

Mormon Priesthood Against the Meritocracy

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Defenses of the male-only LDS priesthood generally pursue a combination of three approaches: ground the practice in ancient scripture, secure it in Restoration history and tradition, or justify it through its sociological effects on gender culture and family formation in the present day. I think this is probably as it should be. If one is going to mount a reasoned defense of male priesthood beyond a basic appeal to prophetic authority, then scripture, tradition, and gender culture are the right places to begin.

I want to suggest another approach to the question, not primarily to defend our gendered ordination practices—though I am not opposed to such defenses, and find some of them persuasive—but rather to point out one way in which our male priesthood structure organizes the meaning of Mormonism in the present day, and the surprising analytical value that meaning may hold.

The hierarchical, authoritarian nature of the church, with its illiberal orientation toward group roles and obedience over individual right, equality, and freedom—that is to say, everything about the Church that rankles in the context of modern liberal democracy—can provide a set of emotional and intellectual tools with which to examine the buried assumptions of that liberal democracy. The structures of liberalism are so firmly entrenched in the common sense that governs everyday experience in modern America as to become invisible. Indeed, the very project of liberalism is built around the proposition that the public sphere it governs is transparent, objective, and impartial—that is, it conceals no hidden assumptions at all, though this idea is itself a hidden

assumption. Thus even when objections to the “commonsense” tenets of liberal modernity are felt keenly, it can be difficult to find a vocabulary from within liberalism itself to express them. (The contemporary challenges of articulating a comprehensive sexual ethic based on the concept of consent alone—the only concept available from within liberalism to do so—illustrate this difficulty.) Churches that maintain one foot outside the dominant paradigms of modernity can provide the resources for this kind of criticism. Our male priesthood exemplifies this dynamic, by which the apparently illiberal features of a conservative church can usefully destabilize the silently-encroaching paradigms of liberal modernity. Specifically I want to float the idea that the all-male LDS priesthood enacts a critique of the notion of meritocracy that vibrates at the center of the American dream. The notion that equal opportunity will allow the best and brightest from all backgrounds to rise to the top by virtue of hard work has energized the American psyche in forms as various as the Horatio Alger novel and the Oprah Winfrey show. The meritocratic promise has unfolded unevenly, to be sure, and in many ways remains incomplete in the face of intractable race- and class-based inequalities. In many ways, the overarching march of American social history can be seen as the unfinished work of drawing all groups into the meritocracy.

Some contemporary observers, however, are worrying not so much about the incomplete reach of the meritocracy but, on the contrary, about the effects of meritocracy itself. Social mobility is notoriously difficult to assess, but by some measures it has actually decreased in American society since the nation’s great institutions flung wide their doors to people of any color, creed, or sex. At best, the new elite simply perpetuates a different kind of family privilege than did the old WASP establishment; at worst, meritocracy may, in fact, reinforce the heartless lottery of inherited genetic advantage that defines the deep history of our species. Whereas the old elite was always vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy and illegitimacy—it was this critique that ultimately brought it down after the second World War, after all—the new elite is more or less secure from critiques leveled in the language of virtuous liberal citizenship: whatever else can be said about them, they probably

do represent the brightest of their generation, and heaven knows that they are trained from over-scheduled childhood to work hard.

Against this backdrop of meritocracy ascendant, an institution like the LDS Church, governed by a priesthood to which women are not admitted solely on the basis of their sex, stands as a puzzle, an affront, or a curiosity. From some perspectives, an all-male priesthood is nothing more than an atavistic institutional carryover from the days of hard patriarchy, sexism pure and simple; from other perspectives, it's a divinely-ordained reflection of the deep cosmic order that secures and connects individuals in a harmonious chain. Either way, a male priesthood is difficult to explain, much less justify, in the language of liberal meritocracy. Indeed, an organization in which an arbitrary half of its membership has no access to institutional authority is the opposite of meritocracy. Leadership and status are not rewards for ability, hard work, or worthiness—they can't be, since many of the most able, dedicated, and worthy members of the church will never hold positions of executive leadership simply by virtue of their female condition. (It's worth noting that earlier rationales for male headship relied on the idea that the curse of Eve rendered women inferior and submissive to men, and thus leadership was indeed a kind of meritocratic reward for men's superior ability and worthiness. But this logic is largely absent from contemporary LDS discourse.)

A male priesthood, then, stands as an enacted rebuttal to the idea that meritocracy is natural, inevitable, or necessary. The encroachment of merit-based thinking into a Christian community would be disastrously corrosive to gospel teachings on humility, love, dignity, and status; one can never win one's mansion above or compete for salvation. There are no merit-based scholarships to heaven. This lesson is especially important for Latter-day Saints, given our own history with tragically mistaken thinking on this topic: Black Saints were once denied access to the priesthood on the false and immoral premise that they did not merit it. This terrible error has had lasting negative consequences for both the good Black Saints who were spiritually injured by the teaching and for the reputation and credibility of the institutional church as a whole. Spiritual meritocracy is poison. The all-male LDS

priesthood, for which no merit-based justification can be offered, reminds us that the kingdom of God is not a meritocracy.

Some readers might see this as an apology for the LDS priesthood policy, but that's not my intention here. It's neither my job nor my inclination to defend the policy. And even if it were, what a poor justification this would be! I don't believe that the male priesthood was originally established or persists in the present day for the purpose of criticizing notions of inherent spiritual merit; that cultural work, even if what I'm arguing here is right, is a distant second concern to the primary pastoral and administrative functions of priesthood. And even if important social good does come of anti-meritocratic critique embodied in a patriarchal priesthood, who is to judge whether that good offsets the pain and confusion that some women feel as they try to make sense of their own identity in a patriarchal institution? Merely to think in terms of social costs and benefits is to stray back into the technocratic realm of democratic liberalism, and thus into a vocabulary that can't make sense of patriarchy except as illegitimate and abusive.

Instead, I simply want to point out that over time institutional practices can evolve to perform new kinds of cultural work, functions that are often hidden or overlooked. To borrow a word from evolutionary biology, which borrowed it in turn from architecture, the meritocratic critique embodied in a male priesthood is a *spandrel*, a function or feature created indirectly by the interaction of other, more primary functions. Spandrels may be evolutionarily or originally incidental, but over time they can come to perform important work as environments change. If the LDS Church were to go the way of liberal Protestant denominations in ordaining women, so that both women and men could be called to executive leadership positions on their spiritual or administrative merits, a great many sociological, theological, and personal difficulties would be resolved, and this is certainly a development that I would welcome with the bigger half of my heart—though it is not one that I expect or for which I advocate. But such an accommodation would also deprive us of one more intellectual lens that might otherwise provide useful critical views of liberalism's unfinished or unfounded projects. How costly that loss, I can't say.