Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm:  
The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women  

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ABSTRACT

Women’s participation in traditional religions is often explained in terms of their victimization and/or their opportunities for empowerment. This paper seeks to use Mormon women as a framework in order to explore some of the consequences of this phenomenon and to advocate for the creation of multiple, complex spaces where traditional religious women may be understood beyond the paradigm of victim/empowerment. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, otherwise known as the LDS or Mormons, maintains a cosmology that is based upon highly differentiated gendered practices. A belief in a female deity, Mother in Heaven, and a related belief that all pious Mormon men and women have the ability to become gods and goddesses in a post-mortal existence are central to the Mormon gendered cosmology. Despite these beliefs, Mormon women generally resist feminism because they perceive feminism to be at odds with motherhood and family. Ironically, their belief in a female divine and their potential divinity strengthens their commitment to interdependence through maternal practices and kinship.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist theology, cosmology, Mormonism, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Women in the Mormon Church, Western feminism

Introduction

Historically, most Western feminists have misunderstood traditional religious women.¹ This paper seeks to use Mormon women as a frame-

1. ‘Mormon’ is a nickname for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the LDS. Throughout the paper I will be referring to them by all three of their commonly used names. I also use the term traditional religious women to characterize women who are involved in religions that advocate for distinct gender roles, based
work in order to explore some of the consequences of this phenomenon and to advocate for the creation of multiple, complex spaces where traditional religious women may be understood beyond the paradigm of victim/empowerment. Through careful analysis and resisting simple explanations of Mormon women, LDS women may be understood as subjects who are actually engaged in intricate, highly gendered theological worldviews. This gendered cosmology elucidates a profound commitment to marriage, maternal practices and kinship, which is ultimately modeled after two theological principles of the divine feminine: the belief in Deity that consists of a heavenly couple, both male and female, and their own potential to become goddesses in a post-mortal life. By teasing out these two theological commitments, a nuanced understanding of Mormon women may be grappled with.2

Luce Irigaray asserts that in order for women to fulfill 'the wholeness of what [they] are capable of being', they must have a female divine. She states that 'woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity',3 and notes that 'religion as a social phenomenon cannot be ignored', and that 'it is crucial that we rethink religion'.4 Reconstructing the divine and imagining the feminine face of deity is a fitting project for feminists.

The belief in a female deity, known as Mother in Heaven, is an elemental tenet of the theology of Mormonism and has been almost from its inception in the nineteenth century.5 A related doctrine, known as the doctrine of exaltation, asserts that Mormon men and women who participate in a holy marriage ceremony within an LDS temple, will have an opportunity to progress and eventually become gods and goddesses in a post-mortal life, if they continually work, both individually and together, towards living exemplary lives.6 Mormon women already

upon complimentarity. Often referred to as ‘conservative’ religious women, I prefer the term ‘traditional’ as it is not explicitly connected to American political notions.

2. By ‘maternal practices’ I am referring to both maternity—the act of giving birth and motherhood—the ongoing parental practice of raising children.


4. Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, pp. v, 75.


6. D & C 132: 15-21. Mormons believe that the Doctrine and Covenants (D & C) is a compilation of heavenly revelations that were dictated to Joseph Smith, Jr during his lifetime. Mostly, the revelations in D & C address the specifics of the organization of the newly formed church. They have been canonized within the Mormon faith. For an
seem to believe in what Irigaray appears to be advocating. Why, then, do many Mormon women reject Western feminism despite believing in the existence of a feminine divine and the possibility of their own future deification? And why do many Western feminists seem to discount Mormon women, and other traditional religious women, as conversation partners?

Feminism and Traditional Religious Women: Locked in Duality?

Often, Western feminists and traditional religious women, including Mormons, define themselves against each other. Historically, American second-wave feminists criticized motherhood and sought to expand women’s primary identity beyond motherhood and conventional marital roles. Women in traditional religions often define themselves through the very same traditional roles that were originally rejected by second-wave American feminists.

While most academics are aware of the many types of feminisms, many Mormon women, particularly in the US, tend to conceptualize feminism as a monolithic movement, based on what could be loosely categorized as liberal, second-wave, American feminism. Because early feminist writings tended to question the validity of rigid roles prescribed for women, including the role of mother and wife, Mormon women developed distrust for feminist inquiries and agendas. This explanation of Mormon cosmology see Sterling M. McMurrin, The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965).

7. There are some exceptions to this binary relationship, most notably Muslim feminists.


9. Zandra Wagoner, Unlikely Partners: Feminist Theology and Feminist Theory (Claremont: Claremont Graduate University Dissertation, 2005). Although Wagoner looks at the dynamic between secular and religious feminists, I believe that it is a natural extension of her argument that even some religious feminists define themselves against traditional religious women.

10. Second-wave feminism within the United States was largely centred on white, middle-class, heterosexual women and their quest for equality, liberation, and autonomy. Originating in the late 1960s, second-wave academic feminism came out of the women’s movement, which was activist based and sought legislative redress for women.

11. This distrust was exacerbated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’
makes sense in light of their belief in a female divine that is a heavenly *mother* and a *spousal* partner to God. Since most Mormon women are not steeped in the academic language of feminism, they are not aware of the nuances within feminisms and the changes that have occurred within feminist theory since the 1970s. They are guilty of characterizing feminism in erroneous, simple terms, which ultimately distort its complexities and usefulness. That said, there is a vigorous cohort of Mormon feminists who write, publish and work both within and outside of the LDS church structure for gender symmetry. They are a diverse group within a diverse group and have varying ideological and philosophical commitments, which inform their feminisms.12

Academic feminists have also painted traditional religious women, including Mormons, in simplistic terms, glossing over their complexities and differences. Some religious scholars have explained women’s participation in traditional religions as the result of false consciousness or ignorance.13 Mostly, traditional religious women have been categorized as victims of their religion, and specifically victims of the men within their religious traditions. Alternatively, women’s membership in traditional religions has been attributed to their desire to subvert existing power structures and/or to empower other female participants.14 This places traditional religious women within a dichotomous paradigm of victim/empowerment and hides their complexity, offering only a flattened portrayal of multi-dimensional subjects and negating critical theological beliefs that may offer a different understanding.

Certainly there are those who suffer from false consciousness and those who subvert and empower, within both Mormonism and other religious traditions. However, there is a large number of Mormon


women who participate in the religion because it offers them a concrete expression of their value, through conceptualizations of the female divine and the divine within them, which are tied to marriage, maternal practices and kinship. Trapping Mormon women between narratives of victimization and empowerment obscures the theological motivations that guide their lives, discounting what is most central for them.15

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Origins of the Mormon Church

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, formed 6 April 1830, by Joseph Smith Jr, is often thought to be a quintessentially American religion. As a young boy, Smith, Jr declared that he had seen a vision of Jesus and God.16 According to later accounts written by Smith, Jr, he was instructed by the two divine beings to abstain from joining any of the local churches.17 Over the course of the next several years, he received instructions from an angel, Moroni, who eventually led him to an ancient journal written by a family who journeyed from Israel to North America.18 The appearance of Jesus to the people living in North America is a central theme within the Book of Mormon, thus establishing Christianity within the region pre-Columbus.19 Mormons believe that Smith, Jr restored the entire gospel of Jesus Christ by hearkening back to the ancient practices and beliefs of Christianity. Just as Christianity was a restoration of Judaism, Mormons view themselves as participating in a restoration of early Christianity.20

15. Amy Black Vorhees, ‘Problems and Recuperative Strategies in American Women’s Religious History’, American Academy of Religion presentation, Philadelphia, PA, November 2005, paper in author’s possession. Vorhees Black has argued for using ‘theological epistemology’ as a way to get past the ‘empowerment mode’ that is frequently used within American historical analysis of religious women. Theological epistemology is a method of studying religious women, whereby scholars consider the religious commitments that women make as formative and critical to their practices.


18. Bushman, Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism, pp. 61-64.


Currently, the Mormon Church has more than 12 million members, with over half residing outside of the United States. What was once a small American church is rapidly expanding into an international religion. As a result of this religious expansion, Mormon women are not necessarily white, do not always speak English and span the economic as well as ethnic continuum. They are married, single, and many are divorced. Despite their social, cultural and geographical differences, the doctrinal underpinnings of the religion are basically universal for Mormon women.

Mother in Heaven

As previously mentioned Mormon theology includes the female divine. The doctrine of Mother in Heaven was first made known publicly by Eliza Snow, largely considered the ‘leading Priestess’ of Mormondom in the nineteenth century. Snow was the plural wife of both Joseph Smith, Jr and later Brigham Young. Snow penned a poem originally titled ‘Invocation, or the Eternal Father and Mother’, which was published in 1845, although the date the poem was written is unclear. The poem, which was later made into a hymn, suggests that humans are the children of both a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother. While the exact origins of the doctrine are not clear, many believe that Snow received the revelation from Smith, Jr before he died. Others believe that it was revealed to Snow, thus making her a prophetess, and still others heard Joseph Smith Jr speak of a Heavenly Mother while he was alive. A third hand historical account relates the story of Joseph Smith Jr and two other men praying together and being carried away in a vision where they each saw God the Father, Heavenly Mother and Jesus. Regardless of the exact origins, Mormon leaders in the nine-


25. Linda P. Wilcox, ‘The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven’, p. 65. The current title of the hymn, which is still sung regularly in Mormon meetings, is ‘O My Father’.

teenth century widely accepted the doctrine as truth. It was considered almost common sense: if God was a father, and humans were his children, then naturally a Heavenly Mother also existed.27

Contemporary Mormon theology continues to profess a belief in a female deity, who is the spouse of Heavenly Father, although there haven’t been any major expansions of the doctrine. While addressing young Mormon girls in Mexico City, former President28 of the LDS church, Spencer W. Kimball declared, ‘You are daughters of God… You are made in the image of our heavenly mother’.29

The belief in a Mother in Heaven is an important manifestation of the primacy of the nuclear family. Spencer W. Kimball, former prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wrote,

Finally, when we sing that doctrinal hymn and anthem of affection, ‘O My Father’, we get a sense of the ultimate in maternal modesty, of the restrained, queenly elegance of our Heavenly Mother, and knowing how profoundly our mortal mothers have shaped us here, do we suppose her influence on us as individuals to be less if we live so as to return there?30

Clearly, Mother in Heaven is the ultimate mother. Other recent church leaders have also commented on the female divine, thus exhibiting the belief in a heavenly mother endowed with maternal instincts and domestic attributes. Neal A. Maxwell, a previous apostle of the LDS church, wrote,

I, along with my brethren of the priesthood, express undying gratitude to our eternal partners. We know that we can go no place that matters without you, nor would we have it otherwise. When we kneel to pray, we kneel together. When we kneel at the altar of the holy temple, we kneel together. When we approach the final gate where Jesus Himself is the gatekeeper, we will, if faithful, pass through that gate together… Finally, remember: When we return to our real home, it will be with the ‘mutual

28. Mormons believe that God still speaks to humans through prophets, another demonstration of the restoration characteristics of the LDS church. The President of the LDS church is considered to be a prophet. The church leadership consists of a prophet who has two counselors. These three men make up the First Presidency of the Mormon church. There is also a body of twelve men, who are considered modern day apostles, and are often referred to as the Quorum of the Twelve. These men assist in administering and ministering to the members of the church. In addition to the Quorum of Twelve, there are members of several Quorums of Seventies, which are organized to assist in running the expanding international church. These men are referred to as General Authorities.
approbation’ of those who reign in the ‘royal courts on high.’ There we will find beauty such as mortal ‘eye hath not seen’; we will hear sounds of surpassing music which mortal ‘ear hath not heard.’ Could such a regal homecoming be possible without the anticipatory arrangements of a Heavenly Mother?31

Elder Maxwell reaffirmed the modern belief in Heavenly Mother, the concept of the spiritual interdependence of men and women, and the maternal instincts endowed within the Heavenly Mother. In 1987, another leader of the LDS church, Vaughn J. Featherstone, wrote,

Women are endowed with special traits and attributes that come trailing down through eternity from a divine mother… Theirs is a sacred, God-given role, and the traits they received from heavenly mother are equally as important as those given to the young men.32

Elder Featherstone’s comments highlight the importance of a divine mother, her uniquely feminine characteristics, and separate gender roles within Mormonism.

While the belief in Mother in Heaven is widely accepted, worshipping her is not. In 1991, current church prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, cautioned women against praying to Mother in Heaven and stated that he had searched the Scriptures and could find no precedent for praying to her.33 Some women were disappointed and some continued to honor her privately.34

Within Mormonism there are many gods, but only one to whom worship or prayer is offered. Mormons identify as monotheistic but delving further into their cosmology reveals a plurality of gods. For instance, Mormons believe that Jesus Christ is a god, but they do not pray to him. They also believe that the Holy Ghost is a god, but do not pray to him.35

The majority of Mormon women do not vocalize a desire to know more about Mother in Heaven, and some say that they feel valued by the knowledge that she exists.36 However, those who do long to know their Mother in Heaven feel a deep sense of loss because of the lack of information and theological development surrounding her exis-

35. Mormons call the Holy Spirit the Holy Ghost and consider the Holy Ghost to be masculine.
tence. Some Mormons feel hopeful that the doctrine on Mother in Heaven will be expanded in the future, a possibility within a religion that believes in continuing heavenly revelation.

**Doctrine of Exaltation**

The doctrine of exaltation, which claims that all women and men may eventually become divine if they live piously while on earth, is directly related to the theological construction of a divine couple. Because Mormons believe that families can be bound together beyond the mortal experience, the concept of a Mother and Father in Heaven as divine partners exemplifies the ultimate model of an ‘eternal family’, to which all Mormon families aspire. The belief in the timeless nature of the family is one of the most important theological principles within Mormonism. Mormonism conceives of three degrees of glory, or three kingdoms in the afterlife, as opposed to a heaven/hell construction. Hierarchically organized, the three degrees of glory correspond to one’s works and actions on earth. According to LDS belief, Heavenly Father and Mother dwell in the highest kingdom, called the celestial kingdom. Mormons aspire to one day live in the celestial kingdom with their families, including their heavenly parents.

The doctrine of exaltation was revealed by Joseph Smith, Jr and is canonized within Mormon scripture. The doctrine requires reciprocity between men and women; neither may be exalted without the other. They are interdependent and must rely on each other for exaltation, although they may be individually saved. Exaltation is the ability to become gods and goddesses eventually and to live within the celestial kingdom with Heavenly Father and Mother. In order to achieve the highest degree of glory, the celestial kingdom, Mormons believe that marriage in a Mormon temple is necessary in order to ‘seal’ a couple together eternally. This step, eternal marriage, partially fills the require-


41. The Doctrine and Covenants, p. 132.

42. Mormons make a distinction between salvation and exaltation. Salvation is possible through living a pious life but exaltation is granted by living a type of ‘higher law.’ Only exaltation offers the potential to become divine. Jan Shipps has noted that within the LDS theology, individuals may be saved but families are exalted as units. See Jan Shipps, *Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
ment for celestial glory, or eventual divinity. Living pious lives and constantly progressing towards being more god-like is another requirement and a continual focus for Mormons.

The belief in a Mother in Heaven and the doctrine of exaltation enables Mormon women to imagine themselves as divine and to envision a heavenly couple who work cooperatively together. Mormon women and men are encouraged to marry and bear children as a preparatory state for godhood. There are no greater roles than partner and parent; it is literally a training ground for eventual divinity. Many Mormon women claim that these two doctrinal tenets allow them to feel valued within a patriarchal religion. Without women, men cannot progress. Conversely, women cannot progress without men. Obviously this puts enormous emphasis on the heterosexual family dynamic. The emphasis on a divine heterosexual couple is partially why many Mormon women locate the site of their greatest potential within marriage and motherhood.

Within Mormonism, as in most religions, doctrine and ‘lived religion’ can often diverge. While Mormon women experience doctrinal subjectivity, they are lacking symmetry within the church hierarchical structure. Indeed, some Mormon women could benefit from the efforts of feminism. It is not my intention to minimize the power differences or the range of responses within the LDS community, but instead to focus on some of the theological tenets of Mormonism in order to highlight the complexity of Mormon women’s relationship to the divine. As the space in which Mormon women operate becomes illuminated it may be possible to begin to foster dialogue between Mormon women and academic feminism, and move beyond the victim/empowerment model that has framed most studies of traditional religious women.

Creating Space: Beyond Victim/Empowerment

Western feminists, particularly those working within the academy, must move beyond the victim/empowerment dyad that has been constructed to explain women’s participation within traditional religions. By employing this analysis, real women’s lives are relegated to a caricature of their experiences. This ultimately distorts the religious practices and communities that scholars are attempting to illuminate.

43. Mormon women do not hold the priesthood and ecclesiastical leadership requires that one hold the priesthood. Although women have their own organization, the Relief Society, it is organized under the auspices of the priesthood and thus does not act independently. See Marie Cornwall, ‘The Institutional Role of Mormon Women’, in Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton and Lawrence A. Young (eds.), Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1994), pp. 239-64.
In order to move beyond the victim/empowerment dyad, multiple spaces must be created where the complexity of women’s religious motivations may be wrestled with beyond the initial gaze of the scholar. These spaces could possibly act as a way of meeting, where divergent interests and ideologies might come together, for a time, in order to dialogue. This would allow for both scholars and traditional religious women to inhabit subjectivity as they exchange information and perspectives. In order to attempt to understand religious women’s relationship to the divine creating a space where they are understood as subjects is critical. By expanding beyond the victim/empowerment duality, scholars may be able to allow the feminine religious community to guide their research, exploring the lives of the feminist and non-feminist alike.

Western feminists’ expectations of how the belief in a female divine impacts a religious group may need to shift, as Mormon women demonstrate that believing in a female deity is not necessarily ‘feminist’. Rather, it is part of a highly differentiated gendered cosmology that propels distinct gender notions and encourages women to marry, give birth, mother, and practice complimentary gender roles. Also, expectations of what ‘feminism’ looks like must change within the Mormon community, as there are many types of feminisms with much diversity within each subgroup. Both Mormon women and feminists need to validate each other’s differences as well as commonalities, in order to meet honestly within complex spaces. Of course, these spaces will be messy, paradoxical and contradictory. They will be fluid and flexible, expanding as the participants’ comprehension grows and shifts. It is my hope that through this exercise, the complexity of Mormon women and other traditional religious women, as well as the nuances within feminism will be honored and grappled with.

Such spaces would allow for those who believe in a female deity but do not believe that feminism offers the path to one’s ultimate potential to be illuminated and understood. These spaces would highlight the challenge of Mormon women seeking autonomy when interdependence and family lead to their own deification. Within these spaces, scholars might be able to glimpse the enormous weight that motherhood has for Mormon women and other traditional religious women, and begin to realize that certain types of feminism, or certain tenets within some feminisms, might diminish a connection to children and men. For Mormon women, this would risk severing their connection to their own divinity and ultimately, would not be liberating, but restricting. While hierarchy, patriarchy and Americanism are still characteristics of Mormonism, in order to understand Mormon women, feminist scholars must deepen their understanding of the theological tenets of multiple...
gods, Mother in Heaven and the potential that all humans have the opportunity to become divine within the Mormon cosmology.

Obviously scholars still need to analyze and theorize. By moving beyond simplistic explanations for women’s participation in traditional religions, and by employing a type of empathy towards their subjects, scholars might be able to document how religious women ‘become’ on their own terms. Using Mormon women as a lens to examine the consequences of employing a victim/empowerment framework without examining theological commitments demonstrates the need for complex theoretical space to be cleared within feminist theory. Only through the creation of spaces and an attention to how traditional religious women understand themselves will scholars comprehend that what is liberating to one is restricting to another depending upon her theological commitments.