



BY COMMON CONSENT



VOLUME 10, NO. 1

January 2004

THE TEMPLE AS CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

Paul James Toscano

[Note: This essay begins a four-part series on the temple that will be published in *By Common Consent* in 2004.]

The temple ceremony is admittedly secret and guarded, but we must not see it in elitist terms. Instead, we must see it as requiring us to take upon ourselves the image of Christ, the profession of Christ, and the work of Christ. We must not think that it is only for us the worthy--we few, we chosen few, we band of brothers. We must see that, if we are chosen, it is to proclaim the universality of God's saving grace. If we have been elected by God, it is an election to be the servants of all and the judges of none. If we are priests and priestesses, it is to make sacrifice not to get gain. Just as Christ's death is meant to bring forth life, the secret ritual of the temple is meant to teach us to avoid elitism, narcissism, and provincialism, to accept all of God's priests and priestesses in whatever tradition they may be found, and to recognize the hand of God moving beyond our traditions and beyond our control in the hearts of those who are in many respects quite alien to us.

If the temple is not viewed as a Christian sacrament, it will become for us only a celebration of elitism, though masked as humanitarianism, morality, and fraternity/sorority. These are not the same as holiness. They contain no mystery. There is no mystery in making and keeping covenants, or being a good neighbor, or

doing one's duty, or giving an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, or helping the helpless. I do not wish to denigrate the social gospel. It is full of compassion and is responsible for a great deal of good in the world. And, of course, it is the product of religion. But it is not the heart and soul of religion, at least not for me.

Before I was endowed, I would sometimes go with others to visit the temple grounds in Los Angeles, in Salt Lake, in Oakland, and in St. George. We had no recommends and could not enter. But we went anyway. Why? What was attracting us? Looking back at these events now, I believe that we went because of the mystery of it all. Because there was something hidden, something yet to be discovered, something true that lay out of reach.

I have come to believe that life without mystery is life without meaning. The here and now is defined in a sense by the great beyond. The forms that are visible to us are important in large part because of the substance that is invisible to us. We value the object without because of the subject within. The known and the unknown are necessary elements in the paradox of being.

I remember a long trip I took with some friends down the Baja peninsula. It was the summer of 1976. We had a big truck, a huge camping rig, and a large boat; and we were loaded down with all kinds of American stuff. We went through the Mexican border like a luxury liner through the Panama Canal. We were headed into the unknown, so we had our birth certificates secure so we could get back into "America." We threaded our

way along the poor Mexican roads, through Tijuana, and then on down the sandy western coast where the water was turquoise, and the desert parched, and there was nothing else. After a day's ride, we turned southeastward and inland into more turquoise sky, and parched desert, and vast tracts of arid expanse. On the eastern coast, we turned south again, driving along the edge of the Sea of Cortez, the Vermillion Sea and more turquoise sky, and parched desert, and lonely emptiness. And in the middle of this wilderness, we came upon a little town--a place out of the past it seemed, a kind of Mexican Shangri-la, a Brigadoon with piccante sauce. A canal slipped through the center of town--a ribbon of green water smooth as silk, threading its cool way in the hot, hot, hot-as-chili-peppers afternoon. The town square was surrounded by a few little shops, a cantina, and a general store that was small and stuffy. Most of the customers were flies. But it had everything you could want in such a town.

The main building there was a big adobe church, two stories high, all whitewashed and gleaming in the sun, with big wooden doors and a red tile roof. Inside it was quiet and very cool. Bright, long clear windows floated high along both walls letting in the light. On the chill tile floor rested a few wooden pews, and up front a simple altar with some big candles and a little gold tabernacle for the Sacred Host. Suspended above it like some great sword of Damocles was a massive wooden crucifix on which was painted a life-sized Christ, hanging from his palms, looking sad and mysterious.

We stood silently for a long time in the bright cool silence of that sacred space. And then my friend's mother, who was quite a Mormon lady, turned to me and said: "This chapel makes me wish I were a Catholic and could have a place to come, and kneel, and not have to hear anyone talk, and not worry about always being right."

As Mormons we pride ourselves in having all the answers and in not having to put up with mysteries. But I have come to believe that the day we come to know everything and experience

everything is the day we will have become at once everything and nothing. When there are no more hidden places or sacred spaces or ineffables, there will be no more reason for being, and being will cease.

That is why the temple is so vital to us. The temple must remain for us a symbol of the mystery that lies beyond, the mystery that we must ever pursue, the wine-dark sea that always lies beyond the lengthening shoreline of our certainty. The temple must continue to remind us that a people without mystery is a people without God.

SOME OF US BUT NOT ALL OF US

Fred S. North

Some of us but not all of us look forward to the time when all church meetings will let out 5 to 10 minutes early.

Some of us but not all of us believe that, if God is in charge of heaven, it will be a much better place to live than what we have been told.

Some of us but not all of us look forward to the time when we can get our many questions on religion answered.

Some of us but not all of us believe that a religion which promotes censorship is insecure.

Some of us but not all of us believe that people, when discussing matters of faith, should say, "I believe" more often than they say, "I know."

Some of us but not all of us believe that open, honest, and meaningful discussions are an indication that a church has credibility.

Some of us but not all of us don't understand why some church members believe that the U.S. Constitution is God-inspired but resent the concepts of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion.

Some of us but not all of us believe that the learning curve in religious matters should be more than a horizontal line.

Some of us but not all of us believe that repetition of false doctrine doesn't change the fact that it is still false doctrine.

Some of us but not all of us believe that there are times when trivial matters get more attention in church than matters of importance.

Some of us but not all of us don't mind

hearing the same lesson in church 10 or 20 times but 100 times may be too much.

Some of us but not all of us believe that intimidation in a church setting is a cover-up for ignorance.

FORGIVENESS

Harry Robert Fox Jr.

In Matthew 6:12 in what is commonly called the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells us to pray that God will forgive our trespasses "as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matt. 6:12). He further explains: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you" (w. 14-15).

It would seem that God forgives us depending wholly upon our forgiveness of others. But such conclusion could be reached only if we fail to notice the context in which he spoke--which was the Beatitudes, which preface the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes are spoken in the indicative mood while most of the rest of the sermon is imperative. This means that, before God commands us to be or do anything, He first bestows on us His empowering grace ("blessed are . . .") communicated in the Beatitudes (and many other passages).

Jesus said that all of God's commandments, which includes the commandment to forgive, can be condensed into one all-inclusive commandment: to love God with all that we are and have and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But (thankfully) we are taught (1 John 4:19) that before we can love God or anyone else, we must first be loved. This basic truth needs to be applied to forgiveness: Before we can forgive others, we must understand that God forgave us long before He asked us to forgive others. How do we know this? Because before we even knew that we needed forgiveness, repented, or asked for forgiveness--when we were still enemies of God and participated vicariously in nailing Jesus to the cross--God forgave us when Jesus prayed "Father, forgive them!"

In other words, when we did our worst to

God in nailing His Son to the cross, He did His best for us! --not when we were at our obedient best but when we were at our disobedient worst. As Paul says: "While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6, RSV). He explains: "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet *sinner*s Christ died for us. . . . While we were *enemies* [of God] we were reconciled by the death of His son" (w. 8, 10; emphasis mine.)

Jesus also confirms this view of forgiveness in the parable of the unjust servant (Matt. 18:23-27). A king's servant owed him ten thousand talents, an amount far beyond what he could ever repay, but the king, "out of pity for him . . . forgave him the debt." Only when we who have been forgiven so much--even though we were God's enemies--remember such divine forgiveness can we obey God's imperative to forgive others. Even our enemies!

THOUGHTS FOR A NEW YEAR

L. Jackson Waite

History deals sharply with two groups of souls: those who fall below the mean of the society and those who rise above and beyond. Both groups we put in our prisons, and more often murder the latter, when we can. Socrates, Christ, Sir Thomas More, Joseph Smith, Gandhi, Martin Luther King--all were murdered by their contemporaries. Then, of course, we build monuments to them.

Over the past one-half century, I have had some fifteen or so major conflicts with my church. All but one or two have been resolved by the Church's changing its position. Whenever I had a philosophy student ready to quit the church, I would advise him or her to be patient, that the Church would eventually "get there." I always advised my students, by word and by action, not to leave the Church but to be patient and work for change within.

Students raised Mormon have two choices: Be an institutional Mormon and work within the system, or become a cultural Mormon, and work outside the system for the higher moral value. I have many close friends who have chosen each of

these positions. Lowell Bennion tried to work within. Sterling McMurrin, preeminent Mormon philosopher of the twentieth century, tried doing both. Dr. Chauncy Harris, vice president of the University of Chicago, tried the first but gave up and became a cultural Mormon.

When it comes to religion and philosophic thought, we have a major challenge: harmonizing credulity and skepticism. Credulity (the impulse to believe anything no matter how stupid), untempered by skepticism, leads eventually to fanaticism and to superstition. Skepticism, left untempered by faith and by belief, leads to atheism. All reason, without faith, leads to total disbelief in the entire metaphysical world. As R. Cohen has observed: "Without a legal order and some ministry of religious insight, the path to anarchy and worldliness is indeed dangerously shortened. But without a realization of the essential limitations of legalism and clericalism, there is no way of defending the free human or spiritual life from fanaticism and superstition" (quoted by Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright*, 234).

In my opinion, many Mormon academics and scholars leave the Church because they tend to put all their eggs in the basket of skepticism. If you doubt everything, all religion, and eventually God, you become less interested in family and community and less willing to invest effort in them. Skeptics are not inclined to pull handcars over the plains and Rocky Mountains to build a common religious community. The same scandal, reversed, is that the individual lost in credulity has failed to doubt his or her own illusions. People willing to give their all, even life itself, for their illusion--no matter what it is--have just lost their most precious asset: their own dignity.

How do we work through all these problems, preserving love, harmony and unity in the human family, without creating an empty chair at the table? Robert Frost said: "Always fall in with what you're asked to accept. Take what is given, and make it over your way. My aim in life has always been to hold my own with whatever's going. Not against: with."

I think he identifies the great mortal task. We must keep our souls the end and make institutions the means. While all formal authority comes from the top down, ultimate authority comes from the bottom up, a Mormon concept our General Authorities would do well to appreciate. We must not leave the organized church, though it drives many of us crazy. That would be to deny the human need to belong and contribute.

Hate and separation are not the answer. We must learn to love one another, wherever we are in the larger family, and make a reasoned peace, without victory, with all the countervailing and "wacky" forces of life that impact us. Let Spinoza encourage us: "All things noble are as difficult as they are rare."

Conference Critique

CHURCH "SCRIPTS" MEET REALITY

The discussion group of conference observers who gathered to discuss October Conference talks gave mixed responses to addresses that asserted an apparently positive principle but without explicating a more complex reality.

One example was President Faust's acknowledgment that some people struggle with doubts (a positive acknowledgement) but with the downside, commented one observer, that he "always modified 'questions' by 'private,' clearly implying that such questions were not open for discussion, that a testimony was an all-or-nothing thing, and that if you just prayed about it, you would unfailingly get an answer. The problem is that there's no place to go if your real-life experience doesn't match this script."

President Faust identified as one source of troubling questions episodes in Church history that "are not completely understood." Participants laughed when one woman quoted her husband as responding, "Oh, I think it's when these episodes are understood that people have problems with them."

Another example was Elder Merrill Bateman's talk in the priesthood session about his son Michael who refused a blessing at the beginning of school and then was hit by a car a few months later. "Even though he added a disclaimer that the lack of blessing didn't cause the accident, the narrative had another message," commented one attendee, "especially when the punch line was that Michael was first in line for his blessing the next time around."

Similarly, Bishop Richard Edgley's finding "every-

day heroes" in his own ward was genuinely inspirational, but two of the examples involved worthy young men headed toward their missions, one of whom was killed, the other of whom was so seriously injured that he has been comatose for twenty years. "If God is guiding missionaries to the degree that he's telling them what doors to knock on, then what's the conclusion about these situations?" queried an observer.

"The Church has scripts that explain difficult realities, and these particular stories tell us how parents whose missionary sons are killed or seriously injured are supposed to act," amplified another, "but what if the script doesn't fit your reality? Suppose you don't feel that your dead son is simply serving his mission on the other side? Suppose you really mind that your mission-bound son has been comatose for twenty years?"

A third added, "In every testimony meeting, we hear from people who say that the Lord has given them all of these wonderful blessings and that they see God's hand in their lives every day. That's fine, but what about equal time for the people who have had really terrible, horrible lives?"

A fourth summarized, "I think people who have faith-affirming experiences should testify to them, but I think they should make it clear that they are blessed, not that they are special. And I think we also need to make it clear that sometimes really horrible people get amazing blessings."

Janice Allred continued her usual classification of conference messages as Christian living (three--"an all-time low"), doctrinal (five), and institutional (seventeen, "an all-time high") of the twenty-five given in five sessions.

In contrast to April conference where Elder Jeffrey R. Holland had given a unusual harsh talk, in essence telling parents with questions to model only ultra-orthodox behavior while Elder Boyd K. Packer had given a unusually gentle talk about the role of grandparents, "they were back to their old selves." Elder Holland gave a stimulating address on a little-explored topic: the nature of God the Father. His argument was that, rather than being a distant and judgmental figure, the Father was more truly revealed through Jesus Christ's compassion and mercy.

Elder Packer, in contrast, though ostensibly talking about the importance of chastity, spent "about a third of his time establishing his apostolic authority," which meant that he did not need to provide reasons for his position. One commentator character-

ized President Packer's "sound-bite arguments" in response to the new liberal standards of "diversity, tolerance, and choice" as "totally goofy." A second observer speculated that Mormons following his advice would become "volunteer targets," since "parroting a position without being able to really defend it is not a position that anyone is going to respect." A third queried whether "appropriating the rhetoric of the enemy" to dismantle it is not an ethically problematic position. Elder Packer's assurance, in a context strongly implying homosexuality ("that which they thought couldn't be changed will be changed") prompted a philosophical sigh from one participant and the description that "the Church retreats toward reality very slowly."

A highly praised talk was Elder Craig Zwick's, built around the theme of hands, and including the story of a blind man running a marathon with the guidance of a seeing friend.

Participants noticed several new trends or intensifications of continuing trends, including: (1) the comments by both Elder Oaks and President Hinckley that hierarchy has no relationship to the value of the service rendered in callings--an assertion which, ironically, is always made only by people in higher hierarchial positions, (2) the importance of repentance, (3) the frequently repeated motif that "God knows your name," which one participant speculated "may be the new buzz phrase," (4) the Church's divine and therefore irresistible mission, (5) continued anti-gay rhetoric in quotations from the Proclamation on the Family, the characterization of "unnatural" behavior which echoes BYU's Richard Wilkins's vaunted defense of the "natural family" ("What's an unnatural family?" wondered one listener), and (6) the terrors of "the world."

Speakers on this last theme, however, did not mention problems like war (except for President Hinckley's description of 97-year-old Elder Haight as an "old warrior"), political turmoil, or economic instability but instead concentrated on inappropriate media and other "moral evils." One participant pointed out that this approach was understandable: times are genuinely tense and the Church has refused to take an activist position on the economy, the war, or politics (except for its anti-gay rights stance); but instructing members to control Internet use in their homes and complain to networks about inappropriate TV shows gives them the feeling that they are doing something. (No one complained that these instructions were wrong--just that they seemed to be overlooking more serious prob-

lems.)

Alert listeners wondered if the frequent citations from Joseph Smith's First Vision (particularly by President Faust and Elder Maxwell) were following up on President Hinckley's statement at the previous conference that the First Vision was the line-in-the-sand issue that proved Joseph Smith was either a prophet or "a fraud" (his word) and which observers had interpreted as backing away from making the same claim about the Book of Mormon.

Gordon B. Hinckley, speaking at the Relief Society conference in the week preceding general conference, "ran through his usual approach of identifying each demographic group of women and praising them," but also "took a step back" from his position, announced at his first press conference as president, that women juggling home and professional commitments were not under condemnation but just should "do the best they can." In this year's remarks, he did not make even the usual ritual acknowledgement that some women were required to work. "Even when he was talking about single women, he said only that their cheery smiles and helping hands were needed in the Church," pointed out one observer.

His sole mention of professional employment was to warn mothers of teenagers that they didn't need "the mansion with the mortgage." Listeners felt that this position represented ignorance of contemporary housing costs and also denial of the fact that mortgage failure rates in Utah were among the highest in the nation, at least partly because of large families. Another listener also cited a BYU professor quoted in a *City Weekly* article that many young

couples had internalized the "cultural myth" that if you pay your tithing "no matter what," there will always be enough money. At least two conference speakers had also included "tithing inspirational stories" of the kind that encouraged such thinking.

A couple of observers noticed that those who spoke about missionary work carefully observed a subtle distinction: "When they spoke about the current population of actual missionaries, they included 'elders and sisters.' But when they talked about the premission population, it was exclusively male. Parents should encourage their sons to go on missions. The best of all possible decisions a young man could make would be to serve a mission, etc."

Nominated for "best talk" were (1) Elder Holland, (2) Elder William W. Parmley whose focus on the kind of behavior Christ expected of his disciples was "striking. It was refreshingly radical in contrast to the usual list of pray, read the scripture, do your callings, hold family home evening, etc."; (3) Sister Sydney Smith Reynolds, whose well-organized talk about service was illustrated with examples of strong, faithful women.

Nominated for "worst talk" were (1) President Packer, and (2) Elder Lynn Mikkelsen's "dirty laundry" talk, which had confused most listeners. The emphasis on forgiveness was a positive strand, but it was defeated by his other generalizations. His half-sentence on reporting to the proper authorities seemed a reluctant concession to the mandated reporting of sexual abuse but also seemed to leave the option open of, in other circumstances, not reporting even illegal behavior.

Mormon Alliance
1519 Roberta Street
Salt Lake City, UT 84115