

Self-Blame and the Manifesto

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THIS ESSAY IS AN ATTEMPT to explain the responses of some Latter-day Saints to the Manifesto of 1890. It takes its inspiration from a work by Kenneth Stampp on the American Civil War, in which he proposes that uncertainties relating to the Southern states' cause profoundly affected the Southern mind both during and after the war. Both Stampp's study (1980) and a commentary on his thesis by Peter Loewenberg (1982) suggest to me that something similar may have occurred with the Mormons. As I will indicate, there was a fundamental difference between the Mormon polygamous circumstance and that described by Stampp in his examination of the South and its defense of slavery. While I believe that Stampp's approach has relevance in explaining the origin of the Manifesto, that is not the issue with which I am dealing in this paper. Neither am I seeking to diminish the significance of ingredients like political and economic distress in accounting for why the Manifesto was written.¹ I wish only to draw attention to certain psychological dimensions of the question, especially as they emerged after 1890. Specifically, I will look at expressions of guilt and self-doubt as they were fitted to the Mormon need to explain what had happened.

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¹ These considerations have been extensively explored in a number of works. See, for example, CHC 5:203-9; 6:210-19; Arrington 1958, 353-79; Godfrey 1970; G. Larson 1971; Wells 1978; and E. Lyman 1986.

The two decades previous to the Woodruff Manifesto are crucial in understanding Mormon appropriation of the document. Pressures created by the federal government's opposition to polygamy gave the time an intensity reminiscent, in some ways, of the reformation of the 1850s. On 9 January 1870, Wilford Woodruff reminded a Tabernacle audience that plurality was a commandment from heaven and that they must obey it or be damned. "Now, which shall we obey," Woodruff asked, "God or Congress? For it is God and Congress for it." The assembly, with a loud voice, answered, "We will obey God" (Kenney 1983, 6:518–19). In the spring of 1880, Church congregations throughout the territory received a special message from the General Authorities and were asked to pledge themselves to stand by the laws of God, whatever persecution and consequences may follow. During the 1880s members were told that it would amount to apostasy to renounce the principle and that to do so would result in their rejection by God. The persecution raging against them was interpreted as part of the trial and sifting associated with being among the elect.²

Mormons were reminded that they were like the Israelites in Egypt or the Christians in their early difficulties with Rome. They needed only to keep the commandments, and God would fight their battles for them.³ In late 1889, after Church authorities discussed whether or not to suspend the practice of polygamy because of the severity of government efforts to end it, President Wilford Woodruff prayed for guidance. In the words of Apostle Abraham H. Cannon, God's "answer came quick and strong" (19 Dec. 1889). President Woodruff was told that the Saints should remain allegiant to the revelations already given to them. The Lord would protect them; the wicked would not prevail. Church members needed only to keep the commandments, watch, and be faithful (Kenney 1983, 9:67ff; Nuttall, 27 Nov. 1889).

² An account of the pledge as taken by Saints in St. George is found in Larson and Larson (1980, 2:491–92); see also Orson Pratt's 1880 discourse in *Journal of Discourses* (20:327). For a small sample of typical sermons, see "Effect of Persecution," *Contributor* 4 (Oct. 1882): 34; JD 25:191 (Brigham Young speaking in 1884); editorial, *Deseret News*, 23 April 1885; and "No Relinquishment," *Deseret News*, 5 June 1885.

³ Comparisons with the ancient Jews, persecuted Christians, and even the repressed and injured American Indian were made with considerable frequency. See Kenney 1983, 7:51; JD 22:178–79; 23:271–72; 26:42–43, 159–60; Larson and Larson 1980, 2:555; Joseph F. Smith's comments in Jenson 1887, 195; Eyring, "Reminiscences"; Condie, "Reminiscences and Diary," 3 March 1889. Urgings that the Saints need only trust in God include JD 20:296, 315, 355; 24:111, 173; Larson and Larson 1980, 2:642.

Mormons had looked for the Second Coming of Christ since the 1830s, and opposition to polygamy was counted as further evidence that the time was near. Responding to the United States Supreme Court's decision in the *Reynolds* case, L. John Nuttall wrote in his diary 7 January 1879 that the cup of iniquity was full and that surely the Lord would "shortly come out of his hiding place and vex the nation." Apostle Erastus Snow said in 1884 that the day was at hand when Joseph and Hyrum Smith would be resurrected and Christ would appear among his followers—all, he indicated, before the apocalyptic events associated with destruction of the wicked ("Discourse" 1884). When the House of Representatives approved the Edmunds-Tucker Act in 1887, Wilford Woodruff warned that Congress had "turned the last key that seals their condemnation and lays the foundation for the overthrow & final destruction of the United States Government" (in Kenney 1983, 8:420–21).

The completion of Utah's first four temples between 1877 and 1893 (particularly the Salt Lake Temple) corresponded with hardships associated with the anti-polygamy crusade and contributed to Mormon expectations that special events were soon to occur (Stuy 1990). Sensing the dedication of Church members, Apostle John Henry Smith told a priesthood gathering in 1888 that, if the Church's leaders would show the way, the people would certainly follow. During a meeting of the apostles only four months before the Manifesto, Quorum President Lorenzo Snow told his brethren they would live to see the Savior and would participate in the great work of the world's closing scenes. And Apostle John Henry Smith, less than ten days before the Manifesto, told a Church conference in St. George that "no principle or Revelation that God ever gave to his people was to be laid on the shelf as a thing of the past" (Morgan, 6 Oct. 1888; Young, Jr., 29 May 1890; Larson and Larson 1980, 2:718).

We must recall, in understanding the Mormon mind of that time, what the modern church has purposely, and quite successfully, forgotten: the extraordinary significance attached by nineteenth-century Mormons to the principle of plural marriage. It was, said some, the most important truth given the world by the Restored Church. It revealed the domestic economy of the gods. It alone promised to eliminate prostitution and other forms of sexual corruption; it brought hygienic and biological benefits of a startling nature. It was said to have the capacity for restoring the longevity of the ancient patriarchs. It assured correct government in the home and, therewith, greater peace and stability in society at large. Some called it the "chief cornerstone" of the work; others saw its implementation as a pre-

requisite for Christ's return and the commencement of the Millennium.⁴

And mere belief in the doctrine was not enough—men were told they must actually engage in the practice. George Q. Cannon informed an audience in St. George that he was reluctant to lift his hand to sustain any presiding officer who had not entered the principle. Church elders were told that having a dead woman sealed to them, or living “consecutive polygamy” by taking a new wife after a former one passed away, was not enough. One must live with more than one wife at the same time.⁵ Polygamy was a requirement for membership in the revived School of the Prophets during the 1880s. Members hesitated, for example, to admit John Smith, Patriarch of the Church, because he smoked and, though husband to two wives, spent all his time with only one (Graffam 1981, 37, 48, 57).

Considering the importance of the tenet and the firm assurances that God would protect and deliver his people, why, then, was there a Manifesto? Justifications given at the time it was submitted in general conference—that Church members had suffered enough and that President Woodruff was guiding the Saints by prayer and inspiration—only beg the question. Recognizing untoward circumstances confronting the Church does not reconcile the event with promises and statements of previous years. The argument that the Woodruff document was a “victory” because it was issued only at the Mormon president's pleasure, or because it salvaged other features of Mormon practice, overlooks the fact that such compensation was purchased at the expense of what many considered their most precious tenet (Thomason 1971).

Neither does it help to remember that the Manifesto, when first issued, probably was not intended by Church leaders to be the great dividing line it later became. It is true the document was initially contrived as little more than a tactic and that approved plural marriages continued to be performed for years after its announcement (Quinn 1985). It is also true that nearly two decades passed before the statement was included in the 1908 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*

⁴ Illustrative sources are JD 4:254–55; 11:210, 354; 14:339; 17:218–19; 20:352–53; 25:21, 114–15; Penrose 1868; “Be Not Led Astray by Deceivers,” *Deseret News*, 13 Dec. 1879; “Expressions from the People,” *Deseret News*, 14 April 1885.

⁵ For Cannon's St. George statement, see Larson and Larson 1980, 2:629. There are countless references by Church leaders preaching the necessity of polygamy for those wishing the highest reward in the hereafter. See, for example, Charles S. Smith Diary, 26 April 1884, p. 259; Kimball 1981, 237; Kenney 1983, 8:126–27, 235; John Morgan Diaries, 6 Oct. 1888; JD 20:99; 24:284–85; Roberts 1884, 52, 107; and Tanner 1973, 62.

and that it went through several stages of interpretation before acquiring the regard it has today. This said, it was still an event of traumatic consequence for many. When presented, the Manifesto took numbers by surprise, provoking sadness and disappointment. It was said that gloom filled the Tabernacle after the announcement of its approval. Some sobbed with regret. There were General Authorities who were unhappy with the change. And, contrary to subsequent Church accounts describing the vote on the document as unanimous, we know it was not and that many refused to vote at all. President Woodruff himself later admitted that many Saints were sorely tried by what he had done.⁶

Puzzlement lingered as late as 1930, when Brigham H. Roberts published his *Comprehensive History of the Church*. Discussing the response to the Manifesto, Roberts pointed out that with all the Latter-day Saints had suffered, “they were prepared to suffer more. The thought of surrendering it [plural marriage] had never occurred to the great body of the church, and they were slow to be reconciled to the action.” In almost every paragraph he wrote about it, Roberts betrayed question, if not doubt, as to the necessity of the Manifesto. The most he seemed able to say, by way of justification, was that God’s purposes were His own (CHC 6:223). Years later, an unidentified correspondent told Kimball Young what a blow the Manifesto had been to him, saying that while eventually reconciled to the document, his first question had been, “Could it be that the Lord had made a mistake?” (K. Young 1954, 411).

The sense that a great cause had been inexplicably denied them afflicted some for years. Paraphrasing the sentiments of a plural family that he interviewed in the 1930s, Kimball Young described the period following the Manifesto as the “hardest times.” Until then those engaged in the principle “had the consolation that they were doing right and living their religion. The persecution did not matter.” But with renunciation of the principle, he said, all that had given them a sense of cause was taken away (Larsen 1935, 2).

There was, however, an answer that could explain what had happened. The principle had not failed. Neither had the Saints’ oracles led them astray. Plurality remained a truth, and God had not broken

⁶ “Box Elder Stake Conference,” *Deseret Weekly*, 7 Nov. 1891. See also William Gibson statement in “Polygamous Issues,” *Deseret News*, 28 March 1896; Brigham H. Roberts as quoted in Walker 1982, 365; William Henry Gibbs, Sr., Diary, 6 Oct. 1890; Abbie Hyde Cowley Diaries, 6 Oct. 1890; Gibson Condie Diary, pp. 108–9; Joseph Henry Dean Diary, 6 Oct. 1890; John Mills Whitaker Diaries, 6 Oct. 1890; and Lucy W. Kimball testimony in *Reorganized* 1893, 375.

his promises. Rather, the Saints themselves were responsible for the cessation of plural marriage. The practice of God's holy law was only postponed for a more deserving generation. Comments to this effect appeared within a year of the Manifesto, in a sermon by First Presidency counselor George Q. Cannon (*Deseret News*, 14 Nov. 1891). On that occasion, he explicitly stated that the document was given because the Saints had failed in their religious responsibilities. In an April 1893 lecture given in the Salt Lake Temple, Joseph F. Smith said much the same thing (Whitaker, 9 April 1893). And Apostle Matthias F. Cowley repeated in a 1901 address that it was the Church's own failures that accounted for the Manifesto (in Smoot *Proceedings* 1906, 1:8).

This is, of course, close to the interpretation of Mormon fundamentalists who describe the event as simply an appeasement and surrender to the ways of the world. As one fundamentalist writer explains, just as the ancient Israelites were given a king instead of a prophet, modern Israel was given monogamy instead of the principle (Fulton and Allred 1970, 4:66; see also Newson 1956; Kraut 1977, 140–59).

When the Manifesto was first presented to the Saints in conference, perseverance shown by Church members was memorialized, and they were told the Lord was relieving them from further trial (“Remarks” 1890). In his comments, Cannon referred to an 1841 revelation excusing the Saints from further efforts in an assignment frustrated by their enemies. That revelation exempted the Church from building a temple in Missouri because they had done all they could; continued striving in the face of great opposition was unnecessary (D&C 124:49). This was a change, however, from what Church members were told only five years before. A 5 June 1885 *Deseret News* editorial said that any seeking to use the 1841 revelation as precedent for discontinuing polygamy were moral weaklings—and needed “a ramrod fastened parallel with their spinal column.” The editorial further argued that circumstances giving rise to the 1841 revelation were entirely different from those confronting the Saints in the 1880s. The former had to do with the erection of a physical structure. The Saints either could or could not perform the task. Now, said the *News*, they were dealing with a “law,” an eternal principle. In other words, there seems to have been a return after the Manifesto to attitudes previous to the statement, shifting responsibility more directly to Church members themselves.

The charge of Mormon error was not confined to remarks by Church leaders. In comments by lay members we encounter the most telling references to where the Saints had failed. Recounting a conversation with an older Mormon woman in the early 1890s, Florence

Merriam remembered that the woman had said the Manifesto came about because so many were not living plurality correctly. It had, she said, become “almost a curse to us” (Merriam 1894, 132–33). Journalist Richard Barry reported another Mormon to say the Saints had fallen into such unrighteousness in practicing polygamy that God had to bring it to a halt (1910, 451). Another, Victoria Jackson, recorded in her journal that the Lord ceased fighting their battles because “the law [of plural marriage] was dragged into the gutter. Old men swapped daughters, sex weakness predominated in many cases. Some men neglected present wives . . . and were captivated by a younger face (pp. 4–5). Joseph Lee Robinson later wrote of his concern that, during the 1880s and 1890s, much wickedness had emerged in connection with the principle (p. 66). And Sarah Hendricks, the daughter of a Mormon pluralist, remarked that polygamy “was taken away” because so much abuse had crept into it (1980, 8; see also K. Young 1954, 411; Draper 1980; and Walser 1976).

Whether or not Mormon polygamy had morally degenerated to such a degree, these statements tell of suspicion by the faithful that not all was right in the households of those living the celestial law. Uneasiness about Mormon polygamous behavior is what invites the comparison with Southern misgiving as described by Kenneth Stampp. Citing examples such as the relative rapidity with which Southern states joined in opposing slavery after the Civil War, Stampp argues that the Southern will was eroded by moral equivocation, a process that was often only partly conscious (1980, 255–56).

The parallel is not exact and the issue more complicated because Mormons believed plural marriage to be divine law. Mormons challenging plurality in any fundamental way risked more than cultural treason—they courted heresy and damnation. Unlike those Southerners who Stampp said secretly fretted over their cause, few Saints are likely to have questioned the abstract rightfulness of plural marriage. The Mormon struggle arose within because of what were perceived as personal shortcomings in practicing a commandment of God.

We know, for example, that romantic and exclusive inclinations haunted many polygamous relationships. The persistence of such assumptions has been noted by students of the Mormon polygamous family for decades.⁷ Yet, opposed to such feelings were urgings by

⁷ Hulett 1940, 1943; Young 1954, 291–93; Olson 1975, 61–62. Despite a modest increase in the number of polygamous contractions through the mid-1880s, Presidents Cannon and Smith later indicated that Mormon reluctance to embrace the institution had brought the Manifesto upon them. See “Remarks Made by President George Q. Cannon,” *Deseret News*, 14 Nov. 1891; and Joseph F. Smith’s comments recorded in

Church leaders that plurality was the better way and that all Saints should strive to be worthy to live it. Monogamous sentiments undoubtedly acted as an incubus on the consciences of many, pluralists and non-pluralists, men and women alike.

More crucial, and what particularly recommends the theme of guilt as part of the Mormon response to the Manifesto, is the nervousness felt by many Saints about their sexual behavior. Most of this, I believe, revolved around the question of whether and to what degree sexual activity was to be enjoyed apart from its use for reproduction. General approval of erotic pleasure in marriage previous to the Mormon removal West seems to have given way to a more rigoristic ethic in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁸ This was partly due, undoubtedly, to uncertainties felt by Americans in general about sexual purpose. Anxiety was sharpened by the fact that, despite growing acceptance of the importance of romance, medical advice manuals of the time warned of the dangers sexual indulgence could bring, and Victorians sometimes anguished acutely over what to do with the pleadings of their glands.⁹

Mormon apologetics in behalf of polygamy also contributed to increased sensitivity about the propriety of sexual pleasure. Except for expressions of outrage over Gentile hypocrisy, no subject connected with sexuality occupied Mormon spokespersons more often than denials that gratification of the flesh had anything to do with plural marriage.¹⁰ One might argue, of course, that the frequent and emphatic

Rudger Clawson Diary, 6 Nov. 1899. The relative increase in plural contractions was noted in "Report of the Utah Commission," (*Report* 1885, 2:886); see also Ivins 1956, 231–32.

⁸ Oliver Cowdery, for example, told his wife in a 4 May 1834 letter that not even maternal responsibilities should interfere with a married couple's personal relationship. And Parley P. Pratt recalled that the Prophet Joseph Smith spoke to him approvingly of affection and intimacy in marriage (1985, 259–60).

⁹ For extended discussion of attitudes toward sexuality in nineteenth-century American society, especially relating to its dangers, see Fellman and Fellman 1981, 22–23; Haller and Haller 1974; Barker-Benfield 1976; relevant sections of Degler 1980; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988, 55–84; and Lystra 1989. The impact and appropriation of such views among the Mormons is explored in Hardy 1986. The issue is also treated in Kern 1981, 9, 32–33 passim; Bush 1976; and Campbell and Campbell 1976, 394–96. For suggestion that equivocal feelings about sexuality in contemporary Mormon society is at least partly an inheritance from the past, see Raynes 1987, 238–42.

¹⁰ As a small sample, see JD 2:76; 3:266; 4:278; 8:118; 9:36; 11:210; 20:26; 22:97; 23:228; 25:227; "The Sin of Adultery," *Millennial Star* 30 (5 Dec. 1868):776–79; "'Mormonism' Not Sensual," *Millennial Star* 30 (5 Dec. 1877):789–90; Kenney 1983, 5:563; Cannon, 8 Sept. 1890.

nature of such denials betrayed Mormon anxiety on the subject. Whatever its reason, reproduction was set forth with impassioned emphasis as the near-exclusive function of sexual relations. The Saints were sermonized and warned repeatedly to beware of non-reproductive indulgence.¹¹ Indeed, this was identified by Mormon leaders as one of the gifts of plurality—that multiple partners permitted men to more easily fulfil their needs while confining themselves to reproductively purposed sexual activity. Polygamy, they said, minimized the profligacy they believed inherent in monogamy.¹²

Criticism of the Saints for their failure to abide by the divinely ordained purposes of sexual relations—especially in polygamy—had flowed across Mormon pulpits for years. Brigham Young declared in 1862 that abuse of the principle was sending thousands to hell, and Heber C. Kimball said in 1868 that “hundreds and thousands” in the Church were not living celestial marriage as it was intended (JD 11:269; 12:190). In a sermon in Springville, Utah, Apostle Orson Hyde upbraided the Saints for what he called their “secret sins.” He specifically warned married couples to avoid sexual congress except for reproduction, and admitted that, especially in its early years, polygamy had led many into sexual excess (Gallup, 11 Feb. 1857). And during the 1880s, Apostle Erastus Snow told Mormon colonists in Mexico that too many men were yet rushing into plurality for the wrong reasons.¹³

A common, often dominant, refrain in attacks made upon the Saints was that religion and philosophy were no more than scaffolding, a front to cover their true motivation: common, animal lust. Sexual criticisms by abolitionists of the Old South were adapted and used

¹¹ While this is more extensively explored in Hardy (1986), the following references are illustrative: Orson Hyde’s sermon, reported in Gallup (11 Feb. 1857); a Mormon Elder’s comments recorded in Sinclair (1982, 194); JD 4:278; 13:207–208; B. Young (1861); Ballantyne (1854, 5); and Erastus Snow as reported in Larson and Larson (1980, 2:620).

¹² See, for example, JD 11:206; 24:144–45; G. Cannon 1882, 3068; “Baptism and Plurality of Wives,” *Millennial Star* 17 (30 Oct. 1855):645; “The New York Sun on the ‘Mormons,’” *Millennial Star* 26 (4 Nov. 1865):693–96; “Epistle of the First Presidency,” 4 April 1885, in Clark 1965, 3:11. This subject is explored at much greater length in the author’s forthcoming book, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage*, to be published by the University of Illinois Press.

¹³ Erastus Snow’s comments are found in Jenson, “Diaz Ward,” (1 Aug. 1885). See also “Discourse by Prest. George Q. Cannon,” *Deseret News*, 1 Nov. 1884; Joseph F. Smith’s comment to Heber J. Grant concerning Albert Carrington, in Heber J. Grant Diaries, 24 Dec. 1885; and the paraphrase of the thoughts of Apostle Francis M. Lyman, in A. Lyman 1958, 102.

against the Mormons.¹⁴ And the Saints, despite public denials, must sometimes have internalized such remarks, if only as private self-interrogation—a tendency reinforced by the insistence of their leaders that principle, not passion, must govern them in their marital relations (JD 5:290–91; 9:269; 11:210–11; 18:375; 23:64–65). The intense emphasis on righteous perseverance in the face of attacks from Church enemies, typical of sermons in the 1880s, sensitized Church members to personal failure. The struggle many had with monogamous impulses must have acted as an accusing witness of their selfishness and doubt. But the emphasis on a strictly reproductive employment of sex would have been especially keen as a testament to weakness of the flesh. Mormon preachment created an ideal that was difficult to attain. And, as Freud reminded us, the territory between what we desire and what others tell us we *ought* to desire is a region fertile with guilt (Freud 1922, 106).

In his essay, Kenneth Stampf suggests that what he found in the South could be duplicated often in history. Individuals and societies engaged in great moral conflicts often internalize the issues in ways that, even if unconscious, profoundly affect the outcome of events—so much so that they sometimes actually invite defeat (Stampf 1980, 255). I am not saying that Mormon anxiety acted so powerfully as to contribute to surrender on the practice of polygamy. But I have tried to show that such feelings were recruited *after* the Manifesto, at least by some, as a way of explaining why the document was necessary. This agrees with the research of Leon Festinger and his associates who found some years ago that, surprisingly, when prophecies or theological certitudes fail, most followers in religious movements rebound with even greater faith than before, rather than lose belief. The process seems to involve the invention of a rationale consistent with former teachings that explains the disappointment or failure. The rationale is then adduced as further evidence that what they had believed in, but lost, was indeed true (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956).

The Saints had been told that plural marriage was a dangerously powerful thing, equally capable of bringing great blessings or great sorrow and evil. The crisis of belief precipitated by the 1890 declara-

¹⁴ Abolitionist concern with sexual sin in the ante-bellum South, and revival of reform efforts in this area after the war is treated in Walters (1973). Resurrection of Abolitionist rhetoric, and its focus on sexual immorality after the Civil War, is a primary theme in Pivar (1973). For examples of such criticism directed against the Mormons, see Ferris 1856, 146–47, 200; Utanus 1858; Froiseth 1882, 212; Dixon 1868, 183–84; Tiedeman 1886, 539; “Report of the Governor of Utah,” 1885, 2:1020. See also Bunker and Bitton 1983, 128.

tion naturally provoked members to explain and to blame. Consistent with warnings concerning their sexual behavior, some appropriated events of their recent past as proof that the teachings were true. However, distress and faultfinding took different forms. Apostle Matthias F. Cowley, for example, more than a decade after the Manifesto, said that Mormon society had inherited a generation of immoral women because their mothers had displayed insufficient regard for the principle when it was permitted (*Deseret News*, 9 Aug. 1902). William Henry Smart, joined to an additional wife by a high Church authority in 1903 but yet uncertain about the meaning of the Manifesto, reportedly blamed the birth of a retarded child on relations he had had with his plural wife (Smart 1980). One is reminded of Anne Firor Scott's description of Southern attitudes after the Civil War when she paraphrased a Southern lady to say that "the four years of bloody War was a fit penance for so many [sexual] sins" (Scott 1970, 53).¹⁵

By recalling their doubts, their hesitations associated with plurality, and the sting of guilt for what Apostle Orson Hyde called their "secret sins," Mormons were able to save a recent passage of their history from what must otherwise have been an inexplicable defeat. By resorting to self-blame, regard for their leaders and the principle remained intact. God had not abandoned them. They had failed Him. The Manifesto, they could reason, was a consequence of their own misdeeds.

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¹⁵ I am indebted to Professor Klaus Hansen for bringing this quotation to my attention.

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