

WHY I'M A CONSERVATIVE

RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN SUMMARY

Background

- There is a strong connection between Christian religions, including Mormonism, and conservative thought.
- Latter-day Saints (Mormons) believe that God is their Heavenly Father, literally, and that He has a plan of salvation and happiness for His children.
- In this plan of happiness there is a universal bestowal of moral agency and an established moral order.
- The first tenet of conservatism is the existence of an established moral order.
- The commonality and complementarity between Mormonism and conservatism rests squarely on acceptance of an established moral order.

What's at stake?

- A person's understanding of a) what it means to be a human being, b) the context of liberty, and c) why it is natural for Latter-day Saints to align with conservative thought.

What's next?

- Finding true happiness in a free society requires aligning our personal behavior with the existing moral order.

Responsible *Citizenship*[™]

The Relationship between Mormonism and Conservative Intellectual Thought.

Paul T. Mero

I'm a conservative because I am a Latter-day Saint. Explicit in this claim is that there is a strong relationship between Mormonism and conservative intellectual thought.

Like most Christian religions, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Church) believes it understands the true nature of God the Father, the divine and mortal mission of His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, the purpose and meaning of life for us, His children, and the structure and content of His kingdom here on Earth – and, in that magisterial setting, its context in the temporal workings of communities, governments, and the day-to-day operations of man.

The Church believes it has the answers to the great questions of life: Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? The Church is theologian, moral philosopher, political philosopher, and mortal practitioner. It knows clearly spiritual man as well as temporal man – it is vividly and intimately understanding and enlightened about the heart, might, mind, and will of man. It is the Kingdom of God on Earth, with Jesus Christ at its head, and is platooned by His mortal prophets, apostles, and faithful disciples. It lives and breathes divine instructions amidst a fallen world and fallen man.

Its worldview is detailed in the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, what the Church calls the Plan of Salvation (or the Plan of Happiness). This eternal stage emanates from “matter unorganized” wherein the alpha of man is “intelligence” in a state of natural and determined progression. God the Father – beginning from the same starting point and then fully progressed into holiness and every other divine attribute of godliness – organizes both matter and intelligences, the former organized to benefit the latter, and, with a Heavenly Mother, gives form and light to these intelligences as His spirit children. God the Father is the literal father of spirit children in a divine family.

In His pre-mortal presence, filled with love, peace, and security, these spirit children are taught their purpose – not the least part of which is to gain instruction to act on the quite-natural desires of these children to become like their Father. The Church believes “becoming” like Heavenly Father is the great purpose of life, mortality being the proving ground. The expression “in God’s image” has literal meaning for Latter-day Saints (or Mormons). God has a body of flesh and bones and so must man if he is to be like Him. Intelligence clothed in spirit clothed in a mortal body of flesh and bones is prepared, then, to be tried and tested in obedience to the Father. Can man become like Heavenly Father? The Church believes he can.

The image of God is the thread of life for how all His children are organized in mortality. Though in a fallen state, the “celestial” life of the child is patterned after the “celestial” life of the Divine Parent: His children are bound together in love and purpose, by covenant, to give bodies to more of His children and to perfect themselves, their ancestors, and their posterity within the order of an intergenerational string-of-pearls called a family.

In this natural family, His children are instructed to care for one another and love one another – to comfort, educate, nurture, protect, and provide for one another. A community of such families is the optimal and wholly anticipated City of Zion, a piece of celestial heaven on fallen earth, where “temporal man” is endowed to live as “spiritual man” – where selfish individualism and *homo economicus* are neither present nor guiding.

“Becoming” is a process and mortality is an ocean of conflict for us in that process. While man comes to Earth innocent, he does not arrive already and fully divine. Nor does he arrive prepared to live as citizen in the City of Zion. The meaning of life, in the view of Latter-day Saints, is to struggle and strain toward perfection (i.e., that state of becoming wherein mortal man is in compliance with God’s will). Faithful Latter-day Saints journey for the City of Zion, which is *in* but not *of* a fallen world (until the Lord removes it altogether) and stands in isolation and as an ensign to it. Until that journey’s end, His children must endure well a tortuous trail of joy and sorrow – the enticements and conflicts therein are daily and continuous.

Acting individually in this fallen world the “image of God” is personified by the life and teachings of His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. The Son is man’s example as to how he *ought* to think, feel, and act. His exemplary life is what man *ought* to imitate. His personal example is the way of happiness precisely because that example – mirroring God the Father – is aligned with the great Plan of Happiness. In other words, happiness means being aligned with God in thought, purpose, and action.

Within this order of happiness comes the universal bestowal of *moral agency* upon man. Happiness is neither authentic nor does it have efficacy without

it being genuine and freely chosen. God the Father, the Author of the Plan of Happiness and the breath of life, grants unto man his moral agency. He gives man the power to choose to be in alignment with His glorious plan or not – that is, man's liberty is to choose alignment or non-alignment. Both choices come with consequences and both are efficacious only because of and through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Knowing that choice – man's moral agency – is both meaningless and fruitless without context and measurement (i.e., standards by which any choice can be judged), Heavenly Father sent His Beloved Son to atone for man's poor choices and to permit a path for his ultimate redemption (as well as to seal the righteous choices of man to Heaven).

With both moral agency and God's plan man is prepared for and endures (either well or poorly) this mortal life. At life's end, Latter-day Saints believe that man simply moves on to another step in eternal progression. The "intelligence" in which form we start our journey now becomes complete. The Great Arbiter of life, Jesus Christ, through His atoning sacrifice for our sins, stands as Judge over our mortal actions and executes His just sentences upon us: either permitting us entrance back into the Father's presence or resigning us to a lesser glory.

That is what Latter-day Saints believe. And that is what I believe, for I am a Latter-day Saint.

Conservative intellectual thought has a very similar worldview (see the well-articulated, short but thorough, book by Samuel Gregg, *On Ordered Liberty*). Authentic conservatism is, at its core, a cluster of prioritized values or principles that enable men to govern justly in a truly free society. It effectively negotiates the endless

conflict between man's innate freedom to choose and his choice to adhere (or not) to the structures and rules of a successful social order. In other words, authentic conservatism justly balances rights and responsibilities in a free country.

By comparison, *liberalism* is the fantasy that there are no conflicts between rights and responsibility (or, perhaps more succinctly in this era of progressive craziness, the fantasy that responsibilities *are* rights). *Utilitarianism* is the fantasy that there are only rights and no responsibilities and, hence, no conflicts. *Libertarianism*, utilitarianism's more mature American brother, is the fantasy that the only conflict between rights and responsibilities is the point at which my fist meets your nose (although it can't explain why your nose is of more value than my fist). And, *Marxism* is the fantasy that all conflicts between rights and responsibilities are arbitrary power struggles that can be easily settled by the greatest power, the State.

Authentic conservatism assures mankind that rights and responsibilities, by their very natures, are *always* in conflict and provides a reasonable way for free men to justly and peaceably resolve the two. It does so through a certain moral ecology – the inherent condition of human existence into which our moral decisions are formed, chosen, and brought into compliance: the inherent universality of the human person (i.e., a *reasonable* understanding of what it means to be a human being).

In the previous section, I described the broad moral ecology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: human life is defined, purposeful, and ordered; justification for any human action – is a human action right or wrong or good or evil? – is based on that ac-

tion's accurate reflection of the human identity (i.e., outward expressions of inherited traits as a literal child of God) and judged through the terms of the Atonement of Jesus Christ; and, man's happiness – the joys and sorrows of mortality as well as his ultimate redemption – is largely dependent upon free-will choices that either conform to God's will or not.

But let's drill even deeper in describing the Church's moral ecology to shed further light on how a faithful Latter-day Saint understands what it means to be a human being, the context of our liberty and, hence, why it is natural for a Latter-day Saint to closely align with conservative intellectual thought.

One of the marvelous revelations to unfold in the modern era of the Church was the 1995 pronouncement "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (or the Family Proclamation). The revelation, in part, reads:

All human beings – male and female – are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual pre-mortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose...

We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed. We affirm the

sanctity of life and of its importance in God's eternal plan...

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan...Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ...By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children...Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.

We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.

The first sentence of the Family Proclamation covers a lot of helpful ground. First, it speaks to "all human beings" and, in so stating, prepares the reader for a thorough description of what it means to be a human being. Second, we read that a human being is either male or female and, just words away, that "gender is an essential characteristic" of eternal "identity and purpose." And third, still in the same introductory sentence, we are told that all human beings are "created in the image of God."

Evidently, the human body is something more than a home for the "real you," something more than an object independent of your essence. In fact, the human body is part and parcel of the human being. It is integral. The

human body is partner to the human spirit in human action. Furthermore, there is an inherent complementarity between male and female, and this complementarity is no more evident than in the next thought of the Family Proclamation: the commandment to procreate is still in effect and, more specifically, the “sacred powers” of procreation are to occur between a legally-married man and a woman.

We may begin to compile our list of “basic goods” which help to comprise the essence of what it means to be a human being: human beings are literal children of God (with an inherited nature and characteristics), gender-specific (male and female), procreative, and they have a physical body integrated with the human spirit that constitute the human person. From the next paragraph, we may add to the list that human beings are divinely patterned (an inherent social structure). “The family is ordained of God” – as are marriage between a man and a woman, gender roles of father and mother, and, not coincidentally, happiness.

Lastly, we are informed that the family is the fundamental unit of society in the human sphere. Indeed, in other official forums Latter-day Saints have been taught that family is the fundamental unit of all eternity. Not the individual, not the church, not the corporation, and not the state. This natural family structure is an essential characteristic of what it means to be a human being – so much so that its “disintegration” (note the usage derivative of “integral”) will bring upon human beings great calamities and, to prevent this end, we are called upon to use all of our civic influences to protect this “fundamental unit” of society.

Could it be that our liberty in a free society is tied to the moral recognition and behavioral reflection of these

“basic goods” of what it means to be a human being? Through its Family Proclamation, the Church seems to be saying that a correct understanding of our identity and purpose (i.e., our inherited nature and characteristics, our gender, our gender roles, our willingness to procreate, the intimate bonds of a man and a woman in legal marriage, and the natural family structure – all), at least in substantial part, comprise the essence of what it means to be a human being.

This knowledge alone, if we are to be true to this identity and act out upon the stage of citizenship in a free society, requires all faithful Latter-day Saints to oppose such modern concerns as abortion, same-sex marriage, equity feminism, the objectification of the human body, a growing culture of cohabitation, rampant sex education in schools, and even economic and governmental developments that would burden or help to “disintegrate” the natural family structure.

Liberty, in this sense, means conforming human action to this set of “basic goods” regarding human identity and purpose. And slavery, then, means any human action that distances a person from this identity and purpose. For Latter-day Saints, human beings in a free society have the power to choose Heavenly Father’s Plan of Happiness or oppose it. Given the explicit and detailed explanation of the nature of our mortal existence there is no room for misunderstanding, let alone avoidance of, who we are. Even death, we are told, does not change the fundamental characteristics of our identity or purpose.

In a fallen world, filled with skeptics who challenge either the existence of God or the ability of man to use reason to discover and live according to an inherited identity and purpose (or both), the meaning of liberty

still does not change. Even so, diversity within a democratic society regularly pits skeptics against believers – not simply the irreligious against the religious, but especially persons who do not form their understanding of liberty from what we might call “philosophical anthropology” (i.e., the study of what man is in order to determine what he should or should not do) versus persons who do.

Conservative intellectual thought embraces this challenge and defends the study and practice of “philosophical anthropology” to protect a sacred meaning of liberty – the sort of liberty America’s founding fathers cherished and, for which, they ultimately sacrificed.

The liberty of our founding fathers was perhaps best expressed by Lord John Acton: “Liberty is not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought.” The word “ought” is powerful. With just one word the definition of liberty takes on additional, deeper meanings than, say, the utilitarian ideal of liberty as expressed by John Stuart Mill, that “liberty consists in doing what one desires.” The word “ought” requires an exercise of reason to create harmony between who we are and what we do – to what reality ought our human actions harmonize? Mill’s definition does not require reason at all, just desire and, as we have experience throughout history, brute force.

This intellectual and reasoned exercise to harmonize identity and purpose to human action – the study of philosophical anthropology – has a formal name and common understanding for authentic conservatives from our founding fathers to, most notably, United States Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas: natural law.

But the concept of natural law is not lost on thoughtful people of faith, especially faithful Latter-day Saints. For them, natural law is a forerunner of the higher law understandings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and most other orthodox religious beliefs (in exactly the same way that the Light of Christ is the forerunner to understanding the deeper promptings of the Holy Ghost). In other words, natural law represents a “trainee” of sorts to teach us what we ought to do as human beings. Both levels of understanding are recognized in the Holy Bible and other LDS scriptures:

...when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves.
(Romans 2:14)

...all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are on the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator. (Alma 30:44)

And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings;

Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space – The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed.... (Doctrine and Covenants 88:11-13)

All kingdoms have a law given; and there are many kingdoms; for there is no space in which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in

which there is no space, either a greater or lesser kingdom.

Unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions. All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:36-39)

All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence.

Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man; because that which was from the beginning is plainly manifest unto them, and they receive not the light. (Doctrine and Covenants 93:30-31)

Natural law theorists believe that the light of reason alone can reveal a natural and universal social order into which man may live peacefully, justly, and happily. In other words, by this theory, man's agency does not exist to define his human identity. It exists to serve that identity. Therefore, *reasonable* human actions are those that conscionably comply with the essence of what it means to be a human being, as well as exist within this natural and universal social order, while *unreasonable* human actions do quite the opposite.

Justice Clarence Thomas provides an easy articulation of natural law. In conjunction with the confirmation process after his nomination to the Court by President George H.W. Bush, Judge Thomas was required to meet with each United States Senator. In recounting his meeting with fiercely-liberal Democrat Senator Howard Metzenbaum, he writes,

At one point he [Senator Metzenbaum] actually tried to lure me into a discussion of natural law, but I knew he was no philosopher, just another cynical politician looking for a chink in my armor, so all I did was ask him if he would consider having a human-being sandwich for lunch instead of, say, a turkey sandwich. That's Natural Law 101: all law is based on some sense of moral principles inherent in the nature of human beings, which explains why cannibalism, even without a written law to proscribe it, strikes every civilized person as naturally wrong. (from *My Grandfather's Son*, pages 221-222)

Justice Thomas continues,

...my advisers were less sanguine, warning me to expect to be probed closely about...my views on natural law...I knew it was nothing more than a way of tricking me into talking about abortion... But my interest in natural law was different, and I hoped that I could quell any anxieties resulting from it. If some senators found the subject silly or radical, I was prepared to oblige them by discussing the silliness and radicalism of the Founding Fathers who had written natural-law philosophy into the Declaration of Independence. Why shouldn't a federal judge be interested in what the Founders thought about natural law – and why shouldn't a black man be interested in the fact that the philosophical underpinnings of the Constitution had been in direct conflict with the peculiar institution of slavery, thus fueling the earliest efforts to free my forebears? (page 231)

Our very freedoms as Americans, written into our founding documents, are based on principles we put

into practice regarding what we ought to do and derived from an inherited identity and purpose. Notice the transcendent language of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

We see vividly how our founding fathers viewed their existence: 1) that “truth” exists; 2) that these truths are “self-evident” (i.e., obvious in the nature and character of our personhood); 3) that all human beings have inherited attributes “endowed by their Creator” with: a) a body of flesh and bones (life), b) the power to choose (liberty), and c) a clear idea of the object of our choices (the pursuit of happiness); 4) that government is an expression and extension of human nature and experience; 5) that man is expected to exercise his liberty to harmonize his government to his identity and purpose; and 6) that complementing this identity and purpose are the ultimate aims of man’s government.

A moving example of this harmony between man and his government is witnessed in the *Book of Mormon* as

King Benjamin, even within a monarchy, accounts to the people for the type of government he oversaw:

I have been suffered to spend my days in your service, even up to this time, and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you; neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery; nor even have I suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness, and have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord, in all things which he hath commanded you – And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne.

There is a strong correlation between personhood and government for Latter-day Saints. Conservative intellectual thought complements the LDS view of the world and man’s circumstances in it. It also helps Latter-day Saints to reconstruct their moral ecology in the temporal setting of mortality and helps them negotiate the limits and extent of their earthly governments and, most importantly, the directions that their “power to choose” takes them.

Not surprisingly, for Latter-day Saints, the biggest threats to liberty in a free society come from people who oppose God’s Plan of Happiness. Generally, the Church stays out of partisan politics. It certainly does not endorse specific candidates. It even goes out of its way, quite regularly, to explain that the Church is not parti-

san and that its members are free to (and encouraged to) exercise their citizenship according to the dictates of their individual consciences.

In 1980, at the peak of the divisive political struggle over the Equal Rights Amendment, the Church released a statement titled, "The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue." It wrote that, "Some issues that confront society are strictly political issues, some are moral issues, and many are both political and moral issues. Though the proposed Equal Rights Amendment has both political and moral aspects, emphasis is given here to its moral implications."

Much earlier in that century, the Church took a similar position on a much different sort of issue: public welfare. Rather than succumb to the siren of the modern welfare state during the Great Depression, and in response to President Roosevelt's New Deal program, the Church announced the creation of its own welfare system. It explained that, "the real long-term objective of the Welfare Plan is the building of character in the members of the Church, givers and receivers, rescuing all that is finest deep inside of them, and bringing to flower and fruition the latent richness of the spirit, which after all is the mission and purpose and reason for being of this Church." (J. Reuben Clark, Jr., October 2, 1936, during a special meeting of stake presidents)

And, thirty-six years later, another LDS Apostle, Marion G. Romney, further elaborated on the moral value of an otherwise temporal subject,

In this modern world plagued with counterfeits for the Lord's plan, we must not be misled into supposing that we can discharge our obliga-

tions to the poor and the needy by shifting the responsibility to some governmental or other public agency. Only by voluntarily giving out of an abundant love for our neighbors can we develop that charity characterized by Mormon [a Book of Mormon prophet] as "the pure love of Christ." ("Caring for the Poor and Needy," October 6, 1972)

In these statements the Church reveals that its primary concern and involvement in public policy issues is not centered in a paramount sense of civic-mindedness, although this aspect is important. It is centered in the paramount regard for the human being, as the Church understands human identity and purpose. This is true every time the Church has taken a public stand on any matter of public policy be it the Equal Rights Amendment, public welfare, pornography, abortion, planned parenthood, prayer in public schools, mothers working outside the home, or even such a seemingly distant issue as the MX Missile system in the 1980s.

One of the most popular and beloved Mormon leaders of the 20th century, and into these first few years of the 21st century until his death in 2008, was Gordon B. Hinckley. Perhaps as much as any other example can convey about the transcendent views of the Church, President Hinckley describes a conversation he had with a young man while the two were stranded at a South American airport:

His hair was long and his face bearded, his glasses large and round. Sandals were on his feet, and his clothing such as to give the appearance of total indifference to any standard of style.

He was earnest and evidently sincere. He was educated and thoughtful, a graduate of a great North American university. Without employment and sustained by his father, he was traveling through South America.

What was he after in life? I asked. "Peace – and freedom" was his immediate response. Did he use drugs? Yes, they were one of his means to obtain the peace and freedom he sought. Discussion of drugs led to discussion of morals. He talked matter-of-factly about the new morality that gave so much more freedom than any previous generation had ever known.

He had learned in our opening introductions that I was a church-man; and he let me know, in something of a condescending way, that the morality of my generation was a joke. Then with earnestness he asked how I could honestly defend personal virtue and moral chastity. I shocked him a little when I declared that *his* freedom was a delusion, that *his* peace was a fraud, and that I would tell him why.

As a Latter-day Saint, President Hinckley understood that ideals such as peace and freedom found true meaning and had their greatest significance in the context of the identity and purpose of man. In other words, peace and freedom are not abstract ideals upon which man arbitrarily assigns meaning and value. Each means something because being a human being means something. Each has value because human beings have a set value. Peace and freedom exist only because human beings do.

Not surprisingly, President Hinckley went on to draw the relationship between personal morality and civic freedom. "We need to read more history. Nations and civilizations have flowered, then died, poisoned by their own moral sickness.... No nation, no civilization can long endure without strength in the homes and lives of its people. That strength derives from the integrity of those who live in those homes." ("In Search of Peace and Freedom," *Ensign*, August 1989)

Clearly, the Church believes that moral issues are a different matter. Why? Because the view of the Church is that the meaning of life and the nature of man have been established by God and that the judgment of any human action rises or falls on this fulcrum.

The recent uproar over Proposition 8 in California has brought home this point for Latter-day Saints. The stance of the Church is not surprising. In support of Proposition 8, the Church did the only thing it could do and remain true to its identity and purpose. Most interesting, in the context of this paper, has been the outrage from some otherwise faithful Latter-day Saints over the Church's position – most interesting because this outrage brings us full circle to an understanding of human identity and purpose, the meaning of liberty, and the constructive relationship between man's nature and his governments.

The plaintive cry invokes elements of liberalism, utilitarianism, libertarianism, and even Marxism. It champions equality and justice. It expresses its own reality of eventuality. It lectures with a tone of practical common sense about consenting adults. But absent from all of these complaints is any discussion about the meaning of what it means to be a human being.

The Church knows this meaning – as does conservative intellectual thought. And this is why I, as a Latter-day Saint, am a conservative.

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