

Mormons Consider Ending Bar On Full Membership for Negro

Present Rules Exclude Colored Persons From Priesthood—Decision by Leader of Sect Is Awaited

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SALT LAKE CITY, May 31—The top leadership of the Mormon church is seriously considering the abandonment of its historic policy of discrimination against Negroes.

From its earliest days, the Mormon church has admitted Negroes to simple membership, but it has not permitted them to progress beyond this to the church's priesthood.

Because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a lay priesthood to which almost every adult male member belongs, the effect has been to limit Negroes to second-class membership.

The theological reasons for this are in the writings of Joseph Smith, the founder of the church. Negroes are identified as the descendants of Ham, a son of Noah, and as bearing the curse that, Prophet Smith said, God had placed on the descendants of Cain.

One of the highest officers of the church said today that the possibility of removing this religious disability against Negroes has been under serious consideration.

Leader's Word Awaited

"We are in the midst of a survey looking toward the possibility of admitting Negroes," said Hugh B. Brown, one of the two counselors serving President David O. McKay in the First Presidency of the Mormon church.

"Believing as we do in divine revelation through the President of the church, we all await his decision," Mr. Brown said.

Mr. Brown, a 79-year-old former attorney, said he believed that if the change were made, it would be a doctrinal revision for Mormonism of a magnitude matching the abandonment of polygamy in 1890.

"The whole problem of the Negro is being considered by the leaders of the church in the light of racial relationships everywhere," Mr. Brown said. "We don't want to go too fast in this matter. We want to be fair."

Under Mormon doctrine, the President is the chief prophet. He is always the senior member of the Council of Twelve Apostles, each of whom is considered to be a prophet, a seer and a revelator. A major doctrinal change would be discussed within high church councils before its enunciation by President McKay.

Three Stages of Happiness

Mormon theology envisions an afterlife with three stages of celestial happiness possible, with admittance governed by one's conduct during life. Membership in the church is the re-

quirement for admittance to the lowest degree of paradise. Admittance for a man to the two higher degrees is judged in part on a requirement of priesthood. Women also are barred from priesthood, but their places in paradise are decided by the achievements of their husbands.

Thus Negroes, barred from priesthood, are prevented from aspiring to the most desirable levels of life after death.

The Mormons are vigorous proselyters, maintaining missions all over the world, except in the Negro nations in Africa. They have a mission among the whites in the Union of South Africa.

Earlier this year a plan was announced to send a mission to Nigeria, but the mission has not yet left Salt Lake City.

There are now about 2,000,000 Mormons, and only a few hundred of these are Negroes. Members of all races, except the Negro, are in the priesthood.

The church also has forbidden Negroes the right of marriage in a Mormon temple. In addition, the marriage of Negroes to members of other races is forbidden by the church.

Despite these restrictions there have been Negro Mormons from the earliest days.

There were three Negroes in the party that came across the plains and mountains with Brigham Young to found the Mormon capital in the wilderness here on the shores of the Great Salt Lake. They were reportedly slaves brought into the then small Mormon group when their masters were converted.

Mormon historians also have found that two Negroes were ordained as Elders, perhaps in the eighteen-thirties.

Writings on the Subject

Throughout Mormon writings is the hint that the ban might some day be removed.

Brigham Young once asked himself how long Negroes were to endure the curse of Cain. He thought it would be "until all the other descendants of Adam have received the promises and enjoyed the blessings of priesthood and keys thereof."

More positive hope was held out by President Wilford Woodruff, who led the church when polygamy was abandoned. He said:

"The day will come when all of that [Negro] race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have."

The Mormon church, Mr. Brown emphasized today, has never closed the door to Negroes, nor to the possibility of removing the limitation on their participation in church affairs.