

THE SEPTEMBER SIX AND THE EVOLUTION OF MORMON MAGISTERIA

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In 1997, Stephen Jay Gould published a short essay aimed at limning the conflict between science and religion, particularly with respect to the question of evolution as the mechanism of generating life on Earth. In it, he borrows the Catholic term *magisterium* from papal encyclicals on the topic and asserts that both science and religion have legitimate magisteria:

Whatever my private beliefs about souls, science cannot touch such a subject and therefore cannot be threatened by any theological position on such a legitimately and intrinsically religious issue. . . . We may, I think, adopt the word [magisterium] and the concept [teaching authority] to express the central point of this essay and the principled resolution of supposed “conflict” or “warfare” between science and religion. No such conflict should exist because each subject has a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority—and these magisteria do not overlap (the principle that I would like to designate as NOMA, or “nonoverlapping magisteria”).¹

“Science” and “religion” map imperfectly onto the problems of scholarship and religious authority that were at issue in the events of September 1993, but Gould’s essay provides a heuristic framework for thinking through the questions raised by the excommunications and disfellowshipping of the September Six and the subsequent

1. Stephen Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106, no. 2 (1997): 16–22, reprinted in *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 11 (2014): 11–12.

excommunications of Margaret Toscano in 2000 and Janice Allred in 1995, as well as the related disquiet at BYU throughout the 1990s. The larger questions underlying Gould's discussion of scholarly and religious method—organic evolution and divine creation—are implicated in the ways that the Church and its members arrive at doctrinal truth. Both the similarities and the differences between the Catholic example Gould considers and the way that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints responds to similar difficulties are instructive.

As the Latter-day Saint intellectual community responded to the tensions surrounding the discipline of the September Six, an approximate delineation of nonoverlapping magisteria was tacitly worked out: the Church would define policy and prescribe behavior, and scholars who refrained from explicit personal criticism of Church authorities or overt calls for policy change could write quite freely about Church history, scripture, and sociological trends. The field of Mormon studies enjoyed a new flowering beginning about a decade after the 1993 crisis. By the mid-2000s, professorships and degree-granting programs in Mormon studies were established; *Dialogue* continued publishing robustly and the *Journal of Mormon History* expanded to quarterly publications; excellent papers on Mormon topics appeared in prestigious national journals of history, sociology, and literature; and major national presses published both academic and popular monographs on Mormonism. Scholarly societies and conferences for scholars devoted to Mormon varieties of everything from literature and humanities to social science and transhumanism were inaugurated. A generation of scholars, for whom the troubles of the 1990s seemed more a matter of historical curiosity than lived experience, came of age. This new generation largely pursued their interests without fear. Church discipline seemed generally reserved for activists who sought press attention or directly challenged Church policies rather than scholars and academics. By 2013, at around the twentieth anniversary of the September Six, the Church even began publishing "Gospel Topics" essays on its official

website—the carefully edited work of prominent scholars on difficult issues in Church history and doctrine like polygamy, the priesthood and temple ban, women and priesthood, and the divine feminine. The essays went so far as to recognize the work of unnamed scholars: “The Church acknowledges the contribution of scholars to the historical content presented in this article; their work is used with permission.” The insertion of “historical content” as the contribution of the scholars delimits the realm in which scholarship is permissible, implicitly reserving the category of “doctrine” for the pronouncements of Church authorities. This seems like it could almost be a workable solution along the lines of Gould’s “NOMA”—scholars could investigate the realms illuminated by an epistemology based on empirical investigation and logical analysis, while Church leaders would continue to work in a magisterium where knowledge is acquired by authoritative revelation and disseminated after being vetted by committee.

Latter-day Saints have generally had wide latitude for personal belief, as illustrated by the famous incident with Pelatiah Brown, when Joseph Smith is reported to have said “I did not like the old man being called up before the High Council for erring in doctrine.—I want the liberty of believing as I please.”² Mormonism still bears faint traces of its roots in the New England soil of the primitive gospel movement, eschewing creeds and insisting that the revelation of doctrine is an ongoing process. This can be liberating; it means that Latter-day Saints who can assent to a small core set of beliefs can (theoretically) differ wildly over other points of doctrine or about contemporary issues in broader society and still enjoy the fellowship of the Saints.

2. Joseph Smith, “8 April 1843 (Saturday Morning),” in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, compiled and edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), available at <https://rsc.byu.edu/words-joseph-smith/8-april-1843-saturday-morning/>.

But the lack of a mechanism for declaring official doctrine also creates trouble. While Stephen Jay Gould could examine and compare two encyclicals of Pope Pius and Pope John Paul and discover what Catholics were expected to believe at various moments, no such *ex cathedra* pronouncements exist to define the acceptable range of belief for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The anarchic tendencies of an “ongoing restoration” of a Church that allows and encourages its members to seek “personal revelation” have always been in tension with the need to maintain doctrinal and organizational coherence. The Correlation Department works to create standardized curricula that mitigate this problem, but there is still no clear standard for “official” doctrine—Latter-day Saints differ in their beliefs about what level of authority should be ascribed to manuals, magazines, general conference talks, and the Church’s website and Newsroom. Ambiguity about the bounds of the magisterium of official Church doctrine also increases anxiety for leaders and requires them to police members’ public statements about doctrine. Where no official doctrine is available to be consulted, it is riskier to have members speaking freely about their opinions or their scholarship, since their words might be accorded undue authority.

Gould’s essay anticipates these sorts of tensions: “This resolution might remain all neat and clean if the nonoverlapping magisteria (NOMA) of science and religion [or, in the Latter-day Saint case, scholarship and authority] were separated by an extensive no man’s land. But, in fact, the two magisteria bump right up against each other, interdigitating in wondrously complex ways along their joint border. Many of our deepest questions call upon aspects of both for different parts of a full answer—and the sorting of legitimate domains can become quite complex and difficult.”³ The complexity and difficulty are perhaps exceptionally great in the Latter-day Saint example, in part because our

3. Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” 12.

theology is so loose and our reliance on history and practice as faith-affirming evidence so great. That is, “doctrine” and “history” are not so distinct after all. Gould, who was not himself religious and perhaps misunderstood what is really at stake for religions with strong authority claims, rather naively defined the magisteria of science and religion by the content and methods of their inquiry, as though priesthood or prophecy were just professions: “The lack of conflict between science and religion arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise—science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives.”⁴ It is important to note, however, that this lack of conflict between the Catholic scientists whose perspective Gould presents in his essay and the official pronouncements of their ecclesiastical leader is the result of centuries of negotiation between Catholic scholars and clerics. No such process has occurred among the Latter-day Saints, and the illusion that we have arrived at something like a similar equilibrium is belied by the twentieth-century history of conflict between Latter-day Saint scholars and church hierarchs.

An observer of the BYU “modernism controversy” of 1911 articulated a view strikingly similar to Gould’s schema of nonoverlapping magisteria. In describing the conflict between BYU administrators and two professors who had been trying to reconcile Darwin’s theory of evolution with Mormon doctrine about creation, University of Utah philosophy professor Milton Bennion wrote: “the teachers have proceeded on the assumption that there is no contradiction [*sic*] between science and religion, and that they might teach science freely without detriment to the interests of religion. On this point the school authorities have taken issue with the teachers.”⁵ The administrators, who had

4. Gould, 9.

5. Utah Education Association, *Utah Educational Review* 7, no. 4 (Dec. 1913): 9. Milton Bennion is not listed in the byline, but he is named as the author within the body of the editorial.

ecclesiastical authority on their side, prevailed in that conflict, and the professors lost their jobs, as did two other professors who had been teaching new theories of biblical criticism. Two decades later, in 1931, the First Presidency seemed to have come around to the view that reconciliation was possible when they published a statement on the “Mormon View of Evolution,” which concluded, “Upon the fundamental doctrines of the Church we are all agreed. Our mission is to bear the message of the restored gospel to the people of the world. Leave Geology, Biology, Archaeology and Anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church.”⁶

With some variations, this seems to be the pattern for dealing with unpleasant “interdigitation” of the magisteria of scholarship and religious authority in the Church: individual Latter-day Saints publicly address cultural problems through the lens of faith. They are a little too public, or seem to have too much influence, or are wrong in ways that offend particular General Authorities. Some form of Church discipline is administered, but the Church does not comment on the reasons for the discipline or clarify the doctrine in question. The issue recedes and the “official” doctrine gradually shifts to some more comfortable reconciliation or middle ground.

This pattern unfolded regularly throughout the twentieth century, with the most obvious and consistent examples relating to the problem of plural marriage. Reluctant to repudiate a practice instituted by revelation, the Church eschewed doctrinal modification and managed the practice through individual excommunications. Notable disciplinary actions also occurred over critical assessments of Joseph Smith (the

6. First Presidency (Heber J. Grant, Anthony W. Ivins, Charles W. Nibley), “Memo from the First Presidency to the Council of the Twelve, the First Council of Seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric,” April 5, 1931, reprinted in William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery, *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2005), 54–67.

excommunication of Fawn Brodie and the prohibition of Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery from speaking about their 1984 biography of Emma Smith, *Mormon Enigma*), protesting the priesthood and temple ban (the excommunications of John Fitzgerald and Byron Marchant), advocating for the ERA and publicizing the Church's oppositional tactics (the excommunication of Sonia Johnson), scriptural scholarship (the excommunication of David P. Wright), and the varied and well-known issues at stake in the cases of the September Six.

Even when the stated grounds for discipline include "apostasy," it is rare for these conflicts between members and hierarchs to involve sustained discussion of doctrine. Instead, these confrontations either begin as or rapidly become disputes about authority. It is clear that the cases of the September Six were not about the method or content of inquiry but rather about who is allowed to determine the boundaries within which intellectual inquiry is legitimate and what one may publicly say about it. While the press often described the excommunications as consequences for "scholarship" or even punishment for the publication of particular articles, correcting the ideas or beliefs of those being disciplined was not the point. There was no formal public discussion by Church authorities of whatever mistaken ideas constituted these individuals' "apostasy," and no official correction of belief was offered. Because the Church has no process for officially incorporating new or reaffirmed doctrinal understandings in a durable form, these conflicts are personalized and recur as new generations confront unresolved doctrinal tensions.

Although we might read these individual episodes as exercises in defining the proper magisteria for scholarship and authority, or periodic reassertions of the right of the authoritative magisterium to be extended by fiat, the accumulation of these events over time looks less like the academic/religious disputes over evolution and more like the process of evolution through natural selection: doctrines that are well-adapted for the Church's survival endure, and individuals who don't

accept these doctrines do not. It is only over a lengthy time horizon that change can be observed and reasons for these doctrinal shifts hypothesized. The failure of the process to fully articulate an orthodoxy preserves notional freedom of conscience and holds open the possibility of change at the same time as it creates anxiety on both sides of the divide between scholars and priesthood officers.

For scholars, or would-be scholars, the message of the September Six was vague—it wasn't clear what one was supposed to believe about Mother in Heaven or the history of women's relationship to priesthood, only that it might be dangerous to talk about those subjects. There was no clear statement of which historical and cultural issues one had to take an approved position on, only the implication that disagreeing with Church leaders about some issues could cause trouble. In this regard, Avraham Gileadi's excommunication was perhaps the most puzzling—because he did not speak publicly about the content of the discipline he experienced, some concluded that publishing *anything* about the book of Isaiah could be perceived as risky.

Perhaps this ambiguity has some benefits—a general reminder to be teachable and humble in one's opinions can be salutary. But leaving people to draw their own conclusions with limited information has costs, too: many of my friends drew the not-unreasonable conclusion that any kind of feminism was incompatible with Church membership. And while I did not come to that conclusion, I felt obliquely wounded by the excommunications and the sparse official explanations. In 1993, I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, one of just a handful of graduate students in the tiny university branch. In that largely pre-internet period, I really didn't have anyone to talk to about what the excommunications might mean. I wasn't really a scholar of Mormonism and didn't plan to be. Still, I felt implicated when Elder Boyd K. Packer said, in his talk to the All-Church Coordinating Council, "There are three areas where members of the Church, influenced by social and political unrest, are being caught up and led away. . . . The

dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement (both of which are relatively new), and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals.”⁷

I had been a feminist from the time I was a little girl, and I grew up in a devout Latter-day Saint home where being “intellectual” was like breathing. I was a (still tentative) ally of the LGBTQ+ community in the Church. I *also* had three callings in the branch, attended institute weekly, loved and admired the branch president, and often scribbled scriptural references in my class notes. It was impossible to imagine myself as someone who had been “caught up and led away,” let alone as someone who would try to lead others away. For me, being intellectual had always meant first of all studying the scriptures and trying to understand them more deeply; being a feminist came from my study of Mormon women; caring about my queer brothers and sisters seemed to me to be mandated for followers of a God who was “no respecter of persons” and told parables about relentlessly seeking the lost or marginalized. I had known, in a nine-year-old’s way, about the excommunication of Sonia Johnson, so it was not a complete shock to hear views about cultural issues described as inimical to Church membership, but it was a new sort of pain to feel myself so tidily categorized and dismissed by a leader whose views I knew and worked to respect, knowing that he would never be interested in how I had arrived at my own views. It was hard not to take it personally, and I don’t think I have ever quite recovered the confident sense of belonging in a faith that had formed my deepest identity since childhood. And I was not alone in that feeling. Allowing doctrinal evolution to occur in this random (or at least inscrutable) way whereby individuals are tossed out as cautionary examples is extraordinarily costly, in much the same way that organic evolution by natural selection is costly.

7. Boyd K. Packer, “All-Church Coordinating Council Meeting,” May 18, 1993, available at https://archive.org/details/coordinating_council_1993_boyd_k_packer/.

Thus, perhaps the most important reason to invoke Gould's essay in this context is his quotation from a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in response to Pope John Paul II's encyclical on evolution:

Pope John Paul II's acceptance of evolution touches the doubt in my heart. The problem of pain and suffering in a world created by a God who is all love and light is hard enough to bear, even if one is a creationist. But at least a creationist can say that the original creation, coming from the hand of God was good, harmonious, innocent and gentle. What can one say about evolution, even a spiritual theory of evolution? Pain and suffering, mindless cruelty and terror are its means of creation. Evolution's engine is the grinding of predatory teeth upon the screaming, living flesh and bones of prey. . . . If evolution be true, my faith has rougher seas to sail.⁸

It may really be the case that the way the Church has historically dealt with challenges from its "so-called scholars or intellectuals" is the best we can do. I do not particularly want a more extensively defined orthodoxy. But I also think that a model of respectful disagreement in love and faith is a critical need for members of the Church in a world increasingly fractured along ideological lines. Gould expresses this hope for his proposed NOMA: "we would both be enlightened and filled with better understanding of these deep and ultimately unanswerable issues. Here, I believe, lies the greatest strength and necessity of NOMA, the nonoverlapping magisteria of science and religion. NOMA permits—indeed enjoins—the prospect of respectful discourse, of constant input from both magisteria toward the common goal of wisdom. If human beings are anything special, we are the creatures that must ponder and talk."⁹

Unlike Gould, I *am* religious. I am a Latter-day Saint convinced that "there is no truth but what belongs to the gospel."¹⁰ I accept the

8. Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," 19.

9. Gould, 22.

10. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, compiled by John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 3.

idea that the magisteria of learning and authority do overlap and that the authoritative is ineluctably primary. That is the cost of salvation, as I understand it. And since I manage to accept the theory of organic evolution as a possible mechanism of God's creation of the world, perhaps I ought to be able to accept that authority and scholarship can only ever attain a fragile and unstable equilibrium, that periodic spasms of extinction are an unfortunate but unavoidable feature of a Church dedicated to preserving maximum freedom of individual conscience and agency while still needing to create enough shared belief to cohere. But if this be true, "my faith has rougher seas to sail."

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