

QUESTION: IS SEXUAL GENDER ETERNAL?

By Jeffrey E. Keller

As has been covered elsewhere (*Dialogue* 15:59-78, 1982), there has never been a consensus among Mormon theologians as to when we acquired any of our premortal individual characteristics, including sexual identity. Joseph Smith's original teaching on the subject stated only that "the Spirit of Man is not a created being; it existed from eternity" (Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p.60). Though the prophet never explicitly mentioned gender, and indeed used a neuter pronoun to describe man's eternal spirit, some of his contemporaries inferred pre-earthly gender from his teachings. Joseph Lee Robinson, for example, wrote, "As we understand, [our spirits] are organized upon the principle of male and female" (in Andrus, *God, Man and the Universe*, p.20).

Though later church president Brigham Young and several key apostles were never as pointed in elucidating the doctrine of spiritual gender as Robinson, their belief in the concept followed from their assumption that "the spirit is in the likeness and shape of the body which it inhabits" (Penrose, *Journal of Discourses* 26:21; see also JD 15:242; 26:216; Pratt, *Key to Theology*, pp. 50, 124).

John Taylor and Orson Pratt more explicitly mentioned "male and female spirits" (JD 13:333; Young, "Origin and Destiny of Women", pamphlet by Alder, n.d., p.4) and Taylor further proclaimed that courtship between spirits led to sexual covenants in the pre-earthly life. According to Taylor, women in the pre-earth life "chose a kindred spirit whom [they] loved in the spirit world . . . to be [their] head-stay, husband and protection on earth" (ibid).

Decades later, Elder B.H. Roberts became the first church theologian to postulate gender before spiritual birth: "There is in that complex thing we call man, an intelligent entity, uncreated, self-existent, indestructible, . . . possessed of

powers that go with personality only, hence that entity is he, not it, . . ." (1908 *Seventies Course in Theology*, p.8) Elder James Talmage similarly proclaimed six years later: "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints affirms as reasonable, scriptural, and true, the doctrine of the eternity of sex [i.e. gender] among the children of God." Talmage unintentionally anticipated future questions on this doctrine when he also declared: "There is no accident of chance, due to purely physical conditions, by which the sex of the unborn is determined; the body takes form as male or female according to the sex of the spirit whose appointment it is to tenant that body" (*Young Women's Journal*, 25:600, 1914).

The issue of assigned gender resurfaced most recently as a response to the questions of homosexuality and in the role of women in the church. Addressing the latter topic in an address to the 1983 October Women's Conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, "I know of no doctrine which states that we made a choice when we came to earth as to whether we wished to be male or female. That choice was made by our Father in Heaven in his infinite wisdom" (*Ensign* 13:83).

Seven years earlier, in October 1976 Priesthood session of General Conference, Elder Boyd K. Packer had tackled the sensitive issue of homosexuality. In this talk, he addressed a concern of transsexuals (i.e. people who feel that they are females trapped in a male body or vice versa). Echoing Talmage's 1914 sentiments, Packer stated, "From our premortal life we were directed into a physical body. There is no mismatching of bodies and spirits" (*Conference Reports*, p. 101).

Modern sexual issues present more theological questions than just the mismatching of spirits, however. As pragmatically obvious as sexual gender is, it is

frustratingly hard to define. Duane Jeffery has treated this issue in some detail in "Intersex" (*Dialogue* 12:107-113, 1979). Briefly, all human embryos initially have the complete cellular apparatus for making male as well as female sexual organs. The sex of the end product is determined by the embryo's particular genetic make-up as reflected in its paired sexual chromosomes, designated X and Y. If the embryo has two X chromosomes, its potentially male (Wolffian) system degenerates and the female (Muellerian) system develops. If the embryo has one X and one Y chromosome, the reverse happens and a male develops. In the real world, however, every conceivable thing that could go wrong with this idealized system sometimes does. Depending on the physical location of each type of cell line, some individuals may become reproductively normal males or females, or may develop into true hermaphrodites, having one testicle and one ovary, or both types of tissue on a single gonad. Further, since sexual development is also dependent on genes found in non-sexual chromosomes, malfunction of these other critical genes can cause a variety of sexual dysgenesis: infertile but normal appearing females, infertile but normal appearing males, and many varieties of pseudo-hermaphroditism wherein it is often impossible to say by looking at the external genitalia of the newborn whether the child is male or female. Whether to raise these children as male or female is often an arbitrary decision made by doctors and parents. Both decisions usually require reconstructive surgery and lifelong hormonal therapy. One would expect that with respect to the indwelling spirit, the choice of gender made by these parents is incorrect 50% of the time. There are also cases of normal male children who have been raised as psychologically normal females (albeit infertile, of course) following accidental amputation of the male genitalia.

These diverse cases, as a whole, are not as uncommon as one might think. They are problematic to Mormon theology because they suggest that many people who were, say, males in the preexistence have in this life a female body and a female self-

image; they marry and are sealed as females and raise adopted children as females. The theological issue of their eternal sexual status is understandably of vital interest to them.

One possible way to explain these cases would be to invoke the omniscience of God, i.e., God knew that the surgeon would slip during the circumcision and amputate the penis, and that as a result, the child would be raised as a female. Therefore, God inserted a female spirit originally. However, such a solution may invoke an inordinate amount of predestination relative to Mormon theology.

The case of the transsexual is perhaps more problematic. The transsexual male sincerely and agonizingly feels that he is a female trapped inside a male body, typically from his earliest childhood memories. Despite public assurances by General Authorities that God never makes mistakes assigning gender, and despite that participation in a sex-change operation is grounds for excommunication, the church has been surprisingly lenient in dealing with individual cases of transsexualism and sexual dysgenesis.

Sexual identity after the resurrection is implied by the Mormon concept of 1) a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother, who have begotten our spirits in their image (*Messages of the First Presidency* 4:203; Wilcox, *Sunstone* 5:9-15, 1980), and 2) our capacity to become like them after resurrection. Indeed, the epitome of exaltation to Mormons is "eternal lives, meaning that in the resurrection they have eternal [spiritual progeny]" (*Mormon Doctrine*, 1st ed., p. 220).

According to this theology, sexual gender after the resurrection is essential because "[God] created man, as we create our children; for there is no other process of creation in heaven, in the earth, or under the earth or in all eternities" (Brigham Young, JD 11:122; see also JD 6:101; 16:376). Indeed, Apostle Orson Pratt went so far as to assign post-resurrection sexual reproduction to all living things: "the spirits of both vegetables and animals are the offspring of male and female parents which have been raised from the dead" (*The Seer*, p. 38).

Heber C. Kimball went further, assigning spiritual gender and sexual reproduction in inanimate objects like the earth: "The earth has a spirit as much as any body has a spirit" (JD 5:172). "Where did the earth come from? From its parent earths" (JD 6:36). Kimball indeed understood the interaction in this life between farmer and mother earth to be a type of sexual congress resulting in the "conception" of plants: "Does this earth conceive? It does, and it brings forth. If it did not, why do you go and put your wheat into the ground? Does it not conceive it? But it does not conceive except that you put it there. It conceives and brings forth, and you and I live" (JD 6:36). In modern times John Widtsoe states with more reserve: "[Sex] is an eternal quality which has its equivalent everywhere. It is indestructible. The relationship between men and women is eternal and must continue eternally" (*A Rational Theology*, p. 69).

However, "only resurrected and glorified beings can become parents of spirit offspring" (*The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve, in Man: His Origin and Destiny*, p. 129). When questioned as to how the lower kingdoms would be kept from cohabitation, Joseph Fielding Smith responded that "the privileges of increase or cohabitation between men and women in these kingdoms would be impossible because of peculiar conditions pertaining to these glories" (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:64:67). Smith based this interpretation on Orson Pratt's teaching in *The Seer* (p. 274) that

"there will be several classes of resurrected bodies: . . . each of these classes will differ from others by prominent and marked distinctions." Smith interpreted Pratt's "marked distinctions" to be the absence of sex organs and sexual gender in the lower kingdoms:

"I take it that men and women will, in [the Terrestrial and Telesstial Kingdoms], be just what the so-called Christian world expects us to be—neither man nor woman, merely immortal beings having received the resurrection" (*Doctrines of Salvation* 2:287-288).

In conclusion, the Mormon doctrine of sexual gender encompasses several not completely consistent beliefs. First, Mormon theologians agree that sexual gender has existed from the beginning, though they disagree as to when the beginning was. Nevertheless, men and women created in the image of divine heavenly parents, procreate our spirits via sexual union; our mortal bodies look like these spirits. Second, the blurring and overlapping of sexual identity in this life do not necessarily negate the concept of eternal gender if the omniscience of God can always be invoked to explain them, though this is not without pitfalls. Finally, sexual gender and sexual procreation may continue after the resurrection in the celestial kingdom but not necessarily, though this has not been ruled out, in the lower kingdoms.

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SOCIAL STUDIES

By Martha Bradley

Mormons have long attached great importance to the concept of an ideal order of community life. Different strategies have been tried at various times: we may recall the distinctive aspects of life in Kirtland and Nauvoo, and many communities in the Great Basin were founded as part of the United Order experiment. But while the approaches to Zion may have altered over the years, the goal itself has remained constant.

This aspiration toward the ideal of Zion has left a distinctive mark on Mormon settlements, and in recent years that distinctive character has drawn the attention of Mormon and non-Mormon scholars alike. The literature dealing with Mormon community life and the dynamics of those communities continues to grow, but the following abstracts summarize some of the more notable articles to appear in this area.

Mark Leone "The Evolution of Mormon Culture in Eastern Arizona" *Utah Historical Quarterly* 40(1972):122-41.

Each town in the little Colorado area of Arizona was both part of the larger network of Mormon towns in the Great Basin and an isolated, insulated world unto itself. The Little Colorado area settled under the United Order of Enoch between 1876 and 1885. Colonization was strongly influenced by United Order ideas; the cooperative principle was extended to every form of labor and investment. While cooperation helped to unify the Saints in tight communities, it also fostered the isolation of each town and encouraged the inhabitants to sever ties with the outside world. As was true in most Mormon settlements the notions of self-sufficiency and internal completeness added religious significance to cooperative endeavors.

In the first twenty-five years of settlement each town moved toward internal isolation. This

trend was advanced by intermarriage, which accounted for 80 percent of the marriages in the settlements. This in turn solidified the inbred kinship network of religious, social, and economic ties. Intermarriage created distinct economic advantages; at the same time endogamy was a function of economic stability. Isolation was also extended because each town raised essentially the same crops to ensure that basic subsistence was possible. In the nineteenth century economic stability was equated with self-sufficiency.

Tithing, the author explains, was the means for dealing with inequalities among the various areas. Bishops and other church leaders were the agents of redistribution. Regional disparities were handled by the stakes in the same way through the storehouse system and the Arizona Cooperative Mercantile Institution. Furthermore, the Church functioned in the distribution of natural resources and regulated water sharing and the allotment of land.

In the twentieth century the rate of community exogamy doubled, thus increasing community interdependence. Leone examines this and other factors that caused the area to become absorbed into the national economy.

After 1920 the Church's role in the economic life of the community changed; it assumed a back seat to individual economic decisions about the allocation of resources. In the nineteenth century ecclesiastical leaders chose and defined the tasks and work to be done. With the shift of power to the individual Church member, roles were less precisely defined and a new flexibility or willingness to serve where needed was required.

Dean May "The Making of the Saints: The Mormon Town as a Setting for the Study of

Cultural Change." *Utah Historical Quarterly* 45(Winter 1977):1:75-93.

In large measure the main business of the Church in the nineteenth century was to settle the Saints in unified, harmonious, and orderly communities. This effort centered on the doctrinal concept of the gathering, which was extended beyond the ideal of a diffuse community of the faithful to include locality—combinations of Saints in compact farms and villages.

When both Brigham Young and John Taylor directed the members to gather together in towns, pragmatism directed their thinking. Cooperative effort facilitated ecclesiastical organization and made possible regular meeting schedules and stable leadership systems. The mutual protection fostered by cooperative relationships benefitted everyone.

The author reviews past community studies that have centered on the experience of the Mormons, particularly the work of Lowry Nelson and Thomas O'Dea. Since 1849 an extensive bibliography of Mormon towns studies has developed that stresses the distinctive aspects of LDS town life. As a group these studies ask similar questions about how this distinct subculture emerged. Their observations vary, as do their methods. They generally agree that the Mormon community places a greater emphasis on unity and solidarity, on cooperative enterprise, and group values over individual achievement.

May discusses as well the work of social historians who in the last fifteen years have done important community studies of New England towns. He suggests that this work illustrates the potential for similar studies of Mormon communities. He encourages a longitudinal approach wherein a detailed analysis of changes over time in economic and social conditions of community life would be made.

One significant difference between the two areas of study—the New England town and the Mormon town—is that New

England towns moved toward greater disintegration wherein communities lost control and broke apart, whereas the movement in the Mormon town was instead toward reintegration and greater order.

Richard V. Francaviglia "The Mormon Landscape: Definition of an Image in the American West." *Proceedings of the Association of American Geographers* 2(1970):50-61.

Community, to the nineteenth century Mormon, was a set not just of relationships or neighborhoods but of appearances as well. Most Mormon settlements were founded upon basically the same principles, and were run by ecclesiastical officials who had similar resources and motivations. They also had certain visual characteristics that were typical of Mormon towns throughout the West.

The basis of many Mormon colonization efforts was the plat of the City of Zion. This was always modified to fit specific environments or economic needs, but in general the objective was to create beautiful, orderly cities. The plan for the City of Zion went so far as to include instructions for gardens, orchards, and placement of houses. Much of what was visually typical of Mormon towns was, therefore, prescribed by the plan: for example, the common north/south, east/west orientation and the unusually wide streets. Although many elements were characteristically Mormon, others were simply small-town.

The ward meetinghouse was located near the town square at both the symbolic and actual center of the life of the community. Also bordering the town square was the school, which again illustrated the dynamic relationship between education and religion in the Mormon faith.

Although ideally beautiful cities of God, most of these towns were actually sturdy, commonsense farming communities exhibiting a predominantly rural feeling. Again in a manner suggested by the plan of the City of Zion, the Saints built their homes, farm buildings, and

corrals on small pieces of property in town and would travel to their outlying farmlands. Permanence was the most typical feature of houses—these homes were built to last. A high percentage of them were built with brick or stone, often in the Nauvoo style, thus creating a direct visual link between the group's history in New England, in Illinois, and in Utah.

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