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Trenton B. Olsen

Conflict of Church and State: Two Latter-day Saint Poets’ Perspectives on the Utah War of 1857–58

In a recent lecture, historian William MacKinnon looked to the future study of the Utah War, the armed conflict between Mormon settlers in Utah and the United States government in 1857–58. MacKinnon pointed out that although the Utah War was the largest military conflict in the years between the Mexican and Civil wars, involving one-third of the U.S. Army, it has been largely forgotten in American history, leaving ample room for new research. He noted a few recent scholarly contributions to the field, including his own two-volume study At Sword’s Point, saying that scholars have only seen “the tip of the iceberg” of this fascinating historical episode.1 MacKinnon’s comment is remarkable considering that he has devoted half a century to the study of the year-long power struggle between U.S. president James Buchanan and president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) and Utah territorial governor Brigham Young. As much of the discussion about the Utah War has been fraught with controversy, MacKinnon expressed hope that new discoveries would be accompanied by civility and “that light generated [would] exceed the heat,” as

he called for a renewed investigation of this “complex and colorful” conflict.² Lamenting that historians had missed opportunities for enrichment by failing to search beyond traditional sources such as journals, newspapers, and government reports, he encouraged the consideration of the nonconventional discourses of folklore, the visual arts, literature, and music. Indeed, such material provides a valuable supplement to the study of history as it reveals unique insight into the subjective perceptions that lay behind the events of the past. This essay seeks to expand the scope of Utah War studies in response to MacKinnon’s charge by analyzing the Latter-day Saint perception of the conflict through the 1857 poetic representations of two Mormon writers.

Before an analysis of the literature, however, it is necessary to first give a basic outline of the conflict itself. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Utah territory and its inhabitants were of great interest to the U.S. government. The vast majority of Americans vehemently opposed the Mormon practice of polygamy—an issue brought to the forefront of the national debate by the Republican Party, which identified it along with slavery as one of the “twin relics of barbarism” that must be prohibited in the territories.³ Furthermore, Utah’s “strange mixture of church and state”⁴ was the object of much public criticism, as many

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viewed the strong presence of LDS church leaders in the territorial government as undemocratic. The newly elected President Buchanan had received word from William Drummond, an associate justice of the Utah territorial Supreme Court, that the Mormons were nearing a state of rebellion, defying federally appointed officials, and only acknowledging the authority of their religious leaders. Without investigating the reports or notifying Brigham Young, Buchanan sent Alfred Cumming to replace Young as governor and deployed 2,500 federal troops led by Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston to enforce the appointment and the new governor’s laws. Without knowledge of the approaching army’s purpose, Young assumed the worst and the Mormons made preparations to defend themselves. Ultimately, the conflict was resolved through negotiations between the U.S. government and the LDS Church leadership without an actual battle between the two forces. The Mormons received a full pardon from Buchanan, Alfred Cumming took his new office, and the army entered peacefully into Utah. The Saints, however, given the persecution of their past and lack of federal communication, could not predict such a peaceful resolution with any certainty. Tensions ran high and, as their poetry reveals, Utahns solemnly prepared to lay their lives on the line in defense of their liberty and religion.

Among the most prominent Latter-day Saint poetic voices of the time were Eliza R. Snow and Charles W. Penrose. Snow held a unique status among members of the church as a wife of the late prophet and church founder Joseph Smith Jr., as well as a wife to Brigham Young, and as president of the Relief Society, the church’s organization for women. She also enjoyed literary acclaim among church members. Distinguished by Joseph Smith as “Zion’s Poetess,” her poems appeared in the Deseret News and are still sung frequently as hymns by Latter-day Saints.\(^5\) Though Charles W. Penrose would later become the editor of the Deseret News, a Mormon apostle, and member of the First Presidency\(^6\) of the church, at the time of the Utah War he was a young missionary laboring

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6. The First Presidency is the highest governing body of the LDS Church, composed of the prophet or President of the church and his counselors.
in his native England and had not yet emigrated to Utah. Still, Penrose was already becoming a prominent voice, ministering widely to the Saints in England, and publishing frequently in Britain’s Mormon periodical, the Millennial Star. He felt deeply connected to the conflict and reflected the thoughts and feelings of many Latter-day Saints in his writing. Upon hearing about the invasion, Penrose recorded the following thoughts in his journal: “I wish I was in the mountains with the b’hoys [sic]. My blood boils furiously at the repeated indignities put upon the Saints & my heart beats high with desire to fight with my brethren in the sacred cause of truth and liberty.”7 Around the same time, Penrose learned to fire a gun, having “never fired one before,” and made his first “effort on horseback” to prepare himself in case he was called to fight in the Utah War.8

As these poets acted as public voices, an analysis of their work provides important insight into Latter-day Saint cultural attitudes and perceptions of the Utah War. The two poets wrote from vastly different circumstances, as Snow was a female of high socioeconomic status in Utah, and Penrose was an impoverished male member of the lower class in England. Despite this cultural divide, Snow’s “The Kingdom of God” and “The Ladies of Utah,” both written in 1857, along with Penrose’s “Up, Awake, Ye Defenders of Zion,” which was originally sung as a motivational hymn in England to raise money for the Utah War ef-

7. Charles W. Penrose, Diary, 2 October 1857, Utah State Historical Society Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.
8. Ibid., 23 October 1857.
fort, reflect a remarkably similar perspective of the significance of the conflict. The similarities in these poets’ representations of the war are a product of their common doctrinal paradigm, a close examination of which provides insight into why the Saints felt justified in opposing the federal government.

In their poetry, Snow and Penrose reflect Mormons’ outrage at the Utah War as the federal government’s first direct military opposition to the church. Penrose refers to the government and the army as “the foe,” saying that the Saints were “opposed by a proud boasting nation.”9 Church members had not always had this perspective. Prior to 1857 Brigham Young stated, “The Government of the United States has never engaged in a crusade against us as a people.”10 Snow’s “The Ladies of Utah” reflects the Mormons’ sense that Young’s statement no longer held true, as the government had indeed come against them in the Utah Expedition. “You’ve joined a crusade / Against the peace of those / Driv’n to these distant valleys / By cruel and murderous foes.”11 Crusade seems to have been the word of choice to describe the conflict, as indicated in the journal of Henry Emery, a member of the Mormon militia under Brigham Young’s command known as the Nauvoo Legion, who noted, “The army which James Buchanan President of U.S. sent on a crusade against the Mormons came into the borders of our territory.”12 LDS Church members, who received no notification of the expedition, assumed that the army came, as Young said, “to destroy this people,” and undoubtedly considered self-defense their just cause.13 The Saints believed, as Snow writes, “self-preservation / Is God’s and nature’s law.”14 However, the religious connotation of the word crusade suggests that the Mormons viewed the expedition as an attack on their faith as well as on their safety.

10. “18 February 1855,” Journal of Discourses by Brigham Young, his two counselors, the twelve apostles and others; reported by G. D. Watt (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86) 2:175.
Buchanan disputed this sentiment, saying, “Do not deceive yourselves nor try to mislead others by propagating the idea that this is a crusade against your religion.”

This, however, is exactly how Utahns perceived the expedition, as the government’s opposition to the Utah settlers was inextricably connected to their faith. The Saints considered their efforts a defense of their religion, their safety, and their political rights. As Emery wrote, “The brethren rose up en mass to oppose [the army] or rather to defend themselves, their wives and children, their homes and the right to worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience.” Emery’s words echo the rallying cry of The Book of Mormon’s Nephites, an ancient people who fought for the same cause on the same continent: “In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children,” emphasizing the deep connection the Saints perceived between their faith and their resistance of the army.

As Snow’s and Penrose’s poetry indicates, the pioneers viewed the expedition not only as a threat to their freedom of religion but as a holy war, believing they were entitled to God’s aid as His chosen people, and that those who opposed them engaged in the devil’s work. Penrose’s “Up, Awake” asserts that “Zion” would prevail through the power of God: “Her warriors are noble and brave; / And their faith on Jehovah is founded, / Whose power is mighty to save.” “Save” here suggests a political and military deliverance as well as a spiritual redemption. The poem highlights the faith church members had that if the expedition were to lead to battle, divine intervention would give them

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16. While Buchanan denied that the expedition was a religious crusade, his advisors used the language of religious warfare, encouraging him to invade the territory as a diversion from the national debate on slavery. Buchanan’s democratic ally Robert Tyler wrote the president: “I believe that we can supersede the Negro-Mania with the almost universal excitement of an Anti-Mormon Crusade... The pipings of Abolitionism will hardly be heard amidst the thunders of the storm we will raise.” (Philip G. Auchampaugh, *Robert Tyler, Southern Rights Champion* [Duluth: Himan Stein, 1934], 180).


the victory. “With a host from the regions eternal, / We’ll scatter their troops at a glance.” The confidence of these lines is consistent with Penrose’s journal entry:

Arise O God and let thine enemies be scattered clothe thy servants with power nerve their arms with strength and let the wisdom of the Holy One be made manifest in all their movements like a mighty torrent may they flow down from the mountain and lick up their enemies like small dust may the armies of the Gentiles be before thy servants like withered leaves before the blast and as dry twigs in the flame of a furnace.

Snow conveys similar assurance in “The Kingdom of God,” saying, “All people who fight against Zion will perish— / To tread on her peace is to forfeit their own.” This bold certainty stemmed from members’ belief that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “the only true and living church upon the face of the earth,” established by Jesus Christ in the New Testament era and restored through the modern prophet Joseph Smith. Consequently, they believed that those who fought against the church engaged in demonic opposition to God Himself, as shown in Penrose’s words: “Assisted by legions infernal, / The plundering wretches advance,” and “When the God-hating foe is before you, / Stand firm and be faithful and true.” These lines demonstrate that the Mormons, like Brigham Young, saw little difference between the mobs who had driven them from their former homes in Missouri and Illinois and the invading army, considering both opponents to be aided by the devil’s forces. Snow similarly saw the federal government’s advance as Satan’s effort to destroy God’s kingdom, saying, “All Satan’s foul devices / ‘Gainst Zion will be foil’d.”

20. Ibid., 39–40.
21. Penrose, Diary, 2 October 1857.
Viewing the conflict through this religious perspective, church members, as implied in Penrose’s hymn, may have seen an additional doctrinal incentive beyond the defense of life or liberty in their resistance to the government. “Up, Awake” suggests that the Saints saw in the conflict a specific connection to their history and beliefs. “Shall we tamely submit to the foe, / While the ties of our kindred they sever / And the blood of our prophets shall flow? / No! the thought sets the heart wildly beating; Our vows at each pulse we renew: Ne’er to rest till our foes are retreating.”27 These lines point back to the previous persecution of the Saints as they were abused, driven from their homes, and murdered, and demonstrate their unwillingness to endure further injustice. Penrose’s reference to “the blood of our prophets” had particular significance to the early Saints. Three years after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, Brigham Young recorded that the church’s enemies had “killed the prophets, and them that were sent unto them; and they have shed innocent blood, which crieth from the ground against them.”28 In the senate committee hearings of LDS apostle and Senator Reed Smoot in 1903, J.H. Wallis Sr., a former Mormon, testified that church members of the time took an oath that “they would never cease to opporune high heaven to avenge the blood of the prophets upon this nation.”29 The oath Penrose mentions in connection with “the blood of the prophets” most likely refers to this promise. The oath of vengeance has since been associated with the debate over the causes of the Utah War’s most tragic event, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, in which a party of immigrants from Arkansas were slaughtered by local church leaders and members near Cedar City, Utah. As the band of settlers “had men amongst them that were supposed to have helped kill the prophets in the Carthage jail” and to have participated in the massacre of Mormon settlers at Haun’s Mill in Missouri, followers of John D. Lee, who was convicted and executed for the crime, apparently believed that “the killing of all of them would be keeping our oaths and avenging the blood

of the prophets.”30 As an apostle, Penrose would later become the leading defender of the church against accusations of administrative involvement in the crime. While this is not the place for an in-depth exploration of the massacre, Lee’s words do reveal that in church members’ minds, the oath was connected to the Utah War, supporting my inference from Penrose’s poem. Thus Mormons prepared to battle the federal army not only in defense of safety and political freedoms but in obedience to a sacred covenant to bring God’s justice on those who had slain their prophet and on the government that had failed to give its promised protection.

While this overt opposition to the government seems far removed from the traditional patriotism of American Latter-day Saints, it can be better understood when applied to the church’s doctrine of apostasy—an analogy suggested in both Snow’s poetry and Brigham Young’s words. LDS Church members believe, as taught in their scriptural canon, that God assisted America’s Founding Fathers in gaining independence and forming the Constitution to facilitate the restoration of the gospel.31 One year prior to the expedition, Brigham Young stated that Latter-day Saints had more reason to love and honor the U.S. government and its constitution “than any other people upon the face of the earth.”32 After the Utah War, however, the Saints felt that the government had completely strayed from its original inspired ideals. Four years after the expedition, Snow wrote, “A change came o’er the nation / That once was brave and free;” “Alas! Alas! Our nation / Has fallen—O how changed!”33 The idea that the government had fallen from its divine foundation corresponds with the LDS belief that the original members of Christ’s church deviated from its foundational doctrines and structure, resulting in a state of apostasy or a loss of the truth. Brigham

31. Joseph Smith recorded the following revelation: “According to the laws and constitution of the people, which I [God] have suffered to be established, and should be maintained for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles . . . And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised unto this very purpose.” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:77, 80; see also Book of Mormon: 1 Nephi 13: 15, 17-19).
Young’s words in 1857 demonstrate recognition of the government’s divine foundation and a rejection of those who had apostatized from it: “I do not lift my voice against the great and glorious government guaranteed to every citizen by our constitution, but against those corrupt administrators who trample the constitution and just laws under their feet.” Young also applied Isaiah’s biblical foretelling of spiritual apostasy to the political leaders, saying, “They have transgressed the laws [and] changed the ordinances.”34 Twenty years later, Elder Wilford Woodruff, an apostle and president of the St. George Temple, recorded that the spirits of the Founding Fathers appeared to him in the temple, imploring him to perform the temple ordinances on their behalf, saying, “We laid the foundation of the government you now enjoy, and we never apostatized from it, but we remained true to it and were faithful to God.”35 The Saints believed that the invading federal government had indeed, unlike the founders, apostatized from the democratic government that had been “instituted of God.”36

According to this doctrinal frame of reference, apostasy must be resolved through restoration. Penrose and Snow each extend this analogy, asserting the church’s ability to exist independently of the government and considering the Saints’ resistance both a religious restoration of true democracy and a political revolution against tyranny. In “The Kingdom of God,” Snow declares that the

church is “happy and free: / With prophets, Apostles—with Statesmen, and Warriors.” Snow’s citing of the territory’s religious, political, and military figures implies the church’s ability to exist independently of the United States. Penrose also emphasizes the church’s self-reliance, saying, “Soon ‘the Kingdom’ will be independent.” While the independent society the pioneers envisioned may have merged church and state, they did not consider it un-American, but a heroic defiance of injustice not unlike the American Revolution. While the federal government considered the Mormons in a state of rebellion, church members saw themselves as patriots, and prepared, like their revolutionary forebears, to defend their freedom against a distant and tyrannical government. Definitions of treason and patriotism are dependent on perspective—George Washington, of course, was considered a traitor by the British just as Brigham Young was indicted for treason by the United States. Snow alludes to this correspondence in an earlier poem, saying that the church had “a Washington and Moses too, in Brigham Young.” John Taylor, an apostle during the conflict, wrote to U.S. Army Captain Stewart Van Vliet, “If it be treason to stand up for our constitutional rights . . . then indeed we are guilty of treason.” He also applied the famous words of the revolutionary patriot Patrick Henry to the Saints’ desire: “Their cry is . . . give us liberty or death.” Brigham Young prophesied, “The time must come when this kingdom must be free and independent from all other kingdoms,” and “I shall take it as a witness that God designs to cut the thread between us and the world when an army undertakes to make their appearance in this territory.” Church members prepared for this separation, planning to torch their city and defend themselves from the mountains if the army tried to engage in battle—a strategy bearing some semblance to General Washington’s guerilla tactics against a vastly superior force. Interestingly, Joseph Smith and

40. Qtd. in B.H. Roberts, The Life of John Taylor: Third President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons Co., 1892), 288.
later Brigham Young were the first Americans since Washington to claim the rank of lieutenant general, further highlighting their perceived connection with their country’s father.

The Saints believed their opposition would not only be a revolt against an oppressive government, but a restoration of a pure democracy, as suggested by both Snow and Brigham Young. If the Utah expedition were to result in a revolution, the Saints imagined themselves restoring the true democracy they felt the nation had lost. Brigham Young stated: “Suppose this people inhabiting these mountains are broken off entirely from the nations of the world, rendering no allegiance to any earthly power. . . . I say, let them govern themselves by a republican system of government, selecting a man from their midst to preside over them.” As the possessors of God’s truth, the Mormons considered it their responsibility to restore the divine principles of democracy to the earth. On this point, Brigham Young reiterated a prophecy of his predecessor, similarly pointing to a restoration of the nation’s inspired ideals: “The prophet Joseph said if the Constitution of the United States were saved at all it must be done by this people. It will not be many years before these things come to pass.” The Saints expected that this political restoration, like the spiritual restoration of the gospel, would lead to great opposition. In “The Kingdom of God,” Snow alludes to a biblical prophecy of God’s restored kingdom conquering all other nations that would combine against it in the last days: “The feet of the image, the clay and the iron,’ / The kingdom of God into pieces will break; / The ‘brass and the silver’ will also be broken: / Earth’s nations shall tremble—her kingdoms shall shake.” Latter-day Saints believe that within Mormonism God would establish the kingdom spoken of by Daniel, “which shall never be destroyed” and will “consume all [other] kingdoms.” Snow’s quotation of these lines suggests that the Saints saw in the Utah War a literal fulfillment of prophecy, as she writes in

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“The Ladies of Utah”: “The scriptures are fulfilling.” Not knowing what the outcome of the army’s invasion would be, many Saints believed that militant opposition of an oppressive government would be the only way they would ever be, as Snow writes, “eternally free” and restore true democracy to the earth.

As students of the Utah War respond to MacKinnon’s invitation to inquisitively search for new connections “in the spirit of the hunt,” it is important to consider the subjective perspectives behind the objective facts. A culture’s literature supplements the historian’s study as a window into a people’s collective values and beliefs. The 1857 poetry of Eliza R. Snow and Charles W. Penrose provides important insight into the Latter-day Saint perspective of the Utah War. As a people, the Mormons had endured intense bigotry and persecution since the church’s beginning. However, the Utah expedition was the first time that the government had engaged in direct opposition with the Saints. The Mormons viewed this conflict as religious in nature, considering it a defense of their religious freedom, and a holy war against the powers of evil. They considered their resistance a patriotic parallel to the American Revolution and viewed the government’s injustice and their resistance as a fulfillment of prophecy through the doctrinal perspective of apostasy and restoration. Considering this perspective allows us to more easily understand the Saints’ reasons in opposing the Buchanan administration. Of course, the story of the Utah War has been told in poetry from the federal as well as the Mormon perspective. The poetry of John Wolcott Phelps and many others in Johnston’s Army reveal another view of the conflict. Audrey Godfrey points out that in January of 1859 two Mormon actresses, who had performed for a military audience at Camp Floyd, refused to appear at any further productions on the post because the Military Dramatic Association had presented a vulgar song that ridiculed Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, suggesting that artistic representations of the conflict were heated on both sides.

As historians look to the arts to supplement their understanding of the conflict, the light of new insight into each side's perspectives will exceed the heat of controversy that continues to shroud the study of the Utah War.
The kingdom of God is a kingdom of Order,
   With life in the heart and with power in the head:
With each member in place, the whole body is perfect:
   Gradation existed when Order was made.

Chorus:
The kingdom of God is a kingdom of Glory—
   A kingdom of Righteousness—happy and free:
With Prophets, Apostles—with Statesmen and Warriors:
   The kingdom of God is the kingdom for me.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of Power:
   In the midst of oppression its sinews have grown:
All people who fight against Zion will perish—
   To tread on her peace is to forfeit their own.

“The feet of the image, the clay and the iron,”
   The kingdom of God, into pieces will break;
The “brass and the silver” will also be broken;
   Earth’s nations shall tremble—her kingdom shall shake.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of Mercy,
   Where the fountains of charity flow without guile—
Where law-detained captives are treated with kindness,
   And penitence’ hand is received with a smile.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of Justice,
   Where rights are secured to the great and the small—
Where judicial decisions are wise and impartial—
   Where truth is the sceptre, extended to all.
The kingdom of God is a kingdom of Valor—
   The warriors of Israel are valiant and brave:
The Kingdom of God cont.

The quail not in war, and they shrink not in danger—
O’er them and their Temples, bright banners will wave.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of Conquest,
To which every knee of all nations must bow;
For the law of the Lord will go forth from Mount Zion—
His word will go forth from Jerusalem too.

The kingdom of God holds the keys of Salvation
For life that is now, and the lives yet to be;
With the gifts and the powers of Eternal Progression
Of kingdoms in kingdoms, eternally free.
Eliza R. Snow wrote the following poem on October 13, 1857.

**THE LADIES OF UTAH**

Why are you in these mountains,
   Expos’d to frosts and snows,
Far from your shelt’ring houses—
   From comfort and repose?

Has cruel persecution,
   With unrelenting hand,
Thrust you from home and kindred
   And from your native land?

Have you been mob’d and plunder’d
   Till you are penniless,
And then in destitution
   Driven to the wilderness?

No, no; you’ve joined a crusade
   Against the peace of those
Driv’n to these distant valleys
   By cruel and murd’rous foes.

Amid the dreary desert,
   Where hideous redd’n roam—
Where beasts of prey were howling,
   We’ve made ourselves a home.

We never had intruded
   As you would now intrude;
We’ve never sought to injure—
   We’ve sought for others’ good.

We came through sore compulsion,
   And not from wicked choice;
We had in all our sorrow,
   Heaven’s sweet consoling voice.

Can woman’s heart be callous
   And made of flint and steel?
Perhaps you’ll learn to pity,
   When you are made to feel.

Should sickness prey upon you
   And children cry for bread,
With bitter self reproaches
   You’ll rue the path you tread.

We’re formed of blood and sinews
   And flesh, as well as you;
And we have hearts composed of
   As many fibers too.

We love with purer feelings
   Our husbands, children, friends;
We’ve learned to prize the blessings
   Which God in mercy sends.

We have the ancient order
   To us by prophets given,
And here we have the pattern
   As it exists in heav’n.
We’re well prepar’d to teach you,
   And that you may discern,
We simply here remind you,
   You’ve just begun to learn.
The Ladies of Utah cont.

We’d fain from human suff’ring
   Each barbed arrow draw;
But yet self preservation
   Is God’s and nature’s law.

The Scriptures are fulfilling—
   The spoiler’s being spoiled;
All satan’s foul devices
   ‘Gainst Zion will be foil’d.
Up, Awake, Ye Defenders of Zion

Up, awake, ye defenders of Zion!
The foe’s at the door of your homes;
Let each heart be the heart of a lion,
Unyielding and proud as he roams.
Remember the wrongs in Missouri;
Forget not the fate of Nauvoo.
When the God-hating foe is before you,
Stand firm and be faithful and true,
Stand firm and be faithful and true,
Stand firm and be faithful and true;
When the God-hating foe is before you,
Stand firm and be faithful and true.

By the mountains our Zion’s surrounded;
Her warriors are noble and brave;
And their faith on Jehovah is founded,
Whose power is mighty to save.
Opposed by a proud boasting nation,
Their numbers, compared, may be few;
But their union is known through creation,
And they’ve always been faithful and true.
And they’ve always been faithful and true,
And they’ve always been faithful and true,
But their union is known through creation,
And they’ve always been faithful and true.

Shall we bear with oppression forever?
Shall we tamely submit to the foe,
While the ties of our kindred they sever
And the blood of our prophets shall flow?
No! the thought sets the heart wildly beating;
Our vows at each pulse we renew:
Ne’er to rest till our foes are retreating,
And to be ever faithful and true,
And to be ever faithful and true,
And to be ever faithful and true;
Ne’er to rest till our foes are retreating,
And to be ever faithful and true.

Though assisted by legions infernal,
The plundering wretches advance,
With a host from the regions eternal,
We’ll scatter their troops at a glance.
Soon “the Kingdom” will be independent;
In wonder the nations will view
The despised ones in glory resplendent;
Then let us be faithful and true,
Then let us be faithful and true,
Then let us be faithful and true!
The despised ones in glory resplendent;
Then let us be faithful and true!

—Charles W. Penrose
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Darren Iammarino

Similarities Between Sethian Baptism and the Bridal Chamber of Thomas Gnosticism and Valentinianism

Over the years many theories have been proposed to explain the nature and function of Sethian baptism and the bestowal of the five seals in Gnostic tradition. This paper argues that the rite of Sethian baptism and the reception of the five seals were carried on into later Gnostic traditions, especially the ritual of the bridal chamber. From a critical examination of Gnostic sources, it can be argued that not only are there similarities between the two rites, but conclusions can also be drawn about how Sethian baptism was performed and for what specific purpose.

Section one considers previous scholarship on Sethian baptism, the five seals and the ritual of the bridal chamber. In section two, Sethian baptism is examined by highlighting and interpreting all pertinent references to baptism and the five seals in the Trimorphic Protennoia, Apocryphon of John, Three Steles of Seth and The Gospel of the Egyptians. Followed by an attempt to reconstruct the process that leads to the reception of the five seals or unification in the living water/bridal chamber. The third section provides an analysis of enigmatic statements concerning the bridal chamber and the robe in the Gospel of Thomas,
Gospel of Philip and Hymn of the Pearl. Section four contains a brief restatement of the similarities between the two key rites in Gnostic traditions and concluding comments.

I. PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Attempting to understand the true meaning of the five seals has proven to be a challenging and contentious pursuit. George MacRae proposed that the references to the five seals in Trimorphic Protennoia represent “a Gnostic liturgical fragment probably recited at a ceremony of initiation much in the manner of a Christian baptismal homily or hymn.”¹ J. M. Sevrin believes that the bestowal of the five seals refers to a rite of quintuple baptism. This fivefold baptism is a pre-Christian phenomenon and represents an original Jewish-Sethian baptismal rite.² Sevrin points out that there are no explicit references to unction (or eucharist for that matter) and so there is no reason to assume that Sethian baptism and the five seals are related to the five sacraments mentioned in the Gospel of Philip.

John Turner takes the preceding ideas and improves upon them by postulating that the ritual represents a single baptismal rite consisting of five stages of enlightenment.³ However, there are those who still believe that the five seals and Sethian baptism are actually a Christian phenomenon, since the references to the five seals appear in Christian recensions of Sethian texts. For example, Yvonne Janssens argues that the five seals refer to an anointing of the five sense organs, an idea that Alaistair Logan develops further.⁴ Logan believes that the “Barbelo-Gnostics actually may have been the first to introduce post-baptismal

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² J.M. Sevrin, Le dossier baptismale Sethien: Etudes sur la sacramentaire gnostique (Bibliotheque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section “Etudes” 2) (Quebec 1986) 31-38., cf. also 250-258.
⁴ Yvonne Janssens, La Protennoia Trimorphe (NH XIII, 1) (Bibliotheque copte de Nag Hammadi Section “Texts” 4) (Quebec 1978), 80
Following Sevrin and Turner, this essay posits that Sethian baptism and the five seals is actually a pre-Christian rite. However, this schema differs from Sevrin in that the rite does not involve water immersion at all and instead represents an individual ecstatic ascent experience where one is granted five gifts. These five gifts are the four gifts requested by Barbelo and the gift of reunification with Barbelo or the archetypal human. In other words, the five seals do not refer specifically to water immersion, unction, or insignation, although a part of uniting with Barbelo may be a bestowal of divine names on the Gnostic. Furthermore, this pre-Christian rite of Sethian Baptism continues on into later forms of Gnosticism, such as Thomas Gnosticism and Valentinianism, as evidenced by references to the bridal chamber.

Scholars’ attempts to unravel the mystery of the bridal chamber have led to even more theories and heated scholarship than their attempts to understand the five seals. One of the earliest discussions of the topic came from E. Segelberg who believed that the references to the bridal chamber could not possibly have referred to an actual carnal act. H.M. Schenke presents a similar view by pointing out that the Gospel of Philip frequently rejects marriage as defilement, or an impure substitute to the true bridal chamber.

Other scholars have taken the concept of the bridal chamber more literally. F. M. Grant goes as far as to say that earthly marriage is an archetype of the spiritual marriage. Many scholars seem to have an aversion to attributing salvation to actual rites or mysteries. For example, H.G. Gaffron says, “When sacraments are necessary, for the process of salvation, the step is not too great towards tying the salvation exclusively to the sacraments and to increase their

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singularity and secret character beyond limits." Gaffron, however, oddly concludes that the bridal chamber is a sacrament given just before death. This seems unlikely. However, it may be true that the dying person prepares to repeat this rite, but this time there will be no descent back into the material world.

J. Menard writes that the Gnostic and the image must be united before death and that salvation is realized and actualized in this life for the Gnostic. The truth of the bridal chamber can be made accessible via imagery alone and receiving a sacrament means that an individual has understood the hidden truth present in the symbol or imagery. Elaine Pagels points out that the difference between the psychical and the pneumatic individual is that the pneumatic person has understood the esoteric significance of the religious symbols and sacraments. “Valentinians, then far from intending to do away with images, understand images and symbols as the only means of pointing to or signifying a reality which is essentially ineffable.”

Jorunn Buckley believes that the bridal chamber represents a secret ritual in which the Gnostic achieves salvation through the “collapse of a dualistic worldview.” He goes on to say, “It is high time to take into account cultic elements in definitions of Gnosticism. Excessive attention has been paid to the items, knower and known, but not enough to the significance of the means of knowledge.” Surely, the means of knowledge should now take precedence in scholarship and, thus, we will see that Sethian baptism is similar to the ritual of the bridal chamber and that salvation comes through this ritual. Uncovering the means of this knowledge is one of our primary tasks and our best information regarding method and technique comes from the Sethian tracts themselves.

II. SETHIAN BAPTISM AND THE FIVE SEALS

Sethian baptism is about ascension, unification/enlightenment and then descent, just like the ritual of the bridal chamber. In order to approach the meaning of this essential Gnostic rite, we will first look at the text known as *Trimorphic Protennoia*. In this text the main elements of the Sethian rite of baptism are outlined.

And I delivered him to those who give robes, Yammon, Elasso, Amenai and they covered him with a robe from the robes of light; and I delivered him to the Baptists and they baptized him, Micheus, Michar, Mnesinous, and they immersed him in the spring of the water of life. And I delivered him to those who enthrone, Bariel, Nouthan, Sabenai and they enthroned him from the throne of glory. And I delivered him to those who glorify Ariom, Elien, Phariel, and they glorified him with the glory of the Fatherhood. And those who snatch away snatched away, Kamaliel, [... anen], Samblo, the servants of the great holy luminaries and they took him into the light of his Fatherhood. And he received the five seals from the light of the Mother.12

What we learn from the above statement is that the baptismal rite consists of enrobing, baptizing, enthroning, glorifying and snatching away. However, there are two stages that precede the enrobing in the life of a Gnostic. These stages are the recognition of a calling via a resonance between the spark inside the Gnostic and the primal logos and the stripping away of the material world in response to the call. This imagery is still vague and enigmatic. Before it can have any meaning, we must look at the protology and cosmogony presented in the *Apocryphon of John*.

After an apophatic discussion concerning the nature and transcendence of the One, Jesus the revealer begins to discourse on the initial process of emanation. Emanation begins when the father beholds his own image on the reflected light surrounding him. “Now this father is the One who beholds himself in the light surrounding him, which is the spring of living water, and provides all the

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realms. He reflects on his image everywhere...The father’s thought became a reality and she who appeared in the presence of the father in shining light came forth” (NHC II, 1, 5:28-35). This female emanation is known as Barbelo and she is conceived in living water, which is light. *It is in this living water that the Sethians seek true baptism.*

The important points regarding Barbelo are that she glorifies the invisible spirit, has three names, is paradoxically androgynous and is the image of the spirit. As we saw in *Trimorphic Protennoia*, that glorification is a crucial component of Gnostic baptism and it precedes being snatched away in ecstatic union with the One. After glorifying the Father, we learn that Barbelo requests four gifts: foreknowledge, incorruptibility, life eternal and truth. When we add the union with Barbelo and taking on her name, we have the five seals bestowed upon the Gnostic who achieves ascent and union. After receiving their own personal revelation from the first human (his or her archetypal form), the Gnostic who makes it this far in ecstatic ascent will literally attain a degree of foreknowledge.
This foreknowledge comes because he knows his destiny after death, which is to return to the One. Also, he will be incorruptible, know the truth and have life eternal, in which he will abide in the Good and contemplate the Good.

The only hint at the process that leads to reunification in the Apocryphon of John appears when John asks Jesus, “How can the soul become younger and return into its mother’s womb, or into the human?” (NHC IV, 1, 27:12-15). The response is, “This soul will be made to follow another in whom the spirit of life dwells, and she is saved through that one” (NHC IV, 1, 27:16-20). This “other” is likely the male heavenly counterpart or “twin” which we will see throughout the Thomas and Valentinian literature. Jesus concludes by saying that the Gnostic will be raised up and sealed in luminous water with five seals, “that death might not prevail over the person from that moment on.” (NHC II, 1, 31:25)

Even if we know that the ritual of Sethian baptism consisted of hearing a spiritual call, material renunciation, enrobing, baptizing, enthroning, glorifying and snatching away, we are still left in the dark as to how this rite was performed. Was it a group ritual or a solitary act? Was it a one-time experience or is it a repeatable visionary and revelatory technique? It seems that elements of the rite were practiced or incorporated into group work, but that in its most effective and crucial form, it was something which each individual Gnostic had to perform. It is likely that the process and techniques involved lend themselves to a repeatable ritual that induced visions and revelations. Thankfully, there are two extant texts that shed some light on the process of performing the ritual: Three Steles of Seth and Gospel of the Egyptians.

Three Steles of Seth is a laudatory hymnal to the triple power of God, which is the Self-Begotten, Barbelo and the Unbegotten Father. In the steles we see that a key aspect of the ascent is incantatory praise to the One, where the Gnostic thanks the One for revealing goodness and truth. As a part of this praise, the members of the community identify themselves with “another race,” which stems from the goodness of the One. This shows that the members of the community have heard the spiritual call and are ritually prepared through material
renunciation to begin the ascent. The renunciation likely consists of a period of fasting and abstinence from sex. Next comes the ascent.

It seems that the steles represent a reenactment on a communal level what each individual must go through in order to receive the five seals. The steles allow the community to draw on the power of group work. This text shows that Sethian baptism must at least be performed once on an individual level. However, following the initial performance one can participate in repeated mystical ascent experiences, in which visions and revelations are induced through incantations and invocations of the denizens of the pleroma. “For they all bless these individually and together. And afterwards they shall be silent. And just as they were ordained, they ascend. After the silence, they descend from the third. They bless the second; after these the first. The way of ascent is the way of descent” (NHC VII, 5, 127:12-21). The ritual process itself seems to be rather standard, praising and then silence. It is only through silence that one can enter the highest realms and hear the revelation with lucidity. Fasting, free-form stream of consciousness ecstatic praise, invocations and then silence; this process would likely lead to a profound state of altered consciousness, which is crucial for receiving revelations and visions in all esoteric traditions ancient and modern. However, there is one more technique that Sethians employed and we can see this in the Gospel of the Egyptians.

The Gospel of the Egyptians contains a baptismal hymn that is spoken by the person receiving baptism. In this hymn there are strings of repeated Greek vowels chanted.13 This bizarre looking text is really rather common for the time period and numerous parallels can be found in the Greek Magical Papyri. The purpose of vowel chanting is to induce single-minded focus and an emptying of mental chatter. In fact, mantrical recitation of simple vowels or words is one of the most ubiquitous techniques for aiding one in entering an altered state of consciousness.

It is possible that the Gospel of the Egyptians may include a cipher of some sort, which contains a hidden name for God. We already see the often-used words

13. For example, iii eeee oooo uuuu oooo aaaa in (NHC III, 2, 66:13-15).
Iesseus Mazarkeus Iessedekeus used to open the baptism and these names are likely the three names of Barbelo alluded to in the *Apocryphon of John*. The most likely purpose of the vowels is for focus and entering altered states. However, it seems odd to me that the vowel pattern is broken in the text; where one would expect omicrons there are omegas.\(^\text{14}\) It may be that a gematric analysis of the vowels leads to the possibility of another name for God being reconstructed. Even if this is the case, any attempt at solving this riddle is bound to be highly speculative.

We are now ready to attempt a rough reconstruction of what the spiritual life of a Sethian Gnostic looked like. First, it must begin with a spiritual call. The Father or the Son is constantly sending or descending into the material world, to enlighten those of his seed. However, only some hear the call because only the elect have a spark within them that allows for a harmonic resonance. This is similar to the effect observed on two tuned violins; when a note is sounded on one violin, the corresponding string on the other instrument will vibrate. Only the elect contain the necessary string or spark that allows for resonance.

The next step for a Sethian Gnostic would probably consist of entering a Gnostic community where the mythology with its novel philosophical cosmology and theodicy are presented to the initiate via myths and allegories. After the initial instruction, the initiate then accepts this new paradigm and likely seeks to limit their participation in the material world by abstaining from sex and food for an extended period in order to become ritually pure for the coming affirmation of their new beliefs. In contrast to Platonism, Sethianism likely put little importance on the cultivation of morals. This is because morality was viewed as limiting and enslaving and the result of the Jewish law-giver God Ialdaboath. The Sethian needs a more dramatic and emotionally impacting personal experience.

At this point, the initiate is ready to have his first hand experience of the divine. The ultimate affirmation is a personal experience of visionary and reve-

\(^\text{14}\) The text reads iiii uuuuuu ooooooo. It is odd that it goes four vowels, then six and then seven without five omicrons in between, but it could be that it was more important that the vowels be arranged for visual effectiveness.
latory ascent where the initiate receives first hand gnosis and is sealed with the five gifts of foreknowledge, truth, life eternal, incorruptibility and finally reunification with the divine image in Barbelo. In this way, the initiate is now a full-fledged Gnostic, finally having received knowledge (gnosis) first hand.

The actual ascent itself draws on the full repertoire of available magical and mystical techniques for attaining visions and revelations. It is possible that the actual process is as follows: First, the initiate is called. Second, the initiate gains entry into the group and receives initial education. Third, the initiate begins a period of fasting and sexual abstinence. Fourth, the initiate receives the ritual of spiritual baptism, which utilizes some or all of these techniques: temporary isolation, incantatory praise or prayer, ritual magical tools/paraphernalia and theurgy as evidenced in Marsanes,¹⁵ invocations, mantrical chanting and silent meditation. Fifth, the initiate receives visions and revelations in living water. Sixth, the initiate receives sealing. Seventh, the initiate begins descent. Eighth, the initiate experiences repeated ascents in communal worship.

Of all the above steps, it is steps four through six which are crucial and it is during that ritual that one unites a likeness with an image. More accurately, one unites a spark of the substance of the Image with the source of the Image. In so doing, one is saved, receives gnosis and is one of the perfect. Given the above reconstruction, we will now turn to the possibility that this key rite was appropriated by later groups of Gnostics, such as the Thomas Gnostics and the Valentinians.

III. THOMAS AND VALENTINIAN LITERATURE

Having determined that the purpose of Sethian baptism is reunification and revelation in living water from the original human image, which is Barbelo, we will examine parallels in other forms of Gnosticism. The Gospel of Thomas, includes six references to the familiar metaphor of the two becoming one (logia 11, 22, 48, 61, 84, 114). In four out of the six logia, Jesus explicitly speaks of the

two becoming one: “...When you come to dwell in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?” (log. 11). This first saying is a sort of a warning to the members of the community that you must live a life of the spirit or of matter; you cannot be loyal to both. This concept is reiterated in logion 47 with the image of mounting two horses.

It is a presupposition in the Thomas tradition, as in much of the Mediterranean region during that time, that humans are comprised of both matter and spirit, and that matter weighs down the spirit. Realizing that the spirit represents our true nature is imperative for the Thomas community, but the believer must make matter and spirit one again in order to be redeemed. “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside...when you make the male and the female one and the same...then will you enter the kingdom” (log. 22). This idea of the male becoming female and vice versa is echoed in logia 114. It is also understood as a likeness uniting with an image. “When you see your likeness, you rejoice. But when you see your images which came into being before you, and which neither die nor become manifest, how much you will have to bear!” (log. 84).

The Gospel of Thomas even gives us a term for where this meeting takes place: the bridal chamber. “They said to Jesus, ‘Come let us pray today and let us fast.’ Jesus said, ‘What is the sin that I have committed or wherein have I been defeated? But when the bridegroom leaves the bridal chamber then let them fast and pray” (log. 104). This saying is extremely important for two reasons. First, we learn that Jesus has full gnosis, he has not fallen pray to “drunkenness” or ignorance of his true home unlike the hero in the Hymn of the Pearl to be addressed later. Second, we learn that if the bridegroom leaves the bridal chamber, then he must fast and pray. This is one of the only hints at the actual techniques used by the Thomas community to reestablish unification with our spiritual image. The importance of asceticism is strengthened by logion 75, “Many are standing at the door, but it is the solitary who will enter the bridal chamber.”

In the Gospel of Thomas, we are still left wondering about the details of the
bridal chamber. However, we do learn that it is in the “light” from saying 11 and that our image or twin is waiting there for us. This repeated reference to light in the Gospel of Thomas (11, 50, 77) is similar to the living water of Sethianism, which is identified as light. What man will receive when he returns to the light is cryptically referred to in saying 19:

Blessed is he who came into being before he came into being, if you become my disciples and listen to my words, these stones will minister to you. For there are five trees for you in paradise which remain undisturbed summer and winter and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever becomes acquainted with them will not experience death (emphasis added).

It is possible that these five trees are references to the five seals in Sethian baptism, especially since the trees are referred to as if they are gifts to those who are worthy and as bestowing eternal life. The five trees likely reside or can only be reached through the bridal chamber. Fortunately, a Valentinian text known as the Gospel of Philip, offers a fuller treatment of the bridal chamber.

Valentinians differ from the Thomas and Sethian communities in that they have five sacraments, three of which can take an exoteric form. The Valentinians seem to perform water baptisms, chrismations and the eucharist, but none of these outer rituals compare to redemption and the bridal chamber. In fact, it is through this ultimate process of individual ascent associated with Sethian baptism that one achieves resurrection and salvation.

It appears in the Gospel of Philip that water baptism and chrism are important, but there are constant allusions that one must take on the names and powers of God for themselves. “The bridegroom and image enter through image into truth, which is restoration. It is right that those who don’t have it take on the name of the father and son and holy spirit. But they have not done so on their own. If you do not take on the names for yourself, the name Christian will be taken from you. You receive them in the oil of chrism.”16  This statement makes

16. All the references from the Gospel of Philip are taken from The Gnostic Bible, Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, eds., Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003. This first reference is found on page 277.
it appear that one becomes a Christian via your standard chrismation, but in a later passage, the *Gospel of Philip* explains what is meant by chrism. “No one will be able to look at oneself either in water or in a mirror without light, nor see in light without water or mirror. So it is fitting to baptize in light and water. Now the light is the chrism.”\(^{17}\) In order to actually become a Christian one must be baptized in the light and this happens in the bridal chamber.

The bridal chamber in the Valentinian community is actually the same type of ascent ritual that we have encountered in the ritual of Sethian baptism in living water. In fact, all that matters in Valentinianism is the bridal chamber, which subsumes all other sacraments:

- Baptism is the holy building.
- Redemption is the holy of the holy.
- The holy of the holies is the bridal chamber.
- Baptism includes resurrection and redemption.
- Redemption happens in the bridal chamber, but the bridal chamber is part of something superior to it and the others because you will find nothing like it. Those familiar with it are those who pray in spirit and truth for they do not pray in Jerusalem... It was right for some below to ascend.\(^ {18}\)

Here we see that the bridal chamber is the ultimate goal and it is reached through rigorous prayer. Similar to the *Gospel of Thomas*, we read in the *Gospel of Philip* that the “undefiled marriage” which takes place in the bridal chamber is a solitary and personal experience. “If a marriage is open to the public, it has become prostitution, and the bride plays the harlot... let her show herself only to her father and her mother and to the friend and attendants of the bridegroom.”\(^ {19}\) This saying seems to echo logion 75 of *Thomas*, where only the solitary can enter the bridal chamber and it also bolsters the likelihood that the bridal chamber is an esoteric, non-communal ritual.

Is it possible that the five sacraments of Valentinianism are the same as the five seals of Sethianism? This question is important because if the answer is yes,

then we will be able to recreate a much more precise picture of the communal and ritual life of the Sethians. However, it is unlikely that the non-Christian Sethians would care about such practices, especially eucharist, which would have no historical precedence for the disgruntled Jewish Sethians. Furthermore, the Sethians most likely did not have as large a congregation as the Valentinians and the need for multiple sacraments or graded initiation was less likely to be of importance.

It is also worth mentioning that in the *Gospel of Philip*, there appears to be little evidence to support the claim that the bridal chamber refers to a literal sexual act. Although it is true that some groups of Gnostics such as the Borborites, Caininites and possibly the Carpocratians participated in ritualistic sex acts, it doesn’t appear that the Thomas community or the Valentinians did so. Later occult groups such as the Ordo Templi Orientis and modern-day Satanists, among others, advocate the liberating power of transgressing cultural taboos, yet all the signs in the *Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Philip* point to the importance of asceticism and solitariness.

The best representation of the journey of the Gnostic’s soul is found in the *Hymn of the Pearl*, which belongs to the larger Thomas community tradition. In the *Hymn of the Pearl*, we encounter even more imagery similar to that found in the Sethian works. A central image in the *Hymn of the Pearl* is the robe: “They took away from me the jewel studded garment shot with gold that they had made out of love for me and the robe of yellow color tailored to my size.”

Note that the robe is tailored to the prince’s size and is yellow. In other words, it is a mirrored image in the living water, which is light.

After descending into the material world, the prince becomes lost in Egypt, and it is not until he hears a call in the form of a letter that he begins to regain his memory. “Arise and become sober out of your sleep. Listen to the words written in this letter. Remember that you are a child of kings.”

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20. All references to the *Hymn of the Pearl* are taken from Bentley Layton’s, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, New York: Doubleday, 1987. We will retain the customary Syriac numbering for the *Hymn of the Pearl* (HPrl). This first citation is from HPrl, 108:9-11.

21. HPrl 110:43-44
letter is actually emblazoned on the heart of the prince, implying the need for a degree of the silencing of the mind and an inward transcendence. After hearing the call, the prince gets the pearl and then strips off “the dirty clothing” and leaves it behind. This “dirty clothing” refers to the material body and we find the beginning of the ascent experience. The ascent is accompanied by a female or the letter, which is to be viewed as a female wisdom figure and guide for the prince. The prince then passes through the “Labyrinth and the Meson” or the intermediate realm, which alludes to the Gnostic’s ascent past the archons and beyond the eighth sphere.

Finally, the prince sees his former robe. “When suddenly I saw my garment reflected as in a mirror, I perceived it in my whole self as well, and through it I recognized and saw myself. For though we were derived from one and the same we were partially divided; and then again we were one, with a single form.” 22 The garment or robe has grown in proportion to the prince and literally “mirrors” him. Here we have the enrobing process of Sethian baptism. Next the robe actually discourses, “It is I who belong to the one who is stronger than all human beings and for whose sake I was designed by the father himself.” 23 This speech compels the two to fully come together as the prince puts on the garment and is thereby transported “into the realm of peace which belongs to reverential awe.” 24 In this realm of peace we find glorifying: “I bowed my head and prostrated myself before the splendor of the father who had sent me.” 25 There also may be a reflection of enthroning as the father takes delight in the prince and “receiv[es] him in the palace,” where “all his subjects were singing hymns with reverent voices.” 26 The story concludes with the prince making an appearance before the king himself.

22. HPrl 112:76-78
23. HPrl 113:91
24. HPrl 113:98
25. HPrl 113:99
26. HPrl 113:103
IV. CONCLUSIONS

The *Hymn of the Pearl* succinctly describes all the key elements of the journey of the soul in Gnosticism. In the Thomas tradition, we find images and metaphors similar to those presented in the Sethian tradition. For example, we find calling, stripping, archons and realms, enrobing, glorifying, light/living water and five trees/five seals. It appears that there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that there are parallels between the end goals of the Sethian and Thomas systems. The end goal is the reunification of the spirit with the realm of light. The main point of the gnosis is to realize that you are actually from the race or seed of the light or that you contain a piece of the divine within you.

The two schools of thought did operate from quite different mythological systems to explain the fall and entrapment of light in matter. Regardless of this fact, they both seem to have a rite of ascent that led to a mystical vision and revelation. Both ascent programs were likely preceded by fasting and ascetic practices. What we do not learn from the Thomas literature is the actual procedure to attain this state. In fact, the only thing we learn from the Thomas tradition that we cannot gather from the Sethians is that one must be solitary and that fasting and prayer are crucial when the one has become two. It is quite possible that vowel chanting, magical paraphernalia and lengthy incantations were less common and instead the ascent experience was the result of lengthy and fervent prayer while fasting in temporary isolation in both the Thomas tradition and the Valentinian school.

From the *Gospel of Philip* we learn that Christians cannot be considered saved unless they have entered the bridal chamber, which is the new imagery for the living water of Sethian baptism. Thus, a major difference between the Valentinians and the orthodox Christians of the day is exposed. The Valentinians need direct experience of the One through the bridal chamber and they do not “borrow names at interest.” (NHC II, 3, 64:25) This direct experience leads to the reception of four spiritual gifts: resurrection, light, cross and holy spirit. To these four we can add a fifth gift, which is the title of Christian or unionization with
the image. This is similar to the four gifts requested by Barbelo from the One: incorruptibility, life eternal, truth and foreknowledge plus the merging with the archetypal human, and the corresponding reception of the divine name(s).
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Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado

Despite the fact that there has been a dramatic increase in conversion to Islam in the United States since 9/11, no single work has analyzed the trends of a diverse range of U.S. converts (i.e. men and women; white, Latino, and black). While there is some justification for treating each group separately, at many mosques throughout the country, all these groups are represented and interact. This is the case at the Denver Sunni mosque, Colorado Muslim Society (CMS), where thirteen converts were interviewed for this study. This sample represents


the spectrum of converts in the U. S. since members are white, Latino, and black, eleven converted after 9/11, and there are eight females and five males. It should be noted that Muslim tradition has held that while Muslim men are allowed to marry Jewish or Christian women, Muslim women are generally discouraged from marrying non-Muslim men. This may have possibly affected the decision of two of the men in this study to convert, but neither explicitly reported this as a motive. In fact, all of the converts in this study reported that they experienced no social pressure in making their decision to convert. This essay seeks to contribute to the literature on conversion to Islam in the West, and to begin to explain why in the U.S. conversion to Islam has increased since 9/11.

In *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Lewis Rambo offers a 7-stage model that accounts for the various processes that take place throughout a convert’s experience. These stages—context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences—are together interactive and accumulative, accounting for the fact that sometimes individuals go back and forth between stages. With this model, Rambo has provided a helpful way of examining the complex processes in conversion. This essay uses these stages as a framework for analyzing the results of my fieldwork, as well as for evaluating the results in light of other studies on Western converts to Islam.

The interviews were conducted over the course of two months at a weekly “Beginning Islam” class at the mosque. I interviewed the converts in a corner of the classroom while class was being conducted. I asked them 32 questions about their conversion experience, and each interview lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the detail of each respondent’s answers. The respondents’ ages ranged from 19 to 57, with a mean of 34.7 and a median of 29.

**CONTEXT**

Context can shape the nature of conversion: “context encompasses a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent, and dialectical factors that both facilitate

and repress the process of conversion." Rambo distinguishes between macro-context and microcontext. The macrocontext is the major systems of the environment in which the conversion takes place (political, religious, economic, etc.) and the microcontext is the “person’s family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood.” Each plays its own role in the convert’s experience.

The environment for converts in the U.S. is different than for those in Europe. For example, the U.S. is seen as having a more religious population than European countries. Colorado, in particular, has a large Catholic population, followed by Evangelical Protestants. Its Muslim community is less than one percent of the state’s total population. A handful of Muslims arrived in Colorado beginning in the early twentieth century, and the community had no more than a few hundred people in the 1960s. However, there has been significant growth since the 1970s as a result of reduced restrictions on immigration to the U.S., beginning with the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, and an increase of Muslim refugees coming, since the 1980s, from the Middle East, Europe, and, more recently, Africa. Today there are roughly twenty to twenty-five thousand Muslims in Colorado. Because the community is still small, Muslims of all ethnic backgrounds attend Denver’s largest mosque (the CMS). The Muslim community has had relatively few difficulties with the surrounding population,

5. Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 21-22.
though since 9/11, there have been some reports of harassment.\textsuperscript{10} Concomitantly, the Muslim community has increasingly been involved in interfaith and community-based projects. As the community of those born into Islam has grown, so has the convert community. Early converts to Islam in Colorado were mostly women who married Muslim men, but recently, especially after 9/11, more and more men and single women are converting.

Of the 13 respondents, only 4 were originally from Colorado. Two of these 4 were those who converted prior to 9/11, both in the 1980s. Three of the respondents lived in only one previous location before moving to Colorado as adults, however, 2 of the 3 were immigrants to the U.S. The 5 remaining respondents

lived in more than one state or country, during their childhoods, due to various factors. Having a significant change in one’s place of residence, then, is a theme for 7 out of the 13 converts. For the remaining 5, only 3 have never lived outside of Colorado, and 1 of those 3 travelled abroad for several months. In the literature on conversion to Islam in the West, the theme of having multiple residencies is almost never mentioned. At most, researchers might note whether their respondents are currently living in urban or rural areas, with urban areas being the most typical. It should be noted that the majority of converts in my study, while moving frequently, have lived in primarily suburban environments. If a person has to continually readjust her life, and, therefore, her identity, because she moves to several different places, this might result in being detached from a traditional culture and having a less stable identity—both of which are factors that scholars have noted as contributing to conversion. It is noteworthy that while changing residence is a likely factor in the conversion of my respondents, social class is not: 3 identified themselves as “poor” during their youth, 4 as “middle class to poor,” 3 as “middle class,” and 3 as “upper middle class.”

Education and occupation are factors that diverge from the findings of other Western converts. Of my respondents, 3 had dropped out of secondary school, 3 were attending college courses at the time of the interview, and only 2 had a B.A. or equivalent degree. Anway, who looked at female U.S. converts, found that 53 percent of her respondents had a BA or higher, 12 percent had an MA, and 6 percent had an MD or PhD. Anway’s results, however, are probably more revealing of her method for obtaining responses than of U.S. female converts in general. She sent out 350 questionnaires and only received 53 back; those who took the time to respond were probably the better-educated who are more accustomed to writing and filling out surveys. However, other research-

ers who did one-on-one interviews with European subjects also saw higher levels of education: Zebiri noted that the converts’ education was generally above average\textsuperscript{14} and Köse reported that of his subjects, 60 percent had at least a BA and 20 percent had graduate degrees.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, Zebiri and Poston found that many of their subjects were professionals;\textsuperscript{16} while for my respondents, only 2 could be classified as having professional-type jobs, while 2 worked construction-type jobs, 4 had clerical/service jobs, 2 were homemakers, and 2 were full-time students. Thus, the level of occupation was evenly distributed. I believe that the lower educational and occupational level of recent U.S. converts, as compared to the findings of previous studies concerning European and older American converts, should be seen in relation to the increased rate of conversion in the U.S. Post-9/11 U.S. conversion has been higher in the U.S. than in Europe, likely because of more pervasive media coverage of Islam in the U.S. It seems that while converts in Europe are the relative elite whose education allows them to know more about a minority religion than the average person, because the attacks happened on U.S. soil, U.S. citizens of all classes have been exposed to information about Islam. In addition, because Islam is usually spread through interaction with born Muslims, the increased rate of refugees to the U.S. (which hosts almost twice as many as the United Kingdom)\textsuperscript{17} has meant that more “common” citizens are being exposed to Islam in the U.S. than in Europe. Of my respondents, only 15 percent had any level of university education (which is about half of the national average);\textsuperscript{18} this indicates that Islam is actually more attractive to those with less education. This will be explored in more depth later.

Another set of responses that differs from previous studies’ findings is that of religious participation before conversion to Islam. Of the respondents 5 were

\textsuperscript{14} Zebiri, \textit{British Muslim Converts}, 9.


\textsuperscript{16} Zebiri, \textit{British Muslim Converts}, 9; Larry Poston, \textit{Islamic Da’wah in the West} (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 171.


raised Catholic, 1 Episcopalian, 1 Church of England, 2 Baptist, 2 non-denom-
inational Christian, 1 Pentecostal, 1 Jewish (this person was raised Jewish and
Christian, so both religions are counted), and 1 atheist. Six of the respondents
regularly attended religious services through at least high school, though 4 of
those stopped attending soon thereafter. Four of the respondents attended re-
ligious services regularly until their early-to-mid teenage years. Aside from the
person raised atheist, 2 others had little religious involvement in their youth.
Often, the reason people gave for no longer attending their original church was
because they saw the membership and/or leadership of that church as hypo-
crites, not because they rejected all their former beliefs. Of Zebiri’s subjects,
two-thirds had a non-religious or nominally Christian background; 85 percent
of Köse’s respondents came from a family which did not identify with a church,
and 51 percent said they had “no” or a “weak” religious upbringing; in Poston’s
study, 57 percent were raised Christians, but only 32 percent had strong reli-
gious participation. Conversely, in Anway’s study, only 2 said religion was not
important in their formative years. The results of Zebiri and Köse, who both
studied converts in England, can be seen as reflective of the overall lower rates of
religious participation and belief in Europe. Poston’s results, on the other hand,
might be connected to the fact that the subjects of his study, while American,
did not convert at a time when many other people were converting to Islam.
They converted when Islam was a much more unknown religion and therefore
more threatening to someone who was raised in a religion. Thus, converts to
Islam before the 1980s, as Poston’s results show, were probably less likely to have
been connected to a particular religious denomination. As Islam increasingly
became more of a household word in the 1980s due to world political events and
increased immigration, more religious Americans felt comfortable to convert—
and this is supported by Anway’s results which were based on questionnaires

19. Interestingly, those with religious backgrounds in Köse’s study provided similar explanations.
20. Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 44.
22. Poston, Islamic Da’wah, 165.
23. Anway, Daughters of Another Path, 11.
given in the early 1990s. My own findings confirm this trend as well. Not only did the majority of my respondents come from backgrounds that included regular religious participation until at least their teenage years, the families in which they lived were typically liberal in their views towards other religions and races.

It is in regard to childhood happiness that my results again correlate with those of other studies. While some early scholars of conversion believed that family unhappiness during a convert’s youth was a precondition for conversion, Köse refuted this. Of his respondents, 44 percent were happy, 26 percent moderate, and 30 percent unhappy. My own findings were similar: 15 percent very happy, 55 percent happy/moderate, 15 percent unhappy, and 15 percent very unhappy. Few of my respondents had problems with crime, drugs, or alcohol, and few reported particularly traumatic experiences. In addition, like Köse’s subjects, some of the Denver converts had problematic relationships with their fathers. Three of the respondents (23 percent) had fathers who were absent during a large part of their childhood, and 2 others (15 percent) had fathers who were frequently absent and with whom the respondents had a bad relationship. Twenty-six percent of Köse’s subjects had absent fathers, and 36 percent had passive and withdrawn fathers. Likewise, Roald reported that few of her subjects had poor relationships with their fathers. Köse suggests that absent or withdrawn fathers may “exacerbate the child’s perception of reality outside the home as unreliable,” and therefore may be a factor that motivates some to seek a “reliable” family in a new religion. Generally, however, most converts to Islam in the West do not convert in their teenage years (as will be discussed later), and this is probably reflective of their high levels of happiness throughout childhood, even taking into account their fathers’ absence. The next sections exam-

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24. Liberal views on religion and race: 8; liberal views on race only: 3; liberal views on religion only: 1; Non-liberal views on race or religion: 1.
25. Köse, Conversion, 32.
26. Ibid., 35.
ine how and why these people who have “happy” childhoods come to adopt a whole new religion and way of life.

**CRISIS**

In 1965, Lofland and Stark wrote that tension is a predisposing condition for conversion. They defined tension as “a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up.”

Rambo agreed with this assessment and borrowed their definition for his second stage, “crisis.” He suggests that a crisis can take many forms: social, political, a process of self-exploration, or even in hearing a preaching of sins. Unfortunately, this is such a broad definition that it is hard to distinguish “crisis” from identity formation. Even William James in 1902 remarked that a conversion which is due to a “sense of incompleteness and imperfection; brooding, depression, morbid introspection, and sense of sin; anxiety about the hereafter; distress over doubts, and the like,” is still “in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child’s small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity.”

Nevertheless, looking at Köse’s findings, in the two years preceding conversion, 48.6 percent of his respondents said their lives were filled with distress. Based on these authors, then, I believe that there is something to the idea of “crisis” preceding conversion, but Lofland and Stark’s definition is too broad to be helpful. Instead, I look at whether the respondent indicated that they went through any stressful life change in the few years before conversion. All but two respondents indicated some type of stressful event.

Köse classified stress preceding conversion in five categories. Thus, he found that his subjects reported 1) *spiritual meaninglessness* (48.6 percent); 2) *interpersonal* stress (27.1 percent); 3) *character* stress, meaning problems with

drugs or temper (18.6 percent); material stress involving employment or education (11.4 percent); and physical stress (7.1 percent). I will slightly alter Köse’s categories to describe my respondents, noting that some people indicated more than one type of stressful event: 1) spiritual confusion, 23 percent; 2) interpersonal, 38 percent; 3) character (drugs/alcohol, temper), 23 percent; 4) material (job, school, incarceration), 15 percent; 5) physical, 8 percent; 6) moved to a different city, 54 percent. The fact that the Denver converts were not dealing with spiritual meaninglessness so much as spiritual confusion probably reflects the pervasiveness of religious belief in the U.S. as compared to Europe, and so it can be assumed that spiritual meaninglessness is not as much an issue for Americans. Similarly, while Zebiri, Roald, and Köse each said dissatisfaction with a Western, materialist culture was an important motivator to look for other sources of meaning, this factor was at best only hinted at by the Denver converts. All the other results in my study (interpersonal, character, etc.) were comparable to Köse’s. However, we again see that changing residence is an important theme for these Denver converts.

**QUEST**

Rambo sees quest as a “process of building meaning” and purpose, and this is continually done by all people. During times of crisis, however, this process is intensified. Rambo suggests we look at 3 factors of the quest: response style, structural availability, and motivational structures. The first factor, response style, boils down to whether the convert played an active or passive role in his or her conversion. Early studies of converts asserted that they were mostly passive victims to proselytization techniques of sects, but this has increasingly been shown not to be the case, and is not supported by my findings. The Denver converts were very active in seeking out Islam. As I will explain below, even when they had close relationships with Muslims who told them about the reli-


34. Ibid., 58.
gion, these Muslims never pressured the future converts to convert. Structural availability, the second factor, looks at how individuals’ institutions let them try different activities. This factor is more important for use in a broad historical perspective than in a specific time frame. Most modern Western institutions (excluding the military, legal, and economic system, but including most religious groups), cannot prevent an individual from trying new things. The final factor, motivational structures, deals with the main motivations leading to conversion. These will be dealt with more in the next sections, but for now it is sufficient to say that 54 percent of the Denver converts indicated that their conversion to Islam was based on spiritual reasons.

One of the most salient pieces of evidence that the Denver converts were actively searching and that they were free to choose a new religion (structural availability), is the fact that 7 of them (54 percent), before they converted to Islam, participated in religions other than those in which they were raised. Four of the 7 were for a time affiliated with 1 other religion before converting to Islam, 1 person with 2, 1 with 4, and the other with 10. The religions they participated in varied and no clear pattern emerges. Two people were active in Pentecostalism, 2 participated in witchcraft, 2 had Masonic affiliations, 2 were at some point overtly atheist, and the other religions were only affiliated with by 1 person each: Southern Baptist, Christian Science, Religious Science, Hinduism, Shamanism, Buddhism, yoga, Paganism, magic, Kabalistic practice, Catholicism, and Judaism. Interestingly, this “seeking” behavior is rarely seen in other studies of Western converts to Islam. Only 6 (20 percent) of Zebiri’s subjects chose Islam after looking at other religions, Köse only classified 22 percent as “seekers,”35 and Anway does not provide a number, but only a few of the subjects’ responses mentioned sampling other religions.37 Again, we can attribute the low findings in Zebiri and Köse’s work to the generally low religious participation in Europe. My research shows that the converts with the weakest religious upbringing, like many in Europe, did not sample other religions. Anway’s results are not as easy

35. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 44.
to understand. Her respondents were all women, but from my research it appears that women participated in other religions about as often as men (for the Denver converts, 4 women and 3 men tried different religions). Anway’s respondents were also better educated, but in my results, the people with BA’s and the professionals all were “seekers.” At this point, I cannot hypothesize as to why Anway’s results differed and I only hope that more research will shed light on this contradiction.

**ENCOUNTER**

Encounter, for Rambo, is looking at how people first learn about a religion. People are often introduced to new religions by advocates of that religion. In fact, in the history of conversion to Islam, the phenomenon of conversion without ever having met a Muslim face-to-face is extremely rare, though sometimes classes on religion or television broadcasts do pique the interest of future converts. But in my particular study, just as in most others, converts’ interest in Islam usually came after meeting Muslims face-to-face. It should also be said, however, that people rarely convert immediately after their first encounter with Islam and sometimes people may go several years between their first encounter and feeling like they might want to convert. Here, I will only evaluate first encounters as reported to me by the respondents when I asked them how they were introduced to Islam. None of the respondents credited the news media, though by living in the U.S., I think media exposure would have been unavoidable especially as most of the respondents converted after 9/11. Instead, I believe that the responses given to me indicate the time when each person began to actively learn details about Islam, even if this was not immediately followed by an interest in conversion.

Most of the Denver converts either did not know any Muslims in their

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38. This is noted in the seminal work on the subject, originally published in 1896, Thomas Walker Arnold’s, *The Preaching of Islam* (Lahore: Shirkat-I-Qulam, 1956), 447.

youth or never talked about Islam with a Muslim that they knew. It was when they matured, that these converts gained relationships with Muslims: 3 of the respondents had made Muslim friends in the U.S., 4 were married to or dating a Muslim or person in the process of converting, 1 had a close family member who was in the process of converting, and 2 lived in Muslim countries where they made Muslim friends. Of the remaining 3, 1 started reading about Islam on her own and 2 learned about it in college courses. In Köse’s study, the first social contact with Islam was spread similarly: travel to another country (23 percent), conversation with a Muslim (37 percent), reading literature (23 percent), man-woman relationship (14 percent), and introduced by other family members (3 percent). Nevertheless, Kose’s man-woman relationship category appears to have a lower percentage than in the other studies. One-third of Zebiri’s converts were married to Muslim men at the time of conversion, Roald observed that most Scandinavian converts marry Muslim men before conversion, and Anway showed that 63 percent of her subjects married Muslim men before taking the shahada as well. Zebiri and Anway both mention that women are usually introduced to Islam by their Muslim husbands who are usually only nominally Muslim and rarely pressure the women to convert. The same can be said for the Denver converts who were in a relationship with a Muslim.

Throughout history, there has been little organized effort among Muslims to proselytize. Even in Colorado and throughout the United States in general, where Muslims have increasingly organized proselytization efforts and become involved with interfaith dialogues, on the whole, these efforts do not bring in many people. Even converts to Christianity represent less than 1 percent of all people contacted by the Christian churches. None of the Denver converts in this study indicated that they were introduced to Islam by a formal missionary

40. Köse, Conversion, 112
41. Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 224, 228.
42. Roald, New Muslims in the European Context, 95-96.
43. Anway, Daughters of Another Path, 21. The shahada is the Islamic profession of faith: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” Traditionally, a person is considered converted once this said in front of another Muslim.
44. Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 88.
or interfaith effort. Thomas Walker Arnold, the first scholar to probe western conversion to Islam noted that in general Islam has had no ecclesiastical body, no priests, no organized proselytization system, and that “calling” (da’wah) people to the faith is a repeated exhortation in the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{45} Based on this, he suggested that the individual Muslim “takes more trouble to learn the doctrines and observances of his faith, and thus becoming deeply impressed with the importance of them to himself, is more likely to become an exponent of the missionary character of his creed in the presence of the unbeliever.” \textsuperscript{46} This is reflected in the percentage (77 percent) of the Denver converts who came to Islam only after talking with Muslims. Furthermore, Anway observed that in the case of male nominal Muslims who take Christian wives in the U.S., it was not that they were not practicing Islam because they did not know it, but because they were separated from the social aspect of it.\textsuperscript{47} Still, these men often maintained some Islamic ideas, and transmitted them to their significant others. When the woman converted, the men usually increased their religious participation.

**INTERACTION**

Rambo suggests that to study converts’ interaction with the new religion, we should look at 4 factors: relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles.\textsuperscript{48} What unites the converts in my particular study is that most of them started taking the “Beginning Islam” course at the mosque soon before or immediately after their conversion. The majority of the converts had only known 1 or 2 Muslims before contacting the mosque. When they did so, the mosque secretary generally referred them to the man who teaches the “Beginning Islam” course and he encouraged them to attend that class and a “Basic Arabic” course as well. There, the converts interact with other converts and develop a friendship with the teacher. Most of the respondents attend both classes, Friday prayer, and other mosque

\textsuperscript{46}. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 409.
\textsuperscript{47}. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 21. It is more difficult to practice Islam, which requires constant praying and rituals difficult to perform in non-Muslim countries (such as fasting during Ramadan), when you are living alone in a society that is not built around these things.
\textsuperscript{48}. Ibid., 103.
gatherings. Before the classes were offered (starting in 2000), small study circles were held in people's houses and both of the respondents who converted before 9/11 participated in those study groups. Anway also noted that her respondents generally all took part in ongoing study, and Poston noted that Islamic lessons were instrumental in 75 percent of the conversions he looked at.

Intellectual activities relating to Islam are generally popular among Western converts. Thirteen out of 30 converts in Zebiri’s research said reading and religious debate were key to their conversion. Köse discovered that 71 percent of his subjects were motivated to convert because of intellectual reasons discovered by Muslim interaction. For the Denver converts, all but 1 indicated they did some Islamic reading before taking the Shahada. Most read general books on Islam, and 4 also read the Qur’an. Overall, 8 of the Denver converts indicated that they were attracted to some sort of intellectual or theological aspect of Islam: 4 identified Islam’s congruence with science, 2 appreciated its congruity with their former religion, and two liked that Islam did not have the contradictions which they saw within their old religion.

In general, the Denver converts indicated that the lifestyle change to Islam was not very difficult and reported that they had already been doing some of the things required by Islam. All but 3 said their alcohol consumption was very low by the time they considered converting, and only 1 indicated that it took a few months to stop. And all said it was relatively easy to give up pork products, some had even stopped eating pork long before conversion. Köse found similar results: only 6 of his subjects continued to drink, and all gave up pork, as did Anway’s subjects. Concerning the wearing of the hijab and long sleeves, all but 1 of the female converts does it all the time. Three of the 8 said it took a few months, sometimes longer, to wear it everywhere. The workplace was

49. Ibid., 7.
54. The hijab is a head scarf. The wearing of this and other clothing that covers the female’s body, such as long sleeves, is a sign of modesty and has a long tradition in Islam.
where most were hesitant to wear it. Only 1 of the men I interviewed wore a long robe on a regular basis, and another wore one intermittently. These were also the only 2 men with beards. Anway found that only two of her respondents did not wear the *hijab* full time, and Köse saw that while 30 of the women did not wear a scarf, all wore long sleeves and a high neck, 6 of the men donned robes, and half had beards. Most of the Denver converts indicated that they try to do the 5 daily prayers and participate in Ramadan. Forty-nine percent of Köse’s respondents did the 5 daily prayers, while the other 51 percent believed they should, and 73 percent of his respondents did the full fast for Ramadan. Anway’s respondents all said they did the daily prayers and the full fast for Ramadan. In the study of Parisian converts by Lakhdar et al, 171 out of 191 said they pray on a regular basis, and 187 said they fast for Ramadan. Given the difficulty, as reported by the Denver converts, of finding a quiet and clean place to pray and a work environment that would allow it, it is hard to believe that the majority of the converts in the other studies regularly made all 5 daily prayers. On the other hand, when it comes to using Islamic expressions, particularly “*insha’allah*” (“God willing”), this seems to be ubiquitous for Western converts.

Rambo suggests that rituals “provide integrative modes of identifying with and connecting to the new way of life.” They reinforce the values and lessons of the new religion, they distinguish the convert from the people not in the religion which solidifies the convert’s own identity, they validate the religion to other members of the religious community, and they can help provide a spiritual experience for the person performing them. Arnold, in listing 6 reasons why Islam was successful, noted that the 5 daily prayers are a constant reminder

57. Ibid., 130.
of religion and community, as I believe is true also of the abstinence from alcohol and pork, the attending of prayer service and classes, the change of dress, and the adding of Islamic expressions into one’s speech. All these help to define the convert’s identity and role.

**COMMITMENT**

The level, kind, and time it takes to make a commitment required by a particular religion varies from religion to religion and from person to person. In the case of the Denver converts, it took on average 3.9 years after first learning about Islam until they officially converted, but for some it took only 6 months and others up to 12 years. And while study, rituals, and entering into a community were all important to the converts, each had his or her own perception of what was the main attraction to Islam which culminated in conversion. The converts were allowed to give multiple answers to what attracted them. The majority, 7, identified spiritual motives. For them, Islam “felt right,” and these respondents usually indicated that while the intellectual aspects were important generally in their appreciation of Islam, their conversion was made because of non-intellectual motives. Others, conversely, were attracted to Islam’s congruence with science and logic (4), its congruence with their former religion (2), the fact that it did not have contradictions like their former religion (2), its peacefulness/equality (3), and its discipline (1). Interestingly, European motives were primarily intellectual. Almost half of Zebiri’s respondents emphasized intellectual motives; Roald’s subjects mostly were attracted to Islam because it is a logical religion; Köse found that 47 percent thought Islam offered a better philosophy of life, and overall, 71 percent had intellectual motivations, while only 4 percent had mystical motives (not including Sufis). I believe that the higher rates of intellectual motives among the profiled Europeans are due to their being better educated and therefore more intellectually demanding of their new religion. Roald has also observed that the things attractive to converts about Islam change over time.

and so it is possible that the relatively short time my respondents have been Muslim, 1.7 years (excluding the 2 who converted before 9/11), may play a part in shaping their response.

The average age at which the Denver converts took the *shahada* was 29.69 years. Poston found that the average age at conversion was 31.4 years. Köse found the average age at conversion to be 29.7 years. While my findings correspond with those of Poston and Köse, it should be noted that the age at conversion found in the work of Al-Qwidi, Zebiri, and Roald were all in their mid-20s. Zebiri suggests that the reason for this difference is that these three particular studies were conducted after 9/11, and because of the wide exposure Islam was getting in response to the attacks, more people were curious about the religion, which meant more people became interested in converting and doing so faster. While this probably does play a part, I believe that the composition of the sample group provides insight. Köse had a subject pool with more men than women while Roald and Zebiri had more female subjects than male. It is possible that European women generally convert at a younger age than men, though this would not be consistent with my findings. Early work on conversion found that the average age at conversion was 15, but contemporary works show that conversion is usually later, and is seen as a result of the process of creating a unified self in a modern world, which now takes longer than it did one hundred years ago. Erickson termed this the “moratorium” process and said that it generally ends in a person’s late 20s. This analysis appears to apply, but more work must be done to see general trends.

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65. Poston, *Islamic Da’wah*, 166.
67. Al-Qwidi: age 25, cited in Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 43; Zebiri: age 23.5 in Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 43. In a study by Roald, though she did not give an average age, she found that “(80%) were under 30” in Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context*, 109.
68. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 43.
Traditionally, the only ritual required to convert to Islam is the saying of the *shahada* ("There is not god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger") in front of a Muslim witness. Though occasionally there have been other requirements, today this is generally all that is required to officially convert. Only 4 of the Denver converts took on a Muslim name, though none of them have changed it legally. In England, Köse found that 81 percent took a Muslim name but only 6 percent legally changed it; and Jensen saw that "many" adopted new names, but these were "only seldom registered." It is not clear as to why the Denver converts did not change their names as much as their European counterparts. Nonetheless, one post-conversion ritual that seems fairly consistent is Muslim marriage. After converting, 5 Denver converts either married a Muslim or became engaged to one. One convert’s spouse ended up converting as well. Those who were already married, were married to Muslims, and those who were not married, indicated that they plan on marrying a Muslim, as has been the trend in other studies. The percentage of Denver converts who were married to a Muslim before conversion (23 percent), however, is less than the percentages in the other studies, which is probably reflective of the increased popularity of Islam which may embolden people to convert even without solid social ties in the new religion.

**CONSEQUENCES**

When a person converts to a new religion, especially one as stereotyped as Islam, the reactions of the extended family and friends can often times be difficult. Eight of the Denver converts’ families had negative reactions at first, but over time most grew to accept it. Often, there are some individuals in the

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74. Jensen: 645.
extended family that continue to criticize the conversion or who completely disassociate from the convert. Only one convert reported that the extended family was supportive from the beginning. One convert has yet to tell the family, and others waited several months after conversion. Twice when I asked about the reaction of friends and family, no mention was even made of the family. Conversely, four of the converts had family members who also converted or are thinking about conversion. Friendships with non-Muslims, however, are generally ended. This is not usually the result of negative reactions from friends, but the fact that the converts’ lives are so filled with Islamic activities and Muslim relationships, that they have no time for or see no purpose in maintaining friendships with non-Muslims. Two converts did not even mention friendships with non-Muslims when asked, but 2 also said they still have good non-Muslim friendships. These results correlate with those in other studies. Anway found that 46 percent of her subjects’ families had negative reactions at first, but improved over time, 14 percent said their parents were supportive since day one, some were cut off from their family, and some said it was simply none of their parents’ business. Köse reported that parents were extremely unhappy or hostile in 19 percent of the cases, indifferent in 31 percent, supportive in 14 percent, 24 percent had not seen their parents’ reactions (including the 11 percent who had not told their parents), and most friendships died out with hostility. Zebiri found that converts usually ended associations with non-Muslims. In general, Western converts have decent relationships with their families and minimal relationships with non-Muslim friends.

CONCLUSION

The Denver converts share a few similarities and several differences with the converts in previous studies. As has been shown, while all Western converts tend to take the shahada in their mid-to-late twenties, the education and occupations of the Denver converts are different from the others’. In addition,

77. Anway, Daughters of Another Path, 46.
78. Köse, Conversion, 137-139.
79. Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 187.
Denver converts, in this case study, generally share the experience of having moved several times before converting to Islam and having sampled other religions. Also, on the whole, the Denver converts were raised more religiously than their English counterparts. These religious differences, therefore, can be at least partially attributed to the culture from which the converts come. I believe that the other differences, especially education and occupation, are due to the pervasiveness of information about Islam in the media after 9/11. The experience of moving several times, however, has made these particular individuals amenable to conversion. It has been theorized for several years now that converts are generally “disconnected from the sources of power and support of the traditional culture.”

Without being able to develop long lasting roots in a particular place, combined with being raised with a liberal (religious and racial) worldview, these particular converts were receptive to the message of universal unity in Islam. The Denver mosque is also mostly populated by non-white Muslims, so this kind of egalitarian attitude would be a necessary precondition to convert. I believe that the particular phenomenon of having moved several times, while it may not be unique to the Denver converts, is reflective of the fact that they generally have less education than their American predecessors and European counterparts. Information about Islam has permeated American life since 9/11, and therefore has reached the less educated in a way that it has not before. Therefore, since not all who have learned about Islam in the past 8 years have converted (in fact, anti-Muslim sentiment actually increased after 9/11), I believe that those who converted, at least in part, did so because these were individuals who felt disconnected from their own culture sub-culture (not U.S./Western culture in general, which few of them overtly criticized). Islam provided these converts with a way of unifying their pre-existing egalitarian views with their predisposition (because of their religious backgrounds) to “spiritual” experiences. Furthermore, Islam was also able to reconcile questions about the relationship of religion with logic, provide an alternative to the apparent contradictions in their former religion, or, alternatively, appear as congruent with the

80. Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 41.
81. See note 39.
Bowen: Conversion to Islam in Denver

aspects of their former religion that they liked. Islam’s power of unifying these ideas in a coherent sense of meaning has meant that, as Zebiri observed, individuals are attracted to this religion despite conversion to it having a perceived decline in social status.82

With these findings, we can test the hypotheses of other scholars. Based on his research, Köse proposed that there were three stages in the conversion of his subjects: 1) rejection of religion of origin, 2) getting acquainted with Muslims, and 3) experimenting with Islam, encouraged by intellectual motivations.83 This model essentially holds true for the Denver converts, though their religious backgrounds were stronger than those of Köse’s subjects, and intellectual motivations are not as important for the Denver converts. The fact that Köse’s respondents were not “seekers,” however, led him to reject Lofland and Stark’s seven step conversion model.84 But since several Denver converts were seekers, I believe the seven step model applies. Lofland and Stark believed that individuals had to meet increasingly narrow criteria in order to be able to convert. These steps were “Tension,” similar to Rambo’s “crisis;” “Type of Problem-Solving Perspective” in which an individual chose between psychiatric, political, or religious outlets, and converts usually chose religious; “Seekership” in which individuals sampled different religions; “Turning Point” is a new crisis (e.g. “recent migration,” loss of employment, etc.) that immediately precedes conversion; “Cult of Affective Bonds” is an affective relationship developed between a convert and one or more members of the new religion; “Extra-Cult Affective Bonds” were, in general, minimal or irrelevant for converts; and “Intensive Interaction” in which the convert performs a variety of the required rituals of the religion.85 Lofland and Stark’s model appears to apply to the majority of Denver converts.

Additionally, in his book, Rambo proposed several other hypotheses and encouraged their being tested. While many could not be looked at because of the limits of this study, some of his hypotheses applied: “those who do not con-

82. Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 41.
83. Köse, Conversion, 122-123.
84. Köse, Conversion, 121
vert in a hostile setting are marginal members of society,” “consonance of core values and symbols will facilitate conversion,” and “converts selectively adopt and adapt the new religion to meet their needs.”86 Finally, I return to Arnold who made general conclusions about the success of Islam’s proselytization efforts over the centuries. He attributed Islam’s success to: 1) Islam’s theological simplicity, which is easily grasped by people of all education, and holds at its core views that are already held by Christians and Jews (i.e., the oneness of God); 2) the fact that Islam is founded on rational principles; 3) the ability of the Hajj to constantly reinvigorate proselytizers; 4) the paying of alms supported and held together a feeling of community; 5) the many required prayers are constant reminders to practitioners about their faith and the community in which they practice it; and 6) particular circumstances for each time and place.87 The power of numbers 1, 2, and 5 have already been noted in this study, and the paying of alms (number four) was also fairly consistent among the Denver converts. On the other hand, pilgrimage to Mecca, as far as I know, has not played a strong role in energizing proselytizers, but in today’s day and age of worldwide instantaneous communication, and the emergence of several internet sites on Islam and da’wah in particular,88 I believe the Hajj is less necessary to motivate proselytizers than ever before. Arnold’s final factor, number 6, should be identified as the post-9/11 world in the modern West with instant media communications and increased Muslim immigration. As long as “terrorist” is treated as synonymous with Arab and “Islam”89 thereby keeping the religion in the news, and Muslims continue to arrive in the U.S., it is likely conversion to Islam will proliferate.

86. Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 41-42.
89. Ibid., 41; also consider the incident last year when Raed Jarrar was asked to cover his shirt which read, in Arabic script, “We will not be silent.” David Elliot, “Bill offers redress to victims of terrorist watchlist,” February 4, 2009, http://www.niacouncil.org/index.php?option=com_content &task=view&id=1328&Itemid=2 (accessed February 21, 2009).
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Fifteen years of extensive, written revelations charted Joseph Smith and his associates’ course as they founded what became known as the religion of Mormonism. Faith in the revelations, not merely Smith’s dynamic personality and prophecies, fed the rapid growth and nearly constant change of the fledgling Church of Latter-day Saints (soon to be renamed by one such revelation). The explanation for such a phenomenon was direct revelation from God, according to Smith and those who believed him. Skeptical neighbors, on the other hand, suspected that the young prophet’s own needs and desires had everything to do with his supposedly divine revelations. From the Book of Mormon in 1829 to the treatise on plural marriage in the early 1840s, Joseph Smith’s revelations were the inspiration and guiding force of the Church; for Mormons today, they are standard scripture and distinctive symbols of the faith.¹

While considering the Book of Mormon to be a volume of scripture on its own, Mormons also hold equally sacred a collection of revelations known as the Doctrine and Covenants. The collection numbers over one hundred revelations,

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¹ In acknowledgement of Dr. Grant Underwood, Professor of History at Brigham Young University, who introduced me to topic of “revelation-revision” and Joseph Smith, I would be remiss not to recognize his hours of guidance and advice, which, when combined with his trust to allow me to come to my own conclusions, were instrumental in my research process.
all of them from Smith (with the exception of three late additions from later successor-prophets). These revelations were received as early as 1828, during the revealing of the Book of Mormon, and continued up until shortly before Smith’s assassination in 1844. They were markedly different in that they were considered instructions to a modern prophet, Smith, rather than miraculous translations of an ancient text. As such, they were almost always related to the Church’s current concerns, questions and controversies, both theological and material.

Of course, the use of historical context is fruitful in the study of any religion, but Smith’s revelations offer particularly rich opportunities for study, for several reasons. First, they are recent and well-documented, as is the surrounding church history. Even better, the revelator himself (and his close associates) often provided context by recording, in the preface to the revelation or elsewhere, the reason a revelation was given; it was sometimes a question Smith had asked the Lord, or it might merely mention problems or controversies that the Church faced at the time when the revelation came. Finally and most pertinent to this paper, there is an abundance of documented evidence that Smith edited the substance, style and grammar of the revelations, presumably in response to changing circumstances and needs of the Church. These revisions have attracted the attention of various scholars of Mormonism but have never been the subject of a comprehensive, systematic study. The revisions must form an integral part in textual criticism of Joseph Smith’s revisions.

Moreover, the revisions should be of enormous interest and use to the larger realm of religious studies; in what other revelation are the early stages of the formative process of scripture so readily accessible? The immediately-dictated-in-writing nature of Smith’s revelations make them of a different sort than revelations that were finally written down in the books of the Bible, the suras of the Qur’an, or the Buddhist sutras, all of which were initially revealed and remembered orally. While the “proto-scripture” that fell from the lips of the founders of most religions is shrouded in relative mystery, Smith began to leave a paper trail almost as soon as he had a revelation. Even more uniquely and compellingly, the prophet left behind clear evidence that on two occasions
he systematically revised his revelations in preparation for publishing them. It is a rare opportunity to pore over “rough-draft revelation,” an opportunity that scholars of religious studies will not want to miss. This paper, by examining all of the revisions to two revelations, is a prospectus of sorts, suggesting how this unusual and distinguishing aspect of Joseph Smith’s revelations could be comprehensively documented and analyzed.

On November 8, 1831, a conference of elders, held in Far West, decided that Joseph Smith should “correct those errors or mistakes which [he] may discover by the holy Spirit while reviewing the revelations & commandments & also the fulness of the scriptures.” Manuscript copies and the two earliest printed versions of the revelations, when compared, show that the process of revision went on for several years, until the printing of the first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* in 1835. Comparison of early versions also produces concrete proof that the editing process went beyond the mere correction of errors made by scribes. There is evidence of systematic changes that clarified or dignified wordings and modernized usage of pronouns. In addition to systematic proofreading, Smith made more substantive changes; some added significant information, while others more subtly changed a passage’s meaning. This introductory foray into text criticism of the revelations will illustrate the importance of these revisions and the possibilities for study that they offer.

The question, then, is how these revisions should be understood. Possibly, the above-cited official minutes conceal as much as they describe. Perhaps the council’s real concerns were hinted at in another of Smith’s revelations: “you have sought in your hearts that you might express beyond his [Smith’s] language.” Equally possible, Smith may have acted on his own; having decided to correct mistakes ostensibly made by scribes, he may have felt that he (or perhaps other, better-educated associates) should improve the language as well. In the end, Smith went beyond fixing scribal errors or elevating language; he

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3. *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 67:5.
was no more hesitant to revise the substance than the style. His treatment of his own revealed texts paralleled that of the Bible, which in 1830 he had begun to “translate,” his term for a process of revision that was based on receipt of revelation rather than knowledge of the original languages. This paper begins to make sense of the large number of revisions by classifying them by purpose into several categories, such as “additions,” “clarifications,” and “grammar and usage.” While Smith revised almost every revelation, two seminal revelations received his particular attention: the Articles and Covenants of the Church (hereafter referred to as the Articles), and the Law (these two revelations are known as Sections 20 and 42, respectively, in the current edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*). My purpose is twofold: first, to better document and classify the many manifestations of revelatory revisions that exist in extant early texts of the Articles and the Law, and second, to illuminate Joseph Smith’s revision process. His revisions are evidence for the theory that he saw himself as a revelator-reviser; in revising, his approach does not appear to be much different than the read-and-revise process he used in making his “new translation” of the Bible.

My focus is on the revision process that apparently occurred as a result of the aforementioned conference of elders. Although Smith made quite a few revisions at some time between November 1831 and the 1833 publication of the *Book of Commandments*, a much more extensive revision period occurred at some time in 1835, before the publication of the first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* in that year. As my purpose is to reconstruct the revision process,
insights from research on both periods of revision are relevant; to avoid confusion, the dates of revisions will be carefully differentiated.

While classifying revisions into categories involves an element of subjectivity, this will be mitigated by clear definitions of categories. During both periods of revision, Smith (likely with the assistance of others) proofread the texts; in addition, he made substantial changes to meaning. Where proofreading revisions are concerned, I define significant revision to include any change to the wording but not changes in spelling or punctuation. As Grant Underwood has demonstrated in his analysis of the Law, some revisions changed the original meaning in order to improve it, while others improved the way the original meaning was communicated without changing that meaning. I have further subdivided these two categories of revision. Revisions that changed the original meaning did so in one of three ways: they elaborated on existing ideas or added new, related ones; or, they updated ideas or terms that were superseded by later revelations or official decisions; or, they removed or changed text that had provoked or was feared would provoke the hostility of outsiders and/or potential converts. On the other hand, revisions that retained the original meaning but improved the way that meaning was communicated may be divided into three additional categories: first, some revisions attempted to clarify the original meaning; second, other revisions restated the original meaning in an improved sentence structure; finally, some revisions corrected or modernized the grammar. I will discuss all six categories in detail below.

Only a small percentage of the revisions can be classified as elaborations. In the Articles and the Law, such elaborations accounted for less than six percent of the total words that were added to or deleted from the revelation, but they caused several significant changes in meaning. Since the original manuscripts of the Articles or the Law are not known to exist, it is possible that early on, a scribe could have left out some phrases that were then added again by Smith as

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he revised the text. However, most elaborations to both revelations occurred in 1835, four or five years after they were first recorded. While editing these two revelations, it is inconceivable that twelve phrases – totaling 104 words – could have been omitted by early scribes and overlooked by Smith during his first round of editing in late 1831 or 1832 (when he made many other changes to both revelations), but then rediscovered in 1835. These elaborations, then, must be considered new material that was not contained in the original record of the revelation.

It appears as if re-reading the text prompted Smith to add more information to a given idea. As an example of an elaboration, let us look in the *Book of Commands*, the beginning of the Articles related that he “truly repented” of his sins. When the *Doctrine and Covenants* was first published in 1835, Smith provided an elaboration of his experience; in addition to repenting, he added that he “humbled himself, sincerely, through faith” before he was visited by the angel Moroni.5 Perhaps Smith, as he read, remembered his vision and aftermath, and decided to characterize his attitude more clearly.

Since the Articles and Covenants and the Law contained important passages regarding Church policy, Smith made some revisions in order to reflect changes in policy that had occurred as a result of continuing revelation. After it came with a later revelation, Smith deemed the law of common consent important enough to merit inclusion in the Articles and Covenants.6 In connection with this and other revisions, it is worth remembering that the Articles in particular served as a working handbook of instructions for the elders. For example, after the receipt of the Law, which included instructions for the bishopric, the needs of and demands on the bishopric continued to evolve. Church leaders needed further instructions on how the bishop’s counselors should be supported, and also on the feasibility of traveling elders’ reliance on member families for support. Smith's update of the relevant passage in the Law reflected


how policy was adapted to rapidly changing circumstances. Such revisions differed from elaborations in that Smith used them to address a specific need to bring a revelation up to date with changes in the leadership structure or policies of the Church.

To counteract what was often acute hostility, Smith apparently felt that a few changes were necessary to avoid provoking embarrassing accusations or legal difficulties. In the Law, consecration of properties was enjoined; inevitably, some of those who had agreed to consecrate properties later reneged on their promise and sued for their money. In the course of subsequent lawsuits, the wording of this foundational document of consecration was found legally tenuous; charitable donations to the poor were sacrosanct and non-refundable, but the legality of communal holding of property for use in group projects was highly questionable. Early manuscripts of the Law did specify that consecration is to benefit the poor. But they also indicated that the money would also support other Church activities. In 1835, likely with an eye towards future efforts at consecration, Smith revised the revelation so that every part of the law of consecration was explicitly explained as being dedicated to the benefit of the poor; in all, 110 words were added to the Law, accounting for 14 percent of all the words deleted from or added to the revelation. Such revisions were not merely meant to elaborate, nor did they bring the revelation up to date; rather, these revisions represented an effort to present a revelation in a way that was more palatable. In essence, these presentational revisions were an early form of “public relations.”

Many revisions expressed more clearly concepts that Smith must have decided were in some way unclear in the earlier wording. Some clarifications were made to ensure that the revelation was correctly understood and applied. One such clarifying revision, also made in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, was the systematic replacement of “he” with “he or she” in the Law. “He,” when used as a general term in several revelations, did mean all people of both sexes. However, in the part of the Law that deals with adultery, this revi-

sion was deemed needful to clarify an important concept; penalties for adultery were to be applied equally to men and women. For some reason, it was felt that in this passage on marital matters merited the mention of both genders; perhaps the fear was that a well-meaning church member could misinterpret the revelation as setting a standard for men, regarding adultery, that was different than the standard for women. In all, clarifications entailed the addition or deletion of 133 words, or 17 percent, of all revisions in the Articles and Covenants; in the Law, similar revisions entailed the addition or deletion of 184 words, or 18 percent, of all revisions to that revelation. Clarifications of this kind reflect the extent to which early Church members referred to a revelation on “the Law” as a practical guide for how to carry out Church policy. For example, Hyrum Smith recorded in his journal a visit to a newly baptized, divorced member, in which he questioned the new member as to his marital status. He described the interview using the language of the Law’s instructions regarding divorcees almost word-for-word.9 Such revisions differed from previously explained categories in that they did not affect the meaning of the revelation; rather, they clarified revelations that members at times depended on for practical guidance.

In most cases, however, Smith used clarifying revisions in order to provide clearer doctrinal instruction. For example, the Articles and Covenants declared that men would “receive” the restored gospel “either to faith and righteousness, or to the hardness of heart in unbelief, to their own condemnation.”10 In 1835, Smith changed “receive” to the more precise “come to a knowledge of.” Further, “either to faith and righteousness” became “and those who receive it in faith and work righteousness.” In this passage, the word “receive” was originally used in the sense of receiving a summons, but apparently because “receive” may also have connoted acceptance of truth, Smith decided to clarify. In addition, this revision clarified that for one to receive the restored gospel in righteousness, one had to “work righteousness.” Finally, “or to the hardness of heart in unbelief” became “but those who harden their hearts in unbelief and reject it.” Rejec-

tion of the gospel had been implied before, but Smith now stated it outright so as to mitigate the possible ambiguity of the word “receive” by providing the contrasting verb “reject.”11 In another example found in the Law, he clarified the phrase “unto you the kingdom has been given,” by adding to the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants an explanation of what “the kingdom” meant: “or in other words, the keys of the church, have been given.”12 This revision may be classified as a clarification rather than as an elaboration because the earlier wording already echoed New Testament language related to church leadership.13 In the most likely scenario, the early wording had the same approximate meaning for Smith, but he determined that more instruction on “the kingdom” would be appropriate.

In contrast to the aforementioned types of revisions, all of which served to change or clarify meaning, many of Smith's other revisions seem to have served no distinct purpose other than to make the revelation more aesthetically pleasing. He often reworded an awkward sentence to make it sound more elegant, or replaced a colloquial word or phrase with an equivalent but more elegant one. Or a complicated wording might be replaced by a simpler one. On occasion, the only change was in the order of two phrases, sentences, or even whole verses. In the Articles, Smith flipped the order of two verses, producing no change in meaning; the only difference is a literary effect that changes the order of information about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.14 Revisions that do not fix an obvious grammar mistake, but perhaps provide a slightly more proper word, are also counted in this category, rather than in the category of grammatical revisions. Aesthetic revisions comprise 48 percent of all revisions to the Articles and 25 percent of all revisions to the Law.

Explanation of the final category, grammatical revisions, offers the opportunity to take a more in-depth approach to a type of revision the importance of

13. See Jesus's statement to Peter in Matthew 16:19.
which might be easily overlooked. Smith, probably with a great deal of help from some of his associates, carefully edited the revelations for grammar prior to the publication of the *Book of Commandments*; however, some corrections were also made later, during the effort to publish the *Doctrine and Covenants*. Many of the revisions reflect a wrestling between “modern” and “scriptural” language, rather than correction of careless errors. Most frequently, the words “hath,” “unto,” “thee,” “thou,” “thy,” or “thine” were changed to “has,” “to,” “you,” and “your,” respectively. The large number of grammatical corrections (267 instances in 68 revelations) indicates systematic revision rather than correction of a few scribal errors. In 13 instances, however, someone changed a “modern” passage into an archaic one; these latter revisions are evidence that, even as many passages were modernized, some passages were intentionally kept in uniformly archaic English. The two seminal revelations, the Articles and the Law, present excellent examples of how Smith struggled with the question of how revelations that address a latter-day people should sound.

One phrase in the Articles parallels a phrase in 2 Nephi 31:21 that refers to the “doctrine of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, which is one God.” The revelation, as printed in the *Book of Commandments*, contains a similar phrase: “the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of the Father and of the Son, which Father and Son and Holy Ghost, is one God.” In 1835, the end of this phrase was revised to “are one God.” Interestingly, the wording in 2 Nephi was not changed at the same time, or anytime thereafter. This revelation could have been merely meant to correct the verb to agree with a plural subject rather than modernize the phrase, but other revisions must have been intentional modernizations of language that previously had reflected similar *Book of Mormon* phrases. For example, compare the earlier wording of what is now *Doctrine

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15. Fifteen such modernizations were made to the Articles and Covenants (Section 20); eleven were made to the Law (Section 42).

16. Perhaps reflecting grammatical uncertainty as to whether the Godhead should take the singular or the plural form, Mormon 7:7 promises that the faithful will “sing ceaseless praises unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost, which are one God” (emphasis added).

and Covenants 20:75, “it is expedient that the Church meet together oft,” with Moroni 6:5, “the church did meet together oft.” In 1835, the “oft” of Doctrine and Covenants 20:75 was revised to “often.” The wording of the baptismal and sacrament prayers in the earlier version of the Articles had exactly reproduced the prayers in the Book of Mormon, but Smith or an associate carefully modernized them. Before 1835, the beginning of the baptismal prayer read, “Having had authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize thee.” For the 1835 edition, the language of the prayer was changed to “Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you.” It is interesting to note that similar changes were never made to the identical passages in the Book of Mormon, presumably because modernizing revisions were unnecessary for a translation an ancient volume of scripture. As for the Articles and the Law, Smith, and associates who may have participated, considered them to be a different kind of revelation that called for less traditionally scriptural wording.

Other phrases in the Articles were not quotations from the Book of Mormon, but were expressed using archaic grammar. The editors modernized many of these phrases, while at the same time perpetuating some Book of Mormon phrases. In the Articles, the qualifications to be met by converts before their baptisms formerly read, “Behold, whosoever humbleth himself before God and desireth to be baptized,” but was revised to “All those who humble themselves before God and desire to be baptized.” However, the archaic phrase “come unto Christ” was preserved. We may surmise that this preservation was intentional because several early manuscripts have “come to Christ,” but the phrase was actually changed to “unto” in the Book of Commandments and was not changed back for the 1835 edition.

The focus on modernization of grammar is particularly evident in the revision of a phrase that was very similar to a prominent phrase in the Ten Commandments: “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all

18. See Book of Mormon: Jacob 1:7; Omni 1:26; and Moroni 10:30, 32. Also see Doctrine and Covenants 20:59.
19. Compare Painesville Telegraph, 19 April 1831 with Book of Commandments 24:41. Also see current Doctrine and Covenants 20:59
that in them is, and rested the seventh day” (Exodus 20:11 see also Mosiah 13:19). In an early formulation of articles of faith for the Church, the Book of Commandments text of the Articles affirmed God to be the “maker of heaven and earth and all things that in them is,” while the phrase was revised in 1835 to read, “framer of heaven and earth and all things which are in them.” Perhaps Smith did not realize the manifest influence of the phrase from Exodus on his wording, and was concerned instead with revising the verb to agree with the plural “things,” which his revelation had added to the biblical phrase. If he had realized where the phrase came from and wanted it to echo the wording from Exodus, he could have deleted “things” and been grammatically correct, but less modern.

The Articles was not the only section to be modernized; the Law was also extensively edited in favor of modern grammar. Comparison of several surviving early manuscripts with the Book of Commandments indicates that the editors made most of the modernizing revisions to the Law before printing of that book began. In passages where the Law touches on more administrative and thus modern matters, there was clearly an effort to make the language uniformly modern. Modern matters included the requirement for an elder to be “regularly ordained” and “known to the Church” before he could preach the gospel, and specific instructions regarding how to implement the law of consecration. For example, the earlier reading, “except he be ordained by someone who hath authority” was revised to “has” for the Book of Commandments. Similarly, several early versions have “the residue shall be kept to administer to him that hath not,” while the Book of Commandments reads “him who has not.”

Parts of the Law whose subject matter more closely parallels that of ancient scripture retained the Elizabeth language of the King James Bible and the Book of Mormon. Such passages include: Doctrine and Covenants 42:18-29, which is a latter-day version of the Ten Commandments; Doctrine and Covenants 42:30-31 (also v. 38) which expands on a phrase from Matthew 25:40; and Doctrine and

Covenants 42:48-58, which somewhat parallels commandments and promises given by Jesus to the apostles in the New Testament. In part of the latter passage, the word “hath” was actually in three instances modernized to “has” before the publication of the Book of Commandments, but then for 1844 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants the wording “hath” was restored, making the passage again uniformly Elizabethan. A fourth passage, in Doctrine and Covenants 42:53-69, contains some commandments that lack parallels to actual words of the Lord in ancient scripture, such as “thou shalt stand in the place of thy stewardship,” and “let him that goeth to the east teach them that shall be converted to flee to the west.” In preparation for the printing of the Book of Commandments, “goes” was revised to “goeth” and “obtains” to “obtainest.” While there are no obvious scriptural parallels to explain the intentional use of Elizabethan English in this passage, the above revisions made the wording uniformly scriptural, and may

24. Compare Painesville Telegraph, 13 September 1831 with Book of Commandments 44:38. Also see current Doctrine and Covenants 42:48-52
have been meant to indicate that the entire passage should be taken as a direct address to the members of the Church, as opposed to a revelation that spoke about the Church to Smith. Close Biblical parallels and what might be called “God’s voice of direct address,” offer some possible explanations of how, within the same revelation, the grammar of some passages was Elizabethan while that of others was modern.

There are two revisions in the Article that also return the text to more archaic grammar, but are not part of a systematic effort at revision. As mentioned above, the editors changed “come to Christ” to the more archaic wording, “come unto Christ,” for the *Book of Commandments*. Less easily explained is the revision of “arrived to [the years of accountability]” to “arrived unto.” Grammatical rules would seem to mandate “arrived at.” Possibly, this revision was intended to be a grammatical correction rather than an intentional effort to use a more archaic word. Outside of the foregoing exceptions, the language of the Articles is uniformly modern. The intent of this revelation was inherently modern; it outlined the rules of Church policy. Thus, the revelation employs only modern language. Meanwhile, a revelation such as the Law may have been intentionally left partly Elizabethan because parts of the revelation hearkened back to ancient scripture, and were differentiated from passages that discussed more modern matters such as the bishop’s duty concerning the administration of properties.

Analysis of grammatical revisions illustrates how Smith struggled to determine how modern scripture ought to sound. Only a small portion of the total revisions made in the revelations were grammatical: nine percent of revisions to the Articles and Covenants, and four percent of revisions to the Law. Over half (60 percent) of grammatical revisions were not intended to correct grammatical errors; rather, they modernized archaic grammar, or conversely replaced a modern word with an archaic one. Attention to detail indicates a possibility that an effort was made to use modern English in modern contexts such as Church policy, and to use Elizabethan English in ancient contexts such as the voice of the Lord directly addressing one or more individuals, or the reaffirmation of
promises and commandments also contained in ancient scripture.

Previous to this in-depth examination of grammatical revisions, I provided an introductory explanation to each of the other five types of revisions. Similar to my exploration of the implications of grammatical revisions, I expect that future studies that thoroughly explore each of the other five types of revision will also prove fruitful.

As he began the editing process, Smith appears to have felt free to “discover by the holy Spirit” how to better express the divine will that he had recorded in his earlier revelations. To cite a well-known example, one of the first subjects taught in the School of the Prophets was English grammar; this reflected upon Smith’s initially low level of education, and that of his associates. Due to this and other efforts during the intervening years, his command of the English language had improved and his religious insight had expanded considerably by 1835. His revisions, relatively sparse during the editing of the *Book of Commandments* but much more extensive four years later at the publication of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, reflected the in-progress nature of his academic and spiritual educations. In 1830 he had begun making revisions to the Bible; by the time he went to edit the revelations, he was already quite used to editing scripture. Even though there could be no claiming that the scripture that he himself had revealed was translated incorrectly, he revised his own revelations as freely as he revised the Bible. Although he never admitted directly to his own limitations, much less that he had ever revealed incorrectly, the idea that he could only express divine revelation according to his own limitations is expressly referred to in a revelation: “Your eyes have been upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and his language you have known, and his imperfections you have known; and you have sought in your hearts knowledge, that you might express beyond his language.”

Joseph Smith required no doctrinal leap or special permission to revise his own revelations.

Below is an elaboration, because Smith added heretofore unrevealed, albeit related information; in addition to repentance, he had to “humble himself,” and this was done “sincerely” and “through faith.” These descriptive words evidently replaced the sole earlier adjective, “truly.”

*Book of Commandments* 24:7

...but after **truly** repenting, God ministered unto him by an **holy** angel...

*Doctrine and Covenants* (1835) 2:2

...but after repenting, **and humbling himself, sincerely, through faith** God ministered unto him by an **holy** angel...
To the following verse, Smith made several kinds of revisions. He reassigned the duty of “assisting the bishop” to the post-Law office of counselor, and also included a new allowance for a “renumeration” to be paid in place of a stewardship of consecrated property. Both of these changes reflect updates of policy. Meanwhile, the insertion about helping the poor is part of the systematic effort to present the revelation in a less-legally problematic light.

**Book of Commandments 44:54**

The priests and teachers, shall have their stewardship given them even as the members; and the elders are to assist the bishop in all things, and he is to see that their families are supported out of the property which is consecrated to the Lord either a stewardship, or otherwise, as may be thought best by the elders

**Doctrinal and Covenants (1835) 13:19**

The priests and teachers shall have their stewardships, even as the members and the elders, or high priests who are appointed to assist the bishop as counsellors, in all things are to have their families supported out of the property which is consecrated to the bishop for the good of the poor, and for other purposes, as before mentioned; or they are to receive a just remuneration for all their services; either a stewardship, or otherwise, as may be thought best, or decided by the counselors
In the following revision we find a good example of clarification. The change clarifies what this revelation means by kingdom as it echoes a New Testament passage whose meaning has been much-disputed.

*Book of Commandments 44:53*

Lift up your hearts and rejoice, for unto you the kingdom **has** been given; even so: Amen

*Doctrine and Covenants (1835) 13:18*

Lift up your hearts and rejoice, for unto you the kingdom, **or in other words, the keys of the church, have** been given; even so: Amen
The following passage shows examples of two types of revision: aesthetic and grammatical. Apparently Smith or an associate decided that “framer” was more aesthetically fitting than “maker,” even though the two words clearly have the same meaning. During the same editing process, the reviser corrected the grammatically incorrect “all things that in them is,” likely without realizing that the phrase had its origins in the Old Testament (albeit in a different and grammatically correct phrase).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bible (KJV)</th>
<th>Book of Commandments 24:13</th>
<th>Doctrine and Covenants (1835) 2:4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 20:11</td>
<td>By these things we know, that there is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting, the <strong>maker</strong> of heaven and earth and all things <strong>that in them is</strong></td>
<td>By these things we know, that there is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal from everlasting to everlasting, the <strong>framer</strong> of heaven and earth and all things <strong>which are in them.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following passage illustrates that while either uniformly archaic or uniformly modern grammar was desirable, the revisers attempted to modernize some passages. In this case, modernization may have been haphazard, or the revisers may have thought that the particular phrases which were changed were too awkward when rendered with the archaic, “hath.”

*Painesville Telegraph*,
13 September 1831
(the revelation was published as a curiosity in this local Ohio newspaper)

again it shall come to pass that he that **hath** faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed; he that **hath** faith to see, shall see; he that **hath** faith to hear shall hear; the lame that have faith to leap, shall leap;

*Book of Commandments*
44:38–39

again it shall come to pass that he that **has** faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed; he that **has** faith to see, shall see; he that **has** faith to hear shall hear; the lame **who** have faith to leap, shall leap;

*Doctrine and Covenants* (2nd ed.)
42: 48–51

again it shall come to pass that he that **hath** faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed; he that **hath** faith to see, shall see; he that **hath** faith to hear shall hear; the lame **who** have faith to leap, shall leap;
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Marriage and Divorce in
Islamic and Mormon Polygamy:
A Legal Comparison

This paper compares how Islam and Mormonism crafted the legal framework of polygamy in an attempt to afford women important protections against its inherent inequality. Islam and Mormonism provided these safeguards by regulating how parties entered polygamy and by allowing women to initiate divorce.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the fifth year of the Hijrah, Mohammad received a revelation that ushered in the age of Shari’ah, or Islamic holy law: “To thee We sent the Scripture in truth . . . so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed.”1 From this revelation onward, Islam would encompass legal disputes that were previously religion-neutral.2 In 1831, another revelation promised a similar rule of divine law for the newly organized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: “Wherefore, hear my voice and follow me, and you shall be a free people, and ye shall

2. Goitein, Studies in Islamic Histories and institutions, 131.
have no laws but my laws when I come, for I am your lawgiver...”

Both Islam and Mormonism became dynamic world religions that established theocratic societies and unique legal systems.

Since the advent of Mormonism, commentators have noted the many similarities it shares with Islam. For instance, both religions are a product of a series of new revelations and a prophet receiving a sacred book. Both Mohammad and Joseph Smith viewed their revelations as the commencement of new dispensations, perfectly in line with older revelations and scriptures. The Umma of Mohammad and the Zion of Joseph Smith were to be new social and political communities governed by heavenly law. Finally, both Joseph Smith and Mohammad received revelations governing the practice of polygamy.

There is, however, a striking similarity that has received comparatively little attention: how the two religions designed similar legal structures around polygamy which afforded plural wives important social protections by regulating how a man acquired additional wives and by providing mechanisms for a wife to initiate divorce. Section II examines the rights of polygamous wives within classical and modern Islam. Section III analyzes the rights of Mormon wives within polygamy during the early Utah period. Section IV looks at the steps available to women to pursue divorce in both Islam and Mormonism. One difficulty with this comparison lies in the fact that within the history of Islamic polygamy, prac-

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3. The Doctrine and Covenants (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 38:22.
4. By “Mormonism,” I refer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
tices differ among time periods, sects, and schools. The sheer weight of Islamic history dwarfs Mormonism, a relatively recent arrival on the scene of world religion. Yet the practice of polygamy in Classical Islam and modern reforms throughout the Muslim world are similar enough to make a comparison with Mormon polygamy worthwhile.

II. MARRIAGE AND POLYGAMY IN ISLAM

a. Purpose of Islamic Marriage and Polygamy

The purpose of marriage in Islam is to create and sustain the Muslim family, and to populate the world with believers.10 Marriage is required of every Muslim man and woman, unless they are physically, mentally, or financially unable to marry.11 Yet strictly speaking, marriage is not a sacrament in Islam, nor can it be seen purely as a secular contract. Muslim marriage is a contract in the sense that it requires the mutual assent of both parties, allows for the parties to add conditions, limits marriages with non-Muslims, and is dissolvable if irreconcilable differences arise.12 But it is a religious covenant in the sense that its purpose is to fill the earth with faithful Muslims; the primary means God employs to realize his will as revealed in the Qur’an.13

Islamic polygamy served the general purposes of marriage, but it had other functions as well. Many Muslim scholars argue using the Qur’an that God allows polygamy to ensure that the Muslim community cares for its widows and orphans. The Quranic treatment of polygamy came in the wake of the Battle of Uhud, a battle that left many Muslims without husbands or fathers. Allowance for the surviving men to take additional wives allowed them to receive the eco-

nomic and social protections of marriage. Polygamy further allowed the early Muslim Umma to form political ties with neighboring communities, and by entering polygamy, Mohammad managed to pacify and convert previously hostile tribes. Polygamy also provided a subtle encouragement to manumit slaves.

**b. Regulations and Restrictions in Islamic Polygamy**

When the Quranic revelation on polygamy came, it extended greater protections to women. Polygamy in the pre-Islamic Middle East did not recognize a limit to the number of wives a man could take. Husbands paid the *Mahr*, or dower, to the wife’s family and not to the wife herself. As a result, she became totally dependent upon her husband’s family for her maintenance. A wife had no recourse to change her own status or seek divorce, yet she was subject to her husband’s right to instant *talaq* (repudiation). The possibility of repudiation without a dower hung over a woman like the sword of Damocles, threatening to leave her destitute at any time and without warning.

The *Qur’an* approved of polygamy, but limited its practice in important ways. The revelation stated: “If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, Two, or three, or four; But if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one...” The revelation allowed a man to take multiple wives, but on the condition that he treat them all fairly. Additionally, a Muslim man was forbidden to take more than four wives, even if he was capable of providing for them. If he repudi-
ated his wife, the Qur’an obligated him to give her the unpaid portion of the dower for her maintenance.\textsuperscript{21}

Modern reforms have expanded the scope of these initial protections by making polygamous marriage harder to enter and easier to escape. Modernist reformers, beginning with Mohammad Abduh, have interpreted the Quranic authorization of polygamy in 4:3 (stating that “if you fear you will not be able to deal justly [with multiple wives], then only one…”) with the later axiom that “[y]ou are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire...”\textsuperscript{22} Abduh concluded that the authorization for polygamy must have been a concession to early Muslims, struggling as they were to adapt their customs and lifestyles to the rigors of the new faith. However, the Quranic ideal was monogamy.\textsuperscript{23}

Abduh’s interpretation has made its way into many legal codes, most notably into the 1986 Arab Family Law Project, the model code of family law. The project recommended a series of additional restrictions on Islamic polygamy. Several countries have adopted segments of the project’s suggestions or have taken additional measures to curb the practice of polygamy. Syria included in Article 17 of its Law of Personal Status that a judge may prohibit a man from taking another wife if he does not have the ability to support the new family.\textsuperscript{24} Morocco requires the husband to obtain permission from the first wife before he can enter into a polygamous relationship, and allows the first wife to insert

\textsuperscript{21} Esposito, \textit{Women in Muslim Family Law}, 23.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Holy Qur’an} 4:129.
\textsuperscript{23} Esposito, \textit{Women in Muslim Family Law}, 48.
\textsuperscript{24} Law of Personal Status 1953 (Decree No. 59 of 1953), Art. 17. The amended version requires a man to state a “legal reason” for taking another wife. Mallat, \textit{Introduction to Middle Eastern Law}, 378.
a condition into the marriage contract that the husband will not take another wife.\textsuperscript{25} Yemen likewise follows the suggestions of the Arab Family Law Project. \textsuperscript{26} However, Tunisia took these restrictions further and banned polygamy in 1956.\textsuperscript{27}

In looking at both classical and modern Islam's treatment of polygamy, the trend has been toward restricting the husband’s ability to take on additional wives and enhancing the protections owed to the wife. By limiting the number of wives in a family and requiring the wives be treated equally, early Islam restricted the unhampered marital practices of the pre-Islamic Middle East. Some contemporary Muslim nations have adopted the suggestions of the Arab Family Law Project or similar legislation, expanding the rights women enjoyed under classical Islam by giving them a greater voice in the husband's decision to take on multiple wives and ensuring his ability to maintain an expanded family.

### III. MARRIAGE AND POLYGAMY IN MORMONISM

#### a. Purposes of Marriage and Polygamy in Mormonism

Marriage in Mormonism is a sacrament if solemnized in the temple under the authority of the priesthood.\textsuperscript{28} In 1843, Joseph Smith recorded a revelation explaining that a marriage not solemnized by the Mormon priesthood was “not of force when [the parties] are dead, and when they are out of the world.”\textsuperscript{29} Parties to such marriages could not aspire beyond being “angels” and “ministering

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Mallat, \textit{Introduction to Middle Eastern Law}, 401.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Before unification, South Yemen imposed greater restrictions on a man’s ability to enter polygamy, requiring that he prove to the tribunal that his wife is sterile and the fact was unknown to him before the contracting the marriage, or that the wife has a permanent or contagious illness with no hope of cure. Ibid., 378.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Personal Status Law Art. 18 states that “Polygamy is forbidden ... [and] is punishable by imprisonment of 1 year or a fine of 240,000 francs, or both.” Iraq enacted similar limitations in the Law of Personal Status of 1959. Doi, \textit{Women in Shari‘ah}, 57. However, the strong backlash succeeded in repealing the ban in 1963. Jaime M. Gher, “Polygamy and Same-Sex Marriage: Allies or Adversaries Within the Same-Sex Marriage Movement,” \textit{William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law} 14 (2008): 559, 591n237.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Such marriages are also known as “temple sealings.”
\item \textsuperscript{29} \textit{Doctrine and Covenants} 132:15.
\end{itemize}
servants” in the life to come.30 However, if a marriage is “sealed . . . by the Holy Spirit of Promise, by him who is anointed, unto whom [God has] appointed this power,”31 then the marriage would endure beyond death, and the parties would be entitled to a “far more, and an exceeding, and an eternal weight of glory.”32 In fact, to obtain the highest salvation, a person has to “enter into . . . the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.”33 As one scholar put it, Mormon salvation is essentially a family affair.34 The revelation warned of heavy consequences to those who refused to accept polygamy: “For behold, I reveal unto you a new and everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”35

30. Ibid., 16.
31. Ibid., 19.
32. Ibid., 16. This glory consisted of a person “going from a small capacity to a great capacity” until arriving at the station of godhood, as Joseph taught that Christ and his Father had done. Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 533–7.
The primary purpose of polygamy in Mormon theology was to prepare the earth for the Second Coming and glory in the next life, though Mormons at times justified polygamy as a cure for social evils (such as adultery, prostitution, abortion, and infanticide). However burdensome the practice was on earth, men and women who lived the “higher law” of polygamy would receive increased glory and honor in the life to come.

b. Regulations and Restrictions Within Mormon Polygamy

Contrasted with the Quranic revelation authorizing polygamy, the Mormon revelation on plural marriage was theologically rich and administratively barren. The revelation was primarily concerned with the life to come and consequently, it did not provide any guidance as to how Mormons were to live in polygamy while on earth. Contrasted with the Quranic revelation, it neither imposed a limit on the number of wives, nor required all wives be treated equally. It did not necessitate a husband to prove his ability to provide for a polygamous family. It also did not treat polygamy as an exception to the rule. Joseph’s revelation did not simply tolerate polygamy—it commanded it.

In many ways, Mormon polygamy remains a mystery. Unlike Islam, Mormonism grew up in a puritanical society that viewed polygamy as barbaric, and Mormons initially practiced polygamy in secret. Under Joseph Smith, the practice of polygamy differed in significant ways from the later Utah period, when the church set up a theocratic government. This comparison will only look to the Utah period, in which Mormons practiced polygamy under the jurisdiction of the “the laws of Israel”—presumably as it was intended to be practiced.

37. Speech of Harriet Cook Young, 13 January 1870 (Salt Lake City), reprinted in Jeffrey Tullidge, Women of Mormondom (New York: Tullidge & Crandall, 1877) (advocating polygamy as a cure for various social problems).
While the Mormon revelation on polygamy did not impose the limits of the Qur'an, it did allow men free rein in marriage. Mormon polygamy was regulated in two significant ways. First, church leaders only allowed certain individuals to take multiple wives and second, the “Law of Sarah” required that the first wife give her consent before the husband enter into polygamy.

Only Mormons whom church leaders “called,” through an inspired process, could enter into polygamy. From the earliest occurrences of polygamy, Joseph Smith (and later his successors as president of the church) had to authorize the plural marriage. The revelation stated that the president of the church holds the keys or authority to seal marriages, “and there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are conferred.”

A polygamous marriage entered into without the approval of the president was considered adultery. The experiences of William Clayton and Hyrum Brown illustrate this point. At Nauvoo, Joseph approached Clayton in private and told him it was “lawful” for him to take additional wives. When his plural wife became pregnant and some members began calling for church discipline against Clayton, Joseph told him, “[I]f they raise trouble about it and bring you before me I will give you an awful scourging and probably cut you off from the church and then I will rebaptise [sic] you and set you ahead as good as ever.” Brown, on the other hand, began advocating polygamy in Michigan independent of Joseph’s authority, and was “cut off from the Church for his iniquity.”

Not only was unsanctioned polygamy punishable, but a man who refused to take another wife after being called by Mormon leaders to do so was also subject to reprimand. Brigham Young warned reluctant Mormons that “[i]f any of you will deny the plurality of wives and continue to do so, I promise that you

41. Firmaige and Mangrum, Zion in the Courts, 358 (outlining church court decisions to excommunicate and disfellowship Mormons who entered into unauthorized polygamy).
42. William Clayton, Nauvoo Journal, 9 March 1843.
44. Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Times & Seasons, 1 Feburary 1844.
Mormon leaders taught that a man called to practice polygamy and who did not do so, risked losing his church office and membership in life; in the hereafter, he would fall short of the highest salvation and his wife would be given to a worthier man.\footnote{Provo Conference, Deseret News, 14 November 1855.}

Another important limitation on the practice of polygamy was the “law of Sarah.” This law, named for the wife of Abraham,\footnote{Genesis 16:1–2 (recounting the story of Sarah giving Abraham her handmaid, Hagar, as a plural wife).} required the consent of the first wife before a man could take additional wives. The revelation outlined:

> And again, verily, verily, I say unto you, if any man have a wife, who holds the keys of this power, and he teaches unto her the law of my priesthood, as pertaining to these things [polygamy], then shall she believe and administer unto him, or she shall be destroyed, saith the Lord your God; for I will destroy her; for I will magnify my name upon all those who receive and abide in my law. Therefore, it shall be lawful in me, if she receive all things whatsoever I, the Lord his God, will give unto him, because she did not believe and administer unto him according to my word; and she then becomes the transgressor; and he is exempt from the law of Sarah[].\footnote{Doctrine and Covenants 132:64-65}

While difficult to follow, the law of Sarah appears to require the wife’s consent before a man could take additional wives. The text seems to state that a man is exempt from the law of Sarah (the necessity of obtaining the wife’s consent) if she refuses to consent.\footnote{This incongruity was not lost on Congress during the Reed-Smoot hearings. Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the matter or the protests against the right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from the state of Utah, to hold his seat (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1904) 1:201 (hereafter Reed Smoot Hearings).} Yet early Mormon leaders interpreted the revelation as allowing the wife an opportunity to “state before the President the reasons
why she withholding her consent.” If her reasons were “sufficient and justifiable,” then the husband was forbidden to take another wife. If her reasons for withholding consent were deemed insufficient, then the husband was permitted (though not required) to enter into polygamy without his wife’s consent.

While the loophole in the law of Sarah curtailed a wife’s ability to keep her husband monogamous by requiring “sufficient and justifiable reasons,” Mormon women could effectively exercise their power to refuse in other ways. In one case, a wife in St. George told her husband that “if he ever took another wife, when he brought her in the front door, [she] would go out the back.” In a similar instance, an elder told his wife that he had received a revelation to marry another woman, and that the wife must consent to the divine command. But the next morning, the wife announced that she had received a revelation of her own, instructing her to “shoot any woman who became his plural wife.” In both instances, the husband remained monogamous.

It also seems that a Mormon wife who had given her consent could later withdraw it. In the case of Joseph Smith, his wife Emma initially gave consent for Joseph to marry two additional wives, Emily and Eliza Partridge, in 1843. Shortly after the wedding, however, she changed her mind and objected so vehemently to the polygamous marriage that she successfully persuaded Joseph to divorce them. As Emily Partridge recorded, “[Emma] sent for us one day to come to her room. Joseph was present, looking like a martyr. Emma said some very hard things—Joseph should give us up or blood should flow . . . Joseph came to us and shook hands with us, and the understanding was that all

51. Ibid. It should be noted that early Mormons did not take it into their hands to “destroy” the refusing wife. They assumed that God would destroy her in his own time. Reed Smoot Hearings, 1:201.
52. Pratt, The Seer, 41.
54. Ibid.
55. Emily Partridge Young, Reminiscence, 1899, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
was ended between us." Although greatly dissatisfied with Emma’s decision, Joseph believed he could do nothing in the face of her refusal. As he explained to Eliza, “my hands are tied.”

These regulations show that Islam and Mormonism wrestled with the inequality inherent in the practice of polygamy, and both attempted to provide some social protections to women. Within marriage, these protections were primarily restrictions on the husband. Islam initially allowed any man to practice polygamy, but restricted how the husband could treat his wives and how many he could take. Mormonism only allowed certain men to take additional wives, but neither limited the number nor required a husband to treat his wives equally. Yet Mormon revelation recognized from the beginning that a wife needed a voice in her husband’s decision to take more wives, while women in Islam have only recently acquired this right.

IV. WOMEN AND DIVORCE IN ISLAMIC AND MORMON POLYGAMY

Perhaps women’s most important protection in marriage is the right to pursue divorce. While Mormonism and Islam discourage divorce, both religions regarded it as being less evil than requiring the parties to remain in a dysfunctional marriage. Polygamous wives in both Islam and Mormonism had options available in the pursuit of divorce. This section will analyze and compare these recourses.

a. The Ability of a Woman in Islam to Pursue Divorce

Classical Shari’ah law reserved the right of talaq, or repudiation, exclusively to the husband. Yet in certain limited circumstances, a wife could pur-

56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Mallat, Introduction to Middle Eastern Law, 357. Talaq took two forms: revocable and irrevocable. Under a revocable talaq, the husband could take his wife back during the waiting period of three menstrual cycles (‘idda). However, a revocable talaq became irrevocable after three menstrual cycles or the final pronouncement of talaq. Ibid., 370.
sue a divorce, either by coming to an agreement with her husband to end the marriage or by petitioning a Qadi (Islamic judge) for a divorce. There were three basic types of divorce a woman could request: *khul‘*, divorce in exchange for something of value; *isma*, delegated divorce; and *faskh*, judicial annulment. These options remain open in contemporary Islam.59

*Khul‘* was an extrajudicial divorce a wife could obtain by giving the husband something in return, the cost being decided by the mutual consent of the parties.60 The Qur’an states, “if a wife fears cruelty or desertion on the husband’s part, there is no blame on them if they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves; and such settlement is best; even though men’s souls are swayed by greed.”61 The traditional price was the *mahr* (dower), but historically, some husbands demanded exorbitant payment in exchange for *khul‘* and effectively foreclosed a woman’s ability to obtain a divorce. To correct these abuses, some countries, such as Algeria, have capped the amount a husband can demand in exchange for the wife’s liberation.62

A Muslim wife could also terminate a marriage through *isma*, or delegated divorce.63 A husband could give his wife the power to divorce herself by pronouncing that “her business was in her own hands.”64 However, a husband could stipulate whether the divorce would be revocable or not, and determine how long she could retain the power to divorce.65 The husband had to explain precisely what he meant, because the wife could not exceed the ambit of the delegation.66

60. However, the price was not to exceed that of the dowry, or *mahr*. Ibid.
61. *Holy Qur’an* 4:128. While Mohammad is known to have granted divorces to women seeking *khul‘*, Islam discourages the practice. Doi, *Women in Shari‘ah*, 98. For a discussion of how jurists differ on the various procedures associated with *khul‘*, see ibid., 96--100.
64. Ibid., 225.
65. A husband could give his wife power to make three divorces, which would forever terminate the marriage, or he could simply give her the power to pronounce a revocable divorce. Ibid., 225.
66. Ibid., 226–7.
A third option was to seek *faskh*, a judicial annulment or abrogation of the marriage contract.\(^{67}\) In classical Islam, a wife could petition for divorce under limited conditions. While these conditions vary among different schools and time periods, a wife could always seek *faskh* in the wake of apostasy, lack of equality, or mutual cursing (*li’an*).\(^{68}\) Also, a wife could usually successfully petition for divorce successfully if the husband had contracted an incurable disease or infirmity, such as impotency or madness. Other grounds for *faskh* included abandonment through inexcusable absence for over a year, a lengthy prison sentence, or a refusal to share the wife’s bed for over four months. Finally, a wife could exercise the “option of puberty,” which allowed her to dissolve a marriage at puberty that her guardian had previously contracted for her.\(^{69}\)

Following divorce, classical Islam afforded women some social protections. While the father invariably retained his position as guardian and his right to guide the child’s education, the mother would receive custody of a young child until the child reached a certain age, and the father would have custody thereafter.\(^{70}\) Following a revocable *talaq*, the husband had to support the wife for a period of three menstrual cycles, the time needed to determine if the wife was pregnant.\(^{71}\) A husband was also under the Quranic obligation to return to his divorced wife the unpaid portion of her dower.\(^{72}\)

While Muslim women retain the option of seeking divorce through the methods available under the classical paradigm, modern patterns of legal reform in the Middle East have given the wife additional rights by giving her greater autonomy in pursuing divorce and by limiting the husband’s ability to unilaterally repudiate her. For example, many countries now consider sufficient grounds for

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70. For a discussion of how this practice varied among the schools, see Mallat, *Introduction to Middle Eastern Law*, 357.
71. Ibid., 370.
divorce if the husband fails to provide for his wife. 73 Iran recognizes a bride’s right to insert additional conditions into the marriage contract, reserving her right to terminate the marriage under the conditions she specifies. 74 Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Morocco, and Yemen have given the courts exclusive power to dissolve a marriage, and a husband attempting to dissolve a marriage outside of court (such as through talaq) may face prison sentences and fines. 75 Similarly, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen have prohibited triple talaq, the immediate and irrevocable repudiation of a wife. 76 Jordan, Kuwait, and Yemen now require husbands to pay maintenance to their wives for a year following divorce, and Syria has extended the time to three years. 77

While classical Islam provided women with several mechanisms to pursue divorce, the majority of these methods required the husband’s cooperation, and only in limited circumstances could a wife divorce an unwilling husband. Modern reforms reflect a growing concern in the Islamic world to protect women by giving them greater autonomy to divorce their husbands and by restricting the husband’s power to repudiate the wife. 78

b. The Ability of a Woman in Early Mormonism to Pursue Divorce

Divorce 79 was not uncommon in polygamous Mormon families, and polygamous wives could obtain divorces relatively easily through the church court system. Because federal and territorial law did not recognize polygamous marriages, they refused to grant civil divorces to Mormon plural wives. A woman seeking to end a polygamous marriage had to petition the church’s head office,

73. Esposito, Women in Muslim Family Law, 96. A court typically gives the husband a period of grace to pay his maintenance debt, and upon his failure to do so, the court will grant the divorce.
74. In this tradition, Iran requires certain stipulations to be in every contract, and each must be signed by both the bride and groom in order to make the marriage valid. Ibid., 104.
75. Ibid., 94.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 97.
79. “Divorce” as used in this section refers to a cancellation of a marital sealing by ecclesiastical authority.
known as the First Presidency, the only body that could cancel a temple sealing, as outlined in revelation.  

While church leaders discouraged divorce, they were surprisingly liberal in granting it, especially in polygamous marriages. Brigham Young advised unhappy wives to “stay with [their] husband as long as [they] could bear with him, but if life became too burdensome, then leave and get a divorce.” This willingness to grant divorce reflects Brigham Young’s earlier teaching that “when a woman becomes alienated in her feelings and affections from her husband, it is his duty to give her a bill and set her free,” because a man who continued to cohabit with a wife who had grown alienated from him was guilty of “fornication.”

Divorce in Mormon polygamy cannot be understood without a brief overview of the ecclesiastical court system, the only forum in which polygamous wives could petition for divorce. The church court was a central aspect of the Mormon community. Local lay ecclesiastical leaders ran the courts, and they rarely had any legal training or background. They were simply expected to judge disputes according to the scriptures and the spirit of revelation. If a party was unsatisfied with the court’s decision, they could appeal it to a higher court and ultimately to the church’s First Presidency. Initially, Brigham Young heard every divorce petition, but the workload soon overwhelmed him. He authorized the church courts to hear marriage disputes, and he largely followed their recommendations in deciding whether to cancel polygamous sealings.

Mormon leaders never established formal procedures for church courts, but procedure throughout the courts developed along similar lines. Precedent

83. James Beck Journal, 8 October 1861, LDS Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter LDSA).
85. Ibid., 285–6.
did not control decisions, but decisions tended to follow customs based on scriptural interpretation and instructions from Mormon leaders. The courts had little respect for legal technicalities or lawyers, but occasionally allowed parties to be represented by counsel if the courts believed it would further the interests of the church. Leaders accepted all relevant evidence and ignored the common law exclusion of hearsay.

In the church courts, wives could petition for divorce on grounds such as adultery, “licentious conduct, habitual drunkenness, desertion for more than a year, or brutality.” But a wife did not need to base her petition on her husband’s moral shortcomings to be successful. Some wives obtained divorces for little more than personal dislike of their husband. One woman in Fillmore, Utah, sought a divorce solely because she had no affection for her husband. While the church court stated her reasons for seeking divorce were “not just,” it recommended divorce all the same.

However, women at times had difficulty in pursuing divorce, especially in posthumous proceedings. Since Mormons believed that a marriage solemnized by the priesthood lasts beyond death, some women petitioned for divorce after the death of their husbands. In these cases, women primarily sought to divorce their husband because of his moral shortcomings that made his salvation a remote possibility. Church leaders were very reluctant to grant divorces in these cases, because the “parties are out of reach and are not able to defend themselves” and could be “wronged by the cancellation of the sealing.” Accordingly, the church courts assembled witnesses in posthumous divorce proceedings.

87. Ibid., 290.
88. Ecclesiastical Court Cases (hereafter ECC), 1873, fd. 10, LDSA.
89. Firmage and Mangrum, Zion in the Courts, 283; ECC, 1885, fd. 27, LDSA; Disfellowship Files (hereafter DF), 1885, fd. 2; 1897, fd. 14; 1891, fd. 3; 1893, fd. 5, LDSA. For an analysis of these decisions, see Firmage and Mangrum, Zion in the Courts, 280, 326–7.
90. Firmage and Mangrum, Zion in the Courts, 280, 326–7.
91. Firmage and Mangrum, Zion in the Courts, 327.
92. ECC, 1883, fd. 6 and 1886 fd. 8, LDSA.
93. ECC, 1883, fd. 6, LDSA.
94. Firmage and Mangrum, Zion in the Courts, 331–2.
95. ECC, 1884, fd. 10, LDSA.
to testify as to the character and standing of the deceased, and the council would base its decision largely on the testimony presented.  

While the language of some decisions seems to suggest a presumption that women were to blame for marital problems, church courts often treated women more favorably than men. While the courts at times chided women for their “abusive nature” and admonished them to “humble [themselves] before God” and “honor and respect their husbands,” they granted women divorces more frequently than men. The courts also seemed to have treated a woman better than a man in the same situation. When a wife in 1883 sought a divorce without “just cause,” the records do not indicate any punitive action taken against her. In a similar situation, a husband successfully petitioned for divorce even though he “had no just cause to put away his wife,” yet Brigham Young denounced him as a “fool” and “caution[ed] all the girls against him” for three years.

Following divorce, Mormon women enjoyed greater rights than their Islamic counterparts. In most cases, the church courts awarded custody to the woman, regardless of the age or gender of the children. In an 1861 divorce case, Brigham Young stated “I do not believe in a man getting children,” and church courts adopted this rule in handling divorce cases. Additionally, a Mormon woman had claim upon her ex-husband for support, and “he [was] never completely dissolved” from this obligation.

Mormon polygamy in practice often provided women with safeguards beyond those Islamic women enjoyed. Contrasted with a Muslim husband’s power of *talaq*, Mormonism strictly limited a husband’s ability to divorce his

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96. Ibid.
97. ECC, 1866, fd. 11, LDSA.
98. Firmage and Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts*, 323.
99. Ibid., 324.
100. ECC, 1883, fd. 6, LDSA.
101. ECC, 1856, fd. 3, LDSA.
102. ECC, 1861, fd. 1, LDSA.
103. See, ECC, 1852, fd. 3, LDSA (noting that “it was general counsel from the Presidency that women are more competent to take care of little children than a man.”)
wife by requiring him to petition the church courts. Mormon women also had greater autonomy in seeking divorce than Muslim wives, and got custody of the children when the marriage ended without regard to the age or gender of the children. Mormonism also recognized a divorced wife’s continuous right to alimony, while Islam only required the husband to give his divorced wife the unpaid portion of the dower at the time of repudiation. However, in other aspects, Islam allowed women more autonomy than Mormonism. For example, a Mormon woman could not add conditions into the marriage contract and reserve the right to divorce under stipulated conditions.

V. CONCLUSION

Mormonism and Islam both attempted to mitigate the natural unfairness in polygamy in unique ways. The Quranic revelation required husbands treat their wives equally and forbid a man from taking more than four wives. It also allowed a wife to seek divorce in some circumstances. Modern Islam increasingly restricts a husband’s power to repudiate a wife, and is gradually recognizing a divorced wife’s right to alimony. In contrast, the Mormon revelation only limits polygamy by requiring that it be authorized by the priesthood and recognizing the first wife’s right to refuse her consent in some circumstances. Yet while the revelation provides fewer rights than the Qur’an, in practice Mormon women had greater latitude than their Islamic counterparts in alimony, custody, and the ability to pursue divorce for any reason.

It is interesting to note how, though separated by centuries and hemispheres, both Islam and Mormonism established safeguards and procedures designed to protect plural wives, demonstrating that both religions were troubled by the inequality inherent in polygamy. While Mormonism abandoned the practice over a century ago, the progress of gender equality in Islam demonstrates that Tocqueville was correct in noting that “the principal of equality is, therefore, a providential fact . . . [i]t is universal, it is lasting, and all events as well as men contribute to its progress.”

Upcoming Conference Calls

Unfortunately, a number of Graduate Conferences have just ended their call for papers in September and early October. However, the following conferences are still accepting submissions from Graduate Students in religious studies.

2010 Southwest/Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Associations Conference
Topic: Religion in Popular Culture
Date: February 10-13, 2010
Location: Albuquerque, New Mexico
Deadline: December 15, 2009
For More Information: http://swtxpca.org

The Tung Lin Kok Yuen Conference
Topic: Buddhism and Diaspora
Date: May 14-16, 2010
Location: Toronto, Canada
Deadline: October 30, 2009
For More Information: http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~humdiv/TLKY/event3

“Esotericism and Politics”

To be held June 17-20, 2010 at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan

Jointly sponsored by the Association for the Study of Esotericism, the Societas Magica, and JSR: Journal for the Study of Radicalism

Many esoteric movements, groups, and individuals have tended either to gain some autonomy from normative religious or political institutions, or to set themselves up as a rarefied elite within such institutions through their beliefs and practices. Often, such figures, groups, or movements are much more complex in their political dimensions than it may at first appear. This conference will explore the interconnections between esotericism and various political and social movements. What are the political associations of figures and groups within Western esotericism? What does it mean to say that a given figure or group within Western esotericism is radical? How have charges of magical practice been allied with political accusations against minority groups, and in what ways? We expect that most papers will offer insight into some aspect of the history of Western esotericism, but we also are interested in papers from sociological, anthropological, literary critical or other academic approaches with an eye to political implications or controversies.

If you wish to submit a paper proposal for review and possible presentation at the conference, please send it by regular email to conference organizers at 2010ASE@gmail.com

No attachments, please: simply copy and paste your abstract into ordinary email. Please limit abstracts to one single-spaced page or less, and please also include a short c.v. or biographical paragraph.

The deadline for paper proposals is December 15, 2009

The Association for the Study of Esotericism [ASE]
For more information on the ASE and our conference, see our website at http://www.aseweb.org
Regional AAR Conferences
For More Information: www.aarweb.org

Eastern/International
Date: May 7-8, 2010
Location: Ontario, Canada
Call for Papers: January 31, 2010

Mid-Atlantic/New England
Date: March 11-12, 2010
Location: New Brunswick, New Jersey
Call for Papers: November 15, 2009

Midwest
Date: March 26-27, 2010
Location: Rock Island, Illinois
Call for Papers: January 1, 2010

Rocky Mountain-Great Plains
Date: April 9-10, 2010
Location: Omaha, Nebraska
Call for Papers: October 30, 2009

Southwest
Date: March 12-13, 2010
Location: Irving, Texas
Call for Papers: November 1, 2009

Upper Midwest
Date: April 9-10, 2010
Location: St. Paul, Minnesota
Call for Papers: December 15, 2009