

Unorthodox Article

Philip Barlow's "Unorthodox Orthodoxy" (vol. 8 no. 5) draws attention to the crucial implications of the central Mormon belief that humankind can become gods, an investigation rarely conducted in theological writings in the Church today.

Barlow has attempted to show that the Mormon version of deification was taught in various periods throughout Christian history and that Mormons therefore need not be accused of "making up" the idea.

But has Barlow proven his thesis? The answer must be, "It all depends." From the orthodox Christian perspective, the answer is probably no. To begin with, the sources he cites from the late Middle Ages to the contemporary period hardly represent the orthodox position. Furthermore, the other authorities—those cited from the time of the early church Fathers to St. Thomas Aquinas—can, and have been, interpreted on these points in a way diametrically opposed to the meaning of the Mormon view that "men may become gods." On the alternate reading, the orthodox Christian would understand most if not all of these sayings as expressing the truth that man can become God in the sense that each of God's creations has within it the potential to be drawn back to and assimilated into the divine—the many shall, in time, become the one. In this view, God became man (Christ), that man (humankind) might become God, or in the words of St. Paul, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:17-19).

What Barlow has shown is that Western Christian tradition (not to mention the Eastern Orthodox tradition) is rich in speculations about the nature of the divine, the meaning of the incarnation, and hence, the possible relationships between God and man. But Barlow himself admits that he does not wish to imply "that any or all of the thinkers referred to . . . thought of *theosis* just as the Mormons do." Regardless of how Barlow wants to be taken on this point, the issue raised by his paper goes deeper than whether or not he has proven his thesis. Barlow seems to sense this when he acknowledges that this particular Mormon teaching offends modern Christians because it fosters the worst of human sins—the sin of pride.

I agree with Barlow that this teaching, even when it is expressed in the Church in the best possible way, often gives offense—particularly among those on the right wing of Evangelical Protestantism in America today—but for a reason that I think is more fundamental, both theologically and psychologically, than the one he suggests. The reason for this offense lies at the heart of Mormon theology, namely, the distinctive view of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. In the Mormon view, it is not strictly correct to say that humankind may become as God, as it is sometimes put. Rather, the stress should be on the claim that men and women may become gods; Mormonism therefore belongs among those religious traditions that view the divine as many and not one.

Here is the chief cause of the theological difference between ourselves and others within the Christian tradition and certainly between ourselves and the traditions of Judaism and Islam. Here is the chief cause of offense that the doctrine under consideration causes in the minds of many.

We must face squarely the point that others will understand what we mean when we proclaim that humankind can become gods only when we fully acknowledge that Mormon polytheism can never be reconciled with the prevailing form of monotheism that operates in other branches of Christianity. At the same time, we must acknowledge that while we can show evidence of such polytheism in the orthodox Christian tradition and in the biblical text, we take our stand on such matters not according to the norm of orthodox Christianity (as the title of Barlow's paper suggests) but on the authority of latter-day revelation. This is a Mormon way of saying something fundamental, something that always needs to be kept in mind in such discussions.

The groundwork of Mormon theology, just as with any world view, has its own integrity and authenticity. There is no Archimedean point from which all competing world views can be judged. We must trust in our own ability to express the truths of our position in a straightforward and clear manner. To this end I think Philip Barlow has made a contribution.

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Rediscovering Mormonism

Kent Robson's article, "Omnis on the Horizon" (vol. 8 no. 4) is a well-articulated severing of Mormon non-static limitations on the nature of God from Christian orthodoxy's static God of the three omnis. James M. Robison, professor of religion at Claremont Graduate School agrees that modern historical consciousness is itself (like Mormonism) founded upon the notion of flux—the supreme reality that everything in the cosmos changes with time. As he points out, "We now have, as a result of two

centuries of critical historiography (its limitations notwithstanding), a history of early Christianity which makes indisputable the theological change from Jesus to Paul, from Paul to Mark or Ignatius to Irenaeus or Origen, and then to Augustine or Athanasius. . . .

The time is past when predestination, an eternal [i.e., unchanging] plan or apocalyptic scheme, a Hegelian outline, a prophecy-fulfillment structure, an unalterable will of a changeless deity, can be presupposed in one's understanding of history and human existence." ("The Dismantling and Reassembling of the Categories of New Testament Scholarship,"

Interpretation 25 [1971]: 70, 71, 74-75, 76.)

Robson has correctly noted the irony of recent General Authorities' (and others') misunderstanding of Mormon theology, mistakenly desiring historically grandiose concepts in fear of offending orthodox sensibilities rather than stripping these falsehoods of their cultural appeal.

Irony further abounds when Mormons espouse, assert, articulate erroneous doctrine. And how ironic (given the cover story, "Excommunication,") to realize the possibility of Church "authorities" forcibly excommunicating a scholar who knows more about Mormon doctrine than they do.

The revolution of New Testament analytical categories (a la Robinson) bodes well for Mormonism and some of the distinctive features thereof (e.g., premortal existence) now being discovered in authentic early Christian documents (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas). Why are we paying the Cambridge University Press to publish "Mormon" scriptures, when those (traditional) scriptures may be outmoded in light of modern documentary discoveries? Why not a Mormon-Cambridge Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Truth (or something else from the Nag Hammadi corpus)? Why not a leather-bound, name-engraved *Since Cumorah*?

When will we Mormons learn that truth in a real world of incessant flux is the "eternal" plan of salvation, where only birth, death, and resurrection are mandatory, all else being left to personal free choice and individual responsibility of the Final Judgment?

Why are gospel doctrine teachers being disciplined for digressing from Church-published manuals to include

discussions and criticisms of New Testament texts? (I know one who was censured and removed from all teaching positions by his bishop for teaching ideas expressly contrary to the "Lectures on Faith.")

Mormons may someday realize that their unique theology is not only presently being "rediscovered" in hidden documentary discoveries but that it is the only system of personal philosophy which truly makes sense.

When the individual common sense of Mormonism becomes commonplace,

members may become less intimidated by authoritarian (government or Church) pronouncements, less leader-oriented, less priesthood-regulated and more individually inspired. Then the Church will be able to dissolve (like the dictatorship of the proletariat!) and the family truly assume its rightful place in the gospel scheme. Then the concept of excommunication will become obsolete.

Gerry Ensley
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