

Practicing Divinity

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His divine power has given us everything needed for life and [piety], through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and [virtue]. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of [desire], and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with [virtue], and [virtue] with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with [piety], and [piety] with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. (2 Peter 1:3–9, based on the New Revised Standard Version; translation differences noted in brackets)

Here, the author of this letter instructs his readers to live a life of piety, or godliness. He explains that the power of God has given us all the tools we need to live this life, and that it is in this way that we participate in the divine nature. Then he outlines a set of practices including goodness or virtue, knowledge, self-control, endurance, mutual affection, and love. This is the path to becoming divine.

The concept that religion is about beliefs is a modern notion, a manifestation of the privatization and interiorization of religion that took place in the theorizing of the modern state. Religion is, of course, much greater than either an institution or a set of beliefs. Mormonism in particular is much greater than that. In addition to these things, religion is a set of practices that make spirituality possible. There is no unmediated spirituality apart from the practices that engender it. It is, strictly speaking, impossible to be spiritual without being religious when religion is understood to include the practices of spirituality. These may, of course, include private practices conducted in solitude—such as meditation, con-

templation, or imagination—but they always belong to a history of certain ways of practicing spirituality. In this way, the private is always shared.

Anthropologists and philosophers have increasingly emphasized the deep connection between our ways of knowing, especially ethical knowledge, and bodily practices. The “ideas” of religion and religious people cannot be separated from the practices in which they engage. Practices produce dispositions, not symbols of higher truths. Laws; sanctions; social institutions from church, family, and schools; and bodily practices such as fasting and prayer form the preconditions for our experiences. The scholar of religion Talal Asad has provocatively suggested, “The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies.”¹ There is a double-edged meaning to this statement. On the one hand, Asad means that communion with God is something which is produced as a contingent result of bodily practices. No transcendent experience is involved. On the other hand, the notion that taught bodies can produce these experiences, transcendent or not, is incredibly powerful and one that I think that our own spiritual tradition relies upon.

The past decades have seen increased effort on the part of a few thinkers to reform LDS theology to make room within it for a more robust notion of grace as developed in Reformation traditions. This reform movement has many positive aspects, and it has had a profound impact even at the top levels of our leadership in terms of reducing the anxiety and perfectionism that have often pervaded LDS culture.² There is no doubt that a reflection and incorporation of this theological tradition can be constructive. At the same time, I worry that this notion of grace can vitiate one of the most interesting aspects of the Mormon salvation drama, namely, that we must work out our salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). This oft-repeated phrase speaks to the ominous weight of our burden.

In this particular thread of Mormon thought, the atonement of Christ has held a somewhat ambiguous place. Instead of effecting our salvation by making up for our inherent deficiency, this view of the atonement lays a foundation for salvation, but the actual achievement of salvation is up to us. I use the word “achieve-

ment” deliberately, since this view of salvation requires not only ritualized performances but also the embodiment of particular virtues. Further, in this particular LDS view, salvation is not admission into a heavenly realm, but literally the becoming of something better than we currently are. This soteriology is not an ontological shift from the human to the divine, for there are no proper boundaries between these two states in this tradition of Mormon theology. Indeed, the view that humans are divine tells us a great deal more about what it means to be divine than it does about what it means to be human.

What makes this tradition in Mormonism vital to preserve is that it rests on a view of religion as a set of practices and dispositions. One becomes divine through *acting* divine, through exercising patience, love, self-control, and endurance according to 2 Peter. While our notions of spiritual practices are not nearly as developed in scope as those of some other traditions, they do provide some effective means for the cultivation of virtue. Fasting, prayer, studying sacred literature, journaling, making cookies for the people we visit teach and home teach, attending meetings, reverence, abstaining from forbidden substances and images, and friendship, “one of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism,” according to Joseph Smith,³ are all ways of *practicing* virtue, among others. We root out our bitterness, develop our abilities to forgive, have compassion, serve, be creative, prophesy, and think. It is the practice that creates the conditions for the experience of becoming divine.

I am not suggesting an affected piety in the cultivation of virtue. Such a posture is obnoxious and, I think, has no place in Mormonism. Nor does acting in a divine manner entail exercising authority over others. Such an approach also has little place in Mormonism. Nor am I suggesting an unconditional obedience in terms of conformity (though obedience is a crucial practice in Mormonism). Nor am I suggesting that only “authentically” Mormon practices lead us in this direction and that we cannot draw on the practices of our religious neighbors. I am also not suggesting that Mormonism is comprised merely of practices and that it has no theology proper, as some recent scholars have asserted.⁴ Rather, I am suggesting that we cease to imagine that Mormonism

is a set of beliefs alone to which we either assent or not. Instead, I suggest that we consider Mormonism a set of principles and practices, a technology, an art of existence. Mormonism is a series of techniques and practices for cultivating divine persons.

I have seen that one of the ways that many Mormons manifest their doubts is by moderating their engagement in the practices and disciplines of Mormon life. I am no exception to this tendency. But what I have realized is that the power of Mormonism—and of other religions as well—is in the way that its practitioners cultivate virtue. I am more diligent in my fasting now. I am more diligent in my prayers. I act with more purposefulness in my private and interpersonal religious engagements. I am teaching my body to enter into communion with God, not because God has commanded it, but because of the experience that such practices produce. Through these practices, I seek to participate in the divine nature by cultivating the virtues enumerated in 2 Peter: virtue, knowledge, self-mastery, mutual affection, and the ultimate on the list—love. To be Mormon is to be engaged in the cultivation of the self by covenant, a particular commitment to act in concert with God to be better than we are now.

Notes

1. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 77.

2. See for example, D. Todd Christofferson, "Born Again," *Ensign*, May 2008, 76–79; Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992); Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007). Others have sought to moderate this trend, e.g., Bruce C. Hafen, "The Atonement: All for All," *Ensign*, May 2004, 97–99.

3. From a discourse given by Joseph Smith on July 23, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois. Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (6 vols., 1902–12, Vol. 7, 1932; rpt., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948 printing), 5:517.

4. James E. Faulconer, "Rethinking Theology: The Shadow of the Apocalypse," *FARMS Review of Books* 19, no. 1 (2007): 175–99, and Faulconer, "Why a Mormon Won't Drink Coffee, but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Element* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 21–37.