

## Mormonism and Native Hawaiian Religion: It's a Small World After All

During his distinguished ecclesiastical career, William Cluff served two missions to Scandanavia and spent twenty-four years as the President of Summit County Stake. He also served four missions for the Church in the Hawaiian Islands. It was on his first mission that he almost lost his life while exploring an extinct volcano on the island of Maui. Cluff and his companions had spent the night at the base of Haleakala, intending to set out for the summit the following day. Cluff rose before the rest of the party and began the journey alone before dawn, hoping to view the sunrise from the top of the volcano. While climbing he was engulfed by a thick cloud of fog and so when he reached the summit, he sat down in disappointment. But then as the sun rose, its rays seemed to melt the dense mist and the vista that he had sought slowly came into view. To follow the Cluff Family Journal:

"As the sun rose, the massive body of fog began to break away, and like great huge masses, was rolled away along the mountain and over the dark abyss, where the whirling and eddying winds encircling the great black chasm, made the most fantastic display ever witnessed by mortal man; and when the sun's rays touched the tip edges of these clouds as they rolled and whirled down and around in that immense black chasm, the sight was wonderful. There were all of the hues of the rainbow, and it is doubtful whether Haleakala was more awe inspiring or majestic when its pit was a moving mass of red-hot lava."<sup>1</sup>

After this vision of nature closed, Cluff, too anxious to wait for his companions, chose to descend alone into the pit of the volcano. This he did quite easily, for part of the way he simply stood upright while the loose cinders slowly carried him downwards. Once within the volcano he turned his attention to the cones or natural chimneys that dotted the landscape. These had once allowed for the escape of subterranean heat and gases, and were, in effect, miniature volcanoes, some as tall as four hundred feet. Impelled by curiosity, Cluff climbed one of these and then decided to go down into its pit. Stepping into the pit, he triggered a rock slide but he kept his balance and was able to ride it down. So far his luck had sustained him, but now it would turn against him, for when he tried to climb up out of the pit he found that the loose cinders slid from underneath him to carry him back to his starting point. Moreover,

---

<sup>1</sup> This account is found in Fred G. Beebe, *The Cluff Missionaries in the Sandwich Islands* (n.p.), pp. 41-44.

prolonged exposure to the heat within the cone made him weak, and as his agony mounted he recalled the Hawaiian legend of Pele, the fire goddess who was said to preside over volcanoes. Spying a large block of stone at the bottom of the pit, Cluff wondered if it were not a sacrificial altar erected to Pele and if he had been led by the goddess into this very predicament.

If it were a trap set by Pele, it did not catch its prey. Cluff finally made his way up the slope by lying flat against the cinders so as to distribute his weight across the entire frontal surface of his body. Thereby he did not overly disturb the loose cinders and by carefully waving his arms and legs he was able to make a slow ascent to the top of the cone. Upon arriving he was greeted by the rest of his party, who had watched him go into the cone and feared that he would never come back out. The native Hawaiians who were acting as guides were in fact astonished to see him alive, for they were sure that he had become another of Pele's many sacrificial victims.

In the Cluff Family Journal, the astonishment of the native Hawaiians inspires the following moralistic observation: "With all of the knowledge of Christianity the Hawaiians are far from being free from old superstitions and traditions."<sup>2</sup> Now that danger had passed, it was easy to disbelieve in Pele, to forget that in William Cluff's moment of peril, he had seriously entertained the notion that the Hawaiian goddess had tricked him. But if indeed there are no atheists in foxholes, as the old saying goes, then Cluff's experience might suggest that no one trapped in a volcano, not even a devout Mormon, disbelieves in Pele. This is to say that our belief is often situational. We believe when circumstances squeeze some belief out of us, and different circumstances engender different beliefs.

This paper is an attempt to bring traditional Hawaiian culture into the orbit of Mormon thought. Why should anyone wish to do this? Because there is much to be gained. If the gospel is to bring us together, we must learn to see beneath the superficial cultural differences which divide us to the common human experience that unites us. Moreover, there is nothing wrong with believing beyond our religious comfort zone, for such belief opens doors to new understanding. I think this is what Joseph Smith meant upon remarking that he had never heard "of a man being damned for believing too much; but they are damned for disbelief."<sup>3</sup> To disbelieve is to cut oneself off from wider reality, to lock

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith (ed.), *Teaching of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), p. 374.

oneself into a prison of self-satisfaction. Let me illustrate this point with a personal experience.

A few months ago my daughter visited the Big Island with her BYU-Hawaii biology class. While there she took snapshots of some new lava flows and after the film was developed, she was surprised to see a female face in the middle of one of the photographs. Normally this would have been dismissed as a double exposure, but since the face was unfamiliar, she shared the photograph with her classmates. No one could identify the mystery woman until someone suggested that it was Pele. Who else would be hanging about a new lava flow, superintending its emergence and direction of travel?

When my daughter showed me the photograph and proposed that the face belonged to Pele, I was skeptical. I decided, however, to share it with a couple friends, both of whom are LDS bishops. One is a native of Hawaii, steeped in Hawaiian lore and culture, but educated on the mainland. The other is a haole who has lived and worked in Hawaii for over twenty years. I thought both friends would manifest polite interest in the photograph but dismiss it as a double exposure, not to be taken seriously. The haole reacted as expected by simply handing the photograph back to me and changing the subject. The Hawaiian, however, surprised me by registering deep interest in the picture. He noted that the female face had pure Hawaiian features and thus very well could be Pele. He even suggested that my daughter had been favored by Pele with a kind of photographic visitation. And then he related some supernatural experiences from his Molokai childhood which made belief in Pele seem perfectly natural.

I went home from work that afternoon a little off-center. A new dimension of life in Hawaii was forcing itself upon my consciousness. Could the old stories be more than just stories? The more I considered this proposition, the more I felt encouraged by it. For the first time since arriving in the Islands nearly four years ago, I began to see Hawaii as something more than a physically splendid, overcommercialized tourist trap. It struck me that Hawaii might even be a very interesting place to live, because here the native culture has not been completely stamped out and safely tucked into the past as it has in North America. In any event, the money-driven Waikiki vision of Hawaii began to fade and another, much richer vision came into view. This vision is peopled by ancestral spirits like Kane, Lono, and Pele, by Kahunas and Menehune, the little hairy folk who hide behind trees and leave gifts for you in your dreams. I recommend this vision to you. It will humanize you, even Hawaiianize you.

I am not proposing that the old Hawaiian myths be raised to the level of gospel truth. And I am not trying to romanticize the Hawaiian

past by suggesting that the Islanders once lived in a state of idyllic happiness. What I am proposing is that we try to build a few bridges between the modern LDS and the native Hawaiian world-views. Further, I am recommending that we approach traditional Hawaiian religion in the attitude of belief, for untested disbelief is a type of blindness. "Almost every belief is a stab at truth," said Aristotle. That is, belief is a way of searching into the truth of things. By containing our belief, by limiting it to established facts and principles, we contain and limit ourselves, for, as the scriptures remind us, belief is a kind of searchlight that lets us see things we would not see otherwise. Hence the correctness of Joseph Smith's dictum that there is no error in believing too much.

My submission is that there is enough truth in the old Hawaiian religion to bring us to a deeper appreciation of God's universal love of humanity. Earlier I remarked that different circumstances engender different beliefs. As Christians we trace our beliefs back to the dry climate and geography of the Middle East. It was there that Moses led his people for forty years in the desert, and scholars have suggested that this experience, more than any other, opened the door to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the Egyptians and Mesopotamians lived near rivers whose fresh water facilitated the miracle of agriculture, the Hebrews were nomads with a bleak and understimulating physical environment. Not overwhelmed by or deeply dependent on the so-called gods of nature--a majestic river, the growing greenery that accompanies agriculture, heavenly bodies moving against an unchanging horizon--they were able to hear the voice of a God beyond nature, a transcendent God. We read in I Kings that:

"And, behold the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still, small voice." (I Kings 19: 11, 12)

Here is a new notion, and one that arose in the silent, empty, ungrowing environment of the desert. God's revelation is not always mediated by natural phenomena which excite the physical senses; often

---

<sup>4</sup> Henri Frankfort, H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp. 363-387.

it bypasses nature and sense experience. This idea of a God who transcends nature became part of the theological apparatus of Christianity, but only after the early Church fathers warped its meaning to produce conclusions that would have surprised the Hebrews. Whereas Moses had talked with God face to face, the early Christian God became faceless, having no body parts whatsoever. The link between God and humanity was further uncoupled by the fact that divine reality was said to consist only of immaterial spirit. In other words, what is highest is something other than the element we know best--physical matter. Given these conclusions, it became easy to devalue nature, for God did not traffic in crass, physical matter. Rather He existed on a plane of being that was alien to nature.

This outlook prevails among Christians today, although there is a minority sect--the Mormons--that contends that God is comfortable in the physical realm. He has a physical body not typologically different from our own. He might even dwell within the physical universe--this at least is suggested in the Book of Abraham which situates God's domicile near a large star. Other Mormon scriptural texts declare that God's revelation can be mediated by natural phenomena: "The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun giveth his light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and the stars also give their light. . . . and any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in his majesty and power." (D&C 88: 45-47)

The point I wish to make is threefold. First, Mormonism is a nature-friendly religion. We reject the traditional Christian thesis that there is something wrong with physical matter. Second, God's revelation is mediated differently by different physical environments. The emptiness of the desert makes it easy for one to hear the still, small voice of God, but in a lush, nature-rich setting like Hawaii, the divine revelation is constantly refracted through natural topography. William Cluff experienced as much when he watched the sunrise from the summit of Haleakala. To reinvoké the scripture, Cluff at that moment saw "God moving in his majesty and power."

My third and last observation is that among Christians, Mormons are uniquely qualified to appreciate the deep ties which bind native Hawaiians to their land and culture. Our theology teaches us that God is both far and near, that we can find Him both in the vertical plane which stretches upward beyond knowing and in the horizontal plane of physical, finite creation. Because God does not shy away from the physical realm, we might suggest that every culture, no matter how different from our own, is more than just an opportunity for God: it is the actual occasion of God, a kind of flower sprung up from the soil of God's universal love. To extend the metaphor and give it a Polynesian

emphasis, God is both the Gardener and the mana or life force that fills the garden. For an Hawaiian, then, communion with God entails reverence for one's garden paradise or land, for land is life, and Hawaiians are kama'aina, children of the land. For most haole Mormons, however, land lacks sacred qualities and God is strictly a Gardener, despite the fact that there are scriptures which indicate that His presence or mana suffuses and animates the cosmos. (See, for example, D&C 88: 6-10, 41) Neither view excludes the other; rather each contributes to a stereoscopic understanding of God. And once blended together, the two perspectives push us toward a greater unity of the faith. Because each culture has had its own adventure with God, each has something important to share with the other. Of course such sharing cannot occur if one group seeks to monopolize God by limiting His adventures to particular times and places. But if we can learn to believe beyond our present knowledge, trusting in the proposition that gospel truth is bigger than race or culture, then God may surprise us with new understanding.