

Mormon Paradox

Contributed by Byron Williams
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Is it possible, viewing the same event, whereby the perpetrator can suddenly look like the victim? That is what Elder Dallin H. Oaks—a high-ranking official in the Mormon Church—apparently wants us to believe. Citing anti-Mormon backlash after Proposition 8, which overturned gay marriage last fall in California, Oaks compared it to the intimidation of Southern blacks during the Civil Rights Movement in a recent speech.

"The extent and nature of religious devotion in this nation is changing," said Oaks, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a church governing body. "The tide of public opinion in favor of religion is receding, and this probably portends public pressures for laws that will impinge on religious freedom."

The question raised by Oaks's comments does the private morality rooted the nation's religious devotion trump the public morality rooted in the Constitution?

Oaks also stated though the vandalism connected to Proposition 8 was primarily directed at religious people and symbols, "it was not anti-religious as such." He called the incidents "expressions of outrage against those who disagreed with the gay-rights position and had prevailed in a public contest."

"As such, these incidents of 'violence and intimidation' are not so much anti-religious as anti-democratic," he said. "In their effect they are like well-known and widely condemned voter-intimidation of blacks in the South that produced corrective federal civil-rights legislation."

The certainty that Oaks holds to his religious beliefs is what allows him to engage in historical malfeasance.

Equating the 1960s struggle for justice with the plight of a church that has been a vocal opponent of injustice is deeply offensive. The Mormon Church poured millions into a campaign to ensure that some California families are granted second-class citizenship.

I am always troubled by the use of cheap historical analogies in order to make a self-serving point in the moment. I view it as "cheap" for if it were simply about intimidation tactics against the Mormon Church that is a profoundly American story that practically everyone shares who has immigrated to this country by way of Ellis Island or in the bowels of a slave ship.

I certainly do not condone the reported acts of vandalism. No group can have right so firmly rooted on their side they can receive a moral pass for otherwise egregious behavior. These acts of vandalism are also acts of hubris that ultimately serve the interest of Oaks far more than the cause they claim to represent.

Though the movement led by Martin Luther King was based on nonviolent civil disobedience, there were moments when the frustration of violence rose to the surface. King, to his credit, was quick to reject such actions.

By comparing the treatment of the Mormon Church after Prop 8 to the violence faced by anti-segregation activists not only does Oaks diminish the bravery and sacrifice of those willing to risk bodily harm so that America could come closer to the notion of Jeffersonian democracy, he is unwittingly making another historical comparison

In this context, Oaks speaks as a member of the dominant culture who already has the privilege that others are trying to secure.

The Civil Rights Movement taught this nation many things, and it reminded it of others. The mere fact that something is legal does not make it just. Most of what the South did under Jim Crow was "legal." Ironically, most of what the civil rights workers did to combat injustice was illegal.

In that limited terrain we must conclude that Prop.8 is legal. But it is a law in my opinion that prohibits the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause from achieving its stated purpose.

Based on the millions spent in support of Prop.8, if we were making cheap historical comparisons, wouldn't the side Oaks champions align closer with those that hid behind legality in order to deny the constitutional rights of another group?

It is a tragic paradox when one group proactively spends millions to deny rights already granted to others based on their religious beliefs, bemoan there is an assault on their religious freedom, and then use the greatest grass-roots movement in the history of the nation—one which offers very little documentation they supported at the time—to position themselves as the underdogs in this battle for equality.