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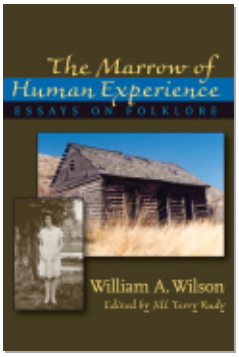
The Seriousness of Mormon Humor



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The Seriousness of Mormon Humor

My first foray into humor studies occurred when I tried to make sense of the humorous repertoire of a particular group that—not unlike the Mormons—was shaped by dramatic historical events and possessed a distinct ideology. In that and subsequent studies, I came to understand that while humor served to entertain and to lubricate social interaction, it was also a significant form of expression. Important messages were conveyed through jokes, wisecracks, and anecdotes. Humorous expressions offered insights into the concepts, concerns, and values of individuals and groups. For more than three decades now, I have heeded Bert Wilson's admonition that jokes are something to be taken seriously.

Wilson's lifelong involvement in the religion and culture of Latter-day Saints—as participant, observer, and analyst—has permitted him to produce detailed records and rich understandings of Mormon life and experience. Eschewing study of the central doctrines and institutional practices of the faith to focus on the stuff of everyday living—the folklore—he has been able to offer, both to the outsider and insider, a glimpse of what it means to be Mormon. Mormon humor is not the least of this stuff of everyday life, and Mormon humor has a direct bearing on Wilson's larger project of understanding what it means to be human.

Religion, for the most part, has not been kind to humor. The early rabbis condemned jesting and laughter as did the church fathers. Rabbi Akiva said, "Jesting and levity accustom a person to lewdness." Saint John Chrysostom asked, "Christ is crucified and doest thou laugh?" Those fixated on the world-to-come have little sympathy for the distractions of the world in which we live. In this respect, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is no different from any other. Salvation is a serious business and the institutions, offices, and practices that ensure salvation merit reverence—not ridicule.

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But a church is not simply a bundle of beliefs and ritual practices. It is organized for and by people, and those people, whether they like it or not, must work out their salvation in this world. Thus, as examples in this article demonstrate, a bishop, who is supposed to be a wise and effective leader, an inspiration to his ward, can be a fool or philanderer. It is not that he *is* a fool or philanderer (although humor can be directed at particular individuals). But because the bishop is human, he can be. Any organization, whatever its goals, must depend upon people who are inept, foolish, or weak—at least some of the time. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental incongruity that conditions religious humor: the irreconcilability of the ideal and the real, the quest for perfection within a material world.

Humor very much depends on a keen apprehension of this world and its ways. And humor, with all its dependence on exaggeration and absurdity, is very much attuned to balance—not extremes. It is the repertoire, however, that is significant in establishing this balance, not the individual joke. For every joke that seems to target the overly pious, there is a joke that targets the sinner and backslider. For every joke that focuses on the overly rigid and unwavering bishop, there is a joke about the bishop who compromises doctrine all too freely. For every joke about a Relief Society president with extensive sexual experience, there is a joke about a saint who is incapable of recognizing even the most blatant sexual allusion. The joke is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* that tells us when a particular line of thought or behavior goes beyond the pale. A repertoire of jokes delimits the boundaries of a world within which the ordinary, aware, and reasonable person can be expected to think and live.

Anthropologist Melford Spiro, in trying to reconcile Burmese *nat* spirit cults—with their attentions to the exigencies of everyday life—and the philosophical doctrines of Theravada Buddhism, suggested that it was the *nat* cults that allowed Buddhism to retain its exalted, systematic, and uncompromising nature. The *nat* cults addressed the here-and-now and allowed village people to confront the world in which they were forced to live. Consequently Buddhist doctrine did not have to bend itself to the necessities of the everyday. It seems to me that religious humor often serves similar ends. As Wilson says in this article, "The jokes remain as clear markers of central issues in the society, as a barometer of those concerns engaging the minds of the people at any particular moment." In the face of impenetrable doctrines and extraordinary demands, religious humor may remind struggling saints that they must make their way in this world, and remind them that this world is also with them.

—Elliott Oring

SOME TIME AGO A FRIEND OF MINE, TALKING TO A PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, SAID he thought the historian and I were working somewhat similar ground—to which the historian replied, "No, we do legitimate history, not folklore.[1] Why, you should see some of the things Wilson studies. He even takes jokes seriously." I do indeed. And I hope to win others to this conviction.

Perhaps even scholars with a little more vision than this particular historian have failed to take either Mormon literary or folk humor seriously because they have believed that no such humor exists. As Richard Cracroft has pointed out, "one must search far into the first half of the twentieth century before turning up any intentionally sustained published humor" (1980, 31). Not until recent times, in novels like Samuel Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why* (1994) or in shorter pieces like Levi Peterson's "The Christianization of Coburn Heights" in *Canyons of Grace* (1982) do we find much *written* evidence that Mormons have been anything but the stolid, unsmiling souls the rest of the world has believed them to be.

Nor is there in the folklore record—at least in the folklore record made available to us through the work of earlier scholars—much evidence to give a happier picture. The reason for this is simple. Just as earlier Mormon writers attempted to give literary expression to the clearly serious struggle to establish the kingdom of God in the western wasteland, so too did the first students of Mormon folklore seek out the folk expressions generated by that struggle. Thus in the first, and still most important, major study of Mormon folklore, *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore among the Mormons* (1956), Austin and Alta Fife devoted one deliciously funny chapter to the trickster hero J. Golden Kimball but filled the rest of the book with solemn and miraculous accounts in which the Saints, aided by God and his angels, struggled to overcome both themselves and a frequently hostile world.

It is not surprising, then, that Leonard Arrington—one historian who does take jokes seriously—addressed Brigham Young University students on "The Many Uses of Humor" and, following the Fifes, said: "The humorous tradition of J. Golden Kimball stories is in marked contrast to the bulk of Mormon folklore, which is dominated by tales of miracles and the supernatural—all serving the didactic function of teaching that God still actively intervenes in the lives of men. . . . Revelatory self-directed humor concerning the weaknesses and special difficulties of Mormons is rare." But then, perhaps troubled by this doleful view of Mormon folk tradition, Arrington added: "A study [by Lucile Butler] of humorous stories told among Ephraim, Utah, residents suggests that perhaps a much larger body of Mormon folk humor could be gathered . . . were we to take the time to gather it" (1974).

Captivated by tales of angels, Nephites, and devils, then, collectors of Mormon folklore have in the past not taken the time to collect that large and vibrant body of jokes which Mormons tell and have probably always told each other about each other—with the result that the scholarly world still tends to view Mormons as a rather dour and pious lot, seldom given to laughter at their own imperfections and human foibles. During the past fifteen years my students and I have attempted to remedy this situation by collecting and depositing in folklore archives at least some of the Mormon jokes and anecdotes Arrington hoped someone would gather. This paper is a first, albeit hesitant, attempt to come to terms with this material.

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At the outset, there are three points to note about these jokes. First, many Mormon jokes are Mormon by adoption rather than by birth. As folklorists know, much folklore is not culture-specific—that is, though the lore may thoroughly reflect the values, attitudes, anxieties, and beliefs of a cultural group, that lore itself may have originated elsewhere, may have at one time been taken over by the group, and then may have been reshaped to reflect the group's cultural contours and express its dominant concerns. So it is with Mormon jokes. These jokes are Mormon not because of where they came from but because of the uses to which they are put and because of what they reveal about the narrators. Most joke tellers, I should add, have no idea that the jokes they tell are not originally Mormon. It is the spoil-sport comparative folklorist who points this out.

The second point to observe is that the J. Golden Kimball cycle is not the heart and center of Mormon humor. While it is certainly true that this cycle is, or at least has been, the creation of the Mormon folk, it is also true that J. Golden is well on the way to becoming a popular hero rather than a folk hero. The folk legacy record by Hector Lee (1964); the book *The Golden Legacy* (1974), by Thomas Cheney; the one-man show, "J. Golden," written by James Arrington and starring Bruce Ackerman; the feature column in *Sunstone*, "J. Golden Nuggets," by James N. Kimball—all these have pulled the crusty old man away from traditional culture, where knowledge is passed along in face-to-face interactions among small groups of people, toward popular culture, where knowledge is disseminated in a one-way communication from the cultural taste-makers to large groups of people by means of the popular media.

If there is any central figure in Mormon folk humor it is not J. Golden Kimball or any other general authority of the church—except occasionally Brigham Young, whose straight speaking, association with polygamy, and safe distance in the past make him the object of some jokes. The central figure instead is the beleaguered bishop, his counterpart, the Relief Society president, and occasionally a high councilor or the stake president—in other words, leaders at lower levels of authority than the revered and fearsome general authorities. Unlike the general authorities, these leaders are nameless—partly because they represent folk types rather than specific individuals, and mainly because, as lay leaders, they represent you and me. Most of us, if we keep our noses even partly clean, may well become the very leaders we make fun of; what's more, many of us already face some of the same problems that now bedevil these leaders. There is in many of these jokes, therefore, a more affectionate feeling toward the objects of the humor than there is in the anticlerical jokes of other groups. Consider the following three stories:

> It seems that a bishop and his two counselors were all stranded out in the desert and just didn't know what they were going to do. Then they noticed a lamp lying there in the sand. They picked it up and rubbed it, and out popped a genie. The genie said each one

of them could have one wish. The second counselor said, "I wish I was home by my swimming pool drinking a big glass of lemonade." Zap, and he was gone. The first counselor said, "I wish I was home sitting in front of the TV with a big glass of orange juice." Zap, and he was gone. And the bishop said, "I wish my two counselors were here to help me decide."

A bishop who was conducting a church building fund in his ward preached a sermon from the pulpit one time about being blessed for contributing to the building fund. After his sermon, a member came up to him and said, "Bishop, that was a damned fine sermon." The bishop replied, "Brother, you had better watch the swearing." The member continued, "Yes sir, Bishop, that was such a damned fine sermon that I gave an extra $650 for the building fund." The bishop then said, "Yes brother, it takes a hell of a lot of money to build a church."

There was a Mormon bishop in a small Utah town who, like all Mormon bishops, worked so hard at his calling that he never had time for his own activities. One Sunday, when the pressure had gotten unbearable, he decided to skip meeting and go golfing. This he did and had quite an enjoyable time. Upon returning home, however, he found his town had vanished. A bit bewildered, he went to his house where he found a note tacked to his door. It read: "Sorry we missed you. —Enoch."

Here, in each of these jokes, is a bishop not unlike ourselves. He must make decisions he does not feel prepared to make; he must commit himself to an ideal world while pragmatically learning to deal with the real world; and, after all the work he does to help others achieve their salvation, he may fail to make the grade himself. As we laugh at these jokes, then, we are perhaps laughing more at the circumstance of being Mormon than we are at the imperfect bishop. And thus it is with much Mormon humor: the targets of the jokes, ostensibly someone else, are really ourselves.

A third point to consider about Mormon jokes is that, contrary to the expectations of many, humor growing out of the Mormon experience will not always reveal a united people, sharing a common identity and viewing the world through similar eyes. While the same Mormon jokes will often be told by members from all segments of Mormon society (the only limiting factor being the intelligence necessary to understand the humor), there is no uniformity of belief about the appropriateness of these jokes. About the only thing clear from the data is that some Mormons frequently tell Mormon jokes and find them greatly amusing, that some never tell the jokes and find them offensive, that the bulk of Mormons range somewhere between these two extremes, and that it is

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almost impossible to know which Mormon will fall into which of these categories. Folklore, we should remember, is communal but not stereotypical; that is, it is kept alive by members of a particular community but does not characterize every member of the community.

According to folklorist Elliott Oring, it is strong emotional involvement which causes some of us not to appreciate our humor. "Appreciation of humor," says Oring, "may . . . require a measure of emotional distance from the subject matter of the humor. Often concepts, philosophies, personalities, or societies may be disparaged in a joke and should these be the focus of intense emotion, humor may not be experienced. The communication may be regarded as a slander rather than as humor because the hearer is unable to achieve sufficient emotional distance" (1981, 54). If what Oring says is true, then one would expect important and sacred Mormon concepts, philosophies, and personalities not to be the objects of humor, at least not among the faithful. Or one could argue that, when the jokes are told, they may be seen as a measure of the psychic distance a Mormon is able to put between himself and the teachings of his church. A few examples from each of the main themes in Mormon humor will reveal whether Oring's principle holds true.

When a three-year-old Mormon boy and a little Catholic girl once sneaked away to a pond behind the boy's house and stripped to the buff to go swimming, the boy looked at his naked companion and exclaimed, "Gosh, I didn't know there was such a difference between Mormons and Catholics." The difference Mormons perceive between themselves and members of other faiths is usually of quite another nature. One of the principal causes of contention between Mormons and their neighbors is the Mormon insistence that Mormons alone possess the complete truth, the only way to salvation, and that all other churches are in error. Out of this belief is often born a smug self-righteousness that is evident in jokes Mormons tell about their dealings with people of other faiths. For example, when a public school teacher asked a little Mormon boy in her class what he would be if he weren't Mormon, he replied, "Embarrassed!" Another time

> two young deacons were very excited about their priesthood lesson which was about baptism. They decided to practice the baptismal service after Sunday School. They went to one boy's home and found the mother cat and her kittens to practice on. The kittens were first because they were smaller and easier to handle, but when they tried to immerse the mother cat, they had quite a bit of difficulty. Finally they gave up in despair, and one of the young boys suggested that they just sprinkle the mother cat and let it go to the Devil.

And still another time

> three ladies on a bus began talking about Mormons. One lady said, "I live where it's 50 percent Mormon and I hate it because I can't

> ever do anything. I want to move." The second lady said, "Well I live where it's nearly 80 percent Mormon and I want to move to a place where there aren't any so I can have some fun." Then the third lady said, "I live in Utah and that's almost all Mormon. I can't ever do anything fun without being looked down on. I want to go someplace where there aren't any Mormons." Just then a man sitting in front of them, who was a Mormon, turned around and said, "Why don't you all go to hell! There aren't any Mormons there!"

But alongside these anecdotes exists another body of jokes in which Mormons poke fun not at others but at the notion that Mormons alone are destined for salvation. For example, according to an anecdote that made the rounds several years ago,

> President Kimball sent out messages for all members of the church to meet on Temple Square for an important message. The Tabernacle, the Assembly Hall, and the Salt Palace were full, and people were all over. President Kimball got up and said: "Saints, I've got some good news and some bad news. First the good news. We have just received a telegram from Western Union; the Millennium is here. Christ arrives in two days. Now for the bad news. We're all supposed to meet at the Vatican."

In the most frequently collected joke in the USU archives, St. Peter conducts a group of people on a tour through heaven and shows them where the different churches are located. As they pass one room, St. Peter says, "Shhh! Quiet! Those are the Mormons; they think they're the only ones here."

A second major theme in Mormon humor has to do with money. Scarcely a year goes by that someone in the national press does not write an exposé on the great wealth of the Mormon church. In the church itself, members, who are asked to pay a full tithing as well as contribute to the missionary fund, the building fund, and the welfare fund, feel at times, as one wit put it, that the letters LDS really mean "Lay Down the Silver." Or when they see the statue of Brigham Young in downtown Salt Lake, back to the temple and hand outstretched toward Zion's National Bank, they may feel there is some justification in the jingle, "There stands Brigham / Like a bird on a perch, / With his hand to the bank / And his back to the church." They chuckle when they hear that the Mormon skyjacker was finally apprehended because he aroused suspicion by suddenly paying $50,000 in tithing. They point out that Howard Hughes did not make it into heaven because in his supposed "Mormon will" he left to the church only a sixteenth of his fortune instead of a tenth—a full tithe. And they tell jokes like the following:

> There was recently a local resident whose beloved dog died of a heart attack. Because this man loved his dog so much, he decided

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> that it would only be appropriate for the pet to have a church funeral. So the man called upon his bishop and asked him if he could have a funeral service for his loved one in the neighborhood LDS chapel. The bishop replied that this was a highly unusual request and one which would probably not be appropriate for an LDS chapel. The man, greatly disappointed, then asked the bishop whether one of the non-Mormon churches in the area would conduct such a service. The bishop, obviously relieved by this suggestion, said that he was sure that one of them would. The man then asked how much money one of these "gentile" churches would charge for such a service. The bishop replied that he did not have any idea of the possible financial costs. The man, while leaving the bishop's office, casually replied, "Well, that's no problem, friend. You see, I am willing to pay $1,000 for a proper service." The bishop, greatly surprised by this statement, jumped up and said, "Wait, brother! Wait! Why didn't you tell me before that your dear pet was a Latter-day Saint."

Not only are members expected to donate money to the church, they are also expected to give great amounts of time. There is considerable truth to the jingle: "Mary had a little lamb. / It grew to be a sheep. / Then it joined the Mormon church / And died from lack of sleep." As every Mormon knows, with a lay clergy and with each member expected to accept "calls" in the church to be a Sunday School teacher, a scoutmaster, a secretary, and so on, a visit from the bishop seldom betokens a social visit but rather another call to duty. Especially is this true when the bishop visits the Relief Society president, the woman in the ward to whom the bishop turns most frequently for help on projects. Thus the following story:

> A Catholic priest, a rabbi, and a Mormon bishop were bragging about how much their various congregations believed them. So they decided to test a member of each faith to see which one would believe a strange thing. They went to a Jew's home. "Hello, Mrs. Goldstein; I'm a holy cow," said the rabbi. "Oh, come on," said Mrs. Goldstein, "you're a lot of strange things, but I know you're not a holy cow." So they went to a parishioner's home, and the priest said, "Hello, Mrs. Florentin; I'm a holy cow." "Oh father," she said, "I know you're not a holy cow, but come on inside anyway." So they went to a Relief Society president's house with whom the bishop had had many meetings. He knocked on the door. As soon as she saw who it was, she exclaimed, "Holy cow, is that you again?"

Though there is no direct statement of it, there is at least a slight hint of impropriety in this joke, in all the visits the bishop has been making to the

home of the Relief Society president. In other stories there is more than just a hint. For example, one Sunday in Idaho an old farmer stood up in testimony meeting and laconically said:

> Well, it's been a right good week. No dead pigs. Corn's in. Cows milked. Few flies, but that ain't so bad. Yep, everything was goin' along right fine, up until last night—when Ma went out and committed adultery.

This brings us to the third major theme in Mormon humor: sex. There seem to be fewer jokes in this category than in others; still, there are too many of them to be ignored. One of the perplexing problems with these jokes is that in many of them some authority figure, usually the bishop or Relief Society president, is guilty of violating the very law he or she is most concerned with upholding, the law of chastity. Perhaps the church's very strict sexual code makes the violation of the code the most effective way of deflating authority figures by making them, as Freud would say, seem inferior or ridiculous. However, as already noted, these figures are very often simply ourselves, struggling with the same problems we must face. The number of excommunications in the church for sexual offenses suggests that the struggle is real enough. These sexual jokes may be one of the few socially acceptable ways of talking openly about this forbidden subject.

Sometimes, in the face of temptation, the bishop in these stories is naive, or sexually unaware:

> A Mormon bishop was hunting deer in the mountains around Salt Lake City. He came into a clearing, and there on the ground was a beautiful woman without any clothes on. "Are you game?" asked the bishop. "I sure am," came the suggestive reply. So the bishop shot her.

More often, faced by this same temptation, the poor bishop succumbs:

> There was a new Mormon bishop who looked like Dean Martin. One day he went around visiting the ladies in his ward. Each time he would knock on the door, the lady would answer, "Dean Martin!" The bishop would say, "Oh no, I'm your new bishop." Finally he came to a door that was answered by a beautiful young girl who was nude. She said, "Dean Martin!" The bishop sang, "Everybody loves somebody sometime. . . ."

Sometimes it is the bishop's good helper, the Relief Society president, who is the butt of the joke:

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> Last summer at Bear Lake a young man of little modesty decided to get in a little nude sunbathing. He walked naked along the beach until he felt tired, so he lay down on the warm sand and soon fell asleep. As he was sleeping, the Logan ladies' Relief Society moved onto the beach for their annual picnic. They all sat down near the sleeping man, but did not notice him. Eventually the man woke up and looked around in fright at all these ladies. Not knowing what to do, he grabbed a brown paper bag that was lying nearby, pulled it over his head, and ran past the ladies toward his car. After the shock wore off, the women began to wonder who this man was. One lady turned to the others and said, "Well, I could tell it wasn't *my* husband." Another one said, "I had a good look and could tell that it surely wasn't my husband." Another one said that she didn't recognize the man either. Finally the Relief Society president spun around and said, "Ladies, I had a good look too, and I'm sure he isn't even in our ward."

On one occasion,

> a woman in St. George, Utah, had a set of triplets and two sets of twins. A church authority visited the area for stake conference, surveyed the woman's offspring, and exclaimed, "Good heavens! Do you get multiple births every time?" She replied, "Oh no. Most of the times we don't get anything."

Though Mormons are sternly warned to avoid pre- and extramarital sex, they recognize, as this last joke suggests, the importance of sex in marriage. They do not believe that children are conceived in sin. Thus, according to tradition,

> Brigham Young was coming across with a pioneer wagon train, and they got close to the Great Basin area. He sent a scout out ahead to see what it was like. And a little while later the scout returned—he was racing back on his horse and saying, "It's there! It's terrific! There's a beautiful lake and it's a paradise. All we can do is fish and make love all day long!" And then Brigham Young turned to him and said, "Well, salt the lake."

There is some hint, however, that Brigham Young's wives may not always have approved of this view:

> As Brigham Young's wagon pulled over the ridge into the Salt Lake valley, Brigham Young's wife was standing looking into the valley. Brigham Young came forward and said the now-famous line, "This is the place!" To which his wife haughtily replied: "This is neither the time nor the place, Brigham."

But while sex in marriage is generally perceived as all right, Brigham's wife notwithstanding, the main purpose of sex is still thought by the faithful to be the production of offspring. Thus in Utah, which has the highest per capita birthrate in the nation, it is not unusual to hear riddle-jokes like this: "Did you hear that the state bird is going to be changed?" "No." "Yeah, from the seagull to the stork." Question: "How can you tell if you are at a Mormon wedding?" Answer: "The mother of the bride is pregnant." Nor is it unusual to hear people make jokes like the following, jokes that make fun of, or negate, Mormon reproductive capacities: "My wife is a big fan of the pill. She eats them like candy. The other day she had taken a number of them and then went to her church duties. While she was there, she sneezed and sterilized the whole thirty-first ward Relief Society." In another story,

> a young girl was sent away to BYU by her parents, and at the end of her first semester she came back home telling her parents that she had to drop out of school because she was pregnant. Her parents were astonished, to say the least, that their daughter with such a fine Mormon upbringing could have this happen to her. They immediately asked her if the boy didn't intend to do the right thing and marry her. To which the girl replied, "Oh Mother, I couldn't marry him! He smokes."

The reference here, of course, is not just to sex but to the Mormon Word of Wisdom, the health code that prohibits use of tobacco, alcohol, coffee, and tea. Jokes about the Word of Wisdom comprise the fourth main theme in Mormon jokelore. Mormons hold ambiguous attitudes toward this teaching. Some think it is greatly overemphasized at the expense of more important principles, hence the joke just cited. Others secretly wish they could occasionally indulge in such pleasures, hence the following joke:

> Some members of a civic organization were making plans for a social. For the party the refreshment committee decided to serve liquor as part of the refreshments; but when it came time for the party, the refreshment committee noticed that the invitation committee had invited several clergymen, and they were in attendance. This presented a problem because they didn't want to serve liquor with the clergy present. Since they were having watermelon for dessert, they decided they would open one watermelon and drain all the juice from it and then fill it back up with liquor for their own use. But as you would expect, the watermelons got mixed up, and they discovered that the watermelon with the liquor in it had been served to the clergymen. They looked to see what was taking place. The Catholic priest was eating his watermelon like there was nothing wrong with it; the Baptist minister was also enjoying his.

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> Then they noticed the Mormon bishop. He was likewise enjoying his watermelon, and he was saving the seeds and putting them in his pocket.

Some Mormons take a cynical view of the Word of Wisdom, questioning the sincerity of those who abide by its principles. For example, "Why should you always take at least two Mormons on a hunting trip?" Answer: "Because if you take only one, he'll drink all the beer." Still other Mormons willingly obey but feel uncomfortable when they must explain to non-Mormons why they can't drink the cup of coffee offered them in friendship. These Mormons will take painful pleasure from the following joke:

> One day St. Peter was repairing the gates of heaven and a Catholic priest who had just died came to get in. "It'll be a few minutes before you can enter," St. Peter said, "The gates are broken. You can go over there and have a cup of coffee while you wait. . . ." Not long after, a Protestant minister who had just died approached St. Peter to enter heaven. "You'll have to wait a while while I fix these gates," St. Peter said. "Just go over there and have some coffee." The minister joined the priest. Soon a Mormon bishop who had just died came up to St. Peter and wanted to get into heaven. St. Peter said, "You'll have to go to hell. I don't have time to make hot chocolate."

The fifth, and final, category of Mormon humor is represented in all these jokes—antiauthoritarian humor. Mormon anticlerical stories are legion but space will allow only a few more examples:

> At a stake conference in Idaho once the stake president was sitting up on the stand, and somebody else was talking. The stake president noticed three people standing up in the back because they didn't have a seat. He proceeded to attract the attention of one of the deacons to have him go get three chairs. He was motioning, signaling "three" with his fingers, moving his lips wide and slow, mouthing the words "three chairs." But the deacon still hesitated. The stake president kept it up, getting more insistent all the time and finally said, "Come on, get up." So the deacon finally dragged himself up [in front of the congregation] and said: "Rah, rah, rah, stake president!"

> There was once a group of Mormons who went to Russia on a tour. . . . About the third day there, three people were arrested for spying. They just happened to be a Relief Society president, a bishop, and a high councilor. The Russians first brought in the Relief Society president and gave her the last wish of her life. . . . She was granted

> [her wish of listening to a tape of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir] and then killed. The Russians then brought in the high councilor, and he was asked for his last wish. He replied that he had a talk prepared for that Sunday and would like to stay alive till Sunday so that he could give his talk. He was then put back into his cell until Sunday. It happened that when the bishop was brought in to see the Russians, he heard what the other two had wished for. When asked what he would like for his last wish, the bishop simply replied, "I would just like to be killed before I have to listen to that high councilor on Sunday."
>
> During sacrament meeting one Sunday, the bishop noticed that too many of his ward members were sleeping. After the last speaker was done, the bishop got up and in his indignation began to really shout at the congregation . . . about how they should be coming to church to receive the Spirit and how they couldn't do that if they were sleeping. He finished off quite emphatically by shouting, "Now, all of you who don't think you'll go to hell for sleeping through church, stand up!" One of the offending brothers had managed to sleep through all of the bishop's tirade except for the last two words. When he heard the command to "stand up!" he immediately jumped to his feet. The whole congregation was rolling on the floor. The brother looked around pretty bewildered and said, "I don't know what we're voting on, bishop, but you and I are the only ones for it."

The final joke comes from my ancestral country, Malad, Idaho, where the bulk of the original Mormon settlers were Welsh and where any Scandinavians were in a distinct minority:

> A certain bishop [a Welshman] noticed some contention between a Welshman and a Danish brother in his congregation, so he called the good Danish brother into his office and said, "What's the problem between you and Brother Jones?" The Danish brother replied: "Veil, dat old Velshman called me a Danish s. of a b. Now vouldn't dat make you upset vith him?" The bishop replied, "No, it wouldn't bother me at all; I'm not Danish." Whereupon the Danish brother defensively asked: "Veil, den, vat if he called you dat kind of s. of a b. vat you are?"

In Mormon joke after Mormon joke, as in these just cited and in many I have given above, an LDS authority figure has the props knocked out from under him, is sworn at, or is made to look ridiculous. Though I am by no means a slavish follower of the safety-valve theory of humor, it seems clear that many of these jokes grow out of the tellers' attempts to live more comfortably within

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an autocratic and pervasively authoritarian system. For a moment, at least, the tellers humanize and make less fearsome those who control their lives.

In light of this fact, do Mormons exemplify Oring's notion that excessive emotional attachment to certain concepts, doctrines, and personalities prevents appreciation of jokes on these topics? Yes and no. The major themes in Mormon jokelore are not just random clusterings of stories; they parallel instead central issues in the Mormon church: the unique and divine calling of the church, the law of tithing, the law of chastity, the Word of Wisdom, devotion to duty, and unquestioning obedience to authority. Most believing, active Mormons will certainly have a heavy emotional investment in these ideas. Yet some of these believing, active Mormons will find the jokes immensely funny, and others will consider them offensive, bordering on sacrilege. Pleas by both Richard Cracroft and Leonard Arrington for a renaissance of Mormon humor and statements by them that this humor can serve healthy restorative functions, enabling Mormons to deal with the frailties of both themselves and their leaders, oversimplify the issue. Clearly, for some Mormons, Mormon humor serves this laudatory function. For other Mormons it can serve dysfunctional or destructive ends.

It would be a mistake to assume, then, as folklorists and others often do, that what is true of one Mormon will be true of them all or that most Mormons will respond in similar ways to the telling of Mormon jokes. It is impossible to stereotype Mormons. Each person must be viewed as an individual in some ways separate and distinct from all members of the group.

It would also be a mistake to develop any monistic interpretation of the function or meaning of the jokes. For example, within a few days after the revelation granting blacks the priesthood June 8, 1978, a spate of "blacks and the priesthood" jokes spread rapidly along Utah's Wasatch front, as many will remember. Most of these were in the form of riddle-jokes. "Have you heard that they've taken the Angel Moroni off the Salt Lake Temple?" "Yes, they're replacing him with a statue of Louis Armstrong." "Have you heard that we've raised tithing to twelve percent?" "Yes, the extra two percent is to pay for busing." According to Richard Cracroft these jokes were "a sign of healthy adjustment to a sudden change in a long-standing uncomfortable condition" (1980, 36). Richard Poulsen, on the other hand, observed in an address to the American Folklore Society that the jokes afforded "an opportunity for Mormons to express the fact that an accepted pattern (of supposed racial tolerance) has no necessity" and added that the joke-telling gave Mormons a twofold victory: "victory over the threat of disruption in the status quo (by black inroads in the sacred), and victory over those who have imposed the pain of change (prominent leaders of the Mormon church)" (1988, 30). Which of these interpretations is accurate? Both of them, of course. The jokes themselves have no intrinsic meaning that we have only to discover and then we will know the truth. They have only the meanings perceived in them by the tellers and listeners, meanings depending on where the jokes are told, by whom, and to what ends. Or they have the

meanings imposed upon them by their interpreters—in this instance Cracroft and Poulsen. From these interpretations we may well learn more about Cracroft's and Poulsen's own personal views of Mormon culture than we will about the culture itself.

Does this mean, then, that Mormon jokes are of little consequence in gaining insight into Mormon society? Of course not. Legend scholar Linda Dègh has shown us that while belief in legends like the stories of the Three Nephites may range from absolute belief to absolute disbelief, the legends themselves remain, in Degh's words, as "sensitive indicators" of conditions within a society (1973, 8). So it is with jokes. The opinion of whether Mormon jokes are funny or are in poor taste will range from one extreme to the other. But the jokes remain as clear markers of central issues in the society, as a barometer of those concerns engaging the minds of the people at any particular moment. As we discover those things that move some Mormons to laugh the hardest or provoke others to righteous anger, we may learn in the process to recognize those things most Mormons feel most deeply.

NOTE

1. All items of folklore cited in this paper are located in the Fife Folklore Archive, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.