



MORMONISM AND A TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

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A sense of life is either one of our most precious possessions, or the source of our private hell. It is the emotional corollary of our personal philosophy of life, or the emotional form in which we experience our deepest view of existence. It is the background music, if you will, which accompanies all we do and experience. It is the baseline from which we spring or stumble into our daily activities. A sense of life is an emotional sum—a derivative of the thinking we have done or failed to do in providing ourselves with a symbolic map or model of the context within which we live and of our place within it. With the help of such a conceptual map, we understand who we are and what we can do, and we project and plan how we are going to live and what we shall try to achieve.

Consider a series of questions: Would it be unfair or extreme to suggest that most of us trudge through life having as our background music not music at all, but a cacophony of feelings based upon a disorganized grab bag of notions which we have passively allowed to settle into our souls by a process of cultural osmosis? Is it possible that many of our personal, institutional, cultural problems are in fact due to our tendency to evade the demands of the human prerogative to know who we are and what we are about? Do we cheat ourselves individually and institutionally by our tendency, born of sloth and fear, to memorize answers provided by others without ever really becoming aware of the questions? As Henry Weiman asked, "Do we look the

answers up in the back of the book without ever learning how to work the problems?"¹ I, of course, mean these questions to be rhetorical. Nonetheless, I believe that, for the most part, honest answers would reveal the reason why there is within so many of us so much of the time what William James called a great buzzing confusion.

A religious tradition constitutes an invitation to develop for one's soul a particular style, a way of being in the world. It seems to me that the style encouraged by Mormonism is based upon a sense of life which I call *tragic*. The philosophical and theological underpinnings of a tragic sense of life might entail the following:

Dimensions of a Tragic Sense of Life

First, a tragic sense of life includes the willingness to view our pervasive shortcomings against the backdrop of our divine potential. In facing up to the implications of our failures, we would be well-advised to turn our attention away from theological doctrines concerning ultimate fulfillment. Instead, we should fully recognize the tragic sense that can accompany the realization of how often we sacrifice the here-and-now richness of experience to the self-imposed littleness of our lives.

There must be moments, perhaps during the inescapable quiet and solitude of the night, when we agonize over our easy contentment with the trivial and the routine, when we recognize that it may be evasion and sloth at the bottom of our inveterate busyness. This same nighttime vigil may also reveal that our busyness

in the Church may have so little to do with greatness of soul.

It's not a question of doing more, of home teaching earlier, or doing better professionally. Instead, it may be a process of doing less, of coming to see these as being less important than previously supposed. It is essential to face really hard, tragic facts—like the courage one has not been able to muster or the effort one has been unwilling to expend in truly being with a wife, a daughter, or a son. There can be a cleansing despair in the sudden insight that we have been so fearful of the passion and heartbreak of a personal search for truth that we have relinquished the responsibility for developing our own hierarchy of values, and have fallen prey to conformity; we are left to strive for the appearance without the substance.

I am thinking of the frequency and ease with which members of a ward or stake are told they are great—an ease and frequency which almost makes a mockery of what could be. Are we unable to face the tragedy of how far we are from greatness without collapsing into self-hatred? Can we openly accept our accomplishments without succumbing to a too-easy contentment? Is it not possible to develop what Walter Kaufmann called "humbition"—a working balance between pride and humility? To disown our failures robs us of the capacity to change. Failure is tragic and painful, but a denial of its reality creates that deeper pain born of illusion and stagnation.

Perhaps we should be more inclined to listen to the criticisms of those who suggest that it is blasphemous to speak of God as an exalted man or that men are gods in embryo. Perhaps these ideas *are* blasphemous—not the doctrines themselves—but our careless, sometimes embarrassing notions regarding what exaltation requires, i.e., attendance at meetings, payment of tithes, and generally staying out of mischief.

Unfortunately, our culture fosters a two-pronged conspiracy against aspirations to godly greatness. On the one hand our so-called realism warns, "Don't hope for too much; the worst thing that can happen is to desire and not be satisfied." On the other hand, we may be encouraged to aspire, but toward questionable goals. Hence the proliferation of positive-thinking and success seminars in our culture at large and our tendency to focus on objectively measurable aims within the Church. The problem in these approaches is that this kind of focus can result in personal or institutional success which becomes a distraction from our commitment to spiritual depth.

Oh yes, there is need for balance, for times of guiltless relaxation, and for the enjoyment of the many unearned gifts of life. But peace and serenity—these all too elusive fruits of gospel living—are only enjoyed when one gives oneself completely and consciously to that which satisfies the deepest and most comprehensive needs of human nature. In this connection I recall some of Kierkegaard's words which, for me, perfectly express the relationship between serenity and a commitment to spiritual development. He said, "Anxiety is our highest powers crying out for full employment."² God help us not to succumb to the blandishments of trivia and easy routine as a means of evading that anxiety.

The second mark of a tragic sense of life involves a rejection of the notion that God manipulates the leading strings of history and that all events serve some cosmic purpose. In this view, one accepts randomness as a fact of existence and realizes that the meaning of events must be provided by those who experience them.

This aspect of a tragic world view demands that we forsake the indefensible, demeaning—if sometimes comforting—assumption that God tailors the experiences of our lives to our particular needs; and, from the vantage of his empyrean calm, views the events of world history and our individual lives as they unfold according to his preordained plan. It is amazing there are so many in the Church who believe this when our doctrine rejects predestination.

Instead of viewing God as the sole author of world history, it seems more consistent to see him as a deity who awaits with desperate personal suffering our willingness to accept our role as coauthors. My contention is that metaphysical facts constrain him to act persuasively rather than coercively and thus require him to plead for our active participation.

I was deeply moved by thoughts expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his incarceration in a Nazi prison camp. As he anguished over human suffering and sin he realized that he was sharing in God's anguish, and he wrote, "Christians stand by God in His hour of grieving." As Donald Evans observes, "It is as if Bonhoeffer were standing by a grief-stricken friend, helping him by being present, as together they mourn the loss of humanity in human life."³ Such a view of God and his relationship to the events of our lives does not strip God of his divinity. It is obvious that man needs God; that God needs man is also true, but seldom emphasized. If we truly believe that God can be not only the paradigm of passionate concern, but also the *focus* of human concern, many of us may find a new dimension to our relationship with him.

Such a view has important implications for the way we view human suffering. At least fifteen million children under the age of five die of starvation each year (roughly one child every two seconds). Many millions more will sustain physical and mental impairment because of prolonged malnutrition. Nearly one billion persons on this planet live in absolute poverty. In human terms, absolute poverty is "a condition of life so limited by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality, and low life-expectancy as to be beneath any rational definition of human decency."⁴ Does the gospel promise these children ultimate relief? My faith answers *yes*, but even so, does this justify the grotesque suggestion that we needn't concern ourselves with their plight because it is all part of their God-ordained destiny? Is this suffering tailored to their particular needs? Does God passively view these conditions as part of his plan for these people? My answer to these questions has to be *no*. These are examples of conditions which need not exist; conditions for which we must, tragically, bear a measure of personal responsibility.

A non-tragic view of life which fails to recognize the random nature of existence can encourage a cavalier attitude toward the misfortunes of victims. It allows the comfortable conclusion that hope for victims of sustained suffering is hope deferred—deferred to the

postmortal realm. Thus our efforts to give meaning to suffering often dismiss it, thereby demeaning its victims as well as ourselves. We ought to be embarrassed and offended by elaborate explanations as to why God caused a particular misfortune. As William S. Coffin, Jr., declared in reflecting upon the accidental drowning of his son, "My own consolation lies in knowing it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."⁵ The fact is that sometimes the best answer to an agonized "why?" is, "It just happened, and now the meaning of this event is to be defined by our response." Surely God's role in most misfortunes is to stand ready to enable us to reach into the depth of our souls and fashion a dignified and courageous response.

Without a tragic dimension to our faith, it is also easy to make a mockery of the antidote to suffering: service. Service can come to mean saving my own skin by playing

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an assigned role in a game the outcome of which has already been decided. We must identify and discard those careless theological conclusions which contradict our own better moments when we yearn to serve with love and with the sense of being summoned to a dignified and necessary role. Indeed, to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and seek out the prisoner is not only to do these things to people but also to God. What a far cry this is from looking to God as a Saturday-night paymaster, the dispenser of our reward for staying out of mischief and attending to our church chores.

Spiritual sensitivity can render us incapable of condoning glib, shallow, too-easy answers to tragic problems which exist in the world and help us develop the courage to actively oppose such answers. More importantly, our own efforts to alleviate suffering may prove to be our most eloquent objection.

The last mark of a tragic sense of life is the pain and joy of autonomy, or the responsibility to make our own decisions. The human race has had something of a love-hate relationship with autonomy, and religion has most often been its greatest deterrent.

With this in mind, I am intrigued by two statements, one from Sigmund Freud, the other from Brigham

Young. Freud objected to the suggestion that the essence of religion is the feeling of absolute dependence, saying: "It is not this feeling that constitutes religiousness, but only the next step, the reaction to it, which seeks a remedy to this feeling. He who goes no further, he who humbly resigns himself to the insignificant role man plays in the universe, is in the truest sense of the word irreligious."⁶ Brigham Young's equally pointed and more theologically oriented statement came in response to the question, "Why are we left alone and sad?": "Man is destined to be a God—and has to act as an independent being—and is left without aid to see what he will do, whether he will be for God, and practice him to depend on his own resources, and try his independency—to be righteous in the dark—to be the friend of God. and do the best I can when left to myself. act on my Agency as the independent Gods, and show our capacity."⁷

Our history, individually and collectively, is in many ways the story of our struggle for autonomy as well as a witness to our fear of it, and our efforts to flee its demands. Sartre's famous 1943 declaration that man is "condemned to be free" suggests that men find freedom hard to bear, and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor is a compelling description of man's tendency to use religion as a means of escaping fateful decisions. "Didst thou forget" asks the old inquisitor, "that man prefers peace and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil?" Rollo May comments: "Christ's mistake, says the inquisitor, 'was that in place of the rigid ancient law,' he placed on man the burden of having 'with free heart to decide for himself what is good and what is evil,' and 'this fearful burden of free choice' is too much for men."⁸

I am convinced that autonomy is indeed a fearful burden and that a tragic sense of life stalks one who is determined to decide, to make significant decisions for himself. Furthermore, any tendency to sneer at those who suggest that freedom is fearful may itself be an indication of how far removed one is from the autonomous life.

Perhaps we have so succumbed to Manichaeism—to think in black and white, to reduce baffling issues to simple "either-or" choices—that we have blinded ourselves to the complexities of life, and in fact are not personally acquainted with the process of making fateful decisions.

We are indeed free, but our freedom is mortal and limited, and therefore essentially tragic. We simply lack the time and talent to satisfy all legitimate claims made upon us. Reality is a matrix of conflict—conflicts of ideas, aims and desires. In an effort to deny this fact of existence, we too often give in to what Frances Menlove called the myth of the unruffled Mormon: There is good and there is evil and the choice is so clear.

But such an approach does not stand up to Lehi's assertion that there "must needs be . . . an opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11). The context of this statement is Lehi's counsel to his son, the main theme of which is that the joy of life must be experienced through, not around, opposition. Thus Lehi's remarks seem to refer not only to opposition between good and evil, but to the opposition between many competing goods. The true

adventure of life lies in attempting to achieve a workable harmony or synthesis between complimentary opposites. I understand the joy of which Lehi spoke to be the subjective accompaniment of growth. Reality, characterized in large measure by polar opposites, provides us with a framework of growth by presenting opportunities to achieve a fusion of such opposites, a fusion which becomes more than the sum of its parts. Such a fusion brings expansion to the soul, and hence joy.

Think with me of the example of a fifty-year-old woman who recognized opposites within herself: "I can see clearly," she says, "two separate worlds within myself, spirituality and sensuality. Perhaps because of my cultural heritage, the mere thought of experiencing one dimension hopelessly suffocates the other one." This woman is so beset with conflict that she feels she isn't pure enough for the spiritual world. On the other hand, she at the same time feels that she has missed complete sensual and sexual fulfillment. If this woman were able to achieve a fusion of these dimensions of life, something new and fine could be created, something more complex than either spirituality or sensuality, but including both.

Reality, as I believe Lehi was teaching, dictates that synthesis or growth occurs only after difficult choices are made. The choices are difficult and, to some degree, tragic because they inevitably involve the acceptance of limitations and restrictions. The life of joy of which Lehi spoke cannot be given over to sensuality as a simple either/or choice nor can it be given exclusively to spirituality. You choose your own set of complimentary opposites: work/play, obedience/individuality, gregariousness/solitude. The principle remains the same.

This view of decision-making has definite implications for our simplistic approach to teaching. Do our efforts, for example, to teach chastity sometimes result in feelings of ambivalence toward the sensual, sexual side of our being? We ought to teach rather that the responsibility and sometimes the pain of self-imposed restraints can result in the joy of synthesis. This is the agony and ecstasy of autonomy.

A review of these three aspects of a tragic sense of life (and many others that could be elaborated) makes it obvious that such a world view is not for the child. Paul's suggestion that he once saw as a child, but now as a man, and that he achieved this coming of age through the instrumentality of the gospel now takes on more meaning.⁹ There is an apparent contradiction between this insight and Christ's urging that we become as children. Perhaps the real intent of Christ's teaching was that we develop the faith and courage to maintain a childlike face-full-to-the-front stance toward life even as we experience its darker realities—realities which are wrought into the structure of what is precious, lovable, beautiful, and holy.

Obstacles to a Tragic Sense of Life

By now it should be clear that I do not equate a tragic sense of life with the notion of ultimate failure or pervasive pessimism. Basic to my faith is the hope for ultimate fulfillment. But on the other hand, I fear that an emphasis upon ultimate, other-worldly fulfillment can encourage a Pollyannish passivity toward proximate

problems and needs, a blunting of an appropriate sense of urgency as well as a tendency toward glib, too-easy answers to agonizing problems. Such answers are, I believe, an offense to many who suffer, to the spiritually sensitive and certainly to God. To explain away or repress our awareness of the tragic nature of much of our experience is to dehumanize ourselves and to be involved in the irony of denying ourselves that intense joy which is reserved for those who face reality without the benefit of illusions. I am convinced that a tragic sense of life provides something better than a choice between optimism and pessimism. As A. Powell Davies suggested, "If religion were optimism we should never have heard Jesus agonize in the Garden of Geth; if it were pessimism, Jesus would never have begun his mission!"¹⁰

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Mormonism, like any religion, can be made into an elaborate means of escape, of refusing to tear away the veil and live with pain and difficulty. Man truly faces a choice here because he is a being whose consciousness, within certain limits, is volitional. To me, then, man's basic sin is evasion. Ethical and spiritual awareness do not come freely. They are gained only at the price of inner conflict and anxiety. This anxiety need not entail self-hate. We can despair over a lack of efficacy while preserving a love of self and of the life within us which still awaits release and expression.

Our hope and our quest is to know an inviolate peace but not without the full release of all capacities—what the Savior referred to as the abundant life. This cannot be until we learn with Camus that it is in the midst of winter that we finally discover that there is within us an invincible summer, that crucifixion precedes resurrection.

The Nature of God

Since understandings of God shape ideals for human existence, it follows that one's sense of life—tragic or otherwise—is significantly influenced by one's interpretation of God's style, his way of being and relating to the world. A tragic sense of life implies a rejection of a number of popular traditions regarding the nature of God. I wish to mention four.¹¹

The first is the foundational notion upon which the

other three rest. It is that God is to be understood as controlling power. All things, allowing no exceptions, are possible to God. Omnipotence, in its traditional sense, implies that God determines every detail of the world.

The second notion is that God is the sanctioner of the status quo, the present order exists because God wills its existence. To be obedient is to preserve the status quo.

The third notion is that God's perfection entails immutability, lack of change, and impassibility which stresses that God must be unaffected by any other reality.

The fourth notion is that God is a kind of cosmic moralist, one who proclaims arbitrary rules and who punishes offenders.

All of these propositions assume that God is a nontragic being. All that is is as he wills it—there are no conflicts, there are no self-determining and self-existent constituents of reality with which he must struggle. Nothing can disturb God's tranquility. In sum, all is well, there is no reason for concern, there is no suffering. Those who espouse these interpretations of God's way of being—if they truly understand them and if they are consistent—will develop their own human version of a non-tragic stance toward life.

Oh, life can be circumstantially difficult for these people, but there are few really difficult decisions—everything is so obvious. They need not accept any responsibility for the way things are, nor need they suffer the burdens of being an agent of change, for that is not their role. They tend not to be goaded by their own potential greatness for that is hubris. And they are certain that their nontragic, controlling God will save their souls in spite of their wretchedness. They may try to alleviate some suffering but only because that is one of the rules they are given to follow. Ultimately such efforts are only a kind of game because there is a cosmic reason and cause behind all suffering. There is no reason, therefore, to give excessive attention to those conditions which spawn suffering.

Juxtapose, if you will, these four points of emphasis with some different assumptions which I believe are demanded by Mormon theology.

First of all we must deny the existence of a god with all-controlling power. Our allegiance must be to a laboring, suffering god who functions, of necessity, by persuasion. If we respond to a god who can and does fail in specific situations and with certain individuals, our sense of his divinity may be actually enhanced and our desire to participate with him may increase.

Second, our theology demands that we deny the existence of a god who is a sanctioner of the status quo. I believe that to understand our theology is to be persuaded that the matrix of activity we refer to as mortality is in fact a stage for the drama of transformation; and that the direction taken by the flux of events results from a composite of our own choices, randomness, and God's persuasive activity. We strive audaciously to transform ourselves and the world in which we live.

Third, the Mormon God is not unaffected by the events of our lives. We have no need to reconcile traditional notions which attempt to define a passionless

god as loving. As is true of all parents, there is no desire nor way to shield himself from the results of our choices. All of our emphasis concerning ultimate victory for his plan cannot detract from the reality of losses along the way. He awaits and is profoundly affected by our response.

Finally, ours is not a god who is primarily concerned with a set of arbitrarily fashioned moral rules, but rather the fulness of life. He is not interested in negation, but in that intensity of experience which we have come to designate as his (God's) life. Spiritual maturity requires that we completely free God of the role of rewarder and punisher and finally conclude that we are our own reward or punishment.

In sum, for us God epitomizes the tragic hero. He envisioned and became fascinated with a magnificent possibility—the enhancement of the quality of existence. What he proposed was audacious. He formed his plan with the knowledge that there would be failure and suffering and that some of those who ventured with him would be lost. There would be some facts before which he would have to stand powerless. One of these, for example, is our own inviolate, self-existent capacity to choose. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever not in the traditional nontragic sense, but in the sense that he remains steadfastly committed to us and to what he knows to be our potential destiny. We stand in awe before all of this, but at the same time, we, with Bonhoeffer, stand *with* God, who requires our participation.

It now occurs to me that all that has been said of God as a tragic hero could, on our level, be true of each of us. We began this venture with boldness, uncertain of the outcome but anxious to try. We stood with Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, who, when warned of impending danger, said, "You make me afraid, but whither shall I fly to be safe? I must venture."¹²

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Notes

1. Henry Nelson Weiman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1958), p. 195.
2. As cited in Colin Wilson, *Religion and a Rebel* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1957).
3. Donald Evans, *Struggle and Fulfillment* (Cleveland: Collins Publishing, 1979), p. 147.
4. Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1981), p. 97.
5. As cited in "A Dad Reflects on the Death of His Son," *Context: A Commentary on the Interaction of Religion and Culture* 15 (1 & 15 September 1983): 1.
6. As cited in Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Anchor Books, 1961), p. 102.
7. Office Journal of President Brigham Young, 28 January 1857, Library-Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
8. Rollo May, *Man's Search for Himself* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1952), p. 189.
9. See 1 Cor. 13:11.
10. A. Powell Davies, *The Temptation to Be Good* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 154.
11. Adapted from David Griffin, *God Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).
12. As cited in Davies, *The Temptation to Be Good*, p. 78.