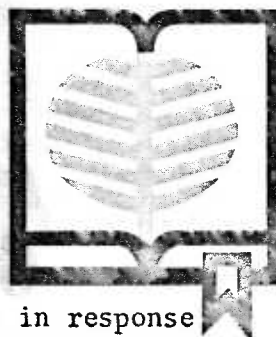


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1 Sept 75

WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, Dean
Exploratory Programs

Dear Ted,

Thanks to you and LaRue for enabling
a great week!

In addition to this thankyou, this letter is in response to the brief conversation you and I had last week on Mormonism, occasioned by your showing me a Mormon-genealogy book and my lifting out the phrase "the one true Church." In case you or La Rue or Bob or Nancy or anyone else might like to comment on anything in the letter, I'm numbering the comments.

1. I'm amazed you haven't become a Mormon! In my experience, you are the number-one holdout: your whole own-family Mormon, all deeply involved in that faith and it's mission; and you a regular attender of a Mormon church. You and I didn't discuss the reasons, but I suspect they are (a) conviction, as you were deeply involved in the Methodist Church and also have an excellent rational-historical education, and (b) parent-honor, your mother as Methodist objecting to Mormonism and your father as parent-honoring atheist. Religious commitment for most people is on the basis of these factors, in declining order of weight: (1) current social-context, (2) past social-context, (3) personal religious experience, and (4) cosmization, viz. the way one sees-and-puts-in-order the world, life, one's own life [which means that #4, while inclusive of reason, is more than "logic" in the narrow sense]. #1 is very heavy for your going Mormon; #2 is decreasingly heavy, as your parents are dying; #3 has been against going Mormon (I remember your deep involvements in Methodism as a young man), but is increasingly for going Mormon (your deepening interest in the dead family [your own genealogy], and the anguish that the dead family is soon to be increased by two, viz. your parents).
2. I don't know whether you should join the Mormon church, so to construe this letter as a plea not to would be a misunderstanding of my intention, which is only to sketch my view, as a cousin who loves you and has known of your struggles through the years and as one whose passion for more than the past third of a century has been religion and religion study.
3. In our conversation, what disturbed you most was my hesitance to use the word "Christian" for Mormonism, specifically my comparing that religion to Islam, which also (a) piggybacks a holybook on the Bible, (b) has a high doctrine of Jesus, and (c) claims restorationism, as well as prophesying (d) the submission of Christians. I'm "into" Islam (a) as a University of Hawaii teacher, two summers back, of the world's great religions, and (b) as a teacher of NYC blacks, on whom Islam, in the form of the Black Muslims, exerts conversional pressure. On the surface, Muhammed and Joseph Smith may seem to be frying different fish, but that is an illusion from relative ethnic distance: Mormonism is among "us" [white Americans], whereas a "they" [viz., Arabs] are Islamites [which is part of the appeal of the Black Muslims, viz. an affirmation of the "they"ness of black Americans over against White America]. Of course any group that wants to can call itself "Christian" and even lay claim to the exclusive use of the term, but such claims are subject to the judgment of criteria like (1) historical rootage, (2) fellow-recognition [Do other Christians acknowledge the claimed identity?], (3) literary-historical criticism [provenance, psychosocial

* A little nostalgia is healthy, but the Mormon eternalization of the reconstituted-in-heaven bio-family is nostalgia sanctified into idolatry. You will remember I compared genealogy interest to stamp-collecting: the former is good, though tempting to introversion; the latter is good, extrovertial, transtribal, global.

*The quotation is from the section in which J. Smith explains why he sought direct revelation from God: "tumult of opinions." It's in Fred. J. Streng et al, WAYS OF BEING RELIGIOUS [Prentice-Hall/73], the best book for putting any religious experience or movement in the context of all religion through the centuries and around the globe.

exegesis, lexical criticism, form criticism], and (4) self-consciousness [religious, American, cultic-competitive, eschatological]. In a special category (5) I put "human": What sort of human being does the particular movement produce---religious-pious? moralistic-legalistic? religioethical? tribalistic? pan-human? philosophical? revolutionary? quietistic?

4. You asked about the claim to be a unique restoration of "Jesus' organization of the Church," and I mentioned that I've done some work in this area [including my book THE PASTORAL LETTERS] and must conclude that the restoration claim is so far from unique as to be almost universal in the earliest apologetic-polemic of religious movements and that even Mormonism's anachronistic back-reading of its polity into Jesus and his disciple band is not unique, the church historian being able to adduce any number of hieratic submovements claiming priestcraft in Jesus' consciousness and intention....In general one may say that the uniqueness claim of any group is due to ignorance and/or overeagerness to share something which is of course unique to oneself and/or duplicity [i.e., suppressing the truth of nonuniqueness in order to have more persuasive clout]; and, on the other hand, one may say that everything's unique, which is an esthetic truth but of no persuasive value in cultic competition.As for the "organization" of Jesus with his disciples, its sociomodels were the peripatetic rabbi and, to a far lesser extent, the peripatetic Hellenistic "philosopher"--but certainly not any form of priesthood, which Jesus saw as of the temple cultus. Secular, Jewish, and Christian scholarship is one on this, and considers the Mormon view a curious aberration due to the scribal-literalistic consciousness and hermeneutic of Joseph Smith, who was typical* of his time except for the intenser activity of both his brain-hemispheres, left-rational and right-imaginal.[*E.g., racism.]

5. Further on "restorationism": Judaism is protestant Israelitism, Christianity is protestant Israelitism + Jesus, Protestantism is protestant Catholicism, Mormonism-Utah is protestant Protestantism + J. Smith + B. Young, Mormonism-Missouri is protestant Mormonism--and new protestant submovements within the Mormon movement can be expected: given enough time, such as "Protestantism" has had, Mormonism will be riven with fissiparous "restoration" claims--all very sad, ludicrous, necessary, depending on point of view. On any branch of the tree, the same dynamic phenomenon can be observed--e.g., Orthodox/Conservative/Reform/"Restorationist"/Ethical Culture Judaism. And the same on other trees--e.g., Buddhism, which is protestant Hinduism and has its many restorationist forms, "Pure Land" being closest to Mormonism [afterlife emphasis, moralism, etc.]. I treat two Mormon missionaries fairly gently because (a) I honor their commitment and courage and (b) I pity their ignorance. But as a Christian committed to Jesus and subcommitted to the great humane tradition of learning through the centuries and around the globe, I'm irritated that people are so easily duped by "true-Church," "unique," "restoration" claims of various gnostic groups such as Mormonism and Moonism (Rev. Sun Moon, now "big" in NYC), which produce "good works" at the cost of entrapping human beings in arrogant tribalisms--a political parallel, Nazism, from which compare the writings of Alfred Rosenberg with the Book of Mormon.

6. You mentioned how fast-growing Mormonism is, and that it hopes to take over all other [?] Christians. But of course statistics are valueless as truth-claim. Pentecostal Christianity is growing faster absolutely, and Moonism [which is even more Christian-language than Mormonism] is growing faster relatively. Then of course we have to do with Eastern-Hemisphere brushfires like Transcendental Meditation, a subtle form of Hindu evangelism that is now official in the public schools of many states....

7. I'll not bother you with bibliography, but only say that any developed movement can answer all objections, and all such answering can be countered at the same level of sophistication. We are on our own under God as to what we commit ourselves to "during this time of great excitement" [p.47, THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE].*

Grace and peace,

