

# AROUND THE U. S. A.

## Mormons and the Negro

St. Paul, Minn.

ACCORDING to Mormon theology the status of the Negro on earth was determined in the "pre-existent" state, specifically in the War in Heaven (Revelation 12:4, 7). As everyone knows, Lucifer rebelled and was "cast down," taking with him one-third of the hosts of Heaven. These are the sons of perdition. Michael clearly had a majority with him, some more active supporters than others. Although I can find no Scriptural basis for it, I have heard it said that the *active* pro-Michael group was no more than one-third. The other third "sat on the fence," refusing to take sides. The latter, in the Mormon lore of my boyhood days, was identified as the Negro. This places him in a sort of never-never land, a twilight zone between the Satanic hosts and those who were ready to be counted on the side of Michael. Thus the blessings of the Mormon Church cannot be extended to anyone with Negro "blood."

This unfortunate policy of the church is a source of embarrassment and humiliation to thousands of its members (the writer among them) who find no basis for it in the teachings of Jesus, whom all Mormons accept as the Saviour. The issue has become increasingly important as members of the church outside of Utah and adjacent states have increased rapidly in recent years and are brought into direct contact with Negroes, and who see their fellow-Christians engaged in programs to reduce racial prejudice—programs in which they cannot fully participate. Such persons would like to see the policy altered in the interest of peace and simple humanitarianism.

The doctrine of white-race superiority, so much the vogue in the early nineteenth century when Mormonism had its beginning, has been so thoroughly debunked as to catalogue its adherents today as either grossly uninformed or victims of traditional irrational prejudices, or both. Mormons as a group are not ignorant people; they rank high in formal schooling, with an extraordinarily high proportion of college graduates. Many of them naturally find it difficult to reconcile what they learn in college

about racial differences and equalities with the stand taken by their church. Curiously the position of the church on the Negro does not carry over to other racial groups. Natives of the South Seas, Mongolians, and American Indians are given a clean bill of health. And Mormons, according to their theology, regard the Jews as their own kin! The doctrine, however, does not mean there is no anti-Semitism among Mormons, but that is another problem.

The basic question remains as to whether the church will modify its present stand on this matter. Perhaps a more important question is, *can* it change? Theoretically the church has a means by which its doctrines may be modified. It was founded upon the idea of "progressive revelation," that as God spoke to the people in Bible days, so He continues to do today through the head of the church. An announcement *ex cathedra* on this question would be accepted by the body of the church; joyfully by some although, no doubt, reluctantly by others. It is recognized, of course, that it is very difficult for a religion based upon revelation to modify its doctrines, but few other denominations have the procedures for change that the Mormon church has. The leaders of this church are men of good will. It is difficult to believe that deep in their own hearts they are not troubled by the ethical problem which this bit of dogma presents.

A very real difficulty is the fact that those who disapprove the church's attitude have no way of expressing their point of view. It is safe to say that most of the one million members give passive assent to the present policy. For most of those living in Utah and adjacent states the Negro question is academic; they hardly ever see Negroes, much less live in the same community with them. In any case, they would find comfortable agreement with the white-supremacy idea because of latent historical prejudices which they share with so many other white people. However, my knowledge of the deep humanitarianism of the Mormon people leads me to think that if the question could be openly discussed they would line up on the side of justice.

Such open discussion, especially in print, however, is a perilous undertaking for any member. It automatically leaves him open to the charge of "disobedience to constituted authority" which may lead to his being excommunicated. The upshot is that discussions by interested persons are largely sub-rosa. So widespread are such discussion groups that they might be said to constitute a "Mormon underground." The participants are not disloyal church members; rather they are generally active in the church and rationalize their conduct by weighing the many admirable features of their religion against the features with which they disagree.

In writing this article for publication the author does so in a spirit of constructive criticism and in the conviction that his church, with so many admirable qualities and achievements to its credit, is faced by a challenge to place itself alongside those other groups which are laboring against racial bigotry.

LOWRY NELSON

[The writer is a lifelong member of the Mormon Church.]

