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Abstract Review of "Anti-Intellectualism in Mormon History" (1966), by Davis Bitton.

Mormon Anti-Intellectualism: A Reply

Davis Bitton

More than thirty-five years ago, a young professor named Bitton wrote an indictment entitled "Anti-Intellectualism in Mormon History." A BYU historian, James B. Allen, bravely tried to soften the blow by citing a few counterexamples, but he was far too polite. Apparently it is up to a seasoned scholar like myself to give upstart Bitton his comeuppance. The poor soul was clearly in over his head.

He made the nineteenth century sound like a Mormon intellectual's utopia. He was anxious to show how nineteenth-century Mormonism could be perceived to be on the cutting edge in its cosmology and theology. Then, apparently striving for a bold thesis, he delivered a series of intellectual body blows that left many of the Mormon claims looking quaint but absurd.

At one point Bitton praised the anticapitalism of some Mormon speakers of the past century. Some of their ideas (one supposes he was thinking of the law of consecration and various denunciations of unequal wealth distribution) he thought "closer to Saint-Simon than to Adam Smith" (p. 118). One suspects that the young professor, not long out of graduate school, head filled with Keynesianism and the social protest of recent American history, was searching for precedents in his Mormon past. If he had not been biblically illiterate, he might have cited the prophets to better effect.

Review of Davis Bitton. "Anti-Intellectualism in Mormon History." *Dialogue* 1/3 (1966): 111–34.

In describing the General Authorities of the church, he pretended to be ever so restrained. They were, he said, "highly business oriented," "conservative in fiscal and economic policy," and, unkindest cut of all, "predominantly Republican." How generous of him to allow that they were also "capable, efficient, and hard-working" and possessed of faith and devotion (pp. 123–24)! With his mind-set, how could he ever be satisfied? Did he want the leadership of the church to be made up of nonachievers, of those who had demonstrated no loyalty or leadership capacity—of flower children, for heaven's sake? He wrote this article in the 1960s. One has to wonder what was going through his head.

Adopting the condescending stance of the satirist, Bitton twitted twentieth-century church leaders who were alarmed by "'the revolution in manners and morals'" (p. 127) during and following World War I. Thus he cast them as stolid, hidebound, and rather obtuse. I may be unfair to the young professor, for he does not say this. To Bitton's credit, he recognized why the key intellectuals of the twentieth century would appear suspicious to church leaders. Freud, Boas, Veblen, Dewey, the jurists Pound and Brandeis—understandably the prophets would not be sympathetic to the presuppositions of these leaders of thought. But Bitton implied that the fears were ill-founded, emanating from a poorly educated "booboisie." The Latter-day Saint leaders were judged guilty by association.

Blurring distinctions, Bitton could not refrain from offering his critical evaluation of Mormon cultural achievement. He quoted from the exaggerated lampooning of Utah by Bernard de Voto (who had his own ambivalent psychological relationship with his native state), tossed a bone to his people by conceding "at least one or two" (p. 130) of more than local reputation in several areas, and vented his spleen in a vitriolic catalog of horrors. The chutzpah of the evaluator is staggering. Standing on a high pinnacle, this thirty-six year old from Idaho surveyed the terrain and, generalizing without fear, pronounced judgments on everything from sermons to politics.

Of course, Bitton should not be faulted for being unaware of what has happened during the past thirty years. Writing in 1966, he was unable to benefit from monographs on Mormon music by Michael

Hicks; literature by Eugene England, Richard Cracroft, and Neal Lambert; and art by Richard Oman, Robert Davis, and Robert Olpin, to cite only a few among many. The relationship between Mormonism and science, which Bitton sought to clarify by pointing out the dated presuppositions of writers like James E. Talmage, had not yet been elucidated by Duane Jefferys and Erich Robert Paul. Had such scholarship been available to him, Bitton might have been less inclined to denigrate in simple terms the achievements of his people.

Writing in the mid-1960s, Bitton could not foresee the fecundity of Mormon literature in the final generation of the twentieth century, the increase in the quantity and quality of biographical writing, the numerous contributions in sociology and other disciplines, an exciting efflorescence in the visual arts in places like Haiti and Indonesia, and a bubbling cauldron of significant, sometimes controversial historical writing—not what we would expect from what Bernard de Voto might have called "the Sahara of the Great Basin."

It takes a historian of greater maturity and wisdom, such as myself, to recognize the inadequacy of young Bitton's history. The listing of specifics that underlay his interpretation was selective. He had an interpretation to prove and, by citing examples and placing a certain "spin" on them, proved it while at the same time self-indulgently giving vent to his own anxieties and placating his own prejudices. The lines of the "anti-intellectualism" thesis are firm and simple, but, lacking shading and coloration, the result is a caricature.

If Bitton thought he was objective, he was self-deluded. Perhaps we should again be charitable by recognizing that he did not claim objectivity, and in a short article could not do justice to a vast subject like the relationship of faith and intellect. What he could do, in the spirit of dialogue, was to advance an interpretation and see how well it held up.

Someone should have taken him by the lapels and said, "Bitton, my naive friend, it is not a question of either/or. Something as multifaceted as Mormonism across more than a century of time is neither intellectual nor anti-intellectual. Repeat after me: it is both/and. With that as your key, see if you can sort it out."

The young Bitton was not enough of a statesman to recognize the need for genuine clarification of the issue. Nor did any of his

respondents cut through to the great realities underlying Mormonism (or any revealed religion) and its relationship to the surrounding culture. Questions of "intellectuality," or the church's attitude toward intellectual endeavor, did not begin in 1966. Nor did they end then. Tension is inevitable. Faith does not claim, or need not claim, to be intellectually respectable. For what, Tertullian asked, has Athens to do with Jerusalem? (see p. 132). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul, himself an intellectual, had earlier drawn the line between the gospel and the wisdom of this world (see 1 Corinthians 1:20). But within limits a salutary, mutually reinforcing (or mutually correcting) relationship can sometimes exist. It is this we seek where possible, and this we have often enjoyed. "Within limits"—that is the key.

The virtual takeover of academe by postmodernists could not be foreseen in 1966, although in retrospect we now realize that preliminary skirmishes were taking place. It is hard for a wise and mature senior scholar like myself to resist the temptation to fire sarcastic questions at young Bitton. Didn't he realize what would happen? But I refrain from such a cheap shot.

If we read Bitton's 1966 article carefully, we find that even then he was not totally caught up in professorial narcissism. He acknowledged the "frequent lack of balance and puerile hypersensitivity" of intellectuals (p. 133). He specifically spurned "setting up an intellectual elite which scorns the faith that our parents have cherished" (p. 134). He showed no desire for "a capitulation to the conclusions of Gentile scholarship" (p. 134). What he sought to exorcise, rather clumsily, was "unnecessary affronts" (p. 134)—which may not be an unworthy goal even now.

If young Bitton's faith did not shine through, perhaps we should give the greenie at least some credit. Even then, he knew that when all is said and done it is a fool's bargain to rely on the arm of flesh.