

International Journal of
Mormon Studies

Volume 6

2013



PUBLICATION DETAILS

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The *International Journal of Mormon Studies* is a European based internationally focused, peer-reviewed online and printed scholarly journal, which is committed to the promotion of interdisciplinary scholarship by publishing articles and reviews of current work in the field of Mormon studies. With high quality international contributors, the journal explores Mormon studies and its related subjects. In addition, *IJMS* provides those who submit manuscripts for publication with useful, timely feedback by making the review process constructive. To submit a manuscript or review, including book reviews please email them for consideration in the first instance to submissions@ijmsonline.org.

International Journal of Mormon Studies (Print) ISSN 1757–5532
International Journal of Mormon Studies (Online) ISSN 1757–5540

Published in the United Kingdom

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<http://www.ijmsonline.org>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MORMON STUDIES

Volume 6, 2013

Contents

Publication Details.....	ii
Editorial	v
In Search of Mormon Identity: Mormon Culture, Gospel Culture, and an American Worldwide Church – <i>Wilfried Decoo</i>	1
From Galatia to Ghana: The Racial Dynamic in Mormon History – <i>Armand L. Mauss</i>	54
Sacred Secrecy and the Latter-day Saints – <i>Douglas J. Davies</i>	74
To Insinuate All Ideas and Inevitably Misperceive Historical Judgment: Epistemological Metaphor in Mormon Biography – <i>Alan Goff</i>	81
Joseph Smith and the Gift of Translation: The Development of Discourse about Spiritual Gifts during the Early Book of Mormon Translation Process (1828–1829) – <i>Kirk Caudle</i>	109
Book Review: Joseph Smith’s Polygamy, Volume 1 & 2: History – <i>David M. Morris</i>	132
Book Review: An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32 – <i>Kirk Caudle</i>	137
Book Review: In Heaven as It Is On Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death – <i>James D. Holt</i>	142
Book Review: One More River to Cross (Book One, Standing on the Promises, Trilogy) – <i>Fiona Smith</i>	145

Book Review: The Mormonizing of America: How the Mormon Religion Became a Dominant Force in Politics, Entertainment, and Pop Culture – <i>David M. Morris</i>	149
Book Review: Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism – <i>Ronan James Head</i>	154
Article Contributors	158

EDITORIAL

David M. Morris
Editor

Since 2007, we have published one volume a year filled with scholarly articles, as well as book reviews. We will of course continue to do this, however, we will begin to publish book reviews directly, to the website and make a selection for each volume. This is to respond to the now numerous books and publications that are coming out.

In this issue, we are excited to publish a lengthy consideration of Mormon identity by Wilfried Decoo, as well as Armand Mauss' article 'From Galatia to Ghana'. Following which, we are able to publish, 'Sacred Secrecy and the Latter-day Saints' by Douglas J. Davies as well as articles by Alan Goff and Kirk Caudle. A number of book reviews also appear, all of which are available on <http://www.ijmsonline.org>. A special appreciation is extended to the contributors for their kindness in making available their submissions.

We, as always, extend our appreciation to those who took time to blind peer-review articles and review books fairly and as formatively as possible. As an editorial board we hope you will enjoy the contents of this issue.

If you wish to make a comment or suggestions on its improvement, please feel free to email us at editorial@ijmsonline.org

SACRED SECRECY AND THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Douglas J. Davies

The place and role of emotions has, in recent years, become of considerable significance across a wide variety of academic disciplines, not least in relation to religion. I have explored a variety of issues connected with this development in my volume entitled *Emotions, Identity and Religion*.¹ Its subtitle, *Hope, Reciprocity, and Otherness*, is of particular interest because it highlights the entailments of emotion, and reflects my own sense that the study of emotion is more useful as a secondary aspect of interpretation than as its primary focus, indeed, each sub-title element could, quite properly, be explored in terms of either doctrinal or social organizational elements of LDS life. While ‘hope’ carries its general Christian resonance it also bears its distinctive LDS hope of glory; ‘reciprocity’ highlights the communal base of Mormon life in which ritual is made to work for each other, while ‘otherness’ highlights belief in and experience of the supernatural world of ancestors and the divine. It is with each of these three elements in mind, though not spelled out at each turn, that this paper considers the topic of ‘sacred secrecy’ as a component of Latter-day Saint spirituality.

The two ideas framing this brief discussion are, that ritual practices help express and foster the emotions favoured by a religious group, and that such fostered emotional clusters constitute a key-core for a group’s spirituality. One could, of course, also show how preferred emotions relate to the ideological or doctrinal base of a group as my former doctoral student Mauro Properzi did in his study of LDS ideas of salvation.²

So, this brief and highly exploratory paper aims to sketch some of the dynamics of the notions of secret and secrecy within LDS culture. Because much Mormonism, most especially earlier nineteenth century Mormonism draws a considerable amount of its language and thought-forms from the Bible, it is to be expected that some aspects of the LDS

¹ Douglas J. Davies, *Emotion, Identity, and Religion: Hope, Reciprocity and Otherness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² Mauro Properzi, ‘Emotions in Mormon Canonical Texts’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Durham University, 2010).

secret and secrecy cluster of ideas will also be influenced by the biblical matrix. However, I do not simply want to draw textual parallels but to ask how secrecy plays a diversity of roles in LDS life. In particular, I am interested in the stark LDS distinction between highly positive and highly negative valuations of secrecy. In shorthand terms, my focus is on secrecy and LDS society. Many might imagine that the intention in adopting this theme is to explore the nature of secret temple ritual, since that often attracts attention, especially from non-Mormon commentators. While, in smallest measure, I will allude to that area, though certainly not in terms of exposé, itself an interesting theoretical corollary, but more in terms of the dynamics of LDS spirituality at large.

BACKGROUND: POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES

Beginning with the Book of Mormon as an LDS foundational source, we do not reach far into its text before secrets and secrecy emerge in words directly echoing the biblical book of Isaiah (45: 19) -'I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth'. Accordingly, we find in 1 Nephi 20: 16 the prophet uttering the words of the Lord God who says, 'Come ye near unto me; I have not spoken in secret'. God and divine revelation is established as open and available to those who approach and listen, an apt exhortation for a book announcing a new divine revelation and a new prophetic figure revealing it. Later, addressing believers, 3. Nephi 13: 6 directly echoes Matthew (6: 6) with its 'pray to thy Father who is in secret', and its alignment of a certain sincerity of religious purpose with non-public display of prayer. These and other texts mark the dual positive and negative potential valuation of the secrecy.

Strongly negative values of secrecy are very well known in the Book of Mormon's warnings against 'secret combinations'. In 2 Nephi 9: 9, for example, itself a synoptically remarkable chapter on doctrine, we encounter these 'secret combinations' that are 'stirred up' in humanity by the 'devil' himself. Such secret combinations involve 'murder and all manner of secret works of darkness. This chapter offers one of the Book of Mormon's clear references to the 'merciful plan of the great Creator' (9: 6), 'great plan of our God' (9:13), often known in LDS thought as The Plan of Salvation, a plan that derives from a whole series of divine attributes including, mercy, wisdom, grace, goodness, greatness, justice, righteous, and holiness. This chapter explains that without the divine provision of resurrection, human spirits would be ever subject to the devil, even become 'angels to a devil' , and even 'become devils'.(9: 9).

This is precisely where the divine plan becomes a way of escape through the resurrection that unites spirits with bodies and brings that united self before divine judgment and its ensuing afterlife.

In specific terms, we are familiar, of course, with the extensive historical comments on the notion of 'secret combinations' as indirect references to Freemasonry and the promissory-oaths of Masons; familiar, too, with a popular association of Masonry with the infamous Morgan case of supposed murder due to the exposure of Masonic secrets.³ More relevant still is the familiar theme of the influence of Masonic thought and practice on Joseph Smith during his brief period as a Mason from March 1842, and on some similarities between Masonic ritual and the rites fostered by Joseph Smith, not least the covenantal-vows of secrecy aligned with temple endowment ceremonies. In this Masonic and Temple frame we see both the strong negative and positive valuation of secrecy, and also something of the way one group regards the secrecy of another. Indeed, for some groups, secrecy constitutes one characteristic feature of boundary maintenance. In this, secrecy resembles food rules or other ethical considerations of group membership.

Within groups, secrecy also often plays a significant role in terms of polity. It is likely that this was one factor in Joseph Smith and a small circle of early leaders engaging with the idea of plural or celestial marriage before the wider church membership was informed of its importance. In such a context, secrecy is a most interesting social phenomenon, aligned with the dictum that knowledge is power. Secrecy, not simply over an idea, but over a shared practice unknown to others is all the more significant precisely because ritual performance cannot be gainsaid: joint action forms a bond. Knowledge of shared action comes to involve power within a group and over members of a group. At its worst this can involve the potential for blackmail, betrayal, and hostility while at its best it engenders communal commitment, loyalty, and friendship. Certainly, Joseph Smith experienced both ends of this secrecy continuum in his own lifetime.

At this point it may be worth adding the briefest theological gloss on secrecy in two ways. First, the very notion of 'the Messianic Secret', is one that played a role in New Testament scholarship of the twentieth

³ David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1989).

century having been introduced by the German William Wrede in 1901.⁴ Issues involved whether Jesus claimed to be the Messiah or that this was a later belief of early Christianity written back into the gospel texts, most especially Mark's Gospel. Another kind of secret has a longer and liturgical use in the preparation of candidates for baptism and their not being admitted to participation in the elements of the Holy Eucharist until after their baptism; the very use of the term 'sacred mysteries' for this rite implicates the idea of a secret that is revealed. I mention this to highlight the role of ritual action and secrecy and not simply to link secrets with ideas.

SACRED SECRETS: FORCE, POWER, AND IDENTITY

But now, in coming to the central focus of my paper, I rehearse the notion of 'sacred secrecy' briefly introduced in a previous study.⁵ There I specifically qualified secrecy in terms of the sacred both to highlight its emotional significance to those engaged with it and to differentiate it from what has been described as 'private-life secrecy'.⁶ For though LDS sacred secrecy is an aspect of private-life it is not an idiosyncratic or person-focused secret. It is not about an individual's secret that must be kept from others for the protection of the self but is a secret whose keeping is allied with a social and group force of its own, one that is not least significant within a family circle.

Here I think the intellectual George Steiner has a valuable contribution to make when he argued that words dealing with intimacy lie 'near the deep springs of language', and identified 'verbal reticence' as something aligned with 'antique energies and sources of wonder'. For him the 'dim places of feeling' are preserved by not being wasted.⁷ To speak of a 'force' also allows us to think of something that can be wasted rather than being valuably retained within the dynamics of spirituality.

⁴ William Wrede. *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (Cambridge: Clarke, [1901] 1971).

⁵ Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) pp. 80–82.

⁶ Stanton K. Tefft, *Secrecy: A Cross Cultural Perspective* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980).

⁷ Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1968] 1972), pp. 104, 97, respectively. See also Davies, *Emotion, Identity, and Religion*, 225–228.

For some people, the very possession of some knowledge or of some memory or event is a power in and of itself. A person knows that he knows, and that knowledge has become part of his or her foundation of life. The anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse, for example, has developed a theoretical approach to religion grounded in a notion something like this but focused much more on a theory of traumatic experience.⁸ People traumatized in religious initiation, he argued, can be understood in terms of what he calls the imagistic mode of religion: they are driven by images of a traumatic event and have flashbulb memories of it. This imagistic mode of religion he differentiates from the doctrinal mode where teachings are formally learned in non-traumatic settings and may be passed on accordingly when teaching or evangelizing others. This is an interesting distinction and might even find some application within the LDS temple initiation of at least some, perhaps few, individuals who do report a form of traumatic experience that carries subsequent repercussion on their form of church membership and temple adherence. But such a significant topic lies beyond the scope of this paper, for here my concern lies with the role of secrecy in the retention of significant positive experience and with the fostering of the 'force' experienced in ritual.

In widely acknowledged LDS terms, the power of the event is not dissipated by loose talk or prodigal gossip. In theoretical terms I would suggest that individual relationships as well as group relationships are empowered by such experiential retention. Outsiders to such a relationship or group tend to think of secrets in terms of ideas and an anti-Mormon view would probably want to pinpoint the ideas and words that are secret; indeed they might well want to 'expose' them by speaking them in public, with numerous online web-sites doing just that. To insiders, however, I suspect that it is not the words as such but the emotional dynamic of identity allied with them that counts. Words, actions and experience cohere within ritual events and ritual memory, and that is what comprises the power of 'sacred secrecy'.

Here, Steiner's 'sources of wonder' can also be understood in a very specific way in terms of gift or reciprocity theory. When its anthropological originator, Marcel Mauss, spoke of the distinction between alienable and inalienable gifts and the relationships they prompted and

⁸ Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity* (New York: Altamira Press, 2004).

sustained he pinpointed an important aspect of human life.⁹ Later scholars, myself included, have developed these themes, and here I would highlight the potential for identifying the sacred secrecy of temple rites with the inalienable aspect of ritual participation.¹⁰ The inalienable gift cannot be sold, it is priceless. It also links a person to their core values and to the source of their values. In this sense temple endowments can be seen as amongst Mormonism's prime inalienable gifts. And, such gifts cannot be squandered. This helps explain the nature of sacred secrecy within LDS spirituality.

SPIRITUALITY – INSPIRE IMAGINATION

Let me add a note on that very last word – spirituality: for 'spirituality' is now an increasingly common concept used in the study of religious and of non-religious or secular traditions. It was also a concept high on my own list of theoretical notions when, as long ago as 1987, I entitled my first LDS focused book, *Mormon Spirituality*, and opened it with the words that I consider as offering one definition-like account of 'spirituality'.

The life of faith is a life of inspired imagination. It brings to the ordinary world a sense of profound significance as passing moments are set within an immense sweep of divine purpose.¹¹

Certainly, aspects of LDS life engage with inspired imagination not just in terms of Joseph Smith's own religious innovations and formulations but in focused forms through temple activities and, for example, in gaining patriarchal blessings. Here Steiner's 'antique energies and sources of wonder' may be tapped and fostered with 'profound significance' being brought to 'passing moments' under the frame of the 'sweep of divine purpose' otherwise identifiable as the Plan of Salvation.

My reference to patriarchal blessings here is not arbitrary but quite intentional, for they offer another domain of sacred secrecy. While often given in public, in early Mormonism they have, with time and with

⁹ Marcel Mauss *The Gift, Forms and Function of Exchange in Archaic Society*, trans. by Ian Cunnison (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, [1925] 1966).

¹⁰ E.g. Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹¹ Douglas J. Davies, *Mormon Spirituality, Latter-day Saints in Wales and Zion* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Series in Theology, 1987), p. 1.

the growth of numbers of the LDS church become more private, just as the number of formal patriarchs has grown. These blessings, believed to be given by direct inspiration of God through the patriarch are personal, directed to the one individual on whose head the patriarch's hands are laid. They are not public property: they are not to be gossiped abroad, but are personal and familial. Still, I suspect that they do not belong to 'private-life secrecy' as described above but to the inalienable domain of profound significance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to complement this emphasis on the individual and ritual with a comment on the wider church organization that provides for it. Certainly, the patriarch's relationship with an individual brings one aspect of the church's life and its value-system of individual revelation to bear upon a single person. In a many-million membership church the provision of many patriarchs, rather than its original single church patriarch, allows for the Church to authenticate itself to individual members through their own opportunity of a gained experience of blessing.

There are, of course, other avenues that we could pursue in explicating the complex interplay of secrets and the sacred in the LDS case. We might, for example, want to take the church as a bureaucratic organization and ask whether Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracies and 'official secrets' might shed light on it and its historical development. Weber thought that, 'the concept of the 'official secret' is the specific invention of bureaucracy' (1991: 233).¹² He also thought that secrecy is found especially where 'power interests towards *the outside*' are at stake. (1991: 233).

In conclusion, however, enough has been said to show that secrecy and its opposite of openness or even of revelation, have numerous dimensions that can be appreciated from a variety of theoretical perspectives. My intention has been simply to focus on how a group fosters that individual spirituality and the inspired imagination that brings to the ordinary world a sense of profound significance as passing moments set within an immense sweep of divine purpose.

¹²f From *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, ed. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), III, , pp. 650–678.