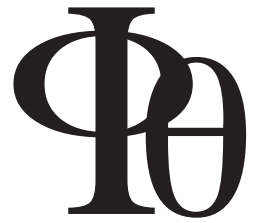




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mormon philosophy  
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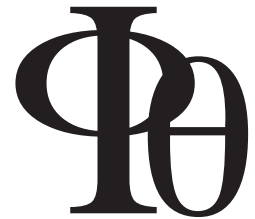
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# THE PROBLEM OF FEMALE SALVATION IN LDS THEOLOGY

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In a talk in the 1991 General Women's Conference, Gordon B. Hinckley read a letter from a 14-year-old girl, which in part said, "a matter has been on my mind a lot lately. In the scriptures I could not seem to find anywhere whether women may enter into the celestial kingdom if they are worthy . . . can women go to the celestial kingdom also?"<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I would like to pose this question in a slightly different way. It is clear enough in LDS teachings that women can in fact enter into the celestial kingdom—as President Hinckley responded to this girl's letter, "of course they may. They are as eligible to enter the celestial kingdom as are men, worthiness being the determining factor for both."<sup>2</sup> The question which interests me, however, is not that of *whether* women can get into heaven, but what they might be doing there. If gender is indeed an eternal aspect of human identity, what it means to be in the celestial kingdom might well be something different for women than it is for men. While at first glance LDS teachings might appear to grant an exaltation to women that is comparable to that granted to men, a closer look raises some difficult questions.

The meaning of "salvation" is already a complex issue, one much discussed and debated in traditional Christian theology, and the LDS version of it, which posits the existence of different levels of salvation rather than making it a binary yes-no question, complicates the discussion even further. There are a number of angles from which one might come at this, but here I wish to focus on two particular issues. Theologians sometimes make a distinction between salvation "from" (what is it that we are rescued or delivered from?) and salvation "for" (what is the end purpose of salvation? where is it taking us?) I would like to spend some time on both of these, looking at them in the context of gender issues. I will first discuss the LDS view of the fall, and the meaning of redemption from the fall, and then go on to examine the LDS notion of exaltation.

## Redemption and the Fall

I begin, then, with the doctrine of the fall. The first and perhaps most obvious point to make in discussing the LDS view of the fall is that it is seen positively—it is not a mistake, a world gone wrong, but a necessary step in

fulfilling God's purposes. Lehi explains that without the fall, Adam and Eve would have remained in a state of unchanging innocence, with no joy or misery, no righteousness or sin. Thus we have the oft-quoted passage: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy."<sup>3</sup>

To say that the fall is a necessary part of the Plan of Salvation, however, is not to deny the reality that it has an adverse effect on the world. While it is commonly asserted that Latter-day Saints do not believe in original sin, it is important to clarify just what is meant by this assertion. I see two specific ideas which are clearly rejected by LDS teachings. First, the Second Article of Faith emphasizes that individuals will not be held personally accountable for Adam's action; and second, the prophet Mormon vehemently rejects the notion that infants are born with an inherited taint which must be removed through baptism. If "original sin," however, refers to the human inclination to sin which came about as a result of the fall, such a notion can be found throughout the Book of Mormon, which teaches that humans have become carnal, sensual, and devilish by nature" and that the "natural man is an enemy to God."<sup>4</sup> We may not be held individually accountable for Adam and Eve's transgression, but we clearly live with the consequences of it.

How do these ideas about both the necessity of the fall, and its consequences, relate to LDS teachings about gender? A traditional Christian view, grounded in the Bible, is that the fall is somehow related to the fact that men are given authority over women, specifically husbands over wives. One of the curses laid on Eve is that "thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee."<sup>5</sup> The author of 1 Timothy appeals to the story of the fall to explain why a woman should not "usurp authority over the man: for "Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression."<sup>6</sup> The Eden story has often been cited in the history of Christian thought both as evidence of women's weaker nature, and as justification for male domination.

It is worth noting, however, that these kinds of arguments have become far less common in contemporary Christian theology. These days the Eden story is much less likely to be read literally, but is instead often viewed as a myth which expresses something basic about the human condition. From this perspective, the doctrine of original sin does not point to some kind of inherited guilt, but is an expression of the way in which we find ourselves enmeshed in a world of sin prior to conscious choice.<sup>7</sup> A striking aspect of such contemporary approaches to the Eden story is that the role of Eve is rarely mentioned. The fall is interpreted as conveying something about human nature generally, not about differences between males and females. The curse laid on Eve in Genesis 3:16, "thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee," tends to be read descriptively—as a condition brought about by the fall—rather than prescriptively, as an ideal to which we should aspire.<sup>8</sup> And the doctrine of original sin has actually been used in the service of feminist theology, as feminist thinkers have pointed to the idea of a pathology which is passed down through the generations and warps our worldview to describe the problem of male domination. As Rosemary Radford Ruether puts it, "We are all products of the

original sin of sexism.”<sup>9</sup> In this way of thinking, Adam’s ruling over Eve is not a relation to be idealized or imitated, but a sinful distortion of relation to be overcome.

What is the LDS perspective on this? The idea of the curse of Eve appears in some nineteenth-century century Mormon writings, but it is not a notion that one is likely to find in current LDS discourse.<sup>10</sup> When Eve is mentioned, she is generally praised for making a difficult but courageous decision, as in this comment from Dallin H. Oaks: “Some Christians condemn Eve for her act, concluding that she and her daughters are somehow flawed by it. Not the Latter-day Saints! Informed by revelation, we celebrate Eve’s act and honor her wisdom and courage in the great episode called the Fall.”<sup>11</sup>

However, while the notion of the curse of Eve seems to have faded, the model of gender hierarchy described in Genesis 3:16 continues to inform LDS views of gender—the 1995 Proclamation on the Family, for example, uses the term “preside” to describe the male role. Talks in General Conference unequivocally state that the father is the head of the family.<sup>12</sup> This raises some difficult questions. If Eve in fact made the right decision, one for which she should be honored, why is she placed in subjection to her husband because of it? And if female subordination is in fact the result of Eve’s decision, how can this be reconciled with the Second Article of Faith? Is it possible that while men are not punished for Adam’s transgression, women nonetheless are punished for Eve’s?

One way of making sense of these apparent tensions is to follow the path taken by many feminist theologians working within traditional Christianity and interpret gender hierarchy as an aspect of the fallen world. I have already noted that the LDS rejection of a traditional understanding of original sin does not preclude a belief that human nature is fallen, and the Second Article of Faith does not state that we escape the consequences of the decision of our first parents—only that we will not be held individually culpable for their choices. Eve’s subordinate position, then, might simply be interpreted as an aspect of mortality brought about by the fall. In the post-Eden existence, the ground brings forth thorns and thistles, Adam must eat bread by the sweat of his brow, women will bring forth children in sorrow, and men will rule over women. This is not a description of an ideal existence; rather, it is the harsh nature of mortality—an existence which Lehi explains has the potential to bring about both misery and joy.<sup>13</sup>

This kind of approach has been articulated by a number of LDS thinkers, who link Eve’s subjection to Adam with existence in a telestial realm.<sup>14</sup> This line of interpretation therefore posits a hope that ultimately such inequities of gender will be overcome. But while this interpretation may be appealing to those troubled by gender hierarchy, I see it as being in tension with other scriptural teachings. It is true that the fact that Adam ruling over Eve is a post-fall curse certainly suggests that this was not the situation in Eden. However, it is not clear that men and women were on equal footing even before Eve took the fruit.

In the second version of the creation story—the one which is usually cited in LDS discussion of gender—men and women are not created simultaneously; Eve is created from Adam’s rib. The fact that she comes from the rib is sometimes cited in LDS discourse as indicating a position of partnership and equality.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the term “helpmeet” is often interpreted as pointing to some sort of basic equivalency, as Eve could not serve as a “helpmeet” for Adam unless she were on his level. While these may be plausible interpretations of these particular elements of the narrative, they overlook something more basic about the story. Eve is created for Adam, and not vice versa. And this has significant implications for gender relations, as can be seen in the way this model is used in the New Testament. According to 1 Corinthians, the discrepancy in which the man is the glory of God while the woman is the glory of man is not linked to Eve’s transgression, but to the fact that Eve was created both *from* Adam, and *for* him.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, 1 Timothy links female subjection not only to Eve being deceived, but also to the order of creation, explaining that “For Adam was first formed, then Eve.”<sup>17</sup> From the perspective of these authors, at least, gender inequality cannot be entirely explained by the fall.

Latter-day Saints might not feel inextricably bound to such statements, given that the Bible can be trumped by modern revelation, but I would argue that specific LDS teachings also pose obstacles to the notion that male rule is limited to this telestial sphere. The problem lies in the ambiguity about patriarchy: is it a product of the fall, or is it God’s eternal system of government? It is far from clear that the model of gender relations laid out in Genesis 3:16 is simply an aspect of mortality, rather than a divinely ordained model of gender relations. Spencer W. Kimball famously suggested that the term “rule” should be changed to “preside.” This of course raises the question of just what “preside” means, and whether it in fact differs substantively from “rule.” But setting that issue aside for the moment, what is notable here is that President Kimball describes men presiding as an ideal; it is what a “righteous husband” does.<sup>18</sup> In other words, it is not described as a curse.<sup>19</sup>

In looking at contemporary LDS teachings regarding the fall and gender relations, I am struck by the extent to which they are treated as separate issues. The fall is rarely discussed in any kind of gendered way; Adam and Eve are usually described as a unit, and the emphasis is on the necessity of the fall in the plan of salvation.<sup>20</sup> In the most recent Gospel Doctrine manual for the Old Testament, for example, the lesson on the fall focuses on its effects and how these effects are overcome by the atonement. Only at the very end—not as part of the main lesson, but under a section titled “Additional Teaching Ideas”—can one see a brief commentary on the “he shall rule over thee” phrase, which cites President Kimball’s statement changing “rule” to “preside,” and includes a quote from M. Russell Ballard emphasizing that this should be done in a loving and Christlike way.<sup>21</sup> But the question is left open as to what—if any—connection there might be between the fall and its consequences, and the role of men as leaders.



This approach, in which patriarchy and the Eden story are de-coupled from one other, is typical of the way these issues are currently framed in LDS discussion.<sup>22</sup> Why do men preside? The Proclamation on the Family simply states that it is “by divine design.” Men have the role of leading their families because this is the way that God has set it up. One is unlikely to hear an appeal to the Genesis narrative as theological justification for this system; rather, the prevailing model appears to be that of complementary gender roles. Men preside because that is the role assigned them by God, while women’s primary responsibility is that of the nurture of children. The reasons cited for this system are often practical ones, related to questions of how a family best functions.<sup>23</sup> This is a quite different theological model than one in which gender hierarchy is a curse and a consequence for disobedience.

There are several significant elements related to gender, then, in the LDS understanding of the fall. First, the fall is good and necessary, but it brings negative consequences into the world. Second, Adam and Eve are both cursed (or in other words, subject to particular mortal consequences) because of the fall, and arguably one aspect of living in a fallen world is that of male domination. And third, the model of gender relations in which men preside is of divine origin. How do these pieces fit together? I propose that many current LDS models deal with the seeming contradictions by distinguishing between what I might refer to as “fallen” patriarchy and “godly” patriarchy.

A patriarchal system which involves male tyranny is clearly condemned in LDS teachings. Men are exhorted to preside not in a domineering and authoritarian way, but in a spirit of love and service. Presiding, it is emphasized, does not mean unilateral decision-making. For example, L. Tom Perry speaks of the father as the “head in his family” and of fatherhood as leadership. But he also comments that “there is not a president or a vice president in a family. The couple works together eternally for the good of the family.”<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on egalitarian relations can also be seen in the Proclamation on the Family, which describes men and women as “equal partners.” Relationships involving unrighteous dominion, in which the husband demands obedience based on his role as the priesthood-holder, have been repeatedly condemned by LDS leaders.<sup>25</sup> Contemporary LDS authorities have also stated that cultural traditions of male oppression are antithetical to the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

However, as I noted earlier, patriarchy itself is said to be of divine origin. The patriarchal order is described as instituted by God, and as something which will continue throughout the eternities.<sup>27</sup> It is not patriarchy per se then, but only abuses of patriarchy, that are problematic. Such abuses might be described as a consequence of the fall, as an aspect of the suffering, challenges, and limitations of mortality. In this there is some resonance between LDS thought and some historical Christian formulations of gender relations, in which the ideal relationship in Eden already involved male governance, but the fall introduced an element of distortion into this ideal relationship.<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, in this model redemption does not involve redemption from patriarchy itself, but only from a fallen version of it.<sup>29</sup> What are the characteristics

of a non-fallen version of patriarchy? The most oft-cited scriptural passages in this context come from D&C 121, which emphasizes persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned as the necessary elements of righteous authority, and speaks of a dominion which flows “without compulsory means.”<sup>30</sup> One way of formulating the contemporary LDS interpretation of the fall and gender relations might then be to explain the curse found in Genesis 3:16 as that of Adam “ruling” in a tyrannical way, as is characteristic of a fallen world, instead of “presiding” along the lines of D&C 121.

In sum, I argue that in an LDS context, the meaning of redemption from the fall with relation to gender includes redemption from a mortal world in which relations are distorted by sin, including oppressive forms of patriarchy. However, given LDS teachings about the patriarchal order as divinely instituted and eternal, I see some serious challenges to interpretations which argue that male governance is limited to this fallen world, or posit an eschatological end to patriarchy. This leads me to the second question which I wish to explore—the question of salvation “for.” What does LDS theology have to say about the role of women in the world to come, and the possibility of female exaltation—particularly if the patriarchal order is in fact eternal?

### Exaltation

What does the LDS notion of “exaltation” involve? The most extensive description in the scriptures is in D&C 76, which relates Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon’s vision of the next life. An examination of this text leaves one feeling rather sympathetic to the concern raised by the 14-year-old who wrote President Hinckley wondering whether women could enter the celestial kingdom. Those in the celestial realm are described as “priests and kings,” specifically “priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek,” and also as “gods, even the sons of God.”<sup>31</sup> Interpreting the scriptural use of male language, and parsing when “men” actually means “men and women” is always a challenge, and given this ambiguity, it is certainly not out of the realm of possibility that here “priests” means “priests and priestesses,” kings means “kings and queens,” and so forth. But the language here seems particularly problematic, especially the comment that celestial beings are priests “after the order of Melchizedek,” given that in other scriptural contexts in which priesthood is involved, “men” is generally interpreted to mean “males.” One might also note that an earlier verse in this same vision uses the phrase “sons and daughters of God” to describe the inhabitants of the worlds, making it less plausible the later use of “sons” is meant to be gender-inclusive.<sup>32</sup> At the very least, this text is far from an unambiguous statement that women are included among those who achieve celestial glory.

D&C 76, however, is not the only scriptural source of information about the celestial realm and who will qualify to be there. The most oft-cited evidence for the presence of women not just in the celestial kingdom, but in the highest realm of it, is D&C 131, which explains that “in order to obtain the highest, a man

must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.]”<sup>33</sup> Undeniably, men cannot get to the top level of heaven without women. However, it is important to note that saying that men need women to be exalted is not the same as saying that the women themselves can be exalted.<sup>34</sup>

Somewhat ironically, the strongest scriptural evidence for female exaltation is located in the revelation which poses some of the most difficult issues for feminists, namely D&C 132. According to this section,

if a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise . . . they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things . . . then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them.<sup>35</sup>

These verses explicitly speak of exaltation as something which happens to men and women together, promising glory and even godhood to married couples. However, I now return to my initial question, which is not whether women can get into heaven, but what they are doing there. Put another way, even given this teaching that men and women achieve exaltation together, does this mean the same thing for women that it does for men? The Proclamation on the Family states that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” In this context, I would particularly note that gender is described as not only an aspect of eternal identity, but also of eternal *purpose*. This points to the very real possibility that even if they are exalted together, women and men nonetheless have different roles in eternity.

What might such differences look like? I would argue that whatever else they might involve, these gender roles are fundamentally bound up with issues of agency. The context described above, one in which godly patriarchy is posited as the eternal ideal, has bearing on the relative agency of both women and men. As already mentioned, in LDS theology men and women are exalted not individually, but in a relationship—specifically, in a patriarchal relationship. Though contemporary descriptions of this relationship use softer language than “rule” and “obey,” and emphasize egalitarianism, the basic model remains in which men are given some kind of leadership role. The issue of what terms best describe the nature of this relationship is a matter of some debate, but regardless, it is clear that women stand in a different relation to their husbands than do husbands to their wives. The man is expected to lead in righteousness, but he is the one to lead. In the 1991 talk by Gordon B. Hinckley cited earlier, he explains, “the husband shall have a governing responsibility to provide for, to protect, to strengthen and shield the wife.”<sup>36</sup> Note the term “governing responsibility.” Or, from James E. Faust, “Holding the priesthood does not mean that a man is a

power-broker, or that he sits on a throne, dictating in macho terms, or that he is superior in any way. Rather, he is a leader by authority of example.”<sup>37</sup>

One inevitable element of placing the male in a leadership role is that he has both greater power to determine the nature of the relationship, and greater accountability for it. This has been explicitly stated by some LDS leaders—for example, President Faust commented in a 1988 talk that the “bearer of the priesthood” has the “greater duty” to ensure that commandments are kept, and when things go amiss, he “is generally more blameworthy because he has been entrusted with the great, righteous power to act in the name of God.”<sup>38</sup> Statements along these lines are more difficult to find in recent decades, but implicit acknowledgement that men have greater power to determine the nature of the relationship can be seen in the repeated exhortations to *men* to treat their wives with respect and establish an egalitarian relationship. For example, consider this comment from Elder Richard G. Scott: “The family proclamation states that a husband and wife should be equal partners. I feel assured that every wife in the Church would welcome that opportunity and support it. *Whether it occurs or not depends upon the husband.*”<sup>39</sup> An egalitarian relationship may be the ideal, but genuine equality is already undermined by a structure in which whether such a relationship occurs is contingent on the decision of the husband.

Another important point is that terms such as “agency” or “freedom” are used in different ways in LDS teachings. One sense of freedom, repeatedly emphasized in the Book of Mormon, is a kind of binary freedom—the ability to choose good or evil, life or death. As Lehi explains, we are “free to choose liberty and eternal life . . . or captivity and death.”<sup>40</sup> However, given the fact that the options presented here are “liberty” and “captivity,” there is clearly another kind of freedom involved here, one which is either expanded or narrowed by one’s free decision between eternal life and spiritual death. In the plan of salvation described by LDS teachings, to follow God is to increase one’s opportunities, while to reject God is to limit them; a higher kingdom is desirable because it gives humans more of a chance to develop their divine potential, to progress eternally. This is something different than the ability to freely say yes or no; it is a richer freedom, a creative freedom, the kind of freedom ultimately possessed by God.

In a patriarchal model of gender relations, women are clearly free to say yes or no—they can choose to follow or not follow, to hearken or not hearken, to the presiding authority. In this sense, their agency remains undiminished. It is less clear, however, that they have access to this second kind of freedom. A failure to appreciate this distinction, I argue, is the fundamental problem with Hugh Nibley’s popular interpretation of the relationship between Adam and Eve. According to Nibley, “There is no patriarchy or matriarchy in the Garden; the two supervise each other. Adam is given no arbitrary power; Eve is to heed him only insofar as he obeys their Father—and who decides that? She must keep check on him as much as he does on her.”<sup>41</sup> Even if this is an accurate description of LDS teachings (a debatable point), this does not actually describe a relationship of equal partners, for this set-up still places Eve and Adam in fundamentally different positions. The ability to reject where someone is leading

you—as Brigham Young famously put it, no woman is obligated to follow her husband to hell<sup>42</sup>—is not the equivalent of having the ability to initiate action on your own.

It might be here argued that Adam is essentially in the same situation, even if one link higher in the chain, in that he is in the same relation to God—his options are to obey, or not to obey. However, I see a basic difference in these two situations, in that obedience to God is in some important ways dissimilar to obedience to other human beings. As mentioned earlier, the choice to follow God is one that enables a richer level of freedom. In a divine-human relationship, far from freedom being curtailed by obedience, it is enriched by it. As Catholic theologian Karl Rahner observes, divine and human freedom are not in competition; God's power is revealed not in overriding the human will and creating obedient automatons, but in grounding and enhancing human agency.<sup>43</sup> This is congruent, I believe, with the LDS teaching that God's work and glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of his children—to enable them ultimately to become like him.

It is in this ultimate aim that the contrast between a requirement that men follow God, and one that women follow men, becomes most clear. Given the LDS emphasis on eternal gender differences, it would make no sense to assert that women follow men in order to eventually become like them. I would also point out that the relation of God to humans is—in LDS teachings, literally—that of a parent to a child. If the relationship of men to God parallels the relationship of women to men, women are placed in a situation in which they are eternally in the role of children. It is for this reason that I see this kind of model as limiting female potential; men's freedom is enhanced as they follow God, but at best, women benefit secondarily from the opportunities afforded to their husbands.

This scenario, however, seems to clash with other LDS teachings which describe women as full moral agents who are accountable for their choices and their lives. How do such teachings fit with the fact that women are placed in a subordinate role in marital relationships, and described as less accountable than their priesthood-holding husbands? It might be helpful here to return to the LDS distinction between salvation and exaltation, in which salvation is bestowed on individuals, but exaltation is available only to couples. As Russell M. Nelson noted in a 2008 conference talk, "In God's eternal plan, salvation is an individual matter; exaltation is a family matter."<sup>44</sup> Given this, I propose that women play an unambiguously agentive role when it comes to working out their own salvation—something which they must individually pursue, and for which they are individually accountable—but are in a different situation when it comes to exaltation, which is achieved in the context of a relationship in which they are the subordinate partner. This, I emphasize, is the case regardless of whether the man exercises his leadership in a "godly" or in a "fallen" way; it is a consequence of the structure of the relationship itself. Here I see a conflict between even the most benevolent form of patriarchy, and full female agency. As a result, the kind

of exaltation available to women appears to be more limited than that which can be achieved by men.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I should at least mention that a giant question mark underlying this issue of female exaltation is that of Heavenly Mother. It is notable that the Proclamation on the Family, which has achieved a kind of quasi-canonical status in the church, is the most official indication that Heavenly Mother even exists. Yet the Proclamation itself demonstrates the ambiguity of her status. In the second paragraph, we learn that each human being “is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents.” Only a few sentences later, it is stated that “in the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped *God as their Eternal Father*.”<sup>45</sup> Note that they are not said to have worshiped their heavenly *parents*; only the Father is equated with God, and is said to be worshiped. Strikingly, this text gives us no reason to think that the Mother should even be referred to as God. The invisibility of the divine feminine, paired with an emphasis on God as Father and teachings on eternal patriarchy, leaves open the unsettling possibility that women’s role in the celestial sphere is one of silence and subordination.

These questions are also closely tied to issues of theological anthropology. In many ways, women remain an enigma in LDS teachings. On the one hand, they, like their brothers, are said to be the literal children of God, and therefore to have divine potential. Yet the God in whose image they are (presumably) created is entirely unknown to us. And they are described as being in some way fundamentally different from men—a point made in the Proclamation, and reinforced by observations about unique female qualities, or elevated descriptions of women as the crowning glory of creation.<sup>46</sup> LDS women are frequently assured that they are valuable, that they are important, that they play a necessary role in the plan of salvation. But there is a difference between being an object which is valued—even highly valued—and being a subject, who has the ability to confer value on others. In a number of texts, particularly the second creation account, it not clear whether the plan of salvation is created for women—or whether women are created for the plan, assigned the task of enabling *men* to achieve their full potential. There can be no doubt that righteous women are promised a glorious reward in the hereafter. But in LDS teachings, the meaning of female exaltation remains disturbingly ambiguous.

*Sheila Taylor recently completed her Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California*

## Notes

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1 Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” *Ensign*, Nov 1991, 97.

2 *Ibid.*

3 2 Nephi 2:25.

4 Alma 42:10; Mosiah 3:19.

5 Genesis 3:16

6 1 Timothy 2:12, 15

7 As Paul Ricoeur comments, “if any one of us initiates evil, inaugurates it . . . each of us also discovers evil, finds it already there, in himself, outside himself, and before himself. For every consciousness which awakens when responsibility is taken, evil is already there” Paul Ricoeur, “Original Sin: A Study in Meaning,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. D. Ihde, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 284. Lutheran theologian Ted Peters similarly explains in his book on sin, “As we grow and come into our own personal consciousness, we wake up to find ourselves already within the state of sin” Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 24.

8 In the entry on the Fall, in the *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, for example, Alice Laffey argues for a reading of the narrative in which the sufferings reflected in the curses “are not punishments sent by God to be borne bravely. On the contrary, humankind should—and has—set about diminishing them. The domination of women by men is the one curse named in Gen 3 that, often unrecognized as evil, continues to prevail” *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard McBrien (HarperSanFrancisco), 1995, 516.

9 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 182. She explains, “sexism is one of these powers and principalities of historical, systemic, social evil that condition our choices as males and females from before our birth.” *Ibid.*

10 See Jolene Edmunds Rockwood, “The Redemption of Eve” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher & Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1987, for examples of nineteenth-century Mormon writings on the curse of Eve.

11 Dallin H. Oaks, “‘The Great Plan of Happiness,’” *Ensign*, Nov 1993, 72. James E. Faust similarly observes, “We all owe a great debt of gratitude to Eve” James E. Faust, “What It Means to Be a Daughter of God,” *Ensign*, Nov 1999, 100.

12 In a 2004 talk on fatherhood, for example, L. Tom Perry has as his first point that “The father is the head in his family” (L. Tom Perry, “Fatherhood, an Eternal Calling,” *Ensign*, May, 2004. Similarly, in the April 2010 Conference, Boyd K. Packer quoted President Joseph F. Smith: “In the home the presiding authority is always vested in the father, and in all home affairs and family matters there is no other authority paramount.” Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (1939), 287, cited by Boyd K. Packer, “The Power of the Priesthood,” General Conference, April 2010.

13 2 Nephi 2:23 explains that prior to the fall, there was neither joy nor misery.

14 Carol Cornwall Madsen is one who take this approach: “Punished for her disobedience in the garden, she is destined to suffer pain and sorrow in childbirth, just as Adam was condemned to work by the sweat of his brow all the days of his life. Eve is further instructed that she must henceforth render obedience to Adam . . . This punishment reflects the change in their conditions, in Mormon terms, from terrestrial to telestial.” Ultimately, then, this condition will be overcome. “It is by the atoning power of Christ that mortal beings can progress beyond the telestial condition imposed on them by the Edenic transgression. It is logical to assume that this atoning power will ultimately restore the equitable relationships between Adam and Eve that existed before the Fall.” Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Mormon Women and the Temple: Toward a New Understanding,” *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher & Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 93.

15 For example, Russell M. Nelson observes, “the rib, coming as it does from the side, seems to denote partnership. The rib signifies neither dominion nor subservience, but a lateral relationship as partners, to work and to live, side by side.” Russell M. Nelson, “Lessons from Eve,” *Ensign*, Nov 1987, 86.

16 1 Corinthians 11:3, 7, 8-9

17 1 Timothy 2:13

18 President Kimball explains, “I have a question about the word rule. It gives the wrong impression. I would prefer to use the word preside because that’s what he does. A righteous husband presides over his wife and family.” “The Blessings and Responsibilities of Womanhood,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1976, 72.

19 One might also note that in LDS temple liturgy, this particular element of the narrative—unlike any of the other curses in the story, such as bringing forth children in sorrow or eating bread by the sweat of one’s brow—is linked to a particular covenant. If this model of gender relations is indeed limited to this telestial realm, this raises the question of why this aspect of the story, unlike other aspects of the fallen world, is something which requires ritual assent.

20 The recent Church publication “True to the Faith,” discusses the effects and the necessity of the Fall, but speaks of Adam and Eve as a unit and does not make any distinction in the way the Fall affects men versus women. One might also note that this approach is consistent with Lehi’s account in the Book of Mormon, which—somewhat intriguingly—mentions that the serpent tempted Eve, but then in the next verse jumps immediately to what happens after “Adam and Eve had partaken of the fruit,” without even mentioning that Eve did it first (2 Nephi 2:18-19).

21 “God has revealed through his prophets that men are to receive the priesthood, become fathers, and with gentleness and pure, unfeigned love they are to lead and nurture their families in righteousness as the Savior leads the Church.” Old Testament Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual, Lesson 4: “Because of My Transgression My Eyes Are Opened.”

22 A glaring exception to this would be the temple liturgy, in which the Eden story plays a central role and Eve’s decision is linked to her subordination to Adam. However, it is notable that despite this, LDS explanations for patriarchy rarely mention the fall.

23 For example, according to Boyd K. Packer, “The priesthood is conferred only upon worthy men in order to conform to our Father’s plan of happiness. With the laws of nature and the revealed word of God working in harmony, it simply works best that way.” Boyd K. Packer, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Ensign*, Nov 1993, 21.

24 L. Tom Perry, “Fatherhood, an Eternal Calling,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 69.



25 Dallin H. Oaks cites President Kimball: “We have heard of men who have said to their wives, ‘I hold the priesthood and you’ve got to do what I say.’ He decisively rejected that abuse of priesthood authority in a marriage, declaring that such a man ‘should not be honored in his priesthood’” (Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church,” *Ensign*, Nov 2005, 24). The *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood* manual also emphasizes this point: “Both husbands and wives are important in the marriage partnership. Some men feel that because they have the priesthood, they are in a position to make all the decisions, but the scriptures tell us this is wrong . . . It is a misuse of the priesthood to “exercise unrighteous dominion.” As priesthood holders, we have a duty to listen to our wives in love and concern. And when we listen, we should not listen as their superiors, for they are partners with us and our equals.” Lesson 13: Counseling with Family Members,” *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood: Basic Manual for Priesthood Holders*, Part A, 93.

26 Gordon B. Hinckley laments that “notwithstanding this preeminence given the creation of woman, she has so frequently through the ages been relegated to a secondary position. She has been put down. She has been denigrated. She has been enslaved. She has been abused.” Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Women in Our Lives,” *Ensign*, Nov 2004, 82–85. According to Dallin H. Oaks, “There are cultures or traditions in some parts of the world that allow men to oppress women, but those abuses must not be carried into the families of the Church of Jesus Christ.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church,” *Liahona*, Nov 2005, 24.

27 According to Russell M. Nelson, for example, “This patriarchal authority has been honored among the people of God in all dispensations. It is of divine origin, and that union, if sealed by proper authority, will continue throughout eternity.” Russell M. Nelson, “Our Sacred Duty to Honor Women,” *Ensign*, May 1999, 38.

28 Rosemary Radford Ruether describes the traditional view: “Even in the original, unfallen creation, woman would have been subordinate and under the domination of man. Normatively and ideally, the woman should have deferred to the man, who represents, in greater fullness than herself, the principle of ‘headship,’ mind or reason. He, in turn, should regard her as representing the part of himself that must be repressed and kept under control by reason to prevent a fall into sin and disorder. According to most traditional Christian theology, this would have been the case even in ‘paradise.’ Within sinful, fallen, historical conditions, however, women’s suppression must be redoubled. Proneness to sin and disorder is no longer potential but actual, and woman is particularly responsible for it. Within history, woman’s subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin” (Ruether, 95).

29 The idea that it is problematic to equate the two can be seen in an observation made by Dallin H. Oaks, who observes that some women who have had negative experiences with priesthood leadership “mistakenly confuse the priesthood with male abuse and become suspicious of any priesthood authority.” But, he points out, “a person who has had a bad experience with a particular electrical appliance should not forego using the power of electricity.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church,” *Ensign*, Nov 2005, 24.

30 D&C 121: 41, 46.

31 D&C 76: 56-8.

32 D&C 76:24 refers to “sons and daughters of God.”

33 D&C 131:2.

34 Another possible source of information on the question of women in the next life is D&C 138, which is Joseph F. Smith’s vision. He names a number of men, but he also sees “our glorious Mother Eve, with many of her faithful daughters who had lived through the ages and worshipped the true and living God” (D&C 138:39). However, this does not tell us more than the already-established fact that women can in fact make it into heaven.

35 D&C 132: 19-20.

36 Hinckley, “Daughters of God.”

37 James E. Faust, “The Highest Place of Honor,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 36.

*Element*

38 Faust, Ibid.

39 Richard G. Scott, “Honor the Priesthood and Use it Well,” *Ensign*, November 2008 (italics mine).

40 2 Nephi 2:26-7.

41 Hugh Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy” (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute). Address originally delivered February 1, 1980, to the annual women's conference at Brigham Young University.

42 “It is not my general practice to counsel the sisters to disobey their husbands, but my counsel is—obey your husbands; and I am sanguine and most emphatic on that subject. But I never counselled a woman to follow her husband to the Devil” (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, 200-01, quoted in “Chapter 23: Understanding the New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage,” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, 163).

43 *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych: (New York : Crossroad), 1978, 31.

44 Russell M. Nelson, “Salvation and Exaltation,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 7–10.

45 Proclamation on the Family (italics mine).

46 In the talk I have been quoting, President Hinckley states that God “created man in His own likeness and image. Then as His final creation, the crowning of His glorious work, He created woman. I like to regard Eve as His masterpiece after all that had gone before, the final work before He rested from His labors” (Hinckley, “Daughters of God”).





BECOMING DIVINE OR *A BECOMING DIVINE*:  
APPROACHING THE DIVINE FEMININE IN  
MORMONISM THROUGH INSIGHTS FROM  
TIBETAN BUDDHISM

SHARON ADAMS  
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*There is not a single Mary anywhere on the globe who is Joseph's wife and  
nothing more . . . .*

Lou Andreas-Salomé  
*Looking Backward*

Introduction

Mormon tradition holds sacred the role of gender in both worship and theology. According to Mormon doctrine, women are created and celebrated in the image of a Mother in Heaven. Due to the uniqueness of this teaching within the Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as the lack of a fully formed approach to the topic within the Mormon faith, there would appear to be value in opening a space for contemplation about the role the divine feminine plays in Mormon life and doctrine. LDS theology has much to offer a feminist philosophy of religion. Mormon doctrine not only includes a Mother in Heaven; it also views Eve as a model of complex moral reasoning, demonstrating the crucial attribute of agency that LDS doctrine ascribes to divine-human relations.

Exploring a feminist theology based on Mormon teachings may be especially significant now as Mormonism has been established throughout the world. An understanding of the teachings related to Mother in Heaven may not only aid LDS practitioners in their worship; it may also contribute to the development of a feminist philosophy of religion that informs western religious traditions and philosophy/metaphysics specifically, as well as the western psyche and culture more generally.

In addressing the topic of a divine feminine within the context of Mormonism, an initial question arises: What does it mean for a woman of the LDS faith to “become divine”? In addressing this question, it will be helpful to note different definitions of the word *becoming*. When used as an adjective, the word becoming describes an object as being suitable, as giving a pleasing effect, or as being attractive in appearance. When a woman appears as a *becoming* divine,

then she exhibits the appealing features which seem suitable for a divine being. However one may also view her becoming divine as a verb, in terms of Aristotelian metaphysics, as a becoming that involves a realization of a potentiality in a movement from a lower level to a higher level of actuality. In relation to a type of apotheosis, this approach is arguably the prototype for becoming divine in the LDS tradition.<sup>1</sup>

In order to articulate a more complex and well-rounded model for female becoming divine within Mormonism, and in an effort to better understand the nature of human potential and reaching toward divinity for both men and women, I turn to a tradition outside of the west, utilizing teachings from Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhist teachings provide insight for an avenue toward becoming divine that is reminiscent of the Aristotelian notion of becoming as progression, yet not according to the notion of progression in the conventional sense of the word. In the Buddhist model there is less of a building toward divinity, and more of a recognition of or a reliance upon the awareness of a divinity within. Incorporating insights from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as they relate to the divine feminine within Mormonism will help bring clarity concerning the human potential, not so much to use a model outside oneself in creating the appearance of *a becoming* divine, but instead to recognize and re-assert the significance of LDS doctrine concerning the divine nature of humankind; that is to recognize the absolute and inherent divinity within.

*Are You My Mother?*

Placing Heavenly Mother Within the Context of Western Theology,  
Philosophy of Religion, and Feminism

*'Where is my mother,' . . . 'I do not see her anywhere. I will go and look for her,' . . . 'I have a mother,' said the baby bird. 'I will find her, I will I will . . . .'*

P. D. Eastman  
*Are You My Mother?*

*. . . very kind mother, I miss you.  
This little child, thinking of Ama, simply can't bear it at all—*

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche  
*Sunshine for a Pauper:  
A Spontaneous Song of Supplication to the Mother-lineage  
Guru of the Great Secret*

In her book *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Grace Jantzen emphasizes the fact that throughout the history of western philosophy of religion and theology, God has been conceived as male. Following Luce Irigaray's text "Divine Woman," Jantzen points out that when women in western religious traditions seek to "become divine" they have no maternal model to emulate. The implications of developing aspects and attributes of a "Great Mother" through

the LDS tradition as a feminist approach to apotheosis within a western context could very well initiate much needed changes in western religious and philosophical traditions that continue to be patriarchal.

How can humans be created in God's image, as stated in the Book of Genesis, and not be like him or her? If there is indeed a Heavenly Mother, then at least as far back as Platonic idealism in the history of western philosophy and metaphysics, it follows that one's earthly mother must be based on some supreme or ideal prototype of heavenly motherhood. Yet, for the most part in mainstream Judaism and Christianity there continues to be resistance to the notion not only of a Heavenly Mother but also of an anthropomorphic conception of God. It follows that an erasure of a Heavenly Mother in the history of Judaism and Christianity coincides with the erasure of embodied divinity.<sup>2</sup>

LDS doctrine is unique in mainstream western religious traditions in acknowledging a Heavenly Mother as a gendered female God as opposed to viewing the divine only in terms of a transcendent God who is beyond gender. Although some feminists in mainstream Christianity have the option of using mother imagery for God, in general their respective traditions hold no authoritative seal for the doctrinal assertion of a female divine or mother God, at least not on par with a father God. Mormonism in contrast provides an ultimate model for human progression for women. It also, and this point is perhaps most important in placing LDS doctrine within the context of historical and contemporary Jewish and Christian traditions, suggests the presence of the mother as she has been denied, forgotten, and repressed in the history of western theology and philosophy of religion.

LDS doctrine on Heavenly parents, God as Father and Mother, refers to the divine in terms of corporeal entities. Eliza R Snow's poem "My Father In Heaven" later used as the lyrics for the Hymn "Oh My Father" references the existence of a Mother in Heaven that connotes a type of anthropomorphic and, as such, a common sense approach for a defense of the existence of a Mother in Heaven. Snow asserts that the appellation Father implicitly assumes there to also be a Mother:

I had learned to call thee Father,  
Thru thy Spirit from on high,  
But until the key of knowledge  
Was restored, I knew not why.  
In the heav'ns are parents single?  
No, the thought makes reason stare!  
Truth is reason; truth eternal  
Tells me I've a mother there.<sup>3</sup>

According to Snow, there exists a divine Mother providing the prototype for an embodiment of the ideal form of an earthly mother. Although the "return of the Mother" inherent in LDS doctrine is significant, it seems not to have created a stir in western theology and philosophy of religion more generally. This is even

as the doctrine of a Heavenly Mother may be one of the more radical offerings LDS doctrine can contribute to western religious and theological traditions, giving solid support for the epithet for members of the Mormon Church as “a strange and peculiar people.”

The implications of the feminine divine in the LDS church have not been fleshed out, literally or figuratively.<sup>4</sup> Currently there remains some ambiguity concerning the nature of the female divine in the form of the Heavenly Mother in LDS doctrine. She is referred to in song and is a figure worthy of veneration, but not of prayer. She is present in the doctrine, but not openly acknowledged in weekly Sunday worship. In contrast, men have access to a certain pathway toward apotheosis in scripture and teachings describing a male divine figure, that is, God the father as well as his son Jesus Christ, to emulate. Becoming like Christ certainly is important for women of the LDS faith as well; it is an aspect of devotion necessary for personal growth and salvation. However, given that Mormon theology holds the view that men and women are spirit children of a Heavenly Father and Mother, and that a man must be married under temple covenant to a woman in order to obtain the highest level of the celestial kingdom, a woman of the LDS faith is likely to wonder at some time in her life how exactly she may attain divine status as a female.

Women of the LDS faith may find direction for becoming divine in the worship the Mormon tradition encourages: reading and reflecting upon sacred scripture, personal and family prayer, paying tithes, fasting for 24 hours once a month, making offerings along with the fast, participating in the church congregation through a calling, focusing on the family, attending church meetings, making and keeping sacred covenants, reaching out to others in service and love through the visiting teaching program as well as in all aspects of her life, and most significantly attempting to become like Christ. A life filled with such activities may bring satisfaction and growth; it may function as the threshold a LDS woman may enter through in her attempts to become divine. I suggest, however, that it is *only* a threshold; it may be necessary, but it is certainly not sufficient for her in becoming divine. She need not only cross over the threshold, utilizing sanctioned forms of worship, devotion, and service, but she must actually *enter into* divinity. Such a prospect may seem unknowable in mortality, but it is nonetheless valuable to explore what this ultimate in divine potentiality may involve in actuality or in embodied form. The teachings on the Heavenly Mother, minimal as they are, still contain much potential for the development of a feminist theology contemporary with LDS worship as well as the feminist movement.

One way to explore the LDS teachings concerning a divine feminine within an historical context is through Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, or ‘retroactive meaningfulness.’ In a manner Harold Bloom may identify as historical *aftering*,<sup>5</sup> it could be that the teachings on the divine feminine came “too early” to take hold; quite literally the teachings arose in a culture inhabiting a world of signifiers without the ability to decipher their meaning. According to this model of historical aftering, it could be that the initial shock of a female divine in mid-



nineteenth century America provoked trivialization or indifference to the full potency of the teachings. Yet as time has passed, the initial shock has set up the pre-conditions for this doctrine to return and take hold. Given the history of the women's movement, especially as there appears to be some question as to a cohesive direction for the "fourth wave"<sup>6</sup> of feminism, it could be that the time is appropriate for some aspects of Mormon feminism to take their place in American culture and society; LDS women may begin to speak as embodied subjects from their own sense of identity and place in the world.

One thing that is for certain within this process of *historical aftering* is that the depth and profundity of these teachings need not, and by necessity cannot, be reduced to a conceptual figuration of a divine female nature. Such an approach to the teachings would function in a manner not dissimilar to that of second wave feminists involved with the Goddess movement. The Heavenly Mother would then be envisioned and set forth, even given some quasi-historical utopian matriarchal past that is created, idealized and romanticized, turning the Heavenly Mother into an object of adoration.<sup>7</sup> It appears to be human nature, when given a particular explicit object to venerate, to lean toward idolatry in mistaking the object for the real cause for veneration, or to confuse a belief for an object.<sup>8</sup> This point is not to denigrate the worship of a God as Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ as his son as they are depicted in image and art in Mormon teachings, it is only to note that given the historical circumstances concerning religion and gender in the west, the divine feminine may indeed need to come forth in a different manner.

Referring to Freudian psychoanalytic theory to help illustrate the point, any attempt to come up with a conception of an one-dimensional Goddess would function as a "mother-substitute," and would only help further a type of melancholic repetition compulsion in the west, that of not facing the loss of the divine feminine to truly mourn and heal, but instead functioning to try to placate the loss through some imaginary figure. Such a form of worship of the divine feminine would not allow for a recognition of her being, but instead further support the status-quo. It would be as Freud's infamous account of the "fort/da game," where his grandson Ernst used a toy/object to replace the mother in a game of repetition in order to attain mastery over his anxiety in her absence. Coming up with an iconic representation of Heavenly Mother without first facing the loss of the divine feminine in western theology would add to a continuation of a patriarchal and potentially oppressive approach to religious worship. It would be little more than the return of the Goddess as "God in a skirt."<sup>9</sup>

A reference to the Greek myth "Medusa's Head" addresses some aspect of the inability to face the "feminine" as loss in western culture. In his analysis of the Greek myth, Freud notes the difficulty in looking at Medusa's head face-to-face.<sup>10</sup> Due to what Freud identifies as the castration complex, he theorizes that one cannot face the lack in the image of Medusa, of male power/divinity represented as the phallus. According to Freud, therefore, there is something terrifying about facing the lack.<sup>11</sup> French feminist theorist Helene Cixous plays upon this reflection. In her "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous does not simply call

for a replacement for the loss, as “mother substitute” to fill in for the silenced voice; instead when Cixous’s Medusa laughs, she overflows with a type of feminist articulation of “woman as speaking subject,” as *écriture féminine*.<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, there is wisdom in the fact that the Mother in Heaven is not “objectified” or conceptualized in Mormon doctrine and practice. Perhaps presenting her nature in an intentionally obscured manner, as being in the tradition, but not openly acknowledged in concept, form, or even, other than in the hymn “Oh My Father,” through inference, is not something to criticize but to accept as completely appropriate. For, the “hidden” presence of the Mother in Heaven suggests the potency of her being without exposing her image/face and role in human life explicitly. Not coming up with a new object to worship opens the way for women as well as men of the Mormon faith to fully contemplate Heavenly Mother’s nature, who she is, and how one may come to know her, not through cognition but directly through experience or awareness. LDS doctrine may be used to help formulate a feminist theology as *laughing medusa* in making a positive and transformative movement into the future, one that truly breaks free of the “status-quo” as well as points toward the direction of not just approaching the pathway toward divinity, but actually entering into the kingdom.

I suggest, then, that an approach to the female divine follow the model of becoming divine rather than *a becoming* divine; for, the latter involves using some *idea* of who she is to fill in for actually embodying her. As men have had the more outward role model of a male divinity to emulate, an exploration of teachings concerning the Mother in Heaven first in reference to Mary, sister of Lazarus, and then through the lens of Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the feminine principle, suggests women may find a place of power in embodying the divine, in declaring that what seemed to be lost in our culture has in fact always been completely present: the divine feminine.

*No Matter Where I Go, Here I Am:*  
Returning Home and Knowing it For the First Time

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"  
*Four Quartets*

*We take a journey . . . and the final sort of resting place is when we return  
home and that home has suddenly changed its name and concept, being  
enlightenment.*

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche  
"1975 Seminary Transcripts"

One fundamental comparison between the LDS and Buddhist traditions in general has to do with the ultimate experience available to practitioners in both traditions in terms of achieving "Godhood," or celestial glory in the Mormon tradition and enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition. This ultimate experience, open to both genders, relates to the absolute or "highest" level of existence. What happens on the relative or everyday, even political context of human activity for Mormons and Buddhists is that women seem not to have equal access to power and authority. Yet, as I have noted a somewhat obscured yet certain source of empowerment open to LDS women, so too do I find that Tibetan Buddhism contains teachings that associate feminine wisdom with the experience of the absolute/Divine. Although the traditions contain multiple significant differences, they are similar in this way. The two traditions can inform each other in that LDS approaches to divinity as they stand may help clarify and provide a model for integration for different approaches to Buddhist enlightenment, while additional insights from Tibetan Buddhism may help articulate or bring forward some of the hidden potency of LDS doctrine and worship of the Heavenly Mother.

Both Christian and Buddhist traditions include a "discovery" or "grace" aspect and approach to spiritual progression as well as a developmental "works" approach. Buddhist scholar Anne Klein explores both the discovery and the developmental approaches in Buddhist thought and practice in the following passage:

Certain forms of Buddhism, like Zen, emphasize that unless one is already an enlightened Buddha, enlightenment is impossible. In this view, enlightenment can only be discovered, not developed. Other forms of Buddhism including some of the major traditions of Tibet focus on the process of becoming enlightened, emphasizing the effort involved and

making a clear distinction between the path and the goal, between who one is and who one will become.<sup>13</sup>

One way to explore the two means of spiritual progression toward becoming divine is through two female models of devotion in the New Testament narratives, Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42; John 11). In relation to Klein's approach to the Zen and Tibetan Buddhist approaches to enlightenment, I associate the Mary model with the discovery approach and Martha with the developmental approach.

LDS women may well personify Martha's diligent efficiency in taking care of house, family, and community.<sup>14</sup> However, one might also note the degree to which LDS leadership encourages women to follow Mary's model of contemplative devotion, of turning inward as set forth in God's dictate to Emma Smith recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 25:8: "Thy time shall be given to writing and to learning much." The LDS Church emphasizes the joy and empowerment that may come through seeking knowledge for the sake of growing in intelligence (to become *God-like*), and LDS doctrine does not suggest that this is only the purview of men. It may be appropriate to stress the Mary role model for women, therefore, in encouraging growth toward divinity, or reaching toward fulfilling one's human potential.

Rather than reinforce any pervasive dichotomies such as the ubiquitous ongoing emphasis in Mormon life on the importance of women working inside rather than outside the home, I instead suggest that there is potential for a skillful integration of the two models inherent in LDS doctrine concerning the "grace" vs. "works" dichotomy. To further specify, I refer to a "works" approach as equivalent to a developmental Buddhist approach to enlightenment and a "grace" approach to the "discovery" model. Where approaches to grace in Christian traditions may not appear to resonate with a "discovery" approach to enlightenment in Buddhism in that Christ's grace would theoretically come from without and enlightenment from within, I suggest LDS approaches to the light of Christ and His grace as it is inherent in all humans likens it to a discovery approach to enlightenment in Buddhism. Where Klein's description of a discovery approach to enlightenment is only possible for those who are already enlightened, resonating somewhat with a Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, LDS approaches to the divine is open to everyone.

In the LDS perspective, humans are saved through grace, after all they can do. Works are necessary, but not sufficient.<sup>15</sup> All humans have divinity or the light of Christ within them, but one must go through a developmental process to realize or attain a level of purity that allows for a full recognition of divinity, and that can only occur through the "grace" of Jesus Christ's atonement. Even so, within the LDS church, as well as within some other western religious traditions and western culture in general, there appears more of an emphasis placed on doing rather than learning, on praxis over theory, on "works" vs. "grace," on the Martha model as opposed to the Mary model, or on action rather than contemplation.

Recent LDS scholarship comparing Mormonism and other Christian traditions has explored the grace/works dichotomy in LDS doctrine and life and has raised the concern that Mormons tend to focus on and emphasize works over grace.<sup>16</sup> Such analysis is useful in considering how or why female role models seem to follow the Martha over the Mary model. One way to help counter-balance a seeming over-emphasis on works, at least as far as LDS women's devotion and practice is concerned, is to highlight the importance of women not only taking care of the home and family, but also making sure they establish a "room of their own" to write in, to study in, to contemplate in and perhaps to discover a sense of autonomy or to realize their own inherent divinity. Ultimately, a comparative discourse with Tibetan Buddhism has the potential to offer insights into how the LDS Church may explore a feminist contemplative approach to reaching toward divinity within.

Facing the God *Without a Face*  
The Great Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* and/as Heavenly Mother

*She is God. She is a face for a god without a face, . . .*

Sandra Cisneros  
"Guadalupe the . . . Goddess"

*The goddess with an empty form, not anything at all,  
And the great bliss, clear radiance that appears as anything,  
The magical illusions that maybe are and maybe aren't—  
In just these themselves, there is something to understand.*

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche  
"A Symphony of Great Bliss"

*Your form is empty, a goddess beyond language to describe you.  
Seeing your innate face of coemergence, inexpressible in words,  
Effortless great bliss blazes, and the great joy of the four joys,  
On the path of freedom, awakens out from the core of my heart.*

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche  
*Sunshine for a Pauper*  
*A Spontaneous Song of Supplication*  
*to the Mother-lineage Guru of the Great Secret*

*Most of us believe emptiness is nothing, and we fear having nothing.  
Emptiness, however, is filled with possibility, filled with space.*

Alice Walker  
*We Are the Ones We've been Waiting For:*  
*Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*

*In the beginning there was space. . . .*

Luce Irigaray

I refer to some teachings on the feminine principle through modern Tibetan interpretations of the Great Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* in Mahayana teachings of India in order to better articulate a Mormon feminist theology or feminist philosophy of religion that has significance for an individual practitioner's psychological and spiritual experience, as well as in the world of religion/theology in general. LDS doctrine and Tibetan Buddhism include teachings that can be used to articulate a western feminist theology based on eastern philosophy's contribution of non-dual awareness/experience and LDS approaches to the Heavenly Mother. An integration of the two traditions articulates a vision of the union of emptiness/feminine/wisdom, and luminosity/masculine/compassion or action, or in other words, grace and works.

The feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism is related to the experience of "emptiness."<sup>17</sup> Emptiness is a recognition of a vast space of potentiality. Certain meditative practices allow for recognition not so much of new concepts, plans, theories, formulas, narratives, but rather for recognition of the gaps in thought, or space as the ground of being. Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche writes of a Vajrayana formulation of space and how to become aware of its existence. He describes a meditation on shunyata as emptiness:

Shunyata can be explained in a very simple way. When we perceive, we usually attend to the delimited forms of objects. But these objects are perceived within a field. Attention can be directed either to the concrete, limited forms or to the field in which these forms are situated. In the shunyata experience, the attention is on the field rather than on its contents. By 'content,' we mean here those forms which are the outstanding features of the field itself. We also might notice that when we have an idea before our mind, the territory, as it were, delimited by the idea is blurred; it fades into something which is quite open. This open dimension is the basic meaning of shunyata.<sup>18</sup>

Such spaciousness, which may seem like a void to the western mind, actually exists as the fecund and vast womb out of which everything arises. The western mind is conditioned to view the ground, space, air, the sky, and as a corollary the "maternal ground as womb," as nothing, or worse, in Julia Kristevian terms, as abject. Yet it is the origin of everything and it is not in the past, dead and gone, but is in fact present in every instant. In many ways, therefore, it represents the "divine mother" in accessing what is missing in western thought, the presence of this vast womb like emptiness of the "maternal realm."

The masculine principle in Tibetan Buddhism is related to the movement out of this vast expanse of originary, primordial emptiness from which all thoughts, feelings, and beings arise. Trungpa Rinpoche describes the result of focusing on the masculine principle over the feminine principle as "knowing the all while

blocked in one.” In contrast, he describes opening up to the feminine principle as “knowing the one while freed from all.”<sup>19</sup>

I associate the masculine principle as movement outward, not in terms of Freud’s notion of libido or Eros as some may ascribe it to, but instead in relation to Thanatos, or the death drive; for it is the death drive that reaches outward, not in giving, but in order to find a sense of being/fulfillment within. It is the impulse toward disintegration or dissolution, that, when turned outward, can become destructive. The problem with a western perspective is that as the death drive is associated with the masculine principle it supports a form of “repetition compulsion” in re-enacting the loss in a melancholic repetition rather than facing the loss and healing from the trauma. Not facing emptiness, or in other words, not recognizing any existence prior to thought/feeling/being in both the ontological and the chronological sense, does not liberate the mind from the ongoing cycle of trying to regain what is missing; it instead leads toward angst in attempting to fill in for what was lost.<sup>20</sup>

Buddhist scholar Reginald Ray proposes a remedy for this problem of the masculine principle forever seeking fulfillment from without in his description of the Heart Sutra, the main *Prajñāpāramitā*, or Great Mother Sutra of Indian Mahayana. He expands upon the experiential transition that takes place when a practitioner has a direct perception of the feminine principle as the inherent “empty” nature of reality. The Heart Sutra includes the seemingly redundant and Kōan like chiasmic phrase that form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form.<sup>21</sup> Through the experiential awareness of this realization, one may come to a face-to-face encounter with truth. He describes two approaches to reality in the following manner:

Ordinary people live on the level of relative truth where ‘form’—as a metaphor for what we normally experience—is taken as self-evident and real. When one sees, however, that form is in fact empty of any characteristic of ‘form,’ that its essential nature is emptiness, then one has come face to face with ultimate truth, the truth of emptiness.<sup>22</sup>

To have grappled with the Heart Sutra, and understood the inherent empty nature of reality allows for a face-to-face encounter with emptiness, or space, as ultimate truth.

This recognition of emptiness as truth, although perhaps quite difficult for a western mind to contemplate, offers one avenue for approaching the great Mother, or the vast womb out of which everything arises. A westerner may experience this emptiness, not as a vast womb of potentiality, but as nothingness. Likewise the “maternal realm,” or Freud’s reference to the Oceanic Feeling, both relating to the period of time when a child is at one with the mother and has not yet developed a separate sense of self, may also be experienced as nothingness, and as a corollary, abject, lost, forgotten, or dead. However, we find in these Buddhist reflections on the feminine principle that that which seems to be nothingness is in fact a potent and powerful primordial vast fecundity of

possibility. As everything exists in it, it is always present in all being.

I suggest that Buddhist recognition of this primordial existence, which a Tibetan Buddhist may identify with the Great Mother of all being or *Prajñāpāramitā*, mirrors LDS conceptions of the divine feminine, not only because Mormon doctrine includes a literal mother in heaven, but also in terms of its notions concerning the origin of *being*.<sup>23</sup> Mormon cosmology does not, as opposed to many other cosmological views in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, advance the notion that God created the world *ex nihilo*. Rather, it posits a vast emptiness out of which God created the world. It is emptiness as vast womb or home, not as nothingness or void.<sup>24</sup>

Anne Klein also writes of Buddhist origins of being in a manner that resonates with LDS cosmology:

In Buddhist traditions . . . the womb that is an ‘expanse of reality’ is a ubiquitous matrix, participating in and pervading all that is born from it. It is never left behind as is the maternal womb of contemporary description. In contrast, most Jewish and Christian traditions understand God to have created the world *ex nihilo*, that is, from a nothing that, like the maternal womb, is left behind. In Buddhist understanding, there is no dead space left behind when existence manifests. The womb of the expanse is an every-replenished resource, and the wish to renew association with it is not regarded as regressive but potentiating.<sup>25</sup>

Just as there are some similarities in LDS and Tibetan Buddhist teachings, there are also significant differences between them. Where Mormonism focuses on a “cosmological” origin of being, Buddhist perspectives focus instead on an “ontological” origin of being. An LDS cosmology would indicate the world was not created out of nothing, but out of the fecundity of unformed matter. Tibetan Buddhism would also reject the idea of creation out of nothing, but would view “the creation” narrative in terms of ontological being; that is, understanding “creation” not in an historical or chronological sense, but in an ontological sense, as something which arises each and every moment from vast “emptiness.” Yet despite these differences, Tibetan Buddhist ontology as it relates to LDS cosmology can inform a feminist theology; they both assert that the time prior to being, or pre-ego is not abject at all, but is the fertile “emptiness” out of which all being arises. The two traditions work with each other, each highlighting a particular significance of the feminine realm.

Tibetan Buddhist teachings on emptiness, then, help to elucidate not so much a literal Mother in Heaven in the LDS tradition, but serve more as a shift in reference to acknowledge what has become absent and abject in western thought/culture. Rather than use the notion of emptiness to characterize a divine feminine in the Mormon tradition, therefore, I refer to it instead in order to help explore an aspect of the human psyche that has been neglected that she in turn represents. This is not to say that there is no literal Mother in Heaven, any more than it would imply there is no literal earthly mother. It is only to add insight into



the origin of all being, couch it in feminine terms, and acknowledge it as powerful and glorious rather than abject and denigrated.

Judith Simmer-Brown writes of the Great Mother, or “the feminine principle as mother” in Tibetan Buddhism as it “was drawn from . . . the *Prajñāpāramitā* – sutras” in a manner that helps bring to light how members of the LDS faith may approach the Heavenly Mother. Simmer-Brown describes *Prajñāpāramitā* as ‘penetrating insight’ (*prajna*) that is perfected or has ‘gone beyond’ (*paramita*) which means that it has transcended concept, expectation, or conventionality of any kind.”<sup>26</sup> It is associated with emptiness, “not [as] an object of knowledge—since it is not a thing— *Prajñāpāramitā* is associated [instead] with the dynamic way in which one directly realizes the unborn nature of phenomena.”<sup>27</sup> She continues:

*Prajñāpāramitā* is the symbolic mother of all those who realize this nature; that is, this insight is the beginning of the practitioner’s uncovering of awakened nature. Finding no inherent essence in phenomena awakens non-dual wisdom in the practitioner, and this is the seed of buddhahood. For this reason, ‘*prajna* which has gone beyond,’ or *Prajñāpāramitā*, is an experiential discovery that becomes at that moment the mother of All Buddhas.<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, Simmer-Brown describes references to Great Mother in terms that are at first *aniconic*, in that they cannot be represented in physical form.<sup>29</sup> It is only after first beginning with practices developing shunyata or the perception of emptiness, that one, in more advanced Vajrayana practices, envisions a female deity to emulate. Significantly, the envisioned female deities used by Tibetan Buddhists in “*yidam practice*” represent the female as multi-dimensional. These deities include attributes associated with enriching, pacifying, magnetizing, and destroying; hence they represent a full human spectrum for women and men to emulate. The practice then ends with a disintegration of form back into emptiness as the divine origin.<sup>30</sup> In LDS terms one could say that what arises through the experience of the *aniconic* nature of Heavenly Mother comes forth, as noted, not through human reason or cognition in a “re-discovery” of the great Goddess, but instead as a re-cognition as awareness of a reality that is the ontological as well as chronological origin of humanity.

Buddhist scholar Andrew Holecek also addresses the sublime origin as mother. He writes in his chapter “Hardship as the Loss of the Feminine”:

The saving grace is that no matter how far the child seems to get away from the lap of the mother, from emptiness, it is impossible to actually leave her. You can't actually leave the mother, . . . It is the aggressive gesture of moving away, of looking out, that creates the illusion of duality.<sup>31</sup>

Holecek therefore refers to accessing the Great Mother through recognizing the divinity within; he also refers to a recognition of her presence as a “saving grace.”

I see a parallel between this approach and Mary's model of devotion in LDS practice and worship. Holecek also writes about the outward gaze in terms I relate to the Martha/LDS model. Incessant efforts or actions, to wash, to clean, to cook, to teach, to be a good role model, even to be "a good mother," lead to a sense of dualism. There arises a tension between within and without. If one is *attempting* to be a good woman, this implies that one does not recognize the inherent goodness that one already possesses. Holecek describes how one may instead follow Mary's lead, by turning inward:

You have run away from home so long ago that it feels like the return is hopeless. But you only have to stop. Stop dead in your tracks and take a look within. Stop looking out, turn your gaze back in, and you will discover that which you truly seek. No matter how far off you seem to be, the mother of emptiness is always holding you. You are sitting in her lap right now.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than looking outward, one turns inward to the source of all phenomena, and through the recognition of "emptiness," to the "unborn quality of basic space," and thus becomes free "of any dualities, conceptualities, or notions of existence or nonexistence altogether." That is the ultimate absolute divine; it is "indestructible and primordial."<sup>33</sup>

Drawing on Trungpa Rinpoche's teachings, Simmer-Brown explains the power of this recognition:

Space is very powerful, for it cannot be manipulated, moved or shaped. Every situation is affected by space, and even the most elaborate structures, administrations, and bureaucracies are built on nothing. Sunyata [emptiness] in its Vajrayana formulation as space has the power to undermine ambitions and delusions of grandeur.<sup>34</sup>

Trungpa Rinpoche describes the power of emptiness as "the black market of the mother, a spiritual atomic bomb that's been manufactured in the basement. . . . [It] is not so much . . . a resigned passive thing – but it is unable to be controlled by any efficient organization of anything." Reminiscent of the famous line from W. B. Yeats's "Second Coming," "The falcon cannot hear the falconer," he concludes:

The overlay of reality is unable to detect the underlayer of reality anymore. The surface may go quite nonchalantly, it usually does, but the undercurrent is extraordinarily powerful. It begins to manufacture a world of its own, in the feminine principle of potentiality, embryonic and resourceful and glamorous at the same time.<sup>35</sup>

These insights suggest a radical re-visioning of a divine feminine in western philosophy and theology, as well as a transvaluation of reality.

Luce Irigaray develops such a re-vision in utilizing imagery from Plato's allegory of the cave in a manner that supports a Tibetan philosophical approach to metaphysics. In a transvaluation of this allegory Irigaray points out that the cave is the womb from which all things are born and should not be left behind in the search for the real/ideal form. She offers not just a reversal still stuck in dualisms such as nature/culture, matter/spirit, feminine/masculine, Goddess/God, however, but instead a true chiasmic reversal. Irigaray provides an account of life before the mighty *reversal* in the following passage: "the story goes, . . . men . . . are living in one, same, place. A place shaped like a cave or a womb."<sup>36</sup>

Irigaray references imagery related to pregnancy in approaching a transvaluated approach to western metaphysics. Through the birthing process, the infant goes through a mighty reversal in leaving the womb as cave "turned upside-down, back-to-front," and entering the world outside. In acknowledging the cave as origin or home, Iriguaray suggests birth as a chiasmic reversal, or *camera obscura*, moving from the real to the world outside; she points toward a type of re-birth in acknowledging the cave as *real*, in a Lacanian sense. This involves a reversal not as the flip side of what is present, continuing a type of dualism that sustains the status-quo, but instead flipped over, *turned around*. In relation to Buddhist enlightenment, it is meant to be liberating and quite potent and powerful in its own right.

Buddhist scholar Peter Harvey similarly writes of a sudden reversal in realizing emptiness in the Mahayana philosophical tradition in terms reminiscent of Irigaray's reversal of western metaphysics:

The final attainment comes suddenly . . . as a momentous spiritual transition, a shattering upheaval which takes place at the root of the mind . . . . This event is known as the 'reversal of the basis' (*asraya-paravrtti*). It is where the usual flow of the worldly mind suddenly stops, so that the six sensory consciousnesses no longer present information. Having stopped discriminating 'objects' in the flow of the six consciousnesses, . . . [it] 'turns round' from this and attains direct intuitive knowledge of [reality]. . . . [One has] gained knowledge of its inner nature, . . . after a reversal has taken place."<sup>37</sup>

This description of nirvana or enlightenment elucidates the sudden nature of this great reversal. After this "final attainment," the ability for direct perception arises from a sense of complete and absolute equanimity concerning all life events. There is a sense of a "mighty change of heart" in such a reversal, with a notion of grace that allows for an enlightened Godly wisdom, one which sees things as they really are and not as one's mind projects them to be.

Father Mother May I Meet You:  
Becoming Divine/Sublime and Building the Kingdom

*And then I get to see my mother's true face of formless awareness.*

*. . . Being mindful of myself, I meet my own face.*

*This brings confidence in my own mind—these are my mother's final instructions.*

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

*Sunshine for a Pauper*

*A Spontaneous Song of Supplication*

*to the Mother-lineage Guru of the Great Secret*

Drawing on insights from Tibetan Buddhism, women in the LDS tradition may find the vocabulary to speak their truth. These teachings do not offer ways to find “role models” for divine empowerment, as this would only be another attempt to “reach outward.” Instead, these insights can help uncover the power of “emptiness” as the feminine principle: *Prajñāpāramitā* as Great Mother. Emptiness, as it relates to the feminine principle also relates to acknowledging and in some way *creating* space as a “room of one’s own.”

Buddhist teachings help validate the Mary model in terms of Irigaray’s notion that humans have divinity within and one need only recognize it. The very potent, powerful, fecund realization in contemplating the chiasmic structure of the Heart Sutra, that “form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form” may provide an opening toward not just a becoming divine through the perfection of actions, but becoming divine through cultivating a contemplative awareness of the feminine principle. Through having a face-to-face encounter with emptiness as ultimate truth, a sublime woman may “mourn” the loss of some hope for a mother substitute, become divine, and then speak coming from the place of emptiness as it relates to the feminine principle.

Delving into some eastern philosophy may also help to articulate a type of becoming divine that certainly includes and depends on gender, but that leads to a place not so much “beyond” gender as through it, toward a type of non-dual union of difference. This is a model not only for a feminist theology, but also for a feminist philosophy of religion that may encourage some strains of third and perhaps fourth wave feminism able to explore notions of spirituality that incorporate wisdom from both the west and the east. It offers a means to not only approach the gateway into becoming divine for both men and women, but to enter and embody divinity in a manner that includes difference yet reaches beyond it to find authentic or absolute divinity as/in unity.

If the LDS church is looking to support and encourage female membership to reach their highest potential, to experience a *mighty change of heart* in reaching toward divinity, then there may need to be more of an emphasis on the type of knowing related to Mary as contemplative in the Christian tradition, not only in helping enact the change, but also in finding ways to help preserve the change. Conscious awareness of the Martha and Mary models, as well as a skillful integration of the developmental and discovery approaches to the divine, utilizing

some Buddhist teachings to enhance the more contemplative aspects of female devotion in the Mormon church, need not lead to division and conflict between personal experience and religious authority. I propose instead that it may in fact lead toward becoming divine on a collective level that is helping to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, or as an *apotheosis* on a collective level.

LDS teachings on the Heavenly Mother have the potential to play a significant role in the history of theology, the history of the philosophy of religion, and the history of philosophy/metaphysics. A Mormon theology that may appear to oppress women according to western cultural standards, in actuality has the potential to provide a most liberatory doctrine. Who better to promote a new feminist ideal of one who acknowledges her true nature in becoming divine out of the “vast womb of emptiness” than a woman of the Mormon faith? Through insights from Tibetan Buddhism, a Mormon feminist theology can support a LDS woman in acknowledging her empowered state and position. She may come to embody the divine as one who laughs, adhering to her own sense of energy, not according to the masculinist zero-sum formulation of libidinal economy, but from the power of emptiness, or in Trungpa Rinpoche’s terms, the “black market of the mother.”

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## Notes

1 Kantian aesthetic theory may help elaborate the distinction between the two types of becoming: the former type of female becoming divine is reminiscent of what Kant would call the beautiful, alluding to her position as an object to be admired or desired; the latter type of becoming divine is associated with the sublime, alluding to her position as a speaking subject and arbiter of desire. Kant himself writes of the terms beautiful and sublime in gendered terms with the female as being more akin to the beautiful and the male having attributes more related to the sublime. See Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

2 For an attempt to grapple with the inherent tensions that arise with a gendered (male) and thus anthropomorphic God in the Jewish tradition, see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

3 Eliza R. Snow, "My Father In Heaven," *Times and Seasons* 6 (15 November 1845), 1039.

4 I suggest that a theological approach to the Mother in Heaven need not come from a voice outside the leadership of the Mormon Church, nor in some future revelation from the presiding prophet himself, although this very well may be the case. I instead assert there is much to explore in forming a deeper understanding of the divine feminine within Mormonism in the teachings and forms of worship as they stand. What may be added is not additional information necessarily, but clarification of what is already available within the teachings.

5 See Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

6 Pythia Peay describes the fourth wave of feminism as a movement involving women from various spiritual traditions. See Pythia Peay, "Feminism's Fourth Wave," *Utne* 128 (Mar/Apr 2005): 59-61.

7 For a critique of the historically tenuous nature of the Goddess movement rediscovering an idealized past see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddess and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

8 This process of reification functions as an example of Alfred North Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness, or as the Lankavatara Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism indicates, as a tendency for those who are not able to go beyond words or theories to mistake their fingertip for what they are pointing at. See *Lankavatara Sutra*, trans. by D. T. Suzuki (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), 196.

9 Jantzen notes that "for women to project a divine horizon, a 'God according to [their] gender/genre,' . . . it is necessary that this female divine [be] thought of in female terms . . . . This is why substitution of 'Mother God' for 'Father God,' while leaving the concept of God otherwise the same ('God in a skirt'), it itself does not change very much. Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 267.

10 See Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Collier Books, 1974).

11 As Freud uses what Diane Jonte-Pace would call his "master-thesis," the oedipal complex, in his analysis of Medusa's head, Jonte-Pace's suggestion of a "counter-thesis" may be more useful in interpreting the myth, that of associating death not with the father, but with the mother. It may be that Medusa's head, as an archetypal western paradigm, exhibits not love for the mother and death of the Father as Freud would assert, therefore, but loss of the mother. See Diane Jonte-Pace, "At Home in the Uncanny: Freudian Representations of Death, Mothers, and the Afterlife," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 1 (1996).

12 Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *French Feminist Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 257-275.

13 Ann C. Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 4.



14 General Relief Society president Julie Beck has emphasized the Martha model in her October 2007 General Conference address “Mothers Who Know.” In her talk Beck stressed the importance of women knowing, equating knowledge with motherhood, obedience, homemaking, leadership (in the home), teaching (through being a good mother), in focusing on being a good mother in a world filled with diversions and distractions, standing strong in “teaching[ing] children the ways of truth.” See Julie B. Beck, “Mothers Who Know,” *Liahona* (Nov 2007): 76-78.

15 In some cases, “works” are not required at all, such as in the case of when a child younger than the baptismal age of eight dies, or when an individual has some type of mental disability.

16 See Robert Millet, *Grave Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 2007) and *By Grace Are We Saved* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1993).

17 The feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism is also associated with the Dakini. Although obscure and enigmatic, Dakini lore along with female representations of the divine in figures like Tara as well as quasi-historical figures like Yeshe Tsogyal are prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism. For the purposes of this paper I focus on teachings relating the feminine principle to emptiness. This I associate with “second turning” Mahayana teachings in Tibetan Buddhism. It is the topic of another paper to begin to envision a female divine coming from “third turning teachings,” emphasizing luminous space and working with representations of female deities arising out emptiness/space. Such figures, be they legendary or historical (with the line between the two oftentimes blurred), involve representations of the divine feminine that include a full spectrum of human qualities rather than the more one-dimensional western cultural/traditional approaches to divinity and femininity.

18 Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Herbert V. Guenther, *The Dawn of Tantra* (Berkeley, 1975), p. 27.

19 Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, “A Symphony of Great Bliss.” Taught at the View of Mahamudra: Song of Realization Program by the Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche, Boulder, CO October 9-11, 2009.

20 Another way to address this tendency to disregard any existence prior to being/ego, we may note in associating the “maternal realm,” with “nature.” In the gendered binary associating women with nature and men with culture, culture has been privileged over nature. See Sherry Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” In *Woman, Culture, and Society*, M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974) 68-87. I propose discussing gender attributes in terms that need not be essentialized, however, assigning gender characteristics to sex, but rather to work with them as they are socially constructed.

21 Luce Irigaray comments on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” in terms reminiscent of the Heart Sutra: “We can agree that there is a situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible.” Both the Buddhist notion of emptiness in the Heart Sutra as well as Irigaray’s reference to the tangible indicate what is associated with the feminine as more originary/primary. Irigaray concludes: “The tangible is, and remains, primary in its opening.” Luce Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1993), 160.

22 Reginald Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 95.

23 The manner in which the two traditions mirror one another relates to another LDS doctrine unique in mainstream Jewish and Christian traditions, that is of a primordial existence. Mormon doctrine on the pre-existence indicates it as a time when there were individual intelligences possessing a type of identity, ability to learn, and volition that would in turn have an impact on the future mortal existence, resonates to some extent with Tibetan teachings concerning not so much “reincarnation,” but rather teachings concerning future emanations of beings. The future emanations are not so much a new incarnation of the same being, but they function, as Judith Simmer-Brown describes, as “mind streams” capable of bringing forth certain teachings into the world. Judith Simmer-Brown, “Yeshe Tsogyal Program,” Denver Shambhala Meditation Center, Denver, CO April 24, 2010.

24 In “A Symphony of Great Bliss” Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche writes of such nothingness in the following manner: “To be a barren woman’s daughter, negation that’s always nothing”

25 Klein, *Bliss Queen*, 178.

26 Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dakini’s Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 85.

27 *Ibid.*, 86

28 *Ibid.*, 87.

29 Simmer-Brown writes of the aniconic, or the “abstract, nonimagined symbol” of the Mother Prajñāpāramitā as that “which cannot be grasped or named” as “signified in a symbolic diagram of crossed triangles. . . , by two juxtaposed triangular shapes, forming a symbol reminiscent of the Star of David.” She notes “triangle is to be understood in Vajrayana as the centerless ‘cosmic cervix’ that has given birth to all phenomena; it is the preeminent symbol for the mother.” *Ibid.*, 107.

30 Typically, this is not the same approach to deity that exists in the west. Following Feuerbach’s critique of the western theological traditions, there is a general assumption that “man” is not created in the image of God; rather it is the other way around. What is unique in Mormonism, and in turn similar in Tibetan Buddhism, is that revelation comes first, and it comes out of a supernatural realm: Joseph Smith first saw God the father and his son Jesus Christ and the teachings came forth through otherworldly means that in turn helped define or flesh out the divine. So too is there a treasure revealing tradition in Tibetan Buddhism in which sacred knowledge breaks into history, rather than what is typical in the west, where historical processes create sacred knowledge. It is significant to note that, as Judith Simmer-Brown explained, the Buddha gave the Prajñāpāramitā teachings eight days after his enlightenment. It was said the time was not yet ripe to receive them. The texts were then buried in the ocean, and as a case of Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, not revealed until 500 years later when the teachings could be more readily accepted. Judith Simmer-Brown, “Yeshe Tsogyal Program,” Denver Shambhala Meditation Center, Denver, CO April 24, 2010. Additionally, during the early nineteenth century Tibetan masters part of the Rimé movement revealed teachings on the Buddhist female deity Tara that had been “lost” or hidden/buried and recovered as *terma* (hidden treasure). See Khenchen Palden Sherab and Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal, *Tara’s Enlightened Activity: An Oral Commentary on The Twenty-one Praises to Tara* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2007).

31 Andrew Holecek, *Power and the Pain* (manuscript, Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2010), 273.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Simmer-Brown, *Dakini*, 107.

34 Simmer-Brown, 109.

35 Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Glimpses of Space: The Feminine Principle and EVAM* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Vajradhatu Publications, 1999), 13; quoted in Simmer-Brown, 109.

36 Luce Irigaray, *The Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca UP, 1974), 244.

37 Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 112.





# FROM HERE TO ETERNITY: WOMEN'S BODIES, WOMEN'S DESTINIES IN JANICE ALLRED'S THEOLOGY

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Since the dawn of the women's movement in the United States, scholars studying Mormon women have wrestled with the place of women in this tradition. Are they equal partners with their husbands, as they embark on the path toward their eternal exalted destiny, or are they subordinate to their husbands, capable of exaltation, yes, but ultimately accoutrements which men need in order to realize their own divine potential? Are they a paradoxical combination of the two?

Mormon scripture itself gives conflicting answers. The first part of D&C 132 shows husbands and wives progressing together toward godhood, stating, "Then they shall be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power..."<sup>1</sup> The language of this verse and the prior one is strikingly egalitarian as there is no distinction between the power and destinies of husband and wife. Later in the same section, however, the subject of polygamy is introduced and a different voice emerges, one that emphasizes patriarchy. We read, "And if... I reveal it unto you, my servant Joseph, then you shall have power...to take her [a woman] and give her unto him...for he shall be made ruler over many."<sup>2</sup> In addition to using possessive language in which women apparently belong to men, this verse indicates that man alone has the privilege of ruling. Woman does not exercise agency. She is a passive object, given to and taken by men, whose purpose is to add to her husband's eternal increase.

Perhaps this difference in rhetoric can be attributed to the temporal versus the eternal context of the two halves of the section. But this begs the question: if women and men are to be equal in the eternities, as the verses in the first part of D&C 132 suggest, why shouldn't men and women be instructed in earthly life to begin establishing such relationships of true partnership? And what does that true partnership look like in the eternities, given the absence of Heavenly Mother from Mormon worship and rhetoric?

Throughout the Mormon Church's history, both the limited and limitless destiny and role of women has captured the beliefs of its members and leaders, with one or the other taking precedence at various points in time. Early Church leaders such as George Q. Cannon and Parley Pratt, who both emphasized the importance of polygamy in God's eternal scheme, tended to see women as

subordinate to men, with their main purpose in life revolving around the ability to birth children and thus add to the husband's eternal increase. God the Mother is similarly circumscribed. As the Mormon Church distanced itself from polygamy and assimilated into mainstream America, other Church leaders softened their rhetoric about women's subordination and elevated Eve. They still asserted men's presiding role, but they attributed this role to difference rather than superiority.<sup>3</sup> Recent feminist Mormon theologians, such as Janice Allred and Margaret Toscano, follow the sweep of this arc to its next logical step, working with Mormon conceptions and beliefs to raise women to full equality with men, both temporally and eternally.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this article, I juxtapose the thoughts of Janice Allred with those of early Church leaders, primarily George Q. Cannon. This comparative approach highlights the theological context from which Allred's ideas have arisen and against which, in many cases, she is reacting. George Q. Cannon stands as the primary contrast in this paper for a number of reasons. As a prolific editorialist, diarist, book author, sermonizer, letter writer, and pamphleteer, the three time First Counselor to the President of the LDS Church produced an enormous amount of material that was highly influential in the Mormon world. As his biographer Davis Bitton wrote, "He was never president of the [LDS] Church, but aside from the founding prophet, Joseph Smith, and Brigham Young, no one surpassed Cannon as a leader, shaper, and defender of nineteenth-century Mormonism."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, for my purposes in this paper, Cannon repeatedly addressed women's roles and women's destinies in some detail, and therefore serves as an illuminating contrast to Allred.

### Janice Allred: A Theology Rooted in Individual Experience

Janice Allred tackles the above questions and many more in her book, *God The Mother: And Other Theological Essays*. Allred gives a forthrightly feminist theological analysis of Mormon doctrine, with the goal of elevating women to equal status with men, while at the same time, affirming the centrality and importance of those principles and attributes that have been gendered "feminine" in Western culture. For Allred, equality does not equal sameness. The physical reality and potential of the female body stands as a potent symbol of uniquely female powers and abilities. She has no wish to interpret Mormon scripture a way which negates or ignores attributes gendered feminine, or which encourages women to assume masculine principles at the expense of feminine ones.

Allred's theology is inextricably linked to both her strong beliefs in Mormon scripture and to her perspective as a housewife and mother of nine children. Her feminist explorations of Mormon conceptions and scripture arose during the women's movement in the 1970's. In 1994, she was excommunicated from the LDS Church on the grounds of apostasy, largely because of her speculative writings on God the Mother.

Her theological approach, which she calls constructive theology, is rooted in two main principles: 1) the inherent worth and equality of all human beings and 2) the centrality of revelation. Joseph Smith, in her conception, stands as the model and inspiration for this type of theology. The trope of the individual who approaches God and receives revelation ignites her imagination, inspiring her to speculate on what revelations might come forth for others who dare to approach deity with the expectation of a response. She describes her theological methodology as beginning “with the desire to make sense of what we have read in the scriptures or heard at church or experienced in our own spiritual struggles. [Constructive Theology] is reflecting on our own quest to know God, to overcome sin and seek righteousness, and to understand how God expects us to relate to our fellow human beings.”<sup>6</sup> For Allred, theology begins with the individual. It arises out of an individual's personal context and experiences, causing her to question the best way to live her life, seek justice for all God's children, and ultimately find God.

From this personal search for knowledge about God comes revelation. A comparison between the view of revelation in orthodox theology and constructive theology is telling. Allred writes, “Constructive theology considers revelation to be fundamental, but rather than equating it with authority as orthodox theology does, it emphasizes its experiential nature and its availability for everyone.... Constructive theology has a dynamic conception of revelation, while orthodox theology thinks of revelation as absolute truth revealed to prophets by God.”<sup>7</sup> Allred thus embraces a less hierarchical vision of revelation. She is wary of depending on Church authorities for revelatory truth since, in her view, truth is contextual and moreover, the great gift of Joseph Smith to humankind is the model of a regular person invited to bypass clerical layers and find out for herself God's will and mind.

Allred's focus on revelation as central to Mormon theology puts her in line with other Mormon thinkers from the past. Early Mormon leader and writer Parley Pratt saw revelation as central to the restoration of the church. It is revelation, glorious and transcendent, that was returned to the earth with the advent of Mormonism. He writes, “The key to the science of Theology is the key of divine revelation. Without this key, no man, no assemblage of men, ever did, or ever will know the Eternal Father or Jesus Christ. When the key of revelation was lost to man, the knowledge of God was lost. And as life eternal depended on the knowledge of God, of course the key of eternal life was lost.”<sup>8</sup> Allred would agree that revelation is central to knowing God. She would also note approvingly the fact that revelation is not overtly tied to priesthood or to authority in Pratt's quote. What she would expand upon, I venture, is the importance of *all* humans knowing God – both God the Mother and God the Father.

For Allred, the revelation that comes directly from God to humans is essential, but the revelation found in scriptures and in the writings of prophets also plays a fundamental role. Allred takes the Mormon scriptural canon seriously in her theology: she quotes extensively from it and uses it to springboard to various speculations about God. Scripture is the basis, the source, and the

justification for much of what she argues for in her writings, though she is also willing to evaluate these revelations, place them in their contexts, and look at them not as fixed but as dynamic texts, waiting to be reinterpreted again by a new generation. What she sees as not fundamental, and in fact antithetical to revelation, is the orthodoxy that is enforced by authorities who try to constrict and circumscribe individual Mormons' relationships with and understandings of the divine.<sup>9</sup>

### The Past: Eve and the Fall

In examining the role of women in Mormon thought, it is logical to begin with Eve and the Fall. While early interpreters within the Mormon tradition often viewed Eve's curse as justification for women's subordination in this life, later interpreters tend to emphasize Eve's insight in eating the fruit and thereby furthering God's plan, though still retaining the idea of men as presiders over women. Allred embraces this latter, more progressive view of Eve's wisdom and moves from it to an interpretation which fully affirms the importance of both men and women in Mormon sacred narrative, insists on their God-given equality, and sees the origin of patriarchy in the fallen world. These various interpretations of Eve and the Fall tend to reflect the unique theological lenses and agendas of their interpreters.

Early apostle George Q. Cannon, a fiery proponent of plural marriage, follows the pattern of many early Mormons and emphasizes the curse that Eve provoked when she ate the apple. He views women's participation in polygyny as women's only chance of redemption from the curse that God visited upon Eve and her daughters. He states, “[Polygyny] ... will exalt woman until she is redeemed from the effects of the Fall, and from that curse pronounced upon her in the beginning. I believe the correct practice of this principle will redeem woman from the effects of that curse – namely, ‘thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.’ All the evils connected to jealousy have their origin in this.”<sup>10</sup> Cannon thus uses Eve's fall and consequent curse to urge women into polygamy or to be better resigned to their current polygamous lives. Redemption from the curse is women's reward for living the plural marriage principle. Interestingly, Cannon explains how polygamy redeems women from the first part of the curse, ‘thy desire shall be to thy husband,’—through painful refining, they are ideally cured from jealousy in a polygamous situation<sup>11</sup>—but there is no discussion of the second half of the curse. Cannon does not mention the possibility of women's redemption from men ruling over women, but rather states a few sentences later that man “is the head of woman.” He notably focuses on that part of the curse which is inconvenient in a polygynous situation, and thereby promotes his procreative theological vision – a vision which centers around the glory and power that accrues to men as they eternally increase their family through polygamy.<sup>12</sup> He does not comment on Eve's insight in propelling



forward this sacred drama of the beginning of the human family, a point which will be emphasized by Mormon theologians a generation later.<sup>13</sup>

Allred, in contrast, uses this story of the fall and the curse to argue against patriarchy and to ground her own egalitarian theological vision. In examining this same exact line from the Bible, she states, "When God said to Eve, 'Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee,' he was describing what would be, not prescribing what should be. Man would lose the Edenic condition of equality with his wife and he would rule over her. The rule of man over woman, then, is a condition of a fallen world, the result of sin, not an eternal principle."<sup>14</sup> For Allred, patriarchy is the state of the fallen world, a natural consequence, not a system which God proactively wills upon women. Allred envisions a religion which encourages men and women to rise above this fallen state and work towards the equality that was established by God in the Garden of Eden and which is central to her theology. While elements of patriarchy may inescapably remain in our fallen world, Allred is reluctant to extend this system outside this world into the pre-mortal existence or the eternities that lie beyond. She uses the story of the fall to emphasize women and men's ultimate equality and parity of roles, stating, "Our Mother Eve, a female deity, sacrificed her immortality to give birth to mortal bodies and bring us into mortality. Jesus, a male deity, sacrificed his life to redeem us from mortality and bring us into the next stage of our existence, which we may suppose will be characterized by the equality of the feminine and masculine principles."<sup>15</sup> In Allred's theological frame, men and women are equal and equally important, though sometimes serving different but symmetrical roles. She strategically names Eve as a female deity to balance out Jesus' status as a male deity, constructing a parallel between Eve sacrificing immortality to birth humans into mortality, and Jesus sacrificing his mortality to birth humans into immortality.<sup>16</sup> The differences in Allred and Cannon's approach to this story are striking. While both interpretations exhort their audiences to embrace a certain (somewhat radical) religious or moral principle, Cannon's premise firmly encases woman in a secondary position, while Allred launches her into the forefront, side by side with man.

### The Present (and Beyond?): Gendered Bodies, Gender roles

Women's subordination comes out even more strongly in other statements by Cannon. The practice of polygamy might redeem women from desiring their husbands, but gendered hierarchy remains in the marital relationship. This subordination of women is related to Cannon's belief in women's inferiority, an inferiority which in turn is linked to the body and bodily desires. He states, "Women, in their yearning after the other sex and in their desire for maternity, will do anything to gratify that instinct of their nature and yield to anything and be dishonored even rather than not gratify it; and in consequence of that which has been pronounced upon them, they are not held accountable to the same extent as men are. Man is strong, he is the head of woman, and God will hold

him responsible for the use of the influence he exercises over the opposite sex.”<sup>17</sup> In Cannon's view, women's desire toward men and toward birthing is so overwhelming that women are not as responsible as men for their actions. Thus Cannon views women as a less evolved subset of humanity, one driven by bodily needs and instincts. This view of women is once again justification for polygamy, since it is much better, in his estimation, for all women to have opportunities to fulfill those uncontrollable needs within the bonds of marriage.

Paradoxically, in Cannon's estimation, men are likewise strongly driven by the body, but unlike women, their susceptibility to bodily needs does not make them less accountable or inferior. Because he thinks that men's procreative powers last longer than women's, and that women ought not to engage in sexual activity beyond their years of fertility, he asks, “...what would this [situation] lead to? Man must practice that which is vile and low or submit to a system of repression; because if he be married to a woman who is physically incapable, he must either do himself violence or what is far worse, he must have recourse to the dreadful and damning practice of having illegal connection with women, or become altogether like the beasts.”<sup>18</sup> Polygamy is Cannon's solution to this problem.

The body and its needs are thus a distinct theme in Cannon's theology. They drive men and women toward the plural marriage system which he feels God has ordered him and his people to practice, and they supply an added justification for women's subordination, based on her inferiority in her bodily control. Other Mormon theologians of the time likewise seize on the female body as justification for women's subordination. President Brigham Young alludes to the secondary status of women when he describes mothers' roles, saying, "Sisters, ... what is your duty? It is for you to bear children....—to receive, conceive, bear, and bring forth in the name of Israel's God that you may have the honour of being the mothers of great and good men—of kings, princes, and potentates... I would cry out, like one of old, in the joy of my heart, "I have got a man from the Lord!" "Hallelujah! I am a mother—I have borne an image of God!"<sup>19</sup> Women's primary role is linked to her bodily abilities to bear children and raise up men, who will ultimately assume positions of power and responsibility. In Young's view, woman is a facilitator for males and an ancillary being who exists to birth men and assist them on toward their glory.

The body likewise plays a large role in Allred's theology, but she uses it in a strikingly different way. Her discussion of body is used to elevate women (and men) out of gender role boxes which constrain them, and also to elevate principles, attributes and symbols that are associated with the feminine. Allred notes that because of her physical body, a woman is assigned a gender, socialized into it, and expected to embody feminine attributes.<sup>20</sup> She then draws on this discussion of body to engage in symbolic explorations of masculine and feminine principles. The body for Allred stands as a potent symbol of difference between men and women, but this is a difference she refuses to name because doing so leads to the problem of gender stereotyping and rigid role assignment. She writes, “If there is essential difference between man and woman, it must remain unnamed. But the essence of essences is the name. If, then, the essence of

gender differences is named, it must be named as difference itself.”<sup>21</sup> This somewhat opaque statement shows the degree to which she is trying to work within both Mormon and liberal feminist constructs. On the one hand, she is willing to acknowledge the possibility of essential difference between men and women, a stance with which most Mormon figures would agree, but of which some feminists are wary because of the limits it imposes on women and men. On the other, she refuses to name that difference, thereby escaping those strictures that naturally spring up when difference is named. Instead, she shelves the question of essential difference and moves into the world of the purely symbolic, a world in which principles gendered male are valued more highly than principles gendered female.<sup>22</sup>

One can see already how different Allred’s approach to body is from that of Cannon and Young. In the view of the latter, women’s bodies lead inevitably to their destinies as secondary humans, with distinct and subordinate gender roles to fulfill. They are meant to be encased in the role of follower and nurturing mother, while the man takes the role of leader and presiding father. Allred sees such feminine attributes or associations as being ranked less important than masculine ones, and thus works to raise them to equal importance with those gendered masculine, saying, “Must difference, then, be valued differently?”<sup>23</sup> She attributes this unequal appreciation for these various attributes to the fallen world, “characterized by the dominance of the masculine principle.” Allred equates this masculine principle with the idea of separation, saying, “The qualities generally considered to be masculine may be categorized under the principle of separation and those generally considered feminine may be thought of as unifying qualities.”<sup>24</sup> Her goal is to raise the symbolic feminine principle of unification to a place of equality with the symbolic masculine symbol of separation, and most importantly, to show how essential it is for every human, both male and female, to adopt both masculine and feminine principles, to embark on journeys of male-associated hero selfhood as well as journeys of the female-associated mother selfhood. In order to do this, she turns to the figure, and ultimately to the body, of Jesus.

For Allred, Jesus and the atonement stand as the ultimate symbol of the need for both men and women to incorporate both masculine and feminine principles into their lives. In her reading, Jesus lived and died in a way that elevated qualities generally associated with women. She notes that he uses a female oriented metaphor when he expresses the desire to act as a hen, gathering her chicks under her protective wing, and she also points to King Benjamin’s use of a birth metaphor when he talks of people “being born of [Christ].”<sup>25</sup> Such language means that metaphorically, “Jesus is both father and mother. It was to redeem us from the Fall, to bring to pass our resurrection from the dead, to bring us new life that Jesus offered his life on the cross, which symbolizes the bringing together of opposites and which is accomplished by the feminine principle of union.”<sup>26</sup> Allred returns forcefully to body language when she gives a close reading of the Atonement, through which Jesus becomes our metaphorical mother. She reads the blood on Jesus’ head to be symbolic of the mother’s blood that is spilled

during childbirth. She interprets the blood dripping out of his hands as a metaphor for the milk that drips from a mother's breast, and goes on to explain that when we are instructed to eat of his flesh through the sacrament, we are like infants, who take their mother's flesh into their mouths for nourishment. She also reads the spear wound in Jesus' side as a metaphor for the birth canal, saying, "From the spear wound flowed blood and water as in a birth blood and water flow from the birth canal."<sup>27</sup> The symbol of the spear wound is twofold for Allred. Not only does it show that the atonement was a metaphorical birthing, but it also emphasizes the coming together and mingling of female and male. She explains, "The sexual symbolism of the spear and wound is significant. Comparing the spear in the wound to the union of the male and female genitals associates death with life, bringing opposites into union. Jesus died that we might live again."<sup>28</sup> For Allred, the body of Jesus is a tapestry on which she embroiders a reading which affirms feminine principles and brings male and female together in a fluidity and shifting of roles, abilities, and processes that both men and women must embrace and incorporate into their lives. Unlike earlier Mormon theologians such as Cannon and Young, body is not destiny for Allred. It is a jumping off point which can add shape and symbolic meaning to our lives and our quests, but as demonstrated in the story of Jesus, it should never constrict our journeys.

The image and symbol of the birthing body and the mothering body pervade Allred's writings. As a mother of nine herself, a mother who nearly went blind because of her refusal to terminate one of her pregnancies, she interprets motherhood as akin to Jesus' role. She explains her focus on motherhood in this way: "The mother-child relationship is the basic model for relational identity or connectedness because it symbolizes the self that is actualized by the sacrificial giving of itself to give life to another. It symbolizes the self that cannot be without the other."<sup>29</sup> The mother selfhood journey, a journey which all humans must take, involves sacrifice, but it also involves embracing, nourishing, and sustaining the other, a process in which change and effect move horizontally between two beings. She explains,

The primary symbol of mother selfhood is the pregnant woman, she who contains and sustains within her body another body created entirely by the materials which her body gives it. The conception of a child involves a reconception of myself. As I watch my body changing, I know that I am changing. I become intimately aware of a force outside myself, the force of life, which is performing a miracle inside me. In becoming a mother I am receiving a gift – the gift of being able to love unconditionally...<sup>30</sup>

This explanation of mother selfhood is emblematic of Allred's theology as a whole. Her personal narrative weaves into her analysis and explication of her theological ideas. There is a fluidity of genre here: the personal creeps into the analytical; the analytical feeds and springs forth from the personal; and the

symbolic melds with actual concrete experience. Although this symbol of the pregnant or mother body is particularly powerful for her, she makes a point of opening up such journeys of mother selfhood to men as well, who must find in their journey of life that ability to sacrifice and build relations and unity, just as women must incorporate hero selfhood, the masculine principle into their lives.

In summation, the female body is important in the theological formulations of Young and Cannon, but its import is based in its procreative abilities to raise up children and thereby add to husbands' eternal increase. Female bodies differ from male ones in being cursed with nearly uncontrollable desires, so their roles are necessarily different and subordinate. Woman in Cannon and Young is the helpmeet, the ancillary actor, not the subject of the story, but instead a prop in the great drama of life. Is her role crucial? Yes, but it is crucial because it adds to the man's glory. While Young saw the image of god in the sons that women bear, Allred sees the image of god in the symbol of the mother body who sacrifices like Jesus to bring forth new life. Woman and the symbolic feminine principle take center stage in Allred's discussion, as she uses the idea of body and body differences between the sexes to springboard into the world of the symbolic, a world in which she lifts up those attributes associated with women to be equal to those associated with men. Rather than trapping men and women in these symbolic male and female identified groupings, however, Allred is careful to assert the importance of fluidity between the two. Just as Jesus promoted ideas and actions typically associated with the female identified unifying principle, every woman and man should work to move beyond the symbolic realm of their gender in order to find balance between hero selfhood quests (in the form of personal achievement) and mother selfhood quests.

### The Future: Divine Destinies

The above discussion of bodies and roles focuses primarily on the position of women in this world, in this life. But what of women in the eternities? The Proclamation on the Family asserts that gender is eternal, but will the gender roles that play out here in this fallen world also be a part of the Mormon eternity? If man's eternal destiny is to be God the Father, what is woman's eternal destiny?

In answering these questions, it is illuminating to examine the position of God the Mother in Mormon thought. The Mother occupies a murky and nebulous place in the teachings of Church leaders, and has become increasingly less visible during the past few decades. Mormons are told by leaders to not worship or pray to her.<sup>31</sup> She is very rarely part of Mormons' speech when they speak of God and is not generally considered part of the godhead. So what is her role? Does her absence and invisibility reflect the eternal destiny of all her daughters?

Cannon sparingly mentions the Mother God, and when he does so, it is usually with other strategic goals in mind. His references to her tend to be vague

and do not explore the implications of such an idea for women here on earth. In describing the afterlife, he writes "...we will fall upon His [God the Father's] neck, and He will fall upon us, and we will kiss each other. We will know our Mother, also. We will know those who have begotten us in the spirit world just as much as we will know each other after we pass..."<sup>32</sup> Heavenly Mother seems to be an afterthought, with the specifics of the interaction focusing on God the Father. Cannon uses both the Mother and Father in this quote to emphasize the familial nature of the next life and the corporeality of the divine parents.

While a few references to Mother in Heaven such as this are found in Cannon's talks and writings, much more common is a complete disregard of Heavenly Mother, and moreover, a disregard for the eternal destiny of earthly women. He focuses instead on the divine destiny of males. He writes, "What is there more helpless... than a human being when it is born into the world. Yet that being, ...that little puling infant may become, in the eternity of our God, a god, to sway power and dominion in the eternal worlds, to be the father of unnumbered millions."<sup>33</sup> Cannon starts off this quote using non-gendered language – "an infant," "a human being," but by the end it is clear that he is thinking only of males: the infant progresses to become 'the father of unnumbered millions.' There is no vision here of female progression into godhood.

Cannon's most striking mention of the Mother God is found in the quote below, in which he firmly limits her power and is at pains to explain her subordinate status:

The tendency to attribute God-like powers to members of the female sex is exhibited nowadays in the adoration which is paid to... the Virgin Mary... great care must be exercised among the Latter-Day Saints... There is too much of this inclination to deify "our mother in heaven"... As Latter-day Saints we cannot be too careful concerning the use of language that may lead to wrong impressions, especially regarding the Being whom we 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"<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

Cannon finds the very idea of a God the Mother who is equal to God the Father offensive, false, and erroneous. Interestingly, he condemns attempts to "deify 'our mother in heaven,'" leaving the impression that there is some question as to her divine status. Also significant is the fact that he does not capitalize the

word ‘mother’ in this quote, and he puts the phrase ‘our mother in heaven’ in quotation marks, as if to distance himself even further from the idea. This is in stark contrast to his willingness to acknowledge her (and with a capital M) in his description of the afterlife quoted earlier. Once again, Cannon uses her strategically. When he wants to elevate humans and emphasize the corporeality of God and the reality of a loving family in the next life, he is willing to acknowledge her existence. However, when she becomes too present in the consciousness of the Saints, when people speak of her too much, when she encroaches on the attention we are to pay to God the Father, and when we use her in ways that specifically elevate the female element as equal to the male, he backs away from the very concept of God the Mother.

Allred also uses God the Mother strategically. Like other feminist theologians, she thinks that picturing God as exclusively male, “leads to valuing masculine attributes, values, and experience over feminine ones and contributes to the oppression of women. The symbol of the Goddess is necessary, they say, to affirm the goodness of the feminine, to enable women to claim their female power, and to acknowledge the goodness of the female body.”<sup>36</sup> Other feminist theologians find the *symbol* of the goddess important for these reasons, but Allred, as a believer in Mormon ideas about the Mother’s existence, believes her *reality* is vital as well, saying, “...comprehending God or [Goddess] is essential to comprehending ourselves.”<sup>37</sup> This is particularly true for Mormons, who look to God[dess] as an example of their own potential future, of their own divine possibilities<sup>38</sup>.

Allred explains that her interpretation of Heavenly Mother’s role in the godhead is based on three things: 1) her belief that “God the Mother is equal to God the Father in divinity, power, and perfection;” 2) her belief that both the Father and Mother are “deeply involved in our mortality and immortality;” and 3) her belief that God the Father has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup> This last point is particularly important for Allred. Her argument for the deep involvement of Heavenly Mother in mortality and beyond hinges on reading scripture – particularly Mormon scripture – as describing Jesus Christ as the mortal incarnation of God the Father, reading ‘Jesus Christ’ and ‘God the Father’ as two names for the same being. This idea is not uncommon among other Christian denominations, but Allred sees this teaching in Mormon scripture as well, detailing verse after verse in the Book of Mormon which supports the idea that the the names of God, the Lord, Jesus Christ, the Creator, the Savior, etc. all refer to the same deity.<sup>40</sup> Allred spends nine pages of her twenty-seven page essay on this point, claiming that every major author in the Book of Mormon taught this.<sup>41</sup>

This new understanding of the identity of God the Father and Jesus Christ leaves space for Allred to further reinterpret the other figure in the godhead: the Holy Ghost. She writes, “If it was possible for the Lord [God the Father] to lay down his immortal body to take on mortal flesh, then surely it is also possible for the Mother to lay down her immortal body to become the Holy Ghost.”<sup>42</sup> Having found the Father in the person of Jesus, she has now found the Mother in the

figure of the Holy Ghost. She lays out several reasons for this interpretation. Since Mormon theology puts such weight on celestial marriage as being a crucial key to achieving godhood, it stands to reason for Allred that God is “also a divine couple...‘The Father’ then must also mean ‘The Mother’ as ‘sons of God’ certainly includes ‘daughters of God.’”<sup>43</sup> She goes on to reason that if “‘the Son’ is the title God the Father takes when referring to his work in mortality as the Redeemer, ‘the Holy Ghost’ is the name of the Mother which refers to her work among us in mortality.”<sup>44</sup> She draws the parallel further:

God himself came down among the children of men to redeem his people. He sacrificed his immortal body and took on himself a mortal body to become one of us and suffer the pangs and sorrows of mortality...God herself came down among the children of women to succor her children. She sacrificed her immortal body to be with us; she remains a spirit so that she can always be with us to enlighten, to comfort, to strengthen, to feel what we feel, to suffer with us in our sins, in our loneliness and pain, and to encircle us in the arms of her love.<sup>45</sup>

Thus not only do God the Mother and God the Father serve humanity in the laying aside of their immortal bodies, they do so in the willingness of both parents to suffer and feel what their children feel. Allred emphasizes the complementary and equal contribution of the Mother and the Father, as both work with their mortal children to help guide them back to the eternal embrace. While Cannon recoils from the idea of God the Mother's equality to the Father's, or to her incorporation into the godhead, Allred embraces both ideas and uses scripture and logic to justify them.

While Allred uses God the Mother as a way of elevating women in this world and the next, her exploration is also based very much in her own personal convictions and experiences with the Mother. Her theological formulations are not simply the result of intellectual reasoning – they are also revelation. God the Mother's involvement in the lives of her children is very much real to Allred. As she discusses her ideas about God the Mother, she once again weaves in personal experience and personal revelation. She recounts an experience her husband had as they drove in the car and spoke of the Mother. She quotes his account:

“...I felt tears welling up.... I couldn't control my voice; I couldn't go on. I wept for a while and then said, “I am very touched by this.” Janice said, “It's more than that. It's revelation.” I said, “She is here with us...” She was around me and before me. With tear fogged eyes I saw her fill the horizon in front of me....This was not just empathy for the Mother. This was epiphany. She is here! I felt such love and identification for her and her work and rapture at her presence. [I turned to Janice and said] “I've given my heart to the Mother. She was here and I wasn't sure that I would go on living.”<sup>46</sup>



Alongside her creative interpretive work on scripture, and her logical arguments for the equality of women and the equality of her divine parents, are moments like this—personal anecdotes from her life which confirm to her the rightness in bringing Heavenly Mother out of the nebulous theological dark. In ending her article on God the Mother with this personal revelatory experience, she returns to the premise of her theology: the primacy of revelation—a revelation which grows out of personal context, personal searches, and personal questions; a revelation which enriches an individual's understanding and unlocks mysteries of godliness.

### Conclusion

The preceding examination of women in the theology of Cannon and Allred highlights particular pieces of their thought which give us insight into their views on this topic. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject and of course does not capture their whole systems of thought, but in these snapshots, we can see how both take core Mormon ideas and principles and build on them in different ways. An emphasis on revelation, scripture, eternal gendered bodies, gender complementarity, and a familial view of eternity ground both their explorations.

However, while Cannon's beliefs about women's subordinate status evolve from ideas like those found in the second half of D&C 132, Allred bases hers on the kinds of concepts outlined in the first half of that section. In following to its logical conclusion the equal destiny outlined in these verses, Allred develops a theology which validates those experiences and attributes which are gendered feminine, encourages fluidity of gender roles, sees in the figure of Jesus a perfect balance of male and female principles, and ultimately elevates God the Mother to equal partner with God the Father. She thus offers an interpretation of Mormon theology which gives equal weight and prominence to women. Implicit in her discussion is the idea that the Mother's destiny is inextricably linked with that of her daughters. If they neglect to incorporate her into their lives, they are consigning themselves to an eternity of oblivion. To dismiss her is to dismiss their own eternal selves.

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## Notes

- 1 D&C 132:20.
- 2 D&C 132:44.
- 3 John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City :Signature, 1997), 97.
- 4 Margaret and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1990) and Janice Allred, *God the Mother: And Other Theological Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997).
- 5 Davis Bitton, *George Q. Cannon: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1999) ix.
- 6 Allred, ix.
- 7 Allred, x-xi.
- 8 Parley Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (London: L.D. Saints Book Depot, 1855) 27.
- 9 While I am not focusing on Cannon's methodology in this paper, it is notable that unlike Allred, he tends to emphasize the revelatory role of leaders of the Church. He is not afraid to creatively extrapolate from scripture and Church leaders' teachings, often utilizing logic and sociological/historical arguments to further his claims, but he does not generally cite personal experience or personal revelation as the basis for his theological positions.
- 10 George Cannon, *Journal of Discourses*, volume 13: 206-207.
- 11 Polygamy redeems women from the first part of the curse because, according to Cannon, it forces women to not cleave so tightly to their husbands. He writes, "It is natural for woman to cleave to man; it was pronounced upon her in the beginning, seemingly as a punishment. I believe the time will come when, by practice of [polygamy]... , woman will be emancipated from that punishment and that feeling." Cannon thus indicates that maintaining an intense desire toward one's husband in a polygamous situation would lead to an unsupportable and miserable arrangement. To survive the marriage, a woman by necessity would have to abandon a possessive desire toward her husband. *Journal of Discourses*, volume 13: 206-207.
- 12 Richard Bushman, October 5, 2010.
- 13 B.H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life – An Elementary Treatise on Theology* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1994) 325, 341, 342.
- 14 Allred, 23.
- 15 Allred, 28.
- 16 By calling Eve a "female deity," Allred is not arguing that Eve is Heavenly Mother. Rather, she uses the term 'deity' to highlight Eve's status as an immortal being.
- 17 Cannon, JD 13:207.
- 18 Cannon, JD:13 206.
- 19 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, Volume 9, p. 37.
- 20 Allred, 26.
- 21 Ibid., 24.
- 22 Ibid., 26.
- 23 Ibid., 27.
- 24 Ibid, 27.
- 25 Ibid, 32.
- 26 Ibid, 31.
- 27 Ibid, 34.
- 28 Ibid, 34.
- 29 Ibid, 39.
- 30 Ibid, 39.
- 31 Gordon B. Hinckley, Ensign, "Daughters of God" November, 1991.
- 32 Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, 3.
- 33 Ibid, 131.
- 34 He is quoting Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *The Woman's Bible*.

35 Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, 136.

36 Allred, 42.

37 Ibid, 43.

38 Some Mormons, including Cannon, project polygamy into the eternities and allow for the possibility of multiple Mothers in Heaven, but Allred does not even entertain this idea. Multiple Heavenly Mothers would destroy her argument for the unique and equally important roles of the Father and Mother.

39 Allred, 43.

40 Allred references the way Abinidi, among others, teaches this repeatedly in the Book of Mormon. Mosiah 13:28, 32, 33, 15:18, 19, 16:4, 15:2-7, 16:15, etc. p. 50-51 in Allred. For example, “ I would... that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his,... that ye may have everlasting salvation...” (Mosiah, 5:15.) And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world” (Alma 42:15)

41 Allred, 46. Allred also addresses scriptures which suggest that God and Christ are two distinct individuals. These are generally ones in which the resurrected Jesus in the Book of Mormon speaks of doing the will of the father or praying to the father, etc. The most natural interpretation, Allred admits, is to read the two beings as distinct in these cases, but she concludes that often Jesus is talking about himself as God in the third person, and she uses other scriptural verses to prove that this is not uncommon (D&C 132: 33-35). Moreover, she uses other scriptural passages to link the term 'Father' to God's spiritual manifestation and the term 'Son' to God's fleshly manifestation. (p. 51)

42 Allred, 57.

43 Ibid., 55.

44 Ibid, 58.

45 Ibid, 59.

46 Ibid, 64.



# I AM AMONG YOU AS ONE THAT SERVETH

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**D**eciding which doctrines to highlight and which to deemphasize is a delicate business. For those positioning the Latter-day Saints as closer to “mainstream” or traditional Christianity, doctrines that emphasize shared biblical faith in Christ and the effects and appropriation of his atoning sacrifice easily rise to the fore. Others, seeking to highlight either the glorious distinctiveness or perceived heresy of the Church, stress more unique LDS doctrines such as pre-mortal existence, continuing revelation, and the potential for deification.

Even more interesting to observe is how the tensions between perceived practice and doctrine are handled. Because the issue of the role of women in the Church has been and continues to be a sensitive issue, the confluence of LDS doctrine and practice which informs women’s roles, status, and potential is certainly worthy of examination. While the ramifications of some of these unique doctrines have perhaps been ignored by detractors, a number of Latter-day Saint scholars of religion are seeking to clarify and make more widely understood these dimensions of LDS belief, as is illustrated in this volume.

As a Latter-day Saint, I am convinced that the Restoration vision of women’s potential is a tremendous part of the rich doctrinal perspective of the Church. In fact, there are a number of points of doctrinal distinctiveness in LDS belief that underline the potential of women and frame this in an elevated level that runs counter to many assumptions of traditional Christianity. Rather than fully developing these doctrines, let me briefly list the highlights. I will then seek to explore the question of how to see these doctrines in a context of Christian discipleship.

A striking doctrinal difference between Latter-day Saints and traditional Christianity on the nature of women stems from Latter-day Saints rejecting the traditional view of the Fall and its concomitant vision of Eve’s daughters as suspect and culpable. While this traditional viewpoint is hardly in vogue in contemporary Christian thought, it remains a centerpiece of the legacy of the Christian perception of women. Both textual and visual images of women for much of the last two thousand years of Christian discourse have been colored by this sense that the Fall was a tragedy and Eve was the culprit.

Latter-day Saints instead have a much more positive, albeit complex, view of the Fall, emphasizing its necessity rather than its tragedy. From this perspective we can glimpse instead a heroic vision of Eve. Early Church leaders often spoke highly of Eve’s role, and while such a depiction of Eve has not always been

foremost in LDS discussion of the Fall, this positive reading has been reemphasized more overtly in the last decades. The doctrines involved in the LDS view of the Fall are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, but to illustrate the impact of this positive view of Eve I can recount an experience with a woman professor in my master's program at BYU. It was the Fall of 1993 just after October General Conference and I distinctly remember the enthusiasm and celebration in her voice as she rejoiced about Elder Oaks' statement that weekend in which he said:

It was Eve who first transgressed the limits of Eden in order to initiate the conditions of mortality. Her act, whatever its nature, was formally a transgression but eternally a glorious necessity to open the doorway toward eternal life. Adam showed his wisdom by doing the same. And thus Eve and "Adam fell that men might be." (2 Ne. 2:25) Some Christians condemn Eve for her act, concluding that she and her daughters are somehow flawed by it. Not the Latter-day Saints! Informed by revelation, we celebrate Eve's act and honor her wisdom and courage in the great episode called the Fall. . . .<sup>1</sup>

She had always believed this perspective on Eve, but to hear it directly spoken by an apostle in General Conference was an affirmation and a cause for celebration. The traditional Christian viewpoint that Eve "and her daughters are somehow flawed by" her choice is directly refuted. This view portrays the Fall as a victory, not a failure, and Eve as a hero, not a villain. The public restatement of this positive understanding of Eve reinforces the LDS view of Eve and, by extension, of women as courageous agents and as critical partners with God in advancing the Plan of Salvation.

A more radical difference in the LDS perception of women comes from understanding women as created in the image of God in a far more literal sense than traditional Christianity. Again, the scope and history of the teaching of this doctrine far exceeds the length and direction of this paper, but it is difficult to overstate the dramatic difference it poses to a traditional view of God. This belief that all people are spirit children of Heavenly Parents frames the LDS view of human life as coming from and returning to a Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. This vision of a "divine feminine" can resonate with many women feeling alienated or disenfranchised by traditional Christianity. It is not surprising that many latch on to it as a central doctrine and then are not satisfied when it does not receive broader treatment in Church discussion.

While I believe strongly in the value and importance of both of these distinctive doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I also believe that to elevate them above the life and imitation of Christ is a profound misunderstanding of Church doctrine and the message of Christianity. In saying this I do not accept the critiques of those outside the Church who accuse us of not being Christian for holding these beliefs. Instead I see these beliefs are precious and believe they add greatly to our vision of the worth of each of God's

children. Nonetheless, I believe that the “worth of a soul” spoken of in Doctrine and Covenants 18:10 is most directly connected to the suffering and death of Christ spoken of in verse 11, “For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him,” rather than any other doctrine. My assertion is that to seek to emphasize the worth or potential of a soul in a context that has been deracinated from the Atonement of Christ is a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel.

As Latter-day Saints we might be tempted to feel threatened or embarrassed by the Church’s position on women and the priesthood. We might feel frustrated that there are LDS women who have great potential and education, but then choose not to work in the professional fields for which they have been prepared, instead choosing to be stay-at-home moms. Perhaps, in part, we seek to rectify this sense that we are not where we wish we were as a Church by focusing on the doctrine of a Heavenly Mother and the glorious potential that women possess. In doing so without going *through* Christ, however, is, I believe, a focus that is ultimately vain and misguided.

In saying this, I am in no way suggesting that the clock be turned back and that the opportunities now available for women’s education and professional success be taken away. I must stress that I am writing this from the perspective of a university professor and as such I hold a profound debt of gratitude for many women and men who have worked to open the educational and work opportunities that I currently enjoy. The path on which I now walk has been both charted and immeasurably smoothed by many generations of women who fought personal and institutional barriers to entering and succeeding in the academy. While I am confident that I do not appreciate the extent of the personal sacrifices and dedication of those who have helped to change legal and cultural barriers to opportunity, as a historian I am aware that professionally and personally things were once very different. I know that I can easily take for granted the opportunities I have to develop and use gifts I have been given.

As a Latter-day Saint, I am convinced that the Restoration vision of women’s potential is harmonious with this season of opportunity. But at the same time I also want to argue that to focus on the potential and the glory of women by choosing to emphasize the doctrine of Heavenly Mother is to miss the central vision of discipleship and service at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The foundation of the LDS view of the role of women, just as for men, must be a radical Christian vision of servanthood that stems from an understanding of Christ’s central mission being to suffer and die for our sakes.

While I believe this vision to be universally true, it is only in light of the aforementioned social and legal changes that I make this argument. I believe that the life choices that Latter-day Saint women make must be exactly that—choices. Thus, when I use the term servanthood to describe discipleship it is in the sense of a voluntary choice to serve, just as Christ voluntarily submitted to come as a servant. In this sense of servanthood as voluntary rather than the product of social and economic forces beyond our control I resonate with Rosemary

Radford Ruether's comment about Jesus heralding a new condition in which servanthood is chosen as a means to bless others. In this new messianic vision she argues that:

Jesus resymbolizes the messianic prophet (and, by implication, God) not as king but as servant. The messianic person and those who follow him must not seek a new situation in which they will dominate others, but they must become servants of all. . . . Jesus does not mean that he and his followers are to be like servants or slaves as society understands the 'good slave,' that is, as one who unquestioningly subjects himself or herself to the existing social order of bondage. Jesus uses the term *servant* for himself and his disciples in a prophetic-religious sense, presupposing a special relationship to God. By becoming servant of God, one becomes freed of all bondage to human masters. Only then, as a liberated person, can one truly become 'servant of all,' giving one's life to liberate others rather than to exercise power and rule over them.<sup>2</sup>

As I will discuss later, I disagree with Ruether on several points regarding her general approach to women and Christology, but I do agree with these insights that in following Christ's message of servanthood one does not seek to dominate others but instead becomes a servant of God, "free of all bondage to human masters."

I am not proposing that we should coerce, glamorize, romanticize, or marginalize those in positions of serving others. I applaud all efforts to enhance the range of choices that people have through altering the legal, social, and economic constraints that limit their opportunities to use and develop their God-given gifts. However, I believe that the choice to become a servant of God does not finally depend on social, economic, or even legal liberation. Being "free of all bondage to human masters" is ultimately a choice of the spirit, even in the most oppressive of outward circumstances. In a New Testament context, one might not be freed from the current reality of an oppressive situation by conversion to Jesus Christ, but Paul suggests that by becoming a servant of God something does change, "Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men" (1 Cor 7:21-23).

King Benjamin similarly talks of the service that he has given his people, but explains that he gave it as God's servant: "because I said unto you that I had spent my days in your service, I do not desire to boast, for I have only been in the service of God" (Mosiah 2:16). While these words were spoken by a king, they could equally have been spoken by the lowest of servants. His conclusion, "that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17), I think, illustrates Ruether's point that only "as a liberated person, can one truly become 'servant of all,' giving one's life to liberate others



rather than to exercise power and rule over them.” The reality of constraints may continue to exist and the reality of serving other people may continue to exist, but the internal experience can be different, a spiritual liberation.

With legal, educational, social, and economic changes comes the chance for a fuller freedom and opportunity that allow for a full exercise of discipleship. In the case of many women in the United States and many other parts of the world, this season of opportunity has arrived. And with it has arrived an increased stigma against those who choose to use their choices to return to social and economic family structures that may have been obligatory for earlier generations. As Latter-day Saint women we are often cowed into embarrassment over personal choices to use this freedom in the dedicated, full-time service of children and family. This should not be the case. Paul taught, “Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth” (Romans 14:4). I am not writing to argue for any particular choices within a family, but instead to advocate the choice to be a servant in the imitation of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that given the values of our contemporary culture we might be lured into seeking out a doctrine that focuses on the glory and potential of women and concurrently shun or distance ourselves from mothers as full-time caregivers. Some of these attitudes stem from the feminist critique of the traditional role of mothers as nurturers as a kind of subservient status. Individuals accepting this perception of woman holding a servile position may wish to frame a more powerful identity and relationship with Deity in which they feel as though they can “relate” to God. For Latter-day Saints the doctrine of a Heavenly Mother seems to answer the soul's quest to find a “role model” and an image of a woman in a position of power. This issue becomes tied in with the issue of women and the priesthood, or, in broader Christian terms, the ordination of women. These topics, again, far exceed the scope of this paper, but I would like to call into question the assumption that women are disenfranchised by not holding positions of “power and authority.” As framed by Rosemary Radford Ruether the problem becomes: “If women cannot represent Christ, in what sense can Christ represent women? . . . How is it possible that more than half of humanity, more than half of the members of Christian churches themselves, find themselves inferiorized and excluded by Christology?”<sup>4</sup> Here the implication seems to be that women without priesthood ordination “cannot represent Christ” and are therefore “inferiorized and excluded by Christology.” It is precisely that assumption that I wish us to rethink. If we assume that exclusion from positions of what the world considers power and honor excludes us from representing Christ, then I think we misunderstand Christ.

I believe that this approach towards both motherhood and the way in which we find access to God is founded in certain premises that are antithetical to the fundamental claims about reality and God that are embodied in the life of Christ who manifests the nature of God. The potential danger of focusing on Heavenly Mother or the potential for the glory of an exalted state can be seen in Matthew chapter 20 when those following Christ were seeking for glory now instead of being aware of the “baptism” and “cup” of suffering entailed in following Christ.

Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father. And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:20-28).

Christ was warning his followers not to seek for glory and position in following him, but instead to recognize that he was offering a profound inversion of what contemporary society had taught them to expect of one in authority and power. As a divine king, he had come to be a servant. In the world we are encouraged to seek for position, authority, and recognition: “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them.” But we are told that if we wish to imitate Christ’s life of voluntary servanthood then “it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister.”

Christ explicitly teaches this doctrine of the true disciple as one who chooses to be a servant when confronted with squabbling apostles, jostling each other for position. “And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth” (Luke 22:24-27). Here the apostles’ cultural assumptions validating position and status are directly challenged in an account which brings into question what we desire to be: the one being served and sitting “at meat” or the one who serves, bringing food to the table and waiting on others.

This doctrine of Christ as a servant was not only shocking to his immediate contemporaries, but continued to be extremely distasteful through the early Christian era. In the revulsion of Celsus, a second-century Middle Platonist philosopher, we can see how the idea of servanthood was a radical and

disconcerting dimension of Christ's life. For Celsus this idea contributed to his disdain for the message of Christianity. He shares the views of the educated Greeks in saying that:

God is good and beautiful and happy, and exists in the most beautiful state. If then He comes down to men, He must undergo change, a change from good to bad, from beautiful to shameful, from happiness to misfortune, and from what is best to what is most wicked. Who would undergo a change like this? It is the nature only of a mortal being to undergo change and remoulding, whereas it is the nature of an immortal being to remain the same without alteration. Accordingly, God could not be capable of undergoing this change.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that Jesus, being God, could “serve as a slave and be sick and die” seems to him as “wicked and impious.”<sup>6</sup> He was shocked that Christ could be divine but also come as a servant; this message was foolishness to him.

In the New Testament Paul acknowledged that the preaching of Christ would be foolish to worldly wisdom, but nevertheless insisted that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men: and the weakness of God is stronger than man” (1 Cor 1:25). Being called as a Christian, as a disciple of Christ, is a call to be counted as the base and weak things of this world (1 Cor 1:27-28). It is a call to be a fool for Christ's sake (1 Cor 4:10).

The radical dimension of embracing the gospel call to imitate Christ is famously illustrated in the Christian tradition by St. Francis of Assisi who rejected the status, wealth, and power available to him to serve in degrading conditions, to care for the lepers, and lose the respect of the world. Significantly, this was a choice that Francis was free to make. If he had been poor it would not have meant anything to give up his worldly wealth and position. His choice to embrace poverty and servanthood was made possible by the wealth and opportunities he had available to him in a prosperous merchant family in thirteenth-century Assisi. It was not the absence of opportunities, but the *choice* to give up those opportunities in which he acted out the radical rejection of the values of the “world” inherent in the imitation of Christ.

Let me give just a couple telling examples of Francis' choice to reject the values of his world in order to be a fool in imitation of Christ. It is poignant that as the son of a wealthy cloth merchant it was giving up his clothes that became a symbol of his rejection of worldly values of the importance of visible status and prestige. We learn that he and his followers “were satisfied with a single tunic, often patched inside and out. Nothing about it was refined; rather it appeared lowly and rough so that in it they seemed completely crucified to the world;”<sup>7</sup> and in his biographer's reference to Galatians 6:14: “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”

An example of Francis' willingness to serve and identify with the poor as a means of identifying with Christ is captured in this quote given by his biographer, Thomas of Celano: "He used to say: 'Anyone who curses the poor insults Christ whose noble banner the poor carry, since Christ made himself poor for us in this world.'" The biographer then connects that view of Christ to Francis' life of service. "That is also why, when he met poor people burdened with wood or other heavy loads, he would offer his own weak shoulders to help them."<sup>8</sup> All of this was explicitly done in the imitation of Christ and in memory of Christ's sacrifice, living out Christ's example of servanthood and ministering. Because of this imitation, within the Franciscan tradition Francis is described as an *alter Christus*.

The Book of Mormon provides a parallel example with the sons of King Mosiah. Born to a position of wealth, status, and the full range of opportunities available in their society, upon their conversion they rejected this status and the opportunity to inherit the kingdom in order to serve. This is most vividly illustrated in Alma 17 where Ammon, after having pleased the king of the Lamanites, was then offered the king's daughter as a wife. In receiving this offer Ammon was, by extension, being given an entry into the world of royal status in which he had grown up, to be a son-in-law to the king, but he instead declined, saying, "Nay, but I will be thy servant" (Alma 17:25).

The examples of St. Francis and Ammon illustrate a vision of the disciple of Christ as a voluntary servant. This vision gives insights into the meaning of motherhood, priesthood, and any call to serve in the Church. It is a universal call to reject the motivations for self-advancement that are antithetical to imitating the One who "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). In the Book of Mormon Jacob describes the universal danger of *not* rejecting the "inflated" sense of personal value that can come from learning, wisdom, and riches. Those that are "puffed up" because of these—"they are they whom he despiseth; and save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility, he will not open unto them" (2 Nephi 9:42).

The examples of the elite of Assisi and Zarahemla upon their conversion make present in the world the radical servanthood of Christ and his condescension. It is precisely in having a choice and then choosing the path of servanthood where LDS mothers can today follow this divine model.

In the Book of Hebrews we learn that the pre-mortal Christ "being made so much better than the angels" (Hebrews 1:4), being God's heir, "by whom also he made the worlds" (1:2), nonetheless, descended and "was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death" (1:5) to "deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (1:15). The Book of Mormon refers to this "self-emptying" of Christ as his condescension (1 Nephi 11:16). In giving up opportunity, status, and glory, Christ chose to come as a servant, "despised and rejected of man" (Isaiah 53:3). The prophet Nephi is asked by an angel if he knows the condescension of God. After explaining that he does not,

he is given heavenly instruction. It is telling that Christ's condescension is *first* explained with a vision of "the mother of the Son of God" and an image of what might be seen as her condescension (1 Nephi 11:18). As Latter-day Saints we have shied away from much reflection on Mary, but 1 Nephi 11 highlights her role in salvation history. Her sacrifice of status, opportunity, and worldly honor is eloquently expressed in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Mary's statement in response to the annunciation of Gabriel: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38) reflects the humility and willingness to be a fool for Christ that characterizes disciples of Christ in all eras. Here the term "handmaid" is the translation of *doule*, a Greek term that could also be translated bondmaid or female slave. While this might be disturbing if understood as a coercive situation, I think the significance of this phrase is Mary's *choice* to accept this role. In this sense she is the model disciple, mirroring her Son's willingness to submit himself to the will of the Father in all things.

Accepting God's will that she take on this role of mother came as a choice to sacrifice opportunities to accept this means of serving her Child, and through him, all humanity. Mary humbly accepted this role as mother even though it would have (save for angelic intervention) meant losing her betrothed husband Joseph and facing the ridicule, censure, and stigma of this particular motherhood. For a Christian this sentiment of willingness to serve and to obey is the most profound echo of the servanthood of Christ—"Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). The victory of Christ in submitting to the will of the Father was to his immediate contemporaries only seen as shame, defeat, and failure. His arrest, suffering, and death as a criminal marked him as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3).

Service and submission are not glamorous. They were and remain a source of derision by those who place status, recognition, position, and opportunities as the aim of the rational mortal life. It is in this sense that the choice of LDS mothers to put the well-being of their children above advancing what the world sees as their potential most fully mirrors the divine life as manifest in Jesus Christ.

Christ taught that "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Perhaps there is a sense in which we can also understand Christ's life as manifesting the true nature of both Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. It is significant that we know about God's identity primarily as a Parent, focused on serving and blessing us. "For behold this is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). We are so familiar with this phrase as Latter-day Saints that we may not observe what it reveals about the nature of Eternal Life, the kind of life that our Heavenly Parents live, eternally working for our well-being. Seen in its humility and submission, Christ's life of self-sacrifice and self-denial has the potential to manifest God's parental, sacrificing, and other-focused nature. Just as Christ lived and died for us, he

points us to divine nature and exaltation – a focus on serving and blessing others for eternity.

This vision of the Restoration connects the lofty, inspiring revelation of our true natures as “a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents”<sup>9</sup> with the stark demands of discipleship and servanthood. We look towards glory, but like the sons of Zebedee, we need to have our eyes redirected towards the cross of Christ. “Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

While the world may look with scorn at intelligent, capable women who spend their days changing diapers and wiping noses, Latter-day Saints should see the imitation of Christ. Peter was likewise profoundly shocked and offended when his master humbled himself to act as a slave or servant. Washing the feet of another was not fit for a respectable freeman, let alone one of status, the King of the Jews. For this worldly pride Peter was soundly rebuked. Jesus taught: “Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (John 13:13-15).

It is this imitation of the servanthood of Christ and rejection of the value of worldly status and honor where LDS mothers stand as examples of the Christian message and the divine nature of Parental service. In this they can say to all of us as Paul said, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). While all may not have the privilege of having or serving children, there is no other way to follow Christ for any of us other than becoming God’s servant. Likewise, this is a choice that all can make, regardless of their life conditions. Being a servant in the imitation of Christ will always be a choice, not a circumstance. Those whose positions bring them status and the acclaim of the world have to find their own way to reject these motivations and consider themselves fools before God, becoming fools for Christ’s sake as they serve.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, Nov 1993, 72.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 121.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Saiving raises the concern that selflessness has been idealized in a way that has been harmful to women, and argues that sin and redemption need to be rethought on the basis that the feminine and masculine spiritual dilemmas are different. [“The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *The Journal of Religion*, 40:2 (April 1960): 107-110] My view is that redemption universally comes in taking upon ourselves the name of Christ and seeking to receive the divine nature through him. How that is manifest in each of us may very well have personal, distinctive dimensions. There may well be some differences in temptations such as those defined as prototypically “masculine” or “feminine,” as Saiving suggests, but all are called to the imitation of Christ and his model of servanthood.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can a Male Savior Save Women? Liberating Christology from Patriarchy,” in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen, 251 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4.58; trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), *Cels.* 4.14; 192-93.

<sup>6</sup> Origen, *Cels.* 7.14; 406.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, in *The Francis Trilogy*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, William J. Short (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press), 58.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, 88.

<sup>9</sup> “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”





# RECONCEPTUALIZING AGENCY

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## Introduction

Feminist theory is one of the most important academic trends in the twentieth century and has been incredibly influential. Within religious studies, it is virtually impossible to engage in an analysis of women without employing a feminist lens.<sup>1</sup> Feminist theory has usually portrayed traditional religious women in America as either oppressed, or working from within the tradition to change it. This inclination is due to the fact that contemporary Western feminism is culturally bound to American and European political notions.

The tendency for feminist scholars of religion to measure traditional religious women in America against liberative norms comes out of the inheritance of liberal feminism within the U.S. and Europe. Beginning in Europe during the eighteenth century, with Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and continuing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America, with the abolition and suffrage movements, what has been called the first-wave of American feminism was a liberative form of feminism, based upon European and American understandings of legal rights, equality and freedom.<sup>2</sup> The goals and values of liberal feminism were naturally taken from the goals and values of European and American political categories and were based upon a liberal, human subject—one that was an autonomous, free individual, who was capable of making independent decisions.<sup>3</sup>

During the second wave of American feminism, liberal political goals once again figured prominently within the women's movement as feminists worked in the Civil Rights movement and for the passage of the long-proposed Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>4</sup> Liberal feminism has enjoyed particular influence over most types of feminisms because most other feminisms have replicated its commitment to the liberal human subject. As anthropologist Saba Mahmood points out, even those feminisms that trace their roots to post-structuralism have adopted liberal tendencies.<sup>5</sup>

The liberal influence within feminist theory has led to an emphasis on the theoretical category of agency, because it has been typically understood to demonstrate freedom. Thus, the feminist theoretical concept of agency has been debated for years. While the debate has taken many forms, feminist scholars have rarely questioned an underlying premise, namely that agency is demonstrated

through the resistance of norms. Since resistance has been equated with agency, women's acts that sustain traditional religions are not viewed as constituting agentic behavior. In other words, women in traditional religions can only exhibit agency when they are rebelling against their traditions.<sup>6</sup> This has resulted in a host of research that looks at various ways that women resist, rebel and subvert their traditions and has left those religious behaviors that sustain, support and propel patriarchal religions largely unexamined.

In order to work through some of the problematics of the feminist theoretical category of agency when applied to the lives of traditional religious women, I conducted an ethnographic study of American women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>7</sup> If one of the purposes of ethnography is to demonstrate how theory either holds up or crumbles when placed next to the actions of humans, then my rationale for engaging the feminist theoretical idea of agency is that, thus far, theories of agency based solely on resistance are woefully inadequate to address the behaviors of the women I worked with. Latter-day Saint women offer an interesting framework in which to examine agency because they adhere to an unapologetically patriarchal religion and they use the category as an indigenous concept, although there are some key differences between the LDS view of agency and the way in which the term is generally used in feminist writings. This does not mean that the feminist theoretical category of agency must "match" the LDS definition of agency in order to be useful, but it must at least be able to adequately describe their actions, including religious practices. Since a majority of traditional women's behaviors are grounded in sustaining, not resisting, religious prescriptions, the feminist theoretical use of agency needs to be reconceptualized.

## Agency

Approaches to agency have varied and many theorists have contributed towards a refinement of agency as a viable feminist theoretical category. Prior to feminist theorists' interest in agency, social theorists had been debating theories of human action, or agency, for decades.<sup>8</sup> Many feminist theorists have largely ignored this wider literature on agency, drawn from social theory, in favor of conceptions of agency that support a singular definition of agency as resistance. After discussing four theorists who have approached agency with a wider lens, I will draw upon both their work and my own ethnographic findings regarding LDS women to propose a way to reconceptualize agency.

Social theorist Anthony Giddens has dealt explicitly with theories of agency, and has largely been able to avoid the singular definition of agency that many feminist theorists have supported. Giddens defines agency as "the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world."<sup>9</sup> Giddens is concerned with the dualism that has come to exist within social theory. Two divisions are particularly vexing for him, the division between "conscious subject from social collectivities (commonly

referred to as the subject/object dualism), and the division between agency (that is, praxis) and collective forms of social life (commonly referred to as the structure/agency dualism).<sup>10</sup> Giddens proposes a way of overcoming these divisions by posing his structuration theory, which proposes that all actions in social life are “generated through enacted forms of conduct.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, structure, or “systems of generative rules and resources”<sup>12</sup> is “constituted through action, and reciprocally... action is constituted structurally.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, social actors produce and reproduce society.

Giddens does not claim that all actions are necessarily conscious or intentional, but that actors produce and reproduce society by “skilled performances.”<sup>14</sup> For Giddens, agency is limited by social conditions, but these structures are not necessarily limiting; they can also be enabling.<sup>15</sup> Giddens offers an interesting way of conceptualizing agency—it can be conscious, but does not necessarily have to be. Agency is used to negotiate a human actor’s relationship with society, and is constantly shifting. Although Giddens does contend that all interaction contains three essential elements—communication, power, and moral relations—his concept of agency is not over determined by issues of power and politics.<sup>16</sup> In this way, agency is left open and can be utilized to resist or maintain social norms.

Lois McNay, a feminist social theorist working in the area of identity, offers a compelling alternative to theories of agency that reduce human action to deterministic limits, proposing instead a conception that takes power as central. McNay challenges the way in which the notion of agency has been used exclusively within a “negative paradigm of identity formation.”<sup>17</sup> McNay critiques both Foucault and Lacan for negative theories of subjectification—theories that claim that humans are subject to limits and subjugation—and argues that feminist theorists have relied too heavily upon poststructuralism for theories of subjectivity and agency. This has resulted in theories that she believes are deterministic and encourage a passive construction of the subject with limited agency.

Agency, once reconceptualized, “yields an understanding of a creative or imaginative substrate to action” because “individuals may respond in unanticipated and innovative ways which may hinder, reinforce or catalyse social change.”<sup>18</sup> As an alternative, McNay draws upon Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Ricoeur, and especially psychoanalytic theorist Cornelius Castoriadis and offers what she calls a “generative logic for a theory of agency.” Generative agency encourages creative agentive responses and also acknowledges material power relations.<sup>19</sup>

As a feminist theorist, McNay is naturally concerned with women’s status, and her commitment to feminist analysis and politics is apparent when she emphasizes agency that enables humans to act creatively in response to hegemonic social systems.<sup>20</sup> She presumes that agents will desire social change and places particular emphasis on the ability of agents to creatively act in the face of social norms. For McNay, a theory of agency that allows for creative responses is necessary “to explain some of the ways women and men negotiate the problems and uncertainties that are a consequence of the restructuring of gender relations in late-capitalist societies.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, although McNay critiques the

limits of agency as constituted by poststructuralist feminists, who draw upon Foucault and Lacan, she maintains that agency is optimally used to challenge social norms.

Mary Keller, a scholar of religion, explicitly deals with agency as a theoretical category in *The Hammer and the Flute*, her research on spirit possessions.<sup>22</sup> Keller is interested in a theory of agency that will adequately address women who are possessed by spirits, deities or ancestors. She situates her work as both a critique of Western scholars who believe that agency implies a Western autonomous subject, and as a theory for addressing how scholars of possession studies can account for the agency of the possessing entity. Drawing upon post-colonial theorists, including Talal Asad, Keller rejects the notion that 'agent' is synonymous with 'subject' and rejects the idea that subjects are individual, autonomous agents.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, she adopts Asad's critique that power doesn't reside in the consciousness of an autonomous "agent" but instead, within "systems that authorize discourses and in disciplinary practices such as are found in religious traditions."<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is a socially and biologically bounded body that negotiates through a religious tradition, not a self-directed "agent."

Keller's concern is to deconstruct the idea that subjectivity is based upon individual humans who make willful choices. Keller sees this as part of an Enlightenment inheritance and finds it inadequate for explaining how women who have been possessed experience this phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Keller asserts that the possessing entity has agency and the possessed woman can be understood in terms of receptivity, neither of which are predicated upon self-directed choices independent of other influences. Keller constructs a theory of "instrumental agency," whereby agency is not predicated upon voluntary action of an individual subject. Keller explains that, "instrumental agency carves out a discursive space in which the agency of the possessing ancestor, deity, or spirit is not elided."<sup>26</sup> In this way, the possessed individual is played by the spirit like a hammer or a flute. Keller contends that she isn't claiming knowledge of possessing agency, for "that is epistemologically impossible," but she is preserving the agency of the possessing entity.<sup>27</sup> Keller's theory of agency is based upon a paradigm where autonomy and individuality are seen as a fiction, although individual bodies can be studied in order to understand how they navigate within systems of power, including religion. Thus, religion is not merely belief; it is embodied in behaviors that are limited by larger axis of power.

Saba Mahmood, an American professor with Middle Eastern roots, critiques feminist theory's reliance upon the liberal human subject in her ethnography of an Egyptian women's piety movement.<sup>28</sup> Mahmood's work also explicitly deals with the feminist theoretical category of agency. Mahmood aims to shift the analysis of agency within religious practices from a singular focus on resistance toward culturally and religiously specific frameworks that consider *both* resisting and supporting religious norms as valid examples of agency. Mahmood argues that liberal and progressive politics have become naturalized within the study of gender and that due to the two commitments of feminist theory, analysis and politics, freedom has become normative to feminism.<sup>29</sup> This has occurred

because liberalism has married notions of freedom with the idea that self-fulfillment comes from individual autonomy.<sup>30</sup> Within this framework, as long as one can demonstrate that they are acting autonomously “even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated” as one is thought to be living out one’s “true” desires.<sup>31</sup>

The challenge is that it is difficult to locate autonomy or freedom when one is compliant with norms, even if this is her “true” desire. As a result, within feminist theory, resistance or subversion has become valorized as a demonstration of one’s capacity to act freely and enact one’s true desires. Thus,

Even in instances when an explicit feminist agency is difficult to locate, there is a tendency among scholars to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination. When women’s actions seem to reinscribe what appear to be “instruments of their own oppression,” the social analyst can point to moments of disruption of, and articulation of points of opposition to, male authority- moments that are located either in the interstices of a woman’s consciousness (often read as a nascent feminist consciousness), or in the objective effects of women’s actions, however unintended these may be.<sup>32</sup>

In short, feminist theorists run the risk of projecting a desire for freedom and autonomy upon women who do not necessarily share these goals. For women participating in traditional religious cultures, this is especially problematic. Feminist theories of agency have largely replicated this pattern by emphasizing women’s resistance to norms.

Even within poststructuralist feminist theory, despite the commitment to the socially constructed subject, theories of agency have remained linked to progressive politics by emphasizing resistance. In other words, poststructuralist feminist theory has kept the liberal human subject intact. Mahmood aims to use poststructuralism, but also go beyond its concept of agency as resistance, by questioning the “overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion of resignification of social norms.”<sup>33</sup>

In order to adequately address the women Mahmood studied, she contends that “it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore,

if we recognize that the desire for freedom from norms is *not* an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times but is *profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions*, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?<sup>35</sup>

In this way, Mahmood does not claim to offer *the* theory of agency; instead she encourages the construction of culturally specific theories that examine behaviors that uphold *and* diverge from religious norms as constituting agency. Thus, agency is expanded and consideration may be given to “projects, discourses, and desires that are not captured by these terms.”<sup>36</sup> Mahmood reminds feminist theorists that “we cannot treat as natural and imitable only those desires that ensure the emergence of feminist politics.”<sup>37</sup>

Mahmood’s pull away from agency that is understood only as acts that resist norms is critical to increase the possibilities for identifying agency. However, I contend that unless agency is conceived of as a fluid continuum or spectrum, which includes more than modes that *either* resist or maintain norms, it will be stuck within another dualistic theoretical construction, which may enact another type of foreclosure.

### Reconceptualizing Agency

Giddens, McNay, Keller and Mahmood each offer insight into the retooling of the theoretical category of agency. The benefit of Giddens’ theory of agency is that he is not reliant on feminist theory, and therefore his theory of agency is not overly dependent upon power relations. Implicit in his theory of agency is the ability for one to either be in compliance with social norms or to go against them. Giddens’ theory of agency could benefit from an explicit discussion about the range of behaviors that can be considered agentive. Furthermore, because he is uncomfortable with dualism in social theory, it is likely that he would be uncomfortable with a dualistic definition of agency.

McNay contributes richly to the discussion on agency by identifying the tendency of theorists to keep agency within a deterministic paradigm. She attempts to detach agency from this notion by offering that agentive acts can be creative and help actors to break free from social limits. Unfortunately, McNay, a feminist theorist, assumes that agency is used, almost exclusively, to challenge social norms. She inadvertently closes off the possibility that agency can also be used to explicitly support religious and/or social norms.

Keller’s work on agency is important and helpful for its critique of Western notions of autonomy and independence, but her swing towards agency as non-voluntary is problematic. In this construct, individual will is replaced with systematic determination, as systems of power over-determine the behaviors of “individual bodies.” This also leaves agency within a dichotomous construct.

Like Keller, Mahmood builds her theory of agency around systems that are limiting, as the very conditions that subjugate women are those that contribute to their subjectivity. Agency is “defined in terms of individual responsibility that is bounded by both an eschatological structure and a social one.”<sup>38</sup> However, unlike Keller, Mahmood contends that individuals retain a level of volunteerism within this process. For Mahmood, agency is either the support *or* resistance of norms by an individual who is limited by religion and culture. Mahmood’s most poignant

contribution to the conversation is her explicit reminder that agency consists of acts that either maintain religious norms, or acts that resist religious norms. However, within her powerful construct, agency is still locked within a duality; it is *either* used to uphold *or* detract from religious and social constructs.

I aim to build upon the careful work of these theorists by highlighting the *simultaneous* nature of agency. I contend that agency often includes a fluid engagement within a spectrum of behaviors, including resistance *and* maintenance of norms, which fall between the poles of autonomy and subjugation. Concepts of agency must be attentive to the influence that the self, both conscious and unconscious, has on actions, as well as the limits that are imposed upon the self within the communities in which these subjects are embedded.. In this way, the self and her communal loyalties are always working together to mediate agentive responses to norms, be they religious, social or cultural. However, loyalties between the self and community will constantly be renegotiated so that diversity will be inevitable in actions, even moment to moment. Naturally, these mediated responses result in behaviors that range from resisting norms to upholding norms and often these occur simultaneously. Concepts of agency must be attentive to the marriage and constant renegotiations between self and community and the flexibility of behaviors that occur as a result of this fluid union, which often result in resisting norms while at the same time maintaining other norms. Thus, all modes of agency can be construed as constituting some form of simultaneous engagement between self and community within a continuum between autonomy and determinism.

The reconceptualization of agency as a simultaneous negotiation between the self and her community is a rejection of theories of agency that are based upon individual bodies that navigate systems of power within a deterministic paradigm. It is also a rejection of the idea that humans act completely autonomously, independent of all kin, social and biological interests. Instead, agency is mediated by loyalties between the self and the community that shift depending upon the context. As such, I propose that acknowledging the simultaneous nature of agency offers a helpful way of analyzing behaviors without delimiting agency within a dichotomy of resistance/support. This retooled concept of agency is useful for analyzing the actions and religious practices of traditional women who are bound by the need for individual salvation but committed to the strengthening of kinship and religio-cultural communities.

### Latter-day Saint Agency

Agency is part of the theological language that the LDS use to explain the role that humans have in influencing their ultimate destiny. It was commonly referred to as *free agency* by the women I worked with.<sup>39</sup> Agency is also part of the everyday vernacular that believers use to explain events. It is not unusual to hear a congregant speaking in a monthly testimony meeting about how their children

used their “free agency” and have gone astray, or, although less often, how they used their agency to serve the Lord. During my ethnography I observed that although the LDS theological definition of agency includes behaviors that are both in concert with and in opposition to God’s will, when the term “agency” was used, it was most often used to describe the actions of someone who had made a choice that was contrary to the will of God.

Within the LDS church, agency is a central element within a belief system that proposes that humans are engaged in a life-long test to prove their devotion to God and Jesus. Within this tradition, one can use their agency to “choose the right,” or one can use their agency to be disobedient to God’s laws and the covenants they have made with Him.

Latter-day Saints define agency in terms of one’s ability to make a “free choice” between options, usually between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ choices. One LDS leader explains “If, through our unrighteous choices, we have lost our footing on that path, we must remember the agency we were given, agency we may choose to exercise again... How do you reclaim that agency? How do you begin again to exercise it in the right way? *You choose to act in faith and obedience.*”<sup>40</sup> In other words, for Latter-day Saints, agency is the ability to choose between disobedience and obedience to God.

The Latter-day Saint concept of agency has an autonomous aspect to it, unlike the determinism within the post-structuralist feminist notion of agency. One contemporary LDS leader explains that “as sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, we have been blessed with the gift of moral agency, the capacity for *independent action and choice.*”<sup>41</sup> This description exemplifies how agency is thought to be choices made by “free” and “independent” individuals who are not hampered by social constructionism and systems of power that act to subjugate them.

### Ethnographic Particularities

My ethnography focused on a community of Latter-day Saints who were located within four wards, each adjacent to one another in a suburban environment in northern California. For confidentiality reasons and for ease of reading, I have chosen to refer to the community as Bay Town.

I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-one women and fifteen men, ranging in ages from 27 to 79. Because of the complementary gender norms that are embedded within the LDS cosmology, I worked with both men and women for purposes of clarity and in an attempt to gain a wider picture of the community, although my primary focus was upon the women. I used the insights and conversations with the men as a way of delineating differences, similarities and nuances that I may not have been privy to had I exclusively interviewed women.

The ward I observed was approximately 85% Caucasian, mostly middle-aged and middle-class. There were some variations in age, racial and ethnic



background, and class, but the average congregant was a white, middle-class, family member in the throws of raising children. The racial and ethnic diversity of the particular LDS community that I worked with, albeit slight, consisted of families who are Chinese, African, African American, Tongan, South American, Mexican, Malaysian, and Vietnamese. The women and men I worked with had varying family situations, and most of them had children. Many of the women I worked with held college degrees, particularly because they had been encouraged by the church leadership to become educated.<sup>42</sup> On average, the women I worked with had completed 3.4 years of college, with the most educated woman holding two master's degrees and virtually every woman attending some college. Of the women I studied, slightly more than 50% held a bachelor's degree or higher.

### Practicing Agency

The practices of the women I worked with both resisted and supported religious norms. I have demonstrated that cosmologically for LDS women and theoretically for certain feminist theorists, agency is not necessarily linked to a strict logic of resistance. I have introduced the retooled concept of agency as a way of recognizing the multiple impulses that inform agency, as played out between the self and community along a spectrum between subjugation and autonomy. This opening allows me to explore the varying outcomes of agency that the women I interviewed employ, demonstrating that agency is used to either transgress religious norms, sustain religious norms, or to *simultaneously* transgress and sustain religious norms.

An important tenet of the LDS faith is the belief in the patriarchal family. Within this construct, men have the priesthood and are considered the patriarch.<sup>43</sup> Historically, the patriarchal family has been constructed and interpreted to mean that men have the ability to make the major decisions within the family and to have the "final say," although I found within my ethnography that this is shifting. However, men have considerable authority within most LDS marriages.

Because of the historic premium placed on men's opinions within the home, a divergence from a husbands' authority can be seen as transgressive, not just of the family dynamic but of the larger religious tradition. One of the questions I asked the women I worked with was a hypothetical: if you had a strong desire to do something, say, go back to college, and your husband didn't support your decision, how would you handle this? During the many interviews I conducted, most of the women answered that this would never happen, because their husbands would find a way to make it happen if it was really important to them. Secondly, the women reminded me, this was an unlikely scenario because of the premium the church places on women's education.<sup>44</sup>

During an interview with Ellen, a Caucasian woman in her thirties, with four children and a full-time career, I asked this question expecting the same response.

I have left the dialogue in its entirety in order to be attentive to how the dialogue shaped the conversation and to allow Ellen to articulate herself.

*Amy:* Okay, this is a hypothetical: if you really wanted to go back to college, and Bob said ‘absolutely not, I don’t want you to go back,’ how would you handle that?

*Ellen:* *That did happen*....when we moved back here...I had gone to BYU for a semester, then we got married then I went to Utah Valley State for two more semesters while we lived there. So when we moved back, I was pregnant with John and I started working for my mom, just kind of part-time hours here and there, and I started realizing, wow, I kind of like this, so I told Bob, I want to go back to school. And he said ‘this isn’t important right now’....and I said...’yeah, it is...it is important to me!’ So we went back and forth and we went back and forth and he found things about what you know, writings from Spencer W. Kimball saying family is the most important thing, or he would highlight all the stuff and I remember talking to Sister Clive, she was the Relief Society President at the time and I remember telling her, ‘you know, this just doesn’t feel right because I feel like it’s a good decision, I feel like it would be good for me,’ and so she started finding quotes...we were in this quote battle, ....

*Amy:* Yeah...different leaders, church leaders...

*Ellen:* Yeah....and I had gone and prayed about it and I knew that it was a good thing—I could go back to school and so I just finally said ‘you know what? Whether you are going to support and help me on this...or you are not, this is the choice that I’m making...so where are you going to stand?’ And he just said, ‘okay then, I guess I’m supporting you.’

Ellen’s answer to my question clearly demonstrates that agency is a simultaneous negotiation. She negotiated between loyalties to her husband, who could have considerable authority in the home, herself, and her religious community. She was acting within limits that suggest that women’s most important role is as a mother who is perpetually available for her children, and as a wife who should heed her husbands counsel. However, within those limits she also found a way to fulfill her own desires by invoking prayer. Ellen relied upon and used her commitment to her religion, her personal relationship with deity, and the advice of certain church leaders in order to negotiate gendered norms within her religious culture. In this way, she simultaneously negotiated between self and community, and resistance and maintenance of religious norms.

In order to thicken this description, it is important to note the primacy of education within the LDS church. Ellen could transgress her husband’s authority

and the gender codes of the religion because education is stressed for both women and men in the church. But what if this disagreement had occurred because she wanted to have a career? Within the LDS tradition, women are expected to stay home with their children whenever it is possible<sup>45</sup> Could Ellen make a claim that her decision to embark upon a career was a valid maintenance of religious beliefs? This next vignette examines this by exploring how one of the women I worked with restructured her career in order to spend more time at home with her children, while simultaneously upholding and resisting particular gender norms.

Jill, a convert to the church, explained to me her first spiritual experience after joining the church. As a professional, Jill indicated that she had previously felt uncomfortable working full time and leaving her children in daycare, but upon joining the LDS church her discomfort became more acute. Jill explains,

So for me, there has been an evolution from being a full-time working mom, kids in daycare, you know, working husband, that whole thing, to joining the church and sort of having what I consider really being sort of my first really clear experience with the Holy Ghost. Of getting this really clear message... but feeling sort of helpless to do anything to change it and then just having the experience of feeling so strongly like 'this needs to change like immediately' and feeling really really really clear – just super clear, super strong, 'you need to reduce your hours and you need to make these changes – you need to be with your family, you need to be with your children' and this is what you know, this is very strong feeling and going home and just pretty much telling Bill you know, I mean 'we need to do this, you know I need to be home with the kids – we need to make some changes' and literally sitting down that night and saying and looking at numbers and you know, going through our regular process that we always go through and it working out perfectly – if I pull the kids out here, day care here, and I reduce my hours here, we – that is a wash – we can make that work.

Jill demonstrated agency by negotiating between the spiritual feelings she was having, her desire to spend more time with her children, and her love for her profession. These elements—her religious commitments, her loyalty to her kin and to herself—were each weighed carefully as she lived within a religious system that actively encourages women to be full-time mothers.

What is particularly interesting is that Jill interpreted her spiritual prompting to mean that she needed to reduce her hours, not to quit her job. In this way, her spiritual feelings both supported and slightly diverged from the prescribed religious ideal. Jill used agency to mediate between complex desires and loyalties.

She now drops her children off at school and drives to work, ending her work day immediately prior to the end of her children's school day. Jill continues,

I'm different than a lot of the other women in the church, you know, and so that is sort of interesting to me. I'm not a stay-at-home-mom. I don't just stay at home, but I do, I think, a really good job of balancing those two things because my kids don't know any different. I mean I was home cleaning my house, or at work seeing patients, it doesn't matter. They are at school.

This ethnographic vignette demonstrates the complexity of the women I worked with. Some of them used agency as a way to support the religious norms while still maintaining a slight distance from them. To interpret this example in a strict subversion/subordination dichotomy, Jill would have to be understood as a woman who is still finding space to subvert the patriarchal hegemonic discourse. But this would run contrary to her expressed motivations. A convert, who joined the religion in her thirties, it would be unlikely that Jill would join the LDS church simply to subvert it as an 'insider.' More importantly, Jill, a self-proclaimed feminist, does not speak in terms that are captured within this subversion/subordination duality. Jill finds value in spending more time with her children and has implemented a system where she can maximize her family time while still maintaining a career that brings her personal satisfaction and joy.

Agency was used repeatedly by the LDS women I studied as a way of negotiating complex circumstances and its deployment produced various behaviors, ranging from compliance to resistance and most often, simultaneous engagement of these impulses. It is important to note that the way in which feminist theorists define agency is different from the way in which Latter-day Saints define agency. Furthermore, these definitions do not need to "match" in order to be instructive. The LDS define agency as one's ability to either obey or disobey Heavenly Father. Even though the women I worked with mostly talked about agency in terms of disobedience, their theological understanding of agency included both the ability to obey or disobey God. Until recently, feminist theorists have conceptualized agency almost exclusively in terms of one's ability to disobey religious mandates. Feminist theorists have not articulated a definition of agency that included behaviors that support, or obey, religious norms until Mahmood's recent work. My point is not to conduct a strict comparison of LDS concepts of agency with feminist theorists' definitions of agency. Rather, I aim to build upon the work of previous scholars and to contribute to the refinement of the theoretical category of agency so that it is relevant and useful for feminist researchers as they examine the rich religious worlds of traditional women.

## Authorizing Agency

Within this system there are varying ways in which agency is authorized. Non-spiritual and spiritual actions are authorized by individuals, by God (*vis-à-vis* the individual believer through prayer, the religious leader, the patriarch of the family), by the local community (local social pressures/cultural pressures) and are all situated, ultimately, within larger theological and cultural boundaries. Many of the women I worked with relied heavily upon a type of self-interpreted authorization. What I mean by self-interpreted authorization is that they relied on their own ability to interpret their spiritual experiences, within the boundedness of the religious tradition. Many spiritual experiences are referred to as “personal revelation” within the LDS community.

Personal revelation entails the ability to receive unsolicited or solicited spiritual guidance, through prayer, priesthood blessings, scripture reading, interactions with other people, or feelings. Although priesthood blessings are administered by men, there are other ways that God’s wishes are manifested, and many do not require another individual to mediate between the believer and deity. Prayer, fasting, and reading one’s scriptures are various ways that believers seek personal revelation and interpret revelation individually. Personal revelation includes the belief that prayer can be answered in ways that are discernable.<sup>46</sup> Revelation is both hierarchical and linear, in that those in authority, usually men, have the ability to receive revelation for those they oversee and every member of the LDS church is considered able to receive ‘personal revelation’ that can assist them in making decisions for themselves and their family.<sup>47</sup> Thus, while men have the ability to receive institutional revelation, which ultimately sets the larger parameters for what is considered acceptable, all followers are entitled to their own unmediated personal revelation.

Personal revelation was most often described as a feeling, either of peace or confidence or sometimes discomfort (when they felt they were being spiritually discouraged from particular actions) by the women I worked with. Many of the women used prayer in order to negotiate the various commitments and loyalties within their lives. As I have shown, at times, prayer supported a counter-intuitive action, such as when Jill was not prompted to quit her job but to reduce her hours, or when Ellen was prompted to attend college despite her husband’s objections. In this way, personal revelation acted as a type of self-interpreted authorization for the women I worked with.

There is a certain amount of privacy that surrounds personal revelation. The women I worked with were very protective of personal revelations but would say things like “I prayed about it and I feel good about it,” or “I feel that this is a good decision for me and my family and I’ve prayed about it.” Once a person invokes personal revelation, there is a certain amount of space that is granted by other believers. It is highly unusual to question others’ personal revelations. There is fluidity that comes with an open canon and the belief that every person is entitled to an individual relationship with God, or that every person may know

God's wishes for them through dialogical engagements with deity.<sup>48</sup> This flexibility potentially results in a religious tradition that is highly individualized, although rampant relativism is tempered by the constructs that are set within a larger framework, which ultimately constitutes the sanctioned limits.<sup>49</sup>

What I want to draw attention to is how individual spiritual feelings, or personal revelations, can act to authorize a range of behaviors within the larger religious tradition. There are limits within the system, particularly surrounding issues of family and sexuality, but there is also considerable flexibility because of the belief in individual spiritual authority, where the will of God must be determined by each of His believing followers.<sup>50</sup> For example, one of the men I interviewed, Allen, indicated that his wife, Camille, felt spiritually guided in her career, and this influenced other decisions, such as the number of children they wanted and whether to work outside of the home full-time. In this way, when she acted upon her personal revelation, by limiting family size or working outside of the home, what may appear like subversion to some was actually motivated by a personal spiritual revelation. For Camille, working full time was an act of spiritual devotion, which was authorized by her interpretation of a priesthood blessing she had received. This self-interpreted authorization allowed Camille to simultaneously diverge from religious tradition while affirming her religious commitment.

The women I worked with displayed a range of behaviors and did not always measure their revelations against the institutional boundaries. This is not to say that they were resisting institutional authority, although I'm sure some did. Rather, most seemed unaware that the two could come into conflict. If God told them to act a certain way, why would He tell them something in contrast to the church guidelines? Furthermore, if their revelation did diverge from official church policy, they often felt that they were the exception to the rule, and because of their revelation, exempt from any policy that might be contrary to their personal revelation. This was not an act of subversion, but a feeling of being "different" or "special," or a feeling that God had a particular purpose for them that could not be exactly explained or understood logically.

American Latter-day Saint women offer feminist theoreticians an instructive way of reconceptualizing agency in order to be relevant to the practices of traditional religious women. The LDS women I worked with employed agency in diverse and complex ways, but it was most often a simultaneous engagement between individual, communal and kinship loyalties that operated within a system which allows for self-interpreted spiritual authorization.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Strathern noted that anthropology has had similar challenges and that a myth has come to exist within the field that there was no prior study of women except by feminist theory. She challenges this and demonstrates that anthropologists were studying women without a feminist analytic prior to the second wave of the American women's movement, which was eventually incorporated into the academy in the form of women's studies programs.
- <sup>2</sup> Rosemary Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989); Sheila Ruth, ed., *Issues in Feminism* (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing, 1995), 445-451.
- <sup>3</sup> Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- <sup>4</sup> The ERA was first proposed in 1923. For an alternate history based upon the work of women see Kim Blankenship and Anne Bezdek, "Rediscovering American Women" A Chronology Highlighting Women's History in the United States," in *Issues in Feminism*, ed. Sheila Ruth (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1995), 455-469.
- <sup>5</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> See Saba Mahmood; also Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001); Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
- <sup>7</sup> My ethnography was conducted during 2005 and 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> Ira S. Cohen, "Theories of Action and Praxis," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* ed. Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 73-74.
- <sup>9</sup> Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 81.
- <sup>10</sup> Cohen, 93.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Giddens, 134.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 169.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 168.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 169.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 133.
- <sup>17</sup> Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3-7.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 161.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 164.
- <sup>22</sup> Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power & Spirit Possession* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002).
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 64.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 55.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 74.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.
- <sup>29</sup> Other scholars have made the argument that feminism includes both analysis and politics but Mahmood is unique in linking the twin commitment to the tendency to define agency strictly in terms of resistance. For other scholars who have written on the dual role of feminist theory see Diane Fuss, Judith Butler, Marilyn Strathern and Wendy Brown.

<sup>30</sup> Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, eds. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 184. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Mahmood, "Agency," 186.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Mahmood, "Agency," 187.

<sup>38</sup> Pamela Klassen, "Agency, Embodiment, and Scrupulous Women," *Journal of Religion*, 84, no. 4 (Oct. 2004): 592-603. Klassen quotes a manuscript version of Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* and cites page 281.

<sup>39</sup> Although the women I interviewed referred to it as *free agency*, in recent years there has been a shift away from this language as several LDS Church leaders have referred to it as *moral agency*. For instance, see L. Lionel Kendrick, "Our Moral Agency," *Ensign* (Mar 1996): 28; David A. Bednar, "And Nothing Shall Offend Them," *Liabona* (Nov 2006): 89-92.

<sup>40</sup> Robert D. Hales, "To Act for Ourselves: The Gift and Blessings of Agency," *Ensign* (May 2006): 4-8.

<sup>41</sup> David A. Bednar, "And Nothing Shall Offend Them," *Liabona* (Nov 2006): 89-92. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon B. Hinkley, "Inspirational Thoughts," *Ensign* (June 1999): 2.

<sup>43</sup> Rex Eugene Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers: Mormon Covenant Organization* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> Gordon B. Hinkley, "Inspirational Thoughts," *Ensign* (June 1999): 2.

<sup>45</sup> Heaton, et al found that Mormons disapprove at higher rates than non-Mormons of mothers working, even if it is part time when children are under five years old. Yet, Mormon women tend to work outside of the home at close to national averages, indicating no substantial difference in practice. Heaton, Tim B., Kristen L. Goodman, Thomas B. Holman. "In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?" in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton and Lawrence A. Young (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 103-104.

<sup>46</sup> Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Todd Compton, "Non-Hierarchical Revelation" in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). Compton argues that historically, revelation has been non-hierarchical because some revelations that are revealed to those who are not in authority manage to find their way up to those who are in authority and become legitimized. Feminists working within the LDS community have critiqued the limited institutional authority that women have within the LDS church. See Marie Cornwall "The Institutional Role of Mormon Women," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1994): 239-264.

<sup>48</sup> Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*.



<sup>49</sup> As scholar Lawrence A. Young observes, their “emphasis on experience does not result in freedom of self from the community. For Mormon religious experience to be valid, it must be interpreted in ways that elevate the organization above the self.” Young makes an important observation about the place of individuality within the larger Mormon construct; it is subordinate to that of the community in some ways. However, my ethnographic findings suggest that Young overstates the priority of the community over the individual, they actually act more in concert; individual and kinship responsibilities are equally important. Lawrence Young, “Confronting Turbulent Environments: Issues in the Organizational Growth and Globalization of Mormonism,” in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* eds. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton and Lawrence A. Young (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 76.

<sup>50</sup> Sara Patterson has addressed the shifts within the LDS church regarding how institutional revelations become authorized, and argues that the early LDS church embraced a more democratic definition of revelation. Patterson contends that by the twentieth century, the dominant form of revelation within the LDS church is what she calls the “Moroni fideist model,” where members of the LDS church pray to determine if a revelation is true and rely on the Holy Ghost to witness to them the legitimacy of the revelation. Sara Patterson, “Divine revelations/delusions revealed: historical understandings of Revelation in debates over Mormonism” (Claremont: Claremont Graduate University, 2005).



## WOMEN WITH A BISHOPRIC

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As a missionary, I gained a sense for what the experience of holding priesthood might be like. I was and felt myself to be officially ordained to decipher God's whisperings for the benefit of others. I remember clearly the sense I developed of the power of my own efforts enhanced by God. I watched God quicken my learning of a new language; I heard Him give me words; I felt my words accompanied by the strength of his love and his witness. After my time as a missionary, I knew something about the spiritual power in Mormonism. I knew that God is present in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I assume that being a bishop fosters spiritual growth in a way similar to missionary service—God augments one's limited abilities to accomplish His will. One has the privilege of watching Him infuse beauty and comfort into people's lives. Second Wave Feminism, the feminism of the seventies and eighties, produced many insights about the potential for damage when only men are leaders. The insight that has most resonated with me—perhaps because of my mission experience—concerns the growth people experience in leadership positions. When women are denied a chance to wield responsibility, they are effectively denied the wisdom and experience that come with holding it.

An additional major insight of Second Wave Feminism is that excluding women from governing councils means that women's insights are absent during policy-making. This process can happen despite male leaders' best intentions to account for women's needs; women's different life-experience gives them perspectives that men do not have. But even those traditions that endorse female ordination usually keep women on the margins, in the small parishes, far from centers of power.<sup>1</sup> The term bishop comes from the Greek word *episkopos*, a term that means overseer, watcher, protector. These activities are not limited to those who hold specific Church titles. The following examples from religious history, contemporary life, and my own observations illustrate how some women have grown spiritually and increased in wisdom through a broadened pursuit of "bishopsing" activities, and how some LDS male bishops have pursued creative solutions for including more women in decision-making processes. In the LDS Church, a structure that prevents women from serving as the bishops of their wards can still include female influence on policy (when policy-makers choose to include women), and it still allows for the growth in wisdom and spiritual power that comes from bishopsing endeavors (when women choose to be active in those endeavors).

Sometimes the limitations placed on LDS women by the fact that we do not serve as bishops, stake presidents, apostles, or prophets pale in comparison to self-imposed limits. In a 2009 *Ensign* article, Diane Terry Woolf described that her husband had drowned two years after finishing his medical residency, before they had begun to reach financial solvency, and while she was pregnant with their fifth child. She wrote about how her life had changed when in prayer she stopped asking **why** and started asking **how**.<sup>2</sup> This paper honors that concept. Thinking about what we cannot do, and why we cannot, is less effective and less satisfying than asking God to help us do what we can. God blesses efforts to bless the world, which is what bishoping means.

### Broadening the Vision of Bishopric

Joseph Smith's revelation about Enoch (now Moses chapter 7) provides a close look at the breadth of episcopal activity. God does not make Enoch responsible to staff the callings in his ward, but He asks him to watch, charging him to oversee and protect. This passage is an ascension text, where a prophet is drawn up to God's presence to observe world history from the Divine perspective--past, present, and future. Here we see the active interplay between the episcopal activity of watching and other episcopal duties like preaching, baptizing, testifying, weeping, and hoping.

The section begins when Enoch has momentarily ceased traveling to pray. While praying, he hears a voice that tells him to turn and ascend Mount Simeon. When he reaches the top, the vision begins:

I beheld the heavens open, and I was clothed upon with glory; And I saw the Lord; and he stood before my face, and he talked with me, even as a man talketh one with another, face to face; and he said unto me: Look, and I will show unto thee the world for the space of many generations.

God thus welcomes Enoch into a form of partnership. He shows Enoch the doom awaiting iniquitous lands like Canaan, and then tells him to preach to help other peoples avoid the same fate. As a result of his efforts, many people join with Enoch, and their utopian community is eventually translated, taken as an entire city to God's bosom. After the translation, God looks on those who refused to repent and weeps.

And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency;

And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood; . . . Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer? . . . And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Enoch, and told Enoch all the doings of the children of men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook.

This passage not only provides a vision of God as an empathic parent, but it illustrates the interplay between watching and watching over. What shakes eternity is the sadness that comes from watching over. In these visceral images of tender concern and shattered aspirations, Enoch speaks with God and weeps with God. Much of the bishoping Enoch performed so long ago lies within an ungendered realm of watching over, a realm LDS women can choose to inhabit today.

#### Assuming a Bishopric

Latter-day Saint women bear a mandate to watch over, and to seek opportunities to render help. In the words Mormonism's foremost mother delivered to the Nauvoo Relief Society,

we must watch over ourselves—[She said] that she came into the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to do good—to get good, and to get into the celestial kingdom. She said we must cherish one another, watch over one another, comfort one another and gain instruction, that we may all sit down in heaven together.<sup>3</sup>

When “Mother Lucy’s” son addressed the society the previous week, he too spoke of “bishop” activity, though he did not explicitly relate that activity to members of Relief Society in the way that his mother did. Joseph directed “looking to the wants of the poor—searching after objects of charity, and in administering to their wants.”<sup>4</sup> The female Relief Society arose as a reform society, and has maintained that spirit for two hundred years. The historical duty of Relief Society is now honored as one of the four purposes of the Church. To the mandates 1) Proclaim the gospel, 2) Perfect the Saints, and 3) Redeem the dead, will be added: 4) Care for the poor and needy.<sup>5</sup> The new Church handbook states, “In fulfilling its purpose to help individuals and families qualify for exaltation, the Church focuses on divinely appointed responsibilities. These

include helping members live the gospel of Jesus Christ, gathering Israel through missionary work, caring for the poor and needy, and enabling the salvation of the dead by building temples and performing vicarious ordinances.”<sup>6</sup> Women’s work needn’t be limited to the realm of charity, but meeting physical needs can be an effective entry into the bishoping realm. The attempt to meet physical needs is rarely a limited interaction—it encompasses the teaching, mourning, celebrating, talking and walking with God that Enoch performed. Prayerfully seeking our own bishoprics provides opportunities to contribute, learn, and craft for ourselves rich and fulfilling lives.

The approach of this paper, looking to maximize female agency, contribution, and expertise inside of a tradition, is not atypical for feminists of the current generation. Religious women today often look for solutions to gender inequities within the framework of their traditions, and few are willing to sacrifice their religious ties on the altar of radical change. At a 2008 conference cosponsored by Radcliffe and Harvard Divinity School entitled “Gender and Religion: Authority, Power, and Agency,” Lisa Sowle Cahill explained: “Catholic women who came of age during Vatican II and today’s young Catholic women tend to “talk past each other” when it comes to issues of change.” Catholic feminisms shaped during the “confrontational political culture of the 1960s” often call for change to Church infrastructure and ordination policies (as well as issues like abortion and birth control). Cahill acknowledged that while young women might support the institutional change called for by their mothers, they focus more on finding within Catholicism a personal “sense of purpose and meaning.” Cahill attributes this shift to the fact that young women came of age in a “pluralistic, unstable, and confusing” popular culture.<sup>7</sup> Cahill’s description of the shift in feminist activity over the past forty years helps to explain the tensions that can surface between younger and more seasoned feminists. But examples abound of feminists today who are still possessed of their foremothers’ activist spirit. It is true that fewer agitate for radical restructuring, but neither do they turn to religion only as a personal sanctuary. Instead religion inspires and fortifies them as they create new spaces to work.<sup>8</sup>

Plentiful examples throughout LDS history show women enlarging the scope of their influence *within* the bounds of Mormon hierarchy. Sarah Granger Kimball worked to create the Church’s first Relief Society in Nauvoo. Amy Brown Lyman left Utah for social work training, then returned to establish a department for social services at Relief Society headquarters in 1919.<sup>9</sup> Romania Pratt (Penrose), Ellis and Margaret Shipp, and Martha Hughes (Cannon) also left Zion for training and returned to practice healthcare and to teach.<sup>10</sup> In Boston in the early 1970s, Claudia Bushman, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Carrel Sheldon, and many others combined their energies to found *Exponent II*, a quarterly journal that celebrated Mormonism and the accomplishments of Mormon women, while providing a space where Mormon women could grapple with the particular challenges they faced. The paper’s purpose was “to strengthen the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and to encourage and develop the talents of Mormon women.”<sup>11</sup> Regular publication of *Exponent II* recently resumed under

the direction of Aimee Hickman and Emily Clyde Curtis. Meanwhile, the *Exponent* blog flourishes, as do many other outposts in the Mormon blogging world which discuss questions of feminism and the experience of Mormon women, including Feminist Mormon Housewives, Segullah, Zelophehad's Daughters, and By Common Consent.<sup>12</sup>

There are also Mormon women today who expand the vision of watching over. For example, Carol Gray, a stay-at-home-mother, took the step from merely watching to watching over. Carol was a ward Relief Society president in England when war broke out in the Balkans. Carol watched the graphic British news reports and wept as she watched women trying to shield their children from gunfire and avoid bombs as they left their shelters to find food. Of Carol's seven children, only two still lived at home, and she decided to find a way to help those starving, desperate women she had seen on television. Carol started a charity drive. So many people responded to Carol's request for food and supplies that the materials filled the warehouse and some Church activities had to be cancelled that week. But then she received a phone call. The charity that had agreed to deliver these supplies would not be able to do it after all. Devastated, and wondering what to do with a building full of supplies, Carol prayed and strategized with her husband. She decided to sell her sports car, buy a lorry, and join a convoy to deliver those supplies herself. When she and her seventeen-year-old daughter arrived, the people who greeted them asked which of the truck drivers were willing to enter the war zone to distribute materials. Carol and her daughter immediately volunteered, not realizing they would be the only ones to do so. So Carol and her daughter drove into the no-man's land and personally distributed supplies. While she delivered that aid, Carol saw myriad additional ways she could help, and immediately on her return to England she began preparing for another trip. In all Carol made 34 trips (1992-1997), leading many of the convoys herself. But as the UN and USAID began to provide aid, Carol felt her efforts could be more effective elsewhere. She called the Church Humanitarian Services and asked them where in the world the needs were greatest, and they suggested West Africa. So Carol started an NGO that has been working in Ghana<sup>13</sup>. Three hundred and fifty students now attend the school Carol's efforts have built. Her work also resulted in the completion of two orphanages, and the organization is about to break ground for a medical center. Carol has had to delegate the most recent of this work because of a battle with terminal cancer.

There is a difference between Carol Gray and her bishop. Carol does not hear confessions and does not assign callings in her ward, but she has done analogous work in her NGO<sup>14</sup>—listening to problems, allocating responsibilities. Historical examples of this kind of female “bishop” abound. In Catholicism, for example, they include Mother Theresa, who found a need and dedicated herself to serving and leading in attempt to meet that need. Mother Theresa could have spent her days as a nun expressing anger that she could not be a priest, arch-bishop, or Pope. But instead she assumed a bishopric. Her hero was St. Teresa of Avila, another “bishop” in the Christian tradition. Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement was also a “bishop” in this broad, non-official sense.

## Raising Female Voices

Feminists of the Second Wave articulated another danger when only men are in leadership positions, and that is that women are not present to represent and support their own interests, so the general good gets defined in terms of what is good for men. I have been in several wards where official bishops who were sensitive to this problem created new callings that would bring more women into their meetings. Some attempts to include female perspectives in governing councils have been more effective than others. I share here my own responses to these experiments. I wish to emphasize that these experiences are particular to me, and alone they provide an insufficient basis to evaluate the merits of these experiments. But they do provide a starting point for conversation and creative thinking. There are better and worse ways to involve women in deliberations.

As a sisters' leader in the MTC, I felt like a spy, reporting on women in situations where men were not allowed to watch them instead of actually representing their concerns. I was instructed to check in on the sisters every night while wandering through their dormitories. On Sunday mornings, I met with my branch president in a room crowded with men—most of them young missionaries—while my companion waited on the other side of a closed door. At the beginning of the meeting, I was to disclose any misdeeds I had witnessed, give the name of anyone who seemed on the verge of a breakdown, and then I was sent out of the room so the men could make their plans and speak freely about problems with the elders. Thankfully, I saw no evidence of wrongdoing among my sisters, and all appeared to maintain sufficiently high spirits while I held this responsibility. Had I felt obliged to report one of them, I would have faced a crisis of divided loyalties. That room full of men was not a safe place to reveal either the transgression or the suffering of a fellow sister. I felt my own presence there was regarded as a necessary evil—there was no other appropriate way for the leaders to obtain information about the conduct of sister missionaries in their living quarters. When I tried in a letter to explain my feelings to the branch president, hoping he could lend me spiritual insight and find a less humiliating method to dismiss me from the room, he responded by berating me in front of that room full of elders, repeatedly telling me that women do not hold leadership positions in the Church. I had not considered desiring a leadership position in the Church. My naïve intention had simply been to express my discomfort so I could have help figuring out how to perform my calling more effectively.<sup>15</sup>

Other experiences have been more positive. One bishop called me as a scheduler, a counterpart to the executive secretary where I sat through meetings in order to learn whom the bishop needed to see. I also served on the liturgy committee, which meant I planned sacrament meeting topics, assigned people to give talks, and coordinated themes with the male ward music coordinator. For both of these callings I occasionally offered my own perspective, though usually only when the bishop directly asked for it. I worked in a similar role years later—



this time I was called the sacrament meeting coordinator—and by then I had learned how to contribute more effectively. The bishop asked me to attend ward council meetings to listen to general trends and concerns in the ward so that I could make informed decisions about what topics would be relevant. He was explicit about wanting to hear my opinions and insights during the meetings. The music coordinator was also female and coordinated music to the themes of the meetings in a similar way. In these meetings I obliged myself to brainstorm, to suggest ideas before making sure they were perfect, and to actively restate others' words to further our effective communication.

I was able to contribute more effectively in meetings with the bishopric as I gained practice speaking up in the larger world—as a graduate student and a teacher. It was my pursuit of a bishopric in the larger world that prepared me to be helpful to an LDS ward bishopric. I was more effective in this last role because of my own development rather than the nature of my responsibility. Finally, I was learning that the reason I kept being invited to attend these meetings was because the bishops wanted to broaden the base of perspectives represented during the decision-making process, so they would make choices that served a larger percentage of the congregation. They all actively sought female perspectives. But it took me years to learn how to be of real assistance. In the combination of nature and nurture that had been my youth, I was not, by the age of 21, outspoken. My hero had been a fictional American Indian guide from a young adult short story (I forget the title) who maintained silence and spoke only when he had something of consequence to say. I tried to follow his example. But the resulting conversational circumspection did not contribute to the aims of the bishops who had invited me to their meetings. They needed me to talk.

I share these personal experiences because due to some combination of low testosterone levels and socialization, women too often hesitate to speak. This was another insight of Second Wave Feminism, and women in the seventies and eighties organized assertiveness training courses to help them learn to speak out. But women still hesitate to speak today. Whether it is in church, lectures, or business meetings, men speak more frequently than women. Slowly I came to realize that the men who spoke in the meetings I attended, and the men who spoke up in Gospel Doctrine at church and in my classes at Divinity School, did not wait to speak until they had something brilliant to say. Often their imperfect offerings were helpful contributions; other times they were not. Regardless, speaking up helped the speakers to practice, to think things through, to develop a voice.

The way we internalize roles assigned according to biological sex is misleading. Yes, men have more leadership callings in the church than women, but what they do in those callings is not so different from what women do as they try to live up to a Mormon ideal. To say that one group runs the Church and one raises the children is an oversimplification; the lines are more blurred than that. Women and men have a mandate to watch over. Amidst the theological and institutional barriers between women and bishopric, there is more freedom in

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lived practice than we imagine is written in official texts. Women can choose to assume a bishopric, and policy-makers can choose to hear their voices.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a sociological analysis on women and ordination in the 19th- and 20th-century United States, see Chaves, Mark. *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- <sup>2</sup> Woolf, Diane Terry. "Putting My Hand in the Lord's." *Ensign*. Jan 2009, 36–39.
- <sup>3</sup> Lucy Mack Smith. Relief Society Minutes, 1842-1844, Church History Library, 24 March 1842.
- <sup>4</sup> Relief Society Minutes, 1842-1844, Church History Library, 17 March 1842.
- <sup>5</sup> Stack, Peggy Fletcher. "New LDS emphasis: Care for the needy." *Salt Lake Tribune*. 12/10/2009.
- <sup>6</sup> <http://lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/priesthood-principles?lang=eng#22>
- <sup>7</sup> Blagg, Deborah. *Exploring the Tangled Histories of Women and Religion*. Radcliffe Quarterly, Summer 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> For examples of these efforts, see: Griffith, R. Marie. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. , Ed. Abdul-Ghafur, Salemah, Ed. *Living Islam Out Loud: Muslim American Women Speak*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005. Davidman, Lynn. *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Bischoff, Claire and Rachel Gaffron, eds. *My Red Couch and Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005. Religious women during the Second Wave speak about their efforts both within and in conflict with their traditions in Braude, Ann. ed. *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- <sup>9</sup> Derr, Jill, Mulvay. "Changing Relief Society Charity to Make Way for Welfare, 1930-1944." *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington*. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, eds. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987.
- <sup>10</sup> Derr, Jill Mulvay, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992. 107
- <sup>11</sup> Bushman, Claudia. "My Short, Happy Life with Exponent II." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Volume 36, Number 3 / Fall 2003. 179-192
- <sup>12</sup> See [exponentblog.blogspot.com](http://exponentblog.blogspot.com), [www.feministmormonhousewives.org](http://www.feministmormonhousewives.org), [www.segullah.org/blog/](http://www.segullah.org/blog/), [zelophehadsdaughters.com](http://zelophehadsdaughters.com), [bycommonconsent.com](http://bycommonconsent.com).
- <sup>13</sup> Their first fact-finding trip was in 2000.
- <sup>14</sup> In the UK, the NGO is called HUGS TLC, Mmofra Trom Foundation in the US. [www.mmofracrom.org](http://www.mmofracrom.org).
- <sup>15</sup> Holbrook, Kate. "Conflicts that Fortify: The Landscape of My Spiritual Home." Bischoff, Claire and Rachel Gaffron, Eds. *My Red Couch and Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith*.