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The Return of Simon and Helena

Reviewed by William J. Hamblin

Nothing is a greater injury to the children of men than to be under the influence of a false spirit when they think they have the Spirit of God.

Joseph Smith¹

Paul James Toscano has created a minor stir along the Wasatch Front in recent years. Toscano has enjoyed an uncontested public platform from which he has repeatedly denounced the Latter-day Saint Church, its doctrines, and its leaders. Most Latter-day Saints are familiar only with a sanitized version of Toscano's ideas via carefully choreographed sound bites. The recent publication of a collection of his essays and speeches, *The Sanctity of Dissent*, offers a chance to examine the rationale for his attacks on the Church and to evaluate his ideas in their full context. We should thank Signature Books for providing us this opportunity to see the real, uncensored Paul Toscano. Even a superficial reading of Toscano's essays reveals that from the traditional Latter-day Saint perspective he is—to say the least—unorthodox.

Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24) was widely believed by early Christians to be the founder of Gnosticism and father of heresy; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 23, 2; Eusebius, *History of the Church* II, 13, 1. Helena, Simon's female companion, was said to have been an incarnation of the Mother Goddess "Thought" (*ennoia*); Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 26; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 23, 2–4.

¹ TPJS, 205.

Toscano recognizes that "the modern church's view of the restoration [is] irreconcilably opposed to [his] own" (p. xv), and that he doesn't "fit into the Mormon mainstream" (p. 23). For him this means, of course, that the Church as a whole is wrong and that he is right. The Brethren are condemned for "mak[ing] additions to the gospel message" (p. xiv), as if this is not precisely the purpose of continuing revelation.²

For Toscano there is little room for revelation from Church leaders. Ideas and policies should be allowed "to accumulate support on the basis of merit alone; [only then] can a group be assured that its decisions are made in light of the experience of all its concerned members rather than the limited experience of its leadership enclave" (p. 144). Toscano apparently sees the Church as an ecclesiastical political organization where lobbies and campaigns should influence decision making. Toscano seems to realize that even in such circumstances his "party" would form an extreme minority among Latter-day Saints. Thus,

what is necessary to protect the [Latter-day Saint] community from both the wrongheadedness of the multitude [i.e., the vast majority of Church members] and the narrow-mindedness of the elite [General Authorities] is a courageous and loyal opposition [i.e., Toscano and friends]. When the wisdom of the many and prudence of the few fail, an organization is most likely to find the vitality and vision to survive in the voices of its dissenting members. (p. 145)

This condescending attitude toward Church members should be troubling for any would-be Toscanites. For Toscano, ordinary members of the Church are apparently too "wrongheaded" to think for themselves. It seems inconceivable to him that someone could study the Church carefully, intelligently, prayerfully, and rationally and still conclude that its principles are true, its leaders inspired, and that it is the path to salvation. We should all thus humbly turn to the "Mormon intellectual [i.e., dissenting] com-

² Although Toscano insists that modern prophets should not "make additions to the gospel message," his essays demonstrate that he seems to feel he should.

munity”—rather than the prophets, scriptures, and our own inspiration and reason—for guidance in these latter-days.

Toscano has conveniently provided us with tests by which he feels any of his “additions to the gospel message” (p. xiv) should be evaluated.

In order to test the truth of any inspiration, statement, or purported revelation—even of a church leader—it must be subjected to four tests: [the first two are] First, it must not be inconsistent with the scriptures; second, it must not be inconsistent with the teachings of the prophets living and dead. (pp. 163–64)

Readers of Toscano should pay careful attention to how often Toscano’s own ideas meet, or fail to meet, these two criteria.

Toscano exhibits a remarkable indifference to careful contextual reading and exegesis of both scriptural and historical texts. A particularly egregious example of this is found in his reading of Joseph Smith’s statement:

That man who rises up to condemn others, finding fault with the Church, saying that they [the Church] are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly, that that man is on the high road to apostasy; and if he does not repent, will apostatize. (p. 60)³

As Toscano sees it, this passage is “often quoted to members who are critical of [Church leaders] as a warning that criticism can lead to apostasy. But this twists the original meaning and purpose of the statement” (p. 60). He maintains that this passage was directed “to church leaders—to apostles and seventies—who were critical of church members” (p. 61). Thus, for Toscano, Joseph was not saying that Toscano should not criticize the General Authorities, but that the General Authorities should not criticize Toscano! Although it is true that Joseph’s sermon was given to a meeting of the early General Authorities who were preparing to leave on a mission,⁴ Joseph specifically directed his statements to both the

³ Citing *TPJS*, 156.

⁴ *HC* 3:382–83.

"Twelve and all Saints."⁵ Thus, while this principle certainly applies to General Authorities, Joseph also specifically directed his remarks to "all Saints," a category which, until recently, presumably included Paul Toscano. In other words, even Paul Toscano, and not just a General Authority, is capable of the hypercriticism which leads to apostasy. And, according to Joseph, a certain sign of apostasy is for either a member or a Church leader to claim that the Church as a whole is "out of the way, while he himself is righteous." Toscano's interpretation of this passage reminds me of the story of the dotty old woman, who, while watching her son marching in a parade, blithely announced that "Everyone's out of step but my Johnny!"

Many of Toscano's theological dogmas are supported by neither scripture, prophetic teaching, nor argumentation; they are simply asserted on his own authority. On the few occasions when he does reference scripture, his exegesis is frequently idiosyncratic. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 113:8 reads:

He [Isaiah] had reference to those whom God should call in the last days, who should hold the power of priesthood to bring again Zion, and the redemption of Israel; and to put on her [Zion's] strength is to put on the authority of the priesthood, which she, Zion, has a right to by lineage; also to return to that power which she had lost.⁶

For Toscano this is not simply a case of using the feminine English pronoun to personify the Church as a whole as Zion, but is instead a call "to the whole church to accept the doctrine of the fullness of the priesthood of men and women" (p. 81). Toscano likewise reads 2 Nephi 2:11-13 as referring to a "composite of two opposing principles, male and female" (p. 86), despite the fact that this passage makes absolutely no reference to such an idea—or even to males and females—but only to the idea of "opposition in all things."

Toscano makes no attempt to hide the fact that he despises modern Latter-day Saint doctrines and leaders. He compares what

⁵ *TPJS*, 156.

⁶ Referring to Isaiah 52:1.

he sees as the "prevailing view of the current [Latter-day Saint] leadership" to "the salvation plan of compulsion scripturally attributed to Satan" (p. 135). He speaks of the "Brezhnevization of the church," in which the Church uses "precisely the system [of tyrannical controls] that was employed by Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev" (p. 143) to bolster the faltering Soviet Union. He accuses the Church of "unrighteous dominion, spiritual abuse, theological correctness, and ecclesiastical tyranny" (p. 113), strongly implying that the current Church leaders are false prophets by contrasting their alleged behavior with what Toscano feels should be the behavior of "true prophets" (p. 166). But the Church is not merely misguided in its policies or afflicted by human error among some of its leaders. Rather, for Toscano,

Evil [in the Church] is something quite specific: it is the persistent systematic abuse of power by the strong [Church leaders] to the detriment of the weak [members]. Evil in this sense can corrupt individuals and institutions. The church is not exempt. Within its divinely authorized structures, evil can and does manifest itself as spiritual abuse. (p. 145)

The logical extension of this idea is that "the church is not the source of salvation. The church is what needs to be saved" (p. 138). Just who is to save the Church should be rather obvious.

Toscano tacitly recognizes that the vast majority of Latter-day Saints fail to see any evidence of such intrinsic evil in the Church and its leaders when he admits that the "wide-spread abuses [by Church leaders] are . . . invisible" (p. 155). Of course such invisibility can be most simply explained by the hypothesis that such "abuses" do not exist outside of the minds of a few dissenters. But Toscano has another explanation:

Few are prepared to admit that such abuses [in the Church] are not the result of the personal foibles and failings of individuals but of the systemic failings of the church itself: from false teachings, false doctrines, false perceptions, and false practices. (p. 156)

Ordinary members are deceived by the leaders of the Church who are hiding the truth, deluding themselves by "deny[ing] the evi-

dence” and “rationaliz[ing] that the church is true” (p. 155) anyway.

But even if the institutional Church and its leaders are in apostasy, what of the unique truth claims of Latter-day Saint scripture and tradition? Can something be salvaged from the wreckage of the Restoration? For Toscano, does Latter-day Saint doctrine offer any unique truths which—despite the usurpation of tyrannical leaders—still provide the path to salvation and exaltation? The answer is no. Toscano’s view is that “people are called of God to their spiritual convictions” (p. 112), by which he means that God calls people to believe whatever they happen to believe. His next statement makes this clear: “Some are called to one religion, some to another, and some to none at all” (p. 112). His position on the truth claims of the Church is further clarified when he says that “for those called by birth or rebirth to be Latter-day Saints, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true and living church on the face of the whole earth. This is not to deny the truths to which God has called others” (p. 112). In other words, Toscano is an unabashed relativist: all churches are equally true for those who believe in them. Toscano is not making the traditional Latter-day Saint claim that there are important truths to be found in most religions, and that God has inspired great religious leaders and sages in many different traditions, places, and times. Rather, he is claiming that all religions are equally true. Therefore, Christianity is just as true as Buddhism, Islam, or Hinduism—but no more so. This is the only way to make sense of Toscano’s odd statement that he still “believes in the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Norse gods” (pp. 34–35).

Paradoxically, Toscano does not grant this same relativistic cosmic truthfulness to the doctrines of late twentieth-century Mormonism. Although Toscano “believes in the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Norse gods” (pp. 34–35), the traditional Latter-day Saint doctrine of God the Father is “patriolatry, . . . the idolatry of God the Father” (p. 156). Here we have the ironic situation where Toscano—who claims to be merely a faithful, ordinary but oppressed Latter-day Saint—apparently believes in Zeus, but (as I shall describe below) rejects the Latter-day Saint understanding of Elohim.

Suppose for a moment that Toscano's view of the universe is correct. Then may it not be possible that I have been called by God to believe in an oppressive patriarchy whose power is based on spiritual abuse? From an eternal perspective might this not be just the right kind of church for people like me? Might this not be the "spiritual conviction" to which I have been "called of God"? Apparently not. Like many "politically correct" multiculturalists, the facade of toleration in Toscano's religious relativism can only be taken so far. Some doctrines of the nature of God are simply too appalling to be acceptable, even in Toscano's relativistic cosmos. Although Toscano feigns that all religions are equal, in reality some religions are more equal than others.

If the Latter-day Saint understanding of God the Father is "patriolatry," what, precisely, is the nature of the god whom Toscano has been "called of God" to believe? His essay "All Is Not Well in Zion: False Teachings of the True Church" (pp. 153–75) answers this question. Toscano informs us that this essay "served as the sole evidentiary basis for my excommunication" (p. 153). Readers can decide for themselves whether any other evidence was necessary.

Toscano informs us that:

All is not well in Zion—not because some people are imperfect, but because there is a steady, relentless advancement of an *heretical* concept of God. . . . I believe *all* Zion's ills, including spiritual abuse, spring directly or indirectly from modern Mormonism's oversimplified God-concept. (p. 172, emphasis added)

What is this "oversimplified God-concept" which is the cause of "all Zion's ills"?

For me, a heresy is a teaching of the church⁷ that is significantly more likely to lead to evil than to good. . . . Our chief idol is a false concept of God, a heresy which I call "patriolatry." It is the idolatry of God the Father. From this single heresy springs an unnumbered

⁷ Note that, for Toscano, "heresy is a teaching of the church." This is quite revealing—the Church preaches heresy, not individual members who are in apostasy.

host of mischiefs and abuses, including—to name the most egregious—a false concept of salvation; false ideas about priesthood and authority; misunderstandings about church structure and membership; poisonous teaching about gender and sexuality; misconceptions about ordinances; and a false picture of Zion. (pp. 156–57)

And what is the nature of the abominable God of “patriolatry?” It is the standard Latter-day Saint concept of God as found in Doctrine and Covenants 130:22, the idea “that the main members of the Godhead are the Father and the Son, two separate and distinct beings with glorified bodies of flesh and bone” (p. 157). The Latter-day Saint doctrine of God “is concocted out of half-truths, misperceptions, and trivializations” (p. 158). Rather, for Toscano, “Jesus [is the] God of the Old Testament . . . both Father and Son”—the Father and the Son are not two separate beings, but are one and the same! The Latter-day Saint concept of God is not based on divine revelation; rather, “patriolatry is *nothing* but a composite of some of the most abusive characteristics of controlling, modern, middle-aged, white, western males” (p. 161, emphasis added). All of this undermines Latter-day Saint priesthood authority, since “patriolatry then is the source of the modern church’s false concept of priesthood and authority” (p. 162).

But if the traditional Latter-day Saint understanding of God the Father is idolatrous “patriolatry,” what is the true nature of God? It is, quite simply, Paul Toscano’s stunningly idiosyncratic version of the Adam-God theory.

Utterly repressed from the Mormon God-concept are the teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young that Michael the archangel is the father of our premortal spirits. . . . Christ, the eternal God and father of heaven and earth, raised an archangel [Michael/Adam] to divine status and then [Jesus the Heavenly Father] condescended to become the Son of that archangel [Michael/Adam]. . . . He [Jesus the Heavenly Father] agrees to make his son [Michael/Adam] a Father, not only the progenitor of our spirits and mortal bodies,

but the heavenly Father of Christ incarnate. . . . Thereafter, Christ [the Father] calls Michael [Adam] "my Father who is in heaven," and Michael [Adam] speaks to us of Christ [the Heavenly Father] in the gracious anthem: "This is my Beloved Son! Hear Him!" (pp. 158–59)

But this is not all. Toscano is fixated on his personal interpretation of the Latter-day Saint Mother in Heaven, which—unremarkably enough—draws much more from late twentieth-century feminist ideology and New-Age Mother-goddess worship than from Latter-day Saint scripture. Toscano makes the bold statement that "if the scriptures are silent or deficient on a point, we cannot conclude the negative proposition with respect to that point" (p. 89). Quite true. On the other hand, it is even more dangerous to conclude, because the scriptures do not mention an idea, that that idea is therefore necessarily true, which is precisely what Toscano does in his speculations on the Mother Goddess. He insists that the "dearth of information about this being" is because "plain and precious things [have been] taken from the scriptures" (p. 95, cf. 86–90). This absence of information on our Mother in Heaven is quite convenient, since it allows Toscano limitless range for conjecture.

I know of no Latter-day Saint who would deny the existence of our Mother in Heaven. Indeed, there is an article entitled "Mother in Heaven" in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*,⁸ in which the existence of our Heavenly Mother is clearly affirmed. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, scripture provides little or no information on this subject. Toscano helpfully repairs this deficiency in revelation by concocting a lengthy fantasy about her (pp. 81–98). Those who reject Toscano's imaginations are warned that they will "inadvertently find [them]selves fighting against God" (p. 98).

Lost in the simplified God-concept of the modern church are the female divinities. Brigham Young taught that Eve is the mother of all living. She continues to be

⁸ Elaine A. Cannon, "Mother in Heaven," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:961.

so denominated in the temple ceremony. "Mother of All Living" was the ancient epithet for the Great Goddess.⁹ . . . Thus for her children's sake, Eve the Great Mother [the celestial wife of Jesus the Heavenly Father] entered Eden as a daughter, yielding up her divinity to become the helpmeet of her son Adam [Michael]. For her children's sake she sacrificed her glory and immortality to inhabit the dreary world. For their sakes she suffered death to wander in the earth as a light to them that dwell in darkness—the *Shekinah*, [Qabbalistic "indwelling" of the Spirit] the *Hokma* [wisdom], the paraclete [comforter], the Holy Spirit. (p. 159)

If I have understood all of this correctly, it seems that Toscano would have us believe that Christ is the Eternal Father, the celestial husband to the Heavenly Mother. Their archangel son Michael becomes Adam. The Heavenly Mother then becomes an incarnate mortal—paralleling Jesus the Heavenly Father's redemptive incarnation—by becoming Eve and incestuously marrying her son Adam to produce the human race. Upon her death, she remains disembodied as the Holy Spirit.

The atonement was not the work of Christ alone. Rather each of the Toscanan deities seems to play an atoning role.

We seem to have lost sight of the truth that our Mothers [Eve and Mary] and Fathers [Jesus and Adam] in heaven yield up their glory, descend into mortality, suffer as sinners,¹⁰ and die so that we their children may be exalted. (p. 160)

Thus, "in the end of time,"

Father Michael, the ancient of days, shall sit. And Mary, the Mother of Christ, shall be honored in the Godhead. The Father [Christ]—Mother [Eve/Holy Spirit]—Son

⁹ For some reason Toscano does not mention the fact that the epithet "mother of all living" is not a new esoteric revelation of the Heavenly Mother by Brigham Young, but is in fact a description of Eve found in Genesis 3:20.

¹⁰ Note that, for Toscano, Christ is not the sinless Atoner, but is himself a sinner. There is certainly a significant theological difference between Christ suffering for our sins, and Christ "suffering as [a] sinner."

[Michael/Adam]—Daughter [Mary the mother of Christ] shall be made one. (p. 160)

Toscano is manifestly correct in his contention that “all these teachings both leaders and members [of the Church] ignore or deny” (p. 161). And it is a good thing too, since these ideas have absolutely no basis in either scripture or the teachings of our prophets. Toscano’s speculations utterly fail his own two tests to evaluate false doctrine. Whatever Brigham may have speculated about Adam-God, it certainly had nothing to do with Toscano’s Quadrinity. Toscano’s doctrine of the divine Quadrinity of Father-Mother-Son-Daughter is merely his own fantasy. He makes no attempt to provide scripture, prophetic teaching, or even rational argument for his ideas. He simply asserts them, as if we are all expected to accept blindly Toscano’s radical reinterpretation of the Godhead on the basis of his authority alone.

Unfortunately, Toscano often seems less than forthcoming to the media with an accurate explanation of his ideas and their implications. Recently, he appeared with Van Hale on the radio talk-show “Religion on the Line,” and engaged in the following exchanges.

Hale: Your position isn’t that here are some interesting speculations, it’s that here’s something that if we had this concept it would clear up the problems that we have in the Church. . . .

Toscano: If I have condemnatory language or rhetoric in this article—chapter nine of my book [“All Is Not Well in Zion: False Teachings of the True Church,” in] *The Sanctity of Dissent*—it isn’t because I condemn the Church for not accepting the Holy Ghost as a female. I condemn the Church—to the extent I do, which I don’t think is very severe, but the rhetoric is there— . . . for closing off the discussion, for proposing a very simplified view of the Godhead.

. . . .

Hale: I do see within your article what I would consider an extremely radical reinterpretation of Mormonism; . . . the attack on the Mormon hierarchy and your discussion of the concept of salvation and so forth I see as

being a very radical departure from what I see as historical Mormonism.

Toscano: The radio audience is at a great disadvantage because you are able to—with my book in your hand—confront me on the text about which they have no information. So all I can do to counter you is by saying I have made no radical reinterpretation of Mormonism, and that you have misread my article. And I guess people will have to buy the book and read the article to see which one of us is correct.¹¹

Although Toscano does not provide any scriptural authority or rational argument for his interpretation of the Godhead,¹² an attempt at scriptural justification for the Toscanan Godhead was made by Janice Merrill Allred, sister of Toscano's wife Margaret Merrill Toscano.¹³ The relationship between Allred's article and Toscano's ideas is nowhere made explicit, but it is quite clear that Allred's theology is closely related to Toscano's. Like Toscano, Allred maintains that the correct interpretation of scripture is that the Father and Son are a single being,¹⁴ and that the Mother in Heaven is the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ (However, Allred never ventures into a discussion of Toscano's Adam-God/Mary theory, and it is possible that she rejects this doctrine.)

Allred's attempt to establish that the Father and Son are a single being on the basis of Latter-day Saint scripture and Joseph Smith's teachings founders on several exegetical errors. Her basic methodology is to identify a few passages in the Book of Mormon that make ambiguous statements concerning the relationship of the Father and Son. These she interprets to mean that the Father

¹¹ Paul Toscano, interview with Van Hale on "Religion on the Line," 9 October 1994; transcribed from a tape recording.

¹² Some elucidation on the Toscanan Quadrinity can be found in Margaret and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 29–104, with a fuller version of their "myth" on pages 68–70. See also the review by Brian M. Hauglid, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 250–82.

¹³ Janice Allred, "Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother," *Dialogue* 27/2 (Summer 1994): 15–39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18–27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27–35.

and the Son are the same being. Now it is certainly true that some passages in the Book of Mormon concerning the Godhead are ambiguous, and can be interpreted in several different ways. Allred's interpretation of these passages is not, however, the only possible one.¹⁶ While it may be true that we cannot prove the traditional Latter-day Saint doctrine of the Godhead from the Book of Mormon alone, neither can we prove the existence of the Trinity from Old Testament texts alone. The revelations of each dispensation are cumulative, leading us line upon line to a fuller understanding of the gospel.

Allred's exegetical method is to insist upon the validity of only one of several possible interpretations of ambiguous passages in the Book of Mormon concerning the Godhead, while conveniently ignoring other unambiguous scriptures and prophetic teachings which explicitly contradict her interpretation. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 reads:

The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit.

Although she has obviously read this passage (she references it on page 24), she ignores its clear implications: the Father and Son have separate bodies of flesh and bones. This is precisely how Joseph Smith understood its meaning:

I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.¹⁷

Likewise, Joseph taught:

¹⁶ James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1899), 465–73, including an official statement by the First Presidency. Neither Toscano nor Allred makes any attempt to engage this position.

¹⁷ *TPJS*, 370 (16 June 1844 = *HC* 6:474); cf. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp. and ed., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1980), 378, 382.

Any person that had seen the heavens opened knows that there are three personages in the heavens who hold the keys of power, and one presides over all. *If any man attempts to refute what I am about to say, after I have made it plain, let him beware.* As the Father hath power in Himself, so hath the Son power in Himself, to lay down His life and take it again, so He [the Son] has a body of His own. The Son doeth what he hath seen the Father do: then the Father hath some day laid down His life and taken it again; so He [the Father] has a body of His own; *each one [the Father and the Son] will be in His own body*; and yet the sectarian world believe the body of the Son is identical with the Father's.¹⁸

Allred also ignores the obvious implications of Joseph's 1838 account of his first vision:

It [the light] no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy [Satan] which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw *two Personages*, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him! (Joseph Smith—History 1:17)

If the Father and Son are one and the same, as Allred insists, who is the being who calls Christ his "Beloved Son"? Allred never even attempts an answer, but Toscano provides a hint. Based on his Quadrinity theory, Toscano believes that it was "Michael [Adam, who] speaks to us of Christ [the Heavenly Father] in the gracious anthem: 'This is my Beloved Son! Hear Him!'" (pp. 158–59). Really?

Both Allred and Toscano maintain that the Holy Ghost is the disembodied Mother in Heaven. Yet this too contradicts Joseph Smith's explicit teachings:

¹⁸ TPJS, 312 (11 June 1843 = HC 5:426); cf. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 212, 214, emphasis added.

Joseph also said that the Holy Ghost is now in a state of Probation which if *he* should perform in righteousness *he* may pass through the same or a similar course of things that the Son has.¹⁹

But the Holy Ghost is yet a Spiritual body and waiting to take *himself* a body, as the Savior did or as God did, or the gods before them took bodies.²⁰

Why should we seriously entertain the idea that Joseph Smith secretly believed or taught that the Holy Ghost was the disembodied Mother in Heaven, when he explicitly referred to the Holy Ghost using masculine pronouns, and taught that he was awaiting incarnation?

In fact, Toscano has admitted that his doctrines have no real basis in scripture or in Joseph Smith's teachings. In a radio interview he said:

I'm not going at it [the idea that the Holy Ghost is the Mother in Heaven] from the point of view of historical Mormonism. I don't care whether in history Joseph Smith ever said it. He *should have said it*. If he doesn't say it somebody has to say it now. . . . What I'm saying is that even if it isn't in the [Latter-day Saint scriptural and historical] texts, the Holy Ghost is with us. We have got to revisit these things in the power of the Spirit.²¹

In other words, although these ideas cannot be found in Latter-day Saint scripture or prophetic teachings, the Holy Spirit has revealed them to Toscano—so they must be true. Thus, Joseph “should have said it.” This attitude may indicate that we are seeing the beginnings of a new religion, a splinter group that is loosely based on the Mormon tradition, but which has developed into something quite different. Perhaps it could be called New-Age Mormonism.

¹⁹ Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 245, recorded by Franklin D. Richards, emphasis added.

²⁰ Ibid., 305 n. 26, recorded by George Laub, emphasis added.

²¹ Toscano, interview with Van Hale on “Religion on the Line,” 9 October 1994; transcribed from a tape recording, emphasis added.

Now, of course, Toscano has the right to believe whatever he wants to believe about God. Likewise, all of the rest of us—as well as the institutional Church—may accept or reject Toscano's speculations. Yet, for some reason, many dissenters are under the strange delusion that the Church, by publicly rejecting Toscano's heresy, is somehow trying to suppress freedom of thought and speech. The Church, as an institution, has the responsibility to reject certain ideas or doctrines which it considers false; it can also determine that it will not use its ecclesiastical authority or resources to support ideas which are understood to be antithetical to the gospel. But simply by saying that an idea is false or heretical, and that members of the Church should not preach it, the Church is not saying that someone outside the Church cannot believe or proclaim that idea. Perhaps some dissenters are unaware that the Church is, after all, a voluntary organization. Each member is perfectly free to accept or reject the teachings of the prophets. Likewise the Church, as an institution, should be free to accept or reject the teachings of its individual members.

On the other hand, Church leaders have the responsibility to advise members that certain behavior is not in accord with the commandments of God, or that certain ideas are fundamentally incompatible with Church doctrine. If dissenters or sinners behave in a manner that reaches outrageously beyond the bounds of Church norms, they may be excommunicated. This is what the Lord tells us on this matter:

The day cometh that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be *cut off* [i.e., excommunicated] from among the people [i.e., the Church];

For they [those "who will not hear"] have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant;

They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and *after the image of his own god*, whose image is in the likeness of the world. (D&C 1:14–16)

Furthermore the Church neither claims the authority, nor does it have the means, to compel anyone to do anything or believe anything against his or her will. It certainly cannot "silence" anyone. Has the Church ever attempted to use the force of law to prevent Toscano or any other dissenter from saying or publishing whatever they please? Far from silencing him, his excommunication has actually enhanced Toscano's ability to get his ideas in print, as I'm sure the Church leaders knew that it regrettably would. Toscano has always been and is now free to think, believe, say, or write anything he wishes.

Latter-day Saint scripture teaches that the Father and Son are separate beings. Toscano teaches that they are one and the same, and that to believe otherwise is to commit the "heresy" of "patriolatry" (p. 156). If the Church teaches X and Toscano teaches not-X it seems inevitable that one or the other must be wrong. No amount of pleading for tolerance for different ideas can prevent us from ultimately making a decision: do we believe X or not-X? The fatal weakness of contemporary dissenters is that they are unwilling to make the inevitable commitment about what they really believe and don't believe. They wish to be in the Church, but not of the Church. They wish to remain neither hot nor cold toward the Church and the gospel. Tolerance of divergent opinion does not require that we abandon all logic and reason, proclaiming that both X and not-X are simultaneously true so that those who believe in not-X will feel less out of place at Church. Nor does it require the Church to abandon the commandments against sexual promiscuity (as Toscano seems to advise; pp. 112-13, 170-71) so that the sexually promiscuous don't feel any unpleasant guilt about their sins.

Toscano denounces the Church leaders as heretics; but when they respond that it is Toscano who is, in fact, the heretic, he cries "spiritual abuse," insisting that the Church is attempting to suppress his freedom of thought and speech. After numerous attempts by leaders to counsel Toscano, the Church was finally forced to excommunicate him for heresy. Toscano's response was to issue a *de facto* excommunication of the leadership of the Church.

Any action to excommunicate a believing member for the purpose of coercing obedience to church leaders,

church policy, or in the interest of church image is an abomination in the eyes of God, is utterly invalid, and will result in the de facto excommunication of the perpetrators who will suffer a withdrawal of the spirit and then amen to the priesthood of those leaders. (p. 172)

Although he never makes an explicit claim, I rather suspect that Toscano believes that his ideas are based on a revelation to him from God. Be that as it may, he clearly claims that the Holy Ghost is inspiring his attacks on the Church (p. 152). Indeed, Toscano promises an imminent revelation "of the doctrine of the Heavenly Mother" (p. 89).

The Heavenly Father was revealed 4,000 years ago, and the Redeeming Son 2,000 years ago. Could it be time now for the revelation of the Bride, the Comforting Woman of Holiness, the Lady, the Queen of queens and her connection to the earth, the environment, the heavens, the angels, and the Father and the Son whom we have heretofore worshipped? Could we be standing on the eve of a second restoration, when—as the Book of Mormon prophesies—the Lord shall "set his hand *again* the second time to recover his people" (2 Nephi 25:17; 29:1)? Must the same Goddess who in the beginning condescended first be in the end unveiled last? Must She, the last God to be worshipped, be the first to come again as part of the final parousia? I cannot say. I say only that all is not well—nor is it likely ever again to be well in Zion. For unless there is a spiritual revival in mythical dimensions, the restoration, I fear, is doomed to resolve itself into yet another sect full of ethical pretensions and xenophobic aspirations—and nothing more. (p. 175)

Toscano claims that he "was excommunicated from the church for publicly expressing . . . criticisms" (p. xv) of the Church and its leaders. But any reader of *The Sanctity of Dissent* can plainly see that there is much, much more to it than that. Toscano's dissent is not mere benign disagreement over esoteric doctrine, or a helpful reminder that problems such as materialism

and pride afflict many in the Church. Rather, as Toscano himself has put it, "The real issue is: if Toscano is right, then the Brethren have made a mistake, and we [the Latter-day Saint Church] have gone astray."²² For Toscano the institution of the Church is hopelessly cruel, corrupt, and unhallowed (p. 151); its leaders are not prophets, but evil tyrants; its doctrines are false and heretical; its members are mindless automatons (pp. 27, 140–41, 145). Indeed, the Church encompasses "the heart of darkness, the soul of evil" (p. 146). Only the dissenters have the intelligence and inspiration to recognize this tremendous evil for what it is—the rest of us are blind dupes whose shackles can be broken only by following the dissenters. I will leave it to the readers to decide for themselves whether Paul James Toscano or Gordon B. Hinckley is the true prophet of our time. For me, the choice is quite simple and clear.

²² Ibid.