remove those blocks, our awareness of their existence will help us better understand the frustrations and anxieties of many of our Latin Mormons.

In the United States we complement gospel teachings with all kinds of reinforcing devices applicable to our problems and our time. In Latin America, because of differing environmental conditions, some of the priorities are different while new ones are added. There, our Saints are drawn more to the spiritual and temporal relevancy of Brigham Young than to the social issues of people who have already “made it” economically; more to a combination of spiritual growth, social and economic development under the aegis of the Church than they are to issues of strict separation between religion for this life and religion for the life hereafter; more to a feeling—at least a desire—for spiritual brotherhood and community than they are to replicating the politics, culture, and society of the United States.

I expect that in our lifetime we will hear of “Lamanite Service Corps” as well as proselyting missionaries, of exchange programs for temporal progress between wards here and branches there as well as fund-raising projects for missionary support. I expect that we will witness a general involvement between those of us who are economically well off and in need of spiritual development with those of our people in other parts of the world who are searching for both the Spirit and the daily bread to sustain

life. It will cost more; it will take more of our time; it will demand of us in every way. But it will help us to become true disciples of Christ.

So what of the future? A very famous Christian once said: "The future does not belong to communism. The future does not belong to capitalism. The future belongs to God." It is therefore a future more concerned with Christ-like living than with the political maxims of any given people.

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