

tainties of crusade and adventure. But however sanguine its claims and extravagant its vision, there is something noble and heroic about the authentic Mormon orthodoxy which Roberts and his generation believed and defended, and which is still the religion of the uncorrupted Mormon. For it joins faith in God with faith in man, and unless this can be done effectively, not only in theology but as well in the minds and experience of men, religion in any viable and acceptable form may not prevail.



THE CRITIC IN ZION

Stanford Gwilliam

Stanford Gwilliam teaches English at John Jay College, City University of New York. During the past fourteen years he has been a communications advisor to various corporations. Recently he completed a book he has entitled THOMAS CARLYLE, RELUCTANT CALVINIST.

The best of words, like the best of men, may suffer the woes of slander. Such a word is "criticism," and such a man was Socrates.

Socrates, though slandered and finally slain, achieved a lasting glory. Not the least of his glories was in founding the art of criticism, according to what is still the basic and best meaning of that word.

The name Socrates now commands a respect undreamed of when men mis-called him "corrupter of youth," then laced his drink with hemlock. His enemies poisoned him, really, because he was a critic. His enemies were, by the way, among the most respected citizens of Athens.

The critic, far from gaining the good name—in rhetoric, reason, and religion—that this ancient sage hoped for him, has suffered through all time from a bad reputation. Nowhere has the hostility been greater than among the orthodox, whether secular or religious. The Greeks removed their critics with lethal cocktails. We still remove them, but by more humane means.

I plead the critic's cause. I plead his cause at least so long as the tone and temper of his criticism is positive and creative. And I plead his cause especially before those who, in error, equate all criticism with denial and subversion, and thus permit the critic no place in Zion.

Before leaving Socrates, let us recall that he was a constructive seeker after truth: he was a *kritikos*, or "critic," in the classic sense that he was a man who "discerned," "judged," "discussed." And he preferred to discern, judge, and

discuss *ideas*, rather than *personalities*. He was not a faultfinder. Probably no more than one-fifth of his critical energies were devoted to the negative alter ego of criticism, just as only one meaning out of the five meanings of "criticism" listed in the authoritative *American College Dictionary* is devoted to "censure." The other four meanings are mainly positive.

The true and whole critic—nay, even the holy critic if he be a true one—is essentially creative, essentially positive. And I believe that the Church should be more hospitable to him than it now is.

Criticism is usually suspect. But it naturally becomes more suspect if directed at the "authorities." Criticism directed at our leaders *personally* should be suspect, for it is neither valid nor fair. It is better called faultfinding and thus deserves to be condemned. When Joseph Smith spoke the following warning, he was referring to faultfinding, or—if you will—to criticism of personalities more than of words or concepts:

That man who rises up to *condemn others, finding fault* with the Church, saying *they* are out of the way, while *he himself* is *righteous*, then know assuredly that that man is in the high road to apostasy; and if he does not repent, will apostatize, as God lives.¹

The italicized words help support the conclusion that the Prophet, in this oft-cited discourse, is opposing criticism aimed more at the brethren themselves than at what those brethren think and say as leaders. The long-proscribed activity, "evil speaking of the Lord's anointed," could apply only to malicious, personal gossip. By no semantic stretch could it be made to apply to criticism of the Socratic sort.

We should not, then, "criticize"—in the sense of finding fault personally—any of our fellows, much less our leading "authorities." But is this to say that we must not criticize any of their statements?

The publicized thoughts of all leaders, religious or secular, should be subject to creative, positive criticism. By the very token that a man is not a follower but a leader, his ideas should be "discerned, judged, and discussed"—in a word, *criticized*. Since our leaders are, after all, but the ideal and larger-than-life projection of ourselves (hopefully of our best selves) as their followers, then true self-criticism properly leads to criticism of certain of their ideas.

It is not easy to follow a leader so proud of his high place that he esteems himself beyond criticism and, therefore, does not *expect* his conceptions to be evaluated by those he seeks to influence. However intelligent he may be, or however perfectly attuned to the will of God, the true leader needs and should seek, not merely an expression of assent, but an active critical response from those he would truly lead. Otherwise he is not really a leader but a chief follower, for he deprives himself of the needed counsel that thinking disciples can give him. Such a leader is like a speaker declaiming to empty chairs. He is like an actor who performs before cameras only, and not before a live and responsive audience.

A class of students, for example, whether in a public school or in a Sunday

¹*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), pp. 156-7. Italics are mine.

School, would serve a limited educational purpose if they could not question or challenge their teacher. It would then be hardly a school at all, hardly a place either to prove or to improve one's intelligence. It would be but a cell of passive assent, where no freshening breeze of inquiry is allowed to blow. The school analogy also applies to the larger institutions of Nation and Church, for the molding of minds is any leader's main responsibility. Mormons scarcely need reminding that intelligence is one of God's glories, if not His chief one.

In great leadership inheres a paradox. The man who governs in the great manner, who prefers to preside over those whose intelligence he wants to improve, *wants* to be subject unto his subjects in one way: he submits to constructive criticism, for he admits to possible fallibility. A leader's admitted fallibility poses no problem for intelligent disciples. Feigned infallibility does.

The fallibility of St. Peter himself, a man so honored by Christ that He dubbed him "The Rock" and made him the chief apostle, is exhibited by Peter's thrice denying the Lord in the palace of Caiaphus,² as well as by his refusal to sup with the gentiles because of his atavistic belief that he would still be "justified" by the works of the moribund law of the Old Testament rather than through faith in Christ.³ St. Peter's reactionary theology regarding the old Jewish law, by the way, was publicly criticized by St. Paul, in this wise: "I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed."⁴ For "blamed" we may fairly read "criticized."⁵

But the fact of all men's fallibility, which few would question, does not exclude the doctrine that an infallible God helps direct the Church through the medium of divinely appointed—albeit human—leaders. And here we might well focus upon the root word "divine." The word "divine" descends from *divus*, meaning "belonging to deity." If a Church leader declares an idea but does *not* declare that the idea "belongs to deity," in the scriptural sense of "thus saith the Lord," then his followers are duty-bound to give serious and respectful consideration to the idea, precisely because his appointment is divine. But they should still reserve the right to criticize the idea in the light of their own share of the Spirit of God and of their own intelligence—both of which, however circumscribed, are also divinely given.

If a Church leader declares an idea, however, and *explicitly* adds that it "belongs to deity" (i.e., "Thus saith the Lord"), then the problem of criticism is much more delicate and serious. In this instance, it seems to me, the responsibility for evaluation and for normal acceptance of the declaration—as revelation, of course—would now seem to devolve primarily upon the entire body of General Authorities, or upon any other of the "competent assemblies or conferences of the Church."⁶ Once the individual leader's declaration is officially

²Matt. 26:69-75.

³Gal. 2:11-16.

⁴Gal. 2:11.

⁵There is a compelling echo of this incident in the public criticism—by various Mormons, in various levels of the Church hierarchy—of public statements made by a modern apostle in overt support of a political system thought to be rather extreme. Whether these criticisms are right or wrong is outside the purview of this paper, but the action has implications of great importance for Mormonism. It needs noting here, however, that the criticisms were made of the *ideas*, not of the man, and that the brethren did not criticize without love.

⁶See Page v of the Introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants.

ratified as “belonging to deity” and, therefore, as scripture—in the sense that the Doctrine and Covenants was so officially ratified⁷—then criticizing such a declaration amounts to a challenge to the orthodox views of the uniform validity of scripture.

But it seems neither heterodox nor unreasonable to believe that a leader can be “divinely appointed” and yet possibly think and speak amiss upon occasion, as even the most wise and godly of men have been known to do. Jonah, for one, was so carried away with his prophetic accusations against the sinners of Nineveh that he spoke amiss in expressing an inhumane regret that the Lord should elect to spare their lives.⁸ The Prophet Mormon was referring to sacred scripture itself when he said, “And now, if there are faults, they are the mistakes of men,” then significantly added, “wherefore, condemn not the things of God. . . .”⁹

Socrates and Joseph Smith—both were critics of the ideas of leading authorities who presided over other times, other epochs of mind and faith. Both died because of ideas existing in various “true” establishments no longer all true—no longer all true, that is, because the then prevailing theologies had, unwarily, nurtured a tare that grew to stifle criticism.

Weed seeds may lodge in the purest soil. And latent error may infest the sub-surface of any institution, even the true Church. In the earliest Christian era, though the Twelve that Christ personally chose presided over his Church, apostasy finally won the day, abetted alike by error from within and by malicious power from without. From the first, the Lord’s earthly kingdoms have known recurring apostasy, and all have shown early symptoms of error—error small at first, yet always unshakeable in its dogmatic self-assurance—that later grew large enough to overwhelm the truth. It was this self-assurance that slammed the gates against all criticism.

Maybe some, or even most, critics in that olden time were too full of error to detect error outside of themselves. There surely were a few critics among the disciples, however, who could truly see, but who must have heeded the age-old caution not ever to “criticize the authorities,” not even one of their various statements. For a man who would follow truth’s elusive gleam, wherever it may lead, any doctrine that bans enlightened criticism is a doctrine of wondrous complacency. The complacent man, made deaf by pride, can hear no critical voice, not even his own.

Criticism, of course, is not without pain. He who questions runs the risk of an unquiet spirit. And he risks offending even the friendliest of the faithful. But such risks are essential to the salvation of intelligent and free believers. Non-criticism, on the other hand, poses the greater peril of creating a church whose creed is one of monolithic passivity, with never-tested tenets and never-challenged guides.

John Stuart Mill seems pertinent here (perhaps impertinent to some of us), in speaking on this very theme:

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Jonah 4:1-4.

⁹See Title-page of the Book of Mormon; also, Mormon 8:17 and 9:31.

. . . it is not the minds of heretics that are deteriorated most by the ban placed on all inquiry that does not end in the orthodox conclusions. The greatest harm done is to those whose whole mental development is cramped, and their reason cowed, by the fear of heresy. . . .

However unwillingly a person who has a strong opinion may admit the possibility that his opinion may be false, he ought to be moved by the consideration that, however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth.⁹

Opinion discussed “fully, frequently and fearlessly” is but another definition of true criticism, and the key word is “fearlessly.”

The ecclesiastical body, says Paul, has “many members.” He also speaks of diversity of parts comprising this body, all of which the body [Church] needs.¹⁰ For example, some members of the Church prefer to communicate by means of sermons and other statements of assent, all declarative and all positive. Others, however, may prefer to communicate by means of the query, the occasional dissent. This member, too, can be—if not always declarative—at least positive. Paul also referred to “those members of the body which we think to be less honourable. . . .” I would be tempted into the surmise that Paul here refers to the critics—were it not that he adds, “upon these we bestow more abundant honour.”¹¹

Upon the critic we bestow *less* “abundant honour.” Time will probably never change that melancholy fact. The critic, more often than not, is a “disturbing type,” sometimes even “a pain”—even to himself, I might add. But he is probably necessary to the Church’s total well being—just as certain pains, like those that accompany childbirth and inoculation, are necessary to a healthy body; just as certain disturbances, like those that attend man’s tragic effort to extract a little truth from the vast welter of error with which it commonly mingles, are essential to a sound mind.

Yet he who would be a proper critic must be more critical of himself than of any other. If he has a yen for *personal* criticism, then may his own person be the main object of his searching analysis. Above all, however, he should know that by being a critic—whether he be a small or a great one, and whether he criticize the thoughts of those of small or great degree—he carries an awesome load of responsibility.

The following may serve as the critic’s creed: to be a genuine searcher after truth and not a mere iconoclast; to evaluate the ideas of Church leaders while maintaining due regard for them as deputies of the Almighty, as well as brothers; to use criticism as a medium that makes for equanimity and understanding, not for carping and mere denial; to assume that the “authorities,” whatever their office, are generally men of inspired faith, honest convictions, and sincere love for those whose spiritual destinies they try to guide; and, finally, to leave his (the critic’s) own mind open—even if just slightly ajar—for self-criticism, for

⁹*On Liberty* (London: Watts & Co., 1948), pp. 40-42.

¹⁰I Cor. 12:12-21.

¹¹I Cor. 12:23.

criticism by others, and for that most painful of all persuasions, that he himself may think wrong at least once in a while.

True, the critic may be wrong at times, maybe most times. But without the critic's voice—even assuming it be *never* right—the voice of the leader sounds lonely and unproven, a voice that hears only its own unquestioned echo through the partial night and partial light where man searches for the truth of earth and Heaven.

Let us listen, then, to the critic in Zion. Zion is the pure of heart, but it must also be the free of mind. A disciple not free to criticize owns only a particle of freedom, and that a doubtful one. And a leader with ideas not free for creative criticism seems a dubious oracle for a free man's God.