

# Culture, Charisma, and Change: Reflections on Mormon Temple Worship

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UNDERSTANDABLY OUR CURIOSITY IS AROUSED whenever we hear of secret indoctrinations or rituals being practiced by unfamiliar religious groups within imposing buildings of unusual architecture. Such curiosity easily turns to suspicion, fear, or hostility once the group in question has acquired a deviant or negative image more generally in its surrounding society. Thus, especially against the troubled history of Mormon relations with the political and religious establishments of the United States and elsewhere, 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.

When non-Mormons, and even Mormons who fail to qualify in some respect, are forbidden to attend the temple weddings of even their own children, suspicion will likely, for some, be accompanied by resentment as well. Nor is anyone likely to be mollified by the facile “explanation” so often heard that the temple ceremonies are “sacred, not secret,” a semantic word play ignoring the fact that to Mormons the ceremonies are obviously *both*.

In actuality, however, as David Buerger has demonstrated, very little about what goes on in the temple is not available through public records like the Smoot hearings, through apostate exposés of varying reliability, or through extant diaries and other primary source materials.

For that matter, there is no real reason that even devout Church members could not talk more about the temple ceremonies than they do, with appropriate discretion about time and place, since the oaths of secrecy attach only to the new names, signs, tokens, and penalties. Indeed, more open talk about the temple would not only facilitate understanding among both Mormons and non-Mormons in certain historical and scholarly respects, but would also infinitely improve the preparedness of initiates, almost all of whom now enter

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the temple with only the vaguest idea of what to expect or of the obligations they will be asked to assume.

Like other forms of religious participation, temple work means different things to different Mormons at different times in their lives. To some, it unquestionably provides that sense of connection and communion with Deity and the other world, with the ultimately sacred, which the Church officially says that it provides. To others, it is a time of retreat from the cares of the world, of spiritual renewal. To still others, it is a duty and obligation, either to ancestors or to priesthood leaders or to both. And then there are those we encounter from time to time for whom the temple experience, like sacrament meeting, may not be gratifying at any level but instead ranges from the boring to the offensive. Some Mormons have experienced all these feelings (and others) at different times in their lives, depending on their own spiritual, emotional, social, or intellectual condition at the time of a given temple visit. An interesting subject for future scholarly investigation would, in fact, be the different meanings of the temple experience to Mormons in different cultures, different geographic locations, different stages of life, and different stages of development as Church members.

Sociologists are inclined to look for the "functions" of religious institutions like the temple — the different purposes served by the temple, intended and unintended, in the religious community. One of the more obvious functions of the temple endowment, for instance, is that of a rite of passage, signifying to the whole church that the endowed individual has become a "spiritual adult" either by upbringing or by later conversion. This status carries with it certain assumptions about what responsibilities can reasonably be imposed on the member and what can be expected of him or her.

Closely related is a structural or organizational function — the creation of a spiritually or theologically advanced group, an "elite," if you will, toward which all Mormons might aspire and work. In an organization in which so many men (and even boys) hold the priesthood and in which there is so much rotating in and out of ecclesiastical office for both men and women, it is difficult to maintain an enduring or fundamental sense of status differential. This is all the more true in North America where so few other social distinctions exist among the homogeneously middle-class Mormon membership.

At any given point in time, however, endowed Mormons are likely to be a minority of the membership in a given ward or branch — indeed, rather a small minority outside the American Far West, and an even smaller minority if we specify regular temple-goers. If the Church ever reaches the point where a majority of the adult membership has been endowed (as may have been the case in the late nineteenth century), a sociologist would be inclined to predict a return to some kind of "second endowment" just to provide an additional elite category for the continued striving of the spiritually highly ranked among the faithful, lest they become complacent. For now, status distinctions among the endowed seem to be maintained partly by the *frequency* of temple-going and hence of the number of vicarious endowments performed, but mostly by

the existence of an informal elite consisting of “set-apart temple workers” who know the temple liturgy as both recipients and officiators.

Temple work also serves an occupational function for the elderly. Earlier in this century, when some temple workers were actually paid for their vicarious work by descendants of the deceased or by others, temple-going provided paid employment, however minimal and however limited, for at least a few. Now, it is an occupation in a less intentional or conspicuous but nevertheless important way: In a time when people are living longer and in a church that has always had relatively great average longevity, thousands of Church members are able to spend some portion of their retirement in work that is presumably not only meaningful for them but deeply fulfilling, as well. For some, it seems to offer the additional psychological function of preparing them emotionally and spiritually for their own departure to that spiritual realm to which they come to feel so close in the temple. This would seem to be a very constructive social function of temple work in a modern age which has virtually no useful work for most of its elderly. (The growing practice of sending retired couples on missions makes a similar social contribution.)

In a more theological context, Buerger’s paper raises the question of the respective roles played by the social environment and revelation in both the form and the content of the temple endowment. The most emotional and controversial aspect of this issue, of course, involves possible borrowings from Masonry. Richard Bushman has warned us (1966, 1984), with persuasive examples, that we should be wary of facile assumptions about environmental borrowings, a position I fully share. Yet I see no reason to argue the opposite extreme typical of folk Mormonism — that revelation of the endowment (or of anything else) came spontaneously out of heaven, through a cultural and social vacuum, and into human minds somehow totally devoid of or unaffected by pre-existing conceptions or proclivities.

Mormonism, perhaps more than most religions, recognizes the human element in the revelatory process, whether in initiating that process (D&C 9) or in providing the conceptual categories and constraints within which a given revelation is understood. The Book of Mormon readily acknowledges “mistakes of men” in its preface, and the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants came to the Lord’s servants “in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” despite their tendency to err (D&C 1:24–28). Why should it be different with the revelations on temple work?

Given the involvement of the Smith family and friends in the Masonic Order prior to 1842 and the similarities between portions of the Mormon and Masonic rituals after 1842, the question of some degree of Mormon borrowing from the Masons obviously arises. That the Masonic ceremony itself changed and evolved even in recent centuries does not necessarily invalidate Joseph Smith’s claim that he was restoring, by revelation, an even more ancient temple ceremony to which the Masonic one bore certain resemblances. On the other hand, neither does that claim constitute a declaration of the total independence of the Mormon temple ceremony from any external cultural influences, includ-

ing Masonry. Frankly, I have some difficulty understanding why this should be such a big issue, except to those with a fairly limited understanding of how a prophet gets ideas. Since prophets and religions always arise and are nurtured within a given cultural context, itself evolving, it should not be difficult to understand why even the most original revelations have to be expressed in the idioms of the culture and biography of the revelator.

It seems to me that the most original, authentic, and enduring temple elements are its *doctrines* and the *covenants* transacted there. By *covenants* I mean the commitments made to certain standards and principles — not those associated with the signs and tokens, which seem to me to have only the most peripheral doctrinal significance. The basic temple doctrines with their associated covenants indeed call for a deeper understanding and a stronger commitment than a new member usually has at the time of baptism. It seems entirely appropriate to me that a member should take on those covenants in a sacred place and at a more mature stage of spiritual development.

These particular covenants and doctrines, however, take less than an hour of the endowment. The rest of the ceremony is best understood, I think, as a kind of liturgical medium for carrying and reinforcing the crucial covenants. Even *those* elements might be subject to some modification as revelation dictates, but the rest of the ceremony — the liturgical trappings — could be replaced altogether in accordance with the varied historical and cultural settings in which the LDS temples are found. We do not value fish more or less because they are found in fresh or salt water or because they are surrounded by this or that kind of marine geology or flora. Similarly, a great variety in environmental elements ought to be acceptable as the medium for the essential elements of the endowment.

To discover that our current medium contains Masonic elements should be no more disturbing than the Disney elements of its films; or the non-Mormon artistic traditions and motifs which appear in the murals of older temples (Seifrit 1986); or that the meeting rooms in the temples, like those in chapels, strongly resemble those found in many Protestant churches, with a pulpit or altar, seats or pews in rows, etc.; or that the hymns sung in LDS sacrament meetings are borrowed in form, if not always in content, from the Protestant tradition (as is, for that matter, most of the order of service); or that the youth program for males was adopted from the Boy Scouts of America; or that Christmas trees (and even Santa Claus) appear in Mormon churches at Christmas time; or that the Church bureaucracy has borrowed liberally from the corporate business world for its procedures and practices. The list could continue, for Mormonism always has been, and always will be, given expression primarily in forms and idioms familiar to its converts and adherents.

Of course, such expressions may be consciously and strategically chosen. Thus, just as the assimilationist policies of Church leaders in the twentieth century have modified the endowment and garment to make them seem more “normal,” so in the nineteenth century, when Mormonism was trying to establish its uniqueness and distance from conventional Christianity, it is not surprising that its leaders would include in the endowment some elements that

were anathema to that Christianity, including Masonic elements. (A possible parallel is how some American blacks have rejected "white" Christianity for "alien" Islam.)

With such an understanding of the interaction of cultural, temporal, and revelatory elements in their religion, Mormons may better identify which elements are truly distinctive, inspired, and indispensable, while considering all the rest subject to modification or even elimination as cultural settings change. This principle operates in Mormonism as a whole, and there is no doctrinal reason that it could not apply to the temple as well. As time goes on, we may see variations in the endowment, not only from one generation to another but also from one country to another, as long as the essentials remain. It seems to me that the question of "Masonic borrowings" shrinks into insignificance with this more expansive perspective.

The changes in the endowment (and in the garment) traced in the Buerger paper can be understood as responses to the changing circumstances surrounding the Mormon religion more generally. Max Weber's disciple Ernst Troeltsch (1931) pointed to a recurring cycle in the history of new religions that by now has many empirical replications. Though religions and their new converts tend to be characterized at the beginning by many mystical and spiritual experiences, and by much "charismatic" fervor, they tend to be "tamed" with the passage of time, if they are to survive at all. A rapidly increasing membership brings with it many organizational imperatives, leading to increasing bureaucratization, standardization, and routinization. A hostile social environment will exert pressure on the new religion to give up or tone down its most deviant characteristics in exchange for the social respectability necessary for its survival and continued growth. The unique charismatic elements which nurtured the religion in its infancy are eventually "routinized" and brought under institutional control. This process can be seen as readily in the history of Mormonism as in the histories of countless other new religions. It has been thoroughly described and documented, most recently by Thomas Alexander (1986) in his history of the Church from 1890 to 1930.

As Alexander indicates, during the 1920s both the endowment and the garment underwent a great deal of modification, shortening, streamlining, and standardization as part of the assimilation process (1986, 291-303). Indeed, there is some reason to believe that the Twelve may have seriously considered even relinquishing altogether the use of the garment outside the temple (Boyd 1985). Buerger highlights the related point, made by Allen Roberts (1979), about the decline of unique Mormon symbolism in the temples and elsewhere in twentieth-century Mormon culture. This classical process of routinization and standardization, even in the temples, has continued down to the present time, when computers are used to reassemble on the records those segments of temple ordinances that have been pragmatically disassembled in the actual doing.

What Weber called the "routinization of charisma" can be seen even more clearly in the relation of the temple to the rest of the religion. The increase in temple activity during the first half of this century, documented both by

Buerger and by Alexander, has clearly been accompanied by a decline in the more spontaneous charismatic expressions of healings, visions, tongues, millennial anticipation, and accounts of the Three Nephites. Though I do not have systematic data on this decline, it is clearly implied by Gordon and Gary Shepherd's analysis of the changing content of general conference sermons (1984, 254) and by Thomas Alexander (1986, 294-98). Anyone who has lived as long as I have, furthermore, has seen the typical testimony meeting transformed from a sharing of personal spiritual experiences into a series of formula recitations about things to be thankful for. Alexander has made the astute observation in a personal conversation that a major if unintended function of increased emphasis on an increasingly standardized temple routine has been that the spontaneous and unregulated charismatic expressions of early Mormonism have been displaced by the controlled, channeled, and institutionalized expression of charisma in the temple. Insofar as the residual charisma of the temple experience continues to be eroded by batch processing and enhanced technology, we may have a partial explanation for the declining popular enthusiasm for temples implied by Buerger's figures on the flattening rates of recent temple activity.

Yet it would be premature to conclude from Buerger's tables and graphs that there has been a decline in temple activity more generally. Statistical relationships between conversion rates and rates of temple activity are complicated by both time and geography. There is always a time lag between high conversion rates in an area and the construction of a temple there. We would have to break down the data according to time and place to make meaningful inferences about relationships between conversion rates or Church growth and temple activity. This would be even truer for vicarious temple work, as distinguished from personal endowments and marriages. A further complication arises from defection rates which, in certain times and places around the world, have been phenomenal. Thus, high rates of church growth accompanied by low rates of temple work may say more about defection than about commitment to temple work in high-growth areas.

My final observation deals with the implications of the temple for dogma and popular belief. It is unavoidable that ritual, like other human transactions, not only reinforces beliefs but even generates them, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. What may the Saints unintentionally be learning from the temple experience, especially if it is repeated often? At the popular level, for example, the "protection" promised of the garment has often been taken as literal protection against physical injury, a property never attributed to it officially or doctrinally, as far as I know, but nevertheless widely circulated in the folklore. Buerger reports that serious consideration was once given to casting a dark-skinned actor in the role of Lucifer in a temple film. If this had happened, the image would surely have been sacralized and, by implication, canonized, despite its origins in folklore, rather than in revealed doctrine.

What notions may unintentionally be "canonized" by consistently portraying Adam, Eve, and other biblical figures not only as European but as Nordic, even in the temples of Asia and the Pacific? This bias, serious enough in our

visitors' centers, may actually take on doctrinal implications in the temple, despite the routine injunction that the portrayal of events in Eden is to be understood figuratively. And what inadvertent teaching occurs through films that portray the Father and Son as white, not just in a celestial or spiritual sense but in a mortal, racial sense, with the stereotypic white beards of Catholic and Protestant art; or that show the dwelling place of the Father with the stereotypic golden throne and arches; or that portray Lucifer as a good-looking man with a black Van Dyke beard; or that present non-Mormon clergy as slow-witted dupes dependent on Satan for their livelihood, who spout medieval theological notions that have had no currency for generations; or that seem to say husband-wife relationships are in some spiritual sense egalitarian but temporally hierarchical, even in the temple?

Certainly the Saints are not so unimaginative that they always take everything literally, nor is it up to scholars to reconstruct the temple endowment to match their own notions of modernity and respectability. Yet in a Church which aspires to have universal appeal, it is incumbent upon all of us to attend to elements of cultural ethnocentrism which remain intertwined with our teachings, wherever they occur. One way to undermine both ethnocentrism and undue literalism in the temple is to permit the expression of the endowment in as great a variety of cultural idioms as possible, consistent with the integrity of the fundamental covenants and doctrines which must unite Latter-day Saints across all cultures. Should that begin to happen, we shall all see far greater change in the temple endowment than the relatively modest examples traced for us in David Buerger's careful and interesting paper!

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