

Keeping the Sacred: Structured Silence in the Enactment of Priesthood Authority,  
Gendered Worship, and Sacramental Kinship in Mormonism

by

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For Neal, whose example of generosity, courage, intellectual rigor, and humility has constantly inspired me toward this goal.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Notes on Formal Theory**

This dissertation is as much a product of Mormonism as it is of Anthropology. Ethnographic research and analysis has a rich and storied history of pressing the particularity of specific communities into the service of more universal, general, cross-cultural theorizing and claims, and this very much draws upon and continues that tradition. But there is more at work in the genesis of this project than the application of anthropological theory to Mormon field data. As a practicing Mormon raised in the LDS Church, my own awareness of the potency of the sacred—and of the secrecy surrounding it—is part of what drove me to study anthropology in the first place. Which is to say, this project was conceived, executed, and written as much by a native as by an anthropologist. Anthropology as a discipline and a global enterprise has its own vexed historical relationship with evangelical Christianity (and the evangelizing project's close ties and shared heritage with the global spread of colonial power). Christian and colonial (and anti-christian and anti-colonial) anthropologies have intersected and interbred, sometimes fruitfully, sometimes violently, and often unwittingly, to produce the particular anthropology that counts as disciplinary Anthropology today. The hope here is that my own offering, with its own fraught genealogy, is a fruitful one.

My research explores the following questions: what role do communicative practices, strategies, and taboos oriented around sacred objects, spaces, and texts play in organizing social relations and social realities within strongly-defined religious communities? How are the forms

of social value constituted by the practices under consideration channeled into creating and supporting other salient cultural formations like kinship, bureaucracy, and capital? What is the relationship between semiotic and social life—between, for example, secrecy and holiness, between insider speaking registers and kinshipping practices, between corporate organization and models of social personhood, between language about gender and the semiotic enactment of gender difference, between dress standards and transcendent religious experience?

The capacity (and persistent tendency) of language for self-referentiality (what Agha, 2007, calls *reflexivity*)—the fact that language-use inevitably refers not just to the world but to language itself, to interactions, interactants, and interactional contexts—makes language an unusually powerful and exquisite tool for shaping and contesting our social world. The irreducible indexicality of language and language-use means that our actual semiotic interactions implicate and are implicated by the often power-saturated nexus of social relationships we inhabit, in the same way that the semantic properties of our words both refer to and draw meaning from the semiotic economy of our shared, structured lexicon. This dissertation explores these dynamics within two Mormon speech-communities (described below) and also proposes a new heuristic model or working cross-cultural “definition” of religion in expressly semiotic terms. This model will place the theoretical work of Durkheim—especially his claims about the role played by the sacred/profane binary partitioning of the world in the constituting of human sociality—into conversation with more recent trends in American linguistic anthropology. Rather than asking what makes an act religious, I ask how it is that we make certain of our acts legible to others as religious acts. The dissertation presents Mormonism as a case-study which challenges and problematizes some key orthodoxies in the social scientific study of religion, particularly those drawn from and built upon Weber's secularization thesis.

The dissertation is based on ethnographic and archival research conducted from 2011-2013 in Utah and Missouri with members of The Church of Jesus Christ (Cutlerite) and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The Cutlerites are a small schismatic offshoot, distinct from the mainline LDS Church in Utah. In addition to sharing a “restoration” heritage with the LDS (Mormons refer to Joseph Smith's revelations and founding of a church as The Restoration), the Cutlerites share distinctive features of worship, particularly secretive ceremonial rites, with the Utah Church. Such religious forms are largely absent from other restoration Mormon churches, but are the basis for an unusually close proverbial kinship between these two groups as compared with other branches of Mormonism. Conversely, the Cutlerites typify the opposite pole of a sociological or demographic spectrum from Latter-day Saints. In contrast to the growing (roughly 15-million members), globalizing, corporate, highly capitalized LDS Church in Utah, the Cutlerites count fewer than one dozen members, have only one church-house, and are all close blood relatives. These strong similarities and stark differences formed the basis for fruitful comparative study.

The analytic focus is not sacred discourse *per se* but discourse about the sacred in Mormonism, and the role played by various forms and patterns of secrecy within that discourse. Part I (Chapters 2-3) explores these discursive phenomena within the liturgical language of/about LDS temple rites. This is not an account of sacred language, nor an explication of Mormon temple worship; it is an analysis of language *about* sacred language, an ethnography of how Mormons talk about (and talk about not talking about) temple rituals. These rites comprise a central yet extremely secretive and confidential feature of Mormon life and worship. Patterned norms of speaking about, not speaking about, and speaking around what Mormons simply call “temple work” figure prominently not only in generating the experience of holiness within

temples but in fashioning, negotiating, contesting, and reinforcing the differences in social and ecclesiastical position and power that the salience of the rites depends on. These discursive patterns are the means by which Mormons collaboratively enact and stabilize the holiness of the temple (from the outside, as it were), and through which they channel the holiness of the temple out and into the fabric of extra-temple Mormon experience. The discursive linkages between the inside and outside of the temple sanctuary—between sacred/secret rites and everyday Mormon life—in tandem with the productive and distributive corporate practices which allow Mormonism to expand its capital and demographic bases globally, are vital to the creation and stabilization of the kinds of value, the social and ecclesiastical power, on which a distinctive Mormon system of kinship draws its enduring generative power and stability.

In Part II (Chapters 4-5), structured silences surrounding such topics as female deity, polygamy, and female sexual desire which factor centrally into the social construction of sex and gender are examined, with particular focus on the role they play in shaping the experience of Mormon women and the cultivation of a distinctly Mormon model of femininity. The silences, taboos, and normative constraints under consideration—along with the patterns for circumventing these norms—not only substantively implicate gender (and the LDS cosmological framing of differences between male and female) but differentially apply to men and women. Knowing what can or cannot be said, what is or is not appropriate to say about such subjects, and upholding these discursive norms not only abstractly or doctrinally helps to define the lives (gendered divisions of social, domestic, and ecclesiastical responsibility, sexual relations and identifications), worship (from formal modes of worship to prayer and the terms of specific relationships sexed individuals cultivate and experience with God), and soteriological expectations (what the eternal world will be like, what eternal marriage means, what theosis

entails); it also genders subjects through the enactment of the taboos, in that to speak with a particular degree of freedom or constraint about such things is to speak *as a man or as a woman*, depending on the specific shape the performed silences take. To be male is in part to speak in a manner about topics which deeply and inescapably implicate sex and gender which discernibly contrasts to how a female might speak about them.

Part III (Chapter 6 and Conclusion) brings the Cutlerites into the conversation, mostly as a point of contrast. After a historical survey of the Cutlerite movement, its separation from the branch of Mormonism that would eventually settle in Utah and grow into the contemporary LDS Church, and the common preservation in both traditions of the Nauvoo era liturgical forms found in LDS temples, I emphasize a key difference: whereas the LDS use the endowment as a preparatory ceremony leading into sacramental kinshipping (“sealings”), the Cutlerites preserve only the endowment, and do not perform liturgical marital or sealing rites. The ethnographic description and analysis of what I argue is a highly distinctive kind of LDS kinship grows out, in part, of thinking through this difference between the two traditions. Drawing analytically from the work of Sahlins, I describe the distinctive shape that Mormon shared subjectivity takes and how it is enacted. These processes, in the LDS tradition, articulate closely with the discursive practices and structured silences, described in earlier chapters and formative of the cultural raw material of priestly authority and gender. This salvific kinshipping system, centered on the highest and most cumulative rituals of LDS temple work, draws on structures of priesthood authority and performative addressivity which apply jointly to two separate worlds (of which the temple is itself a mediating nexus point) to bind the two worlds together precisely by forging sacred familial ties in this world with the capacity and strength to persist into the eternal world. The social encoding of concentric spheres of compounded holiness, oriented around the temple

spaces in which the sealings occur and ramifying out into the world of everyday Mormon worship and experience, is essential to the efficacy of the rites.

The concluding chapter presents a theory of religion—a heuristic cross-cultural model or “definition” of religion—as primarily a semiotic phenomenon. In part the model is meant to expressly sidestep some of the questions and issues—including belief, sincerity, agency, and the supernatural—which have regularly encumbered past attempts to define religion. It is also intended as a theoretical extrapolation out from the specific case of this dissertation: locating the defining features of religion in semiotic activity raises general questions about the semiotic enactment of, for example, the sacred/profane binary to which the case study in the following chapters provides empirical answers and examples.

### **Key Themes: Structured Silence**

A number of significant anthropological studies on this subject have focused primarily on either silence as an aesthetic (Bauman, 1983) or even specifically aural phenomenon (Tannen and Saville-Troike), on the one hand, or secrecy or verbal taboo, on the other. Preeminent in this second category is the work of sociologist Georg Simmel (1906). Simmel treats secrecy as a universal feature of human interrelations, a dynamic push and pull of concealment and revelation that forms the basis for a wide range of human solidarity and intimacy. The sociocultural power of secrecy is independent of its specific content. Simmel's account is notably structuralist, not only in the sense of depending on pure contrast (between known and unknown, concealment and disclosure) as opposed to the substantive content of the known and the unknown, but also in the sense of being irreducibly relational. Simmel's treatment of religion in this context aligns him theoretically with Durkheim and the secret, in its cordoned-off and set-apart status with respect to the ordinary, with the sacred.

This alignment, between Simmel's secret and Durkheim's sacred, forms a key part of the theoretical foundation for Johnson's (2002) analysis of secrecy in the context of the Afro-Brazilian indigenous religion Candomble. Focusing primarily on ritual secrecy (and ritualized secrecy) in Candomble, Johnson reconstructs its transformation from a secret slave society into a public religion and inscribes this shift in the larger narrative of the emergence of a political and public Brazilian sphere of national identity. Johnson's work addresses some of the themes and difficulties I encountered researching and writing this dissertation, though ultimately he takes his research and his conclusions in a different direction. Of particular interest is Johnson's development of the concept of *secretism*, the active promotion of the reputation of secrets, the public circulation of the secret's inaccessibility. Here Johnson hints at a kind of metadiscourse of secrecy, a discourse about secrecy, secrets, concealment, and inaccessibility that disseminates well beyond the bounds of the substance of the secret itself (see also "public secrecy" in Taussig, 1999). Secretism is a point of both intersection and departure with my own work—intersection in the sense that it implicates a metadiscourse about secrets, a discourse by which awareness of both the existence and potency of secrets circulates, and departure in the sense that the metadiscourse of the secret/sacred described in the following chapters is very different from his Candomble ethnography.

Foucault (1978) describes Victorian efforts to discursively contain sex and its "free circulation" in speech, leading to an effective discursive explosion, "a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor," codified around and in relation to sex and sexuality. What makes modern sexual discourse so distinctive is not the consignment of sex to a "shadow existence" but rather the persistent ability to speak about and typify sexuality "ad infinitum" precisely by means of its coded status as The Secret. No less is said about sex, things are just said in different ways, by

different people. The structured silence around sex is about what one expressly declines to say, about what is forbidden to invoke, about the careful and complicated discretion of speakers and addressees. “There is no binary division,” he declares, “between what one says and what one does not say” (p. 27). The elliptical, circumlocutionary, and euphemistic means of speaking about sex, the arrangements of who can and who cannot employ what semiotic means, and the patterned norms and forms of agreed-upon discretion systematically structure silences around and apropos of the subject, simultaneously multiplying its discursive presence and dissolving it into the discursive background. Sex is nowhere quite explicitly, yet everywhere (architecture, disciplinary regimes, organizational arrangements, the “internal discourse of the institution”).

Building on similar analytic themes, Irvine (2011) synthesizes a vast and rich descriptive and ethnographic literature on verbal taboo and unmentionability. Yet while the cross-cultural variety of tabooed materials and subjects is itself fascinating, along with the range of norms and strategies for contesting, circumventing, and evading taboos—for mentioning the Unmentionable—Irvine's analysis calls attention to what the upheld norms (as opposed to the breaches) tell us about social histories, social differences, social power, knowledge- and truth-making regimes, limited access to semiotic resources, second-order indexicalities, and other social effects of discursive containment strategies and their patterned evasions. Though her work deals primarily with taboos and unmentionabilities oriented around and with respect to social and cultural toxicity, its implications for materials, spaces, objects, words, subjects, and persons coded (perhaps, as this dissertation will argue, especially by the semiotic practices under consideration) as holy and/or sacred are eminently apparent. What is the relationship between the secret, the unmentionable, and the sacred? As religious communities engage in the work of “scaling” the sacred (as in the case of a Church with sustained global growth and highly

centralized organization like the LDS Church), what is the difference (that makes a difference) between public secrets and absolute secrets? Between religious secrets and proprietary information? Between intellectual property and private ritual? If Irvine's work (along with some of the other authors in the 2011AQ issue) has opened up and rigorously demonstrated new analytic possibilities for examining the existing literature on verbal taboo and politeness, one of the aims of this project is to apply those analytic insights to new anthropological categories (holiness as opposed to toxicity) and to empirical data from a new ethnographic field (Mormonism).

### **Semiotic, Social, and Religious Life**

Agha's account (2007) of reflexivity in language-use—of the capacity of language to not just participate in social conduct but to model such conduct, of language-use as a means for both performing and construing both stereotypic and emergent social effects—provides a useful framework for dealing with issues of scale. An interaction in which some stretch of discourse occurs that is construed, for example, as sacrilegious involves converging vectors of scale, history, and emergence. A condition for sacrilege to be conveyed in a semiotic encounter is that bits of discourse contained within the interaction have to have become coded in a specific way through larger socio-historical processes and patterns *as* sacrilegious, at least for certain people, people who need themselves to have undergone processes of socialization and conventionalization to have become persons for whom the discourse in question counts as sacrilege. These two very different large scale processes precede, both historically and logically, the emergent social and interpersonal consequences and trajectories entailed and enacted during the sacrilegious interaction. This analysis dovetails nicely with Keane's elaboration of moral valorizations of language use in contexts of Protestant evangelization (2007) as well as the very

marked uses of linguistic resources characteristic of “religious language” in general (1997). The present work is nothing if not an ethnography of religious language, in particular of language that distinguishes itself by virtue of the connection it establishes with the sacred. It is hoped that it will shed some new light on the question of the nature of religious language and signs, on the socio-historical and semiotic processes behind and beneath how we make our acts legible to others as religious acts (or sacrilegious, or priestly, or submissive, or holy acts).

### **Gender, Feminism, and Silence**

A brief note here on gender and feminist theory. The ethnographic descriptions and analysis of the chapters on Mormon sex and gender comprise modest, perhaps even peripheral, contributions to current theoretical debates on these subjects. Part of the reason for this is that I do my very best to let the female participants in my research not only speak for themselves but theorize their experiences. If being Mormon brings down an ethnographic barrier to understanding generally, being male puts new ones in place. Further, Mormon women have a rich and complicated history of feminist activism and theorizing, a tradition which at best imperfectly aligns with larger feminist movements and orthodoxies in the West. If these chapters directly engage any theoretical literature outside of the Mormon tradition, it is the work of Saba Mahmood (2005), who (following in the tradition of Stacey, 1991, and Rouse, 2004) has persuasively argued for the need for anthropologists, feminists, and western academics in general to adopt an analytical language and notions of agency that do not circumscribe the actions of women or reduce female agency to acts of resistance to or re-signification of the discourse of patriarchy. To the extent that my analysis involves a feminist critique of Mormon patriarchal norms (and it should be noted that, notwithstanding my personal commitments to and engagement with feminist activism and change within the LDS tradition, I have deliberately

eschewed the language of activism here), the feminism in question is distinctly Mormon. Because the primary aim of these chapters is to examine the relationship between the structured silences that implicate femininity and female experiences within Mormon tradition and those that surround the sacred spaces and discourses of temple worship, the analytical thrust of this section is drawn largely from the theoretical underpinnings of the previous chapters (outlined above).

### **Kinship, Corporateness, and The Social Body**

The final section of the book deals with Mormon notions and enactments of kinship. The analysis draws heavily from Sahlins' (2011a, 2011b) ambitious general theory of kinship as mutuality of being or shared subjectivity. Sahlins' canvassing of the wide range of possible constructed forms of kin relations in anthropological literature ends with quotation from Vilaca on bodies, corporealities, and Wari kinship: "It is not just substances which circulate. The Wari body is also constituted by affects and memories. Memory, say the Wari, is located in the body, meaning the constitution of kin is based to have a high degree on living alongside each other day-to-day, and on reciprocally bestowing acts of affection" (2011a, 5). While this almost mystical notion of kinship propels Sahlins into his general theory, it also invokes social-theoretical frames that resonate closely with the subject of this dissertation: particularly Douglas' (1966 [2002]) identification of (parts of) individual bodies with (parts of) social bodies, of relations of the sexes to hierarchies "which apply in larger social systems" (4); and Bourdieu's (1977) locating of social structure on the bodies of social actors. A key purpose of the final body chapter is to critically consider what role sacred/profane partitioning and the metadiscursive norms and processes oriented around it play in constituting the forms of social difference and authority that underly Mormon sex, gender, priesthood, and kinship.

### **Note on Some of the Problems of Writing this Dissertation**

In his introduction to *Off Stage On Display*, Shryock (2004) describes the tantalizing role played and “abominable” space occupied by the ethnographer. Part of the ethnographer's fate and responsibility is to justly represent public secrets by revealing their power, at the threshold of social space (19). “Abomination” here is in the technical sense, as a person who (once again, in the spirit of Douglas) confounds categorization or orderliness, or (to invoke another well-worn anthropological category) is *liminal*. All ethnographers make careful, and often fraught choices about what to disclose and not disclose in their writing and analysis. The same is true for informants and other research participants. As an anthropologist, I am bound by professional ethics not to disclose information about my ethnographic community that could in any way compromise, demean, or otherwise harm the community or its members. As a practicing Mormon, I am bound by religious ethical obligations grounded in the formal confidentiality of the rites in which I have participated. I was surprised to realize how closely the professional (externally imposed) and religious (internally imposed) constraints aligned and mutually reinforced. Still, how to convey some reasonable anthropological sense of ethnographic knowledge which, as an anthropologist, I was not meant to have and which, as a Mormon, I was not meant to disclose? At the threshold between public and secret lies the public secret, defined here as a metadiscourse of the secret/sacred. This is where the real, culturally productive work is done, where the social indexicalities anchored to the sacred (secret) domain play themselves out (see also a more detailed discussion of these dilemmas in Chapter 3).

In addition to this not being an ethnography of Mormon secrets or Mormon temple rites, this is also not an ethnography of Mormonism in anything like a comprehensive sense. In the first place, my research is limited to accounts of English speaking Mormons, chiefly in the

United States. As the chapters that follow will make clear, there are class, geographic, and even genealogical strands of privilege at work here which mark English-speaking North American Mormons off from their global co-religionists. I have little doubt that the discursive and semiotic patterns under consideration here are a poor representation of Mormonism outside of these demographic parameters. This is not a grand unified theory of Mormonism, Mormon ritual, Mormon temples, or Mormon secrets. This is an examination of English-speaking Mormon discourse about the sacred and the pragmatic reach of that discourse in terms of social, ecclesiastical, and familial relationships.

One final note, on terminology. The word “Mormon” is contested and far from stable in the lexicons of the various restoration traditions that grew out of Joseph Smith's visions and revelations. For purposes of internal and stylistic consistency, I will apply the terms 'LDS' and 'Mormon' to members of the mainline Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah), and 'Cutlerite' to members of the smaller Church of Jesus Christ (Cutlerite) headquartered in Independence, Missouri.

## **Part I: The Temple**

### **Chapter 2: Sacred, Not Secret**

“Well, it's not a secret that the best thing about a secret is secretly telling someone your secret, thereby secretly adding another secret to their secret collection of secrets. Secretly... “

---Spongebob Squarepants

“There is nothing we like to communicate to others as much as the seal of secrecy together with what lies underneath it.”

---Friedrich Nietzsche

*I'm driving in a car with three college age Mormons. Peter and Brady recently returned from serving missions in Russia. Like the majority of young LDS women, Rachel did not serve a mission, and though slightly younger than Peter and Brady, is nearly finished with her degree, whereas the other two are barely sophomores. The interaction between Peter and Rachel is almost excessively flirtatious, but I can't tell if they're dating, or if the flirtations are just a playful way of interactionally managing the fact that they are close friends, both single (in a culture that places an enormous premium on marrying as early as possible), but not romantically attached. They spend hours a day together, usually at Peter's house with his roommates (including Brady), all of whom love Rachel. Brady sits quietly with me in the back seat, and we listen to Rachel and Peter chatting.*

*Because she hasn't served a mission, Rachel's only experience inside a Mormon temple is youth group trips to participate in proxy baptisms for the dead. This means that, unlike the other two, she has not received her endowment, which is to say, undergone the extensive initiation rites associated with the ordinance of the same name. At some point, this difference between them comes up in the conversation, and Rachel notes that she knows virtually nothing about the endowment. Brady decides to enter the conversation here by describing the ordinance in very general, opaque terms. "It's basically just a series of covenants you make with God—obedience, sacrifice, you covenant to keep the law of chastity [prohibition against pre- or extra-marital sexual relations], that sort of thing." Rachel looks a bit puzzled. "I guess I always thought it was more weird than that." Brady continues: "well, some parts are definitely a little weird, but you get used to that, and the covenants are still the most important part..."*

*Here Peter interrupts. "Hey, can we talk about something else." Brady agrees, and the conversation moves on, after barely a beat of awkward silence. I later asked Peter why he ended things so abruptly (especially considering he hadn't actually been actively participating in the conversation he stopped, though I didn't mention this fact when I asked). After all, nobody came close to discussing any of the actually forbidden or sacred elements of the ceremony. "I could just tell," he replied, "that it was making Rachel uncomfortable."*

This ethnography of Mormon temple worship begins with the admission that this is not, in fact, an ethnography of Mormon temple worship. I explicate not Mormon temples or their rites, but rather Mormon discourse *about* the temple—not what happens or is said inside the temple, but the things Mormons say (and do not say) about what happens there and how they say (and do not say) such things *outside* of the temple. Mormon discourse is saturated with metaphors (and corresponding realities) of spatial and ontological separation, threshold,

mediation, and interpenetration. The image of a Protective Hedge built around a sanctuary or holy space, or around commandments and regulations to which strict and absolute fidelity is non-negotiable, is hardly unique to Mormonism. But to the degree that such an analogy aptly describes the discursive practices of secrecy, euphemism, coded signaling, and cautionary discretion which prevail in Mormonism around the central sanctuary of the temple, then it can fairly be stated that this is primarily an ethnographic account and analysis of that Hedge.

Mormons take it as a given, nearly to the point of cliché (at a minimum it is a standard aphoristic trope), that the temple is “sacred, not secret.” Yet the fact of secrecy—of confidentiality and non-disclosure, of reverence for the temple and careful discretion about what can or ought to be said about it to the world—is as inescapable in Mormonism as the temple itself. Like the sexuality of children (for lack of a less loaded point of comparison) in Foucault’s account of 18th-century secondary schools (1978, 27-28), signs of preoccupation with the temple are omnipresent. The sheer openness of this secret, the constant awareness of the existence and presence and importance and mystery and potency of the temple, means that a consciousness of it looms over the religious lives and practices of all Mormons. Consider its potential influence even on those who haven’t yet been initiated into its sacred rites, as hinted at in the vignette above. Although very high behavioral standards and benchmarks of spirituality and commitment effectively exclude a high percentage of practicing Latter-day Saints—a sizable plurality of adults and all children and adolescents (in the latter case, with the exception of proxy baptisms)—from participation in temple-work, the temple nevertheless exerts an almost constant gravity in the religious experience of even those who have never been there.

Mormons raised in the tradition spend a decade or more, from their baptism (and official entry into the Church) to their graduation from the Church’s youth programs, preparing in self-

conscious earnest to enter the temple, with virtually no awareness at all of what actually happens there. They know that they will be expected to accept and make binding covenants, they know that something called “the endowment” exists, and they know that temples are where marital and kinship rites occur which seal families “for time and for all eternity.” Adults who convert to Mormonism spend the first year of their Church membership preparing to attend the temple, under the veil of the same discursive opacity. However LDS Church members wish to parse the distinction between the secret and the sacred, secrecy is an indisputable feature of Mormon discourse around the temple and its ordinances.

Three governing logics organize and underly Mormon notions of the sacred. These logics apply most clearly and most often to the temple itself, but are not limited to it. The first is the notion that there exist in the universe experiences, spaces, materials, and ideas which are simply too sacred or holy for language to adequately (or lawfully) express. Such sentiment underlies Joseph Smith's well known pronouncement of the inadequacies of human language at conveying heavenly truth—“Oh Lord God, deliver us from this prison, almost as it were, of paper, pen and ink, and of a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language”—as well as his relentless quest for the uncorrupted semiotic perfection of the lost Adamic tongue (Brown 2009, 2011). These things cannot or ought not be uttered or written (Flake 1995). In one of the earliest known accounts of temple ordinances, Apostle Heber Kimball wrote to his colleague, Parley Pratt: “I wish you was here so as to feel and hear for your Self. we have recieved some pressious things through the Prophet...that would cause your soul to rejoice I can not give them to you on paper for they are not to be riten.” Flake notes that what is sacred to the initiated (in the sense of being set apart and discursively cordoned off from other forms of religious knowledge) is, by definition, secret to the uninitiated (who simply cannot access it), yet this only augments the

canonical authority of the temple rites as a key site of transcendent meaning, experience, and knowledge production precisely in its performed, embodied enactment.

Again, the category of too-holy-for-utterance is far from exclusive to Mormons. In Christianity it goes as far back as Paul's inability to communicate in writing what "the eye hath not seen" (1 Corinthians 2:9), and the paradigmatic prototype is the Hebrew tetragrammaton. But this theme is richly developed and variably expressed in Mormonism. In fact, its prevalence well predates the inception of temple rites. More than a decade before he began initiating disciples into the paramasonic rites Mormons today know as the Endowment, Smith translated an account of a post-resurrection visit by Jesus Christ to extra-biblical ancient people, from engraved (and long hidden away) gold records delivered to him by an anglic guardian-warrior named Moroni. The translated record (The Book of Mormon) is the foundational scripture not just for the LDS Church but for all branches of the Mormon Restoration. The description of the risen Christ's visit to Book of Mormon peoples includes the following verses (and others like them): "And many of them saw and heard unspeakable things which are not lawful to be uttered" (3 Nephi 26:18); "...and they were caught up into heaven, and saw and heard unspeakable things. And it was forbidden them that they should utter; neither was it given unto them power that they could utter the things which they saw and heard" (3 Nephi 28:13-14). This second example in particular synthesizes lawful prohibition with the ability (power) or lack thereof to convey in speech (or writing) what was seen/felt/experienced/encountered.

Later in the Book of Mormon text (but earlier in its narrated history) there is an account of a man simply described as "the brother of Jared" (the designator is itself a descriptive evasion, and the text seems to go out of its way not to disclose the name of this very central narrative actor) whose speech was able to effectively summon God into his presence: "he could not be

kept from beholding [what was located] within the veil” (Ether 3:19-21); “...when God put forth his finger he could not hide it from the sight of the brother of Jared, because of his word which he had spoken unto him... the Lord could not withhold anything from his sight; wherefore he showed him all things, for he could no longer be kept without the veil” (Ether 12:20-21). The power of the brother of Jared's speech and his “mighty” writing (Ether 12:24) reflect the power of his experience, but stand in contrast with Moroni's own (the same Moroni who guards, keeps, and delivers the record) inability to convey in written language the substance of the brother of Jared's experience. These stories even suggest that the confounding of language associated with the biblical account of Babel is a kind of veiling of language or dampening of its semiotic power, precisely a reduction of its ability to adequately describe or convey the realities of God, godliness, and eternal truth.

The logic of linguistic inadequacy in the face of transcendent reality articulates with a separate but related logic: the potency of the sacred and the threat it poses to the ordinary or the unholy. Like Christ in the gospels declaring that he speaks in coded language (parables) to protect the hard-hearted and unrighteous from the spiritual and existential condemnation that a fuller understanding of his teachings would entail when combined with their persistent disobedience and sinfulness, prophets in the Book of Mormon persistently warn those they address that sinning “against greater light” brings greater condemnation. The notion that increased understanding and the increased obligations and responsibilities it entails represent a kind of curse that augments or worsens the effects of sinful choices rings clearly through the explanation one Mormon gave me of the dilemma surrounding the baptism of a child (the minimum age requirement for Mormon baptism is eight) whose parents were not active/practicing Mormons: “you're damning that child! You can't force him to make covenants

that he's then not equipped to live up to because of his home situation. Better not to baptize him until he's older." This is the logic of reverse-contagion. The threat in question is not just that the profane will contaminate the sacred sphere, but that unchecked sacredness (particularly sacred knowledge) will condemn, damn, or even destroy the ordinary, fallen world.

A passage from the Book of Mormon prophet Alma ties this logic rather seamlessly to the third logic of Mormon sacredness—progressive initiation into mystery:

“It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him. And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries; and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction...” (Alma 12:9-11).

The deliberative and conventionalized patterns of disclosure and non-disclosure, admission and non-admission, mystery and secret, progress and regress, reception and rejection are animated by the potency of sacred knowledge, the limitations of ordinary, worldly language for conveying knowledge of the sacred, and the gradual, line-upon-line nature of progress toward knowledge of and union with God. The sacred nature of certain knowledge and certain means for conveying it (and for conveying persons progressively toward it) both drives and is driven by the forms of secrecy, confidentiality, euphemism, parable, and coded-signaling that characterize Mormon talk about secret/sacred things. Holiness or sacredness then is a collaboratively and socially enacted value which depends upon secrecy and confidentiality.

Rachel did not end the conversation because she felt uncomfortable with where it was going, but rather Peter ended it because he sensed her discomfort. Yet he knew in a way she could not have known that the conversation had not, in fact, violated any of the obligations of secrecy or non-disclosure. It is therefore possible that, while he himself knew that the discussion was technically above board, he thought that she, as a non-initiate, might wonder if Brady was crossing lines, and might be uncomfortable on the basis of that knowledge alone. Rather than try and explicitly parse the difference by explaining that some of what happens in the temple can be discussed in certain contexts, but some of it cannot, but don't worry, this is all kosher, he simply opted to change the subject. What distinguished her from her interlocutors, then, was not just her unawareness of the ceremony itself, but her unawareness of the fact that some parts of the ceremony are more sacred (and therefore more deliberately protected by secrecy) than others. Though unendowed, she is a lifetime member of the Church, and is acutely aware that taboos and communicative prohibitions apply to temple rites, but unlike the endowed Mormons in the conversation, she is not equipped to distinguish specifically between what can and cannot be said.

While modern social norms (particularly the political culture of classical liberalism) treats secrecy as scandalous, as a threat to a fetishized ideal of transparency and openness, the fact remains that limited and proprietary access to information, legal privilege, trust, and confidentiality—all contemporary euphemisms for secrecy—are essential to the protection, stabilization, and controlled circulation of the values (monetary, symbolic, brute) foundational to business, law, politics, marriage, friendship, education, entertainment, art, and, yes, religion (Bok, 1982). In the case of Mormonism, the three interlocking figurings of the sacred outlined above—its ontological and epistemological transcendence of ordinary language, its potency and

the threat it poses to the profane/ordinary, and its progressive pull of initiated persons toward God's presence—precede, both logically and historically, the ritual forms and codings of the temple and its liturgy. These logics also reinforce, in their everyday social and communicative performance, a strong association between secrecy or restricted access, on the one hand, and holiness, on the other. The sacred is secret.

### **Talk About Temple-Work**

*“One of my most vivid memories as a teenager was when my uncle told me his temple name.” Mark recently went to the temple for the first time. He's preparing to leave on a mission to South Africa. “I knew he had left the Church and was totally inactive. I suspected he was privately pretty anti-Mormon, but he had never badmouthed the Church to me. We were on our way to a movie, I think. Someone had recently told me that in the temple you learn your heavenly name, or something along those lines.” This is true. Initiates receive a new name which they should remember throughout their lives without ever revealing it, under any circumstances, to anyone. Mark continues: “he told me very casually, like it was nothing 'I think my name was Noah.' He wasn't trying to be in-your-face about it or anything, just told me as if he were giving me the most ordinary information, like the name of a college friend or something. I think, especially in hindsight, that's what most disturbs me about it, was how casually he treated it. At the time I didn't even know how serious it was to talk about, to reveal, that you actually make a covenant not to. I realize now that he was already past the point of no return, and that he'll never come back to the Church.”*

*This is a grave admission for Mark. He and his uncle were and continue to be very close. Now he tells me a story about another uncle. “Last week, the day before I went [to the temple] for the first time, my uncle Jason was telling me what to expect. Of course he didn't give much*

*detail, but he basically told me that you pretty much just make very serious covenants to do things you're already committed to doing, like obeying God, living the gospel, keeping the law of chastity. Then his friend Matt says 'yeah, if you're going to sleep with a girl, you should do it tonight.' We all kind of chuckled at that, but it also makes sense. He's right, because doing that would be a much more serious sin once you're endowed and you've made temple covenants not to do it. The repentance process would be much less serious if you haven't already been to the temple, because you're not sinning against as great a light." He looks at me with a subtle smile. "I didn't, though." Meaning, he didn't sleep with a girl that night.*

Considerations of secrecy and confidentiality invoke an image of discursive binary—of a partitioning of the spoken (or speakable) world into two opposing categories: the permitted and the forbidden, that which you can say, and that which you cannot. While the idea that there probably exists in most contexts some gray area or latitude between these two categories, talk about the temple in Mormonism is an example of the two categories (the forbidden and the permitted) and the nearly limitless cultural salience of their opposing pull effectively producing and stabilizing a third category: the neither-forbidden-nor-permitted.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the sheer gravity of the prohibitions against disclosing certain parts of temple ordinances in Mormonism. A violation of the sacred obligations not to reveal those aspects of the ceremonies formally protected by covenant is considered one of the highest breaches in the Mormon universe, an act of almost incomparable wickedness, open rebellion, a brazen mocking of God, a sin against the greatest imaginable light. If pressed on the direct comparability of the sin of disclosing temple secrets and, say, murder, most Mormons would agree that that the latter trumps the former on consideration of practical ethics alone, but that conclusion, for an endowed Mormon, would require careful and considered deliberation.

Mormon scripture describes sinning against or denying the Holy Ghost (a very vague behavioral category) as the most grievous, unforgivable sin. Many endowed Mormons consider the violation of temple covenants to be this sin. One high profile Mormon apostate wrote an online exposé of his temple experiences, which he entitled “I Am A Son Of Perdition.”

This powerful and explicit prohibition is the defining feature of the first category. It comprises those portions of temple ceremonies which the endowed are explicitly forbidden to reveal. It is legalistic, but the legalism is magnified by (and maybe itself magnifies) the power and potency of what is protected. Initiates are given certain key pieces of knowledge, the means by which they make and mark their progress toward God, and are placed under covenant (through accepting explicit oaths) to never reveal them. The obligations not to disclose the protected knowledge are as sacred as the knowledge itself; indeed, the shared sacredness is substantial since you receive the knowledge *by* a covenant not to reveal it to others. Such explicit and profoundly serious prohibitions technically apply to only a small portion of the overall ceremonial corpus of temple ordinances. Endowed Mormons accept binding covenants which define a category of protected discourse: there are simply certain things you absolutely cannot say about the temple, without an inch of latitude or room for compromise.

By contrast, there are certain things which are totally permissible to say about the temple, completely legitimate descriptions and accounts of what goes on there, the ordinances. This category of temple talk is defined primarily by official, Church-produced discourse and by public descriptions by Church leaders. The Church has endorsed several books written by apostles about the temple (Talmage, Packer 1980), and has produced instructional pamphlets (Packer 2002), preparatory curricula, and media descriptions of temples and temple-work (Ensign 2010). These accounts are similar to my depiction in the previous chapter. They are

generalized descriptions of the nature of temple ordinances and covenants, largely devoid of specific details (about either ceremonial procedure or the specific content of the covenants) or actual language from the ceremonies. Within the boundaries circumscribed by these official accounts, endowed Mormons are totally free to discuss temple rites with non-initiates and describe them to them. This is the discursive category of the expressly permitted. Notably, while the positive contours defining this category are generally rendered clear by the strong overlap in and continuities between official descriptions of the temple, an outer limit or absolute boundary is far from obvious. That is, it is fairly clear what content appropriate, faithful descriptions of the temple should or will likely include, but what should be excluded from such accounts is a murkier issue.

This leaves a third category. In terms of content, at least theoretically this category is simply defined as comprising all temple related discourse not expressly contained within the first two categories. And given the very small amount of discursive material technically covered by the other categories, that means that the majority of what actually happens in the temple falls in this category. Virtually all the ceremonial content, particularly the scripted ritual drama of Adam and Eve in the Garden and after their exile from it, aside from those small portions protected by specific covenants, are included. Qualitatively, this category is coded and defined by both of the other two. On the one hand, the category of permissible temple talk clearly reaches into the temple itself and applies to some of what happens there, but where its reach ends is unclear. How much detail about the ceremony (excluding forbidden elements) can you divulge without crossing the line out of safe, permissible territory? Descriptions coded as faithful generally approach this question conservatively and avoid testing the outer limits. Still, some descriptions of the ceremony are permitted.

On the other hand, the category of prohibitedness imposes genuine force here as well. The covenants of non-disclosure for a very limited range of temple discourse are so powerful and taken with such grave seriousness that the prohibitions effectively spill over onto the rest of the ceremony. The discursive proximity of the majority of what goes on in the temple to the actual secrets of the temple makes endowed Mormons intensely (though variably) uncomfortable openly or frankly talking about any of the ceremonial content. This is the in-between category, the neither expressly prohibited nor expressly permitted, the bulk of discursive material—most of the ceremonial language, sacred vestments and temple clothing, the aesthetics of the space—on which the category of permissibility has undeniable purchase and the category of prohibition exerts serious gravitational pull. Descriptions of most of LDS temple work are therefore both informally permitted and prohibited. How do these dynamics—the respective push and pull of the opposing poles that defines the intermediate category—play out discursively in Mormon talk about the temple, in a social world where people allegedly talk very limitedly about the temple and yet where its presence is everywhere? The argument I will develop in the excavation of Mormon language about the temple that follows is that this intermediate category, defined and culturally encoded solely in terms of its relationship to two other much more simple and obvious discursive categories, is where the real socially productive and generative power of Mormon temple discourse is most richly present.

### **Parentheses: Neither Forbidden Nor Permitted**

Such middle or intermediate semiotic categories or modes of expression are a vital part of lived Mormonism. On the surface, Mormon ethical and behavioral codes appear strongly binary, structured around opposing, eternal moral categories: righteous and sinful, obedience or disobedience to divine commandments. And in many cases this pattern holds. But there are a

number of behavioral guidelines which, because not strictly enforced or coded as formal commandments, permit an in-between, gray space in which a range of performative options remain open to still strongly committed Latter-day Saints. A rich example comes from the LDS dietary code, the Word of Wisdom. This is the source of Mormon religious prohibitions against the consumption of coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. There is virtually no latitude here, and fidelity to the prohibitions is actually a precondition for entering the temple. But there is at least one area of gray: caffeinated sodas. On the one hand, caffeine is a demonstrably habit forming stimulant. On the other hand, its effects are generally mild, and is not coded in wider consumer culture as drug-like, even in the way that tobacco and alcohol are. Perhaps most relevant, it is not explicitly prohibited under the scriptural, canonical revelation that forms the basis for the Word of Wisdom.

In recent generations, caffeine avoidance has become an important, but not absolutely binding, cultural marker for Mormons. Caffeine-free variants of nearly all soda brands are widely available in and around Utah, and soda fountains in the campus of BYU stock caffeine-free Coke, Diet Coke, Barques Root Beer, and Mountain Dew. Yet because it is not formally prohibited, and because, in contrast to the five items listed above, Mormons are not asked about caffeine consumption during ecclesiastical interviews assessing temple-worthiness, Mormons are still technically free to drink their Diet Coke with caffeine. Caffeine drinking, then, is a fruitful semiotic resource for branding oneself along a spectrum of observance, without the risk of drawing oneself outside of the circle of faithful fellowship.

Strict caffeine avoidance is as potentially conspicuous as caffeine drinking, because decaffeinated versions of popular beverages are explicitly marked as such. *Not* drinking caffeine is something you *do*. And it can be a way of doing or enacting a particular form of vigilant

obedience. It is going the extra mile, erring on the side of strict obedience to commandments. Conversely, caffeine consumption (also conspicuous) can mark you as non-conformist, can be a culturally salient form of rebellion, free from the risk of disapproval. It is a performative (both in the sense of demonstrating as well as enacting) for liberal or “edgy” Mormon, as opposed to “inactive” or lapsed or unbelieving Mormon (like drinking alcohol would clearly be). And even those patterns of performed Mormonness have limitations. Scrupulous avoidance of caffeine can have mildly socially toxic effects, indicating self-righteousness as opposed to righteousness, whereas conspicuous caffeine drinking can denote obnoxious or self-absorbed rebelliousness-for-its-own-sake. Such considerations and their entailed performative ramifications are far from the only or even the primary drivers or indicators for caffeine consumption in Mormon culture. Yet they are still inescapable. Whatever other, perhaps health-related, reasons a Mormon might have for caffeine avoidance, there is no avoiding the fact that it is heavily coded as hyper-strict obedience. If caffeine consumption were either absolutely prohibited or totally and explicitly permitted, the choice, in either case, to drink it or avoid it would mean something very different than in the context of its current cultural configuration.

The logic of not-a-commandment but a widely reinforced cultural rule applies strongly to dress and personal presentation standards. There is no formal, absolute rule dictating that adolescent and adult males must wear a *white* dress shirt to Sunday worship services. But most males do, it is often remarked upon as a sign of respect and reverence for the sanctity of the worship setting, and there is strong pressure to do it. This is especially true because the pressure increases once adult males begin to ascend the hierarchy of ecclesiastical leadership. Although there are no written rules dictating it, it is a universal rule—formally enforced as “The Unwritten Order Of Things”—that ecclesiastical leaders at the ward, stake, mission, area, and general

Church levels always wear white and only white shirts to church and to church related meetings. It would be considered well outside the boundaries of acceptable for an adolescent or adult male to wear a t-shirt to church, but wearing a nicely-kept, *non-white* formal dress shirt is a way of signaling one's non-conformity, as well as one's lack of ecclesiastical status or (sometimes more importantly) ambition. If wearing a white shirt were an absolute rule (in the way that, for example, wearing a dress shirt is), then the choice to wear one would have extremely limited semiotic reach; if, on the other hand, there were no more pressure to wear white than any other colored dress shirt, the same would be true.

This logic holds for a number of behavioral and self-presentational standards: women wearing slacks to church; multiple ear-piercings (and body piercings); tattoos; watching R-rated movies; wearing sleeveless shirts (for teenage girls); having long hair or facial hair (for males); using mild swear words (hell, damn, ass). Most of these standards are so closely tied to larger cultural practices and norms (and to the negotiated separation or distinction from wider cultural standards), that they have limited shelf-lives. At one point, listening to the Beatles or rock music in general was a similarly coded group norm. R-rated movies and caffeine are now less culturally salient than they were even a single generation ago, whereas regulations of ear- and body-piercings or tattoos are of more recent vintage (indeed, the prophetic statements which underly these new norms, though not formally binding in the way that other prohibitions are, are recent enough that non-adherence to them is still probably too strongly coded as unfaithful to reach their full range of potential for intracultural signaling). Thus, while sociological discourse, with varying degrees of theoretical rigor and usefulness (and influence on Anthropology), has preoccupied itself with the distinction between laws, rules, and norms (Parsons, Bourdieu) my concern here is primarily with the semiotic significance of such informal but stable patterns of

cultural regulation. The intermediate category—qualitatively defined as near-but-not-quite-commandment, formally neither prohibited nor permitted—is richly semiotically productive. Informal but strict, widely known behavioral and presentational regulations provide the semiotic raw material from which social actors can draw to performatively generate social indexicalities, a gradient of enactable social roles and characterological types within the boundaries of “active,” faithful, observant Mormonism.

### **Known Unknowns**

*Michael, age 23, is an active participant in the online world of intellectual Mormonism. He avidly reads Mormon blogs (known collectively as the Bloggernacle), where he comments often enough that his internet moniker is fairly well-known. “I remember first realizing that they were connected, historically,” he tells me, in reference to the temple ceremony and the rites of freemasonry. “I’ve always avoided reading exposés of the temple, even though I’ve read about all of the Church’s other dirty secrets”—probably a reference to, among other things, early polygamy, the mountain meadows massacre, and the historical practice of prohibiting black men with African ancestry from holding the priesthood. “So I never read about the temple itself, but I started to read about masonry. I found stuff online, some Mormon sites, some not. I even bought a book.” The relationship between the temple and Masonic rites is a prominent theme in Mormon studies, and a prominent focus of anti-Mormon/post-Mormon discourse. “I remember I was showing my older brother some of the stuff from the masonic ceremony, some of the handshakes and signs, just because I found them interesting. I hadn’t been to the temple yet, but he had. Of course now I can see how uncomfortable what I was showing him made him. He was trying to act like it didn’t phase him, because he didn’t want me to know about the connection. I think I could tell, though, because I stopped and didn’t show him any more. But it’s not like*

*either of us said anything about it.”*

Taussig (1999) elaborates on the power of the public secret as “knowing what not to know,” as the “most interesting, the most powerful, the most mischievous and ubiquitous form of socially active knowledge there is” (2-3). The public secret and its explosive potency underlies Taussig's entire analysis of defacement and the flows of social energy it releases into the world. In the case of Mormonism, the communicative and semiotic patterns generated by the secrecy of the temple draw their productivity in part from the fact that the temple is not an *absolute* secret. It is a public secret (though it differs in key ways from Taussig's description of Isla Grande initiation rites). It is a known (as opposed to unknown) unknown. It isn't as if non-initiated or pre-initiated Mormons are unaware that the temple and its ceremonial mysteries exist. The temple is everywhere in Mormonism. The confidential or secret elements of the temple are known to be secrets, even by those who do not know them. Further, they are actually easily accessible through the wide range of exposés that are available in numerous books and on the internet. Both endowed and unendowed Mormons are acutely aware of this, and so are non-Mormons for whom the secrets of the temple are a known unknown.

Temple secrets are public secrets, secrets whose existence is widely known, even if the details are not. Michael knew exactly what he wasn't supposed to know—and what he scrupulously avoided knowing. He poked and prodded around the edges, familiarizing himself with the secrets (not sacred to him) of freemasonry, but also recognized when the sharing of those secrets with an initiated Mormon (his brother—Michael knew his brother knew what he was not supposed to know, and which he did not know because he knew to avoid knowing it) threatened to inappropriately reference or implicate what they both knew he was not supposed to know. To see the possibilities of social and cultural productivity the known-ness of nevertheless

highly confidential secrets, consider an admittedly incomplete but still useful analogy: the money multiplier.

Banks store money for individuals who trust the security of the banks enough to keep their money there for long and generally predictable periods of time. The banks can then, in turn, lend out the money, essentially multiplying its existence and its effects in a stable manner across the economy. As long as there aren't major defaults on non-collateralized loans, a currency crisis, or a run on the banks by depositors, the financialization of monetized economies can stably and predictably grow the supply of money both through the lending of deposited funds and through the interest on deposits and loans (essentially the buying and selling of currency for currency). This is a wildly oversimplified description of the multiplier effect, but helps illustrate a key point: the multiplier is essentially a semiotic phenomenon. Banks do what they do precisely because they combine the security of absolute protection of deposits with a general public awareness that the deposits exist. Banks can't/don't use safe-deposit boxes as a cash store backing their lending activity, because safe-deposits are absolute secrets, a more-secure equivalent of under-the-mattress storage. It is the combination of public awareness that the deposits exist with the fact of absolute public non-access to the deposits that underlies the bank's ability to credibly lend and multiply money within the economy. But if banks were secret institutions which only depositors knew existed, the deposits could not be the generative foundation for a productive lending economy.

Setting aside the well documented historical, sociological, and iconographic similarities between temples and banks/treasuries, the productive possibilities intrinsic to carefully managed public secrets involving agreed-upon forms/sources of value and severely restricted access to the valuables in question are evident in both cases. Restricted access to sacred spaces, vestments,

words and phrases, information, thresholds, and ritual forms—in short, to discursive materials which are widely known to exist but a specific awareness of which and access to which are confined to special functionaries and the initiates to whom they specifically grant access—is vested with the logical and semiotic potential to multiply and spread the value of holiness across the symbolic economy oriented around and defined by the limited-access space. One way to think about the analysis that follows is as an excavation of this semiotic field—the structured regulations by which holiness is channeled in and out of the vaults of the temple sanctuary, and of the discursive feedback mechanisms through which movement in and out of the temple actually mobilizes and augments the productive capacity, the leveragability, the consumption, the transactionability, and social-generativity of holiness within the Mormon symbolic economy.

### **Unknown Unknowns**

The public/open secrecy of temple-work in general stands in contrast to the actual and absolute secrecy of one particular feature of its ritual corpus: the ordinance known variously as the Second Anointing (or Second Anointings), second endowment, or the Fullness of the Priesthood. The blessings of this ordinance are conferred onto only a very small number of Mormons, usually after the better part of a lifetime of faithful and loyal service. Because of the heightened dimension of secrecy here, even the most cursory description of the rites would be as inappropriate as it would be of questionable accuracy. These rites are a closed, absolute secret. Only those Mormons considered most trustworthy by high Church leadership are invited to participate, and they are expressly instructed not to disclose anything about the ordinance, including their own participation in it, to anyone, including family (only married couples participate in the rite). To the extent that any Mormons (besides the initiated) are aware that such a thing exists, it is largely due to historical scholarship on the topic. Such ordinances were more

common during the Church's early years, and some scholars have published research and analysis on their history. Significantly, academic treatments of the topic are generally limited to non-Mormon or openly heretical scholars. Devotional scholars and scholars employed by the Church generally avoid the topic, and when they can't evade it altogether, they avoid too direct references to it (for example, it is categorically verboten to use the phrase "second anointing").

Still, a general historical or abstract awareness of this ordinance creates a small amount of discursive latitude for (very carefully) discussing it. On the one hand, a non-initiate could plausibly know enough about the rite to comment intelligently on it; on the other, an initiate, otherwise bound not to acknowledge anything about it, might pass for a non-initiate whose knowledge of it draws from something other than personal, first-hand experience. Gossip about the ordinance, therefore, is typically limited to speculation about whether or not it still exists in Church practice, and about its general frequency. Indeed, speculative discussion of the topic almost always includes the aphoristic observation: "those who know don't talk, and those who talk don't know." Talking or writing about it in detail, then, is coded as transgressive, as a violation. Even if the detail is derived from publicly available historical sources, you're abrogating the discursive norms of faithful scholarship. And if the detail is derived from first-hand experience, the transgression is far more serious. And there is no effective way to make the former absolutely distinctive from the latter, except in cases where the possibility of the speaker having received the ordinance stretches credulity. This would apply to non-Mormon scholars (who would, by virtue of their standing outside of the obligations of Church membership, be shielded against charges of faithlessness), though not to former-Mormon scholars (who could be branded as apostates by the conversation). But it would also apply scholars who do not fit the (rumored) biographical or demographic pattern of participation in the ordinance: namely, that it

is given to elderly married LDS couples with a history of service in high-ranking ecclesiastical counsels.

A rich ethnographic anecdote gets to the heart of some of these semiotic and social complexities. I spoke with Adam, a well known, well-respected devotional Mormon scholar. His books are widely popular in Mormonism and enjoy the support of the LDS Church's publishing arm. He writes in a very conscious effort to support and strengthen faith in Mormonism. During a long conversation, he brought up the topic of second anointings, specifically as an example of a kind of secrecy more qualitatively and quantitatively strict than what usually governs talk about temple-work. He described in some detail the kinds of self-censorship and discretion he had to use in writing a recent book, portions of which had the potential to run into historical accounts of these rites (to the point that he even had to go in and use his word processor software to locate all instances of a particular phrase and replace them with a less revealing, less loaded phrase). He then proceeded to tell me two stories, which he described as representing exceptions to the general taboos surrounding the topic. One involved the rather clumsy efforts of an unnamed colleague of his at elliptically conveying his (the colleague's) recent reception of this ordinance. The colleague had tried to say it without saying it explicitly, to communicate something he was not supposed to communicate but in a way that preserved deniability. Adam told me that he felt that his colleague had rather sharply failed in this regard. He felt that the disclosure, however oblique or coy, had constituted a violation of the obligation of non-disclosure, and he was honestly baffled at why the man had behaved in such a spiritually reckless manner.

The second story involved Adam's recent visit to Church headquarters, in Salt Lake City. There he had met with a member of the Church's quorum of Twelve Apostles. This apostle

conveyed to him that he and other Church leaders were very concerned about a man who had recently apostatized (left and denounced Mormonism). What most concerned and surprised the leaders was that they had genuinely had complete confidence in the man, and had called him to several prominent leadership positions over the course of his adult life. “He,” the apostle noted, “had even received his second anointing.” Adam's stated purpose in sharing this story was conveying his own surprise at the casual, off-the-cuff manner in which the apostle had mentioned the second anointing. In his experience (Adam's), such open talk was highly, highly irregular, yet he certainly did not question it, coming from an apostle. What is so interesting to me about these stories is not just the degree to which they illustrate the freighted norms surrounding the subject of second anointings and its general unspeakability. What struck me only later was the strong impression that hearing those stories gave me that Adam had, in fact, at some point himself received the ordinance, and that he had somehow managed to communicate that to me (in contrast with his colleague) without coming anywhere near actually telling me that, or even hinting at it. Whether or not he was conscious of this, or intended it, I realized that I assumed in listening to his stories that both his tactless colleague and the apostle in question had themselves assumed that Adam was an initiate. Of course, it's possible that they both just assumed a certain awareness on his part based on his reputation as a scholar of Mormonism. But I did walk away from that encounter with the strong impression that Adam had managed to do the impossible: to convey to me that he had received his second anointing without violating, in any way, his obligation not to convey it.

It turns out that there are also spaces in Mormonism that constitute exceptions to these rules. Though it is far from clear how or why this has happened, there are LDS congregations in certain parts of the world where second anointings have spilled out of the realm of absolute

secret and into open-secret status. That is, in these congregations the existence of second anointings is generally known and potential recipients of the ordinance are the subject of gossip. Congregants will often quietly inform visitors or new ward members that “that guy over there has had his second anointing.” This is remarkably unusual in Mormonism. But it illustrates a difference that makes a difference: the difference between public and absolute secrets.

### **Sacred Secrets**

*“On my mission I was a branch president in a really tiny town. So I got a copy of the Handbook.” Eric is now the Bishop of a congregation in Salt Lake, married with four children. He works as a financial advisor for an LDS-Church-owned company. “My companion would always ask me questions about it. We called it 'The Book of Knowledge.' When other missionaries were at our apartment, they would always ask if they could see it. It was kind of a joke, but I was usually very uncomfortable letting them look. I didn't even know it existed before I got the calling.” Branch president is the equivalent of Bishop, except for a smaller congregation. Now technically in his second tenure as a Handbook carrying ecclesiastical leader, Eric is more sanguine about the book. “I think more people know it exists now than did 20 years ago. Even before they made the second one public., people would regularly ask me what it said about this or that, or would I show them a certain part. I would always have them come into my office, and usually I would just open it myself and read out loud the passage that was relevant to their question. Once, someone wanted to know if they could photocopy a certain passage, since they needed it to make a point to a relative about whatever their concern was. I read the passage out loud and let them write down the exact phrasing. Then I told them they could read it to the other person, but they had to promise they would tear it up and throw it away as soon as they were finished.”*

The association between secrecy and the sacred in Mormonism is so strong, and the phrase “it's not secret, it's sacred” so clichéd, that one prominent LDS internet humorist created a web page called Post Sacred. Riffing on the well-known and popular site PostSecret, where people mail letters or postcards in which they anonymously disclose sometimes extremely scandalous personal secrets, Post Sacred displays fake notes from Mormons who “confess” their secret transgressions (“I get bored during Sunday school and my mind wanders...”). The playful troping underscores the strong identification of secrecy with holiness in LDS discourse. Consider another example. For more than a century, Mormon central (general) leadership has published and distributed instructional manuals for local leaders. Revised regularly, and known variously as *Annual Instructions*, *Handbook of Instructions*, *General Handbook of Instructions*, and now simply the *Handbook*, it is a two-volume set of instructional guidelines, policies, and procedures, prepared by the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency (the Church president and his counselors), for leaders at the ward and stake level. The volumes are meant as a practical guide as well as doctrinal foundation for the day to day running and work of the Church. For most of its history, the *Handbook*, in its various incarnations, was made available only to those individuals working in the specific leadership callings to which the instructions were directed. The books were to be kept confidential, not made publicly available or shown to anybody not in the relevant leadership positions.

As the conversation with Eric indicates, for decades there was a strong sentiment in Mormonism that the Church handbooks represented a kind of privileged, special, even esoteric knowledge. This was a public secret, par excellence. Leaders who had access to the book knew well how mundane and procedural its contents actually were, but the taboos around unauthorized access to the book were often so strong that leaders declined to say anything at all about it. The

obvious utility and importance of the book for Church governance was shrouded in mystery by the secrecy and restricted access to its content. Perhaps the strongest evidence for the association between secrecy and sacredness here—for the restricted access to the volumes driving and augmenting their perceived mystery and holy significance—has been the dramatic demystification of the handbooks in the very short time since they were made public. Actually, Church leaders made only the second volume publicly available online (*Volume 1* is still governed by the same accessibility guidelines), but even that alone precipitated a major shift in attitudes toward both books. Though still viewed as authoritative and important, the mystery and esoteric aura have largely vanished. The key, though, has not been actual exposure to the *Volume 2* text. People aren't reading it and experiencing disenchantment at its content. Rather the demystification is a result of its availability, driven not by an actual encounter with the text but by the mere awareness of its public accessibility (with the effect applying to both volumes).

A identification between limited access and sacred gravity underlies a key part of the process preparing Church members to go to the temple (and maintaining standards of worthiness to continue to participate in temple-work). In order to enter an LDS temple, Mormons are interviewed by ecclesiastical leaders to assess their degree of commitment, faithfulness, and observance of behavioral standards. Successful completion of the interviews results in the conferral of a *temple recommend*, a card that gains one admission at the entrance of any temple. The recommend is a kind of certification of one's temple-worthiness and, provided one does not forfeit one's recommend through major infractions of the standards it measures (ecclesiastical leaders can and sometimes do revoke recommends of congregants who confess serious transgressions), it lasts two years (after which one repeats the interview process and receives a new card). There are two identical interviews, one with the bishop and one with the stake

president (or one of his counselors). The questions are all yes/no format, specifically scripted and leaders are admonished to ask them with undeviating exactness, and to ask the questions only (not to expand or comment on them). So the exact same questions, worded exactly the same way (leaders who conduct these interviews typically memorize the questions instead of reading them), in the exact same order are presented to the recommend-seeking ward-member twice.

The recommend interview, though, is the final step in a long process of preparing Church members for temple-work and temple covenants. Temple ordinances are the culminating ritual experience and cumulative salvific requirement for exaltation in the Mormon eternal world. In some sense, the entirety of one's experience in the Church prior to entering the temple is meant primarily as preparation for it. More specifically, Mormons preparing to go to the temple participate in formal, standardized Temple Preparation courses during weekly Sunday services. The course lasts several weeks and employs standard, church-produced curriculum. Church members routinely note (occasionally by complaint) that the course does very little to prepare pre-initiates for what they will actually encounter and experience inside the temple. Indeed, the course materials seem to go to great lengths to avoid anything like a description of what temple ceremonies are actually like (in rare instances the course instructors will opt to describe the rites in fuller detail, but do so in acknowledgement of how this approach deviates from the official course materials). Generally, the course is understood and organized as preparation for temple-worthiness and for accepting the moral and behavioral obligations of temple covenants.

One of the lessons in the course manual (*Endowed From On High: Temple Preparation Seminar Teacher's Manual*) is devoted specifically to preparation for the temple recommend interview and the standards it enforces. The teachers are advised to invite the bishop to give a short presentation about temple recommends and the interview process. Bishops are specifically

admonished, however, that they “should not read the actual interview questions in a group setting,” but instead should “present ideas about what class members can expect when they are interviewed” (Chapter 2). Church members should only hear the actual language and verbiage of the questions in the interview setting, inside a bishop's or stake president's office, and only as part of a semi-ritualized process of symbolically entering the temple (by acquiring the means to do so). The speaking of the questions in the interview is the only scripted performance in Mormonism that is not explicitly an ordinance. Mormons are encouraged to undergo the interviews even when, based on geography or other circumstances, they are pragmatically unable to do temple-work. Temple worthiness is a goal in itself, and church members are strongly encouraged to always have a current, non-expired recommend. Participation in the structured, ritual-like interview process is the only space in which Mormons acquire familiarity with the language of the questions, which are not publicly available (even in the *Handbook*). The specific wording and verbiage of the questions is encoded with sacral efficacy by their exclusion from ordinary discourse. Subsequent sections will explicate the relationship these discursive containment regulations forge between the space of the interview and the inside of the temple itself.

### **Actual Silence**

*“You used to be able to talk freely about this stuff, as long as you were in the temple. I remember hours-long discussions, sometimes wildly speculative, about the endowment, and about what this or that meant or might represent.” Robert is in his late 70s. His office shelf is covered with books about Mormon temples and ancient temples. He just finished showing me how the Salt Lake temple is constructed on a plot with 2-to-1 dimensions—twice as long as wide—and how you can use a 2X1 rectangle to create a golden rectangle. He tells me that the*

*architect of the temple consulted esoteric medieval sources like Vitruvius. “They don't let you do that anymore. Nowadays, if you try talking in the celestial room, those old ladies will just hush you. 'Sshhhh!' And you used to be able to talk with the temple president about this stuff too. Now they either won't listen to your questions or else they'll just say that it's all a matter of personal interpretation and there are no official answers.”*

Consider the distinction between the structured silence, the patterns of discretion and unmentionability under examination here, and actual silence as an aesthetic, aural quality. Bauman's analysis (1984) focuses on the function of silence in generating distinctive religious identity and divine communion for 17th-century Quakers. In contemporary Mormonism, actual silence plays an important role not just in worship but in the semiotic codings of sacred space and sacred language. Quietude and silence are aesthetic markers of reverence, of its performance as an outward representation of an inner quality or orientation toward sacred things. Quiet reverence is an essential feature of the holiness of the space and work of the temple, such that “temple voice” is a common Mormon way to describe a barely audible whisper. Yet the actual language of the ceremonies is spoken at normal, conversational levels. It is only extra-ritual verbal communication within the temple that is meant to be as quiet (reverent) as possible. Further, temple patrons are strongly and expressly discouraged from discussing everyday, worldly topics inside the temple. These aesthetic and content-oriented regulations create a layer of discursive insulation around the ceremonies, a buffer zone or barrier formally separating ritual language from forms of talk and communication that characterize the outside world.

The premium placed on silence as an aesthetic and moral value, as an index of holiness, inside the temple has other effects, particular in its articulation with the larger patterns of structured silence built around temple discourse. In theory, the temple is the one space in which

Mormons should feel free to openly discuss the details of its rites. For many generations, this was in fact the case in practice. Temple patrons would often spend time privately discussing the ceremony, its symbols, its meanings, its implications after participating in it. Such conversations would sometimes take place in the Celestial Room (the room where ceremonial participants finish the endowment, representing the presence of God), and sometimes just in a private room elsewhere in the temple. But over recent years, the emphasis on quiet and silence, and the increased association of silence with reverence for the sacred, has greatly reduced the possibility for substantive discussion within the temple—particularly in the Celestial Room. Robert's description above is emblematic of a common complaint among older generation temple-going Mormons: that there is simply no longer any space, anywhere in Mormonism, where the details of the temple can be comfortably and openly discussed.

There is a strong sentiment in Mormonism today that the meaning of the temple is solely a matter of private contemplation, not of discussion. There is no commentary on the temple, no published exegesis of its hidden truths, no open speculation on the meaning behind its symbols. This is not taken as a particularly or necessarily negative development (and in some sense, it is only the augmenting and hardening of an already long-standing tradition of avoiding exegetical analysis of the temple), particularly among younger Mormons. One popular LDS scholar even compared this to Quentin Tarantino's description of the light in the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction*: the briefcase contains whatever the viewer needs it to contain, just like the symbols of the temple, not subject to official interpretation, “are there for us to interpret as we need them, when we need them.” Nevertheless, the space for commenting, speculating, discussing, questioning, and explicating the temple ceremony is shrinking to the point of vanishing. Mormons can *only* speak about the temple indirectly, elliptically, obliquely, euphemistically, and covertly, with the need

for such patterns of semiotic evasiveness varying (but never disappearing) in correspondence to one's proximity to the innermost spaces of the temple itself.

The effects of these discursive constraints are most sharply felt in settings where the temple is explicitly (if discretely) discussed, and not just by endowed Mormons. Temple preparation courses exemplify the tensions at play in discussing temple-work outside of the temple, in part because of the unusual threshold straddled by those (the students) addressed by the instructional discourse. As noted above, the official curriculum is almost entirely devoid of details regarding temple-work. Yet the curriculum is not comprehensive and encourages instructors to promote discussion, share personal stories, and invite and answer questions from the students. Further, students are unsurprisingly curious about the temple. Thus, temple-prep students comprise the category of unendowed Mormons (and therefore uninitiated into the discursive norms that regulate how the temple is to be talked about) closest to the temple threshold. They are faithful, committed, observant Church members actively pursuing admission to the temple and seeking to conform their lives to the standards of temple worthiness and temple covenants. They are on the immediate cusp of admission, and an awareness that they will very soon be initiated into the sacred knowledge of the temple does guide the discursive choices of the course instructors.

Some instructors stick closely to the patterns of non-disclosure characterized by the official teaching materials. Others choose, strictly within the setting of the preparation class, to discuss the Endowment and other temple ordinances in great detail, omitting only those elements most explicitly protected by covenants of non-disclosure. Such detailed descriptions are still rare, but more open disclosure in temple-prep courses is increasingly common, particularly in the case of younger instructors, whereas a more reserved, conservative approach still tends to

prevail among older generations. This generational gap extends beyond the space of the temple-prep class—including other devotional-educational settings where studying scriptures and Church history regularly leads to discussions of the temple (seminary and institute courses, for teenagers and college students, respectively)—and is generally observable in Mormon discourse on the temple. In negotiating what one can and cannot say and the addressee categories to which different degrees of disclosure are appropriate, younger Mormons tend to be more comfortable sharing more and speaking with greater candor, at least regarding those aspects of the ceremonies not strictly protected by covenants.

One might reflexively explain away this observation in terms of generalized notions of elderly versus generation X demographics, conservatism versus pushing-the-envelope, etc., but recall the fact that older Church members—those who have been going to the temple for decades—acquired their fluency in the norms of temple discourse in a time when open discussion of the rites was not only possible but common within the temple itself. Further, past versions of the ceremony (Church leaders occasionally revise and edit the ceremony, and major revisions occurred during the early 1990s) had a notably higher level of content that seemed, in itself, strange or unusual, elements that endowed mormons were instinctively hesitant to speak casually about or disclose to outsiders. With much of the esoteric ritual features scaled back as the rites were revised by Church leadership, younger Mormons feel more comfortable talking openly about the ceremony, because the ceremony itself feels less in need of protective secrecy. Combine this generational difference in perception of the ceremony's “coefficient of weirdness” (pace: Malinowski) with a now lacking space for open discussion or commentary on the ceremony and it is not surprising that younger endowed Mormons are more prone toward candid patterns of talk than their much older peers, without that increased candor in any way reflecting

a decrease in the seriousness or reverence with which they regard temple-work as a whole.

### **Insider Discourse: Experiencing the Sacred by Proxy**

*Seth and Kristen are both high school juniors in Bountiful, Utah. They both agreed to spend their lunch period (along with half a dozen other students) here in their LDS Seminary classroom based on the promise of donuts (which I furnished). We're talking about the temple, about preparing to go to the temple, and about hearing older, endowed Mormons talk about the temple. "It makes me feel a little uncomfortable, but I can't really explain why," Seth admits. "Like I'm not supposed to be there." Kristen continues in a similar vein: "it's like an inside joke, but one where you know that there's an inside joke, that the others have an inside joke, but you're not in on it." She says this playfully, without frustration or resentment. I note that being on the outside of an inside joke is usually alienating and frustrating. "Well," she replies, "I guess not in that way." She thinks for a second. "It's more like it just makes you want to get in on it, so it doesn't hurt your feelings or anything, just makes you more motivated to go to the temple." "Yeah," Seth adds, "it makes me more curious." I ask if that makes them want to ask questions about the temple, even though they're uncomfortable in those situations. "No," says Kristen; "it makes you want to be worthy to go there eventually and to learn about it, to see for yourself."*

An intriguing consequence of the self-consciousness involved in all the choices about what should or should not be disclosed or discussed and in what settings is the effect these discursive routines have on the perceptions of the uninitiated. Three different, but related demographic groups described similar reactions to hearing endowed Mormons talk about the temple: adolescent Mormons who self identify as active in the Church; unendowed but active adult members; and non-LDS scholars of Mormonism who actively participate in the Mormon

intellectual community. People from all three groups consistently described feeling shifted to the outside of conversations when endowed Mormons started to talk about the temple. This was more than just a lacking common experience. For people sufficiently acculturated to recognize the significance of the temple as well as the scope of their own lacking awareness of what happens inside temples, conversations among insiders are unusually alienating experiences.

When their parents or Church leaders talk about the temple Mormon teenagers (as noted above) are acutely aware that other speakers are in on something, and they feel excluded by a combination of their own unawareness of subject with the very obvious shared awareness of the others. But they also report that the exclusion generally serves to heighten the mystery of the rites and their motivation to eventually go to the temple. Non-LDS scholars of Mormonism find this phenomenon equally prevalent, and far more alienating, precisely because the exclusion is not channeled into a desire to enter the temple and get in on the secret. One scholar (unwittingly channeling Geertz) described feeling like “everyone else in the room was winking, and I knew they were winking, but I couldn't see the actual winks.” He found it extremely uncomfortable and, though generally quite comfortable (and in some sense even an insider) among Mormons, he hates being around Mormons when the subject of the temple comes up.

\* \* \*

A sense of the effect that insider-talk about the temple has on non-initiates is a helpful backdrop for an analysis not only of the details of such patterns of talk but of their potential effects on those discursively positioned on the inside. Discourse of the sacred in Mormonism is fruitfully oriented around a particular space and set of ritual practices, highly guarded by secrecy, but universally present throughout the Mormon world. The temple is situated firmly within this discursive formation, where much of what should or should not be said about fits

somewhere between opposing poles of explicit prohibition and permission, where language has a freighted and complicated relationship with the sacred things it attempts to describe, and where everyone knows what only some know, and precisely what they are not meant to know. Long before the temple is encountered as a physical and material space and set of ritual practices, it is encountered as a known unknown—even as a knowable unknown which the faithful choose not to know, so they can later become worthy to know it. Outside the temple, talk about the temple articulates with silence about the temple in ways that can have strong effects on the uninitiated. What are the specific features of talk about the temple that conduce such effects? And what are the effects of talk about the temple on those who actually engage in it as discursive insiders?

### Chapter 3: “Those With Ears To Hear”

“Satan boldly announces his clever plan to use that very enmity to his advantage and set men against each other by it in a rule of blood and horror. How? By offering men anything in this world for money and so making men competitive—competitive in a big way. He would, with the natural wealth of the earth (precious metals, coal, oil, timber, real estate), as exploited by financiers (manipulation of the money market), buy up armies and navies (they cost the most—the military-industrial complex), and the leaders of nations and churches (who embody power), and rule the earth with terror.”

---Hugh Nibley, “The Law of Consecration” (transcript of a talk given at LDS Church headquarters, reprinted in *Approaching Zion*)

Recall the earlier discussion of an intermediate discursive category of talk about the temple, one involving neither expressly prohibited nor expressly permitted references to and descriptions of the temple ceremony. Perhaps nowhere in the Mormon semiotic economy is the richness, salience, and intermediateness of this category more evident (and more subtle) than in the forms of insider-speak and coded-signaling which I call *temple code*. Endowed Mormons, particularly those who regularly attend the temple, actually quote the ceremony to each other with some regularity. There are strong, if unspoken or unwritten, regulations governing and constraining the ways the language of temple rites can be mobilized in everyday discourse, but language (deployed as speech or writing) about the temple is almost always interspersed with bits of language *from* the temple. In addition to direct, if surreptitious, quotes from the actual ceremonial language of the endowment, temple code also includes allusions to unique features or

qualities of temple discourse which fellow initiates will hear and understand as references to the temple.

Sometimes the practice is playful, a kind of inside joke. This is especially the case when it occurs among peers or social equals. Humor can be a powerful source of social bonding and co-identification, and humor drawn from a shared experience and familiarity with temple discourse (including with the standards that distinguish appropriate from inappropriate quotations) can augment this effect. Because humor and discursive playfulness entail the strong potential to trivialize sacred things, the regulations and normative patterns of discretion that separate respectful from sacrilegious invocations of temple-speak are especially salient in such settings. At other times, verbally gesturing toward or quoting the temple is an act saturated with rhetorical, social, spiritual, and ecclesiastical power. The language of the temple can be appropriated by a speaker or writer to display, enact, or reinforce cultural and moral authority to an extent that not even quoting scripture can match. Yet even in such cases, norms of propriety must be strictly observed in order to prevent the social consequences of invoking the language of the temple from essentially backfiring, from neutralizing or even (more likely) undermining their intended effects (and the status and authority of those who improperly attempt their use).

Church leaders, including (and perhaps especially) apostles, routinely invoke temple language in their public discourse, usually discretely but occasionally in rather obvious ways (obvious, at least, for those attuned to the language, words, and phrasings in question). Apostles also explicitly caution against using temple language outside the temple (Hinckley, 1990). Such admonitions generally apply explicitly to insider-speak of the more playful or humorous variety, and are sometimes accompanied by cautions against sacrilege which themselves draw on the contours of portions of the temple ceremony which warn against disclosing temple secrets—

essentially using temple language in an admonition against using temple language. This isn't taken by most Mormons as hypocrisy but rather as an index of the responsibility apostles have to preside over and protect the rites of the temple and its sanctity. And the caution and discretion with which apostles adumbrate temple language in official speech reinforces the taboo against using it casually.

Apostolic speech highlights the importance of addressivity in calibrating the use of temple language. When apostles speak (in their capacity as apostles, *ex cathedra*, as it were), they address the general body of Church membership—a group which manifestly includes temple-attending Mormons (those capable of recognizing the invocation of phrasings from the temple ceremony, and for whom such warnings are most relevant). They speak with assurance that those to whom their admonitions against treating the holiness of the temple casually are addressed will hear, recognize, and understand the sacred gravity temple language imparts to their words. Most instances, however, of this kind of coded-signaling or insider-speak occur at much smaller levels of semiotic scale and involve smaller disparities (or no disparities at all) of ecclesiastical authority between interlocutors. Typically, Mormons only parrot temple language in the presence of other Mormons they are confident will recognize the signal. This might mean a gathering primarily comprised of endowed Mormons, or a deliberate signal to only one other fellow Mormon in a room full of non-Mormons. Whether the intended effect is humorous or more rhetorically serious, the speaker addresses those in whose ears the language of the temple will clearly resonate.

### **Parentheses on knowing what not to know (and say) as an ethnographer**

*“It's kind of like fair use in copyright, don't you think?” Nick and I have been talking about Temple Code—the subtle, patterned quoting of temple language in everyday settings—for twenty*

*minutes. He calls it “dog-whistling.” “You can only quote very small snippets, otherwise you're breaking the law,” he continues. He's half joking, but I tell him I think it's a brilliant analogy. That makes him laugh hard. “So you're going to quote me in your dissertation then?” I tell him of course, but I'll probably change his name. “What's been so interesting,” he observes, “is that our entire conversation has been filled with exactly the kind of stuff you're studying.” “Virtually every time I talk with another Mormon about my dissertation topic,” I tell him, “it turns into an ethnographic encounter. We end up enacting in the conversation exactly the phenomenon that I'm trying to analyze.”*

*He smiles. “You should do a chapter in your dissertation on what it was like for you to write this dissertation.”*

The Hugh Nibley quote that began this chapter is packed to the hilt with allusions to, gestures toward, and even directly quoted language from the temple ceremony. It comes from what might be his most famous (and blistering) anti-capitalist, anti-militarist speech ever. The coded signaling, addressed to endowed Mormons, embedded in this one quote (and this small excerpt is only one of many examples from this speech alone, to say nothing of Nibley's larger oeuvre) occurs at a number of different levels. There are actual textual units (direct quotations) from the ceremony, but also compositional features which strongly adumbrate textual units from the ceremony without necessarily quoting them. Here it is again:

Satan boldly announces his clever plan to use that very enmity to his advantage and set men against each other by it in a rule of blood and horror. How? By offering men anything in this world for money and so making men competitive—competitive in a big way. He would, with the natural wealth of the earth (precious metals, coal, oil, timber, real estate), as exploited by financiers (manipulation of the money market), buy up armies and navies (they cost the most—the military-

industrial complex), and the leaders of nations and churches (who embody power), and rule the earth with terror.

Formally unpacking the particular and varying points of connection between this quote and the endowment raises serious ethical questions for an anthropologist. On the one hand, there are important limitations to the degree of detail with which the ceremony can formally be described publicly. For me to reveal such details would constitute a breach not just of personal religious obligations but of professional and anthropological ethics as well. Of course, in the absence of such ethical considerations, the easiest thing for me to do in the service of clear analysis would be simply to straightforwardly list all of the quotations from the ceremony which regularly make their way into everyday Mormon talk, and then give examples.

But even beyond the professional ethics, there is a problem in that what makes these discursive connections between everyday LDS semiotic life and the ceremonial language of the temple so vital, potent, and socially generative is precisely the knowledge that only the initiated are capable of having the bits of discourse under consideration address them *as* temple language. Only the endowed are meant to recognize the signals. It's one thing for me to explain, even in some ethnographic and sociological detail, that this phenomenon occurs. It's quite another thing for me to reveal the substantive content of the code. Even with the proper caveats about the likely insignificant readership for the dissertation, such revelations would nonetheless run the risk of disrupting and fundamentally altering the semiotic economy in which the signals currently exist and their particular place within it. Merely acknowledging that these patterns of cryptic signaling exist at all has the potential to affect their use, positioning, and coding in Mormonism (though, it is hoped, in a largely insignificant and minimally disruptive manner).

Of course if I didn't feel the pull of these layered, complicated, and sometimes counterpoised constraints and considerations, I wouldn't really be writing about secrecy. If a key theme of this entire work is that Mormons have developed rich and fascinating shared strategies for talking about secret things without inappropriately revealing, spoiling, desecrating, or otherwise disempowering them, is it possible for me to explicate these strategies in a way that does some ethnographic and descriptive justice to them without disrupting the careful and delicate social and semiotic balances they sustain? Consider again the Nibley quote. It comes from a public and published speech, widely available. There's nothing inherently secret (or revealing) about the quote itself. Further, I can disclose that this passage contains bits of discourse directly lifted, word for word, from the ceremony, and I can technically do this without actually revealing the ceremonial language. But if I were to disclose which segments of the quote came from the ceremony, I would, in the process, be exposing the actual content of the ceremony itself.

On the other hand, the passage gestures toward the ceremony in more ways than by just surreptitiously quoting from it, and I am more comfortable explicating these gestures. Endowed Mormons will quickly recognize an iconic resemblance between Nibley's linking of wealth (especially the mention of precious metals), military power, and religious authority not only with each other but with Satan (and his strategy for amassing worldly power and causing human suffering) and a memorable portion of the ceremonial drama. By pointing out this resemblance (and its likely recognition by initiated Mormons) I am conveying some sense of a small part of what occurs in the ceremony, but I am also avoiding (in the same way Nibley is) imparting an inappropriate degree of detail and specificity to my implicit description of it. Thus, while I will try, in some cases, to give some sense of how a particular stretch of extra-temple Mormon

discourse intertextually typifies discourse from within the temple (and the discursive boundaries of the ceremonial rite), I will stop short of pointing this out with too much precision in the case of direct (if cryptic) quotations.

### **Pedagogical/Exegetical Contexts**

*Brother Mason is a Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University's School of Religious Education, where he has worked, instructing LDS students in devotional scripture study for several decades. He is one of the department's most respected, accomplished, and popular professors. "I don't know that there have ever been written policies, though there might have been, but it's certainly a question that we all deal with on a regular basis." We're discussing what kinds of strategies he uses for pitching his lessons, course outlines, and lectures to endowed versus unendowed students. "I've had a number of conversations, with colleagues but also with higher-ups, about the need to be particularly cautious in discussing temple related themes with students who haven't been to the temple."*

*This is a dicey proposition. Young college students are at precisely the age when Mormons typically go to the temple for the first time, though the circumstances under which this occurs vary enough that any given individual student might or might not be endowed. "It usually means freshmen, non-member [non-LDS] students, and women." The majority of male students at BYU have served full-time missions, and as a prerequisite to serving, received their endowment. Most leave at age 19, return at age 21, and the bulk of their college experience is post-mission. Only a small percentage of LDS women serve missions, and those that choose to must wait until age 21—after they've completed most of college—to serve, per Church policy.*

*"You have more latitude with the returned missionary crop," Brother Mason continues. "They haven't just been to the temple but most of them have been many, many times. It's not*

*necessarily that they understand more or are more spiritually mature or anything like that. But it is a little bit easier to talk, um, around certain sensitive topics—especially the temple—when you know the students will take your meaning. They know what you're talking about without you having to come right out and say it. That's why we like to separate the non-RMs [returned missionaries] from the RMs in the separate class sections. It's liable to make those who haven't been to the temple very uncomfortable in such discussions.” “Even if you aren't coming right out and saying it,” I ask. “Maybe especially if you aren't,” he replies after a quick beat.*

Certain institutional settings complicate the question of addressivity. At Brigham Young University, all students must take and pass several courses in religious education. These classes cover a wide range of topics (from books of scripture to Church history), are devotional in nature, and are meant primarily to spiritually enrich the university experience of students. Students who enroll in courses on LDS scriptures (a class on the Old Testament or the Book of Mormon, for example) must choose between two sections: a section for “returned-missionaries” and a general section. This is the most effective indirect way of partitioning the students into groups of endowed and unendowed (because missionaries receive their endowments before entering the mission field). Professors and instructors prefer to know the general make-up of their classes, especially in terms of the students' familiarity with the temple. The School of Religious Education has even issued guidelines to instructors for how they should address temple related themes in courses comprised primarily of unendowed students. Being able to gauge the status of their student audience as discursive insiders is vital to determining the pedagogical and rhetorical approaches the instructors will make in everything from curriculum design to lecturing approaches. This dynamic is complicated for the course on *The Pearl Of Great Price* (a short book of Mormon scripture consisting primarily of Joseph Smith's midrash-

style expansion of the biblical creation account and early Genesis). On the one hand, this is the portion of LDS scripture in which temple themes are most likely to arise. On the other, this is not a required course, and enrollment numbers are too low to justify splitting it into two sections. So instructors for this course are forced to teach it without being able to divide their students along endowed/unendowed lines.

To understand something about what might be at stake in these questions of addressivity in devotional-educational contexts, consider some examples of the deployment (and salience) of coded insider-speak in devotional and apologetic LDS scholarship. By far the most well-known and influential Mormon intellectual of recent history was Hugh Nibley (quoted in this chapter's epigraph). A respected linguist and expert on rhetoric in ancient Rome, Nibley made a career and practically founded an entire Mormon cottage industry of intellectually rigorous apologetic literature. His writings and public speeches combined vigorous defenses of the tenets of Mormonism (often rooted in obscure readings of obscure texts—he was sometimes compared to Levi-Strauss in his ability to see unifying themes and connections across disparate time periods and cultural contexts, with an eye to demonstrating the unity and universality of the deep structure of Mormonism, an approach Mormon scholars playfully refer to as *parallelomania*) with iconoclastic social criticism (he was fervently pacifist and anti-capitalist). He was also famous to the point of notoriety for his relentless, if subtle, and often rhetorically very powerful use of temple language in his discourse. Every Mormon scholar I spoke to about this phenomenon quickly cited Nibley as a prime example. Nibley used temple-speak to two broad effects: it strengthened the force of his criticisms of American (and Mormon) materialism and militarism; and it enabled him to circuitously comment on the temple rites. This second effect was accomplished through a connection he established between some part of the temple

ceremony and some other (typically ancient) text and/or practice by describing the latter using language from the temple and then analyzing or providing extended commentary on it. In both cases, establishing discursive contact between his own speech or writing and the endowment infused his own discourse with a kind of transcendent authoritative force.

Consider this other passage from the same speech, a commentary on the actual covenants of the temple:

“We have noted that the covenants of the endowment are progressively more binding, in the sense of allowing less and less latitude for personal interpretation as one advances. Thus (1) the law of God is general and mentions no specifics; (2) the law of obedience states that specific orders are to be given and observed; (3) the law of sacrifice still allows a margin of interpretation (this is as far as the old law goes—the Aaronic Priesthood carries out the law of sacrifice and no farther; and it specifies that while sacrifice is a solemn obligation on all, it is up to the individual to decide just how much he will give); (4) the law of chastity, on the other hand, is something else; here at last we have an absolute, bound by a solemn sign; (5) finally the law of consecration is equally uncompromising—*everything* the Lord has given one is to be consecrated. This law is bound by the firmest token of all.”

This is part of a larger argument he is making: that Mormons (at least endowed Mormons) should be actively living and practicing consecration—a Church-centered donation and redistribution arrangement, similar to 19th-century Mormon experiments with communitarian socialism—and that, in fact, they are incontrovertibly obligated to live this. He isn't actually directly quoting anything from the ceremony here, but the iconicity is accomplished at the level textually aligning common Mormon themes and terms in a way that essentially recapitulates, in order, the covenants of the temple (without explicitly listing them by

name). Beyond that, he also mentions a “sign” and a “token.” He does not specifically name or describe either the sign or token, but he associates those words in the text with the covenants of chastity and consecration. So endowed Mormons know which sign and which token he is referring to, and they know exactly what he means by “solemn” and “firmest.” This is as close as Nibley ever came, in my judgment (and in the judgment of many Mormons) to crossing the line of inappropriate disclosure of temple secrets. He causes his addressees (those, that is, with ears to hear) to recall the most expressly verboten, and therefore most sacred and potent, portions of the ceremony and he presses that recollection rhetorically into the argument about the need for the Saints to abandon capitalist property rights, give up their wealth, and collectively implement a consecration-economy.

Another quite famous example is John W. Welch's *Illuminating the Sermon At The Temple And The Sermon On The Mount: A Latter-Day Saint Approach* (1998). Welch was a founding figure in contemporary Mormon apologetics, and his arguments about ancient Hebrew poetics (including and especially chiasmus) in the Book of Mormon set many of the basic contours of apologetic scholarship for a generation. In *The Sermon*, Welch provides an extended commentary on a passage from the Book of Mormon, in which the visiting (post-resurrection) Christ instructs a group of Israelites (exiled centuries earlier from Jerusalem) at their temple. A significant portion of this instruction bears extremely close resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount from the New Testament (Matthew 5-7; the resemblance is augmented by the fact that the Book of Mormon was dictated and written in King James Bible style English).

Welch begins his book with two premises: 1) the Book of Mormon account describes a historically real event; 2) the setting of the Sermon in the Book of Mormon (the Nephite temple) provides a key to unlocking and understanding the meaning behind the Sermon in Matthew. His

core argument is that the Sermon on the Mount was closely connected to the mystery rites of the Hebrew temple, that the sermon repeatedly alluded to prophetic and scriptural texts about the temple (allusions Jesus' hearers would have recognized), and that the ethics of the sermon comprised a basis of initiation, preparatory to their induction into the ceremonial rites over which Jesus secretly officiated. Welch comments on the differences and similarities between the biblical and Book of Mormon versions of the sermon, between the sermon and temple-related Old Testament passages (particularly in Ezekiel and the Psalms), and on later New Testament references to mysteries which, he argues, allude to the sermon. But the key to his rhetorical success in making these claims effectively resonate in Mormon ears is that he makes his arguments with clear references to and in the language of LDS temple rites. He connects these other texts to the (ancient) temple by describing that connection in language that is recognizably temple-based in the ears of endowed Mormons. He also furnishes a careful analysis of the 3 Nephi version of the sermon and its context full of language, analogies, and allusions that endowed Mormons will recognize through the lens of temple worship and rites. Because his own experience in the temple and with the language of the temple was central to his ability to see the connections in the first place, he chose to cautiously and respectfully make deliberate allusions to the modern day LDS temple in his analysis, a move which, in the minds of his target audience (intellectual, practicing Mormons), strengthened not only his core arguments about the ancient texts, but their faith in the historical and theological legitimacy of temple-work.

### **The Rules**

*Catherine is a professor with a PhD in one of the hard sciences. She is the only Mormon I ever spoke to during my research (or have ever met) who actually figured out that other Church members were cryptically quoting the temple to each other before she ever went to the*

temple herself: “I noticed that there would be unusual—like not matching 1990s American/Californian English common usage—phrases that people would use sometimes in church settings. Some of these were recognizable as being pulled from familiar scripture verses—‘your ways are not my ways’—or General Authority talks—‘do it’—but others I couldn’t place. I would say I started really consciously suspecting or diagnosing these in Institute class.”

Institute is a program of the Church Education System for college students. The Church purchases buildings close to university campuses and offers devotional religious classes geared toward young adults, very similar to religion courses at BYU. Although Catherine had taken seminary classes as a teenager, she notes that this was the first Church-sponsored pedagogical setting in which, by virtue of their age, at least some of her classmates would have been endowed. “So this would have been the first time,” she observes, “that it would really make sense for a teacher to make such a reference in a way that might have been an intentional communication to fellow endowed members.”

She continues: “Not only were the phrases divergent from everyday speech—even everyday church speech—but the teacher would often inflect them in a way that, while there were no explicit citations, it was clear something was being quoted or referenced. So they naturally stood out, and were meant to.” What led her to the conclusion that these phrases, which she “couldn’t place in our ‘open-source’ canon” must be from the temple was “when they elicited a reaction—sometimes a nervous burst of a ‘hah!’, or an eyebrow raise, or a knowing half-smile—from only the RMs [returned-missionaries] in the room. Of course, then we know it’s an inside joke.” She tells me that although she initially used the term “inside joke” merely as an analogy to inside jokes (“emphasis on the ‘inside’, not on the ‘joke’”), the more she thinks about it “it is sort of remarkable, actually, how often it was in a way a joke—not an uproarious LOL

*kind of a joke, but a little formal chuckle kind of joke.”*

*I mention to her that surely there had been other times in her life prior to that class where she had been part of a Church audience that included endowed members—worship services, church conferences, etc. She says that even now she rarely if ever notices it in such settings, but vividly remembers it happening regularly during institute classes: “maybe teaching a class feels private in a way that the other venues do not,” she suggests, “more like an alley where you can be a little more furtive.”*

There is a set of unwritten rules, an informal but carefully observed social grammar for how one goes about quoting the temple ceremony. First, as noted above, only the language of the scripted participatory drama can be quoted. Mormons steer well clear of the actual ritual forms (the imparting and reception of holy knowledge, signs, keywords, etc.), but most of the scripted enactment of the creation, Eden, and the Fall is fair game. Quotes must be very short, no more than a few words or a phrase. Consider again Nick's analogy to “fair use” under copyright law. A common strategy for extending beyond this fairly strict limitation is to syntactically alter or paraphrase the quoted text. This entails careful balancing work, because the phrasing must still resemble the distinctiveness of the quoted discursive segment but must differentiate itself sufficiently to foreclose the potentially toxic consequences of an inappropriately lengthy direct quotation. This deflection can also be accomplished if there exists an independent source for the quoted material. A form of plausible deniability emerges when the quoting of temple language is also technically the quoting of a passage of scripture or of a Church leader (who was himself quoting the temple).

The most important rule, aside from avoiding ritual elements explicitly protected by covenants of non-disclosure, is that the metapragmatics of quotation or direct discourse must be

totally eschewed. Quoting the temple is “for those with ears to hear.” Nobody ever says “as they say in the temple...” or “as we learn from the temple ceremony...”. Speakers should not in any way explicitly or directly indicate their intent of quoting the temple or mark any segment of their discourse as a quotation. This means that in written form, quotations from the temple should absolutely not be bracketed with quotation marks. You simply say what you say, and those who recognize what you are doing, the pragmatic thrust of your discourse, will recognize it. Its presence and its effects are unremarked upon, with the exception of humorous or playful dog-whistling, in which case an effect like laughter would index recognition of temple discourse within otherwise everyday speech as well as approval of its invocation (an indicator that temple language had been used appropriately and did not constitute covenant violation). Such a cryptic, coded invocation of temple language is a kind of mentioned unmentionable which acknowledges its unmentionability by self-consciously failing to mention its mentionedness.

Because these metadiscursive dynamics occur within the intermediately coded semiotic space defined by an absence of both explicit prohibition and permission, the give-and-take and lack of absolute, formal regulations make the range of possible social meanings and effects wider, richer, and more palpable. Consider the social indexicalities potentially implicated by quoting temple language, and from which such discursive acts draw their meanings. The ability to correctly and appropriately deploy temple language is an index not just of a person's having been to the temple but having been there multiple times, often enough for the ceremonial language to become sufficiently familiar to facilitate recognition outside of the context of its ritual use. One who appropriately quotes the temple is not only temple-worthy but attends the temple frequently (as Mormons are asked to do to the best of their capabilities).

Temples are limited resources in the Mormon spiritual and actual economy. By

comparison to ordinary church-houses, they are incredibly expensive, capital-intensive buildings to construct and maintain. There are tens of thousands of LDS houses of worship throughout the world, but only just over one hundred temples. So there is an important geography/proximity dimension at play. The closer one lives to the “Mormon Corridor” (Utah, most of Idaho and parts of Arizona and Southern California where Mormons comprise a significant portion, and sometimes majority, of the population), the more likely one lives in close enough proximity to a temple to attend often. Outside of this region, average travel times for church members rise considerably, even in North America and Europe. Elsewhere in the world, Mormons save for years to make long trips to temples where they work for several days before returning and beginning saving again. Geography, nationality, and even socioeconomic class all co-articulate at this indexical level of excavating the meaning of temple code. One's ability to attend the temple with sufficient frequency to be proficient in its ceremonial language and one's capacity to recognize the patterned norms of using temple language in extra-temple contexts are indicative of one's proximity to a temple, one's worthiness and ability to regularly attend, and one's proximity to other Mormons similarly situated with respect to access to a temple.

The surreptitious use of temple language has sustained indexical ties to Mormon gender norms. Men invoke temple speech with considerably higher frequency than women, and both men and women strongly perceive this difference. At one level, this could be explained as a function of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the ceremonial language in question is spoken by male figures/characters (and by male actors) in the ceremony itself. In this regard, the temple replicates as well as theologically grounds the predominance of men in the Church's administrative hierarchy (comprised primarily of members of the all-male priesthood). The role of men in authoritatively administering the key forms of knowledge, saving rites and ordinances,

and necessary sacred covenants which comprise the totality of the purpose of the Church and the priesthood on earth and its ability to save and exalt God's children is powerfully underlined in the drama. Although some temple rites place men and women on a fairly even footing, the endowment ceremony itself—not only the longest rite but the ordinance most closely associated with the temple—is a preeminently male space and male-centric experience. Mormon men routinely acknowledged to me the likely ambivalence that women experience with the endowment. And while few Mormon women described personal discomfort with the temple ceremony, most believed that other women generally found the temple less satisfying and more alienating than men. Because the coded-signaling of temple-speak can index playfulness as well as rhetorical and ecclesiastical authority, it is a more natural and comfortable idiom for male communication.

### **Hazards**

*Jeremiah, a graduate student, writes me in an email:*

*“I remember one really uncomfortable time. I was talking with one of the guys in my program (who was studying Mormonism) and for some reason I just assumed he was Mormon. I said something funny, some play on when Satan says (paraphrasing) “oh, you've seen what I have and now you want it all!” Except I used like the exact phrasing. For some reason I just thought in the moment that that was hilarious. And the other guy laughed too. And of course anyone else besides a Mormon would just find that weird and not funny at all. But he thought it was hilarious. After a few more minutes I somehow realized that, wait, this guy ISN'T Mormon. I was sick. I mean, I'm sure he was just curious since he studied Mormonism and had read the endowment online or something. Or maybe he was even just being polite by laughing because he could tell I thought it was funny. But there was something about realizing that I had shared this*

*inside joke from the temple with someone who hadn't been there, who wasn't even LDS, that made me feel horrible, like I'd done something really, really wrong, maybe even broken my covenants.”*

The use of temple language in everyday speech is a code. A code in the sense that it is cryptic, surreptitious, and relies for its semiotic efficacy on shared secrets. Also a code in that it is prescriptively governed by a highly conventionalized system of regulations and norms. Proficiency in temple code means not only close familiarity with the scripted forms of the ceremonial language but an awareness of—and ability to correctly reproduce—the conventional rules for incorporating it in speaking and writing. Thus, while quoting the language can be an index of commitment and faithfulness, quoting it in a way that violates or fails to uphold the norms can indicate the opposite: lack of respect for the sacredness of the temple, spiritual immaturity, trifling with holy things, even apostasy or gross wickedness.

This is why casually or ostentatiously quoting the temple (including the covenant-protected elements) is a salient form of informal exit-rite for endowed Mormons who choose to disaffiliate from the Church. When I initially reached out to ex-Mormons in my research, the first person to email me back began his message by introducing himself: “My temple name is Gabriel. What's yours :)” There exists a wide range of ex-LDS support communities, and speaking with what faithful Mormons would consider inappropriate levels of candor and openness about the temple is a powerful way of performatively enacting one's newfound footing outside the Mormon Church and within a community defined by ex-Mormon identification. Quoting the language can either safely and stably channel the holiness of the temple out into the extra-temple world where it can be felt by those who talk about it (even those who lack first

hand knowledge or experience of the temple) without undermining the integrity of the barrier that separates them; or it can desecrate the sanctuary, trivialize the sacredness of the temple, and make the speaker an agent and facilitator of such effects.

The possible meanings at play here articulate closely with social and ecclesiastical positioning and power. What you can and cannot say, and the meaning of what you do and do not say, depend on who you are, where you are, and who you are speaking to and in the presence of. As a speaking register, temple code helps to constitute and reinforce ecclesiastical power and authority. It is ecclesiastical leaders—the Bishop at the ward level and the Stake President at the stake level—who guard and regulate access to the temple. Access to the temple is a precondition for semiotic participation in temple code. It is also what is potentially at stake for those who participate in that code.

Consider again the recommend interviews. Here the Bishop's/Stake President's offices become proxies for the actual threshold of the temple. Instead of having one's worthiness to enter assessed at the threshold itself (a practical and logistical impossibility), Church members are assessed in advance by persons expressly authorized: the Bishop as a “Judge in Israel” and representative of the Aaronic (Levite or Levitical) Priesthood; Stake President as the presiding Melchizedek Priesthood holder in the stake, the latter priesthood solely administering the ordinances of the temple. These authorities regulate access to the sanctuary. Church members are asked scripted questions—in language they encounter only in the interview itself. Significantly, the language of these questions is also regularly invoked in coded, dog-whistle fashion. Making a statement about a particular value, such as honesty (or about somebody's relationship to said value) in the language of a temple recommend question is a way (for those with ears to hear) of implicating not just a person's honesty, but his or her worthiness to enter the temple. For

example, Mormons who do not like Mitt Romney (a small but vocal minority among American Latter-day Saints) regularly criticize his reputation for truth-telling not merely by calling him dishonest but by accusing him of not being honest “in his dealings with his fellow men.” Even progressive Mormons who would otherwise eschew archaic gendered language retain the “fellow *men*” here, because that is the language of the temple recommend question: “Are you honest in your dealings with your fellow men?” Thus the criticism is meant to implicate not just Romney's honesty but his temple-worthiness.

Members judged as worthy carry a recommend (a bar-coded card with their name and the signatures of both interviewers) to the temple, and present it to demonstrate their worthiness to be there. There is a rich semiotic exchange between the space of the interview and the threshold/entrance of the temple. The recommend itself is an index of the previously conducted interview, its presentation to the priesthood representative at the entrance functioning as a kind of recapitulation in miniature of the authoritative assessment of worthiness. And temple semiotics are channeled out of the sanctum and replanted in the interview not just because of the subject but by the formal scriptedness, ritualized presentation, and restricted circulation of the language of the questions. Because adult Church members the world over, regardless of situational constraints on opportunity, are strongly encouraged to always keep a current temple recommend (and renew it by repeating the interview process when it expires), temple-worthiness becomes a value in itself, more than just a means to an end, a key category of Mormon personhood.

Priesthood leadership holds the keys to temple access (through authorized discernment of temple worthiness). For endowed Mormons who participate in temple code, then, the Priesthood is in a very real sense defined as those (males) to whom and in the presence of whom the stakes

for correctly and appropriately reproducing the norms of what can and can't be said by whom and to whom are the highest. The addressivity and/or presence of Priesthood leaders increases the degree to which the sacred potency and gravity of the temple is felt and experienced throughout the semiotic encounter and in the invocation of the language of the temple. It raises the significance of the norms of use closer to the threshold of conscious awareness. The self-consciousness of the social potency of the language, of any language relating to the temple, is isomorphic with the actual holiness of the temple itself, a sacred gravity felt by the initiated and uninitiated alike.

### **Threshold**

*Brother Rasmussen is a retired Institute teacher. He now volunteers several times a week at the Salt Lake temple, where he has been called to serve as an ordinance worker. His enthusiasm for temple work and for the subject of the temple is practically limitless. He is describing to me some of the architectural and design features of the Salt Lake temple. How it is squared to the compass. How it is the zero-point of reckoning positions, locations, and addresses throughout the Salt Lake valley. On one of the towers there are engravings of stars in the shape of the Little Dipper. "The Priesthood is the Lodestar," he tells me. "It's the one constant, and the thing you can always use to orient yourself, where you are, where you're going." The original, first LDS temple in Kirtland, Ohio, had a main hall with six pulpits at its head—three lower pulpits representing the presiding Aaronic Priesthood and three elevated pulpits behind them representing the higher, presiding Melchizedek Priesthood. This pattern is reproduced in the external design of the temple in Salt Lake City, with three spired towers on one side counterpoised by three higher towers on the other. He tells me that the calendar stones that wrap around the exterior of the temple situate the central of the higher towers "at the time of*

*year representing Christ's birth, with the opposite towers on the west side coinciding with the birth [six months earlier] of John the Baptist." The Baptist represents the Aaronic Priesthood and Christ—the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek (cf. Hebrews 7) who brought baptism by fire and the Holy Spirit—the Melchizedek Priesthood. The higher towers face east, toward the rising sun (Celestial glory), "signifying that the lesser priesthood receives its light from God through the mediation of the Melchizedek Priesthood, just as the the lesser priesthood receives the light of revelation from Christ through the higher priesthood that presides over it."*

If movement across thresholds is a key metaphorical frame for religion generally, its figuration is especially prominent in a religion wholly organized and oriented around a sanctuary. Mormon cosmology elevates the sacred threshold in both salience and ubiquity, rendering a universe endlessly partitioned by barriers and points of entry, separating realms, spheres, and spaces defined in terms of differential knowledge and awareness, proximity to God, consecration, and divine sovereignty. Individual spirit children of God pass through a *veil* to come to earth and be born into new bodies and new families (the veil typified in our lack of memory of our premortal lives, relationships, and choices). The foundational sacraments of baptism and reception of the gift of the Holy Ghost are described as a gate or an entrance into the Kingdom of God, and they mark an individual's entrance into formal Church membership and full community fellowship. This is a joint, double-threshold entrance, the first mediated by the Aaronic Priesthood (closely identified with and occasionally even called the Levitical Priesthood), the second by the Melchizedek Priesthood.

The same dual gate marks the passage from the space of weekly worship in the congregation (the jurisdiction of the Aaronic Priesthood) into the temple (under the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood), via the double recommend interview. Mormons constantly,

routinely move in and out of sacred and profane (and more sacred and less sacred) space and time. Church buildings, like temples, are consecrated by priesthood authority as houses of worship. Mormon homes (The Home) are also subject to priesthood consecration by husbands/fathers and are strongly identified with temples, in terms of their sanctified removal from the carnal excess of the outside world (it is a standard teaching that the home is the only place that can compare to the temple in terms of holiness and refuge from the world), and even the aesthetics of interior design and iconography. Time too can be sacred (and cast in contrast to ordinary or profane time). The weekly sabbath is set aside for worship (and abstention from a wide range of otherwise acceptable activities). *Family Home Evening* is a weekly ritual, typically Monday nights, in which families gather together for worship, instruction, and uplifting activity.

The Church in its most abstract sense is also a consecrated entity/space, defined in part by its separation from the world (Zion is a metaphor for both consecrated purity and divine community as well as for the Church itself, as separate from Babylon). The temple stands at the apex of this graduated ontological scale of holiness, its threshold The Threshold par excellence. Mormon ritual, Mormon worship, like Mormon cosmology are preeminently about movement across thresholds, beginning with the transition out of divine kinship across a blinding threshold (separation from primeval divine parents through birth/veil) and culminating (after the passage of multiple and concentric thresholds toward the gravitational center of the temple) in the guided movement of kinship units (fashioned in mortality) back across the veil into the presence of (and identity with) God (now configured as a union of a Heavenly Mother and Father).

To be a Mormon in the fullest sense is to fully experience and feel the differences in holiness and sanctity marked by such thresholds as one passes between and over them. These

differences map along corresponding, mutually-constituting, co-dependent gradients or continua of profane-to-sacred, worldly-to-holy. The first gradient is spatial. It is the Mormon map of heaven, of the eternities. It comprises three concentric spheres or *kingdoms*: the Celestial, at the center, the residence and presence of God and the place where divine law, absolute incorruptibility, enduring kinship bonds, and limitless productive (and reproductive) increase prevail; the Terrestrial, where Christ can visit (but not God the Father), a space where righteousness prevails but falls short of the glory and the specific qualities—particularly family bonds and reproductive increase—of the Celestial, peopled by good individuals who still rejected the fullness of the priesthood and the exalting ordinances of the temple; and the Telestial, where only the Holy Ghost can come (no other members of the Godhead), in which wicked, sinful individuals spend eternity—not damnation in the sense of tormented fire and brimstone but damnation in the sense of halted progression. An enduring point of theological and doctrinal disagreement among Mormon leaders has been whether or not progress between the kingdoms is possible after resurrected beings have been consigned to one. All three are degrees of glory, separated out in terms of distance from God (and godliness), reduced access to Godhead, diminished sociality, and dissipated glory. All surrounded by a final layer—a realm in which individual spirits remain unembodied and are ground down and disintegrated into their more primal constituent parts—known as Outer Darkness.

This celestial-terrestrial-telestial gradient maps onto our current conditions. The Telestial Kingdom is also the world in which we now live, a world characterized by avarice, deception, the rule of Satan, and death. Both Eden and the temple are intermediate, Terrestrial spheres. The Celestial is the endpoint of our existence, the fulfillment of the measure of our creation, the sphere to which we, from Adam and Eve's initial expulsion from the garden, continually strive to

return, via the temple (now a model for Eden) and the sacred knowledge ritually imparted within its sanctuary. The Church—the Kingdom of God *on earth*—exists in the world, and at the level of weekly worship and principle ordinances it is the governed by the Aaronic Priesthood (technically, since the Church also controls and protects the temple, the Aaronic Priesthood is subsumed into the higher Melchizedek Priesthood—thus a Bishop is the highest office of the Aaronic Priesthood, but to be called as a Bishop, a man must hold the Melchizedek Priesthood). Beginning at baptism (an Aaronic Priesthood ordinance), Mormons are channeled first through the ritual reception of the Holy Ghost (a Melchizedek Priesthood rite) and then inexorably toward the temple.

This transition from the telestial/world into the terrestrial/temple is effected by gatekeepers who hold priesthood *keys*: first an interview with the presiding Priest (Aaronic), followed by an interview with the presiding Elder (Melchizedek), both recapitulated symbolically in the presentation of the recommend at the threshold of the temple, the bar-coded card functioning as a key in its own right, bearing the requisite marks (signatures) of both authorities. You pass out of the purview of the lesser priesthood and into the purview of the greater. Life in the Church is meant largely to prepare one to pass through this entrance, to pass the interview, to live a life worthy of admission into the temple. The Aaronic Priesthood (and the Church it administers) is itself a transitional space between the world and the temple, and passage into the Church, via baptism, also involves an interview of worthiness (the baptismal interview that precedes the ordinance, administered by the Bishop). It moves you into the presence and sovereign jurisdiction of the higher priesthood. Similarly, inside the temple you are guided toward and prepared for another interview at the threshold separating the terrestrial from the celestial. The transition from telestial (world) to celestial (God's presence), mediated by the

terrestrial (temple), is reproduced by metonymy within the temples itself. Ritual participants begin in a room representing Eden, and move from there into a telestial room (reenacting the Fall), then to the terrestrial room (reenacting passage into the temple), and finally into the celestial room. The temple connects the two worlds on either side, and performative acts inside the temple are witnessed by and efficacious for representatives of both worlds.

This illustrates just how closely bound and aligned the telestial-to-celestial spatial continuum is to an ecclesiastical gradient. The lesser (Aaronic) priesthood is subsumed beneath the higher (Melchizedek) priesthood, but also surrounds and hedges it. Aaronic priesthood authority and ordinances direct individuals toward the authority and ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which in turn directs people, now in kinship units forged under its authority and by its constituting power, into the presence and sovereign protection of God and Celestial law. This passage from Aaronic Priesthood ordinances to Melchizedek Priesthood ordinances to an ordinance administered by God that moves one into His presence, all effected through ritualized interviews, is also reproduced within the progressive ritual steps of the temple ceremony.

These conjoined spatial and ecclesiastical continua of worldly-to-sacred articulate with a communicative or semiotic gradient of (un)mentionability. Recall that the ordinariness of everyday speech is contrasted with the absolute secrecy and unspeakability of those portions of the temple ceremony protected by covenants of non-disclosure. Those elements are also the divinely disclosed communicative means for reaching/regaining God's presence. Brigham Young publicly defined the endowment as the ritual reception of “all those ordinances in the house of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to

give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation.” The semiotic units most potent in the crossing from terrestrial to celestial must be most forcefully kept from crossing in the reverse direction, from terrestrial back out into the telestial. Celestial semiotics stand in starkest contrast with telestial discourse. But terrestrial discourse—the general ceremonial language of the temple—is intermediate. Though it exists primarily in the temple/terrestrial space, it can be heard in both worlds—in the celestial world by angelic witnesses who attest its efficacy in the eternities, and in the telestial world where it is surreptitiously uttered by and to those with the capacity to speak and hear (recognize) it. The patterns of unmentionability and discursive containment are also reproduced within the temple, where ceremonial (terrestrial) language prevails, where worldly language is attenuated, and where, in its celestial center (attained through fluency in the celestial code), telestial speech is banished altogether.

The ecclesiastical and semiotic gradients exist primarily *outside* the temple, which means that the most firmly grounded (because spatially anchored) continuum is laminated, if mutedly, onto everyday life. Outside the temple, discourse about the temple is carefully and deliberately punctuated with the potency of discourse *from* the temple. Acts of communication involving the temple are highly self-conscious, and manifest a complex, unwritten, informal social grammar oriented around sacred obligations: to preserve and revere the sanctity of the temple, and not to disclose the explicitly confidential elements of its holy ordinances. This semiotic, interactional temple code ties the two other gradients (spatial and ecclesiastical) to one another and to the interaction itself and the interlocutors.

The continuum of worldly-to-holy, telestial-to-celestial is both mediated by and materially grounded (in terms of orientation, direction, and reckoning) in the temple itself. The

temple is the intermediate world, the terrestrial space, and the entire gradient is reproduced in miniature and by metonymy inside its walls (with telestial, terrestrial, and celestial rooms and spaces). The continuum between worlds, cast in terms of profane-to-sacred, worldly-to-godly, is also mapped onto ecclesiastical and social relations of authority, admission, and worthiness—a new gradient of holiness: the *holy person*. Parallel to this runs a semiotic gradient of unmentionability, register partitioning, structured silence, euphemism, circumlocution, signaling, insider-speak, and patterned discursive leakage—the temple code: an entire grammar of cryptic quotation, winking, gesturing, and otherwise establishing connection with the inside of the temple—that draws on the social indexicalities generated within day-to-day and week-to-week Mormonism to connect these two progressive continua (a spatial one weighted toward the innermost space of the temple and an ecclesiastical one pointing toward the high priesthood of Melchizedek) and make their unified gradient—the respective pull of this and the other worlds—felt in varying degrees during virtually every semiotic encounter relating to the temple and temple-work.

The temple code makes the holiness of the temple palpably, if intuitively, encounterable outside of the boundaries of its physical/spatial domain. That holiness, then, exists in stabilized, regulated form outside of the temple itself. It raises the sense that one feels the sanctity of the temple—even one who has never before been there—to the level of conscious awareness. This ineffable encounter with the sacred gravity of the temple pre-conditions and prepares non-initiates (future initiates)—as well as endowed Mormons who plan to return—to experience the the “strangeness” of the temple as holy, otherworldly, deeply spiritual, and utterly serious because unspeakable.

In a very real sense Mormons make or enact the holiness of the temple *outside* its walls.

They carry the sense of mystery and expectations generated by extra-temple discourse—the temple code—with them into the temple on their first visit. The profound sacredness and unparalleled spiritual power Mormons experience as they work/worship in the temple in turn motivates, shapes, generates, and reinforces the temple code. Endowed Mormons reproduce the discourse that helped code (or pre-code) their temple experience, in direct proportion to the spiritual gravity that does, in fact, characterize their temple experience and to the frequency with which they return (and are correspondingly better able to recognize and acquire proficiency in the code—the patterned norms of speaking about the temple—and more deeply sustained in their appreciation and reverence for the temple's unique holiness). The result is a stable positive feedback loop in which the two fields—inside and outside of the sanctuary—mutually reinforce and co-constitute. The sanctuary is sanctified not merely by contrast with the profane world but by semiotic activity occurring within a mediating or intermediate transitional field (Mormonism outside the temple) in which the two spheres fruitfully and messily intersect and interact.

## Part II: Gender in Time and Eternity

### Chapter 4: Heavenly Mother

“Every night I pray that my husband will die before I do so he will not have the chance to take a second wife.”

#### **Prelude: Notes on Mormon Patriarchy and Mormon Feminism**

Mormonism is a patriarchal religion. In contrast to feminist or contemporary western political discourse, for most Mormons “patriarchal” is not a bad word. Actually, that's not entirely true, in the sense that while historically and until quite recently “patriarchal” was a term that Mormons enthusiastically embraced and was (and still is) inextricably embedded in the fabric, logic, and formal performative structure of the LDS Church's most sacred and vital rites, the place of the term in the day-to-day language Mormons use to talk about Mormonism is contested and shifting. As recently as 2002, Church-produced curriculum for instructing adolescent Mormons in devotional settings were designed to teach “the patriarchal order” and convey the importance of supporting father-patriarchs as they preside over and bless their families. The Patriarchal Order is, simultaneously, “The Lord's plan for families” and “The Lord's system of government” (*Aaronic Priesthood Manual 2*, 1993).

The word patriarchal is closely aligned with the word *preside*. The LDS Church's ecclesiastical structure is rooted in a universal, all-male priesthood. Priesthood holders preside over congregations (wards in Mormon parlance) and all other administrative units. Fathers are also designated priesthood holders in homes/nuclear families. That male priesthood holders

preside in ecclesiastical settings is non controversial for Latter-day Saints. By contrast familial priesthood roles and the place of male headship is undergoing subtle but visible transformation. Consider a more recently developed (*Come Follow Me*, 2012) curriculum for teaching young Mormons about the “complementary roles” men and women are to ideally play in families. Neither the word “patriarchy” nor its derivative forms appear at all in the lesson. The only time the term “preside” appears is in the following quotation taken from a paracanonical text called “The Family: A Proclamation To The World,” issued by LDS leaders in 1995:

“Fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.”

This passage from the Proclamation introduces a key logic into Mormon discourse on family models and gender roles: fathers preside in a relationship of equal partners with mothers. Equality in this formulation is complementarity. Fathers and mothers have separate, sacred duties, which fully and equally complement one another. Thus, while ecclesiastical presiding explicitly denotes and pragmatically entails authority and headship, familial presiding is not just compatible with but in some sense synonymous with equality. While cementing the language of presiding into the logic parental cooperation, the Proclamation also emphasizes the importance of something not officially extolled by Church leadership prior to its presentation to the general membership: equal partnership in spousal relationships. Since the issuance of the Proclamation, the emphasis on equal spousal partnership has been an almost constant refrain, while talk about priesthood in families has shifted from priesthood authority as the basis for presiding over

families (in the sense of headship) to priesthood power as the basis for blessing families.

Thus, two very different, in some sense contradictory, notions of presiding now prevail in LDS discourse: ecclesiastical and familial. Mormon feminists have criticized this shift with the designation “chicken patriarchy.” The term originates in a widely influential essay, written in 2007 (as fourth wave LDS feminism became a formidable presence in the Mormon online world alongside the rise in prominence of the blog *Feminist Mormon Housewives*).<sup>1</sup> The author notes that as recently as the 1970s, when the LDS Church actively opposed (and mobilized church members nationally in opposition to) the ERA, family presiding was explicitly meant to mirror ecclesiastical presiding, quoting a 1973 editorial from the official LDS periodical *The Ensign*:

Let us begin by saying that a Latter-day Saint husband or father presides over his wife and family in much the same way a bishop, stake president, or elders quorum president presides over the specific group to which he is called. . . . Imagine, for example, the confusion that would result if two bishops were appointed over your particular ward . . . Similarly, should two people preside over each other in marriage, particularly when one holds the priesthood and has been divinely designated to preside? . . . The mystery may not be so much in the manner in which a wife submits herself to her husband as, in fact, the way a husband will preside over and interact with his wife and family.

This she contrasts with a statement written by then Church President and Prophet Howard W. Hunter, in the same publication, in 1994: “a man who holds the priesthood accepts his wife as a partner in the leadership of the home and family with full knowledge of and full participation in all decisions relating thereto.” Church discourse on gender, she argues, shifts untethered between the poles of patriarchy and equality. “without any clear destination.” A kind of patriarchy that

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<sup>1</sup> The essay, “The Problem With Chicken Patriarchy” actually appeared at another smaller Mormon feminist blog, *Zelophehad's Daughters*, was published anonymously, and can be found at <http://zelophehadsdaughters.com/2007/11/30/the-trouble-with-chicken-patriarchy/>.

dares not speak its own name—not a soft patriarchy, but a patriarchy “too chicken to stand up for what it believes.” It embraces strains of egalitarianism, but lacks the moral courage to repudiate unequivocal examples of patriarchy. It softens the language of patriarchy, without formally abandoning it, failing in the process to assert a consistent position on gendered authority, submission, or equality. Referring implicitly to certain explicitly gendered features of LDS temple rites, the author asks: “If patriarchy is God’s will, why not stand up and take the flak for advocating values that have been taught from Adam to Paul, from Joseph Smith through most of his heirs, from the temple to the pulpit? If it’s not, why continue to cling to patriarchal language and women’s ritual submission to men?”

If Mormonism's attachment to patriarchy is complicated and shifting, so is its relationship to feminism. The history of Mormon feminism can also militate against expectations shaped by western academic and political categories. In contrast with the orientalist image of women as sexual slaves to a polygamous Mormon harem, female Mormon leaders in pioneer Utah were outspokenly feminist, extremely politically active, played prominent roles in first wave feminism, and founded and published one of the first national women's journals. Running from 1874 to 1914, the *Woman's Exponent* championed women's suffrage *and* plural marriage. The magazine devoted itself to the education and strengthening of women, inside and outside of Mormonism (Bennion, 1976).

Second wave mormon feminism was transformationally pivoted around the decision of LDS male leadership to formally oppose the Equal Rights Amendment. Belle Spafford, who served as the president of the LDS Relief Society from 1945 to 1974, was also a member of the National Council of Women and served as its president from 1968 to 1970, a period when the Council formally supported ERA passage. By the late 1970s Spafford was a vocal opponent of

the ERA, and Mormon women were arguable as effective in mobilizing against the amendment as they had previously been in support of the 19th amendment. Spafford's tenure as president of the Relief Society also marked the passage of the Society from a largely autonomous and independent women's organization into the direct administrative control of male priesthood leadership. While feminist expressions were programatically constrained and marginalized, some Mormon feminists redoubled their engagement (Bradley, 2006). While many of these women (now revered as feminist "elders"), including those who revived the *Exponent* journal in 1974, remained active members of the LDS Church, Mormonism's most continually outspoken public supporter of the ERA, Sonja Johnson, was eventually excommunicated from the Church.

By the early 1990s, Mormon feminism's third wave was just taking shape, marked by the increased visibility of academic feminism on the campus of Brigham Young University, and coalescing around the publication of *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism* (Hanks, 1992). A number of high profile and outspoken Mormon feminists, including several contributors to *Women and Authority* as well as the volume's editor, were excommunicated. The crackdown precipitated widespread backlash within mainstream Mormonism against feminism and feminists. It wasn't until the advent of online LDS communities, a time and medium typically associated with fourth wave feminism, that Mormon feminism began not only to recover but to visibly thrive.

Despite the residual stigma that most mormons reflexively associate with feminism, today's Mormon feminism is growing and mainstreaming, engaged in campaigns of high profile feminist activism within the LDS Church (often explicitly within the discursive framework of faithful mormonism, as in communal fasting and prayer for gender equality, gestures of solidarity in church attendance and worship, etc.), sometimes to unequivocal success. Though

still largely on the margins, Mormonism feminism now enjoys far more appeal and staying power among the general membership (in part due to the likely accurate assumption that Church leaders are not willing and probably significantly less inclined to enact an early 90s style purging of feminist leaders) than its second- and third-wave predecessors. And it's possible that the decreased taboo within faithful LDS discourse on the word "feminism" itself tracks closely with the decreased comfort with the term "patriarchy."

### **Structured Silence and the Cultural Productivity of Discursive Taboo**

In Chapters 2 and 3 I attempted to capture something of the tremendously socially productive nature of how Mormons avoid certain swaths of discursive territory. The "moral life" of Mormon language aligns closely with and is manifest in taboo, in the unmentionable and in the metadiscourse of unmentionability—not just what kinds of things Mormons avoid talking about, but how Mormons talk about not talking about the things they don't talk about. How and to whom do discursive taboos apply? How and by whom can they be evaded, transgressed, circumvented, or even contested or ignored? How do the patterns of taboo and taboo avoidance shape and reflect differences in standing, power, position, and experience in the shared social reality of speakers? Like all discourse, tabooed speech forms summon not just ideas, words, forms, spaces, or acts but addressees. Interactional observance and breach of the standards of unmentionability position speaker and addressee with respect to each other, and to other salient discursive registers and resources, values, forms of authority, and categories of personhood within the community defined by taboos in question.

The forms and variances of social power implicated by speech events and discursive exchanges involving taboo articulate with race, sexuality, class, and gender. What I hope to illuminate in this chapter is the exceptionally productive role played by the metadiscourse of the

unmentionable in the construction and enactment of Mormon femininity. A number of key Mormon taboos apply to sex and gender, both substantively (in the sense that they are “about” gender) and in terms of the social-indexicalities they entail: the taboos themselves and their concomitant strategies of evasion and subversion apply differently, with differing expectations and consequences, to males and females. The circulative activity of these unmentionabilities within Mormonism form part of the discursive base on which the differences between male and female acquire distinctively Mormon form, tonality, and cadence. How Mormons talk about not talking about such subjects as Female Deity, polygamy and celestial marriage, and female sexual desire shape what it means to be a faithful and fully Mormon girl and woman.

### **A Mother There**

*“Since the early years of the Church, Latter-day Saints have commonly understood that a Mother in Heaven exists, but that little has been said beyond acknowledging her reality and her procreative powers.”*

---Caption to the cover photo for a 2011 *BYU Studies* article surveying LDS historical teachings about female deity, entitled “A Mother There.”

In 2011 *BYU Studies*, a Church-owned academic journal with a strong commitment to faithful, devotional scholarship, published an essay by renowned Mormon theologian David L. Paulsen (which he co-authored with his student, Martin Pulido) entitled “A Mother There: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven.” Paulsen introduces the essay by noting his “puzzlement” at hearing with increasing frequency claims about “the need for a ‘sacred silence’ with respect to Heavenly Mother.” His surprise and skepticism about the formal requirement for such a stricture contrasts with his observation of its ubiquity in LDS discourse. Part of the purpose, then, of Paulsen's historical survey, in addition to compiling and aggregating official statements about Heavenly Mother, is to push back against the notion, widely believed

among Mormons, that we should be avoiding too much talk or too much detail about Her.

After quoting the section of “The Family: A Proclamation To The World” that acknowledges female deity (“All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of *heavenly parents...*”); it should be noted here that “The Family,” presented to the Church in 1995, is the closest to a canonical source affirming female deity that exists in Mormonism), and pointing to the claim by then Church president Gordon B. Hinckley that nothing authoritative has been revealed about Her, Paulsen examines the widespread perception within the Church that “respecting her sacredness requires silence.” He describes the widely held view that God the Father is extremely protective of Heavenly Mother's identity to shield Her from blasphemy, that God holds Her “on a pedestal where she [is] never to be seen or spoken to, for fear that her purity would be sullied.” He points to online surveys indicating that most Mormons believe that “discourse about Heavenly Mother is forbidden or inappropriate,” to academic critiques of the structured silences surrounding female deity in LDS discourse as indications of her status as a “silent, Victorian housewife valued only for her ability to reproduce,” and to claims that Heavenly Mother historically has been invoked in the Church “only when the community wished to glorify motherhood.”

Note immediately that Mormons, who nearly universally believe in a Heavenly Mother (it would not be considered heresy *per se* to reject a belief in her, but definitely a deviation from standard, orthodox Mormon doctrine), do not really talk about her so much as talk about talking about and not talking about her. She is rarely spoken of matter-of-factly, in a metadiscursively unmarked manner. Discourse about Heavenly Mother is irreducibly meta-referential. One does not talk about her without also talking about the fact that they are talking about her. Any reference to her at a minimum marks itself as either conforming to or breaching the norms and

boundaries that structure the taboo. Beyond that, though, it is common for Mormons to explicitly remark upon the constraints of their own speech. “I know we don't usually talk about her in order to respect her,” notes a woman who recently addressed her congregation in a sermon, “but I find the doctrine of Heavenly Mother so comforting.” I spoke with dozens of women who said that the hymn “O, My Father”—penned by famed Mormon poetess, prominent 19th century feminist, and Relief Society President Eliza R. Snow—was their favorite, precisely because it is the only canonical text that explicitly acknowledges the existence of a Mother in Heaven. It is also the source for the title of Paulsen's essay:

I had learned to call the Father  
Through the Spirit from on high  
But until the key of knowledge  
Was restored, I knew not why  
In the heavens are parents single?  
No, the thought makes reason stare!  
Truth is reason, truth eternal  
Tells me I've a mother there

Snow, one of Joseph Smith's plural wives, wrote the original poem not long after Smith's martyrdom. “Key of knowledge” is also an implicit reference to the liturgical innovations introduced by Smith in the final years of his life and which would eventually comprise what Mormons today know as the temple ceremonies. The implication is that Smith taught the doctrine of Heavenly Mother in secret, or to a limited and initiated audience. Thus, from the outset, female deity has always carried an air of mystery. Because of the strong association in Mormon discourse between the sacred and secrecy or limited access (recall the example of the General Handbook of Instructions from chapter 2), it has become gospel truth that we don't talk

at length or in detail about her to protect her sanctity.

“My son,” writes another LDS woman, “asked me about Heavenly Mother in the same conversation when we told him about Santa Clause. We told him he could ask us anything. He didn't ask if she was real, he asked 'why don't we ever talk about her?' I asked him why he thought that, and he said that his primary teacher had taught the class that she exists, but then said that we shouldn't talk about her. I told him that Heavenly Father didn't want her name to be used in vain or for her to be disrespected the way He so often is, so we don't talk about her because we respect her the way Heavenly father does.” That she exists or what that might mean is not discussed. Why we don't discuss her is what's discussed. Conversations about Heavenly Mother are not about her or about the theological implications of gendered deity, about her power or authority as a god(dess); they are conversations about conversing about her. Talk about her situates her, not in the universe or the cosmos or the narrative of the plan of salvation, but in the discourse.

Corrine, a lifelong Mormon, had some involvement researching for the Paulsen and Pulido article on Heavenly Mother. She explains: “It was first presented at a paper in February 2009 at a Colloquium, sponsored by the now defunct Women's Research Institute. It was advertised on BYU's homepage, and was well attended.” The premise of the paper, she notes, is that “Heavenly Mother may be spoken of faithfully, and that She has been, over time, by many Church leaders.” Afterward, Paulsen expressed gratitude to his researchers for their contributions, and shared with them that the editor of BYU Studies expressed interest in publishing it. “Approximately two weeks later,” she continues:

Paulsen's Staff blog, run entirely by his student researchers, was closed at the request of BYU administration. A church member had stumbled upon it, and read

two of the researcher's published dialogue on their research of Heavenly Mother. Among other things, he wrote them that they were on the road to apostasy. A third student researcher responded in defense of his friends, and the conversation heightened. The member presumably contacted the administration, and silence ensued.

Corinne concludes: “the researchers involved were varying levels of hurt and frustrated. The research that they had done, demonstrating that it is not unfaithful to speak or write of Heavenly Mother had just been celebrated, and now they were being quieted.”

A young Mormon woman whose feminist commitments have “complicated” her relationship with the LDS Church writes: “It would be easier, in some ways, if she didn't exist at all. If the Mormon God were just like the God of traditional Christianity. But on the one hand, we get to know she exists, but on the other, we don't get to do anything more than acknowledge that. We can't identify with her because we can't worship her, can't pray to her, can't seek answers. Even as girls, and even though we know she's there, we're taught that we're only supposed to have a relationship with the Father. And that relationship's supposed to be beautiful, and intimate, like He really knows us and listens to us and gives us answers, and we can trust Him and He loves us and will help and guide us. But she's just silent. We're not supposed to approach her. She's invisible, but we still KNOW she's there.” Although she conveys grief at the situation in a manner that is definitely outlying among LDS women, her basic description is not incorrect. Most Mormons would not frame the question of Heavenly Mother in such stark or frustrated terms, they would also not challenge the technical accuracy of the statements. Which is to say that, regardless of the fact that Mormons tend to freely and unreservedly accept this arrangement, the structured silence around Heavenly Mother does not just affect theological speculation or doctrinal framings; it affects the relationships individual Mormons cultivate and

experience with the divine.

This is not meant as a comprehensive accounting of official LDS sources on Heavenly Mother. Paulen and Pulido's essay is an excellent resource for interested readers. The quasi-official though non-canonical *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (edited and compiled in 1992, with entries written primarily by faithful Mormons, largely with academic backgrounds, with a few key entries written by high profile Church leaders) gives a brief historical and theological context, grounds female deity in the doctrine of eternal families, and concludes: "Today the belief in a living Mother in Heaven is implicit in Latter-day Saint thought. Though the scriptures contain only hints, statements from presidents of the church over the years indicate that human beings have a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father." Yet despite being only "implicit" it is also widely viewed as one of the most innovative, beautiful, and comforting doctrines of Mormonism, as something that, in a positive way, sets the Church apart from the rest of Christianity. This canvassing of the Heavenly Mother doctrine is meant to convey its simultaneous position as central to Mormon cosmology and almost obsessively unremarked upon. A silence that is constantly spoken, an ever-present absence. Articulating the strange position of this doctrine in LDS discourse sets the stage for examining its social productivity, for understanding how this rigorously structured silence shapes gendered experiences and interactions within Mormon communities and ecclesiastical structures, expressions of Mormon femininity, and what being a Mormon woman feels like to Mormon women.

### **Earthly Father, Heavenly Father**

*Carol Lynn Pearson is a well known Mormon author, poet, screenwriter, and playwright. She has published dozens of books and collections, and had her work performed on the stage and in film for more than four decades. Heavenly Mother has been a recurring and very*

*consciously emphasized theme of much of her work. Now in her early seventies, she has been an active member of the LDS Church for her entire life. “Over the many years and decades of my career,” she recalls, “I have walked a strange line. Years ago I became famous for the simple sweet stuff, the sentimental poetry. That had a lot of mainstream appeal. The brethren [Mormon parlance for the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles—the governing counsels of the Church] quoted me in conference. In 'My Turn on Earth' [an oft-performed play] there is a king and a queen. It's a female voice that calls Barbara back.” Her artistic work was, for her, occasionally a medium for quiet but effective activism. “In the theater you can do things with more artistic freedom than an essay or an article or a talk. My poems brought in feminism, subtly. Some of them were very feminist. Safer material can also be more subversive.”*

*She is conscious of the ironic or even paradoxical nature of her ability to walk this fine line: she has depended in part on men to do it. “I received tons of support from local leadership.” In Mormonism, formal discipline and excommunication proceedings always originate with and are conducted by local leaders. There is no central disciplinary body (although in theory central church leaders can and sometimes have prompted local leaders to investigate individual Church members). “I was lucky to have such great leaders. At the same time as others [about which more below] were being excommunicated for talking about Heavenly Mother, my leaders were coming to my defense. Salt Lake was calling and asking 'do we need to be worried about Sister Pearson,' and my Stake President was emphatic: 'no, you don't.' He always stood by me.”*

*She has tried to use her protected status to the best possible good, preserving and strategically deploying her “mormon capital” to convey and encourage a balance between faithfulness to Mormonism and commitment to the ideals of feminism. “It has always been*

*important for me to find Heavenly Mother, to locate Her voice and Her authority. To help the women who read my work to find Her, to know that She's there and She doesn't have to be silent." In her play "Mother Wove The Morning," performed internationally, she voices sixteen different women from different places in history, all searching for "the female face of God." She herself performs all the characters, and the play has even been professionally recorded and can be purchased on DVD. Over the decades she has received thousands of letters from Church members, a small portion of them expressing critical frustration, but most of them conveying gratitude for her willingness to speak openly about Heavenly Mother, and her ability to give voice to the experience of Latter-day Saint women. "I believe that the body of the Church is more open to acknowledging her than our Salt Lake leaders are."*

*Some feminist Mormon scholars have argued that Heavenly Mother chooses to remain hidden because Mormonism persists in viewing women as so subservient and docile and passive that if She were to become definitively known we would all immediately disrespect Her by ascribing to Her such demeaning and ungodlike qualities. Sister Pearson is not sure she agrees: "In my mind Her absence has nothing to do with Her unwillingness to be known. I don't see any good reason for Her absence at the Family Table. It's our own fault. And I actually don't think She is absent at all; She is all around us and in us always, missing only from our perception and our language. God as female is as present as God as male. It's the children that have gotten things all screwed up, not the Parents." She pauses before concluding this thought: "And truly, my heresy goes so far as to believe that I am not apart from God at all, but I am a part of God. I am a cell of God, a holograph of God—the part is in the whole and the whole is in the part."*

*Her recent work has focused on two goals: pushing the body (and leadership) of the Church toward accepting, loving, and fully fellowshiping LGBT Mormons, and acknowledging*

*and addressing the pain experienced by many LDS women over the principle and practice of polygynous marriage. “I don't think it's possible to look at our history of plural marriage and see God's fingerprints anywhere.” She is unapologetic in her rejection of plural marriage. She takes great pride in her own family history in this regard. Her great grandmother converted to Mormonism during the pioneer era and moved from Nottingham England to the Mormon colonies in Southern Idaho. After a couple of years, her great grandfather returned home one way, unexpectedly, with a second wife. This summer, Carol Lynn made a pilgrimage to the tabernacle of the Idaho town where her ancestors lived.*

*“Suddenly I had a brilliant idea. I asked my husband to take a picture of me at the pulpit. Behind me was a pipe organ and chairs for the choir. Just below me there were 12 chairs for dignitaries. And then my brilliant idea took a leap forward. There was nobody in the hall (it could seat 1500 on its shiny pine-looking benches). Not a single tourist. So I stood at the pulpit and said: 'Brothers and sisters. We are gathered here today in honor of Mary Cooper Oakey, who had the good sense and the guts to leave her suddenly polygamous husband, leave Paris, Idaho, take her three younger children, and become the first citizen of the little town of Dingle, telling her husband James he could not follow her. There she homesteaded one hundred and fifty acres while she and her children lived in a lean-to and then a log cabin. Sister Oakey, we honor you! And I am also pleased today to announce a new revelation. From this moment forward it is made clear that polygamy is not now, never has been, and never will be a principle of Truth or a part of the plan of the Lord. Thank you, brothers and sisters.' And then I stood down. I can hardly remember anything that I have enjoyed doing more.”*

In January 2013 the LDS Church released, via its own website as well as YouTube, a promotional video entitled “Earthly Father, Heavenly Father.” The unusually high production

values (for a Church-produced film) and Terrence Malick-like formalist aesthetics convey a key Mormon doctrinal precept: that fatherhood, in its best forms, gives humanity “a glimpse” of divinity, and that the experiences and joys of fatherhood parallel those of Heavenly Father. The film visually foregrounds the everyday experience of small children in their home, with a voice-over narration by their father, who works away from them to provide for their needs and wants. “They lay in the comfort we provide. All while I work. I’m far, but close. Always thinking of them.... I do it all for them. I work, that they may grow.... I will be their protector. I will be their gentle friend. I will be my wife’s faithful husband. I am a father. I am also a son.” The video concludes with the onscreen caption, sourced to the Quorum of Twelve Apostles: “Of all the titles of respect and honor and admiration that are given to Deity, He has asked us to address Him as father.”

From the perspective of traditional monotheism, the only really controversial aspect of this production is the analogic parallel between humanity and divinity—not the gendering of God as male. Yet this gendering is something very different in Mormonism, in contrast with traditions in which the maleness of the One God is beyond questioning. For Mormons, though, there still *is* a Heavenly Mother. She does exist. And Her place in LDS cosmological discourse is also strongly paralleled in the video. Mostly, she is in the background, a logically necessary but unremarked upon presence. She is only explicitly mentioned twice—as someone who appreciates naptime, and as someone to whom he “will be a faithful husband.” Implicitly, her presence is also adumbrated in the pronoun “we,” as in “they lay in the comfort we provide.” Visually, she has only a few seconds of screen time in a 4-minute film. The minimality of her presence is highly conspicuous. While most Mormons see the film as an inspired and genuinely affecting depiction not only of the dignity of fatherhood but of the intimacy of the connection

humanity is meant to have with its Heavenly Father, some immediately noted (sometimes publicly) the impossibility of having a similarly constructed homage to motherhood, ie a film extolling the virtues of motherhood entitled “Earthly Mother, Heavenly Mother,” a condition set into especially sharp relief against the otherwise omnipresent efforts at formally extolling motherhood in LDS discourse. The contradiction is captured well by the closing caption. Deity, as an analogic projection of earthly parenthood, is both implicitly male + female and explicitly male only.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to give the impression that most LDS women experience or respond to discourse on Heavenly Mother in a manner that would be consistent with a feminist deconstruction of same. The great majority of Mormons—including and especially Mormon women—find the doctrine of Mother in Heaven to be not just comforting but empowering. This includes the various taboos and other discursive constraints that comprise the structured silence surrounding Her. They appreciate knowing She exists and sincerely view the silence surrounding Her as an expression of genuine respect. Nevertheless, the feminist critique brings fully to the surface much of what is otherwise left implicit, utterly taken for granted, within LDS discourse, not just about Deity but about gender.

Consider another essay by Carol Lynn Pearson. Recall that virtually all of her literary work, so much of which incorporates themes of female deity, has very self-referentiality cast itself within a devotional and faithful expressive idiom. Her work has had widespread appeal among LDS women who would not consider themselves feminists. The essay, entitled “A Walk in Pink Moccasins,” has achieved iconic, canonical status in LDS feminist circles. Originally published in 2005 in the LDS journal *Sunstone* and republished two years later at the *Feminist Mormon Housewives* website, it is more of a parable. “Men cannot possibly know what it is

like,” she begins, “to be a female child in a Motherless House unless they are given a glimpse into what it would be like to be a male child in a Fatherless House.” The fact that what she writes seems shocking only underscores the degree to which we have become “acclimated to absurdity, to being assured that a Motherless House is normal.”

The scene depicts an LDS worship service conducted by a Presiding Sister, who addresses the young men in the room. She reminds them that their Mother in Heaven sees them, and assures them that She loves them: “I am persuaded that She loves you just as much as She loves her daughters, and I hope you can believe that.” She also assures them that they indeed have a place in Heavenly Mother's plan for Her children, that ever since Adam was fashioned from Eve's body to be a friend and a helpmeet to her, they have had a part to play. Down through the ages Heavenly Mother has revealed Her plan in finer detail through the great biblical matriarchs and prophetesses. She admonishes the young men to keep themselves pure and chaste, and to ignore the voices from the world trying to convince them that they are oppressed: “the role of man has been made clear by God Herself. The place he occupies in our Mother's plan is not in question...” She concludes: “And as the light of our Mother grows brighter in this world we learn even more of the glorious truths concerning manhood, that it is intended indeed to be a partnership with woman. In fact, one of the truths of our age, and I believe with all my heart this is a truth even though we don't want to talk about it and even though the words were written by a man—somewhere we've a Father there!”

The scene is deliberately provocative, and the truth is most Mormon women would find it as shocking and alienating as Mormon men. Still, while it does not reflect the perspective of most LDS women, it does place into relief those features of Mormon discourse of gendered deity which typically lurk beneath the surface, what is presumed rather than explicitly denoted by

Mormon talk about Heavenly Parents. Conversely, Pearson's larger body of work very much does capture the yearning to more fully understand Heavenly Mother and Her role in the eternities, to flesh Her out, to make Her more real—a yearning hardly limited to Mormonism's more progressive or feminist corners. But the scene subverts by more than just inverting the gendered tropes of LDS theology; arguably the most jarring inversion is that of gendered voice. It's not just that the speaker talks of Goddesses and matriarchs and prophetesses; it's that she speaks in a woman's voice. It's not just that divine authority is a woman, but that ecclesiastical authority sounds like a woman. This underscores an important feature of LDS discourse on sex and gender. The structured silences that implicate gender are *about* gender in the denotative or referential sense; but they also *enact* gender in that they entail significant gendered differentials in terms of who the discursive constraints apply to, who can (and cannot) speak authoritative on such matters, and what the consequences of breaching or subverting the norms can be.

### **Women and Authority**

*Adam is a full-time seminary teacher in Utah. This means that the LDS Church employs him to instruct Mormon youth, ages 14-18, in daily devotional scripture study in a classroom setting. He is also a member of his ward's bishopric (ecclesiastical leadership is often drawn from the ranks of the Church Education System). He is married with 4 young children. "I was talking with my wife about how we had just given the speaking assignments for the Mothers Day program." This is a reference to the fact that the lay membership is almost always assigned to give sermons or talks during worship services. Topics are assigned, and ward members usually have a couple of weeks to prepare a 10-20 minute sermon. "She [his wife] asked me if someone was going to do a talk on Heavenly Mother. At first I thought she was kidding, but then I realized she was at least partially serious. She had just read an article published by BYU that showed all*

*of the different things that Church leaders had said about Heavenly Mother over the years. The article had concluded very strongly that it was not doctrine that we couldn't talk about Heavenly Mother.” He says this in a way that indicates that he expects me to be surprised by it and that he endorses it. His wife had in effect asked him if someone could be assigned to give a talk based on the contents of the article. “She said she thought it would be great idea if one of the sisters in the ward spoke about Heavenly Mother, as long as she knew that she was to only quote from official sources and Church leaders.”*

*he problem, he explained, was that sacrament meeting talks are supposed to be either based on topics that can be easily searched in the scriptures (via the “Topical Guide” contained as a supplement to LDS editions of the Bible) or on a specific talk or sermon by a Church leader (and almost always a contemporary, living leader). The statements collected in the Paulsen article were from dozens of different talks and sermons over the course of more than a century. There are no direct references to Heavenly Mother in the “Standard Works” (the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and a series of revelations penned by Joseph Smith compiled in two volumes entitled The Doctrine & Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price). “What we don't do is give someone an academic article—even one published by BYU—and tell them to do a talk based on that.” Someone could independently consult the article as a resource for historical statements from Church leaders. Congregation members have a fairly free hand when it comes to actually preparing their talks. But it would be improper for the bishopric member who assigns the talk to explicitly direct someone to an academic journal.*

*I ask him why he didn't just prepare and give such a talk himself or have his wife do it. “Well, I considered it, except that it just seemed so unusual. I mean, she read a lot of it to me, and nothing struck me as, you know, really radical But I had also never, ever in my life heard a*

*talk on the subject in any Church meeting. I definitely wasn't going to have her do it, because she would just come across as a troublemaker or a feminist. I thought that if I gave it it would be less likely to raise eyebrows, but in the end I just decided to pass on it. There's nothing preventing anyone from studying this on their own, and about a month later I even made a comment during Sunday School where I mentioned the article and said that there was no good doctrinal reason why we couldn't talk about her.” I ask him if his comment actually spurred a conversation about Her. “No, the teacher just thanked me for my comment and then moved on with the lesson.”*

Recall Sister Pearson's comments about being protected from ecclesiastical discipline by her very supportive local Church leaders. This was an oblique reference to the very public excommunication of several high profile LDS feminist scholars in the early 1990s, including women who specifically and vocally advocated the open worship of Heavenly Mother. In the wake of Church President Gordon B. Hinckley's 1991 admonition to church members not to pray to Heavenly Mother, Janice Allred, author of a collection of theological essays entitled *God the Mother*, was subjected to formal ecclesiastical discipline for contradicting Hinckley's instruction. Several years later BYU professor Gail Houston was fired for publicly describing her personal relationship with Heavenly Mother, including the meditative and visualization practices (but not praying) to strengthen the bond. These stories are just touchstones from a period recalled with a combination of regret, anger, and anxiety by progressive and feminist Mormons who were old enough at the time to still remember experiencing it. The early 1990s have come to be identified with vigorous anti-feminist backlash (in different locales/ecclesiastical jurisdictions several contributors to and the editor of a volume on feminism and priesthood entitled *Women and Authority* were excommunicated within weeks of each other), including the disciplining of

female scholars who refused to retract public statements and teachings about female deity.

More recently, LDS apologetic scholar Kevin Barney published an essay (2008) in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* entitled “How to Worship Heavenly Mother Without Getting Excommunicated.” He begins by asking, if most Mormons believe in Heavenly Mother, then why is discussion of her so controversial, even resulting at times in excommunication or other Church discipline? From there Barney surveys what can be gleaned about Heavenly Mother from the scriptures, even if that gleaning has to be largely indirect, drawing particularly from Old Testament sources. He locates Her in the pantheon of Gods worshiped by early (polytheistic) Israelites, under the name Asherah, wife of El (the High God). They had sons (among them Baal and Yahweh), and over time Israel became monotheistic by essentially combining El and Yahweh (under the latter's designation), relegating other gods and sons of gods to angels, and cracking down on the worship of these now non-gods, including Asherah. This overview sets up a list of suggestions he makes for how Heavenly Mother can be worshiped today without threatening one's standing in the Church. These are meant as “reconceptualizations” of things Mormons already do, not the introduction of new modes of worship. The practices he suggests are modest and, more importantly, meant to be private, not public.

His first suggestion flows directly from his scriptural analysis: assign Her the name/title of *Asherah*. This is an incredible Mormon suggestion, since Mormons conceive of their special relationship with God at least in part in terms of their knowledge of His name (which they learn in the temple). Thus by naming Her, by knowing Her name, they enter into a more intrinsically worshipful relationship with Her. Beyond that, Barney suggests associations Mormons can envision between female deity and other key theological, scriptural, and cultural themes

(Wisdom, creation, healing, fertility and breastfeeding, holy sanctuary), as well as practices that can be understood as acknowledging or observing Her existence (for example, Mormons could consciously consider their Christmas trees, a tradition originally stemming from pre-Christian goddess worship, to be a symbol denoting Heavenly Mother). Significantly, from the outset Barney categorically rules out public prayer as a legitimate, safe mode of worship. This would also likely include public advocacy for or descriptions of privately praying to Heavenly Mother.

Although the essay was not meant as a commentary on or rejoinder to the excommunications of women who advocated Heavenly Mother worship a decade earlier, the association (particularly given the direct invocation of excommunication in the essay's title) is inescapable. Janice Allred—who, as noted above, was excommunicated specifically for her scholarship and advocacy regarding Heavenly Mother—published a response to Barney<sup>2</sup> in which she noted that she had, in fact, done exactly what he was advocating but was nevertheless subjected to discipline and public discrediting by Church leaders. “Barney,” she argues, “actually follows the same basic approach I followed, which is to search the scriptures for knowledge of the Mother using scholarly tools and insights about the nature of God developed from Mormon theology.” The problem as she sees it is that Barney frames the controversy over discussing Heavenly mother in terms of idiomatic cultural dynamics, as if the discomfort or hesitation at discussing Her were the mere byproduct of misunderstanding between people or factions with differing opinions about how much can or ought to be said. Barney's advice, she concludes, “does not address the role of the Church hierarchy in the fear and silence surrounding speaking about the Mother in Heaven”—the effects of which she has exquisitely, and tragically personal experience.

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2 At <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/the-one-who-never-left-us/>, last accessed 13 February 2014.

A similar critique applies to Paulsen's article, which gives example after example of predominantly male leaders talking openly about Heavenly Mother, expresses repeated incredulity as to where the “cultural” silence surrounding Her might have come from, and concludes that there is no binding doctrinal reason for anyone to avoid the topic. What the analysis fails to imagine is not just the compatibility but the reinforcing coupling between strong, hierarchically enforced discursive taboos against talking about a subject and the ability of a small subset of authority figures to nevertheless freely (and authoritatively) speak on the matter. Their authorization to candidly address the topic couples with choice to nevertheless do so in an elliptical and circumscribed manner not just to reinforce the general taboo but to align the spectrum of privilege with regard to the tabooed material with priestly and ecclesiastical authority—precisely the kind of authority from which women are categorically excluded.

Like the patterned constraints and codes regulating talk about the temple, the structured silence surrounding Heavenly Mother governs more than what can or cannot be said about Her or even whether or not (or in what ways) She ought to be worshiped; it also reflects, fortifies, and scripts the enactment of a continuum of discursive authority and social prerogative that diffuses women's voices in the same way that the descriptive terra incognita effaces Her presence/role in the divine plan and the Godhead. On one end of the continuum you have a small group of people, all male, with virtually limitless freedom to comment on Heavenly Mother. Neither Paulsen nor Barney has the cultural authority to tell Mormons that it is acceptable to discuss Her (despite their attempt to do so), never mind to worship Her (pace their conspicuous refusal to do so). Such authorization could only come from top Church leaders, and would be necessarily spoken in a male voice. On the other end of the spectrum, you have a small group of women, formally excommunicated from Mormonism (and thus wholly discredited within the

discourse of faithful Mormonism), not just for speaking openly about Heavenly Mother but for attempting to authorize other Mormons to freely discuss, invoke, relate to, and even worship Her. The the outermost points on the spectrum, the pole/antipode, are male and female, authority and apostasy.

Of course nearly all Mormons fall somewhere in the middle, carefully measuring and ameliorating their talk of Heavenly Mother, but calibrating their speech with very different bases for identification with the individuals and the social categories that mark either end of the continuum—a difference cast primarily in terms of the (silent) speaker's sex. Rather than being the distinct discursive purview of women to speak about female divinity, it is the prerogative of the all-male priesthood, particularly the high-priesthood that comprises the Church's central governing councils. Talking about Heavenly Mother (and not talking about Her, and, most significantly, talking about not talking about Her) thus implicates not just femininity as social, familial, and cosmic or eternal ideal, but an enacting of gender based in part on the gendered disparity regarding who can and cannot speak about gendered divinity and “man's” (a gendered gloss for humanity still extremely common in LDS discourse) potential to achieve godliness and even godhood. Men speak authoritatively about God's divine purpose for Man, for men and women, and for women.

There is no Mormon Goddess (except in deliberately subversive discourse). Church Apostle George Q. Cannon wrote in 1857 that “there is too much of an inclination to deify 'our mother in heaven. Our Father in heaven should be the object of our worship. He will not have any divided worship... In the revelation of God the Eternal Father to the Prophet Joseph Smith there was no revelation of the feminine element as part of the Godhead, and no idea was conveyed that any such element 'was equal in power and glory with the masculine.’” Note the

scare quotes as well as the non capitalization of “mother”, in contrast to “Eternal Father” (and “Prophet Joseph”). Cannon concluded: “Therefore, we are warranted in pronouncing all tendencies to glorify the feminine element and to exalt it as part of the Godhead as wrong and untrue, not only because of the revelation of the Lord in our day but because it has no warrant in scripture, and any attempt to put such a construction on the word of God is false and erroneous.”

Other church leaders, while affirming Heavenly Mother's exclusion from the trinitarian Godhead, argued that divinity in its fullest form was male and female, that maleness was insufficient for deification without its female complement. Thus while the question of whether husbands preside over wives is incrementally unsettling itself in Mormonism, Christ (the husband) manifestly presides over the Church (the bride), and men only—as Christ's representatives and authorized witnesses—preside over the Church temporally. And although She is too circumspectly and vaguely spoken of for such a claim to definitively and canonically situated in official Mormon doctrine, it would be very difficult not to conclude that Heavenly Mother is presided over by Her Husband, God The Father.

### **Queen of Heaven**

*“When the suffering female kind over the great globe are acquainted with the fact that ‘the daughters of Kings are among the Lord's honourable wives in heavn (Psalm 45) and on the right hand the Queen in Gold...’ you will hear of more honourable women clinging to the holy Priesthood than you ever thought of.”*

—William W. Phelps, 1852

Plural marriage—the divinely authorized taking of multiple wives by male priesthood holders—dates in Mormonism to the final years of Joseph Smith's life in Nauvoo Illinois. The details of how the practice developed, of the specific shape it took early on, the persons

involved, and the revelations and theological innovations that underscored it are the subjects of numerous theses, dissertations, and book-length scholarly treatments. Being primarily concerned not with the actual historical practice of plural marriage but rather with LDS discourse about plural marriage, this analysis draws on only a few aspects of Mormon polygyny, none of them particularly contested or controversial in LDS historical scholarship. As an anthropologist, it is my duty to declare at the outset what anthropologists know to be true: polygyny (and polyandry, which figures both tangentially and centrally in contemporary discussions of plural marriage) is not merely a marital practice but a *kinship system*. As the religious and cosmological universe developed through Smith's revelations extended itself further and further away from traditional protestantism, Smith began to reconstruct Mormon kinship along equally heretical lines. The trajectory of Smith's break with Victorian kinship patterns and familial and sexual moralities as well as the specific contours of the entailed ways of making and reckoning kin networks are not the focus here (although they will figure more prominently in my arguments about contemporary LDS kinship in Chapter 6). Still, treating polygamy as kinship (as opposed to, say, institutionalized adultery) is a starting point for what follows.

These are the elements of early Mormon polygamy<sup>3</sup> most relevant to my discourse analysis: 1) it was secret; 2) it was not completely secret; 3) it involved Smith not just marrying multiple otherwise unmarried women but also his marrying of women already married to other men (most of them Smith's colleagues in elite Church leadership, and mostly unbeknown to said husbands); 4) Smith vigorously and publicly denied its existence and/or his involvement with it; 5) Smith's (first) wife, Emma, was generally opposed to it (she made effort to accept it when initially made aware of it, but became increasingly hostile to the practice with the passage of

<sup>3</sup> The best reference on early Mormon polygamy is Hales (2013). See also Compton (1997) and Bachman (1975).

time); 6) it figured prominently in non-Mormon suspicion of and hostility toward Smith in Nauvoo, and an attempt to suppress/punish its public exposure was the proximate catalyst for the extralegal violence that culminated in his assassination; 7) protecting/guarding the secret of Smith's (and other prominent Churchmen's) plural marriages was a key factor in the development of many of the institutional, theological, and even liturgical developments of Smith's late prophetic career, including the ritual forms which would eventually comprise the endowment, the Relief Society, and marital sealing rites.

Under divine admonition (which he described himself, to both colleagues and prospective wives, as having initially resisted and only having accepted under the threat of death administered by an angel with a drawn sword), Smith began taking plural wives in secret ceremonies which *sealed* them to him for time and eternity, sometime in 1841. An earlier effort to take a plural wife (a young housemaid in his and Emma's home in Kirtland, Ohio, named Fanny Alger, probably in 1836 though possibly as early as 1833) proved abortive, with disastrous consequences for the stability of Church leadership councils (as well as for his relationship with primary Book of Mormon translation amanuensis and Church First Presidency member Oliver Cowdery, whose subsequent disaffection from Mormonism lasted decades). Thus, Smith had intimate, first-hand knowledge of the potential consequences, not just for himself and his marriage to Emma but for the stability of the Church and for the good relations between Mormons in Nauvoo and non-Mormons in surrounding settlements and communities (Nauvoo was settled predominantly by Mormons just expelled from Missouri in the aftermath of the 1838-39 “Mormon War” that culminated in an Extermination Order issued by Governor Lilburn Boggs—Smith himself was imprisoned on the charge of treason against the state after the conflict, and after several months he and a few colleagues were permitted to escape during a

prison transfer, and they fled to join their expelled co-religionists in western Illinois; see Gentry and Compton, 2010). While it might be unclear to non-believers in Smith's prophetic calling why Smith undertook such a risky enterprise under the circumstances (though it is my judgment at least that Smith sincerely believed himself to be under divine injunction to do so).

According to Smith's recorded revelations, his reception of the “sealing power”—divine authorization to perform marriages and constitute familial relationships on earth that would persist and be valid in the eternal world to come—occurred when Elijah visited him (along with Gabriel, Elias, and Jesus) on Easter (!) in the Kirtland Temple in 1836 (note the temple in Kirtland did not house most of the rites now associated with temple worship; these were not developed until Nauvoo, during the period under consideration). This means that while technically considering himself authorized to do so, Smith nevertheless understood himself to be somehow unready or incapable of actually performing or enacting these new familial bonds. Though he never commented on this lapse (indeed, it is virtually uniformly unremarked upon in LDS discourse and even scholarship), the best historical reconstructions of the timelines involved indicate that his early 1842 initiation into freemasonry (and his rapid ascension to the rank of Master Mason) were a kind of creative catalyst. He almost immediately began working to establish three intimately tied institutions: the Anointed Quorum, the Relief Society, and a push forward for Celestial Marriage. Immersion in the social and ceremonial world of freemasonry seems to have catalyzed in Smith a new awareness of the sociological and metaphysical possibilities of the elaborate ritual forms and their connection to oaths of secrecy and protection. Smith drew from and reconfigured the ceremonial raw materials of the masonic rites to fashion an entirely new Mormon liturgical corpus and to vastly expand the scope of celestial marital sealings.

The rites he developed and into which he began to initiate male and female members of his personal inner circle would be, after his death, standardized and canonized into what Mormons today know as the endowment and the sealing ceremony (sacramental marriage). Over the next two years, Smith would invite several dozen prominent men and women to undergo the sacred ordinances, rites which cleansed and anointed, conferred name and title, instructed and adorned participants, preparing them to invoke and enter the presence of God. Those initiated were known colloquially at the time as The Anointed Quorum or the Quorum of Anointed (or even The Quorum). With only a few exceptions, all Quorum members were also initiated into and participated in the secret practice of plural marriage.

LDS historian Andrew Ehat (1982, a work that has acquired an almost mystical reputation in Mormon intellectual circles since he never elected to formally publish it and it circulates mostly in photocopied samizdat form) has persuasively argued that, in the wake of Smith's death (and the simultaneous death of his obvious prophetic successor, his brother Hyrum) the makeup of this confidential quorum helped settle the question of Brigham Young's (really, the technically separate but overlapping Quorum of Twelve Apostles over which Young Presided) succession for most members of Smith's inner circle (and, by extension, for most Mormons in Nauvoo who, though unaware of the existence of these institutions were certainly aware of the close relationship between the people involved and Smith). Ehat ignores the connection to plural marriage (possibly because of the taboo surrounding early polygamy at the time of its writing), but significantly, all of the non polygamous members of the Anointed Quorum (Sidney Rigdon, William and Jane Law, and William and Rosannah Marks) either challenged or refused to support Young and the Twelve's claims to succession authority. Also noteworthy, the Twelve consolidated their succession authority in part by assuming control over

the then unfinished temple, completing its construction, and taking thousands of saints through its ceremonies in the weeks and months leading up to their forced expulsion from Nauvoo and trek west.

Participants in the new ordinances were enjoined by powerful oaths of secrecy, particularly regarding the nature of the sacred information (keywords, handclasps, gestural signs) ritually conferred on them during the ceremonies. Beyond this, not only were those who entered into celestial (polygamous) unions formally admonished not to reveal their participation in or the existence of plural marriage, but the marital rites themselves included some of the most sacred, protected elements of the endowment rite. To complicate matters, plural marriage was not an absolute secret, in the sense that there were relentless and rampant rumors and allegations about Smith's "spiritual wifery." John C. Bennet—once a close and trusted colleague who quietly worked alongside Smith in the initial stages of establishing polygamy but was later excommunicated for allegations of sexual misconduct—published a "history" of Mormons in several prominent newspapers, focused largely on exposing the practice and Smith's involvement with it (Smith, Andrew 1971; see also Bushman, 2005). So the imperative for secrecy involved not just silence but denial (and Smith issued several official denials of the practice). As an excommunicated and disgraced former Mormon, now perceived to be slandering Smith, Bennett's allegations had virtually no credibility among Mormons in Nauvoo (most of whom were themselves utterly unaware of Smith's polygamous unions), and only mixed credibility among the region's non-Mormons.

Significantly, among those who were still unaware of plural marriage at the time Bennet's allegations began to circulate were Smith's first wife Emma and his brother (and associate Church president) Hyrum. Emma Smith was eventually made aware of the practice (something

she had suspected for some time) and halfheartedly assented to several of Smith's unions (he had already married several women without Emma's knowledge). She later withdrew her support, after which Smith took additional wives at a notably slower, more careful pace. After more than a year of public denials (which he not only accepted at face value but many of which he issued himself) Hyrum was presented (by Brigham Young) a written copy of the revelation authorizing plural marriage and commanding the Smiths (Joseph and Emma) to accept it (the revelation was eventually canonized as Section 132 in the current LDS Doctrine & Covenants; Emma was rumored to have burned one of only a few extant copies when first presented with it; see Newell and Avery, 1994). Hyrum reluctantly accepted the practice and eventually took plural wives. Still, while Bennett's accusations forced official denials, Smith faced the challenge of keeping the polygamous marriages secret not just from the public but from several of his closest friends, family members, and colleagues.

Shortly after Smith's initiation as a Mason, and concurrently with his active development of temple rites and plural marriage, he also organized the Relief Society. More accurately, he responded to the formal request of local women who had organized (and even drafted a constitution) a "Ladies' Society" or a "benevolent society" by telling them that they did not need a written constitution because he would "organize the women under the priesthood and after the pattern of the priesthood." They held an organizing meeting, and Smith encouraged them to choose a president. They selected his wife Emma. At her suggestion they rejected the term "benevolent" in favor of "relief"—a word that more accurately reflected in their minds the charitable purpose of the organization—and they formally adopted the name "The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo." In addition to a charitable women's organization, the Relief Society was an attempt to extend something of the organizational logic and ceremonial functionality of masonry

to women.

Brown (2009) described it as a cross between a female para-masonic lodge and a Christian reform league designed to prepare women for initiation into temple rites. Its organization occurred in the room that served as the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge, and in which Smith had been raised a Master Mason only the previous night. When the women selected Emma as president (and she selected councilors), Joseph ordained them “to preside over the Society just as the Presidency presides over the Church.” In future meetings he instructed them that they would “grow up by degrees,” and further taught that they needed to be able to observe the strictest confidentiality relating to Church matters: “there may be some among you who are not sufficiently skill'd in Masonry to keep a secret.” He enjoined them to keep the secrets with which they were entrusted, “and then shall we learn whether you are good Masons.” As an interesting coincidence, an 1830 revelation penned by Smith (more than a decade prior to his masonic initiation or the Society's organization) referred to Emma Smith as an “Elect Lady,” the designation of the highest rank for members of Adoptive Masonry, a masonic appendage intended to include women in freemasonry's secret rites.

The focus on secret keeping related to another key function of the early Relief Society. In addition to poverty relief and to preparing its female membership for their introduction into the formally masonic and highly secretive temple ordinances, the new women's organization was eventually given authorization to investigate public allegations made against Smith—allegations chiefly concerning his secret marriages. But the secrecy was not just a function of keeping the truth about Smith's polygamy from going public; it was about keeping even rumors from publicly circulating and (perhaps more importantly) keeping awareness of most of the marriages from the awareness of Emma Smith. That is, conferring investigative authority onto Emma as

president of the Society was in part a way of appeasing her suspicions that Joseph was taking wives behind her back (which he was), a process enabled by the fact that many of Joseph's plural wives were ranking members of the Society and were helping to keep the truth from Emma. And because rumors of Emma's anger at Joseph over the plural marriage accusations (she had publicly railed against the practice), her position at the head of the Society was an effective means of diffusing public suspicion regarding the allegations. Emma's opposition to polygamy was not always principled or unqualified. She assented to several of her husband's plural marriages, and was herself sealed to Joseph (at the time a nuptial rite reserved only for participants in celestial or plural marriage). But she also withdrew her consent, and lived in almost constant fear that he continued to secretly take additional wives (a fear which proved correct).

This period—where rich patterns of secrecy played a particularly robust and productive role in shaping Mormon social reality and forged a strong link between plural marriage, temple rites, women's roles in church administration, and the increasingly fraught relations between Mormons and non-Mormons in the region—also witnessed the development of the theological trends and shifts that would crystallize around two closely related Mormon doctrinal precepts: theosis—the conspecificity of humanity and God(s)—and Heavenly Mother. Celestial marriage—at the time understood solely to denote plural marriage—introduced to humanity a “New and Everlasting Covenant” whereby participants could become gods. The new rites, culminating in the sealing and the “fullness of the priesthood,” placed men and women on a trajectory toward deification. Marriage in this new Covenant was a prerequisite for achieving the highest degrees of exalted heavenly glory, union and communion, unity and community, with God (and gods), the ability to create and preside over new worlds, to have marital bonds not just exist within the

eternities but to define Eternal Life (and “eternal lives”). All of this extended maleness and femaleness into the eternal world, and made them (and their distinctive complementarity) into defining and intrinsic qualities of Godhood. Arguably, the ontological separation of human beings and God was not completely effaced, since the faithful who became gods would still retain a relationship of worship and submission to God, so the extrapolation from women becoming god(desse)s to a Heavenly Mother was not an overdetermined conclusion. Nevertheless, She was a conclusion drawn, and the inextricability between celestial marriage as the basis for theosis and celestial marriage qua plural marriage complicated matters: the connective logic between the plurality of gods, of worlds, and of wives was seized upon by a number of influential Mormon thinkers and leaders.

The connection between secrecy, masonic forms, plural marriage, and new authority-conferring rites is on display in the story of Smith's martyrdom. The wide range of events and factors leading up to the assassination are too many to elaborate here (and parts of the story remain a mystery). The proximate catalyst, however, was the conflict between Smith and First Presidency member William Law over Smith's attempt to introduce Law into the practice of celestial marriage and proposal to take Law's wife, Jane, as a plural wife (she would have remained married to William but been sealed under the priesthood to Joseph in the eternities). Law formed a faction within Nauvoo determined to expose Smith's secret marriages and rescue the Church from Smith's influence as a “fallen” prophet. Unlike John C. Bennett, Law was a highly respected citizen, both within and outside the ranks of Mormonis, and his accusations would have carried real weight. Law and his collaborators established a printing press for publishing a newspaper, *The Nauvoo Expositor*. The *Expositor* only ran one edition, with detailed accusations about Smith's polygamous activities. As Nauvoo's mayor, Smith

collaborated with the city council to have the paper declared a public nuisance and the press destroyed (see discussion in Bushman, 2005).

After an initial attempt to flee west, Smith returned to face arrest, knowing that Mormons in Nauvoo would pay a heavy price if he did not face justice: “I go like a lamb to the slaughter,” he was remembered to have said. He was jailed in nearby Carthage with his brother Hyrum and a few colleagues to await trial. Days later, the jail was stormed by a mob wearing masks. Hyrum was quickly killed, and Joseph fired several shots out the cell door with a smuggled in revolver. He then tried to escape through the narrow second floor window and was shot several times in the process. From the window, before falling to his death, Smith issued a truncated masonic distress call, “Oh Lord my God,”<sup>4</sup> likely in the hope that masons in the mob might be convinced to end the attack. Since Hyrum, Smith's obvious successor, was killed alongside his brother, a succession crisis ensued, a crisis that settled itself for most Nauvoo Latter-day Saints, first when Brigham Young persuasively argued that the Twelve had received the necessary instruction and keys to preside over the work of the kingdom, and second when the Twelve conferred similar instructions and keys onto the body of Nauvoo Mormons in the temple on the eve of their collective expulsion and cross country exodus.

As participation in rites associated with the Anointed Quorum expanded to the general membership (and the Quorum itself ceased functionality), so did awareness of and participation in celestial marriage. Independent sovereignty in the west gave Mormons the willingness to publicly acknowledge and defend polygamy. The secret rites of Nauvoo were consolidated and standardized, to be performed in the temples Mormons were feverishly building throughout the Utah Territory. While secrecy about polygamy in general dissipated, the details of Nauvoo

<sup>4</sup> The full distress call would have been “Oh Lord, my God, is there no help for the widow's son?” The widow's son is Hiram Abiff.

polygamy were treated more carefully and confidentially. Though widely and openly and unapologetically practiced by pioneer Mormons, plural marriage's inception had been shrouded in mystery and secrecy. The secrecy would reappear as federal efforts to stamp out Mormon polygamy achieved real momentum in the 1880s (Smith 2006). Participants in plural marriage were driven underground, although for most the underground was a discursive or semiotic rather than material space. “Mind your own business” was the Mormon creed, as anti-cohabitation laws could be enforced and prosecuted on the basis of evidentiary hearsay; the only evidence needed to convict someone of unlawful cohabitation (plural marriages were illegal and therefore illegitimate, not to mention impossible to prosecute given the constraints of spousal and ecclesiastical privilege) was the testimony of a community member that Person A was generally perceived to be in a marriage-like relationship with Person B. The patterns of evasion, silence, and prevarication which initially sustained the underground against federal prosecution would eventually sustain polygamists against efforts by the Church itself to end plural marriage (eventually leading to the birth of Mormon Fundamentalism alongside the rise of the post-pioneer Modern, monogamous LDS Church).

The point of this cursory historical overview is to demonstrate the close ties between different strands patterned silence and secrecy in Mormonism, particularly the temple and polygamy. These ties are buried and calcified in Mormonism's deep structure, in practices, institutions, and doctrines that at the time were inextricably tied to each other. This is a powerful cultural transformation. Today, eternal, sacramental marriage sealing is monogamous—there is no semantic connection between “celestial” and “plural.” Mormons believe in Heavenly Mother, but many would be very uncomfortable with the idea of Heavenly Mothers. There is no perceived connection between the Relief Society and temple rites. With rare exceptions,

Mormons do not become freemasons and are unfamiliar with their rites (although there is some sense, sometimes fraught, that they are vaguely related to the endowment). Yet in Nauvoo circa 1843 plural marriage, sealing, paramasonic rites, actual masonic rites, the Relief Society, and esoteric theological innovations would have been impossible to un-connect from each other for those who were aware of them. Historically, even when polygamy was something openly practiced, the story of its inception was at best an open secret. Its discontinuation reintroduced secrecy into the Mormon social world with a thoroughness not felt since Nauvoo four decades earlier, and the desire to move past our polygamous past, as it were, has kept the structured (though not absolute) silence around polygamy firmly in place.

## Chapter 5: Heavenly Mothers

### Pluralities

*Carol Lynn Pearson describes her own pathway into Mormon feminism as originating in a formative moment during her adolescence. “I was maybe seventeen and my seminary teacher bore fervent testimony not just of Heavenly Mother but of Heavenly Mothers.” She wants to be clear that he was a good man and a good teacher, and that his testimony and conviction in this matter were unquestionably sincere. Still, the prospect horrified her. “It was one of the worst moments of my life to that point. I left and walked home. I could not accept that.” The implication was that the silence surrounding Heavenly Mother concealed a deeper, more scandalous and mysterious secret: God’s identity as a polygamous patriarch. Throughout her subsequent life in Mormonism, seeking and emphasizing Heavenly Mother has been about precisely that: acknowledging not just Her existence and Her divinity but Her singularity. “It has been as important to me to bring Her more fully into our awareness as it has been to show that She is our only Heavenly Mother. I am as confident in Her reality as I am confident that our Father is not a polygamist and that polygamy is not an eternal principle.”*

Mormons have always talked about our polygamous heritage. But our polygamous heritage has also been our pioneer heritage. That is, polygamy is remembered as a part of pioneer Utah, a relic of Brigham Young’s Mormonism. This is not to say that all Mormons are

unaware of plural marriage's origins under Joseph Smith. Many of them have some sense of the practice's Nauvoo origins, and even that the canonized revelation on celestial marriage has something to do with it. But Joseph Smith has a strong mythic presence in Mormon memory, and there he is a devoted husband to his beloved Emma. The Church has been periodically accused of systematically hiding or covering up Smith's polygamous unions (to say nothing of the secrecy and obfuscation, or the fact that he unquestionably had sexual relationships with at least many of his wives). Accusations of censorship or information suppression, I think, miss the larger dynamics involved. Mormons do not categorically avoid talking about Smith's polygamy; instead we talk about not talking about it.

Part of the issue is that pioneer era polygamy in Utah Territory was practiced and defended openly, whereas in Nauvoo plural marriage had been, at the time, a well (but not perfectly) kept secret and a subject of scrupulous taboos. What that means for present day speakers is that openly acknowledging Joseph Smith's polygamy potentially implicates his own public denials of the practice. That is, it's not so much that Smith practiced it as that he covered it up. There is a kind of discursive mirror to the past here: Mormons freely talk about plural marriage that was freely practiced, but speak elliptically, evasively, uncertainly, and even sometimes obfuscate or deny with regard to polygamy that was practiced underground.

This applies to Smith's plural marriages as well as to polygamy that occurred after the 1890 manifesto ending plural marriage in Utah was issued by Church president Wilford Woodruff (some of it concealed from Church authorities). Smith's wives are a significantly more sensitive topic than post-manifesto polygamy, because of his own contemporaneous public denials, because he hid the practice from so many people close to him (including, at times, his first wife), and because of how strongly his relationship with Emma is portrayed in LDS

devotional discourse and cultural mythology in romanticized monogamous terms (and how forcefully official Church discourse on its founding prophet de-emphasizes his polygamous marriages).

Mormonism's internet age has produced a new narrative, a story of discovery, disillusionment, and disaffiliation. In this narrative (which has acquired a kind of orthodoxy among former Mormons as well as among advocates of glasnost-style reform within the Church's ranks) unassuming Church members—raised within the discursive structure of devotional Mormonism, Sunday school, and Church education—encounter sensitive or controversial information about LDS history or doctrine. Joseph Smith's plural marriages (along with a number of the specific details of Nauvoo-era polygamy) are the prototype for such disquieting revelations.

Everyone knows that Brigham Young had plural wives, but learning that Joseph had them, that he kept his plural marriages a secret—including and especially from Emma—and that some of his plural wives were still married to other men can be very troubling, particularly for Mormons who have not paid close attention to or attentively studied Church history. What follows is disenchantment and a sense of betrayal, eventually leading to inactivity, to a loss of testimony, and even to apostasy. The key here, and what both disaffected ex-Mormons and believing proponents of more openness within Mormonism agree on, is that it is not the new, potentially shocking information itself that bothers people so much as the sense that they have not been told the truth by the Church—by Church leaders and by Church-produced Sunday school lessons, scripture study materials, devotional films, and histories.

Brother Tippets, an instructor at an LDS institute who has focused much of his pastoral and pedagogical energy on shepherding young Mormon adults dealing with faith-crises

precipitated by revelations that counter traditional LDS narratives (often by himself introducing the problematic material in a candid, but non-threatening manner, a process he and other advocates of reform describe as “inoculation”), describes the feelings of betrayal he sometimes encounters:

It's not that they actually care that much about Joseph's polygamy. What bothers them is that this is the first time they've heard about it. They say to themselves 'what else hasn't the Church told me about? What else are Church leaders keeping from me?' When South Park did that segment where they showed Joseph translating with his head in a hat, instead of using the Urim and Thummim to read the plates, most of my students thought that was just stupid, that it meant that the writers had no idea what they were talking about. When they eventually learned that the scene, at least that part of it, was accurate, some of them were like 'why did I hear about this for the first time on South Park? Why didn't this ever get taught to me this way?' So it's this sense that the Church is hiding something, and when they lose faith in that, it can be very difficult for them to retain a strong testimony.

Because Smith's plural marriages figure so prominently into these exit narratives, their position in LDS discourse has shifted. Whereas for decades Mormon intellectuals have debated the details, the accounts, the historical accessibility, and the larger meanings of Smith's introduction and practice of celestial marriage, it has remained largely surrounded by silence in both official and ground-level Mormon discourse. Now, with the advance of the new narrative, the invisibility of the topic has itself become a topic. That is, Mormons increasingly talk about the fact that we do not talk about Joseph's wives, about who talks about it and who does not, and about what not talking about it means.

This metadiscourse partially insulates those who talk and write about Smith's plural marriages from the potential effects that a more direct engagement with their brute facticity

might entail. Mormonism's radical restorationism, its underlying claims that primitive Christianity and concomitant priestly and apostolic authority were fully restored via heavenly beings through Joseph Smith, forges direct ties between the history of its founding and the devotional lives and experiences and religious practices of contemporary Mormons. Consider the priesthood authority. The stories of John the Baptist placing his hands on Smith's head and directly, tangibly conferring authority to baptize upon him or Smith's similar receipt of apostolic authority by the laying on of hands of resurrected New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John, figure directly into priesthood holders today both receive and perceive their own priesthood authority. "Brother Johnson received the priesthood through the laying on of hands from his father, Brother Johnson, who received it from his father," etc., etc., all the way back to "who received it from Joseph Smith, who received it from Peter, James, and John, who received it from Jesus Christ."

There is a direct and irreducible connection between the authority and authenticity of my priesthood (and the efficacy and legitimacy of all that I do by virtue of my priesthood) and these narratives of unmediated, physical, and personal restoration through Joseph Smith. The official cessation of polygamy more than a century ago sunders such a connection for Mormons between their eternal, celestial marriages and the restoration of Celestial (plural) marriage in the years before Smith's martyrdom (the legitimacy of the marriages, instead, anchors itself to the restoration of the Priesthood generally and, specifically, of the sealing authority years before Smith began actually sealing spouses, always in plural marriages; note too that 19th century Mormons believed that not only biblical patriarchs and New Testament apostles married plurally, but that Jesus Christ himself had multiple wives, the women routinely, if ambiguously described as attending Him in the gospels). To speak of the "restoration" of celestial marriage in Nauvoo in

the manner that Mormons speak of the restoration of the Priesthood would disrupt the continuity between present-day monogamous marriages and the grand narrative of Restoration.

Rather than incorporating Smith's actual inception of celestial marriage into devotional narratives (something Mormon fundamentalist schismatic groups do in strong self-conscious contrast to mainline LDS discourse), Mormons who know about Nauvoo polygamy talk and write about it in a way that metadiscursively addresses the place and/or absence of this part of our history in our discourse. We do not talk about Nauvoo polygamy without also talking about talking about Nauvoo polygamy. In contrast to so much of our discourse of sacred and devotional history—a discourse which implicates us and to which we attach ourselves and in which we immerse ourselves through the very act of telling our history—this metadiscourse of the Sensitivity or Complicatedness or Controversy of Nauvoo polygamy cordons us, as discursive agents, off from submersion into the discourse we produce by positioning us outside the discourse, as commenting on rather than acting in the narratives. By implicating ourselves in the discourse *about* the discourse of early polygamy—by positioning ourselves vis a vis other groups of people who know or don't know or talk or don't talk or accept or don't accept it—we partially shield ourselves from being implicated in the discourse of early polygamy itself.

For decades this applied primarily to LDS scholars and intellectuals, or to Mormons who left the Church. The new narrative of information age Mormonism, of uncontained secrets, of information leakage, of personal disillusionment and betrayal, of The Church as unfaithful narrator, has rapidly expanded and magnified the range of this metadiscourse. The metadiscourse of talking about Joseph's plural marriages once primarily concerned such questions as “what historical sources do we trust” or “how candid can one be about the subject in print while still remaining faithful” or “will discussing plural wife X affect my employment prospects at BYU”

or “will I be perceived as a critic of the Church if I publish in this academic journal which recently published an article about Nauvoo polygamy?” Today, the questions that animate the conversations are “how honest or dishonest has the Church been about this subject,” “is the Church itself to blame for the exodus of young adults from Mormonism,” “why do people care so much more about Joseph Smith’s polygamy than Brigham Young’s,” “how much do Church leaders themselves even know about this,” and “would frank and open acknowledgement by the Church of this subject drive more people from the Church or inoculate more of them against a faith crisis?”

The discursive cordoning, though, is only partial. The reason for this is that plural marriage has not been entirely abandoned. It is still practiced in serial form. A Mormon man who loses his wife can be sacramentally sealed to another woman, and this second marriage is also considered valid and binding in the eternities. He is eternally plurally married to both women. Significantly, this does not apply to women. A woman previously sealed to a man, even if he has passed away or they have legally divorced, may not be sealed to a second man unless the first sealing is officially and formally nullified by the Church’s First Presidency. She can marry a man, even sacramentally in the temple, but the marriage is “for time only,” and not “for time and all eternity.” Like historical polygamy, present-day plural marriage—often described by Latter-day Saints as “eternal polygamy”—is patriarchal, that is male centric. At a Sunday school lesson I recently observed, the instructor—Brother Park, who also serves as an ordinance worker in the nearby temple, performing and officiating in the rites for a four-hour shift, once a week—described a recent devotional (a testimony strengthening meeting where special guest speakers—often church leaders—speak) he attended. The main speaker was a high-ranking member of Church leadership. Brother Park’s description of part of this apostle’s talk is animated and

enthusiastic: “He was talking about the significance of the sealing power and eternal families. He said 'my [recently deceased] wife was an absolutely beautiful woman. I mean really beautiful. I can only imagine how much more beautiful she is on the other side, in perfected form. I know there are men who see her there and see how beautiful she is. I know they want her.' And then he pounds his fist on the pulpit and almost shouts 'well, they can't have her! She's mine!' Maybe you had to be there but it was so cool. Really, really powerful.” This talk, and in particular this part of the talk, is discussed often in the congregation in the weeks following the devotional.

A forceful testimony to the power of sealings and the eternally binding nature of temple work, the quote also casts into relief a stark truth about gender in Mormonism: the fact that not a single woman in the Church, past or present, could make the same exclusive claim on her husband. This impossibility, this lack of certitude regarding the plausibility of having to share one's husband with other women in the Celestial Kingdom, is a source of quiet, widespread, and sometimes devastating anxiety for married Mormon women (or even Mormon women seeking marriage), an anxiety that men can only scarcely imagine. One woman, a lifelong Church member now in her seventies, writes:

I was so horrified by eternal polygamy—something I didn't really know about until I was an adult and engaged to be married---that I briefly considered not getting married at all, or at least, not in the temple. There were a few nights I cried myself to sleep. Our legacy of polygamy invites doubt. Not just doubt in God, but doubt in the safety and stability of our most private, precious relationships. It suggests to women that betrayal—or the feeling of having been betrayed—may be asked of us at any moment, and that our feelings would be yet another sacrifice on the altar of devotion.”

Another sister, a happily married 55 year old homemaker, describes her own mother: “My mother is a very faithful woman, and has given her entire life in service to the church. Yet—she says she will never be exalted because she cannot share my father with another wife.”

Another woman details her own dilemmas, brought on by the prospect of eternal polygamy. She describes meeting her husband when they were still teenagers, how safe she felt with him, how “no one held a candle to him” and how she knew she had the same effect on him, and cherished it. He is, she writes, “my best friend, my soul mate, the one person on this planet who knows me and appreciates and loves me anyway. He is my greatest source of happiness.” Despite all this, she continues, “there has always been a lingering pain in my heart that makes me hold back. There is always a piece of me that wonders...if I die first, will he marry again? Then what?” The lingering “then what” has made her permanently cautious. She wonders “if there would be a place in the universe far enough away for me to hide if I was on the other side of the veil and my forever love was marrying someone else.” She notes what the practical effects of this anxiety have been, that it has “had an impact on intimate aspects of our eternal love. As my marriage has grown over the past seven years, the pain of this issue has only worsened. Could God break my heart forever and call that heaven?” And perhaps the most devastating account I witnessed of this anxiety, Caroline writes: “Every night I pray that my husband will die before I do so he will not have the chance to take a second wife.”

It is also not clear what the eternal status of polygamy is, and many Mormons express confidence that in the grand scheme of things somehow it will all be mercifully worked out to prevent heartache. Yet it is the future—and present—heartache of women specifically that is the object of such reassurances. To express anxiety about this as a woman can come across as faithless, as an unwillingness to either sacrifice one's private, selfish desires for the good of

fulfilling God's plan, or simply to trust God (who might Himself be a polygamist!). The effect of these anxieties on marital relationships is not always manifested in the outspoken terms of the examples above, but most married couples have conversations—even playful ones to diffuse the tension inherent to the subject—that touch closely to the persistent worry. Couples talk about what kind of woman he might marry if something happens to her—“will it be someone I like, that I can get along with as a sister wife?” Or they talk about her not wanting him to remarry, or to remarry for time only if he really needs to. “But what if she wasn't previously married? What if she loses the chance to be eternally married because I'm too selfish to share my husband?” The general taboo around the subject of polygamy intersects with the sensitivity of such questions in all marital relationships as well as the specifically LDS silence around Heavenly Mother. But the taboo is also gendered. Men often speak cavalierly about polygamy, both historical and eternal. They casually discuss it, its nature, its meaning and implications, why it happened, why it stopped (as a temporal practice), whether or not it will exist for everyone.

This is even true, notes one respected female Mormon scholar, “perhaps especially true of academic and intellectual treatments of and debates about polygamy.” All kinds of discussions, in books and journals and at conferences, on blogs and message boards, occur “with sometimes alarming, if predictable frequency. What was Joseph trying to do? How many wives did he have? Were all of the marriages consummated? What is the proper theological and cosmological context for understanding plural marriage? Were the plural marriages full blown marriages, or were they more 'dynastic' in nature? Are they better understood as a restoration of biblical patriarchy or as the multiplication and expansion of enduring relationships? Was Joseph thirsty for kin, or for sex? Did he lie about it to protect himself from Emma, or to protect the Saints from frontier violence?” Such questions and others like them, she notes, are “discussed

and dissected and revisited and revised, and it's almost always solely by men. Occasionally a woman will chime in and share her perspective, and maybe she'll point out how interesting it is that it's, once again, a male dominated discussion.” These exceptions prove the general rule. “Even when the conversation is *about* not talking about polygamy or our inability to be really open and candid about it, and even when it's a conversation about *why women don't usually participate in such discussions*, it's mostly men doing the discussing.”

An interesting side-note to discourse on Smith's own plural marriages is the fraught and highly problematic place of his polyandrous unions. Several of the women Smith had plurally sealed to him were married to other men, and in most (possibly all) such cases, the husbands were not consulted prior to the marriage and the women continued to live with and in marital union with their first husbands. These marriages are generally considered far more scandalous than Smith's marriages with theretofore single women. Discussions of historical 'skeletons' or parts of its history that the Church fails to address always mention “Nauvoo” or “Joseph Smith's” polygamy and almost always include a special reference to polyandry. The heightened tension surrounding these marriages reflects two heavily gendered anxieties: over the privileged sexual access of males to their wives and over the sexual desire of women. The former is illustrated nicely in the anecdote above about an apostle declaring confidently that no man can ever have access to his wife, because she is eternally his—a claim that would be impossible for an LDS woman to make, even a century after the official cessation of plural marriage. Some Mormon feminists echo the framing of Smith's polyandrous marriages as especially problematic, while others argue that treating these marriages (which forced other men to share their spouses) as more scandalous than Smith's other plural unions (which forced Emma to share her spouse) reflects a disturbingly sexist view of the husband/wife relationship.

The anxiety over female sexual desire is reflected debates about the alleged sexual consummation of these marriages. There is very little direct evidence that Smith had sexual relations with any of his polyandrous wives, although ample evidence exists that he consummated several polygynous relationships. Arguments that Smith refrained from sex with these wives are almost always framed as apologetic in nature, as protecting the good name and reputation of the Prophet. The underlying concern for the sexual privilege of the original husbands is obvious. Recent historical and theological treatments of Smith's polygamy boldly assert that Smith did not consummate not just on the grounds of lacking affirmative evidence but on the strength of the moral-appeal that the women, the wives, in question were entirely too virtuous and righteous to engage multiple sexual partners. Smith's virtue, in such accounts, is grounded in his acknowledgment of the sexual claims of the wives' first husbands; the women's virtue, by contrast, is grounded in their unwillingness to sleep with more than one man.

Not only do these debates and conversations routinely reflect male perspectives and male anxieties, but they, as noted above, are conducted by men. A noteworthy exception to this pattern is a recent series at the Feminist Mormon Housewives blog, highlighting the individual stories and biographies of Smith's plural wives.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to traditional debates about the theology, the historical roots, the social implications of polygamy and their thorough, ossified grounding in male voicings, here Mormon feminists seek primarily to recapture and focus on the experiences and perspectives and voices and sacrifices of the women. While there is no shortage of abstracted and principled debates over the “original” meaning of plural marriage for Joseph Smith, the conversation in this expressly feminist space concerns itself with what plural marriage meant for the women involved. Although the series on Smith's wives draws heavily on the

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1 The list of entries can be found here: <http://www.feministmormonhousewives.org/?s=Remembering+the+Forgotten+Women+of+Joseph+Smith&submit=Search+fMh>

historical research of a male historian (Compton), here Mormon women deal with the freighted subject of plural marriage by recognizing and holding up the women involved, by showing solidarity with them and their experiences, regardless of how any of them today feel about Smith's institution of or involvement of the practice. Smith's wives are celebrated as feminine (and feminist) icons and heroins, and their stories are reclaimed for and on behalf of Mormon women today.

Talk about plural marriage in LDS discourse not only implicates sexed and gendered persons and experiences but is enclosed within a structured (though not absolute) silence defined by taboos, elliptical allusion, and patterns of discretion and self-censoring that are differently applied to and enacted by men and women. Part of the disparity reflects the differing practical implications and consequences faced and imagined by men and women confronted with the facts of polygamy, whether in its past historical, present-day serialized, or future/eternal (and ambiguous) instantiations. Plural marriage as a historical fact and as a potentially eternal law means something very different to me as a male than it does to my wife. Having to share one's spouse as a test of faith or as an eternal imperative is simply not a fear seriously contemplated in the LDS male experience. Plural marriage was once loudly defended by LDS leaders as an antidote to the irreducibly and inherently polygamous nature of male sexuality, as a way of channeling it into something good and eternally productive, of directing its potency into the formation of gods and godliness.

In this rendering male sexual desire is ubiquitous, unstable, and threatening. Males sexually submit to the demands of celestial marriage and the imperative to raise up an eternity of righteous posterity, while individual females (who, since the Fall, desire only their husband) submit sexually to their husbands both by incubating and nurturing that righteous seed and by

sacrificing their singular and manifestly monogamous husband-desire on the altar of a divinely ordained plan, a celestial and patriarchal order revealed from on high. These social, sexual, and theological disparities in the fabric of Mormon marriage survived the transition from earthly polygamy to earthly monogamy, not just doctrinally in the continued canonicity of the revelation on celestial marriage or liturgically in the practice of serialized polygyny, but discursively in the very obvious differences in how LDS men and women, respectively, talk about (and talk about not talking about) plural marriage. These discursive patterns articulate closely with those manifest in speech about eternal families, Heavenly Mother, heavenly mothers, celestial (pro)creation, sexuality, chastity, and (female) desire.

**(In)visibility: Desire, the Acting, and the Acted Upon**

*Stephanie is married, with two children, working in university administration. She is a lifelong Mormon and still actively attends and serves in her local congregation. She recalls being taught about chastity and modesty by Church leaders during her adolescence, in Sunday school lessons, during “Standards Night” (an annual Church event where youth leaders teach young women about the importance of chastity and of dressing modestly), and during annual interviews with her Bishop. “I was a very obedient young girl and very much believed in my religion and trusted my leaders. So when I was taught about modesty I believed what they said. They explained that we as young women needed to make sure that we were modest because men are very visual and when they see a woman they cannot help but think sexual thoughts. They said it was our duty to be good and virtuous to stay modest to protect men from their automatically sexual thoughts.” These lessons shaped how she understood male sexuality: “men were unable to control sexual desire and [] just underneath the surface, all boys and men were uncontrollable beasts of sexual thought and desire and that we needed to keep that veneer of*

*modesty up so that they would remain leashed.” She laughs uncomfortably, noting that in retrospect it sounds crazy. “But at the time that is what I felt. I would babysit for many families in the ward and anytime I was alone with the father of the family taking me home I was terrified. Being alone with males in general scared me because of this teaching.” Even when she turned 16 and was permitted by LDS standards to begin dating, she was afraid to date young men “because they were this mystery to me.” Although she knew them to be good people “on the surface, underneath they are uncontrollable.”*

*In hindsight Stephanie believes that she missed out on important sexual and developmental milestones, due to her fear of the opposite sex. “I was also very confused about my own sexual desires. In NONE of the many chastity and modesty lessons I had every year of my entire youth did MY sexuality ever get discussed. I was never told that girls also had sexual desires and that we also thought sexual thoughts.” The worst consequence of this fear and this absence of female desire for her was that “I was taught my sexuality from the perspective of boys and men where I existed only as an object to their own sexual experiences, not as an independent or co-experiencing sexual being.” This meant that during early adolescence “it came as quite a surprise when I discovered... that I too was a sexual being.” She and the other young women in her congregation were even taught about masturbation as a male experience and behavior. During one such discussion “a girl raised her hand and asked, 'What is that?' and a female leader very euphemistically and bashfully said it is when 'You touch your private parts because it feels good.'”*

*That answer shocked Stephanie: “I had been touching myself for years. It just felt good. But I had NEVER equated this with a sexual experience or even anything to do with sex.” The lesson induced horrible guilt. “I continued to feel very guilty for the rest of my youth and young*

*adulthood about masturbation. For one, I felt like such a deviant, bad, evil person for even wanting to do it. I had NEVER not once even heard of the word before this meeting and then it was only in the context of boys.” The guilt and remorse draw from her sense not just that she was “bad,” but that she was “an anomaly”: “I was a girl with sexual or, rather, physical desires. This caused me a lot of grief. It made me question my sexuality (am I like a boy because I like to touch myself?), my worth (I must be an unworthy person because I like this), my confidence (I can’t ever tell anyone about this because I am so different and weird or no one will ever love me if they find out) and my own feelings (I can’t trust what I feel because what I feel is categorically wrong, so I need to only trust what other people tell me).”*

*Although such experiences are neither rare nor particularly or exclusively Mormon, they were nevertheless, in her memory, not only central to her sexual development and transition into adulthood, but carried a deeply Mormon valence: “Recognizing myself as a transgressive sexual being in a culture where women’s sexuality was so taboo that it was completely invisible, became the foundation for self-development, how I saw myself, how I made decisions, etc. I ended up avoiding relationships with boys at all costs,” both because she feared male sexuality and because she feared her own sexual desire. “I tried to never kiss a boy or get too close. I tried to be perfect.” She wanted to repent for the sin of masturbation and heal herself, cleanse herself from immoral desires. “But the only way to do that was to admit to my bishop what I had done. I could barely admit it to myself. I was terrified of that experience and so I never told.”*

*Not telling only deepened the guilt and sense of diminished self worth. “I felt like a liar and dishonest. I felt unworthy going to the temple and participating in church activities because I had never officially repented. I prayed diligently about this issue and agreed in prayer with God that if he would just forgive me and I didn’t have to talk to a bishop, I would never do it*

*again.” But her abstinence never lasted, and the cycle continued for years. “I felt isolated and alone. In all that time I had never, not once, heard of another girl masturbating.” It was not until much later, when she attended graduate school and befriended several non-Mormon women, that she realized that “other women had desires.” She concludes, wearily: “It has taken me years to develop a proper attitude and understanding of female sexuality mostly due to the fact that experiencing sexual desire and pleasure was never something I was taught to think of as natural for a woman.”*

Mormonism is relatively unique among Christian denominations (particularly among conservative and evangelizing churches) for its positive view of the body. God has a body of flesh and bone. A perfected and immortal body, but a body nonetheless. God has passions and desires. God is not just creative but procreative. He is married (perhaps plurally). He delights in His body, and prior to the resurrection and the reunification of body and spirit, even the very righteous will look upon the absence of their bodies as a kind of prison, as a source of existential grief and desperation. Adam fell so that all God's children could receive bodies, necessary for their eternal salvation and exaltation, and humanity exists “that they might have joy.” Bodies are a kind of kingdom that individual spirits are given dominion over, or rather that they should learn to exercise dominion over. In a prior existence, our “first estate,” all of God's loyal children conformed their spirits sufficiently to Him (or to them, as parents) to qualify for a second estate, a new phase—to receive a body.

The Fall, which is distinctively and pretty unambiguously positive in LDS cosmology, made this possible, the peopling of the Earth. But it also meant that we would receive our bodies, by contrast to our primordial parents Adam and Eve, outside of God's presence. In order, then, for our bodies to develop the qualities, habits, and strength necessary to prepare them for

returning to God's presence and achieving godhood, they must be forced to conform with our spirits. Unlike our spirits alone, which proved their loyalty to God and conformed to Him to the degree possible without bodies in the pre-existence, our bodies are carnal, prone to ungodliness, rendering us enemies to God. But they are still absolutely necessary. The Soul, in Mormon theology, is the perfectly united spirit and body, the two combined into an unbreakable one, an immortal and unsunderable Whole.

Within this narrated cosmology, sexual desire is among the most potent forces in the universe. It is the great obstacle to godliness, except when channeled appropriately and subordinated to the imperatives of the Law of Chastity. If we bridle our passions and use our sexuality only within the bonds of lawful marriage—both to create children and as an expression of and vehicle for deepening love between spouses—it is among the most godly and sacred acts mortals can participate in. That is, because of its true and divine nature, sexuality, when misused, is also a great and devastating sacrilege, among the worst and wickedest forms of sin, an abuse of the most godly power with which mortals are entrusted.

Apostle Jeffery R. Holland, in an extremely popular and widely disseminated speech to the student body at Brigham Young University in 1988 (reprinted in Holland, 2001), even described sexual relationships as and analogized them to, within the context of marriage, a sacrament. Sexual intimacy, particularly as a procreative act, is the holiest act men and women can engage in in mortality, because it so closely approximates the creative power of God. It is God's most sacred gift to His children, and is not to be trifled with. God is especially concerned with the means by which life begins and ends, by which spirits are brought into and taken out of the world, and to use either power outside of the boundaries circumscribed by holy law is a serious violation. It is widely held in Mormonism that sexual sin is the second most grievous sin

a person can commit, behind only murder.

The sexual desire around which pragmatic anxieties are discursively drawn is highly gendered. Sexual desire expressly male, and is a continuously threatening presence. It is to be resisted, contained, constrained, and domesticated by males and females alike, though in very different ways. The embattled preoccupation with male sexual desire is evident in the two dominant modes of addressing desire in official discourse: anti-pornography, and body modesty. Anti-pornography discourse, from sermons and curricula to programs for treating sexual addiction, primarily addresses males. It addresses women only in their capacity as protectors of male minds—as mothers and wives of boys and men potentially ensnared by pornography. Pornography is routinely described as a “plague,” as a “scourge,” as the feature of modern, decadent, permissive culture which most consistently and existentially threatens priesthood by threatening to undermine the personal worthiness of individual priesthood holders. Viewing pornography is a sin whose seriousness is indexed in part by the need to seek ecclesiastical counsel and support during the repentance process. Boys and men who deliberately view pornography are unequivocally admonished to confess to their bishop and to seek his guidance and submit to his counsel as they seek to extricate themselves from pornography's “clutches” (confession to priestly authority in Mormonism is not a regularized sacrament, but a case-by-case process reserved for only very serious—usually sexual—sins).

While young adolescent males are enculturated into a discourse of “priesthood worthiness” that relentlessly insinuates itself in between their eyes (windows to the soul which must be single to God's glory) and female bodies, young women learn the significance for them of worthiness' feminine counterpart: modesty. Modesty is coded as both an expression of one's divine nature and status as a daughter of God as well as something basically reducible to the

covering of the female body. To be a modest person is to dress modestly—to cover the parts of one's body that need to be covered. This is in part a function of the temple garment. Mormons, males and females, who receive their endowment are clothed in a priesthood garment—an undergarment that they wear every day beneath their clothes. Often derisively termed “mormon underwear” or “magic underwear” this undergarment is an expression and reminder of the covenants made as part of the endowment and the obligations they entail in everyday living.

The garments cover more of the body than most underwear and they are themselves supposed to remain covered by outer clothing. They cover the thighs down to just above the knees, the hips and torso completely, and the shoulders. Preparation for garments is thus a common practical explanation for teaching and enforcing female dress standards, not just to adolescent girls but at increasingly young ages. And while the range of body covering is essentially identical for men and women, the impositions the restrictions place in contrast to common masculine and feminine dress standards are far from equal, underscoring not only the relationship between the garments and body modesty but the rigidly gendered nature of modesty discourse.

The articulation of the covering of the female form with the silences and discursive constraints under consideration is fairly straightforward. Not only do the garments symbolize and remind wearers of the temple covenant of chastity, they also effectively protect against violations by shielding women's bodies from male sexuality—by protecting the woman's body from male access, and by shielding men's eyes from visual exposure to the female form. The garments are explicitly symbolically linked to the temple veil through which the endowed interact with deity and eventually pass into God's presence (the celestial room at the center of the temple into which the ceremony directs worshipers at the apex of the rite). The room is a silent

space whose thresholds are characterized by the whispers of entrance interviews. The alignment of body and temple is both scripturally expressed and ritually enacted, and the structured silence surrounding sexual intimacy (not just general taboos regarding talk about sex but the Church's explicit position that official church policies on sexual propriety “stay out of the bedroom”) overlaps discursively and symbolically with the silence surrounding the inner sanctum of God's presence.

Significantly, when first receiving their endowment, most women are taken into the celestial room by their husbands—disclosing in the process, non-reciprocally, secret/sacred information about themselves. Access to what is located beyond the sacred markings of the veil/garment sacramentally links the holiness of sexual intimacy (pace: Elder Holland's sermon) and the sacred gravitational pull of the celestial space, and the endowment is both an immediate and necessary prerequisite to sacramental marriage rites (the culmination of all temple worship) as well as a key symbolic source of the sacral vitality of the sealing ceremony (see Chapter 7).

The discourse of pornography (addressing males) and the discourse of modesty (addressing females) co-articulate to configure male sexual desire as omnipresent and perpetually threatening, while rendering female sexual desire both invisible and irrelevant. Male sexuality is located in the mind, is proactive and agentic, visual and leering, incredible-hulk-like and thus in need of protection from being summoned. Female sexuality, by contrast, is located on the body, is passive and receptive, but also threatening, not because it is desire but because it constantly threatens to trigger male desire. Apostles have even warned young women that an important reason for them to dress modestly is to prevent themselves from becoming “walking pornography” to the boys and men that see them. Young women have given video testimonials on the importance of dressing modestly for co-ed youth activities so that they do not

threaten the worthiness of young men and jeopardize their chances of serving missions.

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*Amber is a sex therapist who works primarily with married Mormon women as clients. “One of the most common problems I see in women is that once they're married, suppressed desire turns into suppressed expectations about pleasure.” Women teach girls, she says, usually their daughters, about “giving their virtue—which basically means virginity—to their husbands.” But, she argues, “there is no language in the Church for talking about or even acknowledging the existence of female desire and female pleasure.” She regularly sees female clients who have treatable but physiological problems preventing sexual pleasure, and not only have they never sought treatment but it had not even occurred to them that they might have a problem--”that enjoying sex—and desiring it because it is enjoyable—is normal and, therefore, that not enjoying it is not normal, something they should try to solve.” It is non-desire turned to non-expectation of pleasure that accounts, in Amber's experience, for why the Twilight books resonate so much with LDS women: “Bella has desire. She's not Mormon, so it's okay for her to have it, but they can still identify with her. Bella is an important exception to what they've been subtly taught their whole lives. Female desire can exist in a virtuous woman, in a non-whore.”*

*Amber also believes that priesthood authority is part of what renders women incapable of talking about sexual displeasure or dysfunction. “To talk about your husband in a way that highlights or even suggests any inadequacy is almost like criticizing your priesthood leader.” Sex, she argues, is something you simply learn to submit to. “From Mormon culture, and from their own mothers, these girls learn that it's painful, it's your duty, and it's only between the two of you.” They also learn from a very early age that there is something toxic about their bodies, especially the sexual parts. “No touching! We tell even very young girls not to touch their*

*'privates.' You can't say 'vulva' or 'labia' or especially not 'clitoris.' Even as grown women we can't say that." She considers this to be the primary goal of her therapeutic work, her books, her workshops—all targeting LDS women:*

*“Desire is OK. It's actually a good thing. We need to find desire. We need to embrace it. We need to learn to talk about it, to each other as women, but especially with our partners. There's no language for that right now for righteous Mormon women. They connect so much of their own sense of their righteousness and worthiness and goodness to their sexual lives, to being chaste. So in many ways it's harder to get them to talk about desire than about anything else, even abuse.”*

*When she first starts working with clients, she says, for most of them there is just “no way to integrate being a Mormon woman, having sexual desire, and being a sexual agent.” Those notions are totally disconnected. “What sex,” she asks with visible frustration, “can exist on the pedestal LDS women are placed on? Women especially internalize things like the Satanic inflection of the word 'pleasure' from the temple.” She tries to help them discover sexual agency “by giving them a language to talk about desire.” More than anything she wants them to believe that God approves of their desires. She wants them to learn “to talk to God about their desires,” in the way they are already so used to talking to Him about other, “righteous” desires in their lives (health, spiritual growth, protection for their families, divine guidance, etc.).*

The invisibility of female sexual desire in LDS discourse is situated against a discursive backdrop that increasingly and relentlessly describes feminine righteousness in sexual terms. Over the past decade, virtue has become almost exclusively aligned, at least for girls and women, with virginity. The official curriculum for the Church's female youth program revolves around a set of “values” which young women consciously seek to cultivate and exemplify:

divine nature, faith, individual worth, knowledge, integrity, etc. Church leadership recently added a new value to the list: *virtue*, which is explicitly described in terms of chastity, modest dress, and sexual purity.

It is the culminating value in the program, the value (“priced far above rubies”) best calculated to prepare them for entering the temple to be sacramentally married and eternally sealed to their husbands. Its associated color (all the individual values have colors) is gold. Official explanations (from the all female General Young Women's Presidency) of the importance of maintaining virtue include the notion that a girl's or woman's virtue can be forcibly taken from her through sexual assault, and the imperative to protect one's virtue. This is actually a sentiment against which kidnapping and rape victim Elizabeth Smart has indirectly but forcefully pushed back against in her advocacy, emphasizing that she retained her virtue and purity throughout her experience, that her abductor was powerless to take those things from her. Young women are to be “guardians of virtue,” in that they are to protect their own virtue (virginity or sexual purity) and they are to protect the virtue of boys and men (virginity as well as the absence of lustful thoughts and masturbation).

A key feature of Virtue is the principle of repentance, the assurance that one's virtue and status before God can be recovered through the power of Christ's atonement if the proper steps are taken. This includes not just contrition and abstaining from the sexual sin in question, but partaking worthily of the healing power of “the sacrament” (Mormon parlance for the eucharist), and confessing to the Bishop (who, among other things, helps you determine when and if you are worthy to take the sacrament). The female experience of sexual desire, then, is framed on a number of levels in terms of how it addresses the needs, responsibilities, and experiences of men: men whose worthiness is potentially threatened by female sexuality, men (God the Father

and Christ) whose cosmic acts reflect both the need and possibility for overcoming the effects of sexual sin, and men whose priesthood stewardship and powers of discernment enable them to guide sexual transgressors back into paths of virtue. The focus on pastorally guided repentance underscores the existence of an exception to the general norm of unmentionability regarding female sexual desire. Although female sexual desire is nowhere spoken of or addressed in any official discourse (and in stark contrast to the obsession with a barely containable male sexual desire), there is one official and formally LDS space in which it can—and indeed should—be mentioned: the confessional. Which is to say, the only explicitly Mormons place in which open speech about female desire can occur is a space which codes desire as transgressive (cf Stephanie's account above).

For some girls, these discursive patterns and the general emphasis on male sexuality and male desire leads them to experience their own sexuality not as libido but as obsession. Rebecca, a college educated at-home parent with four children, describes experiencing sexual arousal as an adolescent not in terms of “carnal lust” but as a kind of “dislocation of consciousness.” Like most girls, she was infatuated with boys, and hyper aware of the presence and proximity of certain boys. More powerful, however, than her own desire “for him” was “his imagined desire for me.” More than wanting him, “I wanted him to want me.” Her desire extended toward him but also “into him,” into his own perception and subjectivity. She describes a kind of “reverse desire,” not oriented around a “first-person” appetite to sexually possess another body—not what she calls a “subject-rich sexual drive”—but a desire “to be the desired body.”

This charged her experience with desire, but not an externally directed, private, “Rebecca-centered” desire: “I wanted to be found desirable by him.” So her self-presentation choices—grooming, dress, make-up, etc.—became themselves a kind of sexual practice. So

while official LDS discourse “had little to say to me about sex *qua* sex, other than 'don't do it,' it did have a lot to say about how I should display my body.” Modesty discourse functioned as a means for mastering her own sexual desire, but in part by configuring it solely in terms of this de-centered sexuality, by refracting her sexual desire wholly through the lens of males desiring her. Her desire was a kind of desire by proxy—a notion with wide play in Mormon thought and praxis—a desire that depended for its existence on the desire of another, of a desiring male.

Virtue, then, is something to be protected and preserved chiefly through strategies aimed at containing and curtailing and appropriately redirecting male sexual desire. It is to be channeled into the production of a righteous family and righteous posterity, and circumscribed by the imperatives of the Law of Chastity: the absence of any sexual relationships except with one's legal spouse. Abstinence before marriage, and strict fidelity in marriage. For a not insignificant portion of LDS history, male sexual desire was contained in part through the practice of male-centric plural marriage. Church leaders routinely denounced the vices of monogamous culture, blaming the evils of infidelity, rape, infanticide, and prostitution on the inability of monogamy to control and properly channel an overflowingly libidinous male sexual nature. Female virtue is protected through actions that prevent the triggering of male sexuality: dressing modestly and the closely related task keeping your husbands and sons from consuming pornography. The maintaining of (female) virtue *qua* virginity is not just about personally refraining from sexual activity but preventing males from imposing sexual activity upon you by triggering their drive to copulate.

Male virtue, like its feminine counterpart, is related to virginity. But unlike female sexuality (conceived primarily as power to entice), it is mental and interiorized. Virtue is not just sexual abstinence but “purity of thoughts.” Their worthiness as young men and men—including

and especially their worthiness to hold and exercise the holy priesthood—depends upon the “virtue” which must “garnish [their] thoughts.” Male desire is threatening insofar as it might jump the boundaries of its imaginative and behavioral containment; female desire is threatening insofar as it exists in any egocentric way. Perhaps the threat female desire poses is not unlike that posed by the similarly discursively contained and unmentionable sacred forces contained within the mysteries of the sanctuary. Unspeakability reinforces something like sheer potency. A force need not be intrinsically toxic to be threatening (see Chapter 2).

The invisibility of female desire and its threatening nature (a nature that separates it from the threat of male desire) reflect and are reflected in the philosophical defenses against accusations that Joseph Smith practiced sexual polyandry (i.e. that he had sexual relationships with those of his plural wives who were also married to other living husbands). The women in question were simply too righteous and virtuous to ever so much as consider having multiple sexual partners. Polygamy contained and controlled male sexual desire; it did not catalyze in women an unnatural polyamorous desire. Women desire to be desired by men, and righteous women desire to be desired by only their husbands. The sexual agency men exercise is self-control of their own desire. The sexual agency women exercise is the containment of male desire. A woman, then, is a sexual agent only insofar as she exists in some kind of relationship with a male, who, it is hoped, will righteously desire her (and only her, at least today) and to whom she can safely submit herself bodily, sexually, and reproductively.

Much of what is described here, the structured silence surrounding female sexual desire and pleasure, is hardly unique to the discourse of American Mormonism. Treating women as the passive receptacles of an agentive (and aggressive) male sexual desire and sexual action and framing female sexual desire as either invisible or (in the case of the archetypal whore)

threatening to male worthiness are longstanding discursive traditions in the cultural formations in which Mormonism has embedded itself. One could argue that Mormon discourse on sexuality reflects but also augments, magnifies, even distorts these wider normative patterns for representing female sexuality. Yet there is clearly more at work here. In Mormonism these themes articulate with a discourse of the sacred that closely aligns the value of holiness with unmentionability, secrecy, and euphemism, as well as with a discourse of submission to priesthood that aligns divine power, ecclesiastical position, and the authority to officiate in salvific ordinances with patriarchal presiding and male headship within the home and family. All of which is situated within a divine anthropology that aligns male experience with a highly visible and speakable (and speak-to-able), limitlessly reproductively fecund, explicitly male, paternal Deity, while aligning female experience with an invisible, barely mentionable, and inaccessible Mother in Heaven, wife to God, whom Mormons are forbidden to worship.

The unspeakability of female sexual desire and framing of female sexuality wholly in terms of its effects on male sexuality—as a trigger to, protector of, and receptacle of male sexual and reproductive potency—draws on the unmentionability of all sacred things and the framing of sexual acts themselves (when conducted according to divine law) as sacramental. Submission to husband is aligned with submission to God, and it ultimately results in the realization of the ultimate promise of priesthood, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant itself: endless posterity, where priesthood power ultimately finds its most universal and meaningful expression. God's glory, in the end, consists not in authoritarian power over others but in the power of eternal lives, of eternal increase, of endless procreativity. This power is unmistakably male, and yet depends for its expression and fulfillment on the presence and sexual cooperation of its complementary female force. The Goddess is the Wife, *par excellence*. Celestial coupling

primarily fulfills not Her desire but His promised eternal seed, which She receives and incubates.

There is no intimation that the wives of the Gods are sexual slaves or servants; they are fully free to submit or not submit, to receive or not receive the seed of their eternal companions. Yet any choice but the choice to endlessly produce spirit children would irrefutably obviate the fulfillment of the promises made by God to her husband during mortality when he received the priesthood and when he received her as a wife along with the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Women receive no such promises independently, only as a part of their ritually submitting their obedience to and giving their selves to their husbands as wives. Wife, within this liturgical framework, aligns with Priestess, Queen, and Goddess, with each expressly connoting their connection to husbands/priests/kings/gods. The entire cosmological model—the ritualized narrative of salvation, exaltation, theosis, and “eternal lives”—aligns the unspeakability of female sexual desire and sexual pleasure with the unspeakability of the discursive placeholder that represents a woman's divine potential and exalted future: the unworshipped Heavenly Mother and Wife, presided over by the Heavenly Father and God She Herself (possibly alongside other sister wives) surely worships.

### **Some Conclusions**

These two chapters attempt to ethnographically (and historically) canvass the patterns and articulations of the various structured silences in Mormonism that both substantively implicate and organize the enactment of gender. The taboos surrounding female deity not only apply to descriptions of femininity or gendered divine nature as ideals but implicate the performance—both the demonstration and the making or enacting—of gender in terms of the gendered disparity of who can and who cannot talk about Heavenly Mother. Very similar patterns characterize the discourse surrounding plural marriage, in both its historical and its

eternal forms. In this case, the lack of clarity regarding the origins, meaning, and eternal status of plural marriage adds a disquieting dimension to its the discursive taboos surrounding it, and the anxieties it entails are borne directly and almost exclusively by women. The opaque but serious implications of plural marriage, past and future, are radically different for husbands and wives (and for their sons and daughters), a disparity reflected and often magnified by the sometimes casualness with which men, in both devotional and scholarly settings, abstractly discuss polygamy in comparison to the sometimes lifelong practices of suppressing and silencing devastating anxieties about polygamy by faithful Mormon women across a broad range of demographic categories. Even talking about not talking about it can be a discursive exercise rife with gendered tensions, and the close connection between (not) talking about Heavenly Mother and (not) talking about Celestial Marriage occurs at the representational/lexical level (both are *about* gender and the place of women in the eternities), the metadiscursive level (the gendered patterns of unmentionability, circumlocution, and discourse *about* not talking about them which align both with the structured silences of the temple), and the social-indexical level (the enactment of gendered relationships of difference in position and power).

The discourse of female sexuality and female (non)desire reproduces key features of these patterned norms. The coding of male to female runs a continuum from speakable to unspeakable, from unrelenting preoccupation grounded in explicit representation of male desire to practical invisibility (and preoccupation of a rather different sort). Both males and females access “spiritual power” through chaste behavior, but this virtue is very different for each. For boys and men, virtue is intrinsic to priesthood, to their worthiness to hold and righteously exercise priesthood. The containment of their own sexual desire, manifest first and foremost in control over thoughts (pure versus sexual), is the key. Male spiritual power is priesthood, and is

threatened by sexual desire and by anything that might trigger desire.

For girls and women, virtue is bodily (as opposed to mental) sexual purity, lack of defilement. Virtue is a source of profound spiritual power, perhaps the most significant source it. It is a spiritual power that enables them to be the guardians of male virtue (read: priesthood, which could be short-circuited by male desire), by covering their own pornographic bodies and by preventing their husbands and sons from viewing internet pornography. Their virtue (read: virginity) is protected by their own choices (not to engage in sexual acts and not to provoke desire in the males around them), and protecting this virtue brings spiritual power. This is the power to protect the worthiness of priesthood holders by willfully not exercising a more carnal and threatening power: the power to entice. Thus girls are taught that they possess a profound kind of power—the ability to provoke desire in males—and that by *not* exercising this power, they discover a new power (the power to uphold and support male priesthood worthiness). In both cases, male and female virtue, male desire is the preoccupation, the force to be contained. Male desire is omnipresent, while female desire is irrelevant, nowhere present or acknowledged in the disciplining field equations for accessing and wielding divine power. Male sexual desire is channeled into divine purpose (eternal marriage and posterity); female desire is invisible, and female sexuality (located on the body) is channeled into the same purposes: protecting priesthood and providing worthy priesthood holders with eternal wives and eternal posterity.

The gendered silences and taboos under consideration stand in stark contrast to the openness and mentionedness of their male-coded counterparts. Heavenly Father is everywhere, ubiquitously referenced and represented, literally omnipresent. Plural marriage is practiced—past, present (limited), and future (mysterious)—in a wholly male-centric way, as the intersection of divine priesthood power fully realized and the patriarchal order of families. Male

sexuality is coded as visible yet also mental and interiorized, as agentive, as desire, as “acting” rather than “acted upon”—a key Mormon framing for the theologically central principle of “moral agency.” Maleness *qua* priesthood (priest-ness) runs like a red thread throughout, alongside the conspicuous fact that women are structurally excluded from the priesthood. Seed or posterity is an extension and the culmination of the priesthood. Plural marriage is the extension of the Kingdom of God in the eternities. One extends priesthood power in time, vertically, across generations; the other extends it horizontally, in space, expanding in the present the reach of the priest's power and dominion, which his spouse(s) can share in solely as a function of being sealed to and reproductively submitting to him. Pornography and sexual misconduct—including abuse—are framed as threats, not to women but to priesthood.

The unmentionabilities that characterize the feminine/female side of these continua underscore and reinforce the markedness, lexical and cultural, of girls and women as categories of personhood. They also co-articulate with the structured silences surrounding temple rites and the patterns of priestly power and authority that temple discourse diagrams (see Chapter 3). Yet the connection is forged much more deeply than the level of parallel discursive patterns. The temple itself is where these gendered disparities are rendered, represented, and enacted most forcefully and explicitly. And for precisely this reason they are insulated, not just from outside scrutiny but from evaluative consideration by insiders. The silence surrounding female experience and female perspectives—including conspicuous examples of the literal silencing of women—is subjected to the same metadiscursive constraints as the temple ceremony itself because it forms a part of the fabric of the rites.

Women submit ritually, promise obedience and fealty, not directly to God but to their husbands who in turn will identically submit to God. Men are anointed and ordained with

promises of regal and priestly title and authority, vassals to God. Women have similar, parallel gendered titles conferred upon them, but their vassalage is to their husbands. And in the sealing only the wives give themselves to their husbands. Beyond all the parallels that can be drawn between the unmentionabilities and discursive taboos surrounding female divinity, patriarchal celestial marriage, and female sexual desire, on the one hand, and the holiness of the ceremonial forms of temple worship, on the other, it is within the temple ceremonies themselves that these patterns converge and, therefore, where the structured silence is most stably anchored. The temple is where female submission—of self, of agency, of desire—to the patriarchal authority of her husband is firmly aligned not just with the sacred nature of the space or the rites but with the covenants and narratives of divine potential, eternal fecundity, and endless priesthood power that inscribe submission's enacted forms.

## Part III: Mormonism as Kinship

### Chapter 6: Toward A Theory of Mormon Kinship

*“In this universe in which nothing is created and everything is appropriated, different groups—human or non-human, living or dead—related as meta-affines... seek to capture people to turn them into relatives.”*

—Carlos Fausto

#### **Prologue: The Story of the Cutlerites**

The Church of Jesus Christ (Cutlerites) is the Restoration church with both the most and the least in common with the mainline LDS Church.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of Joseph Smith's assassination in 1844, Alpheus Cutler initially, if reservedly, remained attached to the body of Mormons that followed the Twelve (and Brigham Young) west in a forced exodus from Nauvoo, Illinois. Cutler, who had converted to Joseph Smith's movement in the early 1830s, is probably the most influential associate of Smith's that most (LDS) Mormons have never heard of. He was a close confidant of the prophet, a chief member of his personal security detail. He was closely involved with the construction of the temple in Kirtland, Ohio during the mid 1830s, and was charged with overseeing the construction of temples in Jackson County, Missouri (never completed) and in Nauvoo (completed only after the prophet's death). He was also a member of all (or nearly all) of Smith's inner circles of ritual initiation and confidentiality in the years leading up to Smith's martyrdom: he was initiated into the rites that defined membership in the Anointed Quorum; he was a ranking member of the secretive Council of Fifty; he belonged to the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge; and by some accounts (including the Nauvoo temple sealing records), he was a

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this history comes from Fletcher and Whiting (1974).

polygamist (though we will return to this question shortly).

During the long trek westward, as thousands of Mormons under the direction of Young the Twelve settled temporarily near Council Bluffs, Iowa, Cutler founded and began to preside over a “lamanite” mission—a mission to convert Native Americans. The precise nature of Cutler's falling out with Young and the other apostles is only vaguely adumbrated in the historical record, and debates over the details are not without controversy (by one popular account, Young and Cutler mutually excommunicated each other and parted ways). What is clear is that Cutler's primary institutional allegiance was to the (Council of) Fifty, as opposed to the (Quorum of the) Twelve. Members of both groups understood themselves to be possessed of vital emblems of authority from the prophet, “keys” to carrying out their respective missions. Significantly, the lamanite mission marked a point of intersecting and competing jurisdiction for both quorums.

Prior to the martyrdom the Twelve's primary responsibility was that of “Traveling High Council”—to preside over and oversee missionizing (particularly in Western Europe) and direct local ecclesiastical leadership in congregations outside of the Church's Nauvoo center (which had its own High Council and where the Church's First Presidency—comprised of Smith, his brother Hyrum, and a few others) . The Fifty, by contrast, was a proto-governmental body, a secret deliberative, political (largely symbolic during Smith's lifetime by most accounts) body that nominated Smith for president of the United States and sent diplomatic emissaries to represent the Kingdom of God in foreign countries. Thus, while a mission to Native Americans would seem to be the purview of the Twelve, Cutler had in fact been set apart by Smith and the Fifty as the Kingdom's official diplomat to the Lamanites. Differences over the mission, and particularly over what to do with it as Young and the body of the saints prepared to pick up and

continue west toward northern Mexico, brought the conflict between the Fifty's surviving members and the Twelve, between Cutler who had established himself a rightful authority over this region of the Kingdom and Young who had just reorganized the First Presidency and had himself set apart as the Church President (Smith's prophetic office had been nominally vacant for the three years since his death).

From there, Young headed west and Cutler remained in Iowa. Nearly a decade later, Cutler—who to that point only considered himself possessed of keys of authority applying to the Kingdom and not the Church (the Church no longer existed in any valid or divinely approved sense, taken into apostasy by Young's tyranny)—received a series of visions by which he was authorized by God to reorganize a new Church. At its height, prior to Cutler's death in [], the movement likely numbered several hundred members. They relocated several times, from Iowa to Minnesota and eventually back to Jackson County, Missouri—Zion—where today they number fewer than a dozen members. By contrast, the LDS Church has grown over the past 175 years into a global organization of more than 15 million members, with more membership outside the US than in the US. This is the point of almost staggering dissimilarity between the LDS and Cutlerite Churches; despite their common origins in the schismatic period following Smith's martyrdom, they now occupy virtually polar opposite ends of a sociological or demographic continuum. The LDS Church is a massive, expanding global organization, a near perfect exemplar of a church *qua* multinational corporation, heavily capitalized and propertied, with congregations in nearly every country on earth.

The Cutlerite Church, however, is a single church—in the sense that it is a single church-house or building. It has roughly 1en active members, most of whom are retirement aged. No missionaries, no foreign congregations, no globally distributed magazines or curricula, no film

studios or media companies, no massive private data encryption systems for protecting Church records (indeed, no digitized records at all), no intellectual property holdings. The members are all close kin, most of them siblings or cousins (and in many cases double cousins). They all descend from two prominent early Cutlerite families (though, as far as is known, none are descendant from Cutler himself). All members collectively manage a trust that controls church-owned property, and many of them consecrate their properties (for example, by deeding their houses to the trust after paying them off). They are a small and cautious group, somewhat weary of outsiders but still friendly and hospitable. Visitors are welcome at most of their worship services, in a church-house that likely could not sit more than about 50 people.

Yet while the difference between the LDS and Cutlerite Churches are rather obvious in terms of organizational features and sheer scope, the two branches of Joseph Smith's Restoration also share a deep and significant point of similarity. While most of the movements that emerged in the post-martyrdom succession crisis set themselves apart from Young and the Twelve mostly by rejecting the theological, liturgical, and ecclesiastical innovations of the Nauvoo period,<sup>2</sup> the Cutlerites (who still resoundingly rejected plural marriage and much of the theological radicalism of Smith's late career) kept and preserved the rites that contemporary Mormons know as temple ceremonies. The centrality of these rites to mainline Mormonism was canvassed at some length in Chapters 2 and 3. Their presence (though they are not identified with a temple in Cutlerite practice) is the source of a strong sense of kinship and identification between Mormons and Cutlerites (at least to the extent that Mormons are even aware of their existence). Mormons see that the Cutlerites have the endowment. The Cutlerites see that “Utah Church” has

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<sup>2</sup> The half decade immediately prior to Smith's death—innovations including temple rites, plural marriage, the Relief Society, sacramental marriage and sealings, and the rise of a kind of materialist monism and divine anthropology that entailed extremely robust notions of human-god conspecificity and theosis.

priesthood ordinances like their own.

Thus, while all the Restoration Churches share some sense of, for example, the Book of Mormon or at least some of Smith's early revelations as scripture, the point of shared identification between the LDS and Cutlerite traditions around these sacred ritual forms is unique. And unlike the polygamist, fundamentalist groups that broke away from the mainline Church after the cessation of polygamy (and who still retain temple ceremonies), the Cutlerites are not, in the imagination of most LDS, a repugnant other. Mormons who know about the Cutlerites (and know that they have what we call the temple ceremony) tend not to be threatened by this fact but are instead fascinated and sympathetic. That's undoubtedly partly a function of the glaring differences noted above—that a church so tiny and dwindling cannot be seen as a competitive threat to missionary efforts. But the captivation is palpable: Mormons are enthralled by the notion of an independent (and functionally non-threatening) tradition that independently preserved the sacred ordinances first revealed in secret by Joseph prior to his martyrdom.

This point of identification between the two traditions was the basis for my desire to conduct ethnographic research with the Cutlerites in the first place. Although as a Mormon my personal curiosity about the actual substance of the Cutlerite rites was enormous, as an ethnographer I was primarily interested in how the Cutlerites talked about the rites outside of the immediate context of their actual performance. What kind of meta-discourse had developed around the highly secretive and confidential nature of the ceremonial forms, and what kind of latitude was manifested in the discursive practices for addressing the rites without violating their sanctity? Did Cutlerites surreptitiously signal each other, speak in code, deploy euphemisms, speak for those with ears to hear?

Trying to broach the question presented a serious ethnographic obstacle, particularly as I

began my research. Some patterns did become apparent: the term “priesthood” is the standard gloss for referencing the rites, similar to the term “temple” in Mormon parlance. It also became clear that the transmission and preservation of the ritual forms (which involve hours of scripted performance) over the many generations since Cutler re-introduced them after reorganizing the Church in the late 1850s does not involve writing them down, though this was only alluded to cryptically or elliptically. I asked the one ranking leader of the Church if they wrote down the priesthood ordinances, and he replied “we're not really comfortable discussing those kinds of details,” then he paused for a moment and interjected “but we do think Joseph Smith was right when he said they shouldn't be written down.” They also occasionally used a spatial gloss for the rites, referring nondescriptly to “upstairs” (the priesthood work is performed in the upper room of the church-house where they also conduct Sunday worship services).

They also favored different analogies for thinking through and describing the secretive nature of the rites. One sister compared the knowledge imparted in the ceremony to the knowledge acquired during a lengthy apprenticeship, even using the example of an auto mechanic. A qualified mechanic hasn't simply been told a secret; he or she has slowly acquired a proficiency to *do* something over a long period of study and practice. By contrast, the dominant lens for making sense of the secrecy of temple ordinances in Mormon discourse is *confidentiality*. You have been taken into someone's confidence, entrusted with important information, bound by your relationship with that person not to disclose it to any third party. It is a legal-juridical framing, and an unsurprising one given the predominance of attorneys and businessmen (and lack of auto mechanics) in the ranks of LDS Church leadership. “There's nothing especially secret about it at all,” affirms the same sister: “it's just a matter of some people having learned things that others don't know.” The analogy to craftsmanship and

apprenticeship in Cutlerite discourse also seems appropriate given the largely blue-collar background of most of the members. It eschews the notion of secrecy itself, while retaining the logic of initiation into mystery.

Overall, though, the preeminent feature of talk about the rites in Cutlerite discourse was the absence of such talk. More than one person told me “what is upstairs stays upstairs.” This, they assured me, is not merely a way of deflecting questions from an outsider, but reflects the patterns of insider discourse. They simply do not talk about the rites with any degree of detail or specificity, either directly or indirectly, outside of the specific context of their actual performance. I spent some time describing to them the complicated subtleties of LDS patterns of elliptically and euphemistically talking about or talking around temple rites—the coded signaling, the discursive “winking,” the surreptitious quoting of snippets of the ceremonial language, along with the norms and rules (the metadata) for engaging in such fraught semiotic exchanges without violating the sanctity of the actual temple or its ritual forms.

They found this sincerely amusing and not a little bit surprising. But it also made a kind of sense for two reasons. First, all of the Cutlerites who have received High Priesthood ordinances can participate in Priesthood meetings which are regularly conducted, always upstairs. The nature of these meetings remains a mystery to me and to all outsiders. They were even uncomfortable with my question of whether or not they use these meetings to practice memorizing the ceremony. All they would say is that during the meetings they speak openly and frankly about the Priesthood in a manner they never would outside of the meetings. The existence of a space specifically set apart and designated for free and open discussion of Priesthood matters diminished the need to discuss it at all in other contexts and for the kinds of semiotic and meta-discursive resources that might enable such discussions outside of the

sanctified space of the upper room. As noted in Chapter 2, this contrasts sharply with what is essentially a vanishing space for open discourse about temple worship in Mormonism. Even inside the temple such conversations are verboten.

The second reason the existence of a convoluted meta-discourse in Mormonism for discussing sacred things in un-sacred spaces made sense to the Cutlerites is the sheer difference in size between the two traditions. The LDS Church has to standardize the ceremonial forms across multiple performance spaces (many temples throughout the world), in multiple languages and countries, as well as the management of temple rites by local ecclesiastical leaders and ordinance workers and the processes governing preparation for and admission to temples. This requires regulated discursive practices for talking about temples and temple work, practices that form the semiotic basis for any standardization regime. The Cutlerite Church President speculated: “if our membership were to unexpectedly grow significantly to the point that we had, say, several hundred members, I don't think there would be any way around having to develop some kind of carefully managed way of talking about Priesthood. It would just be impossible without it.”

Priesthood authority in the Cutlerite Church is isomorphic not with the rites themselves, but with their preservation. Church Elders, presided over by the President, have a right and obligation to preserve, perform, and protect the ordinances. They demonstrate and enact their authority over the rites by preserving and protecting them. The authority to preserve is the authority enacted *in* preserving. They preserve true authority by preserving the rites, and they exercise their authority with respect to the rites by preserving their sanctity. Thus preservation entails both the retention and transmission of the rites over time, and their concealment from non-initiates at any given point in time, the integrity of the latter ensuring the success of the

former. The obligations of non-disclosure, most directly grounded in specific covenants and promises not to reveal sacred information, act to insure the Church's larger mission, its role in the unfolding of the eschaton and the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity.

There is another dimension to the lack of a robust meta-language for referring to or discussing Priesthood rites in Cutleritism. I have argued that in the LDS case, far more than just enabling the existence of standardization practices for regulating temple worship, the meta-discourse surrounding the temple is profoundly and productively constitutive of the social realities in which Mormons exist and interact outside of the temple and the meaningful differences in social and ecclesiastical power and position of which they are comprised (see especially Chapter 3). The social-indexical dimension of Mormon talk about the temple primarily implicates intra-group relationships. Patterns of social, gendered, geographical, class, and ecclesiastical distinction are typified and performatively enacted by how different kinds of Mormons talk about, do not talk about, and talk about not talking about temple worship.

But in a group comprised of just a handful of close kin, such meta-discursive effects are unnecessary. Cutlerites do not engage in elaborate patterns of elliptical and euphemistic talk or observe structured but non-absolute silences around sacred discourse to assert social power or difference or to affirm an abstracted set of positions within a structured group economy of categories of personhood (“this interaction affirms that I am a [category A] person and you are a [category B] person”). An extremely small group of close relatives, all living in close proximity to the actual physical space of the Church (*qua* building or property), means that Cutlerites encounter one another, phenomenologically and semiotically, in an almost perfectly unabstracted manner, or at least that the abstractions in question draw from cultural patterns and social categories which precede or underlie the discursive forms specific to Cutleritism. They

encounter each other as men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings and cousins, elders and youth, employed and unemployed, etc., and these categories and the kinds of social relations they capacitate and potentially comprise are typified and enacted by semiotic interactions that are religious in nature as much as by any semiotic encounters. But the notion of asserting or affirming ecclesiastical authority over one's spouse or sibling or cousin in a tiny group comprised exclusively of spouses, siblings, and cousins is devoid of precisely the kind of logic and sense that would prevail in, say, a congregation of 350 people, let alone a Church with 15 million members globally.

Cutlerites do not lack a meta-discourse of Priesthood rites; instead, the lack of meta-language is itself the meta-discourse. The social-indexical productivity of this meta-discourse implicates not relationships within the group but relations with non-group members. Most outsiders who express interest in or visit the Cutlerites do so out of curiosity regarding Priesthood ordinances. The lack of talk about and only vaguest acknowledgement of secret rites asserts and affirms difference, not between members of the group but between the group itself and non-members. This by contrast to the richly developed LDS meta-discourse around temple worship (see chapters 2 and 3), which, while unquestionably functioning to some degree to mark LDS off from non Mormons, actually primarily serves to reflect, enact, and reenact social and ecclesiastical differences within the group.

One more important point about Cutlerite Priesthood ordinances: while they have preserved key ceremonial forms from Joseph Smith's original Nauvoo introduction and elaboration of the liturgical forms Mormons associate with temple worship, the Cutlerites have also eschewed other forms. For Mormons, the endowment is a vital saving ordinance, but also a stepping stone to the apex of temple worship: sealing rites, the sacramental making of kinship

bonds under sacred priesthood authority. As noted in Chapter 4, the original inception of Mormon sacramental marriage (sealings) occurred within and was irreducibly bound to plural (celestial) marriage. Since most of the Restoration traditions that rejected Brigham Young's succession claims also rejected plural marriage, they do not perform sealings or sacramental marriage rites. This includes the Cutlerites, for whom the emphatic assertion that neither Smith nor Cutler participated in plural marriage is an article of faith. They share with Mormonism what Mormons call the endowment, but do not seal spouses to spouses or children to parents. The Cutlerites are kin—very close kin, as it happens—but with the sacred priestly authority they preserve they do not ritually make kinship.

### **Marshall Sahlins and Kinship Theory**

In an ambitious two-part article published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2011a, 2011b, later developed into a full monograph) Marshall Sahlins proposed a general theory or definition for the “specific quality” of what kinship “is.” Kinship is intersubjective relationality, not just people who participate intrinsically in each other's existence or experience but “persons who are members of one another.” It is a “mutuality of being,” a kind of co-personhood or intersubjectivity. As a general definition it applies to both biological and cultural accounts of constituting kinship. Kin live each other's lives and die each other's deaths and experience each other's experiences. He draws on a wide range of ethnographic accounts and analyses of kinship for reports which exemplify his theory, and virtually everywhere he looks he finds people who are “intrinsic to one another's existence.” He argues over the course of the essays that mutuality of being covers the entire range of ethnographically documented ways kinship is specifically and locally constituted, the forms and shapes it takes. His model also seeks to account for what he describes as the “enigmatic” effects of kin relations, a kind of

magic that permits subjectivities and experiences which transcend individual persons and fundamentally call into question the ontology of individuals.

Sahlins' account places kinship *qua* mutuality of being and shared subjectivity on the same ontological ground as the categories of magic, gift exchange, and witchcraft. In the second essay, Sahlins considers the entailments of his model in practice across a range of ethnographic descriptions. He begins by reaffirming the case that human nature, the very “being-ness” of human being is not, at its core, individual or confined to individual persons. This means Aristotle's model of “one entity in different subjects,” but also its reverse: one subject in different entities. Multiple subjectivities can intersect in single “individuals” and individual persons can be distributed across multiple subjects. For Sahlins, mutuality is an intrinsically and uniquely human quality and capacity. Humans can be members of one another in ways made possible only by culture, and human nature itself is cultural. Indeed, the primary work of culture is to transmute the generalized human capacity for transpersonal being and mutuality into the specific and enduring forms of locally constituted kinship. Transpersonal praxis entails “mystical interdependence” and the ability of individuals to substantively and substantially co-experience one another's existence (see also Smail and Shryock, 2012).

What follows is an attempt to make sense of Mormon kinship in terms that resonate with Sahlins' generalized account, to canvas the specific features of Mormon intersubjectivity and mutuality and argue that there is something distinctively Mormon about their constellation. Further, I will argue that the structured silences ethnographically detailed in the previous chapters and vitally constitutive of distinctively Mormon ways of enacting and affirming ecclesiastical/priestly authority and sex/gender relations figure centrally in the making of Mormon kinship. Finally, I will revisit the Cutlerites and rationalize their inclusion in this

account as a key point of contrast that illustrates, by casting into relief, the significance of the meta-discourse of unmentionabilities for the Mormon enactment of kinship and the centrality of kinship-making to Mormonism itself.

### **Sealings: Joseph Smith and Speech Acts**

As noted in Chapter 4, Joseph Smith waited approximately half a decade after receiving, via visitation from the Old Testament prophet Elijah in 1836, the authority to perform sacramental and eternally binding marriages (this power/authority is known in LDS parlance as the *sealing power*) before he actually began to direct the performance of sealings. That is, he believed himself to be technically authorized to bind couples together on earth and have the binding sealed in heaven, yet he waited until he had a richer sense of the creative and socially productive power of ritual before he began to organize a ceremonial and liturgical system for enacting these new kinship forms. Part of the delay seems to have been his own effort to come to terms with both the underlying morality as well as the likely consequences in terms of Mormon relationships with non-Mormons near the frontier of one key feature of the new system: the restoration of biblical polygamy.

Although his experiment with polygamous relationships (his controversial and contested marriage to a young woman named Fanny Alger) in the mid 1830s ended disastrously, after the Mormons relocated to western Illinois following their expulsion from Missouri Smith revisited the question of plural marriage in the early 1840s. He secretly proposed to several women he knew, and the first marriages solemnized via the sealing authority were plural marriages. Smith did not perform the ceremonies himself, but rather conferred authority to perform them onto a third party and explained precisely how to perform the marriage ordinance.

While Smith's initial ambivalence toward practicing plural marriage eventually abated,

this only partly accounts for the time lag between his reception of authority and his application of the power. Plural marriage, its inception, its practice, its spread, and (significantly) its secrecy were closely bound to the other emerging ritual and liturgical forms which Smith developed in the immediate aftermath of his own initiation into the craft of freemasonry. Smith recognized the community and fraternity shaping power of the rites and began work on an entirely new and radically expansive liturgical framework that would eventually develop into what Mormons today associate with temple work.

He likely had some sense of the potency of the rites prior to his initiation—his father and brother Hyrum had been serious Masons for years—and the new Mormon liturgy strongly echoed the ceremonial forms of the craft. Yet it would be naïve to conceive of Smith's ritual creativity primarily in terms of appropriation. He did not plagiarize freemasonry. Someone intent on “stealing” the ceremonies would undoubtedly have worked to cover up the connection or similarities between the two. In Smith's case, some of the resemblances are uncannily precise, whereas the borrowed ritual features are inscribed into a radically different narrative and cosmological framing. Furthermore, Smith not only did not suppress freemasonry in Nauvoo (acquaintance with which ostensibly would have exposed his purloining of the ceremonial forms) but he actively promoted it and demanded that Mormons who were to participate in the new ordinances—including marital sealings—must first be initiated into the masonic order. The female Relief Society was conceived partly as an alternative form of preparation (the masonic lodges were exclusively male), to teach the women who participated to be good masons, “to keep a secret.”

### **Families in Time and Eternity**

*As a missionary in small town in Southern Russia, circa 1999, the idea of eternal families*

was a prime selling point for my work.<sup>3</sup> I often began conversations with potential converts with the question “how would you like to learn how you can live with your family for all eternity,” or “did you know that families can be together forever?” That was the mantra, what we’d known since we were small children and we sang the song “Families Can Be Together Forever,” a Mormon classic. I contrasted this promise in my own mind with the logic of “‘till death do you part.” I assumed that non-Mormons understood the fate of their family relationships in the same way I did—as terminal, as ceasing with death, as non-existent in the afterlife. I could not for the life of me figure out how people didn’t flock toward what I was offering, why they seemed so indifferent. Surely they longed for what only we were offering, for what other Churches frankly admitted they could not provide in those tragic words “‘till death do you part!”

It was years later that it occurred to me that I was trying to solve what was to them a non-existent problem. They didn’t think their family relationships would terminate or vanish after death. I might as well have asked them “hey, how would you like to learn how to remember your own name after you die?” I realized that I had misunderstood a core truth of Mormonism. We aren’t unique in believing that it’s possible for families to remain intact eternally; we’re unique in believing that it’s possible for them not to remain intact. What did this mean? What might it even mean? Would God simply separate family members from each other if they hadn’t received the correct ordinances in this life? What shape might families not being together take eternally.

I thought on this many more years, before I felt like I zeroed in on some insight. I began to reconnect with some of my childhood friends via social media, and I was shocked to remember just how much these friendships had once meant to me and just how little they meant

<sup>3</sup> Here my tenuous position as an insider-ethnographer surfaces most unambiguously, as I cite myself as a key informant to frame the stakes of ritual sealings in Mormonism.

*now. My friendship with so-and-so in second grade was the most important thing in the world to me. I was obsessed with it. Now, just a couple decades later, I was oblivious and indifferent to that same person. Not only were we not friends, not only did we have no meaningful relationship to speak of, but I didn't care. I thought, "what if this is what the afterlife is like? What if that world, that existence, is so much larger and so radically different (like adulthood is different from childhood, but with the difference magnified indefinitely) that relationships that seemed to matter more than anything here just seem meaningless or irrelevant there?"*

*The idea terrified me a little bit. It originated in my convictions as a Mormon, it was an inverted expression of the hope held out by priesthood sealings and the promise of eternal families. Yet I was horrified by the possibility. What if I just don't care anymore about my family relationships in that infinitely larger existence? This is why the movie Wall-E had such an impact on me. It's such a Mormon film. In the end, after Wall-E dies and is reassembled by Eve and she reboots him, the question is not "will Wall-E still be Wall-E" or "will he still have the same directive" or "will his operating system work?" The question is: "will the relationship still be intact?"*

When J. L. Austin first articulated speech act theory (1962), his two favored examples of speech-acts were oath and marriage ceremonies. Smith seems to have understood the power of speech in an entirely different way (although he had always been preoccupied with God's creative power as involving a magnified form of something like the logic of speech acts, as well as with the idea of a pure, undefiled language not shorn of its potency by humanity's Fall) following his introduction to the masonic rites. The power of oaths, of covenants—covenants of secrecy, of mutual protection, of bodily sacrifice, of obligation to other initiates—held out tremendous promise to a man charged by gods with creating a fundamentally new form of

sociality. The experience with Masonry deepened and enriched his sense of the productive capacity of language to bind people—bind them in the sense of placing upon them binding obligations but also in the sense of forging bonds between them—and he began to expand upon an existing genre of socially productive speech: the marriage ceremony.

Polygamy, then, was both a quantitative, as it were, and qualitative departure from existing marital norms. It was more than a new kind of marriage; it was a new kind of kinship. It expanded the range of persons—not just multiple wives but their families and kin<sup>4</sup>—who could be sealed to Smith and bound to God, through Christ, via Smith's seal. Polygamy was a new kind of sociality, and Smith assured the Saints that the “same sociality” which prevailed in this life had the potential to carry into the eternities. Smith's framing of the universe suggested that only certain kinds of relationships forged in mortal life had the capacity to persist into the eternities. You could fall in love, together cross the potent ceremonial threshold of marriage, experience life together, have children, suffer trauma together (Smith and his first wife lost several children to death in infancy), grow together, and yet reach the other side, the new reality, and all of that will not have been enough for your relationship to remain intact. Only a particular kind of kinship, of marriages and the kinship forms they sustain, enacted in a particular kind of way, with particular forms of ceremonial and social and ecclesiastical practices, could actually survive the transition into eternity and retain any even residual meaningfulness to the people involved in the new, celestial context. Marriages (and families) made here *could* endure and remain intact there. What is bound here could be binding there, the authority by which it is bound on earth being recognized in heaven.

Polygamy effected a radical break from existing, Protestant notions and practices of

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<sup>4</sup> Smith repeatedly and emphatically assured prospective wives that their marriage to him would have important and eternal consequences not just for them but for all their families and relatives.

marriage and family, a foundational reconfiguration of culture and society on the ground of kinship. The new kinship folded the ceremonial raw material of Protestantism, Catholicism, and freemasonry into the cosmos as rendered by Smith's revelations. The creation on earth of kinship forms both recognized by and capable of translation into celestial social order—eternal sealings—was inextricably tied to plural marriage and to the paramasonic rites that both forged a new kind of cross-gender fraternity and enforced the secrecy around polygamy. These rites, in part, ceremonially enacted the human progress toward Godhood that Smith called the great secret of the universe (and progress involved initiation into and reception of secret and vital bits of knowledge), and they would eventually be formalized and canonized by Brigham Young and extended to the entire body of Church membership as the Endowment.

None of these things—masonic oaths of secrecy, the secrecy of polygamy, the inception of sealings, apotheosis theology and divine anthropology, the creation of the Endowment rites—could be disentangled from each other, from the time of their development under Smith in Nauvoo to the generations following the abandonment of plural marriage more than a half century later in Utah. New kinds of gendered relationships, new patterns of kinshipping, developed alongside a new way of conceiving (and ritually enacting) men and women's relationships to deity. It is at this time that the idea of a “Queen of Heaven,” a Heavenly Mother, takes root. Godliness itself consists in these relationships, and by making new kinds of relationships, the saints were making (themselves) gods. The introduction of polygamy pushed Mormon sociality and the Mormon cosmos away from its cultural heritages in Protestantism and colonial American republicanism, eventually leading to their expulsion from United States and the establishment of an independently (though, as it turns out, temporarily) sovereign Mormon Kingdom in the State of Deseret, complete with its own communitarian and isolationist

economics, political structure, marriage and kinship systems, and even its own alphabet. By the end of the Nineteenth Century, Congress would manage to annex Utah territory, create a new state, and incorporate the Mormon people back into the republic (and put an end to Mormon socialism, theocracy, and polygamy in the process). That Mormon kinship had developed on such fundamentally different lines for that half century that much of its distinctive shape survived the transition back into monogamy this analysis treats as axiomatic, choosing instead to canvas the specific features of that distinctiveness as it exists in contemporary Mormonism.

### **Interviduality**

*Steven Peck is a biologist and philosopher, teaching at Brigham Young University. He is also a novelist who has published several novels, one of which is currently in development as a feature film. His best, and most unyieldingly Mormon, novel is The Scholar of Moab (2011). From the back-cover synopsis: "What happens when a two-headed cowboy, a high school dropout who longs to be a scholar, and a poet who claims to have been abducted by aliens come together in 1970's Moab, Utah?" The book currently ranks second, behind McCarthy's Blood Meridian on goodreads as the most important contemporary novel of the American West.*

*Adam Miller, a professor of philosophy and theology in North Texas, is widely viewed as Mormonism's most intriguing and influential theologian. A review of his book Rube Goldberg Machines (2012) in the most recent addition of BYU Studies Quarterly by Mormonism's most famous playwright (Thomas Rogers) described it as "one of the best and most important commentaries on the gospel and on life itself that I have ever read. It can perhaps be best compared to Ecclesiastes, The Annals of Confucius, or the compact wisdom of the Tao Te Ching." Recently Miller reviewed Peck's Scholar of Moab. He entitled the review "Interviduality," arguing that the shared subjectivity, so vividly described in the novel,*

dramatizes for readers “a general truth about the human condition. To be a human being is to exist simultaneously on complementary but asymmetrical planes.” Human nature, he argues, “is split, composite, spread, distributed, and open-ended.” To be human is “to be of two minds, to depend on bodies we can influence but not control [like the conjoined twins in the novel], to think thoughts we don't understand...”

In the novel, physicians discover within one/two of the main characters—conjoined twins with separate minds and several opposing traits (introvert and extrovert, hetero- and homosexual, etc)—a “third mind,” a “neural mass” not fully possessed of consciousness but still independent of the minds of the two heads. This “person,” who controls the legs, is affectionately dubbed by the twins “Marcel.” For Miller, Peck's characters reflect an important feature of “the human way of being,” a mode of existence necessitated by the structure of the Mormon cosmos. But they also reflect something about the core nature of being Mormon itself, which Miller identifies with the presence within the self or the mind of something else, something which colonizes, reorders, and redistributes the “self” in particular ways. For Miller, this is the Book of Mormon, “lodged like an eccentric body between my ears, spools in an endless loop.” The book inside him “composes me, conjoins me, compels me, and overwrites me as literally as any third-wheel neural mass could.... It keeps me up at night, it wakes me early in the morning, it keeps me from folding in on myself, from coinciding with the shadow I work to project, from imploding into a vacuum-packed hell where my 'self' and my life become one and the same. This is a little bit crazy, but it saves me from being completely sane.” And what could be more insane than the dissolution of the discrete, contained, individual self?

Neither Peck's nor Miller's writings are particularly representative of common Mormon patterns of doctrinal reasoning. But they are articulations—albeit eccentric and novel

*articulations—of the basic fabric of a kind of Mormon folk anthropology, grounded in much more central and canonical sources of Mormon doctrine and thought on God, the cosmos, and human nature.*

### **Communion, Community, Consubstantiality, and Conspecificity**

The scriptural prototype for Mormon baptism is arguable not Jesus' at the hand of John the Baptist but a story from the Book of Mormon. A prophet named Abinidi enters the court of King Noah to deliver a message of warning and a call to repentance. He is interrogated by Noah's priests and eventually sentenced to death and executed. One of the priests—Alma—is secretly converted by Abinidi's words, leaves the kingdom. In the wilderness, he finds a small community, preaches (in secret) the words of Abinidi, and begins to baptize his followers. Alma's teachings about the significance of baptism form the basis for LDS understandings of baptismal covenants. Alma presents baptism as a token of the people's willingness and desire “to come into the fold of God, to be called His people,” but also “to bear one another's burdens...to mourn with those that mourn...to comfort those who stand in need of comfort.” A willingness to accept these obligations qualifies the people to be baptized “in the name of the Lord” and as a witness of their entering “into a covenant with him.” This community, forged by the rite of baptism under covenants of mutuality—particularly mutual suffering, the willingness to co-experience the suffering of others in the community—became the Church.

These passages are read to every person considering Mormon baptism. Baptism is the rite by which converts enter the fold, become part of the community and members of the Church, and take upon themselves the name of Christ. It is also the rite by which young Mormons who come of age (age 8 is the minimum) do same. Those contemplating and preparing for ritual incorporation into the Church (and even those raised in the Church must choose to “enter by the

gate” of baptism) are taught that these covenants of mutuality under the name and head of Christ are the covenants of baptism. Alma's sermon concludes with a command “that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another.... And thus they became the children of God” (Mosiah 18: 8-22). Another prophetic figure in the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin, taught that by making covenants of submission with God, the people become the “children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you.” The underlying logic is that of hearts changed and unified in mutuality of being (Mosiah 5: 7).

Still, Christ's own baptism is also a model for Mormon baptism, particularly insofar as it establishes or definitively affirms His sonship, His relationship with His Father (and our Father). His baptism prefigures His death, and according to Abinidi's teachings which so affected Alma, in His death Christ's will is “swallowed up” into the will of the Father (Mosiah 15:7). Through baptism Mormons understand themselves to be reenacting not just Christ's own baptism, but His death, burial, and resurrection. All LDS baptismal fonts are built below ground level (to signify burial), and complete submersion in the water is essential to the correct performance of the ordinance. Immediately afterward, like Christ, the newly-baptized ritually receive the Holy Ghost. At Christ's baptism, the Spirit ascends and the voice of the Father affirms the Sonship of Jesus. In the Mormon ordinance, the newly baptized is “confirmed” a member of the Church, formally admitted into the community, the body and name of Christ.

LDS covenants of baptism and the promises from God they entail (most notably the presence of the Holy Ghost) are reenacted and renewed through partaking of the Eucharist (“the sacrament” in Mormon parlance). The blood and body of Christ, separated from one another through the violence of His death, are recombined in the bodies of those who themselves

comprise His body. They take into themselves His essence and substance, make their suffering His suffering, take upon themselves His name, and reaffirm their obligations to and membership within the community. These rites bind adherents into members of the same body, with the same name, the same divine parentage and heritage. They become members of one another, members of Christ, children of Christ, sons and daughters, joint heirs, brothers and sisters (indeed, Mormons refer to one another in devotional settings as “Brother” or “Sister” so-and-so).

Baptism as a reenactment of Jesus' resurrection entails other layers of distributed personhood. There is a rather strange but prominent feature of the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament. There are three separate stories of disciples, intimately acquainted with Jesus during His ministry, encountering the risen Christ without recognizing Him. Consider this from the perspective of the disciples described in the narrative, men and women who now encountered the risen Christ as an ordinary, anonymous person who walked and spoke and ate. Biblical accounts suggest that these disciples would have also been familiar with the parable of the goats and the sheep.<sup>5</sup> It is one thing for Christian (and Mormon) believers to understand the moral imperatives of the parable in something like metaphorical terms, as Jesus admonishing that feeding the hungry or giving drink to the thirsty or visiting the sick or imprisoned is *like* doing those things to him. The parable combines with the tradition of encounters with a Jesus unrecognized by close acquaintances to ground the ethics of caring for those in need in a semiotics of possibility, in the principle that the vagrant or prisoner or naked person you encounter might be Jesus himself.

The emblems of the Last Supper were metaphors for—“in remembrance of”—his body

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5 Matthew 25: 31-46, in which Jesus draws a kind of metonymic equivalence between himself and the needy: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?” In the parable the King replies “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

and blood. But he did not say “whatever you have done for one of the least of these...you have done in remembrance of me” but rather that you have done it unto him. This association of the very person of Jesus with the actual bodies of those most in need assigns new meaning to the category of “stranger,” a meaning defined in part by obligation and compassion. This reading of the resurrection narratives has a particular resonance for Mormons, because of the circumstances surrounding Joseph Smith's own death. In the hours before his assassination, Smith's good friend John Taylor sang to the prophet a rendition of James Montgomery's hymn “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief” (originally titled “The Stranger and His Friend”). The verses of the song tell the story a man's encounters with beleaguered and downtrodden strangers, culminating in a prison cell, where the man agrees generously and mercifully to undergo execution in place of the stranger. At that moment, Christ reveals himself as the stranger, consistent with the logic of the post-resurrection New Testament stories.

Although the hymn itself is of Protestant origin, it has a strong LDS connection because of its place in the story of Smith's death. It has acquired particularly iconic status in the Mormon canon, and remains a favorite in no small part because of its connection to Smith's martyrdom (indeed, Smith is viewed as having submitted to death willingly to protect the Saints in Nauvoo, to die in place of the body of Christ). It is the last song he heard in the hours before his own execution. The hymn implicates not just the distributed subjectivity or identity of post-resurrection anonymity but the obligations of mutuality entailed and reinforced by the every-person-ness of the resurrected Christ. He is all of us, and we are Him, a mutuality of being grounded in obligations of care, support, compassion, and sacrifice.

## **Blood**

The symbolism of the Eucharist (sacrament) involves not just Christ's body but His

blood, particularly in LDS ritual discourse. Blood, historically and biblically, is not just a symbol of violence but a metaphor for relatedness. For early Mormons was the dominant idiom of kinship (and remains so even in the scientific present). Baptism purifies a person of sin/blemish by cleansing her with the blood of Christ, making her a co-participant in Christ's death, the spilling of His blood. His blood covers the baptized sinner, making him His son. The converted and baptized become both the offspring and siblings of Christ, joint heirs with Him, children of the Father. In Mormonism this divine parentage is dual and gendered: a Father and a Mother (although there is no indication that baptism or Christ's blood transforms the relationship with Heavenly Mother, She is still considered, in LDS theology, the mother of our spirit selves in the same way that the Father sired us spiritually). The transformation of these relationships into lineal kinship is sealed by Christ's blood, which reconciles us with our (His) Father. We *are* His blood.

It is not just the blood of Christ at work here. Mormons are also the blood of Israel. They become Israel, the literal posterity of the tribes of Israel, when they undergo conversion. This blood lineage is pronounced ritually by man ordained to the priesthood office of *patriarch* in an ordinance usually conferred during adolescence, called a patriarchal blessing. The term patriarchal here connoted not the “Patriarchal Order” (cf Chapter 4) but our lineal connection to the patriarch's of old---Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel) and his sons—the fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham that his seed would be endless *in* us. Smith taught that when a person receives the gift of the Holy Ghost after baptism, the effect on someone who is not already a direct genealogical descendant of Abraham is that the Spirit literally changes their blood, transforming us into Abraham's seed. We are also the blood of Adam, the great patriarch of the race, the Ancient of Days. We inherit his fallen blood as his posterity, but are redeemed by

the blood of Christ *as* the blood of Israel. That is, the sanctification of our blood as children of Adam comes through the blood of Christ we now share, in fulfillment of the promises made to our (now) ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, who we also now *are*.

The blood of Christ articulates with the body of Christ in and through us. We are His blood and body. Bodies, in turn, are a necessary part of our purpose as spirit children of God who become more fully His children by obtaining bodies and through becoming adopted into the House of Israel through the blood of Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost. Childbirth is the event by which spirits become embodied, and receiving a body is one of the central purposes of God's master plan for humanity. Consider this passage, a portion of a revelation/translation Smith penned in late 1830, in which God explains these metaphysics to Adam:

“...by reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin... For by water ye keep the commandment; by the spirit ye are justified; and by the blood ye are sanctified” (Moses 6: 59-60).

Just as one's spirit self acquires a physical body in childbirth and also inherits the fallen blood of Adam, so one receives (and is received into) a new body (Christ;s) inheriting new blood (Christ's) and receiving a new spirit (the Holy Ghost; those onto whom this gift is ritually conferred after baptism are specifically told in standardized, undeviating language “receive the holy ghost”). Bodies and blood are necessary vehicles of transition toward consubstantiality with God. We are already conspecific with God—we are the same species. But we become one substance with God by becoming in the fullest possible sense His kin—sons and daughters, joint

heirs with His Only Begotten Son, being spiritually begotten by the Son through His death (which also involved blood, water, and spirit) and claimed as His offspring, His blood, through baptism. Our bodies are necessary, and our bodies are His body. His blood is necessary, and we become His blood by being cleansed by His blood. *Atonement* is both the mechanism (the sundering of His body from His blood, and their subsequent recombining in the act of resurrection, is called The Atonement and almost obsessively commented upon in the Book of Mormon, the great and lasting sacrifice of Jesus Christ) and the outcome (at-one-ment, unity, reconciliation, shared substance with Him and His Father) of His death. Our “individual” bodies are tiny kingdoms over which our spirits are given dominion, just as the Church is Christ's body, over which He and the Father have dominion. Our kingdoms (bodies) are His Kingdom (body).

But our bodies are also gendered. The ontological monism and radical materialism of Smith's rendered cosmos, with marital unions at the apex, necessarily entail the persistence of our bodies as gendered bodies. The Church is Christ's body, but it is also His bride. The metaphysical dualism which Smith's late theological innovations dispensed with—the ontological gap between God and humanity, heaven and earth, mind and body, spirit and matter—was recast (and is still being recast today) at the level of culture and kinship, in the cultural ground (gender) where the combining of eternally and ontologically distinct Male(s) and Female(s) into units, families, extensions of kinship can be bound and sealed, ramifying outward in space and forward and backward in time, sealings which define our celestially.

As the theoretically limitless possibility of horizontal expansion of celestial kinship bonds in the form of plural marriage was foreclosed by federal law, Mormons opted instead to extend the sealings in time by founding the Utah Genealogical Society and beginning to work obsessively on locating their ancestors, sacramentally binding them to themselves (and acting as

proxies for them in the sealing rites). Still, the gender binary underlies it all, the extension of sealings across time or space. Today, the gender binary has been cast backward-eternally in the quasi- (or ultra-) canonical text “The Family: A Proclamation To The World.” Here Mormons are taught that gender is an eternal characteristic of our souls, that our spirits were gendered prior to our embodiment in sexed mortal frames. Gender determines biology in the most direct sense: you are born male or female because your maleness or femaleness preexists your embodied sexual anatomy. Gender was relevant prior to mortality (though how is still a mystery), it is relevant now in the constituting of sealed kinship bonds, and will be relevant forever into the future, not only because the blessings of priesthood sealings will extend eternally in time in our posterity, but because true godliness is itself a gender binary, a function of the bond forged between eternal companions, husbands and wives.

### **Corporate (re)Production, Addressivity, and Generic Personhood**

The above analysis leads inexorably back to the temple and temple-work. But before we get there, a few notes on Mormon ecclesiology and on the LDS Church as a global corporation. How might the practices by which the Mormon Church extends itself globally—reproducing its worship forms, its standardized doctrines, its ritual and ceremonial corpus, its administrative units, and its productive and distributive practices as far and wide in geographic, national, social, legal, and financial space as possible—implicate the creation of kinship, the patterns of shared subjectivity and mutuality of being under consideration here? How might the ecclesiastical forms and norms, reproduced in standardized form via corporate best practices, themselves be constitutive of Mormon kinship (or Mormonism *qua* kinship)?

The “corporate-ness” of the LDS Church has made it the object of some criticism and derision. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a religion that so enthusiastically embraces

and embodies both the ethos and the practical strategies of corporate governance as Mormonism. Smith's (Daymon, not Joseph, 2010) analysis coins the neologism “ecclesiasticapitalism” to convey the essence of how religion and management, God and Mammon, have been made to “synergize” in the LDS Church. One Mormon, acquainted with both social theory and the inner workings of the Church Office Building (Mormonism's corporate headquarters), described the Church as “cutthroat capitalism combined with a gift economy.” The core of the critique advanced by Smith's (Daymon) argument is twofold. First, the capitalist forms employed by the series of corporations otherwise known as the Mormon Church fall short in key ways precisely in their failure as instruments of capitalism—the Church mass-produces and mass-distributes religious materials to its membership but is missing a feedback system, something like the equivalent of a price mechanism, a shortfall Smith describes with biblical allusion as “having the forms of capitalism but denying the power thereof.”

The second is an essentially semiotic criticism, mingled with Weber, grounded in the argument that producers and productive processes in Mormonism's internal economy replace the things represented with the images that represent them. Numbers in particular do this effectively, so the Church's corporate headquarters runs entirely on signs and images, things made legible to the logic of accounting and the representational and calculative capacities of computers. Instead of qualitatively attempting to gauge the spiritual effects of, say, sunday school manuals on actual persons, the persons are reduced to images that can be counted and categorized, revising in the process what exactly is regarded as religious or spiritual. It is a detailed, ethnographically rich account of rationalization, of the subjecting of spiritual matters intrinsic to religion to the logic of accounting and capital. Real persons are transmuted into the generic personas imagined by producers as their target consumers, materials address themselves to consumers, but to

consumers *qua* generic personae.

*Correlation* is the set of practices which generate the feedback loops in question, writing real people out of the process. What began in the 1960s as a Church-wide administrative realignment, a bureaucratic streamlining of the Church publishing, eventually came to exercise a kind of omnipresent, capillary power throughout Mormonism, with the power to surveil and refashion all ideological productive processes of a modern messaging organization. Smith sees in corporate Mormonism, possibly even in magnified form, a manifestation of how power operates in the world, power which constructs people in and as images legible to microprocessors in order to make us real in spaces surveyed by the powerful. Church members, in this account, are somewhat akin to the generic “shareholder” in legal regulations governing management duties: real not as actual persons but as idealized and genericized entities on whose behalf the company operates, whose “interests” (financial, spiritual) it maximizes. Smith, himself a practicing Mormon, sees in these operations rampant disenchantment, the dilution of the spiritual power and dynamic transcendent forces set in motion by Smith's (Joseph) revelations.

I admit that Smith's critique is compelling. It is certainly true that the productive and distributive messaging mechanisms of the Church address actual people as almost absurdly generic quasi-persons. Mormons are fond of noting that the Church, like Walmart, is the exact same everywhere you go. We see this as a salutary consequence of *Correlation*, yet the effect is not limited to the genericizing of individual Church members into idealized persona-types. It also forges an alienating distance between the membership and the Church, casting the latter as an alien entity, external to our immediate religious lives. We are the Church, of course, but the Church is also something distant, in Salt Lake, that makes and sends us stuff, to which we pay

tithing and donations. Its leaders are also our leaders, but they also speak in a kind of generic, indexically bleached voice, the unified monotones of Correlation. Curricula are authored by anonymous committees, their work subjected to the approval of another anonymous committee (Correlation has a committee), presented with a generic stamp of the First Presidency (as a single entity, not the individual First Presidency members). In your capacity as someone addressed by these materials, you are a kind of everymember, a type rather than a token, a *general*. As a representative member of the general membership you are addressed in the generic voice of General Authorities (the Church's full-time, central ecclesiastical leadership).

Despite the resonance of Smith's critique, I think there's an alternative to his rather dire (if implicit) conclusions. Consider first that a corporation is an association of persons into a unified body (and, in fairness, Smith is not criticizing the LDS Church for being a corporation). The Latin roots are *corpus* (body) and *corporare* (to combine in one body). I am in the process of making the case that Mormonism is, at its core, a kinshipping system and a kinship network. Previous sections of this chapter canvassed in some detail how the Church effects the kinds of shared subjectivity, transpersonal unity, and mutuality of experience broadly constitutive of kinship. Insofar as the Mormon Church is almost singularly preoccupied with organizing its membership into kinship groups and constituting novel and soteriologically relevant kinds of kinship, the forms and processes of modern rationalization it undergoes would ideally facilitate (or, minimally, not undermine) these constitutive processes and the forms of co-personhood they capacitate.

One way of reading the processes outlined above (and in Smith's work more broadly) is that they, in fact, enhance and multiply the range and forms of shared subjectivity intrinsic to the work of Mormonism, even while standardizing and routinizing their means of enactment and

subjecting their distribution and administration to the productive logic of capitalism. The generic, transpersonal, unified Subjectivity imagined within and diagrammed by the addressivity channels of Church-produced, member-consumed materials articulates closely with the patterns of mutual-being entailed not only by Mormon anthropologies of divine kinship, blood, and bodies but by Mormonism's ecclesiology of volunteer clergy as well as the liturgical corpus of its temple.

### **Ecclesiastical Structure and Interchangeable Persons**

*Scott Ericson is a graduate student in a Midwest college town. Several years ago he arrived at his student housing complex with his wife and three young children. “We had been driving our enormous truck through the night, and when we arrived it was raining.” Scott and his wife had visited the campus earlier in the year for recruitment. They had attended the local LDS Church, and prevailed on one of the member-families to show them their student housing apartment. “When we left, she told us to email her if we decided to come here. We did email her, but didn't hear anything from her after that.” Two months after sending the email, they arrived and quickly realized that they didn't yet have a key to their apartment.*

*“We were just sitting there, my wife and I in the moving truck, my parents in our minivan with the kids. We just sat there, waiting. After about 3 minutes we saw a woman walk out of one of the neighboring apartments. We hadn't seen her before, but she walked right up to us and asked, 'are you the Ericsons?' We said yes we were, and she said 'okay, your kids can come in with me while you go get your keys and then the ward will be here to help move you in.' So we left the kids, got the key, filled out some paperwork at the housing office, and by the time we got back an hour later, there was like 30 people from the ward there. They unloaded our 24-foot truck in 45 minutes flat, and we even had time to assemble our kids' beds before their bedtime.”*

*Scott's story seems intended primarily to convey how impressive the actual move-in was, the number of people who showed up and how quickly they worked. He continues: "the next summer we heard that there was another family with 3 kids moving in. Stacey [his wife] knew how much harder it would be work with kids under foot and she told me to take the wagon and bring their kids back to her to watch them while we helped unload the truck. When they pulled up I said, 'are you the Websters?' She said yes, and I told her 'I'm here to take your kids. My wife can watch them while we get you unloaded.' She had her kids get into the wagon I was pulling, I took them home, and then we unloaded their truck in about an hour. For years to come they became some of our best friends."*

This story has become rather iconic for me as a native anthropologist. I share it regularly with colleagues, because to me it illustrates what Mormonism is more completely than any story I could make up. The rendered service, the congregation members coming together to help out a family in need, stands out most in terms of conventional narratives about religious community. Indeed, it was such a coming together to support coreligionists, even new to town, that Scott's telling was intended to highlight. Stories like this are often glossed in LDS circles as examples of the "Mormon Mafia." The most interesting part of the story, however, was mentioned practically in passing: the fact that in both cases young parents completely new to a city immediately turned over their children to people they had never met.

That the prospective babysitter knew the family's name closed a semiotic chain of inference permitting the parents to conclude minimally that the person offering was an active member of the Church. Both families had made local Mormons aware of their impending arrival, and at the mere mentioning of their name they knew that they were committing their children to

the care not of strangers but of Mormons. As an anthropologist I can think of no other basis for solidarity or common identification that would facilitate something as typically unthinkable as giving your kids to strangers in a strange city. Would a democrat give her kids to someone with a friendly face and an Obama sticker? Would a teamster to a fellow Union member? Would Real Madrid supporter to a fellow fan? A Michigan graduate to a fellow wolverine? No, but a BYU graduate would to a fellow cougar. The only example I can think of, the only basis for shared identification that would enable a person to behave in such a manner is *kinship*: people might willingly and without a worry turn over their children to their erstwhile unknown relatives.

### **Ward Family**

Mormon congregations are called wards. Like their political counterparts, they are organized geographically. Groups of wards (usually 6-9) are organized into *stakes*, the LDS equivalent of a diocese. All ecclesiastical leadership and staffing at the ward and stake levels is non-professional, volunteer. Bishops (presiding over wards) and stake presidents, with the exceptions of retirees, still have full-time careers and fulfill their ecclesiastical responsibilities during evenings and on weekends. Bishops are typically called for five-year terms of service, stake presidents ten, and stake presidents are almost always former bishops. Bishops are viewed as father figures who preside over ward families the way fathers preside over nuclear families. As a policy, they are always married, and never divorcées.

One of the primary and most consistent and time-consuming duties a bishop has is staffing the ward. In theory, all adult members have *callings*, formal responsibilities which they are called to take on, for example, Sunday school teacher, president of a youth organization, organist, facilities coordinator (keeps the church-house clean and locked). When someone is called, they are presented for a ratifying vote to the entire ward during sacrament meeting (the

primary weekly worship service that includes sermons, hymns, and the Eucharist). If they are unanimously approved (and they are the overwhelming majority of the time) they are *set apart* via laying on of hands (a formal blessing that confers upon them the rights and responsibilities of their calling, performed by the bishop or a bishopric member). These new callings and sustainings occur during every sacrament meeting. People are released from old callings (with a public vote of gratitude), given new callings, and there's plenty of turnover. Ward leadership, under the direction of the bishop, spends hours every week coordinating the task of staffing the ward and ensuring that as many adult (and adolescent) ward members as possible have callings.

Brother Harmon is a bishop in Salt Lake City. He has been serving for four years now. He is in his late fifties, and works as a financial planner. He and his wife have five children, two of them grown, three teenagers. “I think staffing the ward is the hardest part of this calling. But it's also the most rewarding in many ways. It requires the most collaboration with other ward leaders, especially the relief society president and primary president. Even more so it requires collaboration with the Lord.” Here it should be noted that most of the basic functioning of a ward is dictated by policies and procedures originating at Church headquarters, conveyed in the General Handbook of Instructions. How sacrament meetings are to run, how tithes and offerings are to be collected, what kinds of callings should exist in the ward—virtually everything is already decided in advance for a bishop. Yet the bishop also has responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the ward, which means he is uniquely positioned and entitled to pray for guidance, inspiration, and revelation on behalf of all ward members.

Because so much of how the ward is run is effectively out of his hands and simply a matter of written, standardized policies, staffing the ward—deciding who to call to what positions, who is needed where—is one of the most prayerful and spiritually rigorous

responsibilities a bishop has:

“Some of the most sacred and spiritually powerful experiences I've had, not just as a bishop but in my entire life, have involved praying about callings. I have received such strong promptings, known the Lord's will with such clarity. Sometimes what He's telling me is shocking. I'd have never thought to call so-and-so to that calling. But it turned out to be such an inspired choice. I know giving callings seems like such a mundane thing, and it is, but for me it's also the source of miracles on almost a weekly basis. I don't think I've ever prayed harder. It's funny, really, because it's not all inspiration; you have to think really hard, you rack your brain, try to figure it all out as best you can. Then you get stuck, get on your knees, and somehow it works itself out. Sometimes it's just a quiet bit of insight, sometimes it takes weeks or months to solve a problem. But in the end, it always feels like a small miracle. I know that I have called this person because it is the Lord's will.”

Sister Harmon (his wife) reflects on the staffing decision to call her husband as bishop. “I think when he was called that was a trial of my faith.” She chuckles. “I'm serious, I thought there's no way he's ready, we're ready for this. They must have misunderstood what the Lord wanted. We'd only even been in the ward for less than a year. He'd never been in a bishopric or had any kind of leadership calling.” She pauses and actually winks at me. “I won't say that it caused me to question my faith, but I was sure shocked by it. Over time, of course, I came to realize how right it was. It's amazing to see the mantle of responsibility fall onto someone you'd have never thought capable of it. The ward became our family, and even though the calling did take away from his time with us, with his own family, we were blessed and the ward was blessed.”

She shifts topics to tell me about helping her daughter and her family to a new city earlier

this year. “Her husband was just starting his pediatric residency.” As an aside she lets me know that the husband is several years older than her daughter is. “They’d never been away from us, he did college and med school here. I was just devastated that they were leaving and taking my two grandchildren with them!” She actually chokes up a bit here, even while she laughs. “I went with them and spent the weekend helping them unpack. And we went to church, and it was this wonderful ward full of graduate student families. The bishop was so amazing. His wife too. It’s hard to explain, but just going to church that one day and seeing what the people there were like relieved so much of my anxiety. I was so worried that they were just on their own now, without us, without a support system. But I realized that they were getting a new, wonderful family, and that was such a comfort to me. I also realized that we were that to people here. Her father might not be able to give her much support from fifteen-hundred miles away, but he was being a father to those he was called to serve here. She was going to be fine, they were going to be fine, and,” here she winks again, “*I am going to be fine.*”

Part of what these accounts illustrate is the predominance of the family as an analogy for the social and spiritual support that exists in a ward community. The Mormon Mafia. But the cultivation of kin-like relations through the administration of wards extends well beyond the fact that ward members take care of each other and call each other “brother” and “sister” or even revere their bishops in an expressly paternal way. Bishops change, and in theory, any adult male in the ward could one day be the bishop, could someday receive that same mantle of spiritual responsibility. Everyone in the ward has callings, and although many callings are gender-specific, it’s easy for most members to imagine themselves being called to virtually any of a wide range of callings. The callings are uniform across wards; every ward has callings x, y, and z. They are more than just offices or designations of responsibility. They are categories of

personhood, categories defined in part by the radical interchangeability of persons that can occupy or fill them.

Mormons encounter one another not just as individuals but as tokens of these universal category types. And, significantly, I don't just encounter you as "Elders Quorum President" but I also encounter *myself* in you precisely insofar as I could potentially hold that same calling. This forms a not insignificant basis for the reverence, deference, and patience with which Mormons hold one another in their respective callings. I respect your office, knowing that it might one day be me in your shoes. We associate specific callings not just with their descriptions or their duties, and not just with the specific individuals who hold them at a given time, but with personality types. We come to expect bishops to be certain types of persons, and relief society presidents, and young mens presidents, and Sunday school instructors, and ward clerks. We recognize these types when we visit other wards, and we know the kinds of people likely to be called to certain callings within our own wards. Sometimes we're surprised when someone gets a calling, but very often the performance of the calling brings out in the person precisely the kinds of traits we have come to associate with it.

Both the universality of callings and their wide interchangeability enable us to encounter our selves, our past and potential selves, in others. Ward leaders see ward members, all their names, arranged on an organizational chart, knowing that, within certain constraints, any one of them could go anywhere on the chart. But the organizational chart is also a kinship chart. It is the basis of distributing not just persons but personhood both within and across ward families. We are members of our wards, but also of one another. I am forced by my knowledge of the possibility of my stepping into the category you currently occupy to see in you myself, and you in me. Like kinship categories, callings conferred by a presiding father figure strongly implicate

gender. I know what I can and cannot do because I am a man or a woman. But they are also transcendent, both in that they carry a kind of transcendent otherworldly force in their issuance, and that they transcend discrete individual persons. These endlessly interchangeable categories of personhood are the basis of genericity, but instead of entailing alienation they capacitate an abiding and universalizable mutuality of experience and of being. They implicate us in one another's affairs, desires, sufferings, goals, struggles, and daily lives.

### **Brothers**

*Brother Jones is sitting in the lobby of the temple. He has just come from a proxy sealing session, and is casually talking with several of the people who also participated in the session (all of whom he met only today). He brought with him the names (and prepared genealogical records) of two of his father's brothers. Acting as a proxy for one of them, and sitting next to an altar with three strangers (acting as proxies for the other brother and their mother and father), Brother Jones was sealed to his parents (their parents) on behalf of his late uncle. The four of them clasped hands as the sealer pronounced the words of the ceremony, sealing the brothers under the new and everlasting covenant to their parents for time and eternity, formally conferring upon them all the blessings they would have received had they been born under the covenant. This means that the brothers and their parents died before embracing Mormonism and receiving these ordinances in mortality. The parents were first eternally sealed to each other (in a previous proxy ordinance), and then the brothers sealed to them. Had the parents been sealed in mortality, prior to having children, the children would have been "born under the covenant" and no child-to-parent sealing would have been necessary.*

*He is talking now with some of the other temple patrons who were a part of this proxy sealing. He casually comments on the irony of the order in which the sealer read the names of*

*the brothers. “They were twins, and the one was always fond of reminding the other that he was just a few minutes older.” This is funny because the sealer read the name of the younger twin first, so he assumes they both shared a good laugh, even though what was happening for them was one of the most important things of their entire existence. The walls on opposite sides of the altar in the sealing room have huge mirrors facing each other, creating the visual effect of endless symmetrical reflections of reflections, a potent symbol of the eternity touched by the rites performed at the center. The reflections extend in both directions, past and future, anchored in the mortal and temporal present. “I even thought I could hear one of them laugh, just faintly, and I looked into the mirror to see if they were there. I didn't see them, I guess I don't think I even expected to, but I know they could see me. I know they were there, and their hearts were rejoicing that their day had finally arrived.”*

*“I have come to know and love these two men as I have done their [genealogical and proxy ordinance] work. They're like my own brothers. The bond I have with them could not be stronger than it is right now, than in that room where I helped take their place and had them sealed to our family. If the bond was strong before, it is one thousand times stronger now.” He tells a story of how his father, as a young boy, became lost in the woods overnight, only to be shown the way home by two strange young men who barely spoke. When he arrived home and told his parents about the young men, “his dad had to leave the room because he got so upset. But his mom told him about his brothers. You see, they both died within a couple of months after they were born, and they hadn't even told my dad about them. But the boys he was describing fit exactly, especially the age. They would've been about 12 at that time.” At this point I am considering the age of the twins' death in light of Brother Jones' account of their bickering over who was older. I doubt Brother Jones has had experiences actually interacting with the dead*

*brothers. More likely, he has simply come to know them as he said, doing their work, acting on their behalf, sealing himself (and his family) to them as them. He knows they argue about these things because he knows them, their hearts and minds.*

Temple worship—or temple work, as Mormons call it—consists of work for the living and work for the dead. There are three main ordinances performed in the temple (for the living): the initiatory, the endowment, and family sealings. The initiatory and endowment are inseparable; the one is an immediate preparation for and leads directly into the other. In the initiatory, a patron is ritually (and symbolically, it is not a literal washing) washed, anointed with oil (a drop on the head with a pronounced blessing), and clothed in the priesthood garments (sacred underclothing which endowed Mormons wear daily throughout their lives as a reminder of their covenants and a source of spiritual protection). The clothing process is also symbolic—initiates wear the garment beneath a full length white tunic into the ordinance room, and the ordinance worker merely pronounces the garment “authorized.”

When the initiatory ends, the endowment begins. The patron is given a new name and placed under covenant never to divulge it to anyone. The endowment itself (the term is actually an obsolescent usage, to “endow” meaning “to clothe”) begins as a ritual drama which the patrons watch, either acted out in real time or (in most cases) as a film produced by the Church. As the story of creation, Eden, and the Fall unfolds, patrons—acting as Adam and Eve, respectively—co-participate by interacting with representatives from God, taking upon themselves covenants of righteous living, and receiving signs (gestures, passwords) which they must remember but are bound by covenant to never reveal. Most of the ceremonial elements of the rite take place after Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden.

As Adam and Eve receive these covenants and special tokens from heavenly messengers,

so do the patrons, acting, again, as Adam and Eve. Their is a progression to the covenants, they move from general to specific, and the expectations associated with faithfully keeping them increases. Over the course of the ceremony, patrons also clothe themselves in increasingly elaborate robes and sacred vestments. The ceremony culminates when patrons are presented at a veil. A person representing God stands on the other side, the patron's knowledge of the special information conferred with each covenant is tested, new information is revealed, and the patron is admitted into the symbolic presence of God, the celestial room, where silence and reverence prevail. The ceremony is over. Patrons spend a few minutes in the celestial room before returning to their dressing rooms, putting back on street clothes, and leaving the temple.

Although the progression is not immediate, the endowment is itself a preparation and prerequisite for sealing ordinances. Only endowed couples are sealed to each other. The endowment is a kind of fertility rite for individual adults. Their potential for posterity and their posterity itself are blessed, but they are also enjoined by covenant not to engage in sexual activity except after marriage with their spouses. So it is a preparatory fertility rite. And although Adam and Eve are married and patrons are explicitly told to identify themselves as Adam and Eve, men and women participate separately and individually. The endowment is as intrinsically an individual ordinance as the sealing ceremony is an ordinance for couples. As a part of the sealing, the couple's fecundity and their realization of the promises made to Abraham of numberless seed are acknowledged and blessed. Whereas only their potential fertility was blessed and empowered in the endowment, those blessings can now be realized, and their fulfillment is blessed in the sealing. And whereas the endowment takes more than an hour to complete, the sealing lasts just a minute or two. As the sealing ordinance itself begins, all of the holiness and gravity of the most sacred elements of the endowment are symbolically summoned,

and in addition to being sealed to one another, all of the blessings associated with all of the ordinances prior to that moment (from baptism to the endowment) are sealed upon the heads of the couple. These blessings can only be fully realized by couples, not by individuals. And the blessing of posterity reaching into the eternities, the ability to multiply as Adam and Eve were first commanded, is both the prototype and culmination of these blessings.

Mormons need undergo these rites only once in their lives. Yet temple worship is a regular part of Mormon life. This is because in addition to these living ordinances, the temple rites are performed for and on behalf of the dead. Mormons do genealogical and family history research and submit the names of their ancestors for work. They often perform the work themselves. In addition to temple rites, the ordinances of baptism, the conferral of the gift of the Holy Ghosts (and confirmation as a member of the Church), and ordination to priesthood for males are also performed for the dead. Although the endowment and marital sealings are reserved for adults, adolescent Mormons participate in temple work on a limited basis as proxies in baptisms and confirmations for the dead. So most Mormons go to the temple dozens or even hundreds of times over the course of their lives, but with the exception of their initial reception of the endowment and their own marriages, all the work they do is on behalf of the dead. If they don't bring the names of their own ancestors, names are provided by the temple.

Consider the implications of such an apparatus of ritual work for Mormonism as a kinship system. Individual identities spill over into one another in highly regulated fashion. Participants speak in the voice of others, accept obligations on their behalf. They identify with the proxied dead. The temple is the primary site for what we might call Mormon spiritualism. It is where Mormons encounter the other side of the veil, not just ritually, but in encounters with other persons, with the actual spirit world and its inhabitants, all patiently waiting for mortal

Mormons to do their temple work. Spiritual connection with the person on whose behalf they perform the rites is one of the most common and most frequently described transcendent encounters for temple worshipping Mormons. This is even true of strangers, non-ancestors. And Mormons who actively do family history research regularly have profound experiences involving the ancestors they seek out. They have vivid and visionary dreams in which some unknown ancestor begs them to do their work and even directs them to genealogical resources and clues which will make this possible. Mormons, more than anywhere else, encounter their kindred dead in doing their work. Ritual surrogation forges the connection through which those performing the rites encounter the other in the self, as the self.

The distribution of personhood across individual bodies (and remember, bodies are essential to the entire project, since it is by virtue of still possessing bodies that the living can do work for the dead) is nowhere more robustly worked out or elaborated than in temple work. A man arrives at the temple, shows his recommend (a token of worthiness as judged by his bishop and stake president) to the man at the entrance desk (himself acting as a kind of proxy for the bishop and stake president as gatekeepers). The man changes his clothes in preparation for an endowment ceremony. He is given a card with the name of another (dead) man on it (along with other bits of identifying information, birth and death year, plus the dates of when the rites of baptism, confirmation, and priesthood ordination were already performed on his behalf by some other male temple patron). He is now standing in for this man, accepting and receiving covenant obligations as though he were this man. After receiving the name of the dead man, he is ritually given a new name (the dead man's new name, which he remembers for the dead man, but which the dead man also presumably receives and remembers).

He then enters the endowment room where he is told that he (on behalf of someone else)

is to identify himself with Adam, Adam also being a kind of everyman, representing both humanity's primeval parent and humanity itself. Like all of us, the man is Adam, and also he is Adam on behalf of the dead man, who is also Adam (and they are both Adam's seed). This shared subjective experience, this acting and learning and knowing and accepting obligation both for and as another (and another other) remains throughout the ordinance. Very possibly the man will experience some kind of spiritual manifestation or confirmation that the dead man he represents is, in fact, accepting the work being done on his behalf. In which case the man is also present, hearing, learning, understanding, remembering, accepting, progressing with the man acting bodily on his behalf. The bond between the two is only strengthened if the man is actually officiating in the ordinance on behalf of his actual kindred dead, somebody whose name he came across in his genealogy, someone whose baptism and other saving ordinances he already performed, someone who, in the end, will be bound to him not just as a proxy but as a member of his eternal kin group.

Brian, a lifelong Mormon, described how the temple contributed to his questioning of his place within and allegiance to Mormonism. Raised in Utah, his belief in God had been nourished largely by experiences in nature and through private prayer. The temple he found “unexpected and alienating,” and his initial experience there provoked weeks of soul-searching about Mormonism. He voiced his concerns to his mother, who only noted in response that occasionally God would challenge or “defy our sensibilities” and thereby “teach us something.” After some time he returned to the temple and eventually came to feel God's presence there. In the temple's “strange ceremony” he learned that “the God revealed by Joseph Smith” was tangible and embodied, and that the religion Smith revealed was tactile and sensuous. He discovered in the temple a place to encounter God in others, to touch and be touched in a holy and entirely non-

sexual way, to use our bodies to pledge and commit our souls to God.

Jesse, also a practicing Mormon, initially found the temple rituals disorienting. Over time he came to see the temple as fundamentally about the creation of connection. In his words: “Joseph Smith revealed in a thousand different ways the capacity we have to be related to each other, to create networks of being and belonging. He believed that the temple was central to this project. In the temple, Joseph shares with us his vision of our capacity to be a family that spans eternity and is centered in Eve and Adam, representing simultaneously all of us and those who have given us life.”

In the temple you are you, but you are also a new you, with a new name. You are also Adam or Eve, and by extension, a prototypical member of your gendered half of the human race. You are the personal Adam or Eve and the timeless Adam or Eve. You are everyperson, but also several very specific persons. You are the person for whom you stand in a relationship of surrogation. You are doing their saving work for them, you are making their salvation and exaltation your business, acting as a kind of savior. You have your name, the other person's name, the name of Adam, the new name(s), and the name of Christ. You seek (as yourself and as another) an encounter with God, and when you encounter him he is a person like you, a man acting as a proxy for God. And yet you truly encounter God in this man, you feel God's presence, an unmistakable reality. Nowhere is the encounter with God more scripted, regulated, carefully managed and blocked, more routinized than in the temple. Nevertheless it is in the proceduralism and scriptedness and ritual artifice of the temple that so many Mormons palpably encounter God.

More than anything, the temple rites confer the blessings of posterity. Here the faithful, as children of God and adoptive children of Christ, as the blood of Israel and the seed of Abraham and of Adam, are both the realization God's promises to Abraham and recipients of

identical promises. Abraham was promised that in his seed the entirety of humanity would be blessed, and he would be blessed. In the temple the numberless seed of Abraham blesses the peoples of the earth, past, present, and future, both through the work they do and through the perpetuation forward into eternity of that same blessing of posterity. Abraham's children are blessed as and with posterity, through all generations, worlds without end. It is in the temple that the great chain is formed, welding the generations together, forward and backward in time, into eternity and back to Father Adam and Mother Eve. Joseph Smith used this analogy, the welding chain, when he first introduced not the sealing rites that bound families together, but baptism for the dead. In performing saving ordinances for our kindred dead, on their behalf, *as them*, we are bound to them and become one with them.

### **A Death Scene**

*A large group of extended family has gathered in a hospital room. Jacob's grandfather, Gerald, has been dying for some time—multiple bouts of aggressive cancer—and the family is preparing to remove life-support. Jacob is there with his mother (it's her father dying) and father, as well as his 7 year old son. All of the dying patriarch's children are present, along with twenty or so of his grandchildren as well as both of his ex wives. He is unconscious and intubated, and has been for more than a week now. For most of his life, Gerald was only sporadically active in the Church, although in recent years he increased his participation and even returned to the temple. He is on heavy narcotics, in part to manage the pain of the tube in his esophagus, necessitated by his ravaged and useless lungs.*

*Jacob recalls this scene to me several days afterward. “He was dying, and he needed to die, and everyone knew it.” The family had prayerfully decided to take Gerald off life support, to let him pass on peacefully and end his suffering. “So even though it was a very sad and somber*

*occasion, most of the people there were content, at peace with releasing him.” Gerald had five daughters and one son. One at a time, each daughter came forward and sat in a chair alongside Gerald's bed. Although unconscious and unable to speak, Gerald gave each daughter a father's priesthood blessing, through the voice of his son, Jim. Jacob continues: “Jim placed Gerald's hand on her head and then his own hand on Gerald's to keep it there. Then, speaking in his father's voice, Jim pronounced a blessing.” It is common to hear the words “your father” in such blessings: “your Father loves you,” “your Father is proud of you,” “your Father has great things in store for you.” Jim also used these words, though in this case, Jacob notes, “it had a kind of double meaning. Did 'Father' mean Gerald or Heavenly Father?” Jim spoke in Gerald's voice, and conferred a father's blessing on each daughter.*

*After the blessings, Jim asked everyone to stand and, as a faint echo of the temple ceremony, asked them to either hold the hand or place their hand on the shoulder of the person next to them. Then he offered a family prayer, expressing gratitude for Gerald's life and legacy, and blessing him unto death. Jacob recalls the feeling during the prayer: “the power of the priesthood to bind families and to lift us closer to God in the process was just electric in that room. It was one of the most powerful experiences I've ever had, and I was so glad my son was there for it.” After the prayer, Jim's wife, a nurse, extubated Gerald as additional pain medication was administered. With everyone gathered around the bed, a testament to Gerald's blessing of posterity, and watched their father and grandfather and husband die. Jacob finishes the story by saying, “I hope I am able to die such a dignified death.”*

### **Some Conclusions**

I have endeavored here to make the case for Mormonism as primarily an extended kinship network, spanning temporality and space, past, present, and future worlds, time and

eternity. The cultural-ontological ground for this kinshipping system is the gender-binary, transcending mortal bodies and biology, extending backward and forward eternally. Gender acquires distinctive shape in Mormonism particularly in articulation with the semiotics of the sacred and the unsaid. This is the second tier foundation for Mormon kinship: priestly authority and priesthood power, manifest most fully in the rites, spaces, and functions of temple worship.

Most of this dissertation dealt with Mormon life and Mormon semiotics outside of the temple. This, I argue, is where much of the sanctity of the temple is actually made and enacted. Elliptical discourse about the temple figures vitally in the construction, enforcement, and reinforcement of the holiness of the space. The spatial gradient of holiness that gravitationally centers on the temple (and on its innermost sanctuary) runs parallel to a continuum of priestly and ecclesiastical authority, pointing inexorably toward the temple and the High Priest who presides over it (the Church President). Discourse about the sacred, the way Mormons talk and do not talk and talk about not talking about the temple and other sacred things, makes the temple into a kind of hidden presence, an unspoken but omnipresent force in the religious lives of Church members. And it makes the authority and power of the temple priesthood palpable in virtually every interaction about the temple.

This discourse of the sacred and the unmentionable affirms and magnifies priestly authority. It also articulates with Mormon discourse on gender and sex. An entire, parallel semiotic pattern of elliptical speech and mentioned unmentionable implicates gender on both the semantic-ideological and social-indexical planes. Discourse about gender involves euphemisms, circumlocutions, evasions, and structured silences that closely mirror discourse around temple work. Gender discourse also involves patterned (and gendered) performance disparities; men and women talk differently, have access to different repertoires of semiotic material, different ranges

of acceptability and propriety when it comes to enacting and circumventing the norms of freighted gender related subjects (polygamy, female deity, sexual desire). If the gender binary—reflected and enacted in the structured silences and semiotic patterns of interactively glossing various expressions and adumbrations of gender as an eternal phenomenon which parallels in both form and function the metadiscourse of the sacred surrounding the temple—is the ontological ground for Mormon kinshipping, it is that very priestly authority which operationalizes enacted gender, transmuting it into a vast and enduring, eternal kinship structure. The Mormon map of heaven is a kinship chart, hanging on the temple wall.

The temple is the point of intersection, the place where eternally gendered personhood conjugates with the eternal priesthood. In the temple heaven and earth meet. Patrons ritually transverse the thresholds symbolically separating (*and* connecting) each world (the celestial and telestial), and is itself a great threshold (the terrestrial space). Here the Church, nominally a protective institution guarding access to and protecting the integrity of the sanctuary, comes in contact with the Kingdom of God. The ecclesiastical priesthood converges with the cosmological priesthood, Church administration with the sealing power. Here too is the consummate meeting of the governing ontological duality: Male and Female. The pre-biological, pre-cultural binary of Male/Female that underlies all intelligence, all power, and all existence intersects with the quintessentially cultural binary of sacred/profane. Gender difference finds its deepest expression and fills the full measure of its nature in the space where the holy and the worldly meet and the worldly is banished. Past and future, ancestry and posterity, the living and the dead all meet in this intermediate and mediating space. Persons converge with other persons, individual persons with person types with corporate persons. Earthly enactments of kinship mingle with and become divine enactments of kinship. And just as the totality of one's experience in the LDS

Church inexorably directs one toward the temple and its culminating rites of fertility and kinship, so the full range of intersubjectivity, distributed personhood, and mutuality of being at work in Mormonism draw upon and converge within the work of the temple.

A final note: recall where we began, with a group (the Cutlerites) with both important shared features and heritage (one is tempted to say kinship) with the LDS Church as well as radical, nearly diametrically opposing characteristics. A small group of consanguinal kin, no corporation, no global mission program, no mass-produced units of standardized discourse, translated and mass-distributed to congregations the world over. No billions in capital investments, no general authorities, no charts filled with pre-arranged personhood categories for staffing congregations. But they do have a sanctuary, they do share with the Mormon Church this sacred heritage, the protection and preservation of priesthood rites, introduced by the Prophet of the Restoration in the upper room above Nauvoo's red brick store. They have their upper room, and Mormons have their temple. But recall what else is absent (at least by comparison) in the Cutlerite tradition. No history of polygamy (and no elaborate and rich metadiscourse for elliptically and euphemistically discussing and not discussing it); no divine anthropology, no men becoming gods, no Heavenly Mother; and in place of the structured silence surrounding the Mormon temple, absolute silence, no coded signaling, no surreptitious references to or quotations from the ceremonial language. I have argued that such structured silences and patterned signalings in Mormonism are constitutive of the pre-cultural (gender) and cultural (priestly authority in the sanctuary) ground Mormon praxis draws upon to make kinship. They are as absent in Cutleritism as the sealing rites themselves. Cutlerites are kin, but they do not sacramentally make kinship.

Making kinship is *all* Mormons do.

## **Conclusion: Some Theoretical Gestures on Semiotics and Religious Modernity**

### **An Epilogue on Bodies**

*Greg is in his mid 30s. He and his family are very active in their ward, and he serves as a temple worker. He works a four-hour shift, once a week, where he usually officiates in ordinances. He describes his first experience in the temple at age 19, just prior to leaving for his mission: “They used to do the initiatory differently,” he begins. The initiatory is the ordinance that immediately precedes and is functionally a prelude to the endowment. The initiate is ritually washed, blessed, and anointed and clothed in the priesthood garment, a sacramental undergarment designed to be worn daily, concealed beneath clothing, and with symbolic reminders of sacred covenants made during the endowment. “You used to go in practically naked. You wore a shield, a kind of smock that barely covered your naked body, while you went through the washing and stuff, then they actually clothed you in the garment. They sort of did it under the shield.” He pauses to make sure I understand, unsure of whether my own first endowment was before or after the liturgical change.*

*Today, initiates wear the garment prior to entering, beneath a much more concealing shield. Instead of having the garment placed upon them, they are simply told during an otherwise similarly worded clothing-blessing that the garment they are wearing is now fully authorized. “I get that the new way is probably more comfortable for a lot of people, makes that*

*first experience a little less weird or even creepy. But honestly, my strongest memory from that first time was being clothed in the garment. Even though I wasn't completely naked, I still felt exposed, uncomfortable, vulnerable, throughout the blessings and stuff. I couldn't even really pay attention to what they were saying because I was so uncomfortable. But in hindsight, that was a very good thing because it meant that when I finally received the garment, it was such a huge relief.” Initiates are told that in addition to reminding them of their covenant obligations the garment will protect them from Satan's destructive power. There is a powerful sense in Mormonism that the priesthood garment is a real and efficacious form of protection. “It wasn't just relief, it was like the relief was also something deeply spiritual. I felt covered and truly protected, like the garment was a real shield as opposed to the shield I was already wearing. I really regret that people who didn't come before they made the change will never know that feeling, that sense of relief that came from being clothed in the garment for the first time.”*

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*Anna is in her early 20s. Although she was raised Mormon and even served a mission, she only recently returned to church activity after nearly a year away. She initially left because she came out as lesbian. She only came out to her family and a few close friends, but not to her ward or her bishop. She moved into a new apartment, and stopped going to church. She started to date other women, to drink alcohol, and even, as she puts it, “to fool around” with some of the women she dated (a violation of Mormonism's moral code against both homosexual relations as well as sexual relations in general with anyone who is not your spouse). Recently, she gave up drinking, and resolved to refrain from sexual contact before marriage (she is hoping that Mormonism will “catch up” with the legal shifts across the country, and at least recognize her hoped-for same-sex marriage in terms of definitions of chastity). Her temple recommend hadn't*

*expired during her time away, so she began attending weekly. “The first two times I went back I was honestly disappointed. I had been attending the Episcopal Church, and really developed a taste for their high-liturgy. But the temple was different, and I didn't like it. I didn't hate it, just found it boring.” I ask her how often she attended before going inactive, and she says she did regularly and very much enjoyed it before.*

*“The third time was different. I had an even harder time. This time, it was because I didn't feel worthy to be there. I'm gay, I've done all these things, and even though I stopped, it's not like I confessed or anything. I still haven't come out to my new ward or bishop. I felt completely unworthy, the whole time.” She pauses and looks me square in the eye. “Until I went through the veil and got into the celestial room. There I felt completely at peace, totally worthy in God's eyes, totally accepted. So up to that point, it had been worse than the other times, but in the celestial room, it was maybe the best feeling I've ever had in the temple.” I tell her I wonder if her experience isn't really what most Mormons would experience all the time, if they were really honest with themselves. “When you think about it,” she follows my train of thought, “all the covenants you make before you get to the veil are just reminders of how much you fail to measure up. You accept binding obligations that you know you won't fully live up to, and you renew them over and over every time you go back. It's not just that God has high expectations of you but that you freely accept those expectations, covenant to meet them. They become the bare minimum, yet they're impossible to uphold perfectly. So you're doomed for failure. Renewing the covenants should only make the feeling of inadequacy worse. But you're presented at the veil regardless, and just by showing tokens of your effort, God accepts you, takes you into His presence, and it's quiet and peaceful. I bet plenty of people have felt unworthy during the covenants part of the endowment, even people worthy to be there and sincerely trying. But I*

*doubt any of them felt unworthy in the celestial room.”*

This dissertation has presented an account of the intercourse of various kinds of bodies and signs. Individual bodies, spirit bodies, proxied bodies, social bodies, gendered and sexed bodies, shared bodies, the body of Christ, the body of the Church. Temple worship is, at its core, a lesson in divine signaling. Participants learn how to communicate with heavenly beings, what to indicate about themselves, their lives, and their families in order to obtain, collectively and individually, the presence of God and their eternal kin. But initiation into this semiotic repertoire is also socialization into a new code, one that transcends and transgresses the temple walls, out into the world of day-to-day Mormon life and worship. This extra-temple temple code is integral to the temple itself; it completes a semiotic and interactive circuit through which the holiness of the temple is established and enacted on both sides of the sanctuary walls. The rest of the story told here has been about the interaction and intersection of other, multiple bodies: those caught up in the ecclesiastical structure of the LDS Church and affected by its authority; those implicated in and encoded by Mormon discourse on gender and sex, procreation and priesthood, omnipresent gods and invisible goddesses; and those drawn into complex web of Mormon kinship, the mutuality of being constituted by Mormonism in its fullest expression.

What the two accounts above indicate is the degree to which the Mormon sacred-to-profane continuum is manifested not just in relations of shared, ecclesiastical, and social bodies but on singular bodies. The congruence between the two experiences is made clearest through the metonymous link between the garment and the veil. Each represents the other, not just in my reading, but explicitly so. Both share symbolic markings that typify the other. The garment is a veil, and the veil is a garment. The relief, the enclosure, the sense of divine protection experienced in each account is palpable, emotionally marked, compelling, and thoroughly

embodied. The parallels implicate features of the rites not disclosable here, but recognizable to the endowed. The body, clothed in the priesthood garment, is a holy body, set a part from an unclothed (unprotected, uncovenanted) body. The body becomes itself a sign, a representation of you that is you, and will more fully become you in the resurrection, when spirit and body become inseparable, a unified whole, wherein the quality of your spiritual self is made manifest (indeed, cannot be hidden) in the kind of body you have/are. Celestial persons are celestial bodies and dwell in a celestial kingdom, the complete collapse of spirit, matter, and space.

### **An Argument?**

The introduction of new ethnographic data and analysis in what was meant to be the conclusion of the chapter raises the question: what kind of conclusion is this? A related question might be, what, if anything, is the central argument of this dissertation? Does it tell us something about the nature of secrecy? Of ritual or gender construction? Of kinship? Does it tell us something about what religion is and how it works? Of course I have drawn several conclusions about Mormonism, not the least of which is my claim that Mormonism is, in the fullest sense, not so much a religion as it is a kinship system. Mormons do not just make kin; it is the sum total of everything they do. It is the ritual culmination of their liturgy, beginning with the naming of newborn children by priesthood authorities, bringing those children into the kingdom and body of Christ via baptism and the reception of the Holy Ghost, initiation into priesthood quorums for males, channeling them into the temple and, once there, directing them first into direct communion with God, admission into His presence, and eventually and ultimately into a sealing room where they are placed under the seal of the temple in an eternally enduring covenant relationship of unity, fidelity, and endless posterity. All of the sacramental energy of Mormonism, within and without the temple, is focused into the forging of these kinship bonds,

into inviting or capturing or enclosing others into these units, into uniting the whole of humanity into a single grand kinship unit and network that both transcends this world and transforms it into the eternal world.

Further, I have argued for the particular and vital role played by the reflexive metadiscourse of the secret/sacred in both constituting and construing the liturgical forms and patterns of authority and power through which sacramental kinship is enacted and constructed. On the one hand, the continuum or gradient of sacred-to-profane, the gravitational force of holiness, pulls toward the center of the temple and the apex of its ceremonies. This continuum aligns, not just metaphysically but semiotically and interactionally with the vectors of priestly authority and hierarchy (all male). This is accomplished largely by virtue of the metadiscourse, the patterned norms of talking about, not talking about, talking around, and talking about not talking about the temple in profane or mundane settings. The public secrets, the structured silences, the coded signaling surrounding the liturgical machinery of temple rites (themselves comprised of a separate repertoire of secrets, silences, and coded signaling) not only generates the holiness drawn into and channeled out from the temple but superimposes it onto ecclesiastical priesthood structures, and accomplishes this alignment through virtually every semiotic encounter involving the temple.

By contrast, there is another discursive parallel to the holiness gradient of the temple, enacted through iconically isomorphic patterns of unmentionability, to norms of femininity and notions of the divine feminine. Yet in this case, the feminine is coded as invisible and inert, rather than potent and authoritative, as in the case of ecclesiastical officials and priestly incumbents. That is, the silence surrounding the temple simultaneously accomplishes two closely related purposes: the elevation of men (via priesthood office) and the subordination of

women (via patterned silence). Both positions, super- and sub-ordination, are then oriented on a dynamic vector pointing and moving men and women inexorably toward the temple, where formal covenants of female subordination to male authority are undertaken, and ceremonies uniting the two oppositional (and opposing) beings (and forces) are ceremonially united, sealed in marriage.

Yet while I argue that Mormonism makes better sense as a kinship structure than as a conventional religion, I am also implying something about the nature of religion, some standard to which Mormonism somehow insufficiently conforms. This suggests not only that Mormonism (which would certainly be described by Mormons not just as a religion but as True Religion) is deficient, but that such a standardized definition of something called religion is possible. To argue for a definition of religion that Mormonism fails to meet is to insult not just my ethnographic community but my natal religious tradition. Beyond that, any serious attempt to articulate a universal, cross-cultural definition of religion is well beyond the imaginative or theoretical purview of this dissertation, and likely a fool's errand to boot. Instead, I propose that anthropologists engaged in describing and theorizing religion consider the implications of conceiving and framing religion in primarily semiotic terms.

### **Definition: A Longstanding Enterprise**

Among the tangible legacies of more than a century of social scientific study of religion is a veritable felled forest of papers, books, articles, and essays devoted to the task of delineating what exactly the word “religion” refers to. Attempts to create a universal—and useful—definition of *religion* are as varied as they are abundant. In the time since Marx described religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world... the opium of the people” (1844, [53-54 in Tucker]), anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, cognitive

scientists and social theorists have weighed in on the question: what is *religion*? Edward Tylor defined it simply as “the belief in Spiritual Beings” (1871, 424), while Emile Durkheim furnished the perhaps slightly more descriptively rigorous “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (1915 [2001], 46). Max Weber, by contrast, tended to avoid general definitions, preferring instead to focus on “the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action,” on those forms and behaviors motivated by religion but ultimately “oriented to this world” (1922, 1).

More recently, Talal Asad’s (1993) influential critique of Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion as a “cultural system” introduced a new analytical rigor into the discussion. “Geertz’s treatment of religious belief,” argues Asad, “which lies at the core of his conception of religion, is a modern, privatized Christian one,” in that “it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world” (see also Masuzawa 2005). I am rather more partial to Geertz’s less well-known, and less comprehensively detailed description of religion as something that “places proximate acts in ultimate contexts.” When bracketed off from Geertz’s otherwise sustained focus on beliefs, ideas, truths, and interiorized personal states, such an approach furnishes a useful point of entry into the explicitly semiotic terrain on which anything like a general, heuristically useful social scientific definition of *religion* must be grounded.

Other recent theorists have also engaged, to varying degrees, the semiotic nature of the human behaviors typically denoted by the abstract noun “religion” and its derivative forms. Bruce Lincoln departs from Geertz’s focus on mood, belief, disposition, etc., in favor of a discourse centered approach. He describes (2003) religious discourse as concerning that which “transcend[s] the human, temporal, and contingent” and ascribing similarly transcendent status

to itself. Even bracketing the substantive elements of this description, Lincoln's emphasis on discourse is an important innovation. Paul Johnson (2007) follows Lincoln, drawing in tandem from Martin Riesebrodt's "referential legitimations," to describe religion as "processual," as a repertoire of discursive practices and framings which have the effect of sacralizing—of imparting "transcendent, noncontingent, immutable" status (257-58).

In a similar theoretical vein, Stanley Tambiah focuses his definitional work on "acts of symbolic communication" which seek to effect the realization of "a special awareness of the transcendent" (1990, 6). More recently, Lyle Steadman and Craig Palmer (2008) have outlined a detailed natural-selection argument for the evolution of religion, defined simply as "certain talk about supernaturals" (8), which they describe as the only distinctively religious human activity: "The communicated acceptance of a supernatural claim... of another person's claim as true that cannot be shown to be true by the senses" (16). In addition to focusing on a key semiotic feature of religious activity, this approach introduces another important layer into the equation—the socio-hierarchical dimension implicit in the signaled acceptance by some interlocutor-agents of privileged, salient, and transcendent claims made by or on behalf of others.

Building upon these theoretical developments, I propose a heuristic model or framing of religious phenonema that focuses on their semiotic constitution. Both Johnson and Lincoln lay out definitions that sufficiently draw content boundaries around the kinds of activity potentially isomorphic with the term to retain referential rigor, but are also processual and frame-oriented enough to permit the sacred/transcendent virtually unlimited shift and elasticity in terms of the kinds of objects, spaces, persons, texts, words, utterances, etc., to which such notions can apply in a given semiotic context. Steadman and Palmer add an important social-relational dimension by focusing on the acceptance by some cultural actors of exclusive claims made by others.

I suggest that we begin with the constitution of the Sacred itself. As opposed to the “supernatural” (what Steadman and Palmer describe as claims whose truth cannot be verified via the natural senses), the Sacred, to paraphrase Durkheim, denotes some portion of the social world marked, circumscribed, set aside, separated from the everyday and mundane sphere of human activity, with that separateness enforced through taboos, rules, prohibitions, and demands governing social actors. The conferral or constitution of sacred status upon some socially salient thing (person, object, relic, text, etc.) and its acknowledgment and social enforceability as such within a semiotic community is where religious activity begins. Theorists of the Sacred, from Durkheim to Lincoln and Johnson, have raised and rigorously considered the question of whether or not certain kinds of objects are more intrinsically or easily subjected to sacralization or transcendentalization. For the purposes of this working model, it is sufficient to note that human sociality universally involves such sacralizing phenomena and that this sacred/non-sacred partitioning of the social world forms the foundation of all religious activity. It is also important to distinguish the separating of the sacred from the ordinary, on the one hand, from other kinds of partitioning or marking off that do not involve the sacred (like state secrets, legal confidentiality, electronic encryption, etc).

From there, any consideration of religion in semiotic terms will build on the observation that some exclusive or privileged status relative to the sacred sphere is claimed in a socially legible way by or on behalf of certain—but not other—social actors. The claims regarding the privileged relationship of some actors, as compared to the wider community membership, must circulate in at least semi-public form. Even if their addressivity is limited to a specific, defined subset of persons, their meaning should be legible. Note that the question here is not the *actual* privileged or exclusive access to the sacred, but only the publicly circulating, semiotically

constituted *claims* of such. The claims might not be made by the actual privileged actors they denote, but instead be made on their behalf by some other agent, including other persons or even the sacred things themselves (i.e. a scriptural text which describes the prophet who reveals it to the world). It is also presumed that the majority of the “public” to which the claims are addressed, implicitly or explicitly, acknowledges at least the fact of their existence, is aware that the claims are being made and that others share that awareness. For purposes of clarity, I will refer to these first two, entangled phenomena (the setting apart of some portion of reality as sacred, and the ascribing of a privileged relationship with the sacred to certain persons but not to others) as Conditions 1 and 2.

The third condition for the social, semiotic constitution of what is described here as *religion* (again, presuming the presence of Conditions 1 and 2) is the publicly legible signaling of assent by some social actors to the claims of sacral privilege described under Condition 2. Again, no theoretical significance is extended here to the question of whether or not the communicative acts in question are sincere, i.e. accurately reflect the state of mind of those who deploy them. All that matters is that some members of a semiotic community *signal* in a publicly or semi-publicly legible manner formal acceptance of the claims of privileged access to the sacred for some other community members, and that, presumably, the process of the former (Condition 3) is socially and semiotically guided, circumscribed, outlined, or diagrammed by the latter (Condition 2).

This three-phase approach to thinking about or analytically approaching religion in expressly semiotic terms can be summarized in the following manner: 1) the setting apart and maintenance of some defined portion of the social domain as *sacred*; 2) the publicly circulating claim of privileged position vis a vis the *sacred* on behalf of certain members of the community;

and 3) the similarly public, legible signaling of acceptance by some social actors of the claims outlined under the terms of Condition 2.

The emphasis on semiotic process, on the successful deployment of publicly legible signs that necessarily implicate social relationships, coupled with an explicit focus on the *sacred*, brackets off several of the elements that have historically rendered such definitional work problematic. Questions of gods, spirits, myths, relics, written texts, specific rites, beliefs, states of mind, moods, dispositions, sincerity, fraud, reality, unreality, natural, supernatural, piety, or legitimacy—though any of these elements *might* be relevant to some particular instantiation of “religion” thus defined—are not, of necessity, relevant to this definitional framing. Yet it is difficult to imagine a human activity recognized by participants and/or observers as religious (as opposed to merely transcendent, spiritual, magic, strange, or some such) in nature that would not fit within the descriptive mileage of this articulation.

The three conditions outlined here warrant much fuller explication, well beyond even the scope of this section of my concluding chapter, which seeks largely to lay a theoretical groundwork. At the outset, one main feature should be explicitly underscored. The approach outlined here does not concern the *facts* of sacrality, of social privilege with respect to the sacred, or of social acceptance of that privilege. Analytic attention here is fixed exclusively instead on the realm of semiotic intercourse, rather than social facts *qua* facts. It is an argument about sign relations, about communicative acts, about social legibility.

Condition 3, for example, concerns not the actual acceptance by some social actors of claims of sacral privilege made on behalf of others, but rather only the communicative acts—the deployment and circulation of signs—that are designed to signal, in alignment with established and shared patterns of semiotic interaction, assent to some other similarly communicated signals.

The semiotic phenomena denoted under Condition 3, while themselves constitutive of *religion* as defined here, also depend upon and presuppose the layered sets of sign relations defined under Conditions 1 and 2. In the cases of Conditions 2 and 3—the complex sign and meta-sign relations which diagram a positioning of exclusive privilege between some social actors and sacred entities as well as the signaled acceptance by some other agents of that privilege—the semiotic nature of affairs is fairly self evident. Condition 1—*the Sacred* as a primarily semiotic field of social life—is the most difficult to work through. What exactly is *the Sacred* and how is it constituted, negotiated, reinforced, altered, and shared semiotically? The foundation for Condition 1 is thoroughly Durkheimian, and it is to the great sociologist that we first turn for potential answers.

### **Durkheim and the Ambiguity of the Sacred**

Among theorists of religion whose work has emphasized the Sacred, Durkheim's treatment in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* stands out for its richness, creativity, and sophistication (if not its contested reception). At its core, *Elementary Forms* is an extended, ethnographically grounded argument about the social nature of the Sacred. The social-evolutionary framework *EF* presumes—with the then existing Western academic understandings of Australian Aboriginal “totemic” religious forms serving as the model of nearly vanished human past—framed Durkheim's scientific pursuit of discovering the essential features of our shared social nature as human beings within those universal “permanent elements that constitute something eternal and human in religion” embodied in their most simple and enduring form (6).

The Sacred, in some sense, is what happens when human sociality, in its most uncomplicated and tenuous form, mingles with the rest of the existing world. The Sacred is something which we, as social beings, impart on the empirical world; and our consequent shared

experience of our world as populated with certain sacred entities or spheres enhances and concretizes the unity that first made such renderings possible. The Sacred becomes a kind of ur-symbol—the means by which human sociality represents itself *to itself*—a sign that makes other signs possible. If *religion*, in Durkheim’s vision, comprises those features of human behavior, cognition, and interaction that relate in some form to “sacred things,” then religion also implies or presupposes a shared semiotic fabric which marks and unmarks representations of things in the universe in a manner that divides the knowable and representable world into two fundamental categories: the Sacred and the Profane.

Religion, of course does more than that, in that, in addition to articulating with representations of the Sacred, it must also constitute or reinforce moral solidarity and community. The enduring vitality, malleability, adaptability, and variability of religious forms flow, for Durkheim, from the nature of human cognition: “The categories of human thought,” he famously wrote, “are made, unmade, and remade incessantly” (1915, 16). But Cartesian or Kantian categories of thought are cultural and historical artifacts, products of specific social and linguistic contexts, “far from being inherent to human nature in general” (14). At its core, all human cognition and categorical distinctions draw their rigor from a single, fundamental, first opposition between the Profane and the Sacred. Human experience draws from religion not just the content of our knowledge, but “the form in which this knowledge is elaborated.” The sacred/profane binary is the “solid frame[]” which “encloses” human thought and from which all secondary thought processes are derivative.

The basic categories of thought are “born in religion and of religion” (11). Religion, in some sense, is simply a useful frame to “think with,” to paraphrase another famous French theorist of religious thinking. The categories are “social things,” “collective representations.”

Because of their social nature, they can only extend their reach “by convention,” and yet the social origin of these enduring forms nevertheless “suggests...that they have some basis in the nature of things” (20). Society and religion, as humanly universal as they are mutually constituting, are the products of this primal cognitive binary, remapping the experienced world and reshaping social relations in the process. An essential and defining feature of human thought colonizes the empirical world and acquires socio-historical durability by establishing enduring patterns of sociality grounded in collective experience, shared readings of the universe, and moral community.

### **Mormonism and the Secret/Sacred**

It is doubtful that Durkheim would accept my semiotic model as a universal definition of religion, notwithstanding its rather obvious, if partial, derivation from his thought. And in some sense I do not think he or anyone should accept it. It is useful only insofar as it is, well, useful—as it provides heuristic or analytical clarity to students of religion. Students, because probably few religious people would see much sense in it either. The only substantive features of the model are the sacred/profane binary and authority/hierarchy. To the extent that it has some theoretical usefulness, and I think it probably does, I would strongly hope to see other theorists and students of religion engage with it, apply it in their fields (and field sites).

Returning to two questions recently raised: how is the Sacred semiotically constituted? and, is Mormonism a religion? It turns out the two are rather relevant to each other. If Mormonism is, in the substantive sense, more of a kinship system than it is whatever I imagined religion to be, it is clearly a religion according to the definition outlined above (and by any number of other standards as well). It also manifestly has something to say about how the Sacred is constituted and enacted through semiotic processes. Indeed, those features of Mormonism

presented in the body chapters of this dissertation read like a case study in this semiotic model of religion. Not only is it clear how semiotic processes and encounters, at all levels of scale, can be involved in making the sacred and setting it apart from the ordinary, but the semiotic processes also entail the circulation of claims of privileged access to and relationships with the sacred domain (priesthood authority as temple gatekeeper) as well as the discursive means for signaling assent to those claims. Because the definition is semiotic and largely non-substantive, different religious formations can engage in wildly different kinds of specific activities and do or accomplish very different things. Mormons make kinship, and extend it forward and backward in time and project it into the eternal world.

#### **A Note on Potential Future Research**

In the end, this concluding chapter has argued not just for the viability of a universal, heuristic, and expressly semiotic definition of religion but that Mormonism can tell us something about the nature of religion. This final section will suggest that Mormonism also has something to say in the way of problematizing certain orthodoxies in the social scientific study of modern religion and narratives of modernity. Whatever its genealogical origins in Aristotelian philosophy, early modern political theory, the rise of the liberal polity, or Marx's analysis of capitalist social forms, the Secularization Thesis that has come to dominate social scientific discourse was most explicitly and compellingly articulated by Max Weber (1905). Most basically, the Thesis argues that secular modernity consists in three processes: 1) the increased structural differentiation of the social world, entailing the separation of the religious from politics, economics, science, etc.; 2) the retreat of religion into the private sphere; 3) and the overall decline in the significance and influence of religious forms and systems of thought known as *disenchantment*. These three, taken together, lead to increased *rationalization*, both

the rational pursuit by individuals of economic self-interest as well as the less purposive-agent-centered processes of bureaucratization, standardization, regularization, accounting logic, and so forth. Unlike Marx, who saw primarily economic relations and interests underlying religion, Weber argues that particular religious forms (especially Puritan strands of Calvinism) fostered capitalism by carrying the asceticism of the monastery out into the everyday world of work, economic transactions, and social relations (181).

Notwithstanding its demonstrable impact on sociological, historical, philosophical, and political approaches to modern religion, the Weberian synthesis is problematic not only for its inability to adequately account for the growth and proliferation of distinctively political forms of religion globally of late (which, as it happens, signaled that history is still ongoing) but also for its roots in the privileging of Protestant social reality against the ritual, formulaic, and overtly political excesses of European Catholicism. Here is where Mormonism begins to challenge Weber's paradigm. The transformation of pioneer-era Mormonism into the conservative, hyper-patriotic, operationally consolidated, capitalized, excessively corporate modern LDS Church comports nicely with Weber's routinization thesis. Yet the same story problematizes the Weberian secularization synthesis in that rationalization and social differentiation have, at least to date, accompanied a consistent if not augmented and retrenched zeal for expressly religious and highly spiritualized praxes. The fact that the religious forms, expressions, and beliefs conform to the discursive norms which regulate the boundaries of properly modern religion (the belief/action distinction, the return to metaphysical dualism) does not diminish the fact that signs of widespread Mormon disenchantment are nowhere to be found.

Thus while Mormonism in many ways is the quintessential example of rationalized Christianity, of Church *qua* multinational corporation, the transformation from Burnt-Over-

District sect to independently sovereign pioneer kingdom to a proper church complete with balance sheets and bank accounts and investment holdings has not entailed the dilution of charismatic spirituality prophesied by Weber. Indeed, nothing could be more routinized than the building of temples and the conducting of their ceremonial rites, yet for most Mormons the temple is the site of spiritual enchantment most fully realized. The LDS Church is something like a Holiness Industrial Complex, and closer attention to its unexpected and radical combination of Protestant-capitalist modernity with the esoteric trappings of charismatic spiritualism, hermetic ritual forms, and “Catholic” ceremonialism should be paid by students of modern religion.

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