

U.S. JOURNAL: PROVO, UTAH

CATEGORIES

The position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints affecting those of the Negro race who choose to join the Church falls wholly within the category of religion. It has no bearing upon matters of civil rights.—*The First Presidency, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, December, 1969.*

MOST Americans believe that a moral issue can be contained within a category, and they often find themselves astonished or irritated by those Americans who do not. A lot of university trustees can't imagine why students who are receiving a perfectly peaceful liberal education should concern themselves with the fact that some other department of the same institution happens to do research for the Department of Defense. Most Americans do not hold a Rockefeller in New York accountable for what kind of regime his family's bank helps support in South Africa. But a lot of young people and black people insist on considering everything connected. Because Brigham Young University, which is operated by the Mormon Church, happens to be one of the few places in the country where even the students believe in the sanctity of categories, it is difficult for nearly everyone there to understand how objection to a Mormon religious belief could be translated into rudeness to the B.Y.U. basketball team. In reaffirming that priesthood orders, which every male Mormon must hold in order to participate fully in the Church, would remain closed to Negroes, the First Presidency clearly stated not only that the matter was wholly within the cate-

gory of religion but also that in the civil category the Church specifically teaches that all of God's children should have equal constitutional rights. Furthermore, the University's president has pointed out, the Church has nothing to do with arranging athletic events; and, furthermore, the coaches often say, some of the players are not even Mormons, and the athletic field would obviously not be the place to argue politics or religion even if they were. Yet B.Y.U. basketball players can hardly appear anywhere without being hooted at as racists, and Stanford University announced last fall that it would no longer meet B.Y.U. in athletic contests. Keeping the argument within its original category, Ernest L. Wilkinson, the president of B.Y.U., called Stanford's action "flagrant religious discrimination."

Since the demonstrators obviously have no interest in joining the Mormon Church, it follows to any strict categorizer that they are insincere troublemakers who have merely chosen B.Y.U. athletics as a shortcut to national publicity. B.Y.U. distributes an article from the N.C.A.A. newspaper in which the editors, in their first venture into political undercover work, report being reliably informed that revolutionaries were laying their plans

against B.Y.U. last summer. B.Y.U. also makes available reprints of an anti-Mormon article from a Communist newspaper—a get-the-Mormons signal to the Communist Conspiracy, according to an accompanying analysis by W. Cleon Skousen, a former Salt Lake City police chief who is a member of the B.Y.U. religious-instruction department. It is assumed by nearly everyone at B.Y.U. that even if the Communists are not behind the demonstrations the people who are behind them have chosen an innocent party for their abuse, and the result is often described around B.Y.U. as "persecution." Mormons have been persecuted for their religious beliefs before, of course, and some Mormons explain the current difficulties almost completely as more of the same—an unpleasant and unfair but not unexpected attack from the Gentiles. What strikes the B.Y.U. administration as particularly unjust about dragging the B.Y.U. basketball team into the argument from four or five categories away is that B.Y.U. students are not merely innocent but demonstrably more innocent than any other students. "The students are hurt and angry," I was told by a University public-relations man. "There's probably not a higher-type student body in the United States. Look at that campus! Not a drop of paper on it. No cigarette butts. When the flag goes up, the students come to attention. On other campuses, the students burn the flag. Our students are patriotic and they're well dressed, and these are the people who are being persecuted. The kooks, the hippies, the filthy people—they're not persecuted."

If a B.Y.U. student acknowledges that any of the black students demonstrating against the basketball team are sincere, he usually explains their actions as a failure to understand. It is said they fail to understand that Mormons have nothing to say about Church doctrine, since a belief central to the religion is that doctrine comes, through a process of continuing revelation, from God to the president of the Church and from the president to the membership. There is a feeling among students and administrators that the press has not fairly presented the University's position that the restriction on Negroes holding the priesthood is purely a religious matter and has no connection with the University's policies on race—the complete whiteness of every basketball team ever fielded by B.Y.U. having been explained at length within a separate category. I often asked B.Y.U. students about the possibility that a black student at Arizona or Colorado State





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might not believe that such distinctions were important compared to the presence of yet another institutionalized implication of his inferiority. Most of the B.Y.U. students I asked would pause for a few moments, as if they had never considered that possibility, and then acknowledge that a sincere black student might understand everything perfectly well and decide to demonstrate against the B.Y.U. basketball team anyway—even though the result would be persecution of an innocent party.

THE Mormon Church leaves little room for loyal dissent, and Brigham Young University leaves practically no room at all. Mormonism has not only a strong belief in revelation as the only source of doctrinal change but also an authoritarian structure and a tight sense of community and a history of outside pressure that sometimes makes disagreement seem the equivalent of ammunition for the Gentile enemy. Yet there are Mormons who manage to express disagreement about the denial of priesthood to Negroes—to argue about its origins and point out its contradictions—and still stay within the Church. At B.Y.U.—where ninety-five per cent of the students and virtually all of the faculty are Mormons, and mostly churchgoing, orthodox Mormons—there are few people who hold such views, and fewer still who might want to express them publicly, and no one at all who does. The student newspaper, which reports on the demonstrations and has devoted a lot of space to the University's protestations of innocence, has been instructed to print no discussion of the Church doctrine that is presumably causing all the trouble, and most students agree that there is no reason to argue about something they have no control over. Although the man-in-the-street interviews in the student paper's special issue on the Stanford decision included one or two with students who thought there might be some prejudice at B.Y.U., the rest of the issue was virtually identical to a special issue of the alumni paper on the same subject—a collection of official statements about the absence of discrimination at B.Y.U., a series of answers to such commonly asked questions as why there are only three or four Negroes among the University's twenty-five thousand students ("their decision, not our policy"), and a supportive column by Max Rafferty.

B.Y.U. faculty members have always had difficulty distinguishing the positions of the University administration from the positions of the Church—the Church's General Authorities also serve as B.Y.U.'s board of trustees—and normally express no disagreement with either. At B.Y.U., no one on the faculty has tenure.

Although the young men who serve tours as missionaries for the Church are known for wearing ties and neat white shirts, a Mormon with long hair and a beard could be married in the Salt Lake City temple—unless, of course, one of his great-grandfathers was a Negro. At B.Y.U., someone with long hair and a beard would not be allowed to register for classes. Although Mormons undoubtedly tend to be politically conservative, there are liberals as well as conservatives in the Church leadership. At B.Y.U., Wilkinson regularly lectures student assemblies on the federal government's having become a Socialistic monster, and a few years ago it was revealed that there was a network of student spies reporting to the administration on what was said in the classroom by a few professors suspected of holding liberal political views. At B.Y.U., peaceful picketing is not permitted, the Young Democrats are the most left-wing political group allowed on campus, and the two political bumper stickers available at the bookstore of the Ernest L. Wilkinson student center say "I'm Proud to Be an American" and "I'm a Member of the Silent Majority." The strain of political conservatism is sufficiently strong in the Church that under Wilkinson's em-



phasis it becomes practically Church doctrine to B.Y.U. students. Among the Mormon religious pamphlets displayed at the bookstore is one called "Civil Rights—Tool of Communist Deception,"

by Ezra Taft Benson, one of the twelve apostles of the Church. Not long ago, when the campus Young Americans for Freedom were criticized for displaying the Book of Mormon among such books as Skousen's "The Naked Communist," someone sent a letter to the student paper pointing out that David O. McKay, who was president of the Church until his death, in January, had recommended "The Naked Communist" to the faithful as an "excellent book." The most politically conservative department at B.Y.U. is the religion department, some members of which are said to have quit worrying about the Communist Conspiracy

and switched their concern to something called The Illuminati, an ancient cabal that supposedly still looms S.M.E.R.S.H.-like above even the Red Menace.

The University does permit a weekly free forum during the lunch hour in one of the lounges of the student union, although there have been some complaints that it amounts to no more than the handful of campus radicals (Young Democrats) talking to each other. The day I saw it, all but a few people in the lounge just happened to be studying or chatting there when the forum started. The radicals were arguing that the Mormon tradition included an intellectual search for the truth and that people should be judged for themselves rather than by the length of their hair; the only applause was for speakers who praised the University or defended its dress regulations. During the discussion of dress, one young man in the audience said that the reason for strict control of student appearance was obviously not religious—the prophets of the Church, after all, wore beards—but economic, the realities of the marketplace having led the University to use the uniquely respectable dress and behavior of its students to raise money. He wasn't objecting; he thought it was obviously worth shaving his beard if shaving helped build a new field house. The largest single gift to the University—a thousand-acre ranch in San Clemente said to be worth several million dollars—was presented in 1967 by Ray Reeves, the inventor of the airwedge sole, and his wife, Nellie. The University invited the couple to Provo for the official presentation, and students were given "Thanks, Ray and Nellie" lapel stickers to wear for the ceremonies. "Some time ago my wife, Nellie, and I read a syndicated newspaper article describing Brigham Young University as a place where youngsters still had ideals, still cut their hair, still believed in God," Ray Reeves said. "We had to see it, so we drove to Provo, Utah. The young people at B.Y.U. were all clean-cut, good-looking. We didn't see any miniskirts. There was no beatnik atmosphere. Those students had their feet on the ground. Instead of finding fault, they were accepting leadership. In short, we liked the way the University was being run. Our association with the people at B.Y.U. has been marvellous. To show our support, we've given the University our ranch."

The reaction of B.Y.U. to the continuing demonstrations is not likely to

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diminish the reputation it has acquired among those who are pleased to find one university that stands up to Minority Pressure Groups. The football coach has recruited B.Y.U.'s first black football player, after making it clear to him that interracial dating is not allowed. But according to the Provo paper the coach recently told a local Chamber of Commerce breakfast, "A lot of people are mad at me right now because they feel we are giving in." There are a few people at B.Y.U. who are considering suggesting to the administration that the University prove the sincerity of its statements about the civil category by recruiting Negro students for the same kind of special-help program that B.Y.U. runs for American Indians, but Wilkinson says that limitations on the University's space preclude recruiting of any kind. At the strong urging of the administration, students who organized a nighttime, non-credit Student Academy at B.Y.U. this semester reduced their proposed courses in Afro-American history and literature to one composite course; until the planned curriculum was made public, the faculty members involved were under pressure from the administration to teach no course at all on the subject.

INTELLECTUALS who try to remain within the Church have always had to face the tension between their faith and their intellectual curiosity, and the few students at B.Y.U. who have such problems find them more acute these days. Wilkinson talks of the priesthood restriction on Negroes as if it were some isolated religious practice like total immersion among the Baptists; he often says that Stanford's decision was the equivalent of B.Y.U. refusing to play Notre Dame because of different ideas on divorce. But the B.Y.U. students who tend to approach official statements questioningly know that those students who have been on missions in the South proselyte only among white people, that the traditional attempts by Mormons to explain the restriction on Negroes all contain some implication of inferiority, that the Church is noted for giving its official support to right-to-work laws rather than civil-rights legislation, that the elderly men who preside over Mormonism have sometimes made remarks that would cause the least conspiratorial Negro to shout at B.Y.U. basketball players. (The current president of the Church, who completed his college education in the nineteenth century, was quoted a few years ago as



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saying that "darkies are wonderful people.") A Mormon social scientist has done an attitude study in which he concludes that Mormons in California are no more prejudiced against Negroes than other whites are, but neither side of the argument is heard at B.Y.U.

The vast majority of B.Y.U. students accept the official statements of the University administration as unquestioningly as they accept official statements of the Church authorities. It has never occurred to most of them to compare the statement of the University that black athletes are recruited "under exactly the same terms as any other athletes" and the public acknowledgment by coaches that they have warned Negro prospects that a black athlete may not be happy at B.Y.U. because of the lack of "social life." B.Y.U. has never appeared to place the stimulation of intellectual curiosity high on its list of priorities. The lack of tenure and of a faculty senate have meant some problems with accreditation and the loss of the kind of professors who obviously wouldn't teach in a university that didn't take those institutions for granted, but there has been an accompanying absence of faculty dissent. In the tension between faith and intellect, the University has been a strong supporter of faith. Although the Mormons—people who have placed great value on education—have created what they often call the largest privately operated university in the United States, it is not really the intellectual center of the Church. The center of serious discussions about the race situation and the Church is the state-supported University of Utah. The principal forum for Mormon intellectuals—a fascinating quarterly called *Dialogue*—is published in California rather than Provo, and includes hardly anyone from B.Y.U. on its board of editors. B.Y.U. has presumably chosen to make its reputation on instilling its students with religious faith and patriotism and high standards of personal morality. As far as "building character" is concerned, Wilkinson said in a speech not long ago that universities such as Harvard and Yale—and, of course, Stanford—have "passed their zenith." In its own terms, B.Y.U. has assumed leadership in the field.

—CALVIN TRILLIN

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