

ON TRADITION AND A NONBINARY REVOLUTION

Ray Nielson

You probably have an idea of what a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is like. Whether your exposure to missionaries comes from being a member of the Church, meeting them on the street, or seeing the unflattering depiction of them on a Broadway stage, it probably looks a little something like this: clean-cut young men wearing white shirts and ties, with little black placards on their chests and almost unreal smiles splashed across their faces, exuding confidence and absolute faith in the message they are sharing.

You wouldn't expect a five-foot, frumpy twenty-one-year-old huddled on the floor of their closet in Miami, Florida, holding a small blue pin as though it were the detonator that could trigger the destruction of their whole world. "They/them." Just pronouns. Just simple words in the language I'd spoken my whole life to indicate a plural or unknown-gendered noun. They shouldn't have held so much power over me, but they did.

I had known I was queer for a long time by that point and accepted my attraction to women as a trial. (Deep down I suspected God knew it was a trial I would fail, that he had made me queer to ensure I never achieved celestial glory, although now I reject such notions.) But questions of gender identity were much more foreign to me, something I had avoided for years. I had always tried to find other reasons for how out of place I felt among girls. For the discomfort that I felt in spaces that were supposed to be for me. I'd avoided them, as far as I can remember at least; pulling up these memories at all is difficult. I have had many moments of questioning, which I would later push down

and forget about until the question resurfaced. I only realized later that it wasn't the first time when I stumbled across old emails or journal entries, things that are not susceptible to the malleability of memory.

That's what this moment was. A couple months earlier, I had written to a friend back in Utah. It was June and she was celebrating Pride. I asked her to send me something. I'd been feeling terribly lonely in the missionary culture and wanted a physical reminder that there were others like me out in the world. She mentioned pronoun pins, and in a moment of rash decision I asked for "they/them" as well as "she/her." *Why not?* I guess I thought, *what harm could it do?*



One of my missionary companions was a strong proponent of astrology. At her insistence, as we waited for someone who we knew wasn't going to show, we had the ward mission leader use his phone to look up my star chart so that my companion could explain to me how the planets and stars affect me. It turns out that although I am born in the middle of Capricorn season, many of the other planets on my chart fall under Aquarius.

I can't tell you exactly what this means; in the years since, I've delved more into astrology, but I am still very new to it. However, I did find it an interesting explanation for a personality quirk of mine that has often vexed me: my contentious relationship with tradition. You see, Capricorns are said to highly value tradition and to hold to it as often as possible. However, an Aquarian is more likely to peel back the wallpaper of tradition, covering the walls with crayon scribbles or splattered paint. My whole life I have found myself stuck between two extremes, holding fast to things that my parents have taught me while desperately dissecting those same values and beliefs in the hopes of discovering something more or simply out of morbid curiosity.

"Tradition" is a very broad term: it can refer to something as localized as eating salmon for Friendsgiving dinner because that's what

was done one year before, or family holiday traditions passed through generations, or culturally accepted traditions like wearing white on one's wedding day. All of these, to some extent, affect the way we see ourselves and the world around us, and for many of us, the most impactful tradition of all is the religious tradition we find ourselves surrounded by.

Growing up in Utah, I was influenced by the wider, generically Christian, culture of the United States, as well as the Mormon culture that permeated my hometown. There are a number of intriguing, comforting, and entertaining traditions within these ideologies as well as many difficult ones. Among them is the way we view and understand gender—as two separate, binary groups, each with biological and psychological generalizations that help us organize our society. It is quite convenient to be able to look at someone, observe the length of their hair, the broadness of their shoulders, the style of their clothing, and make a few quick assumptions about what they are interested in, what they are good at, and how you should treat them. We just want to know what box people fit in, not necessarily with intentions to restrict or enforce but because we simply want to understand. It makes life easier, and it makes us feel like life makes sense.

Additionally, I have to recognize that at least some of what the feminist movement has accomplished has come from insisting that society stop valuing masculine traits—both physical and mental—over feminine. Clearly defining the boundaries between genders has mattered to so many people, not just to understand others but to understand themselves.

This is one of the reasons that I push back against the oft-said phrase “gender is just a social construct.” Certainly, the ways that we perform and understand gender have been informed by cultures (one only need look at the typical masculine dress across different countries to know that wearing skirts is not an inherently feminine trait). But if gender was something completely made up by society, I do not believe

so many people would feel intense dysphoria when assigned a gender that does not truly fit them. I believe that gender is somehow tied to our immortal soul and that our relationship with gender is eternal. That is to say, I believe I was neither fully female nor male when I existed as a spirit before this life, and I believe that after this life I will continue with my nebulous and flowing gender identity. That being said, I know many trans people feel differently, and I suppose it's one of the mysteries of the world for which we will have to wait until the next life to find an answer—if there is indeed a next life.



Two months after I asked my friend for Pride paraphernalia, the package finally arrived—not due to a delay in the postal service but rather because of my friend's busy schedule and occasional forgetfulness. I had, at this point, pushed all thoughts of being nonbinary out of my mind, and when I found the pin among the rainbow beads and small flag, my heart stopped. In the superstitious spirituality of a missionary—we have a tendency to give God the credit for every small thing that happens around us—I couldn't help but take it as a sign.

I put the pin secretly inside the pocket of my scripture case. I looked at it during my studies, feeling a warmth of security that was hard to come by in a strange city, far away from my family and friends. I could never tell my fellow missionaries about it. They were kind enough when I told them I was bisexual—as long as I promptly assured them that I still planned on marrying a man—but I wasn't sure how they would react to this betrayal of the tradition of our faith.

In the LDS Church, at least in the generations that have most impacted my understanding, gender is viewed as essential. Among the doctrine there are whisperings of a Heavenly Mother, the spouse to our Heavenly Father who helped create us and awaits our homecoming at the end of our earthly trial. She has become more and more discussed

in recent years, and as interesting as the concept of a feminine divine is, she is often used as an argument against homosexuality—a way to defend the tradition of straight marriage. For if God is a man who is married to a woman, and we are all supposed to follow God's example, all men must marry women. She is also an example of the binary nature of gender. For if there are only two heavenly parents—a man and woman—then there is no divine precedent for genders outside of that, at least in the Mormon conception of deity. It is difficult to make an argument for nonbinary or gender-fluid individuals within the way that Mormons understand gender today.

But I have no interest in abandoning the traditions of my heritage, and so I must try.

My traditions are deeply rooted in the faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the center is a faith in Christ and belief in a just afterlife, but I also feel a closeness to my pioneer ancestors who fled from the persecution they faced in the eastern United States, coming to Utah and building up a community where they could all be safe. They were traitors of tradition themselves, chased out because they chose to believe differently than Christians of their day. Even now, many who join our ranks are rejected by friends and family for adopting a new tradition, having found that the one they were handed down at birth no longer fit them. History, just like the present, is fraught with the cruel and violent reactions that have emerged as a response to change.

I understand a fear of change. After all, the systems we have created to describe, sort, and understand the world around us are incredibly useful, and to see them break apart leads many to fear the loss of meaning all together. It is this same fear that led Edmund Burke to write his "Reflections on the Revolution in France." The caste system gave meaning to the world he saw around him, and the notion of French commoners deciding that not only was the king's life no more important theirs but occasionally the slaying of a king could bring great social

good—well, he couldn't comprehend it. He argues that "in order to subvert ancient institutions, [they have] destroyed ancient principles," and he feared the complete degradation of society as a result.¹ It is a similar fear that many of my loved ones are feeling. It is a similar fear that leads religious leaders to single out an innocent valedictorian for sharing personal experiences and call for metaphorical "musket fire" to defend a university from students who are only trying to live our lives and find happiness for ourselves.

Did Europe lose its moral heart in the years following the uprisings and deconstruction of societal stratification that followed the French Revolution? (With all the colonization before and after that point, it's hard to know if they had a heart to begin with.) Was Burke right to fear the changes he saw? Europe certainly went through major changes in the following decades, and though many poets would mourn the loss of some romantic simplicity that no longer could be found in the metal- and smoke-filled world of the Industrial Revolution, it led to many working- and lower-class individuals demanding to be heard, demanding rights, and demanding to be treated as proper citizens. For all our nostalgic views of the past, I think most people would agree that valuing each human life as equal, regardless of the station in which they are born, has been an improvement to our society—not a detriment. Not that our society has fully reached that point—there is still great inequity in the world—but there have been great strides taken since Burke wrote his essay.

I don't want to draw too close a parallel between the fight for queer rights and the French Revolution. I am not advocating for chaos and

1. Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France," in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (Project Gutenberg, 2005), 3:334, available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15679/15679-h/15679-h.htm#REFLECTIONS>. I came across this passage in Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, "The Revolution Controversy and the 'Spirit of the Age,'" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 202.

blood, but I do find Thomas Paine's reaction to Burke quite interesting. He insists that "it is the living, and not the dead that are to be accommodated."² As important as tradition is, and as much meaning as it may have offered in the past, does it not benefit society more to accommodate those currently participating in it?

2. Thomas Paine, "Rights of Man" in *The Political Works of Thomas Paine*, vol. 2 (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 1817), 3. See also Greenblatt and Abrams, 210.

RAY NIELSON is a recent graduate from Brigham Young University. They are bisexual and nonbinary and greatly enjoyed their time at BYU despite the negative attitude toward queer people that can sometimes be found there. They served in the Florida Fort Lauderdale Mission and will forever be grateful for that challenging and rewarding experience. Ray now resides near Austin, Texas with their fiancé. The two of them are looking forward to a very queer wedding.