

In the World, Not of the World

“My kingdom,” said Jesus, “doesn’t consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But I’m not that kind of king, not the world’s kind of king.” (John 18)

Two thousand years later, when Emmanuel (“God With Us”) made his first court appearance in Salt Lake City to answer charges that he kidnapped Elizabeth Smart, he was asked by the judge if his name was Brian David Mitchell? He replied, “That is the name the world calls me by, yes.”

Both Jesus and Emmanuel, when hailed before civil government authorities, made a distinction between being “in the world” and being “of the world.” This distinction has been the basis for centuries-old religious formation of Catholic monks and nuns.

I experienced this formation in the 1950’s when I joined a Catholic monastic religious order dedicated to teaching poor children.

The first step in the monastic formation was to separate and distance the trainee from parents, siblings, relatives and friends. All correspondence to and from family members was censored by the formation director to ensure a suitable distance was maintained. Hours of visitation by family members were restricted to one afternoon a month, and no home visits were ever permitted. To replace the family-given name, a new one was provided by the religious order. Clerical robes were provided to replace the clothes worn by the trainee when he lived in the outside world. No gifts of any kind from family and friends were to be received, but if they did come, they became the property of the religious order to distribute or not. Personal possessions were not permitted and any goods necessary for daily living were provided by the religious order. A new community of like-minded religious trainees was formed to take the place of the trainee’s former community composed of family and friends. And, if for any reason, a member of the new community returned to live in the outside world, all future contact with that person was strictly forbidden.

A daily regimen in which every hour of the week was designated for prayer, meditation, conferences, manual labor, spiritual reading, silence, recreation,

eating and sleeping was rigorously followed. Daily newspapers, magazines, radios and telephone calls were forbidden. All reading material was approved by the formation director, and almost always consisted of spiritual reading. All contacts with the outside world were systematically severed. Weekly conferences were scheduled with the formation director to discuss and evaluate the spiritual development of each religious trainee, and his adjustment to the monastic religious state.

The goal of this monastic formation was to demonstrate to the religious trainees that even though everyone was required to live in a sinful world, it was also possible for those called by God to lead a more perfect spiritual life, separate and apart from the world.

One of the major considerations in monastic religious formation was preparing the trainee for a life of celibacy. Individual and/or private contact with persons of the opposite sex was strictly forbidden. Any unavoidable interactions with the opposite sex needed to take place in public, or in the presence of other religious members of the community. And while individual and/or private contact with same-sex members was not prohibited, it was carefully monitored by religious directors for any evidence of particular friendship, which in turn might lead to homosexual attraction and activity. In addition to physically distancing oneself from any opportunities for sexual attraction to others, the rigorous practice of self-denial, self-control and self-discipline were deemed to be the keys to maintaining a celibate life.

In addition to self-discipline, prayer and meditation, modesty, and shielding oneself from sensual and worldly images, centuries of monastic tradition held that the practice of celibacy was best achieved by learning to sublimate one's sexual desires for the sake of achieving a personal intimacy with Jesus Christ. The state of celibacy created the opportunity, it was thought, for a person to achieve in his lifetime, the closest possible relationship with God.

The practice of religious monasticism was a conscious effort to withdraw from the world, practice a life of mortification and self-discipline in order to achieve a state of mind that enabled a person to live "in the world" without being a part "of the world".

Emmanuel also felt called by God. He studied the Bible and the Book of Mormon, he sold all that he possessed, dressed himself in monastic clerical robes, let his hair and beard grow, replaced his family name with a religious one, cut all his family ties, lived for long periods in the desert, wrote a book of prophecy, preached in public places, sought to minister to the destitute, and supported himself by becoming an itinerant mendicant. By removing himself from the world, he, too, sought to live a life in the world but not of the world.

At the time of his calling, Emmanuel was married to a woman beyond child-bearing age, and she willingly joined with him in his new life – that of a prophet called by God. She also dressed herself in clerical robes, and as prescribed by ancient religious customs, she used a veil to cover her face. Her name became, “Hephzibah Eladah Isaiah” or “God Adorn Us”.

Emmanuel received a revelation that he was to take seven wives. In his prophecy he wrote, "Wherefore, Hephzibah, my most cherished angel, thou wilt take into thy heart and home seven sisters, and thou wilt recognize them through the spirit as thy dearest and choicest friends for all eternity, and they shall bring thee great joy, even a multiplicity and an eternal weight of blessings and glory and eternal happiness. And lo, thou shalt be healed and made whole every whit, and thine own womb shall be opened, and thou shalt bring forth a son to sit upon the throne of his father David. And thou shalt take into thy heart and home seven times seven sisters, to love and to care for; forty-nine precious jewels in thy crown, and thou art the jubilee of them all, first and last, for all are given unto them, for thou art a Queen, Oh Hephzibah! “

Emmanuel now stands accused of kidnapping a 14-year-old, and forcing her to live as his wife in his newly formed prophetic community. After a nine month period she was found by the local police, and returned to her parents. Emmanuel and his wife, “God Adorn Us”, reside in a Salt Lake City jail, accused of kidnapping and sexual assault and awaiting a criminal trial expected to take place in late 2004.

A close friend from pre-Emmanuel days, is quoted as saying, “I’ve had a hard time believing he is guilty of anything more than being delusional. To me, it’s a miracle that Brian is now in a place where he can finally get some help.” From those who have recently visited Emmanuel in jail, they report he reads only the Bible and the Book of Mormon, and believes his arrest and

imprisonment are part of a divine plan, and like Jesus, he is destined to suffer for his beliefs. Emmanuel's father quotes his son as saying, "I am willing to die in prison if necessary."

Mentally ill? Delusional? Religious fanatic? Cult founder? Or the slippery slope of trying to live in the world but not of the world?