

A DECADE REPORT

*I am amazed that ten years have passed since September 1993,
that so much has been lost, and that so little has changed.*

AN INTERVIEW WITH MYSELF

By Paul Toscano

IN THE FIFTEEN MINUTES ALLOTTED ME, INSTEAD of a speech, I will ask myself fifteen tough questions and give you my unrehearsed answers.

Why haven't you presented anything on Mormonism for so long?

I LOST MY faith. I didn't renounce it. I just lost it—like losing one's eyesight after an accident—and not just religious faith, but faith in the power of my words to make a difference. The polemics of a fiscally conservative, socially liberal, professionally orthodox, religiously radical, spiritually cynical, and politically incorrect excommunicant seem unlikely to matter.

Then why are you here speaking?

THIS EVENT I couldn't miss. It seemed right to set aside fears, doubts, and grievances and make an effort to connect. Not to have shown up might suggest aloofness or indifference, which are not what I feel.

How do you view the Church now?

IT IS LIKE a cherished old relative with advanced Alzheimer's disease. The tabernacle stands, but the lights are winking out. The Church is preoccupied with exteriorities. It prizes righteousness over holiness, image over inspiration. The Church is no longer the Saints, but an increasingly judgmental, puritanical, and authoritarian corporate entity.

Hasn't Mormonism always been that way?

MORMONISM HAS ALWAYS been a mixture of the unmixable. It started as a fresh, hermeneutical movement with a radical vision of messianic Christianity. I saw this even as a



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teenage convert, although it took years for me to articulate the power of its theology, which claims that:

- Christ is not merely God's Son, but God incarnate, who assumes our sins and imputes to us his holiness;
- the chosen people are not just the Jews but all who hunger and thirst for God;
- the Promised Land is not just in Palestine, but in America and in other lands, too;
- the Torah is equaled not only by the New Testament but by other sacred texts—all part of a great and open canon;
- the words of prophets are to be explicated and made relevant by the commentaries of later prophets;
- the covenants of God are to any who will receive them;
- all people are God's people, each with a role to play in the drama of salvation; and
- each soul is to participate in rolling forth the kingdom of God like a stone out of a mountain, a millstone grinding down selfish and narcissistic pretensions.

These notions are a bit out of joint with the banalities of modern Mormon life.

Out of joint, how?

MORMONISM IS NO longer a heterodox and healing hermeneutic of freedom and grace. It has become an archconservative culture built on the sand of family and tribal values, with respectability as its chief cornerstone. Its adherents are less like living stones in the mystical temple of God and more like living stiffs in a morgue of quiet conformity. Members are relentlessly pressured to strain at gnats by avoiding alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea, facial hair, tattoos, body piercing, R-rated movies, public displays of affection, nudity, erotica, masturbation, necking, petting, pre-marital sex, disrespect or questioning of authority, dissent, and anger, while being constantly encouraged to swallow camels by tolerating elitism, racism,

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misogyny, lack of intimacy, homophobia, xenophobia, moral superiority, purification by exclusion, institutional secrecy, theological correctness, spiritual abuse, class discrimination, disdain for civil liberties, and the abdication of personal judgment and responsibility. Mormonism, I fear, is no longer a mystery. It is a machine.

What caused this decline?

THE SPIRITUALITY OF a hierarchical church cannot be greater than the spirituality of its leaders. Ecclesiastical power corrodes individual spirituality. In the early 1960s, Harold B. Lee accelerated this process by using his plan to correlate Church programs to centralize power at the top of the male priesthood hierarchy. The corrosive effects of this power-grab became evident to me in 1982 when Apostle Bruce R. McConkie, in a BYU assembly, told thousands of students not to worship Jesus Christ nor even seek a personal relationship with him. The rest of the apostles did not publicly denounce this heresy because they were more concerned with avoiding embarrassment and appearing united than with proclaiming Jesus as Lord. McConkie's teaching has remained publicly unrebuked and has flourished despite his own contradictory, final testimony given in Conference near his life's end. Unchecked power has led Church leaders to believe that their authority is not limited by the gospel, but that the gospel is limited and may be amended by their authority—a belief evidenced in apostle Russell M. Nelson's recent *Ensign* article that arrogantly declares God's love to be conditional.¹ Faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost are rivaled by obedience, respectability, denial, and sycophancy. The Church is no longer seen as the object of salvation, but its source. Christ is not so much author of redemption as authorization for an aristocracy of apostles who, like the seven dwarves, never tire of aligning themselves in order of their right of succession to the presidency of the Church and who serve less as shepherds proclaiming the gospel and more as sheep dogs protecting the Church's snow-white image from the night soil of human nature.



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Do you regret your angry criticism of Church leaders?

I REGRET THAT my criticism did not have its intended effect of turning them from authoritarianism and intolerance or awakening them to their faults or convincing them they are not above reproach. I regret that my anger has given them an excuse to disregard criticism and tighten further the grip of oppression that manacles the Church. Though I regret this, I do not see that courtesy, flattery, or servility has helped much to lessen their narrow-mindedness or unrighteous dominion.

What about Joseph Smith? Was he flawed? Was he a fraud?

HE IS NO longer a hero for me. But I see no good evidence that he did not believe he was called of God. Of course he was flawed. What leader isn't? He lied. He acted in self-serving ways. He may not have been divinely inspired, but I believe he believed he was. It is not fraudulent to be mistaken or selfish. He had a powerful, expansive, and prolific mind, and genuine

spiritual yearnings. At his life's end, he was apparently troubled that the movement he founded had gone awry. I think he died in a state of existential crisis. His last words were: "My Lord, my God!"—his attempt perhaps to utter the Masonic distress call that ends with the question: "Is there no help for the widow's son?" No, apparently. Not for him.

It takes no courage to accuse the defenseless dead. Defying the powerful living is another matter. Those who shout out the faults of Joseph Smith are often unwilling even to whisper the failings of the current leadership cadre. All leaders sin. But I find sins of passion more understandable than sins of calculation and, therefore, prefer Joseph Smith to Brigham Young and Bill Clinton to George W. Bush.

What do you think of the Book of Mormon?

IT IS EXTRAORDINARY, particularly if regarded not as history but as epic. It tells a dark story of conflict among brothers

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that escalates into tribal hostilities that culminate in the violent eradication of the white-skinned and the Balkanization of the dark-skinned races. Who cannot see reflected in this story the conflicts that plague the world? Catholics versus Protestants, Palestinians against Jews, Christians contra Muslims, poor pitted against rich—rivalries all. The book shows that whites have no guarantee of supremacy or survival, that the powerful eventually fall, that the many trees in God's olive garden are equally subject to cultivation, pruning, and burning. This is a tragedy fitted to the end, not the beginning, of an age—if not a history, then a complex story, strangely prescient and strangely apt.

What do you think of Sunstone?

I FIND NONSENSICAL Sunstone's dream of turning its magazine into an unofficial Church publication, uncensored and uncorrelated and yet inoffensive to the Church hierarchy. In a theocracy, even minor grievances are impossible to express without offending somebody. The fear of giving offense has crippled Sunstone and silenced some voices. Nonetheless, I recognize that it has fostered important scholarship and provided many with comfort and support.

Do you still have a testimony of Jesus Christ?

I LOVE JESUS even though he may be a fictional character. I see him as a combination of Henry V and Dionysus—a king in disguise among his people, eating of their limitations and drinking of their disappointments, yet able to descend into the abyss and rise again, pulling out of meaninglessness both soul and cosmos.

Isn't that a testimony?

NO. TESTIMONIES AND other expressions of certainty disturb me. But I can say that if Jesus was not the Christ, he should have been. If he is not God, he should be. Even as a fiction, he is the best of all possible deities. His disciples claim that:

- He loves us in our sins, before we love him and more than he loves himself;
- He prizes us above his sovereignty;
- He lays aside the riches of his divinity to assume the poverty of our humanity;
- He offers us joint heirship in all he has claim to;
- He transforms a provincial religion of one God of war and one chosen tribe into a cosmic religion of one God of love and many suffering souls;
- He does not require certainty or purity as conditions of his deliverance, merely that we recognize our lack and long to be filled;
- From his cross, he spoke for all those assailed by doubts when he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Jesus may be a fiction; but, if so, he is a fiction against which the banalities of history and sociology pale in comparison, a fiction that transforms reality.

You believe in spirituality, then?

YES. BUT I think its best and most unappreciated manifestation is irony—not sarcasm, or flippancy, or insincerity (all of which have their place)—the ability to read multiple meanings in a single text, to invest with paradox a single utterance, to see order in chaos and chaos in order. Irony is to transcend the single point, or line, or plane, or space and to approach the mystery of simultaneity. In moments of irony, the one becomes the many; the I, the thou; the we, the they; the foe, the friend; the human, the divine. This is the highest manifestation of the spirit of which I am aware.

Do you see meaning in the disciplinary actions of September 1993?

I DO. THOSE punishments had both historical and metaphorical significance. Metaphorically, I have come to see them as a rejection by the Church of elements of its own identity. Don't misunderstand me. Historically, the excommunications occurred for reasons known best to those involved. But metaphorically, they have meaning beyond that:

- Lavina Fielding Anderson was excommunicated despite her commitment to the Mormon community. Her continued Church attendance has proved unavailing. Her Church leaders do not want her kind of devotion. They want loyalty to the current power structure even when it is not loyal in return nor loyal to what has gone before.
- D. Michael Quinn was excommunicated for his commitment to and passion for historical and personal integrity. Church leaders want neither. First and foremost, they want to be obeyed.
- Maxine Hanks was excommunicated because, in Church leaders' eyes, she represents the dark feminine that must be subordinated to or severed from the body of the Church.
- Lynn Kanavel Whitesides represents all those guided by an inner light on a personal spiritual journey, whom the outward Church seeks to control but from whom it should rather draw strength.
- Avraham Gileadi represents the core of Mormonism, with its claim to spiritual gifts, healings, divinings, prophecies, ritual washings, anointings, and the sealing of the faithful, who wait on tiptoe for the final parousia.
- And then there is yours truly, who reputedly deserved his excommunication because of his anger and disrespect.

I wish to clear up a misunderstanding. I was not excommunicated alone. In 1993, Margaret was unofficially excommunicated with me. In fact, Acting President Packer tried to connive her excommunication first. But our stake president, Kerry Heinz, found me a much more deserving target. I was punished under the theory that my excommunication dissolved my sealing to Margaret and to our daughters as well as my baptism, remission of sins, Church membership, priesthood, and endowments. Brother Packer intended my wife to share the

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fate of her husband. But just to be sure, seven years later, on 30 November 2000, Margaret was officially excommunicated in her own right. If nothing else, President Packer is thorough. Margaret and I are the only couple among the September Six or Seven and represent the leaders' rejection of gender equality, of the fullness of the priesthood conferred on the man and woman jointly, and of the equal divinity and dignity of the Heavenly Father and Mother.

Of course, we are not those things any more than Lavina is loyalty, or Mike integrity, or Maxine egalitarianism, or Lynne spirituality, or Avraham ancient Mormonism; but this, I think, is what we have come metaphorically to represent. This symbolic link is, perhaps, why our excommunications are painful to those who identify with such aspirations. And it is this link, perhaps, that causes some to feel that by disciplining those who criticize spiritual abuse, ecclesiastical tyranny, theological correctness, spiritual gifts, and whitewashed history, Church leaders may have unwittingly established excommunication and disfellowshipment as the highest ordinances bestowable on those whose faith and ardor are manifest as indignation and dissent.

What about the future?

I SEE THE future and my own prospects the way old men see their genitals: empty, unpromising, and short. I'm probably too pessimistic. President Hinckley, speaking prophetically in

Conference, once said, "None of us can foretell the future." This candid admission is more hopeful than my own outlook. Perhaps the future is not bleak. Perhaps disappointment is not inevitable. Perhaps pessimism is unwarranted. Perhaps body, parts, passions, faith, hope, and meaning will rise again. Perhaps not. I tend to fear the future, flee the past, and fret about the present. But, then, I lost my faith.

Still I wonder: Is the hereafter any more improbable than the here and now? Is a one-dimensional cosmos of molecules likely to produce mathematicians, mystics, and Mormons? Absent a God of love and laughter, how could so sorry a creature as I find himself driving about in his old Lincoln, listening to the incomparable polyphony of J.S. Bach?

I am amazed that ten years have passed since that eventful September of 1993, that so much has been lost, and that so little has changed. I'd be astounded to find myself here ten years hence. So, let me here say sincerely that I meant none harm and no impiety. There was no malice in my anger, which frankly still lingers. For I must confess, in closing, that I am seriously peeved that September of 1993 and its aftermath have made so little difference. But that, I suppose, could change. After all, "None of us can foretell the future."

Thank you for listening to me.



NOTE

1. Russell M. Nelson, "Divine Love," *Ensign* (Feb. 2003): 20–25.



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