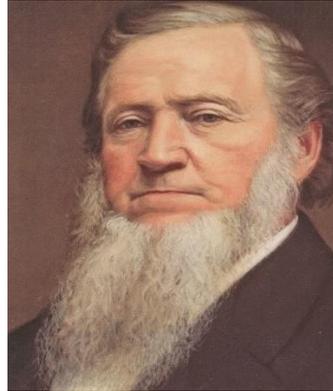


Bernie & Brigham: Two Peas in a Pod, as the Old Expression Goes

By Warner Woodworth, PhD



Bernie Sanders



Brigham Young



The author at a Salt Lake City Bernie Rally

As a scholar of Mormon and American politics, I've seen parallels between various LDS church leaders and U.S. political leaders through the decades. Often their values diverge, but there are also many similarities. A surprising example of common values in certain cases is that of the 1840s Prophet, Brigham Young, the "lion of the Lord," who led the Mormon migration from the plight of oppressed converts to the fledgling religion founded by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the current Senator from Vermont, Mr. Sanders. In 2016 when the radical social democrat was running for the U.S. presidency, he came to Utah to mobilize voters for his cause. I later gave several public talks about the event, focusing mainly on the common values both leaders shared. Bernie, whom I met several times through the years and always admired, is a Jewish firebrand, a social innovator who has worked for civil rights, equality, and other ideas Mormonism shares. Like Bernie, Brigham also condemned oppression, sought justice for the poorest, and spent his years trying to build a better country.

During the 2016 Democratic campaign of over a dozen-plus wanna-be Democratic presidential candidates, Bernie spent several days in Utah, surrounded by adoring fans. Lots were BYU students, as well as young people from multiple other college campuses across the state. On Day One, I was up at This is the Place Heritage Park in the mountains above Salt Lake City, Utah attending the huge 14,000 person rally to hear Bernie speak on March 18. I saw him at the podium, juxtaposed against a great statue there, the head of Brigham Young, the Mormon pioneer prophet. There was a stark similarity to the two. Both older men, both fighting for justice, both confronting the power of the establishment, both laboring against the wealthy, each in his own way.

While there, I began to think through and develop a series of parallel issues that both men believed in their souls were valid political and spiritual perspectives. The Mormon scriptures that Brigham believed and his own prophetic teachings are clear. Yet perhaps many American Mormons themselves have not fully appreciated or understood these core values of their faith. But during that warm spring afternoon, the common teachings between the two innovators were striking.

Below is a brief listing of similar values and beliefs that are quite different from Republican rhetoric:

Wealth: Both leaders rail against the concentration of huge wealth in the hands of a few rich American families (saying as Brigham does that "One of the great evils with which our own nation" suffers is the "growth of wealth in the hands of a comparatively few individuals"). Bernie sees a similar danger, and he warns against the oligarchies of extremely rich dynasties like the Walton family, the Koch brothers, Jeff Bezos, and others: "We now have a political situation where billionaires are literally able to buy elections

and candidates. Let's not kid ourselves: That is the reality right now." That was five years ago, and he again recently condemned the founder of Amazon in April-May 2021.

Education: Schooling is seen as a high priority, not ignorance. Both leaders want citizens to be knowledgeable (Mormons teach that "the glory of God is intelligence"). Brigham established over 400 community schools in the settling of the West. Bernie wants more funding for better quality teachers and schools. He's pushing strongly for new legislation that will help university students have better terms for handling their school debt, and he's also seeking to make a college education free for all Americans.

War: Bernie was one of the few U.S. leaders who voted against the disastrous Iraq War launched by George W. Bush & his buddy, Dick Cheney in 2003. He's always seen war as a last resort, in contrast to others who rattle their sabers first. In the 1800s Brigham led his people west because of the war on the Mormons. He knew the dangers of conflict and what it was like to be attacked. He sought peace, not only with other governments, but also reconciliation with Native Americans and others.

Inequality: Brigham and Bernie both articulate concerns about the gap between haves and have-nots. Mormon scripture declares "It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin." Bernie says, "Today, we live in the richest country in the history of the world, but that reality means little because much of that wealth is controlled by a tiny handful of individuals. The issue of wealth and income inequality is the great moral issue of our time, it is the great economic issue of our time, and it is the great political issue of our time."

Immigration: Bernie, the son of an immigrant father, values the rights of immigrants to America and has worked to establish a comprehensive immigration reform plan to safeguard the rights of the 11 million undocumented workers in the U.S. today. In spite, or perhaps because of, his Jewish faith tradition, he also supports the rights of Muslims in the U.S. and those from throughout the globe. Similarly, back in his day, Brigham called for people from around the world to immigrate to the U.S. and enjoy the blessings of living in American. Some 90,000 LDS converts were ultimately accepted into the nation.

The Dangers to American Democracy of Concentrated Corporate Power: Bernie condemns the evils of big banks and powerful corporations on Wall Street that brought America to its knees in the 2008 Great Recession. Likewise, Brigham was concerned about the "priceless legacy" of democracy and warned that we "are endangered by the monstrous power" of big business that threatens good government and legislative ethics. Instead, both men would agree that America should not let firms that become "too big to fail," go ahead and actually fail. Both prefer, instead, smaller, entrepreneurial business practices for the masses.

Environmental Degradation: Brigham was an advocate for appreciating God's creations, protecting nature, appreciating "the sweet mountain air" and pure waters. "Keep your valley pure, keep your towns as pure as you possibly can, keep your hearts pure, and labor what you can consistently." Likewise, Bernie warns of pollution, such as the dangerous contamination of Flint's city water, and he seeks to preserve wilderness and deal with the polluting effects of global warming. Currently the Green New Deal in Congress is strongly backed by Sen. Sanders as the path to a better future.

On Women: Both Brigham and Bernie can be clearly classified as feminists. Back in his day, Brigham was an unusual advocate of women's rights, encouraging LDS women to be part of the national suffrage movement. He encouraged the territorial legislature to give women the right to vote in 1869, which led Utah to become the second state in the nation, along with Wyoming, to pass legislation and enable female voting in subsequent elections. Today, Bernie is against the Republican war on women, declaring he will not retreat from the fight for women's rights, but will increase their status on such issues as equal pay,

paid leave after delivering a child, more daycare programs, and to protect women from domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Science & Technology: Today's GOP leaders mostly reject science, even bragging how they can alter school texts in public schools, while denying climate change and many other truths. But Brigham Young had no hostility toward science, quite a different view for his era and even now. He embraced new technology such as the telegraph and railroad while many politicians and religionists of his day viewed such inventions as "tools of the devil." Similarly, Bernie believes climate change is a serious challenge facing the world. It's real, caused by human activity, and threatens the environment and our very way of life. In contrast to less educated Americans, even conservative Mormons, he believes vaccines are an effective deterrent to dangerous diseases. Through the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, he continually called for better healthcare and the latest medical support to protect people. Bernie's all for more tech research, but believes we need to do more research that improves human life, eradicates bad diseases, and not just spend our capital on space exploration when we have many needs here on earth.

These Mormon teachings from Brigham Young, when he first arrived at what is now This is the Place Heritage Park in the pioneer wagons of 1847, have been consistent themes of LDS leaders until today. As a Professor of Management at the Marriott School, Brigham Young University for nearly 40 years, I've researched, published articles and books, as well as taught my MBAs and undergrad students the radical principles promoted by he who Mormons affectionately refer to as Brother Brigham. Using quotes in hundreds of Power Points, I've encouraged my students through four decades to study their religion and then vote according to Mormon gospel principles. I've found that these precepts abound in the Bible as well as in the materials of many other faiths beyond Mormonism, including Bernie's own religion, Judaism. Other great Christian traditions, along with Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism tend to value the sacredness of life and the need for peace.

As large numbers of LDS members are still confused, or in denial about the 2020 election that Donald Trump lost by seven million votes, both Brigham and Bernie would urge people to appreciate our democracy. I think they would both urge all citizens to accept the recent presidential election, as the current LDS First presidency has urged.

Note: This is a brief summary of various talks given in multiple settings on Utah college campuses and beyond, from 2016-2021.