

Defending Magic: Explaining the Necessity of Ordinances

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IN THIS PAPER I WANT TO DEAL with a large gap in Christian theology, in general, and in LDS theology, in particular. The gap is the lack of explanation of the moral necessity of religious ordinances or "sacraments." I will explore three possible explanations, of these I will argue that the only theory that can explain the necessity of ordinances is the one that is the most difficult to believe. My method will be analytic, and I will not, in this paper, be concerned with scriptural interpretation. However, I do believe that any view of ordinances should answer to the data found in the scriptures.

DEFINITIONS.

By 'ordinance' I mean *a ritualized action that is supposed to have religious significance*. To say that an ordinance is *efficacious* is to say that the ordinance is successful in achieving its purpose. Generally, the purpose of an ordinance is to make us better people. It should be clear, I think, that ordinances are often efficacious, even if only psychosomatically. The question is how they are efficacious and whether or not this entails that they are also necessary. The sense in which we claim that ordinances are *necessary* is that they are supposed to be necessary for salvation (i.e., LDS *exaltation*). Ordinances are individualized with respect to necessity. That is, the performance of a certain ordinance *for me* is necessary for my *salvation*, and a separate instance of the same kind of ordinance must be performed for you in order for you to be saved. Ordinances are not thought to be sufficient for salvation, however. Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Mormonism all claim that there are ordinances that are necessary for salvation. For Mormonism, they are baptism, confirmation, sacrament, endowment, and temple marriage. The question is how are these ordinances efficacious and why should they be necessary for salvation? The hope is that once we understand how they work, then we will understand why they are necessary.

THE SIGNIFICANCE PROBLEM

There are two problems with the proposition that ordinances are necessary. The first problem is a fairly common one, and I doubt that any seriously religious person has not thought about it at one time or another. I will call this the *Significance Problem*. Perhaps the best way to see this problem is to think about the *Case of the Recalcitrant Saint*. In this case, there is a Catholic who, like Mother Theresa, spends her whole life in the service of humanity. She dies believing that Catholic theology is true. So, in the *spirit prison* she rejects the LDS missionaries. Is she to be denied salvation on the basis of this action? It seems absurd to say "yes." In fact, faithful Latter-day Saints who want to answer this question are often tempted with the idea that people like Mother Theresa will eventually accept the message and the LDS ordinances. This is to deny the possibility of the Case of the Recalcitrant Saint. This denial seems very implausible, but it is a way of avoiding the absurdity of saying that the Recalcitrant Saint will be denied salvation.

I think the reason we think that a Recalcitrant Saint should not be denied a place in the Celestial Kingdom is that there is a difference between the moral significance of the life-actions of the Saint and the action of an ordinance. Sainly actions, such as feeding the poor, are *prima facie* morally good. There is something about the action itself that makes it good—e.g., it relieves suffering. But the action of performing an ordinance is *prima facie* neither morally good nor morally evil, and, hence, it is not morally significant. Indeed, in and of itself, being immersed in water does not seem as though it should have any effect on whether or not someone is a good person. Anticipating later discussion, one might argue that it is not the immersion itself, but the symbolism that is important. However, many things could symbolize the same thing (i.e., the death of the life of sin and the rebirth into a new life). So, the mere fact that ordinances are symbolic does not explain why they would be necessary.

THE CONVENTIONAL PROBLEM

The second problem with the claim that ordinances are necessary is not as common as the first problem since it depends on some technical notions. I will call it the *Conventional Problem*. As we have already mentioned, ordinances are symbolic. But this means that they are *conventional* in the sense that we could have picked many different types of actions to serve as the ordinances. For example, instead of immersion in water, we could have picked the burying of artifacts associated with one's sins. To put it another way, the kinds of actions that we pick to be ordinances seem to be arbitrary. But what is arbitrary and conventional certainly can't be really necessary, since it could have been different.

One might point out that there are necessities that exist internally to

any given symbolic system. For example, in English, 'All bachelors are unmarried' is necessarily true. This is the case even though the word 'bachelor' means what it means in English only by the conventions that we have adopted. In fact, some philosophers have argued that all necessary truth is to be explained in this way. However, this observation will not help in solving the Conventional Problem. This is because the necessity that is supposed to attach to an ordinance is not merely the necessary truth of a proposition, but rather the necessity of the ordinance being a prerequisite for salvation.

SOLUTIONS AND THEORIES OF EFFICACY

In order to explain how ordinances are necessary, we will need to formulate a theory of how ordinances work that solves the Significance Problem and the Conventional Problem. I will entertain three theories. I claim that two of these theories seem to be plausible explanations of how ordinances are efficacious, but do not explain how the ordinances are necessary. The third theory does explain how ordinances are necessary, but is (perhaps) a less plausible explanation of how ordinances are efficacious.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

The first theory as to how ordinances are efficacious is that they affect us psychologically. The idea is that baptism (for example) might cause a psychological change in the person that affects this person's moral nature. In this way, the Significance Problem is solved since baptism becomes a morally significant action insofar as it affects our moral character. Clearly, even if the *Psychological Theory* is not the only reason baptism is efficacious, it is at least one of the reasons. Indeed, anything can effect a change in someone if that person thinks it will cause a change.

However, the problem with the Psychological Theory should be obvious. If the Psychological Theory gives us *the* explanation for why ordinances are efficacious, then it does not explain why they are necessary. One problem is that psychology is not universal. In particular, what affects one person in one way does not affect another person in the same way. So, the fact that baptism may morally change some people does not mean that it will change everyone. A second and perhaps worse problem for this theory is the fact that if baptism can affect us psychologically—making us better people—then so can any number of other actions: twelve-step programs, for example. Why should baptism be necessary for everyone? Therefore, it should be clear that the Psychological Theory does not respond to the Conventional Problem.

One response to these problems is the *Hard-Wired Response*. The idea behind this response is to say that psychology *is* universal. Humans are hard-wired so that the act of baptism will affect them morally. However,

it is not clear how this helps to respond to the fact that many things can affect us psychologically, unless the hard-wired response also includes the claim that people are hard-wired so that *only* baptism will affect them in a morally positive way. But now this response is getting very implausible. Indeed, it should be called the *Hypnosis Response* since it sounds as if it claims that God hypnotized us before this life so that we would have a universal and exclusive reaction to baptism.

Another problem with the Hard-Wired Response is that it makes ordinances necessary at the expense of explaining why they are morally significant. Indeed, why should God hard-wire us so that only baptism will have a positive moral effect on us? What is so morally significant about baptism? The Hard-Wired Response does not answer this question.

Another response admits that the psychological effects of baptism are not universal but asserts that they are common enough that God requires them for everybody. Perhaps he requires them for everybody just to make things simpler. Of course, this response seems to be problematic because it does not seem fair for those who are in the psychological minority. These people can change without baptism, or, alternatively, they won't even be affected by baptism. God should treat them differently because they are in a different situation.

This seems to indicate that to the extent that we solve the Moral Significance Problem we fail to solve the Conventional Problem and vice versa. The problems work against each other. Indeed, consider both of these responses to the problems encountered by the Psychological Theory. These responses explain the necessity of ordinances in terms of the Psychological Theory only to run up against a kind of moral arbitrariness. Why would God hard-wire us so that baptism is necessary? Why would God treat those for whom baptism does not work the same as those for whom it does?

I fail to see that there are any other responses to the problems with the Psychological Theory that would work here. So, I conclude that the Psychological Theory in its most plausible form does not explain why baptisms are necessary. This theory is, however, a very plausible theory as to how ordinances are efficacious. Certainly, there is a psychological effect that results from these kinds of symbolic acts. Of course, one might just give up the necessity of ordinances. But then this is to give up a central aspect of Mormon theology. For those of us who take Mormon theology seriously, we need another way out.

THE CONTRACT THEORY

The main idea behind the *Contract Theory* is the idea of a social contract. Social Contract Theory goes back to Thomas Hobbes (at least) and centers on the claim that morality comes about as a result of a (perhaps

tacit) contract that is made between moral agents. According to this theory, you do something wrong only because you break a tacit agreement that you have made. Now applying this idea to the problem of the efficacy of ordinances, we might claim that participating in an ordinance is like signing on the dotted line of a contract. By doing this, one puts oneself under obligations that might not exist otherwise. This makes the act of participating in an ordinance a morally significant event. This is what makes an ordinance efficacious. And clearly this gives us a response to the Significance Problem, since it entails that ordinances are morally significant.

One problem with the Contract Theory of ordinance is the *Problem of Different Signatures*. It is not clear why only baptism can count as a signing of the contract. Indeed, can't I just say "I hereby commit myself to do all the same things that people being baptized commit themselves to do" and thereby be included in precisely the same contract as those who are baptized? To put it another way, it is not clear that the Social Contract Theory responds to the Conventional Problem.

A second problem with the Contract Theory is that it is based on a very problematic moral theory: Social Contract Theory. Surely moral obligation does not come from tacit contracts. Indeed, we can easily formulate contracts that are unjust. Those involved in organized crime do this.

The main response to the Problem of Different Signatures is that baptism is the only signature that matters because God will only accept this signature. A contract is only good if it is recognized. So, only baptism can count as the right kind of signature. However, this response doesn't work because it doesn't answer the question at hand. Why should God only recognize one kind of signature? What is so special about this signature? The Contract Theory does not tell us why God should only accept a certain kind of signature.

The problem that we are encountering here is that we can seemingly explain why an ordinance is a morally significant event, but we cannot explain why it can be conventional and also necessary. Or, on the other hand, we can explain why it is necessary at the cost of explaining why it is morally significant. Perhaps baptism is necessary if God mandates that baptism is the only acceptable signature. But then if God will only allow baptism as a signature, then why is this the case? Without a substantive answer, this claim seems arbitrary, and flies in the face of the Significance Problem.

THE MAGIC THEORY

The main claim of the *Magic Theory* of the efficacy of ordinances is that an ordinance is an event that, like an incantation, causes something supernatural to happen. In particular, the idea is that baptism brings about a supernatural change in the moral nature of the person baptized.

Surely this theory, if true, would explain why ordinances are efficacious. The question is whether or not it would explain why they are necessary.

But before we go on to discuss whether or not the Magic Theory explains the necessity and efficacy of ordinances, we need to discuss what is meant by “supernatural” in this context. Indeed, by ‘supernatural’ I do not mean what is usually meant. A supernatural event is not one that transcends natural law. Instead, it is merely an event that transcends our understanding of natural law. So, in this view supernatural events are really perfectly natural. The point is that the Magic Theory asserts that baptism affects the natural world directly and thereby attains its effectiveness. This is different than the Psychological Theory that asserts that the effectiveness of ordinances comes via our mental attitudes or the Contract Theory that asserts that the effectiveness of ordinances comes via an increase in moral obligations. As far as I understand it, this characterization fits well with what is often called “The Magic World View” since the latter involves the belief that the world can be directly affected by ritualized actions.

We need to be more specific about how—according to the Magic Theory—there is a real physical change in the person undergoing/performing an ordinance. Of course, the mechanism of change could be a variety of different kinds of things. But I am going to tell one story that is based in Mormon folk theology and so may be familiar to some readers. This story presupposes that some kind of animism is true, i.e., all things are, in some robust sense, alive. So, for example, according to Orson Pratt, everything is composed of “uncuttable” atoms, and each one of these has a degree of “intelligence” or consciousness.¹ Now, if all things are alive, then perhaps it could be the case that we could communicate with things such as rocks, trees, etc. What would be the language of communication? Clearly, the idea of the Magic Theory is that the language of communication is ordinances. So, when we get baptized, it is like saying “I am sorry for what I have done and I am turning over a new leaf.” This is communicated to the intelligences of the world around and within us.

The next assumption that we need is that when we sin we cause a physical/spiritual² change in ourselves that makes us unworthy. The idea that there is such a change is not implausible in Mormon theology since we claim that all spirit is matter and sin affects us spiritually. It follows that sin must affect us spiritually. This material change needs to be “undone.” The material stuff—let’s call this stuff *elements*—that composes us sees baptism as the call to undo the negative physical effects of

1. The Absurdities of Immaterialism,” *The Essential Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 61-108.

2. Of course, the physical and the spiritual are inseparable in Mormon theology.

sin. And without undoing these effects, we are unworthy and physically incapable of being saved. There are many ways that this could be the case. For example, it could be that by sinning, our brains change in such a way that makes it very much more difficult or even impossible to do what is right. Someone or something needs to change our brains back to the way they were.

This sounds like so much science fiction. And yet it is not totally unfamiliar to a Mormon audience. One even gets the sense that when Orson Scott Card includes this sort of metaphysics in his novels, he takes it more seriously than just a background for an interesting story. And he certainly has a basis in the work of people like Orson Pratt for such a view.

Notice that the Magic Theory would explain the efficacy, necessity, and moral significance of ordinances. Ordinances work because they change our very physical nature and, thus, change our abilities to do right or wrong. They are necessary because our ability to do right or wrong must change in order for us to become like God. They are morally significant because our ability to do right or wrong is morally significant.

One objection to the Magic Theory is that it is no better than the Contract Theory. Indeed, as we pointed out above, the Contract Theorist could argue that the reason that ordinances are necessary is that God will accept baptism alone as an expression of repentance. The problem with this is that it does not explain why God should only accept baptism. But then why should things be any different for the Magic Theory? Indeed, why should the elements accept only baptism as a sign of repentance?

The response to this objection is that the elements are stupid and God is not. The elements only know one language. They do not recognize any other way of expressing repentance. In the case of the Contract Theory, we can accuse God of being morally arbitrary. But we cannot accuse the elements of the same thing because they just don't understand enough.

Another objection to the Magic Theory is that even within the church the ordinances have changed. Indeed, we are all familiar with the change of the temple ceremony. But if this is the case, then how can we be sure that the elements can really understand what is being said?

A possible response to this objection is that the changes to the ordinances have been cosmetic and do not change the ordinance in any fundamental way. This implies that the ordinances are incredibly ancient and perhaps even eternal. It seems strange to say that we did not invent these ordinances.

Of course, the main objection to the Magic Theory is just that it is incredibly implausible. The world just does not behave this way. We can't tell the elements what to do and have them listen to us. Instead, they are merely mechanistic "obeyers" of natural laws. The elements are not alive and do not carry any degree of intelligence. This may make good science fiction, but it does not make rational religion.

In response to this objection, I should make two points. First, any serious religion that is not just some version of secular humanism in religious clothing makes substantive claims that we have no reason to believe on scientific grounds. Christianity claims that Jesus resurrected and that Mary got pregnant without having sex. Moreover, it claims that we will resurrect and continue to live after this life. How is this any more outlandish than a story in which the elements make decisions and respond to communication?

Second, nothing in science rules out the kind of story that we have told about ordinances. In fact, some seem to think that quantum mechanics tells us that there is intelligence at the very foundation of physical reality. If the Magic Theory is irrational, it is not because it contradicts science but only because it goes beyond it. And if that is the case, then all of religion is irrational, and we should just abandon it completely.

A final objection focuses on the fact that Mormons believe in vicarious ordinances. How does the Magic Theory fit with vicarious ordinances? It seems that the answer is "not very well." Indeed, vicarious ordinances do not involve the physical participation of the person for whom the ordinance is being performed. But doesn't the Magic Theory require physical participation in the ordinance? If so, then the magic theory requires, at least, that the person for whom the vicarious baptism is being performed must be present at this event. Perhaps, if the elements are so dumb that they cannot distinguish between the proxy and the person for whom she proxies, then vicarious baptism requires possession. Here Mormonism sounds less like an Orson Scott Card novel and more like the Exorcist. But is this a reason to reject it?

CONCLUSION

Initially, the Magic Theory appears to be the least plausible view of the efficacy of ordinances. We think that people who believe such things are superstitious, uneducated, and unsophisticated. But perhaps these people are really recognizing the presupposed conditions of the necessity of ordinances. The Psychological Theory and the Contract Theory are much more plausible. They don't involve any mechanisms that a well-educated, scientifically minded, person wouldn't accept. They don't require much in the way of faith. But they fail to explain why ordinances are necessary. Instead, they seem to imply that ordinances are optional. In the end, Mormon theology requires more. It requires a robust theory that may offend a secular world-view. It requires seeing the world as a magical, fantastic place. But this shouldn't be too surprising. After all, a religion that does not require us to believe anything substantive that extends beyond what a minimalist scientism would allow is surely not worth the effort.