

## 'NOT TO BE RITEN': THE MORMON TEMPLE RITE AS ORAL CANON

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### Abstract

*The manner in which the LDS Church administers its temple rite constitutes a strategic use of the conventions of an oral tradition in a modern, literate society. Three effects of this strategy are considered. First, refusing to make a text of the rite available and insisting that its specific content not be revealed or otherwise subjected to discursive thought sustains the rite's canonical authority as immutable truth, notwithstanding its periodic mutation. Secondly, the conventions of oral tradition structure the relationships created by the ritual and constitute a principal means by which the Church's historic separatism is maintained. Finally, these conventions when applied to the temple rite maximize ritual's capacity to adapt the canon to the needs of successive generations of the faithful while minimizing skepticism and schism.*

By letter of June, 1842, one of Joseph Smith's closest associates in the formative days of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ("LDS Church" or "the LDS") writes to another of the newly-received temple ceremony:

I wish you was here so as to feel and hear for your Self. we have recieved some pressious things through the Prophet...that would cause your soul to rejoice I can not give them to you on paper fore they are not to be riten. (Heber C. Kimball to Parley P. Pratt, Gregory Prince [n.d.:39]).

In the ensuing one hundred and fifty years, the LDS Church has not wavered from its earliest insistence that its temple rite is "not to be riten," but only to be experienced by the faithful who "feel and hear for" themselves by participating in the ritual. If accused of conducting secret rites, the Church will protest that its temple ceremony is sacred, not secret: "'Because the temple ceremony is sacred to us, we don't speak about it except in the most general terms....'" (*New York Times* 3 May, 1990, 1). To Latter-day Saints each of their approximately fifty temples is the "house of the Lord" necessarily set apart from the world. Believing the indictment of Israel—"they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they showed difference between the unclean and the clean" (Ezekiel 22:26, King James Bible)—the LDS have placed their core canon<sup>1</sup> within the temple and strictly limited access to it and its ritual content. Not all within the Church are admitted<sup>2</sup> and, for those who are, even general discussion about the ritual outside of the temple proper is

discouraged by LDS scriptural and ecclesiastical guidelines regarding the temple's sacredness: "That which cometh from above is sacred, and must be spoken with care, and by constraint of the Spirit" (*Book of Doctrine and Covenants* 63:64). Clearly, the content of the LDS temple rite is both sacred and secret: sacred to the initiated in that it is "set apart" by the way it is treated vis-a-vis their other knowledge and secreted from the uninitiated in that they are not to know it at all. Refusing to make a text of the rite available and insisting that its specific content not be revealed exacts a considerable price from the Church. Not only does it engender suspicion in the general population from which the Church desires acceptance; it creates tension within the Church itself, resulting in loss of temple privileges by and even excommunication of some members.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the practice invites the question what interests are served at such costs? I suggest that the answer to this question lies not in theological discourse on the sacred and the profane, but in theories of ritual and oral tradition.

The LDS temple ritual is not, by virtue of its being embodied in ritual, a form of human activity existing separate from belief or existing for the purpose of acting out belief recorded in LDS scriptural canon.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the particular emphasis of my analysis is not on the relative authoritative-ness or particular content of the temple rite vis-a-vis LDS scripture,<sup>5</sup> but on the form of the temple canon: ritualized and orally maintained, not textualized. I will first discuss ways in which the temple rite operates as canon within the Church. Then, I will describe in what ways the Church's maintenance of this canon constitutes a strategic use of the conventions of an oral tradition by a modern, literate society.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, I will suggest that the effect of oral traditioning, in conjunction with ritual practice, is to preserve the legitimacy of the canon and the solidarity of community it orders and reorders. Preliminarily, however, it is necessary to establish that the LDS temple ritual is a form of canonical belief, an authoritative locus of transcendent meaning and law both expressed and negotiated in the embodied activity of its performance.

### THE LDS TEMPLE RITE AS CANON

The LDS temple rite constitutes canon in both senses of the word: its original meaning as the rule or standard by which all else is measured and later as the rule or law by which persons are governed ecclesiastically. Indeed, what has been said of ancient temple-building cultures could be said of Latter-day Saint society: "The origin of law and of legal traditions must be sought in a ritual setting. More importantly, *law is introduced and mediated ritually* in a temple setting. Failure to understand the full implications of this fact has led occidental scholarship into the trap of animosity toward the temple" (John M. Lundquist 1994:279, emphasis in original).

The LDS Church's theology and practice of temple worship are among its more obvious deviations<sup>7</sup> from traditional Christianity and, as such, deserve a fuller treatment than permitted by the scope of this paper. For present purposes, it must suffice to note that Mircea Eliade's conclusion regarding temples generally is specifically true of LDS temples. Patterned on celestial prototypes, temples symbolically represent the "transformation of chaos into cosmos...by giving it forms and norms" (Eliade 1959:10). They are architectural embodiments of the cosmic mountain, the primordial hill which first emerged from the waters of creation, and represent the *axis mundi*: "the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell" and "the point at which creation began" (Eliade 1959:12,16). Or, as described by Mormonism's most prolific writer on this subject: "what makes a temple different from other buildings is not its sacredness, but its form and function...a temple, good or bad, is a scale-model of the universe" (Nibley 1987:357). The faithful who enter this "scale-model" are instructed in the laws which govern the cosmos and commit themselves by covenant to obey them. As stated in the most detailed of the few authorized descriptions of the rite:

Participants in white temple clothing assemble in [the temple's] ordinance rooms to receive...instruction and participate in the unfolding drama of the Plan of Salvation [including narratives of the Creation and the Garden]. They are taught...the laws and ordinances required for reconciliation through the Atonement of Christ; and a return to the presence of God...[S]olemn covenants are made pertaining to truthfulness, purity, righteous service, and devotion. In this way, the temple is the locus of consecration to the teaching of the law and the prophets and the ways of God and his Son. ("Temple Ordinances," *Enc. Morm.*)

Thus, while the LDS temple is the preeminent expression of LDS cosmology, its purpose is not a static, descriptive one. It is also prescriptive of the manner in which life is to be lived and the standards by which good and evil are discerned. While the law obtained in the LDS temple consists, as indicated above, of such common values as "truthfulness, purity, righteous service, and devotion," these communal values are:

enthroned within that community through a temple covenant ceremony. It is in this sense that law cannot be said to exist outside of an ordered, cosmic community...The elaborate ritual, architectural, and building traditions that lie behind temple construction and dedication are what allow the authoritative, validating transformation of a set of customary laws into a code. (Lundquist 1994:282).

The temple is the cosmically authoritative source without parallel in the LDS Church of the laws which bind the LDS faith community, incorporating by reference LDS scriptural canon,<sup>8</sup> but standing independent of it as a source of God's word.

Stanley Tambiah's observations about cosmological rituals are directly applicable to the LDS temple rite: it establishes those "orienting principles and conceptions that are held to be sacrosanct, are constantly used as yardsticks, and are considered worthy of perpetuating relatively unchanged" (Tambiah 1979, 65:121). Not surprisingly, then, one finds the north star, the ancient and unfailing instrument of orientation, represented on the Salt Lake Temple's western wall. The most symbolically expressive in its architecture of any of the Church's temples, the Salt Lake Temple is to Latter-day Saints the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that:

In the last days,...the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains...And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law.... (Isaiah 2:2-3, King James Version)

The Church's 19th century temple-builders wrote a hymn still sung by their progeny: "For God remembers still his promise made of old that He on Zion's hill truth's standard would unfold!...We'll now go up and serve the Lord; obey his laws and learn his word" (Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1985:5). Latter-day Saints "go up" to the primordial hill to be taught the law which orders them within the cosmos. As surely as God ordered the world out of chaos, the Saints come to be ordered in their community. They receive the "rule" by which they should "walk," in Pauline terms (Philippians 3:16, King James Version), and are taught, in modern theological terms, "the law in force in the Church, which governs its activity as a society" (Rahner and Vorgrimler 1985: "Canon Law").

In summary, the LDS temple ceremony can be said to constitute the most complete expression of the Church's canon: both as "*reed*" and as *regula*. The authority of the LDS temple canon is established *inter alia* by the cosmological dimensions of its ritualization within a "scale model of the universe." It is offered as the unique law by which time and space are to be transcended and, thus, it is believed to be timeless, even unchanged from the beginning of time. In the words of one LDS writer: it is "relevant to the eternities. The modern world is as unstable as a decaying isotope, but the temple has always been the same. The ordinances are those taught by an angel to Adam" (Nibley 1992:34).

Yet, it is axiomatic that even rituals which seek to embody the timelessness of sacred cosmic ordering must adapt to the dynamics of time or become irrelevant to or incapable of "heal[ing] or amend[ing] personal or so-

cial disorder" (Turner 1974:149). experienced by those who live in time. Paradoxically, the socially transformative power of such ritual schemes lies, in part, in their *timeliness*: in their capacity to fit into evolving patterns of human choice and action occurring outside of the ritual enactment and to reorder them according to the cosmic pattern provided within the enactment. The ritual which does not respond to time is not timeless, but meaningless and, hence, ineffectual. Herein lies the particular challenge to the LDS Church in the maintenance of both the authority and vitality of its ritualized canon. On the one hand, it must be accepted by the faithful as fixed: a timeless standard by which they order their lives. On the other hand it must shift to accommodate life as experienced by successive generations, if it is to have any relevancy and, hence, power to order their lives. How can these prescribed standards for traversing the lower, middle and higher worlds within the cosmos shift on their *axis mundi* in time without disorienting the faithful and their identity as a community based on shared, timeless belief? This paper suggests that an answer lies in the Church's peculiar methods of administering its temple rite, namely, its strategic use of the conventions of oral tradition to shield its core canon from the divisive effects of discursive thought and public debate.

### THE ORAL TRADITIONING OF THE CANON

Notwithstanding its canonical status, from the beginning<sup>9</sup> the LDS temple rite was "not to be ritten" or to be written about, as indicated in the correspondence cited earlier. First performed in 1842 under the direction of Joseph Smith, the Church's founder and prophet, the ritual was not reduced to writing until 1877 by Brigham Young, his successor. In the intervening 35 years, the canon was maintained only as given in ritual performance by the those who received it directly from Joseph Smith (Buerger 1987, 20:50). In the absence of official explanation, the reasons for creating a written version of the rite can only be surmised from history. No doubt the aging first generation of Church leadership desired to fix the content of the rite as they were about to pass it on to the next generation. In addition, convert baptisms from foreign cultures were pouring into the Salt Lake Valley, bringing with them their own "webs of significance" (Geertz 1973:5). to apply to this highly symbolic ritual. Finally, the Saints had just completed the first temple to operate outside of the immediate geographic influence of the president of the Church.<sup>10</sup> Any of these factors could have motivated leadership to create a text. Regardless, the inclination to fix the canon is so logical in a literate society as to not need explanation. What this paper addresses is the reverse phenomenon: an apparently illogical unavailability of an authorized text of and the absence of any definitive exegesis on the specific content of the LDS temple rite.

No text is read during the temple rite. It is performed from memory both by those who lead the rite and those who participate in it. Indeed, it is not generally acknowledged that a script of the ritual exists. Such authorized, written accounts of the ceremony as exist are rare and made available only to those lay women and men (called "temple workers") who are set apart to administer the temple ordinances (*Enc. Morm.* 1992: "Temples: Administration of Temples"). Even here, however, only that portion of the text relevant to the temple worker's liturgical role is available within a room of the temple reserved for such purposes and it may not be taken outside the temple. Hence, such text as exists is made available in part and for the sole purpose of committing it to memory for performance within the temple. A worker may officiate in the rites once the memorized text has been repeated verbatim to his or her mentor. Since neither an authorized text of the LDS temple rite, nor any descriptive exegesis of it, is licitly available to either nonmembers or members of the Church, full knowledge of the two-hour rite and its specific meaning are obtainable only by oral representation within the temple during the rite's performance.

Nevertheless, beginning in 1842 and continuing to the present, there have been numerous unauthorized versions of the temple ceremony published in a variety of media by those who no longer affiliate with the Church or who believe that Mormonism poses a cultic threat to traditional Christian faith. Viewed as products of "apostates who seek to injure or destroy the Church...usually distorted" (Packer 1980:30), these texts are ignored by the Church. The faithful are strongly discouraged from reading or speaking of the rite and, with extraordinarily few exceptions, they do not. Their general attitude in this regard is illustrated in a recent letter to the editor of an Arizona newspaper: "Discussing the temple ceremonies openly is as insensitive as burning the Torah, stomping on the Eucharist and desecrating a mosque. Just because you disagree with a religious practice does not mean it is justified to hold it up to ridicule" (*Arizona Republic* 1993 [5 May]:A16). Here we see expressed those attributes of the LDS temple already discussed, namely, its role as source of religious law, divine presence and sacred space. Worthy of special note, however, is the author's equating publicity of the rite with its profanation. While less dramatic in tone, official Church statements share the sentiment that the temple ritual is not to be revealed to the uninitiated or spoken of, except in most general terms, outside of the temple itself (Packer 1980:26). Thus, the few books published by the LDS Church on this subject (e.g., Parry 1994) are devoted to analyses of the role of temple ordinances in the Church's soteriology or to oblique analogizing of LDS temple practices to those of ancient civilizations.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, the LDS treat their temple canon in a manner most analogous to an oral tradition and in practical effect it operates as such among the faithful. Though a text exists, it is not generally known to exist and is not

employed during the rite. Neither the text nor its performance are commented on in writing and both are subject to discussion only in the most oblique terms. Finally, no text is available to the participants except under discrete circumstances and, even then, not in its entirety and for only the amount of time required to memorize it. Thus, while the ritual may not be obtained licitly in writing by the uninitiated, neither can it be obtained in writing by the initiated. The price of access to the rite and its specific contents is the same for all: participation in the ritualized social body which is created by the ritual and creative of the ritual as it is handed down personally, even orally, from generation to generation.

I suggest that there are at least two reasons for the Church's employing the conventions of an oral tradition within its modern, literate community. First, doing so protects the canon's perceived legitimacy as a source of immutable truth, notwithstanding the rite's periodic modification. Secondly, it maximizes ritual's capacity to negotiate the meaning of the canon without fragmenting the community ordered by the canon. Each of these hypotheses is discussed below.

### THE EFFECT OF ORAL TRADITION ON THE CANON

The surest way to fix a notion—to obtain maximum uniformity of expression and dictate meaning—is to record it and read it. In writing, consciousness is deemed “liberate[d] from the tyranny of the present” (Oswald Spengler, as quoted in Goody 1968:53). Unfortunately for cosmologies, however, consciousness then becomes subject to the tyranny of the past because writing also “favors awareness of inconsistency” (Goody 1968:49). As discussed at length in Goody and Watt's seminal essay on the effects of literacy (see Goody 1968), it is the nature of language to make distinctions and it is the consequence of writing to preserve these distinctions, compounding a history of conceptual boundaries and barriers which fragment a society's confidence in the existence of definable truth. As observed by Stanley Tambiah, it is not the idea that is fixed by writing, but rather the articulation and critique of the idea's temporal context—“the epistemological and ontological understandings of the particular age” (1979:165). Paul Ricoeur adds: “what we write, what we inscribe, is the *noema* of the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event” (1971, 38: 532).

Rituals are, however, not only meaning, but also event—even religion's “generative and regenerative processes” (Turner 1982:86). Generative rituals are ill suited to being fixed and are undermined by the self-consciousness or historical-consciousness of writing down or writing about. This dynamic underlies what Ronald Grimes labels academia's “fears [of] explaining ritual away” (1982:33) and is caused by the fact that literate societies:

cannot discard, absorb, or transmute the past...[T]heir members are faced with permanently recorded versions of the past and its beliefs; and because the past is thus set apart from the present, historical inquiry becomes possible. This in turn encourages scepticism; and scepticism, not only about the legendary past, but about received ideas about the universe as a whole. From here the next step is to see how to build up and to test alternative explanations....(Goody 1968:67-68)

Ritual cosmologies, of course, seek the reverse effect: the unquestioning sense of a "received...universe as a whole." They resist writing's invitation to find in private thought, not communal experience, the means of discerning truth.

The communal experience of the LDS temple ritual, not private thought, is the privileged source of LDS truth. The rite is, therefore, carefully protected from "historical inquiry" and even an awareness of its having a history independent of its mythos of having been given to Adam by an angel. By scrupulously maintaining the ritual as an oral tradition—not making its text available, or otherwise discussing it publicly for others to record authoritatively its specific contents—the Church enables the temple ceremony to:

function...as a series of interlocking face-to-face conversations in which the very conditions of transmission operate to favour consistency between past and present, and to make criticism—the articulation of inconsistency—less likely to occur; and if it does, the inconsistency makes a less permanent impact, and is more easily adjusted or forgotten. (Goody 1968:48).

In the LDS community, these homeostatic functions of oral traditioning—its facilitation of forgetting and transmuting inconsistency—operate at an overt and public level. Those parts of the temple canon which are deemed to be no longer relevant or necessary are discarded or transformed "without a whisper of announcement" (*Independent* 1990 [5 May]:11). News of change and its explanation comes from the newspaper, not Church administration:

While [a spokesperson for the Church] described the church's basic beliefs and obligations as 'timeless and binding,' she said 'the ceremony itself needs to meet the needs of the people.' The revised ritual is 'more in keeping with the sensitivities we have as a society,' she added. (*New York Times* 1990 [3 May]:2)

Notwithstanding such acknowledgements to the community outside of the Church, no official comment is made to the Church community itself. No doctrinal foundation for, much less commentary on the "sensitivities"



which inspired, the changes is supplied. No theologizing on the implications of the changes is offered or invited. Indeed, the changes themselves are not even identified except as they are directly experienced by the participants in the course of performing the ritual. And, with each performance, the conventional forms of the ritual—formality, stereotypy, condensation and redundancy (Tambiah 1979:123)—restore the sense of the ritual's timelessness and immutability. Personal knowledge and experience of change is neither remarked upon nor long remembered and the sense of collective, shared experience in one eternal round of ordered life is retained. Thus, notwithstanding changes to the rite since its inception and increasing publicity about modern adaptations,<sup>12</sup> the perception of the faithful remains that the temple rite and its canon are today as they were first revealed by Joseph Smith. For example, one LDS historian has referred to "the formidable task of describing and explaining what happened on 4 May 1842, the day our...[temple rite] was first administered as given in our temples today" (Ehat 1994:49).

Approaching this phenomenon with the assumptions of a textually literate and ritually illiterate society, it is possible to conclude that LDS use of oral conventions to adapt and forget is, at best, secrecy in service of willful ignorance or, at worst, deceit in service of social control. To do so, however, ignores that "the issue of truthfulness as a matter of conforming to what exactly happened at some point in the past [is] probably not the issue that [is] most important for an oral community" (Bell 1993, 23:106). If asked, the vast majority of temple-going Latter-day Saints—and certainly the academics referenced in this paper—will acknowledge that the temple rite has changed over time, even recently. They will, however, in the same breath protest the relevancy of change to their present experience of the transcendent through the medium of temple ritual. Thus, the LDS historian who assumed the "formidable task of describing " the original enactment of the rite ultimately resorts to discussing instead the meaning of the temple to the faithful. He says, "In temples, we have a staged representation of the step-by-step ascent into the presence of the Eternal while we are yet alive" (Ehat 1994:49). This is, of course, ultimately what religion aspires to provide and, paraphrasing Catherine Bell, the "most important issue for [the Latter-day Saints acting here as] an oral community."

After all, as Victor Turner said, religion is "not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas, alone, it is meaningful experience and experienced meaning" (Turner 1982:86). This is what Latter-day Saints seek in their temples and attempt, by means of oral traditioning, to shelter from discursive thought and public debate. A primary benefit of doing so is illustrated in James Smart's expression of ambivalence with regard to the success of biblical criticism:

One cannot help welcoming the excavation of every fresh feature of the human story, but at the same time one must recognize the distortion that is taking place with the elimination of the participation and action of the living God from the story. That elimination of a living God from the biblical history can so easily be also the elimination of a living God from our own present history. That, in fact, was the disastrous influence upon the faith of Christians of a historicist biblical science that in clearing away the mythological language of the biblical witnesses reduced their living God, whose powerful presence they knew, to a religious concept or ideal (Smart 1979:123-124).

Orally traditioning the LDS canon is a means of attempting to prevent in a modern, literate community the "elimination of a living God from [its] own present history" by remaining aloof from "the excavation of every fresh feature of the human story." The Church's refusal to textualize its ritualized canon and submit it to the literacy of even the faithful sets the rite apart, secrets it from discursive thought and attendant public debate. In this way, orally traditioning the rite maximizes the "muteness," in Bell's terms, inherent in the ritualization of this canon:

Ritualization is embedded within the dynamics of the body defined within a symbolically structured environment. An important corollary to this is the fact that ritualization is a particularly 'mute' form of activity. It is designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking. (Bell 1992:93)

Hence, the conventions of both ritual and of oral tradition contribute materially to the maintenance of the canonicity of the LDS temple rite. They prevent fragmentation of understanding and belief: what Goody describes as, the "scepticism" which follows from "criticism—the articulation of inconsistency..." (Goody 1968:48).<sup>13</sup> They also protect religious experience of the divine from what Stewart identifies as criticism's conceptual reductionism (Smart 1979:124). In sum, both orally traditioning and ritually embodying the canon cooperate to immunize from a sense of history the canon's authoritativeness and perceived legitimacy, sustaining it as a timeless and immutable source for ordering successive generations of the faithful.

There is, however, a second effect of oral traditioning of the temple canon and it is primary to the integrity of the LDS community, not just its doctrine. The strategic use of oral homeostasis and ritual muteness which sustains the sense of ordered wholeness in their canon is ultimately protective of the LDS sense of who they are and how they relate as a community. The temple canon enables the faithful's meaningful experience not only with a "living God," but also with each other.

## THE EFFECT OF ORAL TRADITION ON THE COMMUNITY

It is a given that, whatever else rituals may be, they are social undertakings both expressing and creating relationships. For example, though it is the "passage" aspect of the "rites of passage" that seems to capture most attention on the subject, the passage exists for the ultimate purpose of putting the initiate in right relationship to the ritual community. Victor Turner is well-known for characterizing the relationship created in complex rituals as "*communitas*" or "society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even a communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (Turner 1966:82).

The sense of community generated by the ritualized canon of the LDS Church is enhanced by the way in which oral traditioning of the temple rite structures the relationships within the ritual community itself. None is set apart to interpret the rite: all are under the same requirement to maintain it as an oral tradition. During the ritual, all present are enacting the ritual and all are eligible to officiate in those parts which require it. The rite is devoid of reference to ecclesiastical position and title. The ritual is always transmitted within the temple proper by a person who knows the ritual to another who does not. The one mentors the other by *inter alia* teaching questions and giving answers. It is an immediate exchange between ritually-identified persons, not persons and textualized ideas. What Goody said of the socratic method could also be said of the LDS temple rite. It is a:

social process, in which initiates pass on their knowledge directly to the young; a process indeed, in which only a long personal relationship can transcend the inherent incapacity of mere words to convey ultimate truths—the forms or ideas which alone can give unity and coherence to human knowledge. (Goody 1968:50).

The solidarity of the LDS community—its sense of ordered wholeness on a social, not only a conceptual level—is enhanced by the oral traditioning of its temple rite. As observed by Goody, "on the whole there is less individualization of personal experience in oral cultures, which tend, in Durkheim's phrase, to be characterized by 'mechanical solidarity'—by ties between persons, rather than between individuals in a variety of roles" (Goody 1968:62). In this manner, the strategic use of oral conventions within the modern, literate LDS Church is basic not only to its cosmos-building, but also to its Zion-building intentions. After all, "out of Zion shall go forth the law...."(Isaiah 2:3 King James Version) and, to the Latter-day Saints, Zion is defined by the nature of its community: "And the Lord called his people ZION [sic], because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there were no poor among them"

The Book of Moses 7:18 (*The Pearl of Great Price* 1981:22). The function of the temple canon is to create such a community "by giving it forms and norms" (Eliade 1959:10).

In their zeal to build Zion, the Saints have always manifest separatist tendencies; not the least of which was their westward trek beyond the borders of the United States to the Great Salt Lake Basin. There the Saints hoped to "put behind them the misunderstanding, dissension, persecution, and temptation of contemporary American society and to build a new and better civilization in the Zion of their mountain stronghold" (Arrington and Bitton 1992:110). Today, the mountains have long since ceased to be a stronghold. The rise of the global village, as well as the Saints' own proselyting intentions and temporal prosperity, make it impossible for them to find their communal identity in economic, political or geographic separatism, as they did in the past. It is the final hypothesis of this paper that the Church's oral traditioning of the temple canon is today no less creative of their identity than these other, more obvious strategies once were. More subtle than LDS economic utopianism and social engineering, both the ritualization and oral traditioning of the Church's core canon make of the LDS temple a unique source of self-identification and cohesion in a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse population. The Church appears to be increasingly turning to it as the *sine qua non* of membership identification. Note, for example, inaugural statements made by Church president Howard W. Hunter which denominate the temple "the great symbol of our membership."<sup>14</sup> The LDS temple solidifies, through the conventions of ritual and oral traditioning, the LDS faith community. It defines the community's internal cohesiveness and the external boundaries in terms of cosmically defined, historically-impervious canon assumed by covenant. No longer able or desiring to isolate themselves in the Rocky Mountain West or to particularize themselves by separate commercial or marital economies, the Saints can be expected to increasingly rely upon the temple for their sense of separateness which is also their sense of cosmic wholeness and solidarity as a community.

Such solidarity does not, however, mean that the community is immune to change. Neither is it wise to conclude that the Church's strategies for creating doctrinal and communal solidarity merely stave off change. Rather, as will now be discussed, the oral and ritual strategies which engender the faithful's sense of conceptual and communal unity are paradoxically the same conventions which facilitate change in the rite. They adapt the community to its temporal reality without requiring it to abandon its sense of relational and ideological wholeness. Only one example can be given here.

## CHANGING THE CANON, CHANGING THE COMMUNITY

If complex ritual "ossifies" when it does not "speak to the minds and hearts of succeeding generations facing change and upheaval" (Tambiah:1979, 65:165), it is not surprising that recently, "[t]he Mormon Church has changed some of its most sacred rituals, eliminating parts...viewed as offensive to women..." (*New York Times* 1990 [3 May ]:2). Gender roles are at the heart of the LDS temple rite and no aspect of life in this generation of the Church has been as subject to "change and upheaval" as gender identity. Hence, the Church's most recent adaptation of its canon illustrates *inter alia* that ritualizing and orally traditioning the LDS canon facilitates not only the ordering, but also the peaceful reordering of the LDS community.

Few notions are as critical to LDS self-definition as that of the relationship between men and women, most often expressed in their theologizing upon the family. Consequently, as one might expect, the LDS *communitas* ordered by the temple ritual is "rudimentarily structured" (Turner 1966:82). by the specific "value-laden distinction[...]"<sup>15</sup> of gender. When entering the temple, all participants remove their street clothing, including jewelry and any other insignia of socio-economic status, and "wear white temple robes symbolizing purity and the equality of all persons before God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ" (*Enc. Morm.* 1992: "Endowment"). No titles are employed other than "brother" or "sister." Temple worship is conducted in groups called "sessions" which begin as often as every twenty minutes with multiple, identical sessions held daily. Consequently, the group gathered in one session is indistinguishable from those in another, except by the time of day the participants arrive. In fact, the only distinctions made in the temple rite are those based on gender. Some of these distinctions are practical, as in the separation of dressing rooms within the temple. Others have to do with the marking of ritual space (e.g., seating in the temple sessions is by gender, not by familial relationship or personal status); ritual identity (e.g., differences in temple clothing); and ritual action (e.g., the majority<sup>16</sup> of the ordinances are administered by women to women and by men to men). In this manner, the LDS temple ritual suspends all distinctions except the one which it seeks to ritualize, namely, gender.

Such value-laden, gender distinctions, like those of all other churches, are a source of contention within the LDS Church.

When these struggles are conducted in the discursive mode, they appear to be primary motivation for ecclesiastical discipline, including excommunication.<sup>17</sup> Ecclesiastical authority has classified feminist critique as a particular threat to the Church. In an unpublished speech given to the LDS All Church Coordinating Council on May 18, 1993, one of the most senior members of the Church hierarchy cautioned its middle management against "dangers [that have]...made major invasions into the membership

of the Church...the feminist movement and the ever present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals."<sup>18</sup> Understood in light of the theory discussed in this paper, this is not an unexpected response by Church authority. To speak of changes made in belief and practice, to publicly debate them, to write them down and create a history of disparate definitions of, for instance, LDS priesthood and its operations with respect to women can, indeed, engender skepticism. Because discursive and literate forms directly challenge belief, the LDS Church will not, and we could say in light of these theories cannot, employ these means to experiment with and respond to modern sensibilities without jeopardizing its sense of a shared universe as a whole, immune to human history. Though the Church must evolve or become irrelevant, it will likely do so through that method which "is designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking (Bell 1992:93). It will rely on the conventions of ritual to adapt its core canon.

Catherine Bell provides a theoretical basis for this conclusion when she reasons that ritual is "the mute interplay of complex strategies within a field structured by engagements of power...." (Bell 1992: 204). Because participants are free to act and understand differently, they make choices, determining the extent of their acceptance of the ritual order. This makes ritual not only a structured, but a structuring environment:

The person who has prayed to his or her god, appropriating the social schemes of the hegemonic order in terms of an individual redemption, may be stronger because these acts are the very definitions of power, personhood, and the capacity to act. (Bell 1992:118)

Thus, for example, the woman who in the LDS temple prays to her god—bodily officiates in administering rites of purifying and sanctifying significance; takes upon herself the signs and tokens of immortality; and receives her husband by covenant and gives herself to him by the same covenant—is, according to Bell, not performing meaning, but obtaining a practical knowledge, even "a mastery that experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded" (Bell 1992:221). Of course, bringing with them as they do contemporary sensibilities, this generation of LDS ritualizers is affected by receiving or observing a woman's cultic activity within the temple. Neither she nor they are required to believe or disbelieve an ideology, but only to consent to a version of the dominant values which they negotiate as they embody the ritual and choose among symbolic multivalence. The negotiation is "mute" because it operates "below the level of discourse" which permits her and them to "misrecognize both the source of the schemes and the changes these schemes undergo in the temporal process of projection and embodiment" (Bell 1992:206-207). It has even been argued that cosmological rituals, in particular, are designed to invite such changes.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, the strategic oral traditioning of the LDS rite maximizes ritual's "mute interplay" and openness to new contents by enabling the entire community to "misrecognize" change for stasis and to peacefully reorder itself. The homeostatic conventions of forgetting and transmuting operate so as to "not lead to deliberate rejection and reinterpretation of social dogma...[but] to semi-automatic readjustment of belief" (Goody 1968:48). Discursive thought, either written or spoken, which aspires to clarify ambiguity by identifying distinctions, requires "deliberate rejection" of the old belief, the conscious choosing among historically-sensitive alternatives. Not all in the community will make the same choice and some may base a given choice on reasons incidental to a meaningful experience with a "living God." Moreover, having once deliberated, others will continue to choose: to make distinctions that separate not only their ideas, but also themselves one from another. In short, because they do not allow a community to make "semi-automatic readjustment" to change, written words and their critique do not have the power to heal what they have breached—to transmute without comment what is transmitted and misrecognize while negotiating new belief and new community. Orally traditioned ritual enables communities to live with ambiguity and to misrecognize change for stasis, even to believe that "the modern world is as unstable as a decaying isotope, but the temple has always been the same" (Nibley 1992:34).

It is in this paradoxical capacity to mutate what it establishes as immutable that the particular, social genius of the LDS temple rite is revealed: "it is the work of ritual action to join into a whole, again and again, what is in fragile relationship and always in danger of disintegration, namely, the future, the present, and the past of a people" (Collins 1987:95). While ritual produces power relationships, they are in a constant flux of negotiation which constitutes "mute interplay," rather than "mechanical solidarity" (Bell 1992:204). Or, as summarily stated by a female participant in the LDS temple rite: "Like any other ritual, you make it your own" (Bell 1992:204). The opportunity it provides to make meaning one's "own" or, in other words, to negotiate the meanings of gender in the rite, makes the temple the most likely forum for "mutely" working out the relation between men and women that is so fundamental to LDS doctrine and community. As in the past, the LDS Church can be expected in the present also to reorder itself by means of its ritualized and orally traditioned temple canon. This will enable the Church community to adjust old belief in light of new belief without having to experience ideological contradiction and the communal conflict it engenders. Though, no doubt, too slow a process for some, it will nonetheless preserve for most the sense of ordered wholeness provided by the LDS core canon: the law that creates and is created by their temple-building community.

## CONCLUSION

Many questions remain to be considered, including several related to ritual authority as it is exercised in the modification of the temple's ritualized canon. For example, one might well ask what is the influence of discursive thought and debate from certain quarters of the Church upon the hierarchically mandated changes to the canon? Other questions remain regarding the restrictions placed upon access to the temple within the faith community; such as, do the limitations on access to the temple rite within the faith community itself dilute its agency as an instrumentality of change? Do they create a community within a community of the LDS Church? Of course, there remain the more historical questions related to the temple rite's evolution in the last century and its theological dimension. Has the rite been responsive to both the needs of the people and the demands of the Gospel? In short, is it an authentic expression of the faith of the worshipping community?

This paper, however, must remain limited to one issue, simply stated by a member of the LDS community: "In an age of so much communications [sic], there may be some value in having something you only think about and share in a special place" (*New York Times*, 1). I have suggested that for Latter-day Saints that value consists in the peaceful reordering of LDS community around its core canon as it necessarily evolves from generation to generation. The oral traditioning and ritualization of the LDS temple canon enables a "mute" evolution of belief and working out of social conflict, such as that related to gender. It is the figurative and literal "muteness" of the LDS oral and ritual tradition that has the potential to preserve the religious community it is also changing. In sum, the classic gifts of ritual—order, community and transformation (Driver 1991, *passim*.)—are strategically augmented by oral tradition to provide in the LDS temple canon "a way of coming to rest in the heart of cosmic change and order" (Grimes 1982:43).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The tendency to conflate the meanings of canon and scripture has created some confusion and, hence, it may be necessary at the outset to stipulate that the term "canon" here denotes a rule or norm, not the privileging of certain writings as authoritative. See *infra* pages 3 through 6. That this rule or canon is orally maintained by the community makes it no less a source of law.

As has been noted of Judaism: "even if the oral law does not defile the hands [as does the holiness of the sacred text], it may provide a more explicit and pragmatically significant register of the demands of a holy life



in Judaism than one can find simply reading the written law." *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Canon," by Gerald T. Sheppard.

<sup>2</sup> Participation in the temple ritual is available only to mature members of the Church in good standing. This determination is made annually through a two-tier interview process conducted by the ecclesiastical leaders at the LDS equivalent of the parish and diocesan levels. "Questions are asked to ascertain one's faith in God...and inquiry is made regarding the person's testimony of the restored gospel and loyalty to the teachings and leaders of the Church. Worthiness requirements include being honest, keeping the commandments, such as chastity—sexual continence before marriage and fidelity within marriage—obeying the laws of tithing and the Word of Wisdom, fulfilling family responsibilities and avoiding affiliation with dissident groups." *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* [hereafter referred to as *Enc. Morm.*], s.v. "Temple Recommend," by Robert Tucker.

<sup>3</sup> "Mormons Summon Those who Spoke to Media of Temple Rites," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 June 1990, 12. ("Most Mormon Church members quoted last month in news stories about revisions in the church's confidential temple ceremony have been summoned for interviews by church officials, it was learned this week.")

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the conceptual distinctions between thought and activity and their effect in limiting the outcomes of analysis of ritual, see Bell 1987, 17:95-118. Note also Mary Collins' related observation that "the human body's very centrality to the ritual action may be the prime reason that rites are judged by academics to be insignificant sources of transcendent meaning" (1987:107).

<sup>5</sup> LDS written canon is comprised of four, equally authoritative volumes of scripture: *The Bible* (typically the King James Version), *The Book of Mormon*, *The Book of Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*, which includes *The Book of Abraham* and *The Book of Moses*. Though believed to present in narrative form the cosmology and soteriology dramatized in the temple rite, these books neither contain the text of nor serve as the locus of authority for the rite as performed in the temple.

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of brevity, when the context keeps the meaning clear, I will refer to this strategic use of the conventions of an oral tradition simply as "oral traditioning."

<sup>7</sup> As stated by one LDS commentator: "the temple and its ceremonies remain as one of the very few aspects of Mormonism still able to evoke suspicion about how 'normal' Mormons really are." Mauss 1987, 20:77.

<sup>8</sup> Note analogous usage of text described by Bell 1988, 27: 385.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the origins of the LDS temple ritual, see Buerger 1987 (Winter) 20:35-46.

<sup>10</sup> In 1877, the LDS constructed a temple in St. George, Utah, approximately 300 miles from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. The textualization of the rite was done on its premises.

<sup>11</sup> The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (1992) published by Macmillan with cooperation from Church authorities contains, under several subject headings, the most thorough description by the Church of the temple ceremony and ordinances, but nevertheless refrains from providing a text of ceremony or description of the gestures associated with its performance.

<sup>12</sup> Even after the creation of a text in 1877, it appears that actual performance of the rite continued to vary considerably until 1927 when efforts were made to write down a "single unified ceremony for all temples" (Alexander 1986: 302). While the exact nature and number of changes to the ritual and the canon it constituted cannot be known, absent official texts, one study concludes that "the history of the [LDS temple rite]...shows, specific content and procedural alterations were made in 1845, 1877, 1883, 1893, 1919-1927, the early 1960s, and 1968-1972." Buerger, "Development", 67. Additional changes were reported in the press as recently as 1990. "Mormons Drop Rites Opposed by Women," *The New York Times*, 3 May 1990:2.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the skepticism expressed in a recent critique, by those affiliated with the Church, challenging the historicity of LDS scriptural canon, in Metcalfe 1993.

<sup>14</sup> *Ensign*, October 1994:5. This emphasis coincides with the Church's increasing commitment of resources to building temples. In the first half of this century, the LDS Church built 4 temples. In the last half, the Church has built or is in the process of building another 48. Of these 48, 32 have been built in the last 20 years. *The 1993-94 Church Almanac*, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1992) s.v. "Temples of the Church." While indicative of membership growth, the financial commitment represented here also reveals the importance of temple worship in LDS religious life and identity.

<sup>15</sup> "Acting ritually is first and foremost a matter of nuanced contrasts and the evocation of strategic, value-laden distinctions." Bell 1992:90.

<sup>16</sup> The only temple ordinance not administered by women is the marital sealing rite. Only men who have received a separate ordination to certain priesthood authority, which is limited to the administration of the sealing ordinances in the temple, may officiate in an LDS temple marriage. Men who have been ordained only to perform the variety of functions associated with the administration of the Church and those ordinances not unique to the temple, such as baptism and confirmation, may not officiate in temple sealings.

<sup>17</sup> "Six Intellectuals Disciplined for Apostasy," *Sunstone*, November 1993, 68, with respect to the excommunications of Michael Quinn and Maxine D. Hanks, writer and editor respectively of "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (1992).

<sup>18</sup> Boyd K. Packer, unpublished speech given 18 May 1983. Photocopy in my possession. Reported in "Elder Packer Names Gays/Lesbians,

Feminists, and 'So-called Scholars' Three Main Dangers," *Sunstone*, November 1993, 74.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Tambiah (1979:136) has concluded that "complex rites, and long recitations, usually have some sequences more open than others, more open in terms of structure and more open to new contents."

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