TRUTH AND MISTRUTH IN MORMON HISTORY

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It was while doing research in preparation for a book on polygamy, especially post-Manifesto polygamy, that I encountered extensive resorts to purposeful mistruth by Mormon leaders and others. I will suggest that such practices have serious implications beyond the particular instances involving their employment. This was certainly the case, I believe, when dishonesty was used to defend polygamy.

Examples of intentional misstatement in the history of Mormon polygamy, all of which are largely undisputed by both member and nonmember historians include Joseph Smith’s numerous denials concerning his sexual relationships with other women; the use of coded and deceptive language intended to mislead the public concerning polygamy, both during the Nauvoo period and after; public denials during the 1880s that polygamy was being authorized by Church leaders when, in fact, it was being urged with an intensity greater than at any time since the 1850s; the preparation of the Manifesto only as an artifice for getting around the law rather than as a measure designed to secure compliance with it; the official authorization of numerous polygamous unions after the 1890 Manifesto while, at the same time, publicly denying that such approval was given; and, the suppression, both before and since the Manifesto of 1890, of evidence concerning polygamous marriages in the Church.¹

While acknowledging that these things happened, we must, in fairness, look at the matter very carefully. Every thoughtful person dealing with the subject of truth and mistruth in any context, religious or otherwise, recognizes its problematic nature. As Oscar Wilde put it, "Truth is rarely pure and never simple."² One can never cite cases of dissimulation, as I have just done, and leave it at that. The question of what constitutes truth and falsehood, honesty and deceit, has occupied theologians and philosophers for centuries. Libraries of treatises exist on these matters, testifying to their extraordinarily complicated natures.

What does one do, for example, with the countless, benign fibs we tell our children on a broad range of subjects? What of the conventions of
common discourse whereby we daily stretch or alter the truth, sometimes for no better reason than to be polite or socially correct? What of Abraham lying to Pharaoh or Jacob dissimulating to obtain the blessing reserved for his brother Esau from blind Isaac? (Gen. 12:17-19; 27:18-23). There are times when it is almost universally agreed that one should engage in mistruth. We award medals to the soldier who, by deceit, escapes from or defeats the enemy. We count as national heroes those who, using lies, helped move Negro slaves along the Underground Railroad. We applaud those who engaged in a broad range of mistruths to hide Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Who among us would condemn anyone who deceives to secure safety for themselves or their family when threatened by thugs or criminals? All of us participate in a system of values that sometimes makes truth a victim. I recall Henry Wotton’s description of the faithful diplomat as "an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country."³

It was for reasons similar to those adduced in the circumstances just recalled that Latter-day Saints in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries felt that the use of mistruth in connection with polygamy was justified. More than one good Mormon stated during the anti-polygamy crusade that deceit was necessary because plural marriage was so important a principle (365-68, 372-75). When forced to choose between keeping or forfeiting what Latter-day Saints in those years referred to as the "chief corner stone" of the gospel, plural marriage, they felt honor bound to do whatever was needed to perpetuate it (18, ix). As Henry S. Tanner, who was given official permission to marry four plural wives after the Manifesto, expressed it, the U.S. Government, by its unrighteous laws, had forced the Saints to say and do things they would ordinarily find repugnant. Like one pinned to the ground by a powerful foe, Tanner explained, they were justified in doing whatever was required to escape (Appendix II, #185; 374). The same thinking explains Apostle John Henry Smith’s reported remark that the Manifesto was but a “trick to beat the devil at his own game” (375). The use of mistruth by men who would otherwise count anything but strictest honesty a serious ethical infraction is one of the things that has persuaded me of the extraordinary importance of polygamy in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century church—a significance quite forgotten by most Mormons today.

Apart from purposeful misrepresentation, there is also the practice, both past and present, of suppressing historical materials or, if not suppressing them, of discouraging their discovery. Not only are records, diaries, reports, notes, and statistics bearing on polygamy withheld from researchers, not only do official Church accounts
carefully ignore post-Manifesto polygamy and engage in distortions concerning it, but efforts are made to direct scholars away from the subject. As a young professor at Brigham Young University in the mid-1960s, after sending questionnaires to numbers of individuals I believed to have been involved with approved plural marriages after the 1890 Manifesto, I was called into the office of a high administrative officer at the university and angrily grilled as to the reasons for my interest. I was further told I should have secured permission from Church superiors before investigating so sensitive a topic. I then dutifully applied to the First Presidency of the Church for approval to continue my research. After months of waiting, I was told by my dean at BYU that he had received a written communication from a member of the First Presidency that not only denied my request but indicated I should discontinue research on polygamy altogether. When I asked for a copy of the letter containing this directive, I was refused.

Some years later, in the early 1980s, at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Los Angeles, the chair of the History Department at BYU publicly stated that he had been told he was yet to discourage research on polygamy. I should add that it is my impression, though I am no longer on the faculty at BYU, that policies have been somewhat liberalized since that time. I am thinking of the massive archive of oral interviews Jessie L. Embry and others were permitted to conduct on Mormon polygamous family life, interviews subsidized by and housed in the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at BYU's Harold B. Lee Library and now available to researchers. This notwithstanding, every scholar with whom I am acquainted agrees that there is yet official Church reticence when it comes to using certain records, diaries, and other materials in the church's archives and in the First Presidency's possession relating to polygamy. This "reticence" has manifested itself most publicly in recent months by the commencement in January 1998 of a two-year curriculum drawn from Brigham Young's writings used jointly by Relief Societies and priesthood quorums in which only Brigham Young's first two (and therefore monogamous) marriages are mentioned, in which the lesson entitled "Understanding the New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage" nowhere mentions polygamy, and in which his own references to "wives" have been edited to "[wife]." And this, I am saying, is a kind of deception, a skewing of the Mormon past and the public's recollection of Mormonism's polygamous experience. Because of the important role collective memory plays in every society, this is a crucial matter.
I believe that the practice of deception both before and after the Manifesto brought with it serious consequences. In the first place, however grand the principle in which the service of mistruth is placed, it becomes an example to others, including young people, to alter what they know to be the truth when they think it justified to do so. One of the sadder aspects of Mormon prevarication during the period of the anti-polygamy crusade and after was that children were told to lie to protect the Church and their parents (368). This pattern so alarmed Charles W. Penrose, a future counselor in the First Presidency, that in 1887 he told President John Taylor that he feared for Mormonism’s future. "The endless subterfuges and prevarications which our present condition impose," he said, "... threaten to make our rising generation a race of deceivers" (368). There was, then, even among those who employed it, a recognition that deceit, however necessary, carries the danger of becoming precedent for more deceit in an ever-increasing spiral.

There is some question, in my mind at least, about the long-term benefits of ever consciously engaging in mistruth for reasons other than immediate survival. Once we begin to devalue truth, either as individuals or as a society, we embark on a perilous course. For truth telling is essential to the social contract. It is perhaps the first ground rule of organized society. Without the assurance, supported by experience, that we can trust others to tell the truth as they honestly perceive it, civilization cannot long endure. This is, I believe, a major reason for contemporary political indifference in the United States. Cynicism mounts on every side because of widespread belief that our leaders do not tell the truth.

This dynamic is even more important when dealing with religious institutions and authority figures. Nothing has a more cankerling effect, especially on young people, than discovering that those believed to be inspired by God, those whose chief vocation is to ethically lead, do not tell the truth. No one better illustrates this than young Carlos A. Badger, secretary to Senator Reed Smoot at the time of the Senate hearings on allegations of continued Mormon polygamy in 1904. When President Joseph F. Smith was first subpoenaed, Badger was exuberant, describing his church president as a warrior for the faith. But after hearing Smith dissemble and prevaricate, declaring things that Badger knew were not true, he was deeply shaken, sorrowful, and bitter. It left him he said, morally confused (376).

More is at stake than even a principle as important as polygamy, or the Church itself, when one dishonestly defends them. For our lives
are lived in common trust. The twine of truth binds us together through the media of language, law, and moral conduct. Coleridge in one of his Aids to Reflection said it best: "He, who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own Sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all." Once we begin condoning the subornation of truth, we may end with no truth at all.

There is yet another cost. When facts believed to be true are repeatedly distorted or denied, our eyes and ears become converted to the fiction. This is especially so when falsehood is given the imprimatur of Church approval. No better example of this can be found than in the 1911 hearing of Matthias F. Cowley before the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Admitting that he had performed a number of post-Manifesto marriages for others on approval from the First Presidency and that he had engaged in deceit to cover them up, Cowley made the following remarkable statement: "I am not dishonest and not a liar." Then, no more than a few sentences later, he added, "We have always been taught that when the brethren were in a tight place that it would not be amiss to lie to help them out" (373).

It is less the inconsistent, non sequitur nature of Cowley's two statements that makes them significant than the example they provide of how perception is blurred when deceit is accepted as a guide to behavior. Cowley was in effect saying that, because he had been authorized to engage in mistruth, no mistruth occurred. In this sense, the phrase "lying for the Lord" is a contradiction. When one is obedient to one's ecclesiastical superiors, or following their example, a lie is not a lie, and there is no sin. This was precisely what Joseph Smith told Nancy Rigdon when she resisted his invitation to become his plural wife. "That which is wrong under one circumstance," Joseph said, "may be, and often is, right under another. ...Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire. ... But in obedience there is joy and peace unspotted" (374).

This same blurring of truth and mistruth was, in my view, an important reason for the transformation from a polygamous to a monogamous ethic in Mormonism. The practice of prevarication used so long to shelter polygamy actually hastened its demise. Because so many of the Saints believed their leaders when they told them that plural marriages were no longer permissible after 1890, the fiction became reality. By giving the appearance of abandoning polygamy, by appointing monogamists to conspicuous Church positions and by
denying that any plural marriages were being performed, the leaders quickly convinced the majority of Church members that plurality was indeed a thing of the past. There were other reasons for the Church’s move away from polygamy at the turn of the century, I know. But I am convinced that a pervasive subscription to what leaders were saying about it so altered views held by the general membership that the practice more rapidly declined.

Last of all, I want to return to an issue raised at the beginning of my remarks. This has to do with policies that encourage suppressing evidence and discouraging scholars from pursuing the truth when researching a subject like polygamy. Concealment and distortion of Mormonism’s polygamous past has a grievous consequence. Those dear Saints who were told they were living the higher law, and who sacrificed so much to do it, are partially dislodged from our history. Policies of obfuscation and mistruth deny them the role they played in our rich heritage. By discouraging the retelling of their complete story, they are denied their full, honored place in our historical consciousness. At once, they are betrayed and we are cut off from part of our roots. Both they and we are the poorer for it.

I know all of us prevaricate. All of us engage in false communication—sometimes for what we think are justifiable reasons. And, certainly, there are countless other occasions when we unknowingly depart from the truth. It may be that dishonesty is simply a condition of mortal existence. For my part, however, and especially as a consequence of my work in the history of Mormon polygamy, I am convinced that although misstatement is sometimes inevitable, when dealing with things that do not immediately threaten life, we should strive mightily to avoid it. Acknowledging that both good and bad men sometimes lie, the eighteenth-century Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson said it was, always, "a scurvy trick at best" (376).

We are both safest and wisest, I think, whether dealing with our history, someone else’s history, or our own daily lives to follow the advice of St. Paul who, in his letter to the Corinthians, admonished all to seek the "unleavened" bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:8; emphasis mine).

¹These topics are discussed at greater length in my *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992). See pages in this work, hereafter cited parenthetically, for relevant references and sources.


4 *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 3-4, 163-69. See p. 165 for two examples of monogamizing "wives."