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Richard L. Bushman

What is the place of Joseph Smith's teachings in our time? What do his writings have to say in a world so much different from the one he himself lived in? If Joseph Smith were alive today, he would be 186 years old. Most of his writings have been in circulation for over 150 years. During that century and a half, vast changes in government, the economy, philosophical outlook, and popular values have transformed society. After all this, what do Joseph Smith's teachings have to say about the problems of late twentieth-century society? We do not expect his writings to illuminate all of the issues in our daily newspapers, much less the multitude of questions that accumulate from decade to decade in our legislatures, in the press, and in our lives. But we are interested in knowing what issues Joseph's teachings do address, and what help he can give with the underlying problems of the current age.

In terms of influence on human lives, there is no question that Joseph's teachings are still important, especially when compared to the ideas of his own contemporaries. Few Americans of the first half of the nineteenth century have had greater influence on the conduct of life or the organization of human affairs than Joseph Smith. Ralph Waldo Emerson is widely read and admired, but not many people govern their lives by his mysterious epigrams. Thoreau's principle of civil disobedience has been practiced around the globe, but few read his writings to learn how to live. Andrew Jackson is acknowledged to have

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been a great president, but his political ideas are only vaguely applicable today. Among lesser known figures of great influence in Joseph Smith's time—Horace Bushnell, Charles Grandison Finney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Emery Channing—none has reached so deep into individual character and none has inspired an organization comparable to the church Joseph Smith founded. The range of Joseph Smith's influence may be narrow—seven million people is a tiny fraction of the world's population—but among his followers it is profound.

The durability of Joseph Smith's teaching is remarkable in light of the changes that have altered the world since he organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1830 people crossed the Atlantic by the same means as Nephi and Lehi—wind and sail. Messages were hand carried from place to place. There were no railroads to speak of in 1830; canal boats were the great transportation innovation of the time. More than seventy percent of the population in the United States still lived in rural areas and well over half were engaged in farming. Before 1844 only a small number of Latter-day Saint converts had gone to college; fewer still had graduated; and that was true of most Americans. His teachings have maintained their influence through a century and a half of the most far-reaching change to have occurred at any time in history.

But apart from the Church where Joseph Smith's influence is concentrated, what do his writings have to say to a time so vastly different from his own? What is the relevance of his teachings in the late twentieth century in view of the transformation in human life since the Prophet organized the Church in 1830? I will focus more on the public realm than on private life, although it must never be forgotten that individual salvation lies at the heart of the Gospel and will always be of highest significance. I emphasize the public side because Joseph Smith's writings are not restricted to the private sphere. His teachings and his life have implications for culture and society as a whole. The Book of Mormon prophets, whose writings Joseph translated, were deeply concerned about public moral-

ity, the rise and fall of peoples, and the ultimate conclusion of human affairs. Not long after the organization of the Church, the revelations to Joseph began to sketch in a new economic and social order, summed up in the word *Zion*. By the end of his life Joseph Smith had built cities, planned a university, and run for President. This was a man whose thinking compassed the whole of society and culture and envisioned the work of the Kingdom as transforming public as well as private life. With this in mind, we have ample reason to consider the implications of Joseph's thought for the public realm in the current age.

Revelation

I will discuss three major principles in Joseph's teachings—revelation, the Kingdom, and Zion. Of these, revelation was the most disputed and perhaps the most important. A casual conversation reminded me recently of the difficulty of accepting revelation. Last summer the time came to have my picture taken again, and we asked a photographer-friend to come to the house. After the sitting, while talking casually, she asked which is more important to Mormons, their way of life or their beliefs. "The way of life is wonderful," she went on to say, "but the beliefs, you know, are a little hard to swallow." I knew she was thinking of the revelations—the visit of Moroni, the miraculous translation, the claim to speak for God in the Doctrine and Covenants, more angels, more revelations, down to the end of Joseph Smith's life. How can a rational, educated person in the late twentieth century accept all of what an undergraduate teacher of mine at Harvard delicately termed "garbage"? People have trouble seeing that our way of life is founded on our beliefs.

The revelations to Joseph Smith were hard to take in his own time. Ministers scoffed at his report of the First Vision. The very idea of the Book of Mormon made the Palmyra townspeople furious before they had read a word of it. Joseph Smith was ridiculed throughout his life for claiming he communicated

with God, even by those who believed in God and acknowledged the occurrence of revelation in the Bible.

Today the revelations are even more difficult to believe than they were in the past. The official scientific culture of our time has largely discredited the divinity of the Bible and is agnostic on the existence of God. One of the great transformations since 1830 is the enshrinement of science as our official culture. Science was well launched in 1830, but over the past 150 years the influence of science has enlarged immensely, especially among the educated populace. Science has become the court of last resort in determining what is true. Unless something can be proven scientifically, its validity must remain in question. Although private individuals and even large organizations maintain belief in God, only those ideas with scientific validation receive general acknowledgement. By science I do not mean only the physical sciences, but all those forms of scholarship that employ evidence, appeal to reason, and leave the determination of truth to the community of reasonable men and women. In educated circles where the power of science is generally acknowledged, the validity of revelation is commonly doubted. Many educated people consider revelation an imagined fabrication, in a class with witchcraft, magic, and astrology. My photographer-friend's husband is a physicist; from her point of view Joseph Smith's revelations were fantastic.

Science is not the whole story in our culture, however. While dominant in the official culture that governs awards of government grants, for example, agnosticism on revelation does not reign everywhere. In our popular culture, we see many signs of a deep yearning for contact with a higher sphere. The desire for supernatural communication shows up in science fiction, the popularity of astrological charts, the stories of life after death, and the movies involving departed spirits. Think of the popularity of *E.T.*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or *Star Wars*. In all of these movies, the existence of powers outside our scientifically known world lies at the center of the plot. How to

reach them, how to cultivate them, how to bring them into our lives are the questions the stories ask. "May the Force be with you," Luke Skywalker is told in *Star Wars*. Latter-day Saints equate Force with Holy Ghost and consider it a religious achievement when Luke does trust the Force. But does not everyone in the movie audience feel the same? Does not everyone want Luke to trust the Force? For a minute or two, the whole audience believes that supernatural powers can expand human powers, and we should all trust the Force. At that point in the story, they believe in listening to the Spirit.

Everywhere in our culture we see signs of this yearning for contact with invisible powers beyond ordinary life, contact that science can neither satisfy nor justify. Occasionally scientists working on the origins of the universe or at some other boundary of knowledge offer a glimpse of something deeper and more wonderful than swirling, cold power. We wait eagerly for them to tell us what it is, but in vain. We want to know: Is there a higher power? Is it benevolent? Will it speak to us? But the questions coming from our popular culture are never answered by the official culture.

All of us, including the believers in Joseph Smith, stand in the middle of this ambiguity. What are we to do? Our calling as believers, I think, is to affirm the reality of revelation. We need to give encouragement to those who yearn for communication from heaven but who are discouraged by the prevailing scientism. We must speak out because we are better prepared than most religions to offer that assurance. Last summer, along with three other Latter-day Saint scholars, I attended a conference at Pepperdine College on restoration religions. Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, and Amish, as well as the Latter-day Saints, were among the churches under discussion. Members of other denominations were also in the audience. After we had made our presentations, someone asked how Latter-day Saints know that Joseph Smith's revelations were from God. In reply I asked the audience of about 150 people, all of them religious, how many used the phrase "Listen

to the Spirit.” Some replied that their churches discouraged listening to the Spirit; others said they did recall hearing those words from time to time.

The lukewarm response surprised me. It made me realize how much more we make of personal revelation than most Christians. From an early age we are told to listen to the Spirit. When we are in doubt about our lives—what course to take, what we believe, what dangers threaten us—we consult the Spirit. Long before children understand the intricacies of doctrine, they are told to listen to Heavenly Father whispering to them. We call business executives, scientists, doctors, builders, school teachers to serve as stake presidents and bishops with virtually no training, and tell them to depend on the Spirit to solve the thorny problems that they will assuredly confront. Moreover, we assume that if every Saint calls upon God for revelation, all these individual inspirations will sustain the teachings of the General Authorities—and more often than not the two do coincide. The discipline of spiritual listening lies at the heart of the Church’s organization and teaching. We see it working every day of our lives.

Strengthened by this powerful tradition, we can assure people that God will hear them, that he loves them, and most important of all that he will speak to them. Joseph Smith once said that what distinguished the Latter-day Saints was the Holy Ghost. Possessors of that gift in a world uncertain about revelation have a responsibility. We must assure people that God will speak to them through his Holy Spirit. The very uncertainty about revelation caused by the limitations of our official scientific culture requires us to take a stand on behalf of this central teaching of the Prophet.

The Kingdom

A second prominent theme in Joseph Smith’s teachings is the organization of the Kingdom. This idea is as contested as revelation. When Joseph Smith lived, Christians largely agreed

that believing people should be organized into churches. A great deal of energy went into forming little congregations along the frontier, constructing churches, and training ministers. Joseph was among the greatest of the organizers, a genius at developing ways to mobilize people for godly purposes. By revelation he established orders of the priesthood, organized stakes, set up conferences, formed the Relief Society, sent out missionaries, designed cities, outlined a new economic system, all as part of building the Kingdom. That impetus did not slow after his death. Brigham Young went on to develop the ward organization, establish auxiliaries, build and man temples, found schools, settle new communities, and organize united orders. The Kingdom did not dwell only in the hearts of individuals. The Kingdom consisted of elaborate institutions for accomplishing God’s work.

We all take pride in the effectiveness of this organization and the blessings it brings to many lives. At the same time, we know that organized religion has gotten a bad name. Organized religion has come to mean large bureaucratic structures, high costs, and political machinations that appear to dampen the religious spirit rather than enhance it. Everywhere we see Christians breaking away from churches to worship in their own homes, with family and neighborhood groups replacing ministers and churches. Ministers make jokes about the very organizations of which they are a part because they understand their listeners’ skepticism. A few Sundays ago I attended a Catholic service in downtown Philadelphia and heard the parish priest’s powerful Christian sermon. To my surprise, he spoke openly of the dysfunctions of the Catholic Church. He got a hearty laugh when he referred to the misuse of money by a Catholic fund-raising group in New York. By poking fun, he appeared to join with his parishioners in acknowledging the failings of the institutional Church.

More than a little of that spirit has infected the Latter-day Saints. We often hear discontented young people say they believe the Gospel while having trouble with the Church. The

prevalence of this idea led Eugene England to give a sermon on why the Church is as true as the Gospel. To a degree the young people may not be entirely wrong. Perhaps we have let our enthusiasm with organization carry us too far. In recent years we have lightened the meeting schedule and simplified the organization in an effort to focus attention on family religion and personal worship.

But while making common sense changes, we should not lose sight of the Kingdom principle in Joseph's teachings. In all he did was the implicit conviction that we must work together as a united body of believers to carry forward God's work. I believe the principle of the Kingdom is more essential now than ever because of one of the most significant developments in our society since 1830. I refer to the emergence of corporations.

In Joseph Smith's time there were only a small number of corporations. The organization of human affairs was far simpler than it is today. The bulk of the population lived and worked on family farms. Virtually everyone's productive life coincided with the family organization and went no further. The corporate bodies that did exist were relatively simple banks and canal companies. The federal government occupied a small number of offices in Washington with employees numbered in the hundreds rather than the hundreds of thousands as today.

Since that time we have formed huge corporate organizations extending across the continent and around the globe. I am not only thinking of mammoth business corporations like Exxon or Dupont with offices and factories in every corner of the earth. Now virtually all work is corporate. Museums and universities are organized as not-for-profit corporations. So are charities, symphony orchestras and opera companies, historical societies and labor unions. It is a rare working individual who is not part of a corporation, whether for profit or not. Mothers are the largest body of working people who function outside a corporation, making them particularly helpful in identifying the failings and dangers of corporate work.

The power of these corporations is immense, not only in organizing the economy but in organizing our inward lives. Corporations focus vast amounts of energy and will to accomplish the corporate purpose. My New York office overlooks another large office across Amsterdam Avenue. Through the windows in that office I can see people sitting at their desks, moving about with papers in their hands, consulting around a table, talking on the telephone. All those people devote their powers of mind and character to the achievement of corporate ends. The corporation not only gives them a purpose for working, but offers them wages, advancement, recognition, power. To be recognized by the corporation brings to focus the approbation of the thousands of people who work there. In some cases that approbation can be followed with admiration, power, and wealth. Some of life's greatest thrills are advancement in the corporate organization. The corporations dangle golden ladders to the earth and invite us to climb them. They are the great and spacious building of Lehi's dream.

These corporations rarely point fingers of scorn at the humble Saints as in Lehi's vision, but implicitly they do deprecate religion. One of my sons recently joined Chemical Bank in New York City, and over the past six months has often put in work weeks of sixty to seventy hours. The corporation confidently demands that commitment from its recruits because its purpose is considered to be so transcendently important. The bank tells its young bankers in training that if family is more important, if seventy hours away from wife and children is too much, then the golden ladder will be gone. The rejects must wander on the misty plain. And so the corporation harnesses our energies and ambitions, consumes our time, and implicitly tells us that nothing, including our religion, is as important. Anyone who chooses other values, having failed the corporation in its designated purpose, will suffer rejection and see the finger of scorn.

President McKay warned us of these potent corporate forces when he quoted that statement that no success in life

compensates for failure in the home. But how can we break the grip of the corporation on our hearts? How can we overcome its hold on our competitive urges, our longing for recognition, our need for security and identity—all satisfied by the corporation?

Surely one answer must be to focus human energy and desire on the purposes of our religion just as the corporation focuses desire on its purposes. We need a corporate defense against the onslaught of secular corporatism, and we offer that defense through our organization into a Kingdom.

We often bear testimony to the strength we receive from Church attendance. We know that we need each other to keep our lives properly oriented. After hearing an effective sermon or testimony we fervently resolve to live more purely and to devote our lives wholly to God's purposes. In our best meetings we know that our families are more important than promotions, that teaching the gospel has greater rewards than recognition at the office. Living the gospel seems easy and natural at Church.

The impetus to live righteously is all the stronger when we receive a Church calling. One of the miracles of our lives is the dedication of bishops, Relief Society presidents, and countless other officers in wards and stakes around the globe. We sometimes forget to marvel that so many ordinary people devote themselves to selfless work for the well-being of others. Tens of thousands of them serve in their offices, and through their service are refined by the pure love of Christ. The Kingdom organizes us for this work and so blesses our lives by focusing our desires on eternal purposes.

Our callings and our common worship are to a degree an antidote to the seductive powers of the corporation. Not that the evil we face is intentionally malicious. Corporations accomplish noble purposes. Corporations are largely responsible for the massive wealth that our society produces. Corporations in the form of universities and schools educate our children. The institutions that govern and defend us function as corporations. But we must recognize the corporation's insidious power to

alienate our affections from the persons and causes we love. To resist the siren call, we must continually review our deepest values and confirm our truest identity as followers of Christ, and that can best be done in common worship. I believe that only in our own form of corporate organization, the Kingdom of God, will we find the strength and wisdom in this corporate age to live as we believe.

Zion

Finally I come to Zion and its place in world history. Joseph Smith's first published work, the Book of Mormon, is set on a large historical stage. The story reaches far back in time and extends forward to the final end in the future. Underlying everything Joseph taught was a sense of events moving toward culmination at the second coming of Christ, followed by the millennial reign, and then the final transformation of the earth. In Joseph's writings, peoples receive dispensations of power and truth, they rise and fall away, and ultimately they come together when the Savior returns. The Latter-day Saints, the people of Joseph Smith's dispensation, are to prepare the earth for Christ's appearance when the hopes of the prophets will finally be fulfilled. The perfect society we seek to create we call Zion.

Are these teachings about history helpful in understanding our position in the world today? The Latter-day Saints have always wondered how the prophecies of the last day coincide with actual historical developments. What is the evil power seen both in the book of Revelation and in Nephi's vision of the future? How is God working in the nations of the earth to bring about his purposes? Outside of the Church itself, where are the forces of good with which we should ally? These questions have always been asked and never precisely answered.

We still cannot tell exactly how God's providential purposes are being worked out in the events going on around us. We are conscious of deep change in the world but can only

speculate on how the new configuration of forces brings us closer to the last day. The best we can do is hold to the teachings of the Prophet to be sure that we do our parts in advancing providential history—even when the hand of God can only be vaguely discerned.

What is happening right now that may play into the divine plan of history? One answer has been given by the state department official Francis Fukuyama in an article (and more recently a book) called “The End of History?”¹ By the end of history Fukuyama meant that the great ideological struggle that structured history in the twentieth century has been resolved by the demise of communism. Events and changes will continue to occur but without their former significance. Latter-day Saints may be able to understand Fukuyama’s idea better than most. In a sense his conception of the end of history is comparable to the Latter-day Saint idea of the millennium when Satan will be bound. Events will happen in the Millennium, but the great conflict between good and evil will cease. History without an evil antagonist will be different.

For nearly a century, the rivalry between two great ideological systems has given significance to many events. Small happenings in obscure countries have taken on importance because of their relationship to the titanic struggle between freedom and communism. Now that struggle has died away, world events have less ideological significance. In that sense, history has ended.

However we judge Fukuyama’s argument, he causes us to realize that the polarity of capitalism and communism has deeply structured our thinking about politics and world history. For years we have spoken of creeping socialism, as if the crucial path for American politics ran between free enterprise and socialism. Our progress or decline was measured by our position on that one road. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, one pole has dissolved.

¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* (Sum 1989) 16:3–16; and *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

No viable alternative to free enterprise capitalism remains, compelling us to change the way we think about our nation and the world.

As we now view world development, the primary question is how and when will democracy and capitalism take over. We no longer think of communism as a serious alternative for social and political organization. We only wonder when the old regimes will fall and when capitalism and democracy will rise. Their eventual triumph seems inevitable.

Can we see in this reorientation of world politics a prelude to a new and better world, one leading to the millennial reign? We certainly rejoice with all the peoples who have been liberated from communism’s oppressive yoke. We rejoice for their freedom and for the promise of improved living conditions that free enterprise offers. But would a world dominated by capitalism and democracy be nearly synonymous with Zion? Would it be the world that Joseph Smith foresaw and prophesied of when he spoke of the last days?

The demise of communism has freed us to look more candidly at capitalism and democracy. In the preceding half century, criticism of either one could have been misconstrued as sympathy for communism. We Latter-day Saints took great pains to differentiate the law of consecration and the united orders from communism, because we knew their fundamental principles were so deeply antagonistic. We wanted to be clear that our sympathies lay with the forces of freedom not authoritarian rule. With the collapse of communism and the possibility of that misunderstanding out of the way, we can now ask what we would think of a world under the sway of capitalism and democracy, since the way seems clear for that very expansion to occur.

Reflecting on our new situation, we realize that the triumph of capitalism would not make us happy although it might make us rich. We know the benefits of capitalism and democracy, and have battled on their behalf for half a century. But that does not diminish the fact that as a cultural and economic system

capitalism is amoral. It cannot differentiate the sale of cars from the sale of pornography; all that matters under capitalism is the production of goods for which there is a demand. The effect of the goods on the well-being of the purchasers is never taken into account.

Capitalism is merciless in its treatment of people. It trims waste from the productive process whether the unneeded parts are human or mechanical. Outmoded or unnecessary workers like outmoded machinery are discarded. The immense success of free enterprise competition in producing the best goods at the lowest price depends on this harsh treatment of inefficient workers whether they be vice-presidents or laborers on the line. In its pure form capitalism is concerned about the welfare of its workers only insofar as they contribute to the productive process. The workers' personal needs and circumstances are irrelevant. On the question of God, capitalism is absolutely neutral; nothing religious operates in the capitalist system to moderate its cruelty.

Is this the kind of world Joseph Smith prophesied for the end of history? I think not, nor is it what men and women of good will generally desire. People have always brought other values to capitalism, softening its excesses, and we do not want unrestrained capitalism any more now than ever. We can be sure that many forces will work to modify and humanize free enterprise, but among these counterforces should be Joseph Smith's teachings about Zion.

Zion was firmly rooted in freedom and individual initiative, but not in selfishness. Joseph Smith envisioned stewardship at the heart of the new order. In Joseph's Zion, men and women did not receive wealth or authority for their own gain and glory. The Lord granted them stewardships for the good of others, their families first and then the larger community. A steward's chief responsibility was to bless others.

Adapting this principle to modern times, managers of large enterprises should think of their stewardships not as occasions for self-enrichment, but as opportunities to provide productive

work to people in need of employment. Laborers in industry should work hard for the common good, and not be concerned solely for enlarging their paychecks. Stewards think of their wealth and position as the means to bless others, not to aggrandize themselves.

The principle applies to every form of work, in industry, education, or the arts. In all work the motive should be to benefit humanity not to seek glory or advancement for oneself. Stewardship applies to every form of power, including the power of government. We yearn for leaders who are dedicated to the public good, who do not wish to perpetuate themselves in office for their own honor and satisfaction, but who seek the advancement of the people and relinquish power when others are more qualified to govern. Sincerely applied, stewardship would transform politics and work, and make capitalism and democracy humane as well as fruitful.

Conclusion

Will the teachings of Joseph Smith be relevant to world developments in the coming years? I believe they will. I do not think we should set up our beliefs in outright opposition to the reigning ideological forces. We do not wish to make Zion the antagonist of capitalism or democracy as communism once was. We know the benefits of free enterprise and democracy and can embrace both. But if we remain loyal to the teachings of Joseph Smith, we will constantly modify our involvement by heeding other principles that compel us to treat our brothers and sisters as ourselves and to use our powers like stewards to bless the people around us.

Joseph Smith's teachings have survived a century and a half of historical change. In many respects they are more relevant now than ever. The world hungers to hear from God, and we teach people to listen to His voice. We need strength to resist the seductive powers of the corporation, and the Church

strengthens us. We want to refine free enterprise and democracy, and the principle of stewardship suggests the way.

As private individuals, we will continue our struggles to obey the commandments and heed the Spirit. Most of the time our personal salvation and the well-being of our families and wards will occupy us. But in living as Latter-day Saints, followers of Joseph Smith, we may also, by small strokes, be directing the course of world history toward the promised end that God revealed to the Prophet.