THINKING GLOBALLY

Editor's note: The following essay is another in Dialogue's *special series which, under guest editor Ethan Yorgason, explores the Mormon experience and identity outside the usual Anglo-American cultural realm.*

Yesterday's People

Gary Huxford

It would take a detailed map of Ethiopia to help you locate the village of Lalibela more than four hundred miles north of Addis Ababa. Save for a lyrically beautiful name, there is little to distinguish this place except that it contains some of the world's most amazing monuments to religious devotion—the "mysterious subterranean, monolithic rock hewn churches," as one travel guide describes them.[1] Some eight centuries ago at a time when Ethiopia exercised a power felt throughout much of northern Africa, a Zagwe ruler dreamed of a series of churches carved from a seam of solid rock. They stand today, eleven of them, still being used for Eastern Orthodox religious ceremonies dating back to the beginning of Christianity and protected as an international historical treasure by the United Nations.

Catherine and I visited the village near the end of our missionary stint in Ethiopia, and there I experienced an epiphany. I attempted to capture something of the feeling in a letter home to our children:

> Our second Christmas in East Africa—last year in Kenya, this year in Ethiopia. I write this sitting beside Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile. It is evening and the water birds return to their nesting sanctuaries. This is the final day of a week of travel along the historical route in Northern Ethiopia, travel that included the churches of Lalibela, truly one of the world's great architectural wonders. A journey such as this redeems this desperate part of the Earth that time and circumstance have abused beyond measure. It is easy to become cynical about human nature when surrounded by people victimized by every form of degradation. But when you experience (the

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most descriptive word I can think of) these churches—eight hundred years old, chiseled out of a solid mass of living rock—you watch the slow, measured cadence of the life of the monks and priests; you smell the incense and listen to the sound of drum, chant, sistrum; and then you realize you are witness to a drama older than Christianity, older than recorded time, and perhaps as basic as breathing.

I do not want to romanticize all this. I shall leave that sort of thing to the novelists, many of whom spend their evenings soused in some shabby third world hotel, then retreat to their lakeside villa in Switzerland to write about how grand it all was, never once living among the people they describe. Life for the victims may be "real and earnest" but it is also narrow—and often short.[2]

A few years of reflection plus an additional tour of duty in Haiti have deepened my broodings begun on that day. I'm not sure I am prepared to make a commentary worthy of universal application on the implications of widely divergent cultures for a world-wide Church. My limited time and exposure may mean that what follows must be taken as no more than solitary ramblings. I am convinced, however, that these are not isolated experiences, nor limited to our time alone. Rather this interface between old and new is so time-honored as to be almost a cliché. But like all clichés, they become such because we forget the substance that made them believable at the outset.

What I felt in that dusty village in Ethiopia was the initial—"doubt" is too strong a word—reevaluation of my errand. I experienced my share, and then some, of the faith-promoting missionary stories: lives deeply impacted by the gospel message and individuals with whom an eternal bond exists. What began to weigh on my mind, however, was the burden of the totality of it all, both in terms of numbers and, more importantly, in terms of the deep cultural setting. What right had I to intrude? Yes, yes, I am mindful of the divine commission. But other than the externals of Church membership, how far was I to go into the heart of the matter? What elements of that culture, far older than our own either as Latter-day Saints or Americans, trailed along like DNA traces covering generations?

Here I was, dark-suited, badged, and armed with my *Handbook of Instructions*, ready to initiate these people of not only another place but, even more significantly, another time into a movement that, in spite of its claims to antiquity, was the very epitome of modernity in its operations. A word of explanation may help.

Much as we would like to think we are exceptional and therefore im-

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mune from general tendencies in the world of religion, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints follows pretty closely the statistical trends of the broader Christian community. We vary above and below the average depending on the factors being measured, but we don't depart far from the norm. Recent developments in western Christendom should, therefore, give us pause or, if nothing else, excite our curiosity.

One such development widely commented upon is the substantial decline of Christianity in its traditional heartland, which to us in the West means Europe and its outreach communities, together with a corresponding surge in adherents coming from non-Christian backgrounds in southern climes. Africa is a case in point although not the exclusive example. There is much to excite the imagination in this shift which is bound to leave both parties—Church and host cultures—altered in the process. To provide a setting, let me offer a quick and dirty romp through the early centuries of the Christian movement. Experts will wince, but bear with me.

The early appeal of the message of Jesus was based, among other things, on the individual's personal experience with God. The kingdom truly was within us. Personal revelation and spiritual manifestations provided constant encouragement. The great challenge was to harness these free-flowing gifts of the Spirit and channel them into a more enduring institutional setting. After all, nothing is more destructive of collective continuity than the individual acting on what is felt to be a personal mandate from God.

The answer was a church.[3] In spite of LDS arguments to the contrary, the New Testament efforts at organization were tentative, incomplete, and, from later evidence, ineffectual. And so the new movement was left with a dynamic faith based on the revelatory experience in search of an institutional framework that provided both a clarification of doctrine, at least to the defining of orthodoxy, and an organizational hierarchy. In casting about, it found the two supports it needed in Greek philosophy and the legal and political framework of the Roman Empire.

In the great compromise that spanned those early centuries, Christianity made its peace, troubled though that peace may have been, with the requirements of historical survival. But at a cost. For the sake of survival, it adopted doctrinal orthodoxy together with enforcement procedures; an ecclesiastical hierarchy, often self-perpetuating, with the power

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to mediate between the believer and God; and an earthly institution, the church, that replicated in Augustine's mind the divine kingdom of God.

The cost was the free flowing of the Spirit, which Spirit may, indeed, flow "where it listeth" (John 3:8); but as far as the religious establishment was concerned, it had darn well better "list" in well-defined paths.

Latter-day Saints will recognize much of this pattern repeated in the early history of the Restoration. One of the major issues faced by Joseph Smith, as seen in several early revelations in the subsequent Doctrine and Covenants, was the effort to silence all competing revelations and confirm his role as the sole source of guidance for the Church. Those of us today with our understandable tendency to read the present into the past are inclined to see order in these formative years where, in truth, chaos often threatened to break through.

What I witnessed in my aforementioned limited stay in the Third World convinced me that we are seeing much the same pattern. What follows are some areas where this dialogue between traditional intimate religious expectations and contemporary institutional requirements was most apparent to me.

One of my first impressions when I arrived in Africa, an impression deepened immeasurably by my subsequent experience in Haiti, was a closeness bordering on an intimate familiarity on the part of most people I met with what I would call the workings of the Spirit. This observation needs clarification.

We in the western world, heirs as we are of the Enlightenment and the subsequent scientific and industrial revolutions, persist in separating the physical from the spiritual worlds. In the Church we make a great deal of being in, but not of, the world (John 17:6–26), our very protestations suggesting that, much as we try, we still muck about in this material world.

I found less of this dichotomy in the people we met in Africa and Haiti—partly due, of course, to the absence of money to spend, but even more because of a deep cultural conditioning that prepares them to accept—indeed, expect—incidents that we would classify as spiritual manifestations. I found, for instance, that they readily accepted the Joseph Smith story complete with its recounting of visions, angels, hidden documents, and divine interventions. Prophets? No problem. They knew a prophet who lived right around the corner. In fact, an uncle of theirs just the other day. . . . Miracles? Commonplace.

I recall a conversation one day with a Haitian man, very well edu-

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cated and a Church leader. We were on our way back from a visit to the south of the island, heading to Port-au-Prince. We passed several drovers herding their cattle to market in the capital city. I wondered aloud where they spent the nights since the trip would take several days. My traveling companion replied, "They turn into animals at night and graze with the cattle." I chided him a bit to the effect that he certainly didn't believe such a thing. He allowed that "it doesn't happen as often now as it used to," but that it could and did happen was not at all in question.

And maybe it does!

Remember, the scriptures are replete with episodes of talking donkeys, spirit-possessed swine, burning bushes issuing messages, and the earth itself weeping for its inhabitants. All this is far beyond, or outside, our ken. But shift our dichotomous thinking to "I and Thou" and mix in a healthy dose of Vodou and you have a potent mix conducive to a belief in what we insist in labeling the supernatural. Maybe there is indeed more "than is dreamt of in [our] philosophy," as Hamlet remarked to Horatio, or our day-to-day religious experience.

The temple provides a good beginning for recapturing this union of the two worlds. During my stay in East Africa, the only temple on the entire continent was in Johannesburg, thousands of miles away and prohibitive in cost for all but a handful of Kenyans and Ethiopians. I had little contact with those who attended. Haiti, however, presented a different story. Haiti shares the same island with the Dominican Republic which has a temple in Santo Domingo. Though the trip is brief in terms of miles, it is still very difficult for the Haitians. Visa clearance, a generally hostile attitude toward Haitians on the part of Dominicans (not temple personnel, I hasten to add), and expense all mitigate against what we would assume to be an easy junket.

Catherine and I were moved, deeply so, as we witnessed the efforts, both financial and logistical, on the part of the Haitian Saints to attend. Catherine spent many hours assisting members by arranging their information in a TempleReady format, no small task given the convoluted nature of most Haitian family genealogies.

Their reasons for making this monumental effort included those common to most temple-going Mormons. We became aware, however, of yet another set of motives, strange and in a way thrilling to us. Be aware that these are people who come out of a religious culture that includes Vodou, much misunderstood by Anglo-American Latter-day Saints. At

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the risk of over-simplifying, Vodou involves an attempt to bridge the world of the living and the spirits of the dead. It invokes divine help. It celebrates elaborate rituals. Highly structured, it is designed to evoke a deep spiritual communion. If this sounds familiar, it should. And so in the temple, many of those with whom we spoke found themselves attracted to the ritual, the oaths of secrecy, the feeling of being initiated into the mysteries. Think of blending Hugh Nibley and *The Da Vinci Code.* However you want to interpret it, the temple to them meant something more and something deeper than it had previously meant to me.

When President Hinckley is asked, as he often is by reporters, "What is the foremost problem faced by the contemporary Church as it expands abroad?" he usually responds, "Growth," with the added explanation, "Training new leadership." And so it is. But the training aims at developing several abilities, and the easiest to achieve are those most readily measured and reported—easiest but probably least important. Far more difficult to deal with are inclinations to use the leadership role to foster values deeply embedded in the dominant cultures that shape us all. When those cultures posit values at odds with a Church culture, much is required of those who assume positions of responsibility.

The Church is new to both East Africa and Haiti, with predictable results when it comes to setting up a functioning organization. If you introduce a church noted for measures of institutional efficiency that have been borrowed equally from scriptural injunctions and Business Administration 101 into the free-wheeling setting of, say, Haiti, you have a challenge of the first order. Catherine and I served among many leaders who met the challenge in truly heroic fashion. That they did so was a tribute more to who they were rather than what they could be taught. And maybe, when all is said, meeting such challenges defines quality in leaders in any society. Good ones are a rare commodity.

But back to the issue of the cultural challenges. May I suggest a few based on personal observations.

I am struggling at this point but can come up with no better phrase than the challenge of what I would describe as leadership based on charisma, which I define as including ascribed as well as manifest abilities. As mentioned, the three countries under consideration have had a brief moment with the Mormon experience. Therefore, Church leaders at the regional and General Authority levels are new, exotic, and—dare I say it—worshipped. Visiting authorities from Church headquarters and area

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presidencies receive a respectful, almost adoring, reception and hearing. Comments from visiting authorities, even those casually made, can redirect entire lives.

This respect for ascribed charisma has both good and not-so-good implications. The good is obvious as indicated above. The not-so-good is the tendency for visiting authorities to come away from short-term visits with a sort of Potemkin-village, distorted picture of life in the trenches. I was heartened by the assignments of Elders Dallin H. Oaks, Jeffrey R. Holland, and L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve to overseas posts. Much good can come from their good sense, observational skills, and candor.

The worshipfulness described above diminishes in direct ratio with close proximity. This phenomenon is not universal, of course, but my experience indicates that local leaders succeed or fail based much more on their personal qualities than their titles. The office does not make the man or woman. Quite the opposite. I see three cultural traits that place this burden on local leaders.

One is the already mentioned theme of the Spirit. After all, if every person is his or her own prophet, then what exclusive right does one have to dictate to others? Even Martin Luther came to regret the chaos loosed upon the Christian community by the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.[4] I was jolted into this awareness shortly after arriving in Haiti. The mission president and I (I was serving as his counselor) reorganized a district, in the process creating two new branch presidencies. Following established procedures, we called in several of the leading local members to ask their opinions concerning potential branch presidents. Of the eight men we interviewed, when asked whom they recommended, seven replied, "Me. I'm your man!" Now, this may have been a language problem in which the good brethren thought we were extending a call to which they dutifully responded. But subsequent episodes convinced me otherwise.

This leads to a second trait, more characteristic of Africa than Haiti. For want of a better phrase, I will call it the "chief" syndrome. Once in power, one does not voluntarily relinquish power. Nor does one consult others. To do so is seen as demeaning. Thus, there is a tendency to close ranks, surround oneself with friends, and regard advice, however wise or well-intentioned, as a challenge. In our eighteen months in Africa, I did not know of one active former branch president. I am confident that this

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situation is correcting itself over time. But the deeper passions that provide the undergirding will always be present.

A third tendency, again more evident in Africa, is tribalism. In societies where Church culture has not yet taken root and where national loyalty is nonexistent, family and tribal ties remain preeminent.

Combine these tendencies and you have a tugging and hauling within the congregation resembling street politics more than the sedate procedures characteristic of Utah wards. As an aside, I recall holding my breath whenever we sustained local leadership. My standard report to the mission president was, "Well, we got a working majority." An exaggeration, to be sure, but not by much.

A final observation on leadership. The growth of the Church, especially during the past half century, creates a bureaucracy, the size and influence of which is a concern. This is especially apparent in newly developing areas. The Church employs a lot of people. In many economically lean countries, the Church is, in fact, the employer of first, last, and only resort. This phenomenon creates several strains, but one stands out: the inordinate number of people who work for the Church and occupy prominent ecclesiastical positions. This mixture of the secular with the religious gives us an early whiff of a professional clergy. If that is overstating the case, then let me simply state that it sets up some awkward personal and procedural problems.

Again, over time the situation will be modified, if for no other reason than the fact that growth will dilute the now top-heavy number of Church employees serving in local ecclesiastical positions. To those who argue that, after all, these leaders are the best-qualified people, my response is to point to a thousand years of medieval history, during which the Catholic Church made the same argument to defend the same practice of overlapping secular and ecclesiastical spheres, despite some consequences that were disastrous for spiritual purity: the deep involvement of ecclesiastical leaders in secular affairs and vice versa, the perpetuation of leadership within certain families, and the increasing influence on doctrine of outside influences.

The LDS Church encourages and, where necessary, enforces a moral order that is scripturally based but also deeply influenced by our western culture. We frequently found this order standing on its head. Relations among individuals, between the individual and the secular powers

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that be, rules concerning personal conduct—these all required reexamination. Although examples are numerous, I offer just one.

One highly regarded virtue of Anglo-American Mormonism is service, King Benjamin's admonition being an eloquent statement to that effect. In Haiti, the tendency is to link service with servitude. Therefore, it often becomes an indication of social inferiority. This is especially true if the service rendered involves physical effort, whether or not there is the exchange of money. The pecking order is not so much tribal, as in Kenya and Ethiopia, but, rather, socio-economic with the degree of servitude as one of the chief indicators.

The reasons are embedded deeply in Haiti's history. This failed nation's one claim to greatness is that it was created from the first successful slave revolt against European imperial control. Two centuries have not removed the inherited memory of what constitutes such personal subjugation. To "exercise . . . dominion" (D&C 121:39; the word indicated by the ellipsis is, significantly, "unrighteous") over someone else, regardless of the degree of volition, is to establish a social order. This understanding looms larger than we may be inclined to believe when it takes place in a society lacking many of the customs and mores of more highly developed societies.

I do not intend this essay to be a litany of complaints. Rather, it is a personal statement based on limited observations summarizing what seemed to me to be some deeply seated matters the Church must be aware of as it deals with people distanced by time and inclination from the world most of us have known. How do we proceed? How much correction is justified, trainable, possible, or even desirable?

As I hope the introductory vignette suggests, I am not nearly as sure of the answers as I once was. The frustrations are there, to be sure; but if you want your worship straight, passionate, moving, and spontaneous, have a go at Mormonism in the newer reaches of Church influence. But catch the delicate bloom quickly before it ripens into the rather bland fruit with which we are all familiar. And what are some of the features you will find? A few illustrations.

The Church has moved quickly and generously to provide meeting facilities for new congregations wherever we went. These buildings, more often than not, are the finest in their respective communities. The meetinghouse then becomes the religious, social, and often economic, hub of the life of the new members. In many cases, the LDS Church is the only

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game in town. (I don't use the term derisively.) For many members, their former gods have failed them. The Church is their last, best hope.

Within the walls of the buildings is a coming together of souls to create a sanctuary from what is, in the view of many of us as observers, an unimaginably harsh, external world. Here they are free to create and perform, often within the expected structures of their newly adopted religion.

Let me spend a moment with that most characteristic of all Mormon artistic forms—the spoken word. We are great talkers—or at one time were. It has been my lot in my missionary experiences, including as a young elder in Ireland, to have labored among peoples for whom the crafting of the spoken word is still an art form. Never in my years in Africa and Haiti did I hear a bad sermon—doctrinally off-center, on occasion, but nothing that couldn't be corrected. And, after all, which would you rather have, a passion that excites, even though occasionally tripping over itself, or a bland competence that is proscribed, prescribed, comfortable—and boring? Two illustrations from many:

A young girl—I'd judge her to be about fifteen—gave a sacrament meeting talk on the care of pets (no table scraps; how many brush strokes, etc.). It sounds silly to mention her effort as being memorable. But her talk was, quite simply, the most coherent, well-thought-out, and earnestly delivered presentation I have ever heard from a young person (or from most older persons, for that matter). She *worked* at it, and the results showed. She paid her audience the highest of compliments; she took us, and her responsibility toward us, seriously.

The second example took place in Nairobi but involved a non-African speaker. I mention the episode because of the reaction on the part of the listeners. We had the privilege of serving with Gunn and Donna McKay. What can one say about Gunn McKay, a larger-than-life presence, several-term Congressman from Utah, and Scot through and through? The entire mission came together for the visit of President Hinckley in 1998. The mission president, David Boucher, asked Elder McKay to address the assembled missionaries prior to the general membership meeting. McKay pulled out all the stops, including slipping into his Scots brogue. As we left, I overheard a group of young North American elders reflecting on the meeting. One of them allowed that he had "never heard a sermon like that" in his life. What he had heard, of course, was good old-fashioned pulpit oratory, the likes of which has largely disappeared in

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this age of scripted, tele-prompted, timed, doctrinally screened performances.

The Africans and Haitians we associated with craved an audience. They wrote and performed plays; and when it came to celebrating, any excuse sufficed. They measured time itself by a different standard, easier to do since most of the adults were unemployed. My most vivid example of this matter of time came in Ethiopia. As we in the West approached the year 2000, the Church financial people became quite exercised that they were not getting any response from our local Bank of Ethiopia about whether the bank was Y2K compliant. I had several conversations with the bank personnel but finally wrote Church headquarters to the effect that, hey, this is Africa, after all, and besides, in Ethiopia, operating with a different calendar, it was only 1993!

The good Saints create to fill needs, even within Church programs. In Haiti where entire branches consisted of young single adults, they invented a week-night program closely resembling the old MIA. In Addis Ababa, at the members' urging, we set up a spiritual Olympics complete with gold, silver, and bronze medals. (Many of the awardees subsequently wore their medals as part of their Sunday attire.) In Nairobi, and again in Addis, under the mission president's direction, I taught a Book of Mormon study class outside the usual CES auspices—probably not a wise thing to do but which was redeemed by the observation that, in my humble opinion, they resulted in a remarkable level of gospel learning on the part of the students.

The interface of the Church and the Third World will leave none of the parties untouched. Right now, as indicated by this essay, there are some rough edges, more than are indicated in our usual Church literature. We are replicating a history already well established. In the end, the institutionalized Church will win in the sense that its policies and procedures, as well as how it defines the life of a Saint, will determine membership. In the domestication process, however, something will be lost as it always is in such exchanges.

And it is this loss that holds my attention much more than our parading of statistics. As stated at the outset, I have no truck with those who would romanticize both the people and the process involved in this change. We can only hope for the best.

A story in closing says a lot—maybe all that needs saying.

In Nairobi, Catherine and I were invited to an outlying village where

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a well-known shaman would perform a healing ritual. It was a compliment to be invited. I found the ceremony moving, complete as it was with incantations, bones, fire, feathers, and the shaman's ritual attire. The ceremony, I was told, went back to time out of mind. Then once finished, the shaman went out to his pick-up and used his cell phone to dial up his secretary to find out his next gig.

These are memories worth hugging.

Notes

1. Patricia Schultz, *1,000 Places to See before You Die* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2003), 365.

2. Christmas letter to family and friends, written from Bahar Dar, Ethiopia, November 22, 1998.

3. I am using the term in its more restrictive and historically demonstrative sense as opposed to the broader and, save for debates among scripturalists, largely useless definition in the Bible Dictionary section of the LDS edition of the Bible (p. 645). The best scriptural example I can cite is Mosiah 18, which is, in my decidedly nonprofessional judgment, the first appearance of a "church," in the sense of a volitional, religious community, in recorded scripture. As such, the nature of both the constituents and the circumstances present at this significant event are worthy of close attention. I acknowledge the appearance of "church" (1 Ne. 13) in the "great and abominable church," but it refers to a future time and describes political, not religious, activities. Nephi also states that Zoram thinks he is talking about "the brethren of the church" (1 Ne. 4:26), but neither the Book of Mormon nor cultural information about Jerusalem in 600 B.C. enable us to see whether this group functions as a community of religious believers.

4. "Christians should be subject to the governing authorities . . . that in the liberty of the spirit they shall by so doing serve others and the authorities themselves. . . . Each one should do the works of his profession and station . . . that through them he may keep his body under control . . . and that by such works he may submit his will to that of others." Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," 1520, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1951), 78; see also Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University press, 1989), 225–57.

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