# Baptism for the Dead and the Problematic of Pluralism: A Theological Reconfiguration

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As RELIGIONS OFTEN DO, MORMONISM promises salvation to its faithful participants. It also speaks of those who are not its participants, who are in some way outside the religion. Under this second heading, there are two issues to be considered. First is the question of other religions: Are they true? Can they save? And what should we do about them? This is sometimes known as the problem of religious pluralism.[1] The second consideration gets less coverage: it concerns the status of an individual who belongs to a religion in name and practice but who is functionally on the outside.

What does it mean to be functionally outside a religion? The kind of functional exteriority I have in mind (which I will discuss at greater length below) has to do with the kinds of problems that arise for a person or, more broadly, with the different *problematics* at work which situate her with respect to her own religion.[2]

My concern in this essay is with the problematic of pluralism itself, that is to say, with the conditions under which religious plurality presents itself as a problem. I intend to pursue this investigation by analyzing the Mormon treatment of the problem of pluralism, specifically the doctrine of baptism for the dead. These two phases of the concern—the problem

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1. My thanks to Paul J. Griffiths of the University of Chicago Divinity School for this identification of the three central questions of religious pluralism, and for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. The word "problematic," used as a noun, is the English translation of the French *"problématique,"* a familiar term in contemporary philosophy and religious studies. We can define it technically as "the systemic condition for the possibility of a problem or set of problems," or less technically as "a way of thinking in which certain problems occur to the thinker," such as the problem of religious pluralism.

of pluralism and the problematic of pluralism—together address the question of the religious outsider. By bringing these two phases into juxtaposition, I hope to indicate the contours of what I consider to be a possible resolution.

## THE STABILITY OF RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS

The idea, and hence the problem, of religious pluralism would not be possible without the idea of distinct religious communities. We need, therefore, to think about religious community and the nature of religious commitment. Religion—an ideational system—and community—a social system—thus constitute a form of hermeneutic circle, in which each of the terms is the basis for the other.[3]

For a community to function and perpetuate itself, it must maintain a kind of equilibrium. This means that the resources a system has to offer must be commensurate with the problems that it generates. At the level of concepts, the answers the system gives must be keyed to the questions it allows.

The religious system asserts its own priority among these several systems, both in claim and in practice. Rhetorically, the claim is made that the answers and questions of the religion are more basic than those of any other system. Religious conflict is reinscribed within the religion itself, framing it as a question adequately keyed to an answer provided by the religion.[4]

Challenges to a religion's claims to primacy occur both intellectually and existentially. Intellectually, the challenge can be explicit, as when one religion says of another that it does not have the truth. Existentially, a competing system may silently make inroads into structuring a person's life in such a way that it disrupts the equilibrium between question and answer, problem and solution. When an intruding system causes problems to arise which are in fact beyond the religion's capacities, there will be a sort of tug-of-war to determine if the person will maintain identification with the community and its religion: will forsaking the religious system and its resources leave more problems unsolved than those which now present themselves as insoluble from within?

One mechanism the religion might have for dealing with such an eventuality is to obscure awareness of the conflict: let other systems pro-

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3. The classic example of such a "hermeneutic circle" is language: we know the meaning of an individual word by how it is used in context, but we can only make sense of the context if we know the meaning of the constituent words.

4. Again, by way of example, when my academic system asserts its own authority and power to address the meaning of life, my religious system counters with a discourse on the relation between faith and intellect.

vide answers to problems they have generated; let those problems even be so basic as to be worthy of being called religious; just don't consider that the arena within which the problem presents itself and is worked out represents a threat to the primacy of the home religious system. Where a religion's tenacity is maintained through this strategy of implicit reincorporation, difficulty comes when the individual believes that the conflict is indeed radical. For such a person, the religion's answer (including its mode of eliding conflict) has become incommensurate with the question before him (which includes a sense of irresolubility between claims). On the one hand, he has lost the stability offered by belief that the home religion can encompass—or at least govern—all other systems. On the other hand, the home religion will not explicitly condemn the source of these new problems, and thereby solve them by exclusion. The problems have been admitted into the person's life with the implicit approval of the religious system, but no resources have been indicated capable of solving them. Or if resources suggest themselves which are outside of the home system, they may already have been marked as foreign and dangerous, available only by way of transgression.[5]

The question at hand, then, is whether the home system can be made to reply to this situation so as to reestablish systemic equilibrium. In offering an analysis of the pertinent doctrinal resources of Mormonism, I hope to show how a concern with the status of the religious other can be made to speak to a situation in which the category of religious otherness has already been undermined.

## VICARIOUS REDEMPTION / TESTIMONY IN READING

The issue of religious plurality is addressed in Mormonism through

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5. It is necessary here to distinguish between condemnation of the problem's sources and condemnation of the problem's solution. In this regard, it may be useful to keep in mind the distinction between *nominal* exteriority and *functional* (or *structural*) exteriority—a crucial distinction for purposes of this essay. The latter concerns the situation of a person or a resource with respect to the actual ideational and social systems whose interacting availability constitutes the world within which a person carries out her life. The former pertains to the ideational means by which these systems are identified and conceptually differentiated. This means that the ordinance of baptism has the effect primarily of bringing someone nominally into the religion, while someone calling himself an "ex-Mormon" could still be functionally very much on the inside of the religion. Naturally, nominal resources subsist as elements within given systems, which can then be analyzed functionally. In turn, such an analysis participates in the nominal, and thus enters into the perceived struggle among explicitly differentiated systems. The situation I am describing, then, is one in which a functionally external problem is not nominally marked as external (i.e., condemned), but in which the functionally external resources for dealing with that problem are so nominally marked.

the doctrine of baptism for the dead.[6] To reiterate the familiar explanation: A person has to be baptized to be saved. God wants everyone to be saved, but baptism has not been an option for a great portion of the world's population, let alone baptism by the proper authority. These people can still be saved, but they are not exempt from the requirement of baptism. And because baptism is a physical ordinance, it has to be performed in the flesh. Those who have died without an opportunity to hear the gospel and be baptized thus need some means of access to this ordinance. This is accomplished by having a baptized member of the church stand as proxy for the deceased individual, allowing his or her body to be baptized for and in behalf of the one who no longer has a body. This takes place inside Mormon temples, spaces set off from the world and reserved for ordinances reaching beyond the veil of mortality. The church carries out genealogical research as (among other things) an orderly way eventually to reach the entire family of Adam, making the gospel and its ordinances available to all God's children. Other religions cannot save (a soteriological exclusivism), but individuals outside of the church can be saved, after death, through the church (a mode of inclusivism).

As an answer to the question raised by religious plurality, this arrangement seems as good as any other, granting its premises. But if we want to understand its persuasive force as a religious doctrine, there are further issues we need to discuss. First, whatever its rational credibility and coherence, this doctrine, like all Mormon doctrines, is to be conveyed and apprehended not by reason alone, but by the power of the Holy

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6. Recall that we can consider the problem of religious plurality under three questions: (1) Do other religions possess any truth? (2) Do other religions have any salvific efficacy? (3) What attitude should one take towards those within other religions? The first of these questions is addressed in Mormonism through the doctrines of dispensationalism, apostasy, and restoration, according to which the gospel has been given to humankind at various times throughout history, from Adam down to the present day; humanity has persistently failed to abide by the standards of truth set forth therein and, forsaking the clarity of revelation, has followed the teachings of humans instead, thereby repeatedly losing the fullness of the gospel, until it was restored for the last time through Joseph Smith, never to be lost again. All other religions, being deviations from the true gospel, have elements of the truth but not the fullness and authority which are necessary to save. The answer to the third question involves a general affirmation of missionary work and the need to preach the gospel to the entire world, baptizing those who believe and repent—tied in with a complex doctrine of Israel's genetic dispersion and gathering in the persons who join the Mormon church. This entire doctrinal milieu, of course, is also inseparable from the answer to the second, soteriological question: the doctrine of the sealing power and of baptism for the dead. Here I limit my exposition to this second question, which is more exemplary of some of the tensions and resolutions I hope to chart.

Spirit.[7] The doctrine comes to value within Mormonism only when it induces church members to do the actual work of genealogy and of baptism for the dead. And the motivation toward this action is attained not by reason alone, nor entirely by the imposition of guilt for inaction, but through effecting a particular *feeling*, associated with and productive of "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5:22-23), which the Saints have learned to recognize as the prompting of divinity through the Holy Spirit.

This feeling has epistemological value as well. Belief in a doctrine is rated inferior to a *testimony* of a doctrine, the secure knowledge in one's heart as well as in one's mind, brought about by divine communication, that a particular tenet is true. A testimony is to be attained through study and prayer, doing what one can of oneself to make sense of a particular point, but having the coherence of one's understanding ratified by the feeling of the Holy Spirit (see D&C 8:2).

This Spirit does not only ratify; it also reveals. New truths can be presented to the mind through the Holy Spirit that reason alone would have been unable to attain. This typically happens in the context of studying holy scripture or preaching the gospel. Elements of life and word come together in ways which, unanticipated, show God's hand to be working in all things.

These truths can be difficult to communicate, especially to someone who has not had similar revelatory experiences. But in the moment of testifying to the truth one has learned—if the Holy Spirit is present to the one hearing the testimony—the truth can be conveyed; the gospel can address the individual's concerns in life; and the coherence and scope of the gospel teaching can be reaffirmed and strengthened (see D&C 50:17-24). Without that divine illumination, however, one cannot finally persuade the unbeliever of what one knows to be the truth.

In all of this, the truth to which the Holy Spirit bears witness is established by a hermeneutic coherence involving both text and life, and by a corresponding feeling. When the Holy Spirit illuminates a passage of scripture, the scripture in turn illuminates the reader's life situation, effecting coherence in that situation by way of a functional correspondence between the elements of that situation as identified and perhaps named by the scripture, and the revealed coherence of the scripture itself. The resolution of otherwise chaotic and unnamed elements in one's life is accompanied by a certain feeling of elation (see D&C 9:8-9). This joins with

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7. Here, too, the distinction employed (between "reason" and "revelation") is in large measure generated by the religious system within which it has its effect. The character of rationality and charisma as constructed with respect to one another deserves a more extended treatment than I give it here.

the sense of discovery of the meaning of the text (the truth of the meaning being ratified by the joyful feeling which accompanies its illumination of one's life), and the reader is astonished at the depth and the relevance of the scriptural word, marvelling that, without God's assistance, this hidden meaning would never have become evident.

This hermeneutic coherence can remain a private affair, falling under the Mormon rubric of "personal revelation." Or, coming through an authoritative interpreter, it can enter into the communal domain of adequate readings. It is then a public revelation, valid for the entire church, and for all in the world who will receive it (see D&C 43:3-7). We can see this at work in the establishment of the doctrine of vicarious redemption through the instrumentality of the prophet Joseph Smith. To do this, we need to examine more closely some of the figures brought into coherence around this doctrine.

## THE RANGE AND LIMITS OF PROSELYTIZING

In the last year of his life, Joseph Smith preached a sermon on the topic of baptism for the dead, which reads in part:

> The Bible says, "I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord; and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."
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> Now, the word *turn* here should be translated *bind*, or seal. But what is the object of this important mission? or how is it to be fulfilled? The keys are to be delivered, the spirit of Elijah is to come, the Gospel to be established, the Saints of God gathered, Zion built up, and the Saints to come up as saviours on Mount Zion.
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> But how are they to become saviours on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them; and herein is the chain that binds the heart of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, which fulfills the mission of Elijah.[8]

No doctrine subsists in a vacuum, and baptism for the dead is no different. Far from being a single solution to a single problem, it is part of a full-fledged eschatology whose various figures permeate the fabric of the Mormon system. The name of Elijah is already introduced at the outset of

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8. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 330; italics in original.

Joseph Smith's mission, when the above passage from Malachi is quoted to the young prophet by the angel Moroni in 1824 (D&C 2), and reaches its fulfillment as the culmination of the Mormon doctrine of priesthood. Elijah himself confers upon the prophet Joseph the *sealing power*, the power to bind heaven and earth, or to have that which is bound on earth bound in heaven (see D&C 110:13-16, 128:11-18). It is by this power that the ordinances of the gospel are made available to the dead, by such means as baptism for the dead. And it is by this power that the Saints who participate in that ordinance become *saviours on Mount Zion.*

This last phrase calls for closer scrutiny. Its meaning in the current context is evident: in acting as proxy for a deceased relative, one acts as a mediator, making available the ordinances of salvation, and thus acting in the role of savior. The association between the figure of the mountain and the figure of the temple, coupled with the millennial expectation (typical of antebellum America) of the reestablishing of Zion, makes it natural to speak of the temple within which these proxy ordinances take place as "Mount Zion" (a use amply borne out in temple-related hymnody and exegesis). Presented with such a coherent bringing-together of themes, interwoven in a total religious framework, one has trouble imagining that the phrase "saviours on Mount Zion" could have any other meaning.

The phrase is, of course, of biblical origin. Mormon exegetes quote Obadiah 1:21 as a prophecy of the latter-day work of vicarious redemption. It is worth asking what textual setting precedes the biblical establishment of this expression. What we find is a nationalistic and military context: "Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom: We have heard a rumour from the Lord, and an ambassador is sent among the heathen, Arise ye, and let us rise up against her in battle" (v. 1). Throughout most of the chapter, the descendants of Esau are in dire straits, as the Lord calls forth all manner of military disaster upon them for their offenses against the children of Israel. In the last five verses, we see the vision of Israel's upcoming settlement, as that nation takes over what Esau had usurped. "And they of the south shall possess the mount of Esau, and they of the plain the Philistines: and they shall possess the fields of Ephraim, and the fields of Samaria: and Benjamin shall possess Gilead" (v. 19). And then the climax of this litany of territorial recovery: "And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (v. 21).

One can perhaps imagine an effort being made to interpret this entire chapter symbolically, in such a way as to lend the final verse some kind of coherence in its reference to Mormon proxy ordinances. I have yet to see such an effort made. The more common approach is simply to ignore the rest of the chapter. A typical feature of Mormon exegesis, both of the

Bible and of Mormonism's own scripture, is a lack of rigorous concern for the relation of individual verses to the surrounding text. Obviously this is nothing new in the history of scriptural interpretation; it is worth noting, however, in order to ascertain why contextualization appears to be unnecessary.

As indicated above, the hermeneutic of the Holy Spirit aims to establish coherence not between the text and its textual surrounding, but between the text and the reader's or the community's life.[9] The sense of illumination conveyed by such a coherence depends, of course, on the system or systems which constitute the reader's/community's interpretive horizon. When the prophet preaches a sermon by the power of the Holy Spirit on the doctrine of baptism for the dead, the ability of his images to cohere and to produce a systemic coherence for the audience is based on a system already in place among those present, whose figures provide a backdrop for the figures of the sermon. By virtue of this systemic backdrop, and of the charismatic hermeneutic insight which constitutes his prophetic calling, the prophet is able to reach into a body of material (e.g., the Bible), pull out a phrase that, in its own context, has nothing to do with his system at all and integrate it into the present systemic backdrop so as to clarify both that system and the life-system which the system in turn illuminates; and to do it with so great a degree of coherence—at every level—that it seems to the church impossible that the material should ever have been read in any other way.

I want to pay careful attention to what is happening here. Material from outside of the system is being apprehended and seamlessly integrated into the system—we almost want to say that it has been *proselytized*. In the process, any reading that cannot be assimilated into the system's pneumatic coherence is rendered *incomprehensible*. A reader within the system either does not care to look for, or cannot even detect, such a meaning. Or, if such a meaning does make itself evident (according to the dynamic of intersystemic intrusion that I discussed earlier), steps must be taken to reincorporate it (e.g., a symbolic reading).[10]

We can see that the process by which a foreign text is incorporated into the home system resembles the solution offered to the problem of pluralism. In both cases, that which is outside of the system (a foreign text outside of the hermeneutic system; a dead person outside of the tem-

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9. This is not to imply that a reading involving critical contextualization cannot be directed towards addressing the reader's or the community's concerns. Nevertheless, there is a difference to be noted.

10. One might thus respond to the military interpretation of Obadiah 1:21 by identifying an analogy between the challenges of temple work and the rigors of battle, suggesting that this is a deeper understanding of the scripture's meaning than a strictly "literal" reading provides.

poral system) is incorporated into the system by means of a power (the Holy Spirit, the sealing power of Elijah) which is capable of mediating between worlds. The supernal efficacy of the priesthood in both cases involves a superimposition: between the body of the living and the soul of the dead, or between the isolated textual elements and the communal hermeneutic matrix. Finally, and perhaps most important, both cases involve an erasing of prior identity: the native problematic of the text is effaced, or rendered irrelevant in the face of the true, prophetic interpretation; and the autonomous setting of a deceased individual's life, the various issues which may have constituted his or her own religious concerns, are likewise obliterated in the conviction that the gospel ordinances now received constitute their real salvation.

This effacement becomes important to us because it suggests how the solution to the problem of pluralism may be enacted in the same sweep as the problem's constitution. If there had been no erasing of identity, there would have been no cause for inclusion. The moment of inspiration, in incorporating a text into the system of true doctrine, simultaneously bars the text from serving as an inroad for the reader into the text's own native system. The act of serving as proxy for the baptism of another, bringing the deceased other under the protection of one's own system of salvation, makes it impossible for the other's foreignness to provoke insight into the limitations of one's own system. Finally, the satisfaction afforded by the doctrine itself—a solution to the problem of pluralism that offers not only internal consistency but the imprimatur of the Holy Spirit—can blind one to the presuppositions that instigated the problem in the first place: presuppositions concerning the nature of truth and the role of the religious system in containing or presenting that truth.

Let us return to our initial question: what happens to the comprehensive claims of such a system when it has failed to render some aspect of another system sufficiently strange?[11] As suggested earlier, the simplest way of dealing with this is to meet the question with the assurance of inclusivity: the other may indeed have its independent meaning, alongside our incorporation of it, but we can rest assured that any meaning or truth found therein is, in the final analysis, also part of the gospel. To the extent that we can accept this claim on faith, our security in the system will not have been seriously threatened.

It will be more difficult to accept this claim when one's interaction with the other and its system, under the gospel's indulgent habit of implicit reincorporation, has become sufficiently crucial to one's own way-in-the-world that the incommensurate element is no longer considered

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11. Another modality of this question is suggested by the association of the sacred with the forbidden/strange/other: What happens when the strangeness that protected the sacred breaks down into familiarity?

alien enough as to require incorporation. As soon as an outside other presents its own claims to truth, the problematic of pluralism has already asserted itself and can proceed to effect its resolution, magnanimously bringing the truth of the other into the fold. The other is *recognized* by the home system whose stability is predicated on its capacity to *set at a distance* that other which it is then so eager to greet and redeem. But this no longer works when the other has insinuated itself into the individual's own constitution, so that it cannot be alienated (that is to say, made foreign and unreadable) without dangerously limiting the individual's access to his or her own resources for dealing with the world. At such a point, the subject may be reduced to carving those resources out of herself, sacrificing them at the altar of normativity, separating herself out from that which is unclean, *rendering* it "unclean" thereby and subject to redemption.

To the extent that a system's vigilance has failed to maintain the rigor of this demand, and has blinded itself to such discrepancies, it has allowed the very ground of a doctrine of pluralism—the possibility of discrete systems—to be structurally undermined. Recall that the utility of a system is a function of its ability to represent—and through the representation, to resolve—the structural tensions which it produces and/or allows. When the distinctness between systems has been structurally undermined, a doctrine that puts forward a gracious response to the systemic other will no longer serve the purpose for which it was intended: the reincorporation of the separate. And at that point nominal commitment to such a doctrine can be painful for the functional outsider, inasmuch as the systemic resources not only fail to address the situation at hand, but also rule out, through the problematic posed in their articulation, the possibility of a solution that would escape their normativity, their capacity to name that solution their own.

## TRUTH AND SUBVERSION

There is no way out of systematicity. Undermining one system with its faults will only situate you inside another one, likewise faulted. The hope, however, is that the new, negotiated system will hold nominal resources that can more adequately represent the structural fissures it allows. These resources in turn do not come out of nowhere; at best, they consist of a rearrangement or refiguring of material from previous systems.[12] To illustrate how this refiguring can happen, I will close by briefly outlining one development that might occur with particular figures of the gospel.

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12. Overtones here of the Mormon doctrine of creation are not lost on me, though they were, when last I checked, unintentional. The closer reference is to Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage*. See *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16ff.

I take my dead relative's name through the temple, letting my own body serve as host to his person. I bring that which is outside the system of life into superimposition with the system itself. In becoming thereby a savior on Mount Zion, I present to myself (in alienated form) a model of superimposition and displacement. The conveyance of roles, the replacing of names, the encoding of signs and the substitution of bodies all constitute, I am told, the mystery of godliness, where earth and heaven are brought together and the one transformed into the other.

The doctrine of vicarious redemption thus appears to me not just as one doctrine among others, but as a central element of Mormon worship and belief, in ways that go beyond the immediate logical confrontation of God's mercy with the religious other. The juxtapositional power of Elijah seems the essence of priesthood power itself, the concentration of the gospel's efficacy. At this stage of the story, such a conviction, reinforced by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, gives me the motivation to persist in the gospel, even in the face of outside threats to my faith.

As I have argued in this essay, however, not all threats show themselves as such. As I live within and among various systems, I need to negotiate the elements and structures of those systems that find their way into my own life's structure, detected or undetected. Eventually, as that structure changes, the work of the gospel may fail to answer my situation—yet I still feel the power of the Spirit's witness. My enthusiasm calls for an object, while my curiosity wants to account for this power. Perhaps I begin to associate such a feeling with the representation of a dialectic between interiority and exteriority, a representation that has the capacity to undermine existentially the subjective constructions of inside and outside.[13]

Notice, though, that at this point, where the ontological status of the borders between inside and outside has been called into question, religious pluralism as such no longer seems to be a problem. Rather, it is the idea that any one system of itself could be "true" that seems problematic—precisely because it now appears that "truth," as experienced under the sign of the Holy Spirit, does not belong to any given system, nor does it share itself with a plurality of systems, but only arises in the subversion of one system by another. More specifically, it is only this kind of subversion that can adequately represent the experience of functional exteriority

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13. The word "dialectic" is a way of identifying the way in which elements set opposite one another communicate with one another, in the sense not only of speaking to one another but also of feeding into one another, almost but not quite to the point of blending. A representation that comes from outside of me, but that communicates something meaningful to me, seems to blend with what is "inside" of me: my own experience. When this near-blending between inside and outside is what I experience, it takes a dialectical representation to render this meaningful.

alongside nominal interiority, and thereby satisfy the psychological demand that experience be named.

In considering the problem of pluralism, and the complicity of the response thereto with the construction of the problematic within which the problem makes sense, I have tried to address the situation of one who finds him- or herself committed to a particular system of religious thought but whose use of that system's resources is made difficult by a kind of self-consciousness. My attempt to make explicit both the constitution and the subversion of a system is directed toward overcoming nominal inhibitions to the structural resolution of crises that threaten to obliterate systemic legibility. Whether such a method allows the development of a more adequate system, or whether its problematizing of normativity threatens a more total dissolution, remains to be seen.