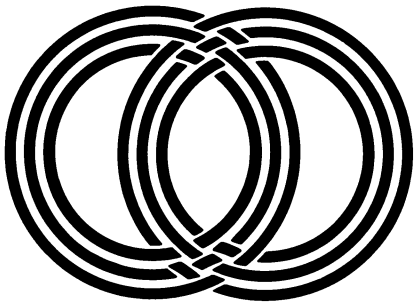
# DIALOGUE

## A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT



# DIALOGUE

A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT

*is an independent quarterly established to express Mormon culture and to examine the relevance of religion to secular life. It is edited by Latter-day Saints who wish to bring their faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought and with human experience as a whole and to foster artistic and scholarly achievement based on their cultural heritage. The journal encourages a variety of viewpoints; although every effort is made to ensure accurate scholarship and responsible judgment, the views expressed are those of the individual authors and are not necessarily those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or of the editors.*

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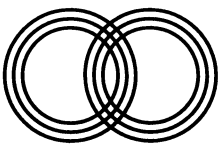

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT

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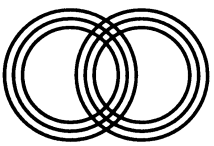

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# Millennium Approaches: An Introduction to New Mormon Scholarship

*Bryan Waterman and Joanna Brooks*

WE BORROW THE TITLE FOR THIS ISSUE of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* from Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches.* In this play Harper Pitt, an agoraphobic Mormon woman married to a gay Mormon man, presents her Valium-induced vision of what the Millennium may bring:

> Maybe Christ will come again. Maybe seeds will be planted, maybe there'll be harvests then, maybe early figs to eat, maybe new life, maybe fresh blood, maybe companionship and love and protection, safety from what's outside, maybe the door will hold, or maybe . . . maybe the troubles will come, and the end will come, and the sky will collapse and there will be terrible rains and showers of poison light, or maybe my life is really fine . . . or maybe not, maybe it's even worse than I know, maybe . . . I want to know, maybe I don't.

And maybe we will never know what the end of the world looks like. Deconstructionists tell us that the end is unknowable, that community is impossible, except when thought of as a possibility. But we knew that already—we who were raised Mormon as the Cold War waned, Cleon Skousen on the bookshelf, *Apocalypse Now* at the movie house, *Saturday's Warrior* songs on the eight-track.

*Millennium Approaches.* Our sense of new Mormon scholarship's simultaneous emergence and divergence led us to choose this title. In the months since, we've reflected on the phrase's particular personal significance. Our exchanges have sounded like this:

*My second grade girlfriend moved to Jackson County, Missouri, in preparation for the Second Coming. They moved back to Arizona when I was in high school. They now live in Manti, Utah, waiting for the Second Coming again. My*

*best friend was convinced, at age seven, that the Second Coming would arrive on 6/6/76 at 6:06 a.m. When the hour arrived, he hid under his bed.*

I grew up a few miles away from two major military bases in Southern California. This was a good thing, my mother explained, because we would get vaporized immediately if the Russians dropped the bomb. There was this relentless sense of readiness—storing fifty-pound cans of wheat, learning how to tie off an artery in Campcrafter first-aid training, getting walkie-talkies for the ward's emergency preparedness plan.

*My family was a little more rational, although we did pray every day for the missionaries to get into Israel and Russia, because the Second Coming couldn't happen until then. My grandpa, who owned a hardware store, was told in his patriarchal blessing that he would help provide supplies to build the New Jerusalem.*

My grandpa, who converted shortly before he died, collected books on the impending financial crash. During the Watts Riots, Grandpa and his friends prepared to take an armed last stand at the bridge over the San Gabriel River which separated his white working-class community, Downey, from Compton, in case the burning spread. After he died, we found a semi-automatic machine gun (disassembled, in its package) under a bathroom sink in his house.

*We were raised to expect the Second Coming by the year 2000. What does it mean, then, for kids who stored water in old plastic milk jugs, who sang "I Wonder When He Comes Again," to seek graduate degrees in "the wisdom of the world"? What does it say about faith when choice spirits, saved for the later latter days, become humanists and professors, clothed in the robes of a false priesthood?*

When the academy starts getting to me, when my colleagues seem a little too secure in their version of "reason" or "truth," I look them square in the face and tell them about the lost tribes under the north pole and the continents coming back together. Bigfoot is Cain. If they think I'm joking, I take them to my car, open the trunk, and show them the two 72-hour kits my mother gave me.

Doomsday deadlines are nothing new; our generation, however, has seen more of them expire than any other. In the meantime mainstream Mormon leaders seem to have bracketed the idea of an incipient second coming and turned their attention to the demands of a world church. Our culture now produces far more full-time missionaries than frontier survivalists. Which leads us to make this prediction: the twenty-first century, for Mormons, will be about confronting Mormon pluralism. By the end of the next millennium (even if that end comes early), we will likely have the culturally entrenched diversity that world religions like Judaism or Catholicism already have. Perhaps someday one could claim a Mormon

identity without having that signify religio-political orthodoxy.

Certainly the range of voices recorded in this special issue speak to an emergent pluralism in "Mormon thought." Our authors—graduate students at universities across the country, some solicited and some responding to national calls for papers—represent a range of disciplinary, theoretical, and political orientations. They call themselves "Mormo-Americans," "post-Mormons," "Jack Mormons," and Saints. They are interested in Mormonism's intersections with larger cultures and with cultural divergences within the faith. (They do not yet, however, speak from Mormonism's still silent subaltern majority—the 5 million church members who live outside the United States.) What they do have in common, we think, are the intellectual customs of our long-deferred era: a suspicion of last stands, a necessary pragmatism, a sense of the weight of genealogy. We inherit a lot of debt, we who start our adult lives at the end of a millennium, exhausted. What's left, post-everything? Readers can look forward, in this issue, which marks the thirtieth anniversary of this journal's founding by a previous generation of Mormon graduate students, to writing which resonates with a sense of humor, a hunger for coherence, and a still not-disproven faith in greater things to come.

# Revival

*David Seiter*

One day we were healed
by a man in a tent.
You remember. We had driven
streets of Four Castle,
Pallenfar, Vegas when we saw
floodlights corral
starless desert sky.
Clouds were grain chaff above the city.

By then we knew
things we shouldn't have.

So we sat down
on folding metal chairs to the side
and listened
to organs and gas generators
outside the big top.
This was not our hardwood pew
our stained glass bits
of light and shadow.
We wanted to be unseen.

But then we thought it was T-Bone
up there waving his arms
pounding the weekday working blues.
We limped up
under sweeping searchlights, pain
to the corners of our limbs
for to save our souls. We were born
again.

# Divine Reason

*John M. Armstrong*

> That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?
>
> —Abraham, reasoning with Jehovah (Gen. 18:25)

MORMONISM SEEMS TO HAVE ADOPTED a position on the relation between reason and revelation. The two concepts frequently appear alongside each other in publications and talks by church apostles, officials of Brigham Young University, and others on topics concerning education, academic freedom, and the like. In most of these appearances, reason and revelation are intended to mark a division between two modes of learning. The position is for the most part uniform: one can learn things by reason or by revelation, but when the content of a revelation conflicts with what is supported only by reason, reason must give way to revelation.

The position is held with conviction, even though reason and revelation are compared with each other nowhere in canonized Mormon scripture. There is, however, some precedent in Mormon tradition for understanding reason and revelation as a conceptual dyad, even though views differ on their precise relation. In the mid-1830s various contributions to the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* claimed that it is "founded both in reason and revelation"; that one must have an idea of God before one can have faith in God; that the universal applicability of gospel requirements makes sense "in the light of reason and revelation"; that "[r]eason and revelation lead us to conclude, that all . . . worlds and systems are adorned with displays of divine wisdom, and peopled with myriads of rational inhabitants"; and that "there appears, from reason and experience, as well as from the dictates of revelation, an absolute impossibility of enjoying happiness so long as malevolent affections retain their ascendancy in the heart of a moral intelligence."[1] In each of these instances reason and revelation appear as compatible avenues to truth

1. *Messenger and Advocate* 2, 5:259; 2, 7:293; 3, 5:463 (twice).

without a hint that revelation operates as a check on reason.

This view continues into the 1840s and beyond. In a letter sent to the *Times and Seasons* on 28 October 1840, Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, and George Albert Smith wrote that they considered "it perfectly consistent with [their] calling, with reason and revelation that [they] should form a knowledge of kingdoms and countries" by all available means.[2] Orson Pratt mentions reason and revelation together on several occasions. On 7 October 1854 he claimed that he sought to justify his teachings "by reason, or by, Thus saith the Lord, in some revelation either ancient or modern." Later that month he said that one can learn things "by experience, by reason, by reflection, by immediate revelation from higher powers, or by a revelation from [one's] fellow man." Finally, in 1872 he suggested that it is true "in the light of reason, independent of revelation," that a person constructing a religion "according to the best light that he had" would "suppose that we were going back to a personage we were well acquainted with."[3]

The view of reason and revelation as compatible avenues to truth had a rival, however. In a conversation between a clergyman and a Saint published in the *Times and Seasons* on 1 September 1842, the clergyman is represented as saying, "You Mormons have too much scripture—you take it all. Now we believe that reason and philosophy have the place of revelation"; to which the Saint responds, "[I]nstead of your reason and philosophy, Paul says, beware lest any man *spoil* you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the rudiments of the world."[4] Here "reason" marks a practice of theorizing about religious matters which ignores continuing revelation, a practice which substitutes human reason for revelation. Although not as stark, John Taylor's comparison of reason with revelation assumes a similar tension. On one occasion he said that building the kingdom of God "is a matter that requires more than human reason," and that "we are left entirely to Revelation, either past, present, or to come" on this matter.[5] On another he offered as an explanation for idol worship the idea that "[m]en of the world, generally, are engaged in the pursuit of objects that come within their natural reason unaided by the spirit of revelation."[6] The compatibilist view and its rival, therefore, have had their advocates from the earliest days of the LDS church.

Co-appearances of reason and revelation have been more plentiful in

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2. Joseph Smith et al., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 4:234.

3. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng.: F. D. Richards, 1855-86), 2:59, 3:98, 15:250.

4. *Times and Seasons* 3, 21:907.

5. John Taylor, *The Government of God* (Liverpool: S.W. Richards, 1852), 89.

6. *Journal of Discourses* 11:314.

this century. A search of *Conference Reports* of the 1950s and 1960s shows many instances of the compatibilist view. For example, Richard L. Evans in October 1958 said, "Just consistency and reason would suggest living prophets and continuous revelation without any deep-seated affirmation of it within our souls," and in October 1965 Howard W. Hunter said, "Without taking into consideration revelation which reestablishes this organization, reason alone would dictate that Christ's Church should be the same today as when organized under his direction." But where we find this view, we also find its rival. For example, Henry D. Moyle in October 1953 said,

> Human reason works under the limitations of a finite mind and shares in the defects of a sinful nature. It has often taken the wrong side in debate and has tried to make "the worse appear the better reason." . . . It has been trammelled by prejudice, blinded by foregone conclusions, and dominated by pride. It has misread the facts, or misapplied the reasoning based upon them. All this goes to show that we need another light than that which reason gives. It can handle categories and make syllogisms, but it cannot make history; cannot survey the whole area of being; cannot speak with authoritative confidence on themes which only revelation can unfold and it transcends its prerogative when it says that a revelation is impossible. It is for reason to take the more modest part of showing us that what we confessedly need has been given us in the religion which came from God.

Whereas the compatibilist view holds that some truths can be learned by either reason or revelation, its rival considers reason a fumbling, degenerate substitute for revelation.

In spite of their differences, both views have a striking deficiency: they overlook the many times that reason is used in Mormon scripture, especially the times that reason is used as a mode of revelation. The same is true for the entry on reason and revelation in the recent *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.[7] In this entry, as in most contemporary Mormon discussions of reason and revelation, the uses of reason in scripture go completely unnoticed. Were these instances to receive due attention, they would change not so much our understanding of what reason is, but our understanding of who has it and of who reasons with whom. Those who contrast reason with revelation implicitly assume that reason is a property of human beings only; God is not mentioned as a reasoning being, nor are any nonhuman animals. In spite of the possibility that they in fact conceive of God as a reasoning being, most Mormons seem to think that "reason" names the activity in which only humans engage when trying to figure things

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7. See Ralph C. Hancock, "Reason and Revelation," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), 4:1,192-94.

out. As a result, the possibility is not entertained that one and the same event could be both a revelation from God and an exercise of reason, for example, an event which consists of a human being reasoning directly with God or with one of his messengers, or one which involves the Holy Ghost's manifest participation in an act of otherwise purely human reason. Although scripture says that God invites us to reason with him, much of the Mormon tradition assumes along with the broader Christian tradition that reason is not a mode of revelation. The view of reason lying behind this assumption I shall henceforth call the *common view.*

The purpose of this essay is not only to explain how Mormons might have come to hold the common view, but to evaluate the common view according to what is said in scripture. When examined against the use of reason in the LDS standard works, we see that the common view fails to account for God's choice of reason as a mode of revelation. I therefore question the common view of reason not because I discount from the start the possibility that it is right, but because after examination I find it inconsistent with what is found in the writings we have canonized as revelation. I consider this inconsistency significant because the common view behind it removes reason from our relationship with God—an outcome which I think distances us from God and, perhaps, from each other. Some hold the common view because they wish to correct those who may trust too much the "arm of flesh" (cf. D&C 1:19). But they mistakenly identify this trust with reason itself—something of which we surely need more, not less.

The *alternative view* of reason implicit in scripture takes reason to be a property of both humans and God. There we find humans reasoning with God and God reasoning with humans. Since the same event may be both a revelation and an exercise of reason, the alternative view accepts reason as a possible mode of revelation. Before proceeding to the scriptural evidence for the alternative view, however, I first want to offer a characterization of reason and revelation in order to make explicit the content of the two concepts as I understand them. Next I discuss some remarks of contemporary Mormons who seem to accept the common view and then explain some of the relevant ideas of three medieval Christian theologians in order to suggest how the common view developed historically. I then present evidence for the alternative view, show how the alternative view dissolves the apparent tension between reason and revelation, and conclude by discussing briefly Abraham's conversation with Jehovah in Genesis 18.

## What Are Reason and Revelation?

I understand revelation to be any sort of contact God makes with hu-

man beings which they interpret as such. It may be verbal or nonverbal. Examples of verbal revelations are God's command to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17), Jehovah's command to Abram to be perfect (Gen. 17:1), and the resurrected Christ telling the young Joseph Smith not to join any of the sects of the time (JS-H 1:17). Examples of nonverbal revelations are the outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the Lord showing his finger to the brother of Jared (Ether 3:6), and the vision received by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon of the Father, the Son, and their heavenly attendants (D&C 76:20-21).

Reason is more difficult to characterize, but I suggest that the central notion behind reason is that of inference. To offer a simple sketch, reason is the process by which one infers that one thing is the case from the supposition that one or more other things are the case. A supposition, moreover, is *a reason* for a proposition it supports. This support may be deductive, inductive, or abductive. If one validly infers proposition $x$ from propositions $y$ and $z$ by *deduction*, then the truth of $y$ and $z$ is sufficient to guarantee the truth of $x$. For example, if Gordon B. Hinckley is a prophet and God communicates with all prophets, then it follows by deduction that God communicates with Gordon B. Hinckley. If one infers $x$ from $y$ and $z$ by *induction*, then the truth of $y$ and $z$ should make it likely that $x$ is true. For example, if I know that the majority of Utah Mormons are Republican and that you are a Utah Mormon, then it is reasonable to infer by induction that you are a Republican as long as I do not have information suggesting otherwise. Unlike deductive reasons, inductive reasons are defeasible, that is, their truth does *not* guarantee the truth of the propositions for which they are invoked as reasons. *Abductive* inference is also defeasible, and so it is often classified as a kind of induction. One reasons abductively when one infers a cause from an effect or, more generally, when one postulates the truth of one proposition as an explanation for another. This is sometimes called an inference to the best explanation. For example, if I read the Book of Mormon and get a certain warm feeling about it, I might infer abductively that the warm feeling is the Holy Ghost's witness that the book is true. Joseph Smith provides another example. He once said that "the heavens declare the glory of a God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork; and a moment's reflection is sufficient to teach every man of common intelligence, that all these are not the mere productions of *chance*, nor could they be supported by any power less than an Almighty hand."[8] God's active participation in the creation and maintenance of the world is offered here as an explanation for the or-

8. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 56, emphasis in original.

der found in it. Abductive inferences like these are defeasible because they compete with other hypotheses which may explain better the facts in question. Epistemologists and philosophers of science, among others, investigate the norms according to which we judge one explanatory hypothesis better than another.

I intend this characterization of reason to extend to both the theoretical and the practical domains. Theoretical reason is reasoning about what one ought to believe. Practical reason is reasoning about what one ought to do and, more broadly, about how one ought to live. The two are connected by the fact that in order to decide what to do or how to live we must have *beliefs* about what is worth doing or what is worth pursuing in life. I think that we accept certain beliefs about what is valuable, as we do all other beliefs, for reasons which are sometimes good, sometimes bad. If we find our reasons weak, we may seek stronger ones in order to maintain a belief which we think must be right, or we may revise our belief by adopting a position we consider more justified. Hence, the norms of deductive, inductive, and abductive inference apply to all types of reasoning, including reasoning about what is good and bad, right and wrong.

If inference is the central notion behind reason, then we might expect instances of "reason" in ordinary language to have some connection to it. I have already shown how being "a reason" is related to inference, but we also say things such as "it stands to reason" that such and such is the case, "she reasoned with him" regarding a certain matter, and "reason should rule over passion." These too are connected to inference. The phrase "it stands to reason" seems to mean "there are good reasons for inferring" that such and such is the case. The phrase "she reasoned with him" seems to mean "she tried to get him to make certain inferences in support of a conclusion she wanted him to accept." Moreover, the "reason" of "reason should rule over passion" seems to refer to a psychological faculty with which one makes inferences about how one ought to behave. Other uses of "reason" in ordinary language may be found, but I am confident that these too are tied to inference.

## Reason and Revelation in Mormonism Today

Those familiar with the public stances taken by university officials concerning BYU's mission know that they often employ pairs of concepts such as soul and mind, faith and intellect, sacred and secular, spiritual and temporal, reason and revelation. Former BYU president Rex E. Lee, for example, made the following series of claims in various speeches to BYU audiences: "Our goal is to blend technical, traditional, academic training with the restored truth into a single whole that develops not just the mind, but the entire eternal soul"; "Here on these 640 acres, faith and

intellect will work together, not just as partners, but as integral, inseparable parts of a single whole"; "The fact that we are not just another university, but a unique one that focuses on the integration of the sacred and the secular, must always support and enhance our seriousness about academic excellence"; "Real conviction concerning absolutes that are so essential to our stability and happiness can come only through additional processes beyond those of reason, logic, and mental exercise. Moroni told us how to do it. [Quotes Moro. 10:4-5.] In short, the final vindication for absolutes in this life necessarily comes through a process that is itself one of those absolutes, revelation."[9] One finds a similar set of concepts in the speeches of former BYU provost Bruce C. Hafen: "[O]ur professional credentials may have earned us passports to Athens, but our citizenship must always remain in Jerusalem"; "[W]e embrace the difficult but promising task of combining genuine religious faith and serious intellectual effort"; "[T]he sacred map of the universe is large enough to encompass the secular map, but the secular map is too small to include the sacred map."[10] Mind, intellect, reason, Athens, and the secular are on one side; soul, faith, revelation, Jerusalem, and the sacred are on the other. The contrast is between the human and the divine, and reason, just as the common view would have it, falls on the human side of the line.

Elder Boyd K. Packer has used similar conceptual divisions in general conference talks. For example, in October 1992 he quoted Doctrine and Covenants 88:118, which reads: "As all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom, yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." He then says that "[t]he words *study* and *faith* each portray a type of education," and later claims that "[i]f there is ever an end to secular learning, surely there is no end to spiritual learning."[11] Elder Packer, therefore, seems to take this verse as supporting a scriptural division between the spiritual and the secular. Does he think this division corresponds to one between reason and revelation? Consider the following excerpt from a 1991 BYU devotional. Here he seems to interpret the con-

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9. "The State of the University: Sound Spiritually, Academically, and Financially," *Addresses Delivered at the 1991 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 26-27 Aug. 1991), 10; "What We Are and What We Can Become: A President's Perspective," *Addresses Delivered at the 1993 Annual University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 23-26 Aug. 1993), 20; ibid., 14; "Things That Change, and Things That Don't," Devotional Address, Brigham Young University, 14 Jan. 1992, typescript, 6-7.

10. "All Those Books, and the Spirit, Too!" *Addresses Delivered at the 1991 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 26-27 Aug. 1991), 2; "The Spirit of the Army," *Addresses Delivered at the 1994 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 22-23 Aug. 1994), 4; "Teach Ye Diligently and My Grace Shall Attend You," *Addresses Delivered at the 1993 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 23-26 Aug. 1993), 4.

11. "To Be Learned Is Good If . . . ," *Ensign* 22 (Nov. 1992): 71-73.

trasts between the spiritual and the temporal, science and religion, and reason and revelation as identical to each other—different names for the same thing:

> The ties between universities and churches which founded them have been severed because of the constantly recurring contention between the spiritual and the temporal; the never-ending controversy between a narrow view of science and religion; the ancient conflict between REASON and REVELATION.
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> There are two opposing convictions in the university environment. On the one hand "SEEING IS BELIEVING"; on the other: "BELIEVING IS SEEING." Both are true! Each in its place. The combining of the two individually or institutionally is the challenge of life. Neither influence will easily surrender to the other. They may function for a time under some sort of a truce, but the subtle discord is ever present.
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> They mix like oil and water mix—only with constant shaking or stirring. When the stirring stops, they separate again.[12]

Later in the talk Elder Packer describes reason as "the thinking, the figuring things out, the research, the pure joy of discovery and the academic degrees which man bestows to honor that process." Apart from the comment about academic degrees, this account of reason is similar to the characterization of reason I offered above. Notice, however, Elder Packer's placement of reason among things human. Reason and revelation are thought to mix like oil and water because, I suggest, the common view is in play: reason, as a human thing, is different in character from things divine.

Other church apostles also have recently discussed reason and revelation.[13] The most detailed of these discussions is found in Elder Dallin H. Oaks's book, *The Lord's Way*.[14] Elder Oaks characterizes reason and revelation as two different methods of learning corresponding to the methods of study and faith. After quoting D&C 109:7, he writes, "Seeking learning by study, we use the method of reason. Seeking learning by faith, we must rely on revelation. Obedient to heavenly decree, we should seek learning by reason and also by revelation" (16). By character-

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12. In "'I Say Unto You, Be One' (D&C 38:27)," *Devotional Address* (Brigham Young University, 12 Feb. 1991), typescript, 10-11, emphasis in original. Shortly before this passage, he suggests that BYU may be in danger of disaffiliation: "Now listen carefully! It is crucial that you understand what I tell you now. There is a danger! Church-sponsored universities are an endangered species—nearly extinct now" (9).

13. See, for example, Neal A. Maxwell, "From the Beginning," *Ensign* 23 (Nov. 1993): 18-20; and James E. Faust, "Enhancing Secular Knowledge Through Spiritual Knowledge and Faith," *Addresses Delivered at the 1994 Annual University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 22-23 Aug. 1994), 26-29.

14. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1991.

izing the commandment of section 109 as one to seek learning by reason and by revelation, Elder Oaks identifies "learning by study" with "learning by reason" and "learning by faith" with "learning by revelation." The identity does not hold, however, because we can and, I think, do accept things on faith *for reasons*. For example, I may have faith that God exists *because* a missionary whom I trust has told me that she knows God exists. My trust defeasibly justifies my faith. Similarly, I may agree to obey one of God's commandments on faith *because*, even though I do not have as full an explanation of the commandment as I would like, I believe that God has my best interests at heart. Instead of being identical to either learning by study or learning by faith, reason would seem to be involved in both.

Continuing, however, Elder Oaks says, "The source of the ancient conflict between (1) reason or intellect and (2) faith or revelation is the professor's rejection of revelation, not the prophet's rejection of reason" (50). He then describes how the prophet uses reason. He claims that reason, in its relation to revelation, has two functions (64-71). First, one should reason out what to ask the Lord, just as Oliver Cowdery was commanded to do in D&C 9. That is, one should not expect the Lord simply to reveal an answer to a question if one has not studied the issue first (D&C 9:8). Second, reason checks possible revelations for authenticity (67). That is, reason can be used to determine whether a revelation is from God or from some other source. Elder Oaks lists three criteria a possible revelation must meet in order to be authentic: "1. True revelation will edify the recipient" (67); "2. The content of a true revelation must be consistent with the position and responsibilities of the person who receives it" (68); and "3. True revelation must be consistent with the principles of the gospel as revealed in the scriptures and the teachings of the prophets" (69). In addition, Elder Oaks says that whatever we learn though reason may be trumped by revelation (71-72).

Reason plays a role in revelation, then, but it is a "before and after" role: reason prepares one for a revelation, and reason checks the revelation afterward for authenticity. Why, we might ask, does Elder Oaks not seem to accept a "during" role for reason, that is, why does he not consider reason a possible mode of revelation? He does mention two passages of scripture (Isa. 1:18, D&C 50:10-11) in which the Lord invites us to reason with him, but these are mentioned only as an aside and have no apparent effect on his account (19). I suggest that the common view of reason is again in play and that it is the explanation for Elder Oaks's conclusion: "In all its forms and functions, revelation is distinct from study and reason" (32).

Others besides BYU officials and church apostles assume the common view. In 1971 Lowell Bennion, a prominent Mormon liberal, argued

that there are three logical possibilities for establishing a "working relationship" between faith and reason: a person can cling to faith and ignore the workings of reason; a person can subordinate faith to reason and allow reason to pick and choose among the religious tenets held by faith; or one can keep one's religious commitments and still remain active in the pursuit of secular knowledge even though this may be the source of tension and unresolved conflict.[15] Bennion rejects the first option, saying, "Religion without thought is deprived of its distinctly human attribute" (111). He also rejects the second option because he thinks that questions of ultimate meaning and value are beyond the grasp of reason and because placing all of one's faith in reason overestimates the ability of human perspective and scientific method to arrive at a comprehensive knowledge of our world. Bennion therefore settles for the third option and chooses to view "religion and secular thought as being complementary to each other as well as conflicting at times" (112). Although Bennion's contrast is between reason and faith and not reason and revelation, it is clear that he, like the others, conceives of reason as something belonging only to humans and their mental activities.

The last contemporary example comes from a devotional address given by current BYU president and LDS general authority Merrill J. Bateman in January 1996.[16] Like Rex Lee, Elder Bateman claims that BYU must teach both "sacred or higher truths relating to the spirit" as well as "secular truth," but then seems to revise this by saying that "all truth is part of the gospel" and that "[t]eachers and students in this community should understand that all truth is spiritual, and thus the so-called secular truths may be discovered by revelation as well as by reason."[17] The claim about truth echoes Brigham Young's assertion that Mormons "believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it."[18] However, the claim about reason and revelation being different ways of discovering truth seems influenced by the common view of reason. Elder Bateman illustrates the role of revelation in scientific discovery with a story about BYU mathematics professor James W. Cannon. After working on a mathematical problem for many months, Cannon discovered the answer in

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15. "Carrying Water on Both Shoulders," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6 (Spring 1971): 110-12.

16. "A Zion University," 9 Jan. 1996, published on the World Wide Web at http://advance.byu.edu/devo.html.

17. See paragraphs 12-14. He then switches back, however, to a distinction between secular truth and sacred truth: "Secular truth is revealed by the Spirit as well as sacred truth" (para. 16). If all truth is spiritual, what distinguishes secular from sacred truth? Elder Bateman offers no explanation.

18. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1954), 2.

what Elder Bateman describes as a "flash of light" after "studying, puzzling, and dreaming" about the problem (para. 16). If the flash is the revelation, the studying and puzzling must be the reasoning. If so, reasoning is again portrayed as the human part of discovery in contrast to the divine part.

## Medieval Precedents for the Common View

Why did the common view become so prevalent in Mormonism? The explanation is no doubt complex. It may be that the church as a large religious institution needs to maintain an orthodoxy in order to maintain an identity, and characterizing revelation as a trump on reason serves to encourage uniformity of belief. I think it is clear that church leaders today value orthodoxy greatly, and Elder Bateman's remark that the BYU faculty must have "no alibi for failure to achieve a first-class rank within the parameters set by the Board of Trustees" (para. 13) shows how revelation, as interpreted by apostles on the board, can be used to discourage heterodoxy. If orthodoxy is the end, however, why is a distinction between reason and revelation the means? I suggest that Mormons now conceive of reason's relation to revelation in a way influenced by historical Christianity—the tradition to which elders Packer and Oaks seem to be referring when they call the conflict between reason and revelation "ancient." I offer as support for this suggestion an account of the common view's development in the thought of three prominent medieval theologians: Tertullian, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas.

In *Prescriptions against the Heretics* (ca. A.D. 200), Tertullian writes his fellow Christians in Carthage to attack the heretics Marcion, a Stoic, and Velentius, a Platonist, and anyone else who diverged from apostolic Christianity.[19] Since these men denied the resurrection of the flesh, introduced new doctrines about God's nature to make the Christian God fit their philosophies, and either excised or included material from the scriptures according to their own judgment, we can see why Tertullian was upset.[20] On the other hand, we are likely to consider Tertullian's attack on the heretics an over-reaction. Consider this famous passage:

> What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the

19. *Prescriptions against the Heretics*, in *Early Latin Theology*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956). See T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 121, on the date of composition.

20. *Prescriptions*, 54-55, 59. Greenslade explains, "Marcion rejected the Old Testament, and his New Testament Canon consisted of Luke's Gospel and ten Pauline Epistles (not the Pastorals or Hebrews). From these many passages connecting Christ with the Old Testament or with flesh, and many passages about the Law, had to be excised" (59n94).

> Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon,[21] who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity.[22] After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe (36).

Tertullian claims that nothing else need be learned after one learns the gospel, thereby proposing the modern equivalent of abolishing the university. In other words, the revelation received is all the revelation there is (47). To Tertullian, if one continues searching for knowledge after one has the gospel, one's belief in the gospel must not be sure. Any form of research—including scriptural commentary—is a sign of apostasy.[23] Revelation leaves no room for reason.

St. Augustine is not as extreme. In *Letter 120* (ca. A.D. 410), he responds to the Tertullian-like view of Consentius that "the truth is to be grasped by faith more than by reason."[24] Augustine tells Consentius:

> [Y]ou should change your statement of principle, not to lessen the value of faith, but so that you may see by the light of reason what you now hold by faith.
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> God forbid that He should hate in us that faculty by which He made us superior to all other living beings. Therefore, we must refuse so to believe as not to receive or seek a reason for our belief, since we could not believe at all if we did not have rational souls (301-302).

Augustine, then, thinks that a rational soul is necessary for both faith and reason. He continues by arguing that both faith and reason are necessary for understanding the gospel. The sequence of the two is important: we must first believe the gospel, he writes, and then seek reasons for our belief. We want to *understand* the gospel, but this is possible only if we have found reasons for those propositions accepted first on faith. Hence, Au-

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21. As opposed to the porch (*stoa*) of Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism.

22. Dialecticians, according to Tertullian, taught "the art which destroys as much as it builds, which changes its opinions like a coat, forces its conjectures, is stubborn in argument, works hard at being contentious and is a burden even to itself" (35). To gain a sense of the intellectual diversity present in the Greco-Roman world prior to and during Christianity's first few centuries, consult the entries on Hellenistic philosophy, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skeptics, Megarics, Cynics, Cyrenaics, Peripatetic School, New Academy, Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, Montanism, and related figures in the new (and inexpensive) *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

23. *Prescriptions*, 42: "Besides, arguments about Scripture achieve nothing but a stomach-ache or a headache."

24. *Saint Augustine: Letters*, vol. 2, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 301.

gustine tells Consentius "these things to rouse [Consentius'] faith to a love of understanding to which true reason leads the mind and for which faith prepares it" (304). Searching for justifying reasons for the gospel without first believing the gospel is a vain exercise, for the person who does this will find the reasons absurd and will understand them only after he accepts on faith that the gospel is true (302, 306). However, if given the choice between believing without understanding and not believing at all, Augustine prefers the former (306). Still, believing *with* understanding is best: "[H]e who now understands by a true reasoning what he only believed a while ago is emphatically to be preferred to the one who wishes to understand now what he believes, but, if he does not also have a desire for the things which are to be understood, he considers them an object of belief only" (306-307). In sum, reason supplements faith by turning belief into an understanding more highly prized than mere belief.

Augustine's conception of reason, therefore, seems limited to making clear the grounds for one's belief in gospel propositions. The conception held by St. Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225-74), on the other hand, makes reason one of two avenues to understanding. The other is revelation. Aquinas argues in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* that there are some truths about God which can be understood by human reason, and that there are some truths which cannot be known by human beings without revelation. Those which human reason can discover include the truths "that God exists, that He is one, and the like."[25] But because God cannot be completely comprehended by human reason, revelation is necessary in order to inform us of those characteristics of God beyond reason's comprehension. This is not the only role for revelation, however. Even though things about God can be understood through reason alone, Aquinas says that, without revelation, few would know even these. Some people do not have the "physical disposition" for the work involved in such inquiries, some do not have the time, and some are too lazy (66-67). However, instead of allowing only a few to know the properties of God discoverable by reason, God saw fit, according to Aquinas, to reveal even these properties so that the knowledge of God would be more widespread, so that it would not take as long to discover the truth as it would by reason alone, and so that the conclusions reached by reason could be free of the falsity which results from the weakness of our minds (66-68).

Aquinas thinks that any truth for which we can find a logical demonstration is *known* by the person who knows the demonstration. This includes those truths about God for which human reason can find demonstrations. On the other hand, those truths about God for which

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25. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*), trans. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 63.

reason cannot find demonstrations, those truths of which we are aware only because God has revealed them to us, are held by *faith*. Aquinas argues that there are two ways in which the mind may assent to a proposition. First, the mind may assent to a proposition immediately known—one seen as intuitively true—or it may assent to a proposition demonstrated from other propositions immediately known. Second, the mind may assent to a proposition through "a voluntary choice that influences the mind in favour of one alternative rather than the other," rather than by assenting to propositions which "cause the mind or the senses to know them."[26] Religious faith—a type of the second kind of assent—is not the same as knowledge. Knowing and having faith are two different and mutually exclusive propositional attitudes for Aquinas. As Etienne Gilson put it, "I know by reason that something is true because *I see* that it is true; but I believe that [or have faith that] something is true because *God has said it*."[27] Revelation from God, then, justifies assent to propositions which would not otherwise command it.[28]

The role of reason in seeking understanding, therefore, differs in each of these figures. Tertullian thought that those who rely on reason are flirting with apostasy. Augustine thought that reason is necessary for proper understanding of the gospel. Aquinas thought that reason suffices for understanding when demonstrations are available, but is insufficient for understanding those propositions beyond the comprehension of human reason. Augustine and Aquinas, moreover, thought that God too possesses reason, but of a non-inferential kind. It is non-inferential because making an inference involves undergoing a change, and, according to Augustine and Aquinas, God does not change. That said, it is clear that the use of the term "reason" in their central discussions of reason's relation to faith or revelation refers only the inferential sort of reason possessed by humans. It is this use of the term which I believe has directly or indirectly influenced the conception of reason found in Mormonism today.

## Reason in Mormon Scripture

Mormon scripture characterizes both humans and God as reasoning beings. It also shows God reasoning with humans and humans reasoning

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26. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, qu. 1, a. 4, trans. T. C. O'Brien (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 19-21. I use "proposition" instead of Aquinas' "object" for the sake of consistency.

27. *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1938), 72, emphasis in original.

28. See *Summa Theologiae*, I, qu. 46, a. 2: "Potest autem voluntas divina homini manifestare per revelationem, cui fides innititur."

with God. An exhaustive study of reason in the scriptures would examine not only how the term "reason" is used in them, but give careful attention to the places where God and humans are shown reasoning either with each other or with other beings. I offer here a survey of terminological usage, and discuss but one example of reasoning in which the term "reason" is not itself mentioned. I hope, however, that this will be sufficient to show that the common view is incompatible with scripture and that the alternative view makes more sense of what we find there.

"Reason" appears hundreds of times in the King James Version of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.[29] Most of the time it indicates a causal relation. An example is Genesis 47:13: "[T]he famine was very sore, so that the land of Egypt and all the land of Canaan fainted by reason of the famine." Another is 2 Nephi 9:6: "[T]he resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression." This meaning of "reason," however, is not the one contrasted with revelation according to the common view, so I offer no further comment on it.

"Reason" is also used in scripture (1) to name the process of inferring one thing from another or the activity of trying to get another person to make an inference,[30] (2) to name the proposition used as inferential support for another proposition,[31] and (3) to name the psychological faculty with which one makes inferences (see Dan. 4:36). Altogether, "reason" in this inferential sense is used 55 times in Mormon scripture: 11 times in the Old Testament, 26 times in the New Testament, twice in the Book of Mormon, 15 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, and once in the Pearl of Great Price.

The scriptures do not have a position on whether reason *qua* reason is good or bad; the value of reason depends upon the purpose of the reasoning and upon those included in or excluded from the reasoning process. For example, Isaiah 1:18 casts reason in a positive light: "Come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Here the Lord invites us to reason with him for the apparent purpose of convincing us of the power he has to make us pure if we repent. The Hebrew *yâkach*, here translated as "reason," has forensic over-

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29. I analyze the King James translation instead of the texts in the original languages because, in my opinion, the language it contains deeply influenced the vocabulary of Joseph Smith and, hence, the language of other Mormon scripture.

30. See 1 Sam. 12:7; Job 9:14; 13:3, 6; 15:3; Isa. 1:18; Matt. 16:7, 8; 21:25; Mark 2:6, 8; 8:16, 17; 11:31; 12:28; Luke 5:21-22; 9:46; 20:5; 20:14; 24:15; Acts 17:2; 18:4; 18:19; 24:25; 28:29; Hel. 16:17; D&C 45:10, 15; 49:4; 50:10-12; 61:13; 66:7; 68:1; 133:57; JS-H 1:9.

31. See Job 32:11; Prov. 26:16; Eccl. 7:25; Isa. 41:21; Acts 6:2; 18:14; 25:27; 2 Thess. 3:2; 1 Pet. 3:15; Hel. 16:18; D&C 71:8. In this group I have included those instances of *reason* in which it means "reasonable."

tones and can mean to judge, to rebuke, or to correct.[32] Each of these meanings sounds odd in this context since it is unlikely that the Lord is inviting us "to rebuke together." It makes more sense to consider the Lord as inviting us to debate (as in court) his indictment against his covenant people.[33] In the verses that follow, the Lord makes clear the benefits of complying with his covenant and the costs of violating it. That is, he not only makes a claim, he offers reasons in its support.[34]

Reason is cast in a less favorable light in Luke 5:22. Here the scribes and Pharisees are caught wondering about Jesus' professed ability to forgive sins. Jesus asks them, "What reason ye in your hearts?" The Greek word here, *dialogizesthai*, means to consider thoroughly, either by reflection or by discussion. In itself, this sort of reflection or discussion is harmless. But the impression we get from this verse, which is typical of the use of "reason" in the synoptic Gospels, is that the reasoning is going on behind Jesus' back. In other words, it is a reasoning process which excludes Jesus as a participant. Elsewhere in the New Testament, however, "reason" is again used in a positive context such as when Paul in Corinth "reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks" (Acts 18:4).

The only appearances of "reason" in the Book of Mormon are in Helaman 16. Shortly before the birth of Christ, many of the Nephites and Lamanites refused to believe that prophecies were being fulfilled in spite of evidence to the contrary. We are told that they "began to depend upon their own strength and upon their own wisdom" (v. 15) and that they "began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying that it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come" (vv. 17-18). Though this verse may appear to present reason in a bad light, the real problem is not that the people were reasoning, but that they did not give place to the words of the prophets in their reasoning and consequently failed to interpret properly the evidence within their view.

That this is in fact the problem in Helaman 16 is evidenced by the use of "reason" in the Doctrine and Covenants where, without exception, reason is cast in a favorable light. It first appears in section 45, a revelation given through Joseph Smith on 31 March 1831, in which the Lord says that he has sent his "everlasting covenant into the world" (v. 9), and that "with him that cometh [to the covenant] I will reason as with men in days of old, and I will show unto you my strong reasoning" (v. 10). A few

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32. See R. Laird Harris et al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 376-77.

33. Ibid., 377.

34. Although the reason offered against noncompliance—being destroyed by the sword—makes this an *argumentum ad baculum*. See "informal fallacy" in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.

verses later the Lord again says, "[H]earken, and I will reason with you, and I will speak unto you and prophesy, as unto men in days of old" (v. 15). A similar phrase is used in section 61, a revelation given on 12 August 1831, in which the Lord says, "I, the Lord, will reason with you as with men in days of old" (v. 13). These verses, as well as the Lord's instruction to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in D&C 71:8 to "let [their enemies] bring forth their strong reasons against the Lord," have ostensibly been influenced by two verses in Isaiah. One is Isaiah 1:18 which we have just seen: "Come now, and let us reason together." The other is Isaiah 41:21: "Produce your cause, saith the Lord; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob." That this intertextual influence took place is understandable if we consider that the Lord says his commandments "were given unto [his] servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to an understanding" (v. 24). It is reasonable to assume that Joseph Smith's language was heavily influenced by the English of the King James Version, so we can expect that by speaking "after the manner of [Joseph's] language" the Lord would use these memorable phrases from Isaiah in his revelations to Joseph.

The other primary biblical influence on the use of "reason" in the Doctrine and Covenants seems to be the descriptions of Paul's activities in Acts, especially chapters 17 and 18. In these chapters we learn that Paul encountered many audiences, and that he "reasoned with them out of the scriptures" (17:2), that he "reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath" (18:4), that he "reasoned with the Jews" (18:19), and, in chapter 24, that "he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come" (v. 25). In the Doctrine and Covenants, we find the Lord commanding several men to reason similarly. In section 49 Leman Copley is commanded to "reason with [the Shakers] . . . according to that which shall be taught him by . . . my servants" (v. 4). In section 66 William E. McLellin is commanded to "go unto the eastern lands, bear testimony in every place, unto every people and in their synagogues, reasoning with the people" (v. 7). In section 68 the Lord says, "My servant, Orson Hyde, was called by his ordination to proclaim the everlasting gospel, by the Spirit of the living God, from people to people, and from land to land, in the congregations of the wicked, in their synagogues, reasoning with and expounding all scriptures unto them" (v. 1). Finally, in section 133 the Lord says that in order that "men might be made partakers of the glories which were to be revealed, the Lord sent forth the fulness of his gospel, his everlasting covenant, reasoning in plainness and simplicity" (v. 57). It is interesting to note that each of the sections which use this Acts-like language are revelations received in 1831: the first in March and the rest in late October or in November.

The passage most loaded with "reason" in the LDS canon is found in

D&C 50—another 1831 revelation. Before instructing the elders of the church to teach the gospel only by the Spirit (v. 14), the Lord says,

> And now come, saith the Lord, by the Spirit, unto the elders of his church, and let us reason together, that ye may understand; let us reason even as a man reasoneth one with another face to face. Now, when a man reasoneth he is understood of man, because he reasoneth as a man; even so will I, the Lord, reason with you that you may understand (vv. 10-12).

Here it is implicit that God is a reasoning being and that reason belongs both in human-human relations and in divine-human relations. Of course God's understanding exceeds ours, but that does not prevent him from reasoning with us in terms we understand. If this alternative view of reason is right, it is clear that the common view must be rejected.

Almost thirteen years later at the funeral of King Follett, the prophet Joseph told the Saints, "We suppose that God was God from eternity. I will refute that Idea, or I will do away or take away the veil so you may see. It is the first principle to know that we may converse with him and that he once was a man like us, and the Father was once on an earth like us."[35] We are not, then, different *in kind* from God, but only *in degree.* "That," declared Joseph, "is the great secret."[36] The import of this great secret, this first principle, is absent from the common view. If the alternative view were accepted today, we would not speak of reason and revelation as if they were two sides of a dichotomy, one signifying the merely human ability to figure things out, the other a communication of the divine. As the passages of scripture and the teachings of Joseph show, God is a reasoning being who sometimes uses reason as a mode of revelation. The alternative view implied by the scriptures, therefore, dissolves the supposed tension between reason and revelation by leaving no conceptual space in which they might conflict. Human reason may conflict with divine reason, but this is a conflict of *reason*, not a conflict between reason and revelation. By recognizing conflicts between the human and the divine as those of reason, and by having faith in the rationality of the parties, we might hope that these conflicts will resolve themselves if the most justified view becomes manifest.

## An Example

If reason is a part of the divine-human relationship, we might expect to find scriptural examples not only of God reasoning with humans, as

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35. Wilford Woodruff Journal, in *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Co., 1991), 344.

36. William Clayton Report, in ibid., 357.

we do in Isaiah, but of humans reasoning with God. Abraham's argument with Jehovah over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is such an example (Gen. 18:16-33). A cry had reached Jehovah from the two cities. What was the crime evoking the cry? Recent tradition claims homosexuality. Ancient tradition, however, claims inhospitality.[37] Whichever, Jehovah had apparently formed an intention to destroy the cities even before he dispatched two angels to investigate—an intention he temporarily considered hiding from Abraham (Gen. 18:17). When Abraham learned of the plan, he questioned Jehovah about its justice. As the epigraph to this essay shows, Abraham engages Jehovah in moral argument. He reasons that the judge of the earth should do what is right, and killing the good along with the bad is not right. The text does not tell us whether Jehovah anticipated Abraham's argument, but it does show Abraham bargaining Jehovah down on the number of good people that must be found in Sodom in order to keep the Lord from destroying it. First it is fifty, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, then finally ten. Lot, Abraham's nephew, was a resident alien of Sodom at the time. Perhaps Abraham was motivated by concern for Lot and his family. When King Chedorlaomer and his allies pillaged Sodom and Gomorrah and took Lot and his family captive, Abraham mustered his own forces to rescue Lot and return the captives and their goods to their homes (Gen. 14). It is reasonable to assume that, under this new threat to Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham again felt compelled to defend Lot and other residents. Or his concern may have been more impartial. He might have thought that, Lot aside, innocent people would likely be killed in a blanket destruction. However, whether his concern was partial or impartial, and whether Jehovah knew the outcome in advance, it remains significant that Abraham reasoned with Jehovah in defense of those who might not deserve the punishment due the rest. Thus, in the divine-human relationship, reason may not only function as a mode of revealing God's will, it may also serve to influence divine action in the interest of the right.

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37. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 92-99, for an argument that Sodom's crime was uniformly interpreted by other Old Testament writers as inhospitality—a sin the culture evidently considered more grave than fornication.

# The Lighthouse Bookstore

*Michael Noble*

Halfway between here and Oregon, the Lighthouse Bookstore
opens along some residential street we browse unwittingly
when reading after dark, where the words and road signs
blur and the sky clouds up and thunders.

Well-versed in coincidence, we peruse the reference works
for the books you know we stashed somewhere
between children's lit and cultural literacy, saving for winter
anything which requires cross-referencing or commitment.

Up a flight, the antiquarian works lean with arthritis
on the shoulders of old friends. On wet afternoons, we smell
their dusty parables and wrinkled leather odes—mossy, traditional,
the gilded edges bright despite recent water damage.

The proprietor roosts omnipotent in the window, bare knees
doubled up, his well-darned socks peering over the incoming tide,
a ledger cradled in arms; he never sleeps, though at times,
he let the lids eclipse his concentration and his judgment.

Cats drape the banisters and ladders, curling up on footstools,
slinging themselves across counters. The newest hardback hides
beneath the belly of a tabby tom, who reluctantly obliges us
and relocates to the comfort of an unabridged dictionary.

In the past somewhere, we hear waves, feel the wind
mount its siege. The walls papered with history and literature
rupture in the storm—the tempest rending the pulpy cocoon,
the breach birthing the hysterical infant brother.

# Theology for the Approaching Millennium: *Angels in America*, Activism, and the American Religion

*Michael Austin*

SINCE ITS NEW YORK DEBUT three years ago, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*—the most sustained treatment of Mormonism to play on the Broadway stage since Jerome Kern's *The Girl from Utah* in 1914—has earned a Pulitzer Prize, a room full of Tony Awards, the earnest praise of New York drama critics, and, not least of all, several surprisingly even-handed responses from Latter-day Saint critics and scholars. After reading David Pace's praise in his review for *Dialogue*, Michael Evenden's balanced appraisal in *Sunstone*, and the even-tempered reviews of the play's Salt Lake opening by nearly every theater critic in the state of Utah, a neutral observer might have some difficulty believing that Mormons are the closed-minded, hypocritical people portrayed in Kushner's play. If anything, the Mormon critics and reviewers who have tackled the play so far have gone to such lengths to be fair in their treatment of *Angels in America* that they have ended up praising with faint damnation elements of the play that are genuinely and justifiably offensive to the vast majority of their fellow Latter-day Saints.[1]

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1. Michael Evenden, "Angels in a Mormon Gaze," *Sunstone* 17 (Sept. 1994), 55-64; David Pace, "Mormon Angels in America," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Winter 1994): 191-97. Other important Mormon responses to *Angels in America* include a panel discussion at the 1994 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium entitled "Mormons and Mormonism in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" featuring David Pace, Colleen McDannell, David Fletcher, and Dwight Cook (Session Tape #334), and four papers given at the 1996 Association for Mormon Letters annual conference and scheduled for publication in the 1997 *Annals of the Association for Mormon Letters*: "Casserole Myth; Religious Motif and Inclusivity in *Angels in America*," by John-Charles Duffy; "Sea-Changed Iconography: Tony Kushner's Use and Abuse of Mormon Images and Traditions in *Angels in America*," by Sandra Ballif Straubhaar; and "Through a Glass Darkly: Mormons as Perceived by Critics' Reviews of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," by Dan Stout, Joe Straubhaar, and Gayle Newbold, and an early version of the current essay, "Theology for the Approaching Millennium: Angels, Activism, and the American Religion."

Whatever one may think about how Kushner treats Mormonism in *Angels in America*, the fact remains that he *does* treat Mormonism—and his treatment is richer and more complex than that of nearly any other non-Mormon writer of our century; however, this significant fact does not seem to have registered with much of the play's non-Mormon audience. A recent study by three members of the BYU communications department surveyed 370 published reviews of *Angels in America* and found that only 68 of them, or 22 percent, even acknowledged the fact there were Mormons in the play at all. And the reviews that do treat the Mormon element generally see it as an interesting sidelight or as a bit of local color that could be entirely removed from the play without substantially affecting its overall presentation. Throughout the play's successful runs, reviewers have either failed to notice the Mormon element at all or have persisted in seeing Mormonism as a metaphor for the play's "real" concerns, such as conservatism, corporate greed, institutionalized religion, or society's duty to tolerate everybody—even the Mormons.[2]

My primary assertion here is that the Mormon element in *Angels in America* is not a *metaphor* for anything other than itself—any more than homosexuality, race, AIDS, or politics are metaphors for anything other than themselves. Above all else, *Angels in America* is a play about America: its problems, its values, its struggle with the terrible pandemic of AIDS, and even its occasional potential for good.[3] And though Tony Kushner demonstrates, in far too many places, that he lacks anything more than a superficial understanding of contemporary Mormon culture,[4] he has managed to portray something that very few contemporary

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2. Stout, Straubhaar, and Newbold, "Through a Glass Darkly."

3. In an interview with David Savran entitled "Tony Kushner Considers the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness" (*American Theatre*, Oct. 1994), Kushner follows the lead of his character Louis Ironson in stating that America, though flawed, is salvageable: "I really believe that there is the potential for radical democracy in our country, one of the few places on Earth where I see it as a strong possibility. There is an American tradition of liberalism, of a kind of social justice, fair play and tolerance. . . . It may be sentimentalism on my part because I am the child of liberal-pinko parents. But I do believe in it—as much as I often find it despicable" (27).

4. Perhaps the most inaccurate perception of contemporary Mormonism that Kushner perpetuates is that any Mormon who has left Utah has abandoned his or her religious community. The two major Mormon characters—Joe and Harper Pitt—are never shown interacting with other Mormons in church or in a social setting, nor do they ever refer to doing so, and when Joe's mother, Hannah Pitt, contemplates leaving Utah, her neighbor (a fanatically devoted Mormon who just happens to be smoking a cigarette) warns her that "this [Utah] is the place of the saints" and that "every step a Believer takes away from here is fraught with peril" (*Millennium Approaches*, 83). Given how important the communitarian ethic is to *Angels in America*, it is disturbing that Kushner's representation of Mormonism would deny one of the elements that so many contemporary Mormons find most appealing about their religion: the fact that they feel a sense of community with their coreligionists wherever they may live.

Mormons fully realize about their own religion: it is intimately bound up with the history, literature, and spiritual development of America. The visions and prophecies of Joseph Smith, as Harold Bloom has recently argued, have been more influential in American thought than all but a few Mormons—and even fewer non-Mormons—have understood. "Mormonism" has come to mean something more than simply the "religion of the Mormons"; it is a philosophical and ethical system whose influence extends beyond either its original or its current practitioners. *Angels in America* mirrors this dynamic perfectly: the play's Mormons are largely represented as provincial, conservative, small-minded individuals who are ill prepared to cope with the real world—by which Kushner seems to mean about six blocks of New York City. The play's Mormonism, on the other hand, is something else altogether. Images drawn from Mormon history and iconography form an important part of the play's magical-realist element, and the events surrounding the Mormon migration become central to the author's vision of progression and social change. It is therefore my argument that the social, political, and cultural agendas that Kushner invokes throughout *Angels in America* have a fundamentally Mormon component and that Kushner's calls for liberal social change and revolutionary action can be profitably analyzed through lenses crafted by Joseph Smith's revolutionary revisions of traditional Christian and Jewish thought.

In offering the above assertion, I implicitly make another argument: Mormonism has an intellectually rigorous, compelling theological framework that can be used to analyze literature, culture, and history in a way that is beneficial to both the church and the scholarly community. This, in my opinion, is a point that Mormon scholars must continually emphasize. Elsewhere, I have made the following argument about the possibility of a "Mormon literary criticism":

> At its best, literary theory is not merely a way to analyze literature, but a way to use literature to analyze the world. And since Mormonism—like Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, or existentialism—contains its own philosophical assumptions and values, it does not matter what we ultimately write *about* but who we write *as*. . . . A Mormon literary critic, then, is nothing more or less than a Mormon who does literary criticism—and does so as a Mormon, raising and answering questions about her faith in the process.[5]

The analysis that follows represents my best attempt to perform this kind of critical intervention and to write *as* a Mormon literary critic, using the theology of Mormonism as a philosophical framework for reading a text

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5. Michael Austin, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Winter 1995): 143.

in much the same way that feminists, Marxists, Freudians, and other literary critics have, for most of the century, used their philosophical perspectives as the basis for literary interpretation. I am aware of the fact that, in proposing such readings, critics often risk going substantially beyond what an author actually "intended" in a given work. I do not find this problematic. Sophocles certainly did not anticipate Freud when he wrote *Oedipus Rex*, but today we are far more likely to associate the term "Oedipal" with the play's most famous interpreter than with its ancient author. Whatever Tony Kushner may personally think about Mormons, I believe that *Angels in America* is a text that cries out for a Mormon reading—not just for an analysis of overt Mormon elements, but for a penetrating analysis of the way that the play's most important elements have been shaped—consciously and unconsciously—by the Mormon experience in America.

For ease of reference, I will use the title *Angels in America* as a blanket designation for two different plays by Tony Kushner: *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches* and *Angels in America Part II: Perestroika*.[6] Though these two plays are substantially different in character, tenor, and tone, they share almost all of the same characters and tell an essentially continuous story that can be profitably analyzed as a single unit. The plot of the combined plays is driven by one of the oldest standard devices known to stage comedy: two separate sets of lovers who combine in unpredictable ways that precipitate multiple complications. The first pair of lovers is a seemingly traditional Mormon couple, Joe and Harper Pitt, who have been transplanted from Utah to New York while Joe serves as the chief law clerk to a conservative appeals court judge. The second consists of two liberal, sophisticated gay men—Prior Walter and Louis Ironson—who have been together in a monogamous relationship for four years and who discover in the opening scenes that Prior has AIDS. Before long, both relationships begin to unravel and the four become entangled: Louis proves unable to cope with Prior's sickness and leaves him in a fit of desperation. Joe finally acknowledges that he is a homosexual and leaves Harper to live with Louis. Harper and Prior, abandoned by their supposedly ideal mates, begin to meet each other in dream states that are brought on, in Harper's case, by her addiction to Valium, and in Prior's, by the fact that he has been selected by an angel to be the next American prophet. From this point, *Angels in America* proceeds along two distinct but highly interrelated avenues: the realistic, in which the main charac-

6. The published versions of the two plays are: *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993); *Angels in America Part II: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994). In-text citations of the two plays will include a page number preceded by either *MA* for *Millennium Approaches* or *P* for *Perestroika*.

ters must work out their relationships to each other, their understandings of themselves, their participation in society, and their vulnerability to the devastation of AIDS; and the mythic, in which Prior must come to grips with the metaphysical consequences of having been selected as a prophet by a group of less-than-competent angels who cannot come to grips with the fact that God has abandoned them.

As some have already noted, Kushner's use of Mormonism goes far beyond his use of openly Mormon characters[7]: the entire concept of an angelic visitation to an American prophet is directly appropriated from Mormon sacred history, and even most casual students of history or theology, when presented with an image of an angel crashing into a young man's bedroom with a sacred, hidden book, would probably recall something about Joseph Smith and the "Golden Bible." Kushner himself has acknowledged the debt he owes to Mormon iconography and has admitted that the very notion of an "American Angel" suggested a play about Mormons:

> I started the play with an image of an angel crashing through a bedroom ceiling, and I knew that this play would have a connection to American themes. The title came from that, and I think the title, as much as anything, suggested Mormonism because the prototypical American Angel is the Angel Moroni. It's of this continent, the place in Mormon mythology that Jesus visited after he was crucified. It's a great story—not the Book of Mormon . . . but the story of Joseph Smith's life and the trek, the gathering of Zion.[8]

True to his inspiration, Kushner incorporates many of the elements that Joseph Smith made famous into the dramatic vision that Prior experiences at the end of *Millennium Approaches* and explains at the beginning of *Perestroika*. In this vision we get glimpses of a buried book, peep stones, a prophetic calling, and a charge to spread a new gospel to the ends of the earth. Even the language surrounding the angel's visit borrows from the Mormon vernacular with phrases such as "truth restored" (*MA*, 26), "a marvelous work and a wonder" (*MA*, 62), and "Prophet. Seer. [and] Revelator" (*MA*, 88). It is my intention, however, to suggest a connection between Mormonism and *Angels in America* that goes beyond either direct character representation or thinly veiled historical allegory. In addition to these direct uses of Mormonism, I believe that there is an element of Mormon theology squarely at the center of the play's social consciousness.

If it is true, as I argue, that part of Kushner's use of Mormon theology

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7. See especially Evenden's "Angels in a Mormon Gaze" and Straubhaar's "Sea-Changed Iconography."

8. Savran, 102.

in *Angels in America* is intentional, then the source of his theological musings must almost certainly be Harold Bloom, the dynamic American literary critic that Kushner has repeatedly credited as a driving force behind his work. In the introduction to *Perestroika*, Kushner acknowledges his debt to both Bloom's *Book of J* and his introduction to Olivier D'Allones's *Musical Variations on Jewish Thought* (7). In the Afterword to the same play, he mentions Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (157). Kushner's appropriation of Bloom's work has been so great, he reports, that, upon being invited to meet the great scholar, he "fled from the encounter as one of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* tribesmen might flee from a meeting with [the] primal father" (*P*, 158). Significantly, Bloom's *The American Religion*, which Kushner has cited as an influence on his writing, also contains one of the most daring and sympathetic readings of Mormon theology ever attempted by a non-Mormon scholar.[9]

Bloom's focus throughout *The American Religion* is on a uniquely American spirituality that differs from its European counterparts and antecedents along the same lines that the early American republic differed from the monarchies of the Old World. In the European religion, Bloom argues, God is the ultimate aristocrat, an all-powerful monarch who rules absolutely and who is essentially superior to his depraved subjects. What the American religion attempts to do, then, is "to bring about in the spiritual realm what the American Revolution . . . inaugurated in the sociopolitical world" by democratizing the relationship between humanity and divinity. Bloom's American Religion cannot be mapped on to any single denomination; it is, rather, a set of theological tenets that are spread across the entire spectrum of religious worship in America. However, America's most successful indigenous theology has earned Bloom's special notice. "If there is already in place any authentic version of the American religion," he argues, "then . . . it must be the Mormons, whose future as yet may prove decisive for the nation."[10]

While Bloom's analysis of Mormon history and doctrine is necessar-

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9. I am grateful to Michael Evenden for first suggesting a similarity between *Angels in America* and *The American Religion* (New York: Touchstone, 1992). In a footnote to his article, "Angels in a Mormon Gaze," Evenden writes, "Bloom has written his own mocking/admiring misprision of Mormonism in *The American Religion*—one wonders if Kushner knew the book" (640). In his interview with Savran, Kushner acknowledges that he has read the book and that he considers it an important inspiration for his ideas about American community (26). However, the fact that Kushner gets much of his Mormon theology through Bloom means that he is far removed from the genuine article. For my purposes, it is more important to understand Kushner's perception of Mormonism rather than Mormonism itself; therefore, when either Bloom's or Kushner's perceptions of Mormonism seem to me to contradict actual Mormon teachings, I tend to concentrate mostly on their perceptions, which, though inaccurate, have been instrumental to the production of the text in question.

10. Bloom, 107, 97.

ily selective, his analysis of Mormonism, and of the "authentic religious genius" Joseph Smith, is one of the most compelling misreadings of Latter-day Saint theology ever offered.[11] In the three chapters devoted to Joseph Smith and Mormonism, he expounds on a number of Mormon doctrines—and an even larger number of speculative propositions by early Mormon leaders—that, in his opinion, make Mormonism essentially American. Four of the doctrines he mentions that bear directly on my argument are:

> (1) God is not a being of pure consciousness and infinite space, but a corporeal, material being who is subject to time, space, and passions.
> (2) God "organized us and our world, but did not create either, since we are as early and original as he is." This means that some part of the human soul, "what is best and oldest in us, goes back well before the creation."
> (3) God has not always been God, but he "began as a man" and "earned Godhood through his own efforts."
> (4) Human beings themselves are not locked into a role of eternal subservience. Just as God evolved from something human, so too can humans evolve to godhood themselves.[12]

The ultimate implication of these four doctrines, as Bloom rightly interprets them, is a version of the cosmos in which "God and man . . . differ only in degree, not in kind."[13] And with this belief comes a necessarily democratized conception of the relationship between the human and the divine. Rather than waiting for their marching orders and obeying them without question, American religionists actively seek revelation from God, and, when they disagree with the divine will, they do not hesitate to question, lobby, pester, and beg God until he changes his mind.

The overt image of divinity in *Angels in America* seems to have been much influenced by Bloom's notion that, in the American Religion, the distance between the human and the divine is minimal. This sentiment appears briefly in Prior's description of angels as "incredibly powerful bureaucrats" who "can do anything but they can't invent, create" (*P*, 49), directly echoing Bloom's assertion that "the Mormon God can organize, but he cannot create."[14] It is much more forcefully suggested, however, in the overtly sexual nature of both the angels and the humans who respond to their visits. Both Kushner's God and angels are portrayed in specifically corporeal terms, and the inhabitants of Kushner's metaphysical world are beings of body, parts, and passions whose generative powers are specifically linked to sexuality, which is presumed to be an eternal

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11. Ibid., 97.
12. Ibid., 101, 103, 111.
13. Ibid., 105.
14. Ibid., 115.

force. Every appearance of Prior's angel is marked by some state of sexual arousal, and in her attempt to explain the mechanisms of creation to Prior, the angel states that "angelic orgasm makes protomatter, which fuels the Engine of Creation" (*P*, 49).

Most contemporary Mormons, I should acknowledge, would probably be offended by Kushner's approach to sexuality. Indeed, one of the fundamental premises of *Angels in America* seems to be that any sexual relationship between consenting adults is a good thing that should be available without restriction and pursued without guilt—a view that contrasts with both the historical and the contemporary Mormon view that proper heterosexual expression is something integral to, and inseparable from, the sacred covenants of marriage. However, even the most conservative Mormon should be able to recognize something vaguely (and perhaps even uncomfortably) familiar in Kushner's portrayal of angels in heaven who actually have sex. It has always been a fundamental tenant of Mormonism that the sexual power is divine, eternal, and exalting. In 1869 Orson Pratt, an early Mormon apostle and theologian, made essentially the same point unambiguously in a speech reprinted in the *Journal of Discourses*:

> Will that principle of love which exists now, and which has existed from the beginning, exist after the resurrection? I mean this sexual love. If that existed before the Fall, and if it has existed since then, will it exist in the eternal worlds after the resurrection? . . . When the sons and daughters of the Most High God come forth in the morning of the resurrection, this principle of love will exist in their bosoms just as it exists here, only intensified according to the increased knowledge and understanding which they possess . . . . According to the religious notions of the world these principles will not exist after the resurrection; but our religion teaches the fallacy of such notions.[15]

Though the Mormon church no longer practices polygamy, as it did in Pratt's day, Mormons still accept Pratt's basic argument as doctrine: heterosexual relations, within the bonds of marriage, are divine, eternal, and part of the very mechanism that "fuels the engine of creation."[16] This is not, of course, exactly what Kushner is saying in *Angels in America*, but

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15. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: LDS Bookseller's Depot, 1855-86), 13 (7 Oct. 1869): 186-87.

16. In *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), Joseph Fielding Smith has written that both sexuality and procreation will be part of Celestial, but not Terrestrial or Telestial existence. "Some will gain celestial bodies with all the powers of exaltation and eternal increase," Smith writes, and they will "live in the family relationship." Those who achieve lesser kingdoms "will not have the power of increase, neither the power of nature to live as husbands and wives" but "will remain 'separately and singly' forever" (287).

the two views are strikingly similar in their view of one basic theological assumption: sexuality in particular, and corporeality in general, are good things. Unlike most Catholic and Protestant theologies, Mormonism does not see physical existence as a consequence of humanity's fallen nature. Mormon theology claims that we experience earth life specifically so that we can obtain a physical body, like the corporeal body of God, which we will ultimately carry with us (in resurrected form) when we are exalted to Godhood. Whereas most Christian religions see the body as a limiting factor to which humans are chained as a consequence of Adam's fall, Mormons see it as a blessing that makes us more like God; spiritual existence without a body is considered by Mormons a terrible impediment to eternal progress. Bloom correctly intuits this connection between sexuality, corporeality, and exaltation when he writes that "the sacredness of human sexuality, for Smith, was inseparable from the sacred mystery of embodiment, without which godhood would not be possible." And to the extent that Kushner uses *Angels in America* to present spiritual existence as essentially material, he argues, on the level of assumption if not on the level of conclusion, squarely on the side of the Mormons and in firm opposition to received notions of both traditional Christianity and normative Judaism.[17]

The same material equality between the human and the divine—and the resulting democratization of the cosmos—manifests itself in another way in *Angels in America* when Prior decides that he does not wish to accept the prophetic assignment given to him by the angel. In order to reject his prophetic calling, Prior must do something relatively familiar to both Mormons and Jews but almost inconceivable for most Catholics and Protestants: engage in a physical contest with a metaphysical being. On the advice of Hannah, Joe's Mormon mother who has become Prior's principal spiritual advisor, Prior approaches the angel, bests him in a wrestling match, and directly quotes Jacob's line from Genesis 32:26: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (*P*, 119). Unknown to Prior (and almost certainly to Kushner as well), his action also contains a resounding echo from one of the patriarchs described in the Book of Mormon: the prophet Enos,

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17. Though not, as Bloom would rush to point out, to the Christianity of the Gnostics or to the Judaism of the Kabbalah, which saw God as "essentially sexual" (106). The connection between the Kabbalism, Gnosticism, and early Mormonism is one of Bloom's favorite themes in *The American Religion*; in his opinion, "the God of Joseph Smith is a daring revival of the God of some of the Kabbalists and Gnostics, prophetic sages who, like Smith himself, asserted that they had returned to the true religion of Yahweh or Jehovah" (99). Bloom's suggestion that Smith had probably had some exposure to the Kabbala has recently been supported by D. Michael Quinn, in *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), who notes that, in June 1843 Alexander Neibauer, a Jewish convert to Mormonism residing in Nauvoo, Illinois, published two articles about the Kabbala's views of spiritual transmigration (639). According to Quinn, Smith's 1844 diary notes Neibauer's articles (643).

who had what he describes as a "wrestle" with the Lord in which he "Kneeled down before [his] maker and cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication" for an entire day and night. After this wrestle, the Lord tells Enos, "I will grant unto thee according to thy desires, because of thy faith" (Enos 4, 12). In an even more direct parallel to Mormonism, the same basic pattern of wrestling with a supernatural force before receiving a divine blessing is duplicated in Joseph Smith's account of his first vision. In Joseph's case, the struggle was with Satan, but it was a struggle that he had to endure before he could be visited by God and Jesus Christ:

> After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction (JS-H 1:15).

Despite their obvious differences, the stories of Jacob, Enos, Prior Walter, and Joseph Smith all follow the same structural lines: a prophet approaches a divine being, engages in a physical struggle that is described as a "wrestle," emerges victoriously, and receives a blessing. More to the point, these four individuals all refused to wait until God chose to bless them; they all took matters into their own hands, struggled with powers that seemed too great to overcome, and, through the strength of their convictions, received the divine intervention that they sought.

This metaphor of wrestling with the divine, I believe, forms an important part of Kushner's theological project in *Angels in America*: the play itself is, among other things, a struggle with God over the question of AIDS. During the Episcopalian National Day of Prayer for AIDS on 9 October 1994, Kushner delivered a lengthy prayer at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. Throughout the prayer, which was later published in the book *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, Kushner repeatedly calls God's attention to the suffering that AIDS and other problems have caused in the world:

> Must grace fall so unevenly on the earth? Must goodness precipitate from sky to ground so infrequently? We are parched for goodness, we perish for lack of lively rain; there's a drought for want of grace, everywhere. Surely this has not escaped your notice? All life hesitates now, wondering: in the night which has descended, in the dry endless night that's fallen instead of the expected rain: Where are you?[18]

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18. Tony Kushner, *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 220.

Compare this excerpt to a remarkably similar prayer offered 155 years earlier by Joseph Smith, who was suffering unjust imprisonment in the Liberty Jail while his people were being expelled from the state of Missouri under threat of extermination:

> O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place? How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries? Yea O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them? (D&C 121:1-3)

I find the similarity between these two prayers remarkable. Both Joseph Smith and Tony Kushner are, in their own way, wrestling with God on behalf of their suffering people, and this fact alone sets them apart from both traditional Christianity and normative Judaism—but not from the American Religion. In the European Religion, suffering is something that should be born, as Job bore it, with deference and resignation, and not something that should be questioned or challenged. In the American Religion of Joseph Smith and Tony Kushner, however, positive human action, such as the humble prayer of a fourteen-year-old seeker of truth, has a real chance of precipitating divine intervention; and human suffering, such as that caused by the terrible epidemic of AIDS, is therefore something that must be continuously called to God's attention in an attempt to secure an intervention or a response.

The second theological emphasis of *Angels in America* that I would like to discuss is the theology of history—particularly the theological history associated with the Marxist Jewish mystic Walter Benjamin. In his own public statements, Kushner has attributed to Benjamin a position of preeminence, along with Harold Bloom and Bertold Brecht, as one of the chief philosophical architects of *Angels in America.* In his longest published interview to date, Kushner speaks at length about Benjamin's classic essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," from which he learned that "you have to be constantly looking back at the rubble of history. The most dangerous thing is to become set upon some notion of the future that isn't rooted in the bleakest, most terrifying idea of what's piled up behind you." So great is Benjamin's influence on the play that the name of its most important character, Prior Walter, is, according to Kushner, a Benjaminian pun: the "prior" Walter is none other than Walter Benjamin.[19]

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin rejects the tradi-

19. Savran, 24-26.

tional Marxist/Hegelian position that history inexorably progresses towards a desired end. Instead, he argues, history is a random collection of catastrophes. He writes that "whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate," and that those who have benefitted from these actions have carefully constructed the twin myths of progress and historical determinism to conceal the consequences of their ascendancy.[20] The most memorable image Benjamin uses to illustrate his conception of history is Paul Klee's painting entitled "Angelus Novus"—a famous Marxist angel that, as much as the Angel Moroni, serves as the forerunner of Prior's divine visitor in *Angels in America*. Benjamin describes the Angel of History as follows:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is called progress.[21]

For Benjamin, history is nothing more than a movement from wreck to wreck, with progress, utopia, or paradise nowhere to be found. This catastrophe is written into history in much the same way that progress is written into the Hegelian version of the script; it is an inevitable part of historical existence. There is no salvation *within* history, only salvation *from* history—a salvation that will require a Messianic rupture of the fabric of the historical continuum itself.

The first part of the play *Millennium Approaches* promises precisely this kind of rupture in its very title, which mixes the Benjaminian notion of a disruption of history with a Christian notion of a second coming to produce the expectation of a significant—and entirely cataclysmic—historical event. Immediately before the angel crashes through the ceiling, one of the characters makes this promise explicit by stating that "history is about to crack wide open" (*MA*, 114). When this divine messenger finally arrives, we discover that her philosophy bears more than a little resemblance to Benjamin's theory of catastrophic history. In her exhortation to Prior, she issues the following anti-progress jeremiad to the human race:

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20. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schoken Books, 1968), 256.

21. Ibid., 257-58.

Forsake the Open Road:
Neither Mix nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow:
If you do not MINGLE you will cease to Progress:
Seek not to Fathom the World and its Delicate
Particle Logic.
You cannot Understand, you can only Destroy,
You do not Advance, you only Trample.
Poor blind Children, abandoned on the Earth,
Groping terrified, misguided, over
Fields of Slaughter, over bodies of the Slain:
HOBBLE YOURSELVES! (*P*, 52-53)

Though the angel that visits Prior echoes some of the words of the Angel Moroni, her actual bearing is much more in the image of the Klee painting: she is confused, chaotic, and desperately trying to stop the storm of progress that she perceives as the source of her misery. Yet, in much the same way that Benjamin offered more hope for the future of humanity than his colleagues in the Frankfurt School by holding up the possibility of some kind of Messianic rupture, Kushner holds up the possibility—though certainly not the guarantee—that human beings might actually figure out a way to work through their own problems—with or without a divine intervention. Ultimately, in fact, Kushner is both too traditional and too postmodern to accept Benjamin's conclusions without substantial modification. As a traditional liberal, Kushner still clings, albeit sometimes tenuously, to the notion that human beings can improve the world if they try hard enough; as a committed post-modernist, he cannot possibly reconcile himself to the existence of an ahistorical space from which history could be assaulted. Prior implies both of these positions when, in rejecting his prophetic calling, he states, "We can't just stop. We're not rocks—progress, migration, motion is . . . modernity. It's animate, its what living things do" (*P*, 132).

So how does Mormon theology fit into all of this convoluted Marxist historicism? Philosophically, Kushner is in a difficult position: he must attempt to theorize some version of historical change that acknowledges the possibility for positive action implicit in modern Hegelian versions of Marxist theory, while at the same time accounting for the hard lesson taught by Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School: that forward motion for its own sake can very often lead straight to disaster. I believe that Kushner attempts to reconcile his own political paradox by appealing to the conspicuously Mormon metaphors of disruption and migration. The name of the book that the angel gives Prior is "The Book of the Anti-Migratory Epistle" (*P*, 120); for her, as for all of the angels, the human impulse to migrate is at the root of our disastrous forward motion (*P*, 49). This emphasis on migration constructs the

angel in an immediate, recognizable opposition to Mormonism, for which "migration" is perhaps *the* key historical term. The Mormon trek across the plains is possibly the most well-known example of migration in American history—and Kushner has gone to great lengths to reproduce the pioneer experience in his play in the form of talking mannequins in an LDS visitor's center. One of these living mannequins, the Mormon Mother, comes to life and comforts Harper after Joe declares his homosexuality and leaves her. In response to the question, "How do people change?" the Mormon Mother responds with one of the play's most profound philosophical observations:

> God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he insists, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching (*P*, 79).

Kushner has stated that the second part of *Angels in America* "is a play about the difficulties of change," and nowhere are these difficulties better stated than in this brief speech by the homespun pioneer woman. The Mormon Mother's view of personal change, I believe, directly equates with the author's view, not only of individual change, but of historical and social progress: society can change, but only with a great deal of suffering, and as much as we may need to progress, we cannot ignore the consequences of our forward motion; there is nothing to guarantee that a change from a bad situation will actually produce improvement, but, because of our natures, we must attempt to change anyway, despite the risk. With these sentiments, Kushner proposes a theology of history that, while not exactly rosy, does manage to avoid the shortcomings of both of the other systems presented in the play. A principal problem with the Hegelian model of history is that it ignores the human suffering that occurs in the name of progress; a principal problem with the Benjaminian model is that it does not allow for any real progress (barring that of a Messianic rupture) no matter how much one may struggle. Kushner's position in *Angels in America* can best be described as an uneasy synthesis of the two positions. Forward motion, Kushner seems to suggest, is possible, but not easy, and never predetermined; and real progress requires that we keep one eye always on the possibility of a better future and the other firmly fixed upon the catastrophic wreckage of the past.

By constructing a philosophy of history that is decidedly theological but completely non-deterministic, Kushner also paves the way for us to examine one more conspicuously Mormon by-product of his play: an emphasis on meaningful human agency. Actually, both of the main areas

that I have discussed so far—the uncreated nature of the human soul and the non-deterministic nature of forward progress—bear directly upon the question of agency. If every aspect of the human consciousness was created by God, then there can be no such thing as free agency, since our ability to react in any situation would have to have been completely predetermined. Similarly, if history marches inexorably towards a fixed, predestined conclusion, then agency cannot be meaningful, since nothing we do can alter the inevitable trajectory. In constructing a theology that rejects both of these common religious premises, Kushner lays the foundation for a meaningful concept of both human agency and human accountability.

Latter-day Saints have always taught the importance of free agency, which, according to Mormon doctrine, was the main point of contention in the War in Heaven referred to in the Book of Revelation (12:7-9). According to this belief, Satan, in a pre-mortal council of spirit intelligences proposed to ensure universal salvation by denying individual agency, and won the support of a third of the Hosts of Heaven. The remaining two-thirds, including everybody who has ever lived or ever will live on Earth, accepted both the blessings and the constraints of free agency and defeated Satan and his followers. Joseph Fielding Smith has written that agency is fundamental to, and inseparable from, Mormonism's Plan of Salvation:

> The Lord gave to man his free agency in the pre-existence. This great gift of agency, that is the privilege given to man to make his own choice, has never been revoked, and it never will be. It is an eternal principle giving freedom of thought and action to every soul. No person, by any decree of the Father, has ever been compelled to do good; no person has ever been forced to do evil. Each may act for himself. It was Satan's plan to destroy this agency and force men to do his will. There could be no satisfactory existence without this great gift.

In the same passage, Smith concludes that the reason agency is such a fundamental part of the human experience is so that "righteous rewards may be given and proper punishment be meted out to the transgressor."[22] The implication of these words is clear: it is only through what the vast majority of the Christian world would call a radical principle of free agency that a just God could possibly hold humans accountable for their actions.

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22. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1958), 2:20. For basic Mormon accounts of the War in Heaven, and of the role that free agency played in it, see Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 750-51; LeGrand Richard's *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 275-76; and Joseph Fielding Smith's *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:64-66.

Ultimately, this same issue of accountability is at the heart of Kushner's critique of historical determinism; the willingness to accept both individual agency and personal accountability separates the heroes from the villains throughout the play. This dynamic first manifests itself early on, when Louis is speaking with a rabbi at his grandmother's funeral and attempting to rationalize his impending decision to leave Prior. When the rabbi asks why a person would abandon a loved one in a time of great need, Louis fails to accept any responsibility for the choice; instead, he attempts to blame history: "Maybe this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time . . . maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go" (*MA*, 25). With this passage, Kushner demonstrates what I believe to be one of the play's central theses: a faulty view of history—one view that replaces human agency with metaphysical determinism—can cause basically good people to commit horrible atrocities in the name of progress. The same kind of misplaced faith in historical determinism that causes Louis to leave Prior is, according to Benjamin, responsible for the rise, or at lest the tolerance, of National Socialism in Germany. "One reason why fascism has a chance," Benjamin writes, "is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history that gives rise to it is untenable."[23]

Nearly every other character that the play identifies as unsympathetic similarly attempts to use history to mitigate agency and, therefore, responsibility. When Joe announces that he his going to leave Harper, he tells her that "my whole life has conspired to bring me to this place, and I can't despise my whole life" (*MA*, 78). When Joe tries to convince Louis that leaving Prior was not a sin, he says, "The rhythm of history is conservative. . . . You must accept that. And accept what is rightfully yours" (*P*, 35). And even Joe's mentor, Roy Cohen, the closeted conservative power broker who is easily the most despicable person in the play, justifies his greed and corruption by sneering, "I am not moved by the unequal distribution of goods on this earth. It's history, I didn't write it" (*P*, 60).

Kushner himself, however, will not countenance these evasions. If we accept the theology of *Angels in America*, we cannot blame history, cre-

23. Benjamin, 257; emphasis in original.

ation, fate, or destiny for the way we are; when we sin we must acknowledge our accountability, accept the consequences, which is almost exactly what Belize, the African-American drag queen who often serves as the play's moral conscience, tells Louis after he leaves Prior: "I've thought about it for a very long time, and I still don't understand what love is. Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the law of love" (*MA*, 100).

The theme of moral accountability colors the play until its final scenes. Prior ultimately refuses to accept Louis back, and Louis has to accept the consequences of having violated "the law of love"; Roy Cohen must pay for his sins throughout the play: he is tormented by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, a woman he illegally had executed in the 1950s, who, moments before he dies, informs him that he has been disbarred. But it is Joe Pitt who must suffer the most severe consequences; after Louis discovers that Joe has written a number of ultra-conservative, anti-gay legal decisions for his employer, Louis viciously berates him, and Kushner abandons him to suffer for his sins. Nearly every Mormon critic who has written about *Angels in America* has commented on the play's unfair treatment of Joe in the end.[24] I would argue, however, that this treatment is necessary in order for Kushner to be true to one of the most fundamentally Mormon tenets advanced by the play: the principle of free agency implies moral accountability. In Kushner's eyes, Joe has committed a grave sin by writing legal decisions assaulting the rights of homosexuals; therefore, he must accept the consequences of his actions and pay for his sins. Fortunately for gay Mormon Republican lawyers everywhere, Kushner has already announced that Joe "will ultimately be redeemable in *Angels* part three."[25]

If my arguments about the theology of *Angels in America* have been correct, then we should be able to identify at least the following five

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24. In his otherwise effusive review for *Dialogue*, David Pace complains that "not everything about Kushner's American epic is satisfying" because "Joe Pitt is entirely dismissed from the core of enlightened individuals who gather around the Central Park fountain." Pace concludes that this exclusion represents an "unfair demonizing of Joe" (196-97). Evenden is even more severe, seeing Kushner's final resolution as one in which "all forms of good and evil finally coalesce into a few images" and in which the playwright is "militant and unforgiving of everyone that [he] finds lacking" (62). Colleen McDannell, in her presentation at the 1994 Sunstone Symposium, employs Catholic terminology to offer a slightly less severe reading of Joe's final position: Roy Cohen, as the play shows, goes to hell, while the play's final community of Prior, Belize, Hannah, and Louis, she argues, represents heaven; Joe, then ends up in neither place, but in Purgatory, where he must purge himself of his sins before finally being redeemed (taped panel discussion #334, "Mormons and Mormonism in Kushner's *Angels in America*").

25. Savran, 103.

propositions as beliefs that Kushner advocates throughout the play:

> (1) Human beings have an indestructible essence that was not created by God but is coeternal with him, making human nature itself something that is always already precious, sacred, and divine.
> (2) Material existence is inherently spiritual, which implies that the body is an inherent part of the soul and that bodily suffering (such as that caused by AIDS) is spiritually damaging.
> (3) The relationship between humans and God is sufficiently democratic that it is possible to "wrestle with God" in order to attempt to secure his intervention.
> (4) Every human being has an essential agency that cannot be mitigated or qualified in any way.
> (5) We are entirely accountable for how we use our agency and must suffer the consequences if we misuse it.

Two things should be readily apparent from this list. First, I would argue that it is recognizably Mormon. I do not mean by this that all of the points on the list are uniquely Mormon—since any one of them, in one form or another, could be found somewhere in the beliefs of other world religions; however, it would be difficult to locate another religion—especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition—that did not view at least one or two of the points as damnable heresies. Taken as a group of theological postulates, this list contains doctrines that are found together so frequently in Mormonism, and so infrequently in any other theological system, that it would not be inaccurate to refer to it as "essentially Mormon."

The second thing that should be evident from this list of religious precepts is that they form the basis for a genuine theology of social activism. By stressing the spiritual nature of material existence, Kushner makes a case for the spiritual damage caused by the AIDS virus and other manifestations of physical pain. For Kushner, material suffering is a spiritual concern that we must respond to by praying to, yearning for, and wrestling with God for a cure, as Prior does when he wrestles with the Angel, and as Kushner himself did when he offered his own public supplications on the National Prayer Day for AIDS in 1994. But for Kushner, prayer and supplication are not enough. We can invite God to intervene on our behalf, he implies, but we cannot wait around for such an intervention to happen; we must use our agency to solve the problems ourselves, or suffer the consequences if we fail. We should, I believe, place Kushner's emphasis on agency and accountability into this context. By emptying history of all teleological determinism, Kushner suggests that everything human beings do has genuine consequences; we cannot blame history for our failures, nor can we rely on it for our solutions. By elevating humanity to a divine status, he suggests that we have both the right and the responsibility to create solutions to our own problems. But

Kushner also warns that revolutionary action must be slow and carefully thought out, or it may lead to unexpected disaster, since the agency to act well necessarily implies the agency to act poorly. Perhaps Kushner imported the character Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov into the opening scene of *Perestroika* for the sole purpose of warning would-be revolutionaries against well-meaning but insufficiently theorized social change (*P,* 13-15).[26]

In the concluding lines of his prayer at St. John's Episcopal Church, Kushner gives as direct a statement of his personal religious philosophy as I have been able to find anywhere in his writings:

> When I was ten, an uncle told me you didn't exist: "We descend from apes," he said, "the universe will end, and there is no God." I believed the ape part—my uncle had thick black hair on his arms and knuckles, so apes was easy—and the universe became a nulliverse, so that was scary and fun. And since his well meaning instruction I have not *known* your existence, as some friends of mine do; but you have left bread-crumb traces inside of me. Rapacious birds swoop down and the traces are obscured, but the path is recoverable. It can be discovered again.[27]

Part of Kushner's project in *Angels in America,* I believe, is to rediscover the path to God; but doing so, for the author, requires a thorough reimagination of received religious traditions. In many respects, Mormonism, as Tony Kushner presents it in the play, is part of the problem: it is an overly institutionalized, guilt-producing, conservative religion that stands in the way of meaningful social change. There is another level, though, which I would call the deep theological level, in which Mormonism is part of the solution, for if *Angels in America* can be said to have a theology at all, it is a theology that, while not overtly Mormon, has more than enough recognizably Mormon elements to make it worthy of the attention of any Latter-day Saint scholar or critic.

In making such a claim, I realize that I am begging some very significant questions about influence. I am not, of course, arguing that Kushner

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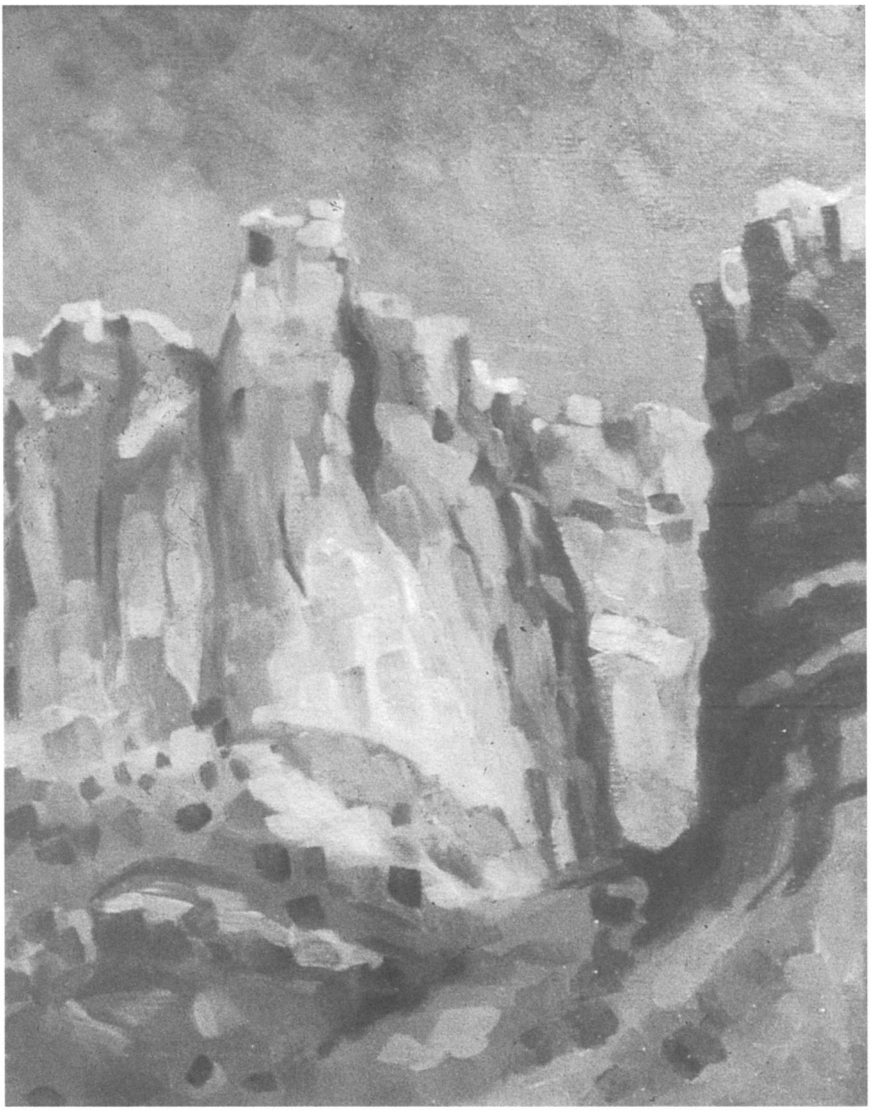
26. The character Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the world's oldest living Bolshevik, is one of the principal characters in Kushner's short play, *Slavs!,* which is reprinted on pp. 87-105 of the collection *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness.* In this later play Prelapsarianov stands between two other Soviet characters, Upgobkin, who represents the impulse towards unrestrained progress, and Popolitpov, who stands for blind conservatism. In the introduction to *Slavs!,* Kushner makes it clear that he intends for Prelapsarianov to be a synthesis between the other two equally dangerous positions (95). The speech that Aleksii gives at the beginning of *Perestroika* (13-14) is taken almost directly from a similar speech in *Slavs!* (108). I believe that Prelapsarianov represents in both plays what I take to be Kushner's own position on radical change: it is possible but extremely dangerous and should only be attempted with a great deal of cautious consideration.

27. *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness,* 223.

is a secret Mormon, or even that he is especially sympathetic towards the Latter-day Saints. To date, Kushner's public statements about Mormonism have tended to be good-natured but condescending. Mormons may be "right-wing and horrible," he states, but at least "there's something dear and nice about them." And while he finds our faith "moving," he believes our cosmology to be "naive," "disingenuous," and "dumb."[28] But even though Tony Kushner the public speaker may have little respect for Mormon theology, I believe that Tony Kushner the author has not hesitated to appropriate numerous elements of that theology into the religious infrastructure of his play. Much of this appropriation comes directly from Bloom's *The American Religion*, but I believe that the Mormon element of *Angels in America* is more complex than a mere popularization of Bloom's book would allow. Ultimately, Kushner has taken on a project that requires him to reimagine the history of Judeo-Christian religion in an unambiguously American, decidedly twentieth-century context. There are very few precedents for revolutionizing 3,000 years of established religion, and, among Americans, Joseph Smith is undoubtedly the best model available. Thus, I would argue, Kushner has included many elements of Mormon theology in *Angels in America*, not because he initially set out to do so, but because his effort to reinvent the foundations of traditional religion required him to appropriate, both consciously and unconsciously, from the most successful attempt of any previous American to do the same. Kushner's own theological project demonstrates, as Bloom has already written, that "there is something of Joseph Smith's spirit in every manifestation of the American Religion."[29]

28. Savran, 102-103.
29. Bloom, 127.



# Hard Publics

*David Seiter*

Not their felon, not their lackey, you.
After the sclerosis of your tissues,
the emulsifying of your fluids,
reprieve
in as thick a prospect, a hand mitten.

Abnormal hardening leaves you
something of a corn husk, an heir apparent,
the block of the person behind you.

Where everything gets slippery
you'll be astraddle your mores, the folkways
given stern and bow by people
you have first deified and then
in so warranted a fashion renounced.

You told stories and did not think
of the public—the hardest part.
Not your sponsor, not your vehicle, them.

# Recovering the Signifier: New Jack Mormons

*Juan de Santiago*

> And now it came to pass that the king and those who were converted were desirous that they might have a name, that thereby they might be distinguished from their brethren: . . . And it came to pass that they called their names Anti-Nephi-Lehies: and they were called by this name and were no more called Lamanites. . . And they began to be a very industrious people; yea, and they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore, they did open a correspondence with them, and the curse of God did no more follow them (Alma 23:16-18).

IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN LIVING in a cultural bomb-shelter (or serving a mission) over the last few years, you've probably noticed a strange media obsession with my generation. *Twenty-somethings*, they call us. Sometimes *slackers*. Or *Generation X*. Even *Generation X-cess*. None of which I had any say in, nor from which I can escape. Fortunately, I am Mormon and accustomed to being called names. Before I could even ride a bike, I had been called Sunbeam, Star, CTR, and Targeteer. On Tuesdays I was known over time as Cub Scout, Webelo, Explorer, and Eagle. And on Sundays the names became Deacon, Teacher, Priest, and then Elder. At nineteen new names appeared: Greenie, Senior, DL, ZL, Branch P, AP. And interspersed with all of those were Messenger of Light, Ambassador of Christ, and everyone's favorite—Saturday's Warrior.

At twenty-one the interesting names all run out. One becomes the perpetually phlegmatic "Young Single Adult," a soul-less bureaucratic paste-up job, and frankly, after all the other titles, an embarrassment. But not soon after, I discovered there was a future title I'd failed to see, unconsciously overlooked—always thought I'd avoid—and unfortunately, just as lifeless as YSA.

A growing number of former Sunbeams, Blazers, and Merry Misses, now current Gen X-ers (and YSAs), are struggling to maintain a meaningful relationship with their church. Whether due to doctrinal disagree-

ments, lifestyle incompatibilities, modern religious skepticism, or just mere sloth, those Mormon young adults are participating less vigorously in the institutional expression of their faith. Or to use a technical term—following Satan down a slip-n-slide towards endless suffering, eternal damnation, and soggy, flattened blue-grass. Or to use a layman's term with less spine, but more diplomacy: going less-active. "Less-active": those are the words, and that's where this gets started.

Not to be left behind in the sensitivity races of the mid-1980s—the rush to rename marginalized groups of people—the church decided to take a crack at identity redescription. After the successful image make-over of '85 with the daring hymn-book color changes, the Brethren took courage and rolled up their sleeves for the makeover that would change the church's insensitive image forever. The oafish, over-presumptuous "inactive" finally got its long awaited corporate face-lift and emerged sparklingly updated—a stunning application of text-book political correctness. "World behold," announced Elder Oaks, "we give you—less active."

But alas, like Jennifer Grey's post-*Dirty Dancing* nose job, it was handsomely unobtrusive, but forgettably dull. Oaks's announcement fell flat; not even courtesy applause greeted its arrival at the characteristically raucous Saturday morning session. The new name inspired no one. "Less-active" as a new adjective is exactly that—it's just plain less-active. It's paunchy, it drinks Diet Coke, and it dresses like the ward clerk. Who, being identified as "less-active," will ever be able to saunter anywhere with sass? Where's the fun, the danger, the beef?

Something must be done. We "less-actives" pause before a momentous confrontation. Should victory be ours—linguistic liberation. Should we stumble—bureaucratic tyranny. Comrades, take courage, we lack only a title of liberty with our new name inscribed across its undulating face. Follow me through the possibilities.

*Heretic?* It's romantic and handsome, but no. Too Joan of Arc. Besides, what's ultimately needed is a title that's not exclusively specific to doctrinal disagreements. Not all less-actives have read *Women and Authority.* Some just like drinking beer.

*Apostate?* Double no. Too Fawn Brodie. Chances are high we'll end up with that title at some point soon anyway. What's the rush?

*Sunstoner?* Lots of potential, good magazine, cool get-high-on-the-sun implications, but I have to say, ultimately too new-age. Too Shirley Maclaine. And it's always best to avoid Yanni associations. Let's leave it on the back-burner.

*Knights In Satan's Service?* Damn near perfect. But they say it's still being used. Damn you, Gene Simmons.

*Intellectuals?* Sure, with holes in our jeans and Butt-hole-Surfers t-

shirts? Next.

*Liahonas?* It could work, although it's probably too obscure, and maybe a little too righteous. Not to mention it sounds like the name of a Hawaiian cocktail. But it's a dandy metaphor and associations with Richard Poll could only improve our questionable public image. Although, I must wonder if co-opting Liahona in some way slightly disfigures the original integrity of Richard's essay. Let's leave it on hold for a minute.

*Backsliders?* Works great with the slip-n-slide metaphor of hell. And associations with Levi Peterson (our culture's Charles Bukowski) are nothing if not uplifting. But backslider as a name might be just a bit too helpless, guilt-heavy, and redemption-needy. Let's leave it afloat, but keep looking.

*Lamans, Lemuels, Gadiantons, Alma-the-Youngers?* I like them, but ultimately they're too bad-boy, too Sid and Nancy. None of us really plan to tie up our younger siblings and whip them with cords (our lovers, maybe) or abduct church authorities (well, not in the near future), which probably means it's best to avoid the Mickey Rourke associations.

*Anti-Nephi-Lehies?* Fiendishly enticing. A more appealingly underhanded maneuver couldn't exist. The appropriation of the title (meant originally as a distinguishing group name for a band of hyper-righteous Lamanite converts) by a rag-tag group of late-twentieth-century religious misfits would not only be a deviously satisfying scheme but also a fittingly post-modern gesture. It's packed with Derridean playfulness. I think, however, it's just too much of a mouthful. Not to mention there are probably more than one or two bishops out there who might not appreciate its self-conscious levity and consider it an insulting offense. Best to maintain amicable ties, I say. So how about its acronym? *A.N.L's?* It definitely keeps the Anti-Nephi-Lehies sedition thing under-wraps, and it's easy enough to say.

So where does all of this leave us? Down-trodden, beaten, frustrated, and still less-active. But, perk up fellow-travelers, the *deus ex machina* is fixing to descend: say hello to "Jack Mormon."

The etymology of the word will forever be debated, but the way Grandma used it is unmistakable. As a kid whenever Grandma started into the Jack Mormon gossip, my mind followed along rustling up black and white *Life* magazine images. As she narrated, I'd see disillusioned men driving home in their air conditioning-less Monte Carlos, ERA stickers peeling off their bumpers. They'd pull into "Foxes" Lounge for a happy hour drink and small talk with the bartender, Lou, then head home for a TV dinner with the dog and Walt Cronkite. Later they sat shirtless on the porch of the trailer, blowing smoke rings, waiting for the home teachers to arrive. Always good-humored and kind. Eternally outspoken and unapologetic. They lived their lives by their own rules and

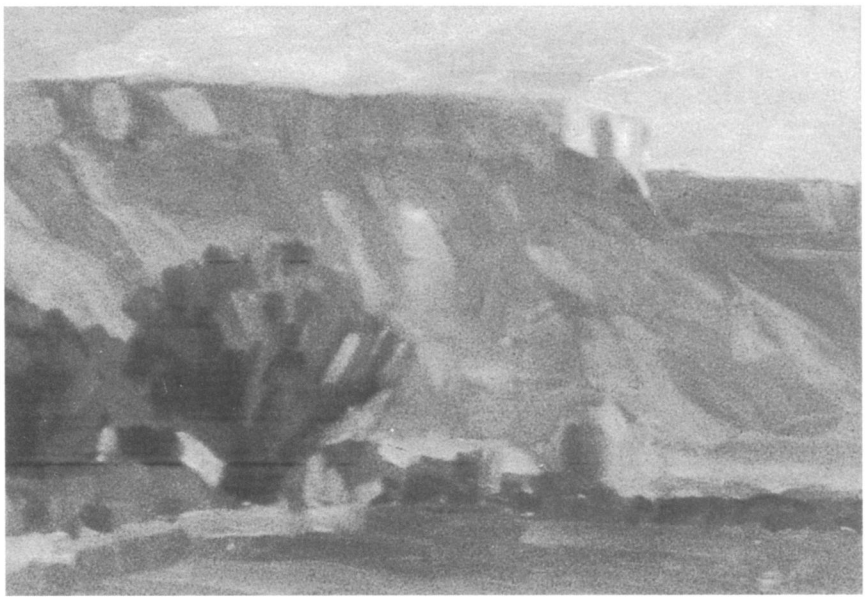
called their bishops by their first names. They usually skipped Sunday school and priesthood, but they gave regular fast offerings. And they made good assistant Scout Masters. Never bitter. They knew they'd always be Mormon. They also knew most Mormons would never really understand their jacked perspective on life, but that never stopped them from confounding the ward and bearing a testimony every few years.

I'm sure everyone knows their own childhood version of the Jack Mormon. It probably bears at least some resemblance to my own. In fact, doesn't everyone's Jack Mormon know the bartender at "Foxes" lounge? If your version of Jack Mormon has ever worn a polyester suit, spent weekends at the race track, belonged to a bowling league, drank a sixer of Schlitz, or owned a Herb Alpert record, then you could hardly be more in synch. My advice, fellow travelers: don't miss the train, or rather, the Greyhound. Jack Mormons of the world, unite—claim your new name and your rightful space on the orange vinyl love seat of fringe Mormonism.

I know this all might be hard to take in. Some might at first be wary. I see your thoughts: lots of campy smoke, but no real fire? Trivial culture babble? An amusing, but overwrought argument? In a head-to-head against the other prospects, it clearly out-performs in every way: it already has a proven track record, a distinguished heritage, and name-recognition value. It struts tons of street-talking attitude and it virtually glitters with white-trash chic. Not to mention, it just rolls right off the tongue. But, best of all, it shouldn't offend a soul. Even Grandma was comfortable talking about it.

If the book of Alma is a reliable guide to our future, we can anticipate that a change in name will only improve our fortunes. Besides the obvious "less-active" liberation that Jack Mormon brings, the name change itself promises even greater rewards. For the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, the change of name opened a friendly correspondence with their former adversaries, the Nephites—and most importantly, "the curse of God did no more follow them."

We hope only the same. Jack Mormon and cursed no more.



# A Place to Call Home: Studying the Indian Placement Program

*Tona J. Hangen*

LATE MORNING HEAT SHIMMERS OFF the hood of my battered Honda. Nothing in sight ahead but more parched fields stretching under an opal sky. A box of cassette tapes in the back seat rattles a staccato soundtrack to my solitary driving. I am near the border between the Navajo and Hopi reservations, where boundaries are forever in dispute. Four miles back I whipped by Coal Mine canyon, which drops off steeply into a dry painted ravine a mile behind the rodeo grounds, and turned off the highway onto an unpaved road. A group of horses shaded by a water tower shies away as my car approaches. I turn off the dirt road toward the trailer I have been told is there. My rear-view mirror reflects two streams of rusty dust kicking up from my tires, lingering in the dry air, marking my progress across a hill that seems to have no road at all. At last the mobile home materializes, with an ellipsis of old tires on the roof and a single strand of barbed wire outlining the dirt lot. Three wildly barking dogs announce my arrival as I mount the steps and knock.

The woman, dressed in a white shirt and short blue shorts, barefoot, opens the door. Her hair is parted in the middle and falls long and black nearly to her waist. She eyes me with suspicion. I introduce myself as an anthropology student studying the Mormon Indian Placement program and tell her I am interviewing Navajos who were on Placement, like herself.[1] She says she doesn't want to talk to me, but she invites me in anyway to the neatly kept interior. I note the set of encyclopedias, the house

1. The 1991 fieldwork for this study was funded by Leaders for Manufacturing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the MIT Kelly Fund. Thanks to Jean E. Jackson, James Howe, Heather Lechtman, H. Kent Bowen, Arthur Kaledin, Clarence Bishop, Thom and Bunn Ranger, George P. Lee, and especially Don Hangen. I respect the privacy of my informants by withholding their names.

plants, the bearskin (with claws still attached) hanging on the wall, the small television tuned to MTV.

She tells me it was a mistake for the LDS church to take kids so young for Placement, that she doesn't want to talk with me about it. I listen for about fifteen minutes to why she doesn't want to talk about Placement, about the rudeness of being thrust into another world as a ten-year-old girl. Finally, when it seems obvious she does want to talk about her experiences, I offer the consent form; we end up talking for three hours. She remembers the loneliness, feelings of rejection from her natural parents, isolation in public school among whites. She tells me it has taken her entire life to make peace with her own past. She estimates that less than 10 percent of Navajos who went on Placement have stayed active in the church; as for herself, she believes in the Book of Mormon, she says, but hesitates to lose ties to her older Navajo relatives and their traditional religion if she were to commit to "all those meetings." The program took her when she was too little to understand what was happening, she says, although she doesn't blame the church or her foster parents, whose intentions she's sure were good.

Her questions haunt me. "When people graduated and came back to the reservation," she asks me, "what was supposed to happen to the values they learned? What was supposed to happen to them? I know for me, I have more bad feelings than good; and nobody has the answers to those questions, no one knew how it would come out."[2] Our conversation winds down. She shows me a small rug she has just finished weaving, which she intends to sell to her coworkers. I snap her picture, the rug flapping out in front of her chest, and watch her gracefully climb back over the barbed wire. Her flip-flops make a little slapping sound. I start my engine and point my car towards the horizon.

## Placing Placement

The Indian Student Placement program was a cross-cultural foster care program administered by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which placed Native American Mormon children into white Mormon homes during the school year. From informal arrangements between southern Utah beet farmers and the children of Navajo migrant pickers in the late 1940s grew a program that at its peak in the early 1970s placed close to 5,000 students a year.[3] Placement recruited children eight

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2. Interview with anonymous informant, Coalmine Mesa, Arizona, 10 Aug. 1991.

3. Neil Birch, "Helen John: The Beginnings of Indian Placement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1985): 119-30; Clarence Bishop, "Indian Placement: A History of the Indian Student Placement Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints," M.S.W. thesis, University of Utah, 1967; Garth Mangum and Bruce Blumell, *The Mormons' War on Poverty: A History of LDS Welfare, 1830-1990* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 193-95.

years old and older to live with Mormon families, returned them to their reservations for the summers, and was designed to allow Indian children to "have educational, spiritual, social and culture opportunities in non-Indian community life."[4] As such, the program embraced dual goals: *educative*—teaching young Indians knowledge, skills, and language to better their chances for success in school and career, and *acculturative*—bringing them in contact with the morals, folkways, and cultural practices of another ethnic group with the expectation that the Indian children would benefit from adopting (white) LDS values and behaviors.

In many ways, the Indian Placement Program replicated other social-welfare institutions aimed at converting Indians to white, Western modes of thought and belief. But one crucial difference is the unique theological relationship the LDS church has claimed with Native Americans. The Book of Mormon itself was intended for the descendants of its writers, or as most Mormons popularly believe, the indigenous people of this hemisphere.[5] From its inception, then, Mormonism was intended to be a Native American religion—dedicated in part to restoring the gospel to those whose ancestors embraced it anciently. Following this logic, some believe that Lamanites (a Book of Mormon term that has come to refer to all Native American Indians) will play a central role in preparing for the imminent second coming of Christ, and that non-Lamanite members are merely assisting Lamanites in this work. This idea was clearly expressed before 1900 by church president Wilford Woodruff, who wrote: "The Lamanites will blossom as the rose on the mountains. It will be a day of God's power among them, and a nation will be filled with the power of God and receive the gospel, and *they* will go forth and build the New Jerusalem, *and we shall help them.*"[6] These kinds of interpretations were commonly espoused as recently as twenty years ago, when Placement seemed to fulfill such prophesies about Native Americans in the church.[7]

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4. LDS Social Services, *Indian Student Guide* (May 1973), 1.

5. "The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians—by it we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph who was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them." Joseph Smith, Jr., *Documentary History of the Church*, 1:315, 4 Jan. 1833, quoted in *Latter-day Prophets Speak: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Church Presidents*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (1947; repr. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 347.

6. *Journal of Discourses* 15:272, cited in *LDS Reference Encyclopedia*, ed. Melvin K. Brooks (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1960), 261-62, emphasis added.

7. Thomas J. Fyans, "The Lamanite Must Rise in Majesty and Power," *Ensign* 6 (May 1976): 12-13; Jerry Jacobs, "The Church has Divine Mandate to Teach Gospel to Indians," *Church News*, 20 Nov. 1976; Dean L. Larsen, "Mingled Destinies: The Lamanites and the Latter-day Saints," *Ensign* 5 (Dec. 1975): 8-13; James D. Mathews, "A Study of the Cultural and Religious Behavior of the Navaho Indians which Caused Animosity, Resistance or Indifference to the Religious Teachings of the Latter-day Saints," M.R.Ed. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1968, 73-77.

In a 1975 First Presidency message, Spencer W. Kimball reminded Lamanite readers, "You are a chosen people; you have a brilliant future. You might possess all the wealth of this earth, but you would be nothing compared to what you can be in this Church."[8] Dean L. Larsen described ideal Mormon-Indian relations in the church as a reciprocal arrangement: "in gratitude for the Book of Mormon, Gentile Mormons would 'nourish' and restore [Lamanites] to their promised blessings. Neither group would be able to completely fulfill their destiny without the other."[9]

The view that North American Native Americans would play a central role in the events of the last days may have been easier to sustain when they constituted the primary "other" to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century white Mormon settlements, but it becomes harder to make these claims today. In the last ten years the church has become ever more international in membership, rhetorically emphasizing cultural diversity and global missionization as a general theme; this provides the context in which Placement has been gradually cut back.[10] Enrollment in Placement has been steadily decreasing, while coordinating programs like the Indian Education department at BYU, the Indian Committee of the Quorum of the Twelve, Indian seminaries in BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) and public schools, and Indian youth conferences have all ended. Age of participation has been raised to sixteen, so that Placement now only involves academically gifted high school juniors and seniors. As one measure of the program's diminished existence, several of my informants believed the program had already been phased out altogether. Among the rest of the sample, the general opinion prevailed that Placement would soon end.

One way to interpret Placement's decline is historical. Changes in the church's Indian programs followed the 1985 death of President Spencer W. Kimball, who was outspoken all his life on behalf of Native Americans. Succeeding church leaders have tended to emphasize church growth abroad. With accelerating membership outside the boundaries of the United States, programs like Placement may be less relevant to the propagation of pluralistic, worldwide missionization. Then too, as some of my informants suggested, Placement may be a natural victim of its own success; conditions on the reservation have changed, and today's children can benefit from their parents' opportunities without needing to be relocated to another family for decent education and church participation.

An alternative explanation is theological. To some Native American

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8. Spencer Kimball, "Our Paths Have Met Again," *Ensign* 5 (Dec. 1975): 2-7.

9. Dean L. Larsen, *You and the Destiny of the Indian* (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1966).

10. See the many thoughtful articles on this topic in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996).

Mormons, Placement's wane signals a fundamental shift in doctrinal interpretation of Lamanite roles; perhaps the church leadership was suddenly disenchanted with the idea of last-days Lamanite leadership. George P. Lee was, of course, the most notable proponent of this idea.[11] Although since his excommunication in 1989 Lee has eschewed the idea of leading a splinter group, he is not alone in questioning whether the church neglects its obligation to its Native American members. The vital expansion of the church in some parts of the world is not reflected on the Navajo reservation, where many LDS congregations are shrinking and being consolidated. During my fieldwork, several people estimated that church activity on the reservation stood at around 10 percent of members on the rolls—a statistic that, true or not, was being bandied about freely. Clearly, the present situation is at odds with what was a widely-accepted interpretation of the destiny of Native Americans in the church, and where optimistic observers saw Lamanites "blossoming as the rose" twenty years ago, today there seems less to celebrate. Between 1990 and 1996 the number of Placement students has dwindled from 450 to 50. Both the long-time administrator, Clarence Bishop, and the current commissioner of the program, Steve Sunday, say that they expect Placement will continue as long as parents want to send their children.

Curiosity prompted me to undertake a study of the Indian Student Placement Program in the summer of 1991; I was interested in what participants remembered about the program, how they perceived its consequences in their lives, what were their speculations about its effect on the wider Mormon community. Growing up in the East after the program had begun to be cut back, I had no history with Placement. At college in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I was struck by the way many of my Utah-raised church friends viewed Placement—a distinctly Western Mormon experience—with something akin to embarrassment, like the garrulous uncle at a family reunion. Our parents' and grandparents' generation perpetuated the program, which in our present-day world of multiculturalism seems tinged with imperialistic, antiquated values of assimilation and cultural mentoring.

The churchwide need for some kind of closure, if not consensus, seems more than evident. Yet the program has received little scholarly attention either from outside the church or from within, and the silence on the subject is puzzling, born perhaps of this present-day embarrassment, perhaps of familiarity, perhaps of indifference. Church publications have reported on Placement primarily from the foster family's

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11. George P. Lee, "To the First Presidency and the Twelve," reprinted in *Sunstone* 13 (Winter 1989): 50-55.

perspective.[12] What few formal studies of Placement there are make use of social scientific data to assess the program's success or failure.[13] A mere handful of the thousands of former Placement participants have written publicly about their experiences.[14] A common theme in published accounts of Placement is the conspicuous absence of the Native American participants' own perspectives.

This study was designed to address that deficit. In order to understand Placement's consequences, I gathered twenty-two participant oral histories during several weeks of fieldwork on the Navajo reservation in 1991. I conducted my research from a particular position: as an insider to Mormonism (a life-long member and Eastern white female academic, to be precise), yet a total outsider to Navajo life. My fieldwork therefore had some methodological complications. On the one hand I was objectively studying Navajo self-perceptions and reconstruction of memory, entering my informants' worlds as a curious but distanced outsider. And on the other hand, my "objectivity" was mere academic fiction; my informants and I shared not only involvement in a common American culture but association in the church's tightly knit religious subculture—including a common discourse about the nature of truth.

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12. A Father, "Six + One = Six," *Ensign* 1 (Jan. 1971): 27-29; Gerry Avant, "Foster Daughter Fits in Just as Her Mother Did," *Church News*, 20 Jan. 1979, 5; Harold C. Brown, "The Church in the Lamanite World: Learning the Best of Both Cultures," *Ensign* 5 (Dec. 1975): 22; Victor L. Brown, "Blessing the One," *Ensign* 9 (Nov. 1979): 88-91; "Foster Families Needed for More Indian Students," *Church News*, 31 July 1976; "Indian Placement: The Three Most Common Questions," *Ensign* 6 (July 1976): 35-37; "Indian Students Bless Many Homes," *Church News*, 22 May 1976; "Indian Students Bridge Two Worlds," *Church News*, 11 Mar. 1978; "Indian Placement Notes Twentieth Anniversary," *Ensign* 3 (Jan. 1973): 78; Janice Kapp Perry, "Shared Son," *Ensign* 10 (Oct. 1980): 42-44; Mary Helen Powell, "Room for Calvin," *Ensign* 3 (May 1973): 61-63.

13. Bishop, "Indian Placement"; Robert D. Smith, "Relationships Between Foster Home Placement and Later Acculturation Patterns of Selected American Indians," M.S.W. thesis, Utah State University, 1968; Martin D. Topper, "Mormon Placement: The Effects of Missionary Foster Families on Navajo Adolescents," *Ethos* 7 (Summer 1979): 142-60; Bruce A. Chadwick, Stan L. Albrecht, and Howard M. Bahr, "Evaluation of an Indian Student Placement Program," *Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, Nov. 1986, 515-24; Bruce A. Chadwick and Stan L. Albrecht, "Mormons and Indians: Beliefs, Policies, Programs and Practices," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994): 287-309. The program has, of course, generated much criticism as well. For typical examples, see John Heinerman's assessment in *The Mormon Corporate Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 223-27; also Bob Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, "The Kids Go Out Navaho, Come Back Donny and Marie," *Los Angeles Magazine*, Dec. 1979, 140.

14. George P. Lee, *Silent Courage: An Indian Story, the Autobiography of George P. Lee, a Navajo* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987), esp. chaps. 9-15; Birch, "Helen John"; Giles H. Florence, Jr., "The Best of Both Worlds," *Ensign* 20 (Jan. 1990): 58-62; Pershlie Tewawina, "A Lamanite: Who Am I?" *New Era* 1 (Aug. 1971): 49.

The ambiguity of this position is nothing new in the social sciences, to be sure, and the acknowledgment of researcher subjectivity has become something of the fashion in the disciplines, accompanied by much chest-thumping of the *mea culpa* variety. The once-solid footing of (social) scientific objectivity seems permanently dismantled. Contemporary anthropological research, thoroughly informed by postmodern and postcolonial theory, has come largely to revolve around the interplay between researcher and informant, about shared meaning and negotiated truth. It has become the initial assumption that the social scientist more than leaves a mark on her informants; she is implicated in—even more, responsible for and revealed by—her interpretation of her informants and the effect of her conclusions. The argument hardly needs to be made any longer that maintaining a significant critical distance is an illusory goal and that all research, to greater or lesser extent, is self-revelation.[15]

Given my initial position on Mormon scholarship—thoroughly, unapologetically subjective—I argue even further that starting as an insider is actually a more, not less, authoritative stance. I also claim that postmodernism's critique of objectivity opens the way, even within Mormon truth-centered epistemology, for a more authentic representation of the past and present. I will have more to say about this last point later in the essay.

## Remembering Placement

Because of the program's scope and the thousands of Native Americans and white Mormon families who participated on both sides of the relationship, Placement's reach was long and deep into LDS homes. Its effects colored our most intimate daily rituals of family life, our memories both individual and collective. The potential pool of informants on this subject is vast and largely untapped, and their stories—in their own words—provide a compelling window onto struggles at once applicable to understanding cultural frontiers wherever and whenever they occur, and at the same time deeply, finally, personal.

The informant sample on which this essay is based, although not randomly selected, is a fair demographic representation of Placement partic-

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15. See, for example, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 19-35; Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Roger Sanjek, ed., *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

ipants.[16] My sample was composed of twenty-two interviewees, all members of the Navajo Nation. Seven were male and fifteen female, a male-female ratio similar to that in the program at any given time. Average age was thirty-three and all but one had been born on the reservation. All had completed high school; ten had attended some college; and four held college degrees. They had a range of Placement experiences: fourteen had been under ten when they first went on Placement, and eighteen were under thirteen, while three were in the last year or two of high school. Forty-three percent lived with a single foster family. Another 43 percent lived with two, and 14 percent lived with three or more families. The average length of time in the program was seven years, with an average age of ten at the time of first placement. The interviewees all declared themselves to be church members.

Based on these statistics, my sample may be considered comprised mainly of "success stories" from the church's perspective: long-term participants on Placement, with more or less lasting ties to the church. Given this, the most surprising element of my findings was the depth of ambiguity among those who at first glance would seem to be the most ready defenders of the program. Painful memories surfaced as informants remembered their initial adjustment to their foster homes. Lingering bitterness tinged their sense of being "of two minds," of belonging, as some said, to two worlds and yet to neither.

This theme initially surfaced when former participants remembered entering the program for the first time. Children going on Placement were bussed to a central location where they had medical checkups and waited for their foster families to meet them. One man remembered—as a twelve-year-old boy who'd never been more than a few miles from home—deciding to go back home and running away from the building, making circles in the city for hours until his foster parents found him. "As it turned out," he said, "the people that took me in were a very well-to-do people. I didn't know that; I thought all anglo people were that way. The car they picked me up in turned out to be a Cadillac." Perceiving his loneliness, they offered to send him home if he wanted. He recalled, "I remember they tried to do everything they could to try to get me over the lonely feeling. They had a swimming pool in the back yard. I knew how to swim, and [when] they got me in the pool I just went over to a corner and stayed there. I wouldn't come out of my corner."[17]

Most Placement participants I interviewed had similarly poignant memories of their initial adjustment to life in a white Mormon family and

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16. Tona J. Hangen, "I Remember Placement: Participating in the Indian Student Placement Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," B.S. thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992.

17. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 5 Aug. 1991.

community. Regardless of their present-day feelings about the program, they had little good to say about their first encounters with this entirely foreign set of experiences. In particular, the impersonal atmosphere of the processing center (a building on BYU campus for many years) stands out in the recollections of many participants, especially those who were quite young at the time. "It was a crazy way they did it," said one woman who was eleven when she first went on Placement. "They put us all in this big building, and gave us our shots and got everything updated. They took care of us until about three or four in the afternoon, and then the families started coming to pick up the kids. They had the names picked out ahead of time—they knew who they were looking for but I didn't know anything about them; being taken from your family and into a different family, it was the loneliest [of] feelings."[18] Another woman, eight at the time, remembers total bewilderment at leaving her parents. "I didn't even know what's going on. Mom and Dad didn't tell me," she recalled. "They just put me on the bus and said goodbye. I didn't know where I was going. My brother at that time was in fourth grade and I was in third grade so we both went together on the same bus. I remember it was a scary experience. I remember it well. Being put on a bus and having to travel all night and being herded like sheep into the stake center and we had to be bathed and printed, so to speak; it wasn't a good experience. They'd look through your hair and they wouldn't tell you why."[19]

With one child being placed in each foster home, siblings and relatives traveling to the processing center together were then separated. As one woman put it: "We were all in this great big room, and they were calling the names and when they called your name you left the room and you never came back! And my aunt left and I was nine years old, sitting there. I didn't know anybody but my aunt and now that she left, she didn't come back, and I was just really scared. Finally they called my name and I went out into the room where my foster parents were and I met them and they were really nice. That was in Provo, and we had to drive all the way back to near Ogden and on the way I remember crying. So, they pulled over to this ice cream store and they got me ice cream. And after that, you know, I wouldn't talk to them for about a week or two. I knew how to talk English; I guess I was just really shy."[20]

Many Placement participants recalled that feelings of loneliness and alienation overwhelmed them in the first few weeks away from home; and their sense of being different intensified as they began to attend

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18. Interview with anonymous informant, Coalmine, Arizona, 10 Aug. 1991.

19. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Tuba City, Arizona, 9 Aug. 1991.

20. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, LeChee, Arizona, 5 Aug. 1991.

school and church. "I came from an all-Indian school and then I went to an all-white school because it was a rich neighborhood," one person told me. "Just me and one other guy were the only Indians in the school. It was a different world. I just felt like I was in a foreign country or something. Everywhere I looked all I could see was white skin and blond hair."[21] Contact with other Navajos was limited for most of the people I interviewed; few parents could afford to visit, most natural families did not have telephones, and letters came only sporadically from parents who often had difficulty communicating in English. A few said that they were actively discouraged from speaking in Navajo with their siblings and Indian friends, while others said the simple fact of being immersed in anglo culture meant they forgot a lot of their Navajo language during the school years. Few children had access to other Placement students who might be experiencing the same conflicts.

Most participants I spoke with drew stark contrasts between the conditions on the reservation and on Placement, emphasizing the sometimes enormous class differences between the two worlds. As one woman recalled, "It was a complete change when I went on Placement. For one thing we didn't have any electricity or running water [at home on the reservation]. We lived in a—I wouldn't know how to call it, kind of like a shack, and it had a dirt floor. And there weren't any beds, we had sheepskin to sleep on. Then here I went up to Orem and you know, completely different! Their house was really nice. It was just like any other suburb community you would see nowadays and they had everything most people would have nowadays."[22] In retrospect, participants tended to conflate class and race, echoing the widespread American ethos of white superiority. "Through the years you are told, you know, that anglos are a superior race," one Placement student told me, then corrected herself: "They don't really tell you that, but you get that feeling somewhere along the way. Maybe even my mom and dad have said, you know, 'the white people are able to do this, they have invented things, they are able to make the money to have all the stuff that they have,' and so you end up thinking that white people are superior."[23] Another young man hoped to better himself by replicating what he perceived as a "white" life-path. He said, "I told [my mom] I was going to marry a white lady. I told her that. I want to be able to go college, marry a white girl, and live here [in Utah] and make something of myself, because my relatives, you know, they work two jobs and they're barely pulling it off."[24]

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21. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Provo, Utah, 18 July 1991.
22. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, LeChee, Arizona, 18 July 1991.
23. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 6 Aug. 1991.
24. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Provo, Utah, 18 July 1991.

Listening to words like these, I could see how in one sense Placement reinforced the powerful class and race hierarchy that persists in American society. With its emphasis on assimilation (via conversion, education, cultural immersion, and so on), the program might be considered functionally and ideologically similar to secular social welfare programs in the familiar paternalistic mode, like Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. But the church's doctrine regarding Lamanites complicates this picture; the unequal power relationship inherent in Placement's structure takes on additional significance in light of Book of Mormon teachings. This significance, I found, was open to interpretation and has changed over time—a fact which is, I think, one of the key sources of discomfort about the program's legacy within the church.

Living out some of their most formative years while dividing their time between two different (sometimes opposing) worlds, former Placement participants had to confront deeply personal questions about selfhood and identity. The people in my sample were at various levels of engagement with these questions: some had constructed what they said was a satisfactory sense of self out of their past experiences, while for others their childhood on Placement had only initiated an elusive and frustrating search for harmony. Among their responses I found three loose categories of self-definition: those who identified themselves primarily as "Mormons," those who identified themselves as "Navajos," and those who held themselves apart from any notion of "culture" or who tried to maintain a balance between two cultural worlds.

Those whose primary self-identification was with Mormon culture choose to sublimate Navajo influences and emphasize those of the Mormon way of life. They want to assume responsibility in their generation to provide opportunities for their children through the church which they themselves had not had. Several expressed to me they saw themselves part of a special generation of Native American Mormons. As one said, "My kids don't need to go on Placement, because I'm active in the church and I'm able to make sure they go to school and take care of those things."[25] Another imagined exhorting people like himself with these words: "Somebody gave it to you, now it's time for you to give it. I make [my listeners] responsible: 'It's up to you, YOU did it. It happened to YOU. The reason why you went was so that you could learn to take care of your own children, yourself and not have somebody else to do it.'"[26]

Other former Placement participants see themselves primarily as Navajo. They may resent the program for having interfered with family and cultural ties so central to Navajo life, or they may see its potential to

25. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 4 Aug. 1991.
26. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 5 Aug. 1991.

strengthen those ties, but either way they believe that Placement's total package devalued Indian goals and practices to the detriment of its participants. I heard these words from a man who celebrated his Navajo identity although he considered himself a committed church member: "We want to survive as a people. We don't want to blend in to the point where people say, 'Oh, they were Indians once upon a time here.' One of the ideas of the program was to be able to see the dominant culture, the opportunities in anglo culture, develop an awareness of who you are, and to be able to take the best of both. Being Indian is not to run around in a breechcloth, saying, 'The white man screwed me.' But to sit down and communicate with the banker or the lawyer and know what he's talking about so you can't be fooled."[27]

The third group's response was deeply personal. One woman who struggled for years to answer to herself whether she was white or Indian concluded, "Later I finally realized it doesn't matter."[28] Her words echoed others who tried to maintain a balance between the two worlds, saying things like "I'm just who I am" or "I need to accept both sides of myself." Suspended between two worlds, they say they are comfortable—at least for now—with that suspension. Their "between-ness" evokes a rich literature (in ever-widening disciplinary circles) on the *liminal*: that which lies "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."[29] This notion was developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, who identified liminal cultural spaces in ritual performance—for example, between the sacred and profane. Turner recognized ritual as a framing device for the reaffirmation of cultural categories; by being set apart from ordinary life, ritual performance highlights the structure outside of which it seems to occur.[30] Liminality, as Leach and Jackson have separately pointed out, occurs when we impose culturally constructed linguistic or cognitive classification systems on the natural world: what falls between the tidy categories ("nonthings," as Leach puts it) defines the liminal.[31] Since straddling the

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27. Telephone conversation with anonymous informant, 12 Mar. 1991.

28. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Provo, Utah, 18 July 1991.

29. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 95.

30. Ronald L. Grimes, "Victor Turner's Definition, Theory and Sense of Ritual," in *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature and Anthropology*, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141-46.

31. Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. Eric H. Lennenberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), 23-63; Jean E. Jackson, "Straddling the Mind-Body Split: Liminality and Chronic Pain," Feb. 1996, privately circulated; Robert Sardiello, "Liminality in a Postmodern World: From Ritual to Ritualoid," paper presented at the Conference on Media, Religion and Culture, Boulder, Colorado, Jan. 1996.

boundary calls attention to its permeability, liminal beings and states of being threaten the apparent naturalness of the social order—possessing a disturbing and potentially subversive (or transformative) power. It may be that Placement participants like the two women I have quoted here can access the ambiguous power of their presentday "placement" between clearly defined Mormon and Navajo worlds. They may find a way to transcend arbitrary notions of "cultural worlds," finding for themselves a personal place where ethnicity cannot penetrate. They travel paths of their own making, often lacking role models; I have sensed their struggles, and I wish them luck.

## Placing Myself

Researching Placement meant negotiating the interstices between clearly defined roles. Like my informants who had spent their lives asking themselves, "Who am I, when?" I found that investigating Placement challenged my sense of self-identity and presented me with occasions to perceive divergent, sometimes oppositional, ways of thinking—within myself.

Being both an insider and an outsider in complicated ways, I juggled the psychological imperative to reaffirm the world view I held in common with my subjects with the need to be critical, even cynical, of that world view. As a committed church member, I naturally found ways to interpret my experiences and those of my informants in light of the gospel, while at the same time hesitated privileging that interpretation in my (supposedly) dispassionate social scientific research. I worried that the critical self-reflexivity imposed by contemporary theory and its distrust of objective truth spelled the downfall of my own inner ultimate meaning. None of these conflicts has an easy answer, as the words of my informants themselves—who had faced far more disturbing cognitive disjunctures—attest. But in the process, I have come to realize that postmodern, self-reflexive Mormon anthropology—or history, or sociology, or even physical science for that matter—may hold out great promise for a more authentic representation of faith in our times. In that way my experiences and methodological challenges become useful as a mirror, a "type and a shadow," if you will, for thinking about self and spirit, community and truth.

Before I began my fieldwork, I wanted my beliefs and my social scientific perspective to occupy different and mutually exclusive spaces. I imagined my task primarily as one of role-switching, or exchanging one set of interpretive lenses for another, and told myself that recognizing which lenses I was holding at the time was the key to studying Placement as a (white) Mormon. It did not take long for that tidy conception to

break down. Witness my first field note, badly typed in a cheap motel after a day on the road listening to narrated Book of Mormon tapes. "Today I listened as an insider AND an outsider and trying to do both at once is disturbing to say the least," I reflected. "I'm wondering, should I set aside time to feed my soul in the way I believe is best? And then set aside time to look with outsiders' eyes and pretend I don't have feelings all tied up in what I'm doing? Or is that just another form of denial? Is there any point in pretending like I'm not here and I don't have beliefs?" I concluded by asserting that my acknowledged perspective—believer, Mormon, insider—could not be separate from the research. "I do exist," I insisted, "I am studying something and I have feelings about what I'm studying. My feelings are going to be tangled up in what I do. They will shape my research and be changed by it. There is an alchemy going on inside me that will be a consequence, and a side effect, and for that matter a driving force of my research. I am going to begin by refusing to deny that I am biased, that my feelings [could] be separate from my work. I hope that makes me a revolutionary."

In the field I tried to follow through with my resolution to sustain critical and reaffirming perspectives at the same time, but despite my intentions, I often ended up compromising both. In-group participation inhibited my critical skills. I relied on church networks for housing and interview contacts, for example, rather than appear to be coming from outside the Mormon community. I attended local wards and tried to blend in (succeeding too well one Sunday, when a visiting regional representative mistook me for the daughter of my white hosts in Tuba City). I often nodded without questioning when I heard Mormon catch phrases in interviews, assuming that my take on those terms necessarily matched the informant's meaning (for example, prayer, the gospel, testimony). Looking out of place on the Navajo reservation encouraged me to seek out other Mormons among whom I would "belong," seeking familiarity instead of novelty.

Sometimes, however, my differences, my "outsideness" came to the forefront, obstructing my view of ultimate, transcendent gospel truth. My personal spirituality suffered in the field; I felt myself being critical of my own prayers, my own convictions. Even in the midst of familiar circumstances, at times I felt very much shut out of inner meanings, as if my shared beliefs with other Mormons could never compensate for vast cultural and ethnic differences. One experience stands out in particular: the Sunday before Pioneer Day, when I attended an Indian ward in Provo. I was about the only non-Indian in the room, the guest of a Navajo family who wanted to give me a sense of the non-reservation Mormon Indian community. Ads for Pioneer Day sales and for the upcoming parade had sensitized me to the potentially touchy issue of celebrating white Mor-

mon history in an Indian ward. I didn't know what to expect from the sacrament meeting program.

To my surprise, between speakers the congregation sang "They, the Builders of the Nation." I struggled through the first verse ("They the builders of the nation/ Blazing trails along the way/ Stepping stones for generations/ Were their deeds of ev'ry day/ Building new and firm foundations/ Pushing on the wild frontier"), fighting the urge to hoot out loud at the ludicrousness of the situation. Me, sitting in a roomful of Indians, singing about pioneers, wondering what they were all thinking. As we shouted out "Blessed, honored Pioneer!" my host and I, who were sharing the hymnbook, caught sidelong glances of each other. The nervous tension turned into mutual awkward giggles, but I had the sense that somehow he and I were not sharing a joke at the expense of the rest of the congregation. Laughing acknowledged the many layers of meaning in the simple act of singing, but did not remove the unspoken barriers I felt.

My ambivalence in the field about the relationship between insider and outsider positions turned to discouragement when I returned home and began transcribing interviews. My outside-ness to the world view of my Navajo informants seemed to undermine my ability to speak for them as an insider. I began to doubt whether what I shared with my informants could ever transcend the hurdles history, theology, and practice had placed in the path of true understanding. The lowest point struck while I was watching a PBS-produced documentary about BIA boarding schools for Indians. Gloomily I wrote:

> One of the films Placement produced to show its critics claimed that Placement was truly the golden rule in action. I wonder. I wonder how much we would really like to become someone else because we were in a dependent position. I wonder how much we would like our children taken away for months at a time. I wonder how much we think we could learn from the whites, were we Navajos or Sioux or Comanche or any other tribe of American Indians . . . The spiritual strength, the community, the deep belief, the culture that makes a Navajo who he is, an Inuit who he is, a Cheyenne who he is—how quick we have been to call them all Lamanites. It's just substituting one word for another . . . Mormons have coopted their history, written them another and called it true. God forgive us [because we do not] know whether it is or not. As one of my interviewees said, when her father dies, the knowledge he has will die with him, because she didn't have the time or the ability or the understanding to learn it from him, and after him it will be gone. We have been calling the Indian a vanishing race for hundreds of years. I wonder how long until we are finally right. Yet I do have faith in the enduring and adaptive resistance of American Indian tribes. They have seen trouble before, have faced the extinction of their ways of life and culture and yet have endured, have even resisted.

I ended my study of Placement painfully aware of ambiguities: the depth of bitterness *and* of gratitude participants harbored, the difficulty of disarticulating Placement from other assimilative trends in postwar American society which have struck at the cultural institutions of Native American groups, and the complications inherent in "faithful criticism." While I believed—and still believe—that there needs to be room both in academic and in religious discourse for truth-making through storytelling about the past, the narrative I had collected from this small sample of Navajo Placement graduates seemed much too fragmented to have anything to teach us.

Upon deeper consideration, however, I realize that the lack of cohesiveness *is* the thing to be learned from aggregating individual accounts of Placement. That the program resists dualistic classification (good/bad, helpful/harmful, progressive/assimilative) compels us to consider it more closely, more locally, more intensely—and ultimately more realistically. For me, the academic quest in search of Indian-centered truth about Placement became something else: a transformative occasion to rethink the boundaries of meaning itself and to reconceptualize it in processual terms. Understanding Placement—for my informants primarily and also for myself—was less about discovering meaning than about making it: in retelling stories, in living out experiences and enacting rituals, and in articulating clear visions of the social and racial dynamics of the Mormon community.

Are Mormon-Indian relations within the church in irreversible decline? My informants' testimony (and testimonies) suggests otherwise; although to my surprise, less because of enchantment with Placement than because of their everyday achievements in making meaning out of their experiences. As Navajos and Mormons and former Placement students, they continually *signify* themselves as whole people, seeking—and occasionally finding—inner peace.

As for me, the conflicted researcher who ended her study mired in ambiguity, my thoughts on Placement and the Mormon community have become more hopeful. I see in my informants and in my lopsided, postmodern dialogue with them the potential for a more communicative present of understanding and acceptance. I am reminded that the beauty of the gospel for the faithful is in people coming together imperfectly, yet having their human-ness hallowed by the transcendent grace of God. And by my experiences I am encouraged that self-reflexive research offers, to those of us seeking to reconcile our faith with our academic disciplines, a more authentic version of truth. By "authentic" I do not mean truth which stands outside our cultural constructions of verifiability, but rather truth in the image of those constructions: fragmented, contested, multifarious, capacious, and fecund. Such a conception of truth would be

appropriate to the times in which we live, neither discrediting spiritual certainty nor elevating it to the primary position as a replacement for scientific objectivity. The warring gladiators (Religion, the Immutable Word vs. Science, the Unchanging Proof) both have been toppled in contemporary discourse,[32] but perhaps for us that is the gain. There is room for us to reconsider ourselves amid the other and the other within ourselves. When I think of singing the pioneer hymns among Indians, I am heartened by the strength of their voices.

32. See Karl Sandberg's felicitous reflections on the notion of the Word in "Thinking About the Word of God in the Twenty-first Century," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996): 58-79.

# Pottery

*Jocelyn Kearl*

I sit at the wheel as I did
when I was young.
My hands pull the
warm plastic sediment
into cylinders like castle
walls, molded and shaped
by layers and layers of hands.
The whirring rhythm of the wheel
enchants my body, as my arms are
drawn to flex with each rivet of the
spinning clay. I think of the princess
who in her youth, dreamed of the
escape into lands of freedom, far
from the tower of thorned ivy.
I am creating the pot that will
hold irises and wildflowers.
With the rib-tool, I smooth
the base and lip, trimming
excess, with a sponge, I
soak the water, as the
wheel winds down.

# Mormonism in a Post-Soviet Society: Notes from Ukraine

*Tania Rands*

> We have separated the church from the state, but we have not yet separated the people from religion.
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> —V. I. Lenin

LEGEND HAS IT THAT IN THE year 988 A.D., Prince Vladimir,[1] ruler of ancient Kievan Rus', brought Christianity to the Slavs. The apparent catalyst for his own conversion was a plea from Emperor Basil II of Constantinople. A renegade general had gathered an army to march on the Christian capital, and the emperor begged Prince Vladimir for an army to buttress the defense of his throne. In return for this great favor, Basil II was prepared to offer the hand of his sister, Anna, in marriage—providing, of course, that Vladimir convert to the one true faith, for Anna could hardly be expected to marry a heathen. Anna herself was none too thrilled with this backwater arrangement—heathen *or* Christian—but Prince Vladimir sent his army, saved the emperor's throne, and was baptized. He also sent out a decree to the residents of Kiev offering them a choice: report to the banks of the Dniepr River on a given day to shed their paganism or incur the enmity of the prince. His population prudently bowed to his will, some perhaps less willingly than others, and were baptized in the river en masse by priests lining the shore and pronouncing the necessary rites. Now a commemorative statue of Prince-turned-Saint Vladimir, holding a cross far taller than himself, pokes through the trees of the lush green park lining the western bank of the Dniepr.

In 1991, one millennium later, Elder Boyd K. Packer stood at the foot of this statue of St. Vladimir and dedicated the land of Ukraine to mis-

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1. I have elected to use the more familiar Russian transliterations in this essay, i.e., *Vladimir* and *Kiev,* rather than the less-known Urkrainian transliterations of *Volodymyr* and *Kyiv.*

sionary work and a great harvest of souls. I arrived in the capital city of Kiev in January 1992 to join some thirty-odd missionaries working to bring his words to fruition. I served six months in Kiev, followed by ten months in the southeastern coal mining city of Donetsk.

Proselyting in the streets of Ukraine was hardly what I had pictured myself doing only a year earlier. I came to the missionfield having only recently returned to the church and faith after a five-year disillusionment with organized religion, and on the heels of earning a bachelor's degree in "Peace and Conflict Studies," a small interdisciplinary major at U.C. Berkeley. Thus I arrived in Ukraine trained to see the world in sociological terms and with several years of college Russian stuffed in my head. I was also well-trained to recognize the evils of large institutions, patriarchy, and western cultural imperialism. With the ink still drying on my diploma, I found myself bringing the restored gospel of Jesus Christ along with an arguably large, western, patriarchal institution to an Eastern European culture in the throes of an identity crisis.

In this essay I hope to share ethnographic observations that I made as a missionary in 1992-93 and as a graduate student in sociology during a subsequent visit to Ukraine for the summer of 1995. My main purpose is to provide some general history and cultural context for Mormonism in a little-known country. I hope to shed light on the fascinating processes by which an American-based church with a lay clergy has established itself in a transitional "post-Soviet" society. My observations also lead me to reflect on some of the global issues facing an increasingly international Mormonism.

Within two years of the first LDS missionaries entering Russia via Helsinki, the first pair of elders to start work in Ukraine arrived in Kiev, then part of the Vienna East Mission, in October 1990. Over six years later the church has grown to two missions and well over fifty branches in ten cities, as well as several branches in Minsk, the capital of neighboring Belarus. The growth rate for baptisms, however, has tapered off dramatically over the last few years, a phenomenon I will discuss later.

The pattern of missionary work in Ukraine has to some degree reflected much of the history and culture of the country. Until recently, for example, missionaries have only been trained and taught in Russian language, rather than Ukrainian, and the growth of the LDS church extended only to the east and south of Kiev. This geographical splintering can be traced back to 1654, when a Ukrainian cossack formed an alliance with the Russian Empire to fend off the expansion of Poland. He was partially successful in his goal: the ultimate result of his treaty was a split through what is currently Ukraine—the east under the control of Russia and the west under Polish rule for three hundred years, each half of the country developing along different cultural, religious, and linguistic

lines. In fact, parts of western Ukraine were not annexed to the Soviet Union from Poland until the end of World War II.

To this day the East is dominated by Russian language and the Russian Orthodox church. The West is dominated by Ukrainian—a Slavic language closely related to Russian—and the relatively strong Ukrainian Catholic church.[2] For this reason, western Ukraine is better known for its ardent nationalism and for more effectively resisting the Soviet indoctrination of atheism. One Ukrainian woman I talked to about the impending plans of the LDS church to send Ukrainian-speaking missionaries to the western city of Lviv, asked, puzzled, "But why? They already have religion there!"

President Howard L. Biddulph, the first president of the Kiev Ukraine Mission and a professor of political science and Soviet studies at the University of Victoria in Canada, was interviewed in 1991 for a lengthy Kiev newspaper article on the future of Mormonism in Ukraine. The skeptical journalist concluded in his article that the relatively ascetic lifestyle of Mormons would hardly appeal to Ukrainians and that doctrines such as moral agency and "man is that he might have joy" were too optimistic for the Soviet soul. A few years and several thousand converts later, President Biddulph attributed the successful establishment of Mormonism in Ukraine to four major factors: a favorable political climate, a favorable ideological climate, disillusionment with traditional religious options, and the popularity of the West.[3]

## Political Climate

Introducing the church to Ukraine in October 1990 proved to be fortuitous political timing. Mikhail Gorbachev had just been personally involved in ousting the tight-fisted president of the Ukrainian Republic, Volodymyr Shcherbitsky, who had long resisted the reforms of *perestroika*. The Ukrainian nationalist organization *Rukh* (meaning "movement") was growing dramatically in popularity. Massive demonstrations, involving first students and then factory workers, were held in spite of Communist Party attempts to stifle them.

LDS missionaries arrived between two of these demonstrations, when the republic seemed most open to change. In fact, the first church meeting in Kiev, with seven investigators in attendance, was held in a building fifty yards from the Communist Party headquarters on the day

2. Sometimes referred to as Eastern Rite Catholicism, Greek Catholicism, or the Uniate church.

3. From a 1994 lecture at BYU on the growth of the LDS church in Ukraine. In this context, President Biddulph was concentrating on historical and sociological factors, rather than the role of spiritual conversion.

of a large student demonstration downtown.

Also relevant was the passage only two weeks earlier in Moscow of an historic freedom of conscience law that guaranteed, among other rights, equal legal protection to all religious confessions and the right of religious organizations to establish themselves according to their own charters. The law also allowed for religious organizations to be directed from abroad.[4] The Ukrainian Republic soon passed its own freedom of conscience law, similar to the earlier Moscow version, and within a month of the failed coup and Ukrainian independence, the LDS church was officially registered in Kiev on 9 September 1991.[5] By 1993 this open-armed attitude toward "new" religions would change dramatically, but during the first few crucial years that missionaries worked to organize the church, the political climate in Ukraine was remarkably favorable to the introduction of a foreign, non-traditional faith.

## Ideological Climate

Historians point to "religious revivals" in several periods of Soviet history. Some refer to a growing renewal of faith in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in response to Krushchev's destalinization policies,[6] a renewal which continued through the stagnation and disillusionment of the Brezhnev years. Other historians emphasize the more recent reforms of *glasnost* in the late 1980s. It was Gorbachev who finally accepted "believers" as equal citizens. During his term, for example, school excursions to churches rose and Orthodox seminaries experienced a surge in students.[7] In Ukraine 450 churches (mostly Orthodox) were opened or reopened in 1988.[8] Certainly the easing of sanctions against religion brought about by Gorbachev, followed by the failed right-wing coup of August 1991 (a convenient event to symbolize the collapse of Communism), dramatically forced a nationwide evaluation of both official and personal ideologies and brought the search for new meanings in life out of the underground and into more public spaces.

An excited, widespread interest in religion was evident in Ukraine at the Saturday street displays we held, especially in the first year of my mission. We would set up a small table with scriptures and literature in

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4. Paul Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1992), 105.

5. Howard L. Biddulph, "Religious Liberty and the Ukrainian State," *BYU Law Review* 2 (1995): 321-46. See esp. 328-35.

6. Jane Ellis, "The Religious Renaissance: Myth or Reality?" in *Candle in the Wind: Religion in the Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Centre, 1989).

7. Lynn Eliason, *Perestroika of the Russian Soul* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1991), 47.

8. Jim Forest, *Religion in the New Russia* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 192.

an underground street crossing or at the corner of a grocery store, tape up a few LDS posters on the wall behind us, and start talking to the small crowd that would soon gather—either one-on-one or town-crier style. Many were hungry to buy the Bibles on display or the colored posters of Christ. And many would accept invitations to church and come to the meetings the following day. During my mission no missionaries ever went tracting door-to-door: these displays and simply stopping people on the street were the most effective ways of finding people who later joined the church.

One young branch in which I served, with fewer than a dozen baptized members, went through several months with 80-100 people attending sacrament meetings. More than once during that time our week's schedule was booked solid with teaching appointments and new member visits before meetings were even over, and I had to postpone requests from church-goers to take the missionary discussions until the following week.[9]

In that same area of the city of Donetsk, my companion and I stumbled into an unusual service project involving local day care centers.[10] A teacher at one of the centers had met LDS missionaries at a street display and invited us to meet with her class of five-year-olds and talk to them about God. My civil liberties separation-of-church-and-state side wrestled mightily with my missionary side, and, although I remained ambivalent, in the end we committed to the project. Casual visits involving playing and teaching Primary songs soon evolved into a more organized story-time with games, object lessons, and a theme for each week. I revamped and recycled every Primary lesson I had used during the first six months of my mission and we taught them every Primary song available in Russian. One week the theme would be "honesty," another "kindness," another "gratitude," and underlying everything was the basic thread that we are children of God, who loves us and wants us to be happy. We discussed Jesus and prophets and scriptures and commandments. I did not simply teach ethics; I taught explicitly Christian ethics.

One week a music teacher from a neighboring center observed our presentation and invited us to do the same thing at her school for a classroom of six-year-olds. Then a third school requested our "program." By then we were short on time, so we visited the third day care center every other week and worked with several classes combined—about forty chil-

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9. I attribute this unique experience in part to the fact that there were only two missionary pairs assigned to the branch at the time, and, as sisters, we often taught more than the elders simply because there were more women interested in taking the discussions than men. It nevertheless illustrates the enthusiastic interest in the area when Mormonism first arrived.

10. With the high number of men and women in the work force, these "kindergartens" were designed to provide up to twelve hours of daily care for children ages 2-7.

dren at a time. Within a few months, as I sat in the music room of the first kindergarten waiting for our original five-year-old class to file in, I noticed that there seemed to be more teachers milling about the hallways and more energy than usual in the school. When the children finally appeared, they were on their best behavior—the boys wearing little neckties and the girls wearing bows in their hair. Evidently, word of these visits from American missionaries had made its way up through the administration and that day we would be observed by three regional directors of day care centers for the city of Donetsk. All three directors looked like stern matronly Communists from central casting. I was sure that this would be our last presentation, but I went ahead with what we had planned for that day. I told the story of Daniel in the lions' den with a flannel board shipped from home and we talked about standing up for what we believe. We sang songs and then ended with a game I had improvised using American Sign Language: we would sit in a circle and one person would sign and say "I love you" to a neighbor, who would say "thank you!" and then pass on the "I love you" to the next person until it went all the way around the circle and the person who had first expressed "love" got "love" back.

When it was all over and the children had returned to their classroom, several teachers and the director of the day care center promptly set up a table with chairs to serve tea (herbal, just for us), as is customary when guests visit. My companion and I joined them and I waited for a "thank you but that will be all" speech from the regional directors. Instead, the three women were beaming and excited. They had never seen material or a presentation style like this and it was just what the children needed. One regional director exclaimed that her favorite part was the "I love you" game and suggested that we play it again right there. And so there we sat, eight adults, signing "I love you" and saying "thank you" all the way around the tea table. They asked us to bring our presentations to every day care center in that region of the city. When I explained that we were stretched thin as it was, they decided to send the schools to us. The following week our lesson was observed by about thirty day care center directors, who were required to attend. In subsequent weeks teachers from around the region came to watch and take notes. Our presentations continued for nine months—all the way through that 1992-93 school year, including a Christmas pageant we helped stage which was attended by parents.[11]

The welcome we received in these schools and the remarkably high levels of church attendance in this Donetsk branch during 1992 certainly

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11. This general acceptance of our presence in schools was no doubt facilitated by the lack of negative stereotypes about Mormonism at the time and the very low numbers of non-Christians in Ukraine.

point to a time of excited interest in what Mormonism had to offer. In the aftermath of national independence, with its accompanying freedom of access to information from new sources, Ukrainians were open to exploring religious options and going out of their way to seek them out.

## Ambivalence Toward Orthodoxy

Russian Orthodoxy is deeply embedded in the national identity of Russia and Ukraine, perhaps in much the same way as Catholicism is embedded in Italy and Shintoism in Japan. In the early 1990s wearing and displaying crosses became more and more fashionable, and Orthodoxy enjoyed a surge in baptisms—especially among the younger generation.[12] But this religious revival did not lead all Ukrainians back to their Orthodox roots. The more firmly established Catholic church fared better in western Ukraine, but the general population in central and eastern Ukraine had lost considerable respect for Orthodoxy.

Even before the Bolsheviks came to power, nationalism in Ukraine had split the Orthodox church into three major factions: Russian Orthodoxy, which remained subordinate to a patriarch in Moscow; Ukrainian Orthodoxy, which answered to a patriarch in Kiev; and the independent, nationalist Autocephalous church.[13] Although the Communist Party spent seventy years destroying church buildings of all denominations, persecuting priests and church-goers, and preaching atheism, Russian Orthodoxy—which could be more easily controlled through its Moscow-centered hierarchy—was more tolerated. As a result, it was considered common knowledge that many of those with authority in the Russian Orthodox church were KGB-friendly and corrupt. In 1992, for example, the highest ranking member of Russian Orthodoxy in Ukraine (Kiev Metropolitan Filaret) resigned his post following allegations of KGB collaboration and sexual immorality, allegations he never publicly denied.[14]

Property disputes further discredited traditional Christianity in

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12. It was actually fairly common for the older people I talked with to have been baptized as infants in secret—usually on the initiative of their grandparents. Soviet researchers estimated that 40-50 percent of children in the USSR were baptized in the early 1960s. Other statistics indicate that in 1975 32 percent of all baptisms in the USSR took place in Ukraine, even though Ukrainians constituted only 19 percent of the Soviet population. See Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 207-208.

13. The word "autocephalous" means "self-governing." For an interesting description and analysis of Autocephalism, see "The Rise of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, 1919-22," by Bohdan Bociurkiw, in *Church, Nation and State in Russia and Ukraine,* (Basingstoke, Eng.: MacMillan in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1991).

14. John B. Dunlop, "KGB Subversion of the Russian Orthodox Church," *RFE/RL Research Report* 1 (20 Mar. 1992): 51-53.

Ukraine. In many cases, Russian Orthodoxy had taken over church buildings and cathedrals abandoned by the more persecuted factions. With the revival of these formerly repressed branches of Orthodoxy, as well as Catholicism, each claimed to represent true Christianity and began to fight bitterly over historical ownership of church property. Many Ukrainians found this squabbling to be confusing and decidedly *un*-Christian. In fact, a 1991-92 opinion poll indicated that 52 percent of Ukrainians described themselves as non-denominational Christians: a possible indication of disillusionment with traditional options of organized religion.[15]

## Popularity of the West

Mormon missionaries have ridden the coattails of American popularity in many parts of the world, and the former Soviet Union is no exception. The opening of long-closed borders made any foreigner intriguing and exotic—especially Americans and Canadians. *Glasnost* exposed Ukrainians to the positive aspects of North American life formerly neglected by Communist media. Most people I talked to about the West spoke bitterly of the now-exposed high capitalist standard of living relative to life under Communism. They often harbored stereotypical visions of America as the golden land of opportunity where anyone could "make it big," and I had frequent jesting marriage proposals from would-be emigres. Many were anxious to ask what America was "really like" since they didn't know what to believe in the media anymore. Offering English classes and making appearances in schools to talk about life in the West were common ways for missionaries to establish visibility in communities. People were generally more likely to pause on the street or to invite Mormon missionaries into their homes out of curiosity about their country of origin, rather than their religion. An elders' quorum president from Odessa acknowledged this initial attraction as an accepted fact and verbalized a common feeling among members of the church: "Of course, many came to church for America. But they stayed for God."[16]

But while American passports opened some doors, they closed others. American presence and leadership in the church have posed several dilemmas for Mormonism in Ukraine, and gradual change in the social

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15. Biddulph, in his 1994 BYU address. See also comparable Russian statistics in L. Vorontsova and S. Filatov, "Religiosity and Political Consciousness in Post-Soviet Russia," *Religion, State and Society* 22 (1994): 397-401.

16. From an August 1995 interview with the author. It should be noted, however, that more recently returned missionaries and local Ukrainian leaders say this attraction has faded. In April 1996 Howard Biddulph stated: "American missionaries are no longer a novelty and people no longer have illusions about material advantages or emigration which American contacts can provide" (Apr. 1996 letter, in my possession).

and political climate slowed down the expansion of the church. By 1993 the sense of excitement and openness to new religions seemed to be waning. Many Ukrainians I spoke with talked of feeling overwhelmed by the number of religious choices now surrounding them. Mormonism was only one of dozens of Western-based religions to begin active proselyting in Ukraine. As different churches became more established alongside Mormonism, and, as Western stereotypes about Mormons along with anti-Mormon literature began to circulate, the "playing field" became more crowded. The energy required to sort through a barrage of conflicting claims on truth discouraged many from even trying. When in doubt, many Ukrainians fell back on the Orthodox church more for reasons of cultural or national identity than through religious conversion. One woman I taught and saw baptized in 1992 identified herself as Russian Orthodox when I saw her again in 1995. Several questions later I learned that she rarely attended religious services, but that she now identified with Orthodoxy because it was the religion of her ancestors and her country.

Another major contributor to a slow-down in church growth is precisely this issue of national identity. In 1991 Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly (even in the Russified east) to separate from the Soviet Union and become an independent state. Politicians found favor by distancing themselves both from Russia and the West, and there were strongly expressed sentiments that Ukraine could and should forge its own path in the world. Leonid Kravchuk, the first president of independent Ukraine, was elected using stirring nationalist rhetoric and speaking fluent Ukrainian, rather than Russian. It soon became clear that his strategies for shaping a new national identity included favoring the religion of Ukrainian Orthodoxy over Russian Orthodoxy and other foreign "transplants" to Ukrainian soil.

In December 1993 an amendment to the 1991 freedom of conscience law was passed emphasizing that the law only guarantees the religious rights of *citizens*, not foreigners. The law is now interpreted to mean that foreigners can only preach and perform rites by invitation of already registered religious congregations—effectively both banning the proselyting of foreign missionaries in new cities where congregations have not yet been established and protecting churches more native to Ukraine from competition for converts.[17]

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17. A direct quote from the amendment reads as follows: "Clergymen, religious preachers, teachers, other representatives of foreign organizations who are foreign citizens and come to visit temporarily in Ukraine may preach religious doctrines, administer religious ordinances, or practice other canonical activities only in those religious organizations which invited them to Ukraine and with official approval of the governmental body that registered the statutes and the articles of the pertinent religious organization." See U.S. Department of State Dispatch, *Ukraine Human Rights Practices, 1994* (Mar. 1995). For an in-depth discussion of religious liberty and the law in Ukraine, see Biddulph's "Religious Liberty and the Ukrainian State," 321-46.

Government officials also made it clear that they preferred to deal with Ukrainian representatives of the church rather than Americans. In order to qualify for missionary visas, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was required to create a national organization with a Ukrainian citizen as its president. Ukrainian branch presidents from all eight cities where the church was established met in Kiev to work on a charter and to nominate a president. Their nomination was approved by the area presidency, but the position is not an official church calling.[18]

Even in cities where the LDS church is already established, Ukrainian government officials have found ways to control the influence of this foreign-based religion by limiting the number of visas allotted to foreign missionaries. And since Ukraine still operates under the old Soviet system of requiring a separate visa clearance for each city visited, the Council on Religious Affairs of each city can arbitrarily set a limit on the number of proselyting Mormon missionaries it will allow. Thus LDS mission presidents do not have the ability to freely transfer missionaries between cities—they must do constant battle with Soviet-style red tape and resistant city governments.[19] These efforts constitute a considerable drain of time and energy for mission presidencies and office elders. City officials have also found other ways to discourage missionary work. Over the past few years, several missionaries have been arrested for having their registration as foreigners expire. In some cities street displays have been banned, and facilities such as schools and cultural halls have been discouraged from renting space to non-Orthodox religions. At least three Ukrainian cities, at one time or another, have temporarily expelled all foreign LDS missionaries over visa disputes.

The church has developed several strategies for coping with these limitations and the severe drop in the number of full-time missionaries allowed into the country. One solution has been to apply for humanitarian aid visas as well as missionary visas. Missionaries who arrive as humanitarian aid workers generally do not wear identifying tags in public and put special effort into community service projects. They are not allowed to contact people about the church but may answer questions, participate in Sunday services, work with church members, and teach non-

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18. Other countries, such as Switzerland, have similar requirements.

19. According to the U.S. State Department's report on Human Rights practices in Ukraine during 1994: "Some local authorities refused to respond officially to the requests [for missionary visas by the LDS church] but stated in private that they will not grant visas because of the opposition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. When the Mormon Church continued to press its case for visas, some members of the Council on Religious Affairs threatened to deregister the Mormon church if it did not cease its efforts."

members when invited to do so.[20]

Another strategy, with interesting implications for the church as an American presence in Ukraine, has been to use native Ukrainians more frequently as full-time and part-time missionaries. Ukrainian missionaries do not need visas to transfer between cities, and although they generally lack familiarity with the scriptures and details of church doctrine and organization, they come with the obvious benefit of language and cultural proficiency. An increasing number of Ukrainians are submitting papers for full-time missions, and single members of the church have been invited to serve mini-missions as their time allows. In 1995 I met a divorced man and older teenage Ukrainians who donated some or all of their summer to become full-time companions to Americans.

One incident that speaks to the success of Ukrainian missionaries and the potential for Ukrainian self-sufficiency in the church took place in the coastal city of Odessa in late 1993. Odessa had been opened to missionary work for less than a year when the American elders there ran into visa expiration problems and abruptly had to pull out of the country until they could renew their documentation. They left behind twenty-five investigators who had committed to be baptized sometime in the upcoming month. In response, the Kiev Mission president gathered together a group of district missionaries—all Ukrainians with some experience proselyting with full-time missionaries—and, after a brief orientation, sent them that very night to Odessa to live in the full-time elders' abandoned apartments and to take over their teaching appointments. By the end of that month, twenty-three of the twenty-five who had committed to join the church were baptized.

Thus the same factors that may have slowed the expansion of the church in the past few years also seem to have propelled the church toward its established goal of having all-Ukrainian leadership in place as soon as possible.[21] Many Ukrainian members have expressed frustration with the church being labeled "American." In testimony meetings I heard frequent emphasis on the international character of the church and assertions that "this is Christ's church, not an American church." U.S. mission-

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20. In Minsk, Belarus, where the church has yet to gain the right to extend invitations for missionary visas, a group of Belarussian members organized a charity society called "Sofia" that could extend invitations for humanitarian aid workers. Thus foreign LDS volunteers are officially members of Sofia, not representatives of the LDS church, and it is illegal for them to wear tags in public or to proselyte. Most teaching appointments come through member referrals.

21. This goal was firmly in place for the mission from its inception, long before nationalist political pressures became acute, and in accordance with LDS policy worldwide. When President Biddulph left the Kiev Mission in 1994, all forty branches in Ukraine had entirely local leadership, and three all-Ukrainian district presidencies with district-level auxiliary officers had been established in the city of Kiev (Apr. 1996 letter from Biddulph).

aries may have been an important initial draw for Ukrainians, but once committed to the church, members put considerable effort into disassociating it from its American roots. Leo Merrill, president of the Ukraine Donetsk Mission in 1995, stated clearly that "the best thing that can happen is for the Americans to get out so it can be seen as a Ukrainian church."[22]

The future political climate for the church in Ukraine is difficult to predict. Leonid Kuchma, who defeated Kravchuk in the 1994 presidential elections, speaks poor Ukrainian and was elected on a platform of re-establishing economic ties with Russia. Since obtaining office, however, his rhetoric has become more explicitly nationalist. Perhaps in relaxing economic independence he has been seeking for stronger cultural and religious autonomy. In fact, it was President Kuchma who dissolved the national Council on Religious Affairs (a remnant of Soviet government) and reorganized it under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture—an organization whose primary goal is to cultivate and revive Ukrainian identity and pride.[23] Non-traditional religious affairs are now handled by the "Ministry of Nationalities, Migrations and Cults." In the summer of 1994 an official proclamation from this ministry went out to all public education administrators forbidding visits from religious representatives and the presentation of religious materials in schools—an enforcement of the separation of church and state that was only a matter of time in coming.[24] How receptive future administrations will be to foreign missionary work remains to be seen.

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22. From an Aug. 1995 interview with the author.

23. A number of teachers and parents I interviewed in the summer of 1995 (particularly those from central and eastern Ukraine) felt that nationalism had gone overboard in many respects. They were disappointed, for example, with hastily-written, poorly-produced Ukrainian history textbooks and with the teaching of scarce Ukrainian literature at the expense of the richness of Russian literature. One of the most prestigious schools in Kiev has thus far resisted government pressure to switch to Ukrainian-language instruction because the directors believe that Russian literature has more to teach their students in terms of culture and morality.

24. The memorandum referred to foreign-based religions taking advantage of economic and religious instability in Ukraine and the lack of relevant legislation and enforcement in order "to spread new untraditional religions. Sometimes foreign preachers disrespect Ukrainian laws and do not take into consideration difficulties in the religious situation, our spiritual and historical traditions and public opinion. . . . Such uncontrolled activity of foreign preachers and missionaries complicates the religious situation in Ukraine and provokes negative reactions from Clergy of traditional religions and from the public . . . The activity of such foreign religious representatives from the Church of Unity (Moonies), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Unity of Krishna Consciousness (Krishnaites), and so on, which sometimes are registered as public, humanitary [sic], cultural educational organizations, etc., arouse great anxiety." None of the subsequent examples given as evidence of such disturbing activity involved the LDS church. Copies of the full text of this decree in both Russian and English are in my possession.

## Mormonism in a New Culture

Experience and scholarship in recent years have shown that the LDS church faces considerable challenges as it expands outward from an American center into other cultures of the world.[25] Just how far can and should Mormonism assimilate into host cultures? Lawrence A. Young suggests that retention rates in new religious movements are positively correlated with the degree of compatibility in mores, values, and behaviors between the religion and its host culture.[26] Will this hold true for the Ukrainian case? To what degree is Mormonism compatible with post-Soviet culture and society? In the case of the former republics of the Soviet Union, caught up as they are in turbulent political, economic, and social transition, these questions are especially difficult to probe.

In such a complicated climate, what constitutes being "Ukrainian" is very much contested. How is "Ukrainian" different from "Russian" or "Soviet" or "Slavic"? Many sociologists and political scientists argue, for example, that it is premature to speak of a "post-Soviet" society; the former Soviet Union is still very much steeped in Soviet culture and its legacy.[27] Indeed, I witnessed many examples of Mormonism grating against and sometimes finding surprising compatibilities with that Soviet culture. In Ukraine, where new effective social institutions have yet to replace those that have disintegrated, some cling to the past, some only react against it, and others have widely diverging hopes for the future. Mormonism has both clashed and connected with many types of people.

Surprisingly, a high number of those who joined the church in Ukraine have been well-educated. This is an unusual pattern for the church in its early stages in most other countries, but the Ukrainian intelligentsia are relatively well represented among early converts to Mormonism. Especially in Kiev there are scientists, lawyers, university professors, business executives, engineers, two prominent surgeons and other health professionals, musicians and artists, a ballet master and a dramatist, several journalists and a prominent anchorwoman for Ukrainian television, linguists, teachers, and museum docents.[28] President Bid-

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25. See, for example, Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, eds., *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996), entire issue.

26. "Confronting Turbulent Environments: Issues in the Organizational Growth and Globalization of Mormonism," *Contemporary Mormonism*, 56.

27. See, for example, Robert C. Tucker's "Conclusion," in Timothy J. Colton and Robert C. Tucker, eds., *Patterns in Post-Soviet Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 235-40, and Alexander Dallin's article "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" in Gail Lapidus, ed., *The New Russia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 245-62.

28. Apr. 1996 letter from Biddulph.

dulph suggests that the intelligentsia are always the critics of the former orthodoxy, a role which in a Soviet context may lend itself to reject atheism and embrace religion. Indeed, Soviet emigres from the 1970s referred to a growing underground acceptance of religion and spirituality among the intelligentsia.

By far, most people I talked with believed there was no going back to a totalitarian regime and they embraced the new freedom of religion openly. Others, however, were not so sure. One woman in southeastern Ukraine took the discussions and agreed to be baptized—until she discovered that the church kept meticulous records on its membership. Fearful of retribution in the event of a repressive political reversal, she finally agreed to baptism, but on the condition that it take place in the privacy of her own apartment with only American missionaries in attendance. Fortunately she was a petite woman, but even then it took three tries to completely immerse her in her bathtub. The witnesses, who could hardly fit in the tiny bathroom, leaned in from the doorway to observe the ordinance. I have also heard stories of Ukrainian parents living under Communism who quietly hired an Orthodox or Catholic priest to come to their apartment in plain clothes and baptize their children away from prying eyes. At least for this woman, some things had not changed.

Issues of trust loomed large in a society that suffered from a serious split between public and private worlds. A Soviet Ukrainian said one thing to her boss, another to her co-workers, and yet another to her family in the privacy of her home. Candid thoughts and deepest beliefs were reserved for a well-tested close circle of friends; those outside this intimate circle were usually suspect. Although American missionaries would be welcomed into the inner circle of the kitchen table with ease, some Ukrainians I spoke with felt that, with few exceptions, others had converted to the church not for God or truth, but in hopes of personal gain—perhaps church welfare, marriage to a missionary, or an invitation to America.

Part of this lack of trust came from lack of experience with a lay church. In trying to organize and train a lay clergy in young branches, I often experienced difficulty finding people with effective organizational and leadership skills, especially outside of Kiev. Some scholars, journalists, and businessmen have suggested that the paternalistic Soviet state killed the spirit of personal initiative and entrepreneurship in the former USSR, and at least one Ukrainian member of the mission presidency in Kiev cited the lack of initiative or "slavish mentality" on the part of the members as one of the main obstacles to the growth of the church in Ukraine. Another church leader from Odessa commented that the Relief Society president in his branch was perfectly willing to work—she just wanted to be told exactly what to do.

The first generation of converts had an especially difficult time. Few materials besides the Book of Mormon and the missionary discussions were translated into Russian during the first few years.[29] What limited religious experience converts had was usually as spectators rather than active participants or leaders. I remember clearly the horror of one woman when we asked her, two weeks after her baptism, to become the first Relief Society president for her branch. Feelings of ignorance and inexperience, therefore, led many members to prefer relying on foreign missionaries to get things done, in spite of their young age. And because they frequently mistrusted the experience and sincerity of their peers, members were sometimes openly reluctant to support and sustain Ukrainian leaders.

Each branch I worked in went through the rocky transition of having foreign missionaries move out of leadership positions and Ukrainians from the congregation called in their place. This transition was almost always accompanied by complaints and a drop in church attendance. One older woman in Kiev told me with feeling: "When the [North American] missionaries are there, I feel the Holy Spirit. When they are not, I don't. Church leadership should have been left in the hands of the missionaries—it was given away too soon! Everyone here is too selfish—they think only of themselves. Only our grandchildren will grow up genuine believers." In a similar vein of resignation regarding the adult generations, a day care worker once told me, "It is too late for us, but teach our children." I also experienced difficulty trying to teach new members that callings were egalitarian and rotational by nature, and that they were more opportunities to serve than positions of power. The common perception that Ukrainians with wealth or social status must have done something illegal to obtain their position (e.g., bribed the right official) sometimes seemed to spill over into impressions of local leaders, and even more so toward members doing paid work for the church.[30]

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29. As of April 1996, Russian translations of the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price were beginning to be distributed in Russian-speaking missions. Ukrainian translations of the Book of Mormon were introduced to Ukraine and missionary work opened in Lviv (a dominantly Ukrainian-speaking city near the Polish border) in June 1996.

30. Journalist Alessandra Stanley commented on this culture of status in Communist life: "There was no shame to poverty when only criminal and party officials were rich. Obscurity was noble when professional achievement was bound up with political compromise" (see "Auld Lang Syne: A Toast! To the Good Things About Bad Times," *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1995). Writer Bruce Sterling also described this perceived link between disenfranchised poverty and honest living: "Muscovites directly equate poverty and squalor with elemental human decency. Cracked ceilings, leaking faucets, and moaning, clunking radiators are signifiers of moral integrity" (see "Compost of Empire," *Wired*, http://www.hotwired.com/wired/2.04/features/compost.empire.html [Apr. 1994]). President Biddulph, however, suggests that these perceptions in the church are waning as branches become more established and leaders more experienced. See chaps. 13-14 in his book, *The Morning Breaks: Stories of Conversion and Faith in the Former Soviet Union* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1996).

Some people I spoke with pointed out similarities between the church and the Communist Party, citing, for example, their top-down hierarchical structures and strong centralized ideologies with certain emphases on conformity. To some Ukrainians, the distant center of Salt Lake City seemed all too much like the distant center of Moscow and was perceived to undermine hard-won national autonomy and identity. Others commented on the seemingly meaningless process of sustaining people to callings in the church. It was too much like party voting: everyone was expected to raise their hands in a consensus for a decision they knew little about that had already been made by those with authority.

Others considered their church experiences to be a stark and welcome contrast to the hypocrisy and insincerity they had observed in Communist organizations. Anna was a hairdresser and single mother of three and served as a Relief Society teacher in her branch. Once in a testimony meeting she related how the Relief Society president called her one evening and asked Anna to represent her at a leadership training meeting that night with the mission president who was in town for his monthly visit. Anna agreed to go out of a sense of responsibility but was not looking forward to it. She had been to "training" meetings before. The bosses were stern and usually chided the group for goals unmet, and it was all very boring and unpleasant. But this meeting caught her completely by surprise—she described it as being full of love and purpose and she was astonished to watch as the mission president shared a personal story about leadership with tears rolling down his face. To her, at least, the church was nothing like the party.

Anna's positive response to the patriarchal leadership she encountered in Mormonism highlights the complex intersection of gender, religion, and politics in Ukraine. To my surprise, I met few Ukrainian women who struggled with the issue of women's roles in the church as I had in my own conversion process. In many respects, women in the former USSR are experiencing a backlash to Soviet-style "equality." During Stalin's era, the "woman question" was proclaimed solved and emancipation declared when the number of women in the paid labor force reached levels higher than in any other country.[31] Since then, politicians and academics have discussed the need to relieve women's domestic bur-

31. In the 1970s 92 percent of working-age Soviet women were in the paid labor force, although that figure dropped somewhat in the 1980s, and due to strong maternity leave policies, only 20 percent of women worked during the first year after the birth of a child. However, in spite of holding 61 percent of degrees in higher education, women overall earn less than men and continue to be dramatically underrepresented in management positions. See James Maddock, M. Janice Hogan, Anatolyi Antonov, and Mikhail Matskovsky, eds., *Families Before and After Perestroika: Russian and U.S. Perspectives* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994), 18-19.

den in the home for decades, but have hardly resolved it, and women still do far more household work and child care than their husbands in spite of comparable hours working outside the home.

Western media have been quick to point out in recent years that many women would gladly drop half of the double burden they carry and return to the home,[32] a preference that has been encouraged in the last few decades by demographers alarmed at the falling birth rate, psychologists warning against the "masculinization" of women,[33] and politicians anxious about the rising unemployment rate. In his book *Perestroika*, Gorbachev posed the "question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission."[34] The 1990s, with their surge in job instability and negative population growth for the former Soviet Union, have only added fuel to this agenda. Most popular and academic debates assume an essentialist "different but equal" stance toward the sexes: man as primary breadwinner, woman as primary homemaker—a stance compatible with the views of the LDS church. And in my experience, few men and women question the suitability of these prescribed sex roles. Although research indicates that a majority of women prefer to keep their jobs,[35] Ukrainian women are still quick to distance themselves from the term "feminist"—a word with only negative connotations in Russian.

Most of the religious women I spoke with agreed that the ideal was to have a strong righteous man as head of the household. Few claimed to have such a household. And more Ukrainian women than men show interest in the church. This is certainly nothing new for Russia or Ukraine, where women have historically dominated more traditional religions.[36]

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32. See Wendy Sloane, "Liberated Women Doff Hard Hat, Don Apron," *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 1994.

33. See Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990).

34. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 117.

35. In one poll in the early 1980s, 65 percent of working women said they would not quit their jobs even if their husband earned as much as their current joint income (only 22 percent said they would). In a similar poll a few years later, 87 percent of working women said they would not give up working if the financial need were eliminated. See *Families Before and After Perestroika*, 160. See also Sarah Ashwin's 1996 unpublished paper, "Russian Mineworkers in Transition," privately circulated.

36. Soviet research in the 1980s suggested that female "believers" (i.e., church-goers) outnumbered male "believers" three or four to one (see Paul D. Steeves, *Keeping the Faiths: Religion and Ideology in the Soviet Union* [New York: Committee for National Security, Holmes & Meier, 1989], 163). Nathaniel Davis in *A Long Walk to Church* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995) also reports that during the Soviet era 80-96 percent of those attending a normal Orthodox service were older women. Although more men are attending in the 1990s, the percentage of women in churches is still overwhelmingly higher (199).

Perhaps the more interesting fact is the relatively high percentage of men and two-parent families converting to Mormonism compared to other religions in Ukraine. President Biddulph calculated that approximately 45 percent of all converts in the Kiev Mission from 1990-94 were men, a percentage comparable to the proportion of men in the general population. Although anecdotal evidence in Ukraine suggests that Mormon women have a higher activity rate than men, it is still interesting to note the relatively strong attraction of Mormonism to men in "a country where few men join or participate in religious bodies."[37] The city of Kiev, where all branch and district presidencies are filled by Ukrainian priesthood holders, is an example of visible local (male) leadership. In other parts of Ukraine, however, and especially in areas where the church is still new, establishing sufficient priesthood leadership for each level of organization remains a challenge. One Ukrainian church leader in Kiev explained that women tend to take responsibility from men; he suggested that men need to take more initiative and that women need to be more supportive of their leadership.[38] The strong, essential, stable woman versus the superfluous, transient man is a recurring theme in Russian and Soviet literature. Many Ukrainians I spoke with—both male and female—saw similar themes in the church.

Another gender issue is the difficulty of marriage for young women. In Ukraine finding a man played a central role in the self-esteem of young women—even more so than what I have observed in the United States. I knew of at least two young women who were discouraged by their mothers from serving full-time missions, because "who would marry you at the age of twenty-three?" These kinds of pressures notwithstanding, of the growing number of young full-time missionaries from Ukraine, approximately half have been women. A special difficulty for Ukrainian women, as for women in many other countries, is the emphasis on marrying within the faith when there are few LDS men to date. And to date a non-member man but insist on celibacy before marriage is to lose him very fast. Many strong young women I knew, when forced to choose between full fellowship in the church—which, by their own admission, had become a central, vibrant force for good in their lives—and a potential husband, chose the man.

Generally speaking, virginity before marriage is not as highly valued or expected in the former Soviet Union as it is in the United States, and my impression is that those youth who commit to keep the law of chastity in Ukraine, especially first-generation Mormons, receive far less support for their choice than Americans. At one extreme, prostitution is a growing industry and source of income for young women. One recent survey in

37. Apr. 1996 letter from Biddulph.

38. Vasilii Lyubarets of the Kiev Mission presidency in a July 1995 interview with the author.

Moscow found that "over one third of high school girls freely admitted they would exchange sex for hard currency."[39] Adultery is also more tolerated and often taken for granted. One woman, in trying to explain to me the sexual culture of the Soviet Union, told me the following joke:

> A married man went to visit his married lover in her apartment when both of their spouses were away. As he sat sipping tea in her kitchen, she asked him to sharpen her knives while he was there. He set down his cup with exasperation and cried, "Every time I come over you ask me to sharpen your knives! I'm tired of it! Why don't you get your husband to sharpen them?!" She turned to him and asked, "Well, who sharpens *your* knives at home?" The man thought for a moment and replied, puzzled, "No one. They're always sharp!"

Other Ukrainians explained to me that it was commonplace for women to be pressured into sex with their male supervisors in order to keep their jobs. One young Mormon woman who responded to a newspaper ad for a secretarial position in Kiev was asked her bust size over the phone. She assured me that such incidents were standard in her job search thus far. Her experiences are supported by other sources. A March 1996 article in *Russian Life* quoted a typical newspaper ad as follows: "Twenty three year old girl, admirable in every way, great measurements, well-built, efficient, communicative . . . seeks serious work as a secretary-abstractor (I have experience) . . . I will be an ornament to your office. No intimate relationships. Natasha." Other ads are not so chaste. The article goes on: "The phrase *bez kompleksov* ('without complexes') is so common in Russian employment ads that it is simply abbreviated: b/k. Everyone knows what it means, too. More and more young women, out of choice or economic necessity, are sleeping with the boss."[40] Pornography is prolific in public spaces: lewd posters are openly displayed for sale in kiosks and underground walkways, and pornographic images often decorate the interiors of public buses and taxicabs. Movie ads, usually hand-painted, regularly feature bare-breasted women in provocative poses.

Along with the lack of prevalent norms that support LDS sexual values, Ukrainians have suffered from the lack of available contraception.[41]

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39. See Helena Goscilo, "Domostroika or Perestroika," in Thomas Lahusen, with Gene Kuperman, eds., *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 240.

40. See Katharine E. Young, "Loyal Wives, Virtuous Mothers," *Russian Life*, http://www.friends-partners.org/rispubs/r1.top.html (Mar. 1996).

41. When I first realized the difficulties in obtaining birth control and the dilemmas this posed for those who did not believe in abortion as an option, I joked in a letter home that we missionaries should be passing out condoms with our copies of the Book of Mormon. A few months later I opened a care package from a younger sister to discover a generous shipment of assorted condoms. There I was—a Mormon missionary—with a lot of condoms to give away. I finally slipped them to a married mother of three I had grown close to, who accepted them very gratefully. In 1995 condoms were more available in ubiquitous sidewalk kiosks, but for a price.

Abortion has long been accepted as the most standard form of birth control. In the last decade roughly one out of every four abortions performed in the world took place in the Soviet Union.[42] Various studies report averages of anywhere from six to fifteen abortions per Soviet woman in her lifetime.[43] In 1991 roughly 1 million abortions were performed in Ukraine alone: over three times as many abortions per capita as in the United States.[44] If we taught any woman over the age of twenty-five who decided she wanted to be baptized, we could safely assume that she would need an "abortion interview" with the mission president. For many Ukrainian women, it was difficult to talk to a man about the sinfulness of such life choices, usually made in the context of extremely limited options. No one in my experience, however, ever refused the interview.

Average family size is smaller in Ukraine than in the U.S.: a family with more than two children is considered unusually large. This has been attributed at least in part to the tight housing crunch in the former Soviet Union, where multiple generations are often crammed into two- or three-room apartments. Young married couples can be on waiting lists for years to receive their own apartment. For Ukrainians in such conditions—tight living quarters, financial struggles in an uncertain economy, and poor access to contraception—to give up the customary option of abortion is a sacrifice requiring much faith.

Along with sexual lifestyle considerations come the usual conflicts with the Mormon dietary code. The Word of Wisdom, which generally marks Mormons in any society, certainly sets them apart in the former Soviet Union. Popular images of Slavic culture include the vodka bottle and the samovar full of hot tea, and Mormonism's prohibition of both is often met with ridicule and disbelief. It is considered insulting, for example, not to drink with co-workers or for a guest at a birthday party not to drink vodka to the health of the birthday celebrant. As foreigners, we were more readily excused from such traditions, but Ukrainian Mormons usually meet with considerable internalized and overt peer pressure in all kinds of settings.

Smoking is also widespread. The former Soviet Union has some of the highest levels of teenage smoking in the world—for both boys and girls. I knew at least two twelve-year-old boys who had to quit smoking in order to be baptized with their families. One sixteen-year-old Mormon

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42. Goscilo, 241.

43. James P. Gallagher in "Russians Wising Up to Contraceptives: Abortion No Longer Their Only Option," http://www.nd.edu/~astrouni/zhiwriter/spool/90.htm (10 Sept. 1995), cites an average of six to eight abortions per woman. Goscilo cites even higher averages of twelve to fifteen abortions per woman (251).

44. United Nations, *Demographic Yearbook 1993* (1995), and *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (1995).

girl in Kiev was the *only* member of her high school class who did not smoke. The pressure against living a Mormon lifestyle, especially on teenagers, is enormous.

On the other hand, health consciousness is on the rise in Ukraine. Many Ukrainians have experienced only too well the terrible consequences of alcoholism in their families, and they recognize alcohol abuse as a tragedy on a national scale. To these people, such a seemingly stringent lifestyle makes enormous sense and is met with easy acceptance. Many Ukrainian Mormons laugh ruefully about the Word of Wisdom and say that it is just as well: some of the most expensive items at the market are coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, and meat, and in these hard economic times, abstaining from such luxuries makes sense for their strained pocketbooks, as well as for their health.

With inflation running out of control, real prices soaring, and job security collapsing, Ukrainians have waded grimly through the past few years of economic turmoil. The average Ukrainian standard of living is estimated to be three times lower than in Russia. I remember one sick, older woman we visited regularly. Her husband was an abusive alcoholic who rarely brought money home, and she was struggling to make ends meet on her pension. We started to bring food with us on every visit—usually fresh vegetables or fruit, which we knew to be expensive. One week I discovered by chance that she was storing on her balcony the cucumbers we had brought her the week before. She ducked her head, embarrassed, and confessed that she was saving them for a special dinner the following week to commemorate the anniversary of her older son's death. She knew she wouldn't be able to buy much and so was hoarding the cucumbers as a special treat, even though they would no longer be fresh, to honor her son.

Stories like hers were not uncommon. A number of the Ukrainians I knew could not count on a regular paycheck even if they were officially employed. State sectors frequently fail to pay their employees for lack of funds. In 1995 the parents of my host family in Lviv both worked at the same electronics factory, which had almost completely shut down for lack of business, forcing employees to take unpaid "vacations." The company already owed the mother three months of back pay. In 1996 coal miners in the Donetsk area have been striking to protest delayed paychecks. Hardly anyone owns a car and many members walk or travel long distances on increasingly more expensive and unreliable public transportation to attend church. Simple things like aspirin or disposable diapers are only available at exorbitant prices, and often only for American dollars—Ukraine's de facto currency. The average monthly salary is barely sufficient to buy one pair of shoes. And still Ukrainian converts

commit to pay tithing, and some make even more financial sacrifices to attend the temple in Freiburg, Germany.

One method Ukrainians used under Communism to supplement the unstable food supply is now used to extend their unstable incomes: growing and preserving as much of their own food as possible. It is fairly common for a family to have a plot of land, usually on the outskirts of the city. Generally, the best time to work these plots is on weekends, especially when families must travel fair distances into the countryside. Ironically, this laudable Mormon trait of pursuing self-sufficiency thus detracts from church attendance, especially during good weather and harvest times. When it is a struggle to put food on the table, setting aside every single Sunday for rest and worship is another substantial sacrifice. Commitments to desperately needed paying jobs, family gardens, as well as the culture of weekend trips to the dacha for work and play, combined with other familiar reasons for inactivity, have put church attendance rates in Ukraine at roughly 40-70 percent of membership, depending on the city.[45] Ukraine, it would seem, has been no more successful with member retention than many other countries.[46]

There are still more dilemmas for Mormons in the former Soviet Union. The LDS church believes in obedience, law, and order, but what if there is no law and no order? As an American writer in post-Soviet Russia observed: "Anything is possible, except surviving while obeying all the laws. Corruption is absolutely inescapable."[47] Tax laws are erratic and oppressive. The "mafia," which has received much attention in the Western press, is indeed a powerful force in Ukraine. At one point the church

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45. Although I do not have full access to official church statistics on activity rates, missionaries have suggested that they vary widely from branch to branch. President Biddulph calculated that in mid-1994, the activity rate for the Kiev Mission was above 72 percent, although reports from more recently returned missionaries cite much lower numbers. Sacrament meeting attendance in the three largest cities of the Donetsk Mission for March 1996 averaged 38 percent. It should also be noted that activity rates for the first generation of converts (1990-91) are much lower than for later converts. Although there may be many reasons for this, I suspect it at least has to do with the fact that going from being the fifth member in a branch to being the sixtieth requires a far more dramatic adjustment than going from being the sixtieth member to the hundredth. In contrast, Gary L. Browning, mission president in Russia from 1990 to 1993, found consistent retention rates betweeen early and later converts in three major Russian cities.

46. See, for example, Wilfried Decoo's article "Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996): 97-118.

47. For a fast-paced, dry, witty, but perceptive description of life and conditions in post-coup Moscow, see "Compost of Empire" by Bruce Sterling on the World Wide Web at http://www.hotwired.com/wired/2.04/ features/compost.empire.html.

had to buy train tickets from the mafia to transfer missionaries because they were impossible to buy over the counter.[48] Organized crime is also an attraction to young men: to make in a day what an honest laborer makes in half a year is a strong temptation.

Even besides the issue of organized crime, finding an honest job to support a family is a challenge. Several Mormon Ukrainian men I talked with in 1995 had been offered much-needed work in shady business ventures and struggled with the choice between integrity and putting food on the table. In a culture where money once hardly mattered, and where now paychecks are never guaranteed, many Ukrainians seek work that can offer non-monetary benefits. Those who work in a bakery, for example, quietly take home flour and sugar when needed. Factory workers steal and sell scrap metal and other raw materials. It is illegal, of course, but it is also expected, and everyone does it for survival. How does a Mormon Ukrainian, then, define honesty? One American church leader I spoke with expressed sympathy for the dilemmas of economic subsistence that face many members of the church. He made clear that in worthiness interviews, he is far more concerned that members pay an honest tithe than an honest income tax—at least during the current economic turmoil.

Such efforts to be sensitive to national and local circumstances have certainly characterized the establishment of the church in Ukraine. Although church leaders have promoted local leadership wherever possible, there have still been inevitable clashes between the American administrative structure and customs and some abiding aspects of Slavic culture. One clear example is the contemporary American Mormon tradition of addressing members by their last names. In Slavic culture using first names is the familiar form of address, while the polite form requires the first name with the patronymic. Last names are hardly ever used, ex-

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48. When I traveled through parts of Ukraine in 1993, I was privy to this process: in order to get train tickets to the Black Sea, I had to go through a Mormon contact who took me down to the central train station of Kiev. There, in a crowded corner of the station, we met a mafia ticket broker. A price was settled on, American dollars were exchanged, and the broker disappeared to get the tickets. While I waited, the broker's mafia supervisor, who had noticed my American origin, wandered over and struck up a conversation out of curiosity. I asked him about his work and he spoke freely, and with some pride, of how he was in charge of all business that took place on the ground level of the train station (i.e., taking cuts from ticket sales, food and cigarette sales, currency exchange booths, etc.). He also spoke of his new cars, many girlfriends, and high-tech toys. He was single, in his late twenties or early thirties, and made several hundred dollars a day—a fortune almost incomprehensible to the Ukrainians I knew. Most families of four I associated with were struggling to survive on about one hundred dollars a month. My monthly living allowance as a missionary from 1992-93 (not including rent which varied widely) was between $80-$100.

cept perhaps with children in school.[49] Early members of the church called each other "Brother Alexander" or "Sister Tatiana," occasionally adding patronymics as etiquette required. Our insistence on using only our last names as missionaries was bewildering to many Ukrainians, and even offensive to the older generations. Halfway through my mission, we were asked to encourage members to address one another, and especially leaders, by their last names. Although in American culture this might be taken as a sign of respect, by Ukrainian standards it added an awkward level of distance and formality between members.[50]

This example raises familiar issues of a globalizing church and the need to divest Mormonism from its American upbringing. Armand Mauss suggests the need to develop a form of *minimal Mormonism*: "a religion which can jettison *all* forms of American influence and reduce its message and its way of life to a small number of basic ideas and principles that will, on the one hand, unite Mormons throughout the world but, on the other hand, will leave Mormons everywhere free to adapt those principles to their own respective cultural settings."[51] Others suggest what I will call *customized Mormonism*, which is essentially the logical extension of Mauss's minimalism: a recognizable form of Mormonism shaped to resonate as appropriately as possible with local and national customs and needs.[52] My experience participating in the pioneering stages of the church in Ukraine, however, leaves me wondering how feasible such forms might be, at least where the church is very young.

As in any country where the church is breaking new ground and the first generation of missionaries is necessarily foreign, establishing a religion unbiased by the cultural experiences of those missionaries is impossible. In an ex-Soviet Republic lacking civic culture, civic infrastructure,

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49. The patronymic acts as a middle name and is formed by adding a masculine or feminine ending to the name of one's father. For example, a brother, Mikhail, and sister, Natasha, with a father named Anatolii, would be politely addressed as Mikhail Anatolievich and Natasha Anatolieva, respectively. Since I did not fill out membership records or baptismal certificates for the people I taught, I sometimes never learned the last names of many families I knew very well.

50. By recent reports, this practice—at least among members addressing each other—is no longer particularly enforced or adhered to.

51. "The Mormon Struggle With Identity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Spring 1994): 149.

52. See, for example, the comments of a Japanese bishop and Yasuhiro Matsushita, mission president of the Japan Kobe Mission, as quoted in an article series "Making Saints" in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 Apr. 1996, A7: the campaign to place more emphasis on Jesus Christ in the church "may work well in such Christian countries as Mexico or the Philippines. But . . . it may not be the best way to appeal to converts in Japan and other non-Christian countries. . . . [President Matsushita suggests] the Japanese church should put more emphasis on such practices as the 'baptism of the dead'" to draw more on the appeal of ancestor worship and eternal families in Japanese culture.

and developed religious traditions, establishing a "Ukrainian-style" Mormonism is especially difficult. Even as members in new branches struggled in a climate of nationalism to divest their religion from America, they also looked constantly to American missionaries to show them how to worship and how to organize themselves. A unique set of doctrines and principles would not have been enough. New members asked to run their own branches were hungry for concrete instructions and a sense of form. The form they were offered came largely from first generation missionaries, most of them North Americans, who drew necessarily from their own backgrounds. Minimal Mormonism may be too shapeless to export, and cultural sensitivity comes only with time, experience, and the growing confidence of native members.

Perhaps in areas like central Kiev which have now enjoyed over five years of organized worship, Ukrainians will begin to feel confident enough about their faith to shape it to their own concepts of culture. The all-Ukrainian leadership in place in Kiev is one positive sign. Also telling are the new mission presidents called to both the Donetsk and Kiev missions as of July 1996. President Wilfried M. Voge, now of the Kiev Mission, is married to a Ukrainian-American, Maria Kozbur Voge, who speaks fluent Ukrainian and has maintained ties with her relatives in Ukraine. President Alexander Manzhos, now of the Donetsk Mission, is a biological scientist in the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kiev who joined the church in 1990 and is now the first Ukrainian to be called as a mission president. President Manzhos was a district president in Kiev and remains president of the national association organized to represent the church to the government. These two mission president calls indicate the commitment of the church to establish native leadership: a step which can only move the church toward a more culturally-sensitive Mormonism.

The journalist who interviewed President Biddulph in 1991 predicted Mormonism's failure within the context of a Soviet legacy and Ukrainian culture, but intriguingly the church has grown at a far more rapid pace in Ukraine and Belarus than in Russia. Considering that the aspects of Slavic culture and Soviet legacy I have discussed are largely shared by all three of these former republics, Ukraine's greater receptivity to Mormonism seems to challenge Lawrence Young's cultural compatibility theory of religious success, referred to earlier. One explanation might be that more churches and religious belief survived in Ukraine, and especially in western Ukraine, than did in Russia through the Soviet years, leaving Ukrainians with stronger traditions of faith and sympathies toward any religion. If the growth rates of other churches in Ukraine relative to Russia are comparable to the LDS phenomenon then this hypothesis would gain more support. Another clear difference between Ukraine and Russia

is the contrast in their economic conditions. Ukraine and Belarus have fared far worse economically than Russia during reforms since independence. Perhaps this correlation fits with the global pattern of Mormonism's growth: where there are poverty and crisis conditions, there is greater openness to what the church has to offer. These observations suggest that economic instability and low standards of living may influence the growth of the church more than cultural compatibility between Mormonism and its host culture. A third explanation, suggested by Gary L. Browing, professor of Russian language and literature at Brigham Young University, and a former Russian mission president, has political undertones: Ukrainians may have been more open to all things Western as a way of turning their backs on Moscow's long domination. They may have been more willing than their Russian counterparts to leave the Orthodox church—associated with Russian hegemony—for a less traditional declaration of faith. Clearly, further research is called for to test these hypotheses.

Finally, with so many institutions in upheaval since the collapse of the Iron Curtain, I was very conscious that part of my work as an LDS missionary in Ukraine in 1992-93 was organizing community and building a civic institution in a country desperate for them. We would find one energetic family of three in an apartment building, an elderly *babushka* living alone in the building next door, and knit them together in a common cause. Organizing a Mormon congregation means establishing patterns of mutual visitation among church members to facilitate the identification and fulfillment of needs, both spiritual *and* temporal. Sick pensioners could receive both blessings of healing or comfort and money for expensive medicine from priesthood leaders. Single mothers found access to shipments of donated children's clothes from Germany as well as a women's meeting on Sunday where they could share their problems and discuss the challenges of responsible parenting.

In North America the church is one of thousands of organizations designed to meet a variety of social needs. In Ukraine the branches being formed and trained to become as self-sufficient as possible offer not only a spiritual haven, but also a rare social and psychological safety net in a chaotic world where so many needs are no longer being met by a powerful central government. Perhaps such civic life is in itself American. Continuing to adapt the American graft of Mormonism to Ukrainian roots may depend on Ukrainians' successful acculturaltion to this kind of community building. And how Mormonism will resolve some of the tensions between its highly correlated and centralized organization and its increasing expansion into dramatically different cultures remains to be seen.

# Women of Cards

*Jocelyn Kearl*

In a monthly cycle,
women gather to play cards,
to not talk of the children
they have or don't.

Red is the color of life,
they say, and black
trumps it
for its purposes.

I shuffle the well-worn cards,
deal to each at the table
her own hand,
each randomly.

Ellen, the divorcee, rages
against the death of her 10-year-old son.
He died in her ex's trailer,
temporary gas tanks leaked,

intruded while the son showered,
suffocated his pink lungs.
Because of this, she risks
the least in protecting her three remaining.

Shelley, mother to none,
whose uterus has never thickened
with rich minerals, reaches 40
and failed blessings,

wonders why she cannot be a woman
until her house
is full. She discards in turn
the queen of spades.

Rachel, abused by her father, discovers
adulthood at age 31, the blood
of her victimizer forever
flowing in her children.

And I, in youth,
hold my flushed hand of hearts;
impatient for my turn
to play.

# Touching the Hem

*Diane Brown*

He has summoned them to the last meal
and (as a shot scatters birds from the wheat)
he scatters their hands from the loaves
with his word: they fly up to him;
they flap, terrified, all around the table
and seek a way out. But no use: *he*
like a twilight hour, Is everywhere.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

MY GRANDMA DIED THREE YEARS AGO. What I have of her now is a collection of odds and ends of memories. I have a few physical reminders: her senior class ring from Jordan High School, an old can full of buttons, and a photo of the two of us at my college graduation. The memories are gradually turning into anecdotes that I tell myself over and over. Sitting on her porch in the summer waiting for the hummingbirds. Wandering through her rose bushes while she gently shook the flowers to get the rain water off the petals. Rice pudding on Sunday nights. Her bird named Pete. Her beautiful white hair and the great legs that she always seemed to show off. Reading Emily Dickinson to her during the long, lonely nights as her body weakened and finally gave in to the cancer that took her once-strong body.

All I have, and all I really ever had, were my impressions—the story of her life from my vantage point. Little bits and pieces of her life, never anything close to the whole. I never knew why she and my grandpa slept in separate bedrooms or what she thought about God or if she prayed. I never asked what she remembered about falling in love or why she gave up painting or how it felt to be a widow for fifteen years.

I knew her the only way I could—through the eyes of a granddaughter. And while I spent most of my life in the same city she did and seeing her often, I don't know the whole person. I can't even come close. Much of it is a fiction, stories I weave and tell myself in an attempt to create or know or remember the whole of Thirza Isabelle Berrett Brown.

If I only have fragments of a woman I knew well—a woman I

watched live and die and be buried—I have to wonder how little I really know of Jesus Christ, or, for that matter, how well he was known by the people who wrote about him, even those who watched him live and die and be buried. I am forced to rely on the words and stories as they are told in the New Testament. I read the parables as they sift through the fingers of generations of authors, translators, and editors. And I have to accept the silence of all the gaps. Uncomfortable with the awkward silence, I have filled in many of the gaps with my own perceptions and guesses. Thus much of my sense of the historical Jesus is a construction, built out of the details of my own time and place. I have fair skin, so I always assumed he did too. I speak English, so when I "hear" the Sermon on the Mount in my head, I hear it spoken in English, as if Christ literally spoke it the way I read it in the King James Version. I hear him saying, in English, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The drawings on the wall in Primary showed him with a beard, so in my construction of Jesus he is bearded. I have been taught that he was the son of God, so I often assume that his neighbors in the Nazareth believed that too—that they knew about Gabriel, and angels appearing to shepherds in a field in Bethlehem, and wise men bearing gifts. But most likely they didn't. Most likely they saw an illegitimate son who spent time in a carpenter's shop.

And I wonder about the many people who saw or heard him only once—who had only one glimpse of the man I would 2,000 years later try to know or worship or understand. At the marriage at Cana, in what is now labeled as his first miracle, Jesus turned water into wine. How many of the wedding guests knew as they drank that they were taking part in an event that would later be called the miracle at Cana? How many even knew what Jesus had done? I am sure that many drank the wine and toasted the bride and groom without any knowledge of anything out of the ordinary. Except perhaps that they were drinking an exceptionally good wine.

I see the lepers who were healed and I think about he nine who didn't return to thank Jesus. Then I focus on one of the nine and wonder how he thought of Jesus the healer. What did he tell his family? What did it feel like to hold his wife after his quick change from pariah to ordinary meridian-of-time guy? In moments of nostalgia, how would he have made sense of being made whole by a stranger? How did he make sense of sickness and health?

Or what of Simon of Cyrene, ostensibly minding his own business when he found himself with the task of bearing the cross? He couldn't have known that the cross he shouldered would soon become a symbol of death and redemption. Simon, the cross bearer, walking the uneven stones of the Via Dolorosa, never knowing the place he held in a story

that would be told and preached for longer than he could imagine. He has no past and no future for us. Just a prop in a passion play, just an hour or so of his otherwise unrecorded life.

I believe in particular individuals living and making meaning out of a particular historical moment. We can't see more than partially, from a particular perspective. Sometimes I can embrace the partial as partial. I can see the fragments and fight the urge to fill in the gaps with invention in a rush toward a completion that is a fiction.

Like any version I tell myself of the life of Christ, I too am partial and fragmented. I am broken in pieces. Paul taught that the church is one body of Christ. I sense the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ as a metaphor of fragments and breaks. If the church is the body of Christ, it is a body that is broken, where an arm sometimes cuts off a hand, where limbs ache. It is not a whole perfect body.

Two events from the life of Jesus of Nazareth help me sit still in the middle of fragments and shards. Two brief events that comfort me when I can't make sense of the whole, when the center cannot hold. The first is the healing of the woman "diseased with an issue of blood twelve years" (Matt. 9:20). She did not seek all of Jesus, just a hem of his garment. And she was healed because of her faith in Jesus but she was also healed because she recognized the relation between a part and the whole. The hem was sufficient. It was her sense of the metonymy of the hem that allowed the plenitude and grace of healing.

The second story was one of my junior high school favorites: the story of the loaves and fishes. I remember having that same "How did he *do* it?" awe that I had watching magic tricks. And I remember the common interpretation of why Jesus asked his disciples to gather up the leftovers: Here Jesus teaches us not to be wasteful. Now I read the gathering of crumbs from the barley loaves as a parable about fragments. He told his disciples to "gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost" (John 6:12). I believe this is much more than a lesson on not wasting food. I believe Jesus is instructing his disciples to act out the attention he pays to the shattered pieces of our lives.

In contrast to the leftover barley loaves, or the fragments of our whole selves, or the broken church body of Christ, I believe—I hope to believe—in a completion beyond the fragments.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is about wholeness—an end to the fragmentation and decay of life and death. If we live now in fragments—without closure—we see that in the mosaic of our lives, there are pieces missing. Pieces that are upside down and out of place. I try to resist the urge to put a frame on the individual pieces and call it done. It is not. I am not.

Christ resurrected is not a missionary film strip or a lesson on Easter.

It is a miracle of wholeness that I can only guess at because it does not match any model I know. And yet I want to believe. I want to believe that if the stones that surround the tomb where Christ was buried could talk, they would tell of an end to decay. They would tell of real and ultimate healing.

In the odds and ends of my faith resides a tenuous hope. It is a hope that I might be gathered up like so many barley loaves. Gathered and blessed by kind, kind hands.

# Poor Sad, Dead Girls

*Elizabeth Visick*

You poor sad, dead little girls
Tonight I am crying for you.
I have walked gingerly in your blue shoes,
Your small shoes, your worn shoes,
As long as I have been alive.
I have let your ghosts inhabit my house
And though I lock the door behind me,
Oh sweet girls, you follow me,
Chase away lovers, take away
The strength from each word
Letter by letter, until at last
I must lay down as you do,
A live dead girl on the bed, a coffin.
Why must you remind me always
Of your grief at growing older and dying,
At falling to the ground like leaves
When you know it had to be so,
It had to be as sure as we were born.

Do not think I never loved you—
I miss your simple clothing,
Your plays acted out on porches,
How you wanted to live on the mountain,
Run away to the beautiful city,
Stay with your mother and father forever.
I smile your same lost smile,
I crawl into the small spaces
Under sinks and in drawers
To show that you are with me still.
Oh girls, I take your hearts to mine,
I give them too much space on my shelves,
I keep them like flowers from my first love.
You are to me the sacred hearts of Jesus,
My religion, my life's work, my greatest design.

Oh girls, it is time to bury you:
The sky is dark and rain falls so often
I must breathe it like air. My own heart,
My beating heart, is angry and indignant
And wants to join the living,
Wants to sing the song of redeeming love,
To walk out barefoot in a white dress.
I must take you now to the churchyard,
Lay you out, pay you proper respect
And carve out a tombstone
With angels and roses. I must follow
The march away through the streets,
Drink and mourn until at last
All of you and I are in our
proper hemisphere, our new countries.

Do not fear I will forget you.
Your picture and your brokenness
Will sit with me at my table,
Each night I will light a candle
And wish heaven for your souls.
Someday when my lover and I marry
I will call you out to celebrate
And we will toast you, youngest to oldest.
Poor, sad dead girls,
may you be forever lost to this world
As you have wished
And your precious youth
Preserved as the stones above you.
Forever may you care for each other
And when the next dead girl joins you
Receive her gently, lightly, wrapped
In yellow blankets like a dream.

# Baptism for the Dead and the Problematic of Pluralism: A Theological Reconfiguration

*Robert E. Clark*

AS RELIGIONS OFTEN DO, MORMONISM promises salvation to its faithful participants. It also speaks of those who are not its participants, who are in some way outside the religion. Under this second heading, there are two issues to be considered. First is the question of other religions: Are they true? Can they save? And what should we do about them? This is sometimes known as the problem of religious pluralism.[1] The second consideration gets less coverage: it concerns the status of an individual who belongs to a religion in name and practice but who is functionally on the outside.

What does it mean to be functionally outside a religion? The kind of functional exteriority I have in mind (which I will discuss at greater length below) has to do with the kinds of problems that arise for a person or, more broadly, with the different *problematics* at work which situate her with respect to her own religion.[2]

My concern in this essay is with the problematic of pluralism itself, that is to say, with the conditions under which religious plurality presents itself as a problem. I intend to pursue this investigation by analyzing the Mormon treatment of the problem of pluralism, specifically the doctrine of baptism for the dead. These two phases of the concern—the problem

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1. My thanks to Paul J. Griffiths of the University of Chicago Divinity School for this identification of the three central questions of religious pluralism, and for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. The word "problematic," used as a noun, is the English translation of the French "*problématique*," a familiar term in contemporary philosophy and religious studies. We can define it technically as "the systemic condition for the possibility of a problem or set of problems," or less technically as "a way of thinking in which certain problems occur to the thinker," such as the problem of religious pluralism.

of pluralism and the problematic of pluralism—together address the question of the religious outsider. By bringing these two phases into juxtaposition, I hope to indicate the contours of what I consider to be a possible resolution.

## The Stability of Religious Systems

The idea, and hence the problem, of religious pluralism would not be possible without the idea of distinct religious communities. We need, therefore, to think about religious community and the nature of religious commitment. Religion—an ideational system—and community—a social system—thus constitute a form of hermeneutic circle, in which each of the terms is the basis for the other.[3]

For a community to function and perpetuate itself, it must maintain a kind of equilibrium. This means that the resources a system has to offer must be commensurate with the problems that it generates. At the level of concepts, the answers the system gives must be keyed to the questions it allows.

The religious system asserts its own priority among these several systems, both in claim and in practice. Rhetorically, the claim is made that the answers and questions of the religion are more basic than those of any other system. Religious conflict is reinscribed within the religion itself, framing it as a question adequately keyed to an answer provided by the religion.[4]

Challenges to a religion's claims to primacy occur both intellectually and existentially. Intellectually, the challenge can be explicit, as when one religion says of another that it does not have the truth. Existentially, a competing system may silently make inroads into structuring a person's life in such a way that it disrupts the equilibrium between question and answer, problem and solution. When an intruding system causes problems to arise which are in fact beyond the religion's capacities, there will be a sort of tug-of-war to determine if the person will maintain identification with the community and its religion: will forsaking the religious system and its resources leave more problems unsolved than those which now present themselves as insoluble from within?

One mechanism the religion might have for dealing with such an eventuality is to obscure awareness of the conflict: let other systems pro-

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3. The classic example of such a "hermeneutic circle" is language: we know the meaning of an individual word by how it is used in context, but we can only make sense of the context if we know the meaning of the constituent words.

4. Again, by way of example, when my academic system asserts its own authority and power to address the meaning of life, my religious system counters with a discourse on the relation between faith and intellect.

vide answers to problems they have generated; let those problems even be so basic as to be worthy of being called religious; just don't consider that the arena within which the problem presents itself and is worked out represents a threat to the primacy of the home religious system. Where a religion's tenacity is maintained through this strategy of implicit reincorporation, difficulty comes when the individual believes that the conflict is indeed radical. For such a person, the religion's answer (including its mode of eliding conflict) has become incommensurate with the question before him (which includes a sense of irresolubility between claims). On the one hand, he has lost the stability offered by belief that the home religion can encompass—or at least govern—all other systems. On the other hand, the home religion will not explicitly condemn the source of these new problems, and thereby solve them by exclusion. The problems have been admitted into the person's life with the implicit approval of the religious system, but no resources have been indicated capable of solving them. Or if resources suggest themselves which are outside of the home system, they may already have been marked as foreign and dangerous, available only by way of transgression.[5]

The question at hand, then, is whether the home system can be made to reply to this situation so as to reestablish systemic equilibrium. In offering an analysis of the pertinent doctrinal resources of Mormonism, I hope to show how a concern with the status of the religious other can be made to speak to a situation in which the category of religious otherness has already been undermined.

## Vicarious Redemption/Testimony in Reading

The issue of religious plurality is addressed in Mormonism through

5. It is necessary here to distinguish between condemnation of the problem's sources and condemnation of the problem's solution. In this regard, it may be useful to keep in mind the distinction between *nominal* exteriority and *functional* (or *structural*) exteriority—a crucial distinction for purposes of this essay. The latter concerns the situation of a person or a resource with respect to the actual ideational and social systems whose interacting availability constitutes the world within which a person carries out her life. The former pertains to the ideational means by which these systems are identified and conceptually differentiated. This means that the ordinance of baptism has the effect primarily of bringing someone nominally into the religion, while someone calling himself an "ex-Mormon" could still be functionally very much on the inside of the religion. Naturally, nominal resources subsist as elements within given systems, which can then be analyzed functionally. In turn, such an analysis participates in the nominal, and thus enters into the perceived struggle among explicitly differentiated systems. The situation I am describing, then, is one in which a functionally external problem is not nominally marked as external (i.e., condemned), but in which the functionally external resources for dealing with that problem are so nominally marked.

the doctrine of baptism for the dead.[6] To reiterate the familiar explanation: A person has to be baptized to be saved. God wants everyone to be saved, but baptism has not been an option for a great portion of the world's population, let alone baptism by the proper authority. These people can still be saved, but they are not exempt from the requirement of baptism. And because baptism is a physical ordinance, it has to be performed in the flesh. Those who have died without an opportunity to hear the gospel and be baptized thus need some means of access to this ordinance. This is accomplished by having a baptized member of the church stand as proxy for the deceased individual, allowing his or her body to be baptized for and in behalf of the one who no longer has a body. This takes place inside Mormon temples, spaces set off from the world and reserved for ordinances reaching beyond the veil of mortality. The church carries out genealogical research as (among other things) an orderly way eventually to reach the entire family of Adam, making the gospel and its ordinances available to all God's children. Other religions cannot save (a soteriological exclusivism), but individuals outside of the church can be saved, after death, through the church (a mode of inclusivism).

As an answer to the question raised by religious plurality, this arrangement seems as good as any other, granting its premises. But if we want to understand its persuasive force as a religious doctrine, there are further issues we need to discuss. First, whatever its rational credibility and coherence, this doctrine, like all Mormon doctrines, is to be conveyed and apprehended not by reason alone, but by the power of the Holy

6. Recall that we can consider the problem of religious plurality under three questions: (1) Do other religions possess any truth? (2) Do other religions have any salvific efficacy? (3) What attitude should one take towards those within other religions? The first of these questions is addressed in Mormonism through the doctrines of dispensationalism, apostasy, and restoration, according to which the gospel has been given to humankind at various times throughout history, from Adam down to the present day; humanity has persistently failed to abide by the standards of truth set forth therein and, forsaking the clarity of revelation, has followed the teachings of humans instead, thereby repeatedly losing the fullness of the gospel, until it was restored for the last time through Joseph Smith, never to be lost again. All other religions, being deviations from the true gospel, have elements of the truth but not the fullness and authority which are necessary to save. The answer to the third question involves a general affirmation of missionary work and the need to preach the gospel to the entire world, baptizing those who believe and repent—tied in with a complex doctrine of Israel's genetic dispersion and gathering in the persons who join the Mormon church. This entire doctrinal milieu, of course, is also inseparable from the answer to the second, soteriological question: the doctrine of the sealing power and of baptism for the dead. Here I limit my exposition to this second question, which is more exemplary of some of the tensions and resolutions I hope to chart.

Spirit.[7] The doctrine comes to value within Mormonism only when it induces church members to do the actual work of genealogy and of baptism for the dead. And the motivation toward this action is attained not by reason alone, nor entirely by the imposition of guilt for inaction, but through effecting a particular *feeling*, associated with and productive of "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5:22-23), which the Saints have learned to recognize as the prompting of divinity through the Holy Spirit.

This feeling has epistemological value as well. Belief in a doctrine is rated inferior to a *testimony* of a doctrine, the secure knowledge in one's heart as well as in one's mind, brought about by divine communication, that a particular tenet is true. A testimony is to be attained through study and prayer, doing what one can of oneself to make sense of a particular point, but having the coherence of one's understanding ratified by the feeling of the Holy Spirit (see D&C 8:2).

This Spirit does not only ratify; it also reveals. New truths can be presented to the mind through the Holy Spirit that reason alone would have been unable to attain. This typically happens in the context of studying holy scripture or preaching the gospel. Elements of life and word come together in ways which, unanticipated, show God's hand to be working in all things.

These truths can be difficult to communicate, especially to someone who has not had similar revelatory experiences. But in the moment of testifying to the truth one has learned—if the Holy Spirit is present to the one hearing the testimony—the truth can be conveyed; the gospel can address the individual's concerns in life; and the coherence and scope of the gospel teaching can be reaffirmed and strengthened (see D&C 50:17-24). Without that divine illumination, however, one cannot finally persuade the unbeliever of what one knows to be the truth.

In all of this, the truth to which the Holy Spirit bears witness is established by a hermeneutic coherence involving both text and life, and by a corresponding feeling. When the Holy Spirit illuminates a passage of scripture, the scripture in turn illuminates the reader's life situation, effecting coherence in that situation by way of a functional correspondence between the elements of that situation as identified and perhaps named by the scripture, and the revealed coherence of the scripture itself. The resolution of otherwise chaotic and unnamed elements in one's life is accompanied by a certain feeling of elation (see D&C 9:8-9). This joins with

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7. Here, too, the distinction employed (between "reason" and "revelation") is in large measure generated by the religious system within which it has its effect. The character of rationality and charisma as constructed with respect to one another deserves a more extended treatment than I give it here.

the sense of discovery of the meaning of the text (the truth of the meaning being ratified by the joyful feeling which accompanies its illumination of one's life), and the reader is astonished at the depth and the relevance of the scriptural word, marvelling that, without God's assistance, this hidden meaning would never have become evident.

This hermeneutic coherence can remain a private affair, falling under the Mormon rubric of "personal revelation." Or, coming through an authoritative interpreter, it can enter into the communal domain of adequate readings. It is then a public revelation, valid for the entire church, and for all in the world who will receive it (see D&C 43:3-7). We can see this at work in the establishment of the doctrine of vicarious redemption through the instrumentality of the prophet Joseph Smith. To do this, we need to examine more closely some of the figures brought into coherence around this doctrine.

## The Range and Limits of Proselytizing

In the last year of his life, Joseph Smith preached a sermon on the topic of baptism for the dead, which reads in part:

> The Bible says, "I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord; and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."
>
> Now, the word *turn* here should be translated *bind*, or seal. But what is the object of this important mission? or how is it to be fulfilled? The keys are to be delivered, the spirit of Elijah is to come, the Gospel to be established, the Saints of God gathered, Zion built up, and the Saints to come up as saviours on Mount Zion.
>
> But how are they to become saviours on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them; and herein is the chain that binds the heart of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, which fulfills the mission of Elijah.[8]

No doctrine subsists in a vacuum, and baptism for the dead is no different. Far from being a single solution to a single problem, it is part of a full-fledged eschatology whose various figures permeate the fabric of the Mormon system. The name of Elijah is already introduced at the outset of

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8. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 330; italics in original.

Joseph Smith's mission, when the above passage from Malachi is quoted to the young prophet by the angel Moroni in 1824 (D&C 2), and reaches its fulfillment as the culmination of the Mormon doctrine of priesthood. Elijah himself confers upon the prophet Joseph the *sealing power,* the power to bind heaven and earth, or to have that which is bound on earth bound in heaven (see D&C 110:13-16, 128:11-18). It is by this power that the ordinances of the gospel are made available to the dead, by such means as baptism for the dead. And it is by this power that the Saints who participate in that ordinance become *saviours on Mount Zion.*

This last phrase calls for closer scrutiny. Its meaning in the current context is evident: in acting as proxy for a deceased relative, one acts as a mediator, making available the ordinances of salvation, and thus acting in the role of savior. The association between the figure of the mountain and the figure of the temple, coupled with the millennial expectation (typical of antebellum America) of the reestablishing of Zion, makes it natural to speak of the temple within which these proxy ordinances take place as "Mount Zion" (a use amply borne out in temple-related hymnody and exegesis). Presented with such a coherent bringing-together of themes, interwoven in a total religious framework, one has trouble imagining that the phrase "saviours on Mount Zion" could have any other meaning.

The phrase is, of course, of biblical origin. Mormon exegetes quote Obadiah 1:21 as a prophecy of the latter-day work of vicarious redemption. It is worth asking what textual setting precedes the biblical establishment of this expression. What we find is a nationalistic and military context: "Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom: We have heard a rumour from the Lord, and an ambassador is sent among the heathen, Arise ye, and let us rise up against her in battle" (v. 1). Throughout most of the chapter, the descendants of Esau are in dire straits, as the Lord calls forth all manner of military disaster upon them for their offenses against the children of Israel. In the last five verses, we see the vision of Israel's upcoming settlement, as that nation takes over what Esau had usurped. "And they of the south shall possess the mount of Esau, and they of the plain the Philistines: and they shall possess the fields of Ephraim, and the fields of Samaria: and Benjamin shall possess Gilead" (v. 19). And then the climax of this litany of territorial recovery: "And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (v. 21).

One can perhaps imagine an effort being made to interpret this entire chapter symbolically, in such a way as to lend the final verse some kind of coherence in its reference to Mormon proxy ordinances. I have yet to see such an effort made. The more common approach is simply to ignore the rest of the chapter. A typical feature of Mormon exegesis, both of the

Bible and of Mormonism's own scripture, is a lack of rigorous concern for the relation of individual verses to the surrounding text. Obviously this is nothing new in the history of scriptural interpretation; it is worth noting, however, in order to ascertain why contextualization appears to be unnecessary.

As indicated above, the hermeneutic of the Holy Spirit aims to establish coherence not between the text and its textual surrounding, but between the text and the reader's or the community's life.[9] The sense of illumination conveyed by such a coherence depends, of course, on the system or systems which constitute the reader's/community's interpretive horizon. When the prophet preaches a sermon by the power of the Holy Spirit on the doctrine of baptism for the dead, the ability of his images to cohere and to produce a systemic coherence for the audience is based on a system already in place among those present, whose figures provide a backdrop for the figures of the sermon. By virtue of this systemic backdrop, and of the charismatic hermeneutic insight which constitutes his prophetic calling, the prophet is able to reach into a body of material (e.g., the Bible), pull out a phrase that, in its own context, has nothing to do with his system at all and integrate it into the present systemic backdrop so as to clarify both that system and the life-system which the system in turn illuminates; and to do it with so great a degree of coherence—at every level—that it seems to the church impossible that the material should ever have been read in any other way.

I want to pay careful attention to what is happening here. Material from outside of the system is being apprehended and seamlessly integrated into the system—we almost want to say that it has been *proselytized*. In the process, any reading that cannot be assimilated into the system's pneumatic coherence is rendered *incomprehensible*. A reader within the system either does not care to look for, or cannot even detect, such a meaning. Or, if such a meaning does make itself evident (according to the dynamic of intersystemic intrusion that I discussed earlier), steps must be taken to reincorporate it (e.g., a symbolic reading).[10]

We can see that the process by which a foreign text is incorporated into the home system resembles the solution offered to the problem of pluralism. In both cases, that which is outside of the system (a foreign text outside of the hermeneutic system; a dead person outside of the tem-

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9. This is not to imply that a reading involving critical contextualization cannot be directed towards addressing the reader's or the community's concerns. Nevertheless, there is a difference to be noted.

10. One might thus respond to the military interpretation of Obadiah 1:21 by identifying an analogy between the challenges of temple work and the rigors of battle, suggesting that this is a deeper understanding of the scripture's meaning than a strictly "literal" reading provides.

poral system) is incorporated into the system by means of a power (the Holy Spirit, the sealing power of Elijah) which is capable of mediating between worlds. The supernal efficacy of the priesthood in both cases involves a superimposition: between the body of the living and the soul of the dead, or between the isolated textual elements and the communal hermeneutic matrix. Finally, and perhaps most important, both cases involve an erasing of prior identity: the native problematic of the text is effaced, or rendered irrelevant in the face of the true, prophetic interpretation; and the autonomous setting of a deceased individual's life, the various issues which may have constituted his or her own religious concerns, are likewise obliterated in the conviction that the gospel ordinances now received constitute their real salvation.

This effacement becomes important to us because it suggests how the solution to the problem of pluralism may be enacted in the same sweep as the problem's constitution. If there had been no erasing of identity, there would have been no cause for inclusion. The moment of inspiration, in incorporating a text into the system of true doctrine, simultaneously bars the text from serving as an inroad for the reader into the text's own native system. The act of serving as proxy for the baptism of another, bringing the deceased other under the protection of one's own system of salvation, makes it impossible for the other's foreignness to provoke insight into the limitations of one's own system. Finally, the satisfaction afforded by the doctrine itself—a solution to the problem of pluralism that offers not only internal consistency but the imprimatur of the Holy Spirit—can blind one to the presuppositions that instigated the problem in the first place: presuppositions concerning the nature of truth and the role of the religious system in containing or presenting that truth.

Let us return to our initial question: what happens to the comprehensive claims of such a system when it has failed to render some aspect of another system sufficiently strange?[11] As suggested earlier, the simplest way of dealing with this is to meet the question with the assurance of inclusivity: the other may indeed have its independent meaning, alongside our incorporation of it, but we can rest assured that any meaning or truth found therein is, in the final analysis, also part of the gospel. To the extent that we can accept this claim on faith, our security in the system will not have been seriously threatened.

It will be more difficult to accept this claim when one's interaction with the other and its system, under the gospel's indulgent habit of implicit reincorporation, has become sufficiently crucial to one's own way-in-the-world that the incommensurate element is no longer considered

11. Another modality of this question is suggested by the association of the sacred with the forbidden/strange/other: What happens when the strangeness that protected the sacred breaks down into familiarity?

alien enough as to require incorporation. As soon as an outside other presents its own claims to truth, the problematic of pluralism has already asserted itself and can proceed to effect its resolution, magnanimously bringing the truth of the other into the fold. The other is *recognized* by the home system whose stability is predicated on its capacity to *set at a distance* that other which it is then so eager to greet and redeem. But this no longer works when the other has insinuated itself into the individual's own constitution, so that it cannot be alienated (that is to say, made foreign and unreadable) without dangerously limiting the individual's access to his or her own resources for dealing with the world. At such a point, the subject may be reduced to carving those resources out of herself, sacrificing them at the altar of normativity, separating herself out from that which is unclean, *rendering* it "unclean" thereby and subject to redemption.

To the extent that a system's vigilance has failed to maintain the rigor of this demand, and has blinded itself to such discrepancies, it has allowed the very ground of a doctrine of pluralism—the possibility of discrete systems—to be structurally undermined. Recall that the utility of a system is a function of its ability to represent—and through the representation, to resolve—the structural tensions which it produces and/or allows. When the distinctness between systems has been structurally undermined, a doctrine that puts forward a gracious response to the systemic other will no longer serve the purpose for which it was intended: the reincorporation of the separate. And at that point nominal commitment to such a doctrine can be painful for the functional outsider, inasmuch as the systemic resources not only fail to address the situation at hand, but also rule out, through the problematic posed in their articulation, the possibility of a solution that would escape their normativity, their capacity to name that solution their own.

## Truth and Subversion

There is no way out of systematicity. Undermining one system with its faults will only situate you inside another one, likewise faulted. The hope, however, is that the new, negotiated system will hold nominal resources that can more adequately represent the structural fissures it allows. These resources in turn do not come out of nowhere; at best, they consist of a rearrangement or refiguring of material from previous systems.[12] To illustrate how this refiguring can happen, I will close by briefly outlining one development that might occur with particular figures of the gospel.

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12. Overtones here of the Mormon doctrine of creation are not lost on me, though they were, when last I checked, unintentional. The closer reference is to Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage*. See *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16ff.

I take my dead relative's name through the temple, letting my own body serve as host to his person. I bring that which is outside the system of life into superimposition with the system itself. In becoming thereby a savior on Mount Zion, I present to myself (in alienated form) a model of superimposition and displacement. The conveyance of roles, the replacing of names, the encoding of signs and the substitution of bodies all constitute, I am told, the mystery of godliness, where earth and heaven are brought together and the one transformed into the other.

The doctrine of vicarious redemption thus appears to me not just as one doctrine among others, but as a central element of Mormon worship and belief, in ways that go beyond the immediate logical confrontation of God's mercy with the religious other. The juxtapositional power of Elijah seems the essence of priesthood power itself, the concentration of the gospel's efficacy. At this stage of the story, such a conviction, reinforced by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, gives me the motivation to persist in the gospel, even in the face of outside threats to my faith.

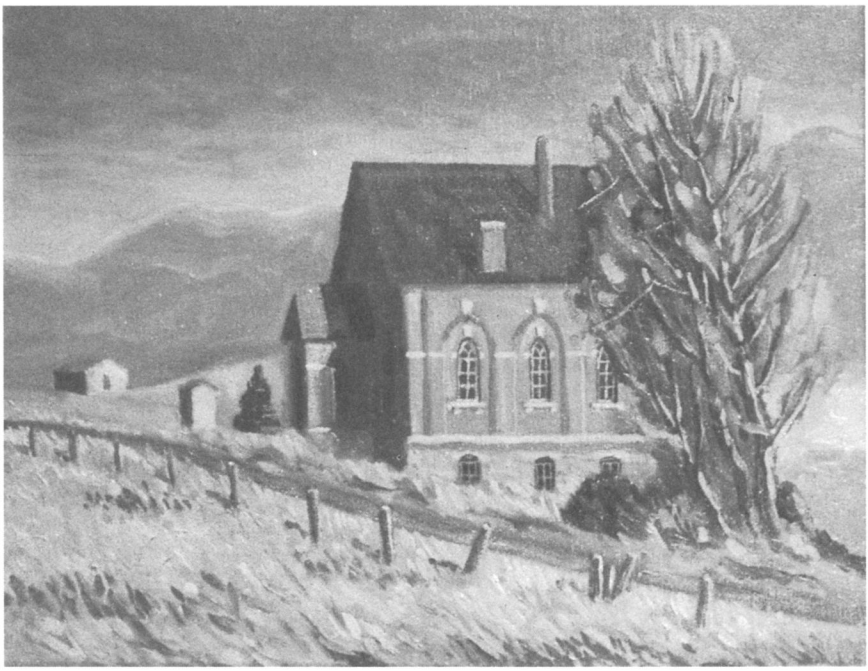
As I have argued in this essay, however, not all threats show themselves as such. As I live within and among various systems, I need to negotiate the elements and structures of those systems that find their way into my own life's structure, detected or undetected. Eventually, as that structure changes, the work of the gospel may fail to answer my situation—yet I still feel the power of the Spirit's witness. My enthusiasm calls for an object, while my curiosity wants to account for this power. Perhaps I begin to associate such a feeling with the representation of a dialectic between interiority and exteriority, a representation that has the capacity to undermine existentially the subjective constructions of inside and outside.[13]

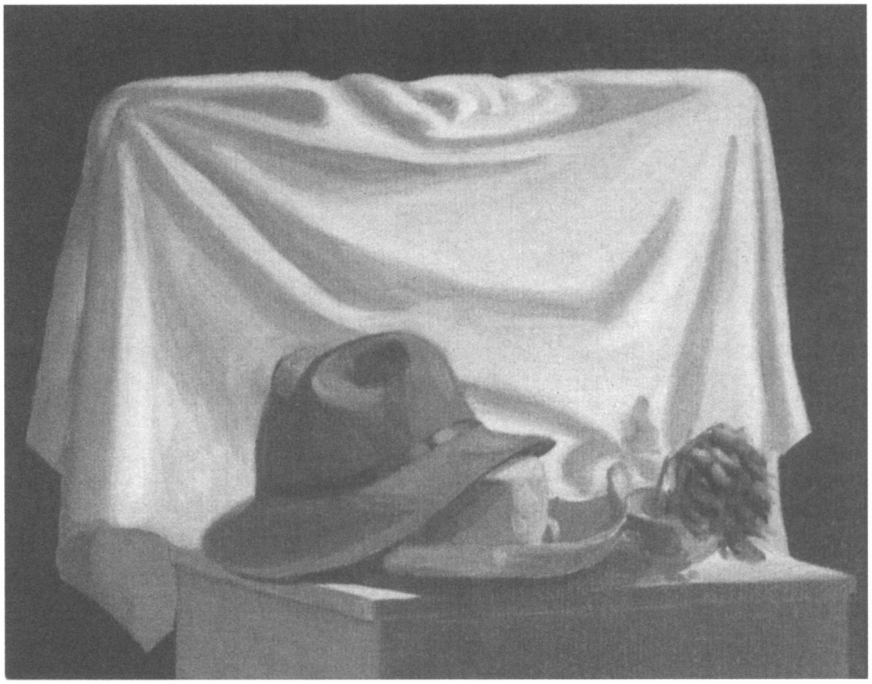
Notice, though, that at this point, where the ontological status of the borders between inside and outside has been called into question, religious pluralism as such no longer seems to be a problem. Rather, it is the idea that any one system of itself could be "true" that seems problematic—precisely because it now appears that "truth," as experienced under the sign of the Holy Spirit, does not belong to any given system, nor does it share itself with a plurality of systems, but only arises in the subversion of one system by another. More specifically, it is only this kind of subversion that can adequately represent the experience of functional exteriority

13. The word "dialectic" is a way of identifying the way in which elements set opposite one another communicate with one another, in the sense not only of speaking to one another but also of feeding into one another, almost but not quite to the point of blending. A representation that comes from outside of me, but that communicates something meaningful to me, seems to blend with what is "inside" of me: my own experience. When this near-blending between inside and outside is what I experience, it takes a dialectical representation to render this meaningful.

alongside nominal interiority, and thereby satisfy the psychological demand that experience be named.

In considering the problem of pluralism, and the complicity of the response thereto with the construction of the problematic within which the problem makes sense, I have tried to address the situation of one who finds him- or herself committed to a particular system of religious thought but whose use of that system's resources is made difficult by a kind of self-consciousness. My attempt to make explicit both the constitution and the subversion of a system is directed toward overcoming nominal inhibitions to the structural resolution of crises that threaten to obliterate systemic legibility. Whether such a method allows the development of a more adequate system, or whether its problematizing of normativity threatens a more total dissolution, remains to be seen.





# What You Walk Away From

*Holly Welker*

JESUS SAID, "AN EVIL AND ADULTEROUS generation seeketh after a sign." In fact, that statement shows up in the New Testament three times: in Matthew 12:39, in Matthew 16:4, and again in Luke 11:29. Now that I am evil and adulterous, I find I'm much less interested in signs than I ever was when I was righteous and virginal. It makes no sense. But still I have these dreadful dreams where someone steals my shoes for no other reason than spite. And it goes on like that for days.

Tonight is Christmas Eve and my Mormon family has just finished watching *Christmas with Brigham Young University* while I have listened to *Meat Beat Manifesto* and polished all my shoes. Now everyone is sitting around the living room, wondering what they can say at our traditional family gathering about the meaning and significance of Christmas with me there, me, the only member of the family to serve a mission, read every word of both the Old and New Testaments, make it through the Book of Mormon twelve times, and after all that still enter into apostasy.

If you talk to me more than once, you'll discover that I tell the same unbelievable stories over and over. You won't know quite what to think because although the stories seem too ludicrous to be true, I seem completely earnest. After a while I'll produce some object that corroborates one of my stories, and then you'll begin to realize that my imagination simply isn't vivid enough to fabricate all the diseases of heart and intestine, all the traumatic religious crises endured on three continents, that I insist clutter my past. Let me qualify that: my mother would say that my imagination *did* create all those diseases and crises, that every wretched thing I've been through is somehow psychosomatic. Which is possible. But I still had to go to the hospital, for hemorrhaging at home one Easter; for depression, broken bones, and vertigo as a missionary in Taiwan; a year ago it was tachycardia and transitory high blood pressure in Shanghai. And I won't be going back to Europe without my stash of antidepressants.

I got home from Shanghai last Christmas jaundiced, jittery, and broke. The yellow disappeared quickly from my skin; my heart slowed

down after a few weeks, and once that happened I could sleep again. I'm still poor but harbor grand notions of not living like a peasant when I go to graduate school next fall. Which is why I'm entrenched in the third bedroom of my parents' house and why I will remain, barring my incarceration for disorderly conduct or some such charge, entrenched there for the next six or seven months.

Sometimes I think about what Morrissey, the thin, angst-ridden, mildly androgynous vocalist for the Smiths, had to say about a type of people at least as common as those who seek after signs: he says he's not interested in hearing about people who are nice, that he's spent his entire life in ruins because of people who are nice. I didn't used to feel all that ruined until I found out that nice people approach my mother and commiserate with her over the fact that she has a daughter who reached the ripe old age of twenty-nine while remaining fond of dancing to loud music. They are all certain that if I only had a little more musical talent and larger breasts, I would name myself after the mother of God and be seen in every medium available, kissing other women and grabbing my crotch. After all, what can you expect from someone who not only *likes* celibate vegetarian homosexual pop icons, but *cites* them as well?

I know this is not a particularly innovative insight, but, really, Jesus Christ seemed to prefer hanging out with the evil and adulterous to being stuck with the pious and dull. In your own reading, who is more interesting: Simon Peter, a guy who wanted to be good but succumbed to fear, or Mary Magdalene, the reformed whore who wasn't afraid of her future or ashamed of her past? Mary Magdalene was the first person Christ appeared to once he'd risen from the grave and I don't think that was just luck on her part. She's one reason I named my cat Madeleine. Proust and his madeleines dipped in tea are the other reason and there I go again revealing my affinity for the effete, the affected, the sexually deviant artist. I also like the young, the angry, and the obnoxious. Especially to dance with.

In 2 Samuel 6, we get this story: David's first wife, Michal, sees him dancing in the street in celebration of a victory. He wears nothing but a loincloth that does an inadequate job of covering him and Michal is disgusted by his display of flesh. When he comes in, she scolds him, saying, "That was no way for a king to behave, cavorting naked in the streets with servants." He says, "If you think that's bad, too bad for you: I won't sleep with you anymore; instead, I'll sleep with the handmaidens you think I disgraced myself in front of." And so Michal ends up childless, which is the worst thing that could happen to a good Israelite wife.

You have to wonder what's so frightening about watching someone else move to music you don't understand—though in Michal's case, it wasn't David's movements but what he was wearing (or not wearing)

that upset her so. Still, the waltz, the Lindy, and now moshing—people get arrested over things like that. Especially in small towns. I should know.

Every so often I tell myself, "Look, you don't have to explain a damn thing." And it works really well for a while because some people are comfortable with mystery and plenty others just don't care. But then I run into one of those people who values certainty above everything else, who insists that if you have questions, it's because you willfully ignore the obvious answers all around you. When that happens, I find myself telling stories like this:

A kind man, a patriarch, once laid his hands on my head and said, "I declare unto you, Holly, that the Lord is aware of you, that he is mindful of your goodness, of your basic integrity." It seemed to me the most miraculous, most impossible thing I had ever heard, and the only sign I ever hungered and thirsted after was proof from God that that impossible statement was true. Perhaps the sign came. But if it did, it came too late: it came when my own soul was so worthless to me that I simply could not believe God would see any value in something I knew had none.

My Bible is fine-grain blue leather and I have a Book of Mormon to match. My name is embossed in silver on each. I used a red pencil and a ruler to underline neatly scriptures that mattered to me. The Book of Mormon is not my favorite book of scripture. It contains verses like this one, in 2 Nephi 9:28: "O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish." Also I say, with an English teacher's smugness, that the Book of Mormon just doesn't sound as good as the Bible. Joseph Smith, supposing he really did translate rather than compose it, simply didn't have the talent of Tyndale and Wycliffe and the other men who translated the Bible into English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I have two favorite scriptures. One is Psalms 139:14: "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well." The other is Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." I think those are the only prayers God really hears: the ones that cannot be articulated in anything other than a shout of joy or a groan of despair. And what can he use to answer a prayer like that?

What good is a world full of grace if you don't share in that grace? When I was certain that God had rejected me, I set about finding other

ways to ensnare him in my life. The first man I loved, the man I loved most deeply, was a nineteen-year-old gay Mormon missionary I met at church when I was twenty-four and on the verge of quitting my religion; his name was Matthew, which means "Gift from God." Then for a while I was with a man who seemed to me more than a little demonic, but he said it made perfect sense that we were together. "After all," he told me, "what Satan shares with the angels is an obsession with divinity." And the best lover I ever had had grown up an Episcopalian altar boy. And I'm glad. I hope things go on like this.

It seems odd that you can look up a word like "nowadays" and find out that it means "In these times." Everyone automatically knows what "nowadays" means and everyone has for the past 1,000 years. There aren't many people who would bother getting out a dictionary to check. Only English teachers and writers do things like that. Which is what I mean about the evil and adulterous not giving a shit about signs.

My name is really quite pagan: Holly, a good old Celtic fertility symbol that has subsequently been co-opted by Christianity and is now one of the most recognizable symbols of Christmas. The song "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" ends with the line, "But the prettiest sight you'll see is the holly that will be on your own front door." One of my lovers, the Episcopalian altar boy, just gave me a Christmas wreath made from barbed wire. Where to hang such a thing? And what does it mean?

Last year at lunch in the Shanghai Hilton, my beautiful student Olivia Hwang told me she had finally managed, after plenty of research, to discover that in Chinese holly is called "nyau bu shu" which means "little birds can't live" (because holly is prickly and uninviting) or else "gou gu" which means "bent bones." "It took me a long time to figure out what that plant is," she said. "It's just not that meaningful in China."

Thank God, no one has ever called me *petunia*.

One of the last Sundays I was in Shanghai, I took my bike and set off, not looking for a holy place in that unholy city, but I found it anyway: a cathedral, severe and gothic in red brick. The spire called such desperate attention to itself against so many tall gray tenements that I began following it through a maze of alleys until there it was, with an unlocked gate and cultivated flower beds and cats lounging in every doorway. The inside had been trashed decades ago, and repairs seemed to have been going on almost as long: pews overturned, scaffolding everywhere, all of it cloaked in thick mantles of dust. But bikes were parked in the chapels and wet laundry hung from twine tied to pillars. Some of the stained-glass windows were broken and some were not, and that's what I remember most: the light, falling in stripes made by those broken windows; the silence a little, but mostly the light. I'd been chased out of plenty of Chinese buildings and kept waiting for someone to show up

and shoo me out. But no one bothered me and so I worshipped there: and I wonder now if it's solitude and size that makes one believe in God.

Even in China I put on my favorite boots and went dancing—not often, perhaps not often enough. At one Chinese dance I disgraced myself with my barely competent knowledge of ballroom dance steps: I would have thought that nothing, *nothing* in this universe smacks so thoroughly of Western bourgeois decadence than the rumba, the waltz, and the jitterbug, and perhaps that's why it was all the Chinese wanted to do. I much preferred squandering my precious foreign currency (I was employed by the Chinese government and paid in worthless Chinese money) at student discos, sweating furiously to anything loud and fast.

Now that I'm home and heathenish, I have tried to reassure my family: I like Christmas. I think they don't quite believe me, but I really do. I like all of it. I like buying and getting gifts and I like going to parties and I like saying "Happy Holidays" to people I don't even know and I like mailing out four dozen obnoxious homemade Christmas cards. But more than anything else, I think, I like the music. Even though you can't dance to it. One of the reasons I was so unhappy in China—it hurts to admit this but I might as well—is that I'm a Western culture snob and I *missed* those really old, kind of scary carols like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" done by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I like "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night," and I love "For Unto Us a Son is Given" from Handel's *Messiah*. I think everyone should "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas." After all, "It's the best time of the year." And so on.

I've begun to suspect that the only thing worse than an inexorable skeptic is a reformed one, a truth seeker who thinks she has found the truth she sought, and so becomes the most rigid of dogmatists. What is so wrong, I want to know, with saying, "I DON'T KNOW!" when you really don't. After all, ignorance may not be bliss but it is certainly hard to avoid. For a while I did word-processing for a guy who was writing a history of Afghanistan and ever since then I have wondered about the quality of life in fourteenth-century Afghanistan. Sometimes my own body is as foreign to me as Kabul and the Bamian provinces: I don't think I really know what I look like. I think about my body and all I can visualize is this landscape of sweat, dark hair, light hair, and blood. And I don't even *want* to know what makes the world go round; I want to know what makes it *stop*.

I have tried to imagine a world with no coffee and no death and all that happens is I wake up sweating. To sleep, to sleep or not: it might not be the question I start with but it's the question I always end with. I've written one pop song and it goes like this:

I don't know which wish to want
I don't know which house to haunt
I don't know which fault to flaunt
Well maybe, I'm confused

I don't know if my own heart
can hurt enough to make me start
falling down and all apart
Well maybe, I'm confused

And the times I feel confused
Are the times when I'm awake
Sometimes I think that getting up
Is always the first mistake.

I think and think but all that happens is I want to go to sleep. So I extinguish all thoughts of music and shoes and clocks and coins and anything else that fits a pattern.

I know in my own way I'm every bit as weird as some fruitcake out of Dickens. But that's okay. How could it be any other way, given the fact that pain perpetuates its own tortured monotony? Pain and religion, resilience and retaliation; what you lose, what you walk away from, and why. Does enduring to the end mean that you accomplish something, or that you merely survive? I want to remain involved in a search for inspiration and for the power to say something that matters about what matters to me.

They say that Joseph Smith insisted Christ was born on April 6th. Very likely Christ wasn't born in December. (But Joseph Smith was. I was too.) The world does not agree on when Christ was born. Nor does the world agree on whether he was—is?—the savior of the world. I don't know if he is. I may yet find out and the knowledge may damn me.

But you know what? Mormon theology has always rejected the traditional hell of fire and brimstone. Hell to Mormons is a psychological state, the pain of being separated from God, of knowing what you could have had if you hadn't willfully rejected truth. And I've already been there. It happened while I was a missionary—I would even say *because* I was a missionary—and I'm not there anymore. I don't reject any truth. I just prefer to admit that I don't know. And then go dancing. And then go sleep: believing I'll wake up.

# Prolegomena to Any Future Mormon Studies

*Joanna Brooks*

> In a spiritual crisis of the individual, the truth and authenticity of the person's spiritual identity are called into question. He is placed in confrontation with reality and judged by his ability to bring himself into a valid and living relationship with the demands of his new situation. In the spiritual, social, historic crises of civilizations—and of religious institutions—the same principle applies. Growth, survival and even salvation may depend on the ability to sacrifice what is fictitious and unauthentic in the construction of one's moral, religious, or national identity. One must then enter upon a different creative task of reconstruction and renewal. This task can be carried out only in the climate of faith, of hope and of love: these three must be present in some form, even if they amount only to a natural belief in the validity and significance of human choice, a decision to invest human life with some shadow of meaning, a willingness to treat other men as other selves.
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> —Thomas Merton[1]

I'LL BEGIN WITH TWO ANECDOTES, in order to situate my comments.

A well-known scholar of nineteenth-century American religion visits a seminar in which I am enrolled. Realizing that we must have mutual acquaintances, I introduce myself during a class break. Sure enough, he knows a few Mormon historians—we chat briefly and easily. Later that week the class tours a famous Los Angeles area church; our guides are members of the ministerial staff who recount for us various "miraculous" healings performed by the church's celebrity founder. After the tour the class meets for further discussion in a conference room on the premises. When the ministers leave, the visiting scholar asks, in the patient but skeptical tones of an ethnologist, if we, as scholars, believe these reported miracles.

The question strikes me as pretentious, even rude in light of the

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1. *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 138.

church's courtesy to us. After giving it some hearty critical consideration, I decide to pose my objection in this way: I ask him, "Does it matter?" Perhaps this is a discipline difference? A theoretical divide? I phrase these questions in my best academic language—this is, after all, a competitive graduate seminar. The scholar responds by asking me how I would feel if someone told me that Joseph Smith fabricated the Book of Mormon. The reply stuns me—completely bypassing my academic questions, shifting the entire discussion to my "Mormonism," a topic definitely not on the syllabus. Equally disgusted by what passed for "academic" consideration of religion and by his assumption that my relationship to my own religious experience was in need of critical consideration by the seminar, I spent the rest of the meeting silent.

Another anecdote. On 12 October 1995, a day of massive University of California systemwide student protests against the university regents' decision to abolish "Affirmative Action" programs in admissions and hiring, I participate in an act of civil disobedience with thirty-five other UCLA student activists. Sitting in a circle blocking the intersection of Wilshire and Westwood, I realize that four of my fellow protesters were also raised Mormon. I wonder at this seeming disproportionality, and then—in good Mormon fashion—wonder if this is more than a coincidence. Is something of our Mormonism implicit in our activism? Is something activist implicit in our Mormonism?

I usually find myself quite alone with complex questions like these. Occasionally a colleague—someone raised Mormon, a young academic on a campus across the country—will post a similar concern to an electronic net board. We will spend a few posts working these things through, then resign ourselves to "real" academic work. As if our "real" academic thoughts were so easily distinguishable, as if the very mystery of our Mormonism didn't animate and shape our "secular" scholarship.

Religion in the academy? The thought makes reason stare. Ever since Hegel fled the seminary at Tubingen for a philosopher's chair, the theorists of the Enlightenment have steadily put more and more distance between their present projects and their theological roots. Modern thinkers, the logic goes, check their superstitions at the school house door. In the name of politeness and good politics, we pretend to come to the seminar table as *tabula rasa* and wear blank faces whenever the talk turns to religion in the particular or, more specifically, to our own particular religious backgrounds. Witness the mute horror with which so many scholars of matters social—even those extremely articulate in the discourses of "race," "class," and "revolution"—have responded to the insurgency of militant, Christian-identified whites in the United States. Perfectly modern critics of modernity may speculate that the Enlightenment project has run its course; claiming one's country cousins when they crash the Mod-

ern Language Association convention is another story. Postmodernity—a homecoming party for rationality's (never) long lost funny uncle—is fine, as long as the reunion recurs in someone else's backyard.

Likewise, a specter is haunting Mormon thought—the specter of secular scholarship. Stop me if you've heard this one before? Probably not: Mormonism is continually spooked by the mere idea of an outside world, though our perception of it predicates our very sense of community. Once upon a time, when pioneers built a desert kingdom, lines in the red dirt served us well. Now we are a diaspora; thinking about "Mormonness" requires ever more subtle and critical demarcations. The neat boundaries enforced by our "home" academic institutions constrict; some scholars find themselves put out to wander in the wilderness, heirs, ironically, to the exile consciousness so historically "Mormon."

"Mormon Studies," in the breadth of its projects and the particularity of its interests, often exceeds its sponsoring institutions—both ecclesiastical and academic. For those of us who find ourselves both academics and Mormons and seeking to critically navigate the places our worlds overlap, perhaps the most difficult work is finding language adequate to the task. How do we both represent our inheritance and talk well with our scholarly neighbors? Fact is, we do not always do so well—some hold purges, some have suspicions. Old stories land in the laps of new readers; the present collides with the past. One need only visit the site of the Mountain Meadows Massacre and read the mournful but evasive prose memorial to its victims to know that even spectral boundaries remain firmly in place, that ghosts are never laid to rest.[2]

What is "Mormon thought"? How and where do we do "Mormon Studies"? Who is authorized to construct these categories? Who is really "Mormon"? These questions haunt our scholarship. To wrestle with them alone is to become quickly overwhelmed; to assume that they are resolved is to alienate ourselves or excommunicate others from the vital work of building a mutually flourishing community. Perhaps we should take a lesson from Mormonism itself, accustomed as it is to the visitations of spirits, friendly and not: the best way to proceed in situations like this is simply to shake hands.[3]

It seems to me that the time has come for Mormon academics to take the gloves off, to engage our "Mormon-ness" and the prospect of "Mor-

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2. My phrasing here carries echoes from two books—Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Mikal Gilmore's treatment of his brother Gary's famous execution and their shared Mormon heritage, *Shot in the Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1994)—both ghost stories. They uncannily intersect with and inform my thoughts on the present subject.

3. I refer here to the method of distinguishing spirits set forth by Joseph Smith in D&C 129.

mon Studies" more critically. As one raised Mormon outside the Idaho-Utah-Arizona corridor, I am not sure that my concept of "Mormon-ness" matches that of my more centrally-located colleagues. The years I spent at Brigham Young University in the early 1990s make it impossible for me to establish any easy relationship between "Mormon" and "thought." My experience—training there as a feminist, theorist, and literary scholar—and the university's recent treatment of Gail Houston, Brian Evenson, and others have shown me that folks who call themselves both "Mormon" and "academic" hold few compatible assumptions about "Mormon-ness" and "Mormon Studies." Some cannot even hold civil conversations with their colleagues.

One of the most difficult aspects of "Mormon Studies" is the way the realm of the "personal" has served as a court of last resort whenever the "critical" discussions have become demanding. Feminists recognize, of course, that "the personal is political," but this slogan takes on entirely new force when one finds herself, for example, during a midnight trip to the vending machines in the dark Stover Hall lobby confronted by her dorm mother who asks, "How dare you write [such-and-such] in that [unsponsored publication] when you were brought here on a scholarship bearing the name of the prophet?" Or when colleagues respond to one's sociological research with veiled (or not-so-veiled) queries about one's private behavior and insinuations about one's "worthiness." Or when one finds herself submitting her written work to her ecclesiastical leaders for pre-approval, just in case? Or when one finds herself bearing tearful testimony to her employers, chagrined by the improper context for such self-revelation, but sensing that only such prostration will pacify their hostilities to her way of reading and teaching literature? Even more disruptive to "Mormon Studies" is the way some scholars shut down discussion by presuming themselves not only authorities in their fields, but authorities in matters general. Appointing themselves the guardians of faith itself, they police their classrooms and faculties like academic Danites. This presumption seems to me a gross underestimation of the nature of God, church, and faith—as if God needs English professors saving the day! Who would imagine oneself in such a proprietary role? A Mormon woman does not naturally imagine herself a general authority on anything.

Thus I find it hard to speak or even accept some of the rhetoric already in place, especially when it speaks of "our values" or assumes that I know what a "faithful Mormon" looks like. Revelation may come from above; matters academic must be worked out among scholars here below. "Mormon Studies" needs, I believe, to find a vocabulary, a way of talking about "Mormonism" that is both sufficiently learned and sufficiently invested in mutuality. This essay will pose some critical questions about

what "Mormon Studies" has heretofore meant and posit some possibilities as to what it might do, as millennium approaches.

## "The Function of Mormon Criticism"? Or, Rather, "What Is To Be Done?"

To begin with, I will look at the current state of "Mormon (literary) Studies," taking as my starting place Michael Austin's award-winning essay "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time."[4] Austin breaks important ground as he tries to bring the work of Mormon literary critics into closer conversation with that of our secular colleagues. He picks up where Brigham Young University English professor Richard Cracroft left off, with the former Association for Mormon Letters president's farewell charge that "this people deserves a literature grounded in Mormon metaphors."[5] Austin counters Cracroft's well-meaning but provincial patriotism with an appeal to the rhetoric of "great books." "Great writers have always produced great books, and mediocre writers have always pandered to the popular prejudices," he explains, no matter what literary critics do or say.[6]

Austin suggests that Mormon literary critics might better serve "this people" and its literature by "plac[ing] Mormonism and Mormon literature in the larger critical context" lest "others . . . offer the definitions [of Mormonism] for us" and we end up "increasingly stuck with the professional consequences of belonging to a version of 'Mormonism' that we had no part in constructing."[7] Asserting that "Mormonism" is more than just a religion, he coins the term "Mormo-American" to "represent a cultural entity whose traditions, heritage, and experience deserve to be considered a vital part of the American mosaic." Those hostile to the prospects of a Mormon-inclusive canon earn, in Austin's words, the title "Mormophobe."[8] While borrowing the discourse of multi-culturalism, Austin is careful to distance his project from what he perceives to be its "worst element": "the already-inflated marketplace of victim-seekers."[9] Presently, Mormons as a whole cannot claim a specific economic or political oppression—on this point I am eager to agree. I am less eager to play

4. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Winter 1995) 4: 131-44.
5. Ibid., 132.
6. Ibid., 133.
7. Ibid., 136.
8. Ibid., 134. The idea of a canon—that is, an established body of texts understood to be representative of human experience—seems in itself inimical to "Mormon-ness." The very existence of the Book of Mormon, the doctrine that other sacred texts representing other societies' spiritual histories exist, though they have not been formally made known to us, and the principle of continuing revelation seem to call for a radically open reading practice.
9. Ibid., 144.

"model minority" of the literary world, though it is this kind of "no fuss, no muss" formula for the Mormon literary-critical enterprise that Austin finally offers:

> If diversity truly constitutes an independent good, and if different cultures and values really do make us stronger, then academia cannot, while being true to its own premises, deny a voice to the Mormons. . . . If, as I have argued, Mormon literature forms a vital part of the American cultural landscape, then it must be considered fair game for all kinds of literary scholarship.[10]

The vision, finally, is cheerful and familiar: Mormo-Americans of the world unite! The world, after all, is our campus.[11]

The premises of the kind of "me-too" multiculturalism Austin incorporates into his argument have been criticized and resisted by other scholars of culture—I think first here of Edward Said—who rightly point out that the sunny rhetoric of "humanities," of the project of "civilization," was designed to civilize and humanize the presumed sub-civil and sub-human subjects of the British empire.[12] Did Johnston's army march on Utah bearing "great books"? Perhaps not. But make no mistake about it, the devotees of the "best that is said and thought," the scholars of "sweetness and light," have historically been hostile to unpedigreed mass cultural movements like our own.

As Mormons and academics, we find ourselves, often, on shaky ground. The critical methods we acquire carry us into unfamiliar cosmopolitan circles; the matter of "Mormonism" sends us back to the province. Austin's own essay bears the kernel of this contradiction. Its very title echoes that of Matthew Arnold's classic 1864 essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." And yet Arnold himself had a few harsh words to say about the literary tastes of our ancestors. The Mormons, he observes in *Culture and Anarchy*, "go to the patriarchs and the Old Testament . . . and having never before read anything else but their Bible, they now read their Bible over and over again, and make all manner of great discoveries there."[13] Elsewhere in the same book, Arnold uses the Mormons to exemplify what the project of civilization must correct, that is, man's "natural" taste for the pathetic. Claiming that "bathos" carries the same appeal "in religion as in literature," he criticizes a contemporary ethnographer's account of the draw of Mormonism:

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10. Ibid., 144.

11. This slogan—"The world is our campus"—can be seen engraved in stone at the entrance to Brigham Young University.

12. See Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

13. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 166.

> "It is easy to say," [Hepworth Dixon] writes of the Mormons, "that these saints are dupes and fanatics, to laugh at Joe Smith and his church, but what then. *The great facts remain.* Young and his people are at Utah; a church of 200,000 souls; an army of 20,000 rifles."

Arnold responds:

> But if the followers of a doctrine are really dupes, or worse, and its promulgators are really fanatics, or worse, it gives the doctrine no seriousness or authority the more that there should be found 200,000 souls,—200,000 of the innumerable multitude with a natural taste for the bathos,—to hold it and 20,000 rifles to defend it. . . . [Have] Mr. Hepworth Dixon's heroes and heroines anything of the weight and significance for the best reason and spirit of man that Plato and St. Paul have? Evidently they, at present, have not; and a very small taste of them and their doctrines ought to have convinced Mr. Hepworth Dixon that they never could have.

Dismissing Dixon's assertion that the mere "magnetism" of American popular religious movements makes them worthy of learned consideration, Arnold concludes that the civilizing mission will falter as "our able and popular writers treat their Joe Smiths . . . with their so many thousand souls and so many thousand rifles, in the like exaggerated and misleading manner, and so do their best to confirm us in a bad mental habit to which we are already too prone."[14]

We are not the heirs of that project of civilization—after all, handcarts had little room for books and now even our universities have endowments. And yes, much of the cosmopolitan world thinks we're curious creatures, Mike Wallace's *60 Minutes* "Mormonad" aside. Perhaps we have responded to our fear of academic inadequacy by emphasizing our "peculiarity." And, indeed, it is this "peculiar" sense of belonging to which we owe the very idea of a "peculiarly" Mormon scholarship. Mormonism's relationship with the scholarly world is formulated in uncertain terms, and I think we should stay there.

This is not to lobby uncritically for a circling of the wagons or for the celebration of "peculiarity for peculiarity's sake." The very fact that there are now more Latter-day Saints residing outside the United States than in it means that we have become a diaspora; received conceptions of "Mormon-ness" no longer fit.[15] What, then, is to be studied? Michael Austin proposes a move beyond the limiting "Mormon" versus "non-Mormon" literary dichotomy towards a presumably more comprehensive taxon-

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14. Ibid., 114.

15. For a brilliant deconstruction of traditional conceptual renderings of "Mormonness," look no farther than General Relief Society presidency member Chieko Okazaki's April 1996 general conference talk, "Bottles or Baskets?"; notes in my possession.

omy: "books by Mormons written to primarily Mormon audiences," "books by Mormons written to non-Mormon audiences," "books by Mormons written to non-Mormon audiences (not about Mormons)," "books by mainstream non-Mormon authors (about Mormons)," "books by mainstream authors (not about Mormons)."[16] The classifications proliferate. And yet, as Michel Foucault's work shows us, bigger and better classifications still can't dismiss our lingering subjective (and subject-centered) suspicions.[17] Of authors, of critics, it is asked, "But are they really Mormons?" Austin tries to diminish the importance of this query. "To the academic audience," he argues, "questions of meeting attendance, payment of tithes, and observance of dietary laws play a less important role than they do in our internal discussions."[18] Although the instruction in academic protocol is salutary, it reinstates old dichotomies and returns the issues supposedly at the heart of our newly world-wise critical enterprise—"what does it mean to be Mormon?"—to the province, for private dispute.

Though I whole-heartedly agree that Mormon literature and the Mormons who study it deserve more academic legitimacy than they currently enjoy, I am not comforted by Austin's concluding statement that "only faithful Mormons can criticize Mormon literature *as faithful Mormons.*"[19] What does it mean to be a "faithful Mormon"? Where are these "internal discussions" being held, and who is invited? Do we ask authors to pass worthiness interviews at the door of the Association for Mormon Letters? The grieving, articulate resistance by some of Brigham Young University's finest scholars to that school's recently instated faculty "ecclesiastical endorsement" policies speaks to the dangers of this kind of critical classification.[20] Mormonism's most vital cultural developments are occurring beyond the shadow of the everlasting hills or springing from closets and hiding places within those sometimes dark shadows. The practitioners of Mormon "letters" can no longer seek familiar signs—ecclesiastical credentials, odd artifacts, or old assumptions, even when they pass as "metaphors"—as evidence of some abiding, essential kernel of "Mormon-ness."

Too much fixation on the local leaves us quibbling over caffeine and arcane points of doctrine, and I give this movement more credit than that. That we have a legacy of dissent, that we believe that common people

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16. Austin, 137-42.

17. I think here of the implications of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1979) and his *Introduction to the History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

18. Austin, 140.

19. Ibid., 144; emphasis in original.

20. See William A. Wilson's letter to "BYU AAUP Chapter Members" and William Evenson's letter to the Provo *Daily Herald*, both reprinted in *Sunstone* 19 (June 1996): 69-71.

can be heirs to all of metaphysics, that we conceive of world revolution in co-operative, practical terms, this ideological heritage could, I believe, inform a more generous scholarship and a more rigorous criticism. Do we consider our "Mormon-ness" a fascinating feature of ethnography with which to buy fifteen minutes of fame on the academic stage? Or do we use it to ground ourselves, to locate our project where it has historically been—in the boondocks, on the margins of civilization? Do we join other academics on the margin in a critical re-examination of the project of modernity? Do we scrutinize Mormonism's complicated—sometimes profitable, sometimes oppositional—relationship to modern concepts like "identity," "property," "history," "race," and "nation"? Do we link our critique of what has heretofore passed for "civilization" to a practical vision of a mutually flourishing community, that is, Zion? What if we were to position ourselves as scholars in such a way as to, in the words of President Gordon B. Hinckley, "stand with the victims of oppression," to be "militant for truth and goodness"?[21]

Yes, Mormon scholars and critics should enter broader academic conversations, with their "Mormon-ness" engaged. And engaging our "Mormon-ness," I submit, will entail some real self-critical activity. Michael Austin speaks the mind of more than a few Mormon academics when he mimics this anxious voice: "As long as we can deflect the occasional inquiry about polygamy, racism, or the status of feminists and homosexuals in our church, we can go about our business without having to reckon directly with these 'weird'-nesses as literary critics." Not directly enough, at least, for my tastes. Such inquiries are not slings and arrows to be deflected in the interest of "Mormon Studies"; they are its very proving ground. Examinations of race, gender, and sexuality in Mormon contexts have yielded some of our finest recent scholarship; moreover, for some of us, these are not "marginal" issues but primary texts. Yes, we have much to contribute to wider critical conversations, and the price of admission will be some consciousness raising. Our colleagues will want to know how "they" figure into "our" stories. And we ought to be able to discuss this with them. Elsewise we cling to a reified, precious sense of our own "weirdness" and, frankly, squander our birthright.

I find myself, at this point, returning to something Matthew Arnold said in one of his more idealistic moments. To what end should scholars and critics devote their energies? Arnold perceived two camps within his own class: "We are still engaged in trying to clear and educate ourselves. . . . We go the way the human race is going, while they abolish the Irish Church by the power of the Nonconformists' antipathy to establish-

21. The former quote is from Hinckley's talk at the October 1995 general conference; the latter is from his address to the April 1996 general conference.

ments, or they enable a man to marry his deceased wife's sister."[22] What is to be done with our "Mormon-ness"? We can join critical conversations already in progress. Or perhaps, in the name of "Mormon-ness," we'd rather abolish all high school clubs in Utah and make it legal for a man over fifty to wed his first cousin.

## "Mormon-ness": Cult or Culture?

Growing up in a Southern California town which was also home to the worldwide headquarters of "Ex-Mormons for Jesus," I developed my sense of "Mormon-ness" in response and resistance to the sometimes hostile campaigns of local Christian fundamentalists. There were anonymous letters taped to my junior high school locker and invitations to Billy Graham's annual Anaheim Stadium crusade etched in my yearbook; prominent local churches showed the anti-Mormon movie *The Godmakers* and mockingly displayed sacred Mormon undergarments in their Sunday meetings. On more than one occasion, when invited to social functions sponsored by local church youth groups, my sisters and I found ourselves the targets of theological ambush. The most persistent and curious charge levelled against us was that we were members of a "cult." "Mormons: Christian or Cult?" the marquee outside one church read; a friend of mine wrote a high school term paper bearing the same title.

Having elected not to read her essay, I am not sure how she arrived at the conclusion that we were (and probably still are), of course, a "cult." I am still not sure what the formal markers of our "cult" status are. Nonetheless, I find the appellation interesting, provocative, even, in terms of my present critical project. A contradictory impulse? Perhaps. I have learned, however, that seeming contradictions are often the sites of productive, even revolutionary thinking. "Go to the confusion!" I tell the students I teach. "Confusion is where your real thinking happens!" The same might apply to "Mormon Studies" as well—engaging the contradictory aspects of our "Mormon-ness," our so-called "weird-ness," especially where it touches issues of race, class, and gender, may yield our most important critical work.

Let's take "cult" as a keyword for a new type of discourse about "Mormon-ness." I suppose that we have been called a "cult" in part because our theology informs and is informed by the way we live our lives. "Cultus" has classically denoted a group devoted to the tending of natural growth; the term speaks to the ideal significance of a community's organic development. Church welfare farms, backyard gardens, food storage, parables of olive trees— "cultivation" has been very much a part

22. Arnold, 187.

of "Mormon-ness." Likewise, "Mormon-ness" itself has been a cultivated phenomenon. More than a static set of received doctrines, our theology has been articulated over time—this is the source of its vitality and its self-generative power. Our understanding of what it means to be "Mormon" and the way we articulate this through social practice have also developed over time, and not always so evenly. Movements of population, instinctual syncretism, and historical necessity have made Mormon *culture* a many splendored and sometimes divergent thing. "Mormon thought" engages these fertile sites, the places where the ideal intersects the material, the dialectic of spirit and matter.

My emphasis on the word *culture* is intentional; thinking about "Mormon-ness" as culture means we think about our own academic enterprise as culture too, a component of the complex movement that is "Mormonism." Thinking about "Mormon-ness" as culture can have significant impact on the way we do "Mormon Studies"—where the clerics of civilization and the keepers of great books use their academic capital to grant or deny others access to "truth," workers of culture (try to) see themselves as a part of an ongoing process. Thinking about "Mormonness" as culture, and putting aside a proprietary sense of our "peculiarity," we can engage our "Mormonism" in more self-conscious, critically aware ways. "Mormon Studies" is not the place to debate "Oh say, what is truth?" Such questions are best left to personal and prayerful consideration. Instead, as Mormons and academics, let us use our critical capacities to examine the terms of Mormonism's collective, ongoing struggles to define itself.

The word "culture" captures the vital, engaged nature of such critical work in its charged, complex etymology. In *Culture and Society,* Raymond Williams explains:

> [Culture] came to mean, first, a "general state or habit of mind", having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean "the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole". Third, it came to mean "the general body of the arts". Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean "a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual". It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility or embarrassment. . . . The development of the word *culture* is a record of a number of important and continuing reactions to these changes in our social, economic and political life, and may be seen, in itself, as a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored.[23]

In the age of "industry" and "civilization," he continues, culture has

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23. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), xvi-xvii.

come to represent "complex and radical response[s] to the new problems of social class," to refer "back to an area of personal and apparently private experience," to serve as a "court of human appeal," "a mode of interpreting all our common experience, and, in this new interpretation, [as a way of] changing it."[24] Culture, in Williams's appraisal, is the site where a community works out its survival.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams derives the political and academic implications of seeing culture in this way. Over time, Williams argues, concepts like "society," "economy," and "arts" have been abstracted, taken out of contact with the dynamic masses, and systematized by an interested group of scholars and clerics as a "self-referring celebration of an achieved condition of refinement and order." Everything still in process, historical developments and new social movements not falling into this polite "order of things" are thus referred to the catch-all term "culture." "Culture," as a "noun of process," Williams argues, "exerts a strong pressure against the limited terms of all the other concepts. That is always its advantage; it is always also the source of its difficulties, both in definition and comprehension."[25] It is precisely in this mix of "difficulty" and "advantage," in culture's contradictory moments, in its "weirdness," its glass grapes and ghost dances, that Williams finds great promise. Where "civilization" takes itself for granted, "culture" is always on the move.

The civilizing mission proposed by thinkers like Arnold claims to seek universal understanding; in practice, it seems to have satisfied itself in pseudo-objective cosmopolitanism. This doesn't leave much room for abiding and engaged Mormonism. The vegetable concept "culture," however, provides for our particular academic project. A sense of culture, Williams claims, restores "a sense of movement within what is ordinarily abstracted as a system."[26] Read with a sense of "culture," texts become products of a specific place and time. Instead of seeking in them verification of the way things have (supposedly) always been—what Williams calls the "dominant"—critics look for markers of memory and indicators of change—elements Williams calls the "residual" and "emergent." The result is a scholarship more aware of its own place in history. In other words, put down your lever, Archimedes, and re-join the program always already in progress.[27] Or, stated in more familiar terms, step out of your ivory tower and put your shoulder to the wheel.

Williams is especially interested in the "residual"—his word for how

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24. Ibid., xviii.

25. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 13.

26. Ibid., 121.

27. My comment is informed by Myra Jehlen's article "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," *Signs* (Summer 1981): 575-601.

a community recycles itself, how folks re-establish their sense of social location when forces beyond their control disrupt and dislocate their lives. In this, the "residual" is closely linked with "emergent" campaigns of local resistance—it is the stuff of which collective action is made, what we got that the guys in charge don't. It also sounds a lot like what we got in the current shape of "Mormon culture," that is:

> certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, [which] are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. It is crucial to distinguish this aspect of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual . . . which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture. . . . Thus organized religion is predominantly residual, but within this there is a significant difference between some practically alternative and oppositional meanings and values (absolute brotherhood, service to others without reward) and a larger body of incorporated meanings and values (official morality, or the social order of which the other-worldly is a separated neutralizing or ratifying component).[28]

Our sense that Mormonism is a peculiar phenomenon, with its own habits and contours, not "expressed or verified in terms of the dominant culture," is a sense of the "residual." That we believe this residue worthy of specifically identified, ongoing contemplation confirms the "emergent" character of our project. Do take note, however, of Williams's distinction between a religious sense which continues to articulate its difference from dominant culture through "practically alternative and oppositional meanings and values" and the "official," institutional ways religion "incorporate[s]" itself into the dominant "social order." One is tempted here to draw a correlative distinction between the variably influenced productions of Mormon culture and the centrally organized operations of the Mormon church. As the two are not always cleanly differentiated (and are sometimes, in fact, mutually informant), a "Mormon (cultural) Studies" might have to read between the lines of the latter to understand the former. That kind of reading too would be part of the practice.

At root, it is a practice which requires sympathy and commitment—the reader puts faith in the gestures by which common people determine themselves. Academics who claim this practice of reading—often called "Cultural Studies"—dispense with presumptions of positivism or objectivity and instead seek a subjective, contextual understanding of culture. In its consideration of context, Cultural Studies turns a critical eye on its

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28. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 122.

own situation, identifying and engaging the political and economic structures which determine cultural production and academic work. The result is (usually) charged, invested, progressive, self-critical scholarship.[29]

I do not intend to infer a causal relationship between a certain school of thought and better scholarship, better living, or better "Mormon-ness." I do believe, however, that Mormon Studies done as Cultural Studies will mean less dogmatism and more conversation. If this assertion seems dogmatic in itself, consider the situation out of which it is born: the defenders of an "essential" Mormon-ness make no place for feminism; many who speak the pretty, open-ended sentences of postmodernism, Mormon-style, shift their feet. I am hungry to identify with others who share my concerns; my very work depends on it. I am hungry for a vocabulary more adequate to discussions of this complex movement, hungry to read "Mormonism" as a "noun of process," and to do it in good fellowship.

The cultivation of fellowship, of mutuality within Mormon scholarship, will depend, I believe, on all parties' willingness to relinquish exclusive claims to "Mormon-ness" or "Mormon truth." Perhaps such divestment will, at first, conflict with the deep-seated "every-member-a-missionary" instinct Mormons feel whenever they speak to mixed (Mormon and non-Mormon) audiences. I am confident, however, that marvelous academic work—work that is intelligent, self-critical, and conscious—can do no damage to the wonder that is Mormonism. The serious study of culture, as I have described it above, in itself signifies commitment and faith. Hopefully our training has given us the tools to distinguish serious, committed scholarship from careless polemics; people with our credentials ought to be able to discern a Walter Martin from a Sterling McMurrin. Only one deserves scholarly attention; neither deserves our suspicion or condemnation.

To appoint ourselves the sole proprietors of essential "Mormon-ness" is to act beyond our station; moreover, it is to exercise such dominion over Mormon Studies as to render the field unfruitful. There is nothing "faith promoting" in the way some Mormon academics have, of late, policed their colleagues' orthodoxy. There is so much fertile ground we can work over together. The places some would pave over with standard answers, I see as fields of questions.[30]

What can we say about the ideology of the "nation-state"? Consider

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29. For introductory and historical overviews of this practice, see *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993); Patrick Brantliger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 11-23.

30. The following list of questions intentionally emulates the structure of the "I Have an Answer" column in the feminist publication *Mormon Women's Forum*.

the Missouri extermination order, the Utah War, our turn-of-the-century drive for assimilation, the subsequent, sometimes excessive performances of American patriotism, bombings in Peru, the "downwinders," anti-Mormon sentiments among emergent nationalist factions in the former Soviet Union, and insurgent claims to sovereignty by Mormon-affiliated or Mormon-friendly groups throughout the intermountain west. What can we say about the structural inequalities of the economy? What about Orderville, water rights debates, Cleon Skousen, and the growing disparity between rich and poor in our own population? There are many questions to ask about Mormon "ethnicity" and "nativity." Can we contribute to critiques of "whiteness"? What made it possible for a nineteenth-century Missourite to insist that "the Lord intends that WHITE FOLKS, and not Mormons shall possess that goodly land?" At century's end, we were caricatured alongside laundry-washing Chinese, simian-like Irish, and cigar-smoking Indians. A 1904 cartoon showed a Mormon polygamist father with African-American children; one 1905 minstrel song was titled "The Mormon Coon."[31] When did we get "white," and how? Where and how do residual racism among Mormons and the Christian Identity movement cross paths? How and why have our cultural constructions of gender changed so radically over time? How can Mormonism produce both Sonia Johnson and Rodney Turner? How has Mormon polygamy been represented in literature and pop culture? How have these representations inflected Mormon sexuality and how do they continue to do so?

When we ask questions like these, we necessarily call our own assumptions into examination. This is a call for transformative thinking, for improved dialogue, for dialectic. This is a call for a re-examination of our dissident heritage and our present academic and political sympathies. This is a call for a renewal of faith in the radical project of community-building we have traditionally called "Zion." Collectively and critically examining Mormon culture and staking exclusive claims to "Mormonness" are two very different academic enterprises. From one emerges a vital school of thought in Zion, while the other marks turf in Provo, waiting for the kind of confirmation only apocalypse will bring.

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31. Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834-1914* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 75-94.

# Passing On, Holiday

*David Seiter*

It's Christmas
and our mothers, weary in their memories,
in their good for others *(those holiday chores)*
keep their feet under them like birds.
They slink to the shadows, coins
on the sidewalk. They cite the secondhand
words of their saviors in damp
and fitful sleep.
How often they'll look in fear
over their shoulders just to find color,
flashing lights.
They'll let their air out,
then they'll let their heart out.
And this they'll pass to you.

# The Woman of Worth: Impressions of Proverbs 31:10-31

*Jana K. Riess*

I AM NEITHER A SCHOLAR OF THE HEBREW BIBLE nor a theologian, yet very occasionally some unsuspecting soul asks me to preach or speak about the Bible. In 1994 I substituted one Sunday for a Congregationalist friend, who asked me to preach using the Protestant lectionary passages for that day. To my great surprise, the Hebrew Bible text was the famous "Valiant Woman" section which concludes the Book of Proverbs. I laughed, because I was unaware that anyone, especially liberal Protestants, ever read Proverbs anymore.

As I undertook my research, however, I began to recognize how very rich and how sadly misunderstood this passage is. If it is not overlooked, it is misconstrued: the Woman of Worth has been used to justify both women's oppression and their independence. She is simultaneously a symbol of women's domestic subordination and their wisdom and power. Traditionalists and feminists alike have proof-texted this passage *ad nauseam*; this essay highlights some of those contributions in an impressionistic manner. It is my opinion, however, that both groups miss the real point of the passage by lifting it out of the context of the entire Book of Proverbs. Ultimately, then, I hope to suggest an alternate hermeneutic of Proverbs 31 which is informed by the text's position as the culmination of a book of wisdom. By borrowing aspects of both traditionalist and feminist interpretations, and adding my own conclusions about Proverbs 31 as a valuable strand in the wisdom tradition, I offer here a tentative synthesis of the passage geared toward practical application.

Before beginning to outline these three interpretations (traditionalist, feminist, and my own), let me say that one of the most neglected facets of Proverbs 31:10-31 is that it is an acrostic text. Each of its twenty-two lines

begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew *aleph-bet*, a device also found in Psalm 119 and Lamentations 1-4. The goal of this type of poem was likely didactic and geared towards memorization; this is particularly true of this passage which is introduced as a mother's instruction to her son. The acrostic apparatus underscored the idea that the passage contained advice to be heeded and passed on. I offer here a modern version of the acrostic text, loosely translated from the Hebrew.[1]

10 **A** woman of worth who can find? She is far more precious than rubies.

11 **B**ecause of this, the heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

12 **C**learly she does him good, and not evil, all the days of his life.

13 **D**oing her work with willing hands, she seeks wool and flax.

14 **E**ven as the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.

15 **F**aster than the sun is she, rising while it is still night to provide food for her family and tasks for her servant girls.

16 **G**iving careful consideration to a field, she buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

17 **H**erself she girds with strength; she makes her arms strong.

18 **I**n her merchandise, she sees the profit of her own work. Her lamp does not go out at night.

19 **J**oyfully she puts her hands to the loom, and her hands hold the spindle.

20 **K**eenly she feels the plight of the needy and holds her hands outstretched to the poor.

21 **L**ooming ahead is the threat of winter snow, but she is not afraid, for all in her household are clothed in crimson.

22 **M**aking coverings for herself as well, she wears fine linen and purple.

23 **N**otable is her husband in the community; within the city gates he takes his seat with the elders of the land.

24 **O**nce created, her linen garments are sold for money; she supplies the merchant with sashes.

25 **P**ower, strength, and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs confidently at the time to come.

26 **Q**uickened with wisdom is her mouth, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

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1. A much more competent scholar has written that "English translations are totally unable to reproduce this poetic device." See Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 219. Readers who desire a more workable English rendering of the biblical acrostic are advised to turn to the J. B. Phillips translation or the JPS (Jewish Publication Society) version entitled *Kethubim*.

27 Regulating well the ways of her household, she does not eat the bread of idleness.

28 She is commended by her children, who rise up and call her blessed; her husband also praises her:

29 "There are other women who have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

30 Unnecessary is charm, and vain is beauty, but a woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised.

31 Value her, and give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.

## Prudence and Discretion: A Traditional Interpretation

By far the most common interpretations of this passage can be termed "traditional"; such commentaries are likely to emphasize the "virtuous" woman in relation to her husband. Her work is viewed as an extension of her husband's household, silently contributing to its smooth operation. Moreover, her personal qualities are heralded as the ideal of modest women everywhere, which makes the traditionalist interpretation *prescriptive* rather than merely *descriptive.*[2]

Proverbs 31 has been quoted in sermons since the beginning of Christianity, but it assumed a new significance during the Puritan era. A uniquely Puritan twist on the passage was to call the woman of worth "Bathsheba."[3] Puritans assumed that Solomon, the traditional author of the Proverbs material, had learned about domesticity from his mother, Bathsheba, and that Bathsheba is the woman of Proverbs 31, whose "children will rise up and call her blessed." (The irony of this, of course, is that Bathsheba is known to have committed adultery, having been previously married to the ill-fated Uriah before becoming one of King David's eleven wives. Moreover, modern scholars have taken issue with this entire scheme, arguing instead that the passage represents a selective adoption of an Egyptian genre of mother-son instructional material, and that the specific king in question here was a non-Israelite, Lemuel, as the passage itself claims.[4])

Three seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sermons illustrate some other themes in a traditionalist interpretation of Proverbs. "The Descrip-

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2. These terms, "prescriptive" and "descriptive," are borrowed from Kathleen Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 10.

3. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 14.

4. R. N. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, no. 168 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 153.

tion of a Virtuous Woman," by eighteenth-century New England minister Matthew Henry, emphasizes our heroine's retiring maidenliness. His description of the woman as "virtuous" (the King James translation) instead of "capable," "worthy," or "strong" gives an entirely different flavor to the passage.[5] Moreover, some of his tangents would be considered rather offensive today. It is difficult to imagine the sensitive 1990s pastor telling the women in his or her parish that a wife should "shew her love to him [her husband], not by a foolish fondness, but by prudent endearments, accommodating herself to his temper, and not crossing him, giving him good words, and not ill ones, no, not when he is out of humour."

Rhetoric like this reveals that in 1785 a husband's temper ruled the household, and a wife was encouraged—from the pulpit—to coddle him and cater to his moods. Her duty was to be ever-cheerful and accommodating.

We can also detect a hint of defensiveness in Henry's insistence upon the "Virtuous Woman's" limited domain. He writes: "She applies herself to the business that is proper for her. It is not in a scholar's business, or statesman's business, that she employs herself, but in women's business; *She seeks wool and flax.*" The Proverbs passage itself never raises these issues. There is no mention of women attempting to be scholars or national leaders; that was simply not a prominent issue in the rigidly defined world of Israelite society.[6] But in Henry's own era, women were beginning to envision a different world for themselves, albeit gently—a change exemplified by Abigail Adams's request that her powerful husband, John Adams, "remember the ladies" in drafting the nation's Bill of Rights. We can see, then, that a so-called "traditionalist" interpretation emphasizes those aspects of the passage which seem best to contest the perceived laxity of the age. Women in the late eighteenth century were getting far too uppity for a traditionalist's sustained comfort.

A second, much earlier, sermon was preached at an English wedding in 1607 in the presence of the king. In this tender hour, officiant Robert Wilkinson noted that simply finding a virtuous woman in the first place was not entirely "a matter of impossibility, but yet for all that a thing of some difficulty!" In contrast to the biblical ideal, contemporary women,

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5. Farmer points out the bias revealed in this translation. The Hebrew word *hayil*, "used elsewhere in the OT, is usually understood as a reference to power, meaning either physical strength, strength of character, or will power. Yet the same word in this passage is alternately translated 'virtuous' (KJV), 'good' (RSV), or, more appropriately, 'capable' (NEB)" (124).

6. Certainly, there are important exceptions to this general exclusion of women from national and public life: Deborah emerges as a national heroine, and less historically verifiable characters such as Esther and Judith also claim their places as legendary heroic women of Israel.

Wilkinson admonished, were far too frivolous and self-absorbed: "A world of wonders it is to see a Woman created in God's image, so miscreate oftentimes and deformed [is she] with her *French*, her *Spanish*, and her foolish fashions, that he that made her, when he looks upon her, shall hardly know her, with her Plumes, her Fans, and a silken vizard; with a ruff like a *sail*; yea, a ruff like a *rain-bow*. . . ."[7]

Whereas verses 21 and 22 speak favorably of the crimson[8] and purple clothing with which our ideal woman has clothed her household, the Puritan interpretation stressed modesty and sobriety of dress.[9] And while the passage itself mentions several times the woman leaving her home (to bring food from far away, v. 14; to invest in real estate, v. 16; and to sell her wares at the marketplace, v. 24), the Puritan reading of the poem honed in on the woman's exclusive tie to the domestic sphere. Seventeenth-century preacher Joseph Hall wrote in his commentary on "Salmons Oeconomicks" that the typical woman "is babbling and perverse; [her] feet . . . cannot abide in her house; *but are ever gadding*."[10] In contrast, the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 has her feet firmly planted at home and is "true to her husbands bedde."[11]

How might a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century woman have responded to such statements on women's roles? Women's reactions to the expectations placed upon them by male pastors like Henry, Wilkinson, and Hall reveal a certain anxiety about not measuring up to the standards. Hints of such apprehensive musings can be found in the journal of Esther Edwards Burr, a Presbyterian woman writing in the 1750s. In her letters to her dear friend Sarah Prince, Esther meditated on the Proverbs 31 passage by posing some practical questions: "Now I query whether 'tis possible for her to arise so early (if she sat up so late as you suppose) and live under it, unless she were made of some other *matter* than we be . . . I appeal to your experience. You know you cant get up erly in the

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7. Robert Wilkinson, *The Royal Merchant: A Sermon Preached at White-Hall, Before the King's Majesty, at the Nuptials of an Honourable Lord and his Lady, 1607* (London: H. Hills, 1708), 9; copy in Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

8. The word which is often rendered as "crimson" can also be translated as "twice" or "double," as in the NEB, indicating that the prudent woman has no fear of winter because her household is doubly clothed in layers. See Alden, 221.

9. There is certainly a precedent for women's abstinence from colorful dress in the writings of Tertullian, a second-century North African theologian. Truly, Tertullian argues, if God had intended for women to wear brightly-dyed woolen clothing, he would have created sheep already decked out with fleece in such "illegitimate colours" as sky blue and purple. See his *On the Apparel of Women*, Book 1, chap. 8.

10. Hall was the Anglican bishop of Norwich in the early eighteenth century, although he had pronounced Puritan sympathies. This quote is from his *Solomon's Divine Arts*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 156.

11. Ibid., 155.

Morn if you set up very late, dont you *say*?"[12] In other words, Esther was wondering aloud how this Superwoman could do it all, without sleep no less. *Her* life, she told Sarah, was exhausting. As the daughter of Jonathan Edwards and the wife of Aaron Burr, Sr., the first two presidents of Princeton University (then the College of New Jersey), her social duties were too numerous to be performed without constant fatigue. When faced with the ideal woman of Proverbs, who found time for weaving, marketing, agriculture, *and* caring for the needy, it is little wonder that poor Esther felt outclassed.

In our brief exploration of traditional historical interpretations, then, we have seen that commentators have tended to emphasize those aspects of the passage that might bolster up an image of the contemporary ideal woman—even if finding those characteristics in the actual text necessitated some hermeneutical gymnastics. Unfortunately, such a reading is not relegated solely to the provinces of earlier centuries. Today, interested interpreters still look to this woman from Proverbs as a model for ideal femininity, although at times such an interpretation might have to overlook the realities of what the text itself actually says.

If we were to peruse the shelves of Christian bookstores today, we would encounter literally dozens of titles which seek to define the role of the contemporary Christian woman. *Fascinating Womanhood, In Praise of Women, The Fulfilled Woman, The Total Woman, The Feminine Principle*: these books and others like them are a symbol of our age. In the wake of the feminist revolution, many evangelical Christians wish to stand apart from mainstream society and proclaim themselves different, separate, a peculiar people. One hard-hitting way to achieve this uniqueness is to hype the Christian woman as somehow different from her secular counterparts. Today's Christian woman is supposed to have it all, according to these authors. But her heart is so tied to her home that she feels no desire to venture beyond its realm. The crowning glory of her life is an adoring husband who pads around behind her murmuring, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

It is no surprise that many of these writers—both women and men—have latched on to aspects of Proverbs 31 to address the appropriate role of today's Christian woman. In one of these books, a 1980 publication called *In Praise of Women*, Robina and John Wakeford employ each verse of Proverbs 31 as a segue into chapters focusing on some aspect of the ideal wife's intended role. Chapters include "A Family Marches on its Stomach," "The Adventures of a Bargain Hunter," "A Model Mother," and "Clothes Make the Woman." Here's an excerpt from "Clothes Make

12. Esther Edwards Burr, *Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757*, ed. Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 72.

the Woman":

> If, as popular folklore has it, primitive man and his mate lived in a darkened cave, there is a good chance that on a snowy, cavebound winter day she announced that as soon as the weather warmed a little she intended to move the firs to another corner of the cave and suggested that as soon as he could get to moving around the countryside again he find some petrified wood for a table. And while he was at it, why not keep his eyes open for a beaver or two. She was sick of wearing these old rabbit skins! Thus perhaps at the dawn of history a woman was concerned about dressing her house and herself. Home decorating and clothing have long been a concern for women. Proverbs 31:22 indicates superwife could have been a bridge between primitive and modern woman.[13]

We might concede a certain astonishment at reading this interpretation of Proverbs 31. The cave story is irrelevant and inane, but the more serious transgression is that this scenario does not sound much like Proverbs at all. In Proverbs, remember, who is it who "brings the food from far away"? (v. 14) Who is it who makes her own clothing of fine linen, and clothing for her household besides? (v. 22) Who is it who supplies merchants (v. 24) with the cloth she has spun from her own wool? (v. 13) It was not her husband, about whom we know little except that he was a respected citizen. No, it was our woman of worth, doing all those things for herself, not waiting around for some man to catch her a beaver or fetch her some wood.

Just as Matthew Henry's sermon rhetoric revealed a great deal about his own era, this book and others like it demonstrate some of the deepest fears among the Christian right today. Many scholars have noted that the rhetoric of today's evangelical movement is characterized by the fear that men are becoming superfluous.[14] If women can be educated, have careers, and support themselves and their children, then some fear that traditional male roles have been undermined. Books like *In Praise of Women* serve to comfort the beleaguered and confirm the notion that men are still in charge—that women still need them, and in fact would be lost without them.

In summary, traditionalist hermeneutics, like all interpretations, reveal anxieties about the interpreter's age and reflect these anxieties back onto the text in question. A traditionalist interpretation might also view the passage as prescriptive rather than simply descriptive. For the traditionalist, the Woman of Worth represents an ideal to which all women can

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13. Robina and John Wakeford, *In Praise of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

14. See, for example, Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

and should aspire. We have witnessed, however, that a traditionalist interpretation might choose to emphasize some aspects of the "ideal" woman's activities, while ignoring or even entirely re-envisioning others.

## "She Girds Herself with Strength": A Feminist Interpretation

Feminist ways of reading this passage are still being explored and developed. A basic premise of feminist critiques of Proverbs 31 is that the woman is judged and valued only on the basis of the service she provides for a man. The authors of *The Women's Bible Commentary*, a landmark feminist exposition, observe: "Good wives—providers of obedient, unpaid, silent labor—are so highly prized that they are considered a gift from God. . . . As always in male-centered scripture, the positive and negative roles of women are viewed primarily from the perspective of what they provide the men involved."[15] This feminist critique rightly contends that praise for the woman of worth, though glowing, came only when she capably fulfilled the role assigned to her by men. Women who deviated from their assigned roles were dangerous and to be shunned, as can be seen clearly from Proverbs 30:1-9, the instruction immediately preceding our passage. In the mother's instruction to her princely son, she warns him not to give his strength to any woman. Women were likely to consume a man's strength just as surely as Samson was sapped by Delilah. This makes it all the more poignant that verse 10 begins with the question: who can find a woman of worth? The implication is that women, who nine times out of ten cannot be trusted with much, will rarely be as faithful and industrious as our Woman of Worth. She is so rare that she is to be esteemed far above rubies.

The feminist approach to the passage shows that women are clearly struggling to find life-affirming texts in the Bible. And there is much that is affirming in this passage. The word "strength" occurs four times in conjunction with our heroine. Her power is evident in verse 17, which claims, "She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong." She is obviously quite independent, as when we hear that "she considers a field, and then buys it" (v. 16). She does not wait for approval from her husband, but makes prudent investments of her own. She does her own trading and markets her merchandise wisely. She is a shrewd businesswoman. But she is also a benefactress, opening her hands to the poor and the needy ungrudgingly.

A feminist interpretation, however, cautions us to realize that our woman of worth was obviously in a unique socioeconomic situation for

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15. Carol Ann Newson and Sharon Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 146.

Israelite women. She was probably a prosperous farmer's wife. We discern from the text that her husband was "known in the city gates," meaning that he was a citizen, and that he was well-regarded by the elders of Israel (v. 23). We know that the household was large and included many servants. She owned property in her own name, and it seemed she had "food storage" enough that she was not afraid of winter's snows, a rare emergency in the ancient Near East. She apparently could afford to be generous with others. And yet, despite her purple garments, her life was characterized not by the ease of court but by honest hard work, thriftiness, and wise investments. Her life was comfortable, to be sure, but not with the luxury of aristocracy and inherited position; her household was carefully maintained through planning, frugality, and unending labor.[16]

Even so, her life is a far cry from the more typical, and more squalid, life of a woman in Israelite society. The unfortunate reality is that more women were like Hagar, a maidservant whose sexuality was at the disposal of her master Abraham, or the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, whose name we never know, who was handed over to thugs to be raped and killed. When her master discovered that she was dead, he chopped her into twelve pieces and sent them to the twelve tribes of Israel—not because of the damage done to her as a person, but for the damage done to her as a piece of property. She was no longer of any use to him.

Through such stories we can imagine the darker side of what women in Israelite society must have faced. These were the more common realities: women were not educated, they could rarely hold property, and they could be divorced at any time by their husbands for the most trifling reasons. This picture is a bit different than what we see with our Woman of Worth, but such historical information can inform us about the underside of her life, and perhaps those of the "servant girls" we hear about in verse 15. Some of their worlds were probably considerably less pretty.

A feminist perspective, then, might consider the descriptive aspects of the ideal woman and interpret the passage as such. Proverbs 31 represents the life, factual or fictitious, of one woman in a particular socioeconomic circumstance in history. The test is not necessarily to be interpreted as "binding" on the single mother or urban dwellers or nonquilters of this world. It is not prescriptive for all women everywhere.

## The Beginning of Wisdom: An Alternate Suggestion

What, ultimately, do we have to gain from a traditionalist interpretation? I believe that traditionalists have the correct general view in taking

16. R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series,* no. 99 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 111.

a prescriptive approach to Proverbs 31—with some qualification. I think it is right and good for women to take strength from this woman's strength, gleaning also from the feminist approach that capable heroines exist in the Bible and must be recognized. I also find completely appropriate the feminist critics' reminder that the text cannot always be prescriptive in the sense that most women, even today, do not find themselves in identically comfortable socioeconomic circumstances. The Woman of Worth in our text cannot be regarded as a *model* housewife for those who might never have a servant, own a vineyard or its equivalent, or have "front money" enough to make shrewd initial investments.

How, then, might we say that the text *can* be prescriptive? Here, I think, traditionalists and feminists alike fundamentally miss the point by removing this acrostic poem from the entire wisdom tradition of which it is an integral part.[17] The text is prescriptive in much the same way that Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are prescriptive: it exhorts us to be *practically* wise. It offers an ideal example of wisdom personified. The opening line, which states that the Woman of Worth is far more precious than rubies, can be fruitfully compared to Proverbs 8:11, which declares that Dame Wisdom herself is "better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her." It is very possible that the Proverbs 31:10-31 poem serves as a final concrete reminder of Dame Wisdom's sagacious discretion. In this scenario even the tangible flourishing of the Woman of Worth reflects Dame Wisdom's favor: "Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity. . . . I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love, and filling their treasuries" (8:18, 20-21).

The "ideal" woman's prosperous household indicates, for Israelite society, that she is walking in the path of wisdom. Dame Wisdom, in fact, is presented in Proverbs 9:1-6 as a householder who opens her feast table to the poor and needy. This might seem to establish a divine precedent for the exposition of Proverbs 31, which details quite intricately the prudence and generosity of an earthly female householder. This human example is said to "open her mouth with wisdom" (v. 26) and to "fear Yahweh" (v. 30). This last statement, the only religious or pious assertion about the Woman of Worth, hearkens back to the very beginning of the Proverbs collection. The Prologue proclaims unequivocally that "the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom" (1:7). Thus the wisdom exhortation comes full circle in the eclectic gathering of proverbial sayings; what begins as a general statement on wisdom and the fear of Yahweh becomes exemplified in the very real circumstances of a model woman.

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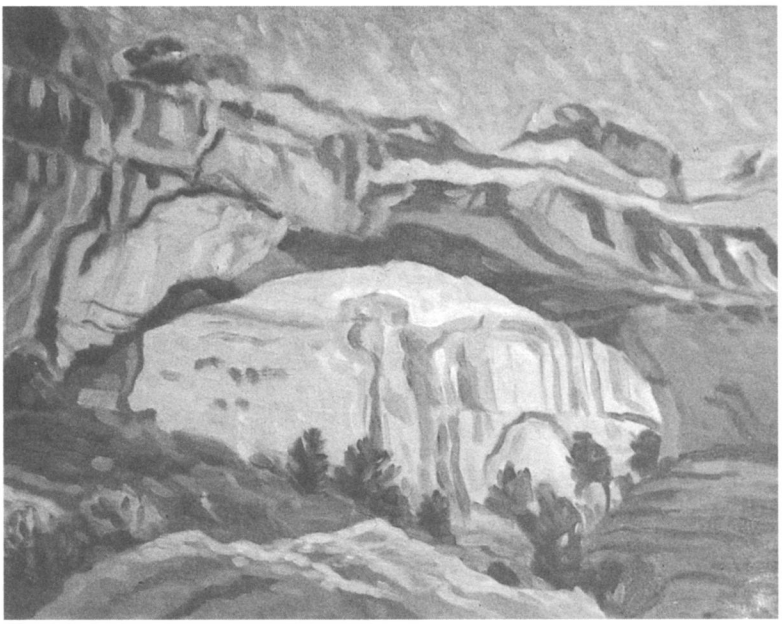
17. For more on the wisdom tradition, see Friedmann W. Golka, *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1994); and Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1994).

In conclusion, Proverbs 31 should not be read, as far too many interpreters have done, out of the context of the rest of the Book of Proverbs. The wise ones of ancient Israel were primarily concerned with practical questions. What will contribute to the happiness of the human creation? Amid the diversity of answers present in the wisdom tradition one finds a common theme: the monumental love of Yahweh is the beginning of a rich, fruitful life. We all are to be sober and frugal, yet happy; industrious and never idle. Wisdom, present since the creation of the world (8:27-31), inspires us to rejoice in the daily round of working life. The Woman of Worth, who is the human quintessence of divine Wisdom, embodies the qualities which the Proverbs encourage all of us to have: discernment, industriousness, a cheerful countenance, and a strong sense of justice. Perhaps where traditionalists have gone wrong is in interpreting Proverbs 31 as a model for women only. I think that it is universally true that a person who fears Yahweh is to be praised. If we all apply God's revealed wisdom to our domestic lives, I cannot think but that our children will rise up and call us blessed.



# Don't Fence Me In: A Conversation About Mormon Fiction

CUSTOM/CULTURE; SACRED/PROFANE; VISION/IMAGINATION; literal/figurative—call them borderlands, call them crossroads—we catch glimpses of possibility and more fully understand the limits of our faith in these places. And the place where "Mormon" crosses "literature" looks like the heart of the heart of the country we're surveying. No utopia, though—it's also ground zero in the ongoing "Who's on the Lord's side, who?" turf wars of Mormon thought. Our most prominent writers seem to flee from the center—Brian Evenson comes up against the boundaries of cultural acceptance; Terry Tempest Williams calls herself a member of a "border tribe"; and Judith Freeman sets out for a "desert of pure feeling." But what is more Mormon than this—flight, exodus, redefinition, destiny?

Gathering fiction and poetry for this issue of *Dialogue* was certainly an exercise in this kind of renegotiation, and some editorial selections might seem renegade to those who like their "Mormon" literature well-marked and familiar. The contributing artists themselves had questions and concerns, and it seemed right to bring them consciously into this discussion. Four of us met at a westside Salt Lake City Mexican restaurant to talk over this terrain, to see if we had found a "no-place" or grounds for possibility.

*Joanna Brooks*: First things first: which of the twelve tribes is your favorite?

*Sam Cannon*: Ephraim.

*Sean Ziebarth*: Manasseh—the only one I remember.

*SC*: We're all in Ephraim, right?

*SZ*: We're all in a cool little town in Central Utah?

JB: And you, David?

*David Seiter*: Navajo.

*JB*: You've all given me stories or poems for *Dialogue*.

*SC*: I felt like my work was expected to be obviously Mormon, that my characters would be obviously Mormon, and I have not at this point written any obviously Mormon characters.

*JB:* "Obviously" Mormon?

*SC*: Characters who obviously go to homemaking meeting and priesthood. As it stands, I could take the story I've given you and add a footnote that all those characters are Mormons. Would that make it Mormon fiction?

*SZ*: As I see it, there are three kinds of Mormon fiction. First, you have the Gerald Lund *Work and the Glory* type, propaganda written to further the church. I guess Jack Weyland falls in this category too, and Spencer Kimball's comment that we would have great artists, Shakespeares, who would talk about Book of Mormon events. Second, I see the Doug Thayer school, guys who studied in Eugene England's Mormon Literature class at BYU, guys who grew up in Utah. Their stories are almost like personal essays. Levi Peterson types. Finally, there are Mormons who write fiction. Mormonism may pop up just as easily as UFOs.

*JB*: And we'd all place ourselves in that last category. We write fiction, and Mormonism may show up in the furnishings. I'd like to push things a little farther. You can honestly tell me that a lifetime of listening to stories told according to some fairly recognizable cultural conventions—testimonies, conference talks, Sunday school lessons, a lifetime of reading the scriptures, that none of this has affected the way you write? That your sense of development and closure, your conception of redemption has not been affected by so much reading and listening?

*DS:* You mean, like start a story with *Webster's Dictionary* defines such-and-such as . . . ?

*SZ*: I see how it could affect my stories sometimes, but probably it has more to do with the reader. A Mormon reader might find Mormon language in our stories. I came across this story in a literary journal (I forget which one) and the author was using terms like "Families are Forever," and I knew, I just *knew* she was Mormon, though none of her characters were Mormon-identified.

*JB*: Pushing you a little farther, even some of the same props show up in our stories—cups of coffee, cigarettes, half-lit living rooms, dysfunction, and then a dim type of redemption.

*SC*: You find all that in Raymond Carver, too.

*DS*: Redemption is an issue in most literature. With the coffee and the cigarettes, maybe those who haven't experienced much of that world tend to relieve the tension fictionally.

*SZ*: I'm sure there is something in our psyches, and maybe it makes

us write about redemption in more specific and resolute ways.

*DS*: Redemption can be rich subject matter; it's interesting stuff. I'm fighting this classification, the labeling of redemption as a necessarily "Mormon" part of our fiction.

*JB*: Who else here grew up reading Jack Weyland and the Yorgason brothers?

*DS*: I did. I think everybody's read *Charly.*

*SZ*: I did.

*SC*: I didn't. But I had this companion who gave me this Yorgason-type book in the M.T.C. [Missionary Training Center], a real gift from his heart. He said that this book meant so much to him, that it represented what he'd been through.

*SZ*: That's so M.T.C.

*SC*: I tried to suspend my fiction bias in the M.T.C. But after reading the first twenty pages, I already knew what was going to happen. So I read the last twenty pages and I was right. It was a new copy, so when I returned it to my companion, he could see that I'd only cracked the spine for the first and last chapters. He could see that I didn't read the whole thing and he was upset. He said, "Why didn't you read it?" And I told him, "Because I knew what was going to happen." Which didn't seem to comfort him much.

*DS*: In the grouping Sean described, which I agree with, groups one and two are very concerned with message and meaning—with significant themes and symbols. I am more concerned with aesthetics, with language. I don't write in order to teach people how to live.

*SZ*: Good point. Me, too.

*JB*: If it's just the concern with aesthetics that distinguishes one group from another, how do you explain the congruence in groups one and two of what we might consider not-so-good aesthetics and explicitly Mormon themes and subjects?

*SC*: I don't think that's necessarily so. Walter Kirn's story "Whole Other Bodies" is a stunning, stunning story in terms of craft, and it's explicitly Mormon.

*JB*: I think you could put Susan Howe's stories in that category.

*SZ*: Walter's left the church, hasn't he? Can an ex-Mormon writer craft Mormon fiction?

*SC*: His story deals with Mormon themes. Some of his details are off, but it literally is a conversion story. What's more Mormon than that?

*DS*: The key thing is that he doesn't reduce the fiction to a vehicle.

*JB*: What about the other end of the spectrum—like Brian Evenson? I want to make it clear that I respect him and his work and that I think BYU handled him very poorly, but I get the sense reading Brian that he's responding to the Mormonism in his writing by trying to be punk, trying

to be hard-core. Kind of like the kids you see stomping around Salt Lake in their all-black Gothic wear listening to industrial music.

*SZ*: He's definitely trying to be hard-core. He likes industrial music, in fact. What was horrible is that his book jacket pinned him: "active Mormon, former bishop." And when the label doesn't seem to fit, he gets marginalized. People reduce everything to fiction equals lie, Mormonism equals true. There's this tension, that everything one writes has to point to Christ, or the Thirteenth Article of Faith: "If there is anything of good report or praiseworthy . . ." The writing can be praiseworthy in other ways.

*SC*: And to be judged by the things your characters do . . .

*SZ*: It just shows how dangerous it is to get pegged like that. The threat of excommunication over a piece of fiction.

*DS*: I would hate to be pigeon-holed on a dust jacket. When I married Eryn [Berg], I went to court to get my name legally hyphenated. But when I send my stuff out, I do it as David Seiter, not David Berg-Seiter so that no one will pre-judge me or my politics based on a hyphenated name.

*SZ*: You could change your first name to Kelly, so there'd be no gender.

*DS*: I heard this writer critiquing Brian Evenson, demanding, "You've got to remember your audience." He was so insistent that writers can control what their readers think, like somebody would read your story and go out and do the same thing in real life. Those kinds of writers, their stuff is not going to get published in the literary journals. It's only showing up in BYU-sponsored publications.

*SC*: But what about *Battlestar Galactica*?

*JB*: Or *Natural Born Killers*. Someone in my stake wrote that.

*DS*: I don't sit down and say, "I want to inspire the youth of Zion." My drive is aesthetic, not moral.

*SZ*: So Mormonism appears as a prop in the story.

*JB*: Beyond the prop level. Bear with me as I propose this again—isn't it possible that after years of filmstrip-watching and seminary-attending and Cougarettes and casseroles that some of that aesthetic is Mormon-cultivated?

*SZ*: Yes, I think we're tainted by it, colored by it.

*SC*: But my fiction is equally, if not more, tainted by the fact that I am a man.

*DS*: My impulse is to say that I am not affected by Mormon storytelling, but I think that would be really presumptuous. It's probably at work, but subtly.

*SZ*: Although I did use chiasmus—that Book of Mormon trick—in one of my poems the other day. I was like, "Hmmm, let's see how this

works."

*SC*: But you didn't use it to teach anybody.

*DS*: Now I'm curious. I want to start a story with "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents."

*SZ*: But it's not like we all learned to write through the *Ensign*.

*JB*: Didn't anyone else here enter those *New Era* contests? What I'm talking about is structural, and yes, it's subtle.

*SZ*: I love how Darrell Spencer ties it together: God reveals things through language, and everything in the universe is in flux, including language.

*SC*: The way I think about fiction and doctrine is dichotomized really; they are two separate things.

*SZ*: Now that I think about it, I read doctrine through fiction, not fiction through doctrine. What I love in fiction is what I love in our doctrine.

*JB*: That's how I read the Book of Mormon, actually. FARMS is busy running around Central America, digging up artifacts and scrutinizing geography. That stuff has nothing to do with my belief. I am a literary scholar and a writer—I believe words can be inspired and inspirational and true without having any actual reference to real life and material evidence.

*SC*: To me, it doesn't matter how doctrine gets presented. Even if a general conference talk is boring and monotone, I say, "So what?" I focus on the content. Fiction and doctrine are split for me. Two separate things.

*JB*: Why can't our culture recognize that split? Why doesn't BYU see things that way?

*SZ*: Look at what happened to Brian Evenson. I could never teach at BYU.

*SC*: It is bad at BYU. When we did a *Sunstone* panel, someone asked me, "My daughter writes, should she go to BYU?"

*JB*: And I hope you said that no young woman with professional aspirations should subject herself to BYU.

*SC*: Not quite, but I did tell him they were chasing away some fine teachers.

*DS*: Except the best fiction teacher ever—Darrell Spencer. [*Everyone present is a former student of Darrell Spencer, and everyone vigorously assents.*]

*SZ*: Calling our work "Mormon fiction" really puts it in danger. I didn't even want to do this interview for fear of being pigeonholed, for fear of scrutiny, even though I haven't published a book yet.

*SC*: I don't live under paranoia . . . *yet*.

SZ: And our names are here, and who knows who reads *Dialogue*.

*SC*: If your name is associated with Brian Evenson's, people will think, "He might be one of *those* . . ."

*SZ*: I saw this profile of a Mormon cartoonist in the *Ensign*. His car-

toons have little temples in the background, and there's a quote from him saying, "I never show my characters drinking or smoking . . . I've never been happier in all my life." Do I have to make all my characters active Mormons? Do I have to play that game?

*SC*: Does everyone in my imagination have to be an active Mormon?

*JB*: I know that you were all hesitant to do this interview, and that you've been pretty resistant throughout to being identified or pegged. We're all cautious—we were at BYU during the September 1993 excommunications, during the Farr/Knowlton firings. I was baptized in the year of ERA—and you bet I knew who Sonia Johnson was. These things will affect us for the rest of our lives.

*SC*: Even at the *Sunstone* panel, even what I thought should be a pretty liberal, sympathetic crowd totally resisted the assertion that fiction is just fiction.

*SZ:* Even left-wing Mormons are not an entirely friendly bunch.

*JB*: Still, at the cultural center, we have these narrowly defined expectations, these preconditions as to what we will recognize as our own, as Mormon art.

# "Awaiting Translation": Timothy Liu, Identity Politics, and the Question of Religious Authenticity

*Bryan Waterman*

> Every inheritance is an accident. This is what religious, sexual, and ethnic identity is designed to make one forget. For a feeling of contingency, it substitutes a feeling of necessity. But it is not necessary to be necessary, if one is ready for work.
>
> —Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity"[1]

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IN A 1991 *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW* article, African-American literary theorist and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., used the bizarre case of *The Education of Little Tree* to reexamine the issues of "identity" and "authenticity" in literary studies.[2] *Little Tree*, a popular best-seller of the 1970s, which purported to be a Native American autobiography, turned out to have been written by a Klansman and former speech writer for George Wallace. Prior to the exposure of its author's identity, the award-winning book had been praised by reviewers and critics for its authentically Native voice, its simple approach to living, and had enjoyed years as a mainstay of Indian reservation tourist shops. The episode, according to Gates, reveals the degree to which "[o]ur literary judgments . . . remain

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1. Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity," *The New Republic*, 28 Nov. 1994, 28.

2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree," in *Inventing America: Readings in Identity and Culture*, eds. Gabriella Ibieta and Miles Orvell (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 439-49.

hostage to the ideology of authenticity" (440). Regardless of the fact that "authentic racial and ethnic differences have always been difficult to define," and in spite of the fact that literary critics for twenty years have heralded the "death of the author"—the code name for the belief that meaning in a text relies more on the reader than on the elusive details of an author's biography—most literary audiences are heavily invested in a politics (and poetics) of authorial identity.

Gates's conclusion, that, "like it or not, all writers are 'cultural impersonators'" (446), seems strange coming from a man whose professional career has been devoted to the self-consciously political task of expanding the American literary canon to include African-American writers and critics *as such*. His willingness, however, to acknowledge that "authenticity" is something that can be faked should be instructive to other groups—including Mormons—that seek to create identity-centered literary criticisms. Moreover, if ethnic authenticity inevitably involves "impersonat[ion]," then religious orthodoxy and apostasy, in all their various manifestations, certainly involve such performance. In other words, to borrow a phrase from anthropologist James Clifford, "the predicament of culture" is that culture—and cultural identity—are "conjectural, not essential."[3] Identity is, in both of these views, a fiction: politically and personally useful, perhaps, but fictional nonetheless.

As several critics of Mormon literature have recently noted, the contention over "Mormon" literature is analogous to similar discussions in other subcultures and communities. Identifying uniquely "Mormon" aspects of literature, in this view, is roughly the equivalent of reading for what Gates calls the "black signifying difference" in African-American literature,[4] or of reading Herman Melville or Walt Whitman, as several critics have done recently, as writing from some form of "gay" identity.[5] The more common analogy, of course, is drawn between "Mormon" writers and authors associated with other religious traditions: Singer, Roth, Bellow, or Ozick from Jewish communities, or O'Connor, O'Hara, Percy, or McCarthy from Catholic traditions. Thinking of Mormon identity as similar to ethno-racial, sexual, or (non-Mormon) religious categorizations has advantages and disadvantages. African-American critics, for example, like many Mormon critics, have sought to delineate tropes and fig-

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3. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 11.

4. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

5. See, for example, James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's* Pierre (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

ures central to "their" literary traditions, an endeavor similar to Mormon critic Eugene England's in his classic essay "The Dawning of a Brighter Day." Like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who, in his literary criticism, draws on African and African-American vernacular and mythologies to find metaphors by which he can help others better understand black fiction, England argues that "Mormon" literature will contain elements derived from Mormon experience and history, including

> a certain epic consciousness, and mythic identification with ancient peoples and processes: the theme of exile and return, of the fruitful journey into the wilderness; the pilgrim traveling the dark and misty way to the tree of salvation; the lonely quest for selfhood that leads to conversion and then to the paradox of community; the desert as a crucible to make saints, not gold; the sacramental life that persists in spiritual experience and guileless charity despite physical and cultural deprivation; the fortunate fall from innocence and comfort into a lone and dreary world where opposition and tragic struggle can produce virtue and salvation.[6]

Perhaps England's catalog of tropes hoped for is what Western historian Patricia Limerick sees (in England's edited anthology of contemporary Mormon stories[7]) as "a clear cultural identity" that "thrives in a way identifiable to any reader."[8] As I discuss below, however, that "clear cultural identity" is not as plain to many critics within Mormon communities as it is to those without.

If similarities can be drawn between "Mormon" and other ex-centric writing, though, obvious differences are apparent as well. An important distinction between ethno-racial and religious identity, for example, is that the former is frequently determined by forces outside the individual, forces that categorize people based on skin color or sex or other physical characteristics. Even the comparison to non-Mormon "religious" writing is limited: the traditions to which Mormon writing is most often compared, for one thing, have hundreds if not thousands of years worth of cultural pluralism which are taken for granted by modern critics. Also, authenticity does not seem to be as serious a topic of conversation in traditions that are too large for rigid boundary maintenance by central

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6. Eugene England, "Dawning of a Brighter Day: 150 Years of Mormon Literature," rpt. in *Wasatch Review International* 1 (1992): 1.

7. Eugene England, ed., *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

8. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Peace Initiative: Using the Mormons to Rethink Culture and Ethnicity in American History," *Journal of Mormon History* 21 (Fall 1995): 23-24.

authority.[9] For this reason, while I think the comparisons to (non-white) ethnic or (non-Mormon) religious literatures may be helpful for understanding "Mormon" writing, Mormon identity may be more helpfully compared to sexual orientation—gayness in particular—which does not in itself prevent the individual from "passing" as a member of the dominant culture and which, as a category of identity, is also a product of the nineteenth century and still very much under construction.[10] Indeed, the questions surrounding "gay" or "lesbian" literature are remarkably similar to those regarding Mormon writing. Listen to Bonnie Zimmerman, an early lesbian critic who, in "determining whether or not [a lesbian] perspective is possible," asks the question: "When is a text a 'lesbian text' or its writer a 'lesbian writer'?" Answering the question in part, she continues:

> The [lesbian] critic must first define the term "lesbian" and then determine its applicability to both writer and text, sorting out the relation of literature to life. Her definition of lesbianism will influence the texts she defines as lesbian and . . . it is likely that many will disagree with various identifications of lesbian texts. . . . The critic will need to consider whether a lesbian text is one written by a lesbian (and if so, how do we determine who is a lesbian?), one written about lesbians (which might be by a heterosexual woman or a man), or one that expresses a lesbian "vision" (which has yet to be satisfactorily outlined).[11]

The dilemmas Zimmerman points to have been shared by those seeking to define a "Mormon" criticism. In fact, the above paragraph makes perfect sense when the word "Mormon" is substituted for the word "lesbian." Her aversion to essentialism, especially, is instructive. What readers of "Mormon" literature could learn from critics like Zimmerman and Gates or from anthropologists like Clifford is that group identity is *never* essential; rather, there are as many "Mormon" identities as there are

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9. Indeed, "identity," for one critic of American Jewish literature, cannot be dealt with at anything but an individual level. "Bearing witness," which Victoria Aarons sees as the central narrative device in "Jewish" storytelling, "becomes [in American Jewish texts] as much an attempt at forming individual identity as perpetuating and refashioning the identity of some sort of communal heritage." Following Irving Howe, Aarons theorizes apostasy ("tradition as discontinuity") as central to much Jewish writing, a concession "Mormon" critics continue to quibble over. See Victoria Aarons, *A Measure of Memory: Storytelling and Identity in American Jewish Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 5.

10. On the history of "homosexual" identity, see David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

11. Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," In *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 120, 123-24.

people who want or need to claim them—as writers *or* readers. Beginning with the instability of group identity (even while acknowledging the very real needs for such classifications) keeps us from seeing identity as an easy formula for understanding any given author. Rather than allowing one pat label—"Mormon," "African American," "lesbian"—to pretend to unlock all the secrets of a text, we can use such categories (if we want or need to) as starting points, recognizing the primacy of individual experience over the group identity of the author.[12]

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> For in every wound there is a truth, a revelation
> like a ram caught in a thicket, each brush stroke
> on the canvas obedient to a law I cannot live.
> I woke up crying, *what shall I do with my life?*,
> fearing the paralysis of each hour until I heard
> your voice: *I need you the way I need music.*
> It was then I knew. Only love can make us visible.
> —Timothy Liu, "With Chaos in Each Kiss"[13]

Even if we find parallels to "Mormon studies" in gay or ethnic studies, we should take one further step and ask: Whence the impulse to limn literature along lines of ethnic, sexual, religious, or other group identity? Claiming an artist belongs to one's own community (or, of course, the opposite measure of refusing one admission into a group) is an act fraught with political significance, as is the claim that "our" writers deserve wider recognition. The question of canonicity, as John Guillory and other theorists and historians have demonstrated,[14] is fundamentally one of representation: in the revolution now revising our understanding of the literary canon, critics from various subcultures and communities have fought for equal representation, requiring us to rethink our standards of what constitutes "good" literature in terms of various historical contexts. Representation is also the concern that most fuels the young (Mormon) critic Michael Austin, who writes in an award-winning *Dialogue* article that

> Mormon students and Mormon professors should be able to use university time and resources to study, write, and teach about our own culture and our

12. On this point I have appreciated the responses to questions I asked on H-AMREL, an electronic discussion group for scholars of American religion, in the summer of 1996.

13. Timothy Liu, *Burnt Offerings* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1995), 30.

14. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Process of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Guillory's work, however, offers a rigorous critique of the idea that "representation" is the foundation of a canon expansion.

> religion. . . . Literary scholars and critics [he writes elsewhere] now rally around the cries of "tolerate difference" and "celebrate diversity," and we, as Mormons, have plenty of difference and diversity to offer.[15]

Claiming an already significant figure as one's own, Austin implies, can also boost one's (group) visibility and status within the larger culture. This has been a principal strategy of gay readers, to be certain.[16] For Mormons this might be the literary equivalent of reminding fellow sports fans that Steve Young is a Mormon and BYU graduate.

As important as Austin's project of representing Mormons in the American canon may be, the more charged contest, in my view—and the more pertinent to a number of writers who self-identify institutionally as "Mormon"—takes place *within* Mormon communities when critics and (so-called) authorities police the boundaries of appropriate "Mormon" expression. Recent casualties of such police brutality include Brian Evenson and Gail Houston, both forced out of BYU's English department: one for inadvertently representing the church and BYU in ways Mormon leaders found unacceptable (the content of his fiction was not authentically Mormon, in other words) and the other for reading *non*-Mormon literature in *un*-Mormon ways (the contention being, at least in part, that her description of Victorian sexuality as a social construct was not in harmony with the hierarchy's recent "Proclamation on the Family," which asserts that gender is essential).[17] Such examples demonstrate that the question of identity politics is as vital within Mormon contexts as it is without.

The struggle to define appropriate means of "Mormon" expression is debated in more innocuous academic conflicts as well. In a recently published and much-cited debate—within certain circles, at least—Richard Cracroft and Bruce Jorgensen, both past presidents of the Association for Mormon Letters and both professors of English at BYU, set forth different ideas about what "Mormon" literature and criticism should be and do. Cracroft, representing a self-proclaimed "faithful" side of the debate, defends an unapologetically *essential* Mormon literature and criticism, grounded in "[faithful] Mormon metaphors" by authors and critics "who

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15. Michael Austin, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Winter 1995): 134, 133.

16. For this reason I noted, earlier, the recent arguments about Melville's "gay" identity. While critics for decades have acknowledged Whitman's homosexuality, to make a similar argument for (the heterosexually married) Melville is a controversial and strategic maneuver in contemporary American culture wars.

17. For the details on these and other BYU academic freedom cases, see *Sunstone* magazine's news sections from July 1993 to the present, as well as Brian Kagel and Bryan Waterman, *The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at Brigham Young University, 1985-1996* (forthcoming).

have been to the mountain" and who "cultivate the presence of the Holy Ghost."[18] In contrast, Jorgensen argues in favor of a "hospitable" reading that welcomes "strangers" into "our common room" with the invitation to "tell us your story so our hearing and telling can go on."[19] It is important to note the points of disjunction when comparing and contrasting the two: where Cracroft is primarily concerned with providing quality literature for a faithful audience, Jorgensen is interested in *teaching* that audience to be better readers of quality literature. Focusing on readers rather than writers, then, Jorgensen has sidestepped the messy question of group identity and its implied boundaries, even though he criticizes the notion of essentialism.

While I applaud several points in Jorgensen's address and find it to be a more satisfying and inclusive outline of "Mormon" criticism than Cracroft's, I am left to wonder whether Jorgensen—even with his good intentions—opens many more possibilities for a diversity of "Mormon" voices. Are his "others," his "strangers," Mormon? If so, how does he determine which Mormons are "stranger" than "others"? It seems Jorgensen relies, even while trying to avoid it, on the same notion of essence he finds problematic in Cracroft's criticism: Jorgensen's "our" and "we" seem to need no qualification. Each of these approaches, then, assumes the structure of an either/or binary categorization of opposites (what Mike Austin, riffing on Philip Roth, calls a "good-for-the-Mormons" and "not-good-for-the-Mormons" approach to literature[20])—Cracroft's in the split between "Mantic" and "Sophic," or between (essentially) Mormon and not-Mormon, and Jorgensen's in the implied opposition between (non-Mormon) stranger and (Mormon) familiar. Each critic positions himself in respect to an Other, another who is fundamentally different in some way.[21]

Into this context, which still has the negative potential of bogging down in a discussion of "Is so-and-so's writing *really* Mormon?" (the equivalent of asking the question: "Is Mariah Carey *really* black?"[22]), I

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18. Richard Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 57.

19. Bruce Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 50.

20. Austin, "Function," 131.

21. Of course, Jorgensen's use of the term "Other" has different connotations than mine. To him, the act of listening to the Other mirrors the central Christian image of Jesus' atonement. My assumption is that every author is always already Other and that Jorgensen's act of hospitable reading needs to be extended to the point that it renders the idea of "our" or "we" much more problematic. The more problematic those boundaries are, I think, the more inclusive they can be.

22. Michael Eric Dyson uses this facetious question in his own critique of African-American identity politics. See his *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 143.

wish to introduce Timothy Liu, a poet whose writing I much admire and who stands ready to follow May Swenson as a world-class poet to grow out of the Mormon tradition. Indeed, given the fact that the New York Public Library recently named Liu as one of "ten poets for the twenty-first century," his poems will likely serve larger academic communities as texts that embody the complications inherent in the very notion of "identity." My hope in examining Liu here, though, is that his poems—and the complexity of the categories of identity that surround (if not generate) them—will help us unravel some of the problematic aspects of trying to quantify the "Mormonness" of any given piece of literature.

Critics concerned with watching the borders of "Mormon" literary territory would be frustrated by Liu. Most definitely Richard Cracroft would dismiss him as not-Mormon: if anything would typify what Cracroft derides as "the faltering spiritual vision among younger Mormon poets" that "repress[es] and replac[es] soaring spirituality with earth-bound humanism,"[23] it would be Liu's frequent gay subject matter, his exploration of corporeality in ways that many orthodox Mormons would find offensive. Jorgensen, on the other hand, in his quest to "undertake the task of love," would likely "listen to the voice of the Other, let the stranger say"; he would attempt to face Eudora Welty's challenge to imagine himself "inside the skin, body, heart, and mind of any other person" (49). In his hospitality, he would be "slow to shut out" or "to decide whether a literary visitor is 'Mormon' or not" (47), although hospitable listening and a slowness to judge are not the same as embracing one as one's own.

In contrast to these approaches, I would argue that the "Mormon" critic's initial task is not only to be slow to determine the visitor's "Mormonness," but also to refuse the notion of essence (rejecting the question "Is this work *really* Mormon?": a question literary or general authorities really cannot answer) and problematize the concept of "Mormon" identity from the outset. Here it is important to note a fundamental difference between the identity-specific criticism of people like Henry Louis Gates and the majority of the "Mormon" critics I have cited so far: while these critics—even Mike Austin, who, like Jorgensen, tries to shy away from essentialism—prophesy about their hopes for Mormon literature, including what tropes, figures, themes, and attitudes Mormon literature *should* take, someone like Gates only describes what already exists in his tradition. In other words, most "Mormon" critics have been prescriptive, whereas the best theories of ethnic or "minority" literature, it seems, grow descriptively out of a body of work already recognized as belong-

23. Richard Cracroft, Review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, *Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1990, 122.

ing to the tradition.[24] The initial critical questions, then, are not "Is this literature Mormon?" or "Is this author faithful?" but "*How* can this literature be read profitably as coming out of a Mormon tradition?" and "What does it have in common with other work that is recognized as 'Mormon' in some way?"

In dismissing essentialism we again find a parallel for "Mormon" criticism in gay studies: problematizing Mormon identity corresponds with the action taken by gay theorist Ed Cohen, who suggests that "the multiplicity of sexual practices that are engaged in by those who lay claim to the nominations 'gay' and 'lesbian' much less 'bisexual,' unquestioningly boggles the mind." Instead of perpetuating easy categories of "gay" and "straight," Cohen looks toward a "plurality of pleasurable, somatic, psychic, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual" locations from which a subject can speak.[25] David Van Leer, another gay theorist, agrees: "[M]onolithic concept[s] of identity den[y] the multiplicity of experience," he writes, "the ways in which people play many different roles."[26] The same suspicion of essentialism—and the accompanying respect for authorial individuality that these critics show—can operate when we discuss "Mormon" aspects of literature; the multiplicity of religious and irreligious practices engaged in, after all, by those who lay claim to the nominations "Mormon" and "post-Mormon," much less "Jack Mormon,"

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24. I don't have the space in this essay to examine other versions of "Mormon" criticism that I find as problematic as Cracroft's, but which might be summed up as "the thirteenth article of faith school." This approach, popular with the electronic discussion group sponsored by the Association for Mormon Letters and propounded most skillfully by Benson Parkinson, that group's moderator, would make Cracroft happy. Its problems, though, are the same as Cracroft's: if "we" base our literary tastes and canons on prescriptive categories such as "virtuous, lovely, or of good report," the question remains, "What authority polices these categories?" The assumptions I work from imply that loveliness, etc., are as difficult to pin down as the word "Mormon" is to define. Rather than giving us more precise terms to deal with, the language of the thirteenth article of faith only increases the muddiness of the "Mormon" critical pool.

I should also mention here that "Mormon" criticism's tendency toward prescription (or "pre-scription": judging literature before it's even written) has been paralleled in the *early stages* of many "minority" literatures and criticisms. As recently as 1993, for example, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong could write that "critics [of Asian-American literature] have not reached any agreement on how their subject matter is to be delimited. Prescriptive usages exist side by side with descriptive ones; some favor a narrow precision, others an expansive catholicity." Her book, significantly, works to displace prescriptive approaches. See Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7. Thanks to Jennifer Ho for bringing this book to my attention.

25. Ed Cohen, "Are We (Not) What We Are Becoming? 'Gay' 'Identity,' 'Gay Studies,' and the Disciplining of Knowledge," in Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden, eds., *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 174.

26. David Van Leer, *The Queering of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

also boggles the mind.

Liu's poetry works to problematize easy categorizations, both religious and sexual. If "gayness" is to be thought of in terms of a spectrum, and also cannot be considered independent of other factors such as ethnicity, class, and religion, then perhaps we can best read Liu's poems as located on a Mormon spectrum or as existing in a space where the categories Asian American, Mormon, and gay all intersect—along with whatever other ex-centricities Liu may contribute. The recognition of such overlapping and contradictory categories of identity, intellectual historian David Hollinger suggests, will be the hallmark of what he calls "postethnic America," an America in which "affiliation on the basis of shared descent would be more voluntary than ascribed."[27] Hollinger's idea parallels what historians and sociologists of religion have recognized about contemporary Mormonism: that the near-ethnic flavor of nineteenth-century Mormonism is giving way to a constructed identity aligned closely with (voluntary) activity in the institutional church.[28] Moreover, Hollinger's recognition of overlapping and competing identity categories (he cites Alex Haley's African-Irish-American heritage) illustrates the same problematics that Liu embodies: whatever "Mormon" identity might mean for a particular author or text, that identity will coexist and possibly be in conflict or competition with any number of other identifications.[29] Adrienne Rich once described herself as seeing from "too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate southerner." She is, she writes, "split at the root."[30] Most people could be described in similar ways.

Liu's poems begin from just such a problematized notion of identity, a strategy he uses to avoid being dismissed as Other, as object, by "Mormon" critics, however loving their intentions may be. For Liu, the overlapping identity categories are "em-bodied" in his very flesh. His fixation with the body—especially with his own sense of enfleshment—undermines binary categorization that would leave him marginal and illegitimate, without possibility of subjectivity in a Mormon (and, very often, in

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27. David Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 19.

28. Jan Shipps, "Making Saints: In the Early Days and the Latter Days," and Armand Mauss, "Refuge and Retrenchment: The Mormon Quest for Identity," both in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Marie Cornwall et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

29. Patricia Limerick recounts a memorable anecdote to make this same point: She was quite surprised, several years ago, when a Mexican American student, a "great supporter of Chicano rights," proposed a term paper on Mormonism. His family was, she learned, fourth-generation Latter-day Saint. See Limerick, "Peace Initiative," 8.

30. Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," in *Creating America*, eds. Joyce Moser and Ann Watters (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 112-13.

a heterosexist American) context. The mere act of recognizing corporeality is charged with political potential. To a belief system that denies the legitimacy of gay identity, the enfleshed gay subject says, to misappropriate a phrase from Catharine MacKinnon, "Try arguing with an orgasm sometime." Somatic realities, the product of a lifetime of cultural inscriptions of the body, are perhaps the best defense against the threat of invisibility. Consider gay activism of the "We're here, we're queer, we're fabulous, get used to us" variety. Bodily subjectivity, in other words, resists institutional definition: the physical outweighs and replaces the metaphysical. In this view, the presence of the (speaking) gay subject emerging from the Mormon tradition threatens the security of a system that denies the reality and legitimacy of gayness, precisely because that presence signifies its own subjectivity.

Of course, the question remains whether a subversive subjectivity can be conceived of as a part of the tradition it consciously or unconsciously seeks to alter or even undermine. Here the question of readership is important. To most of Liu's audience, the "Mormon" content of his poetry is invisible; the poems work well without any understanding of Mormonism. Although Liu has published poems with overt Mormon references in *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, and his 1988 chapbook *A Zipper of Haze* (published while he was a student at BYU), nowhere in his two collections of poetry[31] do we find mention of things overtly "Mormon." In fact, the only explicit references to Mormonism in Liu's books are found in Richard Howard's introduction to *Vox Angelica*, in which he describes Liu as "a young Asian of conflicted Christian (Mormon) faith" (x), and on the flyleaf of *Burnt Offerings*, which mentions Liu's Mormon mission to Hong Kong. Liu's own response to an interviewer who asked if he considers himself a "Mormon poet" reveals a little more about the connection between his Mormon background and his writing:

> It's always been joked that Mormon art is an oxymoron. Most of the vitality is at the fringes[.] . . . I think that many Mormons already believe that they're saved, taken care of spiritually. But for other artists, the art is all they have. A great poem or story saves them. I think if you don't live or die for art, you're not going to make it. When you have all you need spiritually at church, other things become unnecessary. Who cares about Van Gogh? He's not saved and he can't save you.[32]

Here Liu dances skillfully around the question, refusing to position him-

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31. Timothy Liu, *Vox Angelica* (Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 1992); Liu, *Burnt Offerings*.

32. Joanna Brooks, "*Vox Angelica*: Ex-BYU Student/Poet Tim Liu Returns to Provo," *Student Review*, 10 Mar. 1993, 12.

self firmly either with the "they" of "many Mormons" or the "they" of "other artists." While Liu's overtly "Mormon" poems have been unrelentingly critical of mindless religious orthodoxy (see "The Lord's Table," for example, in *A Zipper of Haze*, which I discuss below), many of his newer poems reveal—to someone trained to recognize "Mormon" influence—that much of Liu's sense of his somatic self is the result, in part, of Mormon enculturation. Because this content is evident to a "Mormon" reader, Liu's poems may usefully be discussed, I would argue, as "Mormon" poems. Both "Mormon" and larger American audiences would benefit from such an added angle of explication. Consider the short poem "The Tree that Knowledge Is" from *Vox Angelica*:

> I do not want to die. Not for love.
> Nor a vision of that tree I cannot
> recollect, shining in the darkness
> with cherubim and a flaming sword.
> All my life that still small voice
> of God coiled up inside my body.
> The lopped-off branch that guilt is
> is not death. Nor life. But the lust
> that flowers at the end of it.

A number of signifiers here resonate with a Mormon audience: God's "still small voice" (a favorite Primary phrase); the "vision of that tree" protected by "cherubim and a flaming sword," meaning the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. The "lopped-off branch" brings to mind New Testament imagery, but also the allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon. If knowledge is the tree associated with the loss of innocence, we can attribute the poem's tension to its suspicious refusal of the other tree—the Tree of Life—with its association to God's voice; tension also derives from the poet's refusal of death or life as he settles instead for lust, flowering and bearing fruit. Even though it has been cut off and cast away, this branch is physically real, not vision—neither the mere semblance of an eternal tree nor the death that opens the poem like a disease. As in his response to the interviewer, Liu refuses here to place himself wholly in or out of any one category. But the added understanding gained by considering the poem's "Mormon" elements makes a seemingly parochial activity valuable. And at no point are we required to measure "Mormonness" against arbitrary and sometimes punitive standards.[33]

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33. I have benefitted here from the example of Susan Howe, whose essay "'I Do Remember How It Smelled Heavenly': Mormon Aspects of May Swenson's Poetry," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Fall 1996): 141-56, examines "Mormon" aspects without seeking to quantify or define Mormonness.

3

> The lure of identity is the lure of wholeness. It proposes to bind up the parts and the pieces of a life and transform them into a unity, into a life that adds up. . . . But is there really nothing worse than a life that does not add up? Surely the life that adds up is the easeful one.
>
> —Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity"[34]

To address Liu's texts as "Mormon," then, requires us to refuse the idea of Mormon essentialism; in doing so we recall his eligibility for "other" identity categories—an approach that could be taken with any literature we are tempted to discuss as "Mormon." In this final section of my essay I will outline more clearly two distinct approaches to reading such literature, again using Liu's poems as an example. While these approaches need to be more fully explored in order to demonstrate their applicability to other "Mormon" texts, the discussion here should be sufficient to point out the ways such approaches differ from and, hopefully, are more productive than previous attempts at "Mormon" criticism.

If we take Ed Cohen's suggestion, cited above, to use "gayness" as only a "point of departure" rather than as a totalizing identity, can we not also view Liu's subjective Mormonism as a point on a spectrum that also would include Cracroft in his attitude of judgment and Jorgensen in his invitation to his sitting room? Viewing Liu's poems and the corporeal sensibility they reveal as located in multiple traditions—including a problematic Mormon one—is, perhaps, the only practical way of approaching them. In "The Tree that Knowledge Is," discussed above, the voice is implicitly "gay," but that word does not—cannot—presume to answer all the poem's questions or explain all its meanings. The voice is also deeply religious, and, with the help of a little information about the author—the kind Gates reminds us that readers can't seem to do without, because books continue to be printed with authors' photos and biographical sketches—we realize that the religious language we're encountering likely has Mormon meanings. As I noted above, the tension between the two voices in the poem accounts for its vitality.

In the first version of "Mormon" criticism I am proposing, the idea of "tension" is central. As with the problematic category of "gayness," the "Mormonness" of the poems can be seen as located on similar spectra or in various tensions—tensions I see in much literature we might identify as "Mormon." One such tension is between author and author-ity, seen in the problem Liu as a sexually active gay male would find in the institutional Mormon church; or in the experience of Brian Evenson; or in the fact that the *Ensign* would refuse to publish a poem by Gene England for

34. Wieseltier, "Against Identity," 30.

doctrinal reasons. But the tension would also be present when self-styled literary author-ities like Cracroft deny Liu's Mormonness as they locate themselves in a position of faith, claiming spiritual and literary objectivity—and superiority—through the medium of the Holy Ghost and dismissing opponents as "earth-bound humanists."[35]

A second tension surfacing in Liu's poems is that between the Mormon tradition and an American society that, historically, opposed Mormons and placed them on its margins. This tension finds a counterpart in versions of "ethnic" criticism that rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "double voice." In African-American literature, for example, Gates sees "texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black." These texts have "a two-toned heritage: [they] speak in standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures, but almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent."[36] Much "Mormon" writing—especially that intended for a larger American audience—contains similar evidence of a double voice.

Consider Liu's poem "Awaiting Translation," originally printed in *The New Republic* and collected in *Vox Angelica*:

> My habit is reading only beginnings
> of books in a stranger's tongue, or else
> waiting for a new translation, the meaning
> of lines still imprisoned on the shelf.
> To set myself free! So often I have missed
> the chance to dive into an ocean
> of imposed words (not that I'd resist
> the drowning), yet I've felt the motion
> of wind-tossed water slowly taking me
> farther and farther out in its tides . . .
> If only I could balance that cardboard sea
> on the crown of my head, I would try
> dousing it with fire, that hard-cover cross
> (no heavier than a human heart).
> The ink and paper would save me, not because
> words can save any more than the Ark
> or the City of Enoch (all saved in the Bible)

35. Criticism and real life intersect here all too often: the authoritarianism that fuels Cracroft's readings spilled over, for example, into the 1993 firing of former BYU professor and feminist Cecilia Konchar Farr. Cracroft was head of Farr's college committee, which, although its decision was overturned by the college dean, provided most of the ammunition the administration needed to dismiss her. For details, see Kagel and Waterman, *The Lord's University* (forthcoming).

36. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiii. See also pp. 110-13. For a use of Bakhtin's concept in Native American criticism, see Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

but because words must come to an end.
Did Columbus know there'd be an end to all
his travels—did he expect to find
a new world? Picture him washed up on a shelf
of sand, blazing forth again! I wish
I could be like him and somehow keep myself
alive, leave the last word unfinished.

The audiences of *The New Republic* or of *Vox Angelica* need no knowledge of Mormonism to appreciate Liu's poem. Its religious references—generic enough—can be read as simple metaphors for literary immortality or salvation through art (the City of Enoch, after all, is saved between the covers of a book). For a "Mormon" reader, or someone trained to read as one, the poem's words resonate on a different level. Even the title—"Awaiting Translation"—plays on double meanings: while the poem's speaker literally awaits translations of works in foreign languages, a "Mormon" reader realizes that "translation" means an instant, literal act of salvation: the City of Enoch, in Mormon terms, was "translated" from mortality into immortality. As in the interview cited and the poems discussed above, much of the energy in this poem resides in the tension between its multiple voices—and more specifically between literary and religious salvation. Reading, here, provides baptisms by water and fire; it promises, like religion, salvation through words, although "words," like everything else, "must come to an end." Even in the face of this realization, the poet hopes for immortality, for an unfinished word waiting for another reader—or a new translation—to prolong its life. The tension here, between the vocabulary of Mormon salvation and the promise of literary immortality, serves as a perfect example of the tensions between "Mormon" and "American" voices in texts such as Liu's.

A third tension, present more in Liu's earlier chapbook, but evident in traces throughout his work, is between Mormonism's utopian vision—its prophetic call to establish Zion, where all are alike unto God—and its inevitable failure to do so.[37] The general despair associated with religion in *Vox Angelica* and *Burnt Offerings* can be read as remnants of Liu's earlier, more concrete disaffection with Mormonism as a utopian movement. By continuing to exclude gays from Mormon activity, the contemporary church argues that all are *not* alike unto God. "The Lord's Table," from

37. Thanks to Elbert Peck for suggesting this third tension. Interestingly, the notion of a failed utopia serves as another parallel between "gay" and "Mormon" letters. Gay poets from Whitman to Ginsberg, writes critic Tom Yingling, have confronted (utopian) America's failure to accommodate (utopian) gay cultures. See Tom Yingling, "Homosexuality and Utopian Discourse in American Poetry," in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, eds. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 135-46, esp. 142.

his early work, best exemplifies this tension:

> The banquet table was spread,
> But I could no longer smell
> Satisfaction in the room.
>
> I couldn't swallow the smiles
> Nor could I decipher
> The language I once knew.
>
> But still I joined them,
> Nibbling crusts of dry bread
> And sipping tepid water.
>
> The elders' faces grew old
> Like the legends
> That seasoned my youth.
>
> I sat in silent pews
> Staring past the chancel,
> Wanting more.
>
> I hungered to be
> Consumed, and left
> Emaciated.

The despondent voice of religious disillusionment is figured, again, in terms of vocabulary: the language once familiar has become indecipherable. Certainly not all writing that embodies the tension between utopian Mormonism and its inevitable limitations will contain a response identical to Liu's. What is important for critics to recognize, though, is that the poem is the legitimate product of religious experience: Who has the authority to determine whether the response is authentically "Mormon"?

In comparison to my first suggestion, that we view Liu's and other "Mormon" writing as located in certain shared tensions, the second possible approach is even less concerned with answering the question "Is this 'Mormon' literature?" Informed by cultural studies/new literary historicism methodologies, critics could place Liu's poems in conversation with a number of other contemporary texts to examine ways his poems help explain Mormon—and (Asian) American, and gay—experience at a certain historical moment. For example, reading the intersection of religion and gay sexuality in Liu's poems against other texts that comment on the intersection of Mormonism and homosexuality (anything, really, ranging from essays in *Peculiar People* to Elder Boyd Packer's "Three Dangers" talk to the discourse surrounding gay clubs in Salt Lake high

schools or gay marriage in Hawaii[38]) not only helps us understand this particular dynamic in Liu's poems, but lets the poems help us better understand the contemporary church. This is an approach similar to that taken by Paul Giles, whose mammoth book *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* refuses to investigate or address "Catholic" "authenticity," but works instead from an assumption that the art of people who have grown out of Catholic traditions—from Orestes Brownson to Robert Altmann—can tell us much about not only those traditions, but also about American society in general.[39]

As with the first approach I outlined, this one requires an essay of its own to develop fully. Just thinking of Liu's poems in this way, though, as part of what Barthes calls "the infinite text,"[40] seems full of potential. Stacking cultural texts on top of one another in good new historicist fashion provides an intertextual counterpart for the abstract idea of overlapping identities. Liu, after all, was "the only one at church/ with [his] *Norton Anthology*," he reminds us in a poem anthologized in Gene England and Dennis Clark's *Harvest*.[41] Intertextuality as governing metaphor also helps us understand poems like "Reading Whitman in a Toilet Stall," from *Burnt Offerings*, which casts anonymous sexual encounters in rest stop bathrooms in language that recalls the Mormon temple: the poet places (temple roll) "prayers on squares of one-ply paper," kneels at a toilet-altar, passes through guarded partitions, finds an ambivalent holiness in the encounter itself, and reemerges, consigned to "walk out of our secrets into the world." Reading this poem as a Mormon temple experience—and Tim's poems often seem to recast anonymous sexual encounters in religious language—simply cannot explain, though, the poem in its entirety: the fact that he brings Whitman along to read while he waits is our cue to recognize the multiple traditions, the fundamental intertextuality, from which the poem emerges. If we read it against Tim's "The Lord's Table" (above), particularly the lines "Nor could I decipher/ The language I once knew," we can also see the language of gay identity (*Leaves of Grass* and the "erotic hieroglyphs" etched on bathroom walls) in

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38. Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes, eds., *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Boyd K. Packer, "Address to All-Church Correlating Committee," 18 May 1993, in which he identifies, as three main dangers to the church, feminists, "so-called" scholars, and gays and lesbians; on the Salt Lake clubs and Mormon opposition to gay marriage, see news sections in several recent issues of *Sunstone*.

39. Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See esp. chap. 1, "Methodological Introduction: Tracing the Transformation of Religion."

40. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1975), 36.

41. Tim Liu, "Final Preparations," in *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, eds. Eugene England and Dennis Clark (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1989), 250.

tension with the vocabulary of Liu's childhood religion. In "Reading Whitman in a Toilet Stall," we see Liu reforge "Mormon" identity on (or in) his own terms.

The approaches I have outlined to explore the "Mormon" aspects of Liu's poems should cause us to recognize that the category "Mormon" is not as cut and dried—or even as helpful—as some would like to make it. In fact, I would conclude that the question "Is this literature 'Mormon'?" has more negative effects than it opens critical possibilities. Liu's poems force readers to confront the multiplicity of Mormonisms and possible "Mormon" critical positions. They suggest that the next century, a century of Mormon diaspora, will see discussions that include terms like "gay Mormon," "Mormon feminist," "Asian American Mormon," "Latin American Mormon," and, importantly, "white, mountain-western Mormon"—none of which, especially the latter, will be synonymous with what we now call "Mormon." Even now Liu's poems require readers to acknowledge that Richard Cracroft's "faithful" Mormons are not *essentially* Mormon: they are but one group—a group that performs its Mormonness, Gates and *Little Tree* would remind us, as much as any other kinds of Mormons do. And these others, Liu included, are not strangers or foreigners, but fellow citizens in the largest body of people who can lay claim to the name "Mormon."

# Shorn

*Michael Noble*

Locking the door to the bath,
opens the collar of the shirt,
raises chin, fingers buttons
from their holes, lengthens torso,
molts like a snake.

In the arms, clutches
the folds of shirt and pant,
lifts the scent to the face,
breathes deeply, intimately
the incense.

With other eyes, follows
the bare arm from shoulder
down, lusts for the soft muscles
of the chest, combs its hair
with curious fingertips.

In the mirror, spreads arms
and legs symmetrical
like the sketch by DaVinci,
studies anatomy as geometry,
subtracts all familiarity.

Massages the circles of shoulders,
then the rounded rectangle
of abdomen, pushing down
to the lines and length
of thigh and loin.

Bathes, water runs
in rivers down the back,
twists around legs. Fingers
bead the water condensing
on skin as on glass.

Drinks, slides the tongue
through the dew that gathers
in the downy fur of the forearm,
tastes the steam, heat
and innocent sweat.

With long, rapid swipes
smooths the silver razor
down beard and neck,
reckless, savoring the kiss
and the sting of the blade.

Insatiate, the knife lingers in the hand,
steel caresses the eager flesh
of scalp, breast, stomach,
thigh—the dark hair washes away
leaving the man naked.

Like a voyeur, stares
at the raw skin, the scratches
wet with blood and rain streak,
lace this body with pink watercolor.
Cut clean.

*FICTION*

# Cordoba

*Sam Cannon*

MOM MOVED UP TO SANTA BARBARA, and Dad started having girlfriends over. Ladyfriends, he called them. When I stayed home sick from school, I saw the ladyfriends leave for work. "How cute. Is this yours?" they said, pointing at me on the couch, a blanket around my feet and a bottle of warm Sprite by my head. They had no idea that I knew how to talk like an adult just fine. They'd introduce themselves to me in breathy voices while Dad shuffled around the house, stepping into socks and tucking in his shirt.

There were three in a row: Christine, Joyce, and Mandy. Christine never learned my name, she just called me "hot stuff." Joyce brought me stuffed animals. She had a whole bunch in the back window of her car. I got the rejects—a beanbag hippo, a monkey with unstuffed arms and a plastic head, and a glow-in-the-dark velvet skunk with hearts all over it. Mandy knew my name but said it way too much. "You look better, Charles. Doesn't Charles look better? How is Charles today? Better?"

Dad decided he was going to let me live with Mom. He called it a Christmas present. Turns out she was living with someone for a while, and now that she wasn't anymore, it was Dad's turn to live with someone. Mom sent me a list of rules in the mail. It came in a big, pink greeting card envelope. The rules were numbered and began, *One, nobody sleeps naked.* There was a line at the bottom where I had to sign to promise I would obey the rules while I lived with her.

I was too little to remember when Mom moved out for the first time. Dad always said Mom left the menfolk so that we could see what it's like to clean piss stains off the floor around the toilet. But Dad got a maid for that. My brother Jansen and I got our own bedrooms when she left for good. "Part of the deal," Jansen said. "Part of the deal."

He understood the deal; I didn't. I don't even think Dad did, although he and Jansen talked about it a lot. The deal started when Dad found Jansen and Renae, his girlfriend, both with half their clothes off. Dad yelled at Renae to leave and then at Jansen to get that two-bit whore out of the house. Jansen called Dad a cradle-robbing son-of-a-bitch. After

that, Jansen got a lock on his door.

The deal was what kept Dad and Jansen from killing each other, that's what Jansen told me. Dad had his girlfriends and Jansen had Renae.

Jansen went to live with Renae in North Hollywood. That was originally our idea, mine and Jansen's, to move in together and be bachelors. We were going to order pizza, make sloppy Joes, and play Sega. Jansen was going to teach me how to smoke. I was going to go to a junior high where I could learn to fight like a man. Now it was him and Renae, and I was packing my pajamas that were still in their plastic wrapping.

Jansen called. Dad was out on a date with Mandy. They had gone putt-putt golfing. I told Jansen. "See, that's just what I'm talking about," he said.

I told him how I had to go to Mom's. "Come by and see us, comrade," he said. "We're on the way."

I wanted to ask him for the secret to the deal. He talked about his dumb-ass neighbors and how they always park over the lines in the parking space next to Jansen's. He said he'd gladly ding their car up for them.

Jansen told me this joke before he hung up: "If you need a place to stay, then you've got a place to stay. If you need a warm meal, you got a warm meal. If you need a woman, then you've still got a place to stay and a warm meal."

When I was still in fourth or fifth grade, Jansen told me things after school on the front porch. I'd lick all the ice off an Otter Pop while he smoked and pointed his cigarette around the neighborhood. He told me stories about each family in each house on our street. How that one's parents grew pot in their basement. How the girl that lived at the end of the block used to show guys her panties for a quarter in junior high. How the family across the street had a bomb shelter in their backyard. Because of Jansen I always knew a lot for my age.

Jansen made fun of my school friends, too. He said Adam Foster looked like a frog. He said Benji Wexler talked like a girl. He said Mike Brownsberger had a goofy haircut. But when they came over to play, he'd let me go. I'd look back over my shoulder as we biked away and there was Jansen, sitting on the porch step with his fist in the air, our comrade salute.

Mom called right after Jansen.

"Did you sign the rules?" she said

"Yes," I said.

"My baby," she said, "I can't wait to see you. Put your dad on the

phone."

"He's on a date," I said.

She kept talking. "Remind him about the Greyhound and tell him please not to drive you all the way up. I can pick you up at the depot, it's right by work."

Dad took me to the station in the morning. I asked myself what Jansen would do in my situation. Probably throw away the rules. Probably never even open the letter. I figured if I were Jansen, I'd get off at North Hollywood. I pressed my cheek against the cloudy bus window and counted stops.

I got off in North Hollywood with the skinny, crater-faced man that was sitting across from me the whole trip. I pulled out the half-gone roll of quarters Dad gave me and called Jansen. "On my way," he said. I bought a pack of Marlboro Lights and a Coke with the rest of my quarters. Jansen was there in ten minutes.

"Never sign anything," Jansen said, squinting through his dirty windshield.

I took up maybe half of the passenger seat in his new car, a 1977 charcoal-colored Cordoba. Jansen patted the dashboard. "Nice?" he said.

I nodded. I was actually there when Jansen decided he wanted a Cordoba more than anything. He liked how Cordoba sounded when he blew smoke. When it was cold out in the morning, I would pretend to blow smoke and say Cordoba. That's how I remembered.

There were lots of telephone poles where Jansen lived. The wires seemed to keep the apartments from falling over, especially Jansen's building. We parked on the street in front. The dumb-ass neighbors caught Jansen this morning bouncing his big Cordoba door on the side of their car. "Must be poised for a quick escape, comrade."

We sat in the parked Cordoba. Jansen had the radio on to Z93, the Zoo. He sang along, "Today's Tom Sawyer he gets high on you/And the space he invades he gets by on you." There was a little round, green clock Velcroed to the glove compartment that said 8:43. I waited for Jansen to make a move. He drummed the steering wheel with his thumbs. "Is that your only bag?" he said. I pulled the duffel bag off the floor and onto my lap. "When's Mom supposed to get you?" "9:10 at the depot in Santa Barbara." "You want to stay here?" I nodded. "Go in and say hi to Renae."

Inside, Renae sat at the kitchen table. She had permed her hair frizzy since the last time I saw her. It was still orange. She pinched the stems of the clear plastic-framed glasses she was wearing and looked up at me. "Notice anything different?" she said.

She smelled like coffee instead of gum like she used to.

"Your hair," I said.

"Guess again," she said, looking down again.

She was wearing a long t-shirt and wool socks.

"I'm pregnant."

Jansen came in, snapping the screen door shut behind him. He whistled the song that was on in the car. I stared at Renae's stomach. She had pulled her t-shirt up to show me. Her swollen belly button looked like it hurt. Jansen tapped me on the head with his pack of Marlboro Lights. "Thanks for the smokes, comrade."

"Where's he going to stay?" Renae said, looking over the top of my head.

"That's what we need to figure out," Jansen said. "He doesn't want to go to Mom's."

Jansen and Renae's was the kind of apartment that doesn't have a room with a couch where I could sleep no problem. There was the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen, and, in two months, the baby—Baby Conrad, they called it, because they knew it was a boy. Jansen and Renae made me a bed in the tub with trash bags underneath so the blankets didn't get wet. I fell asleep to the drip of the faucet and the dumb-ass neighbor's snoring.

The phone rang. I opened my eyes and it was still dark everywhere. I could hear Jansen in the kitchen.

"No."

"No, he can stay with us."

"I don't think he wants to."

"Who?"

"That's between you and Dad."

"Bye."

"Good bye."

I lay in the tub and listened to Jansen get back in bed. I felt the cold sleeping bag zipper against my cheek. Jansen was batting for me.

Mom called again the next day. She was not as mad as I thought she would be. She said she had wanted to calm down before she came by to get me. Now she was ready. Jansen had a plan for this. We'd go eat.

We went to a place that served waffles and barbecued chicken. I ordered from the kids' menu so I could get a hot dog and fries. The waiter didn't care. Jansen and Renae shared a stack of pancakes with gravy on them. We went to a movie, just in case. They were having a marathon at the theater next door. We saw the last part of *The Empire Strikes Back* and all of *Return of the Jedi.*

When we got back, there was a note on the door like Jansen had guessed. It said, *Jansen, have Charlie on my doorstep tomorrow morning before work or I'll call the cops.*

"It was fun while it lasted," Renae said.

"You understand, comrade," Jansen said.

I guess I knew better.

We played hearts until Renae went to sleep. Jansen and I went outside. We sat on the hood of the Cordoba with our feet on the bumper. Jansen lit up, sucked, and blew. "Cordooh-ba," he said.

He handed me the cigarette backwards so the right part would go in my mouth. I sucked, coughed, and tried again. I squeezed my jaw tight. "Cor-do-ba."

"Next time, we'll be smoking cigars."

I didn't want to wait for Baby Conrad to be born to see Jansen and Renae again. I wanted to make a deal with Mom, but things were probably different with her. I could have her find my *Playboy* that Jansen gave me when he moved out. But she would just throw it away and make Dad have a talk with me. I could ditch school but I didn't know what I'd do instead. If I took the bus to see Jansen, I would just get Jansen in trouble. I wished I'd made a deal with Dad so that he couldn't kick me out. I wanted to tell Jansen these things but he had other things to worry about.

Jansen put his hand on my knee. "I can't stay with Renae forever. Someday we'll live it large."

"Like comrades?"

"Like comrades."

# Wide Angle

*Sean Ziebarth*

I TOLD DARCY I'D MEET HER HERE. Right here. I can't say where here is. I've made promises. We're going to grab a bite to eat.

You wouldn't know to eat here. It's on the corner, a sign above the door says "Groceries." The "G" and the "S" are wearing off. On the window, just right of the door, Lonnie, the owner, has dabbed the business hours in white-out in very small letters.

I find Darcy and take a seat. The place is a seat-yourself, serve-yourself establishment. Not buffet or anything, but if you want something to drink, you go over to the ice box and get it yourself. Milk, whatever your preference, skim, 1%, 2%, whole—they got it. Coffee, nothing fancy, a good solid roast. Cream and sugar, nobody's guessing how you like your coffee. Deal with it.

There is dust on the textured walls. Raised, four-pronged crowns. The tables are sticky. Our soup comes and Darcy goes to wash up. Her sister, Valerie, who is sitting kitty-corner from me, gets herself up on one knee and dips her spoon into my soup. Plantain coriander. I've got this plastic alligator head in front of me. It's a toy. You open the alligator's mouth and he shows his teeth. I press the teeth down, one at a time. If I'm lucky, I'll be left with just one tooth up. But, you see, one of these teeth is a booby trap. Push it down and the alligator snaps at you. The booby trap tooth changes every time. I push down a back tooth and the mouth goes off. I'm not so lucky.

Valerie puts her spoon to her mouth, blows, sips. Darcy's on her way back to our table.

"You're delicious," Valerie says to me.

It wasn't my idea to have Valerie here. No way. Darcy's idea. The idea light bulb went off in her head, not mine. Too bad that light bulb wasn't one of those yellow ones, designed to keep bugs away. Valerie bugs.

"Soup's that bad?" I say.

"What's wrong with the soup?" Darcy's back.

"Ryan wanted to taste mine," Valerie says. "I said to use your own spoon."

"It's the other way around," I say.

"You're the other way around," Valerie says.

Valerie is instrumental in bringing me down, and I don't want to be down. This is supposed to be an up time in my life. Wife leaves, takes the kid with her, and I'm in the dumps. It's like when my first beach cruiser got ripped off. Dub and I are fifteen and we got cruisers and we're cruising. And my cruiser is red, stretched handlebars, fat seat, white-walled tires, and I take bumps in the road like the princess and the pea. We get to Dub's place and park our cruisers in the garage, and we pull down the garage door. Dub's mom comes home, honks for Dub to open the garage. He hoists the door, raises it aloft, his mom drives in, and Dub never pulls the door down again. It's aloft. Dub's garage is a fat face grin on the front of his house, inviting someone in, a dentist perhaps, to extract that bad tooth in the back of the mouth, that tooth that looks a lot like my red Schwinn beach cruiser.

I go to get on my cruiser, ready for home, and Dub's garage door is still wide-high in the air and my cruiser is gone, extracted. It's like someone has gone and taken a picture of a bike in a garage, but they don't realize that the objects in the foreground, the car, the lawn mower, toolbox, shovels, hoes, and hose, appear larger and overemphasized and the bike is lost in the background. So I crop the foreground, but the bike isn't there. It never was. My dad buys me a new beach cruiser and suggests that I get black, instead of red, so it won't draw attention as easy. This I do, and am happy to be cruising again.

It's Valerie who comes along and shoves a stick into the spokes of my new cruiser, on which I am now cruising, and now I'm not hungry anymore. I push my soup aside and drink water.

I go to the counter, grab Fig Newtons, and pour coffee.

"This is no way to get to know someone," I say. I'm talking to Darcy in a whisper, pointing with my face over to Valerie who's whipped open the weekly, most likely scanning the personals, perhaps going googly-eyed at the story I read in there this morning about a woman in Alabama who delivered a fifteen-pound baby vaginally.

"You're right," Darcy says.

She gets her keys from her purse and tells Valerie that she doesn't know how to say this, but get lost, and tosses her sister the keys.

"Ryan will take me home," Darcy says.

"Sure, sure," Valerie says. She puts the weekly back together, rolls it into a tube, puts it to her eye, and eyes me. The good thing is that she can only see my mouth, or my nose, or one of my eyes, and not all together as a face.

"You can take my soup to go," I say.

"It is very delicious," Valerie says.

"Take his soup," Darcy says.

"I'll have it for lunch tomorrow," Valerie says.

"O.K., yeah, we'll see you," I say.

Valerie pockets the keys and puts the rolled up paper again to her eye. Then she puts her other hand against the side of the roll and walks out of the place saying, "I have a hole in my hand," over and over.

"Valerie's trouble," Darcy says.

"And you're not?" I say.

"I never said that."

"No you didn't," I say, "and I agree with you."

"Agree with me on what?" Darcy says.

"That you're trouble."

"I never said I was trouble," Darcy says.

"Well what then? Are you trouble or not?" I say.

"I'm somewhere in between trouble and not trouble," she says.

It's rhetorical. She's trouble.

"I'm getting more coffee," I say. "You want some?"

"Nope," she says.

At the counter I pour coffee into my mug and look into the fridge for cream and I can't seem to find it. Lonnie's always moving this stuff around.

"Ryan," Darcy says, "is my smile off?"

She smiles.

I extend my arm, close an eye, put up my thumb, and aim it at Darcy's mouth as if I just finished painting it.

"Nope, right on," I say.

"You know, 'smile' has the same letters as 'slime,'" Darcy says.

"Oh yeah, same thing."

"Not the same, just close," Darcy says. She puts her mug to her mouth and finishes off her coffee.

"More coffee now," she says.

"Please."

"Please," she says.

"Just sugar?"

"Yeah, the raw stuff," she says.

Two cups of joe in hand, I go back to our table and decide it's about time to put things out in the open. I've been carrying Holly's picture around with me for the last couple days. It's still in the envelope. I take it from my pocket and hand it over to Darcy. What's this, she says, and I tell her to just open it. She opens it and looks at the picture and I say it's my daughter, Holly. And the feet? Darcy says. My wife. You're married? Darcy says. She left me. Darcy takes her coffee with both hands and takes

a sip, or two, or three, and doesn't say anything in between. Well, this is a fine howdy-do, she says.

"Do you love her?" Darcy says.

"Maybe."

"Do you love me?" she says.

"Lust," I say, "at least."

"Good enough," Darcy says.

The lights are on. Darcy's idea, although I don't mind. On the way over here, to Darcy's place, we argued whether or not lust was good enough. From the way things have turned out here, I'd say good enough indeed. Darcy had the bed turned down, all ready. I tried to keep an eye on my watch, and I'd say it took about fifteen minutes to get from her front door to here. Here. The bed. Both of us are naked. Naked except for our socks. The lights are on. The lights are on and a photo of Darcy's family hangs on the wall. They are nestled in close to each other—Darcy's dad in a dark sports coat, mom in a dark suit, and the three girls, Pilar, Darcy, and Valerie—portrait posed and framed by a frame. It's Valerie who's bigger than life, looking right at me, me at her, and I can't take my eyes off her. Darcy's in the background up there. Down here she's real, corporeal, and temporal, and our bodies are keeping some kind of time with the several clocks ticking around us. And the house, the bed, is silent. Except for that ticking.

Sunday morning paper. The order is religious: comics, calendar, sports (Lakers by four), money, metro, front page. No matter how bad I want to scan the front page, I can't give in, and it's a good thing I don't today, because the big headline this morning is: 5 Dead in Plane Crash. What if it wasn't five? Maybe it was just four, the editor just added one more to please his sense of aesthetics. Like the floral shops who never make a bouquet of roses with an even number of flowers. Try them, they won't do it. They'll talk you into going with one more. Balance, they say. This plane has no balance. A Lear jet, following too close behind a full-on airliner, is knocked to the ground by the airliner's turbulence. Like a wake behind a motor boat. We ain't talking boating here. This is a burger mogul, dead on impact, plus four. Luckily for everyone in the vicinity, for my sanity, no one on the ground was killed. The plane crashed in a triangular-shaped vacant lot.

I heard the crash. I really think I did. It happened a few miles south of Darcy's place. Too close for comfort. If I'm ever to have total comfort and joy in this life, they're going to have to do away with air travel.

"You're fidgety," Darcy says.

"I heard this," I say, holding up the front page Darcy's way. There are fresh picked daisies in a tall, clear glass on the kitchen table. Darcy is all

legs, in a nightshirt, and I'm hoping to sneak a peek at her underwear.

"You heard nothing," she says.

"I'm not one of those people who have interests," I say, "but this interests me." I turn the page and show her the wreckage.

"They obviously picked their spot," she says.

"God picked their spot," I say.

"Let's go out for a bite to eat," Darcy says.

We get cleaned up and Darcy drives us to this omelet joint. I order an omelet named after a bunch of lawyers from this area. Extra tomatoes and a bran muffin that Darcy eats. And milk.

Dub waits outside. In Cook's office I tell him that I heard the crash on Saturday. All his plants have recently been watered and spritzed.

"No shit?" Cook says.

"The windows were rattling," I say.

"That's got to be something," he says.

I hold a hand above my head and crash it down to an open palm. "Wham." I'm improvising.

"Everything else O.K.?" Cook says.

Fine, fine I tell him in so many words. I'm done with Cook for the day and now it's me and Dub, out to our trucks, and when Dub asks if I got under Darcy's skirt I tell him he's filthy.

Yes or no?

"You don't quit?" I say.

"I have an obligation," Dub says.

Darcy is palming a planner and pencils something down in the calendar.

"I think we might be synching up," she says.

Darcy firmly believes that men, like women, have cycles.

"What? What did I do?" I say.

"Mr. Poops," she says.

Darcy's got a thing with mister. Her cat, black, with white face, chest, and paws, and a black moustache like Chaplin, is named Mr. Fizzgig. And now me, whenever my moods swing, whenever my emotions get out of line, I'm Mr. Poops. Darcy's cycle is Aunt Flo-mine, Darcy is attempting to plot it now.

"Where is Mr. Poops?" I say.

"Oh, he's here."

"Just tell me."

"You've been curt all day long," she says.

"I'm going out for a smoke," I say.

"See."

The sun is down. There's still light enough to make out the clouds. The clouds are tire tracks, as if someone burned-out in a muscle car, leaving skid marks in the sky. I promised myself I'd file for divorce. But first I've got to come up with five good reasons. Then I'll divorce Megan. There are two so far:

1. Megan left me.

2. Megan stole Holly.

It was all one action. Maybe I should count those together.

1. Megan left me and stole Holly.

Number two can be irreconcilable differences. No. That's too easy. Besides, I haven't talked to Megan and I don't know where our differences lie.

The front door opens and out comes Darcy's arm, panties dangling from her fingers.

2. Mr. Poops lusts Darcy.

Does this picture have a theme?

That's what it says on the back of this photo of Holly. Holly. Holly. Holly. Holly. Now that I don't see her anymore, the name doesn't fit. This photo is black and white: Holly, in overalls, in her baby seat on a patch of grass.

She's all smiles.

Bordering the grass is a brick walkway, big bricks. Big gray bricks. Of course they're gray in a black-and-white picture, but I think they're gray in real life too. They don't have the same texture as the smaller red bricks you'd expect the smart little pig to build his house with. Then there's the wall. About knee high and a can of pop sitting there.

Product placement.

That's the theme. I'm going to see this photograph in a magazine. An advertisement for pop. One of those advertisements where the picture isn't about the product at all, it's about bodies, one on top of the other. But it's not really about bodies because one of them is wearing little white briefs that have someone's name on them. And this picture isn't about Holly, dolled up in red and white, just like the pop can; it's about the pop.

The camera is tight in Holly's face, super close-up, so the picture seems to be about Holly. But the wide-angle lens allows for the grass, the walkway, the wall, and the can of pop. The can of pop with the print of the bottom lip, left behind in lipstick.

I've strung up string. On my wall. This is where I'm hanging Holly's pictures, "Holly in the Desert" and "Does This Picture Have a Theme?" held to the string by clothespins. Holly's wham-bam blonde hair toussled by wind.

I should make one thing clear. There are certain smells I can't get out of my head: the ocean, rubbing alcohol, a baby, bloody and warm, fresh from birth, cilantro, mustard, sex (hers and mine), and Christmas.

Christmas eve. I'm a kid and my family is sitting around the Christmas tree: Me, Reed, Michael, Mom (on Dad's lap), and Dad. My brothers and I hold mugs of hot chocolate. Each mug has our name on it. Mom was feeling crafty and sent away for kits. I think Mom and Dad are drinking coffee and it's got to be spiked with a little whiskey or something. Dad doesn't have to drive anywhere tonight, like it matters. And I don't see panty lines underneath Mom's nightgown.

"Let me tell you something, boys," Dad says. "Marry a happy woman. A woman who is happy just to wake up in the morning."

"O.K.," we say.

"Will you do that for me?" Dad says.

# Kick and Muff

*David Seiter*

I hear the fist-sized heart
cannon in the fog of rhythm
death and future.
From it I take the few things
I need: the Russian
kick and muff of this generation,
militant voices hammered
in sonorous thrusts
and undulations—vocalizing
a disintegrated voyage
toward the mother.

These aesthetic battles are the story
of a youth. Today
I am Napoleon—
Napoleon and I—
in the resurrection.
Gradually words begin
to ease themselves free
of this dull roar, free from the black
thrusts of desire, free
from the emptiness of heaven.

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# We Dress for Armageddon

*for Shelley Turley*

*Elizabeth Visick*

When trouble—an earthquake, a heart—
Comes to town, breaking dams,
Leveling shops, clubs
Restaurants, ringing out alarms
Like bells at Christmas, my
Best friend and I put on silk,
Georgette, wear hose with seams
Up the back. If the ground is still
And planes drift over us, the sweaters
Thin from wear and broken trousers
Of the transient suit us. We stay inside.
But when the earth and sky
Lap at our ankles, when the street
Cracks like a wound, we walk out
With the maturity of satin, the
Poise of slick shoes and pearls.
Stones of all colors blink
From our ears and fingers, from
Our hair in smooth piles. Scarves
Rest in soft folds at the neck.
It is how we encounter death.

The morning I took my best friend
To be changed with a knife and tough thread,
I wore grey wool, blue cashmere with
Rhinestone buttons. Stockings and
Dark lipstick. I waited with magazines
Glossy as life eternal, figures
Immortalized in haute couture.
I sat with my back straight,
Legs crossed at the ankle until a woman
Dressed like the blue angel
I saw over a motel in Vegas
Led me to Recovery. My friend
Did not want her jacket.
She was too much a vision: blood
Collecting like the rarest jewels
In clear bulbs at her sides, her face
Wet and radiant with confusion. A sight
To weep for, the very Age of Glamour.
When the end, a jealous adversary,
Strips us at last, we will appear
Naked on the streets, hair of grace,
Skin of mercy, bodies perfect
As the lives of the saints. We will
Glow with Armageddon, the sun
Fading behind us, the great nations
Struck blind, outdone.

## *ABOUT THE ARTIST*

Born in 1947, Allen Dale Roberts was raised in Milwaukee and the San Francisco Bay area before settling permanently in Utah where he received a B.A. in Art & Design with an architectural major from Brigham Young University in 1973, and later pursued advanced studies in architecture, history, and philosophy at the University of Utah. He has loved art since he was a young child and at age twelve received a scholarship to the Milwaukee Art Institute where he did his first oil painting.

An architect and historic preservationist by profession and writer by avocation, Roberts revived his long-dormant interest in fine art and began painting in 1991 after a nearly twenty year hiatus from artistic activity. A believer in "plein aire" painting, he pursued his interest in the Utah landscape and historic built environment. Inspired by outdoor painting experiences with Randall Lake, Earl Jones, and Ken Baxter, Roberts is also fond of the turn-of-the-century realist works of John Singer Sargeant and Utah's master tonalist, LeConte Stewart.

Currently co-editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and co-author of Pulitzer Prize-nominee, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, Roberts plans to focus increasingly on representational and symbolic painting as a means of self-expression. His paintings have been exhibited in galleries throughout Utah, where he also has exhibited his paintings, drawings, and photographs in a one-man show.

## *PAINTINGS*

*Front* : "Pioneer House Ruins," 16"x 12" oil, 1991
*Back* : "Still Life with Four Objects," 16"x 20" oil, 1991
p. 45: "Formation at Capitol Reef," 16"x 12" oil, 1992
p. 51: "Natural Bridge, Capitol Reef," 16"x 20" oil, 1991
p. 52: "East of Capitol Reef at Dusk, #1," 6"x 9" oil, 1992
p. 117: "Porterville Meetinghouse," 16"x 20" oil, 1993
p. 118: "Painter's Hat with Lilac," 16"x 20" oil, 1991
p. 152: "Billy, Resting," 16"x 20" oil, 1992
p. 184: "Peterson, Utah, after LeConte Stewart," 16"x 22" oil, 1993

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