

The Paradox of Paradox

Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology by Margaret and Paul Toscano (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 291 pp., \$12.95.

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RECENTLY I WAS ASKED to review Margaret and Paul Toscano's *Strangers in Paradox* for a local newspaper. While I tried in that review to be as honest and true as I know how, I realize that many things can shape—and occasionally distort—a reviewer's evaluation. When I was given the opportunity to write a review for *Dialogue*, I welcomed the chance to reassess both the Toscanos' book and my earlier responses to it. I will use—and quote extensively from—my newspaper review, but I hope to view the book from a less arbitrary and shaping perspective than I may have had earlier. This time around I want to open up my review and go deeper, borrowing freely from myself but expanding and commenting from what I hope is my now more considered view.

Let me first make plain my own stand and biases—as plain as is possible in the light of the ambiguities and paradoxes I myself wrestle with daily. I am a Mormon, I am a woman, I question, and I believe. I yearn for certain things to be true—some of the same things the Toscanos also yearn for.

Strangers in Paradox's catchy title (and gorgeous cover, heavy with symbolism) may sell some copies, but it won't guarantee reading among Sunday-go-to-meeting Mormons. And that's too bad. The book would enliven many a sleepy Sunday School class. Enliven, and in some instances infuriate, because the Toscanos' speculations on LDS theology run counter to the beliefs of most average adult Mormons. Study groups and journals within the Mormon intellectual community will

hash and rehash the book's ideas; a few "outsiders" with theological bent will read the book with interest, if not with full understanding of its boldness, and the corporate Church will roll on.

The authors make it clear from the beginning that throughout the book they will emphasize the symbolic and the mythic, in preference to linear, causal, and historical analysis. Early on too, they admit an adversarial position in regard to what they call "corporate" or "secular" as opposed to "sacral" world view.

The division between secular and sacral, in the sense that Mircea Eliade expounded in his classic work, *The Sacred and the Profane*, informs the whole book. For the Toscanos, the Church has become desacralized, having lost touch with its origins, which were suffused with sacrality. Here is their distinction between the two concepts:

The sacral world is interested in the transcendent, the supernatural, and the symbolic meaning of events; the secular world is interested in the here and now, the physical and the natural causes and effects of events. The sacral society sees nothing as happening by chance or accident; the secular society believes in the random occurrence of events. The sacral world is holistic, and all aspects of life are viewed as connected on a spiritual continuum; the secular world is compartmentalized, and life is seen in terms of the subject-object dichotomy. The sacral world sees history as recurring cyclical patterns; the secular world sees history as linear and often in terms of social progress. The sacral world is organic; the secular is mechanistic. The sacral society assumes there is meaning inherent in things; the secular society says that meaning is what we ascribe to a thing. The sacral society believes in becoming one with God and nature through ritual; the secular society believes in the control of nature through technology. (pp. 21-22)

The Toscanos see the contrast between early sacrality and contemporary secularity in every topic they examine, from "the

negative effects of patriarchal authoritarianism [leading] to the oppression of women" (p. 7), to "a redefinition of priesthood, not as an earthly structure of individual or corporate power but as the spiritual power of God bestowed by grace in equal dignity upon males and females alike" (p. 9), to the time when "apostles were . . . seen as missionaries rather than as a board of directors" (p. 163). They assert that "Joseph did not have a managerial view, he had a sacral one" (p. 188).

Abraham Lincoln is said to have liked to pose the trick question, "If you call a dog's tail a leg, how many legs does a dog have?" To the answer, "Five," he would quickly retort, "Wrong. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it one." The Toscanos would like to believe, and so would I, that God is "not only flesh and glory but also male and female" (p. 48). Yet departing from their original rejection of historical proofs in favor of symbolic and mythic arguments, they go to considerable lengths to affirm through linear scriptural analysis this yearned-for definition of God. Particularly, in the chapters on the nature of the Godhead, I think the Toscanos fail to establish mythic and symbolic avenues to concepts of the Godhead that they wish to be so. Of course no one can be definitive about the nature of divine matriarchy and patriarchy, about time and eternity, good and evil, grace and works. Such theology can be only speculative, yet the Toscanos summarily dismiss views other than their own. They overturn mainstream dogma that is distasteful to them, only to set up non-systematic dogma of their own.

Their book, dealing (they say) with paradoxes in LDS theology, itself presents certain paradoxes in the reading. Provocative, but speculative; insightful, but presumptuous; scholarly, but uneven, it causes me as a reader to be at once annoyed and grateful, skeptical and accepting, assenting and dissenting. I think the book will be perceived by some readers to be immensely important and by others to be in its implications terribly

dangerous. If it were widely read, that is, which, as I have said, I fear it will not be.

But I can't promise a quick read. The book requires a hard look at definitions every step of the way. Halfway through I had to stop and ask myself, what, really, is a paradox, and are the Toscanos dealing in every instance with genuine paradoxes? If a paradox is an assertion that is seemingly self-contradictory, then some of the issues the authors treat are not paradoxes at all, but only questions or dilemmas. If a paradox, on the other hand, may be considered simply a belief contrary to received opinion, then the Toscanos are consistently within the paradoxical realm. For instance, the view of God as at once a God of flesh and of glory; a being of immanence *and* of transcendence, and the Father incarnate as Son—those seem to me to be paradoxes of the first order. But speculations about a Divine Mother do not seem paradoxical in the same way. Where is the contradiction? While a prayer in a public meeting begun with "Our Mother in Heaven" might raise eyelids and bowed heads in the congregation, it contains in its utterance no self-contradiction. Even in suggesting the paradox itself—that "God is not a single male person but a duality: God the Female and God the Male" (p. 8), the Toscanos present such tenuous scriptural and logical support that the issue seems more speculative than paradoxical.

Likewise, slim biblical evidence that the early priesthood was matrilineally transmitted and that women also received the priesthood by ordination, investiture, and anointing as well as by oath and covenant from God does not seem paradoxical to me—only highly speculative and, perhaps, wishful.

Furthermore, though the Toscanos examine many paradoxes that they see in modern-day LDS doctrinal interpretations, in truth, each paradox they consider is but a variant of one central paradox—that two underlying distinct and contradictory world views presently exist

in LDS theology (although there are not many in the Church today, they say, who embrace the alternate sacral world view). Take the chapter titled "The Case for Grace," for instance. In an unlikely alignment, according to the Toscanos, Mormon "progressives" (unidentified in the text—I wonder who they are) have wrongly interpreted Joseph Smith's teachings about grace, seeing in them endorsement of salvation primarily by works. These progressives, advocates of self-improvement and social progress, while fashioning themselves as champions of personal freedom, have tended to "promote rigidity." Go back, say the Toscanos, to the teachings of the Prophet Joseph and find there a case for grace through Jesus Christ. Christ's grace has nothing to do with rules and regulations. Such measurement of works, the Toscanos suggest, tends to lend power and importance to the ecclesiastical structure. It reinforces the role of the Church as definer of good and bad attitudes and behavior in every department of life, "from sex to parenting, diet, doctrine, economics, politics and social attitudes." In short, salvation by works feeds the Church machine, empowering it to reward the faithful and disenfranchise the rebellious (p. 125). This is a frontal attack on modern LDS orthodoxy, but where is the paradox? And in this case I would have to further ask, where are the proofs strong enough to support such a bold, challenging question?

The chapter "Women, Ordination, and Hierarchy" presents more proposal than paradox, and may, in fact, contradict the Toscanos' own espousal of the sacred inner over organizational outer forms. That women are denied access to, and activity in, the Church's power structure ought not to matter if the Toscanos' emphasis on inner spiritual power and authority is prime. Indeed this chapter most seriously departs from mythic defense and symbolic interpretation and stoops to a sort of debate format, attempting to refute point by visualized point the common objections to women's holding the priesthood. The

underlying assumption here, in fact, runs counter to the authors' own sacral world view, implicitly conceding that the official and officiating functions are, after all, important. Ordained empowerment rather than direct spiritual empowerment suddenly becomes an issue. "One possible way to balance the duties of home and church," they propose, "is to allow each presiding office of the church to be a dual office, to be held by both husband and wife acting in concert. The office of bishop or stake president could be filled by a married couple. Thus we would have co-bishops, co-presidents, co-apostles, co-prophets, co-seers, and co-revelators with equal voice" (p. 214). And where, I ask, are unmarried women and men in this scheme?

The last two chapters of the book best follow the authors' proclaimed symbolic, mythic method. The Toscanos come full circle here, looking closely at symbols with their dual or multiple possibilities, so that, as they say at the outset, "the mind may perceive or intuit unknown or dimly perceived truths"—symbols "which serve to hide and reveal simultaneously" (p. 11). In as clear (if inadvertent) a justification of the book as I can imagine, they explain: "Many Mormons, upon first attending the temple, are surprised by the symbolic nature of the endowment rites. This is due, in part, to the fact that in Mormonism, ordinary church worship is as symbol-poor as temple worship is symbol-rich. Many are not prepared for this contrast, a problem exacerbated by the reluctance of members to discuss the endowment, even with the initiated" (p. 284).

I wish that someone had discussed this dramatic contrast with me before I first went, as a bride, to the temple—as a girl having grown up in a Church where even candles on a ward dinner table were anathema because of their associative or symbolic suggestion. I have, in fact, thrust the Toscanos' book upon my own daughter, insisting that she read these last two chapters before she goes to the temple for