

Personal Revelation in Mormonism

BY

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

The doctrine of personal revelation is a vital part of Mormonism. Yet historians of Mormonism have not examined the history of the doctrine or its implications. As a result, I have written a history of the doctrine and shown its importance in Mormonism. In addition, I have examined why claims to the supernatural have not been adequately discussed by the New Mormon Historians and other historians. Employing the insights of the "Reformed Epistemologists," I have argued that claims to the supernatural ought to be critically analyzed in historical writings.

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I

PERSONAL REVELATION: AN INTRODUCTORY CONTEXT

From the very beginnings of a person's introduction to Mormonism, the doctrine of personal revelation is prominent. It is personal revelation that is supposed to be the impetus for converting to Mormonism: the promise is further revelation upon reception of the gift of the Holy Ghost. According to Mormon belief, after a person is baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he or she receives the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands by those who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood, the authority by which the gift is given. The person, then, is entitled, if he or she seeks after it and remains worthy of it, to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. This allows a person to obtain revelation--divine communication--in all aspects of the adherent's life, even having the mysteries of God opened.

As with most religious groups, Mormons possess their own vocabulary when it comes to key theological concepts. While "religious experience" is a more familiar phrase to those who are outside Mormonism to describe many aspects of what Mormons term personal revelation, "religious experience" often does not convey the depth of meaning that Mormons attribute to personal revelation. What is usually involved in personal revelation is communication of some truth, not just an

experience of the divine, as is often the case with the term religious experience. Dreams, visions, angelic visitations, ideas, intelligence, feelings--all belong to what Mormons categorize as personal revelation. Moreover, revelation is used differently outside the world of Mormonism, particularly in Christian discourse. Most often the term is used to designate the revelation of God through Jesus Christ and the Bible. While Mormons recognize these as revelations, for them revelation is a continuous process, not a singular event. One final note on the vocabulary employed with personal revelation: Mormons also use synonyms, such as "Holy Ghost," "the Spirit," "the gift of the Holy Ghost," and all are used to denote the act of divine communication, in addition to being titles associated with the third member of the Godhead.¹ Personal revelation has been the focal point of Mormonism since the time that Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, claimed to have a revelation from God in the spring of 1820. Indeed, while appearing before United States President Martin Van Buren to seek redress for the persecution of Mormons in Missouri during the 1830s, Smith was asked by Van Buren wherein Mormonism differed from other religions. Smith responded that "Mormonism differs with respect to the mode of

¹Since the early days of the Mormon Church, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity has been denied. Mormons maintain that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are three distinct personages who are one in purpose, but not in body or essence.

baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. We [Smith and his associates] considered that all other considerations were contained in the gift of the Holy Ghost."²

Yet for all of its importance in historical and contemporary Mormonism, the concept of personal revelation has not received the type of academic attention one might expect. To be sure, there are numerous epistemological and methodological difficulties associated with understanding this principle. Foremost among them are questions of validity and truth. Are these revelations valid? Are they from God? If so, are they being interpreted correctly? But beyond these difficulties, there is a more basic problem.

Scholarly understanding of Mormonism has suffered because of the polemical nature of the histories written in the past. On the one hand, there were Mormon historians who wrote histories that were meant to portray God's hand in the organization and development of the new religion. The purpose of such histories was to promote faith, down-playing the role of cultural, social and economic influences in the development of the religion, and in the case of some histories often omitting pertinent facts about the more human side of some of

²Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I, History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*, ed. B.H. Roberts, 6 vols., 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1974), 4:42. Hereafter cited as HC.

the leaders. In these histories revelation was taken for granted and not examined critically.

On the other hand, non-Mormon historians or disaffected Mormon historians often wrote histories that were meant to prove that Joseph Smith was a charlatan and that the development of the Church was a tool that Smith used to further his own selfish desires. Mormon revelation was rejected and often explained away as a psychosis or the effects of Smith's charisma. Speaking of the latter group, Mario De Pillis, a Roman Catholic historian of Mormonism, notes, "Non-Mormon historians have not taken Mormonism seriously as a religion."³ This has led to a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Mormonism. Long before Mormonism began to develop doctrines regarding social organization, economic reform, or political aspiration--often the subjects that preoccupied non-Mormon historians of Mormonism--it was about a young man seeking answers to his prayers in a grove of trees in 1820. Religious concerns were the basis for the formation of the church, and religious concerns continue to be the foundation upon which all other principles are built.⁴

³"The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Spring 1966):71.

⁴Earlier this century there were critics of the Church who maintained that Mormonism had no future since what it represented was the pioneering spirit of the nineteenth century. They held that the Church had become obsolete since it had accomplished its goals of establishing communities in the West. Thomas O'Dea, a non-Mormon sociologist of Mormonism, responded to those critics by pointing out

It thus appeared that histories written about Mormonism were doomed to be either apologetic or antagonistic. But in the last fifty years, a group of historians has been pioneering what has been termed the "New Mormon History." These professional historians, not all of whom are Mormon, have attempted to take the "middle way" between the above-mentioned histories. There are two significant watersheds for the New Mormon History: Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows my History* (1946) and Leonard J. Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958).⁵ While Brodie was not sympathetic to the religious aspects of the movement, her biography of Joseph Smith stands unsurpassed in Mormon history because of her meticulous use of primary source data. In other words, her work stands as the model for the New Mormon History when it comes to the critical use of source material.⁶ It was Arrington's work in particular that

"religious vitality" that was at the heart of Mormonism and that would allow the religion to adapt to contemporary culture. See Thomas O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 258-262, for a recapitulation of the arguments of the critics and his response. Indeed, O'Dea has been vindicated as Mormonism continues not only to survive, but to flourish.

⁵Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alexander A. Knopf, 1946); Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

⁶Calling *No Man Knows My History* a watershed for the New Mormon History is not beyond debate. Marvin S. Hill has argued that Brodie's work was a part of the sectarian histories of the past, those concerned with the truth or untruth of Smith's claim and judgements about his moral character, and not typical of the New Mormon History. Her reluctance to seriously analyze the religious aspects of

opened the door for histories written about Mormonism that gave credence to the cultural, economic and social conditions in helping to explain the origin and development of Mormonism, all the while attempting to be sympathetic to the religious aspects of the movement. Non-Mormon scholars had written critical and analytical works on Mormonism before Arrington's work, but essentially for the first time a professional Mormon historian had written a history that, while certainly sympathetic to Mormonism, reinterpreted some of the more traditional aspects of the movement. In fact, Arrington, in the preface to the first edition, notes that some Mormon readers "will be troubled about my naturalistic treatment of certain historic themes sacred to the memories of the Latter-day Saints."⁷ Earlier critical works written by non-Mormons could be dismissed by Mormons as reflecting anti-Mormon prejudices, but Arrington's work opened the door for Mormons themselves to reinterpret the Mormon past. The New Mormon

Mormonism without reductionism mars her work (Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*," *Church History* 43 [March 1974]:78-96). My inclusion of her work in the beginnings of the New Mormon History is to highlight one aspect of this new history: the critical use of primary source material.

⁷Arrington, *The Great Basin Kingdom* (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1993), xxiv. Arrington, for example, treats the establishment of the Word of Wisdom, the Mormon health code which calls for abstinence from alcohol, tea, coffee and tobacco, as a requirement rather than advice--as was interpreted when the code was first brought forth by Joseph Smith in 1833 as a revelation--in the 1860s not because of health reasons as is often stated, but rather as a way to stop the flow of Mormon money to so-called "Gentile" merchants (*The Great Basin Kingdom*, 250).

historians, following Brodie and Arrington, have provided rich insights into the history of Mormonism by applying the rigorous standards of their profession. They have written histories that do not attempt to answer the fundamental truth questions associated with the religion--such as whether Joseph Smith was truly a prophet of God or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints indeed the true church of Jesus Christ.

As the New Mormon historians began to analyze the past, some Mormons became concerned but found themselves in a quandary. No longer could they simply dismiss the histories as products of enemies since some of these new histories were written by faithful Mormons. Some Mormons have chosen to label these historians therefore as apostates or near apostates. Others within the Church have maintained that the New Mormon historians have not portrayed history accurately since they have written histories which do not place God at the center of the development of the Church. For those in the Church who are often critical of the new history, what is at stake is the veracity of the religion. As one noted Mormon historian has said, "Mormonism [is] not philosophy; it [is] history."⁸ The historical foundations of the religion are the basis for the claims of the religion. If Joseph Smith did not have the "First Vision," then the impetus for a restoration of the church of Christ disappears. If Joseph Smith did indeed

⁸Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 188.

compose the Book of Mormon, instead of translating it from ancient records as he claimed, then the very keystone--as Joseph Smith termed it--of the religion comes loose and the religion as it is promulgated today collapses.

Jan Shipps, a noted historian of Mormonism, has highlighted a fairly recent event which illustrates the tension between the more conservative elements in the Church and the New Mormon Historians. In 1972 Leonard Arrington was appointed to the position of Church Historian, breaking the pattern of calling only from within the Church hierarchy. Arrington began to make preparations for a new sixteen-volume history of the Church in addition to making historical documents more readily available to scholars. Shipps notes that with the appointment of Arrington and his desire to open up the church archives to serious scholars it seemed that the "church had changed its policy and its attitude about how its history ought to be written."⁹ But if indeed this was the sentiment, it did not last.

In 1975, a one-volume history of the church was published in collaboration with the Historical Department, entitled *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, and written by James B. Allen and Glen Leonard.¹⁰ Some within the church hierarchy sensed

⁹Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, Ill. and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 106.

¹⁰James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1975).

that the "church itself appeared to be responsible for what was rapidly becoming known as the 'new Mormon history.'" ¹¹ Although *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* was not anti-Mormon, it was written by professional historians "whose Mormon orthodoxy did not prevent their interpretation from assigning more weight to the impact on Mormonism of the social, economic, political and cultural context in which it developed than the currently canonized story admits...." ¹² Again, the concern among some of the leaders was that the authors had taken God's hand out of the history of the Mormons. Continued publication of the work was halted, even though the 35,000 copies already printed had sold. ¹³ A series of events followed in which there was a growing uneasiness between the scholars and some within the Church hierarchy. Reverting back to the pattern of calling a member of the Church hierarchy to become the official Church historian, Church leadership called Arrington to head the newly formed Joseph Fielding Institute of Church History. He was transferred from Salt Lake City, Utah to Provo, Utah. The

¹¹Shipps, *Mormonism*, 107.

¹²Shipps, *Mormonism*, 90.

¹³It should be noted that *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* has been published in a Second edition.

official sponsorship of the sixteen-volume history was withdrawn.¹⁴

While scholars are not necessarily sympathetic to the concerns of the leaders of the Church, such leaders have identified an important component of understanding Mormonism. Mormonism needs to be treated as a bona fide religion. Recalling what De Pillis stated about Mormonism being taken seriously as a religion, a more accurate picture of Mormonism must be able in some way to incorporate the religious experiences--whether they are of God or not--into the explanation of the development of Mormonism. Non-Mormon historians of Mormonism in the past were, and sometimes still are, too quick to dismiss references to the supernatural in the attempt to reduce such claims to some type of naturalistic explanation. Mormon historians have recognized the supernatural aspects but tend to focus more on describing such experiences rather than analyzing them. For Non-Mormon historians, and some Mormon historians, to treat the numerous testimonies based on personal revelation which have been recorded by Mormons as anything but religious is to misconstrue what is at the heart of Mormonism. Mormonism was and is about religion; it was and is about the claim of infusion of the supernatural into the natural world. If the

¹⁴For an insider's look at what occurred during Arrington's administration as official Church Historian, see Davis Bitton's article, "Ten Years in Camelot: A Personal Memoir," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Autumn 1983):9-32.

New Mormon historians, both Mormon and non-Mormon, have done a service to the scholarly understanding of Mormonism, they have done so by helping scholars understand the historical, political and social circumstances from whence it has arisen. But the New Mormon historians have not been able to assist so far in understanding the central role of personal revelation in the lives of Mormons. Personal revelation, therefore, is something which is often mentioned in a footnote or in a single paragraph and then left alone.¹⁵

To be sure, it may not be the historians' task to delineate and interpret theological concepts, such as personal revelation; however, some surely have failed to see the doctrine's importance in helping to define and explain Mormonism. Normally professional theologians would be involved in demonstrating the importance of such doctrines, giving historians the necessary conceptual framework in which to interpret the data of history. But Mormonism has failed to produce professional theologians--ironically, precisely because of the doctrine of personal revelation.

Mark Leone, an anthropologist of Mormonism, has made an insightful analysis of the failure of a group of professional theologians to arise and the enormous impact of personal revelation on the lives of Mormons. Because of the

¹⁵Even so well-informed a work for non-Mormons as Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, Ill. and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), only briefly mentions the doctrine of personal revelation.

availability of revelation to faithful members of the church on practically any issue, "Mormons have developed a do-it-yourself theology which makes the growth of professional theologians impossible as well as unnecessary."¹⁶ While Leone attributes the lack of professional theologians solely to the universality of revelation, however, this is in fact only part of the picture. Mormons have also developed a strong hierarchical structure at the top of which resides the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, fifteen men in all who are regarded as "prophets, seers and revelators." They, and they alone, are the ones to whom revelation can come for the entire Church. As a result, they proclaim what is doctrine and what is not.¹⁷ Yet, both in the case of the personal revelation and revelation to leaders of the Church, personal revelation is still crucial to understanding the lack of professional theologians, since members are encouraged to receive revelation on the truthfulness of the Church leader's revelations, and ultimately the responsibility for discernment of true revelation from false revelation rests with the

¹⁶Mark Leone, *The Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 172.

¹⁷Don H. Compier, "History and the Problem of Evil: Reflections on the Philosophical and Theological Implications of the 'New' Mormon History," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 8 (1988):45-53. Compier traces the lack of professional theologians back to the hierarchy of the Church and their authoritative statements on doctrine. Thus theologians are not necessary as long as the hierarchy determines doctrine. But as noted this explanation, too, is only part of the picture.

individual member.¹⁸ Therefore, it appears, however paradoxically, that because of the very central place that personal revelation holds in Mormonism, it has not received its due academic attention. No professional theologians have arisen in large part because of the doctrine; and historians have largely sidestepped the issue because of their emphasis on the various cultural circumstances that have influenced Mormonism, rather than the interpretation of the supernatural, or at least ostensibly supernatural.

While the debate among Mormon academics over the writing of Mormon history has focused on other issues in connection with this, including the possibility or impossibility of detached, objective history, what is truly at the heart of the debate is the proper relationship between reason--in the case of scholarly studies of Mormonism, the historical, social, and cultural context--and revelation--God's guiding hand, and sometimes direct contact, in the process of development.¹⁹ In

¹⁸J. Reuben Clark, Jr., "When are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12 (Summer 1979):68-81.

¹⁹Mormon philosopher Sterling McMurrin, writing in 1965, stated that Mormonism "is in great need of a definition of the relation of reason to revelation that will preserve the intellectual integrity of the Mormon people and encourage them in an honest and courageous pursuit of truth" (Sterling M. McMurrin, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* [Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1965], 112). The call has largely gone unheeded, which has proved a major problem for the writing of the New Mormon History. Cf. Roger M. Barrus, review of *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* by Thomas G. Alexander, in *The Western Historical Quarterly* (August 1993):395-96. Barrus states that for there truly to be a New

connection with this discussion, a debate has ensued about the methodology of the New Mormon History.

It is difficult to lump together all of the New Mormon Historians and their supporters since their presentations of history and historiography are not uniform. All agree, however, upon the necessity of critically using the plethora of primary source materials available and the need to sidestep the larger truth questions mentioned above in favor of clearly telling the story. An important component of this telling is the need to maintain a critical distance, to be as objective as possible. Practitioners of the New Mormon History such as Leonard Arrington, James Clayton and Thomas Alexander, while realizing that pure objectivity is not possible, nonetheless espouse a type of objectivity in which, according to Arrington, the historian eschews "personal feelings and opinions."²⁰ Arrington, the dean of Mormon History, further remarks that Mormon historians must not be "chroniclers who take the easy way out and use divine miracles as a short circuit of a causal explanation which is obviously, or at

Mormon History, the relationship between reason and revelation must be studied in connection with the Mormon concept of continuing revelation.

²⁰Leonard J. Arrington, "Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1(Spring 1966):17-18. See also James L. Clayton, "Does History Undermine Faith," *Sunstone* 7 (March-April 1982):34-36; and Thomas G. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Fall 1986):25-49.

least defensibly, naturalistic."²¹ The New Mormon historians have striven for an account of Mormon history that gives credence to the social, economic and political and other secular dimensions in their interpretation. Often the historians have attempted to sidestep the issue of revelation by reducing claims to revelation to manipulative tools, or by analyzing the context in which the claim to revelation is made but only describing the revelation itself.²² Again, for most Mormon historians this is not done because revelation is disbelieved, but because the dominant methodological paradigms for writing history dictate such a stance toward the supernatural.

While many scholars have applauded the efforts of the New Mormon Historians, others have been critical. Louis Midgley and David Earle Bohn, professors at Brigham Young University, have criticized the methodology of the New Mormon History. Bohn believes that the New Mormon Historians are trying to be objective in the purest sense of the term, holding up neutrality as the standard.

The detachment or neutrality called for by apologists for the New Mormon History rests on the assumption of a

²¹Arrington, "The Writing of Latter-day Saint History: Problems, Accomplishments and Admonitions," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Autumn 1981):128.

²²Klaus Hansen's *Mormonism and the American Experience* is an example of the former; Thomas Alexander's *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1991), is an example of the latter. Cf. Barrus' review of Alexander's work, *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 396.

certain transparency in understanding the past; it demands a presuppositionless or objective vantage point--one above passion and polemic--which, we are told, allows the reality of the past to reappear as it really was, uncolored or undistorted by personal longings and biases.²³

He argues instead that this is impossible, for the Mormon historian cannot rise to such a "higher ground" since historians "necessarily work out their understanding of the past from within history, prejudiced by their own time's way of constituting the past."²⁴ Bohn argues that the New Mormon Historians have adopted a view of rationality that exalts secular practices and demotes references to the spiritual. In doing so, they have written histories which have tended toward naturalistic explanations that are put forth as objective, but in reality are not. Bohn comments:

Psychological, sociological, and economic explanations of visions, texts..., and practices...do not constitute a neutral or objective way of getting to the bottom of things. The language underlying such theories is repressive. Subtly and sometimes not so subtly it denies *a priori* that the foregoing could authentically involve revelation and the divine and imposes its own explanation. And it is precisely because these theories are not objective or neutral and cannot deal authentically with the sacred that traditionalists have every right to take issue with the way such theories structure the Mormon past.²⁵

²³David Earle Bohn, "Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations: A Critique of New Mormon History," in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1992), 230.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 231. See also *idem*, "No Higher Ground," *Sunstone* 8 (May-June 1983):26-32.

²⁵Bohn, "Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations," 248.

Bohn argues that since the journals and diaries of Mormon history contain a plethora of references to the supernatural, historians using such primary source material cannot reduce them to naturalistic explanations:

It was within the language of the sacred and its categories of faith that both early and contemporary Latter-day Saints have disclosed a world of common meaning and action. How incongruent and futile it would be to try to fuse horizons with that world, to interpret its documents and to write its histories in purely secular and naturalistic terms. How could such histories, systematically closed as they inevitably would be to the genuine possibility of the sacred, escape doing enormous violence to the meaning of the texts and to the very world they seek to disclose?²⁶

Bohn so wraps his discussion of these issues in terms of the New Mormon historians attempting to be objective by closing their interpretations to the possibility of the supernatural that his critics have largely ignored his comments and attacked his labeling of New Mormon Historians as objective.²⁷

Louis Midgley centers his critique of the New Mormon History in what Martin Marty has referred to as the "acids of modernity."²⁸ According to Midgley, the crisis surrounding the writing of Mormon history is the "conflicting ideologies [to traditional histories] that began to dominate the thinking of

²⁶Ibid., 253.

²⁷See, for example, Kent E. Robson, "Objectivity and History," in Smith, *Faithful History*, 155-168.

²⁸Martin E. Marty, *A Short History of Christianity* (New York: Meridian, 1967), 294, 296; as quoted in Louis C. Midgley, "The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," in Smith, *Faithful History*, 196.

educated people beginning with the Enlightenment."²⁹ Commenting on this development, Marty states that Enlightenment scholars "while beginning to relativize Christian distinctives in the face of other ways [religions],...also used critical tools on Christian texts and traces from the past."³⁰ This provided an environment in which objectivity became the standard for writing history, and claims to the supernatural were looked at through increasingly naturalistic lenses. This situation, Midgley argues, is the present state of the New Mormon History. His argument is that the historical claims of Mormonism should be taken seriously by the Mormon scholar and that attempts to reduce the debate over historicity of events is to alter drastically the historical claims and present state of the religion.³¹ He bemoans the fact that some Mormon historians, in the name of objectivity, have attempted to transform traditional claims of historicity to mythical, magical, or mystical claims.³² For example, some, in attempting to do away with the prophet/fraud dichotomy associated with Joseph Smith, have argued that he should be considered a mystic or a person of impressive religious imagination who

²⁹Midgley, "Acids of Modernity," 193. See also Martin E. Marty, "Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983):6.

³⁰Marty, "Crisis in Mormon Historiography," 6.

³¹Midgley, "The Acids of Modernity," 214.

³²Ibid., 201-202.

created through his religious experiences powerful myths which were the basis for a new religion. He argues instead:

The truth of the prophetic message in the Book of Mormon is linked to both its claim to be an authentic history and to Joseph Smith's story of how we came to have the book. To be a Latter-day Saint is to believe, among other things, that the Book of Mormon is true. ...To begin to suppose that the Book of Mormon is true requires that the text be taken with genuine seriousness in all its various [i.e., historical] aspects.³³

Like Bohn, Midgley sees the idea of objectivity, with its setting aside of the question of supernatural truth, as the root of the controversy over the New Mormon History.

Both Bohn and Midgley, however, while tracing their critiques to the ideas of the Enlightenment that have influenced the writing of modern history including Mormon history, have not understood their opponents clearly. In their attempt to get to the heart of the matter--the admissibility of beliefs about the supernatural in writing history--Bohn and Midgley use loaded terms like "pure objectivity" and "positivism" without realizing that the New Mormon Historians, as do other historians, for the most part reject the ideal of pure objectivity, aiming instead to make their work presentable to a public forum. By striving to make their work a part of public discourse, most historians use naturalistic explanations since they are accessible to the general public. They are the cause and effect relationships that most historians, and most North Americans, continue to accept. The

³³Ibid., 214-215.

New Mormon Historians also have failed to realize, however, what is at the heart of their critics' objections, namely, that claims to revelation need to be critically analyzed and not minimized.

The debate about these issues is not one which is unique to the New Mormon History. Historians of religions, Mormon or not, have a delicate task to perform when examining and writing about their subjects. While historians must deal with social, economic and cultural conditions in their attempt to interpret their data, they also have to weave their narratives in, around and through primary sources which speak of the supernatural. Most historians choose to ignore, downplay or find alternatives to the supernatural in their interpretations. This is not to say that some of the historians do not believe in the supernatural. Indeed, some maintain their belief in such, but in their writings, because of dominant epistemological and methodological paradigms that either denigrate religious experience or leave such matters to faith, they omit the supernatural, or resort to describing the claim to the supernatural without assessing it and integrating it critically into their work. Such is often the case with Mormon historians. Most maintain their belief in both revelation to Church leaders and in personal revelation to all Mormons. But they also maintain a sense of responsibility to the modern epistemological and methodological paradigms that dominate the writing of "good" history, and thus seem leery of

discussing revelation in a way that shows its importance not only as a doctrine but also as an integral part of understanding the motivation behind what Mormons believe and do.

With the rise of postmodernism have come various strands of thought that call into question many of the foundations on which contemporary academia has been built. In particular, the denigration of the epistemic value of religious experience compared to sense experience has been attacked in recent years and it appears that religious experience is once again being taken seriously by some not only as a rational justification for religious belief, but also as part of a rational foundation upon which scholar can interpret his or her data.³⁴ Thus the scholar might well allow his or her interpretation of the data to include references to the supernatural.

Following this strand of postmodern thought, the purpose of this thesis is two-fold. The first purpose is to examine the doctrine of personal revelation, including its origins and developments, and to show its importance in the understanding of Mormonism. The second purpose is to argue that personal revelation is a belief-forming practice that produces epistemically justified religious beliefs that the Mormon scholar is entitled to allow to influence her work in Mormon history, rather than using naturalistic theories or

³⁴See, for example, William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

explanations when handling references to the supernatural in such cases.

Part of understanding why the New Mormon historians need to take a better account of personal revelation is that it plays a significant role in the larger history of Christianity. Chapter Two, therefore, is a brief historical overview of revelation in the Christian Church, highlighting those groups and individuals that claimed special revelations from God outside the canon of Scripture until the time of Joseph Smith. The purpose of this survey is to examine the impact these claims had on Christianity, arguing that personal revelation of a sort similar to that in Mormonism has played an important part in the history of the Christian religion. The case of Joseph Smith and the Mormons, that so, will be seen not be entirely novel in Christian history. This chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of personal revelation, but merely a context for the importance of personal revelation in Mormonism.

Chapter Three examines the history of personal revelation in Mormonism from its genesis in the 1820s to the death of Joseph Smith in 1844. Several key periods are identified and changes in the doctrine are highlighted. Smith's teachings are discussed as well as individual claims by others to revelation.

Chapter Four continues the history of personal revelation from Brigham Young's tenure as President of the Church down to

the present. Highlighted is both the continuity and change in the doctrine over the years, and also how Mormon clashes with the larger American culture, and from within the Church itself, have influenced the doctrine.

Chapter Five examines the rationality of religious experience. Beginning with more general arguments against rational justification, I will argue that religious experience does provide a rational basis for religious belief. From there I will argue that if a Mormon scholar's own noetic structure is made up of personal revelations which are justified, then the Mormon scholar is justified in allowing, to some degree, references to revelation to play a role in his or her interpretation of Mormon history. Highlighted in this discussion are the criticisms about the typical writing of religious history in our day, writing which has been affected by *classical foundationalism*, the dominant epistemological paradigm in academia since the Enlightenment.

In short, this thesis intends to show that personal revelation has in fact been crucial in the history and ongoing life of Mormonism. And it will go on to argue that Mormon historians, at least, are epistemically justified in discussing personal revelation in supernatural, as well as natural, terms.

II

REVELATION AND HISTORY: A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Introduction

At its center Christianity is about revelation. Christians believe that in the person of Jesus Christ, God was revealing himself to humanity. Moreover, Christians claim that God, after the death of Jesus Christ, continued to reveal his will to the early apostles. These first-century claims provided the foundation upon which Christianity emerged and continues to grow. But claims to revelation were not confined to the first century or to the leaders of the religion. Indeed, Christianity has a rich history of claims to revelation made by individuals and groups. These claims played a significant role in the history of Christianity.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Christianity, particular attention must be paid to the various claims to revelation. To ignore the claims to revelation or fail to critically analyze the implications of such claims is to leave out a vital component of Christianity. Claims to revelation, whether accepted or not by the church, affected its doctrines and practices. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to examine some of these claims and their impact on the religion as a whole, and also the impact such claims had on the theological environment from whence Mormonism grew.

First Century

After the death of Jesus, the Christian community was thrown into a crisis. Gone was the person who had taught and directed them on an intimate basis. Now the community had to develop and grow without its leader. Yet, the early Christians did not believe that they were alone in their quest to take his message into all the world. They would later report that Jesus had spoken to his early disciples about the work of the Holy Spirit who would not only guide the true Christian in living the type of life he espoused, but also be a source of knowledge. The Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit convinced the early Christians that indeed the Spirit would be active in their lives. In particular, the apostles maintained that even though Christ was the revelation of God's will, they would also claim guidance from the Holy Spirit in directing the affairs of the church, furthering the unfolding of the revelation of Christ. Peter, Paul, and John, among others, would assert that the Holy Spirit was active in their lives, giving knowledge and inspiration to be shared with others to assist them. Early in the history of the church, certain doctrinal and practical questions arose which needed to be addressed by the leadership. In part the answers to some of these pressing issues came in the form of claims to revelation or inspiration from the Holy Spirit ¹ Peter, for example, had

¹While contemporary revelation played a significant role, it was not the only consideration. Apostolic interpretation of the Old Testament and the emerging texts of the New

a vision which he interpreted to mean that the gospel was to go to the Gentiles, and not just to the Jews (Acts 10:9-33).

Beyond the revelation given to the early apostles, average Christians claimed the active presence of the Spirit in their lives. Paul was the champion of those who sought the gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of prophecy (I Corinthians 14). Greatly influenced by his own conversion experience, Paul's theology emphasized the active presence of the Holy Spirit and the need for revelation. The purpose of such revelations and manifestations was to bring one closer to Christ within the context of the Christian community. John's emphasis on knowledge as the key to understanding the mystery of Christ also highlights the necessity of revelation (John 14:26, 17:3). Indeed, it is John who emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in giving revelation and inspiration. Paul and John both emphasize the mystical aspect of Christianity: the personal and revelatory union with Christ. Both also believed, however, that not everything which was claimed to be a revelation was indeed a true revelation.

While Paul consistently taught the importance of personal revelation (e.g. I Timothy 5:20; Romans 12:6), he also was concerned about those who would cite revelations which were false. In his first canonical letter to the Corinthians, composed probably around A.D. 55, Paul cautions them about

Testament also figured prominently in determining orthodoxy. See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 31-35.

accepting everything purported to be inspired by the Spirit as being so inspired (I Corinthians 14). Indeed, Paul is adamant about the necessity of those who possess the Spirit to judge the revelations of others: "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge" (I Corinthians 14:29). Human emotion, dispositions and desires would always be a part of prophecy and difficult to distinguish from spiritual manifestations; thus the early Christians were taught to distinguish between true and false revelations. While no doubt many early Christians sought for the revelatory gifts of the Spirit, their enthusiasm for the realization of the divine in their lives had to be tempered with the principles and doctrines outlined by the living apostles (Galatians 1:8-12; I John 4). In particular, Paul stated that such revelations were meant for the edification of the Church (I Corinthians 14:26). If any revelation did not bring the members of the Church into closer communion with one another, then that particular revelation was spurious:

Christian spirituality...could not be experienced outside the community, which involved a multiplicity and variety of spiritual charisms. The spiritual person is free from many things..., but is bound by one thing--the conscience of the other....The Spirit did nothing but build up the body of Christ here and now.²

In addition to the requirement of edification, orthodoxy in doctrinal matters especially concerning Jesus as the Christ,

²John D. Zizioulas, "The Early Christian Community," *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 27-28.

became a standard by which to determine if a person was entitled even to speak in church (II John 7-12).

Yet in the midst of Paul and John's promulgation of the gospel of revelation and the active presence of the Holy Spirit, a movement was afoot that was destined to link forever and solidify ecclesiastical authority and the claim to revelation: Gnosticism. While Gnosticism's roots were not strictly Christian, it made great inroads with some Christians toward the end of the first century. Even before the rise of Gnosticism in the Christian Church, both Paul and John had to address in their letters to various churches the rise of principles which bore close affinity to Gnosticism.³

Gnosticism and Montanism

By the beginning of the second century, Gnosticism was well on its way to becoming entrenched within Christianity. The appeal of Gnosticism was due in part to its teachings which bore certain affinities to the teachings of Paul and John.⁴ Like Paul, Gnostics emphasized the dichotomy between the body and the spirit, although moving markedly away from Paul by taking their ideas to the point where some Gnostics would deny the humanity of Christ in deference to the

³Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 33-34.

⁴Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 94.

superiority of the spirit over the body. Like John, Gnostics saw knowledge as the key to release from this sinful, physical world. Knowledge born of revelation from God, not from man's reasoning, was the key for salvation for Gnostics.⁵ To be sure, Gnostics did not depend on the writings of Paul and John to expound their doctrines. Their contemporary revelations and their rich corpus of written works became the justification for their doctrines. While some of their teachings followed those of Paul and John, others were not considered orthodox by the various leaders of the church. For example, libertine Gnostics--those who advocated rejection of anything associated with the temporal world including standards of moral conduct--lived a type of life that went directly against the type of life that Christians believed was necessary to live in order to please God.⁶ In addition, some Gnostics, because of the emphasis of the spirit over the flesh, maintained that God had not come down from heaven and taken on a temporal body in the form of Jesus Christ.⁷ But the question remained, how did one determine what was orthodox and what was not?

In the first century the answer that emerged was that the apostles determined what was doctrine, through contemporary

⁵Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1963), 34-35.

⁶Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 34; Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 46, 270-274.

⁷Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 76.

revelation, through their recollection of Jesus's teachings or through their interpretation of the Old Testament. With the death of the apostles came new questions about who had the authority to pronounce orthodoxy. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in the early part of the second century, stands as a transitional figure not only between the apostles and the Apostolic Fathers, but also between the apostles' prerogative to pronounce orthodoxy and the role that the various local bishops would play in determining the same. Ignatius lived in a time when "normative Christianity" was beginning to emerge.

W.H.C. Frend comments:

A body of teaching was becoming established to which appeal could be made. Its authenticity could be guaranteed to the apostles and to Christ himself. It was represented by an ordered hierarchy that could claim descent from apostolic times. Bishops...were already in communication with each other, ensuring thereby a certain uniformity of outlook within their congregations.⁸

Ignatius believed that the bishops had the authority to determine truth. In particular, he maintained that organization of the church, with bishops, presbyters and deacons, stood as the link to the apostles.⁹ While Ignatius's ideas found fruition in the writings of Irenaeus (ca. 200), acceptance of his view did not go unchallenged.

As Gnosticism began to expand within Christianity, the leaders of the local churches had to confront their teachings.

⁸W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 137.

⁹Ibid., 139.

Any hopes of the movement quickly fading were dashed as Rome became a stronghold for Gnosticism toward the end of the second century. Some of their teachings, as mentioned earlier, were in accordance with the teachings of the apostles. Furthermore, Gnostics claimed a tradition of secret teachings of Jesus and the apostles hidden from the typical Christian because of the lack of enlightenment. Finally, they claimed the Holy Spirit as the authority for their teachings.

Still the church leaders attempted to refute what they deemed as heretical. Central to their argument against the Gnostics were the teachings of the apostles. Irenaeus came to the forefront as the exponent of apostolic teaching as the standard. Yet even by erecting this standard, Irenaeus had to deal with the issue of who had the right to interpret the writings of the apostles. For Irenaeus, as well as earlier for Ignatius, bishops would be the only ones entitled to such a judgment. Thus Irenaeus held up the episcopal interpretation of apostolic teaching as the standard to judge orthodoxy.¹⁰ Even if an appeal to the Holy Spirit was made by someone, the teaching was submitted to the test of the bishops' interpretation of the apostles' teachings since God, it was argued, would not reveal something inconsistent with or contradictory to his earlier revelations to the apostles. As Irenaeus' principles became accepted, they changed orthodox views on the nature of the revelation from the Spirit:

¹⁰Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 36-39.

The difference between the Spirit's activity in the days of the apostolic church and in the history of the church now became a difference not only of degree but fundamentally of kind, and the promises of the New Testament on the coming of the Holy Spirit were referred primarily to the Pentecost event and only through that event, via the apostles, to the subsequent ages of the church. The promise that the Spirit would lead into all truth...now meant principally, if not exclusively, that the Spirit would lead the apostles into all truth as they composed the creed and books of the New Testament, and the church into all truth when it was built on their foundation.¹¹

Thus the tension between immediate claims to revelation and ecclesiastical authority was resolved in favor of ecclesiastical authority. It was clear that this was an affirmation of Paul's teachings that not just any claim to revelation would be accepted, but more importantly the leadership of the church now had a *modus operandi* for determining orthodoxy in the second century.

Claims to revelation, however, would not go away quietly. Montanism was a movement that began after the middle of the second century. Montanism emphasized belief in the immediacy of the Holy Spirit and the necessity of revelation. Founded by Montanus, an enthusiastic Christian convert, the movement began as two early converts of his, Maximilla and Priscilla, joined him in preaching the immediate return of Christ, along with a doctrine that before the second advent the Spirit would be poured out upon Christians. Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla believed that they were prophets and that they spoke

¹¹Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 107-108.

in the name of the Lord. Such claims to a first-century gift were a great attraction to many Christians, including Tertullian. Prophets were not uncommon in the brief history of Christianity. Paul had spoken of prophets as part of the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20; 4:11). The *Didache*, probably written in the first century or early second century, speaks of the work of prophets in the church and the favored status that they possessed.¹² The *Shepherd*, an early second century document written by Hermas, speaks favorably of the gift of prophecy. Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340) makes mention of two prophets that lived in the second century, Ammia of Philadelphia and Quadratus.¹³ Justin Martyr (c. 100-c. 165), in his famous dialogues with Trypho the Jew circa 135, argues for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism in part because Christianity still had the prophetic spirit in operation, while in Judaism that Spirit was no longer functioning.¹⁴ Finally Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200) bears witness that there were still individuals in the church during his day who were seeing visions and uttering prophetic expressions.¹⁵

¹²There is some debate on the dating of the *Didache*, with estimates ranging from the middle of the first century to the end of the second century. See Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 46-47.

¹³Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.17.2-4.

¹⁴Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 82.1, 88.1.

¹⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.32.4.

Montanus and his followers saw themselves as part of this long tradition. While the movement grew at a rapid rate, it also met with hostility. In particular, the leaders of local churches soon attacked Montanus and his movement because of their unorthodox teachings on the immediate return of Christ and the nature of contemporary revelation. But as Frend points out, "[the critics] were in a quandary. They could not deny that the Spirit was active in the church and manifested itself in prophecy."¹⁶ To deny the workings of the Spirit in the church would be tantamount to denying the teachings and activities of the first-century church, something entirely unacceptable especially since the teachings and activities of the primitive church were held as normative.

The tactic chosen by the opponents of Montanism was to call into question the manner of prophesying. In particular, they attacked the "frenzy" and the "strange things" that accompanied the reception of the revelation.¹⁷ This, they argued, was not a part of the gift of prophecy of the primitive church. Some went so far as to accuse the

¹⁶Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 255.

¹⁷Eusebius quotes an anonymous critic of Montanism who states that Montanus "became obsessed, and falling suddenly into a kind of frenzy and distraction, raved and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying contrary to the custom of the Church, according to the tradition and the succession of the Church from the beginning" (*Ecclesiastical History: The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1953], 315).

Montanists of being under the influence of Satan.¹⁸ Soon, however, Montanists would provide more fodder for their opponents' attacks. Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236), one of the most important theologians of his day, noted that some church members "allege that they have learned something more through these [Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla], than from the law, and prophets, and the Gospels."¹⁹ Thus contemporary personal revelation was being pitted against the revelations of the past.

While Montanism continued for many years afterward, the conflicts with the local churches had cut them off from the church in general. The church, however, did not come away unscathed. Comparing this situation with the days of Nehemiah when the gift of prophecy came into disrepute with local leaders, Frend comments on the decision made by the church in rejecting Montanism:

The new Israel was confronted with the same problem, either an organized urban and hierarchical church with set forms of worship and discipline and a set relationship with the outside world, or a church of the Spirit in which men and women participated equally as the vehicles of the Spirit. Once again...organization triumphed.²⁰

Pelikan comments on the outcome of the tension between the church and Montanism:

¹⁸Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 106.

¹⁹Hippolytus, *A Refutation of All Heresies*, VIII.12. Cf. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 106-107.

²⁰Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 255.

To validate its existence, the church looked increasingly not to the future, illumined by the Lord's return, nor to the present, illumined by the Spirit's extraordinary gifts, but to the past, illumined by the composition of the apostolic canon, the creation of the apostolic creed, and the establishment of the apostolic episcopate.²¹

Both the Gnostic and Montanist crises solidified the position of the ecclesiastical organization, enhanced the authority of the local bishops, and set precedents for the church when dealing with future claims to revelation.

Mysticism

In the Christian tradition mysticism has had a long and fruitful history. Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, John of the Cross and George Fox--all these mystics bear witness to the importance and prominence of mysticism in Christianity. For purposes of this work what is important in the long and variegated history of mysticism is not so much the specific teachings of the various mystics, but rather the relationship between some mystics and church authorities. While some mystics' teachings must be highlighted in order to understand the uneasiness and sometimes direct conflict between mystic and authority, what is more important for my analysis is how authorities dealt with mystics that they believed had crossed the line of orthodoxy, and how such mystics reacted.

²¹Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 107.

Just after the time of Augustine (354-430), "apophatic" or "via negativa" mysticism began to emerge. It was influenced greatly by Neoplatonism. Neoplatonic thinkers emphasized the "otherness" of God compared with the physical world, and taught the necessity of transcending the world through the ascent of the soul in order to have a vision of God and achieve union with him. Most of the great mystics in Christianity followed this type of mysticism.

Foremost among the Christian mystics influenced by Neoplatonism was Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500), sometimes referred to as the Pseudo-Dionysius to distinguish him from the Dionysius mentioned in the book of Acts. Dionysius's argues that God is above all beings, unapproachable and incomprehensible: "He is both at rest and in motion, and yet is in neither state, nor hath He beginning, middle, or end....We cannot apply to Him any attribute of eternal things nor of temporal things."²² The way to God, therefore, is not with discursive reasoning based in the material world, but through negating all qualities of the world by contemplation.²³ While he acknowledges the helpfulness of the sacraments and the leadership of the Church for some in their quest to achieve oneness with God, for him, as well as for others like him, the call is to "leave the senses and the activities of

²²C.E. Rolt, trans., *Dionysius the Areopagite on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1951), 143.

²³*Ibid.*, 153-154.

the intellect and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things in this world of nothingness...."²⁴ This should not be construed as a rejection of the church or its sacraments. Dionysius does not denounce the church or its clergy, but in his writings one can see the seeds of controversy which would eventually blossom into the uneasiness and often direct conflict that often demarcated the relationship between mystic and clergy.

Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1328) stands unsurpassed as the great mystic of the Middle Ages. Influenced by Neoplatonic thought, Eckhart taught detachment from the world. Eckhart maintained that "God has it from his immovable detachment that he is God, and it is from his detachment that he has his purity and his simplicity, and his unchangeability."²⁵ Emphasizing this immutability of God, he draws attention to the means by which a person approaches God: the person seeking God must empty himself or herself of all things. This union is possible because of the similarity between God and mankind: at bottom God and mankind are really one. In other words, mankind and God share the same being. Speaking of mankind, he preaches, "'Truly you are the hidden God' (Isaiah 45:15), in the ground of the soul, where God's ground and the soul's

²⁴Ibid., 191.

²⁵Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, trans., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defenses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 288.

ground are one ground."²⁶ For Eckhart the personal God revealed through Christ was not the ultimate. Anything that is perceived in bodily forms, whether it is the personal God or angels, is not the ground of all beings, the absolute God. One must rise above all forms to the absolute Deity.

Because of his emphasis on detachment and the ultimate unity between God and mankind, Eckhart tended to emphasize God's interior work in the human soul over the means of external grace such as the sacraments and the priesthood.²⁷ His teachings evoked praise from his congregations, but distrust from church authorities. While he was still alive, charges of heresy were brought against him, but it was not until after his death in 1329 that Pope John XXII denounced him in the *In argo dominico* for "wanting to know more than he should."²⁸

To be sure, there were mystics who were more radical in their analysis of the church and priesthood. However, there were those mystics who also were far less radical. To classify all mystics as anti-clerical is to misunderstand what was at the heart of their discussion. It is true that they sought for God through mystical experiences, but for the most part they were concerned about what constituted a true mystical experience. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written in the fourteenth century in England, points to the

²⁶Ibid., 191.

²⁷Ibid., 47.

²⁸Ibid., 77-81.

necessity of the church, priesthood and sacraments in helping to determine the truthfulness of claims to mystical experience. The church acts as the vehicle through which the sacraments are delivered which help unmask sin, and those appointed by the church, the priesthood, stand as judges over the "conscience of men."²⁹ Thus for the author of *The Cloud*, mysticism does not lead to an anti-clerical stance. But the language of some mystics tended to minimize the importance of the physical objects, including the church, sacraments and, by extension, the priesthood.

While mysticism was controversial, many found in mysticism an expression of their spirituality. Women, in particular, stand as examples of those who found in mysticism the expression of their spirituality. While some women seeking spirituality became nuns, a great many others became a part of the burgeoning mystical groups of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³⁰ A number of the groups were deemed heretical by church authorities, but women continued to find affinities with their religious expression in them:

It...seems clear that these movements, which were often initially labeled "heresies" for reasons of ecclesiastical politics--not doctrine--expressed many of the basic themes in women's religiosity in its orthodox forms: a concern for affective religious response, an

²⁹William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: A Modern Interpretation* (New York: Desclee, 1967), 87.

³⁰Caroline Walker Bynum, "Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages," *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 123.

extreme form of penitential asceticism, an emphasis both on Christ's humanity and on the inspiration of the Spirit, and a bypassing of clerical authority.³¹

The reaction by some men to the new movements, and in particular to the roles that women played in the movements, is evidence of their influence. Some movements were suppressed; some women mystics were burned. Detailing the reactions to these movements and women mystics, Caroline Bynum notes:

The spiritual friendships and networks of the thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century women attenuated as the fourteenth century wore on. Collective biographies of women by women disappeared. Fewer holy women wrote. Male suspicion of visionary women was articulated in a series of influential works, by John Gerson and others, on the testing of spirits.³²

To be sure, not all women mystics encountered such a backlash. Women's involvement in mysticism, however, brought to a head many of the suspicions long held against male mystics. Thus in mysticism issues of church authority and proper discernment of spirits again became prevalent. But mysticism would not fade as other revelatory movements had done. It would continue to play a role in the history of Christianity. For instance, a popular mystical document *Theologia deutsch (Germanica)*, probably written in the late fourteenth century, would influence the likes of Martin Luther and many leaders of the Radical Reformation.

³¹Ibid., 123.

³²Ibid., 128.

Radical Reformation

The Radical Reformation encompasses a broad range of movements that grew in reaction to the Catholic Church and the Magisterial Reformation of Luther, Calvin and others during the sixteenth century. Common to all groups associated with the Radical Reformation was the belief that the leaders of the Magisterial Reformation had gone astray by tying their reform to national or territorial states. George H. Williams, the foremost historian of the Radical Reformation, further delineates the difference between the two reformations:

In insisting on believer's baptism, or on the possession of the gifts of the Spirit, or on the experience of regeneration, and in being often quite indifferent to the general political and social order, the various exponents of the Radical Reformation not only opposed the Magisterial Reformation tactically and on principle but also clearly differentiated themselves from sixteenth-century Protestants...on what constituted both the experience and the conception of salvation, and on what constituted the true church and proper Christian deportment.³³

Thus on just about every level the Radical Reformers differed from their Magisterial counterparts. Williams has summed up the difference between the two by pointing out that the Magisterial Reformers worked within the concept of *reformatio*, while the Radical Reformers worked within the concept of *restitutio*--the restoration of the primitive Christian church.³⁴ Because of their emphasis on the primitive church,

³³George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirkville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), xxx.

³⁴*Ibid.*, xxxi.

it is not surprising that the revelatory gifts prevalent during the first century became a focus for them.

To be sure, the Radical Reformation consisted of varied groups that emphasized or highlighted different ideas and doctrines. Because of their differences, Williams has developed a typology for classifying the different groups: Anabaptists, Spiritualists and Evangelical Rationalists. Because the purpose of this thesis is the examination of those groups which claimed revelation, it is the Spiritualists and their leaders that will be the focus of this section. This is not to say, however, that the Anabaptists and the Evangelical Rationalists did not make claims to revelation. The names of Hans Hut, Hans Denck and Faustus Socinus bear witness to claims to revelation in the two groups, especially among the Anabaptists. But for the Spiritualists the focus was revelation. Thomas Müntzer (1488?-1525), Caspar Schwenckfeld (1489-1561), and Sebastian Franck (1499-1542) stand as leaders in the Spiritualist movement who taught the importance of contemporary revelation.

They emphasized the immediate relationship between the individual and God, a relationship based on immediate communication. Thus with the rest of the Radical Reformation, Spiritualists maintained an anti-clericalism "directed against both the priests and friars of the old church and the 'new

popes' of Wittenburg, Zurich and Geneva."³⁵ This emphasis also led to an understanding of the Bible that, while certainly not maintaining that the Bible was not important, nevertheless gave it secondary importance to the immediate presence of the Spirit. This is indicated by a speech by Müntzer in 1524: "He [who has not the Spirit] does not know how to say anything deeply about God, even if he had eaten through a hundred Bibles!"³⁶ Writing in 1531, Franck echoed Müntzer's statement:

Scripture and [another] person can only give to a person and a believing brother some testimony, but cannot teach what is divine [directly]. However holy they may be, they are nevertheless not teachers, only witnesses and testimony. Faith is not learned out of books nor from a person, however saintly he may be, but rather it is learned and poured in by God....³⁷

Schwenckfeld would also teach the superiority of the Spirit over both Scripture and the sacraments.³⁸ This emphasis on the immediate presence of the Spirit as superior to external aids to salvation was in direct conflict with Luther's doctrine of the need for external grace because of the sinfulness of man. For Luther salvation came from outside of man: the Bible, the preacher and the sacraments were absolutely necessary for the

³⁵Timothy George, "The Spirituality of the Radical Reformation," in Raitt, *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, 336.

³⁶Thomas Müntzer, "Sermon Before the Princes," *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, eds. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 58.

³⁷Sebastian Franck, "A Letter to John Campanus," in Williams and Mergal, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 157.

³⁸Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 199.

imparting of salvation.³⁹ This is not to say that Luther rejected the role of the Spirit; quite the contrary, he emphasized the work but in connection with the outward signs of the sacraments and preaching: "The inward comes after and through the outward, and it is God's will to give nobody the inward without the outward signs which he has instituted."⁴⁰ Despite such teachings, the Spiritualists continued to insist on the superiority of the immediate work of the Spirit.

Such emphasis led not only to a different understanding of the role of the Bible than that held by the Magisterial Reformers, it also led some Spiritualists to claim revelation that was not specifically in the Bible. Müntzer, in particular, pushed the logic of his teachings to the point that "[he] came in the end to attribute to the 'whole Scripture' only a propaedeutic utility in slaying the believer so that he might awaken to the inner Word and respond to the Spirit."⁴¹ Once "slain" the Spirit could then enlighten and grant to the believer revelations in the forms of dreams, visions and prophecies.

The genesis of Müntzer's teachings can be traced to his time spent, ironically, in promoting Luther's Reformation in Zwickau in 1520. While in Zwickau, Müntzer came under the

³⁹Marc Lienhard, "Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation," in Raitt, *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, 275-276.

⁴⁰Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 1249.

⁴¹Ibid., 1250.

influence of the Zwickau "prophets" (Luther's term) Nicholas Storch, Thomas Dreschel and Marcus Thomas Stübner, who taught the necessity of direct revelation from heaven. In particular, Nicholas Storch taught "doctrines about divine dreams, direct revelation to the elect,...and the disparagement of the external Word and sacraments in preference to direct leadings from the Holy Spirit."⁴² Müntzer appropriated so many of their teachings that approximately one year later he was forced to flee Zwickau by the local church authorities.⁴³ Arriving in Prague, he set forth his teachings on the importance of contemporary revelation. The Prague *Manifesto* delineated his position on the gifts of the Spirit: "Among the gifts is the reception of direct instruction from the Holy Spirit in the form of vision, dream, ecstatic utterance and inspired exegesis."⁴⁴ Closing the *Manifesto*, Müntzer stated, "Thomas Müntzer does not want to pray to a dumb but to a speaking God."⁴⁵ Eventually Müntzer and his followers would claim visions and dreams that were seen as fulfillment of the prophecies of Joel (2:27-32; 3:1-4).⁴⁶

⁴²Ibid., 1294-1295.

⁴³Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionary in a Mystical Spirit," *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical Sketches from Thomas Müntzer to Paracelsus*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Goertz (Kitchener, Ont. and Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1982), 33.

⁴⁴Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 127.

⁴⁵Goertz, "Thomas Müntzer," 33.

⁴⁶Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 133.

Müntzer's emphasis on the superiority of the Spirit over Scripture also provided a theological justification for his anti-clericalism since nothing should come between the individual and his or her God. Initially, Müntzer's attacks centered on the Roman Catholic clergy, but in time he attacked Luther's view of clergy as well, believing that Luther's *sola scriptura* was a pretense for the preacher to mediate between God and the individual.⁴⁷ According to Luther, because of man's inherent sinfulness, the whisperings of the Spirit could not be distinguished from the voice of his own imagination. David Steinmetz comments on Luther's teachings: "For Luther it is precisely because the word of God [Scripture] is not dependent upon human receptivity that it can effectively unmask human pretension and sin."⁴⁸ Luther also voiced his opposition to Müntzer's emphasis on the Spirit in a different context, stating that the Spiritualist claimed "*Geist, Geist, Geist*" but then kicked "away the very bridge by which the Holy Spirit can come...namely, the outward ordinances of God like the bodily sign of baptism and the preached Word of God."⁴⁹ For Luther the concern was the subjectivity that he perceived in the Spiritualist and the lack of objective standards, such as the Bible and the preached Word, that could check the excesses

⁴⁷Goertz, "Thomas Müntzer," 36.

⁴⁸David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 214.

⁴⁹*Weimarer Ausgabe, Luther's Works*, XVIII, 137; as quoted in Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 1249.

that he believed were characteristic of the Spiritualist. The principles Luther elucidated won the day. Through the death of their leaders, the failure of the Peasant's Revolt of 1525, and the lack of acceptance of their teachings by the "priesthood of all believers," the Spiritualists lost momentum, as did the Radical Reformation in general, and faded.

With the arrival of the Radical Reformation, Protestantism confronted its first test on handling claims to revelation. It is not surprising that many of the principles that the Magisterial Reformers and the Spiritualists claimed were echoes of previous revelatory crises in Christianity. The Spiritualists, like the Montanists and the Gnostics before them, taught the primacy of the Spirit and the need for contemporary revelation. The Magisterial Reformers, like the Church authorities of the past, emphasized Scripture and the importance of authority. But there were differences, reflecting a changed context. For instance, the appeal to authority by the Magisterial Reformers was not to the bishop's interpretation of Scripture or to the papacy as in the case of the Montanist crisis or the conflicts with the various mystics, but to the priesthood of all believers and their understanding of the Bible. This would not be the last time that Protestantism would confront the issue of revelation, but the controversy over the Radical Reformation did set for

future Protestants guidelines in handling claims to revelation.

Revelation in America

While there are many groups that could be examined as part of a discussion of revelation--such as the Quakers and Moravians--it is important for purposes of this thesis to narrow the discussion to those ideas, principles and groups that focused on America and the theological environment that affected the genesis and development of Mormonism. In particular, there are two areas that need to be examined: first, an examination of the theological environment in the American colonies and its impact on the concept of revelation; second, an examination of teachings on distinguishing claims to true revelation from spurious claims.

With the arrival of the Puritans from England in 1620 in what would eventually be called New England, religion in America would have its most dominating presence, affecting the future course and ethos of the United States. The Puritans brought with them a strong biblical orientation and desire for the total reform of society. While in England, the Puritans were largely unsuccessful in their attempts to reform society. With their arrival in America, they now had a chance to start anew and construct a society based on biblical principles. One important difference would emerge between the two attempts. In England the Puritans accepted all into the

community who showed a desire to be associated with them. In America, however, Puritans made a report of a conversion experience mandatory for admittance into the community. Mark Noll comments on the significance of this requirement:

Prospective members were expected to confess before their fellows that they had experienced God's saving grace. Those who could testify credibly to their redemption in this way joined together to form churches by covenanting with each other. The stroke of genius, which transformed ecclesiastical purity into social purity, was to open the franchise only to those males who had become full members of covenanted churches.⁵⁰

Thus, the conversion experience became a focal point for Puritans, the foundation for the society that they sought. With the emphasis on the report of the conversion experience, Puritans encouraged religious experience.

By encouraging spiritual experiences, even the well-disciplined and relatively homogeneous Puritans had to handle cases of those who claimed revelations which were not in accordance with Puritan ideals. In particular, Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) stands as an example of one who sought personal revelation that was deemed heretical. A follower of the famous preacher John Cotton, Hutchinson began her odyssey into revelation with the midweek meetings she held to discuss Cotton's sermon from the previous Sunday. In time, Puritan authorities became concerned because she began to speak of a spirituality that tended toward Antinomianism, the idea that Christians did not need law (biblical, ecclesiastical, or

⁵⁰Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 42.

civil). In time, Hutchinson would make the mistake of claiming "that the Holy Spirit communicated directly with her, apart from Scripture."⁵¹ This offended the Puritan emphasis on the importance of Scripture, and she was forced to leave Massachusetts. Again, a claim to revelation ran into Scripture, and once again Scripture prevailed.

The individualism that she espoused by claiming revelations apart from Scripture was indeed a threat to Puritan life with its emphasis on the community. As Noll notes, "Puritans sought vital individual spirituality, but they fenced in enthusiasm with the formal learning of their ministers, a respect for formal confessions, and deference to traditional Protestant interpretations of Scripture."⁵² In her slant toward individualism, Hutchinson foreshadowed the next generation of Christians, evangelical Protestants, who would break with the Puritan ethos in favor of a more individualistic Christianity--although not pushing the individualism as far as did Hutchinson.

The importance of the conversion experience continued to play a vital role during the First Great Awakening, a series of religious revivals that swept the American colonies during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Preachers of the First Great Awakening, such as George Whitefield (1714-1770) and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), inherited from the Puritans a

⁵¹Ibid., 62.

⁵²Ibid., 105.

concern for the necessity of religious experience. They sought diligently to be the instruments of God through whom many would experience God's saving grace, a personal conversion experience. With the focus on personal religious experience, theologians became concerned over what constituted a true religious experience--one inspired of God--versus one that was merely a product of emotion alone.

Jonathan Edwards stands in the Protestant tradition as one of the foremost thinkers on the nature of religious experience. He bequeathed to future Protestant, and especially evangelical Protestant, thinkers a framework for discussing the validity of the conversion experience. As an integral part of the First Great Awakening, he sought to define standards for determining when a claim to a religious experience, in this case a conversion experience, was indeed the work of God. He painstakingly sets out his teachings in *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections*, published in 1746.⁵³

Edwards delineates twelve signs that, while not perfect for determining when a true religious experience has occurred, nevertheless help the believer check if he or she is at least headed in the right direction. The difficulty for Edwards was

⁵³Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

reading the signs correctly.⁵⁴ Thus he writes meticulously about the twelve signs, trying to convey in detailed terms how the signs manifest themselves so that the chance for error is minimized. The majority of the twelve signs deal with the spiritual fruit that should accompany a veridical experience of God. He notes that the true experience of God must draw one closer to Christ, produce concern for others, develop a strong conviction of the truth of divine things, and increase humility and one's appetite for more religious experiences.

Edwards's teachings stand as a testament to the importance of religious experience in America prior to the 1800s. In addition, they also show the critical assessment that was prevalent surrounding such claims. Thus by the time of Joseph Smith, the importance of religious experience and principles concerning what constituted a veridical experience of God had become a part of the emerging tradition of revivalism in America, setting the stage for Smith's claims to revelation and his teachings on what constituted a veridical experience of God.

Conclusion

Claims to revelation and subsequent reactions permeate the history of Christianity. Since the beginnings of

⁵⁴Frank N. Magill and Ian P. McGreal, eds., *Christian Spirituality: The Essential Guide to the Most Influential Spiritual Writings of the Christian Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 362.

Christianity, Christians have had to grapple with the meaning, function and ramifications of revelation. Discussion, debate and dissension have followed. The debate at times has been vitriolic, reflecting the value that is placed on revelation and also the seriousness of claims to it. And as long as Christianity continues to emphasize the importance of revelation, it will have to continue to handle cases of those who claim contemporary revelation. Claims and counterclaims of the past seem to resurface when the debate is renewed. Interestingly, many themes run through the debates, highlighting such issues as Spirit versus authority, individualism versus community, revolutionary ideas versus tradition, and women's spirituality versus patriarchy and even misogyny.

What has emerged in each of the claims studied is the importance of revelation, especially personal religious experience, and the necessity of standards for checking such claims. Claims to revelation have become prevalent when people have believed that the existing religious paradigms are inadequate for meeting their spiritual needs. As these people yearn for a new expression of spirituality, they often seek the immediate experience of God. By doing so, they either conform to the standards of their particular religious community or move outside the bounds of orthodoxy, and then either creating new standards or fading away. This chapter has examined incidences of both.

Most of these issues surfaced with Joseph Smith's claims to revelation and his critics' responses. And they have continued to surface internally in Mormonism as Mormons grapple with the issues surrounding revelation. While many of the issues are the same, the unique Mormon theological, doctrinal and metaphysical structure dictates a different intensity in some issues and a variation in others. To understand the debate in its unique Mormon environment, what needs to be seen is the importance of revelation in the history and development of Mormonism.

III

PERSONAL REVELATION: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS, 1820-1844

Introduction

I was determined to find out more about these Mormons so I went to hear the elders preach again on the next Thursday. They preached about the order of the kingdom and I had never heard anything so plain in all my life before; a child could understand it all....On Friday, the next day, I was lying on my bed reading and resting my mind. I traveled back over my past history and was thinking from the first time that I had serious reflections up until the time that the voice spoke to me and told me to stand still and see the salvation of God and that would be truth. And the voice of the same spirit said, "This is truth that you have been hearing, now choose or refuse...." So while I lay on my bed, I covenanted with my Eternal Father to obey.... I then felt better and to rejoice that I was so blessed of God. I then felt the spirit of God to rest down upon me with this testimony that it was right.¹

Experiences such as this are common among Mormons. This type of personal revelation permeates their diaries and journals both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mormons maintain that revelation through personal visitations from the Father and the Son, the appearance of angels, visions, dreams or--by far the most common--the workings of the Holy Spirit are available to each member of the Church. Such manifestations are meant not only to convey knowledge, such as the truthfulness of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, but also to reprove conduct, commend action and modify behavior.

¹John Butler, Autobiography, Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, 8.

In short, personal revelation is the disclosure of God's will to the individual, which is essential to salvation.

Exaltation, the highest degree of salvation in Mormon theology, consists in becoming as God is, including possessing the knowledge He possesses. In 1843, toward the end of his life, Joseph Smith stated the importance of personal revelation in his theology:

Reading the experiences of others, or the revelations given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose. Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject.²

Smith encouraged his followers to gaze into heaven, and many members claimed to do just that. In addition to showing the importance of personal revelation, this quotation also reveals something essential to the history of personal revelation: the relationship between the organization of the church, which administers the ordinances necessary for personal revelation--such as baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost among others--and the individual claims to revelation. It is within the context of the development of the Church organization that the doctrine must be studied.

²HC 6:50

Origins

As discussed in the previous chapter, claims to personal revelations were not unusual in the Christian tradition. Most of these claims were met with skepticism, and the leaders of various congregations did what they could to keep members in accordance with Scripture and their tradition. During the late 1700s, in the midst of the American struggle for independence, there was a definite shift from Puritan ideas toward a distinctive Yankee ethos. Theologians marched away from Calvinism, with its emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the depravity of humanity, toward theology that placed more faith in people's ability to come to God, further opening the door for those who yearned for the immediate experience of God. In politics, intellectual developments and theology, the United States in the early nineteenth century was different from the colonies of one hundred years before. By the early 1800s, the Second Great Awakening (ca. 1795-1810) had relit the fires of Christianity: religion again became a major focus in American life.³ Revivals swept the country and kindled the desire among many individuals to seek God without the fetters of Old World creeds and dogmas.

Although Joseph Smith grew up in a society that was permeated by the political and economic ideas of the now-burgeoning Yankee ethos, and particularly its ideas of

³For a discussion of the impact of the Second Great Awakening on religious life, see Noll, *A History of Christianity*, 166-190.

progression and human liberty, he grew up on its economic fringes. His family was very poor and seemed a step behind in their attempts at economic security. Yet Smith did take in much of the ideas and spirit of the times.⁴ It was an era of burgeoning individualism coupled with a desire for certainty in a new world. Mario De Pillis notes that during this time many were seeking the primitive Christian Church of the first century, searching for something stable from the past to give them their moorings.⁵ Eventually, in 1820 Smith would embark on a career that would take these two ideas and push them to a logical conclusion, creating the quintessential American religion.⁶ By creating the Church organization, with its emphasis on the same ecclesiastical organization that was thought to exist in the primitive church, Smith attempted to give his followers the certainty for which they longed, the stability from the past that would allow them to meet the challenges associated with building their lives in a new country. By teaching the doctrine of personal revelation, Smith exemplified the ideas of religious individualism, that

⁴Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 121. Hatch perceptively notes that the democratic or populist impulse in Smith resulted in the belief "that common people had the right to shape their own faith and to take charge of their own religious destiny."

⁵De Pillis, "The Search for Religious Authority," 68-88. See also Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 20.

⁶Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 82. See also Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: the Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

the individual could approach God on his or her own without the fetters of tradition or dogma. In essence, Smith attempted to fuse the ideas of individualism and stability together, giving his followers a past upon which to build and a future that nonetheless depended on the individual's initiative. Smith's foray into revelation began with what is termed the "First Vision," his purported theophany in the Spring of 1820. When Smith was in his eleventh year (1816), his family moved from Norwich, Vermont, to Palmyra, New York, seeking better living conditions. Palmyra had been and was destined to be a place of religious fervor. Religious revivals had gripped that portion of central New York--which is termed the "burned-over" district because of its recurring and intense religious activity--and Smith was quite affected by the "great excitement" caused by them.⁷

Although he was partial to Methodism, and at one point considered joining, the contentions and divisions among the various denominations caused him to wonder which of all the churches was true. It was to this question that Smith sought

⁷HC 1:2-3. One of the central issues in any discussion of the First Vision is the fact that the official version of the revelation was not written until 1838, eighteen years after the vision. While I recognize the difficulties associated with using this version, with its later theological and doctrinal developments read back into the experience, my purpose is to show that the experience provides the foundation for understanding the importance of personal revelation for contemporary Mormons. For a discussion of the "burned-over" district, see Whitney Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950).

answers. Smith recorded the following in his 1838 account of the "First Vision":

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.* Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart.⁸

Smith decided that the only way to solve the problem was not to appeal to the Bible for answers, since interpretations of certain passages varied from group to group, but he ask directly to God.

In the spring of 1820, Smith retired to a grove of trees to make his attempt at finding out which of all the churches was true. In the 1838 account he notes that as he attempted to pray, he was "seized upon by some power..., which bound his tongue." Darkness immediately gathered around him, and it seemed for a time that he would succumb to it. Smith continues:

At this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared that I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested on me I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name said, pointing to the other--*This is my Beloved Son. Hear Him!*⁹

⁸HC 1:4.

⁹Ibid., 1:5.

Later in the vision, Smith was told that all of the churches were corrupt and all had turned away from the Gospel.

All three known first-hand accounts of this visitation are in agreement when it comes to the following scheme: the process involved in obtaining the revelation and the communication of some proposition.¹⁰ Smith's attempt to find answers to his concerns did not come without much thought on his part. He, however, had come to the point where reason--whether from Bible reading or his attending the various meetings to find answers--could not answer his questions. It was when he decided that reason could not answer these deeper questions that he turned to God for guidance.

When Smith reported his experience, he was surprised at the strong sentiments that it evoked. Smith told a Methodist minister of his experience, and the minister treated it with "great contempt."¹¹ Strong religious experience, often bordering on extreme enthusiasm, was a part of many revivals during the Second Great Awakening, especially among younger

¹⁰Much has been made of the differences in the first hand reports of Smith's vision. Interpretation has varied from the suggestion that the whole story is a fabrication, to the idea that Smith's understanding matured over time. See Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1971), for a discussion of the three versions and what they reveal about Smith.

¹¹HC 1:6.

people.¹² Reports of visions were not uncommon among those who had been "born again." But what was increasingly frowned upon was the message that some said accompanied the experiences: "Too often the visions justified breaches in moral conduct and a sharp departure in doctrine."¹³ Theologians such as Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), a student of Jonathan Edwards, would argue against claims to personal revelations, those that went beyond the conversion experience.¹⁴ Like his teacher before him, Hopkins understood the importance of personal religious experience but adamantly opposed any claim to revelation that went beyond the Bible, either in teaching doctrine or in importance in a person's religious life: "All these are not only entirely different from divine illumination [conversion experience]; but are dangerous delusions; and have proved fatal to many who have depended on them."¹⁵ The minister's reaction, therefore, was understandable when he maintained that the vision was of the devil, for as a result of the vision Smith was convinced not to join any of the churches. Yet Smith could not deny that he had the revelation:

¹²Joshua Bradley, *Accounts of Religious Revivals in Many Parts of the United States from 1815 to 1818* (Albany N.Y.: G.J. Loomis, 1819); as cited in Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 53.

¹³Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 59.

¹⁴Samuel Hopkins, *The System of Doctrines*, 2 vols. (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1793), 1:575-606.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 604.

I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true....For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it....¹⁶

It is not clear from Smith's writings why he did not question the validity of his experience. But it appears that the experience left such an indelible impression that Smith assumed that only God's power could have produced the experience.

Through this and other revelations, Smith's enduring legacy to his people was his emphasis on revelation. So ingrained are his teachings concerning the importance, interpretation and validity of revelation that his teachings are still the foundation of any discussion of revelation.¹⁷

The Early Days of Personal Revelation

After the First Vision in 1820, Smith does not report another spiritual experience until the night of September 21, 1823. While Smith called upon God for forgiveness of his sins, an angel who identified himself as Moroni visited Smith four times during the night. Moroni informed Smith about an ancient

¹⁶HC 1:8.

¹⁷Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintain that there has been a succession of prophets since Smith, each having the ability to reveal the mind and will of the Lord. Some Mormons have even gone so far as to proclaim that a living prophet is more valuable than a dead prophet. Thus the living prophet's words take precedence over any dead prophet's. Joseph Smith, however, is the exception. His teachings are still the bedrock teachings of the church.

record that was deposited in a hillside not far from the Smith residence and which contained a record of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas. The record would later be translated by Smith and called the Book of Mormon. Smith was not permitted by Moroni to obtain the plates until September 22, 1827. Along with the plates was an interpretative device that Moroni called the Urim and Thummim. The Urim and Thummim are mentioned in the Old Testament in connection with the role of the High Priest, and were apparently used for the reception of revelation (Numbers 27:21). Although Smith does not describe their appearance in detail, his mother and several associates described them as glasses or spectacles.¹⁸ Smith appeared more excited about the Urim and Thummim than he did about the plates. Joseph Knight, a close friend of Smith, noted that "he seemed [sic] to think more of the glasses or Urim and Thummim than he did [sic] of the plates, for, says he, 'I can see anything; they are Marvelous [sic].'"¹⁹ According to Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, he could look through these lenses and keep track of the plates even when

¹⁸Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1969), 116. Lucy Mack Smith described the Urim and Thummim as "two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass" that were fixed in bows like old-fashioned spectacles. See, Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 82. Joseph Knight, a close associate of Smith's, also referred to them as glasses; see Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976):33.

¹⁹Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 33.

they were not present.²⁰ These early histories of Joseph Smith indicate his excitement--almost boyish excitement--about being able to learn and reveal hidden knowledge.

It appears that between 1823 and 1827, when he received the plates, the revelations which he received were in the form of angelic visitations. With the receipt of the Urim and Thummim, and perhaps spurred on by his successes in translating the gold plates with them, Smith turned to the Urim and Thummim for direct communication with God. The occasion would present itself in 1828 with the contributions of Martin Harris, a local farmer, and in 1829 with Oliver Cowdery, a school teacher. Both men would act as scribes at different times for Smith as he translated, recording his words as he translated the gold plates. What is noteworthy is that both men claimed to have had promptings and revelations from the Spirit prior to their time with Smith.²¹ Yet they saw in Smith gifts which transcended their communications. In June 1828, Smith had completed translating the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon. Harris asked for permission from Smith to take the translated pages to members of his family who had been skeptical of Smith. Harris believed that by showing them tangible evidence his family would believe him and Smith.

²⁰Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 119, 123.

²¹Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 85; HC 1:35. Harris and Cowdery were not alone: see Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1994), 18.

Harris asked Smith to inquire of the Lord if this was in accordance with the Divine will. Smith used the Urim and Thummim and the answer was no. Harris was not satisfied and pressured Smith to ask a second and a third time. Finally on the third attempt, the answer was a qualified yes. Smith would later report being rebuked by the Lord for not acting on the first answer. The hesitation was well warranted as Harris would lose the manuscript. Smith was understandably distraught by the inability of Harris to keep his promise of making sure the manuscript was not lost. Smith inquired of the Lord once again through the Urim and Thummim and received a severe chastisement in the form of a revelation which encompasses in its present form twenty verses and a subsequent revelation which directs him on how to deal with the lost manuscript, which in its present form is seventy verses.²²

These two revelations appear to be the first revelations other than the earlier First Vision and the visitations of Moroni. They are significant for two reasons. First, as Thomas O'Dea has pointed out, these revelations mark the beginning of the doctrine of continuing revelation, that revelation was to be a continual process "adding line upon line, precept upon

²²*Doctrine and Covenants* Section 3 and Section 10 respectively. It should be noted that when Smith was dictating the revelations, they were not put into verses and chapters at the same time. With the printing of the *Book of Commandments*, the forerunner to the *Doctrine and Covenants*, verses and chapters were incorporated.

precept."²³ The conversion experience would not be sufficient; personal revelation was to be a lifelong pursuit. As a person grew more in knowledge and understanding, the more the Lord could reveal. In 1842 Smith stated it in this manner: "This is the principle of which the government of heaven is conducted--by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed."²⁴ The more a person is ready for revelation, the more revelation that person will receive; and the more a person receives revelation, the more the revelations will contain more significant information.²⁵ Underlying Smith's concept of revelation was that revelation was not necessarily direct dictation from God. Human recipients of revelation were still bound by their circumstances and understanding, affecting the amount and type of revelation they could receive. Toward the end of his prophetic career, Smith would lament that the minds of his followers were still bound by their false traditions and

²³O'Dea, *The Mormons*, 19-20. See also, Jan Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading Toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith," *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974):17.

²⁴HC 5:135. For a concise analysis of the Mormon concept of revelation in comparison with the rest of Christianity see, Lorin K. Hansen, "Some Concepts of Divine Revelation," *Sunstone* 5 (Jan.-Feb. 1980):12-18.

²⁵HC 3:392. "if He [Christ] comes to a little child, he will adapt himself to the language and capacity of a little child."

limited understanding, preventing him from teaching all that he was able.²⁶

Secondly, it marks the beginning of the most dominant tradition of personal revelation in Mormonism: the impressions, ideas, intelligence, feelings and promptings attributed to the Holy Ghost. Parley P. Pratt, an early convert to Mormonism who was present when some of the later revelations were received by Smith, stated the following concerning Smith's revelatory process and how the revelations were put into words:

Each sentence was uttered slowly and very distinctly, and with a pause between each, sufficiently long for it to be recorded by an ordinary writer in long hand. This was the manner in which all his revelations were dictated and written. There never was any hesitation, reviewing, or reading back, in order to keep the run of the subject....²⁷

It appears that Smith would receive mental impressions from the Spirit and then would formulate those impressions into words. It is interesting to note, however, that Pratt was converted in 1830 approximately one year after Smith returned the gold plates along with the Urim and Thummim to Moroni upon completion of the translation of the Book of Mormon. Thus, by the time of Pratt's firsthand experience, Smith was able to receive the impressions without the aid of external devices.²⁸

²⁶Ibid., 6:185.

²⁷Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 48.

²⁸It appears that toward the end of the translation process, Smith was becoming more and more familiar with the Spirit. He stated that after he and Oliver Cowdery received

But what about the revelations received before the Urim and Thummim were returned? B. H. Roberts, a Mormon historian, notes that the revelatory process of the Urim and Thummim required Smith to exert his mental abilities. In the translation of the Book of Mormon, Smith did not merely write the words down as he looked into to the Urim and Thummim: it was not just a mechanical process.²⁹ Apparently, the original word or phrase would appear as written on the plates in the Urim and Thummim. Smith would discern its meaning and intent and translate it into English. So it was in connection with direct communication with God that the use of the Urim and Thummim allowed Smith to focus his thoughts and as a result receive revelation; but it also required him to formulate those thoughts and impressions into words.³⁰ Thus personal revelation as espoused by Smith involved human effort, usually in the form of asking for a revelation and then often formulating the revelation into words.

authority to baptize on May 15, 1829, they baptized each other. After the baptism Smith reported that he had "the spirit of prophecy...[and] prophesied concerning the rise of this church, and many other things connected with...this generation of men" HC 1:42. Later on in the translation process, Smith reports being able to withstand the learned men of his day skeptical about the Book of Mormon due to the influence of the Spirit upon him: "The Lord continued to pour out...His Holy Spirit, and as often as we had need, He gave us in that moment what to say" HC 1:59.²⁸

²⁹B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Century I*, VI vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1930), 1:130. Hereafter cited as CHC.

³⁰Hansen, "Some Concepts of Divine Revelation," 13.

It is important at this point to ask two important questions: Was Smith, and other Mormons to be discussed below, really having an experience of God? If so, was he, and others, interpreting the experience correctly? The first question is central to my thesis. While I will argue that at least some claims to revelation are indeed valid more fully in Chapter Five, it is important to give an initial answer to this question. Given that Smith claims to have had revelations and seems genuinely moved and motivated by such experiences, and given a lack of contrary testimony from contemporaries at this point, I believe that one ought to take his claims to some type of supernatural experience seriously.

It is the second question, however, which may be ultimately more illuminating. Because Mormons often claim propositional content in their revelations, is it possible to judge the validity of their interpretation of the experience based on the correspondence to reality of that particular content? For example, suppose a Mormon has a revelation in which she is told that her mother is going to get sick in a few days. If that sickness does not occur, I believe that a person is certainly justified in concluding that the interpretation was incorrect. Does this weaken the claim to a religious experience? I believe that it does weaken the claim to some degree, but not to the point that one could completely rule out that a supernatural experience has occurred. It may be that the person misunderstood the

experience or read more into the experience than was actually present. On the other hand, if the propositional content is somehow confirmed in reality, then it seems to strengthen the claim that the experience was indeed an experience of God, provided one accepts that God would reveal such a proposition.

These questions also provide an interesting context for examining the experience of Oliver Cowdery. When Oliver Cowdery arrived in the spring of 1829, he worked as Smith's scribe. In time Cowdery also sought the gift to translate. Smith allowed Cowdery to try to translate. Cowdery was unsuccessful in his attempt because, as a revelation to Smith stated, he had not studied it out in his mind before asking if the translation was correct.³¹ He apparently thought that the translation process was automatic or mechanical. The propositional content of Smith's revelation was correct: revelation in Mormonism depended on human effort, something that Cowdery apparently did not exert. In time, Cowdery would become more fluent in spiritual matters, reporting many revelations including the visitation of angels and guidance from the Spirit.³²

These early years also mark the beginning of the conversion process in Mormonism and the role of personal revelation in it. As Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton have stated concerning the Mormon conversion process, "the *sine qua*

³¹*Doctrine and Covenants* 9:7-9.

³²HC 1:42, 59.

non was [and is] the manifestation of the Spirit."³³ In May 1829, Samuel Smith, younger brother of the Prophet, came to visit his older brother to find out about his work. At this time Smith and Cowdery, even though the translation was not yet complete, had come to the conclusion that they should attempt to prove that their work was inspired by reasoning out of the Scriptures. They attempted to reason with the younger Smith who was quite skeptical. Finally Smith and Cowdery were able to answer enough of his questions sufficiently that the younger Smith retired to the woods to pray and find out if the work were true--that is, if it were inspired of God. Samuel received a revelation of its truthfulness and was baptized. Samuel Smith's conversion experience became the archetypal experience for Mormons: initial introduction of basic doctrines along with proof texts and then personal revelation. For some the conversion process was and is instantaneous; for others it was and is not. Gilbert Belnap, a reluctant convert to Mormonism, stated the following about his conversion in 1842:

After a diligent investigation for nearly two years, I satisfied myself with regard to the truthfulness of Mormonism and determined at some future date to obey its principles...., [a]lthough I could not form any particular reason for deterring.... It is beyond the power of man to describe the contending emotions of my soul at that time--pride, pleasure, the speech of people, my accumulating interests, the frowns of newly found relatives, and the appalling stigma attached to the word Mormon---were all obstacles that my youthful mind could scarcely surmount; and it was not until in solitude I unbosomed the

³³Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 41.

contending emotions of my soul to God that I found relief and peace, and the gentle whisperings of the spirit of God prompting me to forthwith obey the truth....³⁴

The conversion experience marked the beginning of the process of learning the spirit of revelation. Joseph Smith maintained that eventually a person could progress to the point of having all knowledge sufficient for salvation revealed by revelation.³⁵

The years between the First Vision and the organization of the Church in 1830 were unique times in the development of the doctrine of personal revelation. While Joseph Smith appeared to be the most receptive to revelation, the small group of followers converted to the Book of Mormon and Smith's own prophetic abilities were not far behind. David Whitmer, a prominent early convert, portrays this early period as a time when every convert was receiving revelations which were seen as being on par with Smith's: "Brother Joseph gave many true prophecies when he was humble before God: but this is no more than many of the other brethren did."³⁶ Whitmer maintains that the early revelations to individuals were private and not meant for the organization that would emerge in the coming years: "Also note that they [the early revelations] were given to individuals, to those who God chose in commencing his work,

³⁴Gilbert Belnap, *Autobiography*, Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, 12-13; 20.

³⁵HC 6:183.

³⁶David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Mo.: David Whitmer, 1887), 32.

for their individual instruction, and were not given to the church, and the church had no need of them."³⁷ Mormon historian D. Michael Quinn echoes this feeling about the early days of Mormonism, when he notes the following:

Until 1830, Mormonism was an individual [Joseph Smith] with a vision of himself and his relationship to God and God's revelation to him through angels, the Bible, and emerging new scriptures. This was so even though that one individual moved in a circle of other individuals with their own experiences, visions, revelations and confirmations that had been triggered through personal or vicarious contact with him.³⁸

With the lack of organizational constraints of early Mormonism, there was a sense of openness, a strong leaning toward religious individualism, in the early days of the church with personal revelation.

While people felt free to seek revelation on a variety of subjects, such revelations often brought reproof for human imperfections. Revelation was not just about knowing the truth of all things; it was also about improving behavior. The early revelations are rich in reproof for actions contrary to the will of God. Smith, himself, received the following in 1828,

³⁷Ibid., 55. It should be noted that Whitmer wrote this tract many years after the experiences of this time period and with the purpose of explaining why he left the Church in 1838 and to convince other members of their errors. He maintained, for example, that organizing the Church in 1830 was a mistake and not inspired of God because then the Church needed a spokesperson, Joseph Smith, who would then receive revelation for the Church, thereby raising the status of his revelations above an individual's personal revelation.

³⁸D. Michael Quinn, "From Sacred Grove to Sacral Power Structure," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Summer 1984):10-11.

after losing the first 116 pages of the translation of the Book of Mormon:

For although a man may have many revelations, and have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God before him.³⁹

The early revelations establish the interconnection between righteous behavior and the attainment of spiritual knowledge. The revelations to Martin Harris through Joseph Smith indicate the necessity of righteous behavior and personal revelation. The following is taken from a revelation in 1829:

Behold, I say unto him [Martin Harris], he exalts himself and does not humble himself sufficiently before me; but if he will bow down before me, and humble himself in mighty prayer and faith, in the sincerity of his heart, then will I grant unto him a view of the things [gold plates] which he desires to see.⁴⁰

Revelation was also about temporal matters as well. In fact, the division between the spiritual and the temporal was almost non-existent in Mormon theology. This would become more prevalent in the 1830s when Smith would begin to develop more fully his theology. Leonard Arrington comments on this fusion of the temporal and the spiritual:

Joseph Smith and other early Mormon leaders seem to have seen every part of life, and every problem put to them, as part of an integrated universe in which materialities and immaterialities were of equal standing, or

³⁹*Doctrine and Covenants* 3:4.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 5:24.

indistinguishable, in God's kingdom. Religion was relevant to economics, politics, art and science.⁴¹

Jon Butler has described the thinking of the early 1800s as a "syncretism" of ideas that he states was not unique to Mormonism.⁴² This concept of "syncretism" provides a way to interpret how the temporal and the spiritual in Mormonism are fused together. Smith blended ideas from magic, Christian primitivism and, to a lesser extent, the economic concepts prevalent in the early nineteenth century to form the basis for a temporal (natural) world in which the spiritual was very evident.

During the 1970s and 1980s a subject that only had been hinted at for some time in Mormon history became a subject of intense scholarly analysis: magic.⁴³ References to seerstones and rods used for finding treasure in the early revelations in

⁴¹Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 6.

⁴²Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 236. Butler notes Methodism, Mormonism, Afro-American Christianity, and spiritualism took various strands of religious thought and melded them together, although each selected different strands of thought.

⁴³In employing the term magic, I follow Jon Butler who rejects Bronislaw Malinowski's judgment that religion was superior to magic because the former was broad, philosophical and ethereal while magic was narrow and mundane. Butler points out that magic was neither, that it was complex and sophisticated. Butler argues that magic and religion both concerned supernatural powers and how to invoke those powers in the natural world. While it appears that Butler tries to tuck the notion of practicality away in his rejection of Malinowski's judgement, it is clear magic's concern for practicality--using the supernatural for practical matters--is still very evident in Butler's analysis of its practice (Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 3).

the Church was fodder for critics. Used mostly to show that Mormonism was a false religion, references to magic were not understood in the context of the times. While Smith toward the end of his life tried to distance himself and the Church from his earlier magical practices, it became increasingly clear that the issue of magic was, at the least, was present during the development of the Church. D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, while overstating the importance and use of magic in the Church, does underscore magic's pervasiveness in Smith's cultural milieu.⁴⁴ Smith grew up in a time when leaders of the various Christian churches were doing their best to eradicate the practice of magic among their followers but to little avail: it appears that most laypeople saw no contradiction between Christianity and the use of magic.⁴⁵ The use of magic in the American colonies was imported from Europe along with Christianity. Its popularity waxed and waned in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

⁴⁴Quinn's work has been criticized because of its argumentation. Often Quinn uses too much conjecture that goes beyond the evidence in trying to build his case. Cf. three book reviews of Quinn's work by various scholars in "Book Reviews," *Brigham Young University Studies* 27 (Fall 1987):87-121. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), also attempts to place Mormonism within the various magical traditions that were a part of the emerging American Republic. Like Quinn, Brooke's work suffers from telling the Mormon story from one point of view, as if magic alone could explain Mormon theology and cosmology.

⁴⁵Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 6-7; 72. See also Marvin S. Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of No Man Knows My History," *Church History* 43 (March 1974):85-86.

but the practice never was completely stopped. At various times it was popular among the upper classes, while consistently it was practiced among the lower classes who remained relatively untouched by the rationalism of the Enlightenment.⁴⁶ Smith was by no means a product of the Enlightenment; his was the world of the common people.

In 1822 Smith found the seerstone which marked the beginning of his personal foray into magic.⁴⁷ Although he would later renounce his magical activities, it is clear that they played a role in his understanding of the relationship between the temporal and the spiritual.⁴⁸ With the use of seerstone, Smith developed the reputation of being able to find hidden things, including treasure. The seerstone, however, would prove far more valuable not only in the translation of the Book of Mormon, but also in convincing those who became interested in Smith's claims of his prophetic abilities. The importance of the seerstone and of the Urim and Thummim would be crucial in counteracting the demands of the early nineteenth-century skeptics who were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment that emphasized the necessity of evidence for justified religious belief and denounced superstitious practices such as magic.

⁴⁶Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 75-83.

⁴⁷Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 30.

⁴⁸Ibid., 121, 150-153.

During the Enlightenment, miracles became the basis for proving or disproving the rationality of Christianity. The attention devoted to miracles by writers such as David Hume and John Locke show their importance. For many writers the existence of the many well-attested miracles during the first century, foremost among them the resurrection of Jesus Christ, were proof of the rationality and truthfulness of Christianity. The study of miracles had such a pervasive influence that when Smith brought forth the Book of Mormon the leading people of his area called for a miracle to attest to its truthfulness as the word of God.⁴⁹ But he showed no inclination toward producing miracles of the sort required by them, including the call for raising the dead.⁵⁰ Smith believed that such miracles were not the basis of faith but the result of faith.⁵¹

Yet Smith did do some things with the seerstone that his early associates in translating the Book of Mormon took as evidence of his abilities. Although Martin Harris previously had revelations from the Spirit concerning the truthfulness of the work Smith was engaged in, Smith would not allow him to see the plates. This lack of physical evidence caused Harris to ignore these earlier revelations at times and seek for more

⁴⁹Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 124-5.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 123.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 124.

concrete answers. One such occasion occurred in 1828 when Smith and he were busily engaged in the translation process. Smith at this time was apparently using the seerstone in the translation process. One day they stopped to take a break and went to the river to skip rocks. On the river bank, Harris found a stone that resembled Smith's seerstone and before Smith returned to continue translating, Harris switched the stones without Smith noticing. When Smith returned, he attempted to translate but was unable, exclaiming "Martin! What is the matter? All is as dark as Egypt."⁵² The earlier spiritual witness coupled with this experience was enough to convince Harris that Smith was indeed translating and not writing the book. But beyond this evidence, the seerstone would become valuable in more practical matters which not only would be evidence of Smith's abilities but also play a role in Smith's understanding of the relationship between the temporal and the spiritual.

In 1829, opposition to the work of translation had hindered its progress, and Smith asked David Whitmer if he and Oliver Cowdery could use his farmhouse as a place to translate. Whitmer came to get Smith and Cowdery and along the way spent two nights at two different inns. When Whitmer arrived, Cowdery, probably trying to bolster Whitmer's faith, asked Smith to look into the seerstone and identify where

⁵²As quoted in Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 90.

Whitmer had stayed on his trip. Smith did so and identified the owners of the inns. Cowdery wrote down the information and on the return trip Smith's pronouncements were proven accurate.⁵³ Regardless of the validity of this experience and the above-mentioned experience of Harris, their importance lies more in the fact that Whitmer and Harris were still struggling with the notion of spiritual confirmation. Manifestations of the Spirit alone were not sufficient for them; there had to be physical confirmation. This indicates, in part, that early Mormons were less than fluent in spiritual matters, relying in large measure on claims to physical confirmation.

In the midst of this skepticism, an unlikely consequence followed. Smith's perceived ability to discern practical things with the aid of supernatural force through the magical instrument of the seerstone convinced Smith at least in part that natural or practical things were very much subjects of revelation, that God was concerned about temporal matters as well as the more ethereal. It appears that for Smith if God were not so concerned, then he would have not received revelations about such matters. It seems evident that Smith's success with magic, which emphasized the harnessing of the supernatural in the interest of the practical, placed in his

⁵³Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 102-3.

mind the importance of the temporal in connection with the spiritual when it came to Mormonism.

This point needs to be qualified in one very important way. The ideas and spirit associated with Christian primitivism also would play a significant role. Lorenzo Dow, Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone and William Miller--all were primitivists who maintained the need to return to the ancient order of things in the teachings and doctrines of the Christian Church. Fueled by the principles of the emerging American democracy, these leaders were confident people's ability "to break the firm grip of custom and precedent" and the "taproots of orthodoxy" in order to return to a more pristine gospel.⁵⁴ Although Smith was not affected by those particular leaders, the democratic impulse to break with the recent past and return to the ancient order had its influence. As evidence of this, Smith went far beyond the other thinkers in claiming to restore the revelatory gifts associated with the primitive church, no matter if Campbell himself (founder of the Churches of Christ) would balk at the suggestion that the ancient revelatory gifts could be restored.⁵⁵

In particular, Smith sought from the early church the revelatory gifts in order to realize the supernatural in the natural world. This yearning for revelation would lead not

⁵⁴Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 169.

⁵⁵Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 183-4.

only to teachings about personal revelation previously discussed, but also to the fusion of the temporal and the spiritual worlds. The natural world was not in Smith's view completely distinct from the supernatural. There was interaction between the two. Thus the combination of the goals of magic and the primitivist impulse would help lay the foundation for his vision of a natural world permeated with the spiritual. In September 1836, Smith would proclaim a revelation in which the Lord stated "all things unto me are spiritual."⁵⁶

The third impulse which contributed to Smith's understanding, although to a lesser extent, was his own economic standing. Smith grew up in poverty. His use of magic must be seen in the context not only of the times, but also of his economic circumstances. Smith used his seerstone to search for treasure to relieve the economic pressures that faced his family.⁵⁷ But shortly before he obtained the plates, he came to the conclusion that his gift of seeing had a far greater purpose than just looking for treasure.⁵⁸ With this understanding, Smith began his journey away from magic. While spiritually he may have been growing, economically he was still on the brink of poverty. Still, his early revelations

⁵⁶*Doctrine and Covenants* 29:34.

⁵⁷Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 68-69. Josiah Stowell, an early associate of Joseph Smith, maintained that he found a lost Spanish mine.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 74.

warned against seeking for temporal things. Perhaps because of his success in spiritual things and because of his own poverty, Smith began to turn his spiritual gift's attention toward temporal matters. Smith began to bring forth revelations which spoke of the need for the Lord's people to be one in all things and that for one to possess above another in wealth was contrary to the true order of heaven. Smith linked temporal and spiritual matters in such a way that equality in temporal things was necessary for the reception of spiritual truths. Smith, of course, was not alone in his rejection of current economic ideas. Communities such as Walden Pond and Oneida stood as monuments to the dissatisfaction with the growing capitalist economy growing in the United States.⁵⁹ Yet Smith formed his ideas on economic reform sometime after he was already involved in esoteric activities. Thus while his economic ideas, motivated in part by his own poverty, may have helped sustain the confluence of the spiritual and the temporal, it is clear that the earlier revelatory ideas of magic and primitivism played a more significant role.

Smith's world was now thoroughly permeated with the supernatural on every level. Although each would have aspects which Smith would jettison, magic, primitivism and his own

⁵⁹Noll, *A History of Christianity*, 197-198.

poverty had left an indelible impression on the religion.⁶⁰ Revelations about temporal and practical concerns were to be expected. Personal revelation on just about any subject was thus available. And so it is today as Mormons bear testimony about receiving revelation about business, social and intellectual concerns. For Mormons, true revelation, no matter on what level, has spiritual impact: for all things, they claim, are spiritual to God.

One of the problems with this type of understanding of revelation is that it is a real possibility that everything can be counted as a revelation--every impression, thought, and feeling--whether it is inspired or not. With the openness that Smith exhibited in encouraging others to seek personal revelation on a variety of concerns in their lives, it is not surprising that discerning true revelation would be a great concern. Smith, himself, had to learn a valuable lesson about proper discernment. When Smith finished the translation of the Book of Mormon in June 1829, he was presented with the problem of getting it published. Smith found a publisher in Palmyra, New York, Egbert B. Grandin. Grandin initially was hesitant to publish the book for both religious and financial

⁶⁰Magic in particular became an acute embarrassment for Smith toward the end of his life. In his written history it is clear that Smith saw himself differently than he did in the 1820s. His history contains only hints of his magical practices. For a discussion of the decline of primitivist feelings among Mormons see, Peter Crawley, "The Passage of Mormon Primitivism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13 (Winter 1980):26-37.

reasons. Friends convinced Grandin that he could publish the book without implying his endorsement of the work, while Harris agreed to put up \$3,000 for publishing, and mortgaged his farm for security. In time, however, residents of Palmyra informed Grandin that they were going to boycott the book. Realizing that the profitability of the project would be nothing without purchases of the book by the local residents--who were essential since word of Smith's discovery had not spread much beyond the local communities--Grandin stopped printing.

In early 1830, Hyrum Smith, older brother of Joseph Smith, heard that in Toronto the copyright could be sold. News of another possible printer away from the proposed boycott renewed their hopes. Since Grandin was the only printer in the area, an alternative location for publication meant that Grandin could be bypassed altogether. Hyrum convinced Joseph to inquire of the Lord concerning the matter. The answer was that Hiram Page, an early convert, and Oliver Cowdery were to travel to Toronto and there they would be successful in selling the copyright. They, however, were unsuccessful even in finding the person that Hyrum Smith had indicated would purchase the copyright. Returning home disheartened, Cowdery began to have doubts about the ability of Joseph Smith to receive revelation. For the first time in his prophetic career, Smith had been wrong, absolutely wrong. When he

arrived at the Smith's home, Cowdery confronted Smith. Smith inquired of the Lord and received another revelation:

some revelations are of God; some revelations are of man;When a man enquires of the Lord concerning a matter, if he is deceived by his own carnal desires, and is in error he will receive an answer according to his erring heart, but it will not be a revelation from the Lord.⁶¹

For Smith, this was a case where his own desires for the publication of the Book of Mormon caused him to mistake his feelings and desires for the impressions of the Spirit. Those present, including Cowdery, who was the most concerned about Smith's ability, were satisfied with the answer. Smith's understanding of personal revelation, therefore, was sharpened and he began to become more acutely aware of other sources of experiences similar to revelation. Smith had taught earlier about the feeling of peace that a true manifestation should produce, but he had never been explicit about the discernment of spirits, although he claimed to have been shown the difference by the angel Moroni in 1823 when he first attempted to obtain the plates.⁶²

The days leading up to the organization of the church in 1830 were days of increased revelation, not only for Joseph Smith but for others as well. David Whitmer would later report the following about the amount of personal revelations:

⁶¹Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 31. See also Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 35; Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, 95.

⁶²*Doctrine and Covenants* 6:23; 9:8. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 73.

The Holy Ghost was with us more in more power during the eight months previous to April 6, 1830, than ever at any time thereafter. Almost everyone who was baptized received the Holy Ghost in power, some prophesying, some speaking in tongues, the heavens were opened to some and all the signs which Christ promised should follow the believers were with us abundantly.⁶³

It was a time when no hierarchy had been developed. It was a time when the individual had the greatest autonomy and used that autonomy to seek for things divine. The Spring of 1830, however, would signal a change in this autonomy.

The Organization of the Church and Personal Revelation

On April 6, 1830 six Mormons gathered at the home of Peter Whitmer, Sr., in Fayette, New York and organized the Church of Christ (later the name would be changed to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). After the Church was organized, Smith began to develop more fully the Church leadership structure. Smith and Cowdery were known as the First and Second Elder, respectively, and they oversaw other elders, priests, teachers and deacons. With the development of the leadership structure came a modification of the parameters of personal revelation. One incident in particular would signal a modification in the scope of personal revelation.

In September 1830, Hiram Page claimed to have a seerstone through which he could receive revelations. This was not unusual in itself. Since 1822, Joseph Smith also possessed a

⁶³Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers*, 33.

seerstone, described as a small stone that was chocolate-colored through which Smith could look and receive revelation.⁶⁴ As we have noted, for at least part of the translation of the Book of Mormon he used this seerstone.⁶⁵ Hiram Page claimed through the use of a seerstone different than Smith's to have received revelations concerning the location and building up of Zion, subjects mentioned in earlier revelations by Smith. Page convinced Cowdery and other prominent members of the truthfulness of his revelations.⁶⁶

This presented Smith with the first real challenge to his leadership. How Smith reacted to this challenge would have a tremendous impact not only on the importance of revelation but also on the development of the Church structure. Smith turned to the Lord and received a revelation which describe Page's revelations as originating from the devil.⁶⁷ It is curious that Smith did not go the earlier route of stating that the revelation could have been the work of emotion rather than the

⁶⁴See Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 69; D. Michael Quinn in his book *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 39, notes that Smith possessed a seerstone as early as 1819, but it was the one that he found in 1822 that figured most prominently in bringing forth the revelations from God.

⁶⁵CHC 1:128-130. Smith's use of the seerstone declined sharply after the translation of the Book of Mormon was complete, although he did not entirely put it aside.

⁶⁶HC 1:109-10.

⁶⁷Doctrine and Covenants 29:11.

Spirit. Instead, the revelation was emphatic: it was of Satan. Thus the words of the revelation clearly reflect the seriousness and potential magnitude of the situation.

This would not be the last time that Smith had to detect false spirits in the revelations of others. Throughout his tenure as prophet, he had to contend with those who claimed revelations that he believed were inspired by Satan.⁶⁸ Each time that Smith had to deal with a major claim to revelation that he judged to be false, he brought forth a revelation to explain the origins of the claimed revelations and re-emphasized his authority to discern.⁶⁹

The revelation concerning Hiram Page was actually directed toward Oliver Cowdery, since he was the one convinced of Page's ability to receive revelation. Smith wanted Cowdery to understand who had the authority in the Church to receive revelations for the Church. Cowdery and, by extension, others could receive revelation, but it was not to be shared as revelation for the entire Church. Cowdery was told that he would have revelations but he should "write them not by way of commandment."⁷⁰ This was to be Smith's duty. Smith presented

⁶⁸See, for example, Smith's list of those with whom he had to contend in *HC* 4:571-81.

⁶⁹See, for example, *Doctrine and Covenants* sections 43, 50 and 90. See George W. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), 59-66, for a discussion of the circumstances surrounding the issuance of these and other revelations concerning threats to Smith's leadership.

⁷⁰*Doctrine and Covenants* 29:8

the revelation to the general membership of the Church, who accepted it as revelation and thus accepted that he was the only one entitled to receive revelation for the entire Church.⁷¹ In bringing forth the revelation, Smith did not diminish the importance of personal revelation, but he did set boundaries which were not apparent before the organization of the Church. D. Michael Quinn has stated the following concerning this transition in the Church:

From the 1820s to the 1830s, Mormonism moved from being a collection of individuals whose equally valid personal revelations revolved around Joseph Smith's theophany to being a church membership with vaguely defined obligations to Joseph Smith as president and to his evolving hierarchy....An immediate problem in the new Church was that individuals who had supranatural, revelatory experiences of their own could not see that these were in any way inferior to the theophanies and revelations of Joseph Smith. This view posed no threat to pre-1830 Mormonism, but it invited disaster to the newly restored Church of Christ.⁷²

Eighteen-thirty one proved to be a decisive year in the development of the doctrine of personal revelation. Growing pains were experienced by the fledgling Church as some revelations to individuals were beginning to run counter to Smith's revelations. In the early months of 1831, John

⁷¹Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 167-8. This incident brings up an interesting "gray" area in the Mormon conception of revelation. If a Prophet of the Church brings forth a revelation from the Lord, does the majority of the Church membership have to accept it in order for it to be considered binding? In other words, is it a revelation if the majority of the people does not accept it? This has never happened in the Church, but has some intriguing possibilities, especially since there are no clear teachings on the subject.

⁷²Quinn, "From Sacred Grove," 12-13.

Whitmer, an early convert and historian of the Church, mentioned that a woman named Hubble came forth and proclaimed herself a prophetess, bringing forth revelations on a variety of subjects.⁷³ Joseph Smith indicates that she "came making great pretensions of revealing commandments, laws and other curious matters."⁷⁴ Some in the Church believed her revelations, apparently maintaining that she could give such revelations and commandments to the Church. Smith enquired of the Lord and received the following instruction:

For behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye have received a commandment for a law unto my church, through him [Joseph Smith] whom I have appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations from my hand. And this ye shall know assuredly--that there is none other appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations until he be taken, if he abide in me.⁷⁵

Clearly Smith saw himself as the revelator for the Church, that no one else could bring forth revelations that were meant for the entire Church. In 1864 apostle George A. Smith stated the following about the clash of personal revelations with Smith's during this time:

There was a prevalent spirit all through the early history of this Church, which prompted the Elders to suppose that they knew more than the prophet. Elders would tell you that the prophet was going wrong, men who thought they knew all about this work thirty or forty

⁷³HC 1:154.

⁷⁴Ibid., 1:154.

⁷⁵Doctrine and Covenants 43:2-3.

years some of them before the Lord revealed it, tried to "steady the ark."⁷⁶

It is evident that the young Church was struggling with the role of personal revelation in the expanding organization. A transition was being made from individualism, as exemplified by the openness of personal revelation prior to 1830, to a more corporate, organizational outlook, as exemplified in the development of the Church hierarchy.

As the Church began to grow larger during this time, proper discernment of revelations became a major concern. Smith's earlier experiences with revelation had taught him that there were other sources of experiences similar to revelation besides God. His encounters with those who claimed revelations for the Church had reinforced the need for an ordered hierarchy. The Book of Mormon mentioned that every true spirit or revelation, "enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God."⁷⁷ But outside these principles, there were few guidelines for determining true revelation from false revelation. In May 1831 Smith brought forth more explicit instructions on proper discernment.

While the leadership of the Church was away preaching the gospel, some members of the Church began to receive manifestations which were quite strange. Parley P. Pratt

⁷⁶*Journal of Discourses of President Brigham Young, His Counselors and Other Church Leaders* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1854-86), 11:7. Hereafter cited as *JD*.

⁷⁷Moroni 7:13.

stated that "some persons would seem to swoon away, and make unseemly gestures, and be drawn or disfigured in their countenances."⁷⁸ Smith would later report that one man chased around an imaginary ball which almost caused him to fling himself off a cliff. Levi Hancock, an early convert, reflected the confusion that many of the members felt about these manifestations: "I dare not come out against anything that an elder should say for fear I should speak against the Holy Ghost."⁷⁹ It is clear that standards for discernment of true revelation had not been developed sufficiently. When Pratt and others went to Smith to enquire if these manifestations were of God, Smith received a revelation which clearly indicated both that edification must be a by-product of the revelation and the necessity of a second witness:

And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness....Wherefore, it shall come to pass, that if you behold a spirit manifested that you cannot understand, and you receive not that spirit, ye shall ask of the Father in the name of Jesus; and if he give not unto you that spirit, then you may know that it is not of God.⁸⁰

Here, essentially for the first time as a general rule for all members seeking personal revelation, Smith is explicit on the need for a confirmation, either through the production of feelings such as love, joy and peace or having the same manifestation given a second time. The necessity of

⁷⁸Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 48.

⁷⁹Levi Hancock, *Autobiography*, TS, Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, 27.

⁸⁰*Doctrine and Covenants* 50:23, 31.

confirmation would from this time forth become prevalent in Smith's teachings.

In 1833, Smith again had to expand his teachings on the relationship between personal revelation and the growing Church leadership structure. By this time Smith had expanded the leadership structure to include the offices of High Priest and Bishop, and ecclesiastical units such as stakes (dioceses) were being developed. In April 1833, Smith received a letter from a Brother Carter. Although the letter is unavailable today, Smith in his reply makes apparent a great deal of its content. It appears from Smith's reply that Carter was involved in preaching the gospel outside of Kirtland, Ohio, where Smith had moved the main body of members in 1831. Carter apparently had experienced many revelations and believed that the revelations should be binding upon all. Smith answered that "it was contrary to the economy of God for any member of the Church, or any one, to receive instructions for those in authority, higher than themselves."⁸¹ With the expansion of the Church organization, Smith had to define the relationship among the various offices. Central to this relationship was the nature of revelation. Each officer in the Church, according to Smith, is entitled to receive revelation for those over whom the officer has stewardship, or that is, those lower in authority. But as the letter clearly indicates, a person is unable to receive revelation for those higher in

⁸¹HC 1:338.

authority. If a person of lower authority claims revelation for those higher in authority, it is *prima facie* evidence that the revelation did not come from God. It is clear that Smith was required to deal with the applicability of personal revelation within the evolving organization of the Church.

Even in the midst of this institutional restructuring, Smith reaffirmed the value of personal revelation. When he began to develop his ability to receive revelation, early members came to ask him to receive revelation for them. Many of the revelations which make up the present *Doctrine and Covenants* are in fact revelations which were given at the request of individuals. This was ideal for Smith for two reasons. First, it certainly was a vote of confidence in Smith to be asked by members to receive revelation. Smith was 24 years old when he organized the Church in 1830. He had attracted followers that were older and some, like Sidney Rigdon, were more experienced than he in administration of a church. With the various problems that he encountered along the way, the confidence of the members was absolutely essential. In fact one of Smith's darkest hours occurred in 1837 when a sizeable number of members began to lose confidence in him, eventually causing him to leave Kirtland forever.⁸²

⁸²See Marvin S. Hill, "Cultural Crisis in the Mormon Kingdom: A Reconsideration of the Causes of the Kirtland Dissent," *Church History* 49 (September 1980):286-97.

Second, the Church was small enough at that time for Smith to accommodate their needs and at the same time ensure homogeneity in the teachings of the new Church. In time, however, the Church would grow to the point that all individual requests for revelation could not be accommodated; the pressing matters of leadership and instruction occupied Smith's time. In the reply that Smith sent to Carter it is evident that Carter wanted Smith to inquire of the Lord and receive revelation concerning a particular matter. Smith replied:

It is a great thing to inquire at the hands of God, or to come into His presence; and we feel fearful to approach Him on subjects that are of little or no consequence, to satisfy the queries of individuals, especially about things the knowledge of which men ought to obtain in all sincerity, before God, for themselves.⁸³

This reply was far more than just a way to handle a person's request for revelation; it was a statement of the importance of personal revelation. No matter how much the Church grew and indeed because it grew, Smith continued to preach the importance of personal revelation.

In 1833 Mormons began construction on the Kirtland Temple. The temple was completed in 1836. In 1834 Joseph Smith had promised that "an endowment from on high" was forthcoming. The completion of the temple signaled the fulfillment of that promise in part by the greatest single

⁸³HC 1:339.

outpouring of personal revelation in the history of Mormonism.⁸⁴ Not only did Joseph Smith and the leaders of the church report revelations, but the typical member as well reported seeing angels, prophesying and beholding visions:

And there in the [Kirtland] temple on the Day of Pentecost of the 6th day of April 1836 there was such a time of the outpouring of the spirit of the Lord that my pen is inadequate to write it in full or my tongue to express it. But I will here say that the spirit was poured out and came like a mighty rushing wind and filled the house, that many that were present spoke in tongues and had visions and saw angels and prophesied, and had a general time of rejoicing such as had not been known in this generation.⁸⁵

Prescinda Huntington also noted that the dedication was a time of revelation:

In Kirtland we enjoyed many very great blessings, and often saw the power of God manifested. On one occasion I saw angels clothed in white walking upon the temple. It was during one of our monthly fast meetings, when the saints were in the temple worshipping. A little girl came to my door and in wonder called me out, exclaiming, "The meeting is on the top of the meetinghouse!" I went to the door, and there I saw on the temple angels clothed in white covering the roof from end to end. They seemed to be walking to and fro; they appeared and disappeared. The third time they appeared and disappeared before I realized that they were not mortal men. Each time in a moment they vanished, and their reappearance was the same. This was in broad daylight, in the afternoon. A number of the children in Kirtland saw the same.⁸⁶

On the day of the dedication, she noted the following about the abundance of revelation:

⁸⁴*Doctrine and Covenants* 105:33.

⁸⁵William Draper, *Autobiography*, TS, Special Collections, Brigham Young University, 2.

⁸⁶Edward W. Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom* (New York: n.p., 1877), 207.

We were also in the temple at the Pentecost. In the morning Father Smith prayed for a Pentecost, in opening the meeting. That day the power of God rested mightily upon the saints. There was poured out upon us abundantly the spirit of revelation, prophesy and tongues.⁸⁷

Nothing in the history of the Church can compare with the Kirtland Temple experience in terms of a single outpouring of revelation. It was the fulfillment in one sense of the evolution of personal revelation within the development of the Church. The greatest single manifestation of revelation was intimately connected with the organization of the Church. The temple from hence-forth would stand as the place where the necessary ordinances for salvation would be performed by the proper priesthood authority. Personal revelation, Church ritual and authority became intertwined. But it would not be until the Mormons moved to what would be called Nauvoo, Illinois in 1838, after being expelled from the state of Missouri, that Joseph Smith would put a capstone on his teachings about personal revelation.

The Nauvoo Period

Smith and five others spent the winter of 1838-1839 in a Missouri on charges of treason, murder, arson, burglary, robbery, larceny and perjury.⁸⁸ These were unfounded charges, but public sentiment in Missouri against Mormons compelled authorities to deal with the Mormons in some way. While life

⁸⁷Ibid., 207-208.

⁸⁸CHC 1:499.

in prison was far from ideal, the five months spent incarcerated afforded Smith the opportunity to develop his theology further.

When Smith and the others were permitted to escape by sympathetic jailor in April, 1839, he went to Illinois, and there established one of the most thriving cities of its day in that state. In June 1839, Smith delivered his most explicit justification for personal revelation:

A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas, so that by noticing it, you may find it fulfilled the same day or soon; (i.e.) those things that were presented unto your minds by the Spirit of God, will come to pass; and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus.⁸⁹

This represents not only what Smith maintained was the most common occurrence of the spirit of revelation--the thoughts and ideas which come into one's mind--but also how one could tell that the inspiration was from God: it works out in reality. His earlier teachings about discernment were not put aside, but he did add a component that was not explicit in his earlier teachings. He appears at this time to be more concerned with the rationality, or reasonableness, of personal revelation than at any other time; as a result, temporal (physical) confirmation is highlighted. Discernment of true personal revelation no longer was a function of spiritual

⁸⁹HC 3:381.

realities, such as receiving a second spiritual witness; it was now based in the physical world. True revelation about temporal concerns had always been a part of personal revelation, but never had Smith been as explicit about the necessity of temporal confirmation.

The fusion of the temporal and spiritual was now complete in his mind. As evidence, this teaching was delivered in a sermon that emphasized the necessity of temporal fulfillment of personal revelation as part of the process of gaining enough faith to have the *summum bonum* of personal revelation, the visitation of the Father and the Son:

...he will have the personage of Jesus Christ to attend him, or appear unto him from time to time, and even He will manifest the Father unto him, and they will take up their abode with him, and the visions of heavens will be opened unto him, and the Lord will teach him face to face, and he may have a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God; and this is the state and place the ancient Saints arrived at when they had such glorious visions--Isaiah, Ezekiel...John...St. Paul...and all the saints....The spirit of revelation is in connection with these blessings.⁹⁰

Smith is adamant that revelation to an individual could go above and beyond where revelation to the Church as a whole had gone. In other words, Smith encouraged members to seek revelation that was not contained explicitly in the Scriptures, ancient or modern. It is probable that Smith's concern for proper discernment of personal revelation, with his emphasis on physical confirmation, during this period was heightened because now he was explicit that personal

⁹⁰Ibid., 3:381.

revelation could be about the mysteries of God: "God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them."⁹¹ Now that Smith had explicitly stated that revelation could come about matters not yet revealed to the Church, it would be of supreme importance to ensure that such revelations were coming from the proper sources. This is not to say, however, that such revelations should be declared to the Church. These were meant to be personal revelations; Smith was still to reveal the will of the Lord to the Church and individuals were still obligated to follow his teachings, no matter the content of their own personal revelations. While serving a mission in England in 1839, for example, Lorenzo Snow had a revelation that would later become well known: As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may become. When Snow reported the revelation to Brigham Young, Young told him to keep it quiet until he heard Smith teach the doctrine. Smith did not develop and teach this doctrine until a few years later.⁹²

A short time later in 1839, Smith would continue his emphasis on the rational character of personal revelation when teaching about visions. Visions and dreams had played a

⁹¹Ibid., 3:380.

⁹²Eliza R. Snow Smith, *The Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1884), 46-47. Cf. Thomas C. Romney, *The Life of Lorenzo Snow, Fifth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Sugarhouse Press, 1955), 34-35.

significant role especially in the early days of the Church.⁹³ Some of Smith's most significant teachings were made known to him through visions. Smith's revelation concerning the nature of the after-life, including the three-tier heaven of Mormon cosmology, were claimed as visions. Reports of visions were not unusual in the so-called Burned-Over District where Smith grew up. And they were certainly not unusual in the Smith family. Smith's father, Joseph Smith, Sr., reported seven visions prior to his son's vision in 1820, most of which were in the form of dreams.⁹⁴ Joseph Smith's family gave him a great deal of support in the early years of his revelations, mostly because of the revelatory tradition in the family.

For Smith, at least in the beginning, the distinction between vision and dream was almost nonexistent. In the Book of Mormon, Lehi, the first prophet in the narrative, has a dream about the tree of life in which he states, "I have dreamed a dream; or in other words, I have seen a vision."⁹⁵ Much like Smith's family, early Mormons also saw dreams as important. Many claimed dreams as the reason for converting and deciding subsequently what to do with their lives. Luman

⁹³Thomas Alexander maintains that there has been a shift in Mormon mysticism, as he termed it, from visions and visitation of angels to the impressions and inspiration of the Spirit. See Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," *Church History* 45 (March 1976):64-65.

⁹⁴Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 53-76.

⁹⁵1 Nephi 8:2

Shurtliff, an early Mormon, noted that he had a dream in the fall of 1832 in which a Campbellite preacher and his brother were riding horses with legs missing, while he was sitting on a horse that had four legs.⁹⁶ Shurtliff concluded that "the horse of William Haden [the preacher] and Selah [his brother] represented the Campbellite religion and my horse represented the Mormon religion and showed the perfect state of the religion I was investigating."⁹⁷

When Moroni appeared to Smith in 1823, he quoted the second chapter of Joel concerning young men dreaming dreams and old men seeing visions. Although Smith never did denounce dreams as means of true revelation, he did perceive that not all dreams were inspired. And with experience and time he began to draw a clearer distinction between visions and dreams based on the importance of sense experience, as his July 1839 sermon indicates:

God has so ordained that when He has communicated, no vision is to be taken but what you see by the seeing of the eyes, or what you hear by the hearing of the ear....An open vision will manifest that which is more important.⁹⁸

For Smith an open vision--in which the person is awake and sense experience is a part of the experience, not just in the mind alone as in the case of a dream--was far more important

⁹⁶Luman Shurtliff, *Autobiography*, TS, Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, 20.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

⁹⁸HC 3:391.

than a dream as a revelatory mechanism. Jan Shipps, in a brief study of Joseph Smith's revelations, has come to the conclusion that his revelations need to be studied as if on a continuum, with the manifestations of the Spirit alone on one end and visions and angelic visitations on the other. Shipps maintains that Smith's confidence in visions was far more emphatic, perhaps because of the emphasis on sense experience, leaving no room for doubts.⁹⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that he would commend his followers to seek such manifestations, to seek such assurances.

Smith's move toward a more rational approach to revelation also intensified his understanding of where the importance of revelation lies: "When you see a vision, pray for the interpretation; if you get not this shut it up; there must be certainty in the matter."¹⁰⁰ Without interpretation the vision or dream is useless. For Smith it is the knowledge behind the dream or vision that is important, not just the experience. Increased knowledge was the sought-after effect of personal revelation. In 1842, Smith stated the following about the importance of knowledge:

A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge, for if he does not get knowledge, he will be brought into

⁹⁹Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle," 18-19. Shipps notes the confidence placed in visions throughout his career and contrasts that with some of the mistakes he made in trying to receive revelation solely through the promptings and manifestations of the Spirit--such as the case with the selling of the copyright for the Book of Mormon.

¹⁰⁰HC 3:391.

captivity by some evil power in the other world, as evil spirits will have more knowledge, and consequently more power than many men who are on the earth. Hence it needs revelation to assist us, and give us knowledge of the things of God.¹⁰¹

It was also during this time that he gave his most explicit instructions on the discernment of angels, furthering his move toward a more rational approach to revelation. In 1843, after years of claiming visitations from angels, he brought forth a revelation which divided angels into three classifications and gave keys, or knowledge, whereby one could discern among the three.¹⁰² Smith stated that there were two types of beings sent from God: angels, which had resurrected bodies, and spirits, who had lived on the earth but who have died and remain disembodied awaiting the resurrection. The third classification of angels were those which were angels of the devil. Smith stated that the way to determine their differences was to offer to shake their hands. If it was an angel, then the angel would shake the person's hand and the person would feel it, since the angel possessed a resurrected physical body. If the being that appeared was a spirit, the spirit would refuse to shake hands, since it did not have a physical body; but the spirit would deliver its message. If

¹⁰¹Ibid., 4:588.

¹⁰²*Doctrine and Covenants* section 129. As early as June 1839, Smith had begun to teach about the discernment of angels and spirits involving a physical manifestation. See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1980), 6.

the being that appeared was from the devil, then it would attempt to shake the person's hand, but the person would not be able to feel it, since Satan and his followers have only spirit bodies. Thus it appears that Smith was concerned about setting guidelines for discernment of angels. And this discernment rested upon a physical manifestation: a handshake.

During the Nauvoo period, Smith introduced plural marriage, the most controversial of all his doctrines, and by doing so set the stage for a poignant look at personal revelation. As early as 1831 Joseph Smith had taught the doctrine and possibly as early as 1835 Smith himself had engaged in the practice.¹⁰³ The revelation to begin the practice as a Church was received in July 1843. An important component of plural marriage was Smith's understanding that marriages performed by the proper priesthood authority were not just for time, but also for eternity, that families could be sealed together so that they could continue in the hereafter. He believed that it was a commandment of God to engage in the practice, as well as to introduce the practice to others.

While Smith was convinced that the practice was ordained of God, those he attempted to persuade to marry him or to engage in the practice themselves did not necessarily share

¹⁰³For a discussion of the early days of polygamy see, Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1989), 1-16.

his views. Some flatly refused his request for marriage. Cordelia Cox, for example, noted her feelings:

Imagine if you can my feelings, to be a plural wife, something I never thought I ever could. I knew nothing of such religion and could not accept it. Neither did I.¹⁰⁴

Others would only practice the doctrine if they had personal revelation on the matter. Lucy Walker Kimball recorded the following about being approached by Smith to marry him:

I had been speechless, but at last found utterance and said: "Although you are a prophet of God you could not induce me to take a step of so great importance, unless I knew that God approved my course. I would rather die. I have tried to pray but received no comfort, no light," and emphatically forbid him speaking again to me on this subject. Every feeling of my soul revolted against it. Said I, "The same God who has sent this message [of the restored gospel] is the Being I have worshipped from my early childhood and He must manifest His will to me."¹⁰⁵

It is clear that many of these women and men as well were not going to follow this doctrine just because Smith introduced it. Lucy Walker Kimball notes Smith's reaction:

He walked across the room, returned and stood before me with the most beautiful expression of countenance, and said: "God Almighty bless you. You shall have a manifestation of the will of God concerning you; a testimony that you can never deny. I will tell you what it shall be. It shall be that joy and peace that you never knew."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴Cordelia Cox, *Autobiography and biography of Isaac Morley*, TS, Special Collections, Brigham Young University, 4.

¹⁰⁵Lyman Omer Littlefield, *Reminiscences of Latter-day Saints* (Logan, Utah: Utah Journal Co., 1888), 47.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 47-48.

Kimball was not alone in her need for personal revelation. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner also needed such a manifestation:

Well, I talked with him for a long time and finally I told him I would never be sealed to him until I had a witness. Said he, "You shall have a witness." Said I, "If God told you that, why does he not tell me?" "Well," said he, "pray earnestly for the angel said to me you should have a witness."¹⁰⁷

She goes on to record how she prayed and received the following angelic visitation:

...an angel of the Lord came to me and if ever a thrill went through a mortal, it went through me. I gazed upon the clothes and figure but the eyes were like lightning. They pierced me from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. I was frightened almost to death for a moment.... The angel leaned over me and the light was very great, although it was night.¹⁰⁸

Still Lightner remained unconvinced, noting the following exchange between Smith and herself:

He said, "Have you had a witness yet?" "No."...Said I, "I have not had a witness, but I have seen something I have never seen before. I saw an angel and I was frightened almost to death. I did not speak." He studied a while and put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. He looked up and said, "How could you have been such a coward?" Said I, "I was weak." "Did you think to say, 'Father, help me?'" "No." "Well, if you had just said that, your mouth would have been opened for that was an angel of the living God. He came to you with more knowledge, intelligence, and light than I have ever dared to reveal."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷Mary Elizabeth Lightner, address, 14 April 1905, TS, Brigham Young University, 2.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 2-3.

Lightner questioned Smith about the angel ever returning. Smith responded that that particular angel would not return, but she would be privileged to have even greater manifestations.

She, then, records the following:

...he gave me three signs of what would take place in my own family, although my husband was far away from me at the time. Every work [word] came true. I went forward and was sealed to him.¹¹⁰

Although she does not mention what those signs were, apparently their fulfillment was proof enough that Smith's interpretation of the angelic experience was correct.

What is interesting about the above-mentioned accounts is the conviction among some of the early participants that they would not act unless there was confirmation from God. This was not simply a case of domination, nor simply a case of blind, slavish obedience to Smith's charisma. In many of the accounts of both men and women, Smith is portrayed as encouraging them to find out for themselves whether plural marriage was of God or not.

On June 27, 1844, Smith was murdered in part because of the introduction of plural marriage. Yet it was his conviction that he practiced the doctrine under the direction of heaven, and many who participated bore the same testimony by personal revelation. Smith left behind a legacy of claims to revelation. He also left behind his teachings on the

¹¹⁰Ibid., 3. Lightner was sealed to Joseph Smith but remained married civilly to her husband, Adam Lightner.

importance of personal revelation. George A. Smith, a witness to the unfolding of the doctrine of personal revelation, stated that "there was no point upon which the Prophet Joseph dwelt more than the discerning of spirits."¹¹¹

Conclusion

Personal revelation, while not unique to Mormonism, became a fundamental part of the "restored" gospel of Jesus Christ. From the more individualistic 1820s, to the organizational parameters of the 1830s, to the more rational approach of the late 1830s and 1840s, personal revelation was a vibrant part of Mormonism. Personal revelation was about gaining knowledge and changing behavior. One of Smith's greatest achievements was his ability to convince his followers that the heavens were opened for them, that personal revelation was possible. From a handful of members in 1830 to the thousands in the 1840s, Mormons maintained that God was speaking directly to them. Being able to commune with the heavens was an integral part of the stability that many members felt as the emerging Church grew from its humble beginnings and changed throughout Joseph Smith's life.

Smith's modification of the doctrine of personal revelation allowed the doctrine to survive and flourish in the development of the Church. One can also see the changes in the

¹¹¹"Minutes of Meetings held in Provo City," 28 November 1869, Church Archives; as quoted in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 21.

doctrine as changes in his understanding of his and others' relationship with God occur, as he moves away from the magic cultural milieu and primitivist impulses toward a man who stands at the head of an emerging church.

Beyond the importance of its own history in Mormonism, personal revelation also affords a unique window to Smith's understanding of the spiritual and temporal world around him. It also provides a unique view of how the average member viewed the spiritual world. Thus the more the doctrine of personal revelation is studied from a variety of disciplines, the more scholars will begin to see the role, function and importance of the doctrine to a comprehensive understanding of early Mormonism.

Chapter IV

PERSONAL REVELATION: FROM THE ERA OF BRIGHAM YOUNG TO THE PRESENT

Introduction

When Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum Smith were murdered in June 1844, the Church was left without the charismatic and centralized leadership that Joseph Smith had provided since the Church's inception. Smith did not clearly delineate who among his followers was to succeed him as Prophet, Seer and Revelator, and there were many who presented themselves as the heir to Smith's mantle. The struggle for leadership of the Church would provide a context in which appeals to personal revelation were prominent, as each contender for leadership would appeal to the doctrine that Smith had so emphasized during his tenure as leader of the Church.

Brigham Young and Personal Revelation

Brigham Young (1801-1877) had been greatly influenced by Joseph Smith. Converted in 1832, Young was a staunch supporter of Joseph Smith, even in the most trying of circumstances. While Young had the inside track on succession, Sidney Rigdon and James J. Strang also came to the forefront.¹

¹For a detailed account of some of the issues involved in the period following the death of the Smiths, see D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *Brigham Young*

Young and Rigdon would take center stage first in the struggle for leadership of the Church.

Brigham Young was away in the East campaigning for Joseph Smith for President of the United States when the Smiths were murdered. News of the tragedy reached Brigham Young on July 16. He immediately set out for Nauvoo, Illinois and arrived on August 6, 1844. At this time, Young was President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a quorum that was designated in a revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1835 to be equal in authority to the First Presidency. Three years earlier Smith had organized the First Presidency, with himself as the President and normally two others as counsellors to the President. At the time of Smith's martyrdom, Sidney Rigdon, a former Campbellite minister, was one such counsellor. Rigdon had also been away in the East when news of the tragedy reached him. He came back to Nauvoo, arriving before Brigham Young. Rigdon came to the members of the Church and stated that he was to be the "guardian" of the Church since he was Smith's counsellor. Upon arriving in Nauvoo, Young also sought to clarify the order of priesthood government, meeting with the other members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

On August 8, 1844, a meeting was called to determine which of the two was to be the successor to Joseph Smith. Each in turn was to speak to a large gathering of Mormons to see who would prevail in the leadership struggle. As far as

oratory skills were concerned, Rigdon was by far the better preacher. In a revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1833, Rigdon was designated as a spokesman for Smith. Indeed, he had been Aaron to Smith's Moses. But on this day, Rigdon's oratory skills were not convincing. He spoke for over two hours but had little effect on the members present. Young then spoke to the congregation. What followed is an interesting insight into the stock that Mormons put into personal revelation after the death of Smith. As Young spoke that day, many had a revelatory experience:

I can bear witness with hundreds of others who stood that day under the sound of Brigham's voice, of the wonderful and startling effect that it had upon us. If Joseph had risen from the dead and stood before them, it could hardly have made a deeper or more lasting impression. It was the very voice of Joseph himself. This was repeatedly spoken of by the Latter-day Saints. And surely it was a most powerful and convincing testimony to them that he was the man, instead of Sidney Rigdon, that was destined to become the "great leader," and upon whose shoulders the mantle of Joseph had fallen.²

While others heard the voice of Smith, many also saw Young transfigured before them:

In the afternoon President [President of the Quorum of the Twelve] Young replied to what had been said and when he arose to speak I was sitting holding down my head reflecting upon what had been said by Rigdon when I was startled by hearing Joseph's voice. He had a way of clearing his throat before he began to speak by a peculiar effort of his own, like Ah Hem, but it had a different sound from him to anyone else. I raised my head

²Helen Mar Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo," *Woman's Exponent* 11 (1882):130.

suddenly and the first thing I saw was Joseph as plain as I ever saw him in my life.³

Clearly personal revelation was a key element for some to Young's success that day. Perhaps encouraged by his success that day with personal revelation, and understanding the necessity of having the support of the majority of members, Young would deliver his first address as leader of the Church on the importance of personal revelation. The occasion was the first General Conference of the Church after the death of Joseph Smith on October 6, 1844:

This church has been led by revelation, and unless We forsake the Lord entirely, so that the priesthood is taken from us, it will be led by revelation all the time. The question arises with some who has the right to revelation? I will not ascend any higher than a priest, and ask the priest what is your right? You have the right to receive the administration of angels....Every member has the right of receiving revelations for themselves, both male and female. It is the very life of the church of the living God, in all ages of the world.⁴

After the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, the forces which had precipitated their murders abated for some time. This allowed Young a necessary reprieve in which to consolidate his power and to prepare the Saints for their departure away from the persecution in Illinois. The goal was to settle somewhere outside the current borders of the United States. Young's plan was to leave Nauvoo in April 1846, but

³George Morris, Autobiography, TS, Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, 26-27.

⁴HC 7:285.

renewed persecution forced the Saints to leave during the winter, the main group leaving in February 1846.

Yet leaving behind the persecutions of Illinois to arrive at their winter home, appropriately called Winter Quarters (Nebraska), did not mean that Young had left all of his leadership problems behind him. Young still had to contend with those who claimed to be the true leaders of the Church, even after his convincing victory over Rigdon. One such individual was James J. Strang. Strang arrived on the scene in Nauvoo in August 1844, shortly after the public confrontation between Rigdon and Young. Strang's claim to leadership was more dubious than Rigdon's. He claimed that he had in his possession a letter from Joseph Smith which stated that he was to be the leader of the church. Most recognized the letter as a forgery, but rather than renounce his claims, Strang persisted. He had one very important attribute that made him appealing to many Mormons: He was much more charismatic than Young--much more like Joseph Smith than Young. Indeed many saw in Strang what was seemingly missing in Young, a prophetic and revelatory quality. Strang claimed to have visions and other forms of revelations that acted as supports for his claim, and also claimed that by personal revelation one could know his claims were true. In fact, Strang was able to convince John E. Page of the Quorum of the Twelve at least for a time that he was being led by God. Wandle Mace noted the following:

They professed to know they were right by the spirit; that would end all argument. John E. Page, one of the Twelve apostles, was one of them. In connection with other brethren I labored with them to show them they were in error but to no purpose, for they would declare they knew Strang was the man to follow by the spirit. They were receiving communications from Strang as revelation from God, and it was no easy matter to convince them that he was deceiving them; but in the course of events John E. Page became convinced of the deception, and left the city in the night. He had been very enthusiastic declaring he knew the revelation he had received purporting to come from Strang was true by the same spirit he knew the Book of Mormon was true.⁵

Strang eventually started a colony on Beaver Island, Michigan and set himself as King of the colony. This self-coronation, which seems quite absurd, was actually a contributing factor to Strang's success. Before his death, Joseph Smith began to envision Mormonism in much grander terms. Perhaps stirred on by the success of Nauvoo and his own personal successes, Smith created an organization known as the Council of Fifty in March, 1844, whose purpose was the establishment of the political Kingdom of God.⁶ Smith maintained that eventually this body would constitute the government of all nations. The council was to be made of up of some of the leading Mormons of that day, along with prominent non-Mormons, all working toward the goal of a divinely inspired government for all nations. Although the Council of

⁵Wandle Mace, *Autobiography*, TS, Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, 194-195.

⁶For an analysis of the beginnings and purpose of the Council of Fifty, see Klaus J. Hansen, "The Political Kingdom as a Source of Conflict," *Mormonism and American Culture*, eds. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 112-126.

Fifty was not that well-known among the general membership of the Church, enough information had leaked out not only to arouse the suspicions of non-Mormons, but also to provide Strang with a basis for his leadership claim. Strang, or at least those members of the Council of Fifty he was able to attract, recognized its importance; therefore it is not surprising, as Klaus Hansen states, that Strang's organization "looked like a ... garbled product of that Council."⁷ Thus in very action and organization Strang presented himself as a contender for Smith's mantle.

The Council of Fifty and its relationship to other governing bodies of the Church was a subject of some contention which would eventually pit Young, as leader of the Quorum of the Twelve, against members of the Council of Fifty. Indeed when Joseph Smith was murdered in 1844, some members of the Council of Fifty maintained that the Council should meet in order to determine his successor. Apostles George A. Smith and Willard Richards informed those who wanted this action taken that the Council of Fifty was not a Church organization and thus had no jurisdiction in the matter.⁸ Even though the Council of Fifty was not considered a Church organization, it still had considerable influence in Nauvoo prior to the exodus, directing "both the policies and the administration of

⁷Ibid., 119.

⁸Ibid., 175.

the government of Nauvoo."⁹ Brigham Young continued to counsel with the Council throughout his days in Nauvoo. And when the time came for the Mormons to leave Nauvoo, the Council played a significant role in the removal of Mormons to Winter Quarters.¹⁰

The prominence of the Council of Fifty in Nauvoo and in the organization of the exodus produced in some members of the Council the idea that it should be in charge in all temporal matters. Lyman Wight, a member of the Council, was one who maintained such a view. After the Saints arrived at Winter Quarters and began to establish themselves, Young along with the Council of Fifty began to look for a permanent settling place for the beleaguered people. Life at Winter Quarters was precarious. Not only did the Mormons have to contend with the harsh environment, but also with a strong Indian presence and the constant rumors of Missouri mobs coming to attack them as they had a decade before.¹¹ Young certainly recognized the gravity of the situation and did his best to maintain order within the camp. He also accelerated plans for the removal of the saints to the West. Wight, who had left Nauvoo in 1844 looking for a permanent settlement, found what he considered to be the ideal location in Texas. Wight wrote to Young explaining the situation and encouraging Young to move to

⁹Ibid., 119.

¹⁰Ibid., 119.

¹¹Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 98-99.

Texas. When Young refused the request, believing that the West offered the best locations, and ordered Wight to Winter Quarters, Wight in turn refused. Such dissension was a constant problem to Young during this time. Not only did he have to contend with those in Winter Quarters that wanted to follow Wight, he also had to contend with other members of the Council about more minor matters as well.

As Young began to formulate his plans to move the Mormons to the Rocky Mountains, not only were various locations discussed but also possible routes. While such locations as Vancouver Island and California had been discussed earlier, Young began to see with more and more clarity that the Great Basin was the location. He was searching for a place where the Mormons could live unmolested; and the harsh and relatively uninhabited Great Basin seemed ideal. As Young began to formalize his plans for removal to the Great Basin, various routes were considered. Young, dominant as ever, had his opinion on the route and manner of travel; but so did George Miller and other members of the Council. Besieged by problems from renegade leaders outside of Winter Quarters--such as Strang and Wight--and problems from those within the community over differences on the final plans to leave Winter Quarters, Young found himself in a precarious situation. Something certainly had to be done.

In the midst of this turmoil in November 1846, Young announced a dream from which came assurances of safety for

them as they traveled.¹² But the route of travel was a subject for much debate. Miller and other members of the Council believed that the best way to enter the Great Basin was via the Yellowstone area, allowing them to establish a way station which could be used to plant crops on the eastern side of the mountains to assist the main group as they traveled later. Young maintained that the best way to travel was along the North Platte River with the vanguard party arriving in the Great Basin to plant crops in preparation for the expected harsh winter of the Basin. While both plans had their merits, the issue became more one of authority and leadership than one of the relative superiority of the plans.¹³ In time the Quorum of the Twelve began to favor the Yellowstone plan; Young, however, remained unconvinced and increasingly concerned about the challenge to his leadership as President of the Quorum of the Twelve that was presented by the Council of Fifty.

Young needed something to reassert his authority and give him the power necessary to reject the Yellowstone plan. On January 11, 1847, Young related another dream in which Joseph Smith had appeared to him and spoke about the move to the Great Basin.¹⁴ Then on January 14, Young announced that he had

¹²Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846-1852 "And Should We Die..."* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 150.

¹³*Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 156.

received a revelation from the Lord concerning the movement West.¹⁵ Mormon historian Richard Bennett comments:

[T]he document was a brilliant and well-timed statement not because of what it said regarding the organization of companies (since they had already had companies of hundreds, fifties, and tens all across Iowa) but for what it declared concerning the source of final authority. Above all, it was a lecture on apostolic supremacy.¹⁶

Young now had the power base from which to implement his plans and once and for all clearly state who was in charge of the westward movement. The revelation was quickly accepted as authentic by the members at Winter Quarters and surrounding settlements--not only because it was consistent with Young's duty as President of the Quorum of the Twelve to receive revelation for the Church, but also because many present claimed the confirmation of the Spirit. Bennett further describes the situation:

For the first time since Joseph Smith, the faithful proclaimed, God had once again given direction, had not left his people alone in the wilderness....Though it said nothing about their final destination or the feasibility of the way station, it did establish final authority.....And those who participated [leaders and general membership] in the meetings and procedures to ratify the revelation did not miss the issue.¹⁷

The members were now prepared to follow Young to their new home in the Great Basin. This event demonstrates the significance that the concept of revelation holds with Mormons. Alliances, compromises, strong-arm tactics--none of

¹⁵Presently known as *Doctrine and Covenants* section 136.

¹⁶Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 157.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 157.

these would have produced the result that the revelation did in securing Young's authority and readying the exodus westward. Young not only had taught the principle of personal revelation, but he had acted in accordance with his teachings and brought forth a revelation.

There is no doubt that Brigham Young was an authoritarian leader--perhaps the most authoritarian the Church has had. Much has been written about his influence over both the spiritual and temporal affairs of the Church, especially after their arrival into the Great Basin in the Summer of 1847. Yet this type of outlook needs to be balanced with his understanding of the importance of such individualistic doctrines as personal revelation. In 1857, years after establishing himself as leader of the Church, Young stated the following about personal revelation:

Should you receive a vision of revelation from the Almighty, one that the Lord gave you concerning yourselves, or this people, but which you are not to reveal on account of your not being the proper person, or because it ought not to be known by the people at present, you should shut it up and seal it as closed, and lock it as tight as heaven is to you....The Lord has no confidence in those who reveal secrets, for He cannot safely reveal Himself to such persons.¹⁸

Like Smith, Young maintained that it was possible to receive revelation that went above and beyond revelation given to Prophets, both ancient and modern, but also that such revelations must be shared within the parameters of the Church

¹⁸ JD 4:288.

organization and its rules. In 1862, Young would again stress the importance of personal revelation:

Without revelation direct from heaven, it is impossible for any person to fully understand the plan of salvation. We often hear it said that the living oracles must be in the Church, in order that the kingdom of God may be established and prosper on the earth. I will give another version of this sentiment. I say that the living oracles of God, or the Spirit of revelation must be in each and every individual, to know the plan of salvation and keep in the path that leads them to the presence of God.¹⁹

Did the typical member continue to receive such revelations? Joseph Robinson, an early convert and associate of Joseph Smith, became confused after the death of Smith concerning a doctrine that Smith had taught concerning the pre-mortal life. Robinson discussed the issue with several of the leading brethren who could not adequately explain the doctrine. Robinson, therefore, sought revelation on the matter and received an answer which resolved his confusion.²⁰ Benjamin Brown, a convert to Mormonism, would report in 1853 the following while traveling over the plains to the Great Basin:

¹⁹Ibid., 9:279.

²⁰Blake Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 (Spring 1982):63. Robinson's question concerned how Smith's revelations spoke of intelligences--the particles that make up the spirit--as always existing. How, if they have always existed, then could God be called the Father of our spirits? The revelation to Robinson stated that intelligences had always existed, but there was a time when those intelligences were organized into individual spirits by the Father; thus, he could rightfully be called the Father of our spirits.

Through the spirit of revelation, great intelligence and knowledge of the principles of eternity were bestowed upon us, such as we had never before received. At our evening meetings all had a privilege of speaking, and by the power of the Spirit many glorious truths were taught--the same things during the day having been frequently revealed to different brethren.²¹

Continuity and Change

The leaders of the Church from 1844 to the turn of the century were men who had been personally acquainted with Smith and were well-informed on his teachings. It is not surprising, therefore, that personal revelation would continue to receive attention in their sermons and writings. Lorenzo Snow (1814-1901), who would become the fifth president of the Church, stated the following in 1882 about the role of Joseph Smith in establishing the doctrine of personal revelation:

Joseph Smith was authorized to open up a channel and lay down a plan through which man could receive a knowledge of these things [the restored gospel], so that we might not be left to depend upon the testimony of the Prophets, or the testimony of the ancient Apostles, or to the testimony of the Apostles of the present day, or to the Book of Mormon, or to anything that was done or said in the past, but that we might know for ourselves. It is an individual knowledge. And if people in ancient times had faith, they had grounds upon which to found their faith, and so have we.²²

Yet a change that had begun during the later years of Joseph Smith was also beginning to manifest itself more

²¹Benjamin Brown, *Testimonies of the Truth: A Record of Manifestations of the Power of God, Miraculous and Providential, Witnessed in the Travel and Experience of Benjamin Brown, High Priest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Pastor of the London, Reading, Kent, and Essex Conferences* (Liverpool: S.W. Richards, 1853), 20.

²²JD 23:292.

readily with the passing of time. Historian Thomas Alexander notes this shift:

Since the Nauvoo period, supernatural mystical experiences such as spirit visitations and displays in the heavens were replaced by inspiration and dreams, generally associated with church ritual, missionary work, and the leadership of the church.²³

Indeed, Mormonism's encounter with Spiritualism in the 1850s provides an example of how personal revelation became associated with Church organization and ritual.

Spiritualism began in the late 1840s in New York, emphasizing contact with departed spirits through seances and rappings. News of Spiritualism reached Utah in 1851 and by the late 1850s and early 1860s some Mormons were following some of the principles of Spiritualism.²⁴ For some Mormons it fit well with Mormon doctrine on the possibility of contact with the spirit world. However, for others, including the leadership of the Church, it was not of God. But how should those who opposed Spiritualism attack it? Davis Bitton points out "simply writing off the new movement as a fraud was too easy. Such terms as 'delusions' came with ill grace from the Mormons, whose claims had repeatedly been disposed of with the same cavalier expression."²⁵ Parley P. Pratt, in particular,

²³Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature," 68.

²⁴For a history of Spiritualism's impact on Mormonism, see Davis Bitton, "Mormonism's Encounter with Spiritualism," *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974):39-50.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 46.

took the lead in assessing the claims of Spiritualism. In 1853, he delivered a sermon in which he reaffirms the possibility of contact with the spirit world and gives five criteria for determining true manifestations: a person must believe in contemporary revelation, must have repented of their sins, must act in the name of Jesus Christ, must hold the priesthood and must receive such manifestations in the temple.²⁶ What is interesting is that two of the five deal with Mormon Church organization and ritual: priesthood and temples.

All worthy males were entitled to receive the priesthood, which would enable them to perform the ordinances of the Church. Holding the priesthood meant belonging to an organized group within the Church organization. Pratt taught the importance of the Priesthood for contact with the spirit world:

And moreover, the Lord has appointed a Holy Priesthood on the earth, and in the heavens, and also in the world of spirits; which Priesthood is after the order or similitude of His Son; and has committed to this Priesthood the keys of holy and divine revelation, and of correspondence, or communication between angels, spirits, and men, and between all the holy departments, principalities, and powers of His government in all worlds.²⁷

Years later Brigham Young would echo Pratt's words on the connection between priesthood and revelation and its importance for dealing with Spiritualism:

²⁶JD 2:45-46.

²⁷JD 2:46.

But God has spoken now, and so has the devil; Jesus has revealed his Priesthood, so has the devil revealed his, and there is quite a difference between the two. One forms a perfect chain, the links of which can not be separated; one has perfect order, laws, rules, regulations, organization; it forms, fashions, makes, creates, produces, protects and holds in existence the inhabitants of the earth in a pure and holy form of government, preparatory to their entering the kingdom of Heaven. The other is a rope of sand; it is disjointed, jargon, confusion, discord, everybody receiving revelation to suit himself.²⁸

Davis Bitton notes that Mormons saw in Spiritualism confusion which was a result of a lack of organization.²⁹ Thus Mormons saw the superiority of their manifestations in part because of the organized manner in which revelation came through the appointed channels of the priesthood, rather than contradictory messages and "helter-skelter stumbling after some kind of guidance" of Spiritualism.³⁰

Commenting on the importance of temples as the place of revelation, Pratt noted:

The Lord has ordained that all the most holy things pertaining to the salvation of the dead, and all the most holy conversations and correspondence with God, angels, and spirits, shall be had only in the sanctuary of His holy Temple on the earth, when prepared for that purpose by His Saints; and shall be received and administered by those who are ordained and sealed unto this power, to hold the keys of the sacred oracles of God.³¹

²⁸JD 13:281. Cf. Bitton, "Mormonism's Encounter with Spiritualism," 48.

²⁹Bitton, "Mormonism's Encounter with Spiritualism," 48.

³⁰Ibid., 48.

³¹JD 2:46.

Personal revelation for a number of years had occurred outside of the temples, but Pratt's comments were to make clear that sacred manifestations of departed spirits were to take place in the temples. For years Mormons had claimed that departed relatives had come from the spirit world to comfort, assist, and teach. Now Pratt taught that the temple was the key place for such visitations.

Just as with the experiences at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the dedication of other temples in Utah provided the opportunity for the greatest outpourings of revelation. B.H. Roberts reports on the outpouring of revelation at the Manti Temple in 1884:

In some cases the speakers were reported to be surrounded by halos, and others heard strains of music and soft chorus singing, to which many scores gave their names as witnesses. Others claim to have seen the spiritual personages of early leading elders of the church.³²

While personal revelation was becoming more linked with Church ritual and organization, the controversy surrounding the end of the practice of polygamy would signal the completion of the shift in personal revelation from the openness of the early period to its integration with the organization and rituals of the Church. Such a completion, however, did not come without some opposition. In the 1860s the Godbeites, a group of disaffected Mormons, left the Church over the intrusion of the Church into what they considered

³²CHC 6:231.

private matters.³³ While the Church struggled with this transition, the issue of polygamy would also produce one of the most important revelations in the history of the Church.

When Joseph Smith first introduced plural marriage, he did so in secret to a select few. It would not be until 1852 that Orson Pratt would announce publicly the practice of polygamy, or more appropriately polygyny, the practice of taking more than one wife. With polygamy now out in the open, it soon became a campaign issue. In 1856 the Republican party in its platform railed against the "twin relics of barbarism: slavery and polygamy." Polygamy was seen as an affront to the moral values that the United States was built upon. Newspapers in the East published lurid tales of polygamy, often portraying Mormon men as lustful dominators who kept women solely for the purpose of sexual gratification. Fueled by such reports, the nation began to focus on the Mormons once again.

There were several legislative attempts by the United States Congress to end the practice of polygamy. However, most attempts to outlaw polygamy until 1882 dealt only with the issue of polygamy per se. Congress for some time failed to see that Mormon religion integrated religious practices, politics and economics, but in time Congress understood that they were practically inseparable.³⁴ The Morrill Act of 1862,

³³Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 176.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 174-177.

one such early attempt at legislation, allowed the prosecution only of the individual practicing polygamy, not of the Church. Realizing that the Morrill Act was largely-ineffective--largely because Mormons made effective use of loopholes in the Act by renaming polygamy as "cohabitation"--in 1882 Congress passed the Edmunds Act. This Act did not distinguish between polygamy and cohabitation and made both punishable; it excluded polygamists from serving on juries; it declared vacant all political offices in the Territory of Utah connected with registration and election duties; and it disenfranchised all practicing polygamists and made it illegal for them to run for office.³⁵ Armed with the Edmunds Act, federal officials set out to find and to prosecute polygamists. While it took some time for federal officials to get started, eventually they were able to prosecute successfully leading Mormons, forcing even Church President John Taylor into hiding and moving from place to place in 1885 for fear of prosecution.³⁶ While the prosecutions were largely successful, the results were not what federal officials had intended. Time served in the Utah penitentiary by convicted polygamists, while certainly not ideal, did not sour Mormon opinion toward polygamy. In fact, convicted polygamists were

³⁵Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 402.

³⁶CHC 6:122-124.

seen as heroes and role models by other church members as they were prisoners for conscience's sake.³⁷

Realizing that the Edmunds Act was a giant step forward but did not achieve its goal of changing Mormon opinion about polygamy, Congress introduced in 1887 the Edmunds-Tucker Act. Designed to strengthen the Edmunds Act, the Edmunds-Tucker Act targeted the Church in addition to individual polygamists. One of the central provisions of the act was the dissolving of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a legal corporation.³⁸ This, coupled with the other major stipulation that the church could not own property in excess of \$50,000, severely hampered the financial strength of the church. While Church property was confiscated, the Church could still occupy the property and the improvements, but they would have to pay rent to the federal government.³⁹

Still the leaders of the Church were willing to put up with such strictness and did their best to encourage the rank-and-file members to continue their support of the doctrine of plural marriage. With time, however, one issue came to the forefront which contributed significantly to the Church's abandonment of the practice of plural marriage: the threat of confiscation of the Mormon temples. When Joseph Smith began to

³⁷Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 120.

³⁸CHC 6:147.

³⁹Thomas G. Alexander, "The Odyssey of a Latter-Day Prophet: Wilford Woodruff and the Manifesto of 1890," *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991):185-186.

unfold his theology, central to his understanding of the human relationship to God and the concept of salvation was the temple. As Smith began to expand upon his earlier theological ideas, the temple was to play a larger and larger role, culminating in the temple ordinances of eternal marriage--viewed as necessary for the highest degree of heaven--and vicarious work for the dead, so that those who never had a chance to hear the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ could still be heirs of salvation. The importance of the temple(s) continued after Smith's death. Brigham Young oversaw the completion of the Nauvoo, Illinois Temple, a project started by Smith. And in 1847 Young, within four days of his arrival in the Great Basin, marked off ground for the Salt Lake Temple.

When the Supreme Court in 1890 upheld the legality of the confiscation of Church property, the Justices opened the door for the confiscation of the temples. This being so, it seemed a remote possibility that the government would act on the ruling, since the receiver in charge, Frank Dyer, had administered the Edmunds-Tucker Act quite fairly.⁴⁰ The situation soon changed for the worse for the Church. Dyer was replaced by Henry W. Lawrence, whom Church leaders described as a "bitter apostate." Lawrence moved to confiscate the temples in St. George, Logan, Manti and Salt Lake City. This move caused Church President Wilford Woodruff to approach the

⁴⁰Ibid., 201.

Lord and receive the revelation simply known as the Manifesto, which stopped the practice of plural marriage at least in the United States. Woodruff would later report:

the Lord showed me by vision and revelation exactly what would take place if we did not stop this practice....All ordinances would be stopped throughout the land of Zion. Confusion would reign throughout Israel....Trouble would have come upon the whole Church, and we should have been compelled to stop the practice. Now, the question is, whether it should be stopped in this manner, or in the way the Lord has manifested to us, and have our Prophets and Apostles and fathers free men, and the temples in the hands of the people, so that the dead may be redeemed.⁴¹

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the issuance of the Manifesto of 1890. Opinions vary on whether the revelation occurred, or whether the Manifesto was simply Mormon capitulation to the United States Government plain and simple cloaked in the language of revelation. Klaus Hansen, for example, maintains that the Manifesto was such a capitulation: "[Woodruff's] insistence that he had indeed acted under revelation has always seemed somewhat suspect to all but the most credulous among the faithful."⁴² Others disagree with Hansen's conclusion, maintaining that only a true revelation would have changed a practice that was lived for years in defiance of civil law: Mormons would only give up

⁴¹*Doctrine and Covenants*, (1981 ed.) Official Declaration-1; as quoted in Alexander, "The Odyssey of a Latter-Day Prophet," 204-5.

⁴²Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 199.

the practice if they knew that it was the will of God.⁴³ Regardless of the validity of the claim to revelation, it seems clear without Woodruff's announcement that polygamy would have continued. B.H. Roberts records the impressions of the United States district attorney concerning the announcement of the Manifesto:

They [the Latter-day Saints] are not obeying the law of the land at all, but the counsel of the head of the church. The law of the land, with all its mighty power, and all the terrible pressure it was enabled to bring with its iron heel upon this people crushing them to powder, was unable to bring about what this man did in an hour in the assembled conference of this people. They were willing to go to prison; I doubt not some of them were willing to go to the gallows, to the tomb of the martyr, before they would yield one single iota.⁴⁴

What is not in doubt, however, was the eventual acceptance of the Manifesto as a revelation by almost all the general membership of the Church.

While it took some time to eradicate the practice of polygamy in the Church, the 1890 manifesto signaled the beginning of the movement of Mormonism toward the mainstream of American society. Mormon political control was lessened and the rhetoric of revenge and retaliation against the United States gave way to feelings of benevolence. This new orientation would also affect the doctrine of personal revelation.

⁴³See for example, Gordon C. Thommason, "The Manifesto was a Victory," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6 (Spring-1971):37-45.

⁴⁴CHC 6:229.

The Twentieth Century

While leaders since the turn of the century have taught the importance of the doctrine of personal revelation, there has been a noticeable shift however in emphasis, at least in public sermons. George Arbaugh, a non-Mormon scholar, comments on the parameters of personal revelation in the first part of this century:

Individuals may receive revelations for their own guidance, but for nothing else. This has been interpreted as inspiration in obeying the commandments of God and the church.⁴⁵

A more recent historian, John L. Brooke, concurs with Arbaugh's assessment, noting that there was a "suppression of popular manifestations of the spirit," and a "move to de-emphasize the mystical dimension."⁴⁶ This is not to say, however, that personal revelation was completely put aside as a doctrine of the Church. But the shift in emphasis is noticeable.

This shift, however, did not mean the end of revelation to the Church or the individual. With the political, economic and social control of Utah was longer a function of the Church, the first years of the twentieth century marked a change in attitude among many Mormons on their relationship to the Church hierarchy. Jan Shipps notes the following about this change:

⁴⁵George Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism*, 180.

⁴⁶Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 291.

...by 1916 there were many Saints who, quite satisfied to be free of the constraints that had gone along with living in a community gathered out of and separated from the world, were welcoming the new situation by questioning the authority of their LDS leaders in all areas except the strictly ecclesiastical.⁴⁷

Others "wondered publicly whether the source of inspiration for Mormonism's change in direction was human or divine."⁴⁸ It is in this context that then President Joseph F. Smith (1838-1918), son of Hyrum Smith, gave a general conference address in April, 1916 that sought to bridge the gap between the Mormonism of the 1800s and the Mormonism of the 1900s. He stressed continuity with the past and testified that the central tenets of the Church of his youth were the same as they were in 1916. Thousands present believed that this address about continuity was divinely inspired, by the feeling of the Spirit that was present during the sermon. Jan Shipps notes that the sermon, although never canonized, carried with it for most members present the "powerful weight of continuing revelation."⁴⁹ That is, the Church, even with all the changes, still was being led by revelation. Was this in fact a divine manifestation? The sheer number who felt the "presence of the Divine" during that sermon makes it difficult to reject it as a valid manifestation, especially since General Conference talks of this day were not done in such a manner, either by

⁴⁷Shipps, *Mormonism*, 139-140.

⁴⁸Ibid., 140.

⁴⁹Shipps, *Mormonism*, 146.

the speakers' actions or language, to evoke emotional responses in the audience.

Joseph F. Smith's sermon coupled with a revelation now canonized as *Doctrine and Covenants* section 138 provided the foundation upon which Mormonism made the transition to the twentieth-century . In 1918 Joseph F. Smith claimed two visions which amplified Joseph Smith's earlier teachings on the Spirit World. Joseph F. Smith reported that he saw many of the faithful early Mormons continuing their work in the Spirit World, and in fact that every faithful member continues to preach the gospel when this earthly life is completed. The visions were accepted by the Quorum of the Twelve as true revelations from God, and eventually canonized by the Church in the 1970s by a vote of the general membership.⁵⁰ The visions reinforced the notion that continuing revelation was still a part of the Church and such revelations were not just affirmations of earlier doctrines, but added to the existing body of doctrines.

While Joseph F. Smith's sermon and revelations provided much needed continuity and sent the message that God was still directing the Church, the move to "de-emphasize the mystical" and to equate personal revelation with "inspiration in obeying" was changing the doctrine of personal revelation. Private revelation was still encouraged but increasingly

⁵⁰Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1986), 282.

public manifestations were discouraged. In particular, the leadership of the Church discouraged public pronouncements of personal revelations, speaking in tongues and public prophecies, all of which had been abundant in the nineteenth-century.⁵¹ Motivation for this change was due in large part to a scientific rationalism that was beginning to develop within the Church. Church leaders and writers imbued with this spirit of rationalism often wrote books which analyzed Church practices from what was considered a scientific view. In doing so, some spiritual manifestations could not be analyzed because they lacked a rational basis. Thomas Alexander notes: "In the early twentieth century glossolalia was difficult to rationalize in scientific terms except by those who saw it as a form of irrational emotional excitement."⁵² Because of this scientific world-view, leaders taught less about public manifestations of revelation, and increasingly some members became uncomfortable with such manifestations, leading to a decline in their occurrences.⁵³ Mormons began to find their religious expressions in institutional forms of worship "such as the bearing of testimonies in the monthly fast and testimony meeting and to genealogical work and vicarious ordinances for the dead in the temples."⁵⁴

⁵¹Ibid., 293-297.

⁵²Ibid., 305.

⁵³Ibid., 296-298.

⁵⁴Ibid., 298.

Another contributing factor to the change in personal revelation was due to those who continued to practice polygamy after the Manifesto. By continuing to practice polygamy, they called into question whether the leadership of the Church was inspired. It is interesting that many who continued to practice polygamy have claimed revelation as their justification.

In 1905 John Tanner Clark was excommunicated from the Church for practicing polygamy and speaking out against the Manifesto. But Clark claimed to have received revelation about polygamy's necessity.⁵⁵ In the 1920s Moses Gudmundsen, a one-time violin teacher at Brigham Young University, claimed personal revelation as the basis for his practice of polygamy.⁵⁶ In fact, polygamists today continue to emphasize the importance of personal revelation as part of their teachings. For example, Jim and Elaine Harmston recently founded The True and Living Church of Jesus Christ of Saints of the Last Days (TLC) on the basis of personal revelation.⁵⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that the Harmstons and their followers are "strong advocates of independence and personal direct revelation from God."⁵⁸ What is interesting about the

⁵⁵Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 201.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 201-202.

⁵⁷For an overview of the history, beliefs and practices of this group, see Becky Johns, "The Manti Mormons: The Rise of the Latest Mormon Church," *Sunstone* 19 (June 1996):30-36.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 32.

claims of the more recent polygamists is their insistence on the need to perform some of the sacred ordinances of the temple outside of the temple, especially those pertaining to the reception of personal revelation. In 1993, for example, several dissident Mormons wrote a letter to some local Church leaders in Central Utah maintaining their right to practice temple rituals in their homes because of the rituals' power in bringing personal revelation.⁵⁹ This is evidence that the move to connect personal revelation with Church organization and ritual has happened, as even those who disagree with current Church policy, practice or doctrine still look to Church rituals as a source of personal revelation.

It is within this environment that leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continue to caution against unregulated personal revelation. As in the days of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, today there have been more than a few members who have claimed to receive personal revelations which are at variance with Church doctrine or practice. The leadership of the Church usually meets the challenges of these purported new revelations in much the same way Smith did--with references to his authoritative teachings and revelations. As noted above, some who claim these revelations eventually break off from the Church and form their own religious organizations. Others, who maintain the

⁵⁹Several authors, letter to Gregory M. Maylett, Harold Mickel and Kim Aagard, 27 June 1993; electronic copy in author's possession.

veracity of their revelations in spite of their rejection by the leadership, remain members of the Church, with the hope that the status quo will change. These situations put the Church leadership in a quandary. Leaders continue to emphasize the importance of personal revelation, but at the same time continually have to emphasize their own authority to make judgements on the validity of individual revelations, a careful balancing act which is not always successful. It is not successful in large part because their public statements give the impression that the authoritarian aspects of the Church are more significant than the individual's prerogative for personal revelation.

Most of the sermons delivered by leaders today focus on personal revelation in terms of gaining a testimony of the truthfulness of the restored gospel or being guided in personal affairs, but very little is stated about the other forms of revelation. Sermons that mention the importance of personal angelic visitations, visions, dreams, or revelations from the Spirit about the mysteries of God are few. Moreover, no contemporary leader has attempted to expand on Joseph Smith's earlier teachings on personal revelation. But even though the emphasis has shifted, leaders are not willing to forsake the teachings of Smith on this matter. While not publicly discussing them as he did, there is still an acknowledgement that revelation is the key to salvation--and the possibility of revelation of the mysteries of God,

mysteries which go beyond current doctrines of the Church. Nevertheless, what is emphasized are the parameters of personal revelation: a person may receive revelation, but it is only for the edification of the individual or for those over whom he or she has stewardship, and must not contradict current Church policy or doctrine. The central concern is adherence to what the past and current prophets have revealed. This is not to suggest, however, that personal revelation is discouraged. In fact the monthly fast and testimony meeting, where members are free to share spiritual experiences, continues to suggest that personal revelation in the Church is still vibrant and a part of the fabric of Mormonism. The tension between the Church organization and individual revelation is still present but so are attempts to reconcile the two, seeking a middle ground between two forces which have been so essential to the development of Mormonism.

It appears that as the Church moves further away from the days of the charismatic early leaders, the more some Mormons will yearn for those days when they believe the heavens were opened.⁶⁰ As a result, personal revelations may more frequently occur on the fringes of orthodoxy by those seeking the same type of revelations experienced in the early days of the Church. This problem is compounded as the Church continues to experience phenomenal growth. The homogeneity of Mormons of the past century is indeed a thing of the past, and the sheer

⁶⁰Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism*, 180.

number of members will dictate less direct administration and teaching by the upper echelon of leaders. All of this will add up to an environment conducive to the importance of and emphasis on personal revelation as a distinctive Mormon experience, but at the same time providing the opportunity for increased claims to revelations which contradict current Church policy or doctrine.⁶¹

Importance of Personal Revelation

Scholarly interest in Mormonism has been increasing among both Mormon and non-Mormon scholars for some time. Yet in many ways the scholarly understanding of Mormonism has lagged behind the understanding of other religious movements. Time certainly has played a role in this. The religion is relatively young and is still in stages of development that other movements passed through long ago. In connection with this, the academic study of Mormonism is still in its early stage. While other scholars studying other religions have moved toward histories and studies of the laymembers, Mormon historians by and large labor with institutional histories or

⁶¹As Mormonism begins to move further away from being a Utah-based church, revelation becomes increasingly important as that which is common to all members, no matter where they live. See Chandri Seshachari, "Revelation: The Cohesive Element in International Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13 (Winter 1980):38-46.

the histories of the elite.⁶² Such histories may be important for a general understanding of Mormonism, but they do not adequately portray how the typical member views his or her religious world and thus leaves out a very important component of a comprehensive understanding of Mormonism. If a more comprehensive picture of the movement is to emerge, the beliefs, attitudes and practices of individual members must be studied.⁶³ Thus as these histories become more prominent, the pivotal role of personal revelation in Mormonism should be seen with greater clarity.

In addition to this methodological concern, a better understanding of personal revelation might also afford insights into previously studied events. For example, scholars in recent years have paid a great deal of attention to the time period surrounding the issuance of the Manifesto.⁶⁴ Various theories have been put forth to explain the transition that Mormonism made from being on the fringes of society in the 1800s and its continued march toward respectability in the late 1900s. The analysis so far has concentrated on changes in Church policies on such matters as plural marriage, economic

⁶²This point is made by Grant Underwood, "Re-visioning Mormon History," *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (August 1986):403-426.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 424-5.

⁶⁴Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930*. Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of New Religions Tradition*. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*. All discuss this transition period.

policies and political control.⁶⁵ The problem with this analysis is that these changes by and large did not affect the typical member as much as they did the institutions and the leaders of the Church. Plural marriage was never a majority practice among Mormons, so for most, the shift back to monogamy was not of as great a significance as it was on an institutional level. Furthermore, the shift in politics from a theocracy toward a republican system does not appear to have been a major transformation. Mormon historian Grant Underwood comments:

When the shift to the national two-party system did take place, the very fact that so few Latter-day Saints were traumatized to find their leaders clashing over issues and competing in elections suggests that, psychologically at least, they had never really been in the thrall of theocracy in the first place.⁶⁶

Thus just how the typical member made the "transition" remains to be seen, but indications are that the typical member did not experience the type of transformation experienced by the elites as indicated by those who have studied this period.⁶⁷

If this is understood it might be that the so-called transition period from Church-controlled life, in which the social, religious and economic policies were at variance with typical American values, to the era in which values more in tune with the American ethos were embraced, was really not a

⁶⁵Underwood, "Re-visioning Mormon History," 403-411.

⁶⁶Ibid., 411.

⁶⁷Ibid., 414-418.

transition period as much as a change in focus back toward the individual. Perhaps less controversially, it might be asserted that the transition made it possible for the latent individualism, present from the beginning of the movement, to come to the surface. This would help to explain why the "transition" period appears to have been relatively easy on an individual level. Mormons have become quite adept at adapting to the social customs, and certainly to the economic conditions, of American life as individual Mormons began to and continue to hold positions of prominence in American business.

What most scholars, even Mormon scholars, fail to realize is the radical individualism that is at the heart of the religion. This is a religion that puts a great deal of trust in the individual. The doctrine of personal revelation, with its goal of revelation which goes above and beyond institutional revelation to the beholding of the mysteries of God, clearly indicates this individualism. In connection with personal revelation, Mormon theology clearly puts free will at the very heart of its understanding of the gospel. God not only does not interfere with free will but apparently cannot interfere--it is beyond His power. True, Mormons do maintain that God can compel people to be humble, but that such compelling is limited by people's free will. Everything revolves around the individual and his or her ability to choose freely.

Mormon historians need to look more closely at the theme of individualism, as exemplified by the doctrine of personal revelation. While it is true that theologians normally would be involved in helping frame the discussion for historians, Mormonism's lack of theologians means that historians must involve themselves in theology in part to see such doctrines and their implications from the perspective of the general membership of the Church. This is a call for more than just a history of the various doctrines of the Church; it is a call for interpreting the impact of those doctrines on the typical Mormon. All of this points to the fact that the doctrine of personal revelation and its underlying ideas deserve more analysis and use as an interpretative tool in understanding Mormonism.

Conclusion

My analysis has shown that personal revelation has continued to be a vital part of Mormonism. The doctrine of personal revelation continued to change with the development of the Church. During this time personal revelation became even more tied to Church organization and ritual. This is not to say that its importance diminished. Church leaders after Joseph Smith continued to preach the importance of personal revelation.

The transition into the twentieth century provides an interesting look at personal revelation. Before this time

mostly internal developments impacted the doctrine, but the twentieth century brought outside forces to bear on the doctrine in a new way. The openness of Mormon society brought with it influences from the larger American culture. Scientific rationalism, in particular, began to impact the Mormon view of revelation. Public manifestations of personal revelations were discouraged because of their non-rational status. Still personal revelation, at least on a private level, was still a part of Mormonism. Today, personal revelation continues to be a vital part of the Mormon religious experience.

While it is true that the Mormonism of today is different from the Mormonism of the 1800s, what allowed in part the transition from the 1800s to the present was the flexibility afforded Mormonism by the doctrine of personal revelation. Contemporary Mormons share with the early Mormons a view of the importance of personal revelation, that God is active in the natural world and that the manifestation of His will and knowledge comes line upon line and precept upon precept through time and all eternity. Such principles need further study and analysis. How typical Mormons view their world is still largely uncharted waters. The study of Mormonism needs to focus on the average Mormon and his or her religious world, a world formed in part by the doctrine of personal revelation.

V

REVELATION, FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE NEW MORMON HISTORY

Introduction

If one were to ask the typical Mormon why he believes in God and why he accepts Joseph Smith as a prophet, his response probably would not include a sophisticated argument for the existence of God, nor would he marshal evidence of Smith's prophetic abilities. Instead, he likely would simply state that personal revelation has made known to him the truth of these two propositions.

Is such a response justified? Is he being irrational or non-rational in responding with references to personal revelation? Beyond the historical importance of personal revelation discussed in the last two chapters, the typical Mormon appeal to personal revelation elicits philosophical questions that in some ways are more important than the earlier historical consideration, affecting even more the writing of Mormon history. The main philosophical question that needs to be discussed is whether beliefs formed from religious experience are rational. And if so, should the Mormon scholar, or any scholar open to the possibility of the supernatural, at least consider historical evidence for or against the authenticity of personal revelation in any given case, rather than reducing it to something else or trying to bracket out the question altogether?

Foundationalism

To understand the debate about the rationality of religious experience and its place in the writing of history, one must understand the epistemological framework on which the debate is centered: foundationalism. A clear distinction needs to be drawn, however, between generic foundationalism and what is termed classical foundationalism. Generic foundationalism states that we possess some beliefs that are based, either wholly or in part, on other beliefs which are held immediately. For example, if I see a person turning red after a joke has been told, I can form the belief that she is embarrassed. This latter belief is held on the basis of my belief that she is turning red and that turning red after a joke is told, at least usually signals embarrassment. This belief is based on my sense experience which is held immediately, that is, without being based on another belief or argument. Classical foundationalism specifies which beliefs can be the basis or foundation for other beliefs and it does so in a questionable way. It is classical foundationalism that is the focus of this chapter since it has set the framework for debate about the epistemic status of religious experience.

Foundationalism (by which I mean "classical foundationalism") has its roots in the philosophy of Aristotle and became the dominant epistemological theory during the high

Middle Ages.¹ Although foundationalism as an epistemological theory has changed with time, its underlying assumption has not. Central to foundationalism is the understanding of when a given belief is justified, in other words when there are reasons for a certain belief. For a foundationalist, no matter the type, there are certain beliefs, termed "basic beliefs," that are self-justifying; that is, there is something in the belief process itself that makes the belief justified. For some early foundationalists, Aristotle and Aquinas, these basic beliefs included self-evident propositions--for example, a bachelor is unmarried, or $2+2=4$ --or the deliverances of sense experience. These beliefs were seen to be justified not by any argument or any other proposition, but by their very nature. Foundationalists maintained that for any other belief to be justified it must be based on evidence that ultimately must be traced back to a self-justifying basic belief. Thus in any formulation of foundationalism there are two things which are necessary for justification: (1) self-justifying basic beliefs; and (2) other beliefs that are not basic, which are justified if and only if they can be traced via evidence back to the foundation of basic beliefs.

In the early formulations of classical foundationalism, basic beliefs were of two kinds: (1) self-evident or (2)

¹Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), 47.

evident to the senses. Philosophers soon realized that the amount of self-evident propositions was not enough to warrant a significant justified body of knowledge; as a result, sense experience, or more properly beliefs formed from sense experience, took on a more prominent role. Descartes's skepticism, however, about the reliability of sense experience forced foundationalists to modify the second condition. As a result, in its modern formulation beliefs are basic if and only if they are (1) self evident or (2) incorrigible, meaning that someone believes them and cannot be mistaken in that belief. In either formulation, though, sense experience plays a significant role. Sense experience (not, say, Scripture or religious tradition) became the basis for all knowledge. And all other beliefs had to be based on evidence which could be traced back to self-evident propositions or sense experiences if they were to be considered justified.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) provides an interesting look at classical foundationalism. Although it could be argued that Kant is a transitional figure between the modern and postmodern worlds, his philosophy reflected, at least in part, a foundationalist framework. Kant's insistence that our minds help form reality through the use of concepts and categories that are *a priori* in our minds sets him apart from the British Enlightenment philosophers who maintained a unified basis for

science strictly in empiricism.² While Kant did not talk in terms of basic beliefs, he did postulate twelve categories found *a priori* in the mind which help shape our perception of reality. In a sense, they are justified not by any argumentation, but because their very existence makes human knowledge of the physical world possible.

This move saved epistemology from the skepticism of David Hume, but it came at a price. Pre-Kantian analysis of sense perception maintained that people could have immediate or direct apprehension of physical objects, unmediated by beliefs or concepts. Kant believed that all perceptions of physical objects necessarily involved the use of concepts or beliefs. Thus for Kant all sense perception was mediate or indirect. Through this he bequeathed to the postmodern philosophical world the idea that perception involves a person taking himself or herself to being appeared to in a certain way, rather than directly apprehending an object without the mediation of a belief or a conceptualization of that particular object.

Religious belief in particular would be affected by his analysis. First, his analysis would later assist those who did not believe religious experience provided a justified basis for belief in God with a way to undercut its justification. Because we know things only as they appear to us, they argued,

²James W. Ellington, introduction to *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, by Immanuel Kant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), xi-xii.

it could be that claims to perception of God had no objective base in reality. Religious experiences could be dismissed by saying that a person had an experience which they took to be of God, but was not necessarily truly an experience of God. Second, because our minds help form reality, we can never know reality as it is-in-itself. To use Kant's terms, what we have access only to is the phenomenal world, not the noumenal. To understand God, therefore, through the use of experience, sense or otherwise, was impossible, since God is noumenal, beyond time and space.

Modified by Kant's views or not, most philosophers continued to accord sense experience, or beliefs formed from sense experience, high epistemic status. Most also increasingly viewed religious experience, or personal revelation, as lacking anything approaching the certitude of sense experience. They maintained that a religious experience or a belief based on a religious experience was not properly basic. Thus if a religious belief was to be justified it had to be based on evidence: argumentation was needed. This is commonly known as evidentialism, a natural corollary to foundationalism.³ Because of the demands of classical foundationalism coupled with evidentialism, arguments for the

³Merold Westphal, "A Reader's Guide to 'Reformed Epistemology,'" *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 7 (November 1992):11. For an analysis of the demands of evidentialism, see Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Ind. and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 24-48.

existence of God became the basis for a rational, justified belief in God.

Despite the stringent demands of classical foundationalism and evidentialism, however, many people still appealed to religious experience as the foundation of true religious belief. Increasingly some scholars turned toward the similarity of religious experience to sense experience to show the rationality of beliefs formed by religious experience.⁴ In doing this, scholars were acknowledging the framework set up by the classical foundationalists.

There are generally two levels on which philosophers study religious experience in connection with the epistemology framed by foundationalism. The first is an argument for the existence of God based on religious experience. To oversimplify, some argue that religious experience is evidence of God's existence since the experience has to be caused by someone or something.⁵ The second involves discussions about the rationality of belief in God based on religious experience. It is different from the first because what is argued is not the possibility for proof of God's existence

⁴See, for example, C.D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953).

⁵For a discussion of the argument from religious experience, see J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 177-187. See also Paul Draper, "God and Perceptual Evidence," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 32 (1992):149-165.

based on premises supplied by religious experience, but rather whether religious experience provides justified belief that God exists.⁶ The distinction, however, is slight and often philosophers mix the two indiscriminately, seeing them as one and the same. Nonetheless, the distinction is real.⁷ The latter is far more modest in its claims, since it does not entail the necessity of proving the existence of God. For purposes of this thesis, it is the latter that is important.⁸ Having stated this distinction, I will explore an argument that combines both elements that I will call the analogical argument.

Philosophers who argue that the process of forming beliefs based on religious experience is a justified belief-forming (or "doxastic") practice use several arguments for its

⁶William Alston makes the distinction clear by comparing it to sense experience. He states that "if one is a direct realist about sense experience...one will be inclined to hold not that internal facts about sense experience provide one with premises for an effective argument to the existence of external physical objects, but rather that in enjoying sense experience one thereby perceives external physical objects and comes to have various beliefs about them, without the necessity of exhibiting those beliefs...as the conclusion of any sort of argument" (Alston, *Perceiving God*, 3).

⁷Alston acknowledges the confluence of the two even in his own writings, see, *Perceiving God*, 3n2.

⁸The argument from religious experience to the existence of God suffers from one of the requirements for rationality established during the Enlightenment: the starting points for any rational discussion must be principles or practices with which everyone can agree. Religious experience was far too controversial and certainly not as pervasive as sense experience--some have not had a religious experience. Therefore, many rejected the argument outright because of its lack of universal starting points.

rationality. One of the arguments is that religious experience is strictly analogous to sense experience, which is (if anything is) a justified-belief-forming practice. Philosophers who argue in this manner point out that religious experiences, commonly referred to as mystical experiences, are perceptual experiences that produce independently verifiable claims about the physical world. They argue that in general that mystical experiences are perceptual experiences of God in that the perceiver sees God or hears God, and the claims to mystical experience can be checked by reference to a change in the perceiver towards being a more "spiritual person." There are obvious differences between the two, but William Wainwright has argued that most of the obvious differences between sense experience and religious experience are not epistemically significant.⁹ For example, he argues that since God and physical objects are different, one should not expect to have the type and number of experiences of God that one would have of physical objects.¹⁰ Nevertheless, God is still an object of experience, he argues.

⁹For Wainwright's discussion, see "Mysticism and Sense Perception," *Religious Studies* 9 (1973):257-278. Even though Alston now defends a more sophisticated argument for religious experience, his earlier work as well as part of his defense of his own theory relies in part on the similarities between sense experience and religious experience. See, for example, William P. Alston, "Perceiving God," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986):655-665.

¹⁰Wainwright, "Mysticism and Sense Perception," 268.

Others have disagreed, pointing out the dissimilarities between the two. One such difference that has consistently been cited is the ability to check sense perception for its accuracy. If I see nothing in my visual field while attempting to walk across the road and then get hit by a truck, then it is evident that my sense experience was not correct. Religious experience, it is argued, has no such checks. There is no way to check if my experience of God is correct. William Alston, however, has argued that the only way to check sense experience is with sense experience, which amounts to a circular argument. He concludes that there is no non-circular method for determining the reliability of sense perception. The best that one can say is that sense experience, when it is functioning properly, is that it is not known to be unreliable.¹¹ Given this, religious experience is analogous to sense experience, since the best that one can say about religious experience, when it is functioning properly, is that it is not known to be unreliable as well. This is so because religious experience also suffers from epistemic circularity in determining its reliability: the way to check a true religious experience is with religious experience. Thus to hold up the reliability of sense experience compared to religious experience is incorrect. Even when both practices are functioning in their ideal environments, non-circular reliability is impossible to determine.

¹¹Alston, *Perceiving God*, 102-145.

There are, however, two crucial distinctions that prove fatal to this type of analogical argument. First, with sense experience there is the possibility of confirmation by others. This differs from the situation mentioned above, in that in this case the sense experience is checked not by the same person who experienced it in the first place, but rather by someone else or a group of people.¹² While it is true that one can specify what steps were taken to have a religious experience, it is also true that another following those steps is not ensured of such an experience, or any religious experience for that matter. Sense experience, therefore, is judged different enough not to be analogous to religious experience. Second, sense experience has predictive capabilities that allow one to experience a chair in my office, for example, by merely going into my office and opening one's eyes.¹³ Religious experience has no such predictive capabilities. The experience of God is something that is not governed by law-like regularities, as is sense perception. Simply going to church, for example, does not ensure one a religious experience, but simply opening one's eyes does produce sense experience. Thus the classical

¹²For a recapitulation of some who argue in this way, see Alston, *Perceiving God*, 209-225. See also C.B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959).

¹³Anthony O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation, and Faith* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 44. See also Draper, "God and Perceptual Evidence," 151.

foundationalist is in the position to judge sense experience as superior to religious experience and then argue that while sense experience is properly basic, religious experience is not. What impact did this development have on the writing of religious history?

Foundationalism and The Writing of History

By the early twentieth century foundationalism had permeated every academic discipline. The writing of religious history in particular bore the mark of classical foundationalism, framing the discussions and debates concerning methodology.¹⁴ Historians have struggled for many years with methodological difficulties associated with writing about religion. Foremost among those difficulties is whether references to the supernatural ought to be included in histories of religions. Classical foundationalism's impact on the writing of religious history was its low evaluation of supernatural belief: belief in God was not rational unless it was based on argumentation. Thus religious experience, or personal revelation, was relegated to categories of irrational

¹⁴For a discussion of the impact of foundationalism on the writing of history, see the collection of essays in C.T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells, eds. *History and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981). Although foundationalism is not explicitly mentioned or discussed, its effects are examined.

or nonrational.¹⁵ Any claim to revelation, to the supernatural, in history was not considered rational and thus beneath the writing of scientific history or beyond its scope. Commenting on this situation, Rick Kennedy notes that "the historical profession is the heir of the Enlightenment's insistence that the veracity of alleged miracles cannot be judged by rational historical methods."¹⁶ Thus many historians, if they mention supernatural events at all, resort to describing the experience rather than critically assessing and integrating it into their work.¹⁷

This being so, some scholars still maintain that the transcendent or the supernatural is the very subject matter of religions and should not only be described but analyzed.¹⁸ For other scholars, however, references to the supernatural move history into the area of theology or (worse) superstition, and away from writing proper history. The latter type of scholar has been labeled as a "reductionist," one who seeks to reduce

¹⁵Rodney Stark, "Normal Revelations: A Rational Model of 'Mystical Experiences,'" *Religion and Social Order* 1 (1991): 239-251. Stark maintains that such categorization has led scholars to look for psychopathological explanations for religious experience.

¹⁶Rick Kennedy, "Miracles in the Dock: A Critique of the Historical Profession's Special Treatment of Alleged Spiritual Events," *Fides et Historia* 26 (Summer 1994):7.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸See, for example, Michael Vertin, "Transcendental Analysis, and the Objective Study of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 1 (Spring 1989):106-114.

certain religious phenomena, such as religious experience, to psychological, social and economic data.¹⁹

Underlying the reductionist position and those non-reductionists who nevertheless insist that religious experience should not be analyzed in the writing of history is the belief that references to the supernatural do not have the scientific status that the generally-observable data of history possesses. Again, such evaluations have been based in the classical foundationalist epistemology. But what if the insights of foundationalism are wrong? What if classical foundationalism as a theory is wrong?

The Putative Collapse of Foundationalism

During the 1960s and 1970s philosophers began to see chinks in the armor of classical foundationalism. The objections to it came from two sides. First, philosophers began to question the rationality of sense experience as defined by the classical foundationalists. Second, some examined the notion of what it means for a belief to be

¹⁹Wayne Proudfoot is a modern proponent of one of the reductionist positions as he attempts to reduce religious experience to constructs of the mind because of the use of concepts by those who claim religious experience necessarily entails that those experiences are made up of concepts. The reason an experience is classified as religious, according to Proudfoot, is simply that religious concepts are employed (Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985]). See also Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 193-238, for a discussion of the ideas of some of the leading reductionists.

properly basic. The attacks opened the door for a plethora of epistemological theories to develop which called into question many of the convictions of the Enlightenment. The philosophical analysis of religious experience eventually came to benefit from the questioning of classical foundationalism.

As stated previously, sense experience was the key to foundationalism. Because there were not enough self-evident truths to ground a comprehensive understanding of the world, sense experience became important as the source of the majority of properly basic beliefs. The first question raised, however, was whether sense experience was incorrigible. For example, if I see a blue car in the driveway and form the belief that a blue car is in my driveway, do I know this incorrigibly? That is, can I hold the belief indubitably? Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued that such a belief is not held indubitably. After all, it may be that I am color blind or that it is a foggy day in which black and blue are difficult to distinguish.²⁰ Even if I am aware, he argues, of the various conditions which could effect my sense experience, do I know all the conditions in which my sense experience can be affected? Moreover, do I know all of them indubitably? In other words, are they properly basic?²¹ His answer is no, one cannot know indubitably all the conditions, and furthermore the way to determine all of the conditions

²⁰Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 49.

²¹Ibid., 50-51.

would be through sense experience, which is the practice that is in question. Thus the foundationalist is committed to a circular justification, which is not epistemically acceptable at least for establishing the reliability of a given practice. All of this proves highly problematic for beliefs formed about physical objects.²²

While beliefs about physical objects may not be incorrigible, the classical foundationalist can argue that appearance beliefs, beliefs about how things appear to the observer, can be known indubitably. I may be mistaken that a blue car is in my driveway, but I cannot be mistaken that, to use Roderick Chisolm's terminology, that I am "appeared to *blue*ly." This move, however, puts the classical foundationalist in a bind that removes the intuitive force of the theory. If all I can believe indubitably are my own mental states, then the Enlightenment goal of knowledge that is universally accessible is not tenable. Wolterstorff states that "it seems unlikely that from our introspective knowledge of propositions about our own states of consciousness we could erect the whole structure of objective science."²³

Furthermore, since appearance beliefs are the only candidates for proper basicity, it must be that sense experience comes to us in such beliefs. But is this true? Agreeing with Wolterstorff that only appearance beliefs are

²²Ibid., 51-53.

²³Ibid., 54.

legitimate candidates, John Pollock argues that beliefs we do form from sense experience, and in particular via vision, are about physical objects not about how those physical objects appear.²⁴ Using the previous example, when I see the blue car, I do not say that there is a blue object appearing in the center of my visual field. What I usually say is that a blue car is in my driveway. My belief is a physical object belief. If only appearance beliefs are candidates for being properly basic, then foundationalism fails because it cannot accommodate the sense experience beliefs that we normally form. What Pollock and Wolterstorff have argued should not be seen as a repudiation of the rationality of sense experience. Most philosophers, except for the truly skeptical, readily admit the necessity and rationality of sense experience. What Pollock and Wolterstorff argue against is the privileged status of indubitability that sense experience is given by foundationalists.

The second objection to classical foundationalism is connected to the first objection but goes beyond a questioning of the privileged status of sense experience to argue that what is involved in a belief becoming properly basic can apply to other beliefs. Given the lack of certainty of sense experience, the best that the foundationalist can hope for is

²⁴John L. Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1986), 61-62.

prima facie justification for sense experience.²⁵ *Prima facie* justification simply means that a particular belief is justified at first glance, but also that it can be rebutted or overridden by additional premises, arguments or evidence. For example, my belief that there is a blue car in my driveway is *prima facie* justified, but can be overridden if I discover that it is a white car lit by a blue light. When I discover that there is a blue light pointed at a white car then my belief that there is a blue car in my driveway is defeated and thus it loses its justification. But *prima facie* justification is not unique to sense experience, Alvin Plantinga argues, and thus the restrictive nature of what a foundationalist considers to be a basic belief is no longer so restrictive. This opens the door to a discussion of religious experience that is not restricted by classical foundationalist principles.²⁶

Reformed Epistemology

While there have been many responses to the putative collapse of foundationalism, ranging from Deconstructionism to attempts to develop new epistemological theories such as reliabilistic and coherence theories, there is one strand of postmodern thought which has sought to examine the rationality

²⁵Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 77, 83-84. See also Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 65.

²⁶Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 73-84.

of religious belief based on religious experience. A group of philosophers have been pioneering an approach to epistemology that has both attacked foundationalism and argued for the rationality of theistic belief based on religious experience. Alvin Plantinga, George Mavrodes, Nicholas Wolterstorff and William Alston are among those philosophers that have developed what has become known as "Reformed epistemology"--called this because they share with Reformed thinkers like John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck close affinities to the idea that belief in God should be based on the immediacy of the Spirit and not natural theology.²⁷

Reformed epistemologists share the belief that classical foundationalism is untenable. Some of their arguments are represented above. Their critique has opened the door for the rationality of religious experience to be discussed in non-foundationalist terms. Alvin Plantinga in particular has argued that the classical foundationalist call for only sense experience to be granted properly basic status is far too restrictive and unwarranted. Plantinga's own theory resembles foundationalism in so far as he realizes that we all possess beliefs that we base on certain foundational beliefs (in this sense he could be called a generic foundationalist). But he

²⁷Ibid., 64-68. It should be noted that not all the philosophers mentioned above are from the Reformed tradition. William Alston, for example, is an Episcopalian. Plantinga is the one who coined the phrase "Reformed epistemology" which now has been accepted generally by scholars (Westphal, "A Reader's Guide," 12).

differs from classical foundationalism in that he believes that claims about God such as "God is speaking to me" or "God forgives me" are properly basic in the same way in which "I see a tree" or "I see another person" are properly basic. The latter propositions are considered properly basic by the classical foundationalist, but not the former. Plantinga argues that both sets of propositions possess *prima facie* justification. Both find their justification grounded in the circumstances in which they occur; that is, they are not mediated by other beliefs or evidence.

According to the Reformed epistemologist certain beliefs are properly basic in certain circumstances; those same beliefs may not be properly basic in other circumstances. Consider the belief that I see a tree: this belief is properly basic in circumstances that are hard to describe in detail, but include my being appeared to in a certain characteristic way; that same belief is not properly basic in circumstances including, say, my knowledge that I am sitting in the living room listening to music with my eyes closed.²⁸

Plantinga acknowledges the ambiguity of the phenomenology of sense experience, but he also points out that this does not detract from the *prima facie* justification. Thus a person who forms the belief that he is "appeared to blue" when he sees a blue object is *prima facie* justified in forming that belief without the need of other arguments or beliefs. In the same way, religious experience, under the right circumstances, provides *prima facie* justification for the belief in God that does not depend on arguments for the existence of God or other

²⁸Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 74.

beliefs. Thus a person is within his epistemic rights in believing in God based on some type of religious experience without having to produce an argument for her belief. This is not to say, however, that he can wall in his belief and reject all rational arguments against the existence of God, such as the argument from evil. The best that he has is *prima facie* justification which can be overridden if he comes to believe that the argument from evil, or some other argument, is a valid argument against the existence of God.²⁹ In essence, Plantinga maintains that if sense experience is considered properly basic, then religious experience should be so considered as well.

Reaction to Plantinga's arguments have come mostly from philosophers who have argued that a person is violating some epistemic duty by believing in God without propositional evidence for such a belief.³⁰ Others have argued that arguments against the existence of God prove fatal to Plantinga's theory. Philip Quinn in particular has argued that the argument from evil provides propositional evidence that overrides the theist's belief in God and so the theist is violating an epistemic duty if she chooses simply to ignore

²⁹For a more extensive presentation of Plantinga's theory, see "Reason and Belief in God," 78-91.

³⁰James F. Sennett, "Reformed Epistemology and Epistemic Duty," *Logos: Philosophic Issues in Christian Perspective* 12 (1991):123.

the argument.³¹ James Sennett has joined Quinn in asserting that the problem of evil presents the theist with a problem that requires propositional evidence to maintain a justified theistic belief, contrary to Plantinga's contention that such a belief does not require such evidence.³² In other words, the argument from evil requires reasons from the theist why the argument should be rejected, and thus propositional evidence is needed to maintain a justified belief in God. Paul Draper, another ardent critic of Reformed epistemology, also has developed his arguments along the lines of the problem of evil and argued that evil presents a problem for Plantinga's theist in that it calls into question the goodness of God, which is essential to Plantinga's view that the promise of divine forgiveness by God is a properly basic belief.³³

Underlying the criticism of Plantinga's argument is the relationship between propositional and nonpropositional evidence. Critics argue that propositional evidence, as in the argument from evil, alone should be enough to defeat theistic belief based on religious experience. Plantinga argues, however, that the nonpropositional evidence of the religious experience itself is sufficient in many cases to

³¹Philip Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985):480.

³²Sennett, "Reformed Epistemology and Epistemic Duty," 123-137.

³³Paul Draper, "Evil and the Proper Basicity of Belief in God," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 8 (April 1991):135-47.

override or rebut the propositional evidence that acts as a potential defeater of the theistic belief.³⁴ This he argues is analogous to a situation in which sense experience acts as its own defeater-defeater. For example, if Jane has a memory belief that she was walking in the woods yesterday during lunch, then she is *prima facie* justified in believing that she was in the woods during lunch. Now suppose that she is accused of robbing a bank during that time period, something that she has tried in the past on several occasions, and furthermore there is an eyewitness that places her in the bank at that time. This person has now presented propositional evidence that potentially could defeat the justification of Jane's memory belief. Jane can offer no rebutting evidence. But, as a matter of fact, Jane did not rob the bank. Is Jane's memory belief defeated by the propositional evidence? Plantinga argues that her memory belief can act as its own defeater-defeater. He asserts that it is more rational for her to trust her memory belief even in the face of such propositional evidence. Likewise, religious experience can provide its own defeater of propositional evidence such as the argument from evil. What is evident in the debate between Plantinga and his critics is that the battleground is the proper relationship between propositional and nonpropositional evidence. And the outcome is far from certain.

³⁴Alvin Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986):309-310.

Plantinga's argument is a definite step in the right direction. His argument thus far allows the scholar to take "a stance within the doxastic practice in question and [defy] all comers to dislodge [her]."³⁵ In essence, the scholar states that her belief is justified and then can proceed to allow that belief to influence her work, since it is justified, and by doing so defies others to show that the belief is not justified. But there is a stronger position which can be taken.

William Alston has developed a doxastic practice approach to what he refers to as mystical experience. It is similar to the analogical argument discussed earlier but departs in a way that makes the differences between sense experience and religious (mystical) experience not detrimental to religious experience, but as evidence of two separate doxastic practices at work. The key concept in his argument is social justification. He argues that sense experience has become a justified doxastic practice in part because it has become a socially accepted practice; that is, with time the practice has become accepted by people as a valid way to acquire knowledge. Similarly, he argues that religious experience also has become an established doxastic practice because those in particular religious communities have accepted it. This is not to say that just any practice could become socially established; there must be some epistemic warrant for the

³⁵Alston, *Perceiving God*, 197.

practice. He develops his arguments about epistemic justification and warrant by stating that a given doxastic practice must have the following: (1) distinctive experiential inputs; (2) distinctive input-output functions; (3) a distinctive conceptual scheme and (4) an internally justified overrider system; (5) no reason to think the practice is unreliable; and finally (6) a significant degree of self support.³⁶ A word about each is in order.

Alston argues that any belief-forming practice that relies on perception must have experiential inputs. In sense experience such inputs come in the forms of colors, smells and so forth. In religious experience the inputs are different than sense experience, but they are (or at least could be) inputs nonetheless. Central to his thesis is the conviction that the direct experience of God is possible. Reports of mystics such as Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross, along with the experiences of laypeople as reported by William James, attest to the proposition that God is able to be perceived directly, Alston suggests. Thus the direct experience of God is the distinctive input for religious or mystical experience. In comparing the doxastic practice of sense experience and religious experience, Alston further argues that "in both spheres perceptual beliefs are typically formed by taking the perceived object to have the

³⁶Ibid., 146-183, 225.

characteristics it experientially presents itself as having."³⁷ Against critics of religious experience who argue that religious experiences are only religious because religious concepts are employed in describing the experience, Alston argues that the experience of God, as reported by both mystic and layperson, attests to the fact that they describe their experiences of God as experiences of God, not experiences which they took to be of God or they identified with God. In the same way, I do not normally say that my visual experience of a rock was an experience of an object to which I ascribed the properties and qualities of a rock.

Outputs for sense experience are widely known and held. When I, for example, see a blue car in my driveway--the distinctive input--I form the belief that there is a blue car in my driveway--the belief formed is the output.³⁸ The outputs for the direct experience of God also consists in beliefs, but such beliefs are not physical object beliefs, but beliefs such as the following: "God is speaking to me," "God is filling me with his love," and "God forgives me," among others.

The third necessary feature of a socially established doxastic practice is the conceptual scheme that affects the outputs formed. In sense experience, beliefs about the physical world provide the conceptual scheme within which we interpret the data from further sense experience. When I

³⁷Ibid., 185.

³⁸Ibid., 155-6.

experience a tree, not only do I use my previous beliefs about the shape of trees to identify my physical object experience as that of a tree, but I also employ the concept of a tree to describe what I have seen. With religious experience, the doctrinal background or scheme of the religious tradition I adhere to affects not only what I call an experience of God, but also affects how I describe the experience.

The background belief system also provides another important component of an established doxastic practice: an internally justified override system. Alston argues that sense experience has such a system. If I seem to see my sister in the store today, my belief that my sister is in the store is *prima facie* justified. Thus I can rationally hold that belief. But if I remember that she took a cruise to the Bahamas and that I saw her get on the ship that would not return for two weeks, then my previous belief about seeing her in the store is potentially defeated. I might instead move closer to the person that I identified as my sister and upon closer inspection realize that it is not my sister. Then again my previous belief is defeated. As a result, I am no longer justified in believing that the person in the store is my sister. Thus sense experience itself and other established doxastic practices such as memory provide a defeater system for sense experience.

Suppose that my best friend reports that he saw a three-legged horse win a race. I would be *prima facie* justified in

believing his statement, since I know that in my dealings with him, he has proven himself to be completely honest. But my belief that a three-legged horse won a race can be overridden if I remember that my friend has difficulty in distinguishing humans engaged in a three-legged race from horses engaged in a race. My memory belief about his deficiency coupled with my beliefs based on previous sense experience that three-legged horses do not win races provide enough grounds for my belief about the horse winning to be defeated. This defeater system provides a necessary check on any claim to sense experience. It allows us to reject the sense experience of those who claim to see pink elephants, for example.

How are such standards erected? Alston notes that they have developed with time among those engaging in sense experience. That is, as the practice of sense experience developed, we became aware through experience of conditions under which sense experience did not produce veridical beliefs. Although they are too numerous to list, they include such things as poor lighting, significant amounts of alcohol in the bloodstream and perceptions made under stressful conditions. Now, religious experience also has a rich internally justified overrider system, says Alston. It is made up of the acquired beliefs in a particular religion, such as Christianity, that provide a basis for determining if an experience of God is veridical. Like the standards for sense experience, they are developed over time by those engaging in

the practice of religious experience. With time the community--in this case the Christian community--determined which ideas or principles would become standards.

In Chapter Two, I examined an example of such standards in the Protestant tradition elucidated by Jonathan Edwards.³⁹ Throughout his analysis, Edwards refers to claims to revelation within the history of Christianity. He does not focus, therefore, on his day only. In drawing upon the history of claims to revelation, Edwards portrays a sensitivity to the standards that have been erected in the past and their application to his work. His signs reflect the importance of the effects of the experience in determining a veridical experience. His concern that the experience bring about changes in the mind and the heart illustrates his understanding of the depth of a true experience of God.⁴⁰ He focuses on the importance of the experience drawing one away from selfishness and towards helping others, the transforming aspect of a veridical experience. He contrasts that with the person who claims an experience of God but does not continue in humility before God, focusing on the experience itself rather than its effects.⁴¹ While Edwards's signs reflect his Protestant background, many of his signs are in agreement with

³⁹For a concise look at the standards developed in the Roman Catholic tradition, see Wainwright, "Mysticism and Sense Perception," 261-262.

⁴⁰Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 266, 293.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 251.

those in the Roman Catholic tradition. In general, most standards, Protestant or Roman Catholic, have included such things as the demonstration of greater love toward others, a strong conviction of the mind, agreement with orthodox doctrine and practice, and the development of a more spiritual person in general as a result of the experience.

Thus the background doctrinal system in Christianity, for example, allows the Christian to reject the claims of a Jim Jones because his message did not cohere with the Christian understanding of what such an experience would properly entail.⁴² Each group of standards have allowed authorities in the various traditions to accept some reports of the experience of God as veridical and reject others. Thus not every claim to religious experience has to be accepted as veridical. While it is true that the standards for sense experience and religious experience differ, the process involved in obtaining them and their function within the specified doxastic practice are the same.

The fifth criterion is that the practice in question must not be known to be unreliable. If such a practice produces beliefs which are inconsistent or produce beliefs that are at variance with other established doxastic practices, then the practice could be considered unreliable. If, for example, sense experience produced beliefs that were inconsistent or contradictory on a wide scale with deductive reasoning or some

⁴²Alston, *Perceiving God*, 189-191, 200-205.

other established doxastic practice, then this would be a manifestation of its unreliability. While it is true that at times reports made from sense experience contradict each other, there is not widespread disagreement.

Does this situation apply in religious experience? With the number of religious traditions that exist there are plenty of candidates for claims to religious experience which contradict one another. Widespread disagreements exist on just about any major doctrine, most of which have their basis in religious experience. For example, the Christian's mystical experience will include references to God as incarnate in Jesus Christ and perhaps to his love or power, while the Buddhist mystical experience will not include such references. This appears to be evidence of inconsistencies in the practice of religious experience.

Alston argues, however, that this is not a case of inconsistency in a single established doxastic practice, but rather that there is more than one doxastic practice at work. Similarly, if I see my friend who appears physically ill and draw the conclusion that she is indeed physically ill, but then I conclude using rational intuition that she is not physically ill but merely stressed, I do not have a contradiction in a single doxastic practice, but rather a case where using two separate doxastic practices I have concluded two different things. In the case of religious experience, the Christian has an established doxastic practice and so does the

Buddhist. While each may depend on religious experience for at least partial grounds for their religious beliefs, the background scheme or system of doctrinal beliefs provide the basis for a differentiation of doxastic practices. Thus the Christian has a religious experience and interprets in one way, while the Buddhist has a religious experience (presumably of the same ultimate reality) and interprets it in another way each based on their respective doctrinal systems.⁴³ It may be that one or both of the background belief systems are incorrect, but this does not affect the fact that the person had a religious experience, no matter how he or she interprets and describes that experience. Remember that the background beliefs only sometimes play even a partial role in having a religious experience, as it does in sense experience as well. Apart from the background beliefs, there is still an objective quality to authentic religious experiences--recall that when both mystics and laypeople report their experiences they do not say I have had an experience which I took to be of God, rather they state simply they have had an experience of God. There is still asserted to be some object outside the mind of the individual that causes the experience. True, there have been many theories over the years which have attempted to explain away religious experience as mere projections of the mind. Two points need to be made in connection with these theories. First, such theories are far from being scientific

⁴³Ibid., 192-193, 236, 255-285.

fact. Whatever their probability is, they are far from being definitive on the origin of religious experience. Second, why should such theories be given more weight than the testimonies of many who describe, often in great detail, the phenomenological content of their religious experience? Are the thousands, if not millions, of people really confused about what they experienced? Moreover, Alston notes that many who have had religious experiences have considered the alternative explanations, such as the projection theories, and rejected them in favor of a direct awareness of God.⁴⁴

Likewise with sense experience, we do not normally say that a person who sees a rock is merely reading her beliefs about rocks into the present experience. The critic, therefore, cannot reduce the claim to religious experience to some naturalistic explanation based solely on the fact that the background belief system is different for various religions. Thus the problem of religious diversity does not seriously undermine the justification of religious experience even if a particular background system cannot be shown to be superior to another or all others.⁴⁵

The final necessary condition for an established doxastic practice is that it must have a significant degree of self-support. In sense experience the self-support comes from the fact that we are able to make predictions based on sense

⁴⁴Ibid., 42.

⁴⁵Ibid., 275.

experience which turn out to be mostly correct, and thus we are able to control the course of events. As a result, we are able to make judgements about its reliability. This is not to say that this is established in a non-circular way. If we were to establish the reliability of sense experience in a non-circular way, then that standard would have to become one of the criteria for an established doxastic practice. In other words, each contender for the position of a doxastic practice would have to provide non-circular arguments for its reliability. Alston spends a great deal of time proving that sense experience cannot be validated in a non-circular way since sense experience would be needed in order to check or test its own reliability. Thus the more modest criteria of "not known to be unreliable" is the standard. Yet the fact that sense experience cannot be shown to be reliable in a non-circular fashion does not take away from the fact that in a circular way it produces a significant degree of self-support.⁴⁶

Likewise, religious experience does have a significant degree of self-support. It provides us with a reliable "map" of the "divine environment." For example, it allows one to progress on the spiritual path that produces virtues and qualities that make up a more spiritual person, however "spiritual" is defined in the various religious traditions. These qualities which are developed as a result of religious

⁴⁶Ibid., 250.

experience act as the practice's self-support.⁴⁷ Religious experience differs from sense experience in that the latter deals with a different sort of self-support, namely prediction and control, but that particular support is not the standard for all other doxastic practices. Other established doxastic practices have different self-supports. Alston points out, for example, that interpersonal perception, or in other words our awareness of other persons as persons (which he differentiates from sense experience) is a doxastic practice that cannot be justified in terms of prediction and control.⁴⁸ By perceiving others as persons we cannot always predict their behavior, but as he notes "the value of this practice for our lives is not restricted to a predictive payoff. To compensate for this relative unpredictability, there is the possibility of entering into communication and fellowship with others."⁴⁹ Likewise, religious experience, even though it does not function under the self-support of prediction and control, does allow "us to enter into communication with God and thereby to become what God intends us to become."⁵⁰ Thus self-support can come from various sources and not just those associated with sense experience. As a result, some of the

⁴⁷Ibid., 250-254.

⁴⁸Ibid., 252.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

self-support from religious experience can come from the spiritual fruit that it produces.

All of these criteria, if met, add up to a socially established doxastic practice that moves beyond Plantinga's work to allow the scholar to take a stronger epistemic stance concerning the rationality of the belief that God reveals His will to mankind. If Mormonism falls under the rubric of the Christian tradition, as it claims to do, and thus is a part of what Alston calls the Christian Mystical Practice, then the Mormon scholar can take the position that her belief about God revealing His will comes from a socially established doxastic practice which provides the belief with its justification. If Mormonism does not fall under the rubric of the Christian tradition as far as the mystical tradition is concerned, then what can be argued, following Alston, is that the Mormon mystical tradition constitutes its own established doxastic practice.⁵¹ Either way, what is important is that the believing scholar can be justified in her belief about God revealing Himself to humans and thus can be in a more justified position epistemically speaking for using that belief in her scholarly work. (How that belief should function will be discussed below).

⁵¹Although I was not explicit in referring to Alston's work in chapter three, it should be evident that the Mormon doctrine of personal revelation contains all of the essential features that he outlines for an established doxastic practice.

The Reformed epistemologists are not the only ones re-examining religious experience. Keith Yandell, Caroline Frank Davis and Richard Swinburne, among others, have been arguing in some form or another for the validity of belief in God based in religious experience.⁵² Indeed, it appears that the study of religious experience is a major topic in the philosophy of religion today, with most of the argumentation in favor of the validity of religious experience. As a result, religious experience deserves a close examination by historians, especially Mormon historians.

Control Beliefs and the New Mormon History

The debate about the New Mormon History has largely revolved around notions of objectivity and, in particular, whether references to the supernatural can be included in the writing of good history. While objectivity is still held up as the ideal for scholars, it is acknowledged by almost all as only an ideal--something to strive for even as it can never be reached. The more a person strives for objectivity, it is argued, the closer his or her work will be free of biases or personal opinions that can color one's work. But beyond the debate about objectivity, every academic discipline has its

⁵²Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*; Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

standards that every competent scholar must meet in order to be considered a good practitioner of his or her craft.

Some Mormon historians have argued that the standards of the history profession exclude beliefs about the supernatural from affecting the writing of what is considered professional history. While most scholars seek to meet the standards and attempt to be as objective as possible, it is also the case that every scholar brings to his or her work certain beliefs that affect how that scholar interprets the data and more generally works within his or her profession no matter how much those beliefs are pushed into the background. These beliefs can be, among other things, doctrinal beliefs, beliefs about the physical world, and beliefs about mankind in general. Wolterstorff has called these beliefs "control beliefs."⁵³ He states that control beliefs function in two ways:

Because we hold them we are led to reject certain sorts of theories--some because they are inconsistent with those beliefs; others because, though consistent with our control beliefs, they do not comport well with those beliefs. On the other hand control beliefs also lead us to devise theories. We want theories that are consistent with our control beliefs. Or, to put it more stringently, we want theories that comport as well as possible with those beliefs.⁵⁴

What Wolterstorff means by "consistent" is logically consistent; that is, the beliefs do not contradict each other. What he means by "comport" is not clear even to himself, but

⁵³Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 67.

⁵⁴Ibid., 68.

he is looking for something beyond logical consistency, to something that signifies a stronger relationship between the control beliefs and new theories.⁵⁵

When a person belongs to a community of scholars and purport to write as an expert in a particular field, then that person has certain intellectual obligations to make sure her control beliefs meet the standards of her particular profession. In essence, what is called for is that her control beliefs, the ones affecting her research and analysis, are justified and applicable to her research. If a particular control belief is justified, then other scholars may disagree with her analysis based in part on that control belief, but they cannot call into question her competence as a scholar in that particular field, if she has met the other standards of the profession.

The application to the Mormon historian is easy to see. Each Mormon historian brings to his or her profession a set of control beliefs. Each has a set of control beliefs that includes religious beliefs and other beliefs which are in accordance with the standards of the history profession. The beliefs in accordance with the standards of the history profession are already justified; they are a part of a

⁵⁵"Just what this last relation may be, that of comporting as well as possible with, I cannot explain. But it seems to me clear that often we demand more than logical consistency between theory and control belief; and it seems to me that sometimes at least that 'more' can be aptly described with these words" (Ibid., 153n31).

socially accepted standard. But what about the religious beliefs? The purpose of this chapter has been to argue that one of the control beliefs common to most Mormons, the belief that God gives revelation to his children, is indeed epistemically justified; it is rational. As a result, the Mormon historian, provided he meets the other demands of what it takes to write good history such as the accurate use of authentic sources and the critical discussion of others' work in the same area, is justified in using that religious belief as a control belief in his interpretation and analysis of Mormon history. Other scholars may disagree with his interpretation, but he will have met the standards of what it takes to write good history.

How should the justified control belief not function? First, the control belief should not force data into a scheme which satisfies the control beliefs alone, but ignores other factual claims. For example, suppose a Mormon scholar is doing research on why Mormons settled Las Vegas, Nevada. The historical data suggests the reason behind the move was primarily agricultural, done under the direction of revelation. Now suppose that the scholar believes, through revelation to him from God, that the real reason why the Lord gave the revelation to settle Las Vegas was so the Mormons could share in the wealth created by gambling, which arrived many years later. If the Mormon scholar interprets the data in this way, then he is allowing the control belief about his

revelation to distort the data of history. The control belief cannot stand on its own; there must be warrant for the use of the control belief in the historical sources.⁵⁶ If the historical sources do not warrant the use of the control belief in this particular instance, then the Mormon scholar has not met the other standards of his profession. In other words, the Mormon scholar cannot run roughshod over the historical sources in an attempt to have his justified control belief about revelation employed in his work.

If there is warrant for the full use of the control belief in the historical sources, then I believe that the Mormon scholar is justified in using that control belief as part of a theory or interpretation of why a particular event occurred. For example, the question of why Mormons practiced polygamy has long been a source of debate. Some have maintained that lust and a desire for power was the motivation. Others have maintained that revelation was the motivation. Perhaps both played a role, but the majority of the primary sources--the diaries and journals of early Mormons--indicate that revelation was the motivation behind why so many practiced it as noted in Chapter Two. Many claimed the promptings of the Spirit, angelic visitations and visions as their reasons for practicing a doctrine that many of them found initially abhorrent, as noted in Chapter Three. Since

⁵⁶This point is made by M. Howard Rienstra, "History, Objectivity and the Christian Scholar," in McIntire and Wells, *History and Historical Understanding*, 81-2.

this is the case, my argument is that the Mormon scholar who possesses a justified control belief about revelation is free to interpret the motivation behind polygamy in terms of revelation, if the scholar has analyzed the claims to revelation themselves and found support for the claims to revelation. Not only does she possess the justified control belief, but there is also warrant for the interpretation in the historical sources. Of course, what I have said is oversimplified, since the scholar must take into consideration the use of biased sources and other secondary literature about the practice.

Does this imply that the Mormon scholar can sit securely in his justified control beliefs and pay no heed to those theories and ideas which are contrary to those control beliefs? This question needs to be answered on two levels.

First, on a personal or existential level, the Mormon scholar must not ignore other theories which do not comport with his control beliefs, if those theories have warrant. It will be helpful for this analysis to distinguish between what Wolterstorff has called "actual Christian commitment" and "authentic Christian commitment."⁵⁷ He states that one's

⁵⁷Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 71-75. Again I believe that Mormons are Christians and thus what Wolterstorff states about actual and authentic Christian commitment applies to Mormons as well as more so-called orthodox. If the reader does not believe that Mormons are Christians, then the reader may use the term Mormon-Christian as an alternative. Thus Mormon-Christian actual and authentic commitment could be used to describe how Mormons view Christ and what they take to be fundamental in following him.

actual Christian commitment is the "complex of action and belief in which his fundamental commitment [to follow Christ] is in fact realized."⁵⁸ Thus one's actual commitment is where one is at present in his or her attempt to be a follower of Christ. Authentic Christian commitment "is how one's Christ-following ought to be actualized."⁵⁹ It is what the follower of Christ strives for as an ideal. These commitments are about much more than belief-content, such as how a Christian should act, but for my purposes it is the belief-content that is important. Wolterstorff acknowledges that Christians should strive toward the authentic commitment, and thus must be willing to do away with beliefs that may be currently actual but eventually are seen as not belonging to one's authentic commitment. While he maintains that even one's authentic commitment is relative to the individual and time, there is also a component of authentic commitment which seems to be the ideal which judges the present. In other words, the Christian scholar must constantly be looking toward the authentic and not rest content with the actual, even though "authentic" is not the same for every Christian.

The Mormon scholar, as a Christian scholar, must strive for new truths and look to move toward full authenticity. This requires that she not rest within the control beliefs of her actual commitment. One of the central tenets of

⁵⁸Ibid., 72.

⁵⁹Ibid., 74.

Mormonism, and I believe implicit in all Christianity, is that all truth, whether secular or theological, must eventually be a part of, or at least accommodated by, the religion. Thus the Mormon scholar must strive to find and accept new truths even if those truths are not a part of one's actual commitment. These new truths may require modifying or abandoning certain control beliefs of the scholar, but by doing so the scholar will move closer to the authentic.

Second, on a professional level the Mormon scholar must be willing to examine with scrutiny new data, theories and interpretations which may call into question earlier interpretations informed by the combination of control beliefs about revelation, for example, and those associated with the standards of professional historians. While they may not necessarily change her faith commitments, the new data, theory or interpretation may force a change in the control beliefs which affect her writing of Mormon history. For example, suppose a Mormon historian has written extensively on the early days of Mormonism and, after examining the extant primary sources and relevant secondary literature, argues that the introduction of polygamy was a revelation from God. In time, however, the same scholar comes to the conclusion, via new data or new arguments from others in the field, that while there may have been some religious motivation, it was mostly a product of Smith's sexual desires. Let's suppose, however, that the scholar still maintains that Joseph Smith was a

prophet and that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is still the true church based in part on personal revelation. The scholar's control belief about a crucial era in the Church has changed, which potentially could have a profound influence on her work; but the essential part of her faith, the authentic commitment, remains in place. In other words, the Mormon scholar, I believe, can maintain that while Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet, not everything that he undertook was indeed a revelation from God. I choose this example to illustrate how much leeway is available to the Mormon scholar in terms of seeking for his or her authentic commitment within Mormonism.

The upshot of what I have argued is that while religious belief, and in particular belief about God revealing himself and his will through personal revelation, can justifiably be used as a control belief, the scholar must continue to strive for truth, even if such striving causes her to modify or perhaps abandon those control beliefs which are not a part of her authentic commitment.

A Proposal for the New Mormon History

So far my analysis has revolved around the notion of rationality. I have argued that classical foundationalism's rejection of the rationality of the belief in God is not correct. In so doing, I have argued the historian cannot reject the possibility of the supernatural influence on

history *a priori*, based on an incorrect theory about what constitutes rationality. Furthermore, I have shown that there is a significant group of respected philosophers who have argued for the rationality of the belief in God and the intrusion of the supernatural into the natural world based on religious experience. Thus a scholar who is open to the possibility of the supernatural can hold as a justified control belief that the supernatural can have an impact on history. In short, what I have argued for is a relatively level playing field between the supernatural and the natural before a scholar begins to research and write history. In addition, I have shown how this justified control belief should not function. What remains to be seen is how the believing Mormon scholar, and others open to the possibility of the supernatural, should proceed in integrating revelation into the writing of history.

A cursory glance at the journals and diaries of early and contemporary Mormons reveals a world where God is active, where the supernatural interacts with the natural world. Since, as I have argued, there should be no prior disposition to reject references to the supernatural, what the scholar must do, again as I have argued, is find evidence in the primary sources. But how should this evidence be weighed? Since the Enlightenment David Hume's analysis of miracles--that there could never be enough evidence to warrant a belief in such because of the greater probability of naturalistic

explanations--has held sway in academia. But recently a call has been made for a return to a pre-Enlightenment analysis of miracles, one where the testimony of the individual is more important than the believability of the event (miracle).⁶⁰ The call comes in part because of modern academia's inability to handle claims to the supernatural. Following this line of thought, what the scholar must do is not only find evidence in the historical sources of the supernatural before using it as an explanation, but also seek to determine the reliability of the witness(es) of the event.

How does one determine reliability of testimony? The great English empiricist John Locke suggested that six factors were important in examining the testimony of a miracle: (1) the number; (2) the integrity; (3) the skill of the witnesses; (4) the design of the author, where it is a testimony out of a book cited; (5) the consistency of the parts, and circumstances of the relation; and (6) contrary testimonies.⁶¹ Notice that the first four deal with the testifier and the last two with the content of the testimony. Locke maintained that the testifier was more important than the testimony.⁶² For my purposes at present it is the first three that are important for the Mormon Historian.

⁶⁰Kennedy, "Miracles in the Dock," 7-22.

⁶¹John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Meridian, 1974), IV.xv.4; cited in Kennedy, "Miracles in the Dock," 14.

⁶²Ibid., 14.

When examining historical data, the scholar must pay attention to the number of related testimonies. Conversion experiences, for example, permeate the journals and diaries of Mormons. They occur across economic, social and geographical boundaries. If the Mormon scholar finds commonalities that cannot be explained due to geographical or other considerations, the Mormon scholar is in a good position to judge these as occurrences of the supernatural provided the other criteria explained below, and perhaps others, are met in a substantial way. Furthermore, experiences such as the dedication of the Kirtland Temple deserve close scrutiny. It should be taken seriously as a possible manifestation of the supernatural by virtue of the number of witnesses involved alone.

The integrity of the testifier also is crucial. I believe that Joseph Smith provides an excellent case in point. Some scholars have attempted to portray Smith as a charlatan, a huckster. Yet when reading the journal and writings of Joseph Smith, one is not presented with a picture of a duplicitous person. Quite the contrary, Smith reveals himself basically as an honest, forthright individual concerned about the welfare of others. Moreover, others who are well acquainted with him portray him in the same light. While Smith may have misunderstood his religious experiences, there is no indication that the development of Mormonism was a scheme concocted to satisfy his ego or dupe his followers. To be

sure, it is not always easy to determine the integrity of an individual, but an analysis of a person's life through his or her writings coupled with the writings of contemporaries about the person should provide enough evidence for a scholar to make some responsible judgements.

Finally, the skill of the witness is important. In other words, who is reporting the event is important. While Locke is not clear on what exactly the skill of the witness is, he does provide some clues. For Locke it was important for matters in dispute that the testifier be qualified to give his testimony. In historical matters, the historian is the expert, for he is able to understand and order the events of history. Likewise, a person who claims to be a witness to a supernatural occurrence should be qualified to give testimony in two ways. First, he must be one of sound mind and free from other mental or physical deficiencies which could diminish his testimony. Second, the report of the witness must indicate that indeed he was present and viewed it from a perspective that would allow him to comment extensively on the conditions of the occurrence.

This is not say, however, that the event itself should be unimportant to the scholar. Locke recognized that it was impossible to separate completely the testifier from the testimony. Thus it is important for Mormon scholars to examine critically reports of visions, dreams and other forms of revelation. Locke maintained that the consistency of the

parts, and circumstances of the relation, and contrary or conflicting testimonies were important. Examining the consistency of the parts and the circumstances of the relation of a claim to revelation involves examining not only the testimony itself, but also the circumstances in which the event occurred and the circumstances under which the testimony was shared. Does the report contradict itself? Is the claim to revelation inconsistent with the background beliefs of theism, or more particularly, a religious tradition? Is there a hidden agenda in reporting the revelation? Does the revelation change the person to any noticeable degree? Is there a change in behavior?

The last category that applies to an analysis of the supernatural is contrary testimonies. The Mormon scholar should not ignore critics of the Church and its policies. Nor should scholars put aside writings which comment on the character and works of a person through naturalistic lenses. When examining a claim to the supernatural, a scholar must look for those who experience an event but do not interpret it in terms of the supernatural. For example, in November 1832, a brilliant meteor shower lit up the skies over much of the United States. Some Mormons interpreted the event as a manifestation of the divine, a sign of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Yet others saw the same phenomena and reported only a meteor shower.⁶³ In this instance, the historian is not

⁶³HC 1:339-340.

in a position to judge whether God was ultimately the cause of the shower or not. But clearly it was a manifestation of nature as reported by other witnesses. As a result, this event should be judged as a natural occurrence as opposed to a supernatural one. Moreover, the Mormon scholar must critically assess naturalistic explanations of historical events and not dismiss them solely because the supernatural is claimed. There must be a careful weighing of evidence and theories which attempt to explain the data, looking for those theories which explain the data in the most comprehensive way.

To see how these criteria should function within an epistemological framework that allows for the rationality of religious experience, it is helpful to examine a recent article that calls into question the revelatory aspects of the transfiguration of Brigham Young in 1844. Richard S. Van Wagoner notes that the accounts of Young's transfiguration were not written until after the Mormons arrived in the Great Basin, many years after the incident.⁶⁴ In noting this, he dismisses these claims in part because of the later date of writing, maintaining that most contemporary accounts of the meeting written before the 1850s mention no such transfiguration or revelation.⁶⁵ His argument is that the

⁶⁴Richard S. Van Wagoner, "The Making of a Mormon Myth: The 1844 Transfiguration of Brigham Young," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Winter 1995):1-24.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 14.

transfiguration was a product of psychological phenomena known as scenario fulfillment:

The paramount dilemma with retrospective transfiguration recountings is why so many otherwise honorable, pious people recalled experiencing something they probably did not. A rational and likely explanation for this faulty group memory is that a "contagious" thought can spread through the populace to create a "collective mind."⁶⁶

Van Wagoner correctly notes that some of the accounts could not have been first-hand although they are reported as such, and his psychological argument has some merit. It is clear, however, that while Van Wagoner will allow a collective mind to develop over time, he will not allow a revelation to expand in meaning with the passage of time. Is it possible that many experienced such a manifestation but did not recognize its significance until years later? In other words, has Van Wagoner precluded even the possibility of the supernatural because the experience was not written down until well after the event? Has he rejected even the possibility of a supernatural manifestation, looking only for naturalistic explanations? This seems to be the case. He dismisses too quickly letters and diary entries written before the exodus to the Great Basin which noted the "spirit of Joseph" described by some as resting on Brigham Young as "elocutionary" phrases, and not as descriptions of a transfiguration.⁶⁷ It seems quite evident from the earliest accounts that something revelatory

⁶⁶Ibid., 23.

⁶⁷Ibid., 15.

happened. Why is it not possible that the meaning, importance and understanding of that revelatory event could deepen with time? It seems that a relatively level playing field between the supernatural and the natural would leave open the possibility of both explanations.

So what should decide which is more plausible? Using Locke's criteria, it is important to look at the testifiers. In order for Van Wagoner's theory to work, he would have to say that Mormons from various backgrounds strung out over hundreds of miles and without the aid of modern communication developed a "collective mind." Moreover, he would have to show why enhancing the claims of the transfiguration would be important to a people who by the time many had written the accounts were satisfied that Young was the rightful successor to Joseph Smith. Furthermore, Van Wagoner needs more argumentation about why a psychological theory should be accepted over the many testimonies given by "honorable and pious people." While it is true that there are discrepancies in the reports, why dismiss the central message of the reports because of conflicts in smaller details? So while Van Wagoner's argument ultimately may be correct, he has not definitely shown the superiority of his explanation over the traditional supernatural interpretation.

My comments on the interplay between the testifier and the testimony, and my analysis of Van Wagoner's argument, are meant only to be introductory. How one should judge among the

listed criteria needs to be examined further. For example, what should the scholar do with a person who claims revelation that is not shared by others, has contrary testimony in the form of a history of epileptic seizures, but still is greatly affected by the event, producing a more benevolent, spiritual person? There is plenty of work to do for historians, philosophers, theologians, and sociologists in examining the criteria for judging the possibility of the supernatural. And certainly each needs to be more aware of the others' work, allowing others' insights to filter into one's work. Mormon scholars especially need to add their expertise in this area. Not only do Mormon scholars come from a religious tradition that is rich in claims to revelation, providing ample data for their work, but they also have a sympathetic understanding of its importance in the lives of individuals. Their research could provide a means for the New Mormon historians to analyze critically the role of the supernatural in the writing of Mormon history.

Conclusion

What is central to any discussion of historical methodology or belief formation is the issue of justification. Whether the justification is epistemological or encompassing the standards of a particular profession, its role provides a meeting place, a middle ground, for scholars with differing control beliefs. The concept of justification allows for the

adjudication of beliefs and practices. What I have argued in this chapter is that the justification of religious belief can be a matter of academic analysis. Furthermore, I have argued that religious experience, or personal revelation, provides a justified basis for belief formation. Thus certain beliefs formed from religious experience are justified.

The application of this to the problem of writing Mormon history has been addressed. It is clear that epistemological justification by and large has not entered into the debate about the writing of Mormon history. If the other issues surrounding what is justified in the writing of history are going to be discussed in a more penetrating way, then scholars must analyze and discuss issues which surround epistemic justification. In particular, Mormon historians must be more cognizant of the developments in epistemology, in which religious belief and its justification have been receiving a great deal of attention. Only when Mormon historians truly begin to incorporate developments in epistemology and other academic studies into their work, will there be a meeting ground for both the traditional historian of Mormonism and the New Mormon Historian. My argument has been that the putting aside of the possibility of supernatural causation in favor of naturalistic explanations is not warranted in every situation, and that the Mormon scholar should allow her justified control beliefs, even if they involve the supernatural, to influence her professional work within certain parameters. Only then

will Mormon historians move toward a more comprehensive understanding of Mormonism, one that is more sympathetic to the claims of the supernatural in the religion, whether ultimately true or not, and at the same time one that retains its critical nature.

The doctrine of personal revelation, therefore, is important to the study of Mormonism. I have argued in this thesis that personal revelation is a vital part of Mormonism, that a more comprehensive view of Mormonism must take account of personal revelation and its implications. Furthermore, I have argued, in addition to its historical significance, personal revelation brings into focus the need for Mormon scholars to take a serious look at the epistemic consequences of the doctrine and its potential impact on the writing of Mormon history.

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