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## The First Vision: Re-Visioning Historical Experience

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## The First Vision: Re-Visioning Historical Experience

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**I**n a recent article, Jacob Neusner remarks that some of us have performed “a negative miracle.” We have, he says, taken a subject, namely religion, which is “rich in life, and made it dull,” have “turned the humanistic study of religion into a technology.”

We have established religious studies as a respectable academic discipline, but perhaps we have done so at the expense of burying the *experience* of religions as they are practiced. Neusner continues:

The [dead] subject we propose to describe and interpret in our classroom remains alive outside. Yet for many of us, particularly in history of religions (perhaps also in the philosophical side of things), that is an unpleasant fact, one we ignore. I think this is so because among our colleagues are some who do not really like religion in its living forms, but find terribly interesting religion in its dead ones. That is why an old Christian text, one from the first century for example, is deemed a worthy subject of scholarship. But a fresh Christian expression (I think in this connection of the *Book of Mormon*) is available principally for ridicule, but never for study. Religious experience in the third century is fascinating. Religious experience in the twentieth century is frightening or absurd.<sup>1</sup>

Neusner goes on to explain that we have taken on the jargon of a pseudo-science, that we have lost sight of the central issues of human experience which both religious studies and humanities should address:

[The disciplines of philosophy, literature, history, and religion] explore the great works of imagination and passion, not alone of intellect, and allow us to experience, in the deeds and vision of other men and women, hitherto unimagined thoughts, unseen visions, unheard sounds, unplumbed depths of mature emotion, by which we measure and shape our own capacity and so transcend our small and limited selves.

If we study religion, how can we insist that it is illegitimate to pay heed to the deeds and visions of those we study, but only proper to reduce them to textual variants on the one side, or to examples of a sociological sport, on the other. If we admit to learning the unimagined thoughts and unseen visions not only of poets but also of religious geniuses, as I think we must do, then is our understanding of our scholarly and educational work not subject to a measure of revision?<sup>2</sup>

The need for Neusner's having to write this particular article may be invisible here at Brigham Young University because we are in a place where the religion of the classroom is, for the most part, the religion of experience outside the classroom. But there are other places. Places in which students, colleagues, and administrators still remain unconvinced that religion addresses the great questions of lived reality, questions of love and dying, of self-transcendence, of sacrifice and resignation, of what it means to be human, to wait, to hope, to expect, to interrogate the cosmos expecting an answer. "Some men and women have known how passionately to care and dream for what is sacred. These we teach: the creations of their caring, their passion, and their sacrifice."<sup>3</sup>

All of which is to say that I am delighted to be included in a program which, while dealing with the literature of belief, extends to the expression of the religious *experience* in sacred texts. I take this to mean that we expect a certain transparency

of text which allows the experience of the *numinous* to show through.

We might, I suppose, get entangled in the "expression" or linguistic part of this title; but I have chosen to dwell on the experiential aspect: on the idea that, as Stanley Hopper might have said, text can in some way be seen to be the "ambush of the Marvelous,"<sup>4</sup> that which has laid hold of the great and glorious theophany.

I have taken the liberty of subjecting a Mormon text to the same sort of comparative study which we are willing to apply to other texts, believing that this can be an illuminating venture, rather than a reducing exercise. In so doing, I have allowed myself to be caught between a rock and a hard place. I have agreed to take seriously the Mormon vision, which leaves me open to the ridicule of my colleagues in the East. For this essay, I have agreed to allow the Mormon text to speak its own experience alongside the texts of other religions, distinguishing none as more true than another. That leaves me open to criticism from those within who might wish the Mormon text could in some way be raised aloft or set apart from other texts before it is subjected to scholarly scrutiny rather than after.

For this paper I have selected a very small portion of a Mormon text, Joseph Smith's account of his first vision. In fact, it is one of the more obscure Mormon texts, being tucked away in the Pearl of Great Price, perhaps the least-known, outside the Church, of all Christian texts. It is referred to in the "Explanatory Introduction" to the Doctrine and Covenants but only gradually received the attention which accompanied the Joseph Smith visions of Moroni, possibly because the later visions led directly to the unearthing of the Book of Mormon, which gained immediate attention. Certainly, outside the Church the First Vision is frequently overlooked. I cannot here discuss the reasons for this lack of attention since it is my intention to deal with the experience related to the text rather than with the historiographical development of the text. Other scholars have documented the First Vision in its historical setting.<sup>5</sup>

A testimony of the truth of Mormonism consists not only in the affirmation of the *content* of the revelations made to Joseph

Smith, but also in the belief *that* there is a modern-day revelation which began with his First Vision. That is to say, Mormons believe first *that* there was a vision and second believe *what* that vision included. Consequently, it is necessary to engage in a two-pronged investigation. The first inquiry will be directed toward the questions, "Did Joseph Smith have a vision?" "What is the visionary experience?" "Is a vision necessarily a religious experience; and if so, how, as religious experience, is it different from ordinary profane experience?"

Second, I will try to direct attention toward the *content* of that vision, most particularly the plurality of personages which appeared to Joseph Smith.

When we concern ourselves simply with the account of the First Vision, we have no more to commend it to us than we have in the visions of George Fox or Theresa of Avila. We have what Joseph Smith says: "I saw a vision." (JS—H 1:25.) He is insistent upon it as is every person who believes he or she had a vision. William James has said that "the genuineness of religion is . . . indissolubly bound up with the question whether the prayerful consciousness be or be not deceitful. The conviction that something is genuinely transacted in this consciousness is the very core of living religion."<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Fielding Smith alludes to another kind of awareness when he says: "Great was his [Joseph Smith's] faith—so great that he was able . . . to penetrate the veil. . . . It was not, therefore, with the power of the natural eye that this great Vision was beheld, but by the aid of the eye of the spirit. The natural man without the saving grace of the power of the Lord, could not behold his presence in this manner, for he would be consumed."<sup>7</sup>

Here we have the testimonies of a philosopher / psychologist and of a believer / historian attesting to the same thing: we must judge religious experience by criteria different from those applied to other phenomena. And in some way both James and Joseph Fielding Smith direct us to faith as a useful instrument in this evaluative process. James is further helpful in pointing out that theories which discredit religious experience because of its origins are not only unsuccessful but unintelligent as well. No

one, he claims, would attack the findings of a genius in the natural sciences by discoursing upon his medical history, family financial status, moral conduct, or otherwise. Neither, says James, can we discredit religious genius by referring to epilepsy, syphilis, disreputable occupations, etc. "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots." It is, then, what issues from a religious experience that counts, not the past life of the visionary. Were that not the case we could not listen at all to Paul or to Siddhartha Gautama or to Mahavira the Jain, all of whom seemed given to excess at one time in their lives. As James says, let "the bugaboo of morbid origin . . . scandalize your piety no more."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the best efforts of James and others, I am still plagued by those who ask, "How can anyone as smart as you are believe such junk?" The only appropriate answer seems to be Chesterton's remark that he is constantly amazed that people will believe that chickens come from eggs but not that princes come from frogs when he has seen many more princes that looked like frogs than chickens that looked like eggs.<sup>9</sup>

As for Joseph Smith's vision, he is certain that it occurred. He was first seized by some dark power of destruction which departed with the coming of the light. When a Methodist minister attacked him for reporting the vision, he was astonished; neither did he understand the prejudice directed toward him by those who could not see the truth of his vision. It was, as far as he was concerned, a fact that he had beheld a vision. He had actually seen the light and neither hatred, ridicule, nor persecution could convince him otherwise. It was true, and he could better withstand the attacks of his fellow human beings than he could withstand God. He *knew* he'd had the vision and he was convinced that God knew it. So convinced was he of this experience that he had full confidence that other divine manifestations could occur.

Our point, as scholars of religion, is not to argue whether or not the vision occurred. It is, instead, to learn what we are able from Smith's visionary experience. Jacob Neusner would no doubt remind us that few question Arjuna's vision of Krishna or

the visions of Black Elk in quite the same way we question the visions of Joseph Smith.

We question the validity only of that which can immediately impinge upon our current experience. While we never question ancient revelation, we question modern revelation because it is threatening. It threatens our experience of our world, the world that is stale and dull but nevertheless reliable precisely because it is not affected by revelations popping up at us just when we have things all sorted out. To risk believing in modern revelation is to risk changing a way of life. And that is a terrifying risk. (This fact we ought not to forget when we preach about modern-day prophets.) The human experience of the divine is awesome and it is just this awesomeness that confronts anyone who must deal with the real possibility of experiencing revelation. Undoubtedly it was part of the experience of Joseph Smith.

This is the awesomeness that Rudolph Otto has called the *Numinous*, the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*—that which terrifies and yet at the same time entices, fascinates, draws us into it in such a way that we experience the reality of another kind of thinking. We experience the eruption of the divine and that experience is too much for us.<sup>10</sup> How many times people have been frozen in fear at the presentation of divinity: the Philistines who steal the Ark are given a plague; Moses is warned not to let his people ascend Mount Sinai; Jesus warns Peter, James, and John as they return from the Mount of Transfiguration, “Tell no man what ye have seen”; the fear and trembling of Arjuna at the presentation of the divine form of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>11</sup> It is claimed that no man looks on God and lives. And to believe in the vision of Joseph Smith is to believe that one may have to look on God and yet live. And that risk is great because one will never again live in the same way. To look upon God is to die to the old and to become the new. And we are too comfortable with the old. The hierophany, the eruption of the Holy—that is indeed, as Joseph Fielding Smith reminds us, something to be viewed only with the eyes of faith lest we be consumed.

The experience of the *numinosum*! That is the visionary ex-



perience. Sadly, I find it is missing in the lives of most of my students. Nothing grasps them, least of all anything categorized as "religious." They are bereft of a whole range of experience because they have neither the eye of faith nor the four-fold vision of William Blake.

It is this experience of the *numinous* which both draws and repels that makes the difference between *Geschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte* (history and sacred history). Faith in this first vision of Joseph Smith as the manifestation of God in human history, as the first theophany of the new dispensation, is what makes the linear daily existence of the Mormon different from the daily existence of the nonbeliever. Events are not seen by the believer simply as strings of incidents to be "gotten through" in order to get on to the next event. In sacred history each event, each encounter, is endowed with meaning because it is done in the recognition that human history is of vital importance because it is through the dailiness of living that God draws near to man, confronts and challenges human life, and finally makes demands on human thinking and behavior. This, by the way, is also recognized by rabbinic Judaism, hence the seemingly nit-picking detail of parts of the Talmud. In fact, both rabbinic Judaism and Mormonism agree that God is concerned about the small things of daily life: eating, traveling ("take us home in safety"), health, sex. History becomes a series of hierophanies.

One who has been taken hold of by a vision such as the first vision of Joseph Smith no longer lives in quite the same historical frame as one who has not experienced the eruption of the *numinous* in human affairs. Mormons say that Joseph Smith had that first vision in the Sacred Grove. In fact, he had it in a clump of trees which then became the Sacred Grove. We testify to the First Vision when we say that we have a testimony that Joseph Smith was a prophet. If we say that in honesty, what we mean is that we too are aware that the divine is indeed at work in the midst of us.

One of the most important things about Joseph Smith's account of his first vision is his certainty that some divine manifestation would come once again. This absolute surety that the

finite and infinite, the transcendent and immanent meet grows, for Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints, out of the conviction *that* the First Vision occurred. It also becomes certain as we look at the accounts of *what* was revealed in that First Vision.

Here I will speak only of one aspect of the content of the vision. Nevertheless, it is the *thatness* of the First Vision which urges the discussion I wish to begin. I am speaking of the nature of God.

It seems to me that there is a logical inconsistency in experiencing a theophany such as a vision and thereafter making the assertion that God is abstract, cannot be known, is purely invisible spirit. Quite obviously, if one has experienced a vision of the divine, the divine can be known, at least to some degree. This is not to imply that visionary experience provides exhaustive knowledge of God. Nor is it to suggest that every paradox ought to be resolved. It is to suggest, however, that every appearance of the divine in the realm of the finite ought to give at least the intimation that there is a finite aspect to the divine and/or a divine aspect to the finite. In other words, God and man are in some way sufficiently similar that they can know and understand each other. It is on this issue that most of the accusations of heresy against Mormonism depend.

Of the several accounts of Joseph Smith's first vision and of the testimonies of others of Joseph's account of the vision, only the 1832 account fails to mention the fact that there were involved and present two distinct personages.

It was the matter of the two personages that caused the Methodist minister to whom Joseph first spoke of the vision to brand him a heretic. While I have, until now, been speaking of the experience of the vision in and of itself, I wish now to turn to the experience of the *content* of the vision insofar as it can be related to the matter of the two personages of the Father and the Son appearing separate and distinct from each other.

Once more we can turn to Joseph Fielding Smith: "The doctrine was taught that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost were incomprehensible, without body, parts, and passions. A revelation of the Father and the Son as separate persons, each with a

body tangible and in the form of the body of man, was destructive of this doctrine, as revelation [the vision] was [destructive] of the doctrine of the closed heavens.<sup>12</sup>

If we are still to deal with experience, the question now becomes, "What is the difference between God experienced as One and God experienced as Many?"

It seems to me that before all else, the experience of Many allows room for univocal experience. Zeus alone, Shiva alone, Wakan Tanka alone, or at least one at a time. Joseph Smith appears to think similarly, for while insisting on the plurality of Gods, he also affirms that there is one *for us*. It is less clear how the experience of One and only One allows for the experience of Multiplicity.

Joseph Smith spoke frequently of there being not God, but Gods. Perhaps his two strongest statements on that matter are found just a year apart in sermons delivered on Sunday mornings in June of 1843 and 1844. The statement of 1844 is the most emphatic. In it he speaks of the persecution received from those who say that his preaching a plurality of Gods shows he has fallen; and he says that the thought has been with him for some time that he ought to clarify his ideas for the people. He then commences to preach on the plurality of Gods. He repeats that he has never preached otherwise and that the elders have been preaching the same doctrine for fifteen years. (That would date back to 1829, before the organization of the Church, so the belief has been there from the beginning and this does not represent a change in his thinking):

I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods. If this is in accordance with the New Testament, lo and behold! we have three gods anyhow, and they are plural: and who can contradict it?

. . . The doctrine of a plurality [sic] of Gods is as prominent in the Bible as any other doctrine. It is all over the face of the Bible. It stands beyond the power of controversy. A wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err therein.

Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many. I want to set it forth in a plain and simple manner; but to us there is but one God—that is *pertaining to us*; and he is in all and through all. But if Joseph Smith says there are Gods many and Lords many, they cry, “Away with him! Crucify him!”<sup>13</sup>

The Prophet then continues that no one has seen the eternal world to offer proof that there is only one God. He answers the arguments of those who accuse him of worshipping heathen Gods: “Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many; and that makes a plurality of Gods, in spite of the whims of all men. Without a revelation, I am not going to give them the knowledge of the God of heaven. You know and I testify that Paul had no allusion to the heathen gods. I have it from God, and get over it if you can.”<sup>14</sup>

Joseph then makes his argument from linguistic evidence, concluding that “the word *Eloheim* ought to be in the plural all the way through—Gods: The heads of the Gods appointed one God for us; and when you take [that] view of the subject, *it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the Gods.*”<sup>15</sup>

We must here add “and the beauty, holiness and perfection of man” since the Prophet continues his sermon to include the teaching that men shall also be gods.

There is no question that Joseph believed and expected others to believe that there were many gods and would yet be many more and that they would all be gods which were in some sense finite in that they occupied time and space.

What is remarkable here is the fact that the gods are experienced as nonabsolutistic characters. The experience of the gods as in some sense finite and near, it seems to me, is quite different from the orthodox Christian view of God as wholly Other, transcendent only, definitely not finite in any way, shape, or form. The problem of the “infinite qualitative distinction” which makes it impossible to “experience” God directly or only as an abstract Other, simply does not apply in Mormonism. God is not “supernatural” in the way the word is generally used and consequently is felt, not as distant or discontinuous with human experience, but as an integral part of the human experience. In

fact, the experiencing of God is so much a part of human experience that man is endowed not only with the capacity to experience god *qua* God, but also with the capacity to experience himself as god, that is, to experience God-ness.

Because man participates in the same necessity of being that God does, traditional problems with which the sincere orthodox Christian is buffeted—problems of contingency, meaninglessness, and alienation—are not a necessary part of Mormon experience. This is not to say that Mormons don't experience these things or that if they do they need only pray more, do more church work, and visit the temple more often, and it will all go away; but it is to say that if Mormon experience includes any of the above problems, the person is not fully experiencing the possibilities available and accorded to him in LDS theology. (This is a descriptive statement and is not to be construed as assigning blame or responsibility.)

In Mormonism, man, though finite, is not completely separated from God, a concept which, along with those just mentioned, rests in some sense upon the details of the First Vision. Joseph Smith had a vision in which two godly personages appeared to him in space and time, and they were recognizably constructed in the same image in which man is constructed. We have in this small portion of Mormon thought almost all of the "heresies" of the nineteenth century. The canon is not closed, God has a body, there is more than one God, man can be godly (no original sin), God occupies space and time, not in the complex manner of the *homoousia* / *homoiousia* controversy but in the same manner in which man occupies space and time.

Human action in history takes on importance because God and man intersect. No wonder Joseph Smith was told to join none of the existing churches. Had they understood him, they would not have admitted him anyway.

I want now to deal with only one branch of this extraordinary theology: that of the multiplicity of gods. What is the experience of one who perceives the gods as multiple? How is it different from the experience of one who perceives God as only One?

Let me refer to a very small book which was published first in 1974 and was reissued in French in February 1979, David L. Miller's *The New Polytheism*. We can call Joseph Smith's idea the "plurality of gods," "multiplicity of gods," or whatever, but there may be reasons why it *ought* to be called polytheism or at least "the new polytheism."

Miller makes some insightful prefatory remarks: "The multiple patterns of polytheism allow room to move meaningfully through a pluralistic universe. They free one to affirm the radical plurality of the self, an affirmation that one has seldom been able to manage because of the guilt surrounding monotheism's insidious implication that we have to 'get it all together.'" <sup>16</sup>

Miller cites the multifaceted richness of Greek structures of consciousness, long forgotten, sneered at, or pronounced heretical, but which, nevertheless, are a major part of the Western intellectual inheritance. One can wonder with Miller what the polytheistic experience has to do with the general cultural situation of the age, and also *how* (or even *if*) the modern experience of polytheism is related to ancient polytheism and/or to traditional Christian experience.

Miller's book is not germane to this paper because he suddenly discovers that Mormonism was right all along. In fact, he concerns himself only with the Greek gods and goddesses, ignoring entirely the Hindu pantheon because, he says, "we are willynilly Greeks because we are Western." At the time his book was written, Miller had no knowledge of the pluralistic impulses of Mormonism. Rather, his book is important because it raises the issue of the experience of multiplicity in Western thought. What does it mean to experience gods rather than God? And why is the issue so pertinent to the contemporary life of religion?

First, it is of import because our experience is manifold. We speak of polyphonic meaning in psychology, "polymorphous reality as a key to . . . history" (Brown), "plurisignificative knowing" (Wheelwright), "polysemous functioning of imaginal discourse" (Hart), "pluralistic ethnic communities" (Novak), and polyarchic government (Robert Dahl).

Nietzsche, says Miller, says it "straight out:" Polytheism! He refuses to hide behind "academic verbiage." And polytheistic to Miller means concrete, real, taking place in the lived reality of people, rather than in the false unity of the abstractions of Greek philosophy. It means being saved, as Mormonism is, from absolutism, since absolutism does not mix well with a finitistic god.

However, along with naming our experience polytheistic, Nietzsche (and Miller) also announce the death of God. Of this Miller says, "The announcement of the death of God was the obituary of a useless single-minded, and one-dimensional norm." A God who never existed in the form which was pronounced dead.

I find it most interesting that Miller sees "an incipient polytheism lurking always in democracy," because, he believes, social monotheism ends in fascism, imperialism, feudalism, and monarchy. "In calling our time polytheist, we are saying something about the state of democracy of our time."

We know from 2 Nephi that there must needs be "an opposition in all things" (2:11). Miller would call that statement a kind of philosophical polytheism since philosophical monotheism would attempt to raise Truth, Goodness, and Beauty to such heights that opposition would be eliminated.

Psychologically, Miller continues, "polytheism is a matter of the radical experience of equally real, but mutually exclusive aspects of the self. Personal identity cannot seem to be fixed. Normalcy cannot be defined." In polytheism, this experiencing of the self in many facets is not seen as pathological: "One gets along quite well in reality; in fact the very disparateness of the multifaceted self seems to have survival power. It seems to carry with it a certain advantage in the face of the times."

Miller uses the word "polytheistic" to apply to the social, philosophical, and psychological realms because he believes that behind all these lies a *religious* situation. Miller further points out that religious polytheism leaves room for a monotheism of sorts. Greece, India, Egypt, and Mesopotamia in fact were in some ways "consecutive monotheisms" or henotheisms. So with Joseph Smith. The gods are plural, but *there is one for*

*us here and now.* Other places, other worlds? Joseph Smith fully expected they would have their own gods.

Miller makes a further point in regard to the early polytheistic cultures in commenting that religious practice and theology are or can be quite separate from one another. One might, and most did, worship one god—Vishnu, Wakan Tanka, Baal—but it required a polytheistic system to explain religious behavior, which is to say that the real practice of monotheistic religion may require a polytheistic theology to account for multiple experiences of faith. This, I want to suggest, is what we have in Mormonism. While one God is worshipped there is yet a polytheistic theology to account for multiple faith experiences. Individual revelation and free agency are the final appeal because Mormonism recognizes multiple faith experiences.

What fails a people in a time when life is experienced polytheistically is not their God but their monopricipled thinking and theologizing. “Monotheistic thinking” cannot handle “pluralistic understanding” and we are left with incomprehensible explanations of the Trinity which finally cause those trying to explain it to give up and say, “Well, it’s all a mystery anyway.”

It is this steadfast refusal to admit to polytheism which contorts even the most lucid theologian’s explanation of the Godhead. No such problem exists for Mormonism. If orthodox Christianity is working with a symbol system which is inadequate to the task of disclosing experience, Mormonism is not.

Polytheism is not merely an academic matter. It is a feeling for the reality of polyvalent experience and the discovery that revelation has not occurred once and for all, that neither God nor vision are dead, but instead were confined by a theological understanding which disallowed process because it focused on the being of God instead of on the becoming of the Gods.

I would like to suggest that the experience of Joseph Smith, our experience, and the experience which David Miller is trying to describe and locate in the traditions of the Greeks, is one of becoming rather than of being. Not only are men becoming gods, but God is becoming more godly. The process theology of Whitehead and Hartshorn attempted to finitize the divine in something called just that—process; but process theology never



became the backbone theology of any practicing body of believers.

Process, eternal progression, continuing revelation—all of these ideas have indeed become the backbone of a large body of believers. For some reason, the polytheistic theology of Mormonism has become a way of articulating our diversity, our pluralistic situation. A becoming God rather than a being God is the central figure of the monotheistic worship and practice of Mormonism, and that becoming God of practice is buttressed by a polytheistic theology. It is this very fact which allows LDS religious thought to be congruent with its religious experience.

Once again I must quote David Miller: "The explanation systems of Western monotheism failed us—by putting it all together abstractly, rationalistically, pseudomystically, and artificially. Such strategy is essentially contrary to the new polytheism, which simply does not lend itself naturally to theologizing and philosophizing in the monotheistic manner. It is lived in one's deepest feelings."<sup>17</sup>

But to return to the Greeks. Ancient Greek religion was blatantly polytheistic and anthropomorphic, but at some point in history that polytheistic religion mutated to a mono-principled abstract philosophy which sought the One beyond the Many in which all things were grounded and from which all meaning derived.

Eric Voegelin in *Order and History*<sup>18</sup> traces this demise to Xenophanes, who became tired of the anthropomorphisms of the Greeks and desired to find and recognize the "One who is greatest." Xenophanes moves to a concept of universal divinity (one God). But there is a problem in Xenophanes which Christian theologians have overlooked. It is that while trying to establish one God he also often speaks of the gods. The Greeks, who had a word for everything, had no word for religion. Neither did they have words for polytheism or for theology until late in their history. Plato invented theology (*theologia*); the science of divine things is first mentioned in *The Republic*. (One might want to interpret that as "what is said about the gods.") Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* includes Hesiod and Homer as examples of theologs.<sup>19</sup> The word meant simply talk (*logoi*)

about the gods (*theoi*). No theoretical abstraction is implied. Miller cites Gerardus van der Leeuw: "Theology was not yet composed of doctrines, theories, and formal structures of logical argument; myth had not yet intellectualized itself into dogma." Then Miller comments: "There is a sort of fascism about rationalism and intellectualism—a sort of rigid one-party dictatorship of the mind which forcibly suppresses feelings and intuitions expressed in concrete images and symbolized in the telling of stories. . . . The mind simply cannot account for all of life. By itself it is finally impotent. Thinking monotheistically about the deepest matters of the heart and spirit cannot put man in touch with life as can another sort of *theologia*: the telling of the tales of the Gods and Goddesses in personified concreteness."<sup>20</sup> I must here refer to James B. Wiggins, *Religion as Story*, a collection of essays, each of which is a different way of "restorying" history and theology.<sup>21</sup>

I have been known to say that Mormonism uses its history as its theology. It becomes clear to me now why I have thought this is so. I have even been known to complain that Mormonism has no theology. What I have meant, of course, is that it had no theoretical theology. I have been guilty of attempting to force a monotheistic theoretical theology on the polytheistic thought of Mormonism instead of realizing that while Mormon religious practice is monotheistic, the supporting structure of any religion which will survive in today's pluralistic culture must be polytheistic, and polytheistic theology means telling the stories of the gods and goddesses—including potential gods and goddesses. It means telling the story of Joseph Smith's first vision and of his subsequent visions as well. It means telling the stories of the Saints, the pioneers, of the potential gods and goddesses. It also means telling the story of the God of religious practice and of his Son.

I have perused my bookshelves: *Classic Stories from the Lives of Our Prophets*, *Outstanding Stories by General Authorities*, *Stories from Mormon History*, *Utah: The Story of Her People*, *Book of Mormon Stories*, *The Mormon Story*, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price*, *Provo: A Story of People in Motion*, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*.

Mormons are the world's best raconteurs. And rightly so it would seem. According to Miller:

Narrative theology may be the only way in our time to revivify an irrelevant doctrinal theology which has abstracted itself out of life by managing to kill God. Concrete images make for a theology of the imagination and an imaginative theology [dare one say vision and visionary?], as opposed to formal theologizing of a conceptual sort. Placing the concrete images in a narrative adds the dimension of time and temporality to a theology which otherwise offers only spatial constructs of meaning, ruled over by a logic which may be able to tell true from false, but cannot account for what is real, a reality in which truth and falsity, life and death, beauty and ugliness, good and evil are forever and inextricably mixed together. . . . Religion means being gripped by a story.<sup>22</sup>

Mormonism, unlike monotheistic (one-centered) abstract theology, is gripped by a story; and instead of stale theoretical formulations, its theologians and historians tell the tales (*Story of the Latter-day Saints*), its Orpheuses sing the epic songs ("Come, Come Ye Saints," "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning"), its dramatists write the plays (*Promised Valley, America's Witness for Christ, Because of Elizabeth*).

Wiggins and Miller both argue convincingly that polytheistic theology is best done by the people, not by the monotheistic, university-trained theologians. Wiggins insists that all the people tell their stories, hence testimony meeting. We gather to hear each other's stories. We gather to hear people tell of concrete experiences like the first vision of the Prophet Joseph. We gather to share our visions. And after the manner of Homer and Hesiod, Mormon historians tell the tales of the visions of the Gods and of the becoming of the potential gods and goddesses.

It is now time to refer to the subtitle of this paper, "Re-visioning Historical Experience." What one may make out of all this is that to accept the first vision of Joseph Smith is to accept a way, not only of believing but also of becoming, of envisioning (putting the vision in), of returning (a way of turning back) toward the time when the gods were finite and inhabited time

and space, a way of turning toward the time when history was the story of the divine moving through time and space. It is to turn toward a time when religion speaks to what is real and concrete and to turn away from a time when it is dominated by the monotheistic thinking of logical positivism and of abstraction. It is to return to sacred history. And it is, most importantly, to experience the meaning of vision in the historical dimension of time and space.

#### NOTES

1. "Religious Studies: The Next Vocation," *Council on the Study of Religion Bulletin* 8 (December 1977): 118.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
4. Stanley Romaine Hopper delivered an address entitled "The Ambush of the Marvelous" at Syracuse University in 1970. The phrase itself is, I believe, taken from a poem of Delmore Schwartz.
5. Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971). Perhaps it will soon find its way back into print. James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision: What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era* 73 (April 1970): 4-13, and "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Autumn 1966): 28-45. See also Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," and Richard L. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *Brigham Young University Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 275-94, 373-404.
6. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 362.
7. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), p. 41.
8. James, *Varieties*, pp. 34-35.
9. See G. K. Chesterton, "The Ethics of Elfland," in *G. K. Chesterton: A Selection From His Non-Fictional Prose*, ed. W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 179.
10. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (1931; reprint ed., London: Oxford, 1968).

11. See 1 Sam. 5:6-9; Exod. 19:12-13; Matt. 17:9; *Bhagavad Gita*, ch. 11. Many good translations exist. I would recommend the Penguin edition, trans. Juan Mascaro.
12. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials*, p. 42.
13. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed., B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1932-1951), 6:474. Hereafter cited as *History of the Church*.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 475.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 476; italics added.
16. David L. Miller, *The New Polytheism: Rebirth of the Gods and Goddesses* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. ix. Next several quotations from pp. ix, 3, 5-7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
18. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 4 vols. *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 2:179-80.
19. Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, B4, 1000<sup>a</sup>9; A3 983<sup>b</sup> 28.
20. Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans., J. E. Turner (New York: Harper and Row, Torchbook, 1963), p. 560, cited in Miller, *New Polytheism*, p. 26; *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
21. James B. Wiggins, ed., *Religion as Story* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
22. Miller, *New Polytheism*, pp. 29-30.