



BY COMMON CONSENT



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CONFERENCE CRITIQUE

Since the Church recently lost a \$4.2 lawsuit for child abuse, has threatened with excommunication a gay Mormon man who legally married his partner in Canada, and succeeded in getting a P.S. appended to HBO's first showing of *Big Love* assuring viewers that "the Mormon Church officially banned the practice of polygamy in 1890," what will April conference bring?

The semi-annual conference critique will explore trends and topics that emerge from this year's April conference on Monday, April 3, 2006, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in Conference Room A at the main library downtown (210 E. 400 South). This conference room is the first on the north side, lower level. Take the elevator just inside the east mall entry down one floor. Janice Allred will lead this freewheeling and insightful exchange.

"Thou Art That": On Mormon Divinity Part 1

Bob McCue

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods. -- St. Thomas Aquinas

Introduction

Late in Joseph Smith's career, he thrilled a Mormon congregation with a discourse delivered at the funeral of King Follett¹ during which he made public various revelations from God related to humankind's divine origins and potential. As a result, Lorenzo Snow coined his famous couplet:

As Man Is, God Once Was
As God Is, Man May Become

For generations this was a basic Mormon belief and perceived by most faithful Mormons to set them apart from (and above) all other religions. "Man can become God" was also such a blasphemous human exaltation and Divine diminution that it proved to many religious people that Mormons were not Christian.

President Gordon B. Hinckley and other Mormon leaders are increasing their efforts to become part of the Christian mainstream and reduce their reliance on increasingly rickety Mormon beliefs such as the literal historicity of the Book of Mormon. Likely as a result, Mormonism's "We are Gods in embryo" doctrine has been at least deemphasized and perhaps discarded.²

The purpose of this essay is to examine this doctrine's roots and possible rehabilitation.

History

The idea that man partakes of God's nature goes deep into the oldest religious traditions. For Hindus, the earliest notion of the power behind religious rituals was called "Brahman"³ which came to be understood as the "world soul," the ground from which all being arises. The ancient Hindu conception of Brahman deftly anticipates the epistemic humility that characterizes modern science. That is, Brahman is all there is, and our ability to understand is so puny that it would be folly to attempt a definition. Hence, the definitions we find of Brahman tend to be negative statements that serve mostly to remind us of our inability to define him/her/it: "Brahman is not x; Brahman is not y; etc."

And from the Hindu point of view, Atman is the essence of the human soul and part of Brahman. This leads to the Vedanta's famous teaching "Thou art That".

This idea runs the length and breadth of Hindu as well as much other Eastern philosophy. For example, a scientist who was raised in the Hindu tradition describes the deepest meditative state in these terms: "The experience of losing the boundaries of one's ego, the feeling of having transcended time and space, gives the feeling of becoming one with the universe, of "seeing" the entire macrocosm in one's own mind. It is not a coincidence that the teaching of Vedanta--"Thou art That"--has been interpreted by so many as implying that I (the enlightened one) am Brahman, that I am the universe, that my mind is the mind of the entire cosmos and by controlling my mind, I can control the cosmos."⁴

The idea that humankind houses divine sparks that can be fanned into godly flame is also central to the Jewish Kabbalah tradition, Christian Gnosticism, Masonic and related belief systems, and many forms of so-called modern paganism, pantheism, and New Age belief. These ideas have gained new currency since the Enlightenment as a result of its "man is the measure of all things" conception of reality.

Joseph Campbell summarizes the ancient mythic tradition as follows:

The transcendent is unknowable and unknown. God is transcendent, finally, of anything like the name "God." God is beyond names and forms The mystery of life is beyond all human conception. . . . We always think in terms of opposites. But God, the ultimate, is beyond the pairs of opposites. . . . Eternity is beyond all categories of thought God is an idea. But its reference is to something that transcends all thinking. The ultimate mystery of being is beyond all categories of thought.

There are two ways of thinking "I am God." If you think, "I, here in my physical presence and in my temporal character, am God," then you are mad and have short-circuited the experience. You are God, but not in your ego, but in your deepest being, where you are at one with the non-dual transcendent. . . .

When you see that God is the creation, and that you are a creature, you realize that God is within you, and in the man or woman with whom you are talking, as well.⁵

And even mainstream Christians have made liberal use of this notion in metaphoric terms at least. We have, for example, Aquinas's statement above as well as many others of similar vintage. Even C.S. Lewis said: "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship."⁶

However, many Christians and particularly those with a literalist bent paint all of the above philosophies with the same black brush. In this, I perceive an age-old power struggle. Christian religious institutions have enjoyed immense influence which is threatened by a host of alternative points of view about how and where spiritual insight can be found. Anything that threatens entrenched power will be resisted.

Here is how one self-styled defender of the Christian tradition puts it:

The conflict of the ages upon which the spiritual battle for men's souls resides is founded upon this single truth: that God is supreme and His creation must be subject to Him. In his rebellion, Satan ("Lucifer") originated the scheme to establish oneself as an equal to God (Isa. 14:12-15). This was the nature of his temptation of Eve: ". . . Ye shall be gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Satan's lie is not just that man "is" God, as espoused in Eastern mysticism, but that he could become "like" God through acquisition of certain knowledge. In essence, man is, or could become, a god himself. . . .

Throughout history the ancient mystery religions have taken many forms, from paganism and witchcraft to humanism and some elements of psychology . . . and include such notable movements as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and Jewish Kabbalism, among others . . . [as well as] the "New Age Movement"--today's vulgar expression for the masses of the "higher" mysteries.

The essence of esoteric religion is that man can attain godhood through knowledge and positive living. From time immemorial man has fallen for this delusion, and has sought spiritual power through mastery of so-called "immutable laws" of Nature operative in the spiritual realm. The learning and mastering of these laws allegedly work for man's purposes and "validate" his position as a god. Though modern theosophy, in all its forms, makes certain teachings of the ancient mysteries available to the masses, these are only the exoteric teachings. The deeper esoteric mysteries are reserved for those initiated through secret rites, sworn to secrecy under penalty of death. . . .

Satan's lies have found fertile ground in the Church not only because many Christians lack knowledge, but because they lack the necessary humility that can protect them against deception. Seeking their own wills above God's will, they are easy prey

for deceivers who exalt men and/or the Church to the status of godhood and promote Satan's lies within the Church, lies characterized by the following teachings:

- Men may become like God;
- Faith is a "law" or "force" that may be activated by anyone--believer or not;
- The ability to perform miracles, signs, and wonders is latent within all; we need but learn the techniques that activate the spiritual laws upon which faith is based;
- God is bound by these spiritual laws, and must respond to anyone--even His worst enemies--who exercises knowledge of them;
- As "gods" ("divine beings") we have the "divine right" to health and prosperity;
- Jesus is our "Elder Brother" who mastered the spiritual laws of Nature, and is therefore our example to do the same;
- Men may become perfected spiritually and physically by mastering these spiritual laws;
- The Kingdom of God will be established on earth when a sufficient number of people have been perfected.⁷

This view strikes uncannily close to Mormonism, given that I detected nothing in the article from which the text above was excerpted to suggest that Mormonism was under consideration. This suggests a strong correlation between Mormonism and the esoteric, mystic traditions described above.

The Source of Joseph Smith's Inspiration

Joseph Smith had ample access to the spiritual technologies just summarized.⁸ His family was part of the mystic or magical culture that came to North America from Europe with the earliest streams of settlers.⁹ Joseph had early contact with Luman Walters, a man well-versed these belief systems and occult practises. The Smith family, and Joseph's, treasure-seeking activities were part of this milieu. John C. Bennett introduced the occult side of Masonry to Nauvoo (possibly including certain sexual practises consistent with Joseph's proclivities at that

time), and shortly thereafter the use of "secret combinations" of the type abhorred by whoever wrote the Book of Mormon became a standard Mormon leadership practise. Joseph became a master Mason and immediately rewrote the Mormon temple ceremony to incorporate the system of names, signs, tokens, and penalties (including a promise to submit to death or dismemberment for betraying its sacred secrets) used by Masonry. He was schooled in Kabbalah by his Hebrew instructor, Alexander Neibaur, shortly before giving the King Follett discourse. Follett's death was the excuse for the speech, Niebaur its probable source.

Yet once a Joseph Smith teaching that dazzled backwater nineteenth-century Mormons is put in context, it seems far from divine revelation unless all creative acts and cross cultural teachings are likewise so characterized. The dynamics of insular social groups¹⁰ explain how these ideas maintain their status as "The Gospel" in the Mormon community.

We should also frankly assess the downside of the "man as god" doctrine within human groups. If man can become like God, the implied developmental process also implies that some are further along this supremely important way than others. Those in authority in such a group are ideally situated to make themselves appear more godly than they are and hence to cement their control over the group. In fact, the right to appoint others to authority can be fairly described as a "god-making" ability in the early Mormon context. Consider the way Mormons venerate their leaders. Joseph Smith is revered for having done more for humanity than anyone, ever, except Jesus Christ.

I experienced a baffling range of emotions at mid-age as the scene just sketched came to booming, thumping life for me. I denied, was devastated, and then overjoyed. I had been watching a side-show, somehow oblivious to a spectacular main event just next door. A pistol shot was drowned by rolling thunder. A fascinating firefly disappeared as an hour-long blaze of fireworks filled me with more

emotion and possibility than I could have imagined. Such is the effect of some of the richest metaphor humanity has ever produced. (To be discussed as Part 2 in the next issue of the newsletter).

Notes

1. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Follett_Discourse.
2. See http://www.i4m.com/think/leaders/god_was_man.htm.
3. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>.
4. See Meera Nanda, "Trading Faith for Spirituality: The Mystifications of Sam Harris" at http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article.asp?9389.
5. See Joseph Campbell *The Power of Myth*.
6. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," <http://www.spirithome.com/society.html>.
7. See <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/12.html>.
8. Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," <http://www.webcom.com/gnosis/jskabb1.htm>.
9. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magical Worldview*, 2d ed. rev.
10. Elliott Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 9th ed.

Church Held Liable in Sex Abuse Case

On November 22, 2005, a jury in King County, Washington, awarded \$4.2 million to two sisters who were sexually abused for years by their stepfather and who sued the LDS Church for "intentional misconduct and negligence."

The stepfather, Peter Taylor, was ordered to pay part of the damages. The verdict was the first sexual-abuse decision against a church in Washington state.

Jessica Cavalieri, now 24, said she told her bishop in 1994 that Taylor had started abusing her when she was 7. The bishop met with her mother and stepfather but did not tell her mother about the abuse. Instead, "he encouraged the family to work out problems through worship," she said. Because Jessica's mother did not help her, she "felt ashamed and frightened to tell anyone else." She endured the abuse for five more years, while Taylor also started abusing her younger sister, Ashley.

Their mother learned about the abuse from Peter Taylor in late 1998, contacted the police, and divorced him. Taylor pled guilty to criminal charges of first-degree child molestation in 2001 and was sentenced to four years, three months in jail. According to Church spokesman Gordon Conger, the Church "disfellowshipped" and stated that he was "shocked" the jury found the Church liable for damages. The Church plans to appeal.

Source: Bob Young, "Church Liable in Girls' Abuse," Seattle Times, Retrieved Nov. 22, 2005 from <http://archives.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/cgi-bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=abuse22m&date=20051122>

Big Love a Big Deal?

Big Love, the story of a modern three-wife polygamous marriage, is not overtly set in Utah, but street scenes that show the Salt Lake Temple in the background, ejaculations of "Oh my heck!," and queries about whether the daughter is in Young Women's embed the story firmly in contemporary Utah. A printed statement after the credits states that, according to estimates by the Utah and Arizona Attorneys-General, an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 polygamists live in the United States as of July 2005. The final sentence is: "The Mormon Church officially banned the practice of polygamy in 1890."

The LDS Church's Public Affairs issued a statement that discussions with HBO executives were "amicable and constructive." The Church "appreciate[s]" the disclaimer. "However, the Church believes that if the statement is intended to clarify the distinction between Latter-day Saints and non-Mormon polygamists, it is inadequate, both in its language and in the fact that it will appear only after the first episode." <http://www.lds.org/newsroom>, posted March 6, 2006.

Legal Marriage No Defense for Gay Latter-day Saints

Buckley Jeppson, a lifelong and active

Latter-day Saint in Washington, D.C., has been given two choices by his stake president: resign quietly or face a disciplinary council. His offense? Legally marrying his partner of eight years, Mike Kessler, in Toronto, where same-sex marriage is legal.

Buckley declined the option which, technically cannot be offered in the case of a "pending" disciplinary council. "It's not going to be my choice to deny my heritage and my faith," said Buckley. Stake President Nolan Archibald, CEO of Black & Decker, claims that Buckley's version is "a total misrepresentation of the conversation we had." Buckley has not received written notification of a disciplinary council.

If the disciplinary council is held, it will be the first time a legal marriage is punished in this way. LDS spokesperson Kim Farah said that the Church recognizes only marriages between a man and a woman, regardless of what other forms of marriage may be legal.

Religion is important to both Buckley and Mike, and they regularly attend synagogue (Mike is Jewish) and sacrament meeting together.

Brecken Chinn Swartz (brecken@ldssafespace.org) Safe Space Campaign Coordinator, has announced a campaign to send thousands of pink flowers to President Archibald in support of the Jeppson-Kessler family and to ask that the Church become a safer space for both straight and gay members. "We stand for a Church that is a tolerant place, a society where a homosexual member's options are not limited to eternal silence, repression, excommunication, or suicide," its declaration reads. For information on how to order flowers or send messages to President Archibald, see www.ldssafespace.org.

The Mormon Alliance has issued a statement of support: "The Mormon Alliance deplores this proposed disciplinary council in the strongest terms for two reasons. It exposes an essential hypocrisy in the Church's position that everyone is being held to the same standard of chastity outside marriage and fidelity within marriage. Buckley Jeppson and Mike

Kessler went to considerable trouble and inconvenience to make their union a legal marriage. For Buckley to undergo church discipline for his fidelity in this marriage is a shocking revelation that the LDS Church really does have a double standard.

"It is particularly hypocritical for his leaders to invite him to quietly resign. Such an action, given Buckley's faithful attendance and strong belief in Mormonism, benefits, not him, but the Church alone. It would relieve the Church from the need to confront its own brutal and inconsistent policy and would allow it to further stigmatize Buckley as not valuing his church membership. "This is truly an opportunity for the Church to examine its policy against the deeper, truer principles of Christlike love. The Mormon Alliance hopes it will do so."

During most of the 1990s, President Hinckley, Apostle Dallin H. Oaks, and others made public statements stating or implying that gay members are held to the same standard as chastity as straight members. (See, for example, *Church News*, September 30, 1995, p. 6; *Church News*, January 27, 1996, p. 3; *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 13, 1997; *Ensign*, November 1998, p. 71; *Ensign*, November 1999, p. 54.) More recent statements have stressed the "natural family" and the Proclamation on the Family's definition of marriage to sidestep the marriage issue. (See First Presidency Statements, July 7, 2004, October 19, 2004).

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Sources: Jennifer Dobner, Associated Press, "Gay Mormon in Legal Same-Sex Marriage Could Face Excommunication," March 15, 2006; "LDS Church Prepares to Oust Legally Married Gay Member," SafeSpace press release, March 6, 2006.

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ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENT

The Mormon Alliance was incorporated on July 4, 1992. Its purposes are to identify and document ecclesiastical/spiritual abuse, to promote healing and closure for its survivors, to build more sensitive leadership, to empower LDS members to participate with more authenticity in Mormonism, and to foster a healthier religious community.

By Common Consent is the quarterly newsletter of the Mormon Alliance. Comments, articles, and items for inclusion are welcome, if they are submitted thirty days before the mailing deadlines, which are the last weeks of December, March, July, and September. Please send all correspondence about articles and subscriptions to Mormon Alliance, 1519 Roberta Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84115.

Subscriptions are \$30 for each calendar year. At any point during the year that a subscription begins, you will receive the four newsletters of that year and the *Case Reports* volume for that year. Copies of Vols. 2 and 3 of the *Case Reports* (1996 and 1997), are available from Signature Books for \$20 apiece (price includes shipping) at 564 W. 400 North, Salt Lake City, UT 84116. The order line is (801) 531-0164 or 1-800-356-5687. Volumes 1, 2, and 3 are also posted on the organization's Website: www.mormonalliance.org.

To report cases of spiritual and/or ecclesiastical spiritual abuse, contact Lavina Fielding Anderson, <lavina@elavina.org> 1519 Roberta Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84115, (801) 467-1617.

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