

# Our Big Fat Temple Weddings: Who's In. Who's Out. And How We Get Together.

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THE POPULAR FILM *MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING* suggests that ethnic families will flood pell mell into any space provided by a family member who announces she or he is getting married. In the case of writer/actor Nia Vardalos's paean to Greek-American culture, the results are funny, raucous, even slightly grotesque. Her groom who falls in love with a spinster waitress is a sort of white-bread Protestant himself. Along with his stiff Anglo-parents, he becomes completely absorbed by the overwhelming insistence of well-meaning Greeks living in a sort of parallel universe. In this universe eccentric, big-haired women and loud-mouthed men assume that any comet within a light year is not only fair game, but needs and desires (even without knowing it) to be pulled in by gravity and stuffed with grape leaves and feta cheese. In other words, to be converted to a more rewarding way of life, however peculiar.

This, of course, brings me to Mormons, a self-identifying peculiar people and arguably their own ethnic group. The marketing for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* revolves around that film's graphic title in which a number of other groups spontaneously appear in place of the word "Greek" and suggest that the show could go on marinated in Mexican, Jewish, or any number of American subcultures. So what might a movie entitled, *My Big Fat Mormon Wedding* look like? In my experience, it would not be a light comedy eventually optioned by television for a sitcom.

I have ten sisters, all of whom, as of last year, have married in the temple. I was able to witness the marriage of only three—two because they were first married civilly and another because, at the time, I was still considered "temple worthy." In an earlier marriage of my own, I left my brother, a brother-in-law, my best friend, the family of my convert

wife, and others outside while we trundled through the quiet rooms of the Manti Temple before settling into one dominated by a Persian carpet. There, the president of the temple performed the ceremony. This man first made the point that the exchange of rings was not a part of the actual LDS ordinance, but that if we wanted to step to the side of the altar, we could exchange rings there. I told him we were planning to do the ring exchange later at a luncheon so that everyone could participate in at least part of the celebration. The president, however, insisted that this was not going to happen on his watch. He said that the brethren were discouraging added ceremonies in rooms outside the House of the Lord. "Where are the rings?" he asked. And I looked to my new wife, who looked at her maid of honor, who stood as if in a tribunal and announced that they were in the dressing room downstairs. While we waited for her to return with the rings, it did not occur to me, nor presumably to anyone else in the room, to challenge this temple president who in essence had ordered us not to participate in a marriage custom (outside the temple) which he and the church claimed had no ritual meaning.

Over a decade later, I still replay this scene in my mind from time to time. I like to imagine myself—married for just minutes—grabbing the rings from the maid of honor, flinging off my temple garb, pulling my beloved by the hand to the window (which somehow opens. . .the heavy drapes crumpling dramatically to the floor), throwing a kiss to the wedding party, bursting through the window and, with my bride clinging to me fearfully, rappelling safely down the flanks of the temple, while white-clothed temple workers pad after us in not-so-hot, slippers pursuit.

Instead, my bride and I exchanged rings altar-side under the approving eyes of the temple president and family members deemed worthy of watching, and then shuffled downstairs shamefacedly to change into our street clothes and greet the uninvited who were waiting for us outside. That morning was filled with convoluted feelings. While I felt ashamed for excluding loved ones from the temple ordinance, I also remember feeling a little smug as well, like a child on the playground who holds a secret and makes sure everyone knows that there is a secret being kept from them. While I felt embarrassed by a certain injustice at the hands of the temple president, I also felt as if my new bride and I were descending from the Persian Room, in the phrase of William Wordsworth, "trailing clouds of glory." It felt good and bad. After all, privilege is an enervating salve, however temporary, to what the Mormon Alliance has termed "spiritual abuse."

Now that I am no longer LDS, having resigned my membership, other things seem more important to me than ring-exchanging protocol. I knew, as everyone presumably does who leaves the institutional church, that I would never be able to enter the temple again. Even so, the LDS church, followed by its members, seems to have become more and

more restrictive not only about temple admittance, but the mere accommodation of non-Mormon or “non-worthy” family members and friends. For example, bishops restrict the content of funeral services; young people with certain sexual histories are not allowed on missions; devout Latter-day Saints more and more often show condescension toward the religions of those who have married into the family by holding that, at minimum, any non-Mormon will always be fair game for conversion.

How are non-Mormons or non-card-carrying Mormons to make a connection to the faithful Latter-day Saint? It is my opinion that the church which promotes strong family bonds has had its own best intentions countermanded by an obligation to protect religious principles. In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the Anglo-Protestant outsiders give in to the more aggressive family in a sort of If-you-can’t-beat-’em-join-’em sigh of resignation. What could they have done differently? I suppose they could have resisted the Greek overtures, insisted on some of their own traditions, engaged in debates over the insensitivity of the Greek way of life—maybe even resorted to sabotage. But that would have been a very different movie. As it would have been had the movie bothered to explore exactly how any of these responses from outsiders might be interpreted by a family that seemed to have an unflinching need to see itself in a certain, totalizing way.

In Mormon circles maybe there is, in fact, a place not only for resignation, but also resistance to an organization that sometimes feels like a juggernaut. Even though the gospel mission, embodied by the church, is to encourage, to enlighten, and even “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39), the institution can seem powerful and all-encompassing in a way that, however unintended, effectively squelches free agency. In my experience the authority of the church runs in a continuum from the upper quorums, through the church, into the family, and, finally, to the terminus of the individual. As free agents at the bottom of this pile, do Latter-day Saints have only two options, to acquiesce to the system, or to resist it?

Is there a third option?

The bi-polar choice that many Mormons feel of being either for or against the Lord’s kingdom is, in my view, shaped by a fusion of church, family, and individual. Mormonism is a totalizing way of life, and little distinction seems to be made among church, culture, doctrine, history, family bonds, or various church programs. Nor, for that matter, among any other enterprises in a Mormon’s life. Many of us were taught, for example, that it is our obligation to the non-Mormons we encounter to share the gospel with them. This was particularly true on our missions where a bus ride with even one potential convert on it was an important opportunity. Some of us held tightly to the most extreme injunction re-

lated to this idea which was the notion that if someone in our purview should never be introduced to the gospel and, thus, never saved, the eternal loss would be on our heads.

I think there is a difference between what I am calling fusion—the melting together of different things—and seeing things “Mormonly,” a variation of Emily Dickinson’s “seeing things New Englandly.”<sup>1</sup> I am not talking about a lens through which we see, but rather a mass of experience that, when we find ourselves in it, gives us a powerful sense of belonging, but at the same time confuses us and arguably arrests our sense of self. Surely one reason church authorities warn us against criticizing the church or its leaders is that criticism can undermine a hierarchical system, and, following the fuzzy imperative of fusion, undermine culture, doctrine, history, family bonds, church programs, and ultimately the defined individual him or herself. Personally, it can reveal that the sense of self at the end of that very long train of authoritative determination is, nonetheless, fragile. That, in any case, has been my experience.

I don’t know exactly what the alchemy is that has brought me and others like me to a place where we do not know where a religious system ends and our family begins or where our family ends and we as individuals begin, but I suspect it has to do with fear. A religious system, like any system, has the potential to move from lofty theory about serving individuals to perpetuating its own existence at any cost, including the cost of the individual—especially at the cost of the individual.

I am reminded of the Russian novelist Vassily Aksyonov who, writing in exile about the Soviet Union, introduces us through a series of novels to the fictional Gradov family, including Nikita Gradov. In one scene from the novel *War and Jail*, Nikita is being honored as a war hero at the Kremlin and feels enormous pride just being in the presence of the Soviet leaders. But almost simultaneously he has a fantasy about machine-gunning them down. These are the men, after all, who sent him and his wife and his brother to the camps where they suffered horribly. In an interview, Aksyonov talks about how common it was for Russians to feel “convoluted in their feelings” about their homeland and government.<sup>2</sup> When he was ten years old, he was nominated for Lenin’s Young

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1. Another definition of “fusion” is instructive. From *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* (unabridged), 1983: “in optics, the act of bringing the eyes in visual line so that the rays from a single point fall on corresponding localities in each eye and are conveyed to a single visual center, producing the impression of one.”

The phrase “see Mormonly” and its borrowing from Dickinson’s line, “because I see New Englandly” are Lavina Fielding Anderson’s in an email to me dated May 28, 1998.

2. Sean Abbott, “Off with Stalin’s Underpants: Vassily Aksyonov talks about his tragicomic Soviet epic,” an interview in *At Random* (Spring 1996): 21-27. All of my information about Aksyonov’s personal life and the connection of his work to Tolstoy is from this article.

Pioneers and was ceremoniously presented a red scarf as a symbol of his belonging. Even though five years earlier, both of Aksyonov's parents had been sent to separate camps, he reports of receiving the scarf, "I was dying of happiness. That was the utmost happiness to me, to be a Young Pioneer."<sup>3</sup>

Why did Aksyonov, like the fictional Nikita, sometimes experience the Soviet Union in this convoluted way: horrified by the state persecution while, at the same time, craving its approval? Perhaps it was because, as a Soviet citizen, he had been conditioned to think that the only alternative to utter fealty to the state was a kind of outer darkness. Perhaps it was because he feared for his own survival and for that of his family if he did not buy into the propaganda that Mother Russia could *only* be the Soviet Union—and vice versa—particularly when there was an outside enemy always bearing down on Moscow, as the Nazis were during Nikita's lifetime. There was no identity for either Nikita or Aksyonov outside of the one prescribed, ordered, and manipulated by the Soviet system. Belonging to the group became the most important thing in life.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the Soviet Union even if I can sometimes understand Steve Benson's impulse to intone that, "Temple Square is Red Square."<sup>4</sup> But I believe it is instructive to compare systems. While I cannot speak for others, I can say that in my twelve year absence from church participation, I have met scores and scores of Mormons like me, who for years have felt a fierce need to defend the system that injured them and their families. In an effort to break out of the fusion that is our fix, some of us have imploded in self-loathing, and self-destructive behavior. We have behaved as though we believed that the only way to respond to our injuries is to *react*, and thus *re-enact* toward ourselves and others the injury and even the spiritual violence that was our experience. In short, some of us seem to have become the very thing we ran away from, which is to say we never got away. To me it is the bitterest of ironies that fellow Mormons, even church leaders, are fond of saying about these fringe sisters and brothers with whom I ally myself, "Yes, they can leave the church. . .but they can't leave it alone."

So I would like to return to the question of whether there is a third option besides acquiescence or opposition to a church that often seems to many of us more interested in social, even political control than in demonstrating (even Mormon) religious values. If there is, I suspect it

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3. *Ibid.*, 27.

4. Walt Jayroe, "Drawing the Line On Religion" (1994), <http://www.lds-mormon.com/benson1.shtml>

will first require sorting out the fusion of our experience so that we are not just reacting impulsively to something experientially overwhelming. I am not an advocate of leaving the church, either through inactivity or through a formal exit. But I am saying that one must rigorously delineate church from doctrine, doctrine from culture, culture from family, and family from self, thereby providing—in the interstices—a space for the soul and subsequently character to develop. Then, instead of just living a reactionary life, a genuine and meaningful response to our experience can occur.

By soul I do not mean only the union of the physical body to the spirit body, but soul in the sense of meaning, passion, and voice. To me, soul is the engine that drives identity from adolescence to adulthood, from idolization to mature engagement. Soul is that transcendent intimation we sometimes feel limning the strict socialization of our children. It is the raw identity borne out of the intelligence that we see as co-eternal with God. Soul is a voice that is not hewn or shaped, but emerges in a space that opens up between struggle and intuition. I believe that the emergence of soul is a pre-condition to any option other than becoming either a blank cog in a machine's wheels or a Luddite, attempting to burn down the machine altogether. Soul, I'm convinced, is the pre-condition to character, to self-directed choice, to free-agency as it was intended to be.

Let me suggest what a third option is not. A third option does not involve our changing the LDS church whose job, as a system, is to do exactly what it's doing: survive until Christ's return. One could argue that any form of survival involves an ability to manipulate one's environment. One could also argue that manipulation of human thinking and motivation demands intense indoctrination. Indoctrination is where I believe the church impacts our lives most directly. That is, I believe the church's position on political agendas, policies, and procedures is the only way it can define what it is and, once again, following the imperative of fusion, who *we* are. That is the church's job. But *my* job as a Mormon—a term I use, of course, in the broadest sense—is to determine who *I* am.

A third option does not rely on an organization re-shaped in our own image. If the church is totalitarian, and I believe one could argue that it is,<sup>5</sup> then totalitarianism is its own enemy. No one need throw rocks from the wings. If we believe the cultural theorist, Mikhail Epstein—yet an-

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5. Definition of *totalitarian* (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* [Unabridged]): "designating, of, or characteristic of a government or state in which one political party or group maintains complete control and refuses to recognize, and as a consequence suppresses, all other political parties." Can refer to a regime or doctrine. *Authoritarian*: "believ-

other Russian—“[o]ur redemption from totalitarianism lies in totalitarianism itself.” Specifically, Epstein writes about “The Totalitarianism of Ideas.” He says that only when ideas are conversant with their limitations can their absolute content be revealed, a content that makes, according to him, “a humiliating farce of their claims to totality, and thereby restores the authentic meaning.”<sup>6</sup>

The authentic meaning of Mormonism. What could that be? Without diverting too far from my subject, I would like to suggest that authentic meaning of any kind lies, not in what a system dictates meaning to be—an ideology—but in the conversation between an idea and an individual soul, much as Joseph Smith’s First Vision could be seen as a conversation between a unique 14-year-old boy and the idea that God “giveth liberally” (James 1:5) to the one who asks.<sup>7</sup>

A third option need not entail burning down the house, so to speak. Mormons are not being sent to the gulag by church leaders, even if it sometimes feels that way. And even if they were, would it be a desirable outcome for the church somehow to be dismantled? I ask this even as I honor my own experience and the experience of others who feel they’ve been injured, even terribly wronged not just by actions of the institutional church, but through the character assassination that often occurs in a climate of fear when individuals find themselves outside the group.

Perhaps this is what Aksyonov illustrates best in his trilogy about

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ing in, relating to, or characterized by unquestioning obedience to authority rather than individual freedom of judgment and action.” The LDS church is totalitarian in the way it uses its authority to suppress and manipulate information, the way it intimidates dissidents through church courts (sometimes secretly instigated by the hierarchy) and the way it, perhaps unwittingly, uses the persistent fear of exclusion and disapproval which individuals feel in highly conformist groups. This phenomenon is far from uncommon and has a very contemporary corollary in the way the current administration can rely on Americans’ fear of being disloyal to keep criticism of the Iraqi war and, thus, public action against that war at bay.

6. Mikhail N. Epstein, “On the Totalitarianism of Ideas,” translated by Eve Adler, *The New England Review* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 11. A fuller quote from Epstein: “Our redemption from totalitarianism lies in totalitarianism itself, but only if it is carried through to the end. . . . [Eventually,] it attains the ultimate totalism—and splits its sides laughing at the realization of its own relativity. The comic utopia. The totalitarian grotesque.” Epstein continues, saying that despite an idea’s “descent to the abysses of ideology, every idea, however comically incongruous in its pretensions to total dominion, still contains a positive, life-enhancing moment.”

7. Epstein makes a distinction between religion and ideology; the first is immune from becoming the second if “it admits its own imperfection in relation to [God]” or “the existence of an Absolute outside itself, beyond the limit of its own knowledge and mastery” (Epstein, 12). Such a concession is almost a religious given, and yet I believe that a church can sometimes operate less as a religion, as Epstein defines it, and more as an ideology. What I am exploring in this essay is the LDS church as it operates ideologically.

the Gradov family, beginning with *Generations of Winter*: he details brilliantly what he calls “the gigantic pandemonium of human arbitrariness.”<sup>8</sup> He shows how the family home changes from a sort of fortress against outsiders to a trap; how suspicion of fellow comrades seems to build organically; how a mere glance can equal treason; how the system gets placed above even family because the very fact that someone, including one’s own father, is arrested reveals that person’s guilt; how leaders justify universal oppression by claiming that the fate of the system as a whole is currently being decided. . . along with the fate of the nation; how arrests begin to take on the veneer of “business as usual”; how the premiere value or commodity becomes party membership, even though membership does not finally protect one from arrests.

“Nothing special is happening,” says the narrator, referring to the arrest and disappearance of a fellow Russian. “The only thing that’s happening is a silent conspiracy of millions upon millions of people who have reached a tacit agreement that nothing is happening. Anything unusual that is going on is happening to the guilty, but *we’re* all right, everything is normal.”<sup>9</sup>

The system of which Aksyonov writes eventually came to an end as Epstein would have predicted. In that Soviet idea there was form, the limitations of which have now been painfully pointed out, and the “authentic meaning” of the Soviet/Marxist idea is arguably now available. Regardless of who is credited with bringing down the Soviet Union: Gorbachev, the Pope, or—as my Republican friends like to suggest—Reagan, I like to believe with Tolstoy that it is never in the hands of one man to alter history. It is not one individual or a singular event, but it is the “sum of human acts of will.”<sup>10</sup>

I have described what I think a viable third option is not, does not do, and need not imply. So what is it, what does it do, and what *does* it imply? These were the questions I faced a few years ago when yet another announcement of a sister’s impending temple marriage arrived in the mail, and the options I considered grew from standing outside the temple with the children, and later, asking at the reception how the ceremony had gone, to something decidedly else. What I did was send a gift, opting not to take part in a wedding I was not invited to. In so doing, I tried to show respect for a decision my sister had made to marry in the temple but also equal respect for my choice not to stand excluded outside. The consequence of my choice is subtle, but it may suggest a viable

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8. Vassily Aksyonov, *Generations of Winter* (New York: Random House, 1995), 294.

9. *Ibid.*, 194

10. Quoted in Abbot, 21.



option for that LDS population, eighty percent by some estimates, which is excluded from temple worship.<sup>11</sup> I did not mitigate the consequence of my sister's decision to be married in the temple and *ipso facto* exclude her own brother from her wedding. I think we do a disservice to Latter-day Saints by believing they have no choice other than the current, church-ordained one. At the Manti temple, I could have insisted on an exchange of rings outside the temple. No one around me acted as though I had a choice, and compliantly, I did not act as though I had a choice either. We often whitewash, for the excluded as well as the member obedient to church edict, the consequences of such choices and actions. And it is only the sum of Mormon "acts of will," to borrow from Tolstoy, that will eventually make a difference.

Having said that, let me give a short list of the kinds of things I believe a Mormon can choose:

- To marry in the temple and still insist that at the reception one's gay brother's partner be present and acknowledged.
- To provide morning coffee for the non-Mormon wife of a son visiting from out of town.
- To name and bless a newborn while the mother holds the child in the circle of priesthood-holding men.
- To drink alcoholic beverages in one's own home or at restaurants in the presence of devout family members.
- To hold the funeral service for a gay son in a funeral home rather than in the ward building so that the gay man's friends will feel comfortable and so that the proceedings can take the shape the family feels best fits the occasion without a presiding church authority insisting on church-approved specifications.
- To respectfully excuse oneself with one's non-Mormon spouse from Memorial Day proceedings when grave-side speeches, even by one's devout LDS father, become pointedly sectarian.
- To frame and hang pictures of children and the partners of those children, whether formally married or not, whether straight or gay.
- To refuse, as a stake president, to pull the temple recommend of a father who has been arrested but not convicted of shaking his infant child to death and who maintains he is innocent.
- To invite the son who lives with his girlfriend to stand in the circle of the anointing and blessing of a sister injured in a car accident.
- To escort a daughter who has decided to abort her unborn child,

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11. D. Jeff Burton, "On Beyond the Borderlands," *Sunstone* 127 (May 2003): 67-69.

through picket lines at the clinic, even though the pregnant woman's parent is "pro-life."

- To overlook the fact that a father does not pay tithing and to renew the man's temple recommend so that he can see his only daughter marry in the temple.
- As a mission president to plead with the prophet to allow a man-to-woman transsexual to be admitted onto church rolls as a woman without going through an excommunication, as per policy.
- To walk to the stand, as the relief society president of a singles ward, and to sit on there in silent protest during an overtly sexist talk by a man in sacrament meeting.
- To flatly refuse to make the youth of a stake over which one presides participate in an inadequate MIA program, however church approved, and instead to shape a program which better meets the needs of teenagers in a difficult, urban environment.

The truth is, all these acts *did* happen in Mormondom. And many more, I am sure, continue to happen. But they are not advertised, considered, honored, or discussed. Moreover, I suspect that such acts often tend to be freighted with a certain dose of dread guilt. After all, Latter-day Saints are reminded constantly over the pulpit—and through manuals, official publications, and stated policies—that nothing is more important than unswerving observance of church standards. Love may be the first principle, but obedience is surely the first law of heaven. Acts like those above are therefore subject to the constantly correlating strategy of church headquarters to regulate them out of existence. In my own memory, the micro-managing of behaviors has a history from discouraging gum-chewing in the 70s to, most recently, condemning tattoos.

We must, I believe, be as clear as we can about what the consequences of our choices will be. Then we must accept those consequences. Whether we decide to put the institution ahead of the individual or the individual ahead of the institution, either action will carry consequences that are favorable *and* unfavorable. But either action will also tell us who we are, what kind of Mormons we are or are becoming, and what it will mean to be a Mormon in the long run.

To an ethnic Mormon like me, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* isn't a very satisfying film in the end. Nary a peep is made by the bridegroom or his family about the wedding, which simply becomes a stage for acting out Greek American culture to an audience of three. Not even a nod is given to the losses experienced by those three outsiders. One has to admire the ferocity with which the bride's extended family markets their prized way of life, but one also has to wonder what price they will pay for this controlling behavior, not even to mention the price the controlled must

pay. (At least we can say in a mitigating aside that these parents were able to attend the wedding of their own son.)

I have a fantasy that eventually great halls will be built all over the Mormon Corridor where it becomes the custom—as it was earlier and out of necessity for many of my ancestors who lived long distances from temples—to marry before, sometimes years before, obtaining a temple sealing. In these halls I imagine spirited and inclusive parties, marked with ritual ring exchanges in front of a smiling officiator with minted breath. My sister's daughter and her chosen stand somewhat shyly, somewhat excitedly at the back of the crowd of adoring friends and family while children spread sego lilies in the aisle prior to the couple's walk down the path to marriage. A recording of the Tabernacle Choir blares, "The morning breaks, the shadows flee. . ." A prayer from someone's bishop is offered—the occasion's nod to the priesthood—and then the ceremony, uniquely Mormon but not of the temple, which may or may not come later, begins. Family of every religious persuasion, non-persuasion, and lifestyle stand looking on, beaming at each other through good will and cologne in this big fat moment. There is plenty of punch and cookies afterwards, warm zucchini muffins from Aunt Kathleen's garden, and a cake the size and design of the original Nauvoo Sunstone. Afterwards there is dancing to two bands, "The Gold and Green Balls," which plays standards for the older crowd, and "The Danites," a new band from South Valley which plays alternative rock for the kids. At ten o'clock Uncle Brent and his partner Ralph escort a brother-in-law outside because he's had too much to drink and is being a little too loud. When the bride and groom leave, we throw salt crystals at them, instead of rice, to remind all of us that we are the salt of the earth and that we need to guard against losing our savor. Afterward, the elders' quorum stays behind to clean up and put away the chairs.

Hey, I can dream, can't I?