

# Rethinking Religious Experience: Notes from Critical Theory, Feminism, and Real Life

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SINCE HUMANS HAVE LONG MANAGED to have experiences that they understood to be religious without the benefit of critical theory, some may wonder why I find thinking about Mormonism and theory not only worthwhile but imperative. Others may suppose that using critical theory as a lens for viewing Mormonism puts the cart before the horse or uses the cart to mow the horse down. The short response to these reservations is that theory enables us to view our identities and our experiences—religious as well as secular—more fully, honestly, and critically; it highlights easily unnoticed but absolutely crucial factors that shape how we exist, think, and interact with others. The long response is this essay.<sup>1</sup>

Religious movements begin in human experience: they are based, as William James writes, in the founder's revelatory experience, in "direct personal communication with the divine." From such "*feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine,*" he explains, "*theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.*"<sup>2</sup> It is also from such experiences that scriptural texts

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1. My thoughts on this topic began to coalesce in a conversation with Lorie Winder Stromberg following Gloria Cronin's paper at Sunstone West in April 1993; I appreciate the spark their ideas provided. My thanks to friends whose readings have helped me to clarify my ideas: Michael Evenden, Joy Ross, Kathleen Boardman, Gaye McCollum, Martha Hildreth, and Elizabeth Houlding.

2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; New York: New American Library, 1958), 42.

develop, for scripture is not a neutral repository of information but is narrative that serves to codify both individual and collective human experience with the divine. Together, scripture, religious institutions, and tradition provide pre-established forms for the woman or man James calls "your ordinary religious believer" to follow.<sup>3</sup> But while James dismisses the experiences of conventional believers as imitative, "second-hand religious life," more recent writers such as Rosemary Radford Ruether argue that it is precisely the ability of religious forms to have meaning for subsequent believers that demonstrates their authenticity. Religious tradition, she writes, "is constantly renewed or discarded through the test of experience": if or when "a symbol does not speak authentically to experience, it becomes dead or must be altered to provide a new meaning."<sup>4</sup>

Many critical analyses of Mormon culture, history, and theology have been published in recent years, but comparatively little that focuses specifically on the nature of Mormon religious experience.<sup>5</sup> Initially this may seem odd, since in placing a high value on both revelation and history, Mormons have long seen religious experience as something so fundamental it matters more than theology.<sup>6</sup> On reflection, however, I think this is not especially surprising: tracing historical events and analyzing abstract concepts may be more pragmatic, perhaps slightly easier, than probing the complicated, subjective, contradictory ways theology plays out in human lives. Experiences that lead to faith can be so important or so evanescent that people hesitate to probe them; we often see (or desire to see) personal experience as something inviolably trustworthy; and religious experience can also be truly personal. At the same time seeing in-

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3. *Ibid.*, 24.

4. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 12-13.

5. Notable exceptions include the following articles, some of which are discussed later in this essay: Lavina Fielding Anderson, "In the Garden God Hath Planted: Explorations Toward a Maturing Faith," *Sunstone* 14 (Oct. 1990): 24-27; and "Modes of Revelation: A Personal Approach," *Sunstone* 16 (Aug. 1992): 34-38; Scott Kenney, "At Home at Sea: Confession of a Cultural Mormon," *Sunstone* 13 (June 1989): 16-21; David Knowlton, "Missionary, Native, and General Authority Accounts of a Bolivian Conversion," *Sunstone* 13 (Jan. 1989): 14-20; and "Belief, Metaphor, and Rhetoric: The Mormon Practice of Testimony Bearing," *Sunstone* 15 (Apr. 1991): 20-27; John Tarjan, "Heavenly Father or Chairman of the Board? How Organizational Metaphors Can Define and Confine Religious Experience," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Fall 1992): 36-55; Lawrence Young, "Response to Scott Kenney," *Sunstone* 13 (June 1989): 21-23; and "Truth and Transcendence," *Sunstone* 15 (Sept. 1991): 55-57.

6. Within the LDS church, for instance, it is widely accepted that people truly convert to Mormon beliefs less through a rational conclusion about their validity than through the persuasion of personal experience, through conviction that comes from following the Book of Mormon advice to "experiment" upon God's word.

dividual or collective experience as both the ground of religious traditions and test of their validity may threaten authority. In Ruether's words, "Received symbols, formulas, and laws are either authenticated or not through their ability to illuminate and interpret experience. Systems of authority try to reverse this relation and make received symbols dictate what can be experienced as well as the interpretation of that which is experienced." "In reality," she argues, "the relation is the opposite."<sup>7</sup> Because the significance of "experience" is so contested, questions about Mormon religious experience are often most effectively asked indirectly—through examining our theology, exploring our history, or scrutinizing our institutions.<sup>8</sup>

In this essay I would like to shift perspectives, to look directly at Mormon understandings of religious experience and assess them in light of contemporary critical theory. How do Mormons define experience as "religious," and what does that mean? What does it mean to identify our experience as "authentic"? What forms for understanding experience does Mormonism offer individuals as they shape their identities, interact with others, and interpret what happens to them—and do they help or hinder the process? What is the place of individual religious experience in Mormon theology, and in the various Mormon communities in which we live?

To address these questions, it is first necessary to consider the term "experience." By habit, we readily trust experience as, in Raymond Williams's words, "the most authentic kind of truth," as "the ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis."<sup>9</sup> Yet even everyday usage reveals how uncertain or contradictory our grasp of experience may be. Anyone who has heard fishing stories has glimpsed how interpretations of experience change over time. Anyone who has had a harrowing adventure or deeply spiritual impression knows how difficult it can be to express such things in the first place. And anyone who has been in a car accident, heard both participants recount a bad date, or found a church meeting insipid while others were moved to tears knows that people can experience something together and understand it in opposite ways. The relations among what happens to people, how they perceive it, and how they narrate it to themselves and to others are anything but straightforward and pristine.

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7. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 12.

8. Certainly many of these inquiries have some basis in experience: contemporary Mormon interest in God the Mother, for example, often comes from those who feel they have experienced loss in her absence, or joy in the sense of her presence.

9. Williams quoted in Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 27.

## CRITICAL THEORY AND EXPERIENCE

Writers and historians have long recognized the significant divergence among actual, remembered, and reported experience. Leo Tolstoy describes this in an essay on his novel *War and Peace*:

Make a round of all the troops right after a battle, or even on the second or third day, before the reports have been written, and ask any of the soldiers and senior and junior officers what the battle was like: you will be told what all these people experienced and saw, and you will form a sublime, complex, infinitely varied and grim, indistinct impression; and from no one—least of all from the commander in chief—will you learn what the whole affair was like. But in two or three days the reports begin to be handed in. Talkers begin to narrate how things they did not see took place; finally a general report is compiled and the general opinion of the army is formed according to this report. Everyone is relieved to exchange his own doubts and questions for this false, but clear and always flattering presentation. A month or two later, question a person who took part in the battle, and already you will not sense the raw, vital material that used to be there, but he will narrate according to the reports.<sup>10</sup>

For Tolstoy, perception quickly if not immediately distorts the experience it aims to represent. We make sense of experience by shaping narratives, addressed to ourselves (reflection, memory) or to others (reports, autobiographies, testimonies); in the process we highlight some events and elide others.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary critical theory further challenges the everyday as-

10. Tolstoy quoted in Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in War and Peace* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 107.

11. Morson (110-11) traces the implications of Tolstoy's ideas:

Immediately after an event, memory begins its work. In order to remember, one must order incidents in some way; those incidents that are not ordered are forgotten. Random incidents—which may have been the most efficacious ones—cannot be narrated, for they fit no structure. . . . Tolstoy frequently describes both an event as it occurs and a participant's account of the event soon after it has taken place; the two renditions always diverge markedly, and imply the impossibility of deriving the actual events from the remembered version.

Indeed, Tolstoy suggests that the mechanisms of memory that regularize and order an event begin their work *immediately*, even as the event is unfolding. Perception itself makes use of the same mechanisms of regularization: to a certain extent, we perceive only what is more or less amenable to memory, and so introduce order not present in the actual event. Thus, mechanisms of memory are also mechanisms of perception, which select and order an event *as it is being initially apprehended*. We see events as if we are narrating them. From experience to recollection, and from each recollection to the next, still more distortions are introduced into events to make them fit the shape of narratives we have heard and can easily remember.

sumption that experience is self-evident and unproblematically true. In recent decades scholars in several disciplines have examined how language and conceptual structures delimit our understanding of experience. The origins of their critical theories are beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief summary of the context in which they developed clarifies some of their primary concerns. From the 1920s into the 1960s formalist and structuralist critics mapped various kinds of human activity, constructing paradigms to show how humans organize their language, ideas, and experience. They emphasized the positive possibilities of both the structures they described and their critical endeavor: the advantages of binary thinking and paradigms, the variety of ways that conventional plot elements are combined in forming stories, the hope of someday being able to explain all human discourse and activity in structural terms.

Since the 1960s, however, many cultural critics have examined discourse and experience in quite different ways; for want of something better they are often referred to by the umbrella term “poststructuralists.” Influenced variously by Karl Marx and Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Helene Cixous and Gayatri Spivak, poststructuralist critics have cast a critical light on, around, under, and through structuralist paradigms. Where earlier critics emphasized what forms make possible, these recent critics highlight what forms limit, suppress, or distort; they subvert them by critique from within and without, and trace what happens when they break apart. They also re-examine the underpinnings of concepts once assumed to be foundational, such as “self,” “identity,” and “experience,” and often focus on questions about ideology and subjectivity. By using the tools of deconstruction, re-viewing the world through a feminist lens, or engaging in Marxist critique, they examine the ways both everyday and critical understandings of experience are produced. They explore how human beings and knowledge are shaped through discourses that by nature are never neutral but always deeply marked by ideology.

In everyday usage “ideology” is a pejorative term—the other person’s ideas are ideological, polemical nonsense, while yours are judicious, unbiased fact. But critical theory argues persuasively that *all* perceptions are ideological: ideas and experiences occur not in a vacuum but in a context shaped by assumptions about the hows and whys of human existence. Catherine Belsey explains the concept:

ideology is not simply a set of illusions . . . but a system of representations (discourses, images, myths) concerning the real relations in which people live. . . . In other words, ideology is both a real and an imaginary relation to the world—real in that it is the way in which people really live their relationship to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence, but imaginary in that it discourages a full understanding of these conditions of

existence and the ways in which people are constituted in them.

Ideology, she continues, thus "obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence."<sup>12</sup>

The traditional notion of the individual as autonomous, unified self is one of these partial truths. For critical theorists, human beings are more accurately described as subjects constructed through a variety of discourses regarding social relations, knowledge, gender identity, and existence. The human subject is not simply the conscious self at any moment but "the site of contradiction"; it is not fixed but rather "perpetually in the process of construction."<sup>13</sup> Belsey uses gender to illustrate:

Women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, we participate both in the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition. The attempt to locate a single and coherent subject-position within these contradictory discourses, and in consequence to find a non-contradictory pattern of behavior, can lead to intolerable pressures. One way of responding to this situation is to retreat from the contradictions and from discourse itself, to become "sick"—more women than men are treated for mental illness. Another is to seek a resolution of the contradictions in the discourses of feminism.<sup>14</sup>

The subject-positions this society produces for women are fundamentally contradictory and thus ripe for dismantling. Poststructuralist feminist thought breaks these positions down by uncovering how they are formed and by challenging the social relations that ideologies about unified selves and women's roles obscure.<sup>15</sup>

Understanding human subjectivity as something constructed and in process undermines the assumption that experience provides uncontested, un-ideological evidence. As Joan Scott points out, the idea that experience is transparently true "reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems."<sup>16</sup> To return to Tolstoy's example, it means taking

12. Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), 45-46.

13. *Ibid.*, 50-51.

14. *Ibid.*, 50.

15. For further discussion of poststructuralism, subjectivity, and feminism, see Chris Weedon's clear, accessible *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), esp. 74-106.

16. Scott, 25.

battle accounts as self-evident facts, without examining the ways narrative forms, notions about manhood, public rhetoric about war, and other discourses must be smoothed over in order to make "complex, infinitely varied . . . impression[s]" into a "clear and always flattering presentation." The idea that experience is transparently true assumes a fixed self as the "bedrock of evidence." Scott proposes a different view: "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative . . . evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced."<sup>17</sup>

As this brief discussion suggests, poststructuralist theories make it difficult, even impossible to use terms like "self" or "experience" uncritically.<sup>18</sup> Recently, however, several thinkers have argued that contemporary theorists must negotiate new ways to discuss "experience," in part because it is "so much a part of everyday language" that it seems "more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations and to redefine its meaning."<sup>19</sup> Critics concerned with gender and race offer an especially compelling argument. Intellectual and political movements from the margins—those of women, African Americans, and peoples of the so-called "Third World"—have long relied on the authenticity of previously unheard voices. They have emphasized passionately and persuasively the importance of taking once-discounted experience seriously. As bell hooks points out, however, the poststructuralist disarticulation of the human subject ironically "surface[s] at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time."<sup>20</sup>

In response, hooks and others argue, cultural critics need to create ways to discuss experience that both value individual voices and *at the same time* examine them critically, as voices restricted or silenced by—and challenging—the discourses that shape them. Contemporary theory must develop approaches that hear voices from the margins without trying to co-opt them, that listen to subjectivities without trying to fix identities. For, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's words,

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17. *Ibid.*, 25-26. Scott continues: "To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces. . . . it . . . implies critical scrutiny of all explanatory categories usually taken for granted, including the category of 'experience.'"

18. Indeed, for a time in the 1980s poststructuralists made these terms taboo in some critical circles and labeled those who used them as hopelessly naive. See, for example, Susan Stanford Friedman, "Post/Poststructuralist Feminist Criticism: The Politics of Recuperation and Negotiation," *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 473-75.

19. Scott, 37. Friedman criticizes the implications of the more frequently used "recuperate" and proposes "negotiate" as a better term (476-86).

20. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Postmodern Culture* 1 (1990): para. 9 (electronic format).

Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak. Of all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of "I," which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt, and which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic? Which, indeed, since all interchange, revolving in an endless process? (According to the context in which they operate, the superfluous can become real; the authentic can prove fake; and so on.)<sup>21</sup>

A critical theory equal to this understanding of identity will seek to describe the workings of the subject-in-process, to understand the ways subjects are formed without necessarily re-forming them along the way. Scott proposes that it should be possible, in Spivak's terms, to "make visible the assignment of subject-positions": to understand the ways identities are "ascribed, resisted, or embraced" through "complex and changing discursive processes" which "achieve their effect because they aren't noticed."<sup>22</sup>

Creating such a new approach requires rethinking the old opposition between history and theory (or, in the present context, theology): "history," taken too naively, assumes experience is transparently true, while "theory," taken too absolutely, assumes it doesn't matter. The present, Susan Stanford Friedman suggests, calls for "a commitment to self-consciously historicising theory and theorizing history": an approach that sees history as the product of complex discourses, theory as the product of historically-specific circumstances, and experience as something constructed rather than simply given.<sup>23</sup> Such an approach will recognize, Scott writes, that "experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political."<sup>24</sup>

#### MORMONISM AND THE FORMS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The significance of these theories for the study of religion in general, and Mormonism in particular, may by now be evident, for encounters with the sacred are the most profound and complicated of human experiences. Mormonism emerged from Joseph Smith's inarticulable experience of the divine in a grove in western New York, and each conversion that

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21. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 94.

22. "To do this," Scott continues, "a change of object seems to be required, one which takes the emergence of concepts and identities as historical events in need of explanation" (33).

23. Friedman, 482-84.

24. Scott, 37.



followed served as further confirmation of that experience, as a figurative renewal of his sacred narrative.<sup>25</sup> As Richard Bushman explains, from the beginning "the core of Mormon belief was a conviction about actual events. The test of faith was not adherence to a certain confession of faith but belief that Christ was resurrected, that Joseph Smith saw God, that the Book of Mormon was true history, and that Peter, James, and John restored the apostleship. Mormonism was history, not philosophy."<sup>26</sup> Certainly Mormonism has also emphasized its distinctive theology and, in recent years, its ecclesiastical organization: such claims, however, are virtually always made by appealing to historical "facts." The result is a creative, often very contradictory relation between experience and theology, history and theory.<sup>27</sup>

"In the final analysis," Bushman suggests, "the power of Joseph Smith to breathe new life into the ancient sacred stories, and to make a sacred story out of his own life, was the source of his extraordinary influence."<sup>28</sup> What interests me is this process of distinguishing experiences as religious, of making sacred stories out of human lives. It is important, of course, to recognize that definitions of "religion" and "the sacred" are not absolute: simply calling something a "religious experience" involves interpretation. As Colleen McDannell points out, boundaries between sacred and profane are fluid, created and re-created by those who live them, and often defined differently by members and authorities.<sup>29</sup> To a

25. Cf. Knowlton, "Belief, Metaphor, and Rhetoric," 24-25.

26. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 188.

27. Mark P. Leone, as Bushman notes, discusses this contradiction in his *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). In response to a question about what the LDS church has to fear from contemporary research on Mormon history, Sterling McMurrin comments:

Mormonism is a historically oriented religion. To a remarkable degree, the Church has concealed much of its history from its people, while at the same time causing them to tie their religious faith to its own controlled interpretations of its history. So there is no point in arguing whether a serious study of Mormon history may have a deteriorating effect upon the faith of large numbers of Mormon people. It certainly will in countless cases. But that is the Church's fault or the fault of the weakness of the faith, not the fault of today's historians, most of whom are both honest and highly competent. The Church shouldn't tie religious faith to history. Religious faith should be faith in God and in one's fellowmen—not faith in some historical events and their official interpretation.

In the case of Mormonism, historical events have been made in effect the foundation of the faith and in a sense the touchstone of orthodoxy (in Blake Ostler, "An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 [Spring 1984]: 20-21).

28. Bushman, 188.

29. Colleen McDannell, "Sacred, Secret, and the Non-Mormon," Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium, Aug. 1992, audiotape.

large degree, we identify experience as sacred through the forms described in our religious institutions—by which I mean ecclesiastical organizations, scriptural texts, and cultural traditions. These institutions have a great deal of authority in Mormonism, both officially and unofficially: they serve as precedent in a culture where precedent often matters more than circumstance, and measure validity in a world where knowing what is “true” is paramount. Mormons are taught to “liken scripture unto themselves,” to look to the past to know how the church should operate, and to rely on scripture, church meetings, and what has been called “faithful history” to show them what religious experience is like.<sup>30</sup>

These institutions are not timeless or absolute, however, but historically-formed and culturally-specific. We understand, respond to, and attempt to imitate them from our own cultural contexts: religious experiences occur in creative interaction between our own circumstances and the forms given to us as tradition. Carol Christ describes the process:

There is a dialectic between story and experience. Stories shape experience; experience shapes stories. There is no primary preverbal experience utterly unshaped by stories. In a sense, without stories there is no experience. On the other hand, there is a distinction between stories and experiences which enables us to see that not all stories are adequate to our experience. Conversely we experience a shock of recognition when we find a story which articulates an as yet unarticulated part of our experience.<sup>31</sup>

Certainly religious conventions do, as she suggests, help us to recognize the possibilities of the sacred in our own lives; they help us identify with the community and in some ways actually make religious experiences possible. For example, as David Knowlton explains, the Mormon practice of testimony bearing “accepts individual experience and creeds and sub-

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30. In a discussion of Harold Bloom’s reading of Mormonism, Lawrence Young observes:

Although Mormons are gnostic in the sense that they place great emphasis on experience and have virtually no systematic or formal theology, their emphasis on experience does not result in freedom of self from the community. For Mormon religious experience to be valid, it must be interpreted in ways that elevate the organization above the self. Individual experience must remain subordinate to and never contradict hierarchical authority (in Lawrence A. Young, “Confronting Turbulent Environments: Issues in the Organizational Growth and Globalization of Mormonism,” in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994], 45-46).

31. Carol P. Christ, “Spiritual Quest and Women’s Experience,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 229.

sumes them under unifying collective symbols."<sup>32</sup> Such conventions also enable us to talk about the sacred in a recognizable and public manner. When one Mormon tells another that he or she "has a testimony," the phrase serves as a kind of shorthand that both joins the individual with the community and implies a type of experience without revealing details one may wish to keep private.

At the same time pre-existing stories and conventions can have limiting effects or be inadequate for articulating our experiences. Without them, people may not recognize the spiritual, but restricted to them they may miss it as well; "likening scripture unto oneself" works in some circumstances but leaves one out in the cold in others. Conventions tend to conceal the messy realities of life rather than to lay them bare. As Mikhail Bakhtin observes: "All ideological forms, that is, institutions, become hypocritical and false, while real life, denied any ideological directives, becomes crude and bestial."<sup>33</sup> Any ideology provides a system of representation, a way of ordering and making sense of the world around us; Mormon culture and theology are no exception. But the neat, partial images ideologies necessarily rely on to interpret ideas and experiences come at a cost. Such cultural forms value some things at the expense of others and may even specifically reject the kinds of experience we want to understand.

This occurs particularly, Ruether argues, when the "historical institution"—in her example, the Christian church generally—disclaims its own historicity and fails to respond to the community. For Ruether, the church must be understood not as institution *or* community but as a dialogic relation between the two that unfortunately breaks down easily and seldom occurs with "optimal creativity."<sup>34</sup> Her argument is strongly phrased, striking, and worth quoting at length:

[H]istorical institutions must accept both their historical relativity as institutions and also their limits as vehicles of transmission and communication. What they transmit is not the Spirit or the living presence of God as such, but rather forms of interpretation of the presence of God that have been shaped by past historical experiences of encounter with God and reflection upon them. At their best, institutions carry with them some collective wisdom about what has worked and what has not, how ecstatic experience can be abused by charlatans and power mongers, or how to draw people of different age groups into learning and participation. All of this cultural heritage is

32. Knowlton, "Belief, Metaphor, and Rhetoric," 25.

33. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 162.

34. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 32.

very important. But all of this is dead without living persons who, in each particular moment, engage in transforming both their experience and the traditional forms into the spark of lived meaning. This is the Spirit actually alive in our midst.

"At their best," Ruether continues,

historical institutions create the occasion for the experience of the Spirit. But they cannot cause the presence of the Spirit, which always breaks in from a direct encounter of living persons and the divine. Historic institutions also transmit a culture of interpretation around such spiritual encounters, but this culture of interpretation cannot be closed and finalized. It is, at best, an open system of symbolism that gives guidelines to interpret the experience and translate it into daily life. But the living encounter with the Spirit is also the occasion for new appropriation of meaning by which the given culture of interpretation is itself renewed and reshaped. Tradition, to remain alive, must be open to this continual reshaping of interpretive culture by new spiritual experience.<sup>35</sup>

As Ruether and other feminist theologians point out, our cultures of interpretation fall especially short of enabling us to have and understand religious experiences when they are deeply, inequitably marked by gender. When historic forms are presumed to be timeless and definitive, for example, we erroneously take stories constructed around men as straightforward means of understanding the experiences of all human beings. Such a "conceptual error of vast proportion" has led to fundamentally inaccurate understandings of reality and thus of the experiences of both men and women.<sup>36</sup> It has long required women, Carol Christ explains, to live "in the interstices between inchoate experiences and the shapings to experience given by the stories of men." They have "discovered more and less adequate ways of circumventing this basic situation of being without their own stories," but the cost has been incalculable: "In a very real sense, women have not experienced their own experience."<sup>37</sup>

#### RETHINKING MORMONISM'S INTERPRETIVE CULTURE

In the last decade thoughtful, striking, critical analyses of Mormon religious institutions have appeared from both within and without the LDS

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35. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

36. The phrase comes from Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 220.

37. Christ, 228-29. And, one might add, men have thus had no access to women's experience either.

church. They have highlighted the limits of Mormon interpretive culture, named many of its blind spots, and dismantled some of its deep contradictions. David Knowlton, for instance, draws upon critical theory in investigating cultural contradictions in international Mormonism and the Mormon construction of masculinity.<sup>38</sup> Lavina Fielding Anderson, Dorice Williams Elliott, and Sonja Farnsworth use rhetorical criticism and feminist and discourse theories in compelling readings of the ways Mormon culture relies on a "grammar of inequity" that devalues women.<sup>39</sup> Marie Cornwall analyzes the effects of institutionalizing church organizations in terms of the strikingly disparate roles and experiences assigned to women and to men.<sup>40</sup> Others, including Elaine Lawless, Margaret Brady, and Susan Swetnam, have examined the complicated ways Mormon women use specific cultural forms—the bearing of testimonies, the telling of visionary experiences, and the writing of ancestor biographies—in trying to make coherent the contradictory subject-positions their culture offers them.<sup>41</sup> And John Tarjan draws upon organization theory to examine how the use of corporate metaphors in contemporary Mormonism leads to emphasis on form over substance, cohesion over benevolence, and competition over community.

Through their thoughtful analyses, these cultural critics have taken on the enormous, unending project of rethinking Mormon religious

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38. In addition to the essays already cited, see David Knowlton, "On Mormon Masculinity," *Sunstone* 16 (Aug. 1992): 19-31, and "Gringo Jeringo: Anglo Mormon Missionary Culture in Bolivia," in *Contemporary Mormonism*, 218-36.

39. See Lavina Fielding Anderson, "A Voice From the Past: The Benson Instructions for Parents," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21 (Winter 1988): 103-13; and "The Grammar of Inequity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23 (Winter 1990): 81-95, reprinted in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 215-30; Dorice Williams Elliott, "For Those Who Have Ears to Hear: Subversive Hidden Messages in Conventional Mormon Women's Discourse," Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium, Aug. 1987, typescript; "The Mormon Conference Talk as Patriarchal Discourse," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (Spring 1989): 70-78; and "Let Women No Longer Keep Silent in Our Churches: Women's Voices in Mormonism," in *Women and Authority*, 201-14; Sonja Farnsworth, "Mormonism's Odd Couple: The Motherhood-Priesthood Concept," *Mormon Women's Forum* 2 (Mar. 1991): 1, 6-11, reprinted in *Women and Authority*, 299-314. See also Linda P. Wilcox, "Mormon Motherhood: Official Images," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 208-26.

40. Marie Cornwall, "The Institutional Role of Mormon Women," in *Contemporary Mormonism*, 239-64.

41. Elaine J. Lawless, "I Know If I Don't Bear My Testimony, I'll Lose It': Why Mormon Women Bother to Speak at All," *Kentucky Folklore Record* 30 (1984): 79-96; Margaret K. Brady, "Transformations of Power: Mormon Women's Visionary Narratives," *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 461-68; and Susan H. Swetnam, "Turning to the Mothers: Mormon Women's Biographies of Their Female Forebears and the Mormon Church's Expectations for Women," *Frontiers* 10 (1988): 1-6.

experience. The task is overwhelming and overdue. In recent decades the interpretive culture through which many Mormons experience the divine, understand their lives, and shape their religious community has been open-ended and tremendously vibrant. It has enabled Mormons to understand themselves and others as subjects-in-process in rich, diverse ways; it has made it possible for many to continue participating in a community they care for deeply. During the same period, however, the conventional or official interpretive culture of the organizational church has appeared increasingly constrained by authority and cut off from historicity.<sup>42</sup> The dialogic relation between historical institution and spirit-filled community has not been operating with "optimal creativity."

The result is abrupt, sometimes painful disjunction between experience and official stories. Compelling, articulate efforts to make visible the assignment of subject-positions to Mormon women, in particular, have often met with disdain, if not derision. In the 1990s many old conventions about women remain deeply entrenched in Mormon rhetoric, despite increasing awareness of their ideological underpinnings and their distance from women's experiences. Despite encouraging cultural changes and occasional institutional shifts, in the 1990s one can still learn from the pulpit that sons matter more than daughters; that "specialness" and spirituality are equivalent; and that women have a good deal in motherhood instead of a burden of priesthood. Ruether writes that "religious traditions fall into crisis when the received interpretations of the redemptive paradigms contradict experience in significant ways."<sup>43</sup> It seems no exaggeration to see such a crisis in contemporary Mormonism.<sup>44</sup>

In the process of writing this paper I reread essays about literary theory and Mormon culture, notes from classes and symposia, old e-mail messages, and comments scrawled (sometimes heatedly) on church programs and odd slips of paper. In this mass of material what struck me most were observations made on separate occasions by several intelli-

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42. Armand Mauss discusses factors contributing to this in *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), and "The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation and Identity: Trends and Developments since Midcentury," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Spring 1994): 129-49.

43. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 16.

44. The events concerning women and intellectuals in the church chronicled by Lavina Fielding Anderson help support such a hypothesis; see Anderson, "Landmarks for LDS Women: A Contemporary Chronology," *Mormon Women's Forum* 3 (Dec. 1992): 1-20; and "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 7-64.

gent, committed, extraordinary Mormon women.<sup>45</sup> In differing ways each mentioned that her alienation in the church and sometimes her skepticism—in part, about others' accounts of "spiritual experiences"—had led her to suppose she lacked sufficient spirituality or simply wasn't "spiritual." Eventually, however, each came to understand that her initial assumptions were skewed: she was indeed "spiritual" but had not recognized it because her perceptions and experiences did not fit those in the script she'd been handed in a religion where spirituality is too often measured by conventionality.<sup>46</sup> Relying on such cultural institutions can hinder recognition of the spiritual within ourselves and others, cause us to devalue genuine introspection, lead us to mistake the secular for the divine, and make us doubt the significance of our own experience. Without new, open-ended stories, unarticulated Mormon experiences can remain disarticulated and absent from our view. Discontent does not automatically signify the absence of spirituality but can indeed be a sign of its presence.

Among the most difficult and pressing questions for contemporary Mormonism are how to honor experiences, understand them critically, and see their relation with the divine. How can we renew our culture of interpretation so that it does not overvalue some forms of religiosity at the expense of others? How can we trust past experiences after recognizing how deeply they may have been shaped by the grammar and ideology of inequity? How can we foster and celebrate the increasingly diverse voices in Mormonism, and hear those from the margins as well as the center? How can we respond to those who speak in unexpected, even disturbing ways? How can we honor one another's "open (never finite)" subjectivity without trying to fix one another's identity? These questions are complicated, to be sure, but they are also essential. Let me sketch some specific areas for further thought.

First, critical and creative examination of Mormon discourse and culture must continue. While some fear such analysis harms the church, it is imperative for the vitality of our communities. Though touched by the divine, theologies and religious forms develop in contexts that are histor-

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45. See, for example, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "The Pink *Dialogue* and Beyond," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Winter 1981): 28-39; and "Lusterware," in *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, ed. Philip L. Barlow (Centerville, UT: Canon Press, 1986), 195-203. Also Lorie Winder Stromberg, in the discussion following the panel "What Do Those Women Want? Mormon Women and Feminism" at Sunstone West in 1991; and Laurie Newman DiPadova, in a post on Mormon-L (electronic forum), 23 June 1992. A similar comment appears in Esther Peterson, "The World Beyond the Valley," *Sunstone* 15 (Nov. 1991): 21-25.

46. Cf. David Knowlton, "Why Can't We Talk? Secrecy, Deceit, and the Sacred in Mormonism," Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium, Aug. 1992, audiotape.

ically-specific and ideologically-shaped: Mormonism is charged with utopian visions, but it is also very human.<sup>47</sup> Our culture of interpretation, like any other, can and does become clichéd. And clichés, as Nancy Mairs notes, provide set formats that distance us from genuine experience while masquerading as the real thing.<sup>48</sup> By inertia, ubiquity, and institutional expediency they claim an authority far exceeding their value: once one has been schooled in clichés, their truth-claim can be difficult to counter. The cliché easily functions as what Bakhtin calls the authoritative or monologic word: it “demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it may have to persuade us internally.” It stands apart from life and requires our “unconditional allegiance.”<sup>49</sup> Such authoritative or monologic discourse presents itself as true rather than partial; it seeks to define rather than to engage, refusing the richness, validity, or even existence of other voices. Creative, critical response, however, Bakhtin argues, will eventually, dialogically, dismantle such claims and lead to something richer.

Second, the nature and significance of faith merit constant reconsideration. Over the last decade I have had the opportunity for many conversations with old friends on the subject of losing and sustaining faith. What has been most revealing is how infrequently the loss of faith is connected with new certainty about the death of God or the fraudulence of all religion. For the most part, it has come through the anguish of trying to live through the deeply conflicted discourses that construct Mormon lives. It is the paradoxical nature of contemporary Mormonism to produce independent-minded, tolerant, responsible, questioning, caring subjects-in-process who are very much Mormon yet never at home in the institution and often ill at ease with the culture. They are Mormon in their bones, but their experiences and critical insight have shown them

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47. German critic Gisela Ecker says of essentialist tendencies in contemporary feminism: “If it is true that no utopian program can do without myth-making it should at least be accompanied by an examination of how these myths are produced and what they are like.” In *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker, trans. Harriet Anderson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 15.

48. Nancy Mairs, Interview on *Fresh Air* (National Public Radio, 30 July 1993).

49. Bakhtin, 342-43. Richard Poll comments on authoritarian language in the church:

Authoritarian pronouncement is, of course, one technique of denial, well represented in the literature of the new LDS orthodoxy. *Since* the scriptures are substantially inerrant, now that the footnotes from the Prophet’s revision are there to smooth out rough places in the Bible, neither fossils nor floating axes need trouble the faithful. *Since* the public utterances of the prophets are almost always inspired and cover almost every consequential topic, one needs only quasi-authoritative help with the odd incongruity in the *Journal of Discourses* to remain secure against the buffetings of dissonance and doubt (in Poll, “Dealing with Dissonance: Myths, Documents, and Faith,” *Sunstone* 12 [May 1988]: 21).



the poverty of cherished clichés and the limits of Mormon religious conventions. In one way or another many have lost hope in the capacity of Mormonism to interpret their experiences and aid them in approaching the divine. They have not necessarily lost faith in God but have sadly recognized that their church often denies the legitimacy of their hope to “experience their own experience,” choosing to fix itself outside of historicity rather than remain open to new possibilities for spiritual insight.

One of the significant contributions of the Sunstone symposia has been the “Pillars of My Faith” series. Together, these presentations and essays provide glimpses of the kind of rich, evolving understanding of faith that may be essential for the future of the Mormon community. Faith takes many forms, develops in diverse ways, and is unpredictable: it is a spectrum or process of belief, not something one either has or hasn’t got. What is faith-promoting for some members of the church alienates others; one person’s pillars can even be another’s burdens. In considering the myriad possibilities of faith, it is crucial to remember that our public expressions and private understanding of faith take shape in the dialogic relationship between story and experience that Carol Christ describes. Stories and language devised for the purpose of inspiring and converting often make faith look like a simpler proposition than it is in real life: do A, B, and C and you will have Faith. This narrative strategy serves a useful purpose, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich notes: “Scriptures clarify by sifting . . . eternal principles from the grainy confusion of ordinary life.”<sup>50</sup> But that clarity becomes a liability if people then devalue ordinary experience because it isn’t like life in the scriptures, or distrust their faith because it isn’t just like someone else’s. One must also remember that faith and religious understanding change through time. While Mormons conventionally describe this as a process of accretion (“line upon line”), it may often be much more a process of discontinuous rediscovery, as semiotician Carlo Ginzburg describes: “I believe that the accumulation of knowledge always happens in this way: across broken rather than continuous lines; through false beginnings, corrections, oversights, and rediscoveries; thanks to filters and schemata which blind and at the same time illuminate.”<sup>51</sup>

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50. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Family Scriptures,” originally published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*; reprinted in *Personal Voices: A Celebration of Dialogue*, ed. Mary Lythgoe Bradford (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 267.

51. Carlo Ginzburg, “On the European (Re)discovery of Shamans,” *Elementa: Journal of Slavic Studies and Comparative Cultural Semiotics* 1 (1993): 35. After writing this, I re-read Lavina Fielding Anderson’s “In the Garden God Hath Planted”:

Revelation is not an orderly, linear process. It can be a sunburst of insight, a glimmer of comprehension, the rethinking with understanding of long-past events, the testing of a beloved principle in an unforeseen crucible. But most important of all, it’s *our* experience. Even if it begins with instructions from elsewhere, it must become *our* experience before it becomes *our* revelation (26).

Third, Mormons need to recognize that there are many viable avenues for religious experience. A man in my former stake commented that he was learning from his children that experiences of the gospel other than his own can also be true; I recall his remark often and think his children fortunate. For within Mormonism there can be too much hostility and not enough respect among caring individuals whose ways of life and approaches to religious experience differ, sometimes tremendously. Those who find religious experience in participating in every program the church offers sometimes need to recognize that what they consider basic activity feels like hyperactivity to others. Those whose religious understanding is shaped by intellectual traditions or critical theory occasionally need to recall that Mormon ideology has virtues as well as failings. To take a random example: I may never voluntarily attend a homemaking meeting, but I must also understand how it gives some women a sense of autonomy and community they find nowhere else in the church. At the same time men and women who would never dream of "questioning" need to understand that for many discussing Mormonism openly and critically is an essential part of religious experience.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the best way to honor Mormon religious experience is to write, read, and tell it against as well as with the grain. We should actively seek new ways of interpreting the secular and the sacred as they mix in human lives—not simply for the novelty, but as a means of coming to a richer understanding of experience and of the effects, positive and negative, of institutions. Mormons need to create approaches for articulating experiences that have been recounted poorly, left unnamed, or silenced entirely by the interpretive means currently available. At present this occurs most successfully in journals and personal essays, where, Julie Nichols writes, stories from ordinary lives have the "ability to interrogate and correct the inadequacies in the larger cultural narrative."<sup>53</sup> Bakhtin's understanding of narrative is illuminating here. Rather than repeating old forms handed down from the past, or authorizing one voice and silencing others, the narrative discourse Bakhtin celebrates reveals the mix-

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52. Thoughtful comments on the nature and obligations of being an "alternate voice" in the Mormon community appear in Armand L. Mauss, "Alternate Voices: The Calling and Its Implications," *Sunstone* 14 (Apr. 1990): 7-10; Scott Kenney, "God's Alternate Voices," *Sunstone* 14 (Apr. 1990): 11-15; and Richard Poll, "Dialogue Toward Forgiveness: A Supporting View—A Response to 'The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 67-75.

53. Julie J. Nichols, "The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Women's Stories, Women's Lives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Summer 1992): 77. Many of these personal essays do offer unfinalized, challenging narratives in place of finished didacticism. See, for example, Martha Pierce's discussion in "Personal Discourse on God the Mother," in *Women and Authority*, 247-56; Martha Sonntag Bradley's "Reclaiming One's Voice," *Mormon Women's Forum Newsletter* 4 (Sept. 1993): 8-9; and the regular "Sisters Speak" section in *Exponent II*.

ture and messy conflict of many voices in a polyphonic world. It dismantles the dominance of any single script through the dialogic presence of others; "it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding"; it takes shape in "maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness."<sup>54</sup>

Dialogue and openendedness can be possible in other Mormon discourses as well. For example, literary critics have highlighted the ways autobiographies and biographies strain, wrench, or delete women's experiences in order to fit conventional plots for women's lives.<sup>55</sup> Mormons have similarly often let the didactic purposes of personal and family histories circumscribe which experiences are recounted and what they are allowed to mean. Even when the narratives include a few moderately subversive anecdotes, their exemplary message predominates.<sup>56</sup> Different kinds of sacrament meeting talks and testimonies may also enrich Mormon understanding of religious experience: even public testimonies about not "having" a testimony provide opportunities for the community to reflect on the diversity of faith and the unfinished nature of all human subjects. Eugene England proposes that in the great social revolution of caring about others, perhaps telling our stories will accomplish what speaking in anger does not.<sup>57</sup> I agree: it is in storytelling that we can best

54. Bakhtin, 9, 11. In his 1990 lecture "Is Nothing Sacred?" Salman Rushdie discusses literature as the absolutely necessary place in which the interconnection between sacred and secular can be explored:

*Can the religious mentality survive outside of religious dogma and hierarchy? Which is to say: Can art be the third principle that mediates between the spiritual and material worlds; might it, by "swallowing" both worlds, offer us something new—something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence?*

I believe it can. I believe it must. And I believe that, at its best, it does (in Rushdie, *Is Nothing Sacred?* [New York: Granta, 1990], 7).

55. For a readable introduction to this topic, see Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988).

56. Susan Swetnam's analysis of Mormon women's biographies of their female forebears suggests some of these contradictions. In a third of those she read, the writer fit her ancestor's life to a conventional formula and praised her as a proper Mormon woman—yet at the same time included a story or two that showed the paragon violating prescribed behavioral norms (using colorful language, rebelling against polygamy, dressing like men, being impatient with children). None of the writers, Swetnam points out, "even seem to recognize the subversive anecdotes" as challenges to their general claims about their ancestors' virtuousness. Whether consciously or not, she suggests, at some level they "see no contradiction in declaring their flawed grandmothers to be appropriate subjects for laudatory biography"—and thus make use of that most Mormon of tasks, family history, in order to quietly subvert cultural conventions about gender roles. See Swetnam, 5.

57. Eugene England, comment made following his plenary address at Sunstone West in April 1993.

tease out the contradictions of human experience, the ways ideology is both a real and an imaginary relation to the world. And it is in retelling old stories against the grain that we can seek a different value for experiences deeply tainted by the grammar and ideology of inequity. The *challenge* lies in telling them out loud in a religious culture where the manner of one's speech can matter more than the content of one's heart, and where narratives that do not match the given scripts too often are discounted as inauthentic.<sup>58</sup> It lies as well in making them heard, for perhaps some of the stories most in need of telling—and hearing—are about misunderstanding, anger, alienation, and voicelessness.

Fourth, Mormons, remembering our deepest ideals, need to work toward institutions and communities in which "the holiness of diversity" is respected as a fundamental part of religious experience.<sup>59</sup> This ideal isn't easy: it can be one thing to accept differences in the abstract, quite another to co-exist with them peaceably in one's own ward and family. Yet, though Mormon culture often underplays or even suppresses them, significant differences do exist in our wards, families, and other communities. Elouise Bell observed at the 1991 Sunstone Symposium that

Mormons tend to speak up about the aspects of their faith which are predictable and traditional; they tend to keep quiet about those parts of their faith which are exotic, unexpected, and highly individualized. But more and more of these folks are speaking of their faith these days. (Look at the program in your hands for proof.) What with the harvest of converts abroad and the unexpected varieties in the crop springing up at home, the church membership will have many interesting questions to ponder in the years ahead.<sup>60</sup>

For the benefit of all, contemporary Mormonism should ponder how it

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58. Zina D. H. Young observed at the first general Relief Society conference: "Where sisters can do so, it would be desirable and we think profitable, to visit each other's organizations and become acquainted; it will tend to union and harmony, promote confidence, and strengthen the chords that bind us together, for there is more difference in our manner of speech, than in the motives of our hearts" (see *Woman's Exponent* 17 [15 Apr. 1889]: 172).

59. The phrase comes from Anderson, "In the Garden God Hath Planted," 26. Recent discussions of Mormon community and diversity in the 1990s and beyond include Reba Keele, "Is Religious Community an Oxymoron?" *Sunstone* 16 (Nov. 1993): 13-21; Eugene England, "No Respecter of Persons: A Mormon Ethics of Diversity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Winter 1994): 79-100; Joanna Brooks, "Gender and Spirituality, or Why the Guerrilla Is the Most Feminine Creature in the Spiritual Jungle," *Mormon Women's Forum Newsletter* 5 (Mar. 1994): 6-7; Jan Shipps, "Making Saints: In the Early Days and the Latter Days," *Contemporary Mormonism*, 64-83; and O. Kendall White, Jr., "The Church and the Community: Personal Reflections on Mormon Intellectual Life," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Summer 1995): 83-91.

60. Elouise Bell, "'Yet All Experience is an Arch,'" *Sunstone* 15 (Nov. 1991): 20.

may welcome the exotic and the unexpected along with the predictable and the traditional: though they may exist on the margins, they are always already—and always have been—a part of our community.<sup>61</sup>

One of the more striking ideas in recent critical theory is that *all* knowledge is “situated”: it is partial, historically-located, culturally-specific, embodied, contradictory.<sup>62</sup> To produce anything approximating authentic accounts of reality, humans must draw from many partial perspectives and recognize that we remain delimited by our own perspective and historicity. We must also remember that every account is provisional, that the authentic comes threaded with the inauthentic, and that one more voice or another partial vision is always possible. If Mormonism aims to embrace all truth, as nineteenth-century Mormons were fond of proclaiming, Mormons nearing the twenty-first century must be willing to hear those voices, whether they come from the margins, the center, or beyond the edges. Mormons must work to honor individuals as well as community, and to become a community that values “alternate” voices as much as “authorized” ones. The voices of women are not “auxiliary,” nor are those of intellectuals. Recently I read the idea that Christianity is “a perspective that is not already true but that becomes true where human beings are freed.”<sup>63</sup> In citing this I do not intend to downplay the significance of Jesus Christ. What I do intend is to suggest that if

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61. In 1859 Brigham Young commented:

In this Territory are people gathered from almost all nations, where they have been differently educated, differently traditioned, and differently ruled. How, then, can we expect them to look, to act, and to have sentiments, faith, and customs precisely alike? I do not expect to see any such thing, but I endeavor to look upon them as an angel would, having compassion, long-suffering, and forbearance toward them (*Journal of Discourses* 7:134).

Certainly the cultural challenges facing the contemporary church differ significantly from those of the nineteenth century, but the need for compassion, tolerance, and acceptance of diversity continues.

62. See Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 183–201. Seeing unmediated knowledge claims as impossible, relativism as unsatisfactory, and both as irresponsible, Haraway argues for “situated and embodied knowledges”: “the alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision. . . . The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (191).

63. Sharon Welch, “The Truth of Liberation Theology: ‘Particulars of a Relative Sublime,’” in *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 226. On truth as something made, not found, see Scott Abbott, “Will We Find Zion or Make It? An Essay on Postmodernity and Revelation,” *Sunstone* 17 (Dec. 1994): 16–21.

Mormons do not listen to one another's voices, if we do not honor individual subjects as well as institutions, we fall short of real understanding. If Mormons take seriously Brigham Young's notion that all truth, even that possessed by infidels, "pertains to divinity,"<sup>64</sup> we must acknowledge the unexpected possibilities of the holy in all experience.

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64. *Journal of Discourses* 7:283-84.