PEOPLE OF PARADOX

A History of Mormon Culture

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OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

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To
Larry H. Peer and
the memory of Eugene H. Falk,
my teachers

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Preface

This work has benefited enormously from the expertise and tender mercies of a host of readers and critics. Vern Swanson is a gold mine of knowledge about Utah art; the LDS art historian Richard Oman provided valuable criticism and suggestions. Daniel Fairbanks is an accomplished artist from a line of superb artists, and his guidance and friendship alike were invaluable. Also a published geneticist, Daniel made important contributions to my sections on science as well as those on art. Steve Harper, Reid Neilson, David Whittaker, and Richard Bushman represent the acme of new and experienced Mormon scholarship, and I count them all as friends and mentors. Gideon Burton was helpful with matters of literature and film. Michael Hicks made pertinent critiques that extended beyond my music sections. Grant and Heather Hardy are exacting critics and scholars and made extensive, helpful criticisms. Larry Peer read a draft, and Armand Mauss continued his role as friend and guide in much that appears here. Lavina Fielding Anderson provided astute comments as well as encouragement, and Paul Anderson shared his expertise in Mormon architecture. As always, my friend Anthony Russell shared valuable perspectives from outside the traditions here discussed. I also thank Bill Slaughter, the master of LDS photo archives; my son, Nathaniel, for his insights and productive leads; my research assistant, Colin Tate, for help in tracking down arcane sources; and Josh Probert for his suggestions with matters artistic and architectural. As always, the first and last reader and critic was Fiona Givens, my North Star.

All were helpful, and I must emphasize that virtually all championed additions and perspectives which lost out to limitations of space—or of my own abilities. I alone bear responsibility for the idiosyncrasies and omissions in the examples covered. "There is no arguing about taste," said the critic Horace. In fact, few things are the subject of more dispute than taste. For we are all critics after our own fashion, and a study claiming to address the sweeping subject of a religious culture is bound to offend almost everyone by dint of something left out, something overpraised, or something undervalued. I can only insist that I made no attempt at comprehensiveness. My purpose is to plumb in tentative

fashion the range of Mormonism's intellectual and artistic productions, to see if one can find there the contours of consistent themes and preoccupations, a unity between theological foundations and history, on the one hand, and cultural production, on the other. My ambition is not to define definitively Mormon culture, but to delineate some key components of that cultural identity as it appears through artistic and intellectual activity, from Mormonism's origins up to the new millennium.

It will immediately be obvious to readers that my study excludes vast swaths of material and popular culture, including folk expressions in art and music and media from furniture to quilts. They deserve—and will doubtless receive—thorough treatments of their own. I recognize as well that in a church and culture increasingly dominated by a Southern rather than Western hemispheric membership, some of the conceptual categories and distinctions implicit in my treatment—like "high culture" or "serious art"—are already in the process of losing their authority. Finally, I hope the historical compression necessary to a study of this nature does not obscure the richness, variety, and subtleties of those individuals and their contributions that will always transcend facile categories, makeshift periods, and the efforts of scholars striving imperfectly to honor them.

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〜 Part III

The Varieties of Mormon Cultural Expression

*A Movable Zion (1890–Present): Pioneer Nostalgia
and Beyond the American Religion*

Introduction

> The circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is
> fixed forever in size; it can never be larger or smaller.
> But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a
> contradiction, can extend its four arms forever without
> altering its shape. . . . It has a paradox in its center.
>
> ～ G. K. Chesterton

> By proving contraries, truth is made manifest.
> ～ Joseph Smith

On August 8, 1844, the restive crowd began assembling in the heat well before
10:00 in the morning. William Marks, president of the Nauvoo Stake, called the
meeting to choose a successor to Joseph Smith, who had been murdered in a
Carthage jail together with his brother Hyrum six weeks earlier. For ninety
minutes, Sidney Rigdon, one-time counselor and confidant of the Prophet, ha-
rangued the Saints, urging that he be sustained as the "guardian" of the church.
After a break for lunch, Brigham Young addressed the reconvened assembly,
expressing his concern that because of their great number, all might not be able to
hear. "Heretofore you have had a Prophet as the mouth of the Lord to speak to
you," he said, "but he has sealed his testimony with his blood, and now, for the first
time, are you called to walk by faith, and not by sight." Then he asked, "Do you, as
individuals, at this time, want to choose a Prophet or a guardian to lead you?"

No one raised a hand. "Elder Rigdon claims to be spokesman to the Prophet,"
he continued:

> Very well, he was; but . . . if he wants now to be a spokesman for the Prophet,
> he must go to the other side of the veil, for the Prophet is there. . . . If 10,000
> men rise up and say they have the Prophet Joseph's shoes, I know they are
> imposters. . . . [N]o man can put another between the Twelve [Apostles] and
> the Prophet Joseph.[1]

The assembly was persuaded. By the end of the afternoon, there was a virtually unanimous vote to reject any individual's attempt to inherit Joseph's title or status. Three weeks later, the Prophet's brother William would concur that Joseph's role was irreplaceable. He petitioned Brigham to be named Hyrum's successor as patriarch, but said he did not wish to be "prophet in Joseph's place for no man on Earth can fill his place[.] [H]e is our prophet seer revelator Priest & King in time & in Eternity."[2]

So, on August 8, the Quorum of the Twelve, as a body, was sustained "to stand as the head." Brigham Young, as president of the Twelve, would be the chief executive. But it would take three long years, the unprecedented orchestration of a 2,000-mile exodus, and the successful resettlement in Utah of thousands of refugees and convert immigrants before Brigham Young, the American Moses, would presume to take the title that had graced the name of Joseph. Even then, he continued to be known throughout his long tenure as President Young, not "the Prophet Brigham." Now, more than a century and a half later, Mormon custom only reaffirms the truth first evident in that Nauvoo meeting: there could be only one Joseph. When Latter-day Saints refer to "the Prophet" in the past tense, there can be no mistake. It is the Prophet Joseph, matchless in his stature and role within Mormonism, who is the once and forever Mormon prophet.

Joseph's unique place in Mormonism is in this regard rather like George Washington's. There can only be one first Mormon prophet, as there can be only one first American president and father of his people. But in both cases, more is at work than mere chronological primacy. No successor to Joseph even begins to approach the scope of his creative energy as a thinker, a system builder, a revelator. The Book of Mormon he produced is revered as a scripture more correct than the Bible, and it is longer than the Quran or the New Testament. The Doctrine and Covenants (D&C), another compilation of Mormon scripture, has 138 sections. All but 4 were produced by Joseph Smith.[3] The Pearl of Great Price, the final volume of Mormon scripture, is entirely a product of his writings, translations, and revelations. It is for the sheer volume of his scriptural production, the comprehensive scope of his religion-making imagination, and the audacity of his theological innovations that Joseph deserves the title of "authentic religious genius."[4]

As a leader of his people, Brigham Young's thirty-three-year tenure is more than double Joseph's scant fourteen. Young colonized over 300 towns and cities, compared to Joseph's handful; he governed a territory larger than Texas and a church that comprised 130,000 Saints at his death. Young was also a man of profound intellect and imagination. Under his theocratic leadership, Mormon life was more thoroughly pervaded by his temporal and spiritual dictates than

was that of any comparable group of individuals in American history. Joseph Smith laid the foundations, and for the balance of Mormonism's first half-century, Brigham Young shaped the Mormon experience. It is on those twin pillars that the Mormon intellectual and cultural heritage rests.

This book is an exploration of the Mormon cultural identity that Smith and, to a lesser extent, Young founded. What such a study might entail is by no means self-evident. "[N]othing is more indeterminate," wrote the great German philosopher Herder, "than this word [culture]." At the same time, short of identifying culture with all dimensions of human life in a given society, three meanings are commonly invoked by the term: a general habit of mind, the intellectual development of a society, and its general body of arts.[5] I have taken these three emphases, and their interrelationships, as my particular focus: the seminal ideas that constitute a Mormon "habit of mind," their development and elaboration over time, and their manifestations and permutations across a spectrum of artistic media.

Speaking of the development of early Christian cultural identity, Graydon Snyder has written that "it took over a century for the new community of faith to develop a distinctive mode of self-expression."[6] Mormonism has been around for nearly two centuries. While it is still a new religious community compared to the great world faiths and even to Protestant denominations, many factors have conspired to foster its development as a community with a distinctive world view, powerful cultural cohesion, and its own forms of artistic and intellectual expression. A radical theology, emphasizing chosenness and exclusive stewardship over divine truth and authority, a history of persecution and alienation from the American mainstream, together with enormous institutional demands of religious commitment, personal sacrifice, and distinctive religious practices have welded the adherents of Mormonism into a people who so powerfully identify with one another that one writer did not hesitate to call them the only instance in American history of a people who became almost an ethnic community.[7] That striking fact, together with the increasingly real possibility that Mormonism may, indeed, become the first new world faith since Islam, provides ample justification for a study of this nature.

A chronological survey of the varieties of artistic and intellectual expression would miss the point of cultural formation. For some of the most productive stimulants to such expression are the unresolved tensions inherent in a culture—tensions with the dominant society in the context of which a new cultural group emerges, or internal tensions that never manage to find full and satisfactory resolution. Frederick Barnard points to Herder's observation that a people "may have the most sublime virtues in some respect and blemishes in others . . . and

reveal the most astonishing contradictions and incongruities." Therefore, Barnard writes, "a cultural whole is not necessarily a way of referring to a state of blissful harmony; it may just as conceivably refer to a field of tension."[8]

A field of tension seems a particularly apt way to characterize Mormon thought. It may be that all systems of belief rooted in the notion of a God who dies have, as Chesterton suggests, "a collision and a contradiction" at their heart.[9] Yet Mormonism, a system in which Joseph Smith collapsed sacred distance to bring a whole series of opposites into radical juxtaposition, seems especially rife with paradox—or tensions that only appear to be logical contradictions.

Such dynamic tensions give cultural expression much of its vitality, but are hardly productive of a cultural tradition that is systematic or linear. For that reason, I have chosen to organize this study around what I take to be four especially rich and fertile tensions, or thematic pairings, in Mormon thought, which have inspired recurrent and sustained engagement on the part of writers, artists, and thinkers in the Mormon community. Obviously, these four do not pretend to comprise all the paradoxes one could locate in Mormonism's intellectual or artistic or cultural heritage. And they are hardly manifest in every instance of Mormon cultural expression. But they provide an effective framework for an exploration of at least a substantial sampling of the several chapters in the history of Latter-day Saints' efforts to make sense of their place in the world and to orient themselves to new concepts of the human and the divine.

The first chapter of the book deals with the polarity of authoritarianism and individualism. It is in the context of those two competing values that Mormon artists and intellectuals have had to negotiate their place in their culture. One paradox of Mormon cultural history is its rootedness in a rigidly hierarchical, authoritarian church—and yet this church was established in the context of two fanatically individualistic phenomena that converged in antebellum America: Western Romanticism and Jacksonian democracy. Smith's version of human freedom was as radical as Rousseau's, even as the model of spiritual authority he enacted earned Mormonism the name "American popery." Mormonism is, after all, a religion in which the authority of the one living prophet at the head of the church is every bit as literal and all-encompassing as that of Moses over the children of Israel. But it is also a religion in which the priesthood authority is also given to virtually every active Mormon male, and all members are vouchsafed the right to personal, literal, dialogic revelation with God. Chapter 1 explores the impact of those dynamic tensions on the cultural foundations of a Mormon intellectual and artistic tradition.

The second chapter explores a second fundamental paradox in Joseph Smith's religion making. The Prophet emphasized in his religious thinking the possi-

bility of epistemological certainty even as he elaborated a theology of audacious scope and a program of eternal learning. Smith made intellectual pursuit a quest of holiness, founding the School of Prophets, establishing a fledgling university, and devoting himself to the study of ancient languages and lore even as he claimed to bypass the learned systems of men with his powers of seership and translation. So it is that Mormons today inherit a tradition rooted relatively recently in concrete artifacts like gold plates verified by eleven witnesses, in accounts of resurrected beings laying physical hands on founding prophets, and in Joseph's testimony of the audible words and visible appearing of Deity itself. And Mormons inhabit a rhetorical world where members give not assertions of fervent belief, but public testimony that they have spiritual knowledge of those events as historical realities. At the same time, such credentials do not attest to personal salvation or blessedness, but only betoken the commencement of an eternal quest for saving knowledge and the burden of an endlessly sought perfection. The mix of intellectual certitude and intellectual insatiability Joseph exuded has left a mixed heritage with which aspiring LDS artists and intellectuals must reckon. While his relentless eclecticism, syncretism, and system building could provoke and inspire, great works of the mind and heart have seldom emerged in the context of the spiritual complacency and sense of plenitude that his theology could also encourage. Chapter 2 assesses the impact of those tensions—searching and certitude—on Mormon understanding of intellectual and artistic endeavor.

The third chapter examines one of the most culturally—and theologically—potent innovations of the Mormon world view, one that appears more as a collapse of polarities than as a tension between them: the disintegration of sacred distance. With God an exalted man, man a God in embryo, the family a prototype for heavenly sociality, and Zion a city with dimensions and blueprints, Joseph rewrote conventional dualisms as thoroughgoing monism. The resulting paradox is manifest in the recurrent invasion of the banal into the realm of the holy and the infusion of the sacred into the realm of the quotidian. The consequent reconceptualization of grace, of humanity's relationship to the divine, and a pervasive suspicion of transcendence and mystery—all follow in turn from the radical paradigm shift instituted by Joseph Smith. Such a reconfigured view of the sacred demands new artistic approaches to the sublime.

Finally, chapter 4 looks at two related tensions in Mormonism: exile and integration, and a gospel viewed as both American and universal. The quest for Zion was for the Saints a search for Eden—but it was always an Eden in exile. The cost of their chosen status appears recurrently in the Mormon psyche as both nostalgia and alienation; and the opposing movement toward integration

into the larger world they had fled was fueled by both a longing for inclusion and an imperative to redeem the world. From its earliest days, Mormon converts embraced a sense of themselves as people of the covenant, peculiar, chosen. Casting all others as "gentiles," and fellow Christians as inheritors of a great apostasy, this rhetoric of difference, together with a history of persecution and geographical remoteness, compounded their isolation into a virtue and a sign of blessedness. But their art and literature reveal a recurrent unease with such difference. Isolation is often felt as a burden of exclusion and is frequently transformed into a quest for connections and universals. Mormons insist on the need for a gospel restoration, but then feel the sting of being excluded from the fold of Christendom they have just dismissed as irredeemably apostate. Or, in a parallel way, Mormons have long identified their faith with America's providential role in history. Mormon origins, the Book of Mormon as artifact and as history, church headquarters, the garden of Eden, and the New Jerusalem—all are identified with a specifically American locale. But in an age of internationalization and global growth, Mormons are necessarily rethinking the limitations and obstacles created by a presentation of the church as an American institution and raising the possibility of a church surreptitiously engrafted with at least some expendable and merely accidental local baggage. In their thoughtful and provocative exploration of these distinctions, Mormon artists and intellectuals may be an effective prod in facilitating the transition of Mormonism into a truly international faith.

The chapters that follow are organized by genre, but also grouped into two major chronological epochs. I make here the usual caveats about periodization: all demarcations are artificial, and others could well be argued for. I have chosen to consider the period from the founding until roughly 1890 as one epoch, because in that year Wilford Woodruff called for the end of polygamy—the practice which served as the most publicly recognizable sign of Mormon difference. Three other contemporaneous developments symbolically if not actually reversed the trend of Mormon cultural self-sufficiency and alienation from the larger society: the fading of the call to Mormons to gather into one geographically bounded cultural community; Orson Whitney's call for the self-conscious production of a Mormon literature; and the sending of art missionaries from the remote Utah desert to the academies of Paris.

The second era I trace from 1890 until the present. This era of LDS history has been almost entirely dominated by first a Utah, and then an American, orientation and has only in recent years seen the beginnings of an international church. The period has seen important changes in Mormon self-conceiving before the world. Mormon intellectual life has been transformed as the church

has addressed the challenges of racial controversies, feminism, and the politics of dissent. Adding to the ferment, Mormon historians began to integrate their studies into secular models, and vice versa, resulting in dramatic tensions between conventional and revisionist modes of understanding the Mormon past and, by extension, Mormon identity itself. Also, under LDS president Spencer W. Kimball's administration, leaders, painters, and writers renewed the emphasis on the project of a Mormon artistic tradition. Equally significant for Mormon culture, Kimball's ambitious vision for an invigorated missionary program and a worldwide church have instigated a still-continuing redefinition of Mormonism as an international, rather than American, institution.

Today, only 14 percent of Mormons live in Utah, and while it is true that Mormonism has at the beginning of the twenty-first century achieved a balance of members that is weighted more heavily with non-Americans than Americans, the fact remains that for the first century and more of its history, Mormon culture was largely a Utah construction. That, and the impossibility of giving fair representation to the forms which the Mormon faith is acquiring in over 100 countries where it is currently practiced, have led me to focus on Mormonism as the essentially American religion it was until the current generation. I express the sincere hope that scholars better qualified will produce examinations of Mormon culture in the truly international complexion being ushered in by the new millennium.

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Part I

Foundations and Paradoxes in Mormon Cultural Origins

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~ 1 ~

The Iron Rod and the Liahona

Authority and Radical Freedom

Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed
unto all his words and commandments which he shall
give unto you, . . . for his word ye shall receive as if from
mine own mouth.

~ Doctrine and Covenants 21:4–5[1]

It is love of liberty which inspires my soul—civil and
religious liberty to the whole of the human race. Love of
liberty was diffused into my soul by my grandfathers
while they dandled me on their knees.

~ Joseph Smith

If any myth can make a claim to near-universality among the cultures and
religions of the world, it is probably the primeval conflict between good and evil.
Christianity has long contended with scattered, cryptic biblical allusions to a
conflict in the celestial realms that antedated even the creation of the earth. "And
there was war in heaven," says the writer of Revelation in the most prominent
example. "Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon
fought and his angels, and prevailed not, neither was their place found any more
in heaven" (12:7–8).

Biblical commentators have long relegated those passages to "rabbinic tradi-
tions" or "Jewish apocalyptic literature," with only symbolic relevance for Chris-
tians. Thus Adam Clarke, in the early nineteenth century, for instance, calls
John's images "peculiarly rabbinical," and J. R. Dummelow suggests the meaning
that, in Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, "Satan was already essentially
conquered."[2] John Milton, however, like many Christians of an earlier age, took
the passage as a quite literal allusion to warfare in high places in eons long past,

finding therein the historical origins of Satan. In the process of recreating epic warfare on high, Milton, in book VI of *Paradise Lost*, transforms the rebel angel Lucifer into the world's first Romantic hero, warring defiantly against God's omnipotent tyranny. In 1835, Joseph Smith produced a text purporting to contain lost writings of Abraham, in which the nature and origins of this crisis in the harmony of heaven are described. Abraham presents readers with an account of a celestial assemblage of unborn spirits, "intelligences organized before the world was."[3] Joseph preferred the word "organize" to "create," since the latter connoted fabrication ex nihilo, which he discounted. It is not clear, therefore, whether this "organization" of "intelligences" has reference to the process by which God worked with primeval human substance, or intelligence, and fashioned or begat it into individual spirits, or whether this phrase has reference to a kind of mustering or ordering of preexistent spirit entities into some assemblage.[4] In any case, the motif of the grand heavenly council, alluded to in Psalm 82, where "God presides in the divine council, [and] in the midst of the gods adjudicates" (Anchor Bible translation), has extensive representation in Middle Eastern traditions and in apocryphal literature.[5] In Joseph's version, God stands in the midst of many "noble and great" spirits, and declares his intentions with regard to these future inhabitants of the earth. "We will go down, . . . and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them." In response, "one among them that was like unto God" offers himself as executor and instrument of the Father's plan, apparently indicating a willingness to expiate the sins that will inevitably accrue to all mankind in the wake of such a probationary scheme (Abraham 3, PGP).

It is at this point, according to a revelation Joseph had published five years earlier, that a second figure steps forward with a competing proposal. Referring to Satan, God tells the prophet Moses:

> . . . [He] came before me, saying—Behold here am I, send me, I will be thy Son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore, give me thine honor. But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever. Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him; and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; and he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive, and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will. (Moses 4:1–4, PGP)

According to this scenario, then, the first cosmic conflict on record is between the principle of agency and the threat of compulsion. Whether we see that attempt at coercion as the first form that evil took, as an evil secondary to a dissent from God's proffered plan, or, more radically, as preceding revolt and rebellion—and thus the primal evil itself—it is clear that Joseph Smith is making moral agency the locus and origin of the moral dualism of the universe. To leave no doubt as to this precedence accorded to the will, Joseph would reveal that moral agency is in fact the indispensable foundation of the soul's very existence. In 1833, he made the astonishing claim that "man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be," adding, "All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence. Behold, here is the agency of man" (D&C 93:29–30).

It is no coincidence that Joseph here links a pronouncement on the supreme importance of moral agency with a claim that human intelligence is uncreated. The formulation cuts through a Gordian knot that had confounded religious philosophy in America since before its founding, and had earlier echoes going back to debates between Erasmus and Luther and, before that, Pelagius and Augustine: the conflict over freedom and determinism. The most famous American philosophical text through the nineteenth century, writes one scholar, was Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*. In that treatise, Edwards had struggled to reconcile God's omnipotence with individual accountability. Calvinism, with its doctrine of total depravity and determinism, was interpreted by non-Calvinists to deny freedom of the will. But Edwards insisted that "freedom was having a will. Having a will meant possessing overriding habits, inclinations, desires, motives, and so on. God could not create free beings unless he created them in such a way that their actions would be morally determined."[6] In this way, Edwards tried to argue that men are both free *and* morally determined.

According to this position, the opposite of moral determinism is not freedom, but irrationality, unpredictability, and random spontaneity. If people did not act in predictable, rational accord with their proclivities, motives, and character, then we would be thrown into a world in which cause and effect break down. We would not inhabit a realm of freedom but of behavioral anarchy and arbitrariness. In the later eighteenth century, philosopher William Godwin put the case simply: "If voluntary conduct, as well as material impulse, were not subjected to general laws, and a legitimate topic of prediction and foresight," the social world would disintegrate, and "there could be no such thing as character or as a ground of inference enabling us to predict what men would be from what they have been."[7]

Even Edwards's adroit reasoning and Godwin's logic, however, could not stem the growing tide of hostility to anything that denigrated the independent self. In Edwards's day, for example, it was still possible to arrest dissenters like Robert Breck of Massachusetts for atheism and blasphemy. Even though a confirmed Calvinist (he affirmed the Westminster Confession), Breck had dared to assert that God "would hold people responsible only for that which was in their power to do."[8] Increasingly, the influence of Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) was gaining sway. A Dutch Reformed theologian, he argued for the compatibility of freedom of the will and God's sovereignty, finding avid followers and a lasting place in the history of theology. In America, popular preachers John Wesley (1703–1791), Alexander Campbell (1788–1866), and Charles Finney (1792–1875) all were associated with the Arminian strain, which emphasized individual responsibility and a self-determining will. As one scholar writes, "the liberal Christianity of the new republic would be built around such moral principles."[9]

In the era of Joseph Smith's religious culture, as in Jacksonian America generally, any theory that privileged individual responsibility over deterministic models was bound to be popular—even if Arminianism itself was far from endorsing limitless human freedom. Jacob Arminius had written of the human condition:

> [I]n this state, the Free Will of man towards the True Good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost: And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace.[10]

Still, it provided the best alternative to the irresistible grace of the Calvinists.

Indeed, the phenomenal growth of both Methodism and the Campbellite movement, as well as of Finney's exuberant brand of revivalism, attest to the great attraction that individualistic religion had for Americans. This elevation of the individual, this "new importance given to the single person" was, in Emerson's 1837 words, a veritable "sign of our times."[11] The heritage of American independence, the infusions of Romantic sensibility from abroad, the vastness and rapidity of territorial expansion, and the volatile populism of Jackson—all conspired to create an ambience of unfettered ambition. As Richard Bushman remarks, by Joseph's day, "it is hard to imagine another time in the world's history when a culture of boundlessness prevailed so widely."[12] Theologies that constrained human will, like those that limited human potential, could hardly hope to compete with doctrines of limitlessness and a fully liberated human

agency. In Joseph's radical rewriting of Genesis, which we saw above, even the elemental particles of the universe cooperate actively in their own material creation. The Gods organize the two great lights, for instance, to rule the day and the night, and then, "the Gods watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed" (Abraham 4:18, PGP). As Hugh Nibley comments, "'They obeyed' is the active voice, introducing a teaching that . . . is by far the most significant and distinct aspect of Mormonism. It is the principle of maximum participation, of the active cooperation of all of God's creatures in the working out of his plans, which, in fact, are devised for their benefit."[13]

Out of this context, however, Joseph's contributions went far beyond quibbling about the compatibility of absolute sovereignty and free will, or merely privileging the latter. Edwards, for example, thought he had reconciled the two principles by asserting that human beings were free in the only way that mattered, i.e., "their choices were thoroughly their own, not bound except by their *own* moral natures and inclinations."[14] That formulation, of course, only revealed—rather than solved—the most fundamental challenge to free will, which neither Calvinists nor Arminians could easily dodge. For in addition to the problems of behavioral irrationality, or a disordered and unpredictable world, proponents of human free will cannot escape the problem posed by the principle of causality itself. If every action presupposes a cause, then all human action is traceable to prior causes, eventuating in a first one, which is God. If this first cause determines every subsequent action, then responsibility—and freedom— can reside only in the realm of that first cause. It is therefore hard, in the final analysis, to avoid an even more inflexible determinism than the Calvinists': as creator of the human soul, God is ultimately responsible for the human soul's nature—its proclivities, tendencies, and appetites. Edwards acknowledged this problem, responding that "every version of Christianity had the same problem. All Christians taught that there *is* sin in the world and that God created the world."[15] Aquinas had addressed this issue in his *Summa Theologica*, recognizing the logical difficulty presented by his own acknowledgment, on the one hand, of God as "First Cause," and on the other, of Aristotle's dictum that *only* that which is "cause of itself" is free.[16] God can be free, therefore, but nothing that derives from, exists outside, or follows upon that first cause can be. In other words, belief in God as the source of all being would seem to be fundamentally incompatible with human moral agency if human beings are his creatures.[17] And that God is the source of all things in existence, no orthodox Christian disputed ("He is the alone fountain of all being," as the Westminster Confession puts it). Or as one philosopher has put the case more simply: "an omnipotent God could have prevented all sin by creating us with better natures and in more favorable

surroundings. . . . Hence we should not be responsible for our sins to God."[18] The entire problem of a first cause could be obviated, of course, only by a radical rejection of God as absolutely sovereign, which would in turn pave the way for eliminating a temporal point of origin for the human soul. But as Edwards noted, no such Christian conception existed in his day.

"We say that God Himself is a self-existent God," said Joseph:

> Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principle? . . . The mind of man—the intelligent part—is as immortal as, and is coequal [co-eternal][19] with, God Himself. . . . I might with boldness proclaim from the housetop that God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. . . . Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it. The first principles of man are self-existent with God.[20]

Joseph's formulation is nothing less than a reconceptualization of the most fundamental division in Christian metaphysics: we move from a binary opposition between a unique Creator and infinite creatures/creations, into a universe divided, as the Book of Mormon states the case, between "things to act, and things to be acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:14). We will further explore in chapter 3 the shattering implications of situating man on God's side of the most essential divide in the universe. For now, it is sufficient to point out that being coeternal with God, man is free like God. Along with Satan, Joseph taught, God and man constitute the "independent principles" of the universe.[21] Or, as Brigham Young was fond of saying, "Men are organized to be just as independent as any being in eternity."[22]

Certainly individual, moral agency occupies a remarkably privileged place, according to Joseph and Brigham, in cosmological history and in Mormon theology. Given these positions on freedom of the will and man's ontological autonomy, one might expect to find in Mormonism an uncommon hostility to dogma, hierarchy, and church authority. Indeed, Joseph affirmed the sanctity of conscience when he insisted that he only taught his people "correct principles, and they govern themselves," elsewhere adding that "we are not disposed, had we the power, to deprive any one of exercising that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts."[23] So it is all the more ironic that the church Joseph founded is one of the most centralized, hierarchical, authoritarian churches in America to come out of the era famous for the "democratization of religion."[24]

To understand this paradox, it is essential to know that Joseph Smith considered two ingredients essential to true Christianity, both of which he declared lost in the "great apostasy," and both of which he claimed to restore. First was the fullness of gospel truth. Primary in this regard was what Joseph called "a correct idea of [God's] character, perfections and attributes" ("necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation," he believed).[25] Among other things, this correct idea would entail a radically unorthodox rendering of the godhead as three distinct individuals (God and Christ both having corporeal form). Added to the equation were man's pre-existent state and the possibility of eternal family units presided over by exalted men and women. But wedded to his focus on a restoration of gospel truth was Joseph's particular construction of and emphasis on priesthood authority. Combining the restricted sacerdotalism of Roman Catholicism with the quasi universalism of Protestantism, Joseph forged a new version altogether.

Like Catholicism, Joseph held that Christ dispensed specific authorization to particular individuals to preach the gospel and administer the ordinances of salvation and that, subsequent to his death, control over this authority and over its various areas of efficacy (called "keys") were centered in Peter. This priesthood, Joseph taught, was an actual power, as well as a principle of authority, that is coexistent with God himself and connected to his own sovereignty. In defining salvation, Joseph said it was "nothing more nor less than to triumph over all our enemies and put them under our feet . . . and the last enemy was death. . . . [U]ntil a man can triumph over death, he is not saved. A knowledge of the priesthood alone will do this."[26]

The power of resurrection, in other words, is one priesthood key.[27] But an additional way in which Joseph considered that priesthood provided an indispensable power over death was in its capacity to cement human relationships eternally:

> All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him . . . whom I have appointed on the earth to hold this power (and I have appointed unto my servant Joseph to hold this power in the last days, and there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are conferred), are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead. (D&C 132:7)

This priesthood, according to Joseph, is an eternal power, physically trans-
mitted (by the laying on of hands) from agent to agent in a chain extending back
to its primeval origin. In this world, he wrote, "The priesthood was first given to
Adam; he obtained the First Presidency, and held the keys of it from generation to
generation. He obtained it in the Creation, before the world was formed." In fact,
he continued, "the priesthood is an everlasting principle, and existed with God
from eternity, and will to eternity, without beginning of days or end of years."[28]
Adam bequeathed the priesthood to his descendants, and so on through the years
of human history. In Joseph's version of dispensationalism, however, the chain is
not an unbroken one. Sporadic interruptions have occurred across the millennia,
necessitating the ordination of new prophets by heaven-sent messengers. Preced-
ing Christ's ministry, for example, John the Baptist was ordained by an angel at
the age of eight days (D&C 84:28). Following the dispersal and death of Christ's
personally ordained apostles, a hiatus of 1,800 years occurred before John the
Baptist and later Peter, James, and John appeared to Joseph Smith in resurrec-
ted form and manually conferred upon him their respective priesthood keys and
authority. Other messengers would follow, including Moses and Elijah. Believing
himself the recipient of literal priesthood authorization by resurrected beings,
Joseph thus avoided the problem of self-doubt about authority that had plagued
second-wave reformer Roger Williams or, later, Charles Wesley. Motivated to
forge a dissenting movement, Williams nevertheless agonized over his own lack
of manifest authority. Soon after his rupture with the Puritans, he withdrew from
his own fledgling church because of such doubts, and resigned himself to wait-
ing until "God should stir up himself or some other new Apostles."[29]

Williams's predicament revealed a drawback of the Protestant appeal to bib-
lical authority alone: it lacked the certainty and singularity of a visible conduit
and unambiguous line of transmission, and hence the assurance that it was di-
vinely approved rather than of human initiation. Joseph embraced the advan-
tages of the Catholic model, even as he shunned its elitism. So while the priest-
hood he claimed to restore was not a "priesthood of all believers," he did expand
the spiritual franchise to virtually all worthy LDS males.[30] Initially, such eccle-
siastical egalitarianism proved appealing and effective. Especially since, from the
perspective of administering church sacraments and ordinances, no apparent
reason existed to restrict priesthood access. But from the standpoint of church
governance, Joseph learned quickly, a church full of prophets was a holy bedlam.
Hiram Page was one of the eight men who saw and handled the gold plates, and
his name is appended to an affidavit so testifying. Some five months after the
Mormon church's organization, he began to make use of a seer stone, through
which he claimed to receive revelations for that church. Many members,

including Joseph's own scribe, Oliver Cowdery, were persuaded by them, prompting Joseph to produce a revelation that established for all time the principle of the supreme spiritual authority in the church. The revelation, by declaring that "no one shall be appointed to receive revelations and commandments [for] this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, . . . until I shall appoint . . . another in his stead" (D&C 28:2, 7), effectively transformed the role of a prophet into the office of Prophet. (The principle was reaffirmed in similar language a few months later [D&C 43:3–5].)

It wasn't Joseph's assumption of the prophetic title that marked a distinctive turn in Mormonism's cultural evolution. It was the construction of that calling into an office, which had no precedent in American religious history. His 1820 visitation from God he had interpreted as a personal response to a personal spiritual quest. From 1823 to 1827, his communications with the angel Moroni (who delivered to him the Book of Mormon) he had seen as personal, heavenly tutorials, preparing him for the work of translating the Book of Mormon. Then, even before the church's organization in 1830, he had begun to pronounce God's will for several other individuals: his father (D&C 4 in February 1829); Martin Harris (D&C 5 in March of the same year); Oliver Cowdery (D&C 6–9 in April); his brother Hyrum (D&C 11 in May); friend and supporter Joseph Knight, Sr. (D&C 12 also in May), and the three Whitmer brothers (D&C 14–16 in June). In fact, all fourteen revelations Joseph received that year addressed or mentioned some individual known to the Prophet. Mostly, these pronouncements offered encouragement or general admonitions to "keep my commandments" or "declare repentance" or "establish the cause of Zion." As such, they could easily be construed to be generic counsel of general applicability.

As the organization of the church approached and then passed, revelations became increasingly diverse in their domain of influence—and increasingly focused and individual-specific in their content. A revelation in March 1830 commanded Martin Harris to "not covet [his] own property, but impart it freely to the printing of the Book of Mormon" (D&C 19:26). In another telling development, persons were rebuked for personal failings in divine pronouncements that were publicly promulgated. David Whitmer was too attuned to "the things of the earth" (D&C 30:2); James Covill had succumbed to "pride and the cares of the world" (D&C 39:9); Frederick Williams, Sidney Rigdon, and Newel K. Whitney were censured as negligent fathers (D&C 93:41–50). Though Joseph did not exempt himself from public reproof (D&C 3:4–9; 5:21; 93:47), he was never called "a wicked man," as was the erratic Martin Harris (D&C 3, 10), nor rebuked for murmuring and courting adultery as was the hapless William McLellin. (D&C 66:10; 75:7).

After relocating the church center from upstate New York to Kirtland, Ohio, and in the midst of growing numbers and internal dissensions there, Joseph announced a new place of gathering that would be the Zion of prophecy, a "New Jerusalem," a city of God built from the ground up as a theocratic community with ownership of all things in common. On the borders of the civilized world, erecting their wilderness utopia, the group's spiritual leader became its de facto city planner, school administrator, and law giver. Continuing to exercise his authority as prophet and revelator, Joseph told followers what businesses to pursue and where, as part of the movement's communal endeavor: Newel K. Whitney was instructed to "retain his store . . . [in Ohio] yet for a little season" (D&C 63:42), while in the same revelation Joseph announced that God had given him the power "to discern by the Spirit those who shall go up unto the land of Zion [Missouri], and those of my disciples who shall tarry [in Ohio]" (D&C 41). Sidney Gilbert was one of the former. He was ordered to "plant himself in [Jackson County, Missouri], and establish a store" in July 1831 (D&C 57:8). His colleague W. W. Phelps was called by the voice of God—through Joseph—to "be established as a printer" (D&C 57:11); he had earlier been commanded to do the work "of selecting and writing books for schools in this church" (D&C 55:4). Other assignments were similarly ordained.

In the days before disestablishment, American Puritans had found no difficulty in wedding the political, the civic, and the spiritual. As one religious historian has remarked, "Puritanism and its Reformed-pietist successors" frequently engaged in the project of "rebuilding Christendom by making towns and eventually nations into virtually Christian societies." One consequence, especially under the school of thought associated with the influential grandfather of Jonathan Edwards, Solomon Stoddard, "was that church and town were more or less coextensive."[31] After the Revolution, however, church authoritarianism that blurred the lines between spiritual guidance and secular control, and intruded into the economic in particular, was bound to meet resistance. And it did.

In early 1838, the man who had transcribed almost the entirety of the Book of Mormon, Oliver Cowdery, left the church over just this issue. Cowdery had sold some of his land holdings in Missouri, in defiance of a revelation by Joseph. Charged by a church council in Far West, Missouri, with "virtually denying the faith by declaring that he would not be governed by any ecclesiastical authority or revelations whatever in his temporal affairs," Cowdery readily admitted the offense: "I will not be influenced, governed, or controlled, in my temporal interests by any ecclesiastical authority or pretended revelation whatever, contrary to my own judgment."[32] In the newfound spirit of American republicanism, Cowdery invoked his "constitutional privileges," the rights adumbrated by Locke,

and his Plymouth ancestors. That the high council rejected the charge against Cowdery suggests the extent to which Joseph's authority to dictate in temporal matters was still a matter of controversy, uncertainty, and discontent.[33]

Throughout those formative years, however, the majority of Latter-day Saints clearly *were* willing to sacrifice economic self-interest, family ties, and self-determination in answering the call to abandon homes and flocks and families and to gather to new locales and to serve missions without purse or script. Why were the majority of Latter-day Saints willing to cede those English/American liberties in deference to a homespun prophet and visionary? Part of the explanation lies in Joseph's reformulation of traditional categories. "All things to me are spiritual," said Joseph's God, "and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; . . . for my commandments are spiritual; they are not natural nor temporal, neither carnal nor sensual" (D&C 29:34–35). Literalizing the gathering of Israel as a physical congregating of the righteous and literalizing the building of Zion as a process using plats as well as prophetic pronouncements made it impossible for his followers to metaphorize such biblically ordained imperatives or divorce them from the central pursuits of personal and community life. Suddenly, being a Latter-day Saint meant full engagement in a life of resettlement, community building, temple construction, economic communalism, and millennial preparation. That left precious little room for a private domain of entirely personal prerogatives.[34]

At least three other factors reinforced the scope and authority of the prophetic office in Mormonism. First was the geography of the Mormon experience. The gathering in western Missouri was at the fringes of civilization, where persecution and relocation heightened dependence on the group and its charismatic leader. The next location, Nauvoo, Illinois, was a virtual city-state, with a prophet who also assumed the roles of lieutenant general of a numerous militia and mayor of the city, making him the political, military, and spiritual leader of his people. Death added martyr to his titles. With the exodus to Utah, Brigham Young consolidated and expanded several of those roles. Joseph was mayor of Nauvoo, a city of 12,000. Young presided as governor (with short-lived official sanction, but permanent de facto authority), prophet, and church president over an enormous—and remote—territory that, by his death, encompassed over 100,000 followers. Critics blasted what they considered his despotic control over all affairs in Utah, both ecclesiastical and temporal. Even admirers have not always disputed such characterizations. As Hugh Nibley writes of Young's followers:

> [W]hat else *could* they think of any man who rolled over all opposition, amassed substance and power, and commanded the absolute obedience that Brigham

Young did? To do that in terms of our world, a man must needs be a com-
bination of Tamerlaine, Caesar Borgia, and Boss Tweed, and as such even the
Latter-day Saints have pictured Brigham Young.[35]

Mormons do not understand the prophetic office in terms familiar to the
world at large. This brings us to the second factor reinforcing its powerful
purchase on Mormon faithfulness: an idiosyncratic understanding of inspiration.
In an essay revealingly titled "The Scandal of Revelation," critic George Steiner
writes, "personally, I find scriptural literalism or any peremptory attribution to
God of 'speech acts' such as we know and use them, to be unacceptable. . . . Such
attribution only offends reason and historical evidence."[36] Steiner's is not the
only example. Referring to theological developments in particular, one religious
historian has written:

> To claim that God reveals Himself to man but to reject the [belief that] he
> reveals Himself by speaking to man is to so whittle away the analogy on which
> the concept of divine revelation is built that it must be seriously asked whether
> the concept of divine revelation has enough content to license its continued use.
> Revelation in the fully personal sense characteristic of personal agents has been
> abandoned.[37]

In the face of such widespread rejection of Old Testament literalism re-
garding God's interaction with human beings, Mormonism is emphatically re-
gressive. Joseph was inflexible in his insistence that his encounters with Deity
involved literal speech acts between divine persons and himself. The Book of
Mormon he produced emphasizes as one of its cardinal teachings the urgency of
embracing dialogic revelation as the birthright of righteous seekers in all ages.
From Brigham Young onward, LDS prophets have muted their claims to divine
epiphanies. The last visitation acknowledged by a modern Mormon prophet was
Christ's appearing to the fifth president, Lorenzo Snow, in the Salt Lake Temple
in 1898, and that experience was shared privately.[38] But what is important is that
the heritage of encounters with a physically embodied Deity who speaks his will
to a prophet continues to inform Mormon understanding of the prophetic role.
So when President Kimball announced in 1978 that "a revelation and assurance
[extending the priesthood to black members] came to me so clearly that there was
no question about it,"[39] his words carried the same weight with—and claimed
the same assent from—members as when Joseph Smith decreed yet another
place of gathering. Mormons by and large believe that God's revealing of himself
to his prophets is just as literal as it ever was. Such manifestations may be less

dramatic, or they may only be less publicly discussed, but members are confident that, as a recent president, Ezra Taft Benson, declared, "today in Christ's restored church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [Christ] is revealing Himself and His will—from the first prophet of the Restoration, even Joseph Smith, to the present."[40]

Finally, Mormon scriptures make it clear that acceptance of LDS church presidents as inspired spokesmen for God is a religious imperative. An early revelation commanded members to "give heed unto all [Joseph Smith's] words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them. . . . For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth. . . . For by doing these things, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you" (D&C 21:4–6). A subsequent revelation enjoined the faithful to "uphold him before me by the prayer of faith" (D&C 43:12). Today, members celebrate the office with rousing anthems ("We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet"); publicly avow their support of the living tenant of that office as "prophet, seer, and revelator" in ward, stake, and general conferences of the church; and must confirm to the bishop their assent to the prophet's unique authority over the church as a condition of temple admission.

The consequence of these two traditions of emphasis on freedom and authority is an ever-present tension in Mormon culture between submission to an ecclesiastical authoritarianism without parallel in modern Christianity and an emphasis on and veneration for the principle of individual moral agency so pronounced that it leads even careful observers into major misperceptions (Mormons "earn their way to godhood by the proper exercise of free will, rather than through the grace of Jesus Christ," reports one news magazine).[41] Without moral independence, says the LDS scripture, "there is no existence." "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done," says the (officially disavowed but widely accepted) LDS saw.[42]

Certainly when the LDS leaders speak, they do so with an unusually high rate of responsiveness from church members, even compared to another authoritarian institution, Roman Catholicism. Theologian Richard P. McBrien, a passionate admirer of the most popular pope of modernity, John Paul II, for example, acknowledged that notwithstanding his having "more prestige than any pope in history," the pope had "very little influence on the lives of Catholic lay people. They see him and cheer for him. But there's not much substance" in his influence over them.[43] To cite one example, the Catholic church maintains an official opposition to abortion even more emphatic than Mormonism's. Yet statistics reveal no discernible influence of that position on the numbers of American Catholics having abortions; they obtain them at a rate even higher than their

Protestant counterparts. Mormons, on the other hand, undergo abortions at a rate dramatically lower than the national average.[44] The category of mothers who work outside the home is another area where "the influence of prophetic instruction . . . is substantial."[45] Mormon youth as well, a comprehensive study finds, "showed a greater willingness to adhere to the requirement of their faith" than youth of any other religious group in America.[46] Certainly, LDS conformity to church teachings is a mixed bag, but one sociologist notes with surprise that "even the readers of *Dialogue*, presumably an independent-minded lot, in a 1984 survey, expressed a willingness by a margin of two to one to go along with Church policies that displeased them—perhaps with some question but with no 'dissent,' even privately."[47]

Some critics—even in the church—find such patterns prima facie evidence of mindless conformity to authority. For example, in February 1981, 53 percent of respondents in southwestern Utah opposed the proposed MX missile system. After the First Presidency in May publicly criticized the proposal, the opposition increased to 76 percent. "It seems clear," wrote one disgruntled Mormon critic, "that Mormons in that poll had simply allowed the Church leaders to do their political thinking for them."[48] Other Mormons could, with equal plausibility, applaud the promptness of their peers to fall in line with God's directives as revealed through his mouthpiece the prophet.

For intellectuals and artists, the tension is especially stark. Intellectual inquiry and artistic exploration should thrive in a culture like the Mormon one, which opposes as evil any attempt "to deprive us of the slightest respect for free agency."[49] At the same time, LDS artists and intellectuals find themselves constrained by the church's insistence that all inspiration is not equal, and they discover that the same prophetic prerogatives that impeded Cowdery's exercise of autonomy may cramp the style of maverick intellectuals and artists today. "The mantle [of holy office] is far, far greater than the intellect," warned Boyd K. Packer. "[T]he priesthood is the guiding power."[50]

The resulting collision of views and valuations is inevitable. No consensus is ever likely to emerge in the Mormon community about the proper reconciliation of authority and independence, faithfulness and freedom. On the contrary, Richard Poll once found it convenient to improvise categories that respond to the growing sense of a fundamental dichotomy in Mormon culture between "Iron Rod Mormons" and "Liahona Mormons." According to this dichotomy, Iron Rod Mormons find comfort and safety in reliance upon the institutions and authoritative oracles God has put in place. "In the pronouncements of the General Authorities, living and dead," he writes, "the Iron Rod finds many answers. . . . This reliance extends to every facet of life." For the Liahona Mormon, the central

concept of the gospel is freedom; "my range of freedom is left large, and arbitrary divine interference with that freedom is kept minimal, in order that I may grow."[51]

This cultural divide is not always so neat and precise, but more important, the divide Poll describes is one that, at some level, operates *within* thoughtful Mormons as much as *among* them. That is why both institutional conflict and personal anguish will continue to characterize artists and intellectuals who struggle to find their comfortable place in a culture where proponents of opposing views each cite scripture and prophetic precedent for support. And indeed, in Joseph's vision, the quest for salvation poses challenges of both an intellectual and imaginative nature. "Thy mind O Man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and Expand upon the broad considerations of Eternal Expanse."[52]

Young, perhaps the most authoritarian Mormon prophet in history, himself protested the perils of conformity. "I am not a stereotyped Latter-day Saint," he said, "and do not believe in the doctrine. . . . Away with stereotyped 'Mormons'!"[53] Neither did he wish for slavish obedience and fawning submission: "I do not wish any Latter-day Saint in this world, nor in heaven, to be satisfied with anything I do, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, the spirit of revelation, makes them satisfied. I wish them to know for themselves and understand for themselves."[54] Elsewhere, he reaffirmed:

> I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful that they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwa[r]t the purposes of God.[55]

What this means is that, as in Joseph's claim that his followers govern themselves, priesthood authority directs man in the use of his agency, it does not coerce or preempt it. At the same time, personal agency is preserved by personal knowledge. Coercion and ignorance alike are antithetical to human autonomy.

His beloved younger colleague, the colorful J. Golden Kimball, reminded his audience:

> There are not enough Apostles in the Church to prevent us from thinking, and they are not disposed to do so; but some people fancy that because we have the Presidency and Apostles of the Church that they will do the thinking for us.

> There are men and women so mentally lazy that they hardly think for them-selves. To think calls for effort, which makes some men tired and wearies their souls. No man or woman can remain in this Church on borrowed light.[56]

In 1945, when a church magazine urged, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done," an indignant President George Albert Smith repudiated the statement. "Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking," he wrote, "is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church."[57]

On the other side of the equation, the same Joseph who reveled in freedom of the mind also produced a powerful instance of supremely docile obedience. In a re-telling of the aftermath of Adam's expulsion from the garden, an angel asks Adam why he performs sacrifice. He answers, "I know not, save the Lord commanded me" (Moses 5:6, PGP), which one LDS leader called "a glorious example . . . of compliance to counsel without knowledge of the reason."[58] And the same Brigham Young who decried conformity could also insist that loyalty to a prophet trumped personal judgment. Finding fault in his heart with Joseph's financial dealings, Young quickly felt it needful to repent: "The spirit of revelation manifested to me that if I was to harbor a thought in my heart that Joseph could be wrong in anything, I would begin to lose confidence in him" to the point that he could not believe anything that Joseph said. Young concluded, "Though I [knew] that Joseph was a human being and subject to err, still it was none of my business to look after his faults. . . . It was not my prerogative to call him in question with regard to any act of his life. He was God's servant, and not mine."[59]

No wonder the whole tension provokes a kind of cultural cognitive disso-nance. And the tensions are only exacerbated by a burgeoning population, across continents and cultures, that leaders work to keep in check with increasingly centralized administration and correlation. Since the early 1960s, a priesthood correlation program has served to centralize and coordinate all church organi-zational structures, planning, programs, and teaching curricula and manuals. This has been an extremely efficient factor in maintaining strict control over how the Latter-day Saints' version of the gospel is taught and administered. There is an important historical dimension to George Q. Cannon's proud claim that "the people who have embraced this Gospel have had to think for themselves. It is no light matter to become a 'Mormon.' "[60] But what was true in 1881, when to be LDS meant to willingly affiliate with the small, besieged, and most reviled re-ligious group in America, is not true in the twenty-first century, with Mormon-ism a prosperous, respected church, touted as a burgeoning world religion.

Clearly, control and regimentation will increasingly contend with size and global dispersion, perhaps eliciting growing signs in the LDS community of

independence and resistance to the ongoing stages of institutionalization. And history is a factor as well in the shifting value of rhetorical terms. Concepts like personal freedom have much greater modern resonance than respect for authority, and diversity is a vastly more alluring value than conformity. Apostle Dallin H. Oaks is clearly attempting to counter the declining cultural currency of those unfashionable terms. In one sermon, he urges that "diversity for its own sake is meaningless. . . . What unites us is far more important than what differentiates us. Consequently, our members are asked to concentrate their efforts to strengthen our unity—not to glorify our diversity."[61] And at the same time, he argues that the primacy of agency over coercion does not translate into choice without accountability.

Still, a segment of Mormon society will always be disposed to see unquestioning obedience to priesthood counsel as weakness and abdication of moral autonomy, while others will see independent-mindedness as a euphemism for the fetishizing of difference and pride. And the tensions will doubtless be fiercest among those whose life work calls them to worship God through creative expression and intellectual pursuits.

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The Endless Quest and
Perfect Knowledge

Searching and Certainty

And now, behold, because ye have tried the experiment, and planted the seed, and it swelleth and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, ye must needs know that the seed is good. And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant.

~ Alma 32:33–34

You must begin with the first and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them.

~ Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith taught that "there is no pain so awful as that of suspense; this is the punishment of the wicked; their doubt, anxiety and suspense cause weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth."[1] In a religious context, faith is generally seen as the antidote to uncertainty about the state of the soul, or its eventual fate. And religious faith, presumably, is a willful decision to believe, to choose conviction in the absence of empirical proof or epistemological certainty. The case of Joseph Smith presents us with several anomalies in this regard. First of all, a man inducted into his religious vocation with a literal visit by an embodied God and Christ is not likely to view his religious convictions in the same terms as a typical Christian believer. Translating scripture out of tangible metal plates weighing forty or fifty pounds is not of the same order of prophetic utterance as expressing mere spiritual intimations. Feeling the weight of angelic hands belonging to

resurrected apostles on his head, conferring upon him the priesthood of God, produced a crystalline certainty about his authority. Joseph Smith, in other words, did not simply believe he was a prophet inspired to act in God's name. In his mind, he was as certain as any man could be on any subject, sacred or secular. "I knew it, and I knew that God knew it," he said of his initial encounter with Deity (Joseph Smith—History 1:25, PGP). Joseph claimed his formative experiences, both as a fourteen-year-old seeker, and as a prophet and religion maker, were saturated in the physical, the tangible, the material, and the visible.

Certainty is a term that frequently appears in the ministry of Joseph Smith, often in a doctrinally prominent position. In the *Lectures on Faith*, which he employed in teaching the elders in Kirtland, it is affirmed that from earliest times, faith has been a prelude to sure knowledge:

> [T]he inquiry and diligent search of the ancient saints to seek after and obtain a knowledge of the glory of God . . . [were rooted in] the credence they gave to the testimony of their fathers. . . . The inquiry frequently terminated, indeed always terminated when rightly pursued, in the most glorious discoveries and eternal certainty.[2]

Two religious awakenings on American soil as well as European history had been replete with accounts of visions and heavenly voices. Joseph was as skeptical as any that all such experiences were valid, but he believed self-examination could free the individual from the pitfalls of self-delusion:

> [W]e may look for Angels & receive their ministering but we are to try the spirits & prove them for it is often the case that men make a mistake in regard to these things. God has so ordained that when he has communicated by vision no vision [is] to be taken but what you see by the seeing of the eye or what you hear by the hearing of the ear. . . . There must be certainty in this matter.[3]

In his own case, Joseph never admitted a particle of possible self-deception. As he wrote to his wife, "Forasmuch as I know for a certainty of eternal things, if the heavens linger, it is nothing to me."[4] Such certainty, he believed, may be temporally late in coming, but is logically the starting point of true religion. "It is the first principle of the gospel," he wrote, "to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another."[5] It is easy to see why his personal encounter with a conversing Deity would ground his own sense of epistemological certainty. But he clearly saw his own experience as a prototype to which others could—and should—aspire. An

1833 revelation had the Lord declaring that "every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face, and know that I am" (D&C 93:1). This possibility Joseph related to the doctrine of the second comforter, spoken of by Christ when he addressed his disciples before his crucifixion. On that occasion, he promised that the Father would send them "another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever" (John 14:16). Joseph gave his gloss of this passage years later:

> Now what is this other Comforter? It is no more nor less than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself; and this is the sum and substance of the whole matter; that when any man obtains this last Comforter, 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 the 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.[6]

Joseph apparently believed that the personal epiphany he experienced in his visitation by the Father and the Son, heralding full immersion in the divine light, with all its epistemological fullness and certainty, betokened an order of knowledge that was the right and destiny of all faithful Saints. A principal tool in shaping Mormon aspirations to such perfect knowledge was the Book of Mormon. It was not just that as a material artifact it so visibly and insistently trumpeted the claim that angels were again visiting the earth. The thematic thread that pervaded the text from first to last was the timeless accessibility to all persons of revelatory experience. Visions, visitations, and dialogic encounters with a God, a Christ, and a Holy Spirit that communicate in discernible human language fill the narrative. Initiating the model that Joseph would expand, Nephi, first author of the Book of Mormon record, discovers in dramatic fashion that human beings are eligible not merely to feel or intuit divine truths, but to literally "see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him" (1 Nephi 10:17). In contradistinction to Old Testament patterns, the Book of Mormon chronicles an array of divinely communicated speech that extends not to prophets alone, but to wayward sons, anxious fathers, military leaders, and questing individuals. And the content of those communications can be as portentous as word of a coming messiah, or as quotidian as the location of game sought by a hungry family. Then, at the conclusion of the Book of Mormon, in a gesture the echoes of which still

shape the central thrust of modern Mormon missionary work, the scripture's ancient final editor, Moroni, challenges his future readers to secure their own spiritual knowledge of the record's truthfulness. Imploring an audience remote in time to "ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true," he promises them that "he will manifest the truth of it [and "the truth of all things"] . . . by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 10:4–5).

In America's colonial years, Anne Hutchinson would be censured and banished from Massachusetts for taking such doctrine literally. Interrogated about her purported revelations, she was asked, " 'How do you know that was the Spirit[?]' She replied[,] 'How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son . . . ?' 'By an immediate voice,' Thomas Dudley replied, meaning the direct voice of God, unmediated by Scripture or a minister. 'So to me,' Anne Hutchinson said."[7]

"The ground work of her revelations," Governor John Winthrop pronounced at her trial, "is the *immediate* revelation of the spirit and not *by* the ministry of the word" (emphases in original). Unfortunately for Hutchinson, as her biographer notes and the verdict revealed, "professed direct revelation from God . . . [was] an ecclesiastical crime."[8] Even a committed restorationist and anticipator of "new revelation" like Joseph's contemporary Alexander Campbell thought Mormonism was pushing the envelope of spiritual ways of knowing too far. He asked:

> Do not the experiences of all the religions—the observations of the intelligent—
> the practical result of all creeds, reformations, and improvements—and the
> expectations and longings of society—warrant the conclusion that either some
> new revelation, or some new development of the revelation of God must
> be made . . . ?[9]

But he responded to Moroni's guarantee of the confirmation of new revelations with scorn:

> If there was anything plausible about Smith, I would say to those who believe
> him to be a prophet, hear the question which Moses put into the mouth of
> the Jews, and his answer to it—"And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we
> know the word which the Lord hath not spoken?"—Does he answer, "Ask the
> Lord and he will tell you?" . . . Nay, indeed.[10]

The Methodists were as open to spiritual gifts as any Christians, but a few generations earlier, John Wesley had declared that "a man had no other way of knowing God's will but by consulting his own reason and his friends, and by

observing the order of God's providence." (At one time of urgent decision making, he had himself relied upon drawing lots to make a determination.[11]) In response to reports of extensive spiritual outpourings in Joseph Smith's day, Gilbert Wardlaw, an Edinburgh minister, admonished his American audience against believing in the possibility of spiritual manifestations that were "actually miraculous, something altogether new to the church in the present day, conferred independently of the word, and in a manner almost perceptible to the senses."[12]

Doubtless, the promise of revelatory experience that could bring spiritual certainty appealed to many of Mormonism's first converts. In a remarkable sermon on faith, Book of Mormon prophet Alma the Younger describes faith as merely a prelude to a spiritual knowledge that is radically based in the language of empiricism. By planting the true word in one's heart, Alma says, one may observe that it "beginneth to enlarge [the] soul; yea it beginneth to enlighten [the] understanding." The "swelling motions" in the breast can be "*felt*," he writes. Having "tried the *experiment*," one can discern an effect that "is *real* . . . because it is light; and whatsoever is light, is good, because it is *discernible*." As a consequence of this process, he asks, "is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant" (Alma 32:28–34; emphases mine).

"A man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge," wrote Joseph, virtually codifying Mormonism's gnostic bent. Initiated into a routine of heavenly dialogue as a young boy, Joseph would outline the soaring heights of heavenly knowledge attainable to human beings a dozen years later in a preface to the most extensive revelation he ever received, referred to by early Mormons as simply "*the* vision." Joseph records the Lord as promising that, to the righteous,

> will I reveal all mysteries, yea all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come. . . . Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall they know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations. And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven. . . . For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known to them the secrets of my will—yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man. (D&C 76:7–10)

Within a few years of publishing the Book of Mormon, Joseph further exploded the Christian canon by claiming to recuperate lost writings of Enoch and Moses missing from the text of Genesis, and Abrahamic material recounting a great premortal council in heaven. He had already added recovered writings of