

Mormon Pacifism

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Introduction

Pacifism is a recurring theme in Christianity, appearing in a variety of churches and writings of individual commentators. Little, however, is written on the topic from a Latter-day Saint perspective. Despite the mandate for independent, individual study from Church leadership since the days of Joseph Smith, our culture enforces an unfortunate de facto prohibition on independent thought. The present work rejects cultural considerations and takes what is bound to be a controversial stand: The individual who refuses to engage in violence on behalf of the government is acting in a manner that is morally superior to the actions of soldiers, police, and others who engage in or directly support violence, even under orders from the government.

War is almost universally recognized as an ugly thing, yet we are at least partly responsible for its existence and the accompanying destruction, bloodshed, and suffering. We justify ourselves by tossing responsibility on our government leaders, but it's an individual issue as well: Without the support of individuals willing to kill under government orders, war (or any other form of government sponsored violence) could not take place. The soldier who kills for the government has violated the sacred instruction "thou shalt not kill," and though he may not incur the divine penalties normally associated with murder, he has provided the means by which war can continue. The individual who "supports the troops" by encouraging them to go to war for the government has encouraged killing. As long as we are willing to commit acts of violence, violence will continue.

While on the Earth, Jesus taught a message of peace. Well can the individual wishing to justify his violent tendencies cite Jesus thus: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."¹ Not only does this ignore the obvious metaphor that acceptance of the Gospel may not bode well with one's family, it willfully rejects the much more common sayings of the Savior, such as that spoken to Peter: "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."² It truly takes a great leap of imagination to interpret the teachings of Christ in the gospels as encouraging any form of violence.

Unfortunately, many Latter-day Saints in the United States seem to think that "Choose the Right" is a political statement. According to the Pew Forum, 60% of Latter-day Saints in the United States are conservative, and when moderates are included, this is bumped up to a

¹Matthew 10:34

²Matthew 26:52. The disciple is identified as Peter in John 18:10-11.

whopping 87%³. Liberals are at 10%, leaving only 3% of members outside of the conservative-liberal dichotomy. Poor folks outside that 87%. The members of the Church tend to strictly enforce cultural conformity, particularly in politics. A quick Google search for “Liberal Mormon” will take one to a myriad of complaints about the difficulty of being liberal in a conservative Church, and most liberal LDS blogs will have plenty of aggressive comments by visitors asserting that a liberal cannot be a faithful Latter-day Saint. If liberals are disparaged, what of the anarcho-pacifists?

Official Church doctrine covers a very limited sphere, inviting and even requiring us to study and learn for ourselves. There is no obligation for Latter-day Saints to be pacifist, but the purpose of the present work is to show that, likewise, there is no prohibition against pacifism. Indeed, as we will see, sometimes pacifism is a better fit than mainstream opinion with the teachings of the scriptures. Accordingly, the present should definitely not be taken as official doctrine or views of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, since it is in fact merely my own personal opinion.

A Higher Law?

God has traditionally given laws adapted to the spiritual maturity of His people. The Law of Moses is the classical example of this, being described as a “schoolmaster”⁴ adapted to the wickedness of the Children of Israel⁵ and later superseded by the much stricter law given by Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount.

The Word of Wisdom provides a more modern example, being “adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints,”⁶ indicating that a separate, possibly stricter, law of health is the ideal. Likewise the Law of Tithing stands in contrast to the Law of Consecration as a lesser law adapted to the imperfect Latter-day Saints who still have not shown themselves ready to live according to the higher version⁷. Tithing and the Welfare Program stand in place of the Law of Consecration until we are prepared to follow the law in its fullness⁸. So the Law of Moses isn’t the only “lesser” law given to God’s people. We have more in common with the Israelites than we sometimes think.

Latter-day Saints speak of celestial, terrestrial, and telestial laws, which possibly have finer separations as well. It is clear indeed that there are higher laws and lower laws, and that which is given to the Saints must be adapted to the weakest.

³The Pew Forum, “Religious Landscape Survey”, <<http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons>>, retrieved 2011-05-24.

⁴Galatians 3:24

⁵Galatians 3:19

⁶Doctrine and Covenants 89:3

⁷Doctrine and Covenants 105:3

⁸Doctrine and Covenants 105:9

Jesus said, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.”⁹ But we don’t excommunicate an individual for looking. Christ clearly stated the higher ideal, but it’s the lower law that’s actually applied to members of the Church.

So it is with “Thou shalt not kill,”¹⁰ which is not fully applied in certain cases. Military, for example, is excused from this law in normal combat operations, which is justified because they are “legally obligated” to kill¹¹. But is this the ideal? We are told to “renounce war and proclaim peace.”¹² A soldier will not necessarily incur the divine penalty of a murderer because he is obligated to kill by his government, but by volunteering to go to war for his country he has failed to live up to the higher law of renouncing war.

The story of David is useful for illustrating this point. David was not held responsible by the Lord for killing Goliath¹³ or for the other killings that occurred as part of government business during his reign, with the exception of Uriah¹⁴. Notwithstanding his exculpation from “thou shalt not kill,” he was prohibited from building a Temple to the Lord because he had “shed much blood upon the earth.”¹⁵ A higher law indeed! David was not penalized, for he kept the law that was expected of him, but one cannot obey a lesser law and expect to gain the blessings of the higher law.

What about conscription? We can’t say no if our government obligates us to go to war, can we? This is a trickier issue because one brings up our belief in “being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.”¹⁶ The General Authorities regularly provide rhetoric around being subject to sovereigns, etc., but can they really say otherwise? It would be disastrous for the Church if its leaders made governments uncomfortable. The key was given by President Joseph Fielding Smith, who said, “We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man’s doctrine.”¹⁷ Elder Bruce R. McConkie clarified, saying that “if Brigham Young, who was one of the greatest prophets, said something about Adam which is out of harmony with what is in the book of Moses and in section 78, it is the scripture that prevails...

⁹Matthew 5:27-28

¹⁰Exodus 20:13

¹¹Hinckley, Gordon B., “War and Peace”, LDS General Conference, April 2003: “I believe that God will not hold men and women in uniform responsible as agents of their government in carrying forward that which they are legally obligated to do.”

¹²Doctrine and Covenants 98:16

¹³1 Samuel 17:45-51

¹⁴Doctrine and Covenants 132:39

¹⁵1 Chronicles 22:8

¹⁶12th Article of Faith

¹⁷Cited in McConkie, Bruce R., “Guidelines to Gospel Study” in “Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie”, Deseret Book Company 1989.

The scriptures always take precedence.”¹⁸ It may very well be that the General Authorities are expecting of us a minimal standard, adapted to the capabilities of the Saints, while the scriptures speak of a stricter ideal.

Well, what do the scriptures say about obeying the law? We have already cited the 12th Article of Faith, but that is not the only word on the matter. The scriptures provide a handful of exceptions to the rule when the law of the land is contrary to the Law of the Lord. The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who refuse to worship a golden image as required by King Nebuchadnezzar, provides a good place to start¹⁹. They admitted their crime and were willing to accept the consequences, but would not obey this particular law. Likewise Daniel worshipped the Lord, contrary to the decree of King Darius, and was thrown into a den of lions²⁰. Similarly, the Apostles Peter and John were arrested, brought before the rulers, and instructed not to teach about Jesus. They responded, “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”²¹

A couple of common points come across in these examples. First, the laws broken were always contrary to the commandments of God. Second, the individuals involved did not try to hide their crimes, but rather were willing to accept the consequences. These are the same principles behind the nonviolent resistance espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr.²². We do not consider Martin Luther King, Jr. to be an evil man, so we are not justified in taking the strictest interpretation of statements by modern General Authorities with respect to following the law.

Just as we would not accept a law requiring us to worship a golden image, or a hypothetical law requiring us to commit adultery, or to renounce our faith, we need not accept a law requiring us to kill. Peaceful resistance with a willingness to accept the consequences, then, must be an acceptable action, and if not explicitly required of the Saints, at least it must be considered a higher law to those whose conscience requires it.

Particular exceptions to the law are more interesting than the blanket amnesty provided to government agents. Joseph Smith said: “God said, ‘Thou shalt not kill;’ at another time He said ‘Thou shalt utterly destroy,’ This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted -- by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire.”²³

The story of the death of Laban is of particular interest. Nephi was instructed by the Spirit to

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹See chapter 3 of Daniel in the Old Testament.

²⁰Daniel chapter 4.

²¹Acts 4:19-20

²²King, Martin Luther Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 1963.

²³History of the Church 5:135

kill Laban, though he was reluctant to do so²⁴. The particular circumstances of this case are important. Laban had given out standing orders to kill Nephi and his brothers. Here he was, armed, though in a drunken stupor. Should he awake, Nephi would likely have been killed. However, Nephi's purpose in mortality had not been fulfilled, and he was thus far a righteous man, so he was ordered to commit this particular act of self-defense. It is a distinct possibility that such orders would be given to a faithful Latter-day Saint in similar circumstances if he still had a mission to fulfill.

Other examples exist, such as the commandment given to Saul to go to war against the Amalekites²⁵, which resulted in the loss of his kingship²⁶ when he failed to kill what the Lord commanded him to kill.

These examples were instructions given to specific people in specific circumstances. Unless otherwise directed, we must assume that the standing law is "thou shalt not kill." Indeed, thousands of years have passed since the Lord last instructed His people to go to war, and He doesn't appear disposed to give such an instruction again in the near future. This is an important point: No matter how just we may think a certain war is, we have received no commandment from the Lord to engage in any of the wars in recent history. The history of modern warfare is the history of wars waged by men without direction from the Lord to do so.

War and the Law of Moses

The Law of Moses had some interesting things to say about the order of society. War was glorified in Israel, as among many ancient peoples, and they frequently referred to their God as the "Lord of Hosts."²⁷ "The Lord is a man of war," sang the Israelites²⁸, though He hardly turned out to be a bloodthirsty general when He came to Earth. Jesus was unique among Jewish teachers in that He did not use military terminology in describing the Kingdom of Heaven. Yet we don't even have to go all the way to the New Testament to find God making efforts to restrain His people's blood lust.

Why should we worry about what the Law of Moses has to say about war? Didn't Jesus' teachings supersede the Mosaic Law? Apart from some things, such as circumcision²⁹ and animal sacrifice³⁰, the teachings of Christ were generally stricter than the Law of Moses. "Thou shalt not kill," for instance, became "whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of [God's] judgement."³¹ Likewise it should be reasonable to assume that any restrictions on

²⁴1 Nephi 4:10-13

²⁵1 Samuel 15:3

²⁶1 Samuel 15:26

²⁷See Isaiah 1:24 and Zechariah 7:9 for some examples.

²⁸Exodus 15:3

²⁹Acts 15:23-29

³⁰3 Nephi 9:19-20

³¹3 Nephi 12:21-22

war given to the Israelites are not only still in effect, but probably superseded by even stricter limitations on what can be done without incurring divine judgement sooner or later.

Chapter 20 of Deuteronomy provides the exposition of certain laws given to Israel regarding the recruitment of soldiers and going to war. We are particularly interested in the limitations placed on the Israelite war establishment under the understanding that we're under obligation to not only observe such restrictions, but to "go the extra mile" in our own personal and national lives.

Particularly noteworthy are the requirements to excuse certain people who chose not to fight. We would have to broaden our leniency beyond strict definitions of "conscientious objector" in order to live up to the law given to Israel. Anyone who has recently built a house, planted a vineyard, or gotten married is allowed to be excused from battle³². Furthermore, anyone may be excused from service just by virtue of being scared to go to battle³³.

Although rabbinic interpretations make a distinction between voluntary wars and wars of national defense³⁴, abrogating the exemptions for the latter, this distinction is not made in the Law itself. It appears to fit the natural pattern of interpreting the scriptures to selectively apply the rules in a manner which suits oneself for which Jesus harshly criticized the Scribes and Pharisees. In fact, the introduction to these particular laws of war instructs the people not to be afraid when their enemies outnumber and out-equip them³⁵, a situation unlikely in a voluntary war for the expansion of national territory. The self-appointed teachers of Ancient Israel were not permitted to make the smallest change to the scriptures, but it was standard fare for them to write commentaries obscuring their meaning and granting exceptions.

Women, children, and animals aren't part of the battle, so they must be spared³⁶. In modern times many men are non-combatants as well, so we would have to be even more selective about who we kill. This is a particularly difficult principle for us, since modern warfare tends to result in more civilian than military deaths³⁷. Additionally, fruit-bearing trees should not be cut down³⁸.

Though not pacifist at all, the Law of Moses was a great advancement for a warlike people. It

³²Deuteronomy 20:5-7

³³Deuteronomy 20:8

³⁴Broyde, Michael J., "Fighting the War and the Peace: Battlefield Ethics, Peace Talks, Treaties, and Pacifism in the Jewish Tradition" <<http://www.jlaw.com/Articles/war2.html>>, retrieved 2011-05-20: "The Talmud delimits two categories of permissible war: 1) Obligatory; and 2) Authorized... many of the restrictions placed by Jewish law on the type of conduct prohibited by war is frequently limited to Authorized rather than Obligatory wars."

³⁵Deuteronomy 20:1

³⁶Deuteronomy 20:14

³⁷Orend, Brian, "War", "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)", Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/>>, retrieved 2011-05-20: "It is worth noting that almost all wars since 1900 have featured larger civilian, than military, casualties."

³⁸Deuteronomy 20:19

is a step ahead of us. Even without the draft, our “voluntary” service falls short of -- or cheats to get around -- the spirit of Mosaic law by suddenly stripping a soldier of any ability to claim exempt status once he has taken his oath. The onetime volunteer is enslaved by the system and loses the excuses of a new house, a new garden, a new wife, or cowardice, a clever but dishonest workaround to be able to use the term “voluntary.” We wouldn’t have such a large fighting force at all if it were truly voluntary, but that’s the idea.

Beyond a voluntary force, we would do well to strictly apply the rule of not killing non-combatants. This would limit what weapons we could use, and if we could justify dropping bombs, we would be much more limited in where we could drop them than we are now. This would make success a much greater challenge for us, but we would end up with much less blood on our hands. Being on a higher moral plane, we would have much more reason to believe that the Lord our God goes with us, to fight for us and save us from our enemies³⁹.

War and the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon has a great deal to say about war. The Nephites were hardly pacifists, but their policies in war are well worth studying, and would be a major improvement if implemented in place of our current policies of aggression. And if there’s any message to be taken from the final history of the Jaredites and the Nephites, it’s that the end result of being a warlike people is not good.

The Book of Mormon begins with Lehi, due to his righteousness, being warned to escape from Jerusalem and its coming war with Babylon. His children, however, have conditions upon the promises of peace. Nephi is told, “if it so be that [your children] rebel against me, [the Lamanites] shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance.”⁴⁰ That is, war will come as a consequence of unrighteousness.

Nephi himself is commanded to kill Laban, and his reluctance in complying along with his statement, “Never at any time have I shed the blood of man”⁴¹ indicate pacifist tendencies uncommon among the people of his nation. He had to be given an order tailored to his specific circumstance repeatedly in order to kill his enemy. If it weren’t for that order, he would have preferred to let alone the man who was actively trying to kill him. This must have been a traumatic moment for Nephi, since he takes the time in writing to explain his case and say that he didn’t want to do it, but the Lord kept insisting. Indeed, rather than killing Laban’s servant -- the easy, safe, and obvious option -- he preferred to invite him to come live with his family.

Nephi takes beatings from his brothers⁴² and deals with their attempts at murdering him⁴³ and

³⁹See Deuteronomy 20:4

⁴⁰1 Nephi 2:24

⁴¹1 Nephi 4:10

⁴²1 Nephi 3:28

⁴³1 Nephi 7:16 and 1 Nephi 17:47

abuse at sea⁴⁴ without fighting back, but rather forgiving them⁴⁵ and praying for their benefit⁴⁶. He simply allowed the Lord to take care of matters, which was done at one point in a miraculous fashion⁴⁷, though Nephi makes it clear that it was the Lord's will and actions, not his.

After Lehi and his family arrive in the New World, and Lehi dies, Nephi laments the fact that he occasionally gets angry with his enemies⁴⁸. His brothers try to kill him again⁴⁹, and rather than fight back he runs off to somewhere he can be safe⁵⁰. He just left instead of fighting. Nephi thus gives us every indication that he was at least a borderline pacifist, unwilling to fight or kill unless specifically commanded to do so by God. The only weakness in the Nephi-as-a-pacifist theory is the fact that he made weapons for his people⁵¹, but considering the lack of detail in the account, and in the context of the rest of his words and actions, we must acknowledge the possibility that either he was instructed to do so by the Lord, or pressured to do so by his people. We know that his people pressured him to do things against his nature by his mention of them trying to make him king⁵². He mentions wars⁵³, but refuses to go into detail about the circumstances.

When Jacob takes over the Nephite record he mentions that Nephi did engage in some violence in defense of his people⁵⁴. With Nephi and his pacifist influence gone, we learn that there began to be more wars with the Lamanites, but Jacob protests that they were completely defensive and that the Nephites sought any possible way to avoid them⁵⁵. His son Enos continues to document the decline of Nephite righteousness and mentions that it is accompanied by warfare⁵⁶. Enos' son Jarom mentions the increasing wickedness of the Nephites, but clarifies that their wars are still completely defensive and only take place in their own land in response to invasions⁵⁷. In other words, even in their wickedness the Nephites of his day did not engage in preventive war such as we do in modern times.

Omni and his descendents then continue the Nephite record, mentioning that they had fallen into such a degree of apostasy that there were no longer revelations nor prophecy in the land⁵⁸. This wickedness was accompanied by ever-increasing warfare, still defensive on the part of the Nephites, until Mosiah was instructed to take as many as would listen to him out of the land

⁴⁴1 Nephi 18:11

⁴⁵1 Nephi 7:21

⁴⁶1 Nephi 18:21

⁴⁷1 Nephi 17:53-54

⁴⁸2 Nephi 4:27,29

⁴⁹2 Nephi 5:3

⁵⁰2 Nephi 5:6

⁵¹2 Nephi 5:14

⁵²2 Nephi 5:18

⁵³2 Nephi 5:34

⁵⁴Jacob 1:10

⁵⁵Jacob 7:24

⁵⁶Enos 1:23-24

⁵⁷Jarom 1:7

⁵⁸Omni 1:11

of Nephi rather than continue engaging in constant war⁵⁹. Zeniff's group is briefly mentioned, whose travels are recorded later. Their first expedition ends up in a fight, due to wickedness, resulting in the death of most of the party⁶⁰.

When Zeniff's story, and that of his people, is recounted, we learn a bit of his motives. His group wanted to return to the land of Nephi, and were about to do it by force, when he was struck by the fact that the Lamanites weren't necessarily the monsters that Nephite propaganda made them out to be⁶¹. This new interest in peace didn't bode well with all of the party, and ironically ended in a lot of killing. However, Zeniff set out again and made a peaceful agreement with the king of the Lamanites⁶². Zeniff and his people, however, had been duped⁶³, and eventually found themselves in battle. However, they did not think of it as anything glorious, and paid due respect to their dead enemies while lamenting the loss of their brethren⁶⁴. Further wars occurred, but as the people of Zeniff weren't completely wicked they received aid from the Lord⁶⁵.

During the reign of Zeniff's son, Noah, the wickedness of the people resulted in their seeing war as a glorious thing⁶⁶. This, combined with their other sins, angered the Lord, who sent Abinadi to preach to them⁶⁷. Abinadi was imprisoned⁶⁸ and ultimately killed⁶⁹ for his preaching. Alma is converted by Abinadi's teachings, and departs with a group of about 450 people⁷⁰. The Lamanites come to battle against Noah and his people, and in a horrid mess of war and politics Noah is killed by his people⁷¹ while others among them sue for peace⁷². Noah's son Limhi becomes king, and eventually the Lamanites become so abusive that his people want to go to war again⁷³. The war is a disaster, and, chastened, they turn to prayer instead of violence⁷⁴. Ammon, sent from the Nephite people at Zarahemla, consults with king Limhi and comes up with a strategy to escape the Lamanites without recourse to violence⁷⁵.

Alma and his people, on the other hand, are more passive from the date of their departure.

⁵⁹Omni 1:12

⁶⁰Omni 1:28

⁶¹Mosiah 9:1

⁶²Mosiah 9:6

⁶³Mosiah 9:10

⁶⁴Mosiah 9:19

⁶⁵Mosiah 10:19

⁶⁶Mosiah 11:18-19

⁶⁷Mosiah 11:20

⁶⁸Mosiah 12:17

⁶⁹Mosiah 17:13

⁷⁰Mosiah 18:34-34

⁷¹Mosiah 19:20

⁷²Mosiah 19:13

⁷³Mosiah 21:6

⁷⁴Mosiah 21:13-14

⁷⁵Mosiah 22:7

Being a particularly righteous people from the time of their conversion, they choose to surrender to approaching Lamanites rather than to fight⁷⁶. Though they are abused at the hands of their captors, the Lord blesses and strengthens them so that their burdens are hardly noticed⁷⁷. They are eventually provided with a miraculous and bloodless escape⁷⁸, and received joyfully by the Nephites in Zarahemla. It is quite noteworthy that this less violent, more righteous group - though they faced their difficulties -- had a much easier time than Limhi's people who had to learn pacifism the hard way.

In the days of Alma's son, also known as Alma, a man named Nehor came along who resorted to violence when a more righteous individual disagreed with him⁷⁹. Upon being tried for murder, he becomes the first case of capital punishment explicitly mentioned in the Book of Mormon⁸⁰. Nephite politics were obviously far from pacifist at the time, but as always this corresponded with increasing wickedness among the people⁸¹.

Then Amlici comes along, who isn't a big fan of the fledgling democratic government, and tries to establish himself as king⁸². His failure provokes a civil war⁸³, resulting in plenty of death. Alma Jr., who had so recently decreed capital punishment for Nehor, kills Amlici himself⁸⁴. This Alma, as opposed to his father, is more utilitarian than pacifist in his values, and thus more representative of the vast majority of Latter-day Saints than other religious figures in the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, he warned his people that God viewed them as blood-stained murderers⁸⁵, and mentioned that the wars with their enemies were a symptom of their own wickedness⁸⁶. The Lamanite attack on the wicked city of Ammonihah is provided as an example⁸⁷.

Meanwhile, the sons of the former king Mosiah have been out doing missionary work among the Nephite's traditional enemies. The converts, who go by the name Anti-Nephi-Lehies⁸⁸ and are later known as the Ammonites, are a remarkable people who take up pacifism as clearly as can be seen in the Book of Mormon. They and their pacific tendencies are discussed more in detail in the following chapter.

An antichrist named Korihor comes along, and we see more of Alma's utilitarian nature. Less

⁷⁶Mosiah 23:29

⁷⁷Mosiah 24:15

⁷⁸Mosiah 24:19-20

⁷⁹Alma 1:9

⁸⁰Alma 1:14-15

⁸¹Alma 1:16,19,24,etc.

⁸²Alma 2:2

⁸³Alma 2:10

⁸⁴Alma 2:31

⁸⁵Alma 5:22-23

⁸⁶Alma 9:18

⁸⁷Alma 16:2-3

⁸⁸Alma 23:17

kind than some other Book of Mormon figures, he not only strikes Korihor dumb via the power of God⁸⁹, but refuses to heal the repentant Korihor just in case he would revert back to his old ways⁹⁰. Korihor, now a mute beggar, wanders around until he is killed by a wicked faction of the Nephites⁹¹. The meme of the wicked killing the wicked is quite relevant to the pacifist since it takes two to fight, and rarely is either side completely innocent in either an individual dispute or one between nations.

Alma goes on a mission with Amulek to try to reconvert the members of the aforementioned wicked faction of the Nephites to the truth. Though they are not interested, it turns out that they have been abusing a lower social class among them. Among Amulek's teachings are some interesting points and choices of words. When referring to the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, rather than mentioning an end of blood sacrifice, he says more generally, "then shall there be, or it is expedient that there should be, a stop to the shedding of blood."⁹² He particularly instructs them not to fight back with, or even hate, their oppressors, because doing so would result in them becoming sinners also⁹³.

At this point the famous Captain Moroni comes into the picture, a military prodigy heading up all the Nephite armies from the age of twenty-five years⁹⁴. The accounts of his battles give us some of the most detailed insight into Nephite wars and politics that we find in the entire Book of Mormon. We are told from the start that he put a lot of effort into defensive preparations⁹⁵ and intelligence⁹⁶. Moroni was of the same utilitarian philosophy as Alma Jr., believing that war was an unfortunate necessity⁹⁷, but nevertheless was quick to call a halt to the battle as soon as they had the upper hand⁹⁸. At this point he offers to let them return home peacefully if they promise not to come back to war against the Nephites⁹⁹, and eventually the Lamanites took him up on that offer¹⁰⁰. At this point we begin to get a picture of the Nephite attitude to war. Although they weren't pacifist, they were much closer to that ideal than we are. Not only did they refuse to engage in pre-emptive or preventive war, as soon as the battle started turning in their favor they let their enemies return home with no conditions beyond a simple covenant of peace. No reparations were required, and no aggressors were tried for war crimes. Mormon continues to remind us at this time that these wars were strictly defensive and that the Nephites followed a strict rule never to conduct offensive war or even take up weapons except when under

⁸⁹Alma 30:50-51

⁹⁰Alma 30:54-56

⁹¹Alma 30:59

⁹²Alma 34:13

⁹³Alma 34:40

⁹⁴Alma 43:17

⁹⁵Alma 43:19

⁹⁶Alma 43:23

⁹⁷Alma 43:46-67

⁹⁸Alma 43:54

⁹⁹Alma 44:6

¹⁰⁰Alma 44:15,19

immediate threat of death¹⁰¹. He also reminds us that it was the Nephites' own wickedness that brought about warfare in the first place¹⁰².

Despite Welch's comparison of Nephite warfare to rabbinical laws of war¹⁰³, there is no direct evidence in the Book of Mormon than anyone with pacific tendencies was obligated by Nephite law to go to war. Indeed, the only people noted to have been compelled to fight in defense of the Nephites are the Amalickiahites¹⁰⁴ and the king-men¹⁰⁵, both groups being dissenters from the Nephites actively supporting their overthrow and not philosophical pacifists by any stretch of the imagination.

Battles with the people of Morianton¹⁰⁶, and the Lamanites under Jacob's command¹⁰⁷ provide further examples of the policy of simply allowing their enemies to return home under a covenant of peace if they decide to give up. In the latter case, even those who will not give up their weapons are not killed, but rather captured and retained as prisoners.

Meanwhile the saga of a Nephite captain named Teancum is interspersed with the tales of the Nephite wars. Teancum has the peculiar philosophy that he can do the most good by killing the leaders of the opposing armies, and begins with Morianton¹⁰⁸. He sneaks into the enemy camp to kill off Amalickiah¹⁰⁹ and later Ammoron in a fit of anger¹¹⁰. Despite its usefulness to the Nephites, he pays for this strategy with his life.

Also during this time period the children of the Ammonite pacifists, caught up in a patriotic fervor and not having the same commitment to pacifism as their parents, join up with the Nephite armies¹¹¹.

After Moroni's retirement, Moronihah takes over the armies. We are apprised of the continuing Nephite policy of only fighting defensive battles, and those only on their own land; they never follow their enemies back to their home territory when they flee¹¹².

At this point a much more frightening enemy appears on the Nephite scene with elements of organized crime, terrorism, and special ops squads that are perhaps even more relevant to

¹⁰¹Alma 48:14

¹⁰²Alma 48:21

¹⁰³Welch, John W., "Law and War in the Book of Mormon" in "Warfare in the Book of Mormon", Ricks, Stephen D. and William J. Hamblin, eds., Deseret Book, 1990.

¹⁰⁴Alma 46:35

¹⁰⁵Alma 51:15, 62:9

¹⁰⁶Alma 50:36

¹⁰⁷Alma 52:37

¹⁰⁸Alma 50:35

¹⁰⁹Alma 51:34

¹¹⁰Alma 62:36

¹¹¹Alma 53:16

¹¹²Alma 63:15

the modern world than traditional warfare. These elements are combined into organizations referred to as “secret combinations.”¹¹³ The ultimate result of these secret combinations was the collapse of Nephite civilization¹¹⁴. However, even against terrorism the Nephite policy of no offensive or preventive wars, and no warfare outside their home territory applied. The people wanted a preventive war in the style of Afghanistan or Iraq in order to “destroy them in their own lands,”¹¹⁵ but Gidgiddoni, the Nephite commander, warned the people that the Lord didn’t approve of going on the offensive: “for if we should go up against them, the Lord would deliver us into their hands.”¹¹⁶ Rather than offend the Lord by taken up the Bush Doctrine of “take the fight to the enemy overseas before they can attack us again here at home,”¹¹⁷ they adapted themselves to unique and creative strategies.

After the collapse of Nephite civilization and the coming of Christ, Lehi, Ishmael, and Muleki’s descendants enjoy about two hundred years of peace¹¹⁸, after which they fall back into their habits of secret combinations and wars. Eventually they take it into their hearts to engage in their first offensive war, at which point Moroni, their commander, resigns¹¹⁹, and they are destroyed in their final battle within 20 years¹²⁰.

Among the last acts of Mormon is a letter written to his son, lamenting the fact that his people are engaging in torture of prisoners taken in war¹²¹ much like the type of torture the CIA is accused of committing against prisoners such as Khaled El-Masri¹²², and mentioning that God would not long allow a people to continue thus without incurring His retribution¹²³.

The Book of Mormon itself is neither pacifist nor anti-pacifist. Some of the greatest leaders in the book showed pacifist tendencies, and others didn’t. However, no great leader was willing to engage in offensive war, conduct warfare outside of the nation’s territory, mistreat prisoners, or hold war crimes trials or demand reparations after a war. There is not one restriction on warfare in the Book of Mormon that we do not break in the modern United States of America. And the inconvenient message of the Book of Mormon is that when those restrictions are broken, the collapse of the society that breaks them is not far off. The Book of Mormon, then, has much to provide the Latter-day Saint pacifist as an inspirational work.

¹¹³Helaman 3:23

¹¹⁴3 Nephi 7:6

¹¹⁵3 Nephi 3:20

¹¹⁶3 Nephi 3:21

¹¹⁷Bush, George W., “Decision Points”, Crown Publishers , 2010, p396.

¹¹⁸4 Nephi 1:22,24

¹¹⁹Mormon 3:10-11

¹²⁰Mormon 6:5

¹²¹Moroni 9:9-10

¹²²El-Masri, Khaled, “Statement: Khaled El-Masri”, American Civil Liberties Union, December 6, 2005: <http://www.aclu.org/human-rights_national-security/statement-khaled-el-masri>, retrieved 2011-05-23.

¹²³Moroni 9:14-15

The Ammonites: A Case Study in Pacifism

At about the time the Nephite government underwent the transition away from the old monarchy, a group of missionaries under the direction of Ammon¹²⁴ went out to preach the word of God to the Lamanites. After a series of extraordinary events, a large portion of the Lamanites were converted to the Nephite Church and called themselves Anti-Nephi-Lehies¹²⁵. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies were pacifists from the time of their conversion, not willing to go to war¹²⁶, and being so strict in their pacifism that they allowed themselves to be murdered rather than responding to violence with violence¹²⁷.

The Anti-Nephi-Lehies took pacifism a step further than just a philosophy of life; after an impassioned speech from their king they buried their weapons in the earth and made a sacred covenant with God “that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives; and rather than take away from a brother they would give unto him; and rather than spend their days in idleness they would labor abundantly with their hands.”¹²⁸ When they were forced to leave their home kingdom, they were given lands among the Nephites and were referred to as Ammonites, but retained their noncombatant status¹²⁹.

Boyce claims that it is inappropriate to apply the term “pacifists” to the Ammonites¹³⁰. It is appropriate to review his arguments here in order to better establish the pacifism of this people. First of all, Boyce argues that the murders for which the Ammonites covenanted to abstain from bloodshed as a part of their repentance were not acts of conventional warfare as a group, but individual acts of murder: “the Ammonite king is speaking of the murders that they themselves had committed, not that the body of Lamanites as a whole had committed.” This interpretation is problematic in two respects. First, if there was a distinction to be made between their murders and conventional warfare, there would be no reason for them to covenant to avoid participation in conventional warfare. Second, from the early days of the Nephite nations, there were much more Lamanites than Nephites¹³¹. If all of the Lamanites had individually murdered Nephites, the Nephite nation would have been entirely wiped out. If not, then there was no reason for every Anti-Nephi-Lehi to make the covenant of nonviolence. It is possible that they could have referred also to murders of other Lamanites, but this is unlikely since it would have meant their numbers would be much lower. No, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies must have been referring to actions that the Lamanites had taken as a group, which means warfare. The corollary is that, unfortunately for Boyce’s thesis, but fortunate for the pacifist theory, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies

¹²⁴Alma 17:18

¹²⁵Alma 23:17

¹²⁶Alma 23:7

¹²⁷Alma 23:21-22

¹²⁸Alma 24:18

¹²⁹Alma 27:22-23

¹³⁰Boyce, Duane, “Were the Ammonites Pacifists?” in “Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture”, Volume 18, Issue 1, Maxwell Institute, 2009.

¹³¹Jarom 1:6, Mosiah 25:3

referred to acts of killing in war as “murder.”

Boyce also claims that the Ammonites “never claimed a pacifist explanation as the reason for” eschewing war. He claimed that the only reason for their oath of noncombatant status was to maintain the forgiveness for their past sins. No explanation is given as to why a fear of condemnation doesn’t qualify as a pacifist explanation -- indeed, any explanation for not wanting to kill could be considered a pacifist explanation -- but even so it is not the only reason given for their pacifist stance. Ammon tells us that “they had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of their enemy; and they have buried their weapons of war deep in the earth, because of their love towards their brethren.”¹³² Boyce himself admits that “the Ammonites were motivated by the love of their brethren in refusing to take up arms against them,” so his assertion of a lack of a pacifist explanation for rejecting war is bewildering.

Boyce also points out that the Ammonites didn’t object to the Nephites fighting on their behalf. But we are never explicitly told this. We do know that the Ammonites weren’t given a choice. Ammon insisted vigorously that they go to the land of Zarahemla to escape the rest of the Lamanites who were actively killing them¹³³. They resisted until Ammon finally told the king of the Ammonites that the Lord instructed them to do so¹³⁴. They did pay taxes to support the Nephite armies, but again they weren’t given an option¹³⁵. A pacifist will pay taxes when the government enforces their payment¹³⁶.

The only indication that might damage the case for Ammonite Pacifism is in a moment of extreme distress among the Nephites, when they “were desirous to take up arms in the defence of their country,”¹³⁷ seeing the dire situation of the Nephites and the great lengths to which they went to preserve them. However, we know that extreme situations can impel one to question his beliefs, and it is also quite likely that Mormon, himself being a warrior, read more into this situation than a non-soldier historian would have done.

Boyce’s final point is that the children of the Ammonites went to war without objection from their parents. Yet not even a non-pacifist member of the Church would think to enforce their faith, let alone any particular ideology which is an extension to their faith, on their children. The Ammonite children were swept up with patriotic zeal during a difficult time for their nation, and their parents, even if they could get away with it, did not think to force their beliefs on their children.

¹³²Alma 26:32

¹³³Alma 27:5

¹³⁴Alma 27:10-13

¹³⁵Alma 27:24

¹³⁶Ballou’s Catechism of Non-resistance: “A tax is levied by the government, and is exacted independently of the will of the subject. It is impossible to resist it without having recourse to violence of some kind.”, cited in Tolstoy, Leo, “The Kingdom of God is Within You”, Project Gutenberg, 2003.

¹³⁷Alma 53:13

Thus we are given no reason to conclude that the Ammonites weren't pacifist in the truest sense of the term. Indeed we are given plenty of evidence that they were, from their noncombatant status to their love for their brethren as a motivation behind it. We are told that "they did look upon shedding the blood of their brethren with the greatest abhorrence; and they never could be prevailed upon to take up arms against their brethren," a truly pacifist stance if there ever was one¹³⁸.

The fact that a Book of Mormon people who were considered particularly righteous were pacifists establishes a basis for Mormon pacifism. It shows precedence for pacifist groups in the Church, and allows members with pacifist tendencies to be comfortable that despite the war-supporting tendencies of the membership of the Church at large, their beliefs are compatible with their religion.

Pacifism and Church History

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints might be said to have a violent history. From persecution in Illinois to the Mountain Meadows Massacre and beyond, Latter-day Saints have been at both the giving and the receiving end of violence. This violence might be looked at as a symbol and a metaphor. It might be considered to represent our human imperfections and the war played out against us by Satan and his followers. It might represent the struggles of the Latter-day Saints to find their way to Zion, a city of peace. To do that they must overcome their tendencies to violence. There is a lot up for grabs in that effort, as the Nephites were never able to overcome their violent tendencies and ultimately succumbed to it and their destruction.

Joseph Smith, Jr.'s life might be taken as a case study of struggle against adversity, and one aspect of this struggle was the efforts to overcome the weaknesses of the flesh, including a tendency to violence. In 1834 Joseph Smith formed an army, called "Zion's Camp" to reclaim the saints' property in Jackson County, Missouri. The members of Zion's Camp suffered greatly on their march, possibly leaving Joseph Smith reflective at the time they were about to kill some rattlesnakes, and he told them, "Let them alone -- don't hurt them! How will the serpent ever lose his venom, while the servants of God possess the same disposition, and continue to make war upon it? Men must become harmless, before the brute creation; and when men lose their vicious dispositions and cease to destroy the animal race, the lion and the lamb can dwell together, and the sucking child can play with the serpent in safety."¹³⁹

At times Joseph Smith expressed a wish that capital punishment could be applied to government officials who denied people their freedom of religion¹⁴⁰. At other times, while suffering at the hands of government, he was taught patience by the Lord: "If thou art called to pass through tribulation... know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good... Therefore, hold on thy way, and... fear not what man can do, for

¹³⁸Alma 27:28

¹³⁹Roberts, B.H., ed., "History of the Church", vol. 2, Deseret Book, 1976, p.71.

¹⁴⁰Roberts, B.H., ed., "History of the Church", vol. 6, Deseret Book, 1976, p.57.

God shall be with you forever and ever.”¹⁴¹ Truly the prophet’s characterization of his slow, sometimes painful, spiritual growth was accurate: “I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else... all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty.”¹⁴²

This culminates in a scene in Carthage in the morning of Joseph’s last day on earth. He hands a pistol to his brother Hyrum, who tells him “I hate to use such things or to see them used.”¹⁴³ Joseph concurs, the spirit at this point committed to nonviolence, while the flesh still resisting to the last moment. The tragic events that follow are a central point in Latter-day Saint history, well known to members of the Church.

As far as nonviolence in Church History goes, the history of the one time state military service was explicitly requested of the saints provides an interesting case study. Five hundred men at Brigham Young’s request took part in the Mormon Battalion. This service was considered a practical necessity for the church, but the key in this case was that upon being asked to serve they were promised “that their only fighting would be with wild beasts.”¹⁴⁴ It is interesting that when the saints were asked to perform military service, they were promised that they would not have to engage in violence.

After the exodus to the Salt Lake Valley, the Saints continued to have a rough time with government officials. With federal troops on the way to invade Utah, some Mormons committed a horrific act known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre against a group of pioneers on their way to California. However, in a brighter note for pacifists, Brigham Young sent out a unit of the Nauvoo Legion with the purpose of repelling the incoming troops without killing anyone¹⁴⁵.

Indeed, if the actions of the Latter-day Saints in this period weren’t pacifist, at least lip service was given to peace. Brigham Young taught the Saints in Salt Lake: “Never encourage malice or hatred in your hearts; that does not belong to a Saint. I can say in truth, that with all the abuse I have ever met, driven from my home, robbed of my substance, I do not know that a spirit of malice has ever rested in my heart. I have asked the Lord to mete out justice to those who have oppressed us, and the Lord will take his own time and way for doing this. It is in his hands, and not mine, and I am glad of it, for I could not deal with the wicked as they should be dealt with.”¹⁴⁶

The Church enjoyed a measure of peace while the United States was distracted with the civil war. Over the next years the Church dealt with issues such as missionary work, polygamy, and anti-Mormon publications not directly related to physical violence.

¹⁴¹Doctrine and Covenants 122:5-9

¹⁴²Roberts, B.H., ed., “History of the Church”, vol. 5, Deseret Book, 1976, p.401.

¹⁴³Roberts, B.H., ed., “History of the Church”, vol. 6, Deseret Book, 1976, pp.607-608.

¹⁴⁴Tyler, Daniel, “A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War”, 1881, p.118.

¹⁴⁵Arrington, Leonard J., “Brigham Young: American Moses”, University of Illinois Press, 1986, p.255.

¹⁴⁶Widtsoe, John A., ed., “Discourses of Brigham Young”, Deseret Book, 1925, p.420.

During World War I members of the Church served in militaries in various countries. In a General Conference during this time, President Joseph F. Smith made a remarkable statement: "I want to say to the Latter-day Saints who may enlist, and whose services the country may require, that when they become soldiers of the State and of the Nation that they will not forget that they are also soldiers of the Cross, that they are minister [sic] of life and not of death; and when they go forth, they may go forth in the spirit of defending the liberties of mankind rather than for the purpose of destroying the enemy."¹⁴⁷

At the outbreak of World War II the First Presidency, consisting of Heber J. Grant, J. Ruben Clark, Jr., and David O. McKay, released a message saying, "We... declare that God is grieved by war and that He will hold subject to the eternal punishments of His will those who wage it unrighteously."¹⁴⁸ They remarked, "We condemn all war's foul brood-avarice, greed, misery, want, disease, cruelty, hate, inhumanity, savagery, death," and concluded: "We pray that the spirit now raging in men's hearts of hate, of exploitation, of desire to dominate may be supplanted by the spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness, that in obedience to principles of righteousness and of justice this war without further bloodshed and suffering may be brought to an early close."¹⁴⁹ In this message and a prayer published by them later in the year, they cited the Sermon on the Mount's teachings of "Love your enemy" and forgiveness. Additional pronouncements on the evils of war were given over the following years.

Later on, the First Presidency under George Albert Smith protested against building a large standing army: "By creating an immense standing army, we shall create to our liberties and free institutions a threat foreseen and condemned by the founders of the Republic, and by the people of this country from that time till now. Great standing armies have always been the tools of ambitious dictators to the destruction of freedom."¹⁵⁰ This is an ominous statement considering that the United States now has by far the largest military expenditures in the world¹⁵¹.

President Gordon B. Hinckley has the distinction of being the prophet who came out in direct support of one of the United States' wars. He clarified, however, that his words weren't as President of the Church, but his "personal feelings and... loyalties in the present situation."¹⁵² It is appropriate to note that though he based his claim for support on the superior intelligence available to government leaders, President Bush later lamented, "the reality was that I had sent American troops into combat based in large part on intelligence that proved false."¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷Conference Report, April 1917.

¹⁴⁸Clark, James R., ed., "Messages of the First Presidency", vol. 6, Deseret Book, 1975.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Background paper on SIPRI military expenditure data, 2010", April 11, 2010.

¹⁵²Conference Report, April 2003.

¹⁵³Bush, George W., "Decision Points", Crown Publishers, 2010, p.262.

Elder Russell M. Nelson, on the other hand, gave a talk in the preceding conference that was more in keeping with First Presidency positions up until that time. Noting that the scriptures “strongly condemn wars of aggression,” he said, “Resolution of the present political problems will require much patience and negotiation.”¹⁵⁴

Anarchy and the Latter-day Saints

Pacifism is often associated with anarchy. The argument generally goes along the lines of governments are run by force, therefore government is incompatible with pacifism. There is a certain amount of truth to this argument: laws are ultimately upheld by force. Even a minor infraction that incurs only a fine ultimately results in force if that fine isn't paid. Everything is upheld by either a policeman or a soldier, either of which work by virtue of their weapons. Force is central to human governments.

If we equate force with violence -- and to the anarcho-pacifist little, if any, distinction is to be made -- then human governments will never be able to bring true peace to mankind. Writes Tolstoy: “Some believers in the supernatural character of Christianity hold that salvation [that is, peace on Earth] will come when all men are brought to believe in Christ, whose second coming is at hand.”¹⁵⁵ He thus mentions dismissively that certain Christians believe peace can only be brought through the Kingdom of God, which will not come until Christ returns. On the other hand, he argues, we must establish the Kingdom of God among us by non-resistance to evil, which will tear down the governments around us. Anarchy, then, is the Kingdom of God.

Tolstoy is right to say that we must work to establish peace ourselves, rather than wait around for Christ's return. As the scripture says, “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”¹⁵⁶ But is he right in equating anarchy with the Kingdom of God? What if there could be a government that wasn't based on force? This may sound like a word game, since such a system of government might as well be considered anarchy, but this particular word game may be the key to resolving the conflict between the traditional Latter-day Saint teaching of Christ's political kingdom with Christ's own teachings of nonviolence.

What is Zion, if not a community of people who voluntarily submit to the laws of God? And if all members of the society voluntarily submit to its rules, then is it not a government not based on force? Here we have the key: It is not quite anarchy, because there is an established leadership. We have a prophet at the head. Yet there is no need for soldiers or policemen or any office whose purpose is to enforce the government's will through violence. Here we have the Kingdom of God.

¹⁵⁴Conference Report, October 2002.

¹⁵⁵Tolstoy, Leo, “The Kingdom of God is Within You”. Project Gutenberg, 2003.

¹⁵⁶Matthew 6:33

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord,”¹⁵⁷ wrote Isaiah, which Matthew taught us was a reference to the preaching of John the Baptist¹⁵⁸. Such is the message also in the present dispensation of the fullness of times¹⁵⁹. Perhaps we eagerly await the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when we should be building up Zion to prepare for His return. We may do well, rather than praying “Come quickly, Lord,” to say, “Give us time yet, that we may repent and prepare for thy coming.” We have thus far failed to build the New Jerusalem and live the Law of Consecration in its fullness, and instead we’re waiting for Jesus to come and fix everything. Even if we do not accept fully the arguments of the pacifists and the anarchists, we would do well to try to fix things ourselves first, and then see if Christ comes to help when we’re actually making an effort.

President Wilford Woodruff said: “Trust in God. Do your duty. Remember your prayers. Get faith in the Lord, and take hold and build up Zion. All will be right. The Lord is going to visit his people, and he is going to cut his work short in righteousness, lest no flesh should be saved. I say to you, watch the signs of the times, and prepare yourselves for that which is to come.”¹⁶⁰ He clarified our responsibility to take the initiative, saying, “It has been promised that the New Jerusalem will be built up in our day and generation, and it will have to be done by the United Order of Zion and according to celestial law. And not only so, but we have to keep that law ourselves if we ever inherit that kingdom, for no man will receive a celestial glory unless he abides a celestial law; no man will receive a terrestrial glory unless he abides a terrestrial law, and no man will receive a telestial glory unless he abides a telestial law.”¹⁶¹

Joseph Smith published his “Views of the U.S. Government”¹⁶² in 1844 which served as the platform for his campaign for President of the United States. As candidate for public office, he couldn’t advocate anarchy, but his platform was nonetheless the most libertarian position ever staked out by a president of the Church, which is quite fitting for the greatest prophet of the last dispensation.

His criticism of government by force was harsh: “My cogitations, like Daniel’s, have for a long time troubled me, when I viewed the condition of men throughout the world, and more especially in this boasted realm, where the Declaration of Independence ‘holds 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;’ but at the same time some two or three millions of people are held as slaves for life, because the spirit in them is covered with a darker skin than ours; and hundreds of our own kindred for an infraction, or supposed infraction, of some over-wise statute, have to be incarcerated in dungeon gloom, or penitentiaries, while the duellist, the debauchee, and the defaulter for millions, and criminals, take the uppermost rooms at feasts, or, like the bird of passage, find a more congenial clime by

¹⁵⁷Isaiah 40:3

¹⁵⁸Matthew 3:3

¹⁵⁹Doctrine and Covenants 1:12

¹⁶⁰Woodruff, Wilford and G. Homer Durham, “Discourses of Wilford Woodruff”, Bookcraft, 1946.

¹⁶¹Ibid.

¹⁶²Clark, James R. “Messages of the First Presidency”, vol. 1, Deseret Book, 1965.

flight.”¹⁶³

Apart from a proposal to free the slaves peacefully by compensating their owners through money raised by the sale of public lands, he stated some interesting views on prisons, one of the most glaring examples of government force (violence): “Petition your State Legislatures to pardon every convict in their several penitentiaries, blessing them as they go, and saying to them, in the name of the Lord, Go thy way and sin no more.”¹⁶⁴ And also, “Oh, then, create confidence, restore freedom, break down slavery, banish imprisonment for debt, and be in love, fellowship and peace with all the world! Remember that honesty is not subject to law. The law was made for transgressors. Wherefore a good name is better than riches.”¹⁶⁵

Government by force is indeed evil, according to Joseph Smith. Even if he sided with those who claim it is a necessary fact of life until the return of Christ in His glory (he had no choice if he was running for president), he proposed to limit that force to an extreme minimum. Indeed, so close were his views to anarchy that one can hardly fault the anarcho-pacifist Latter-day Saint for any sin against Church doctrine, for the mainstream political ideas espoused by the majority of Latter-day Saints in the United States diverge much further from Joseph Smith’s platform.

On May 8, 1845 the Quorum of the Twelve sent a letter to Wilford Woodruff, who was in England at the time, that contains some interesting instructions on government¹⁶⁶. It begins: “It is a part of our religion to support, any government, wherever we may be, that will protect us in common with other citizens; for, to this end governments are instituted; and as England has ever been true and faithful to us, as a people in common with others, the elders cannot be too particular to enjoin on all the saints to yield obedience to the laws, and respect every man in his office, letting politics wholly, entirely and absolutely alone, and preach the principles of the gospel of salvation; for to this end were they ordained and sent forth.” That is, we leave governments alone. No anarcho-pacifist advocates violent overthrow of the government, and this teaching is completely compatible with such views. It continues: “We are for peace, we want no contention with any person or government, and should war commence between England and America, it will probably be wisdom for you and all the American elders to return immediately home, and leave all parties to fight their own battles.” This sentence is the most interesting part, as it takes a decidedly pacifist stance. The anarcho-pacifist view is decidedly similar: not to take part in the disputes of nations, and if someday the majority of the people in general follow this lead, the nations will be left without means to go to war. A simple refusal to engage in violence can be a more effective tool to limit a despot’s power than a violent revolution.

President Heber J. Grant, with his counselors J. Ruben Clark and David O. McKay, published a letter in 1936 warning members against Communism. The letter is interesting because it clarifies the distinction between government by force and the United Order, which is believed by many Latter-day Saints to the manner of government of Zion, or the Kingdom of God.

¹⁶³Ibid.

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶Clark, James R., “Messages of the First Presidency”, vol. 1, Deseret Book, 1965.

This returns us to the probability that the Kingdom of God is not anarchy, but nonetheless similar to what pacifist anarchists promote in that it is a government based on voluntary consent rather than violent enforcement of the laws. Indeed, that distinction is what makes Communism evil (it is enforced by violence) and the United Order good. In the words of the First Presidency, “Communism is not the United Order, and bears only the most superficial resemblance thereto; Communism is based upon intolerance and force, the United Order upon love and freedom of conscience and action; Communism involves forceful despoliation and confiscation, the United Order voluntary consecration and sacrifice.”¹⁶⁷

On the other hand, though the ideal promoted by the teachings of the Church is probably not equivalent to anarchy, the point is that anarcho-pacifists should be welcomed into the Church, seeing as we welcome conservatives and liberals alike whose political views diverge even further from the Kingdom of God. Anarcho-pacifism cannot be considered evil in the same way that Communism is said to be evil, as the latter advocates overthrow of the government, but the former advocates no revolution or violent overthrow of anything. Indeed, anarcho-pacifism can, at most, only be considered evil in the same way that support of the Republican Party platform can be considered evil: it’s not the government that God would have established if his people were willing to have it.

Conclusion

Pacifism or Just War? That’s a tricky question, isn’t it? Latter-day Saint teachings don’t give us a direct answer; they give us a mandate to study and find out for ourselves. Latter-day Saint culture, on the other hand, gives us a stern answer: Support our military efforts, or you’re unpatriotic. The Latter-day Saint pacifist walks a lonely road, but he can take heart in the words of Isaiah, telling him he’s the leader blazing the path that the rest will eventually follow: “And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”¹⁶⁸ Perhaps the average Latter-day Saint is waiting for the Lord to bring the Millennium and its accompanying peace. The pacifist knows that he cannot wait for the Lord to do what the Lord commanded us to do: “Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace.”¹⁶⁹

The Latter-day Saint pacifist can take heart that Zion will be filled with pacifists: “And it shall come to pass among the wicked, that every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must needs flee unto Zion for safety.”¹⁷⁰ Note that this doesn’t mean that the wicked pacifists are going to Zion; on the contrary, “the wicked will not come unto... Zion.”¹⁷¹ That is, those pacifists surrounded by wicked people will flee unto Zion, the city of peace, while those

¹⁶⁷Clark, James R., “Messages of the First Presidency”, vol. 6, Deseret Book, 1975.

¹⁶⁸Isaiah 2:4

¹⁶⁹Doctrine and Covenants 98:15

¹⁷⁰Doctrine and Covenants 45:68

¹⁷¹Doctrine and Covenants 45:67

who are willing to fight in war will remain among the wicked.

Likewise concerning Zion: "Wherefore, the land of Zion shall not be obtained but by purchase or by blood, otherwise there is none inheritance for you. And if by purchase, behold you are blessed; And if by blood, as you are forbidden to shed blood, lo, your enemies are upon you, and ye shall be scourged from city to city, and from synagogues to synagogues, and but few shall stand to receive an inheritance."¹⁷²

John the Apostle wrote, "He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity: he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints."¹⁷³ If this is any indication of the attitude of the early saints, we must conclude that they took seriously Jesus' admonition to "turn the other cheek" in not responding to violence with violence. Latter-day Saints particularly know that these commandments apply to societies as well as individuals, having the Book of Mormon to explain that to us in no uncertain terms.

Society is a collection of individuals. Once we see that the "state" is a fictional entity, we realize that we kill because we're willing to listen to some glorified individual tell us to kill. Government sponsored violence occurs only because we consent to it. As long as we think that taking actions as a group absolves us from individual responsibility, we're never going to enjoy peace on Earth. But when we break free of that bondage of groupthink we can destroy the government's ability to wage war by (peacefully) refusing to cooperate. Thus the future of the human race depends on the individual, and our hands remain stained with the blood of this generation as long as we continue to consent to its violence.

No, "Mormonism" doesn't require one to be a pacifist, but, on the other hand, the Mormon pacifist is taking the higher road.

¹⁷²Doctrine and Covenants 63:29-31

¹⁷³Revelation 13:10