

# Ministering Angels and Eunuchs for Christ: Being Mormon in the Sexual Margins

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## Introduction: Personal and Social Identities

Human identity has both personal and social components. Personally, our sense of self is influenced by our subjective experience of physiological and psychological facts such as our moods, our sexual drive, and the kinds of sexual attractions that we feel. We may simply respond to these inner processes or only experience them intuitively as we act on them, or we may identify them consciously in statements such as "I am attracted to women", "I am spiritual", or "I am energetic and enjoy physical activity". Such private, subjective experiences as these may influence our behavior and they may also influence our sense of self when they become objects of self-conscious reflection that can be put into words such as these.

Although the process of consciously identifying aspects of our inner selves may be, in part, based on introspection, it is typically influenced very heavily by the dialogs about identity that we hear around us in society. Thus, despite the fact that subjectively experienced facts may contribute to our personal identities, our identities are also greatly shaped by our dialogs with others and by the cultural categories and ideas about the kinds of personal "selves" that we learn by participating in those dialogs.

Each society has a variety of preexisting labels and ideas about a variety of personal identities that we may adopt when we communicate about ourselves to others. Identifying ourselves as "gay", "straight", "moody", "exuberant", or "depressed" are just five out of many such socially shared labels that may become part of our personal sense of who we are.

Other parts of our personal identities are based on the kinds of social relationships we regularly participate in. By participating in the various social roles that society makes available to us, we learn to identify ourselves in terms of these social identities when we call ourselves by the words that identify these social identities: "father", "wife", "Mormon", "businessman", "golfer", or "lesbian" to name just six. In adopting such labels we contrast ourselves with others, demarcating the boundaries between them and ourselves: I can be a "heterosexual" as opposed to a "homosexual", a "Mormon" instead of a "Gentile", or a "woman" rather than a "man". Each of our many social identities marks off part of the territory that we occupy in society at large. By becoming aware of such contrasts we gain a more conscious conceptualization of exactly who we are and where we fit in the broader landscape of society at large.

These many identities, both personal and social, are organized into a hierarchy. Some are more important, more central to our sense of self and our outlook than are others. I may view myself first and foremost as a Mormon and secondarily as one who makes his living as an academic, or I might perceive myself as primarily a social scientist who also happens to be a Mormon. One way or another, some of our identities influence our outlook on life, our understanding of things, and our values more than do others.

Society also has widely shared social values about how we should rank our different identities. Unfortunately, these socially shared values may differ from the actual, subjective rankings that inform our personal sense of who we are. When this is so, we may experience both stigma from others and subjective distress about our failure to meet the expectations of others. For instance, I may perceive myself most intensely in terms of how I make my living and be so involved in its roles that, perhaps without even consciously choosing it, my other roles--as husband or father--may come in a distant second. But if I say that being an anthropologist is more important to me than being a father, I can surely expect to hear disapproval from my wife, my children, and probably even from many fellow anthropologists as well, because this ranking is out of step with widely held social values about the importance of the family and how its roles should be prioritized over our economic identities. Stigmatizing terms such as "workaholic" testify to such social conventions, while "dedicated parent" is always a compliment.

We establish our social identities by becoming members of various social groups and participating in their dialogs about the social identities that bind their members together. In so doing, we learn to label ourselves in terms of these social identities: "I am a gay activist", "I am a Republican", "I'm a farmer", or "I am an agnostic".

Our full selves consist of many identities, including some that are personal and subjective and others that we share with others by participating in the groups that foster those social identities. When one of our many social identities is generally held by society at large to be incompatible with other social identities or with personal identities that we privately perceive ourselves to have, and especially when those incompatibilities involve identities that are central to our sense of who we really are, then the distress of cognitive dissonance is inevitable. In this paper, I will explore some of the ways that individuals attempt to cope with the dissonance that arises from being both "LDS" and "gay".

## **The Identity Politics of Being Both Mormon and Same-Sex Attracted**

As Geertz (1973, P. 5) so aptly noted, we symboling animals are "suspended in webs of significance". We fix our location within the human landscape by defining our identities with boundaries that contrast them with the alternative identities of others. Each of us is a combination of such identity markers: "I am a Mormon", "I am an anthropologist", "I am White", and "I am a lesbian" are but four of the many component parts of personal identity. Sometimes these identities may form a comfortable, coherent whole. At other times, they may be in conflict. Such internal dissonance may work itself out in various ways, but the process is particularly problematic when one's allegiance to an external institution such as a religious denomination makes the institution's definitions of appropriate identities a source of personal intrapsychic dissonance.

In October of 1995, Elder Dallin Oaks fired a salvo in the war of words about sexual orientation. Hailed by liberal Mormons as a blow against intolerance and homophobia because it acknowledged the possible role of biology in sexual orientation and decried discrimination against "those with homosexual problems", Elder Oaks' article nevertheless reinforced the LDS church's discrimination between members whose sexual drives may be channeled into

heterosexually married relationships and those whose spontaneous desires may never be acted on as a source of fulfillment and love.

As do all definitions, Elder Oaks' specifying of homosexuality as a form of orientation and behavior rather than a characteristic of persons excludes as well as it includes. In Oaks' terminology, a homosexual orientation may not legitimately define one's identity within the Mormon context. One may be "a Mormon with a homosexual orientation" but not "a homosexual Mormon". Though it is true that heterosexual identity is similarly expected to be subordinated to religious values within Mormonism, heterosexuality need not be totally suppressed to maintain an acceptable religious identity. Mormonism is institutionally compatible with heterosexual dating, and the conflicts that the dating couple may experience between sexual desire and religious restraints on sexual behavior is mitigated by the possibility of heterosexual marriage within which sexual desire may eventually find fulfillment. For the homosexually-oriented member, the prospect of nonfulfillment of sexual desire must be life-long.

But sexuality plays a powerful role in the human self-concept and for Mormons whose orientation is to their own sex, placing religious identity in a more central position within self-concept is not easily done. Both religion and sexuality can be central to one's self-concept. And when the two are at odds, the conflict allows no easy resolution. Other than complete rejection of those religious values, the conflict remains unresolved no matter how one prioritizes religion versus sexual orientation. As one gay Mormon informant explained, "The church teaches us that we are eternal beings, and I believe that. Eternal means having no beginning . . . and having no end. If we are eternal then it seems to me that our personalities and identities are eternal as well. Being gay is as much a part of my personality and who I am as any other dimension. Not only do I think I was gay in the spirit world before I came to this one, but I also believe I will be gay in the spirit world after I leave this one." Such a view is unsurprising. After all, for most post-adolescents, sexuality and its role in relationships with others are central elements of self-image. As Calderone (1972:9) noted nearly thirty years ago, "Sexuality is the end result of sexualization which establishes the whole human being as male or female, including all . . . sex-related thoughts, fantasies, information, self-images, feelings, behavior, and experiences." The place of sexuality in self-concept must be understood not as a self-contained intrapsychic fact, but as an element of human relationships. As Atwood and Williams (1983:56) put it: "We define ourselves in part not in reference to stereotyped roles, but in the positive or negative feelings about our biological sexuality and the expression of it to others. . . From birth this sexuality becomes an integral part of one's capacity for tenderness, warmth, love, and intimate relationships."

It is not surprising then that, whatever their stance on the Oaks' statement about homosexuality and Mormonism--whether favorable or critical--sexuality is necessarily problematic for lesbian- or gay-oriented persons for whom the LDS subculture is also an important part of personal or social identity. Nowhere is the relationship between personal identity and social definitions more clearly exemplified than it is in the ways in which sexual orientation is addressed in the various discourses concerning homosexuality among persons of LDS background who are affectionally oriented towards others of their own sex.

## **Sexual Identity, Religious Identity and Cognitive Dissonance**

The potential for dissonance between the demands of a religion and one's personal identity is not unique to the role of sexuality in personal identity. David Knowlton's (1992) essay

on the oxymoronic dilemma of the "Mormon anthropologist" prophetically illustrated how certain professional identities may be incompatible with one's religious tradition. But while most people are not social scientists, most do experience themselves as sexual beings and sexuality is both a powerful and important influence on self-concept and self-worth.

Religion is not an important element of personal or social identity for many people. To those for whom religion is an important part of personal or social identity, the dissonance that can exist between religious and sexual identities is a particularly strong example of the difficulties inherent in conflict between religious values and other elements of personal and social identities. As one excommunicated gay Mormon claimed, "Neither [members nor nonmembers understand] that being a Mormon is just as much a part of who I am as is being gay. It is not just the Gospel. It isn't just the Mormon doctrine and principles. It's part of the fabric which is made up of my memories--both happy and not so happy. It influences how I look upon others, how I perceive the world around me. It is one hell of a big chunk of my young life. How could I just throw it all away? I can't! And I do not want to either." Or as another put the same idea, "This is probably one of the most commonly asked questions I get, mostly from the LDS: 'How can you be Mormon, if you're gay?' For some reason church members just do not 'get' that being Mormon goes beyond which church roster one's name appears on." Or, as another put it, "Being a Mormon is no more voluntary than being a man, or being gay."

## Coping Options

Kristin Severson (1998) expressed the conflict between these two competing identities for lesbian Mormons in this way:

*"Identifying as both lesbian and Mormon can create a moral conflict which brings into question one's whole conception of moral authority. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . works from a 'rational' moral authority with a 'spiritual' source. The leaders of the LDS Church themselves are esteemed as the moral authorities within Mormonism, chosen by God to lead.*

*These leaders consistently claim that homosexuality is 'immoral,' that is detracting from the spiritual progress of humanity. The Mormon community, as a body, rejects its members who choose to pursue sexual relations with members of their own sex. In order to process this moral conflict, lesbian Mormons may choose to continue their belief in a moral authority which rejects them, and may accept their lesbian desires as 'sinful.' They may alter their belief in this moral authority slightly, claiming Church authority is wrong regarding only the particular issue of homosexuality. Or lesbian Mormons might experience this moral conflict as a gateway through which they begin to address their entire spiritual belief system and their concept of moral authority" (p. 10).*

In his study of LDS gays, Phillips (1993) noted that his sample included both persons who "choose to live celibate lives, attempt to change their sexual orientation, or marry heterosexually in order to maintain favor with the Mormon church" (p. vi) and those who "strive

to reform the Mormon church and seek to have gay relationships sanctioned within Mormonism" (p. vi). What these attempts at reconciling sexual identity with religious preference have in common is that none is able to overcome the marginalizing effects of dissonance between a sexual identity and a religious system that marginalizes it.

## **Isolation and Loneliness**

Phillips noted that members of his sample who abstained from sex in order to remain active in the church were generally admonished "to divulge their orientation to other church members on a 'need to know' basis. Depending on the bishop, this may even include members of the immediate family" (p. 94). They were also strongly advised to drop further contact with other gay people. The effect, according to Phillips, ". . . for most celibate gay Mormons is that they live solitary, lonely lives with few social outings" (p. 94) either within their religious community or outside it.

Though the LDS church does not formally encourage any member to relate to others socially in a way that explicitly highlights their sexual identity, the central role of the (heterosexually-based) family and of eternal (heterosexual) marriage covenants does enable heterosexually-attracted members to informally experience their sexual-attraction as very compatible with their social role and with their dialog with other members. This contrasts in an important way with the experience of homosexually-oriented members. The LDS church has no formal or informal means of providing fellowship to same-sex-oriented members in a way that permits them to integrate their experience of same-sex attraction with their social identities as members of a network of LDS friends at the ward level. The heterosexual presumption of LDS discourse leaves such members inevitably feeling isolated within the Church, unable either to fully identify with its heterosexually-oriented message or to readily communicate that sense of isolation and lack of meaningful fellowship to other members, since Mormons generally do not speak of sexual issues very directly within a Church context.

Phillips illustrates the role of loneliness by citing cases such as the informant who did volunteer work at a homeless shelter not because he cared about the work, but, as he put it, "because it gives me someone to talk to. They're about the only ones who don't judge me". He also cites the gay member who drove around the streets at night looking for hitchhikers, just to have someone to talk to; and another who described the local talk radio station as his "best friend."

## **Personal Adaptation of Religious Views**

Being isolated within the church means that being a so-called "active member" does not necessarily imply commitment to the institution despite belief in the doctrines. One gay member pointed out, "I believe that everybody has a different understanding of Mormonism. I do have a testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, but I also cannot deny the fact that I am gay. In my reconciliation, I have learned to make a separation between the Church and the gospel. I still sustain the brethren of the Church as apostles, prophets, seers and revelators. But I don't believe that every whim that comes out of their mouths should be exercised into every individual's

personal life. . . My personal experiences have revealed to me that the Brethren are misguided on the issue of homosexuality. And perhaps other things too. The Lord has personally affirmed to me that these teachings are not right for ME. In a most convincing way, He has told me to be true to myself. In that regards, I search for a companion to share the joys of life with." Interestingly, this adaptation subverts the anti-homosexuality values of the institution by affirming one of its own doctrines, the right of individuals to personal revelation in matters that concern their personal lives, thereby legitimating the individuals right to carve out a personal niche within an institution that does not make room for his marginal sexual identity. Yet, this resolution of gay identity with Mormon religious identity is not entirely unproblematic. The individual's religious adaptation is only secure so long as his sexual desire remains unfulfilled. This results in a tendency to become inactive when he is involved in a loving same-sex relationship. "The reality," he says, "is that there is really NO place for ME in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I am searching for what I believe can be my 'eternal companion.' To be completely accepted in the Church, I must end that search. I won't do that..."

## Anger

The lack of a meaningful support network in which identity issues can be dealt with takes its toll and inevitably leads to strong feelings and innovative personal ways of reconciling orientation, spirituality, and church. As one informant told me, "I am . . . angry at and deeply disturbed by the Church for the untold suffering and destruction it has precipitated in the lives of so many of my gay brothers and sisters. I don't apologize for those feelings. I believe in my heart that the Church is deeply mistaken concerning its attitude and policies toward homosexuality. I still have a testimony of the gospel and resent having to attempt to find another outlet for my spiritual feelings." Even the least volatile of reconciliations of a gay identity with church membership entails at least a conscious dissonance with respect to the church, a dissonance that plays itself out either in self-deprecation or cynicism towards church leaders: The first is illustrated by the words of one member who reported, "I served for several years in high level church and stake callings," said one gay member. "I was twice considered the man most likely to be called as the next bishop. I was never called, and I was convinced it was because the Lord knew that I was gay, even though no one else in the world did." Or, the fault may be displaced onto the church, as when another member more wryly observed, "I was working [as an employee] in the First Presidency's Office, Section Leader of Mormon Youth Chorus, writing RS lessons for the General Church Writing Committee, high council member, temple sealer at 35 and even Nursery Leader . . . all the while being complimented for my spirituality, devotion, etc. and knowing full well in my heart my true sexual identity. While I do not doubt the 'goodness' or 'righteous intentions' of any of us, nor any other qualifications which make us capable of serving, I find it somewhat amusing that all these calls were made after fasting, prayer and deliberation to find the most ideal candidate! I even have more personal examples of direct dealings with the brethren who were 'impressed' with my 'deep spirituality'--I often wondered how impressed they would have been if they knew a 'deeply spiritual' man could also be 'deeply' gay!"

The particular difficulty of conforming to the church's behavioral demands despite same-sex desire is poignantly expressed by one gay ex-Mormon: "I used to [actively participate in the church] for 22 years and decided that 'no one can serve two masters...' The energy to maintain this stance was too much for me to handle. I had been celibate for a period of six years and had

been through all kinds of reparative therapy and psychotherapy plus I am a psychotherapist myself. I found that I would move into fear at the thought of being found out and I would often go through guilt trips and depression because of my so-called unrighteous thoughts and desires to love and be loved by another man. . . I made the conscious choice to leave this time last year because the Spirit told me it is time to go."

## **Compartmentalization**

The "at-odds-ness" between the gay identity and feeling full fellowship is clearly demonstrated by those who are assertive about their right to a sexually fulfilling life yet still maintain their activity within the church. Answering the question of how he manages both, one gay member explained, "The way I do it is to be firmly convinced the Church is wrong on this point, and I know that from personal revelation. Having served in bishoprics, mission, etc., I know that the church is run by well-meaning and sincere amateurs who do their best but are human. That also helps. I attend church regularly in my small inner-city branch . . . . The branch president 'knows' [that I am sexually active] but I have stood firm that I will participate as much as I am allowed without answering questions about my personal sex life. I know I can't get into the temple without answering such questions, so I don't ask for a recommend. The result, sadly, is that I'm there every week with about 40 other people and I have yet been asked to say a prayer, speak, teach, or pass the sacrament. Still, I have the gospel, the scriptures, and my prayers. Some day it may change. Maybe not. I am content either way in God's love and the warmth of his arms around me."

## **Disengagement**

More often, an assertive validation of one's sexual identity is found to be more compatible with the marginal role of a "disengaged" Mormon. In this route, fellowship is found in alternative social settings, sometimes by simply "coming out" and going it alone, but other times by shifting to a "gay-friendly" denomination (such as the Metropolitan Community Church or the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ) or by finding a support network among other sexually active gays who still also identify with their Mormon religious or cultural heritage. The first route, "coming out" on one's own appears to be most associated with embittered feelings towards one's Mormon past. A second-hand account of one such case is illustrative: "I've known one gay man who was a bishop, married, successful, very handsome. He has expressed to me his regret for excommunicating a gay man from his ward when he was trying to be straight. Since coming out he has become so totally intolerant of anyone who is Mormon, and anyone who says that not all Mormons are that way."

Organizations such as Affirmation and internet lists such as Q-Saints provide a setting in which persons of Mormon background can find their sexuality validated. These groups draw heavily on mainstream American gay-supportive discourse as a basis for discussing their sexuality and the conflicts it has presented for them within the church. Wasatch Affirmation exemplifies this approach. Its mission statement says it ". . . aims to provide a safe, inclusive space for gay men and lesbians from Mormon backgrounds who live along the Wasatch front.

We affirm that a gay/lesbian lifestyle can be a positive one and that homosexuality is not incompatible with spirituality. At the same time, we are a diverse group who embrace a variety of lifestyles and hold a variety of attitudes towards spirituality, religion, morality and politics. We are united chiefly by our desire to interact with others who share our dual background--Mormon and gay/lesbian--and therefore share the unique struggles and blessings which that duality engenders."

## **Religious Identity Center Stage: Heterosexual Temple Marriage**

Other gay members seek to fully implement the heterosexist ideals of the church into their own lives, through sexual abstinence, service within the church, and heterosexual temple marriage. Yet, even this route of full conformity to the outward trappings of Mormonism is recognized as one that involves compromising one's psychological identity: "The woman that I will marry will not fulfill my sexual desires entirely, but will feed me what I need from her. Together we will strive to be a 'whole'. And it will be enough to help me endure to the end." That such ideals face conflicts with practical reality is stated more directly by another: "I am 25, LDS with a rock solid testimony and planning on a life of celibacy to honor my Temple covenants. But to be realistic being alone is very hard if not impossible, but it is worth a try, and it is what I feel Heavenly Father wants me to do."

Clearly, this alternative is not an easy one for persons whose spontaneous desire is toward their own sex. Nor is it always successful. As one man stated, "I thought when I was younger that I was bisexual, that I could CHOOSE the only option the church gave me of heterosexual monogamy. Maybe I just wanted to believe it. I certainly believed that when I went to the temple before my mission, and I believed it when I married. But in the intimacy of a shared life, I couldn't sustain it. I'm still married, I'm still at home and am trying to do so until June when our younger daughter graduates. This last year brought me disfellowshipment, passage through depression, thoughts of suicide, therapy, and a new sense of self and peace on the inside. I'm going to be alright. And both God and the Spirit never left me. I am looking for a new spiritual home."

## **Conclusion**

Despite its heterosexist theology and despite its self-portrayal as a highly unified religious subculture, Mormonism is not one thing for all members, and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual margins which it, in fact, includes are themselves quite diverse. The diverse adaptations that arise from the conflicts between official Mormon theology and same-sex desire is particularly dramatic and serves well as a type-case for the general issue of of dissonance between personal and social identities.



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