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# Mormons and Muslims: Living in an Intolerant World

Matt Bagley

December 7, 2011

September 11. Osama Bin Laden. Suicide bombers. Taliban. Terrorism. Cult. Allah. Muslim. These are just a few of the many words that instinctively slip to the tip of the tongue as the average American is asked to verbalize his or her thoughts on the Middle East. Not only are these some of the first words and images that come to mind, they are oftentimes the only words and images that one might have in regards to this group of people.

Cult. Joseph Smith. The Book of Mormon. Polygamy. Gold bible. These are some of the words that come to mind as an average American is asked about Mormons or the "Mormon Church." And like the example of the Middle East, these are often not only the first, but the only things some may know about this group of people.

Unfortunately the stereotypes aren't new, the prejudices aren't isolated to one generation, and the fear of a different way of thinking and living than that of the so-called norm holds strong. Isn't it interesting that these two religions- these two groups of people- which started at different times in history, in different parts of the world, and by different people, can have something so strongly in common? Isn't it interesting that two philosophies that are so very different in certain points of doctrine and outward worship and lifestyle are both viewed in such a similar light by so many? Perhaps the peoples of the Middle East and the peoples of Mormonism aren't very different at all. Perhaps no other two groups in the modern world could so well relate and understand the unique scrutiny and criticism faced by the other.

Observing these two groups of people gives us an interesting perspective on the nature of humans: We tend to fear, belittle, despise, and shy away from people, places, or activities that are different than our own perceived normal or familiar. We pride ourselves on our own customs and how they've shaped the progress of our societies, yet criticize that very trait when demonstrated by someone else. Customs and lifestyles don't just apply to a religion or church, they apply in nearly every

area of life, including gender, race, nationality, economic condition, political orientation, and social position. Intolerance and prejudice can easily infiltrate all peoples when left unchecked. Véronique Campion-Vincent wrote, “Social scientists have become increasingly conscious of the strength of prejudice... all of us at some uncritical emotional level may harbour racial prejudices.”<sup>1</sup> Whether racial, religious, or any other prejudice, with this understanding we can look at the examples of the past to help us see why prejudices form and how to overcome them.

Dr. Richard Francaviglia, in his speech at the Arrington Mormon History Lecture this year, put a heavy emphasis on the fact that early Mormon history has strong connections to the peoples of the Middle East. He highlighted the fact that Mormon leaders were fascinated by the Middle Eastern culture and were influenced by it as well. Muslims, Jews, and others of Middle Eastern origin were viewed in a negative light by many, and the fact that the Mormons adopted somewhat of an “Oriental identity” helped fuel the fire of prejudice from those opposed to the Mormon faith.<sup>2</sup> There are indeed many striking similarities between the Mormons and Muslims. There are, in fact, enough parallels between the two cultures that Dr. Francaviglia stated, “one cannot fully understand Mormonism without understanding Orientalism.”<sup>3</sup> Such similarities are key to understanding why both groups have been disparaged in both the past and the present. I will highlight several of these commonalities that often prove catalysts to the controversy and prejudice.

A common characteristic of both Mormonism and Islam is that both were started under the direction of men revered by their followers as prophets of God. Like the ancient prophets of the Old Testament, these men (Mohammed and Joseph Smith, respectively), were mouthpieces for God to speak His words to the people. Christian sects across the world accept the teachings and the divine role

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<sup>1</sup> Campion-Vincent, Veronique. "Preaching Tolerance?" *Folklore* 106.1/2 (1995): 21.

<sup>2</sup> Francaviglia, Richard. "Like the Hajis of Meccah and Jerusalem'—Orientalism and the Mormon Experience, 1820-1970." Arrington Mormon History Lecture. 15 Sep 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Francaviglia, Arrington Mormon History Lecture, 15 Sep 2011.

the prophets played in the Bible, but deny that prophets with similar abilities or duties still live, at least in an equal capacity as the Biblical figures. The incredible devotion and faith that the peoples of both religions place on the word of God, as it is given them through their prophets, has been and is disturbing to those who do not share such beliefs. And though the current religions as seen by the world were started by Mohammed and Joseph Smith, in both cases they claim to be continuing the same Gospel and same faith that is found in the Old Testament, and both religions cite scriptures from the Bible as prophecies referring to these prophets.<sup>4</sup>

The respective ministries of each originate from divine visitations of heavenly beings. Mohammed reports having been visited by the angel Gabriel and receiving his calling to serve as Allah's prophet.<sup>5</sup> Joseph Smith's account of his initial experience is being visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ, in which visit he learned that all churches had deviated from the ancient church of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Each subsequently went on to preach the messages they reported to have received. In both instances such claims were bold and extremely controversial. Mohammed lived hundreds of years before Joseph Smith and had already made a drastic impact in the religious world. As Dr. Francaviglia mentioned, many during Smith's time considered him the "Ontario Mohammed," saying that America was the best place thinkable for a second Mohammed to come onto the religious scene and create a stir, or a new movement.<sup>7</sup> Due to the already existent fear and disdain towards the Muslim and Mid-Eastern culture harbored by many in the United States, the thought of a new Mohammed was indeed troublesome.

Trouble and opposition seem to follow these two groups wherever they go in the world. As previously mentioned, much of the cause of this pertains to some of the uncharacteristic doctrines seen

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<sup>4</sup> Nasir, Khalil, Ahmad. "Muhammad in the Bible." Al Islam. Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. <http://www.alislam.org/books/in-bible/index.html#brethren>

<sup>5</sup> Singh, David Emmanuel. "Muhammad, "The Prophet Like Moses"?" *Journal Of Ecumenical Studies* 43.4 (2008): 545-561.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Joseph. *Joseph Smith-History*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1838.

<sup>7</sup> Francaviglia, Arrington Mormon History Lecture, 15 Sep 2011.

as radical or oppressive by many. One of the most controversial is that of polygamy, or the practice of one man having multiple wives as his own. Both religions have practiced this lifestyle, although the practice was officially abolished among Mormons in the year 1890 through an official declaration from Wilford Woodruff, who was the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints at the time.<sup>8</sup> The religion of Islam at large still practices polygamy, and even in the United States and other western countries where such practices are illegal, it is practiced by some members as part of their culture.<sup>9</sup>

This has been a subject of intense criticism of both groups of people. Many have argued that leaders of these groups called for this practice to satisfy some sort of lustful, sexual desire and use their religious titles to justify and coerce their followers into the practice. This was an accusation used especially against Joseph Smith by his opponents. *The Nauvoo Expositor* was a short-lived newspaper designed to “expose” the grievances opponents of Joseph Smith had. It was published by one William Law, a man who had previously served as a counselor to Smith in the First Presidency, the highest governing body of the Church. In the Friday, June 7 1844 issue it reads:

Our hearts have mourned and bled at the wretched and miserable condition of females in this place; many orphans have been the victims of misery and wretchedness, through the influence that has been exerted over them, under the cloak of religion and afterwards, in consequence of that jealous disposition which predominates over the minds of some, have been turned upon a wide world, fatherless and motherless, destitute of friends and fortune; and robbed of that which nothing but death can restore.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Woodruff, Wilford. Official Declaration-1. *The Doctrine and Covenants*. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1890.

<sup>9</sup> Hassouneh-Phillips, Dena. "Polygamy And Wife Abuse: A Qualitative Study Of Muslim Women In America." *Health Care For Women International* 22.8 (2001): 735-748.

<sup>10</sup> Law, William. "Preamble." *Nauvoo Expositor* 7 Jun 1844: 2.

Comments such as this, made by those who had at one time been close to Smith and other church leaders, ignited a spirit of hatred and violence against members of the church.

Similar statements have been made against Muslims for their practice of polygamy. In 2001, Dena Hassouneh-Phillips of the School of Nursing at Oregon Health Sciences University surveyed a number of American Muslim women on the subject of polygamy. In her article describing her findings she reports, "Experiences of polygamy in this sample of American Muslim women were intertwined with abuse. All women reported feeling that they were treated unfairly in comparison with other wives, and all women perceived this as emotional abuse and religious failure on the part of husbands. Also significant was the presence of co wives, who sometimes were witnesses to abuse by husbands and sometimes acted as perpetrators themselves."<sup>11</sup>

These are indeed troublesome reports, but they represent only one side of the coin. When looking at the other side of the argument an entirely new perspective opens up. An important element to understanding a group of people is just that-understanding. One must understand the context of a practice and the motivations behind it. The Old Testament is replete with examples of prophets of God who practiced polygamy. Is it any wonder that two religions who revere this book as scripture would see divine justification in its implementation? As mentioned, Mormons no longer practice polygamy, but in both cases, that of modern Islam and early Mormonism, the practice exists and is perpetuated out of a deep, sincere conviction that they are doing God's will for them, just as a Catholic honors the Virgin Mary, a Jew faithfully adheres to the Torah, or a Hindu refuses to eat the meat of a cow. Such is the case with all other unique, mysterious, or controversial practices by any religion or group of people. The key to tolerance is understanding someone else's motives, and while not necessarily accepting or believing them, learning to allow for their existence.

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<sup>11</sup> Hassouneh-Phillips, ""Polygamy And Wife Abuse: A Qualitative Study Of Muslim Women In America," 735-748.

Differences in religious belief and practice, like those just mentioned, are some of the hinges upon which the doors of great prejudice and misunderstanding turn. On what basis should an individual or society judge another? Should a person's worth, status, or level of perceived societal danger be based upon religion? Should it be based upon race, gender, income, or any other of a host of demographic traits? These are questions that are not easily answered, and the debates will surely continue. To some extent certain societies, including that of the United States, have already decided the answers to these questions. For example, the last sentence of Article VI of the Constitution reads, "[N]o religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."<sup>12</sup> Many societies are beginning to adhere to this philosophy, but there is still much improvement to be made.

Passing judgment is so often dependent upon actually meeting or knowing somebody. Recently Daniel Ruth, a columnist for the *St. Petersburg Times*, wrote an article in which he experienced a difference of perspective on a Mormon leader after meeting him. The article was written in the midst of controversy surrounding the Presidential election, and the Mormon issue was largely brought to the table by strong, prejudiced comments made by leaders of other religions denouncing the Mormon faith of candidate Mitt Romney and referring to it as a cult. Mr. Ruth had the opportunity of meeting Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the second highest governing body of the church. Ruth states:

Nelson paid a visit to the *St. Petersburg Times* editorial board recently and at 87, he was lean, fit, mentally sharp and about to embark on a multi-nation tour on behalf the church. There were no horns. No signs of Beelzebub. No harems. This was just a thoughtful, spiritual man. Nelson readily acknowledged the church's image problems. His solution? Simply live a moral, decent life. Be a responsible member of the

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<sup>12</sup> The Constitution of the United States. Article VI.

community. And by living a virtuous life, you set an example for others to recognize Mormonism is not a threat to anyone — except perhaps Starbucks.” Ruth went on to state that, “We all tend to fear what we don't know... I am an extremely lapsed Catholic who hasn't voluntarily attended Mass in more than 45 years. But what if I suddenly faced some personal crisis and I wanted to talk to someone for spiritual insight, guidance or consolation? Whom would I be more comfortable with? Would it be [an outspoken Pastor from Dallas] or would it be the octogenarian gentle man, who may hold dogmatic beliefs I don't subscribe to, but nevertheless yearns to simply lead a meaningful life. I think I would be on the next plane to Salt Lake City.”<sup>13</sup>

The purpose here, of course, is not to endorse or favor one religious leader over another but to simply highlight the fact that one cannot pass judgment until they truly know the person on whom the judgment is passed. Prior to this meeting Mr. Ruth may likely have held biases and fears about Mormon leaders based on discussion in the media, but once he met Elder Nelson he realized he was a man that could be respected and didn't need to be feared.

Prejudice and judgment don't pick favorites, and most every group has some experience with this terrible twosome. But some groups seem to be better acquainted with them than others, and reasons like the ones highlighted in this essay are in large part to blame. In reality one of the biggest reasons prejudice exists is a lack of understanding and promulgation of misinformation. There are many efforts to try and counter intolerance by trying to counter the dissemination of information that is either incorrect or taken out of its proper context.

Dean Obeidallah, an award-winning comedian who has appeared on multiple TV shows and is the executive producer of the annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival and the Amman Stand

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth, Daniel. “Friend of Perry is Enemy of Almost Everyone Else.” *St. Petersburg Times* 11 Oct. 2011.

Up Comedy Festival visited Salt Lake City during the very time the previously mentioned comments about the Mormon faith being a cult were made. In response to the comments and his trip to Utah he wrote an article that appeared on CNN.com. He writes his purpose in traveling to Utah by stating, "I was in Salt Lake City because I'm performing as part of a stand-up comedy tour called 'The Muslims Are Coming,' featuring American-Muslim comedians performing free comedy shows across the country as a way, we hope, to counter misinformation and build bridges with our fellow Americans." He later stated, "There we were -- Muslims and Mormons -- bonding on some level because we were both the subject of attacks from people on the far right."<sup>14</sup>

This is yet another example of Mormons and Muslims sharing a piece of the intolerance pie, and while usually praying over it in a little different manner, they eat the same one at the same table. Diversity and variety is something to be celebrated, not feared or despised. As people learn to educate themselves and understand others, a greater spirit of tolerance will permeate our society and remove prejudice.

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<sup>14</sup> Obeidallah, Dean. "Who Says Mormons Aren't Christians?" CNN Opinion 12 Oct 2011. CNN.com. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/12/opinion/obeidallah-mormon-christian/index.html>

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