

MORMON USE OF METHODIST ARCHIVES (1988)

In recent months considerable anxiety has been caused in a number of areas across the country as a result of requests made by the Genealogical Society of Utah to microfilm Methodist Registers and Records. Pressure has been brought to bear on local Superintendent Ministers by City Archivists to allow this to happen in the interests of preventing the deterioration of the registers as a result of constant handling. The Genealogical Society of Utah is prepared to provide County Records Offices with free copies of registers up to about 1900, a programme of microfilming which local offices are not able to undertake themselves because of the enormous costs involved. It is recognised by the County Archivists who themselves claim to be interested merely in the long-term preservation of valuable archive material that the Genealogical Society of Utah wants to undertake this work in pursuance of the religious objectives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

It has to be acknowledged that refusal of permission to microfilm Methodist registers will not prevent members of the Genealogical Society of Utah from seeing Methodist records and using them for their own purposes, since they have the same right of access as any member of the public. The Connexional Law and Polity Committee was consulted about this matter and the conclusion reached was that it is for the Managing Trustees of the local church in each case to decide whether to permit their records in County Archives to be copied. The Faith & Order Committee was asked to advise on the theological issues involved with a view to offering guidelines for Superintendent Ministers and Managing Trustees.

The genealogical data in Methodist records is clearly of great benefit in tracing family trees, an enterprise sometimes engaged in out of curiosity concerning family history, sometimes out of a desire to find family roots. Such activity cannot be considered in any way sinister. However, the purposes for which the Mormons gather genealogical data are more specifically related to their beliefs and practices. The first concerns their understanding of baptism and the second their teaching concerning marriage.

According to Mormon teaching baptism is always by total immersion for the remission of sins. Infants and small children are not capable of repentance because they have not reached the years of accountability before God. The age of accountability is eight years. Baptism is a prerequisite of salvation. Accordingly, in the Gospel God in his goodness has made provision for the news of salvation to be preached not only to the living during their life-time but also to those in the grave. He has given to his priests who have died, i.e. deceased male Mormons, the task of preaching to the dead, who may be baptised by proxy. The living are baptised in the temples of the Latter Day Saints on behalf of the dead who accept the Gospel in the spirit world.

In relation to marriage it is claimed that God's intention is that marriage should be for all time and for all eternity. Marriage 'until death us do part' is said to be a human convention. Therefore all those who have not been 'sealed' to each other for ever by the power of the priesthood have no claim upon each other or upon their children after death, because they have not made a covenant of eternal marriage. Hence, in order that God's purpose may not be thwarted, power has been given to his priests in these latter days to marry living children vicariously for their dead parents.

There is in these passages an appeal to a retroactive kind of universalism. It is based on the claim to know what God must do and what his justice requires. It is founded in scriptural terms on the single reference in 1 Cor. 15:29, although Joseph Smith did not claim to find his teaching concerning baptism for the dead in the scriptures. He claimed to have received it by special revelation and not by reading the Bible. Since the salvation of those who have already died depends on the activity of the living on their behalf, it follows that baptism by proxy is a central tenet of Mormon teaching. The benefits, however, are reciprocal, for neglect of the responsibility laid upon 'the saints' to ensure that their deceased relatives receive vicariously the riches of the gospel may imperil their own salvation. The Mormon passion for collecting genealogical data is the natural corollary of this belief. Accurate information is necessary for the correct performance of this task.

Mormon teaching concerning baptism for the dead and the sealing of the eternal covenant of marriage on behalf of the dead is promulgated on the basis of the claim to special revelation. It is supported by an exegesis of the text of the canonical scriptures which is only possible by reason of a prior understanding of what the text means. The report (in 1 Cor. 15:29) of the practice by some people 'of being baptised on behalf of the dead' is read as legitimising the practice by the Mormons.

It is one of the functions of the canon of scripture to provide a yardstick to guard against unwarranted addition to (or subtraction from) what may properly be regarded as Christian. Examined in the light of Scripture the teachings of the Book of Mormon can only be adjudged to go beyond what is necessary for salvation. The Mormon dismissal of centuries of Church history as deviation from the true Church of Jesus Christ, with the implication that their own way is the only right one, removes another Christian reference point. The Tradition is discounted except at those points where wisps of support may be found for Mormon positions.

It is an Article of Faith (No. 11) of the Latter Day Saints that 'We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may'. This profession of tolerance of the beliefs of others is not maintained with regard to the beliefs of the departed, the integrity of whose beliefs is shown scant respect, since they appear to be willy-nilly the targets of Mormon ordinances. People whose religious beliefs were held with conviction are made the objects of ceremonies of which they could in their own life-time only have heartily disapproved. There also appears to be little concern for the sensitivities of the non-Mormon relatives of the deceased to whom the unsolicited activity of the Latter Day Saints is profoundly disturbing and offensive and who with regard to the departed prefer to commit them into God's merciful care and keeping.

It is the judgement of the Faith & Order Committee none the less that there is positive value in having records microfilmed and that the Methodist Church should not want to exercise a censorship role in relation to what are after all public documents. The Faith & Order Committee, however, concurs with the conclusion reached by the Law & Polity Committee, that it is the responsibility of the Managing Trustees of the local church in each case to decide whether to permit their records in County Archives to be copied or not, in the light of the theological issues outlined above and with due consideration of the effect of granting permission on any descendants of those to whom the records refer.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the report.

(Agenda 1988, pp.817-819)