The Gospel as an Earthen Vessel

by Adam S. Miller

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. (2 Cor. 4: 6-7)

I. INTRODUCTION

A simple question prompts this essay: is Mormonism thinkable? I do not mean to ask: has Mormonism *ever* been thinkable. I leave aside the question of whether or not Mormonism has been thinkable in past dispensations or in previous historical epochs. I mean instead to pose the question in its most rigorously contemporary form: is Mormonism thinkable *today*, is it thinkable according to thought's modern symbolic configuration?

By thought I mean here something unusually strict and narrow. I am not asking if Mormonism is imaginable – I have in mind here something like the psychoanalytic distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic, or a Marxist distinction between ideology and science – clearly Mormonism is imaginatively accessible. But more narrowly, an idea is

thinkable – in the sense that interests me – only if it, in principle, has formal, public intelligibility. It is possible to *imagine* nearly anything, but for an idea to be *thinkable* it must be potently universalizable.

As a result, to ask if Mormonism is publicly thinkable is to ask if it is possible to articulate the essence of Mormonism within the horizons of the contemporary public space for thought. Thus it is both a question about Mormonism's potential political efficacy and a question about the possibility of Mormon theology. The horizons of thought's contemporary situation may not be strictly definable, but we can, at the very least, say that the symbolic shape of thought's public space is today largely determined by two extraordinarily dominant factors: (1) science, and (2) capital. To ask whether or not Mormonism remains thinkable is to ask: does the essence of Mormonism become irremediably obscured if it submits itself to the twin conditions of science (in particular to materiality and temporality) and capital (in particular to its universalizing, *denaturalizing* operation)? Must Mormonism refuse to submit its essence to these conditions - and thus remain simply imaginable - or is it capable of traversing our modern symbolic order?

Clearly, however, it is not possible for Mormonism to be simply assimilated to the world's perspective and horizon. Were this possible, it would become identical with the world and lose its redemptive capacity. But if the essence of Mormonism can only be accessed imaginatively, if its essence is not capable of engaging with sufficient traction the order of the world, then, again, it risks losing its redemptive capacity. As a result, what is needed in order to pursue my question is a way of addressing Mormonism that allows it to be both inside and outside the world. We need a way to conceive of Mormonism that allows it to be bound to its social/practical context *while at the same time* allowing it to challenge and transform that context. Or, to borrow Paul's language from 2 Cor. 4:7, we need a way of addressing Mormonism strictly as an "earthen vessel." Simply put, in order to pursue this question, we need a way of conceiving Mormonism without reference to any kind of strong transcendence.

Contemporary thought offers us a conception of an *immanent* transcendence – as opposed to something that is strongly transcendent or transcendently transcendent – in the figure of an *event*. If Mormonism were to show itself thinkable on the model of a thoroughly immanent

event, if its essence were not obscured by such a translation, then it might show itself thinkable in relation to thought's contemporary symbolic configuration. Thus, to ask if Mormonism remains thinkable as an immanent event – as (1) subtracted from anything transcendently transcendent (that is: submitted to science, to its materiality and temporality), and (2) subtracted from any natural particularity (that is: submitted to capital, to its denaturalizing universality) – amounts to asking if its essence can be thought in God's absence. Can Mormonism appear as what it is if God does not appear? Can Mormonism be thought as a genuinely earthen vessel?

My thesis is that Mormonism can be productively thought according to these conditions and that, in fact, *because* of our unique horizons, the essence of Mormonism is more immanently thinkable in our time than in any previous epoch. When subtracted from any strong transcendence and from any private authority, Mormonism's essence shows up with razor sharp simplicity as an inflection of the event of Christ's redeeming love into an entirely new conception of the family. Further, from such a perspective, it becomes possible to view the events of the past two-hundred years not as an anxiety producing process of "watering down" Joseph Smith's inaugural revelations in the wake of a fading charisma, but as the process of purifying and applying with ever greater potency the truly universal, immanent effects of Mormonism's inaugural events.

II. HOW TO THINK AN IMMANENT TRANSCENDENCE: THE FIGURE OF AN EVENT

The first order of business is to sketch, in the simplest possible terms, what it would mean to think Mormonism as an event. What, in the technical sense intended here, is an event?[1] *An event is that which is immanently transcendent.* An event is immanent insofar as it always occurs in relation to an immanent situation of which it is a part and without which it is strictly inconceivable. An event is transcendent insofar as it is capable of escaping, shattering, and reconfiguring the horizons of the situation to which it belongs. An event's immanent transcendence can be elaborated in terms of the three primary conditions of contemporary thought as determined by science and capital: materiality, temporality, and universal-

ity. That is to say, the nature of an event can be described ontologically, temporally, and epistemologically. In order to make intelligible such a conception, I will explore the nature of an event from each of these three perspectives. In each case I will offer a formal elaboration followed by a scriptural exemplification. It should be kept in mind, however, that though it is possible to offer relatively discrete conceptual descriptions of an event in terms of its ontological, temporal and epistemological aspects, every event will, in practice, necessarily involve the interpenetration of these three aspects.

A. Thought's Material Horizon: The Event Conceived Ontologically

First, thought's contemporary configuration demands that ontology be conceived in a manner that is profoundly and monistically material. For us, science sets the stage of being. Though such a material ontology should not be conceived in a way that is narrowly positivistic, its content must at the very least be thoroughly immanent. The result is that neither metaphysical speculation, nor appeals to anything transcendently transcendent here remain publicly intelligible. However, of particular import is that which plays at the limits of this immanent materiality: the event.

An event both does and does not belong to a given immanent situation – hence its immanent transcendence. But what makes this paradoxical pairing possible? How is it possible for an event to be both immanent *and* transcendent? An event belongs to a situation insofar as the elements of which it consists are all materially *present* in the constitution of that situation. However, an event does *not* belong to a situation insofar as the elements of which it consists are not *re-presented* by the situation to itself. Every situation is composed of an infinite number of material elements, but any given situation will only be able to define itself and represent itself to itself through a limiting and finitizing operation of counting. That is to say, a situation can only constitute itself as such by excluding certain elements that are present in it from representation by it. Simply put, the constitution of every social context is accomplished by exclusion. A genuine event always irrupts from this site of exclusion. An event, then, is a presentation of the unrepresented that forces the situation to which it belongs to reconfigure its symbolic order to allow for it to be

counted. Thus, every truly revolutionary event is rooted in a presentation of whatever has been constitutively excluded from a given context.

This formal description of an event, abstract as it may be, ought to strike a familiar cord. Despite its subtraction from everything strongly transcendent, its logic is profoundly Christian. Paul's description of the gospel's redemptive operation in 1 Cor. 1:18-31 brilliantly illustrates the point in question. Verses 26-29 in particular address the gospel-event in explicitly ontological terms:

> For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called:* but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, *yea,* and things which are not [*ta me onta*, non-beings], to bring to nought things that are [*ta onta*, beings]: that no flesh should glory in his presence.

The redemptive operation of the gospel involves, as Paul describes it here, a profound ontological reconfiguration. The gospel message here consists of God's call, of God's calling all of the things that are present in the world but un-represented by it - of all those who count for nothing in the constitution of their material situation despite the necessity of their presence - from non-being into being. Central to the gospel-event, thus conceived, is the redemptive presentation of those whom the world counts for nothing: the weak, the foolish, the poor, the base, the mad, and the outcast. Those who are not (*ta me onta*), the world's non-beings, are called into the light of their situation in order to "bring to nought" those beings that are (*ta onta*). Exemplary, for Paul, of this kind of reversal is the event upon which the whole of God's redemptive act hinges: God's calling Jesus out of death (non-being) and back into life (being). For Paul, Jesus' resurrection is the event *par excellence*.

What we must see, then, is that those who are designated non-beings by the world occupy a unique position vis-à-vis their material situation: they both do and do not belong to that situation. They are immanent to it even as their representational exclusion sets them beyond it. Simply put,

they are immanently transcendent. For God to call them into the light of being is to force the re-composition of the entire situation. The world's horizons are forced to bend and twist in ways that reconfigure the rules according to which things get counted. The laws according to which the situation was previously ordered – the laws of wealth, wisdom, and power – are inflected in such a way as to simultaneously bring non-beings into being *and* beings into non-being.

B. *Thought's Temporal Horizon: The Event Conceived Historically*

Thought's contemporary configuration is profoundly temporal. The world in which we live can be thought only within the frame of history's movement. The combination of our historical consciousness with our understanding of evolutionary biology solidifies the contemporary necessity of thought's temporal conditioning. Eternity, classically conceived, is thus excluded from thought in the same manner as anything strongly transcendent. Similarly, however, though a strong conception of eternity may be excluded, an immanent conception is not. Under the figure of the event both an *immanent* transcendence and a *temporal* eternity remain thinkable.

Phenomenologically, an event is always a surprise. It is always an interruption of time's smooth homogeneous flow. Its capacity for disruption marks precisely that which is eventual about an event. The necessary difference may here be identified in terms of Walter Benjamin's distinction between homogeneous history and heterogeneous history.[2] Homogeneous history is composed of a situation's actualized possibilities (what it counts as being) and is conceived of in terms of an inexorable movement from cause to effect to effect. Homogeneous history is history as any given situation is capable of representing its movement to itself. Time here appears as flat, two-dimensional, and determinative. In homogeneous time, both the present and the future groan under the full burdensome weight of the past.

Heterogeneous history, on the other hand, includes not only those actualized possibilities represented by a situation to itself, but the unrepresented wealth of possibilities that have failed to be actualized in the past and that appear to be unactualizable in the present or future. An

event marks the moment in which these present but unrepresented possibilities burst the context's chain of cause and effect and reveal the possibility of the previously impossible. Here again, just as in the case of ontology, the crucial difference, the gap that allows for the possibility of the event, is the difference between those possibilities that are both present *and* represented in a situation and those that are merely present. An event is the exposition of this gap, a recovery of lost possibilities and forgotten relics that interrupts time's homogeneous flow. As a result of this recovery and exposition, an event is capable of momentarily shocking time and freezing the chain of causality, creating space for the possibility of something absolutely new. Thus, we can say, an event is an immanent irruption of the eternal in time.

In broad terms, the temporal operation of an event follows the logic of an immanently conceived Christian eschatology. But of particular interest here may be the way in which the Book of Mormon exemplifies this temporal operation. The Book of Mormon not only instantiates this temporal logic but, further, it explicitly conceives of its own operation in these terms. For instance, drawing on Isaiah 29, Nephi describes the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in the following way:

> For those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be one that hath a familiar spirit; for the Lord God will give unto him power, that he may whisper concerning them, even as it were out of the ground; and their speech will whisper out of the dust. (2 Nephi 26:16)

The Book of Mormon is a voice from the dust. It is a voice from the past that speaks in hushed tones about the destruction of a people, the end of their world, and the loss of the limitless possibilities that once belonged to them. The Book of Mormon is a stubbornly recalcitrant remainder of what was and, more importantly, what might have been. The Book of Mormon is a remnant of love and redemption unrealized, of lost possibilities excluded by the actual constitution of our present situation.

Because the Book of Mormon does not belong to this world, because the configuration of our present situation renders it archaic and/or

anachronic, it occupies a profoundly redemptive position with respect to our situation. The recovery and inclusion of its lost possibilities can shatter the hegemony of actualized history. The past, weighty as it is, need not remain as it was. The Book of Mormon is capable of interrupting the relentless flow of cause and effect and of creating, even if for only a moment, a time in which something entirely new can take place. Because the Book of Mormon is both (1) materially present (there is, irremediably, such a thing), and (2) materially unrepresented (it belongs to a past that is, for our situation, both lost and excluded), it can serve as the site for an event that is capable of puncturing our homogenous temporality with an immanent eternity.

C. Thought's Horizon of Universality: The Event Conceived Epistemologically

Thought's contemporary configuration is universal and global. Capital is responsible for this universalizing globalization. The operation of capital is nowhere more profoundly apparent than in its capacity to dissolve all natural and local bonds in – to paraphrase Marx's famous formulation – the icy waters of pure exchangeability. Such a dissolution leaves us in a difficult position. It leaves us stranded in a flatly profane world in which every apparently necessary "natural" identity and relation is revealed as, in fact, contingent.

This position may be properly described as profoundly difficult because, however much we might wish it to be otherwise, there is no going back. Capital has only made plain what has been true all along: we are human precisely because our identities and social relations are *not* strictly bound by nature or by the limitations of our bodies. To attempt to turn back the hands of time, to un-show what capital has revealed, to retreat in search of some kind of primordial nature – this is to retreat from our humanity as such. Attempts to continue to think natural and local bonds as primary either paradoxically feed the universalizing operation of capital or fade into obscure unthinkability. The denaturalizing universality of capital cannot be opposed by a valorization of the "natural" or the particular; it can only be successfully opposed by that which is itself genuinely universal. That which traverses and opposes the ubiquitous, denaturalizing operation of capital is the event in its capacity for

universal revolution. Or, to frame this question in an explicitly epistemological way: that which opposes the reductive and banal universality of a situation's representation of itself, that which opposes the given totality of knowledge, is the presentation of the universal truth of an event.

The key to delineating the epistemological operation of an event is the subtraction of truth from knowledge. Truth and knowledge must be conceived as wholly distinct. By knowledge I mean: every kind of understanding that a situation is capable of representing to itself about itself. Knowledge here coincides neatly with all that has been classically categorized as *doxa*. Knowledge consists primarily of our everyday understanding of the world, the taken for granted horizons of intelligibility within which we live and eat and breath. It encompasses the social context of interpretation and communication that represents to a situation the manifold of what it knows of itself. In short, knowledge bears within itself all the facts, particularities, and assumptions out of which daily life is woven.

Truth, on the contrary, is conceivable only in terms of an event. Truth always relates to that element of a situation that is everywhere present, but nowhere represented as such. Truth is a break with knowledge, an interruption of interchangeable meanings that challenges the legitimacy of the manner in which the horizons of knowledge are currently constituted. If, when prompted by an event, you subtract from a situation all that is representable, then the residual, generic excess that remains is truth. The truth of a situation is thus always properly universal: it is everywhere present, but nowhere represented. The truth of a situation, the evental element excluded from representation, is part and parcel of *pure* presentation itself – bare-boned, formal, and generic. This to say, truth is universal because it has to do with that element of a situation that is excluded *for the sake of* the constitution of the situation itself.

As a result, truth is not hermeneutic, nor is it contextual. It is universal precisely because it is not bound to any interpretive context. Hermeneutics, the business of negotiating meaning, occurs only at the level of representation and only within the parameters of the circulation of meaning. Truth occurs, instead, at the level of formal, generic appearance. Truth is not that which is assimilated by and organized according to the interpretive horizons of a situation. Truth is that which traverses and

restructures those interpretive horizons. Truth requires a bare, generic formality in order to operate as a universal truth capable of re-ordering a situation.[3]

We should note, however, that an evental truth, prior to the operation of its transformative reinsertion into a situation, always appears as non-sense (or, ontologically, as non-being) when examined from within the unchallenged horizons of representability. A truth is an event that breaks with knowledge, interrupts the circulation of meaning, and restructures the situation as a whole. As a result, it cannot be intelligible from within the horizons that it is challenging and reshaping. But this, of course, does not mean that *anything* that is unintelligible from within the context of situation is capable of producing an event. In order to be authentic, an event *must* relate to an element of a situation that is genuinely, materially present, though un-represented, in that situation. The test of any event's authenticity is straightforward enough: its authenticity is manifest in its capacity to *universally* revolutionize the whole of the situation to which it belongs.

The task that remains, then, is to give some indication of the way in which such a stark, immanent conception of truth finds expression in scriptural language that is more familiar. In this connection, Paul again presents himself as one of our most profound thinkers of the gospel as an event. Paul expresses his conception of the gospel as a unique kind of truth, as an entirely new kind of discourse, in the following way:

> For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. (2 Cor. 4:6-7)

This passage explicitly brings our attention to an issue around which we have circled from beginning: the logic of an event, of an immanent transcendence, is profoundly Christian because it is, after all, the logic of incarnation. There is a transcendent light, Paul argues, that shines in our hearts, there is a light of truth now illuminating the world, only because that light was immanently manifest in the face of Jesus Christ.

The logic of an immanent transcendence informs the whole of the Christian message. It shapes not only the sense of Jesus' own incarnation, but the nature of our redemption as well. It supplies not only the content of the gospel message, but also the efficacy of its declarative form. We have the transcendent treasure of the truth, Paul tells us, but the very nature of this truth demands that we bear it only in a strictly immanent, earthen vessel. Were it otherwise, we could claim the excellency of its power for ourselves and thereby undermine its excellency all together. To wish to bear the truth in something other than an earthen vessel is to have never grasped (or been grasped by) that truth in the first place. This, however, is exactly why the truth, as an earthen vessel, necessarily appears in the context of an untransformed world as a kind of foolishness.

Alain Badiou's powerful reading of Paul makes this point with great precision. The Christian declaration of truth, Badiou argues, is a declaration that is potent only in its immanent weakness. It is a declaration that, "without proof or visibility, emerges at the points where knowledge, be it empirical or conceptual, breaks down."[4] That is to say, for Badiou, the Christian proclamation is characterized above all by the efficacy of its purely generic eventality. God operates here not as the God of being or as being itself but as the impossible event that traverses and re-structures the ontological horizons.

This conception of truth, however, finds itself in an extremely difficult position: every truth must be entirely self-supporting. Truths must never rely on any external support. Because a truth, by definition, is independent of the interpretive context from which it has been excluded, it cannot call upon any representable elements of that situation as evidence of its potency. Nor, however, can a truth appeal to anything beyond the situation, to anything strongly transcendent, for evidence of its veracity. Because a truth is only a truth insofar as it is genuinely immanent to a situation, truths must never seek support in either signs or miracles. Every truth, in order to operate as a truth, must rely solely on the self-evident efficacy of its pure presentation. This is its weakness.

Because Christian discourse, Paul insists, necessarily appears so profoundly foolish in the eyes of the world, it is always tempting to prop up a truth with appeals to mystical experiences and miracles. For instance, though Paul has had his share of private mystical experiences, Badiou

argues, it remains Paul's conviction that "Christian discourse must, *unwaveringly*, refuse to be the discourse of miracles, so as to be a discourse of conviction that bears a weakness within itself."[5] Paul, Badiou adds, "refuses to let addressed discourse, which is that of the declaration of faith, justify itself through an unaddressed [that is: private or mystical] discourse."[6] A truth is a truth because it bears its own efficacy, and, with respect to its dissemination, "there is *never* occasion to try to legitimate a declaration through the private resource of a miraculous communication."[7] Truth, in order to maintain its efficacy, must unflinchingly abide in its weakness, in the pure presentation of its universal declaration.

Citing our passage from 2 Corinthians 4:7, Badiou summarizes the issue with great care: "the treasure is nothing but the event as such, which is to say a completely precarious having-taken-place. It must be borne humbly, with a precariousness appropriate to it."[8] As a result, Christian discourse must necessarily "be accomplished in weakness, for therein lies its strength. It shall be neither logos, nor sign, nor ravishment by the unutterable. It shall have the rude harshness of public action, of naked declaration, without apparel other than that of its real content. There will be nothing but what each can see and hear. This is the earthen vessel."[9] This is the potent weakness of a genuine truth.

III. MORMONISM CONCEIVED AS AN IMMANENT EVENT

We must now finally pose the question for the sake of which this entire investigation has been conducted. Does Mormonism remain thinkable within the horizons of thought's contemporary configuration? Does it remain thinkable if its operation as an event is thought strictly according to the limits of an immanent transcendence? If Mormonism is submitted to the harsh conditions of public action, naked declaration, and pure content, what appears as its essence?

A. An Immanent Atonement

Mormonism consists, first and foremost, of fidelity to the event inaugurated by the declaration of Christ's resurrection. It is a re-affirmation, a re-inauguration, of the gospel-event. Moreover, Mormonism is itself an

event of fidelity to the Christ-event. Its re-inauguration of the gospel-event is accomplished primarily through the publication and dissemination of the Book of Mormon's uncompromising declaration of hope in Christ. But is it possible to conceive of this event, this event of all events, without reference to anything strongly transcendent? Would not such an attempt eviscerate its potency? What is left of the atonement if it is wholly subtracted from metaphysical claims, cosmological speculation, and divine machinery?

Thought under the figure of an event as a strictly immanent transcendence, the generic declarative essence of Christ's resurrection appears as the possibility of an entirely new life in an entirely new kind of world. We might say: Christ's atonement testifies to the possibility of the event *as such*. It is an event whose content consists primarily in declaring the possibility of eventality itself. As such, it is an infinite and irreducible protest against the world's perpetual reduction of every life to a purely immanent animality. Christ's resurrection testifies to the possibility of lost possibilities. It proclaims that our lives need not be wholly determined by the tyranny of the world's contemporary configuration, by the weight and burden of a history without hope or redemption, or by the brutal reign of pure causality and merciless economy. In a word, the event of Christ's resurrection promises the possibility of *repentance*. Repentance marks the possibility of a new life and a new world. It reveals the world to us as free from its veneer of necessity and inevitability and shows us life in all of its dazzlingly positive contingency.

This is all to say: an immanent atonement promises possibility as such. It promises agency amidst determinism and freedom amidst fatalism. Few things in the world manage such freedom, but when something *is* genuinely free, we call it a gift. Because the logic of the gift, of a giving that exceeds reason, is the logic of love, freedom and love coincide. Thus, the name given to this evental revelation of contingency, to this excess of freedom, is love. We can say, then, that Christ's atonement simply and precisely marks the intervention of love in the world. It marks the possibility of an act that is without cause, precedent, or explanation, of a gift that defies economy, reward and recuperation, and of a love that gives simply to give itself, always excessively and always gratuitously. Thus, love and freedom coincide necessarily in gratuity and there is, of course, no

better one-word summary for Christ's atonement than grace. Mormonism, first and foremost, is a faithful declaration of the infinite potency of grace. This remains true even if such a grace is conceived in terms that are strictly immanent.

B. *Immanent Revelation*

As we have seen, it is possible to say that the essence of an event of truth *is* its revelatory power. An event of truth is what it is because it reveals that which has gone un-presented. A truth is a revelatory exposition of that which has been excluded. If revelation is thus conceived as an event, then it follows that every revelation is, by definition, an operation of love and redemption. The elements of love, freedom, and revelation here coincide inseparably. As an event, every type of revelation, every kind of truth, implicates the gospel-event.

Another consequence of conceiving revelation as evental is that, on this model, truth is necessarily epochal or dispensational. An immanently transcendent truth, because it belongs to a particular situation located in a particular time and place, will always manifest itself in the transformation of a given historical epoch. Truths, then, insofar as they remain strictly distinguished from knowledge, are relatively rare phenomenon. An event is a brief, spectacular burst of light, the consequences of which we must then, with infinite fidelity and tenacity, work out with respect to the whole of the situation to which it belongs. An event is a dispensational flash in the pan, a pure presentation, the truth of which must then be carefully applied to each and every element of the situation to which it belongs until the whole of that situation has been transformed by the inclusion of what had been excluded.

There are, of course, on this model of truth, many different kinds of truths, be they scientific, political, artistic, or religious. Mormonism appears here, in its dispensational particularity, as a truth among truths, as a kind of truth that does not claim to master the totality of knowledge. However, despite its subtraction from the urge to totalize, in its generic affirmation of eventality as such, in its reaffirmation of Christ's atonement, it also serves as a shelter for every conceivable kind of truth or event. Mormonism does not itself produce such scientific or political

truths, but it is necessarily called to shelter and protect every truth. Mormonism is thus both a truth among truths and a sheltering affirmation of the possibility of universal truth as such.

In turn, insofar as every truth, by definition, bears within itself a universal potency, insofar as every truth works universally upon its situation as a whole, every truth is necessarily generic. This is to say that every truth, as a truth, refuses ownership. Truth can never be proprietary. Truth, because it belongs to everyone, belongs to no one. Mormonism is an act of communal fidelity to the task of working out the effects of the singular events which called it into being. But the events to which we belong, to which we are attempting to be faithful, do not belong to us. Their universal scope exceeds us in the same way that their potency calls us to ceaselessly exceed ourselves in their application and extension. Truth, even the truth of our own peculiar event, can never be said to be exclusively our own. Every truth is incapable of justifying any pretension or exclusion. Mormonism belongs to everyone or it belongs to no one at all.

C. An Immanent Priesthood

Priesthood, immanently conceived, is a formalized expression of the potency of an event. The authority of an immanent priesthood is bestowed wholly and completely by the veracity of the truth that it is called to apply. Priesthood is as priesthood does. It bears no authority in and of itself apart from the efficacy of the truth that it bears. Its strength consists entirely of the weakness of an event. This, I take it, is the sense of D&C 121:39-46. To exercise "unrighteous dominion" is to assume that priesthood authority bestows a power that is not exclusively dependent on the potency of a truth. "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned" (121:41). The truth of the gospel-event calls upon no external support or influence to accomplish its ends. Its only power is the power of truth itself, a truth that persuades, suffers, and loves in all its immanent weakness without recourse to anything beyond itself. Only a truth is capable of reproving the world with its sharpness and in so doing showing forth an increase of

love. The truth of an immanent priesthood can be nothing other than truth itself.

D. The Uniquely Mormon Event

We must now finally turn our attention to an examination of Mormonism's own expressly unique evental truth. Apart from its reaffirmation of the event of Christ's resurrection, apart from its affirmation of eventality as such, what might we say of the event of Mormonism in and of itself? The event of Mormonism may be conceived in the following way: *Mormonism is an entirely unique inflection of the event of Christ's love into a profoundly new figure of the family*. With respect to the constitution of our contemporary situation, the family is situated in a singularly powerful way. Family is a name for something that is properly generic in relation to our contemporary situation. It is everywhere present, but nowhere represented as such. It grounds and constitutes our situation even as it is goes uncounted as mattering from within the horizons of this situation's self-representation. If the event of Christ's resurrection proposes a revolutionary new world, then the contemporary militant unit of this revolution is the family.

We must see, however, what is powerfully unique about the Mormon inflection of the event of Christ's love into the figure of the family. It is my argument that Mormonism is *not* proposing that the traditional family be preserved and sustained within and against the hostile horizons of our given world. It is a mistake, I would argue, to conceive of our efforts as an operation of *conservation*. No event is an event of conservation. No truth is a truth of perpetuation. The operation of all truths and all events is revolutionary. We are not attempting to preserve the family or return the family to some previously viable historical configuration. We are attempting to revolutionize and transform the family itself. Our aim is to traverse the family as it presently exists and convert it into something entirely new. We want the family to be something that it has never yet been. And in doing so, we want to reconfigure the horizons of our world as a whole.

The essence of the conversion is this: in the face of the relentless work of capital to dissolve all natural bonds in favor of pure exchangeability,

the event of Mormonism does *not* seek to reverse this operation, but to traverse it and carry it through to its completion. Mormonism does not seek to reassert the efficacy of the natural bonds that have to this point always characterized and structured families. *Mormonism's fundamental insight is that such local, natural, finite bonds have never been adequate or sufficient.* Local, natural bonds – bonds structured necessarily by interest and desire – have only ever configured the family according to variously destructive class and gender hierarchies. Were natural bonds sufficient, there would be no need to submit these bonds to the infinite conditions of an eternal marriage.

The family is not meant to be natural, closed, and finite. It is meant to be infinite. If marriage is infinitized, if it is reconfigured by submission to the infinite, generic and universal conditions produced by the event of Christ's resurrection, then something entirely new takes place. If marriage is rendered eternal, if it is submitted to the generic conditions of Christ's resurrection, and if marriage marks precisely the uncounted and unrepresented evental element of our contemporary situation, then the reconfiguration of the family marks the reconfiguration of our entire world. The infinitization of the family marks love's global intervention.

I will venture a final – though admittedly tentative – formulation of how such a revolution might operate. The family, as it has been naturally and traditionally constituted, has always broken by a fundamental contradiction. The "natural" family has always been organized by interest and desire. As a result, it has been consistently subject to the gender inequity attendant to any configuration of its relations by the operation of interest. The inadequacy of this configuration is strikingly apparent: these natural bonds are easily dissolved and revealed as contingent. Capital has accomplished few tasks so effectively. As a result, to advocate a return to "traditional" family values makes little sense; to characterize our own position vis-à-vis the family as "conservative" risks missing the essence of our own position. We are not conservatives, we are revolutionaries.[10] Though there is no space to elaborate its extensive implications here, we can say at the very least that, traditionally, this gender inequity has been characterized by a split within the family that designates the male as the public figure and the female as the private figure. The world's contemporary response to this inequity has been to attempt a subversion of this

public/private split by configuring the family in such a way as to move both male and female members into the public sphere. This, however, fails to address the fundamental problem. The mutual relocation of man and woman into the public sphere does not free the relationship from the tyranny of desire and interest, but instead exacerbates the problem by directly exposing both genders to capital's reduction of *everything* to desire.

Mormonism does not attempt to preserve these traditional gender roles in terms of a public/private split. Instead, Mormonism is *also* an attempt to subvert altogether the public/private distinction. The difference is that its attempt takes the form of a relocation of both members into the previously private – but now generic and universal – space of infinite fidelity to one another. Mormonism's revolutionary reconfiguration of the family does not subvert the entire social order by having both genders identify themselves with the public operation of capital, but instead accomplishes this subversion by having both genders identify themselves with their genuinely infinite commitment to one another. This is the sense of the *Proclamation on the Family*. Fathers are instructed to identify themselves with their roles as a husband and father, not with their roles as an accountant or teacher. Mothers are similarly instructed to identify themselves with their roles as wife and mother. If both are accomplished simultaneously then the way in which both genders are actually "equal partners" appears in all its generic truth and the very social structures of desire and private interest that reinforce and perpetuate gender inequity are themselves transformed and reconfigured. The event of Christ's resurrection transforms marriage from something "natural" into something infinite and in doing so it transforms the structure of the entire world.

IV. CONCLUSION

Does Mormonism remain thinkable? Is its essential content immanently intelligible in relation to thought's contemporary configuration? Mormonism – as an inflection of the event of Christ's resurrection in the figure of the family – may be more amenable to thought than it has ever been. Its material, temporal, and universal aspects, as they appear in

the absence of any strong transcendence, may be more intelligible than at any previous point in time. Are we, however, under any necessity to render Mormonism thinkable? This is also a difficult question, but in my estimation all that need ultimately be required of Mormonism is the following: if Mormonism genuinely intends to universally revolutionize the world, then it must render itself sufficiently generic in order for the entirety of world to be transformed by it. This is, in my estimation, exactly what has been happening for the past 200 years. Mormonism has done nothing other than self-consciously and consistently purify and universalize its own potent inflection of our ultimately generic declaration of the universality of God's love for all his children. Mormonism has not been "watering itself down" and moving ever farther from its original impetus. Rather, it has done nothing other than move ever closer.

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NOTES

[1] This conception of an event, as I elaborate it here, draws philosophically on both (1) phenomenological descriptions of an event, and (2) Alain Badiou's conceptual formalization of an event. For additional reading see, for instance, Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) or Alain Badiou, *L'etre et l'evenement*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1988).

[2] See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969).

[3] Similarly, it seems to me that the possibility for any genuine inter-faith dialogue resides here, at the level of an evental truth that challenges and transforms interpretive contexts. Only an evental truth has any communicative autonomy from such contexts. I would argue that genuine interfaith dialogue cannot occur *between* established interpretive contexts and that genuine interfaith dialogue can, instead, only occur in the precarious evental space of the radical transformation of those contexts.

[4] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 45.

[5] Ibid., 51.

[6] Ibid., 52.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 54.

[9] Ibid.

[10] One possible effect of this conception of the event of Mormonism is that Joseph Smith's early institution of polygamy takes on a new intelligibility. Polygamy might then mark clearly the ways in which Mormonism is not, nor has ever been, an attempt to preserve the traditional family. Polygamy would mark instead precisely the way in which our fundamental impulse has been, from the very beginning, to transform and reconfigure the family according to an entirely new pattern.