

The Persecution of Mormon Church

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For the past few years, colleagues and I have been engaged in a project reflecting on the path religious groups pass through moving from persecution to general, public acceptance. The history of my own church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, often known as the Mormon church, is an interesting case study in this regard. Now, almost 200 years old, the church underwent some of the most acute persecution of any group in American history in its early days.

Yet now, it is the fourth or fifth largest denomination in the United States, and its members are widely accepted and rarely persecuted. Much can be learned from this history.

Volumes have been written about persecution suffered by early church members. Incidents range from the mockery that the young Prophet Joseph Smith encountered when he told others of his first vision to brutal personal attacks. One thinks, for example, of instances in which he was tarred and feathered, of other times when he was in prison for extended periods. Beyond that which was suffered by Joseph Smith himself were the more extended persecutions of the Mormon community at large. After being forced to move from place to place in Missouri, they were ultimately driven out of the state altogether in response to an extermination order issued by Missouri's governor, and then built the city of Nauvoo on the banks of the Mississippi River in Illinois, only to be driven out of that state after the Prophet Joseph himself had been murdered by a mob. These and many similar stories are emblazoned in the consciousness of church members from childhood on.

But what are the lessons drawn and how are the lessons drawn?

In 1843, Joseph Smith proclaimed on another front, "I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-Day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics or of any other denomination who may be unpopular."

The point of these accounts is that the lesson drawn from persecution was not the need for revenge, but an intensified appreciation of the practical importance of freedom of religion.

Part of what one learns from awareness of persecution in one's own tradition is empathy for the suffering of others.

Another lesson is that circling the wagons and hiding, or simply retreating, is not helpful or healing. In the 19th century, the main body of Mormons trekked West to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake and settled in the isolated mountain valleys of the western Rockies. But ultimately what made the path from persecution to acceptance possible was not retreat but re-engaging with the world. Studying at other universities, interacting with people in business, providing non-threatening ways for others to learn about us and finding ways to serve others.

We could remember persecution without holding it against others. It could be part of our history and identity without being a source of animosity and distrust for others.

This had the dual effect of encouraging church members to live their religion and help solidify a strengthened appreciation of freedom of religion as the guarantee of the social context in which healing relationships could unfold.

A final lesson about persecution comes from a deep understanding of the relevant verses from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad; for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

Part of the lesson here is that the pain of persecution will be compensated by blessings in the hereafter. But it's really more than that. Standing up under persecution builds a kind of strength which is its own reward. Enduring the fire of persecution well, or learning of others that have done, reinforces the depths with which beliefs are held and their meaningfulness to the person who holds them. Perhaps there is a deeper lesson as well. It is also worth reflecting on the position of Jesus as the person pronouncing the Beatitudes in question. What is easy to overlook is that, in a certain sense, Jesus is the most persecuted of all as the being who ultimately bears the sins of all others, who pays for the ultimate costs of human freedom. He is the being that is in effect subject to the greatest persecution -- yet he responds not by complaining about his own suffering but by pointing to the suffering of others, the prophets and the other victims of persecution.

With that in mind, perhaps the deepest lesson of persecution is that we should do all we can to minimize its infliction on others. That is ultimately what freedom of religion is about and why that right is so fundamental.

Thank you.