Ritual as Theology and as Communication[1]

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THEOLOGY IS USUALLY CONSIDERED an intellectual activity for philosophers and educated religionists. Actually, most humans discuss the same subjects, but at a different level than do the pundits. Commoners too cogitate upon the nature of suprahuman power, the possibilities and limitations of humankind, the means by which we and the cosmos came into existence, and our ultimate fate. However, there are two major differences between formal theological and folk discourse on these matters: the level of erudition, and the language dialect used. Unfortunately, formal treatment of these topics by the elite is based on logicoverbal communication, which emphasizes rationality and literacy, and most people are not strong on those two dimensions in a religious context. Consequently, the formal discussions do not speak very powerfully to the public.

Consideration by scholars of the role theology plays in Mormon life has hardly begun. Modest studies by historians and academic philosophers have outlined some of the more self-conscious aspects of theological dimensions among a few of the more vocal LDS ecclesiastical and intellectual leaders. Yet practically nothing has been done to discover and analyze more than anecdotally what common Mormons have believed.[2] This is puzzling inasmuch as Mormons themselves claim it is their beliefs, not ecology, social organization, behavioral norms, nor geography—topics quite commonly examined by scholars—which set them apart.

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1. This is a substantially revised version of "Ritual as Theology," *Sunstone* 6, no. 3 (1981): 4–11. A slightly revised version was published in John L. Sorenson, "Ritual as Theology," Matthew Sorenson, ed., *Mormon Culture: Four Decades of Essays on Mormon Society and Personality* (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997), 29–37.

2. However, see John L. Sorenson, "Conflict between Mormon Folk and Mormon Elite," *Horizons* 1, no. 1 (1983): 4–18.

Due to their missionary emphasis from the beginning, the Latter-day Saints have encountered practical problems in communicating their beliefs across cultural boundaries. Scandinavia and Polynesia were particularly early laboratories for such attempts, but it has mainly been since 1950 that the problem of transculturizing has become urgent, as the church seriously penetrated first Japan and then other Asian countries, and eventually Africa and other areas. Successfully communicating theologies across cultural boundaries is difficult. Historians and anthropologists particularly are aware of the nigh impossibility of crossing forbidding boundaries of worldview and tongue.

This article broaches the problem by noting how ritual has come to serve as a vehicle, a language of sorts, for exploring and sharing LDS beliefs. Increasing participation by the Saints in rites with sacred content has coincided with the expansion of the LDS church into a multiplicity of host cultures. In the course of that expansion, ritual has come to serve as a simplifying medium and a unifying force.

Media beyond language have served to express matters of sacred belief and practice in every culture. Ceremony, folklore, and myth, as well as drama, come easily to mind as examples. For the modern United States with its heterogeneous population, it might be thought that no shared theology would be possible, yet seminarian John Wiley Nelson argued that the mass media—film, radio, popular literature, and especially television—regularly present a relatively unified "American cultural religion" to a majority of readers and viewers in this country. He claimed that much of television communicates "a systematically arranged set of answers to basic life-problem questions," that is, a functional equivalent to theology.[3] Formal presentations by theologians attempt to express the same thing, but Nelson felt that discussions and sermons by ecclesiastics pale to inconsequence as a cultural force when compared with TV. In television shows and other nominally entertaining media forms, people have dramatically displayed for them recipes current in our culture for managing personal and social dilemmas involving virtue, justice, evil, truth, and every sort of human relationship as well as how to resolve those dilemmas. When the media offer many options instead of a single widely shared solution, the message is changed to "Do your own thing." Viewers respond to the presentations by various forms of feedback, particularly through ratings, from which network "producer–priests" shape messages to resonate closely with what large blocs of the public currently feel and think. Nelson granted that details of the issues raised and solutions offered in this public "church" vary with

3. John W. Nelson, *Your God is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 20.

fashion and with the needs of the genre, yet he argued persuasively that the ritualized interplay of the esthetic presentations and the audience responses like tension, satisfaction, and laughter, is beyond question.

For Latter-day Saints, dramas traditionally performed in ward "amusement halls" in the first half of this century served a similar function. In 1968, Gary L. Stewart analyzed 45 plays performed frequently as part of the Mutual Improvement Association program from the 1920s into the 1960s.[4] He found a narrow range of stereotyped cultural dilemmas central to all the plays. They raised issues such as loyalty to church teachings, whether family responsibilities should take precedence over personal convenience, and other problems engendered by the competing demands of the American cultural emphasis on individual freedom versus Latter-day Saint and family solidarity. The solutions were presented in terms of traditional LDS values like obedience, optimism, and sacrifice, as well as divine intervention. The message invariably communicated was that when moral decisions are made in accordance with LDS norms, good triumphs, evil is thwarted, and the saintly protagonists figuratively ride off into the sunset as surely as in a classic western movie.

In communication terms, the plays can be seen as an extended dialogue in which the author, acting as the voice for approval-giving church authorities, offers a formulation of LDS theology applied to a familiar situation; the audience then responds collectively and individually throughout the performance.

Myth and lore also serve as communicative media to permit participants in a culture to interpret that culture in terms of ultimates and to apply the results to mundane life. Origin stories and hero tales particularly provide examples by which the inexperienced are enculturated and mature culture bearers have key values, beliefs, and actions clarified and reinforced. Thus, when Mormon missionaries are called upon to explain the nature of God or the need for a modern restoration of the gospel, they are not likely to go much beyond relating the story of Joseph Smith's first vision. Similarly, reciting the tale of how the seagulls' saved the Mormon pioneers from a disastrous cricket infestation, or of an appearance of the ultra-mortal Three Nephites, serves as a shorthand affirmation of shared belief and a guide to approved behavior in the face of challenges. The focus of church activities throughout 1997, the sesquicentennial of the Mormon pioneer trek across the plains, was to reenact that crucial historical event by as many church members in as many formats as possible.

However, the most universal mode for communicating about the

4. Gary L. Stewart, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Mormon Drama" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1968).

meaning of life and the nature of divine and human powers is, arguably, religious ritual. By religious ritual or rites I mean formal, culturally specified patterns of group behavior in which issues of ultimate significance are affirmed, reflected, or brought into thoughtful consideration in a context of divinity or the supernatural. Words are usually involved, but alone they are insufficient. Rites usually include kinesthetic motion: priests and worshippers bend, kneel, or gesture, and processions move on defined paths. Chanting, singing, and instrumental music are also often a part. Visual elements are important too: dramatic episodes, costumes, architecture, decor, and spatial placement of officiants and respondents are often crucial in a rite. The linguistic forms for religious ceremony are at least stilted, and may be so esoteric or archaic as not to be wholly decipherable by those involved. Didactic elements can be involved, but usually religious ritual makes little claim to teach in a conventional sense. Rather it tends to involve all the senses, thus constituting "thick" learning, to co-opt an apt adjective from Clifford Geertz.[5]

Latter-day Saints generally feel uncomfortable with the idea that religious rites are important in their system of practice. This stems in part from the claim that their church is historically discontinuous from other modern Christian churches, some of which Mormons have seen as excessively ritualized. More significantly, they tend to think of "spirituality," to which they give high value, as contrastive with the "mere ritual" they attribute to others. Church leaders prefer the term "ordinances" for the more obvious LDS rites, yet beyond those particular performances, rites are widely employed in Mormon religious life. The designated ordinances are only the beginning of a list of rituals considerably longer than Latter-day Saints normally recognize.

The use of these rites has increased substantially in recent LDS history. I believe this increase derives partly from the fact that rites have proven helpful in meeting a communication problem. (This is not to say that no other reasons exist.)

In the changeover of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from a regionally concentrated, culturally homogenous organization toward becoming a world church,[6] issues of "translation" became salient.[7] Several pragmatic ways have been found to reduce the problem of cross-cultural communication. Sharing rituals is one. Rituals provide a more

5. Clifford J. Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972): 1–37.

6. Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (1984): 18–27.

7. See, for example, various papers published in *Conference on the Language of the Mormons, 1974* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Language Research Center, 1974), *and Second Annual Symposium on LDS Intercultural Communications and Language Concerns, October 7–10, 1974* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Language Research Center, 1974).

nearly universal language than, say, the localized version of English used in the formative period of church development.

The extent to which Mormons currently employ religious rites can be seen in the accompanying tables. In these tables, one dimension categorizes rites according to the social scale of participation involved; the other dimension rates the degree to which religious elements dominate or infuse the activity. The participation scale ranges from individual through family group, ward, and stake congregations, and from the special case of temple congregations to general church assemblies. (Sub-groups such as quorums or classes, as well as sets of leaders at each congregational level functioning as small groups themselves, have their own less public set of rites which are not considered here.) On the second dimension, some rituals are categorized as patently religious; others are substantially religious, despite other concerns; and a third class consists of largely social rituals with significant religious involvement or overtones. The examples in the table are illustrative, not exhaustive; some historically dated, less common, or infrequently discussed rites are not even mentioned.

The ritual behavior in these activities pervades Mormon life. A normal, active Latter-day Saint could easily engage in more than 100 rites each week; for leaders, the figure would be much higher. On the other hand, to be "less active" likely means only rare participation in ritual events.

In Mormon-dominated communities, the spillover of religious ritual into secular life is ubiquitous, to the cultural consternation of non-Mormons trying to participate in those communities. Numbers gathered in my 1958 study of American Fork, Utah, illustrate this: With the help of many people in the community, I compiled a reasonably exhaustive list of every meeting with five or more persons in attendance held in the town during a two-week period. Church-initiated meetings accounted for at least 20,000 person hours, while all non-church gatherings, not counting school classes or activities, produced only 4,300 person hours.[8] Such numbers would, naturally, differ in other times and places, but the point is that for many Latter-day Saints, organized public life involves levels of religious ritual well beyond what might be found in many other modern groups.

All the behavioral patterns encompassed by the list seem to conform to my definition of religious ritual, although conventional Mormon usage would not give them all equal standing. Some deserve to be called ceremonies, because they comprise sets of component rites. Thus, the sacrament usually includes this essentially invariable sequence: (1) congregational singing; (2) breaking the bread, then kneeling (by the officiant) to

8. John L. Sorenson, "Industrialization and Social Change: A Controlled Comparison of Two Utah Communities" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1961).

Table 1
Some Latter-day Saint Religious Rituals

Individual	*Family*
Local Congregations	
PATENTLY RELIGIOUS RITUALS	Personal prayer
Testimony bearing	
Preparing, giving talk	
Blessing a meal	
Fasting	
Patriarchal blessings	
Tithing settlement	
Home teaching	
Temple attendance	
Temple recommend interview	Family prayer
Family home evenings	
Anointing the sick	
Blessing a meal	
Father's blessing	
Tithing settlement	
Funeral prayer	
Blessing and naming infant	
Scripture study	Devotional segments of any meeting (song, prayer)
Sacrament meetings	
Testimony meetings	
Sustaining and releasing officers	
Baptizing, confirming, ordaining, setting apart members	
Funerals	
Church courts	
Building dedications	
Temple dedications	
Stake conferences	
Rituals with Substantial Religious Components	Scripture study
Preparing and giving lessons	
Genealogical work	
Relief Society visiting teaching	
Journal writing and family histories	Bishopric visits
Home teaching visits	
Family reunions	
Reunion at rites of passage (i.e., infant blessings, baptisms)	Missionary farewells
Sacred holiday commemorations	
Other commemorations (i.e., Easter, Mother's Day, etc.)	
Social Rituals with Religious Components	Genealogical correspondence
Fellowshipping	Wedding receptions
Post-funeral meals and socializing	
Grave visits	Ward work events
Camping trips	
Firesides, study groups	
Youth socials	

Table 2
Additional Latter-day Saint Religious Rituals

TEMPLE	*General Church*
Patently Religious Rituals	Endowments for living and dead
Ordaining, baptizing, confirming proxies	
Initiatory ordinances for living and dead	
Sealing of living and dead	
Solemn assemblies	
	General and area conferences, including sustaining of officers
Special-occasion TV satellite programs	
Solemn assemblies to sustain new presidents of church	
Special church-wide fasts	
Substantially Religious Rituals	Submitting names for temple work
Placing names on prayer rolls	
	Missionary reunions

bless the sacrament; (3) reciting the prayer of blessing (the phrasings of the two prayers, one for the bread and one for the water, are invariable and must be repeated if a noticeable error is made), during which the congregation bows their heads and closes their eyes; (4) Aaronic Priesthood holders marching to the table and aligning themselves there; (5) passing the bread first to the presiding officer; (6) passing it then to the congregation according to a locally fixed pattern; (7) deacons realigning and marching back to the sacrament table; (8) repetition of the sequence to bless and distribute the water; and (9) at the conclusion, officiants dispersing to their seats with family members in the congregation. This ceremony may not be as formalized as the Catholic mass, but it is unquestionably ceremonial. Many activities conducted in the temple are even more elaborately ceremonial: The service in which the endowment is administered uses 99 percent prescribed language and behaviors involving hundreds of essential elements within a period of an hour and a half. The semi-annual general conference, widely shared via television, constitutes ceremony on an even larger scale.

How is theology involved when Latter-day Saints participate in these rituals? Virtually every principle and concept of the gospel are brought to attention, either explicitly or by reflection, by the repertoire of rites. In the sacrament, for instance, the worshipper is expected to ponder such matters as the death and atonement of Jesus Christ, forgiveness for one's own sins, the relationship of the Son to the Father, one's degree of obedience to the commandments, the promise of support from the Holy Spirit, the role of the priesthood as visible officiators, the sense of fraternal sharing with others of the faithful through the act, and many other points. The language, the acts, and the setting not only raise ques-

tions in these domains, but also help the worshipper develop answers. The ceremony is rich enough that repeated participation does not exhaust its possibilities, particularly because of the sensitizing and evocative setting in which it is conducted.

The entire set of words, sounds, actions, sights, and even taste in the case of the sacrament, constitutes a complex communicative medium. Amid the silence of the sacrament service, the Spirit may be thought of as "speaking" to individual worshippers about their condition. Participants "speak" to each other by presenting themselves in the appointed place and manner, and by partaking of the emblems (or, even more eloquently, by not taking them, an acknowledgement of unworthiness) as a social act. Authorities "speak" to lesser priesthood holders, and they in turn to the congregation, by positioning themselves where expected and then performing the required procedures. Worshippers even "speak" to themselves via contemplation. Appropriately, the sacrament sequence proper is considered more consequential than the minor ritual elements that precede it in the service, or than the talks which follow it.

Much of the power of this language resides in its comprehensiveness. Surely it says more, to more persons, than a mere sermon would. The church's insistence on the necessity of certain ordinances further underlines the point of the comprehensive nature of rites as communication. For example, "the mysteries of godliness," the understanding of which one is enjoined to approach through the temple ceremony, are nowhere significantly discussed in the language of ordinary learning or discourse. Minimum verbal explanation is used to lay a foundation for understanding any portion of the temple ceremony upon one's first participation, but only repeated experience of the ceremony itself is supposed to clarify or expand perception of the significance of the situation. Indeed, throughout the ceremony itself, alternation of word and act continues rhythmically to deepen and reinforce the participant's understanding. Yet even the highest church leaders and most frequent temple attenders claim they only partially understand it. In fact leaders themselves participate as laymen when they repeat the temple experience by acting as proxies on behalf of the dead.

Didactic, but symbolically involved, elements in LDS rituals are evident. The Doctrine and Covenants makes the cosmic instructional objective clear:

> To be immersed in the water and come forth out of the water is in the likeness of the resurrection of the dead in coming forth out of their graves; hence, this ordinance was instituted to form a relationship with the ordinance of baptism for the dead, being in likeness of the dead. Consequently, the baptismal font was instituted as a similitude of the grave, and was commanded to be in a place underneath where the liv-

> ing are wont to assemble, to show forth the living and the dead, and that all things may have their likeness, and that they may accord one with another—that which is earthly conforming to that which is heavenly.[9]

More obviously, the person officiating plays the role of a teacher. For example, the one performing a baptism can be said to communicate, in addition to the formulaic verbalization, something like this: "Through my authoritative action, as well as through your obedience, we are jointly manifesting essential, eternal principles as we participate in this ordinance. Treasure this experience."

A rite may also be compared to a text. Repetition, or re-exploration, is as essential in learning from ritual as it is in learning from verbal discourse. Written texts, such as the scriptures, demand repeated searching at several levels; a written sacred text's meanings are not easily exhausted. Rereading invites continuing reassessment or mental redaction; thus the reader participates in a process, not in a single event. Ritual, even where language and behavior are specified, as in the temple ceremony, functions the same as does a rich text.

Many people find such satisfaction in ritual that the forms tend almost inexorably to become more elaborate. Church officials sporadically discover manifestations of this tendency. Without going into nineteenth-century examples, we can note the elaboration of rites that took place during World War II, at a time when church supervision of local affairs was at a low ebb. After the war, some Mormon congregations in Europe were found to have begun using candles in worship services, while in Pacific islands some church members were discovered to be placing bottles of consecrated oil in house corners to protect against evil spirits. In Deseret itself, church leaders have periodically combated a tendency for local leaders to dress Aaronic priesthood youths in virtual uniforms and specify processional demeanor for them during administration of the sacrament. Also, for years many orthodox Mormons coached their children to take the bread or water only with the right hand, despite repeated statements from Salt Lake City denying any authoritative basis for such a practice. Further adjustments may lie ahead for the church in coping with this human tendency. Yet the increase in ritual to which I refer is a matter not only of elaboration, but also of frequency.

The level of activity among Latter-day Saints has increased greatly in the last half century. For instance, my American Fork study revealed that between 1928 and 1958, the amount of time spent by the average person in church meetings increased by almost 700 percent.[10] Since it is in meet-

9. D&C 128:12–13.

10. Sorenson, "Industrialization and Social Change," 181.

ings where much ritual occurs, the number of rites experienced by the average person must have also increased greatly. In the subsequent four decades, the figure could easily have doubled again. In geographical areas beyond Deseret, the increase is likely to have been of the same magnitude.

Family rituals are also more frequent and general now than at most times in the past. Additionally, more officers are set apart, more members participate in conferences, and the increased number of temples around the world has meant a marked rise in the proportion of members who participate in that heavily ceremonial setting. In fact, the huge increase in temples has been brought about precisely so that ritual participation by members might be multiplied.

While ritual has increased, formal theologizing has decreased. Both tendencies, I suspect, have been related to the increasing cultural diversity of members. In the early decades of this century when the major systematizers of Mormon theology—Talmage, Roberts, Ballard, Widtsoe, and the young Joseph Fielding Smith—were active, most of the Latter-day Saints lived in "Deseret" and shared a common cultural background and language. Today, members in over a hundred nations and from very differing educational and class backgrounds share much less in experience, ideas, standards, and especially language. Efforts are indeed made to teach them the special Mormon vocabulary and to gain some acquaintance with the essential history of the church through standardized lessons and media presentations, but the faster growth proceeds, the less quickly and completely comprehensive internal learning of Mormon culture can be realized. The need for a minimal unity of the diverse membership might be met by simply increasing the rate of verbal communication from headquarters to the members, but that solution is hampered by literacy, translation, and economic constraints. For example, the church has its own satellite system to reach some areas, but it does not extend worldwide and remains only lightly used. One response has been to rely on the scriptures as a unifier. The theme "Study the Scriptures" is constantly stressed. Scriptural language thus provides, partially at least, a minimally shared set of terms and symbols for the conduct of church communication. Meanwhile, in doctrinal matters, basic principles are emphasized, for extended theological discussion can only be divisive, given the great differences in background and experience of members. With so many new members having limited knowledge of scripture, church history, or the language of LDS discourse in Utah, it is little wonder that communication among the Saints about theology in its usual sense is stifled.

The increase in ritual helps fill this gap. The universal quasi-language provided by the sacred events in which members participate—baptism, prayer, the sacrament, family home evening, ordination, temple

ordinances—applies wherever Mormons live, as much in Japan, Nigeria, or Poland as in St. George or Dallas. The labored, bookish, nineteenth-century vocabulary used by James E. Talmage in once-popular theological treatises such as *The Articles of Faith* is being largely ignored, but the core experiential language of the ceremonies speaks immediately to new and old members alike.

Moreover, there is a helpful ambiguity to ritual so that specifications and definitions do not have to be spelled out. Mark Leone argued that the LDS system currently leaves individuals substantial freedom to shape their own configurations of belief. By a "do-it-yourself-theology," he observed, members who are exposed to questions of belief in instructional classes end up resolving the issues for themselves because instruction normally pretends to few authoritative answers on issues of real moment to the participants (whatever the lesson manual writers might have intended those issues would be).[11] Individuals settle upon their answers in terms which fit their spiritual, social, cultural, and psychological circumstances and needs. The instructional materials do, of course, direct the attention of all the saints to certain topics chosen by the leadership, as well as setting limits, usually phrased in scriptural terms, to how much variance one is allowed in interpretation. Still, Mormons have been able to articulate personal versions of their gospel with lifestyles and sociopolitical ideologies as varied as vegetarianism, apartheid, liberalism, capitalism, fundamentalism, socialism, libertarianism, militarism, and pacifism. One can shape one's Mormonism into more or less agreement with any of those ideological or political positions, it appears.[12]

The core beliefs one must hold in order to retain standing in the church are few, but all are expressed and reiterated in the rites and ceremonies. Mormons have apparently come to maintain such unity as prevails on the basis of conformity to and acceptance of the crucial rites, more than through linguistic discourse about doctrine. Interestingly, many members who might appear on the grounds of everyday behavior and words to have lapsed from loyalty to the church still manifest a core commitment by calling on the elders for the ritual of anointing the sick.

Increased participation in ritual will predictably compound the tendency toward individual interpretation. We have already noted that the temple ordinances are not significantly explained or interpreted. Even baptism is little discussed, aside from a brief review of certain related

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11. Mark P. Leone, *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 167–93.

12. Compare Sorenson, "Conflict between Mormon Folk and Mormon Elite," and A. Bert Horsley, "The Consideration of a Possible Heretical Trend Developing in the Religious Philosophy of the Latter-day Saint People in a Given Geographical Area" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1954).

scriptures plus a few traditional statements, about which many members remain somewhat vague. Meanwhile, the format for the rite of prayer is so loose that a contact being instructed by LDS missionaries can hear the essential guidelines for prayer in about one minute. Thus, prayer is pretty much what Mormons make of it in the act, and it is the same with nearly all the other sacred rites. Members are left to their own exegeses of these behavioral texts.

Whether by plan or by the unintended force of events, the increased use of ritual among the Latter-day Saints seems to be providing a universal language, a *lingua franca*, which all may share beyond the hundred discursive tongues of today's officiants. I have suggested that one consequence of increased ritual is the shrinking of formal theological talk; Latter-day Saints now more often share experiences and testimonies in the church setting without doing much defining of terms or arguing issues of belief. Nor do most of us consult or desire theological handbooks, however they might be labeled. Increased reliance on communication through ritual seems to be moving believers toward an ideal mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants: "[M]an should not counsel his fellow man" because "every man might speak in the name of God."[13] The consequences of this tendency for other aspects of Mormon life remain to be seen, but they are likely to be substantial.

13. D&C 1:19–20.