

odology: *The Case for Reciprocal Illumination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

8. Michael D. K. Ing, presentation published as “Ritual as a Process of Deification,” *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 39–55.

9. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, translated by Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 6. For more on metaphor theory, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

10. John H. Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 7.

## The Fabulous Jesus: A Heresy of Reconciliation

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Let me begin by stating that this is not an academic paper; there’s no bibliography. It is, rather, a personal reflection addressing the difficult questions of reconciling faith and the academy—many of which have already been raised today.

I hope that you are amused by the title of my talk. I hope that you are envisioning Jesus brunching by the Sea of Galilee, wearing bejeweled Armani sunglasses and a pashmina ascot, sipping mimosas and flamboyantly expounding the homosexual agenda with an Aramaic lisp. I also hope you are thoroughly baffled, maybe even a little offended—although this crowd seems shameless. Those among you who are New Testament scholars are required to be annoyed by this ludicrous and anachronistic characterization of Jesus. Faithful members of the Church will be deeply troubled by the mimosas. But however ludicrous, ahistorical, or

even heretical a gay Jesus might seem, I submit that He is a highly appropriate metaphor for our unique project. As both practitioners and scientists of religion, we often find ourselves in a rather ludicrous position, at once derided for believing in the absurd and impossible, and distrusted for making irreligious and unspiritual investigations. We balance history and science on the one hand and faith and revelation on the other. We are baffling and a little offensive. So my fabulous metaphor stands. You (and especially I) are all fabulous Jesuses. And, as I hope to demonstrate, we are all heretics, or, at least, should be.

It is with a certain smugness that every intellectual generation concludes that it has, once and for all, settled the ultimate questions of epistemology over and against the obvious idiocy of its predecessors. We are indebted to the Enlightenment for the offended chastisement of passé religious superstition and for the discovery of pure, rational, and unbiased objectivity. But we are also relieved that poststructuralism has completely reversed the Enlightenment by clearly demonstrating the instability of meaning. And what a blessed day when postmodernists deconstructed the whole damn thing! While epistemology is ostensibly concerned with the science of knowledge, it is often more concerned with how out-of-style epistemologists got it wrong. It is, like most intellectual systems, a reactionary science.

The intellectual orientation of the eighteenth century gave us Immanuel Kant. The nineteenth century gave us Joseph Smith. Both preached a "coming of age," but they disagreed considerably about where it was coming from. The Second Great Awakening and American Transcendentalism had very specific targets. They sought to reclaim the soul of humankind from the mechanical and self-congratulatory excesses of Enlightenment philosophy and academic elitism. At the heart of this struggle was the basic question of epistemology: How do we know what we know? And, indeed, what exactly is it that we know and why do we know it? Rejecting the hyper-secularism of eighteenth-century deists, Transcendentalism sought to restore experiential and spiritual sources of wisdom. The nineteenth century defined itself by what the eighteenth century lacked. Mormonism, born at the dawn of the Transcendental movement, beautifully and dramatically typified this restoration. Early Mormon theology and culture largely de-

defined itself as a reactionary movement, embracing a posture of antagonism, difference, and peculiarity. It still does.

The players have changed and the debate has evolved in the last two hundred years, but it is not unfair to say that modern Mormonism still defines itself in opposition to secularism, academic intellectualism, and even mainstream scientific investigation. Its epistemology is revelatory and it is fundamentally suspicious of other sources of knowledge. By contrast, the academy (at least on its face) adheres to the scientific method, rejecting divine revelation as unsuitable evidence for determining historical accuracy. The academy's epistemologies, methodologies, and even philosophies are defined by what religion is not.

To demonstrate my point I present Exhibit A: Bruce R. McConkie, arguably Mormonism's most influential and widely read doctrinal authority of the last fifty years, wrote a book many of you may have heard of: *Mormon Doctrine*. The book was neither authorized by, nor—officially—affiliated with the Church. And despite the fact that it is no longer published, it survives in lesson manuals, conference talks, and Sunday School discussions as a definitive source for, well, Mormon doctrine. McConkie has a lot to say about nearly everything, Mormon and non-Mormon. If you look under the heading of “Higher Criticism” in *Mormon Doctrine*, it says “see also, Apostasy.”<sup>1</sup>

Exhibit B: Before the most recent meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta in November 2010, a former member of the Society, Ronald S. Hendel, wrote an article excoriating the society, claiming that it had lowered its academic standards by providing too large a space for religious practitioners and faith-based projects at its annual meetings. He stated: “Facts are facts, and faith has no business dealing in the world of facts.”<sup>2</sup> Support for Hendel's position was considerable, with the result that SBL revised its oversight procedures to more strongly emphasize and encourage its academic mission. This is not a polite disagreement. The church and the academy impose mutually antagonistic paradigms or, as I would like to call them, hostile orthodoxies.

Scripture tells us that we cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:24), but here we are, standing in the sliver of a very angry and ever-shrinking Venn diagram. One of the questions posed by our conference is: How do we maintain a place for ourselves? Shifting

the pillars of these orthodoxies themselves is likely a task beyond our ability. If, then, institutional change is not a viable option, our prospects are individual. Can our dual identities be reconciled? The simple answer? Maybe. But it's tricky. In the path toward personal reconciliation, how do you stay faithful to these two mutually antagonistic orthodoxies? You don't. You can't. Instead, I suggest you practice heresy—double heresy, to be precise. I suggest this approach because I am a self-professed heretic and have found, in my heresy, reconciliation. If you will indulge me in presenting a brief autobiography, I would like to describe a personal heresy that repaired a mortal fissure in my ultra-orthodox soul.

As I am sure it has become clear (by the purple cuff links, if nothing else) I am gay. I was Mormon. Two and a half years ago, I began a master's program in New Testament at Yale Divinity. At the time I was a closeted homosexual but openly intellectual. And devoutly Mormon. My intellectual interests were well received by my peers and professors, though they were a bit tepid about the whole Mormon thing, questioning whether I would be able to endure challenges to my faith. Since I was a card-carrying Mormon, the New Haven singles branch was delighted to receive me, though some of its members were troubled about my openly intellectual lifestyle and were, regrettably, distrustful of the mission of the Divinity School altogether.

Both the academy and the Church were uneasy places for me, not so much because they so often disagreed, but because they decided to disagree before a disagreement ever came up. Ultimately, it was not the historical Jesus who brought the tension to the breaking point. It was the Fabulous Jesus or, rather, the Jesus who was not-yet-fabulous. Being gay at Yale Divinity School is a lot like being Catholic in Italy. Our queerness is legendary even for the gay Ivy. Being closeted at Yale is—well, it's hard. While Mormon theology is met with open hostility, queer theology is happily practiced in the Divinity School chapel. By contrast, while McConkie may be quoted regularly from the pulpit of the local branch, Oscar Wilde is not.

And so, there were places I could be an intellectual; there were places I could be a Mormon; and there was a place where I could have been gay. But there was really nowhere that I could be all three. Things really began to fall apart for me on October 10,

2008, the day the Connecticut Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage to be an inalienable right. For weeks leading up to the decision, Church leaders strongly encouraged me to do whatever was in my power to oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state. When the decision was announced at the Divinity School, the room erupted into cheers. I wanted to disappear forever.

That day broke me. My Church leaders wondered how I could support an organization that tolerated and championed that kind of moral degradation. To them, the Divinity School typified the sort of arrogance, moral bankruptcy, and worldliness that they believe characterizes the liberal movement. My fellow students—my friends—at the Divinity School questioned how I could be a part of what they saw as a close-minded, intolerant, and unloving institution. On that day, the Venn diagram was just too small. And so, unable to serve two masters, I clung to one and watched my soul tear apart. I stopped going to church. I came out of the closet.

That is not reconciliation. Choosing one orthodoxy over the other is not reconciliation. In leaving the Church, I did not find reconciliation—at least, not immediately. I merely became an apostate and a heretic. But I wasn't a good-enough heretic. A good-enough heretic pisses everyone off. A good-enough heretic makes mutually exclusive orthodoxies agree at least about one thing—namely, that he's a heretic. Let me describe to you a good-enough heretic. To Mormonism, the concept of a gay, ascot-wearing Jesus is thoroughly heretical. But to the academy, particularly in the field of LGBT studies, the ascot is perfectly acceptable. A Mormon Jesus, on the other hand, is completely unacceptable and offensive to the academy. But a Mormon Jesus for the Saints? Well, duh. Both a gay Jesus and a Mormon Jesus are heretical, but they are not heretical enough. But a gay Mormon Jesus, maybe even a gay, Mormon, intellectual Jesus—there we have something. Something that pisses everyone off. That is a good-enough heresy.

An intellectual, gay, Mormon Jesus is shocking and offensive to just about everyone, except, perhaps, to an intellectual gay Mormon who has been scorned by the intellectuals, rejected by the gays, and cast out by the Mormons. But, to me, such casting-out resonates with the New Testament characterization of Je-

sus—the Jesus who was not understood, who offended the orthodox and the powerful, who was abused and cast out by His own people. But also the Jesus who identified with, condescended below, and lifted up the poorest of the poor. Now, I wish to make it clear that, in my melodramatic reference to rejection, I am not claiming to be among the poorest of the poor. Nor am I claiming to be Jesus. (I assure you that I took my medication this morning.) But through this mixed metaphor of this mixed Jesus, I am telling you something you already know—something I wish I had remembered during those dark and lonely days: All is reconciled in Christ. While these two orthodoxies are defined by what the other is not, Christ is only defined by what is. And God is more nuanced, more complicated, and more complete than either of these orthodoxies can circumscribe. God is the infinite Venn diagram. Somewhere along the way, I stumbled into that Venn diagram, or rather, I stumbled out of orthodoxy altogether. For the Jesus I came to know and who knows me is so mixed up that He is something wholly other.

A good-enough heresy offends both orthodoxies because it forces each to see itself melded with the other. It forces each to see itself in the other, reconciled with the other, to see that its identity need not be defined by what the other is not, but rather that its identity can be completed only by what the other has. A double heretic embodies a completed orthodoxy. Our heresies complete us.

I do not consider myself to be a particularly graceful double-heretic. As I said, sometimes it's tricky. I did not, nor do I believe I ever will, find a place for myself in the Church. On the other hand, while there may be a place for me in the academy, it won't be an orthodox place. I hope never to give up heresy completely. As a New Testament scholar, I may be quick to dismiss the Gospel of John as fundamentally ahistorical. But I will accept as truth the words of the Johannine Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Jesus didn't say that, but Christ did. That is a double heresy. And that is good enough.

I am not suggesting that the answer is to leave the Church. Nor am I suggesting it isn't. But wherever you are—wherever we are—we should not be quiet, feeling obligated to vote along party lines. We should not define ourselves by what the other half of us

isn't. We should not be orthodox. If we wish to reconcile our competing orthodoxies, we must practice a healthy dose of heresy. Reconciliation is found by living in the other.

As a student of history, I have to admit, however reluctantly, that Jesus didn't wear pashmina ascots or Armani sunglasses—but neither did he wear white shirts, dark suits, and a bicycle helmet. Jesus wasn't fabulous but neither was Jesus a twenty-first-century Mormon. It's hard to tell whether he was even an intellectual. Of the historical Jesus, we know so very little. But what does seem clear is that he didn't play by the rules. He caused great offense to official authorities—Roman and Jewish. And he attracted a following of not particularly notable people. We are not particularly notable people. But we are people with issues, people who are complicated, people who are torn, people in need of reconciliation. And so, we can follow Him. And break the rules. And cause offense. And be made whole. Of course, if you've read to the end of the book, you know that it's a rather risky venture. But as Paul taught, the Cross that offends also gives life (Gal. 5:11). "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

#### Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 353.
2. Ronald S. Hendel, *Biblical Archaeological Reviews*, <http://www.bib-arch.org/bar/article.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=36&Issue=4&ArticleID=9>, (accessed February 10, 2011).